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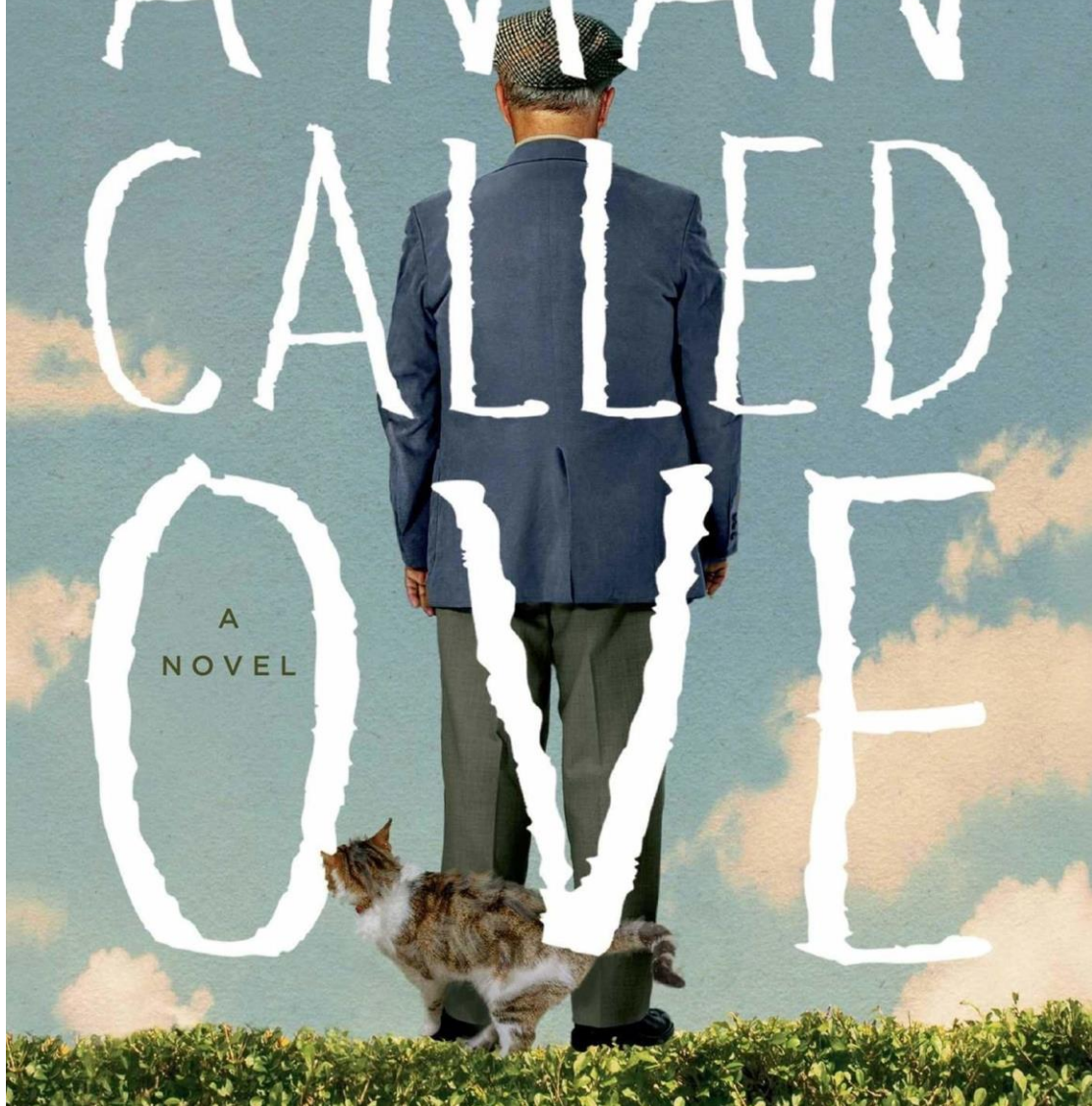
—PEOPLE

