

2. help wanted

I know many lucky people who have a handful of holiday gifts to buy. My total must be at least 50 by the time I factor in my extended family that gathers for Christmas lunch, including uncles, aunts, cousins—even a cousin's daughter (what's that, a cousin once removed?). And then there are friends, long-suffering baby-sitters, my assistant, my five godchildren, the super, the panhandler on the corner, and anyone else toward whom I feel guilt or gratitude.

I enjoy shopping for gifts, especially when I travel. I make daring and mostly successful moves, like buying people clothes, and regret gift-wrapping services because I love to choose papers and ribbons. Or rather, loved. With two young kids and a busy job, the joy of wrapping can lose its luster when you're doing it at 2:00 A.M. Recently I've also noticed a certain atrophy creeping into my efforts. I find that I get fixed ideas about the right gift for somebody—how many varieties of blue scarves can I buy my sister-in-law, for instance? (Blue is her favorite color.) And how many more books on Arctic exploration, far-flung travel, and death-defying adventure can I find for my brother, a surgeon whose tastes run to extreme physical challenge?

This season, in order to save time and break out of a rut, I enlisted the services of a personal shopper, and what's more, I outsourced her. Alyson Scott runs StyleChic, a Los Angeles-based firm that offers closet makeovers to locals and a

Eve MacSweeney puts her extralong list in the hands of a professional.

six-hour shopping package for visiting clients, as well as a Web-based service for people like me. A former ce-

lebrity stylist with a background in magazines, Alyson launched her company last year, using her contacts to sidestep wait lists and source unusual finds and undiscovered boutiques. The shopping day costs \$1,800, which, when you add up the designer discounts that are part of the deal, often cancels itself out for big spenders. For other services, she charges \$250 an hour.

"It's all about getting people what they want," she says. "The other day I had a call at 5:00 P.M. from a woman from Cairo who wanted a Balenciaga bag in blue, which wasn't available in any of the stores here. She was leaving the next morning. I had the bag driven by town car from Vegas and delivered to her at LAX." A pair of Saudi princesses were so thrilled with their shopping trip that they're flying Alyson to Riyadh to revamp their wardrobes. I was happy to hear that she also caters to clients on a budget.

Most of Alyson's customers fill out a questionnaire on her Web site. I sat on my balcony while on a fall vacation in Greece and thumb-typed her an E-mail on my Treo. I explained that several of my recipients fell into the impossible-to-buy-for category because they are either the person who has everything (i.e., super-expensive and rarefied tastes) or the person who *view >204*

VIEW good giving

Gifts, Bagged!

has nothing (i.e., ascetic types who say there isn't a thing they need). I gave her ten categories, with mini-profiles, such as "best friend: has exquisite taste, lives with Japanese antiques, wears YSL" and "sister-in-law: very granola, likes blue." Time expenditure: five minutes. I was curious to see what she would do with these skimpy descriptions. Surely it takes more than a couple of words to explain the intricacies of someone's personality, especially all the difficult people I know?

Apparently not. Alyson must be something of a clairvoyant because three days later, an E-mail arrived with several suggestions for different people at different prices, many of which were apt, useful, and imaginative. For my husband, whom I described as "in the art world, interested in architecture, design, gadgets, has an extremely good eye, hates surprises," she came up with some obvious but on-the-mark ideas like an iPhone or Bose wireless surround-sound system, plus a book on Chinese contemporary art, a historian who provides private tours of architectural gems in different cities, and a place where you can learn to make wine (signaturedays.com), which would be great if he drank the stuff. For a splurge, she came up with the Jaeger-LeCoultre Master Compressor Extreme World Chronograph (\$13,500). How did she know he was watch-obsessed?

It turns out Alyson is an expert at boys both young and overgrown. For my sons, three and six, she chose a shockproof digital camera by Fisher Price, vintage video games, and a German Web site (haba.de) that has hundreds of great-looking board games you've never heard of. For male cousins she suggested gift certificates from tech brands like Apple, which they could use to buy software or download music, personalized Nike or Adidas sneakers, and a hideous but useful thing called a Video Rocker (videorocker.com) to sit on while playing computer games. If you squint at it, in orange perhaps, it could look like a modernist piece for your den. My brother, meanwhile, got a chance to be a fighter pilot (cloud9living.com) or a spy for a day (greatamericandays.com), or membership to a wine club (wineinsiders.com), which he would love.

For teenage girls, Alyson offered iKaraoke for iPods (griffintechology.com) and an extravaganza of beauty products called the I Want It All Set, \$450 from arbonne.com. Vintage Japanese hair combs and estate jewelry were nominated for the aesthetically inclined best friend, as well as custom-designed perfume from Yosh. For the numerous people I'll be visiting in London over the holidays, for whom I'd requested house-gift ideas, her best suggestions were the Linari Legno reed diffuser (\$96 at eluxury.com) and truffle oil or chocolates from Trader Joe's, since they don't have that excellent and excellently priced emporium over there. For the granola sister-in-law she came up with a very granola Web site selling flax boots (earth.us),



personal shopper's picks

- ELEMENTS OF SURPRISE**
1. LORO PIANA CASHMERE ROBE, \$2,350; LORO PIANA STORES.
2. LUCIEN PELLAT-FINET CASHMERE SWEATER, \$2,317; LUCIENPELLAT-FINET.COM.
3. LINARI LEGNO REED DIFFUSER, \$96; ELUXURY.COM. **4. HERMÈS BANGLES,** \$395 TO \$570; (800) 441-4488. **5. JAEGER-LECOULTRE MASTER COMPRESSOR EXTREME WORLD CHRONOGRAPH,** \$13,500; (800) JLC-TIME. **6. BALENCIAGA BY NICOLAS GHESQUIÈRE BESACE DESERT SUEDE SHOULDER BAG,** \$1,695; BALENCIAGA, NYC.
7. YOSH SIGNATURE PERFUME, EAUDEYOSH.COM. **8. TRADER JOE'S TEN-POUND BELGIAN DARK CHOCOLATE BAR,** \$19; TRADERJOES.COM. **9. NIKE ZOOM RS SNEAKERS,** \$120; NIKEID.COM. **10. ANDY WARHOL BY BURTON DIY 151 SNOWBOARD,** \$550; BURTON.COM.

another that gives a portion of its profits to feed the hungry (hungersite.com), or a hydroponic herb-growing kit (michaelkritzer.com). Her time expenditure: three hours.

The only stumbling block was my mother, which made me think that the person you know best is the one who is hardest to describe. My brief had been "likes tasteful luxuries, more into quality than labels." Alyson's suggestions—a bespoke Anya Hindmarch handbag; a personal chef for a day—weren't nailing it. I went back to her with more characterizations: "Kind of bohemian but not hippie, more Dries than sharp, likes cash-

mere" yielded the options of a Gina Cendese vase from Barneys, a spa day at the Mandarin Oriental in London, and a sweater, wrap, or robe by Lucien Pellat-Finet, Giulia Piersanti, or Loro Piana. Nothing was quite there. What can I say? Mothers are tricky.

Ultimately, however, 98 percent of my list was done, for an outlay of around \$1,000 if I had her order the gifts for me. And all in a few minutes while I enjoyed the mountain views and sea breezes on a Greek island.—EVE MACSWEENEY *view >206*

StyleChic, stylechicla.com, (323) 806-2626