Shadow

Karin Alvtegen

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Extract

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translated from the Swedish by McKinley Burnett



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I

'When you hear the tone – ding-a-ling – it means it's time to turn the page. Now we'll begin.'

The voice on the tape had changed. It almost sounded like a man now, although he knew it was a lady. Once again he opened the Bambi book to the first page and listened to the story on the tape player. He knew it by heart. He had known it for a long time, but today he'd listened so many times that the lady's voice was beginning to turn dark.

It had begun to grow dark around him as well; not as many mammas and pappas with kids and balloons were coming by any more. He was hungry. The buns he'd been given were all eaten up and the juice had made him want to pee, but she had told him that he should stay here, so he didn't dare move. He was used to waiting. But he really had to pee now, and if she didn't come and collect him soon he might wet himself. He didn't want Mamma to get that look. The one that made him hurt and sometimes made her leave him alone in the dark. He put his hand on the sore spot he'd got yesterday when he didn't want to go with her. Her eyes had turned so angry and she'd told him he was being naughty. And then his back had hurt. She wanted to go to that house so often. First take the bus and then the long walk. Sometimes she stayed with him out there, but sometimes she was gone for a long time, and he wasn't allowed to bother her. There was a strange house of glass in the garden where it was rather fun to play, but not all the time and never alone. There was a little shed with wood in it too, where he could carve things even though he wasn't allowed to play with knives. Sometimes she took such a long time it got dark. Then

the ghosts came creeping out, and the thieves. The knife in the woodshed was his only protection. And the magic floorboard with the dark spot that looked like an eye. If he stood on it with the knife in his hand and sang 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star' then they couldn't get at him. Before, she used to say they were going to live in that house someday, not in the glass house or the one with the wood, but in the big one, and then he would have his own room. Everything would be all right then, she said.

He looked around. He was sitting at the top of a wide staircase, and behind him there was a pond with birds in it. For a moment he wondered whether he dared leave his spot and walk up to have a look, but he remembered what he'd been told and stayed right where he was. The stone step began to feel cold. The voice on the tape player was speaking more slowly now. It almost sounded like she was falling asleep inside. Finally the button popped up and the voice stopped altogether. He suddenly felt lonely. And soon he wouldn't be able to hold it any longer. He didn't know where there was a toilet, and now he began to feel a little sad too. He didn't want to sit here any more. He had waited so long and now he had to go and pee and after that he wanted to leave.

'Hi.'

He jumped at the sound of the voice. In front of him stood a man dressed in green. It looked like he was wearing a police uniform but it was the wrong colour. There was writing on his chest just like a policeman's shirt.

'What's your name then?'

He didn't answer. Mamma had told him never to talk to strangers, and he lowered his eyes and stared hard at the stone step.

'We're closing now, so it's time for everyone to go home. Where are your mamma and pappa?'

The man's voice didn't sound angry. It sounded rather nice, but he knew he wasn't allowed to answer. At the same time he couldn't be rude, and suddenly he didn't know what to do. Two big drops landed at his feet, making dark spots on the stone. And then two more.

'Are you here with your mamma or pappa?'

He shook his head slowly. That way he wouldn't have to talk.

'So who are you here with?'

He shrugged his shoulders.

'Don't be sad. My name is Sven and I'm the guard here at Skansen amusement park. Anybody who needs help in here can come to me. If you've lost your parents or can't find your way or need help.'

It was quiet for a moment.

'How old are you?'

Cautiously he held out the fingers of his left hand, and with his other hand he folded down his little finger and thumb.

'Are you three??'

He shook his head a little.

'No, four.'

He clapped his hand to his mouth. Now he'd spoken to him. What if the old man told his mamma?

He sat in silence, his eyes fixed on the ground. Then he glanced at the man to see if he looked like somebody who would tell. The man smiled at him.

'If you want, you can come with me to the little house down there where I work. We can wait there until they show up.'

He had to pee so badly. Soon he was going to wet himself, and then Mamma would be even angrier.

'I need to pee.'

The man nodded, still smiling.

'The toilets are down there. You run along, and I'll watch your things. Do you see the door there?'

He hesitated a moment before doing as he was told.

