

REBECKA EDGREN ALDÉN

THE EIGHT DEADLY SIN

DEN ÅTTONDE DÖDSSYNDEN

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Sample translation © Julie Martin

julie_hazelryst@talktalk.net

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www.norstedtsagency.se
linda.altrovberg@norstedts.se
catherine.mork@norstedts.se

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SYNOPSIS

Nora is a successful columnist, author and lecturer, the kind that instil in her readers and audience that everyone can achieve happiness and success if they just make an effort. That is exactly what Nora did herself after the accident ten years ago, when she fell in a stairwell from the seventh floor and nearly lost her life, an incident she only vaguely remembers. Now she lives with her husband Frank and their two children in a stately villa on a well-off residential street. In their neighbourhood she is the self-evident centre of attention, and she really revels in the attention and admiration from others.

But one day Klara moves in across the street and the idyllic picture is disrupted. And as Nora starts to write on her next future bestseller (on the theme of the deadly sins) she is met by a series of difficulties, something she is not at all accustomed to. Slowly but surely fragments of Nora's past is coming back to her and suspicions start to haunt her – maybe what happened ten years ago wasn't an accident.

Den åttonde dödssynden is a cleverly written psychological thriller revolving around false fronts, pretence, human failures and horrific secrets. It is a contemporary, stand-alone novel, perfectly fitted in the 'domestic noir' genre.

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SAMPLE TRANSLATION by Julie Martin (pp 5-37)

1.

“Do you live life to the full? Do you make the most of every day? Do you appreciate what you have? And what it would mean if you lost it? My name is Nora Lindqvist and I am here to talk to you about how to live life to the max.”

She paused and looked confidently out at the hundreds of people attentively watching her as she stood there on the stage. She took a sip of water from the glass in front of her. Not because she was thirsty but because of the effect the pause would have.

“I was one of those people who was dissatisfied with most things. Someone who whined and whinged about life. Who didn’t think things were going my way. It always rained when I had time off. I never won when I bought lottery tickets. My boss didn’t notice what I did and I wasn’t paid enough. I rowed with my husband, he didn’t appreciate me. I badmouthed my friends when they weren’t there. I was too fat, too tired, too pale. Quite simply, I was just like most people. Dissatisfied. Whinging. A victim of circumstance. I didn’t have any luck.”

She paused and looked at the audience, met as many pairs of eyes as she could.

“My nails were always breaking. I never had a good hair day.”

She shrugged her shoulders and exaggeratedly pulled down the corners of her mouth. The audience giggled. She waited until the laughter had subsided and then clicked on her laptop that was standing on the little table next to her. The projector showed a picture on the big screen behind her. It was a picture of

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her. Before the accident. She was sitting slumped at a table, with a glass of wine in her hand and the other arm draped across her stomach. As if in a forlorn attempt to hide the size of it. She was dressed in a big shapeless black sweater and her legs looked fat in a pair of tight, pale-coloured jeans.

The people in the front row smiled in recognition. She knew she had the audience spellbound. That the effect of what she was saying was strong when she was standing there as large as life in front of them, dazzlingly beautiful and perfect in every way. It fascinated people when someone who was successful had also known hard times. It gave them hope. She had read up on it. Nothing had such an impact as rags to riches stories. The chrysalis that became a butterfly. Preferably overnight. Like Paul Potts or Susan Boyle, two quite mediocre singers who had become worldwide sensations in a TV talent show and had thereafter sold vast quantities of CDs.

That was why she emphasised her rotten luck before the accident. To make the transformation even more explicit. Even her appearance today was carefully calculated. She should not stand out too much, not be too smart. She still had to be a person the public could identify with. Definitely not provocative. She needed to be loved by both men and women. She was careful not to wear heels that were too high, not to show too much cleavage. Her hair was worn disarmingly loose and moderately long, in a shade of reddish blonde.

She moved up a gear. “But then something happened. Something that changed my life for ever. I was about to lose everything I was so dissatisfied with. And I realised that that is everything I have. That even the things that are not perfect are mine. My life! And that only I can change it. Nobody else.”

She took another sip of water while the audience held their breath.

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Then she told them about that dark evening towards the end of October almost ten years ago. How she had had a row with her husband, got drunk, how he had left the flat and she had rushed after him. How she had leant too far over the banister and ultimately fallen. Seven floors down. She knew the story well, she had told it many times.

She clicked on an image of the stairwell, taken from above. Even in the picture you could see how dizzyingly far down it was to the ground floor. She heard the audience catch their breath. A woman in the front row put her hand over her mouth. Others shielded themselves instinctively by wrapping their arms around themselves, with their backs pressed into the red cinema seat backs, as if to ward off what she was talking about.

They knew what was coming. That was part of the attraction. Like a Greek drama where the agreement with the audience is already written in the first scene.

It had been headline news when she fell seven floors down and miraculously survived. She didn't remember anything about what happened herself, the doctors had gently anaesthetized her poor, broken body. She showed the pictures that had been taken of her. Bruises, swelling, bandages, tubes connected to sophisticated machines. To start with the situation had been critical. Altogether she had broken twenty-one bones and punctured one of her lungs. Her cheekbone and jaw were crushed and one eye pushed in. She told this part of the story as gently and unemotionally as she could. She knew that it didn't require any dramatic gestures or artificial pauses. The audience sat in silence. Followed her movements on the stage, hung on every syllable. She clicked on a fresh slide. It was taken three months later, when the doctors

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decided she could be woken from her coma. A little, thin, hollow-eyed person with arms and legs that had no muscle.

“The doctors told me that I would never walk again. It was a miracle that they could wake me at all. A human body cannot take just any amount of stuff.”

