

The
WOMAN
INSIDE *a novel*

M. T. EDVARDSSON

AUTHOR of *A NEARLY NORMAL FAMILY*

The
 Woman
Inside

Also by M. T. Edvardsson

A Nearly Normal Family

The Woman Inside

...

M. T. Edvardsson

TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL SWEDISH BY

Rachel Willson-Broyles



CELADON
BOOKS
NEW YORK

*For Kajsa, Ellen, and Tove
Always.*

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.

THE WOMAN INSIDE. Copyright © 2023 by M. T. Edvardsson. English language translation copyright © 2023 by Rachel Willson-Broyles. All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America. For information, address Celadon Books, a division of Macmillan Publishers, 120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271.

www.celadonbooks.com

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

ISBN 978-1-250-20462-2 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-250-20460-8 (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 by Forum/Bonnier

First Edition: 2023

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

REVIEWERS ARE REMINDED THAT THIS IS AN UNCORRECTED PROOF. ANY QUOTES FOR PUBLICATION MUST BE CHECKED AGAINST THE FINISHED BOOK. PRICE, PUBLICATION DATES, AND MANUFACTURING DETAILS ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE WITHOUT NOTICE. ALL INQUIRIES SHOULD BE DIRECTED TO: CHRISTINE.MYKITYSHYN@CELADONBOOKS.COM.

First Patrol on the Scene

I—Officer Larsen—and Officer Hemström respond to the Lund home after the man who lives there fails to report to work.

The large brick house is set back from the road, and a Tesla is parked in the driveway. I enter the yard by way of an iron gate and ring the doorbell, while Officer Hemström runs the license plate.

I peer through the windowpane in the door. Some coats and jackets are hanging in the foyer. There are several pairs of shoes on a low rack. I ring the doorbell several times, but there is no response.

Hemström and I walk around the house together. We get the impression that no one is home. All the lights are off and every blind is down, but I notice a gap at the bottom of one of the kitchen windows.

Officer Hemström helps me pull away a few tree branches so I can step into the flower bed, where I stretch up to peer through the window. When I shine my flashlight inside, I see a tidy kitchen. There are two drinking glasses on the counter, and a black cardigan is draped over the back of one chair.

Only when I aim the beam of light at the floor do I discover a person lying next to the table in a semi-prone position. This person's outline is

all that is visible; their face is turned away from me. I bang on the windowpane in an attempt to draw their attention, but there is no response.

Officer Hemström calls it in on the radio, reporting that we have discovered an individual but are unable to establish contact, and we receive orders to enter the house to investigate further.

I break the windowpane in the front door, which allows me to reach in and turn the lock. I enter the house with Hemström close behind. We aim the beams of our flashlights around until I find a light switch on the wall.

We continue straight ahead, through the hall and into the kitchen, and as we go we call out, alerting any occupants that we are police officers. On the floor in front of us lies a motionless woman. While Officer Hemström provides light, I examine her and quickly determine that the woman is deceased.

We make a joint decision to search the rest of the house. Officer Hemström checks the living room while I open the doors of bathrooms and closets. Nothing significant is found.

We take the stairway in the hall to the second floor. I sweep the beam of my flashlight through the second floor and find three closed doors.

Officer Hemström investigates the bathroom while I approach the first bedroom. The door is a few centimeters ajar, and I nudge it open with my foot as I aim the flashlight into the room.

The blinds are down, and all lights are off. Against the wall is a bed with a headboard. On the bed is another dead body.

In service,
Ludvig Larsen

Karla

The house is enormous. When I stand on the little path that leads to the door, the roof blocks out the whole sky. The blinds are drawn, and two black birds stare down at me from one of the windowsills. The front door is guarded on either side by a bronze lion.

It's hard to believe that only two people live here. But that's what Lena at the cleaning company said. And I can't imagine there's any reason for her to lie. Even if her eyes did start shifting oddly when she described the clients in the mansion on Linnégatan. Steven and Regina Rytter.

Before I ring the doorbell, I double-check the address on my phone. I take a deep breath as the *ding-dong* echoes through the house. When a man opens the door, I have to clear my throat before I manage to stammer out a few incoherent words.

"That's right," he says with a smile. "I heard they would be sending someone new."

