

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.