

A
Nearly
Normal
Family

A
Nearly
Normal
Family

M. T. EDVARDSSON

Translated by

RACHEL WILLSON-BROYLES



CELADON
BOOKS
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

A NEARLY NORMAL FAMILY. Copyright © 2019 by M. T. Edvardsson. English language translation copyright © 2019 by Rachel Willson-Broyles. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. For information, address Celadon Books, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010.

www.celadonbooks.com

Designed by Steven Seighman

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data (TK)

ISBN 978-1-250-20443-1 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-250-23112-3 (international, sold outside the U.S.,
subject to rights availability)

ISBN 978-1-250-20442-4 (ebook)

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use. Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at 1-800-221-7945, extension 5442, or by email at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

Originally published in Sweden in 2018 by Forum as *En helt vanlig familj*

Published in agreement with Ahlander Agency

First U.S. Edition: June 2019

First International Edition: June 2019

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Dedication TK

A
Nearly
Normal
Family

Prologue

The district courthouse is in downtown Lund, kitty-corner from the police building, a stone's throw from Central Station. Anyone who lives in Lund passes the courthouse regularly, but most go their whole lives without setting foot inside the building. Until very recently, that was true for me as well.

Now I'm sitting on a bench outside Courtroom 2, and the monitor in front of me informs me that a trial is under way in a homicide case.

My wife is inside, on the other side of the door. Before we walked into the courthouse and went through security, we stopped on the stairs outside and held each other. My wife squeezed my hands so hard they trembled and she told me it is no longer up to us, that the decision is in other hands now. We both know that isn't entirely true.

The loudspeaker crackles, and I am struck by an acute wave of nausea. I hear my name. It's my turn now. I wobble as I rise from the bench and a security guard opens the door for me. He nods, but his expression doesn't betray a single thought or emotion. There is no room for that here.

Courtroom 2 is larger than I'd expected. My wife is squeezed in among the audience members. She looks tired, exhausted. There are traces of tears on her cheeks.

An instant later, I see my daughter.

She's pale and thinner than I remember; her hair looks tangled and wispy, and she looks at me with dull eyes. It takes all my strength not to run over and throw my arms around her and whisper that Dad is here, that I'm not going to let go of her until this is all over.

The presiding judge welcomes me, and my immediate impression of him is favorable. He looks alert, yet there is something sensitive about him. He

appears to be both sympathetic and authoritative. I don't think the lay judges are likely to oppose his ruling when it comes. What's more, I know he, too, is a father.

Since I'm a close relative of the defendant, I'm not allowed to take the oath. I know the court must hear my testimony in full knowledge that my daughter is the defendant in this case. But I also know that who I am, and not least my occupation, means that the court will consider what I have to say to be trustworthy.

The lead judge gives the defense attorney the floor. I take a deep breath. What I'm about to say will affect so many lives for so many years to come. What I'm about to say might decide everything.

I still haven't decided what I'm going to say.

PART ONE

THE FATHER

*A man will be satisfied with good by the fruit of his words,
And the deeds of a man's hands will return to him.*

PROVERBS 12:14, NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE

1

We were a perfectly ordinary family. We had interesting, well-paid jobs and an extensive circle of friends. We kept active in our free time thanks to our interest in sports and culture. On Fridays we ate takeout in front of *Idol* and dozed off on the sofa before the voting was over. On Saturdays we ate lunch downtown or at a shopping center. We watched handball or went to the movies; we enjoyed a bottle of wine with good friends. We fell asleep each night cuddled close together. Sundays were spent in the forest or at a museum, having long talks on the phone with our parents, or curled up on the sofa with a novel. We often rounded off Sunday evenings sitting up in bed with papers, binders, and computers strewn everywhere, preparing for the upcoming workweek. On Monday nights, my wife went to yoga and on Thursdays I played basketball. We had a mortgage, which we dutifully made payments on; we sorted our trash and used our blinkers and kept to the speed limit and always returned library books on time.

This year we took vacation late: early July to mid-August. After several lovely summers in Italy, we had spent the last few years scheduling our international trips in the wintertime so we could spend summers relaxing at home and going on shorter excursions along the coast to visit friends and relatives. This time we also rented a cottage on the island of Orust.

Stella spent just about her whole summer working at H&M. She was saving up for a long trip to Asia this winter. I still hope she manages to go.

You could say that Ulrika and I rediscovered each other this summer. It sounds like such a cliché, almost too cheesy; no one believes it's possible to fall in love with your wife all over again after twenty years. As if the years

raising a child were merely an aside in our love story. As if this is what we've been waiting for. But that's how it feels, anyway.

Kids are a full-time job. When they're babies you're waiting for them to become independent, and you spend all your time worrying that they'll choke on something or fall on their face. Then comes preschool and you worry because they're out of your sight, because they might fall off a swing set or fail their next check-up. Then they start school and you worry that they won't fit in, won't make any friends, and everything is homework and riding lessons, handball and pajama parties. They start high school and there are even more friends, parties and conflicts, talks with tutors, all the chauffeuring around. You worry about drugs and drinking, that they'll end up in bad company, and the teenage years go by like a soap opera at 190 kilometers per hour. Then suddenly you're standing there with an adult child and you think you'll finally get to stop worrying.

This summer, at least, we managed several long runs without worrying about Stella. Family life had never seemed so harmonious. Then everything changed.

One Friday in August, Stella turned eighteen—I had booked a table at our favorite restaurant. Italy and Italian cuisine have always been close to our hearts, and there's a little place in the Väster neighborhood that serves divine pasta and pizza. I was looking forward to a quiet, cozy evening with my family.

"Una tavola per tre," I said to a waitress with deer eyes and a pierced nose. "Adam Sandell. I have a reservation for eight o'clock."

She looked around anxiously.

"One second," she said, walking off through the busy restaurant.