Lena at the office was right. This man really does look like a movie star.

"I'm Karla," I say.

It seems that my attempt to erase the worst of my Norrbotten accent from my voice doesn't succeed.

"You're from Norrland?" says the man. He looks to be somewhere between forty and fifty.

"Yup," I reply, not without irony—I suck in the word on an inhalation, as we do up north.

He smiles anyway, and his handshake is warm and firm.

"Steven Rytter," he says. "I'll show you where we keep the cleaning supplies."

I leave my shoes on the rack and follow him through a wide hall with mirrors on the wall and a chandelier hanging from the ceiling. The furniture is rustic, older; the ceilings are high, and the railing of the massive staircase is covered in beautiful flourishes that must have been carved by hand.

"What a lovely home," I say, regretting my words immediately. I'm here to work, nothing more.

But Steven Rytter doesn't seem to notice my comment. He opens the door to another room. Brooms, vacuums, and mops line the walls, along with rows of detergents and sprays.

"If there's anything you can't find, or if anything runs out, just let me know and I'll take care of it for next time. We're still on for Mondays and Wednesdays, right?"

I nod. Mondays and Wednesdays. Four hours each visit. Which sounded pretty darn excessive when Lena told me—like, who needs a maid twice a week? But now I realize that a house this size will take time to clean.

"Are you a university student?" Steven Rytter scrutinizes me, still with a smile on his face.

Maybe it's silly, but suddenly my body is warm. Me, a student? It's for real now. Guess you can tell just by looking at me.

"I'm going to study law," I say with such pride that I almost sound smug. "This is just a side job."

Even though I'm taking out full loans from the state, the course materials are ridiculously expensive, and apparently in recent years the Lund housing market has gone seriously bonkers. People are paying ten thousand kronor a month for a studio. It's beyond lucky that I found a part-time job.

"What an exciting subject," Steven Rytter says. "I actually considered the law too, but I decided on medicine in the end."

"You're a doctor?"

Steven Rytter nods and smiles. He does actually look like he was plucked straight out of *Grey's Anatomy*.

"Feel free to help yourself," he says, leaving me alone in the cleaning closet.

For a minute or two I'm at a loss as I face all the cleaning supplies. I pick up and examine some of the implements; there are a few I don't even know how to use, or what they're for. But how hard can it be? I've been cleaning our apartment back home since I was four.

When I haul a bucket of brushes and sponges into the hall, Steven Rytter is kneeling by the front door with a shoehorn in hand.

"Do you want me to mop all the floors?" I ask.

Some of the rooms have shiny hardwood floors that I suspect might be sensitive to moisture.

"You can do whatever you like," says Steven Rytter, cramming his feet into his shoes. "Mop if you think it needs it."

The other clients I've cleaned for this week have been awfully picky about exactly what I should do, down to the tiniest detail; some talked about their houses and apartments as though they were their babies, but Steven Rytter seems more or less indifferent. Which is nice for me, of course. Eight hours a week here will mean lots of easy money.

Steven Rytter gets up and smooths out his shirt. We make eye contact for a second, but he immediately looks away and clears his throat.

"Did the cleaning service mention anything about my wife?"

I remember Lena's hesitant face. His wife's name is Regina, but that's all I remember.

"No, why?"

He heads for the staircase and gestures at me to follow him.

"She's in bed, up there."

That sounds odd.

I stop on the first step.

Steven Rytter turns around with his hand on the railing. His movie-star looks aren't quite as obvious now. His head is drooping, and he has shrunk into himself a little.

"My wife is sick," he says.

Bill

I've never been late with the rent before. Other bills can sometimes be put off, but rent and electricity have to be paid on time. That's what Dad taught me.

Miranda would be furious if she knew. A few years ago, I got a letter from a collection agency—it turned out to be a mistake, but Miranda acted like the end was nigh.

“There are certain things everyone can manage,” she said. “Being on time, saying thanks for dinner, and never buying something you can't pay for.”

She and I truly come from different backgrounds.

Most things in life came so easy for Miranda.

She was the one who got us this apartment, a two-bedroom on Karhögstorg in the Järnåkra neighborhood. Four floors up, and not far from Lund city center.

