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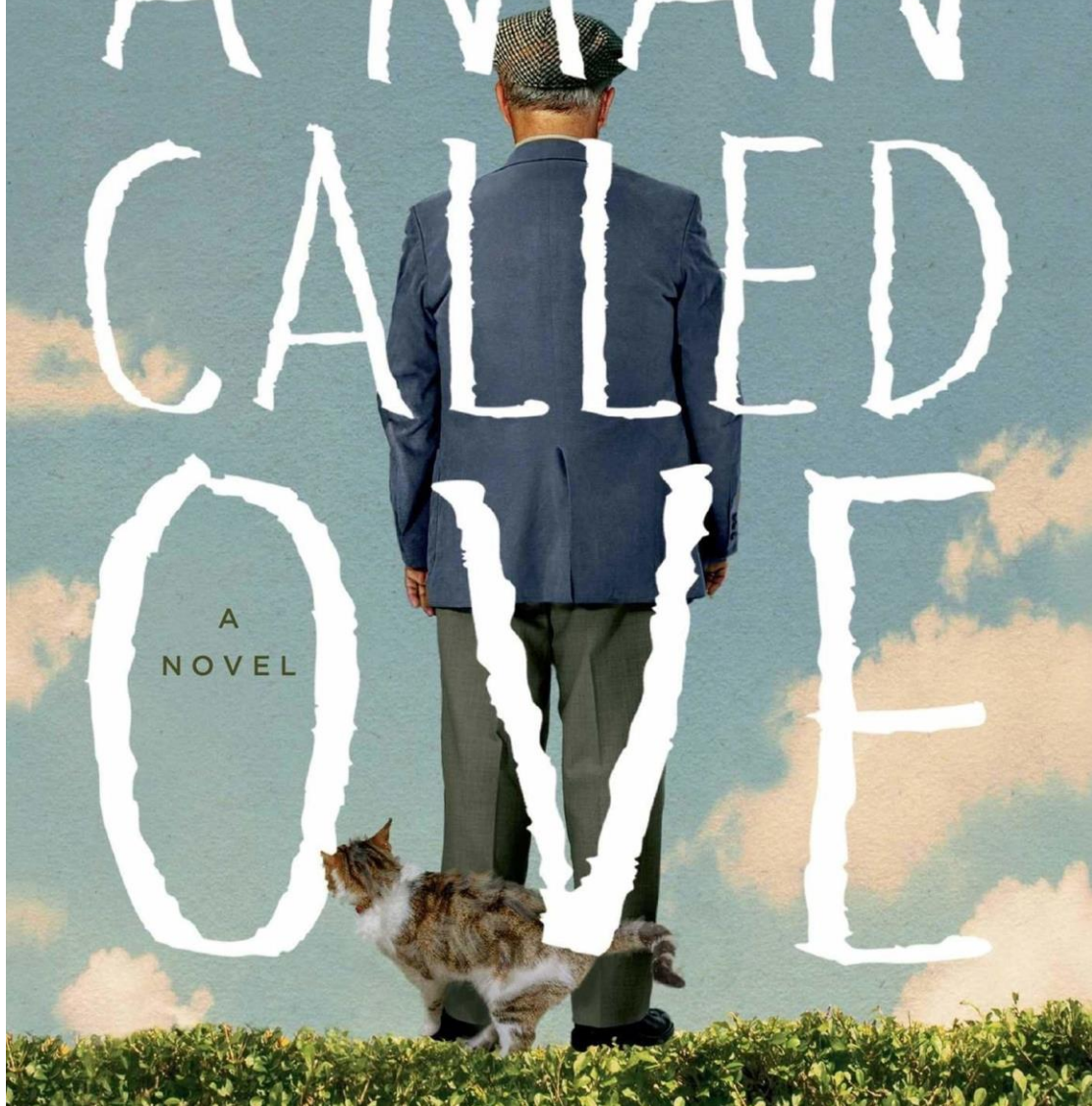
—PEOPLE

