

The Red Address Book

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*For Doris, Heaven's most beautiful angel.
You gave me air to breathe and wings to fly.*

And for Oskar, my most precious treasure.



The salt shaker. The pill box. The bowl of lozenges. The blood pressure monitor in its oval plastic case. The magnifying glass and its red bobbin lace strap, taken from a Christmas curtain, tied in three fat knots. The phone with the extra large numbers. The old red leather address book, its bent corners revealing the yellowed paper within. She arranges everything carefully, in the middle of the kitchen table. They have to be lined up neatly. No creases on the pale blue ironed linen tablecloth.

A moment of calm as she looks out at the street and the dreary weather. People rushing by, with and without umbrellas. The bare trees. The gravelly slush on the tarmac, water trickling through it.

A squirrel darts along a branch, and a flash of happiness twinkles in her eyes. She leans forward, following the blurry little creature's movements carefully. Its bushy tail swings from side to side as it moves lithely between branches. Then it jumps down to the road and quickly disappears, heading off to new adventures.

It must almost be time to eat, she thinks, stroking her stomach. She picks up the magnifying glass and raises it to her gold wristwatch with a shaking hand. The numbers are still too small, and she has no choice but to give up. She clasps her hands calmly in her lap and closes her eyes for a moment, awaiting the familiar sound of the front door.

'Did you nod off, Doris?'

An excessively loud voice abruptly wakes her from her sleep. She feels a hand on her shoulder, and sleepily tries to smile and nod at the young carer who is bending down over her.

'I must have.' The words stick, and she clears her throat.

'Here, have some water.' The carer is quick to hold out a glass, and Doris takes a few sips.

'Thank you... Sorry, but I've forgotten your name.' It's a new girl again. The old one left, she was going back to her studies.

‘It’s me, Doris, Ulrika. How are you today?’ she asks, but she doesn’t stop to listen to the answer.

Not that Doris gives one.

She quietly watches Ulrika’s hurried movements in the kitchen. Sees her take out the pepper and put the salt shaker back in the pantry. She leaves a tablecloth full of creases in her wake.

‘No extra salt, I’ve told you,’ Ulrika says with the tub of food in her hand, giving her a stern look. Doris nods and sighs as Ulrika peels back the plastic film. Sauce, potatoes, fish and peas, all mixed together, are tipped out onto a brown ceramic plate. Ulrika puts the plate in the microwave and turns the dial to two minutes. The machine starts up with a faint whirr, and the scent of fish slowly begins to drift through the flat. While she waits, Ulrika starts to move Doris’s things: she stacks the newspapers and post in a messy pile, takes the dishes out of the dishwasher.

‘Is it cold out?’ Doris turns back to the heavy drizzle. She can’t remember when she last set foot outside her door. It was summer. Or maybe spring.

‘Yeah, ugh, winter’ll soon be here. The raindrops almost felt like tiny lumps of ice today. I’m glad I’ve got the car and don’t have to walk. I found a space on your street, right outside the door. The parking’s actually much better in the suburbs, where I live. It’s hopeless here in town, but sometimes you get lucky.’ The words stream from Ulrika’s mouth and then transform into a faint hum. A pop song, Doris recognises it from the radio. Ulrika whirls away. Dusts the bedroom. Doris can hear her clattering around and hopes she doesn’t knock the vase over, the hand-painted one she’s so fond of.

When Ulrika returns, she is carrying a dress over one arm. It’s burgundy, wool, the one with bobbed arms and a thread hanging from the hem. Doris had tried to pull it loose the last time she wore the dress, but the pain in her back made it impossible to reach beyond her knees. She holds out a hand to try to catch it now, but grasps at thin air when Ulrika suddenly turns and drapes the dress over a chair. The carer comes back and starts to loosen Doris’s dressing gown. She gently pulls her arms free and Doris whimpers quietly, her bad back sending a wave of pain out into her shoulders. It’s always there, day and night. A reminder of her ageing body.

'I need you to stand up now. I'll lift you on three, OK?' Ulrika places an arm around her, helps her to her feet and pulls the dressing gown away. She is left standing there, in the kitchen, in the cold light of day, naked but for her underwear. That needs changing too. Doris covers herself with one arm as her bra is unhooked. Her breasts fall loosely towards her stomach.