Ulrika and Stella turned to me as the waitress fussed at her colleagues, gesturing and making faces.

It turned out that whoever had accepted my reservation had accidentally written it down for Thursday.

"We thought you were coming yesterday," the waitress said, scratching the back of her neck with her pen. "But we'll figure it out. Give us five minutes."

Another party had to get up while the staff dragged an extra table into the dining room. Ulrika, Stella, and I stood in the middle of the crowded

restaurant, trying to pretend we didn't notice the annoyed glances shooting our way from every direction. I almost wanted to speak up, point out that it wasn't our fault—it was the restaurant's mistake.

When our table was finally ready, I hurried to hide my face behind my menu.

"Apologies, apologies," said a man with a gray beard, presumably the owner. "We'll make it up to you, of course. Dessert is on the house."

"It's no problem," I assured him. "We're all only human."

The waitress scribbled our drink order on her pad.

"A glass of red wine?" Stella said.

She looked at me for permission. I turned to Ulrika.

"It's a special day," my wife said.

So I nodded at the waitress.

"A glass of red for the birthday girl."

After the meal, Ulrika handed Stella a card with a Josef Frank pattern.

"A map?"

I smiled mischievously.

We followed Stella out of the restaurant and around the corner. I had parked her present there that afternoon.

"But Dad, I told you . . . it's too expensive!"

She brought her hands to her face, gaping.

It was a pink Vespa Piaggio. We'd looked at a similar one online a few weeks earlier and, sure, it was expensive, but in the end I had convinced Ulrika we ought to buy it.

Stella shook her head and sighed.

"Why won't you ever listen to me, Dad?"

I held up one hand and smiled.

"A 'thank you' will do."

I knew Stella wanted cash most of all, but it felt so boring to give money as a present. With the Vespa she could get downtown easily and quickly, to go to work or visit friends. In Italy, every teenager drives a Vespa.

Stella hugged us and thanked us several times over before we all headed back into the restaurant, but somehow I felt disappointed.

The waitress brought our comped tiramisu and we all agreed that we couldn't eat another bite. And then we ate it all up anyway.

I had *limoncello* with my coffee.

"I have to head out now," Stella said, squirming in her seat.

"Not already?"

I looked at the time. Nine thirty.

Stella pressed her lips together as she continued to rock back and forth on her chair.

"A little while longer," she said. "Like ten minutes."

"It's your birthday," I said. "And the store doesn't open until ten tomorrow, does it?"

Stella sighed.

"I'm not working tomorrow."

She wasn't working? She worked every Saturday. That's how she'd gotten her foot in the door at H&M. A weekend job had turned into a summer job and more hours.

"I had a headache all afternoon," she said evasively. "A migraine."

"So you called in sick?"

Stella nodded. It wasn't a problem at all, she told me. There was another girl who was happy to take shifts.

"That's not how we raised you," I said as Stella stood up and took her jacket from the back of her chair.

"Adam," Ulrika said.

"But why such a hurry?"

Stella shrugged.

"I have plans with Amina."

I nodded and swallowed my displeasure. This was just the way eighteen-year-olds were, I supposed.

Stella gave Ulrika a long, heartfelt hug. I, however, only managed to rise halfway before she put her arms around me and our embrace was awkward and stiff.

"What about the Vespa?" I asked.

Stella looked at Ulrika.

"We'll get it home," my wife promised.

Once Stella was out the door, Ulrika slowly wiped her lips with her napkin and smiled at me.

"Eighteen years," she said. "How does it go so fast?"

Ulrika and I were both totally beat when we got home that night. We sat in our respective corners of the sofa and read as Leonard Cohen crooned in the background.

“I still think she could show more appreciation,” I said. “Especially after the incident with the car.”

The incident with the car—it already had a name.

Ulrika made a sound of disinterest and didn't even look up from her book. Outside, the wind had picked up enough to make the walls creak. Summer was heaving a sigh, taking a breath; August was almost over, but I didn't care. Autumn has always appealed to me, that feeling of a fresh start, like the first phase of new love.

When I put down my novel a little while later, Ulrika was already asleep. I gently lifted her head and placed a pillow underneath. She moved restlessly and for a moment I considered waking her up, but instead I went back to my reading. It wasn't long before the print grew blurry and my thoughts wandered. I drifted off with a great lump in my chest over the chasm that had opened between Stella and me, between the people we once were and the people we had become, between the images I had of us and reality as it looked now.

When I woke up, Stella was standing in the middle of the room. She was shifting back and forth as the gentle moonlight illuminated her head and shoulders.

Ulrika had awakened too and was rubbing her eyes. Soon the room was full of sobs and gasping breaths.

I sat up.

“What's wrong?”

Stella shook her head as the tears ran huge and wet down her cheeks. Ulrika threw her arms around her and when my eyes adjusted to the darkness I realized that Stella was trembling.

“It's nothing,” she said.

Then she left the room with her mother and I was left behind with an uneasy feeling of emptiness.

2

We were a perfectly ordinary family, and then everything changed.

It takes a long time to build a life, but only an instant for it to crumble. It takes many years—decades, maybe a lifetime—to become the person you truly are. The path is almost always circuitous, and I think there’s a reason for that, for life to be built around trial and error. We are shaped and created by our trials.

But I have trouble understanding the point of what happened to our family this autumn. I know it’s impossible to understand everything, and there is a greater purpose to that as well, but I still can’t find the deeper meaning in the incidents of the last few weeks. I can’t explain it, not to myself and not to anyone else.

Maybe it’s the same for everyone, but I imagine that because I’m a pastor I’m held accountable for my view of the world more often. In general, people have no problem calling my philosophy of life into question. They wonder if I truly believe in Adam and Eve and the virgin birth, that Jesus walked on water and brought the dead back to life.