Now the balcony door is open, the sun is shining, and I'm sitting on the sofa with my laptop on my thighs. Once again I log into my bank account to look at the sad reality.

If it weren't for Miranda, I probably never would have ended up

in Lund. She was born and raised here; she was surrounded by family and friends and couldn't imagine living anywhere else.

My childhood was spent moving constantly from place to place. When people ask where I'm from, I usually name a town in Östergötland, but that's mostly just to have an answer—in reality, I've never felt like I belonged anywhere in particular.

I don't have any solid ties to Lund either, but for Sally this is home. I know what it's like for a child to be uprooted and dragged away. I don't want to subject Sally to that. Not under any circumstances. We're staying in Lund.

Miranda and I were supposed to get married. I proposed while we were expecting Sally, but the wedding got postponed. Miranda was dreaming of a big, fairy-tale wedding with an extravagant party, and we just didn't have the money. In the end, we simply ran out of time.

For a long time, Miranda was the one who supported us. I was in the film studies program at the university, worked at a movie theater, and wrote a few reviews and half-decent columns for an online magazine. For almost ten years, I stood in the sales window, tearing tickets and filling colorful cardboard buckets with popcorn. The theater was doing well. We had survived some cutthroat competition, first from the Pirate Bay and then from Netflix and HBO, but when Miranda got sick, I had to turn down more and more evening shifts to take care of Sally. At first my boss was understanding and sympathetic, and rightly so, but when I returned after taking sick leave last winter, there were hardly any shifts left for me. Three months ago, I was let go for good.

The rent reminder arrived in the mail a week ago and caused me to fly into a panic. Ever since, I've been all over town to let folks know I'm looking for work. My caseworker at the employment office may be super friendly and encouraging, but I seriously doubt she'll be able to secure me a job. Not that I'm a hopeless case. I think I'm reasonably good at most things, I'm service-minded and upbeat, and even though

Miranda used to say I was all thumbs when it came to working with my hands, I've never been afraid of getting them dirty. I'm prepared to take whatever's available, as long as I can be home with Sally on nights and weekends, but this city is crawling with hungry young college students armed with top grades and impressive résumés. And the employment office isn't what it once was. My caseworker herself says that most people end up finding jobs on their own. It's all about taking initiative and being well-connected. That's why I'm sitting here checking off my Excel list of local businesses.

When Sally gets home from school, I've got a batch of thin pancakes ready. She spreads them with a thick layer of jam, rolls them up, and eats them with her fingers.

I sit down across from her and try to decide what to do with my hands.

"So I had an idea," I say.

Sally licks her lips, but somehow there's jam all the way up by her ear.

She knows we don't have much money. Even if I'd tried to hide it, she would have seen the situation for what it is. No McDonald's in weeks, no chocolate milk in the fridge. It's been two months since we went to the movies.

"I was thinking we could get a lodger," I say, taking my hands from the table and placing them in my lap. "Just for the summer, maybe."

"A Roger? Like a man?"

"No—a *lodger* means someone who needs a place to live. Maybe a student?"

"And they would live here?" Sally says. "With us?"

"Yes, we would share the kitchen and bathroom. Since you sleep in my room every night anyway, I thought we might as well move your things in there. It would only be for a while. Like just for the summer."

It's actually the worst possible time. Lots of students leave Lund in early June. Most of them don't have to pay rent for their student housing over the summer. But I can't wait.

Sally pokes the end of a pancake roll into her mouth. "If we do, it will definitely have to be a girl lodger."

"A girl?"

She's chewing with her mouth open. "Yeah, kind of like Mom."

My stomach ties itself in a knot and tears burn behind my eyes.

Me, the guy who never cries.

Neither Miranda nor I have ever been good at feelings. When she came home from her first appointment at the hospital, we sat down right here in the kitchen after Sally fell asleep. Very matter-of-factly, without revealing her emotions, Miranda told me what the doctors suspected. She could just as easily have been talking about a cold. We nodded at each other; her calm spilled over onto me, and we declared, together, that everything would be fine.

I'm sure things would have been much worse for Sally if we hadn't managed to maintain that balance through everything that followed. I didn't even lose control during the funeral.

But now that we risk losing the apartment, I can't hold back any longer. I bolt from my chair and hide my face from Sally as I hurry to the bathroom.