'Oh, you poor thing, you're freezing! Come on, let's get you to the bathroom.'

Ulrika takes her hand and Doris follows her with cautious, hesitant steps. She feels her breasts swing, clasps one arm tight against them. The bathroom is warmer thanks to the underfloor heating hidden beneath the tiles, and she kicks off her slippers and enjoys the warmth beneath the soles of her feet.

'Right, let's get this dress on you. Lift your arms.'

She does as she is told, but she can only raise her arms to chest height. Ulrika struggles with the fabric and manages to pull the dress over her head. When Doris glances up at her, she smiles.

'Peekaboo! What a nice colour, it suits you. Would you like some lipstick as well? Maybe a bit of blusher on your cheeks?'

The makeup is set out on a little table by the sink. Ulrika holds up the lipstick, but Doris shakes her head and turns away.

'How long will the food be?' she asks on her way back to the kitchen.

'The food! Ah! What an idiot I am, I forgot all about it. I'll have to heat it up again.'

Ulrika hurries over to the microwave, opens the door and slams it shut again, turns the dial to one minute and presses start. She pours some lingonberry juice into a glass and places the plate on the table. Doris wrinkles her nose when she sees the sludge, but hunger makes her lift the fork to her mouth.

Ulrika sits down opposite her with a cup in her hand. The hand-painted one, with the pink roses. The one Doris herself never uses, out of fear of breaking it.

'Coffee, it's liquid gold, it is,' Ulrika remarks. 'Right?'

Doris nods, her eyes fixed on the cup.

Don't drop it.

‘Are you full?’ Ulrika asks after they have been sitting in silence for some time. Doris nods and Ulrika gets up to clear away the plate. She comes back with yet another cup of steaming coffee. A dark blue one, from Höganäs.

‘There you go. Now we can catch our breath for a moment, hmm?’

Ulrika smiles and sits down again.

‘This weather, nothing but rain, rain, rain. It feels like it’s never ending.’

Doris is just about to reply, but Ulrika continues:

‘I wonder if I sent any extra tights to nursery. The little ones will probably get soaked today. Oh well, they must have spares they can borrow. Otherwise I’ll be picking up a grumpy, barefoot kid. Always this worrying about the kids. But I suppose you know what it’s like. How many children do you have?’

Doris shakes her head.

‘Oh, none at all? You poor thing, so you never get any visitors? Have you never been married?’

The carer’s pushiness surprises her. They don’t usually ask this kind of question, at least not so bluntly, anyway.

‘But you must have friends? Who come over occasionally? That looks thick enough, anyway.’ She points to the address book on the table.

Doris doesn’t answer. She glances at the photo of Jenny. It’s in the hallway, but the carer has never even noticed it. Jenny, who is so far away and yet always so close in her thoughts.

‘Well, listen,’ Ulrika continues, ‘I’ve got to rush off. We can talk more next time.’

Ulrika loads the cups into the dishwasher, even the hand painted one. Then she gives the counter one last wipe with the dishcloth, sets the machine going, and before Doris knows it, she’s out the door. Through the window, she watches Ulrika pull on her coat as she walks, and then climb into a little red car with the local authority logo on the door. With shuffling steps, Doris makes her way over to the dishwasher and pauses the wash. She pulls out the hand painted cup, carefully rinses it and then hides it at the very back of the cupboard, behind the deep dessert bowls. She checks from every angle. It’s no longer visible. Pleased, she sits back down at the kitchen table and smooths out the tablecloth with her hands. Arranges everything

carefully. The pill box, the lozenges, the plastic case, the magnifying glass and the phone are all put back in their rightful places. When she reaches for the address book, her hand pauses, and she allows it to rest there. She hasn't opened it in a long time, but now she lifts the cover and is met by a list of names on the first page. Each one has been crossed out. In the margin, she has written it several times. One word. *DEAD.*

• *The Red Address Book* •

A. ALM, ERIC

There are so many names which pass us by during a lifetime. Have you ever thought about that, Jenny? All the names which come and go. Which rip our hearts to pieces and make us shed tears. Which become lovers or enemies. I leaf through my address book sometimes. It has become something like a map of my life, and I want to tell you a bit about it. So that you, who'll be the only one who remembers me, will also remember my life. A kind of testament. I'll give you my memories. They're the most beautiful thing I have.

