

ON COLLECTING STAMPS

BRUNO GMÜNDER



A novel by HÅKAN LINDQUIST

Håkan Lindquist

On collecting stamps

Novel



Translated from the Swedish by the author

BRUNO GMÜNDER

Table of Contents

Titel

Quote

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

Notes

Quotations in the novel

About the author

Imprint

”som når et rum fra en drøm
på en rejse engang
er netop det rum man kommer
hjem og flytter ind i”

Inger Christensen, *Alfabet*

“like when a room from a dream
on a journey
is the same room that you come home
and move into”

Inger Christensen, *Alphabet*



1

I wake up from a dream about roe deer on a moor. For a while I lie still with my eyes closed, trying to make those shadowy creatures stay, but inevitably they disappear. One of my hands was clasping something in the dream, I still think I can feel the object in the palm of my hand, against my fingers, and I open my hand and my eyes to see, but whatever it was I was holding is gone. The only thing that remains is the memory of the touch, a light pressure against my skin.

My eyes are drawn to the bedroom window. The light from the window is soft and sensual. I stand up, slowly stretch myself before pushing away the chair to get more space. The parquet floor—worn dark—is shimmering. I can smell the wood as I do my push-ups—*sixteen, seventeen, eighteen ...*

Then the phone rings, my concentration is broken.

“Mattias!”

It’s my mother. Her voice immediately reveals sadness, or fatigue.

“I called to tell you about Samuel,” she says. “Do you remember him? Samuel Gunnarsson.”

She continues to speak, but my thoughts have gone elsewhere.

It was Sunday, early afternoon and just a week left before summer vacation. It had been raining heavily for a couple of days—it was cold, so those who had the opportunity chose to stay indoors—but during the night it had suddenly ceased and the morning brought sunshine and a clear blue

summer sky. I had left home early on my bike, while the moisture still covered the world.

Mother had been standing in her bedroom window when I left.

"Be careful now, Mattias," she called. Careful ...

"He's dead," she says. Her voice is soft and sympathetic. "He died a couple of days ago. In his sleep. Still, he was not that old, a few years older than I, that's all. I think it was a heart attack, but I don't really know. Anyway, I thought you might want to know. You were quite close for a while ..."

"Yes, we were."

"Do you like butterflies?"

"Yes, I do."

"I too like butterflies. Do you like stamps?"

"Yes. I think so."

"I can show you if you want me to. I have lots of beautiful stamps."

"Have you got stamps with butterflies?"

"I do. I have plenty."

"Has there been a funeral?"

"No," Mother says, "there hasn't even been a death announcement, at least not in the *News*."

"When will it be?"

"The funeral?"

"Yes."

"It will probably be in a week, maybe ten days. Sometimes it takes longer. Why? Are you planning to come down?"

I try to see Samuel before me, but it's a long time since I met him, and all I manage to conjure up is a dark silhouette without specific features.

"I'm not sure. But I think I will. If I can take some time off work."

The bicycle was flame-colored and brand-new, and provided with drop handlebars, ten gears and handbrakes. It was, in fact, a present for my twelfth birthday in September, but Mother and my grandparents thought I

should be able to use it during summer vacation, so it was given to me in early May.

I was going at full speed down the slope toward the Döderhult brook and the old bathhouse, and I was splitting the Sunday stillness and the early summer air with my pedaling and my heavy breathing. My eyes were tearing from the wind. I changed gears and enjoyed the smooth rattling sound as the chain was led over the sprockets.

After the allotment-garden area by Storåkersbacken Hill I turned away from the asphalt road and drove toward the manor. Two large horses in an enclosed pasture by the graveled road allowed themselves to be scared by my driving. For a short while they were galloping with me, throwing back their heads, playfully, powerfully. Their thundering hooves created vibrations that spread to me, a rhythmical tickling sensation via the ground and the bicycle wheels, through the frame and to the saddle under my buttocks, the handlebars under my hands.

On the roadside, coltsfoot—horsehoof—flickered by ...

“Are you still there, Mattias?”