In the beginning of my Christian life, I frequently went on the defensive and began a debate about the questioner’s own views. I sometimes argued that science is just one more religion among many. And I certainly had doubts; I found myself wavering in my convictions now and then. These days, however, I am secure in my faith. I have accepted God’s blessing and I let His face shine over me. God is love. God is longing and hope. God is my refuge and my comfort.

I like to say I’m a believer, not a knower. If you start to believe you *know*, be wary. I think of life as a state of constant learning.

Like the great majority of us, I consider myself to be a good person. That sounds arrogant, of course, if not self-important or superior. But I don't mean it like that. I'm a person with an abundance of failings, a person who has made innumerable mistakes and errors. I am acutely aware of this, and the first to admit it. What I mean is that I always act with good intentions, out of love and care. I have always wanted to do the right thing.

The week that followed Stella's eighteenth birthday wasn't much different from any other. On Saturday Ulrika and I biked to the home of some good friends on the other side of town. That's one of the advantages with Lund: it's small enough that you can bike from one side of the city to the other in just twenty minutes.

I took the opportunity to ask a cautious question about the previous night's incidents, but Ulrika assured me that Stella wasn't in any trouble, that it was some boy problem, the sort of thing that commonly afflicts eighteen-year-olds. There was no need for me to worry.

On Sunday I spoke on the phone with my parents. When the topic of Stella came up, I mentioned that she was seldom at home these days, at which point Mom reminded me of how I had been as a teenager. It's so easy to lose perspective.

On Monday I had a funeral in the morning and a baptism in the afternoon. It's such a strange job I have, where life and death shake hands in the foyer. In the evening, Ulrika went to yoga and Stella locked herself in her room.

On Wednesday I officiated a lovely marriage ceremony for an older couple in our congregation who had gotten to know each other as they grieved their former life partners. A moment that truly touched my heart.

On Thursday I twisted my ankle playing basketball. My old friend from handball, Anders, now a fireman and father of four boys, accidentally stepped on my foot. Despite the injury, I managed to remain on the court for the whole game.

When I biked to work on Friday morning, I was tired. After lunch I buried a man who had only made it to forty-two. Cancer, of course. I never get used to the fact that people younger than I am can die. His daughter had written a farewell poem but couldn't get through it, with all her tears. I found it impossible to keep from thinking of Stella.

On Friday evening I felt unusually worn down after a long week. I stood at the window and watched the end of August sink into the horizon. The solemnity of autumn had a foot through the door. The last of the grill smoke vanished up over the rooftops in curling columns and patio furniture was emptied of cushions.

At last I took off my clerical collar and I wiped my sweaty neck. When I leaned against the windowsill, I accidentally knocked our family photo to the floor.

A crack appeared across the glass, but I put the photo back anyway. In the picture, which is at least a decade old, I have a healthy glow and something playful about my eyes. I recalled that we laughed just before the photographer snapped the picture. Ulrika is smiling with her mouth open, and in front of us is Stella, with rosy cheeks, braided hair, and a Mickey Mouse shirt. I stood at the window for a long time, gazing at the photograph as the memories swelled in my throat.

After a shower, I made a casserole with pork tenderloin and chorizo. Ulrika had bought new earrings, small silver feathers, and we shared a bottle of South African wine with our meal, then rounded out the evening with pretzel sticks and a game of Trivial Pursuit on the sofa.

“Do you know where Stella is?” I asked as I undressed in the bedroom. Ulrika had already crawled under the covers and drawn the blankets to her chin.

“She was going to see Amina. She wasn’t sure if she would be coming home.”

This last bit slipped out of her like a minor detail, although Ulrika knows exactly what I think about hearing that our daughter *might* come home on a given night.

I looked at the clock; it was quarter past eleven.

“She’ll get here when she gets here,” Ulrika said.

I glared at her. Sometimes I think she says things just to provoke me.

“I’ll text her,” I said.

So I wrote to Stella and asked if she was planning to sleep at home. Naturally, I didn’t receive a response.

With a heavy sigh, I got in bed. Ulrika immediately rolled over onto my

side and slipped a hand onto my hip. She kissed my neck as I stared at the ceiling.

I know I shouldn't worry. I was never the neurotic type when I was young. The anxiety crept up on me when I had a child, and it only seems to increase with each passing year.

With an eighteen-year-old daughter you have two options: either you drown under the constant worry or you refuse to think about all the risks she seems to love taking. It's simply a question of self-preservation.

Soon Ulrika was asleep on my arm. Her warm breath rolled over my cheek like gentle waves. Now and then she gave a start, a quick, electric movement, but soon sleep enfolded her again.

I really did try to sleep, but my head was occupied with thoughts. My exhaustion had given way to a state of manic brain activity. I thought of all the dreams I'd had throughout the years, many of which had changed and others of which I still hoped to fulfill. And then I thought about Stella's dreams and was forced to accept a painful truth—I didn't know what my daughter wanted from her life. She stubbornly claims that *she* doesn't even know. No plans, no structure. So unlike me. When I finished high school I had a very clear image of how my life would take shape.

I know I can't influence Stella. She's eighteen and makes her own decisions. Ulrika once said that love is letting go, letting the person you love fly away, but it often feels as if Stella is just flapping her wings without taking off. I had imagined something different.

No matter how tired I was, I couldn't fall asleep. I rolled onto my side and checked my phone. I had received a response from Stella.

On my way home now.

It was five minutes to two when I heard the key in the lock. Ulrika had moved to the very edge of her side of the bed and was facing away from me. I heard Stella padding around downstairs: water running in the bathroom, quick steps into the laundry room, more water running. It felt like an eternity.

At last I heard her footsteps creaking on the stairs. Ulrika gave a start. I bent over to look at her, but it seemed she was still asleep.

I was beset with mixed feelings. On the one hand, I was annoyed that

Stella had let me worry; on the other, I was relieved that she had finally returned home.