It was 1928. It was my birthday, and I had just turned ten. The minute I saw the parcel, I knew it contained something special. I could tell from the twinkle in Dad's eye. Those dark eyes of his, usually so preoccupied with other things, were eagerly awaiting my reaction. The present was wrapped in thin, beautiful tissue paper. I followed its texture with my fingertips. The delicate surface, the fibres coming together in a jumble of patterns. And then the ribbon: a thick, red silk ribbon. It was the most beautiful parcel I had ever seen.

'Open, open!' Agnes, my two-year-old sister, leaned eagerly over the dining table with both arms on the tablecloth, and was given a mild scolding by our mother.

'Yes, open it now!' Even my father seemed impatient.

I stroked the ribbon with my thumb before pulling both ends and untying the bow. Inside was an address book, bound in shiny red leather which smelled sharply of dye.

'You can collect all your friends in it,' Dad smiled, 'everyone you meet during your life. In all the exciting places you'll visit. So you don't forget.'

He took the book from my hand and opened it. Beneath A, he had already written his own name. *Eric Alm*. Plus the address and phone number for his workshop. The number which had recently been connected, the one he was so proud of. We still didn't have a telephone at home.

He was a big man, my father. I don't mean physically. Not at all. But there never seemed to be enough room for his thoughts at home, it was as though he were constantly floating out over the wider world, away to unknown places. I often had the feeling that he didn't really want to be there, at home with us. He didn't enjoy the small things, he didn't enjoy everyday life. He was thirsty for knowledge and he filled our home with books. I don't remember him talking much, not even with my mother. He just sat there with his books. Sometimes, I would crawl into his lap in the armchair. He never protested, just pushed me to one side so that I didn't obscure the letters and images which had caught his interest. He smelled sweet, like wood, and his hair was always covered with a thin layer of sawdust which made it look grey. His hands were rough and cracked. Every night, he would smear them in Vaseline and then sleep wearing thin cotton gloves.

My hands. I held those around his neck in a cautious embrace. We sat there in our own little world. I followed his mental journey as he turned the page. He read about different countries and cultures, stuck pins into a huge world map he had nailed up on the wall. As though they were places he had visited. One day, he said, one day he would head out into the world. And then he added numbers to the pins. Ones, twos and threes. In the order he was prioritising the various locations. Maybe he would have been better suited to life as an explorer?

If it hadn't been for his father's workshop. An inheritance to look after. A duty to fulfil. He obediently went to the workshop every morning, even after Grandpa died, to stand next to his apprentice in that drab space, with stacks of boards along each wall, surrounded by the sharp scent of turpentine and white spirit. We children were usually only allowed to watch from the doorway. Outside, white roses climbed the dark brown wooden walls. As their petals fell to the ground, we would collect them and place them in bowls of water; we made our own perfume which we then splashed onto our necks.

I remember stacks of half-finished tables and chairs, sawdust and wood chippings everywhere. Tools on hooks on the wall; chisels, jigsaws, carpentry knives, hammers. Everything had its rightful place. And from his position behind the woodworking bench, my father had an overview of it all, with a pencil tucked behind one ear and a thick apron of cracked, brown leather. He always worked until

darkness fell, whether it was summer or winter. Then he came home. Home to his armchair.

Dad. His soul is still here, inside me. Beneath the pile of newspapers on the chair he made, with the seat my mother weaved. All he wanted was to venture out into the world. And all he did was leave an impression within the four walls of his home. The crafted statuettes, the rocking chair he made for Mum, with its elegantly ornate sections. The wooden decorations he painstakingly carved by hand. The bookshelf where some of his books still stand. My father.