FREDRIK BACKMAN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

A MAN
CALLED
OVE

A
NOVEL



CHAPTER 4

A MAN CALLED OVE DOES NOT PAY A THREE-KRONOR SURCHARGE

Ove gives her the plants. Two of them. Of course, there weren't supposed to be two of them. But somewhere along the line there has to be a limit. It was a question of principle, Ove explains to her. That's why he got two flowers in the end. "Things don't work when you're not at home," he mutters, and kicks a bit at the frozen ground. His wife doesn't answer.

"There'll be snow tonight," says Ove. They said on the news there wouldn't be snow, but, as Ove often points out, whatever they predict is bound not to happen. He tells her this; she doesn't answer. He puts his hands in his pockets and gives her a brief nod. "It's not natural rattling around the house on my own all day when you're not here. It's no way to live. That's all I have to say." She doesn't reply to that either. He nods and kicks the ground again. He can't understand people who long to retire.

How can anyone spend their whole life longing for the day when they become superfluous? Wandering about, a burden on society, what sort of man would ever wish for that? Staying at home, waiting to die. Or even worse: waiting for them to come and fetch you and put you in a home. Being dependent on other people to get to the toilet. Ove can't think of anything worse. His wife often teases him, says he's the only man she

knows who'd rather be laid out in a coffin than travel in a mobility service van. And she may have a point there. Ove had risen at quarter to six. Made coffee for his wife and himself, went around checking the radiators to make sure she hadn't sneakily turned them up. They were all unchanged from yesterday, but he turned them down a little more just to be on the safe side. Then he took his jacket from the hook in the hall, the only hook of all six that wasn't burgeoning with her clothes, and set off for his inspection. It had started getting cold, he noticed. Almost time to change his navy autumn jacket for his navy winter jacket. He always knows when it's about to snow because his wife starts nagging about turning up the heat in the bedroom. Lunacy, Ove reaffirms every year. Why should the power company directors feather their nests because of a bit of seasonality? Turning up the heat five degrees costs thousands of kronor per year. He knows because he's calculated it himself. So every winter he drags down an old diesel generator from the attic that he swapped at a rummage sale for a gramophone. He's connected this to a fan heater he bought at a sale for thirty-nine kronor. Once the generator has charged up the fan heater, it runs for thirty minutes on the little battery Ove has hooked it up to, and his wife keeps it on her side of the bed. She can run it a couple of times before they go to bed, but only a couple—no need to be lavish about it ("Diesel isn't free, you know"). And Ove's wife does what she always does: nods and agrees that Ove is probably right. Then she goes around all winter sneakily turning up the radiators. Every year the same

bloody thing. Ove kicks the ground again. He's considering telling her about the cat. If you can even call that mangy, half-bald creature a cat. It was sitting there again when he came back from his inspection, practically right outside their front door. He pointed at it and shouted so loudly that his voice echoed between the houses. The cat just sat there, looking at Ove. Then it stood up elaborately, as if making a point of demonstrating that it wasn't leaving because of Ove, but rather because there were better things to do, and disappeared around the corner. Ove decides not to mention the cat to her. He assumes she'll only be disgruntled with him for driving it away. If she was in charge the whole house would be full of tramps, whether of the furred variety or not. He's wearing his navy suit and has done up the top button of the white shirt. She tells him to leave the top button undone if he's not wearing a tie; he protests that he's not some urchin who's renting out deck chairs, before defiantly buttoning it up. He's got his dented old wristwatch on, the one that his dad inherited from his father when he was nineteen, the one that was passed on to Ove after his sixteenth birthday, a few days after his father died. Ove's wife likes that suit. She always says he looks so handsome in it. Like any sensible person, Ove is obviously of the opinion that only posers wear their best suits on weekdays. But this morning he decided to make an exception. He even put on his black going-out shoes and polished them with a responsible amount of boot shine. As he took his autumn jacket from the hook in the hall before he went out, he threw a