She swallowed a mouthful of water, allowed the public to take in the image and the details. Then she launched into her story up again and told them what she had told people so many times before. How her husband had been there at her side. How they had realised what was important in life. How they had stopped their destructive rowing and had supported each other instead. How they had chosen one another and life. It had taken a year and then she was able to walk again. Today, ten years later, she was pretty much fully restored. A few screws in her body, invisible from the outside.

She prepared for the final crunch. The crescendo.

I learned that it is a question of will-power. It is a question of making up one’s mind. It is a question of seeing the goal, visualizing what you want to achieve. I said out loud what kind of life I wanted – and I got it.”

She raised her voice a fraction.

“I never hesitated. My husband never hesitated either.”

She held out her hands. Looked out over the audience. Then she went on quietly.

“We had decided. We did not say IF I got better but WHEN. We talked about everything we would do when I got better. What our life would be like. I am convinced that that is why I am standing here today.”

The applause was spontaneous. She looked around with satisfaction. She was a success.

And she could send in a bill for 45,000 Swedish kronor plus VAT.

2.

The house stood on a small hill. It looked down self-assuredly on the detached houses in the street. Bigger, older and more imposing than all the other detached houses that had popped up over the decades like weeds below the grand house built at the turn of the century in rendered stone. The area had been developed with a degree of care, without encroaching too much on the dignity of the house. It was still the biggest and finest and stood the highest up. And it was undoubtedly the little hill that the house stood on that gave it its imposing presence. The house was like an old factory owner that, with unending generosity, had allowed the other houses to rest in its shadow. The perspective from the street meant that the house seemed even bigger than it actually was. Nobody could call the magnificent stone staircase that led up to the big gate at the front modest. Two lions on either side added weight to the importance of the whole.

Frank had thought that they looked ridiculously pompous with their outstretched paws, up-tilted noses and stylised wavy hair. Nora had laughingly agreed with him but actually she had secretly fallen in love with the big stone cats. It was in fact they that had made up her mind. This house and no other.

That was nearly eight years ago. Albin had been a baby then and the future had been before them, promising and bright. The fact that Nora had managed to survive at all, learn to walk again and even get pregnant was a miracle.

The grand house reflected their triumph. A young family that had risen from the ashes like the phoenix.

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Secretly Nora loved not just the house but even its nickname. The Judge's House. It sounded grand and she couldn't help seeing it as symbolic: she was not doomed to a life on a sickbed, crippled, unlucky, depressed. She could do as she pleased with her life. Create what she wanted.

The nickname came from the fact that an old judge had lived there for the greater part of the previous century. According to the older neighbours, he had been the lord of the street for ever and most people who lived there had bent the knee to him and the house.

One day shortly before the turn of the century the judge had disappeared without trace. Most people assumed that he had suddenly had to go into a home and had died. The house fell into lonely disrepair in the new century. It was a few years before a couple of middle-aged men, who subsequently turned out to be the judge's nephews, had come and looked at it. The neighbours heard not a whisper of the judge's fate from his unapproachable relatives. A few years passed and the house stood empty and the furniture gathered dust. None of the neighbours really understood why. But one fine day in the late summer the judge's house was put up for sale. The advertisement made much of the size of the property and of its façade. And the location of course. The area had become more desirable in recent years, even though it was slightly outside the city. There had been no pictures of the interior in the advertisement but it was described as beautiful, with faded original details, potential and possibilities. In other words a property ripe for renovation.

The August sun was warm when Nora and Frank walked up the stone steps for the first time and toured the house. There at the back was the big, overgrown garden. The unpruned fruit trees had grown matted, the shrubs were tangled and the lawn patchy and scorched.

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Even though the garden was wild and neglected, that was nothing compared with what the house looked like inside. Many of the potential buyers turned their noses up at the smell of cigars that was ingrained in the drab carpets. There were big cracks in the ceiling and patches of damp on the floor. But Nora was not to be put off. On the contrary, there was something about the old, upper-class house that attracted her. As Nora walked reverently up the stairs to the first floor and saw the huge picture that hung on the wall, she was almost in a trance. It was not a beautiful picture, although the elegant gilded frame was imposing. The subject was painted in subdued colours and represented the old judge in the black robes of his office. The artist had done little to embellish his appearance, on the contrary. The face was furrowed and really quite ugly, with dry, pursed lips and sparse hair. But there was something about his eyes. Gravitas and a self-awareness that went straight to Nora's heart. She felt scared but at the same time she was drawn to his eyes. This was a man who was not to be trifled with, a man who expected to be obeyed and treated with respect.

Nora and Frank knew that the nephews had not had time to empty the house of furniture. But they were surprised that even the big portrait was still hanging there when they moved in. Who had he been, this stern judge? The old furniture under layers of dust gave away quite a bit about his person. Heavy, conservative pieces made of dark wood lined the walls, there was a lot of velvet and leather. And over everything lay the musky smell of expensive cigars.

Frank had had his doubts. It was obvious to everyone who came and looked that there would be an incredible amount of work to be done. But Nora had persuaded him. And when it transpired that all the other potential buyers were dropping out, one by one, and they got the house for far less than the asking price, even Frank fell in with the idea.

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“Are you absolutely sure?” Frank asked one last time.

Nora had just gritted her teeth and nodded. Something about the judge and the self-assuredness of the house, that radiated upper-class, had captivated her. Perhaps the house could give her what had been missing in her life?

Of course they had been obliged to completely renovate the whole house. They had torn down walls and ceilings. They had thrown the furniture out into big skips, most of it was too worn to be worth anything, even secondhand. The fitted carpets were ripped out and gave way to newly laid floors – genuine parquet and solid concrete. The wallpaper was stripped, walls were knocked out and new plasterboard was put up and painted white or papered. The upstairs bathroom was completely renovated with sandstone, mosaics, a Jacuzzi and a wall-mounted toilet. Down in the cellar they built a modern laundry room and a sauna and installed a shower with a huge shower head that had been marketed in the shop with allusions to the rainforest.