I got out of bed and opened the bedroom door just as Stella went by in only her underwear, her hair a wet tangle at her nape. Her back was a glowing streak in the dim light as she opened the door to her room.

“Stella?” I said.

Without responding, she slipped through the door and locked it behind her.

“Good night,” I heard from the other side.

“Sleep tight,” I whispered.

My little girl was home.

3

On Saturday morning I slept late. Ulrika was sitting at the breakfast table in her robe and listening to a podcast.

“Morning!”

She pulled her headphones down to hang around her neck.

Although I’d slept in more than usual, I still felt disoriented and spilled some coffee on the morning paper.

“Where’s Stella?”

“At work,” said Ulrika. “She was already gone when I woke up.”

I tried to dry off the paper with a dishrag.

“She must be exhausted,” I said. “She was out half the night.”

Ulrika aimed a smile at me.

“You’re not looking particularly energetic yourself.”

What did she mean by that? She knew I couldn’t sleep when Stella wasn’t home.

We were invited to a late lunch at the home of our friends Dino and Alexandra on Trollebergsvägen. A late lunch meant alcoholic beverages, so we biked into town. As we reached the Ball House sports center I spotted a police car; fifty meters on, at the roundabout next to Polhem School, were two more. One had its flashing lights on. Three officers were walking briskly up Rådmanngatan.

“Wonder what’s going on?” I said to Ulrika.

We parked our bikes in the courtyard and took the stairs up to the apartment. Alexandra and Dino met us in the hall, where we got past the pleasantries. It had been a long time. How were things?

“Isn’t Amina home?” Ulrika asked.

Alexandra hesitated.

“She was supposed to have a match, but she’s not feeling very well.”

“I don’t understand what it could be,” Dino said. “I can’t recall her ever missing a handball match.”

“It’s probably just a regular old cold,” Alexandra said.

Dino made a face. I was probably the only one who noticed.

“As long as she’s healthy again by the time school starts,” Ulrika said.

“Right, she wouldn’t miss that even if she has a fever of a hundred and four,” Alexandra said.

Ulrika laughed.

“She’s going to make a fantastic doctor. I don’t know anyone as diligent and thorough as Amina.”

Dino puffed up like a peacock.

He had every right to be proud.

“So how’s Stella?” he asked.

It was a perfectly reasonable question, of course. But I think we hesitated to respond for a moment too long.

“Just fine,” I said at last.

Ulrika smiled in agreement. Perhaps that answer wasn’t far from the truth after all. Our daughter had been in a good mood that summer.

We sat on the glassed-in balcony and enjoyed Dino’s pitas and mini pierogis.

“Did you hear about the murder?” Alexandra asked.

“The murder?”

“Right here, by the Polhem school. They found a body there this morning.”

“The police,” Ulrika said. “That’s why—”

She was interrupted by the squeak of the balcony door. Behind us, Amina peered through the crack, her eyes glassy, washed out and colorless, a shadow.

“Oh sweetie, you look awful,” Ulrika said, with no tact whatsoever.

“I know,” Amina croaked; she seemed to be clinging to the balcony door to keep from falling over.

“Go back to bed.”

“I suppose it’s only a matter of time before Stella comes down with the same bug,” I said. “Because you two were hanging out last night, weren’t you?”

Amina's expression froze. It only took half a second, maybe tenths of a second, but Amina's expression froze and I knew immediately what that meant.

"Right," Amina coughed. "Hope she's okay."

"Now get back to bed," said Ulrika.

Amina pulled the door closed and dragged herself back to the living room.

Lying is an art that few people fully master.

4

If it weren't for our daughters, Ulrika and I probably never would have become friends with Alexandra and Dino.

Amina and Stella were six when they ended up on the same handball team. Most of their teammates were a year older, but it wasn't very noticeable. Both Amina and Stella showed a winner's instinct early on. They were strong, stubborn, and unstoppable. Amina, in contrast with Stella, also had an unusually gifted sense for executing planned strategies and plays.

During those first practices, Ulrika and I sat on the bleachers in the sweaty gym and watched our little girl run herself absolutely ragged. We had seldom seen her so free and happy as she was on the handball court. Dino was single-handedly coaching the girls' team; he was extremely engaged, passionate, and generous, and gave the little handball players lots of love. But there was one problem: his body language. He displayed explosive joy through gestures and expressions when one of the girls succeeded on the court, but he was equally free when expressing his distress if something went wrong. Naturally, this was a matter of concern to Ulrika and me, and we discussed it after every practice. I suggested we talk to the other parents or perhaps go to the club council. We really liked Dino as a coach. Maybe he was simply unaware of how his body language could be interpreted.

"It's better to talk to him personally," Ulrika said, and after the next practice she walked up to Dino, who, rumor had it, had once played handball on a pretty high level himself.

I hovered in the background as Dino listened to Ulrika. Then he said, "You seem to have a knack for this. Would you like to be my colleague?"

Ulrika was so taken aback that she couldn't respond. When she finally

managed to speak, she pointed in my direction and said that I was the one who actually knew anything about handball and would make an excellent assistant coach for him.

“Okay,” Dino said, looking at me. “The job is yours.”

The rest, as they say, is history. We led that team to win after win, traveled around half of Europe, and brought home so many trophies and medals that there wasn’t room for them all in Stella’s bookcase.

Amina and Stella were quickly compatible on the court. With finesse and cleverness, Amina got the ball to Stella, who tore herself free from the line without ever yielding until the ball was in the goal. But that winner’s instinct had its downsides. Stella was only eight when things went off the rails for the first time. During a match at Fäladshallen, she received a pass from Amina, smooth as butter, and found herself alone with the goalie but missed the breakaway. Quick as a wink, she caught the ball as it bounced back and threw it full force at the goalie’s face from three meters off.