Sven Johansson waited on the steps, concerned as he watched the little boy running off towards the toilets. He had noticed him earlier that afternoon, and now he was worried. When the boy disappeared into the toilet, he squatted down and had a look at his belongings. A tape player, a Bambi book, a clear plastic bag with crumbs in it, and a small juice bottle with a yellow plastic top and a few drops of juice left inside. He opened the book to see if the boy's name

was written in it. A folded piece of paper fell to the ground. With a sense of foreboding he unfolded it and his worst fears were confirmed. The brief message was written in a flowing script:

'Take care of this child. Forgive me.'

2

The key to the flat had arrived in a padded envelope from the police. A brown-veneered door in an old-fashioned stairwell that had been gnawed by time. Gerda Persson had lain dead for three days by the time the home help discovered her body. After ninety-two years and a little more than three months she had filled her lungs one last time and turned into a memory. That was all Marianne knew. And since she was the one now standing outside the door of the flat, it was also clear that neither the police nor the home help had managed to find any relative who could take care of all the details required when a life came to an end. That was why the task had landed on Marianne Folkesson's desk. A stranger's key to an unknown life whose past she'd been assigned to retrieve.

She had been in the neighbourhood before. The blocks were full of small flats, and many of their residents were in contact with Social Services' care for the elderly. Sometimes, when one of them died, there was no one to contact. No one except the district commission's estate administrator, Marianne Folkesson.

She opened her bag and took out the thin plastic gloves, but left the mask. She never knew what awaited her behind these strangers' doors, but out of respect for the deceased she tried to go in with an open mind. Sometimes the home was as neat as a doll's house, left to posterity in spotless condition, with meticulously cared-for possessions that no one would ever want. But sometimes among the belongings that

filled the home of the deceased there was an inexplicable feeling of *presence*. In a way, her own arrival was an encroachment, and she didn't like to make it worse by wearing an ugly mask. She preferred to think of herself as an ally, come to close up with respect and dignity the lives hidden behind the unfamiliar names that landed on her desk. To gather the objects she found, and if possible locate the people to whom they would mean something. Death was no longer something that scared her. After twenty years in this job she had realised that it was a natural part of life. She no longer sought the meaning of life, but that didn't mean she thought she had found it. Since the universe had taken the trouble to exist, there must be a reason for it. And with that she had to be content, willing to trust in the mystery.

Life. A tiny moment between two eternities.

Far from all the cases she worked on spoke of lonely lives, even though the circle of friends may have diminished with time and the final years spent in loneliness. But some homes were the opposite of the neat doll's houses – where the chaos and filth were so pungent that her body recoiled from stepping across the threshold. Ripped wallpaper and broken furniture that loudly proclaimed the desperation felt by the deceased. In those cases her report was a portrait of a mentally unstable person without a social network who got by as long as psychiatric support was available. Perhaps the person had lived in a home, but eventually felt better and was then considered too healthy to take up one of the few places offered by the state. Then he was expected to take care of himself and was provided with his own flat, where isolation quickly allowed the disease to regain lost ground. A lonely person who had been in need of care but, once rejected, had not had the strength to beg or plead. Then it was her duty to provide some form of redress, to do everything in her power to track down a relative who at least would come to the funeral. Sometimes there was no one. Just her, the pastor, the funeral director and the cantor who followed the deceased

to his final resting place. In that case she had to try, with the help of photographs and mementos, to get some sense of the person, to give the funeral a personal touch if possible. Whenever she was the only one placing a flower on the coffin, she always prayed for forgiveness for society's incompetence – that it had allowed this person to endure his misery without any intervention.

She turned and gave her companion a pair of gloves. On the first visit someone from the county council always had to accompany her. There should never be any question that everything had been done properly. Various colleagues took turns coming with her, depending on who had time. Today it was one of the aid workers from care for the elderly. Marianne knew the woman's first name, but right now she couldn't remember her surname.

Solveig pulled on the gloves, and Marianne put the key in the door. The hall floor was covered with flyers and a handful of copies of the free local newsletter. There was no stench, only a musty smell that needed to be aired. She glanced through the post as she gathered it into a stack and put it all on the hall table. As far as she could see, there were no bills to be paid or magazine subscriptions that needed cancelling. Only one letter was personally addressed to Gerda.

An offer from a broadband provider.

The flat seemed to be in order, but a thin coating of dust lay on all the clear surfaces. From the home help she had learned that someone came by to do the cleaning for Gerda every third week and to shop for food every Monday. She had declined other assistance, wanting to take care of herself. The dust was certainly no sign of negligence but rather a sign of poor eyesight. Marianne had witnessed this before: the flats of old people where everything was in order but the dust was allowed to settle undisturbed.