By the time they had finished, only the façade of the old building was left – and that in turn had been improved with a coat of tawny yellow, the same shade as the Tre Kronor castle had once been painted. Nora liked thinking of it like that.

The only thing they could not get rid of was the stale smell of cigars. Frank said he didn’t notice it but Nora knew he was lying.

3.

“Of course you should go!”

Nora hesitated. She hated it when Frank was so adamant. Her gut feeling was that SVT Debate was a programme one should avoid. That had not been

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the case a few years ago but if she had understood the opinions on social media correctly, the programme was held in considerable contempt today. The participants were mostly seen as publicity-seeking B-list celebs, who were prepared to think anything you liked for a little TV coverage. She had several acquaintances in the Facebook crowd who usually reported that they were invited to the evening programme but had of course turned it down. She would actually like to be one of them.

“If you won’t go they are bound to ring Angelika, you can bet on it.”

Nora felt her stomach clench. Angelika Simonsson. Up and coming. Younger, pretty, charming and above all hungry. Angelika did not have anything like as many books or years behind her as Nora did. Nor such a big public. Yet. But Nora kept an eye on the media. If there was a newer, hotter name, that was the one they picked. Frank was right. Of course she had to go. She must dress up, fly to Gothenburg, spend ages in make up for the subsequent humiliation of the max three or four responses that she knew she would be capable of seizing. Thank goodness it wasn’t until after the weekend. She had time to prepare herself.

“I’ll go,” she said to Frank and slammed the receiver down.

She sometimes thought that the way they divided their roles was not really very healthy. Morning and evening they were the husband and wife but during the day he could ring up and give her loads of orders and rules of conduct. Even though they had worked together for many years, it was still difficult to switch sometimes. What bothered her was that it seemed to be just her who found it difficult. Frank on the other hand seemed to enjoy taking up the role of her agent. It was as if it gave him the right to manage her. As in their

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recent conversation. He knew exactly what to say to get her to do what he wanted.

There were a lot of threats out there. Angelika Simonsson was just one of them. Nora had been around long enough to understand how the business worked. She had to provide a book roughly every other year and in between take part in a number of media appearances, debates or café programmes, morning sofa slots, if possible Studio One on PI as well. Everything in order to seem relevant, active and credible. If she started to fall behind on these points, she would soon be replaced on the women's magazine where she had her regular column and then the thing that she actually earned money from – the lecturing – would dry up. It was important to be seen and heard all the time, in the right way and in the right context. Her brooding caused her to take out her telephone automatically. There was the route to the outside world, her dialogue with her readers, the check on precisely how popular and interesting she was today. Unforgiving on the number of followers and likes.

She started with Instagram. Swore quietly to herself when she saw that she had lost eleven followers just since yesterday. One had joined. Not even the five hundred and forty-four like symbols and the thirty-three comments could calm her anxiety. She quickly clicked on Angelika Simonsson's account. Her shoulders sagged, Nora was still bigger but Angelika's popularity was steadily increasing with every day that passed. It was her rival's latest book success that was the reason. *Stuff the excuses!* was seen as cocky and somewhat disrespectful and not unexpectedly it had attracted some criticism from some quarters but the general public still seemed to think it was a breath of fresh air in the Swedish debate. Nora had immediately realised that the book could be quite irresistible for the media to home in on.

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Hell. Her next book needed to be a real hit, otherwise she would be downgraded to the poorer, more boring and more flashy number two. She scrolled through Angelika's Instagram pictures: well made-up, happy selfies interspersed with beautiful still-lives with great messages about seeing beauty in the everyday and group pictures with various other celebs. Nora thought. Maybe she should use the day to think seriously about how she should use Instagram – write a proper policy for herself, go through all the previous contributions and really draw up an inventory of what had worked, what had not worked and why. The last time she had done that it had produced good results. But in this ever changing world you could never lie back and say that something was finished. After scanning Instagram, she moved on to Twitter. Here she knew that she was beating Angelika hands down, Angelika didn't even have an account. But Nora could not be satisfied just with that. Was it perhaps a sign that Twitter had played its part? She shook off her anxiety, she had a big following on Twitter after years of building it up, she couldn't just abandon it. To some extent she reached a different public there, slightly more intellectual, somewhat more influential media people and therefore very important. Even though they could sometimes be hard work, with their critical questioning, many of them were also good at spreading her name and thoughts and she knew that she was accepted by and known to the Twitter elite.

She noted twenty-three new followers, twenty-five retweets and a number of comments and questions. She quickly replied to the most important ones. Then she went on to Facebook. In one way Facebook was the most difficult medium. Here she had the whole of her circle of acquaintance, her old childhood friends, distant relatives, neighbours – but also quite a lot of fans. There was a time when she had thought of setting up one private and one

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professional account. But she realised that it would be too difficult to keep them separate. Instead she now had to constantly toe the faint line between being sufficiently personal without being too private and putting out sufficient publicity without being too pushy. She had discreetly divided her followers into different categories, so that they didn't all see the same posts. Or rather, she disclosed what she thought each person should see. Imagine if ordinary people realised how much time she spent just on this. And how incredibly necessary it was. Not even Frank fully understood it, even though he banged on about image and PR nearly all the time.

It took over an hour and a half before she had finished. She had to force herself not to go into Instagram again because then the whole song and dance of comments, questions and likes would start up again.

It was like a continuous cycle.