Chaos ensued, of course. The coach and parents of the opposing team rushed the court and fell upon Stella and me.

She didn’t mean to. Stella never aimed her rage at anyone but herself. Upset by the missed goal, she had simply reacted impulsively. She was full of regret to the point of being crushed.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking.”

This became a recurring phrase. Almost a mantra.

Dino liked to say that Stella was her own worst enemy. If only she could conquer herself, there would be no stopping her.

It was just that she found it so darned difficult to control her emotions.

Aside from that, it was easy to like Stella. She was thoughtful and had a strong sense of justice; she was energetic and outgoing.

Amina and Stella soon lived in close symbiosis even off the handball court. They were in the same class, bought similar clothes, listened to the same music. And Amina was a good influence on Stella. She was charming and quick, caring and ambitious. When Stella began to slip, Amina was always there to get her back into balance.

I only wish Ulrika and I had taken Stella’s problems more seriously. That we had reacted earlier. I’m ashamed to admit it, but apparently our greatest hurdle was our pride. Ulrika and I both considered it a radical failure to turn to the institutions of society. It may seem egotistical, but at the same time

it's very human, and it might not have been entirely misguided. We had demanded a lot of ourselves, to be the best parents we could be, but we were unable to live up to our own requirements.

Perhaps it never would have had to go as far as it did.

5

When we biked home from Alexandra and Dino's, the police cars were still at the school. It was frightening, that something like this could happen so close by. Apparently the body had been found at a playground by an early-bird mom who'd brought her small children to play. I shuddered at the thought.

Ulrika hopped off her bike in the driveway and hurried for the door.

"Aren't you going to lock it up?" I called.

"Have to pee," she mumbled, digging through her purse for her keys.

I led her bike across the paved path and parked it next to my own under the metal roof. I realized I had forgotten to cover the grill and found the protective casing in the shed.

When I came inside, Ulrika was standing on the stairs.

"Stella's still not home. I called, but she won't pick up."

"I'm sure she's working late," I said. "You know they're not allowed to have their phones on them."

"But it's Saturday. The store closed hours ago."

That hadn't occurred to me.

"I'm sure she just went somewhere with a friend. We'll have another talk with her tonight. She needs to get better at keeping us in the loop."

I put my arm around Ulrika.

"I got such a terrible feeling," she said. "When we saw all those police. A murder? Here?"

"I know. It makes me feel uneasy too."

We sat down on the sofa and I looked up the latest news on my phone, reading it aloud to her.

The victim was a man in his thirties, a local. The police were being very secretive about the incident, but one of the evening papers said that a woman who lived nearby had heard fighting and shouting outside her window during the night.

“This kind of thing doesn’t happen to just anyone,” I said, as if I, and not Ulrika, were the expert. “I’m sure it’s alcoholics or drug addicts. Or gang crime.”

Ulrika breathed calmly against my shoulder.

But I wasn’t saying this to relieve her anxiety. I was convinced it was true.

“I was planning to make carbonara.”

I stood up and kissed her cheek.

“Already? I don’t think I could manage to eat as much as a piece of arugula right now.”

“Slow food,” I smiled. “Real food takes time, honey.”

As the bacon sizzled in my carefully selected olive oil from Campania, Ulrika came thundering down the stairs.

“Stella forgot her phone.”

“What?”

She paced restlessly back and forth between the kitchen island and the window.

“It was on her desk.”

“Well, that’s odd.” The carbonara was at such a critical stage that I couldn’t look away from it. “Did she forget it?”

“Yes, didn’t you hear me? It was on her desk!”

Ulrika was nearly shouting.

It was certainly unusual for Stella to leave her phone at home, but there was no reason to overreact. I stirred the carbonara swiftly as I turned down the heat.

“Forget the pasta,” Ulrika said, tugging at my arm. “I’m seriously worried. I just called Amina, but she isn’t answering either.”

“She’s sick,” I said, just as I realized the carbonara was going to be a failure.

I slammed the wooden spoon down on the counter and yanked the pan from the burner.

“Maybe she left her phone at home on purpose,” I said, battling whatever was bubbling up in my chest. “You know her boss has been getting after her about it.”

Ulrika shook her head.

“Her boss hasn’t been getting after her. She gave the whole staff a warning about using their cell phones at work. Surely you don’t believe Stella would voluntarily leave her phone at home?”

No, of course that didn’t sound likely.

“She must have forgotten it. I’m sure she was in a hurry this morning.”

“I’ll call around to her friends,” Ulrika said. “This isn’t like her.”

“Shouldn’t you hold off on that?”

I rambled on, something about how we’d been spoiled by modern technology and constant access to our daughter, always knowing where she was. There was really no reason to get all worked up.

“I’m sure she’ll come flying through the door any moment.”

At the same time, I started to have a nagging feeling in my stomach. Being a parent means never being able to relax.

When Ulrika padded up the creaking stairs, I took the opportunity to slip into the laundry room.

There I was. Surely it wasn’t just a coincidence? I opened the door of the washing machine and pulled out the damp clothes. A pair of dark jeans that I had to turn right side out to confirm that they belonged to Stella. A black tank top that was also hers. And the white blouse with flowers on the breast pocket. Her favorite top that summer. I was holding the blouse in one hand and fumbling for a hanger. That’s when I saw it.

Stella’s favorite top. The right sleeve and front were covered in dark stains.

I looked up at the ceiling and said a silent prayer. At the same time, I knew God didn’t have a thing to do with this.

6

Throughout the years I have frequently encountered the false assumption that a belief in determinism is simply a natural by-product of my belief in God, as if I must consider my free will to be limited by God. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. I believe man to be the living image of God. I believe in man.

Sometimes when I meet people who say they don't believe in God, I ask which god it is they don't believe in. They often proceed to describe a god I certainly don't believe in either.