Later that evening, I post the ad on Facebook. *Room for rent, short-term.*

As usual, Sally shows up in my room during the night. Just after midnight, I wake up to the sound of her padding feet. Without a word she tucks herself into Miranda's side of the bed, and a moment later her hand finds mine under the covers.

"Dad?"

"I'm right here," I whisper. "Sleep tight, honey."

"Okay," Sally says every time.

It never takes long for her hand to relax in mine and her breathing to grow heavy.

All I care about is making sure Sally feels safe and secure.

Jennica

The patio at Stortorget is swarming with the cheerful Friday happy hour crowd. What was I thinking? The chances of running into a familiar face here are basically 100 percent.

As I walk the last few steps to the restaurant, I try to spot him among the umbrellas surrounding the outdoor bar. Here's something I've learned after five years on Tinder: the question isn't *if* he'll look different from his pictures, but *how* different he'll be.

I'm standing on the sidewalk outside the entrance, digging through my purse for my lip gloss, when a hand lands on my arm.

"Jennica? Hi!"

He was unusually honest with his pictures.

Most forty-seven-year-olds are, like, half-bald with a doughy belly.

I'm pleasantly surprised.

"Is it okay if we sit inside? I thought that would be more relaxing."

His smile is so confident and hard to resist.

Together we walk through the stuffy summer air of the restaurant to a table in the back, where he pulls out my chair like a real gentleman. A marked difference from the twenty-eight-year-old IT guy I was out with last weekend.

“Forgive me for saying this, but I’m so relieved.” He hangs his jacket over the back of his chair and sits down across from me. “You never know, with Tinder. So much Photoshop and who even knows what.”

“It’s so nice to hear you say so. I was thinking the same thing.”

He laughs.

“Can we make a deal?” he says, placing his large, hairy hand beside the silverware on the table. “If you feel like I’m a total dud, just get up and go to the bathroom after the appetizer. I promise never to get in touch again, or even be the least bit disappointed. Or—well, of course I would be terribly disappointed, but I promise to keep it to myself.”

“Ditto,” I say. “After the appetizer, in the middle of the meal, whenever you like. Just get up and go. No hard feelings, I promise.” A quick wink.

His hand remains on the table.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I never introduced myself. Steven.”

“Jennica.” I nod and let out a ditzzy sort of giggle. “I thought you would have one of those sexy English accents.”

“I certainly *can* have one,” Steven says in a thick accent. “My mother is from Scotland. Dad wanted to call me Stefan, but she had a terrible time pronouncing it, so Steven it was.”

What luck.

“My parents made a similar deal. Dad wanted me to be named Jenny, but Mom voted for Annica.”

“Fantastic,” Steven says. “We’re both the result of compromise. Isn’t it great when people get along?”

I force myself to zip my lips.

I have a whole lecture on this very topic on deck in the back of my mind. About how my mother, like so many other women, always seemed to draw the short straw when it came to compromise.

I smile and hope a better opportunity will arise for that lecture.

“Well, we’ve got one thing in common, at least. It could be worse.”

Steven laughs. He browses the menu and quickly decides to order the fish.

"I'm thinking of getting the flank steak," I say.

Steven shakes his head. "That's a tough one. Meat should be thick and tender. Most kitchens can handle a sirloin or a tenderloin. I wouldn't take the chance on a flank steak at this place."

I look at him, astonished.

"It's up to you, of course," he continues. "But don't sit here whining later if you have to saw your way through a tough piece of meat. I warned you," he says with a smile.

I like this audacious character. He says what he thinks. Besides, he seems to know what he's talking about.

"I'll try the fish too," I say.

Steven smiles, satisfied.

"And wine," Steven says. "What's your preference there?"

I shrug. "White? High rating?"

He laughs out loud.

"Maybe a Pouilly-Fumé?" Steven suggests.

That sounds like a breed of horse.

"Excellent," I say.

There are a few seconds of silence as the waiter arrives and jots down our order, and it's painfully long enough for me to blurt out the first question that pops into my head.

"So, you're a doctor?"

What a dumb thing to ask, given that he'll expect me to talk about what I do in return.