FREDRIK BACKMAN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

A MAN  
CALLED  
OVE

A  
NOVEL



## **CHAPTER 3**

# **A MAN CALLED OVE BACKS UP WITH A TRAILER**

Ove whips open the green floral curtains, which for many years Ove's wife has been nagging him to change. He sees a short, black-haired, and obviously foreign woman aged about thirty. She stands there gesticulating furiously at a similarly aged oversize blond lanky man squeezed into the driver's seat of a ludicrously small Japanese car with a trailer, now scraping against the exterior wall of Ove's house. The Lanky One, by means of subtle gestures and signs, seems to want to convey to the woman that this is not quite as easy as it looks. The woman, with gestures that are comparatively unsubtle, seems to want to convey that it might have something to do with the moronic nature of the Lanky One in question. "Well, I'll be bloody . . ." Ove thunders through the window as the wheel of the trailer rolls into his flowerbed. A few seconds later his front door seems to fly open of its own accord, as if afraid that Ove might otherwise walk straight through it. "What the hell are you doing?" Ove roars at the woman. "Yes, that's what I'm asking myself!" she roars back. Ove is momentarily thrown off-balance. He glares at her. She glares back. "You can't drive a car here! Can't you read?" The little foreign woman steps towards him and only then does Ove notice that she's either very pregnant or suffering from what Ove would categorize as selective obesity. "I'm not driving the car, am I?"

Ove stares silently at her for a few seconds. Then he turns to her husband, who's just managed to extract himself from the Japanese car and is approaching them with two hands thrown expressively into the air and an apologetic smile plastered across his face. He's wearing a

knitted cardigan and his posture seems to indicate a very obvious calcium deficiency. He must be close to six and a half feet tall. Ove feels an instinctive skepticism towards all people taller than six feet; the blood can't quite make it all the way up to the brain. "And who might you be?" Ove enquires. "I'm the driver," says the Lanky One expansively. "Oh, really? Doesn't look like it!" rages the pregnant woman, who is probably a foot and a half shorter than him. She tries to slap his arm with both hands. "And who's this?" Ove asks, staring at her. "This is my wife." He smiles. "Don't be so sure it'll stay that way," she snaps, her pregnant belly bouncing up and down. "It's not as easy as it loo—" the Lanky One tries to say, but he's immediately cut short. "I said RIGHT! But you went on backing up to the LEFT! You don't listen! You NEVER listen!" After that, she immerses herself in half a minute's worth of haranguing in what Ove can only assume to be a display of the complex vocabulary of Arabic cursing. The husband just nods back at her with an indescribably harmonious smile. The very sort of smile that makes decent folk want to slap Buddhist monks in the face, Ove thinks to himself. "Oh, come on. I'm sorry," he says cheerfully, hauling out a tin of chewing tobacco from his pocket and packing it in a ball the size of a walnut. "It was only a little accident, we'll sort it out!" Ove looks at the Lanky One as if the Lanky One has just squatted over the hood of Ove's car and left a turd on it. "Sort it out? You're in my flowerbed!" The Lanky One looks ponderously at the trailer wheels. "That's hardly a flowerbed, is it?" He smiles, undaunted, and adjusts his tobacco with the tip of his tongue. "Naah, come on, that's just soil," he persists, as if Ove is having a joke with him. Ove's forehead compresses itself into one large, threatening wrinkle. "It. Is. A. Flowerbed." The Lanky One scratches his head, as if he's got some tobacco caught in his tangled hair. "But you're not growing anything in it—" "Never you bloody mind what I do with my own flowerbed!" The Lanky One nods quickly, clearly

keen to avoid further provocation of this unknown man. He turns to his wife as if he's expecting her to come to his aid. She doesn't look at all likely to do so. The Lanky One looks at Ove again. "Pregnant, you know. Hormones and all that . . ." he tries, with a grin. The Pregnant One does not grin. Nor does Ove. She crosses her arms. Ove tucks his hands into his belt. The Lanky One clearly doesn't know what to do with his massive hands, so he swings them back and forth across his body, slightly shamefully, as if they're made of cloth, fluttering in the breeze.