In the kitchen a plate and a glass stood in the dish-rack. Otherwise it was empty. A kitchen towel hung over the radiator, and the little table with two chairs was cleared,

except for a wicker basket sitting on an oilcloth with a pattern of tiny flowers. She opened the refrigerator. The stench of rotting food rushed out. Marianne found the plastic rubbish bag she'd brought along. Two weeks had passed since Gerda had died, and after the ambulance took away the body, the home help had been forbidden entry to the flat. An open carton of low-fat milk, a tub of butter, caviar and a rotten cucumber were all consigned to the plastic bag, which she quickly sealed and set by the front door.

'Look at this. She has books in the freezer.'

Solveig was still standing by the open refrigerator door when Marianne came back to the kitchen. A thick layer of ice had formed around the books, which were sealed in clingfilm and neatly stacked at the back of the freezer compartment. In one of the kitchen drawers Marianne found a spatula, which she used to prise the books from their prison. The plastic was frosted over, and she scraped her fingernail along the spine of one of the books. *Let the Stones Speak* by Axel Ragnerfeldt. One of the greatest. Not his most famous one, but then all his works were considered modern classics.

'There might be money hidden between the pages,' her colleague said. On several occasions Marianne had found banknotes hidden in the strangest places. But this book was empty, as were the others. All of them were by Axel Ragnerfeldt, and with some astonishment she discovered that they all had handwritten dedications. *To Gerda with affection* and *To Gerda with the warmest thanks*. And then an ornate signature above the printed name of the author. Marianne felt a warmth in her chest. As always she was glad to discover signs that this person who lived alone had at one time been part of some sort of community. That her life had not always been so solitary. In this case Marianne felt doubly satisfied. Generally, if no assets and nothing of value were found, there was little chance of a nice funeral. But these books could certainly be sold for a good price because of Axel Ragnerfeldt's

personal dedication, and she would see to it that as much as possible went towards the decoration of the church and a beautiful headstone. A testament of respect for the person whose life had now ended.

'They don't seem to have been damaged by being frozen. These books must be really valuable.'

Marianne nodded. The shy Nobel Prize-winner had achieved fame that was without precedent in the cultural life of Sweden, but he had seldom given interviews. She couldn't remember hearing a single detail of his private life.

'Gerda Persson was ninety-two. They must have been almost the same age, don't you think?'

'I didn't realise he was that old. Do you really think so?'

Marianne wasn't sure. And the book jackets provided no clue. They had been printed before the era of the cult of personality, back in the days when an author's words were more interesting than his face.

The flat consisted of two rooms and a kitchen. They went into the hall, past the living room, and into the bedroom. A Zimmer frame lay on its side on the floor. The nightstand had been knocked over and the sheet torn off the bed. The rug was in a heap and on top of it clothes and magazines were jumbled together. A water glass lay on its side next to a tube of hand cream and a box of valerian. In the midst of all this an alarm clock kept on ticking. Marianne straightened up the nightstand and replaced the bedside lamp. In the little drawer there were magazine clippings, throat lozenges, a Bible, a necklace, some envelopes, and a small pocket diary. She turned to a page at random. *Woke up at 6 a.m. Potatoes and meatballs. Hedda Gabler on TV.* Most of the magazine articles were about heart disease, and the dates showed they'd been collected over a long period. Some were poems from obituaries with the names cut off. The first envelope contained a fifteen-year-old gift voucher for podiatric care, the second a card offering congratulations on her seventy-fifth birthday from her friends in the library

pensioners' group. The third envelope was thicker and well-thumbed. Marianne looked inside. Solveig opened a wardrobe but closed it again when she saw it contained only clothes.

'How much is in there?'

Marianne took out a bundle of banknotes and counted them.

'Eleven thousand, five hundred and seventy kronor.'

She closed the drawer but kept the envelope with the cash. After she had finished her search of the flat she would have to fill out an inventory form on which furniture and objects of value had to be listed along with any other assets found, such as cash. Any property belonging to the deceased would go firstly to pay for funeral expenses and a headstone, and secondly to the settlement of the estate. Whatever remained would go to any creditors.

Solveig took a quick look through the other wardrobe, then they both moved into the living room. This room was mainly furnished with older pieces. A bureau, a bookshelf and a more modern sofa – nothing that would generate large sums for the estate. A bed had been set up in front of the TV, and on the table next to it lay a TV guide, two scraped-off lottery tickets with no win, and a considerable array of medicines. They stood lined up on a piece of paper, cross-ruled with handwritten dates: Imdur, aspirin, Bisoprolol, Plavix, Plendil, citalopram, Pravachol.