God is love. It's wonderful to find someone you belong with. It might be God, it might be another human being. It might even be both.

Ulrika and I were young when we met and since then there has been no other alternative. We were both new to Lund. Thanks to my powerful but naïve dream of becoming an actor, I joined the skit group at the Wermland student union, and Ulrika moved into the union's student apartments later that winter. She was the type of person who attracts attention without taking up too much space, who shines without being blinding.

As I fought to chip away at my Blekinge accent and rid my skin of pimples, Ulrika sailed into every imaginable university scenario as if she clearly belonged in each one. I plastered the city with posters that read *No EC, No Bridge* while Ulrika became procurator of the student union and aced all her law exams.

Late that year, when we found ourselves attending the same corridor party, I finally got up my nerve. To my surprise, Ulrika seemed to enjoy my company. Soon we were spending all our time together.

“I can’t believe you’re going to be a pastor,” Ulrika said on that first evening. “You could be a psychologist or a political scientist or . . .”

“Or a pastor.”

“But why?” Ulrika eyed me as if I were begging to have a healthy limb amputated. “You’re from Småland, huh? It’s in your blood?”

“Blekinge,” I laughed. “And my parents have very little to do with it. Aside from the fact that they sent me to Sunday school, of course, but I think that was mostly just for the free babysitting.”

“So you weren’t brought up a Christian?”

I laughed.

“I was actually a die-hard atheist until I started high school. I was a member of Revolutionary Communist Youth for a while; I went around quoting Marx and wanted to rid the world of religion. But you grow out of all that dogmatic stuff. In time I grew more and more curious about different outlooks on life.”

I liked the way Ulrika was observing me as if I were a riddle she wanted to solve.

“Then something happened,” I said. “In my last year of high school.”

“What?”

“I was on my way home from the library when I heard a woman screaming. She was by the edge of the harbor, jumping up and down, waving her arms. I ran over.”

Ulrika leaned forward. Her eyes widened.

“Her daughter had fallen into the cold water. There were two more children. They were on the quay, screaming. I didn’t have time to think. I just threw myself into the water.”

Ulrika gasped, but I shook my head. I wasn’t telling her this to portray myself as some sort of hero.

“Something happened just then. The second I hit the water. I didn’t quite understand what, at the time, but I know now. It was God. I felt Him.”

Ulrika nodded thoughtfully.

“It was like a bright light came on in the dark water. I saw the little girl and got hold of her. My body filled with strength—I’ve never felt so strong, so determined, nothing could stop me from saving that child. It was almost effortless. Something supernatural pulled the girl up over the edge, made

me blow life back into her. The mom and the little sisters were standing next to me, screaming, as water poured from the girl's mouth and she came to. At the same time, God left my body and I returned to my regular self."

Ulrika blinked a few times, her mouth open.

"So she made it?"

"Everything turned out okay."

"Incredible," she said, giving me her amazing smile. "And ever since, you've known?"

"I don't know anything," I said firmly. "But I believe."

On that Saturday night when our lives were about to change, I turned to God. I was worried about the stained blouse in the washing machine. I made the snap decision not to mention it to Ulrika. Those stains could be from anything, it didn't necessarily mean much, and there was no reason to subject Ulrika to further anxiety. Instead I closed my eyes and prayed to God, asking Him to take care of my little girl.

I was leaning against the kitchen island and swirling a glass of amber-colored whiskey in my hand when Ulrika came bounding down the stairs.

"I just talked to Alexandra," she said, out of breath. "She woke Amina. Apparently she was shocked to hear that Stella never came home."

"What did she say?"

"She doesn't seem to know anything."

I swallowed all the whiskey.

"Should we call her colleagues at H&M?" I asked.

Ulrika placed Stella's phone on the counter.

"I already tried. She only has Benita's number saved, and Benita didn't know who was working today."

I sighed and muttered. My anxiety was mixed with irritation. Wasn't Stella aware of what she put us through? How we worried about her?

When the phone began to jump on the counter, both Ulrika and I lunged for it. I was faster, and hit the green button.

"Yes?"

I was met with a deep, slightly guarded male voice.

"I'm calling about the Vespa."

"The Vespa?"

My head was spinning.

“The Vespa that’s for sale,” the man said.

“There’s no Vespa for sale here. You must have the wrong number.”

He apologized but insisted that he hadn’t misdialled. There was an ad on-line with this number, and a Vespa for sale. A pink Piaggio.

I grunted something about a mistake and hung up.

“Who was that?”

Ulrika sounded eager.

“She’s planning to sell the Vespa.”

“What?”

“Stella put out an ad.”

We sat on the sofa. Ulrika sent a group text asking anyone with any information about Stella to text back. I poured another whiskey and Ulrika put Stella’s iPhone on the table in front of us. We sat there staring at it, and every time it buzzed we bounced up. Time stood still as Ulrika scrolled with her thumb.

A few of Stella’s friends texted back; some seemed mildly worried, but most of them stopped at stating they knew nothing.

When I googled Stella’s phone number, I found the ad straightaway. She really had put the Vespa up for sale. Her birthday present. What was she up to?

“Should I take my bike and go looking for her?”

Ulrika wrinkled her nose.

“Isn’t it best to stay here?”

“This must never happen again. Doesn’t she understand how much we worry?”

Ulrika was close to tears.

“Should we call the police?” she said.

“The police?”

That seemed excessive. Surely it couldn’t be that bad.

“I have some contacts,” Ulrika said. “They could at least keep their eyes peeled.”

“This is ridiculous!” I stood up. “That we should even have to . . . I’m so . . .”

“Shhh!” Ulrika said, one finger in the air. “Do you hear that?”

“What?”

“Ringing.”

I stood stock still, watching her. Both of us were sick with worry. Soon a long signal echoed through the house.