“Sorry! My thoughts were drifting. Do you remember the bicycle you and Grandma and Grandpa gave me? The flame-colored one. It was when I was out on it, on one of my first tours, that I met Samuel and his mother, Carolina.”

“Yes, I remember the bicycle. It was very nice. Was that when you turned eleven?”

“Twelve.”

I am not sure how old Samuel was then. Close to fifty, I would guess. But he seemed to be a lot older. He was a very sad man when I drove my bicycle into his life. That’s how it was. That’s exactly how it was.

Suddenly a dog ran out into the street. It was right in the tight curve on the steepest part of the church road, just by the approach to Dalgatan street, and there was no way I could have seen it before it was suddenly right in front of me. I braked instantly and tried to turn, but I was thrown off my bike and into the shrubbery next to a wall. The dog was gone.

A few seconds of smells—sticky sap, soil, broken nettles—was followed by the sound of a person running. The rapid steps seemed to match the pulsating soreness of my left arm.

“Are you all right?”

I wiped off some of the dirt before I turned and looked up. The woman crouching next to me reminded me of my father’s mother. Her long blond hair was held in a topknot on the back of her head, and for a moment I actually thought it was she who had climbed down from heaven to take care of me, her only grandchild.

“Are you okay? I looked up and saw you fly into the shrubbery. Are you hurt?”

I told her about the dog, but I didn’t tell her that I—in all the commotion—had forgotten that I was riding a new bike and had tried to use a non-existing coaster brake.

“Come with me. We need to clean that wound and put on a plaster.”

She picked up my bicycle. “I think we should have a look at this too ...”

He entered the kitchen while the woman was cleaning the wound on my arm. I heard the steps but could not turn around to see who it was. I could clearly feel his looking at me.

“Who’s that?” he asked. His voice was dark and soft.

The woman looked up, over my shoulder. I tried to turn but she was still holding my arm in a steady grip—“Just wait a minute.”—and I merely caught a glimpse, or perhaps it was just a sense of a large figure, out of the corner of my eye.

“It’s a little boy who had an accident while biking. I think King is running loose again. One of these days someone will run over that dog. There you are. Now we just need the Band-Aid. Hold on for a bit.” She let go of my arm. “Meanwhile, you can talk with Samuel.”

I turned around and for the first time saw his face. His dark eyes were looking at me closely but were strangely empty. He was sitting on the kitchen sofa between the door and one of the windows.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Mattias.”

He repeated my name. “It means ‘gift from God.’ Did you know that?”

Then there was silence. The only thing I could hear was the ticking of a dark-brown pendulum clock on the wall. A hollow, metallic sound. I looked around. The kitchen was modern but had an old-fashioned feel. It had something to do with the light and the smells, a heavy saturation I instantly felt, although I did not immediately comprehend it. The clock underscored the passing of time till Samuel’s mother returned with the Band-Aid.

"There you go. Now everything's all right." She smiled. "And now I think we could do with some coffee. And some black-currant juice for you, child. Unless you'd prefer coffee. Samuel liked coffee even as a child, unlike his sister."

"I like coffee," I replied without even trying to protest that within just a few minutes she had called me both little boy and child.

"Do you like butterflies?" Samuel asked.

I glanced quickly at his mother before I answered. She smiled and nodded.

"Yes, I do."

"Do you like stamps?"

Samuel had two rooms of his own on the upper floor. He gestured as we passed the first one. "This is my bedroom."

The door was ajar, and I caught a glimpse of a bed and a desk. Hanging over the bed were some paintings and photographs.

"And that's my bathroom."

Then he opened the gabon-wood door to the left of the bathroom.

He stopped at the door and nodded into the room. I was right by his side by now, and I couldn't help but once again notice his eyes. They had come alive, and there was now a completely different expression. He looked at me curiously.

"This is where I keep all my stamps."

The walls of the room were lined with shelves covered with boxes, albums, and catalogues. The boxes and albums had labels. Some of them I could read even from the doorway. "Sweden—duplicates," "Norway," "Norway—uncancelled," "Subject—mountains."