"I'll move it and have another go," he finally says and smiles disarmingly at Ove again. Ove does not reciprocate. "Motor vehicles are not allowed in the area. There's a sign." The Lanky One steps back and nods eagerly. Jogs back and once again contorts his body into the under-dimensioned Japanese car. "Christ," Ove and the pregnant woman mutter wearily in unison. Which actually makes Ove dislike her slightly less. The Lanky One pulls forward a few yards; Ove can see very clearly that he does not straighten up the trailer properly. Then he starts backing up again. Right into Ove's mailbox, buckling the green sheet metal. Ove storms forward and throws the car door open. The Lanky One starts flapping his arms again. "My fault, my fault! Sorry about that, didn't see the mailbox in the rearview mirror, you know. It's difficult, this trailer thing, just can't figure out which way to turn the wheel . . ." Ove thumps his fist on the roof of the car so hard that the Lanky One jumps and bangs his head on the doorframe. "Out of the car!" "What?" "Get out of the car, I said!" The Lanky One gives Ove a slightly startled glance, but he doesn't quite seem to have the nerve to reply. Instead he gets out of his car and stands beside it like a schoolboy in the dunce's corner. Ove points down the footpath between the row houses, towards the bicycle shed and the parking area. "Go and stand where you're not in the way." The Lanky One nods, slightly puzzled. "Holy Christ. A lower-arm amputee with cataracts could have backed

this trailer more accurately than you,” Ove mutters as he gets into the car. How can anyone be incapable of reversing with a trailer? he asks himself. How? How difficult is it to establish the basics of right and left and then do the opposite? How do these people make their way through life at all? Of course it’s an automatic, Ove notes. Might have known. These morons would rather not have to drive their cars at all, let alone reverse into a parking space by themselves. He puts it into drive and inches forward. Should one really have a driver’s license if one can’t drive a real car rather than some Japanese robot vehicle? he wonders. Ove doubts whether someone who can’t park a car properly should even be allowed to vote. When he’s pulled forward and straightened up the trailer—as civilized people do before backing up with a trailer—he puts it into reverse. Immediately it starts making a shrieking noise. Ove looks around angrily. “What the bloody hell are you . . . why are you making that noise?” he hisses at the instrument panel and gives the steering wheel a whack. “Stop it, I said!” he roars at a particularly insistent flashing red light. At the same time the Lanky One appears at the side of the car and carefully taps the window. Ove rolls the window down and gives him an irritated look. “It’s just the reverse radar making that noise,” the Lanky One says with a nod. “Don’t you think I know that?” Ove seethes. “It’s a bit unusual, this car. I was thinking I could show you the controls if you like . . .” “I’m not an idiot, you know!” Ove snorts. The Lanky One nods eagerly. “No, no, of course not.” Ove glares at the instrument panel. “What’s it doing now?” The Lanky One nods enthusiastically. “It’s measuring how much power’s left in the battery. You know, before it switches from the electric motor to the gas-driven motor. Because it’s a hybrid. . . .” Ove doesn’t answer. He just slowly rolls up the window, leaving the Lanky One outside with his mouth half-open. Ove checks the left wing mirror. Then the right wing mirror. He reverses while the Japanese car shrieks

in terror, maneuvers the trailer perfectly between his own house and his incompetent new neighbor's, gets out, and tosses the cretin his keys. "Reverse radar and parking sensors and cameras and crap like that. A man who needs all that to back up with a trailer shouldn't be bloody doing it in the first place." The Lanky One nods cheerfully at him. "Thanks for the help," he calls out, as if Ove hadn't just spent the last ten minutes insulting him. "You shouldn't even be allowed to rewind a cassette," grumbles Ove. The pregnant woman just stands there with her arms crossed, but she doesn't look quite as angry anymore. She thanks him with a wry smile, as if she's trying not to laugh. She has the biggest brown eyes Ove has ever seen. "The Residents' Association does not permit any driving in this area, and you have to bloody go along with it," Ove huffs, before stomping back to his house. He stops halfway up the paved path between the house and his shed. He wrinkles his nose in the way men of his age do, the wrinkle traveling across his entire upper body. Then he sinks down on his knees, puts his face right up close to the paving stones, which he neatly and without exception removes and re-lays every other year, whether necessary or not. He sniffs again. Nods to himself. Stands up. His new neighbors are still watching him. "Piss! There's piss all over the place here!" Ove says gruffly. He gesticulates at the paving stones. "O . . . kay," says the black-haired woman. "No! Nowhere is bloody okay around here!" And with that, he goes into his house and closes the door. He sinks onto the stool in the hall and stays there for a long time. Bloody woman. Why do she and her family have to come here if they can't even read a sign right in front of their eyes? You're not allowed to drive cars inside the block. Everyone knows that. Ove goes to hang up his coat on the hook, among a sea of his wife's overcoats. Mutters "idiots" at the closed window just to be on the safe side. Then goes into his living room and stares up at his ceiling. He doesn't know how long