She forced herself to put her mobile away and switched on the computer. She had a few things she needed to get done. The column in the Susanne magazine. She had received five new questions from the editor that needed answering. She also had a debate article to write for a web publication. And then she had to ring SVT and accept the invitation to the debate on Monday and then she would have to prepare for it too. She worked efficiently for several hours, with no other interruptions than visits to the bathroom and a few top-ups from the coffee pot. Her stomach was protesting about the quantity of strong coffee but she ignored it.

It got to four o'clock and it was time to fetch the children from the after-school club. Albin, who was in class two, had already rung to ask if he could go home with a friend. Nora had said no and explained that he had football practice

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and needed to get home and change and grab a sandwich before he was due on the pitch at five with his kit on.

Saga had never asked whether she could go home with anyone. And no-one had invited her either.

Nora could feel the stress. At six they were invited to the neighbours, she had remembered to mention that they would not be able to get there until half past because of Albin's football.

She had signed Saga up for football as well but her daughter had only stood on the sidelines and looked scared. It had been impossible to get her to interact with the other members of the team and she mainly seemed to be afraid of the ball. After a couple of tries Nora had allowed her to drop out. Since that fiasco Nora had tried to find a suitable sport for Saga but it had not been easy. Gymnastics that she had been on a waiting list for for several years hadn't worked either. Saga was afraid of just about everything the instructors wanted her to do. The same with dance. Saga did not want to perform and she didn't want to do anything in a group. The only thing she had now was the piano and that was going excruciatingly slowly Nora thought. She reminded herself that Saga was only in class one. She would surely find something that worked. Maybe swimming? Saga did like the water. Or did she? Nora sneaked a look at the clock, it was time to rush off.

4.

The goat's cheese melted into the honey. The walnuts crunched in her jaws. Nora chewed somewhat nauseously on the sticky mixture. Their neighbour Mimmi had a predilection for sweet things in food.

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“Here we are, here come the drinks! Help yourselves, help yourselves.”

Mimmi was in an unusually good mood. She usually repeated everything at least twice when she was in a really good mood. Her generous bust bounced under her flowery top. Her round cheeks were slightly flushed.

Mimmi and Peter had been among the first neighbours they had got to know after they moved in. They lived opposite and were a few years older than Nora and Frank.

“Help yourself, help yourself, Nora, have you had a sandwich?”

Nora nodded with her mouth full of the sticky spread. A few crumbs of walnut crept out of the corners of her mouth and slipped down on to her dress.

“Frank? Have you had one? They’re home-made. Frank? Home-made!”

Frank, who had managed to bag one of the big armchairs, smiled broadly, his white teeth gleaming. He looked at Mimmi though narrowed eyes. Nora thought she saw a quick wink of the eye.

“Mimmi you are fantastic. These are amazing.”

Frank chewed on his sandwich without taking his eyes off her. Mimmi cooed like a lovesick dove. She had always had a soft spot for Frank. Actually probably all the women in the street had. For the most part it did not bother Nora. On the contrary, it flattered her that she had the most handsome and charming husband. She eyed him covertly. Noticed his well-practised crooked smile and his fringe that he had happily allowed to flop over one eye. She believed that he thought it reminded people of a boys’ annual hero from the forties. A latter day Biggles. Or why not Kalle Blomqvist? There was something about his bearing that really reminded one of those plucky schoolboy heroes from a lost age when everything was black and white. It was as if he exerted himself to seem unsophisticated and uncomplicated. Even his clothes reinforced

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the impression. He looked as if he had come directly from a country club, with his sweater over an open-necked shirt and light trousers with a crease. The only things missing to complete the picture were the beret and moustache.

“Oh this, this was nothing special at all. Not at all. Nothing special,” giggled Mimmi.

Frank clapped Peter, who was sitting in the armchair next to his, hard on the back.

“Peter, you’re a lucky dog. What a woman you have there. I’ve never eaten anything so good!”

Yet another of Frank’s characteristics. Exaggerating his compliments. Nora could not refrain from rolling her eyes at him discreetly.

Peter was sitting leaning back and displaying a little paunch on his otherwise slim and loose-limbed body. He chuckled contentedly.

“How can you say that Frank, when you have snaffled the queen of the street.”

Peter looked at Nora, smiled broadly and winked at the same time as he raised his glass to her. She could feel the warmth radiating from him. There was nothing flirtatious in his behaviour towards her. Nora could not quite put her finger on what it was between them but it was definitely nothing improper. Peter always behaved more as if he were incredibly impressed and proud of her. He made her happy.

Nora smiled at him and raised her glass in reply.

“Yes, all of us here are fortunate. Beautiful women, good children and wonderful neighbours. Cheers!”

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Frank looked around the room to include everyone in his toast. In addition to Mimmi and Peter there were two other couples from the neighbourhood there, Lasse and Helena and Elisabeth and Stefan.

Lasse immediately joined Frank's toast.

“Well of course, we really do live in Paradise!”

Lasse laughed loudly at his own joke, and it was not the first time he had told it.

“Yes, cheers to all of us on Paradise Street! And cheers to all our beautiful women!”

Frank repeated his toast.

“Stefan! Are you with us?”

Elisabeth nudged her husband who was sitting slumped next to her on the green sofa. A picture wall loomed behind them. Mostly wishy washy water colours in pastel colours. Some home-grown, others found at numerous summer boot sales. All elegantly framed in identical gilded frames.

Stefan was lost in his own thoughts, as he usually was when conversations were being held in larger gatherings. He could brighten up if he had someone's full attention and then he was capable of talking quite wittily if it was a subject which he knew something about, such as particle physics for example. Stefan was a researcher at the Royal Institute of Science. Unfortunately his subjects rarely came up at the neighbourhood dinner parties. Nora had always thought that although he was very intelligent, he probably had a touch of Aspergers or one of those conditions with a set of initials that were so common these days.