Even the smallest of movements requires as much mental power as physical exertion. She moves her legs forward a few millimetres and then pauses. Places her hands on the arm rests. One at a time. Pause. She digs in her heels. Grips the armrest with one hand and places the other on the dining table. Sways her upper body back and forth to get some momentum. The chair she is sitting in has a high, soft back support, and the legs rest in plastic cups which raise it up by a few centimetres. Still, it takes her a long time to get to her feet. She manages it on the third attempt. After that, she has to stand still for another second or two, with her head bowed and both hands on the table, waiting for the dizziness to pass.

Her daily exercise. The stroll around her small flat. Down the hallway from the kitchen, around the sofa in the living room, pausing to pick any withered leaves from the red begonia in the window. Then on to her bedroom, and her writing corner. To the computer, which has become so important to her. She gingerly sits down, in yet another chair resting on plastic supports. They make the chair so high that she can barely fit her thighs beneath the desk. She lifts the lid of the computer and hears the faint, familiar whirr of the hard drive waking up. She clicks the Internet Explorer icon on the desktop and is greeted by the online version of the newspaper. Every day, she is amazed by the fact that the entire world exists inside this tiny little computer. That she, a lonely woman in Stockholm, could keep in touch with people from all over the world, if she wanted to. Technology fills her days. It makes her wait for death that little bit more bearable. She sits here every afternoon, occasionally even in the early morning or late at night, when sleep refuses to cooperate. It was her last carer, Maria, who taught her how it all worked. Skype, Facebook, emails. She had said that no one was too old to learn something new. Doris agreed, and said that no one was too old to realise their dreams. Shortly after that, Maria handed in her notice so that she could start her studies.

Ulrika doesn't seem so interested. She has never mentioned the computer or asked what Doris is up to. She just dusts it in passing as she sweeps through the

room with her to-do list swirling around in her head. Maybe she's on Facebook, though? The majority of people seem to be. Even Doris has an account, the one Maria set up for her. She also has three friends. Maria is one. Then there's her great niece, Jenny, in San Francisco, plus Jenny's eldest son, Jack. She checks in with their lives every now and then, follows images and events from another world. Sometimes, she even studies their friends' lives. The ones who have public profiles.

Her fingers still work. They're a little slower than they used to be, and sometimes they start to ache, forcing her to rest. She writes to gather her memories. To get an overview of the life she has lived. She hopes it will be Jenny who finds everything later, once Doris herself is dead. That it will be her who reads and smiles at the pictures. That it will be Jenny who inherits all of her beautiful things: the furniture, the paintings, the hand painted cup. They won't just be thrown out, will they? She shudders at the thought, brings her fingers to the keys and starts to write, in order to clear up her thoughts. *Outside, white roses climbed the dark brown wooden walls,* she writes today. One sentence. Then a sense of calm as she navigates through a sea of memories.

Have you ever heard a real roar of despair, Jenny? A cry born out of desperation? A scream from the very bottom of a heart, which digs its way in to every last atom, which leaves no one untouched? I have heard several, but each of them has reminded me of the very first, and most terrible.

It came from the inner yard. There he stood. Dad. His cry echoed between the stone walls, and blood pulsed from his hand, staining the layer of frost covering the grass red. There had been an accident in his workshop, and he had a piece of metal wedged in his wrist. His cry ebbed out and he sank to the ground. We ran down the steps and into the yard, towards him, there were many of us. Mum tied her apron around his wrist and held his arm in the air. Her cry was as loud as his when she shouted out for help. Dad's face was worryingly pale, his lips a shade of bluish purple. Everything that happened next is a haze. The men carrying him out to the street. The car which picked him up and drove him away. The solitary dry, white rose growing on the bush by the wall, and the frost embracing it. Once everyone had gone, I stayed where I was on the ground and stared at it. That rose was a survivor. I prayed to God that my dad would find the same strength.

Weeks of anxious waiting followed. Every day, we would see Mum pack up the remains of breakfast, the porridge, milk and bread, and head off to hospital. She would often come home with the food parcel unopened.

One day, she came home with his clothes draped over the basket, which was still full of food. Her eyes were swollen and red from crying. As red as Dad's poisoned blood.

Everything stopped. Life came to an end. Not just for Dad, but for all of us. His desperate cry that frosty November morning was a brutal end to my childhood.