"A pediatrician," Steven says. "Before I specialized, I spent two years in South Africa with Doctors Without Borders. It was appalling to see all that suffering, but also fantastic to see the genuine, pure joy in those children's eyes. That was when I decided to keep working with kids."

"So lovely" is my unimaginative reply.

"Tell me about yourself." Steven smiles. "I'm so curious."

What can I say? He saves starving children in Africa while I spend my days pretending to be a student so I don't have to register with the Employment Service, and play fortune-teller over the phone each night.

"I'm still a student," I say, picking at my napkin. "Right now I'm studying international development. I got it into my head that I want to do something abroad, maybe with a nonprofit or something, but I'm not so sure anymore."

"Interesting," Steven says.

His eyes are intense, deep and pale blue, almost transparent.

"I want to know more," he says. "Who are you? The person behind the Tinder profile."

I laugh.

"Come on," Steven says. "I'm too old for games and that kind of crap."

I can't deny that this sounds nice. "I mean, I'm not even thirty yet, so I suppose I'm still trying to figure out who I am."

"That has nothing to do with age," Steven says. "You never stop wondering who you are."

"Maybe not. But it's especially obvious at the moment. I'm the only one in my circle of friends without a family or a career. I guess you could say it's my thirty-year crisis."

At least no one can accuse me of selling myself on false grounds. No wonder my career in telemarketing lasted about as long as a fruit fly does.

"Thirty! Imagine being so young," Steven says. "All jokes aside. I remember what it was like. I'd hardly had a proper relationship by the time I was thirty. I had spent all my time on my studies and the student union life. One day I discovered that everyone else had settled down and become adults. As if I was the only one who didn't come down to earth. It was pretty rough."

"Exactly!"

He really does understand. We raise our glasses in a toast as the waiter brings our fish.

“I read an incredible book last week,” Steven says, without putting down his glass. “More than two hundred pages on eels. I thought I had no interest in eels whatsoever, but boy, was I wrong.”

“*The Book of Eels*? I’ve read that one too! Isn’t it great?”

“Beyond fascinating. I mean, everyone has heard how all eels are born in the Sargasso Sea, but there was so much more. What an amazing animal!”

“Right?”

I almost have to pinch myself. A date who talks about books! When was the last time this happened?

“What was this, again?” I poke my fork into the white fish on my plate.

“Hake,” Steven says.

I look him in the eye. “They’re probably not mysterious at all, are they?”

“Not at all,” he says, taking a big bite.

It’s like slow motion. Something about his strong jaw slowly chewing his food. I’m riveted.

“What?” Steven laughs and wipes his lips with his napkin. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.”

I can’t help but laugh too.

But I honestly don’t know what the matter is.

By the time we’ve eaten up our hake, we’ve discussed everything from climate change and Greta Thunberg to Me Too and Bob Dylan’s Nobel Prize. Even though Steven appears to have firm opinions on most things (climate change must be arrested primarily by way of the UN and China; Me Too was much needed on a systemic level, but courts of public opinion are never a good thing; and even though Bob Dylan

is the world's foremost rock poet, the Nobel Prize should go to real authors who write real books), he always lets me have my say and seems perfectly genuine when he says he's willing to reconsider his views.

"Would you excuse me for a moment?" he says, pushing his chair back.

"It's fine. We have a deal."

He laughs, and I take out my phone as he disappears around the corner. I send a quick message about the date to the Messenger group that still goes by the name Tinder Central. Then I realize his jacket is gone. Suddenly my heart is pounding. I crane my neck to look for him.

Shit. Of course he made use of our emergency exit. I can't even manage to order a glass of wine properly.

Responses to my message are already pouring in, in the form of emojis that are applauding or sticking out their tongues. As always, only Rebecka dares to actually ask what they all want to know.

Sex?

I reply with a sunglasses emoji.

"Are you texting your other date?" Steven asks.

He's standing behind me with his jacket over his shoulders. Relieved, I put my phone aside.

"I have a Messenger group with a couple of girlfriends, we check in to make sure everything is okay when we're on dates."

"Smart," Steven says. "Can't be too careful these days."

I manage to avoid the sad fact that Tinder Central is a remnant of better days. I'm the only one who still dates. The others are probably at home on their sofas at this time of night.