“The landline?” Ulrika said, standing up.

No one ever calls the landline.

8

We never planned to have Stella. She was a wanted, welcome baby; eagerly awaited and beloved long before she took her first breath. But she wasn't planned.

Ulrika had just received her Master of Law degree and was about to start a clerkship when, one evening, she sat down across from me, placed her hands over mine, and looked deep into my eyes. Her smile was restrained as she shared with me the fantastic but overwhelming news.

I had one year left in my education and another year as a curate after that. We lived in a one-room apartment in Norra Fälåden and survived on loans; our situation was far from optimal for bringing a child into the world. I realized, of course, that Ulrika had doubts; there was an anxious hesitation behind that initial, effervescent joy, but a whole week passed before either of us even said the word "abortion" aloud.

Ulrika was rightly worried about practicalities. Money, housing, our education, and careers. We could always wait a few years to start a family; there was no reason to rush into it.

"With love, we can do anything," I said, bringing my lips to her belly.

Ulrika made some financial calculations; meanwhile, I bought tiny socks that said "My Dad Rocks."

"You're not antiabortion, are you?" she'd asked even during those first intoxicating days of our love, five years earlier, when we'd hardly left the student apartment at Wermlands Nation.

"Absolutely not," I responded.

I'm certain my belief in God filled her with doubt and fear. It was easily the greatest threat to our budding, fragile relationship.

“I never dreamed of a pastor,” she said on occasion. Not to hurt me, not at all. It was just an ironic comment on the mysterious ways of the Lord.

“That’s okay,” I would reply. “I never dreamed of a lawyer.”

Not once did I seriously consider not having the baby. At the same time, I inserted doubt in my conversations with Ulrika, to seem open to all options. It didn’t take long, though, before we were united in our decision.

Before the birth we took classes and practiced breathing together. Ulrika had morning sickness and I massaged her swollen feet.

With one week left before her due date, Ulrika woke me at four in the morning. She was standing at the foot of the bed, wrapped in a blanket.

“Adam! Adam! My water broke!”

We took a taxi to the hospital and it was like I didn’t understand what was happening, how much was at stake and how much could go wrong, until Ulrika was lying on a stretcher in front of me and writhing in pain while the midwife snapped on her long rubber gloves. It was as if I had gathered all my fears and anxieties into a hiding spot deep inside, and it had all been released, all at once.

“You have to do something!”

“Let’s have a sit, Dad,” a nurse said.

“Take it easy,” said the midwife. “Everything is going to be fine.”

Ulrika was hyperventilating and swearing. As soon as a new contraction hit, she pressed herself upward, screaming and flailing.

I held Ulrika’s hand tight. It was relentless; her whole body was shaking.

“We have to get the baby out now,” the midwife said.

“You can do this, honey,” I said and kissed Ulrika’s hand.

She stiffened and her body tensed like a spring. The room grew perfectly silent and I could almost feel the wave of pain that crashed through her body. Ulrika thrust her pelvis in the air.

“Help me, dear God!”

And the midwife yanked and tugged and Ulrika roared in long, primal jolts. I held her tight and swore to God that I would never forgive Him if this didn’t end well.

Silence fell over us like a blanket. You could have heard God snap His fingers in that moment. The longest second of my life. Everything that meant

anything seemed to hang in the balance. My mind was devoid of thought, but I still knew this was the instant when it would all come to a head. In the silence.

Then, as I peeked out, I saw it. A bloody, blue clump on a towel. At first I didn't understand what it was. A moment later, the room was filled with the most beautiful infant's cry I had ever heard.

9

Stella's face flickered through my mind as I rushed into the kitchen after Ulrika. Although our little girl was eighteen now, the face I always pictured was that of a child.

Ulrika grabbed the landline phone from the wall. Not once during the call did I take my eyes off her.

"That was Michael Blomberg," she said after she'd hung up.

"Who? The lawyer?"

"He has just been appointed to represent Stella. She's with the police."

My first thought was that Stella had been the victim of a crime. Hopefully it wasn't anything serious. I even had time to think that it was okay if she'd been robbed or assaulted. Anything but rape.

"We have to go, right away," Ulrika said.

"What's going on?" I thought about the peculiar call and the ad online. "Is it the Vespa?"

Ulrika looked at me like I was nuts.

"Forget about the damn Vespa!"

On her way to the door she ran into my shoulder.

"What did Blomberg say?" I asked, but she didn't respond.

Ulrika snagged her coat from the rack and was headed for the door when she suddenly wheeled around.

"I just have to do one thing," she said, walking back into the house.

"Come on, what did Blomberg say?"

I trailed her through the kitchen. As she reached the doorway she turned around and fended me off, her arms straight out.

"Wait here. I'll be right back!"

Taken aback, I stood in the doorway, counting the seconds. Soon Ulrika returned and shoved past me.

“What did you do?”

Once again I saw Stella’s face before me. The toothless laugh, the little dimples in her soft cheeks. And I thought about everything I’d wanted for her that had never come to be.

It’s so easy to believe that the best is always yet to come. I suspect that’s a deeply human fault. Even God instructs us to yearn.

Why don’t we ever think about how quickly time passes, while it is passing?

Stella’s first word was “abba.” She used it for both me and Ulrika. These days, most Swedes associate the word with pop music, but in Jesus’s language, Aramaic, it means “father.”

I had four lovely autumn months of paternity leave with Stella, and I watched her personality emerge day by day. The other parents at our congregation’s children’s group often remarked that she was the very definition of a daddy’s girl. I don’t think I understood the significance of this until it was too late. To some extent, my whole life has been one big *esprit d’escalier*. I haven’t managed to capture a single moment. I’ve always had terrible timing.

I am doomed to yearn.

10

We were standing in the entryway. My hand on the lock. Ulrika's whole body was shaking.