S. SERAFIN, DOMINIQUE

The tears at night weren't mine, but they were so constant in my soul that sometimes I would wake and think they were. Mum started sitting in the rocking chair in the kitchen once we had gone to bed, and I got used to falling asleep accompanied by her sobs. She sewed and she cried; the sound of her sobs came in waves, carried through the room, across the ceiling, to us children. She thought we were sleeping. We weren't. I could hear her sniffing and swallowing, trying to clear her nose. I felt her despair at having been left alone, at no longer being able to live securely in Dad's shadow.

I missed him too. He would never sit in his armchair again, deeply absorbed in a book. I would never be able to crawl into his lap and follow him out into the world. The only hugs I remember from my childhood are the ones I was given by Dad.

Those were difficult months. The porridge we ate for breakfast and dinner became more and more watery. The berries, which we had picked in the forest and then dried, started to run out. One day, Mum shot a pigeon with Dad's gun. It was enough for a stew, and it was the first time since he had died that we were all full, the first time the food had made our cheeks flush, the first time we had laughed. But that laughter would soon die out.

'You're the eldest, you'll have to look after yourself now,' she said, pressing a scrap of paper into my hand. I saw the tears brimming in her green eyes before she turned away and, with a wet cloth, began frantically rubbing at the plates we had just eaten from. The kitchen we stood in at the time, so long ago, has become a kind of museum of memory for my childhood. I remember everything in detail. The skirt she was busy sewing, the blue one draped over the stool. The potato stew and the foam which had run over during cooking, drying down the side of the pot. The lone candle

which bathed the room in a dim glow. My mother's movements between the sink and the table. Her dress, which swung between her legs when she moved.

'What do you mean?' I managed to ask.

She paused, but didn't turn to look at me.

'Are you kicking me out?' I continued.

No reply.

'Say something! Are you kicking me out?'

She looked down at the sink.

'You're a big girl now, Doris, you have to understand. It's a good job I've found for you. And as you can see, the address isn't too far away. We'll still be able to see one another.'

'But what about school?'

Mum looked up and stared straight ahead.

'Dad would never have let you take me out of school. Not now! I'm not ready!' I shouted at her. Agnes whimpered anxiously in her chair.

I slumped down at the table and burst into tears. Mum came to sit next to me and placed her palm on my forehead. It was still cold and damp from the dishwater.

'Please don't cry, my love,' she whispered, pressing her head to mine. It was so quiet that I could almost hear the heavy tears rolling down her cheeks, mixing with my own.

'You can come home every Sunday, that's your day off.'

Her comforting whisper became a faint murmur in my ears. Eventually, I fell asleep in her arms.

I woke the next morning to the brutal and undeniable truth that I was being forced to leave my home and my security for an unknown address. Without protesting, I took the bag of clothes that Mum held out to me, but I couldn't look her in the eye as we said goodbye. I hugged my little sister and then left without a word. I carried the bag in one hand, and three of Dad's books, tied together with a thick piece of string, in the other. There was a name on the scrap of paper in my coat pocket, written in Mum's ornate script: *Dominique Serafin*. That was followed by a couple of strict instructions: *Curtsey nicely. Speak properly*. I wandered slowly through

the streets of Södermalm towards the address below the name: *Bastugatan 5*. That was where I would find my new home.

When I arrived, I paused for quite some time outside the modern building. Red window frames surrounding big, beautiful windows. The facade was made of stone, and there was an even pavement leading into the yard. It was a long way from the simple, weathered wooden house which had been my home until now.

A woman came out through the door. She was wearing glossy leather shoes and a shiny white dress with no defined waist. She had a beige cloche hat pulled down over her ears, and a small leather bag in the same shade hung from her arm. Ashamed, I ran my hands over my own worn, knee-length wool skirt, and wondered who would open the door when I knocked. Whether Dominique was a man or a woman. I couldn't know, I had never heard such a name before.

I walked slowly, my feet pausing on each step of the polished marble staircase. Two floors up. The double doors, made from dark oak, were taller than any doors I had ever seen. I took a step forward and lifted the door knocker, a lion's head. It echoed faintly, and I stared straight into the lion's eyes. A woman dressed in black opened the door and curtsied. I began to unfold the note for her, but another woman appeared before I had time to finish. The woman in black moved to one side and stood against the wall with a straight back.