A red flush crept up his pale cheeks when he realised that the assembled company was waiting for him.

“What? Oh, of course, cheers then!”

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Frank laughed.

“Yes Stefan, we are drinking a toast to our beautiful wives”, Frank spoke slowly, emphasising every syllable.

The red patches on Stefan’s cheeks and neck deepened. He was lost in thought but not stupid. Of course he understood that Frank was teasing him but he was far too well-mannered to challenge him.

“Yes, yes of course. Cheers to them,” he mumbled and swallowed a big gulp of bubbly.

Elisabeth looked at her husband and sighed. Nora wondered what she actually saw in him. In actual fact he wasn’t really ugly at all. Tall and quite well built but oh so absent-minded. At any rate Elisabeth was welcome to him. Nora looked at Helena, who had worked her way over to Frank’s armchair and was sitting on one of the arms. She was leaning over him with the top half of her body. Her mouth was pouting. Her short skirt had ridden up and was showing off her long, slim legs. And to make sure that Frank didn’t miss them either, she had crossed them and was allowing her top leg to bob up and down just in front of his eyes.

Helena didn’t seem to be aware of the most basic rules of dress, with her far too short skirt she was wearing a particularly deep décolleté. Admittedly she had a figure that was worth showing off but perhaps not in quite such a provocative way.

Irritatingly enough, Frank’s eyes were glued to those long legs. Nora had no problem with Frank flirting with Mimmi, but with Helena it was another issue. Helena looked good and Nora had the feeling that she wouldn’t hesitate if Frank just gave her the right signal. Could she trust Frank? He was a flirt but somehow he never went beyond the line. Not when she was there anyway.

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Helena shuffled even closer to Frank, who was laughing at something she said. Nora compressed her lips and fixed her eyes on Frank. It seemed as if he knew that she was looking at him, because he straightened up and raised his glass to her with a disarming smile. Helena pursed her lips and Nora sneered inwardly. She would bet that Helena would try and grab the seat next to Frank during the dinner. If Peter and Mimmi hadn't arranged a seating plan of course. In that case Frank would be next to their hostess at the table. For some extraordinary reason it was always he who got to escort all the hostesses to the table.

“Tell us about your new book project Nora,” Peter invited her and laid his big hand on her knee.

That was an affectionate gesture. Normally it bothered her when people touched her, but never when Peter did. He was actually the reason why she still accepted the invitations to these rather tedious dinners. Peter was her greatest supporter and always gave her a lot of endorsement. She was not a bit attracted by him, but nourished a deep desire to be close to him. In a purely amateurish attempt at psychoanalysis, she had thought that perhaps he was a father figure for her. The way he always looked at her, that was how she would have liked her own father to look at her. He was one of the few people that she was certain wished her well. She took a deep breath and then, with Peter's blessing and the others' polite attention, began to tell them about her latest meeting with the publisher. The idea was that she should take up the seven deadly sins and on the basis of them produce a modern self-help book.

“Basically it's about having a balance. About being humble in life. You know, pride goes before a fall. Like Icarus who flew towards the sun and burnt

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his wings so he fell into the Aegean Sea. Pride was one of the seven deadly sins you know,” she began.

“Oh, that’s interesting. What were the others again? asked Helena. “Gluttony, avarice ...”

“Well yes, gluttony is one. Pride is another. But avarice isn’t, it’s greed, although that’s almost the same thing. And then there’s,” she paused and held up her fingers. Silently crooked a finger for each of the sins she had just rattled off, “envy, wrath, sloth and lust.”

“Lust? That doesn’t sound particularly sinful,” said Helena, as she straightened her cleavage.

“It may also be called fornication or covetousness, well you know, liking coveting your neighbour’s wife,” explained Nora. She paused and then added:

“Or your neighbour’s husband in your case.”

Helena’s lips were pouting even more now and Nora could see she was really thinking about this. The next moment she turned noticeably red in the face and at the same time she swung her legs away from Frank. Serves you right, thought Nora. She had to try hard not to smile.

“But wrath,” Peter wondered. “Is it such a bad thing to be angry?”

“If it is a destructive anger then it certainly is,” said Nora. I believe you don’t need to take them so literally but that they can still mean something for a twenty-first century person. It’s not particularly healthy to go around hating and being bitter. Isn’t this actually universal advice on how to achieve happiness and wellbeing in one’s life?”

She paused and looked at her neighbours. They were all turned towards her and she could feel the butterflies in her tummy.

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“You’re so wise Nora! Imagine if more people were like you. Fantastic! Did you think this all up yourself? Peter asked as he clapped his hands.

Encouraged by him she continued her little lecture.

“Envy destroys us and blinds us so that we don’t realise what we have. Hate distorts and poisons us.”

She lost the thread, thought about her parents. She had not been able to forgive. She couldn’t stop hating. She ran her hand through her hair and opted to continue.

“Greed is the same, we don’t appreciate what we actually have, we just want more.”

She looked at Elisabeth, who was just putting her third sandwich in her mouth.

“And greed is undoubtedly the reason for today’s welfare disease number one, obesity,” she went on.

Elisabeth coughed. Put her hand over her mouth but too late. Baguette crumbs and walnuts spluttered out over the table.

Peter chuckled and smiled at Elisabeth. Then he turned to Mimmi, who immediately understood his silent signal. Mimmi hurried out to the kitchen, with the tray still in her hands and quickly came back with a cloth and kitchen roll.

“That sounds incredibly interesting,” Peter went on. “I actually have a book about the seven deadly sins. I’ll see if I can find it for you ...”

He got up, walked over to the massive bookcase that covered the opposite wall, pulled his glasses down to the tip of his nose and scoured the shelf with his short-sighted eyes, muttering quietly to himself at the same time.