"Dessert?" the waiter asks, handing us each a menu.

I try to read it, but I can't focus.

"A week ago, I was on the verge of deleting Tinder," Steven says, shaking the last drops of the wine into my glass. "Now I'm glad I stuck it out a little longer."

"Have you been on it for long?" I ask.

“Not really—I’ve messaged with quite a few people. But there’s only a handful I’ve met in real life.”

A handful? What does that mean? Five? No way can I reveal how I’ve spent years working my way through Tinder, with an ever-expanding age range.

“It was easier in the olden days,” I say with a sigh. “When you married the neighbor boy or let your parents pick someone for you.”

Steven folds the dessert menu.

“There are too many delicious options.”

“Are we still talking about Tinder?”

When he laughs, the tip of his shoe happens to brush my foot under the table. We look at each other.

“What would the lady say to a drink instead?” He leans back with his elbow over the back of his chair. “We could find a cozier spot.”

“Well . . . did you have somewhere particular in mind?”

“I’d love to invite you back to my place,” Steven says, rising from his chair. “I’ve got a really nice Hennessy. Do you drink cognac?”

“Definitely.”

“But unfortunately, that will have to wait. I’ve got water damage in the bedroom. Blower fans and dust everywhere.”

Typical. Most Tinder guys hardly manage to swallow their dinner before they want to drag me home with them. Now, the one time I actually want to go, it doesn’t seem like it’ll happen.

“My place is no good either,” I say, adjusting my dress. “My roommate and I have a pact. No gentlemen callers allowed.”

That’s a white lie.

There’s no way I can bring a forty-seven-year-old pediatrician to my shabby student studio with its kitchenette in the student housing complex Delphi.

Steven looks a little glum as he hands me my jacket. With one large hand at the small of my back, he guides me out through all the tables.

“How about Grand Hotel?” he asks.

“Sounds good.”

I haven't been there since my uncle turned sixty. It's no place for my usual Tinder guys.

I wobble slightly on the stone steps, and Steven reflexively takes my arm. I stare right into his pale blue eyes and feel a tickle low in my belly.

“To Grand.”

Excerpt from Interrogation with Bill Olsson

Would you please state your full name?

Bill Stig Olsson.

Can you tell me a bit about yourself, Bill?

I'm thirty-three years old. My education is in film and culture studies, and I live here in Lund with my eight-year-old daughter, Sally.

How do you support yourself?

I write quite a bit for online outlets, reviews and so forth. I used to work at a movie theater, but that ended last spring.

What do you do all day, then?

This summer I've mostly been spending time with my daughter. We've gone on little outings to the beach and stuff. One day we went to the 4H farm. At the same time I've been trying to look for work, but it isn't easy.

You're aware of why we're here today, Bill. Two people have been found dead in a house on Linnégatan here in Lund. What do you know about that?

I mean, obviously I've read about it and everything. Lund is a small city, things like that don't happen much here.

When did you become aware of who had died?

I saw it online a few days ago. Naturally, I was curious.

Did you recognize the names of these people?

Not exactly.

So you weren't acquainted with Steven or Regina Rytter?

No, I've never met them. Not that I know of, anyway.

You've never been inside their home on Linnégatan?

No. Like I said, I don't know who they are.

This isn't the first time you've been investigated for a crime.

But, *murder!* You can't be serious!? I would never be capable of hurting another person.

But you're in our database, Bill. We have your fingerprints on file. You were aware of that?

Yes. Sure.

So how do you explain the fact that we've found your fingerprints in several locations in the Rytters' house?

What? No, that can't be right.

Karla

These orange earplugs are totally useless. I haven't slept a wink all weekend. The student housing I've ended up in seems to be some combination of hostel and rec center, with constant partying: music and shouting around the clock.

On Monday morning, the alarm on my phone goes off at seven. With my eyes half-open and the beats of the night still ringing in my ears, I cross the street to the bus stop. The sun has risen large over the city, and the wind yanks at my cardigan. It always seems to be windy here.

The bus ride takes ten minutes, max, but there's time to see a whole lot of the city. Rows of small houses crowding close along narrow, winding alleys; lovely institutional buildings that have been around for centuries. And the magnificent cathedral with its two towers, overshadowing everything else. There's something Harry Potter-like about Lund.