The second woman had reddish-brown hair which she wore in two long plaits wound into a thick bun at the nape of her neck. There were several strings of white, non-uniform pearls around her neck. Her dress was made from shiny emerald green silk, three-quarter length and with a pleated skirt which rustled when she moved. She was wealthy, I knew that immediately. She looked me up and down, took a drag on the cigarette which she held in a long, black holder, and then blew the smoke up towards the ceiling.

'Well, what do have we here?' She had a strong French accent, and her voice was hoarse from the smoke. 'Such a pretty girl. You can stay. Come, come, inside now.'

With that, she turned around and disappeared into the flat. I remained where I was on the mat in the hallway, my bag in front of me. The woman in black nodded for me to follow her inside. She took me through the kitchen to the adjoining maid's

bedroom, where the slender bed which would be mine stood alongside two others. I placed my bag on the bed. Without being told to, I picked up the dress lying there and pulled it over my head. I didn't know it at the time, but I would be the youngest of the three servants, and would therefore be left with all of the jobs the others didn't want.

I sat down on the edge of the bed and waited with my feet pressed firmly together and my hands tightly clutched on my lap. I can still remember the feeling of loneliness which enveloped me in that little room, not knowing where I was or what was awaiting me. The walls were bare and the wallpaper yellowed. There was a small bedside table next to each bed, with a single candle in a holder. Two half-burnt down, one new, its wick still waxy.

It didn't take long before I heard loud footsteps on the tiles and the rustle of my new mistress's skirt. My heart was racing. She paused in the doorway and I didn't dare meet her gaze.

'Stand up when I come into the room. There. Back straight.'

I got up, and she immediately reached for my hair. Her slim, cool fingers moved all over me; she craned her neck and came closer, inspecting every millimetre of my skin.

'Nice and clean. That's good. You don't have lice, do you girl?'

I shook my head. She continued to inspect me, lifting wisp after wisp of hair. Her fingers moved behind my ear, I felt her long nails scraping my skin.

'This is where they usually live, behind the ear. I hate creepy crawlies,' she mumbled, a shiver passing through her body. A ray of sunshine had found its way in through the window, highlighting the fine, downy hairs on her face, rising above a layer of light powder.

The apartment was big and full of art, sculptures and beautiful furniture in dark wood. It smelled of smoke and something else, something I couldn't quite place. It was always calm and peaceful during the day. Life had been kind to her, and she never had to work; she was well off enough without it. I don't know where her money was from, but sometimes, I fantasised about her husband. About her keeping him locked up in the attic somewhere.

Guests often came over in the evenings. Women in beautiful dresses and diamonds. Men in suits and hats. They came in, still wearing their shoes, and strolled around the drawing room as though it were a restaurant. The air filled with smoke and conversations in English, French and Swedish.

My nights in the apartment introduced me to ideas I had never heard before. Equal pay for women, the right to education. Philosophy, art and literature. And to new behaviours. Loud laughter, furious arguments and couples kissing openly in the bay windows and corners. It was quite a change.

I would crouch down when I crossed the room to collect glasses and mop up spilled wine. Legs moved unsteadily between the rooms on high heels; sequins and peacock feathers floated down to the floor and became wedged between the broad wooden tiles in the hallway. I would have to lie there until the early hours, removing every last trace of the festivities with a small kitchen knife. When Madame woke, everything had to be perfect again. We worked hard, she expected freshly ironed tablecloths every morning. The tables had to shine and the glasses be free of flecks. Madame always slept until late morning, but when she eventually left her bedroom, she would walk through the apartment inspecting it one room at a time. If she found anything noteworthy, it was always me who got the blame. Always the youngest. I quickly learnt what she might spot, and would do one last loop of the apartment before she woke, righting the things the others had done wrong.

The few hours of sleep I got on the hard horsehair mattress were never enough. My body was constantly tired from the long days with the seams of the black uniform irritating my skin. And from the hierarchy and the slaps. And the men who laid their hands on my body.