thoughtful eye on his wife's collection of coats. He wondered how such a small human being could have so many winter coats. "You almost expect if you stepped through this lot you'd find yourself in Narnia," a friend of Ove's wife had once joked. Ove didn't have a clue what she was talking about, but he did agree there were a hell of a lot of coats. He walked out of the house before anyone on the street had even woken up. Strolled up to the parking area. Opened his garage with a key. He had a remote control for the door, but had never understood the point of it. An honest person could just as well open the door manually. He unlocked the Saab, also with a key: the system had always worked perfectly well, there was no reason to change it. He sat in the driver's seat and twisted the tuning dial half forward and then half back before adjusting each of the mirrors, as he did every time he got into the Saab. As if someone routinely broke into the Saab and mischievously changed Ove's mirrors and radio channels. As he drove across the parking area he passed that Pregnant Foreign Woman from next door. She was holding her three-year-old by the hand. The big blond Lanky One was walking beside her. All three of them caught sight of Ove and waved cheerfully. Ove didn't wave back. At first he was going to stop and give her a dressing-down about letting children run about in the parking area as if it were some municipal playground. But he decided he didn't have the time. He drove along, passing row after row of houses identical to his own. When they'd first moved in here there were only six houses; now there were hundreds of them. There used to be a

forest here but now there were only houses. Everything paid for with loans, of course. That was how you did it nowadays.

Shopping on credit and driving electric cars and hiring tradesmen to change a lightbulb. Laying click-on floors and fitting electric fireplaces and carrying on. A society that apparently could not see the difference between the correct anchor bolt for a concrete wall and a smack in the face. Clearly this was how it was meant to be. It took him exactly fourteen minutes to drive to the florist's in the shopping center. Ove kept exactly to every speed limit, even on that 35 mph road where the recently arrived idiots in suits came tanking along at 55. Among their own houses they put up speed bumps and damnable numbers of signs about "Children Playing," but when driving past other people's houses it was apparently less important. Ove had repeated this to his wife every time they drove past over the last ten years. "And it's getting worse and worse," he liked to add, just in case by some miracle she hadn't heard him the first time. Today he'd barely gone a mile before a black Mercedes positioned itself a forearm's length behind his Saab. Ove signaled with his brake lights three times. The Mercedes flashed its high beams at him in an agitated manner. Ove snorted at his rearview mirror. As if it was his duty to fling himself out of the way as soon as these morons decided speed restrictions didn't apply to them. Honestly. Ove didn't move. The Mercedes gave him a burst of its high beams again. Ove slowed down. The Mercedes sounded its horn. Ove lowered his speed to 15 mph. When they reached the top of a hill the

Mercedes overtook him with a roar. The driver, a man in his forties in a tie and with white cables trailing from his ears, held up his finger through the window at Ove. Ove responded to the gesture in the manner of all men of a certain age who've been properly raised: by slowly tapping the tip of his finger against the side of his head. The man in the Mercedes shouted until his saliva spattered against the inside of his windshield, then put his foot down and disappeared. Two minutes later Ove came to a red light. The Mercedes was at the back of the line. Ove flashed his lights at it. He saw the driver craning his neck around. The white earpieces dropped out and fell against the dashboard. Ove nodded with satisfaction. The light turned green. The line didn't move. Ove sounded his horn. Nothing happened. Ove shook his head. Must be a woman driver. Or roadwork. Or an Audi. When thirty seconds had passed without anything happening, Ove put the car into neutral, opened the door, and stepped out of the Saab with the engine still running. Stood in the road and peered ahead with his hands on his hips, filled with a kind of Herculean irritation: the way Superman might have stood if he'd got stuck in a traffic jam. The man in the Mercedes gave a blast on his horn. Idiot, thought Ove. In the same moment the traffic started moving. The cars in front of Ove moved off. The car behind him, a Volkswagen, beeped at him. The driver waved impatiently at Ove. Ove glared back. He got back into the Saab and leisurely closed the door. "Amazing what a rush we're in," he scoffed into the rearview mirror and drove on. At the next red light he ended up behind the