I'm on my way back to the big house where Steven and Regina Rytter live. Could it really need cleaning again? Even before I got there for the first time, a week ago, it was cleaner than most other houses I've seen.

Lena at the cleaning company squirmed a bit when I asked why they needed a maid twice a week.

“It’s up to the client how often they want us to visit,” she said.

But she couldn’t hide the way her eyes were shifting here and there. Obviously, she was aware that I wouldn’t want to question it any further. I was damn lucky to get this job, and I definitely don’t want to seem ungrateful or difficult.

It’s a bit of a walk from the bus stop. Past a schoolyard full of children playing jump rope under big green trees, in through the black wrought iron gate, and up the path of pebbles that crunch beneath my sandals. Once I’ve entered the code on the alarm, I step into the hall with a cautious *hello*. No response.

All the doors upstairs are closed. Everything looks just as neat and tidy as when I left last time. I start with the upstairs bathroom, spraying lemon-scented cleaner into the toilet, the sink, and the bidet, and I’ve just knelt down with the scrub brush when I think I hear something. A sound. A half-muffled whimper.

I get up. Standing stock-still, I listen. The scrub brush drips onto the tile floor.

“Come here.” A pathetic voice from the bedroom.

I toss the brush into the sink and hurry over.

“Hello, excuse me,” I say.

Regina Rytter is lying on her side in a luxurious bed with a velvet headboard. The blinds are down; the air is dry and stale. Her speech is slurred and slow; I don’t understand what she’s trying to say, but she seems upset, almost afraid.

“I’m the new cleaner,” I explain. “We met last Wednesday, but maybe you forgot. . . .”

“No, no, I haven’t forgotten you.”

Glassy eyes stare at me in confusion. Her skin is white and fragile as tissue paper, and her every movement seems to be painful. Her sunken cheeks and haggard gaze remind me of Mom.

“My medicine. I need my medicine.”

Her hand flutters out from beneath the covers and fumbles on the nightstand. I don't know whether I should help.

“I'm sorry,” Regina says, sitting up with effort. “I feel all out of it when I don't take my pills.”

I assure her that there's no reason to apologize and ask if there's anything I can do to help.

“Oh, no, go ahead and work. It's important to my husband for everything to be nice and clean.”

She fiddles with a plastic pill organizer, the kind with different compartments.

“I'm sorry if I woke you up,” I say, backing out of the room as I close the door.

Throughout the rest of the day, I interrupt my cleaning several times to listen for sounds from the bedroom. I work for four hours. Sweeping and vacuuming, mopping floors, beating rugs and scrubbing. Not once do I hear a peep from the bedroom.

What kind of life is this poor creature living? It makes no difference if you have crystal chandeliers and charming grandfather clocks that would be right at home on *Antiques Roadshow* when you don't even have the strength to get out of bed. These beautiful rooms, all these knickknacks and valuables. The clinical neatness. It's just so clear how little it truly means.

When I return to the rowdy student housing complex, I'm exhausted in mind and body. Muscles whose existence I had only been vaguely aware of ache and throb.

The room has a bed and a wobbly chair and nothing more. I sit on the chair, staring out the window as I drink a Coke. Apparently, there's some sort of mental hospital across the road.

It's not long before someone is pounding at my door.

“Hey, Norrland!” someone bellows.

When I unlock the door, a whole gang of guys tumbles into the room. They're smashed even though it's the middle of a Monday afternoon.

"Stop being such a drag," they say. "Come hang with us in the kitchen and have a drink."

"No, I'm beat. I've been working all day. And now I need to study."

In the end I have to shove them back out the door. Whooping, they disappear down our corridor to bother someone else.

When I sink onto the bed with my laptop, my eyes are burning and soon my vision is cloudy.

I can't absorb a word of what I'm reading.