“But isn’t what you write quite judgmental?”

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Elisabeth had recovered from her coughing attack.

“No, why would it be?”

Nora opened her eyes wide. An irritated smile was playing at the corner of Elisabeth’s mouth. Nora pretended not to see it.

“Yes, but I mean, you can hear what it sounds like yourself. Deadly sins!” exclaimed Elisabeth and looked around for support. “What sins are so terrible that they are deadly? Sloth for instance. Can that actually be worse than, shall we say, murder?”

“We’ve got a new judge in the judge’s house,” laughed Helena and looked at Frank.

Helena’s comment stung. Nora tried hard not to give her more fuel. Instead she fixed her eyes on Elisabeth and replied quietly.

“I’m not passing any judgment on which sins are the worst.” She thought about her parents. “I am just using the seven deadly sins as a starting point for how you can actually create a better life. Pride for instance. It’s like megalomania or vanity. Believing that you are superior to others. Do you think it’s a good thing to be like that?”

Touché, thought Nora and smiled a broad smile at Elisabeth.

“I think it sounds incredibly wise,” Peter interjected from the bookcase. “I’ve just found ...”

A shrill scream was heard and a gaggle of youngsters tumbled in and interrupted them. Someone was crying broken-heartedly.

“He took my game!” a piercing high-pitched voice yelled.

It was all of Elisabeth’s and Stefan’s tousled children.

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Elisabeth tried to mediate and at the same time comfort the one who was crying. As usual her husband stayed passively in the background. Nora could not help smiling at the whole situation.

Mimmi looked extremely uncomfortable. Her and Peter's only child, a son, had left home several years ago and she seemed to have forgotten what it was like to have young children. Helena, who didn't have any children at all, looked completely unconcerned. Instead she bent over and whispered something in Frank's ear. Frank smiled in amusement.

"I want my game!" yelled the youngest and sniffed up a greeny-yellow string of snot through his nose.

"It's really mine," explained the middle boy.

Elisabeth got up from her seat, grabbed hold of the two children who were closest to her and thrust them out of the living room.

"You can stay downstairs if you're going to fight and carry on like this. Why can't you sit still quietly like Saga?" She pointed at Nora's daughter who was sitting huddled up in a corner of the sofa. Her tightly braided plaits hung stiffly down beside her slender face. She has her lips pressed together and looked as if all she really wanted was to be as invisible as she had been before.

Nora laughed indulgently.

"Ture, ask Albin if you can borrow his game. I'm sure he'll let you."

Nora raised her voice and called to her son.

"Albin? Ture can borrow yours can't he?"

There was a muttering from Peter's and Mimmi's office.

"Thank you!" called Elisabeth in that direction.

"What is it you give Saga, Nora, to keep her so quiet, I'd like the recipe for it, don't you think Stefan?" said Elisabeth.

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“Yes, then it would at least be quiet occasionally at home,” laughed her husband.

Nora laughed too, at the same time as she looked across at her serious daughter.

“She’s just a quiet child, aren’t you, sweetheart?” said Nora.

Saga sat motionless, clearly uncomfortable with the attention. Frank lifted Helena’s arm away and stood up.

“Come here darling,” he said and held out his arms to Saga, who climbed silently on to his lap.

Helena pursed her lips and at the same time as she uttered a sort of humming sound she exclaimed:

“What a fantastic father he is!”

“Come on, now it’s time for us to sit down and eat, the food is on the table,” Mimmi interrupted.

Frank went over to the dining table with Saga clinging to him like a baby monkey. She had still not said a thing.

5.

It was a shame really to be driving on such a beautiful day. But Frank had insisted. And somehow Nora admired him for that. He visited his mother one day a month and he liked to take the whole family with him. It wasn’t unreasonable, thought Nora. While the children got into the back seat, Nora took her seat in the front. They did not even need to discuss whether Frank was going to drive. She pulled the sun visor down and took a quick peek at herself in the mirror. Her make-up was as it should be. She quickly put on a coat of lip

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gloss which the advertisement said would re-moisturise her lips and at the same time give them colour and shine. She smacked her lips together a couple of times and tasted the bittersweet taste of cherries. Then she picked up her mobile. On the way to the home she could look through all her social media accounts. She took a few quick selfies, chose the best one, where the children could be glimpsed in the back seat and added a nice filter to it. Then she put it out on her Instagram account and wrote underneath: “A Saturday outing now with all the family.” She looked at the whole thing for a moment before she clicked on send. A second later she had already received five likes and her body calmed down.

Albin was sighing in the back seat.

“Do we have to go to Granny?”

Nora swung round quickly.

“Of course Daddy has to go and see his mother, she is all the family he has. You know how important family is.”

She could hear for herself how stern she sounded, but it was important to her to teach the children the right values. Their family would not be like hers.

The children had actually never asked about their maternal grandmother and grandfather and Nora hadn't talked about them either. It was obvious that her parents had no place in their lives. When Nora talked about the importance of family, it was their own family she meant. She was quite determined not to be like her parents and definitely did not intend to lose contact with her children, like her parents had done. At least I'm normal, she thought. My children are growing up normally, in a normal, happy family.

Her stomach churned when she thought about her own original family. Her parents were still living in the same place and Nora knew that she would

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never go back. When she had moved away from the village it had been for good, she had left her old life, left her parents and her childhood friends. Left the Congregation. She had never regretted it.

Never wished herself back in the community, as her mother would have put it. Never.

For her they might as well be dead.

She swallowed silently. It wasn't the thought of her mother and father that hurt. It was the thought of Elsa. Her sister. If only she could get away and move out as Nora had done. Elsa had been strong enough to leave the Congregation but she was still living there and still in touch with their parents. That was a betrayal that Nora could not forgive.