Mercedes again. Another line. Ove checked his watch and took a left turn down a smaller, quiet road. This entailed a longer route to the shopping center, but there were fewer traffic lights. Not that Ove was mean. But as anyone who knows anything knows, cars use less fuel if they keep moving rather than stopping all the time. And, as Ove's wife often says: "If there's one thing you could write in Ove's obituary, it's 'At least he was economical with gas.'" As Ove approached the shopping center from his little side road, he could just make out that there were only two parking spaces left. What all these people were doing at the shopping center on a normal weekday was beyond his comprehension. Obviously people no longer had jobs to go to. Ove's wife usually starts sighing as soon as they even get close to a parking lot like this. Ove wants to park close to the entrance. "As if there's a competition about who can find the best parking spot," she always says as he completes circuit after circuit and swears at all the imbeciles getting in his way in their foreign cars. Sometimes they end up doing six or seven loops before they find a good spot, and if Ove in the end has to concede defeat and content himself with a slot twenty yards farther away, he's in a bad mood for the rest of the day. His wife has never understood it. Then again, she never was very good at grasping questions of principle. Ove figured he would go around slowly a couple of times just to check the lay of the land, but then suddenly caught sight of the Mercedes thundering along the main road towards the shopping center. So this was where he'd been heading, that suit with the plastic

cables in his ears. Ove didn't hesitate for a second. He put his foot down and barged his way out of the intersection into the road. The Mercedes slammed on its brakes, firmly pressing down on the horn and following close behind. The race was on. The signs at the parking lot entrance led the traffic to the right, but when they got there the Mercedes must also have seen the two empty slots, because he tried to slip past Ove on the left. Ove only just managed to maneuver himself in front of him to block his path. The two men started hunting each other across the tarmac. In his rearview mirror, Ove saw a little Toyota turn off the road behind them, follow the road signs, and enter the parking area in a wide loop from the right. Ove's eyes followed it while he hurtled forward in the opposite direction, with the Mercedes on his tail. Of course, he could have taken one of the free slots, the one closest to the entrance, and then had the kindness of letting the Mercedes take the other. But what sort of victory would that have been? Instead Ove made an emergency stop in front of the first slot and stayed where he was. The Mercedes started wildly sounding its horn. Ove didn't flinch. The little Toyota approached from the far right. The Mercedes also caught sight of it and, too late, understood Ove's devilish plan. Its horn wailed furiously as it tried to push past the Saab, but it never stood a chance: Ove had already waved the Toyota into one of the free slots. Only once it was safely in did Ove nonchalantly swing into the other space. The side window of the Mercedes was so covered in saliva when it drove past that Ove couldn't even see the driver. He stepped out of

the Saab triumphantly, like a gladiator who had just slain his opponent. Then he looked at the Toyota. "Oh, damn," he mumbled, irritated. The car door was thrown open. "Hi there!" the Lanky One sang merrily as he untangled himself from the driver's seat. "Hello hello!" said his wife from the other side of the Toyota, lifting out their three-year-old. Ove watched repentantly as the Mercedes disappeared in the distance. "Thanks for the parking space! Bloody marvelous!" The Lanky One was beaming. Ove didn't reply. "Wass ya name?" the three-year-old burst out. "Ove," said Ove. "My name's Nasanin!" she said with delight. Ove nodded at her. "And I'm Pat—" the Lanky One started saying. But Ove had already turned around and left. "Thanks for the space," the Pregnant Foreign Woman called after him. Ove could hear laughter in her voice. He didn't like it. He just muttered a quick "Fine, fine," without turning and marched through the revolving doors into the shopping center. He turned left down the first corridor and looked around several times, as if afraid that the family from next door would follow him. But they turned right and disappeared. Ove stopped suspiciously outside the supermarket and eyed the poster advertising the week's special offers. Not that Ove was intending to buy any ham in this particular shop. But it was always worth keeping an eye on the prices. If there's one thing in this world that Ove dislikes, it's when someone tries to trick him. Ove's wife sometimes jokes that the three worst words Ove knows in this life are "Batteries not included." People usually laugh when she says that. But Ove