Why had Michael Blomberg called? What was Stella doing at the police station?

"Tell me," I said to Ulrika.

"All I know is what Michael said."

Michael Blomberg. It had been several years since I'd heard his name. Blomberg was well-known in more than just legal circles. He had made a career as one of the country's foremost defense attorneys and had represented defendants in a great many high-profile cases. His picture had been in the evening papers and he was called upon as an expert on TV. He was also the man who had once taken Ulrika under his wing and paved the way for her success as a defense attorney.

Ulrika was breathing hard. Her eyes were darting like frightened birds.

She tried to squeeze past me and out the door, but I caught her, held her in place between my arms.

"Stella is in police custody."

I heard what she said, the words reached me, but they were impossible to comprehend.

"There must be some mistake," I said.

Ulrika shook her head. A moment later, she collapsed against my chest and her phone crashed to the floor.

"She's suspected of murder," Ulrika whispered.

I stiffened.

The first thing I thought of was Stella's stained top.

Ulrika called a taxi as we hurried to the street. Outside the recycling station she dropped my hand.

“Hold on,” she said, stumbling in among the recycling bins and containers.

I stayed put on the sidewalk and heard her coughing and throwing up. Soon a black taxi appeared.

“How are you feeling?” I whispered as we put on our seatbelts in the back.

“Like shit,” Ulrika said, coughing into her hand.

Then she typed on her phone with both thumbs as I rolled down the window and bathed my face in the fresh air.

“Can you go a little faster?” Ulrika asked the driver, who grumbled a little before stepping on the gas.

My mind turned to Job. Was this my trial?

Ulrika explained that Michael Blomberg was waiting for us at the police station.

“Why him?” I asked. “Isn’t that an awfully big coincidence?”

“He’s an extraordinarily talented attorney.”

“Sure, but what are the chances?”

“Sometimes things just happen, honey. You can’t control everything.”

I don’t want to say I disliked Blomberg. I don’t like speaking badly of others that way. Experience tells me that when you dislike someone on such vague grounds, the problem often rests with you.

I tipped the driver and then had to jog up the stairs to the police station, where Ulrika was already pulling open the door.

Blomberg met us in the lobby. I’d almost forgotten what a big man he is. He came lumbering over to us like a bear, his jacket flapping around his stomach. He was tanned and wearing a blue shirt and an expensive suit, and his slicked-back hair curled at the back of his neck.

“Ulrika,” he said, but he stepped right up to me and shook my hand before he embraced my wife.

“What’s going on, Michael?”

“Take it easy,” he said. “We just concluded the interrogation and this nightmare will be over soon. The police have come to an extremely hasty conclusion.”

Ulrika sighed heavily.

“Stella was identified by a young woman,” Blomberg said.

“Identified?”

“Perhaps you heard that a body was found on a playground over by Pilegatan?”

“And Stella was supposedly there? On Pilegatan?” I said. “There must be some mistake.”

“That’s exactly what it is. But this girl lives in the same building as the man who was murdered and claims to have seen Stella there last night. She thinks she recognizes Stella from H&M. That seems to be all the investigators have.”

“That’s ridiculous. Can she really be in custody on such flimsy grounds?”

I thought back to the night before and tried to remember the details. How I had lain awake, unable to sleep, waiting for her; how Stella finally came home and showered before slipping into her room.

“Is she detained?” Ulrika asked.

“What’s the difference?” I asked.

“The police have the right to take someone into custody, but in order to keep them there a prosecutor must order detention,” Blomberg said. “The lead interrogator just has to brief the prosecutor on duty and then Stella will be released. I assure you. This is all a mistake.”

He sounded far too confident, just as I remembered him, and that worried me. Anyone so free of doubt is certain to lack attention to detail and engagement as well.

“But why such a rush to bring her in?” I asked. “If they don’t have anything else to go on?”

“This case is a real hot potato,” Blomberg sighed. “The police want to act quickly. The fact is, the victim isn’t just anyone.”

He turned to Ulrika and lowered his voice a notch.

“It’s Christopher Olsen. Margaretha’s son.”

Ulrika gasped.

“Mar . . . Margaretha’s son?”

“Who’s Margaretha?” I asked.

Ulrika didn’t even look at me.

“The dead man is named Christopher Olsen,” Blomberg said. “His mother is Margaretha Olsen, a professor of criminal law.”

A professor? I shrugged.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Margaretha is very well-known in legal circles,” Blomberg said. “Her son has also made a name for himself in a number of circles. A successful businessman, he owns real estate; he sits on lots of boards.”

“Why would that matter?” I said, my irritation mounting.

At the same time, I recalled my own words, that this sort of thing only happens to alcoholics and drug addicts. That had certainly been an assumption full of prejudice, but it was also based on empirical evidence and statistics. Sometimes you have to close your eyes to the exceptions to keep from going under.

“Maybe it shouldn’t matter,” said Blomberg. Reading between the lines, it was clear that it *did* matter, and that he wasn’t sure there was anything wrong with that fact.

“Margaretha Olsen’s son,” Ulrika said. “How old is . . . was he?”

“Thirty-two, I think. Or thirty-three. Deadly force with a bladed weapon. The police are being very tight-lipped with the details. During the interrogation, they were mostly interested in Stella’s whereabouts yesterday evening and last night.”

Yesterday evening and last night?

“When was this man murdered?” Ulrika asked.

“They’re not sure, but the witness heard arguing and shouting just after one o’clock. Were you awake when Stella got home?”

Ulrika turned to me and I nodded.

There I’d been, tossing and turning, unable to fall asleep. The text I’d sent, without receiving a reply. So my worry hadn’t been unfounded. I thought of how Stella had come home and clattered around in the bathroom and laundry room. What time had it been?

“There must be someone who can give her an alibi, I said.”

Both Ulrika and Blomberg looked at me.