he stands there. He loses himself in his own thoughts. Floats away, as if in a mist. He's never been the sort of man who does that, has never been a daydreamer, but lately it's as if something's twisted up in his head. He's having increasing difficulty concentrating on things. He doesn't like it at all. When the doorbell goes it's like he's waking up from a warm slumber. He rubs his eyes hard, looks around as if worried that someone may have seen him. The doorbell rings again. Ove turns around and stares at the bell as if it should be ashamed of itself. He takes a few steps into the hall, noting that his body is as stiff as set plaster. He can't tell if the creaking is coming from the floorboards or himself. "And what is it now?" he asks the door before he's even opened it, as if it had the answer. "What is it now?" he repeats as he throws the door open so hard that a three-year-old girl is flung backwards by the draft and ends up very unexpectedly on her bottom.

Beside her stands a seven-year-old girl looking absolutely terrified. Their hair is pitch black. And they have the biggest brown eyes Ove has ever seen. "Yes?" says Ove. The older girl looks guarded. She hands him a plastic container. Ove reluctantly accepts it. It's warm. "Rice!" the three-year-old girl announces happily, briskly getting to her feet. "With saffron. And chicken," explains the seven-year-old, far more wary of him. Ove evaluates them suspiciously. "Are you selling it?" The seven-year-old looks offended. "We LIVE HERE, you know!" Ove is silent for a moment. Then he nods, as if he might possibly be able to accept this premise as an explanation. "Okay." The younger one also nods with satisfaction and flaps her slightly-toolong sleeves. "Mum said you were 'ungry!" Ove looks in utter perplexity at the little flapping speech defect. "What?" "Mum said you looked hungry. So we have to give you dinner," the seven-year-old girl clarifies with some irritation. "Come on, Nasanin," she adds, taking her sister by the hand and walking away after directing a resentful stare at Ove. Ove keeps an eye on them as

they skulk off. He sees the pregnant woman standing in her doorway, smiling at him before the girls run into her house. The three-year-old turns and waves cheerfully at him. Her mother also waves. Ove closes the door. He stands in the hall again. Stares at the warm container of chicken with rice and saffron as one might look at a box of nitroglycerin. Then he goes into the kitchen and puts it in the fridge.

Not that he's habitually inclined to go around eating any old food provided by unknown, foreign kids on his doorstep. But in Ove's house one does not throw away food. As a point of principle. He goes into the living room. Shoves his hands in his pockets. Looks up at the ceiling. Stands there a good while and thinks about what sort of concrete-wall anchor bolt would be most suitable for the job. He stands there squinting until his eyes start hurting. He looks down, slightly confused, at his dented wristwatch. Then he looks out the window again and realizes that dusk has fallen. He shakes his head in resignation. You can't start drilling after dark, everyone knows that. He'd have to turn on all the lights and no one could say when they'd be turned off again.

And he's not giving the electricity company the pleasure, his meter notching up another couple of thousand kronor. They can forget about that. Ove packs up his useful-stuff box and takes it to the big upstairs hall. Fetches the key to the attic from its place behind the radiator in the little hall. Goes back and reaches up and opens the trapdoor to the attic. Folds down the ladder. Climbs up into the attic and puts the useful-stuff box in its place behind the kitchen chairs that his wife made him put up here because they creaked too much. They didn't creak at all. Ove knows very well it was just an excuse, because his wife wanted to get some new ones. As if that was all life was about. Buying kitchen chairs and eating in restaurants and carrying on. He goes down the stairs again. Puts back the attic key in its place behind the radiator in the little hall. "Taking it a bit easy," they said to him. A lot of thirty-one-



year-old show-offs working with computers and refusing to drink normal coffee. An entire society where no one knows how to back up with a trailer. Then they come telling him he's not needed anymore. Is that reasonable? Ove goes down to the living room and turns on the TV. He doesn't watch the programs, but it's not like he can just spend his evenings sitting there by himself like a moron, staring at the walls.

He gets out the foreign food from the fridge and eats it with a fork, straight out of the plastic container. It's Tuesday night and he's canceled his newspaper subscription, switched off the radiators, and turned out all the lights. And tomorrow he's putting up that hook.