Elsa had made a choice. And she had chosen to give up on her, her sister.

Albin switched on his Nintendo and soon they could hear the cheery little tunes.

“Albin, do you understand?” Nora turned round again and looked at him.

“Yeah, yeah,” he muttered.

“You should be glad you have a family. And have a sister,” said Frank.

Nora saw him sneak a look at Albin in the rear view mirror. Nora took his hand.

“Tell us about when Grandad burnt to death” asked Albin.

“But Albin!” exclaimed Nora.

“Let him ask. It's got to be a good thing that they have the courage to ask questions,” said Frank as he tried to make eye contact with his son.

“Our house burned down. Mum, that is your Granny, was the only one who escaped. Both my dad and my sister Kristin died that night.”

“But what about you Daddy?” asked Albin.

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“I wasn’t there. I had already moved out, as luck would have it.”

“So how did Granny manage to get out?”

“It was a miracle. She got out at the last minute before the whole house went up in flames and everything was destroyed. But she was not herself after that.”

“Is that why she has to live in a home?”

“Yes, exactly, sweetheart.”

The children were thinking about what he had said. There was silence in the car. He carefully let go of Nora’s hand and took a firm ten-to-two hold on the steering wheel. She looked at his profile. He looked more handsome than ever. Such bearing. She had always admired him for daring to talk to the children about what had happened in his childhood so naturally. She felt butterflies in her stomach.

He was a survivor, just like her. Some people go under when they suffer misfortunes. Others learn lessons. Both she and Frank had lived through difficult events in their lives and come out better people on the other side. Even though she found it hard to admit it to herself, she felt a certain degree of contempt for people who did not survive. For those who allowed the setbacks to be excuses for allowing things to fall apart. People who gave up. She and Frank were not like that. What doesn’t kill you, makes you stronger, as the saying goes. Not even a fall from the seventh floor had killed Nora.

She wished she was the one who had written *Stuff the excuses!*.

6.

Although the authority had tried hard to create as homely an environment they could, with carpets, pictures, flowers and patterned sofas, the whole place cried out institution. The lack of thresholds between the rooms and the shiny synthetic floors reinforced that impression. Nobody was here voluntarily or at no cost.

It was above all the smell of disinfectant and hand sanitizer that gave it away. And underneath that the smell of old age and loneliness. And stew, probably the previous evening's meal. Nora felt nauseous and breathed through her mouth to help her cope. The whole atmosphere repulsed her.

Frank's mother Sonja was sitting in her usual place in a wooden armchair with patterned red upholstery, right next to the window. She was wearing some sort of cloth robe and her grey hair was unkempt.

"Hello Mum, it's Frank, how are you?"

"Who?"

"Frank, Mum, Frank."

"Fancy that, it's Frank who's here. My little boy! Now you haven't been being naughty again have you? Who is that with you?"

Nora stepped forward.

"It's me, Nora. We're all here. Look. Frank and the children. You know, Saga and Albin. Come here children."

Nora noticed how Frank took a couple of steps back. She thought, as she had so many times before, that she only knew one person who hated care homes more than she did and that was Frank. Before she had time to react, her mother-in-law had grabbed hold of her hand. The children stepped somewhat

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reluctantly up to the old lady they had never really got to know. She had wandered off into the mists long before they were born. Granny was not interested in her grandchildren. She looked straight through them, unseeing, and then turned to Nora again.

“Nora, I’m so pleased to see you. I hope Frank is treating you well?” Sonja stressed every word as if she really wanted to emphasise what she was saying.

“Oh yes, he is kind to me.” Nora sneaked a look at Frank, who had walked once round the room and then stopped by the window. Something outside there, between the green curtains, had caught his attention. Nora rolled her eyes at him.

“Nora you must be kind to Frank.” This time she stressed must and kind as if she were talking to a four-year-old. “He can be quite naughty and disobedient. Have I told you about the time he put the kittens in the handbag...”

“Yes I have, I’ve heard how he put the kittens in the handbag. But Frank isn’t a child any more, he is a grown man now. You’ve no need to worry.”

Sonja shook her head. “That boy worries me. He always has. Frank, my little boy, come here, I want to talk to you.”

Frank turned around, looking surprised. Nora frowned and waved to him to come over. Frank strolled over to his mother.

“Yes Mum.” Frank’s voice was high-pitched.

“My dear, you are fine lad. You just need to take care, behave yourself, do you hear me?”

“Yes, Mum!”

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Sonja reached for Nora's hand again. Found it and pulled it to her so that Nora was compelled to bend nearer. She could feel the stale breath on her cheek. Sonja smacked her lips a few times and then she whispered loudly in Nora's ear:

“Nora, don't be afraid to tell him off if he doesn't look after you properly, promise me that. I know we're not supposed to hit people but a little smack on the bottom won't hurt him if he doesn't behave himself.”

Frank rolled his eyes. Nora couldn't help giggling.

“OK, I'll give him a spanking if he doesn't behave himself.”

“Thank you Nora my dear, thank you. I'm so glad he has you.”

Nora pulled her hand away and massaged it lightly with her other hand. It was smarting a bit from her mother-in-law's firm grasp. The children mumbled goodbye. Frank kissed his mother on her hair but mentally she had already said goodbye and her mind had wandered.

7.

The first thing she saw when she turned into their road was the removal van. Like a gigantic black beetle, it was standing there in glaring contrast to all the leafy green around it. An interloper, thought Nora. The whole street had been talking about who was going to move into the shabby little seventies house almost opposite the judge's house. It was not the best plot on the road. On the contrary. Most of the garden was in the shade. Big pine trees scattered their cones all over the lawn that had run wild. Bohmans, who had previously lived there, had not been capable of looking after either the house or the land in the end. Now she was left on her own and she should have been moved to the assisted accommodation on the other side of the motorway a long time ago.