"Come on in! Don't be shy!"

I stepped into the room. There was a soft smell of soap. In front of the window toward the valley were a light-gray table and a dark-brown wooden chair. On the table were a magnifying glass, a cigarbox, and some books with stamps on their covers. A paper note was attached to the windowframe with a red thumbtack. "Do not open! Stamps!" Below the note, on the windowsill, stood a pair of binoculars.

"You can sit on the chair if you like. I can stand. I've been sitting all day."

I sat down.

"Are there stamps in all the boxes? In all the albums?"

"Yes, that's right."

"How many are there?"

"I don't know. Thousands. Many thousands."

"From all over the world?"

"Yes, more or less."

Samuel pulled out one of the boxes, a dark-green shoebox with a beautiful monogram on the short side. He took off the lid and put the box in front of me.

"Have you looked out the window?" he asked, his voice different now.

I turned, looked out over the valley, the softly winding road with the lonely tree and the white eighteenth-century church with its red-tile roof. To the left of the church was the old cemetery. Samuel was still smiling, but I was somewhat confused.

"Did you see?"

I shrugged. "Yes ..."

"The church," he said.

"Yes?"

"You see the church, don't you?"

"Yes."

He pushed the box a bit closer.

"All these stamps have church motifs. All the boxes on this side are divided into different motifs: churches, bridges, mammals, birds ..."

"Have you got a stamp with this church?"

"The church here in Döderhult?" Once again he smiled. "No, I don't. There is no such stamp. But I do have several postcards with our church that I can show you sometime. But there has never been a stamp." Then he put out his left hand—it seemed to be twice as big as mine—and gently touched my shoulder.

"I don't think you know that much about stamps. But I can teach you, if you want ..."

The telephone conversation is over and I enter my kitchen, open the window toward the backyard and start to fix my breakfast. Some children are climbing the plastered walls between the yards. I can hear their yelling and their voices as I wash the espresso machine and fill it with fresh water. Then—just as I turn off the tap—there is a silence. I lean out of the window. The children have disappeared into some gateway or are hiding in some nook. I stand for a long time, holding the coffee machine.

“Where have you been?” my mother asked, and closed the book she was reading.

“I’ve been to someone called Samuel,” I replied, as I kicked off my shoes in the hallway. “He and his mother helped me when I had an accident on my bike.”

“Have you been in an accident?” She stood up and came close. “I told you to be careful. Are you all right? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I just scratched my arm a bit. It doesn’t hurt anymore.”

She gave me a worried look.

“You promised me you’d be careful.”

“The bike hasn’t been damaged. It wasn’t that bad.”

“Where did it happen?”

I could hear she was still worried.

“On the slope by the church, but not at the steepest point. A dog ran out in the street and I had to give way.”

Then I pulled out a thick envelope from my jacket pocket.

“Look at this! Samuel gave me lots of stamps. I can show you.”



2

The white-plastered parish church seems strangely small when I enter it. It appeared to be a fantastic cathedral when I was a child and one of the boys in the choir or one of hundreds of pupils at the ceremonies before semester break. But the coolness inside is definitely the same. And the filtered light falling thin and green from the high windows next to the altar, illuminating the dust floating somewhere between the large brass chandeliers and the hard, shiny wooden pews, seems to be the same: a quiet, reduced light without joy.

An old man welcomes me with a steady, soft handshake. He hands me a hymnbook and a folded piece of paper. I look briefly at the paper and catch a glimpse of a cross and a quotation from the Bible and some other text. The man points toward the dark pews.

There are already people sitting in the front pews, some ten men and women, all in their sixties or older. Some of them are talking quietly to each other. They sit close together—lean against each other—in their dark mourning clothes. Now and then someone nods supportingly or sympathetically. Against the light they all become silhouette figures, a not quite silent play.

The coffin, standing on a low, oblong table in front of the altar rail, is draped with a light piece of cloth and decorated with a simple arrangement of flowers and an elegant silver candlestick.

I walk up to the south wall, stop in front of the window beside the strange gallery, and look out at the graveyard