It was amazing what society would do to keep people alive. Not to mention the enthusiasm of the pharmaceutical industry.

Like an exclamation mark amid the old-fashioned furnishings, a red push-button telephone sat on a small table inside the doorway. Marianne went over and leafed through a small stack of papers. A handwritten list of postal giro account numbers for radio service, telephone company and insurance. A notice from Söder Hospital. A supermarket flyer. A brochure from the chemist's about the use of Bisoprolol. At

the bottom lay a dog-eared address book. Marianne looked up the letter A. A handful of names and phone numbers were written with different pens, and all but two were crossed out. The sum total of a lifetime of acquaintances collected in a little book. One by one the links to the outside world had vanished and were then deleted.

Address books were her best tool in the search for relatives. She would ring all the numbers she found, in the hope of persuading someone to come to the funeral. When older people died, the numbers were often disconnected with no forwarding number. Occasionally so much time had passed that new subscribers had taken them over.

A sudden thought made her turn to the letter R. At the top of the column of names she found what she was looking for. Ragnerfeldt. The name was not crossed out.

'Here are some photos.' Solveig was kneeling in front of the old bureau with a brown envelope in her hand. Marianne put the address book in her bag and went over to her colleague, casting a glance inside the open bureau doors. Piles of neatly ironed tablecloths, crystal glasses of various designs, a Chinese-inspired coffee service. A red cardboard binder labelled *Household Accounts* on the spine. Marianne pulled it out and stuffed it into her bag.

'I wonder if this is a picture of her? Looks like it's from a birthday.' Solveig turned it over. 'Nothing written on it.'

She handed Marianne the picture. A faded colour photo of an elegantly dressed woman sitting in an easy chair surrounded by vases of flowers. Her hair was brushed back and fastened in a bun. Her face wore a serious expression, as if she wasn't comfortable being the centre of attention.

Solveig took out another photo.

'Look, here he is. That's him, isn't it?'

Marianne looked at the picture. Black-and-white this time. Axel Ragnerfeldt was sitting at a wooden table staring into the distance with a coffee cup in his hand. A woman of about the same age and two small children were also at the

table, looking into the camera. A girl and a boy. The boy was a few years older.

Marianne nodded. 'That's definitely him. I didn't even know he had a family.'

'Maybe it's not his.'

'It looks like a family photograph.'

Marianne put the photo back in the envelope and stuffed it into her bag.

Solveig moved on to the bookshelf. 'Here are some of his books.'

Marianne followed her.

'Signed?'

Solveig opened a book. The florid signature flowed above the printed name, but this time without a personal greeting. Marianne pulled out another and flicked through the pages with her thumb. She gasped when she saw that all the pages were crossed out with a thick red marker. In certain places the text seemed to have particularly incensed whoever held the pen. Those pages had been obliterated with such force they were unreadable and the paper was almost torn.

'Why the hell did she do that?'

They checked one book after another, and they had all been subjected to the same fate. The red lines shone blood-red on the pages, and here and there the pen had made small punctures. Marianne pulled out a book by a different author but found the pages untouched.

'Hmm.' She didn't usually make comments, especially not about things that had taken place in the person's own home and didn't harm anyone else. But she found it odd, to say the least, that someone would intentionally destroy a signed book by Ragnerfeldt. Particularly in a home like this where the extra income from the sale of a valuable item might have been welcome. Perplexed, Marianne shoved the book back in place.

'So, what do you think?' said Solveig. 'Do you have everything you need for now?'

Marianne opened her bag and took out the folder of inventory forms.

'We just have to fill out one of these now.'

When the form was completed and Solveig had left, Marianne remained standing at the living-room window. She took in Gerda Persson's view. A tree, a lawn, the dull green façade of a block of flats in the background. Behind those windows the lives and secrets of other people.

Everything she needed for the time being was packed into her bag. If no relatives contacted her after the death notice appeared, she would have to resort to the provincial records office and the church birth registry. And the names in the address book. She would do everything she could to find as many pieces of the puzzle as necessary to honour Gerda Persson at her funeral. Now her real work began. The hunt for Gerda Persson's past.

She had already found one name.

Axel Ragnerfeldt.