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Nora saw the removal men carrying a big, flowery sofa in. Soon after a woman jumped down from the lorry, carrying a standard lamp. She had actually been looking for one like that herself. One that was divided into three lamps, each with its own coloured shade. Red, yellow, green. Under her arm the woman had two cushions. Nora recognised the light-coloured fabric. It was the same fabric that she had herself on two armchairs in the living room. The sight of the cushions made her feel strangely calm. As if the strange bird had just become more familiar.

The woman was tall and blonde. A big bust, curvaceous but not provocative and not overweight. Just big. Possibly a little older than Nora.

Nora was pensive as she parked the car. She was in no hurry to get out, she rooted around in her bag for the keys, then she opened the door and carried the bags of groceries in. She did not take her shoes off. When she had put away the shopping she went out into the hall again. She stood in front of the mirror. She saw her familiar reflection, flicked the brush quickly through her hair, straightened her skirt. She bent forward and looked closely at her face in the mirror. She smoothed her eyebrows with her index fingers. Then she went out to welcome the new neighbour.

Across the road she could see the woman walking backwards and forwards between the door and the black removal van. She had a scarf over her hair, like charladies used to. But it didn't look out of place. With it she wore a plain, light green T-shirt, worn light-coloured jeans that were too short and a pair of trainers that had probably been white once. Nora looked down at her own white blouse, skinny black jeans and high-heeled sandals. She took a few quick steps forward and was careful to put out her right hand promptly. She had read somewhere that it gave a strong impression of gravitas. It was always the

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government ministers, managing directors and presidents who put their hand out first.

The first impression was everything.

8.

“Hello! Welcome to the neighbourhood! My name is Nora Lindqvist. I live opposite, in the big ... er, stone house up there on the little hill.”

The neighbour didn't seem to see her outstretched hand. Instead she held both her hands up in the air and waved them, like a child, at the same time as she smiled with her whole face.

“Hello! Yes, I saw you drive in. My name is Klara.”

Nora could now see that the other woman was really tall. Almost a head taller than her. Nora, at just over one hundred and seventy-two centimetres, was used to being tall. But this woman must be a good bit over one hundred and eighty-two. It felt strange to have to look up at someone.

Apart from her height it was her eyes you noticed. Ice-blue, almost transparent. Completely unmade-up, with pale eyelashes that were spread like a halo round her eyes.

Nora quickly withdrew her hand and put it on her hip instead.

“How nice! It's lovely to have new neighbours. Have you done up Bohman's old house? It was quite dilapidated. Both of them were over eighty years old. I can imagine that there was quite a lot to be done.”

“Well no. We're just moving in. I might paint some of the walls.”

The neighbour looked at her. Nora was not sure if she was imagining it but was there something in her expression? Recognition? But not the usual

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admiring kind she usually encountered, as a semi-well-known writer. She tried to put the feeling into words. Contempt?

Nora felt herself starting to blush. She cleared her throat and tried to think of something to say. Her neighbour waited, still with that smile at the corners of her mouth that was so hard to interpret.

“Yes, well ...” Nora stammered. Klara opened her mouth at the same time.

“I’m afraid I need to carry on moving in now. Nice to meet you!”

She turned on her heels, jumped up in the van and soon came out again with two bright blue Windsor-style chairs. Nora still stood there as if turned to stone, then she recollected herself and hurried away.

When she had closed the door behind her at home she wrung her hands. Something had gone wrong in that encounter. And she couldn’t really understand what. She strode to and fro in the hall. She knew that everyone in the street looked up to her. Would Klara understand and treat her in the same way? Nora tried to shake off her anxiety, of course there would be more opportunities with Klara, wouldn’t there? Of course there would.

Yet she still felt uneasy, it was as if she had an itchy sticky film on her skin. She had not experienced the feeling of being left out and despised for a very long time. But now that it had alighted on her it was familiar. It affected her in a way she did not like. Not at all.

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ABOUT REBECCA EDGREN ALDÉN



Rebecka Edgren Aldén is a journalist and editor of the women's magazine *Damernas Värld*. She lives in Nacka outside Stockholm.

Den åttonde dödssynden is her first novel.

PRESS VOICES AND BLOG REVIEWS

“A psychological thriller about lies, control, and the ability to choose your own life. /.../ Well written /.../ with an unexpected twist at the end which opens for a sequel. And which one is ‘the eighth deadly sin’? Yes, you will find this out too.”

Borås Tidning

“Rebecka Edgren Aldén has written a really nice suspense novel, up-to-date and with a good plot. I read this little gem in one sitting last week and finished genuinely pleased.”

Bokhora

“*Den åttonde dödssynden* is creepy, psychological suspense novel, putting its finger on today's exaggerated demand for success stories and self-help books and

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the downside of this demand; the fact that we seldom dare to show our true colours. /.../ This is interesting. *Den åttonde dödssynden* is interesting.”

Enligt O

“Quite impossible to stop reading. This is the author’s debut and one must say that this is nothing but a success. I strongly recommend this book to everyone who likes suspense. I, myself look forward to many more novels by this author.

5 out of 5”

Ylva Kort och Gott

“When you start reading *Den åttonde dödssynden* it’s soon perfectly clear that the author is experienced in writing and handling language. She works like a spider in its web – as a reader you’re soon effectively ensnared in her story. The book unfolds into a real page-turner that is extremely hard to put down. Perhaps one of this season’s hottest debuts in the genre of suspense.”

Johannas Deckarhörna

“Top grades to this debut novel, absolutely the most thrilling book this year. Read it, but during daytime. 5+ (out of 5)”

Mia’s bokhörna

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