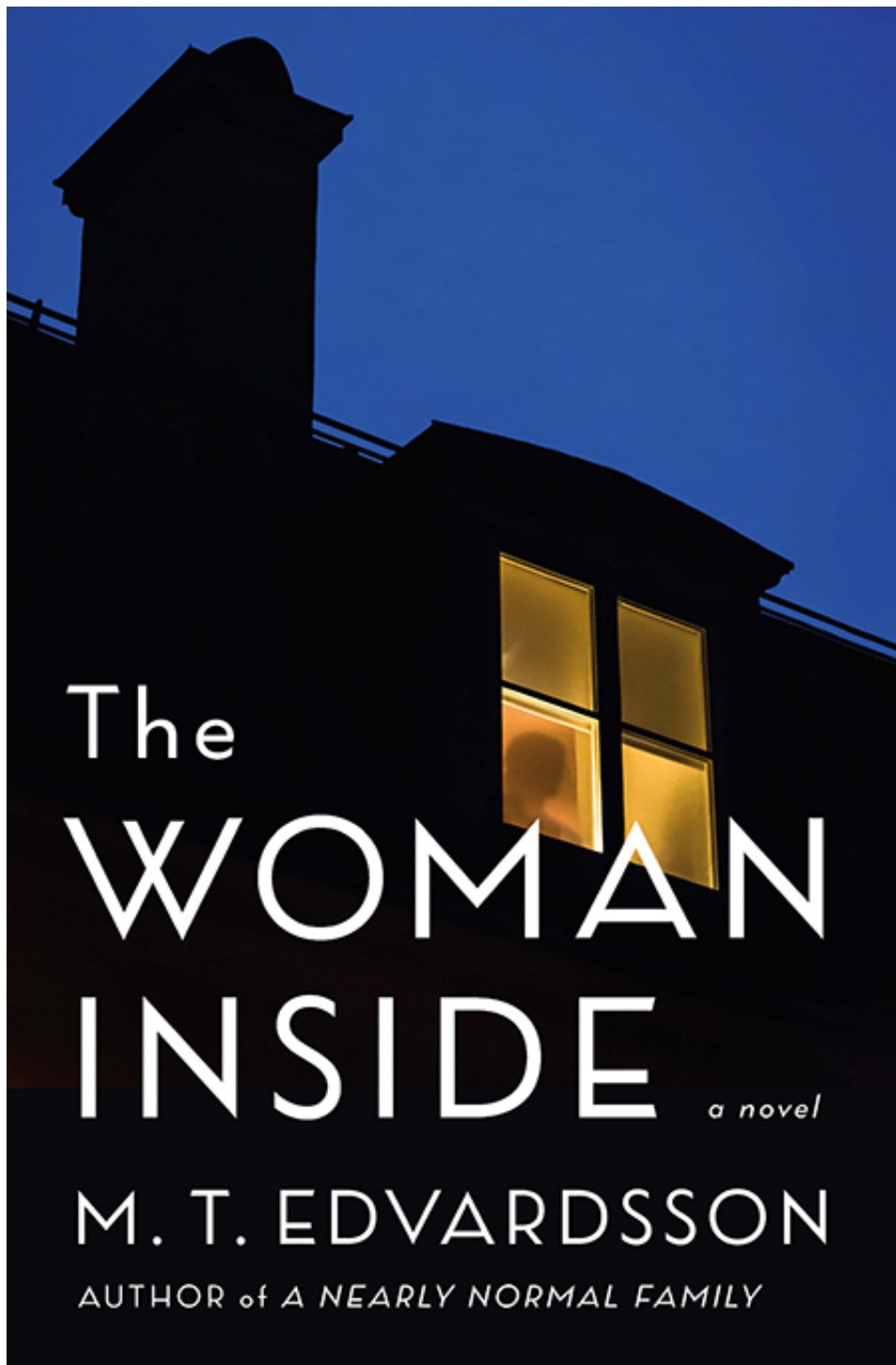
How am I supposed to manage this? Working, studying, and never getting any sleep?

Maybe Mom was right after all. I'm not going to last long here.

I close the laptop with a bang and press my face into my pillow. I feel naked. I grab the blanket and draw it over myself.

It's like a shell is falling away, leaving behind the ten-year-old girl who was forced to grow up way too soon. The girl who cleaned up after her mother on so many levels, who did the shopping and laundry and dishes. Who soon learned to keep secrets. The girl who put herself to bed every night without knowing what would still be there when she woke up.

I squeeze my fists and sob into my pillow. Mom's voice echoes in my head. I will not prove her right. I refuse to give up.



Order Now!