does not usually laugh. He moved on from the supermarket and stepped into the florist's. And there it didn't take long for a "rumble" to start up, as Ove's wife would have described it. Or a "discussion," as Ove always insisted on calling it. Ove put down a coupon on the counter on which it said: "2 plants for 50 kronor." Given that Ove only wanted one plant, he explained to the shop assistant, with all rhyme and reason on his side, he should be able to buy it for 25 kronor. Because that was half of 50. However, the assistant, a brain-dead phone-texting nineteen-year-old, would not go along with it. She maintained that a single flower cost 39 kronor and "2 for 50" only applied if one bought two. The manager had to be summoned. It took Ove fifteen minutes to make him see sense and agree that Ove was right. Or, to be honest about it, the manager mumbled something that sounded a little like "bloody old sod" into his hand and hammered 25 kronor so hard into the cash register that anyone would have thought it was the machine's fault. It made no difference to Ove. He knew these retailers were always trying to screw you out of money, and no one screwed Ove and got away with it. Ove put his debit card on the counter. The manager allowed himself the slightest of smiles, then nodded dismissively and pointed at a sign that read: "Card purchases of less than 50 kronor carry a surcharge of 3 kronor."

Now Ove is standing in front of his wife with two plants. Because it was a question of principle. "There was no way I was going to pay three kronor," rails Ove, his eyes looking down into the gravel. Ove's wife often quarrels with Ove because he's

always arguing about everything. But Ove isn't bloody arguing.

He just thinks right is right. Is that such an unreasonable attitude to life? He raises his eyes and looks at her. "I suppose you're annoyed I didn't come yesterday like I promised," he mumbles. She doesn't say anything. "The whole street is turning into a madhouse," he says defensively. "Complete chaos. You even have to go out and back up their trailers for them nowadays. And you can't even put up a hook in peace," he continues as if she's disagreeing. He clears his throat.

"Obviously I couldn't put the hook up when it was dark outside.

If you do that there's no telling when the lights go off. More likely they'll stay on and consume electricity. Out of the question." She doesn't answer. He kicks the frozen ground. Sort of looking for words. Clears his throat briefly once again.

"Nothing works when you're not at home." She doesn't answer. Ove fingers the plants. "I'm tired of it, just rattling around the house all day while you're away." She doesn't answer that either. He nods. Holds up the plants so she can see them.

"They're pink. The ones you like. They said in the shop they're perennials but that's not what they're bloody called.

Apparently they die in this kind of cold, they also said that in the shop, but only so they could sell me a load of other shit." He looks as if he's waiting for her approval. "The new neighbors put saffron in their rice and things like that; they're foreigners," he says in a low voice. A new silence. He stands there, slowly twisting the wedding ring on his finger. As if looking for something else to say. He still finds it painfully difficult being

the one to take charge of a conversation. That was always something she took care of. He usually just answered. This is a new situation for them both. Finally Ove squats, digs up the plant he brought last week, and carefully puts it in a plastic bag. He turns the frozen soil carefully before putting in the new plants. "They've bumped up the electricity prices again," he informs her as he gets to his feet. He looks at her for a long time. Finally he puts his hand carefully on the big boulder and caresses it tenderly from side to side, as if touching her cheek. "I miss you," he whispers. It's been six months since she died. But Ove still inspects the whole house twice a day to feel the radiators and check that she hasn't sneakily turned up the heating.