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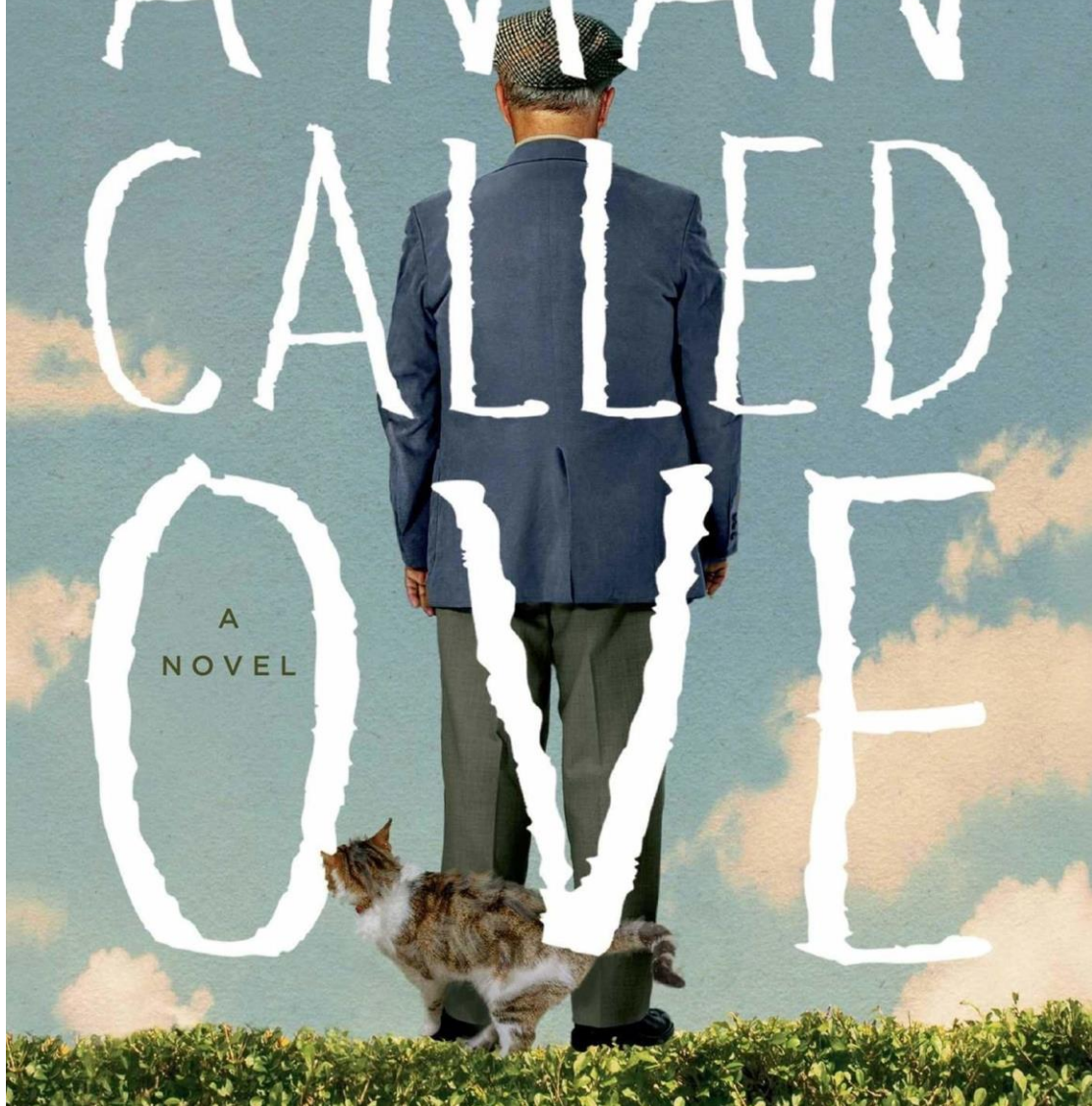
—PEOPLE

FREDRIK BACKMAN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

A MAN  
CALLED  
OVE

A  
NOVEL



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **(THREE WEEKS EARLIER) A MAN CALLED OVE MAKES HIS NEIGHBORHOOD INSPECTION**

It was five to six in the morning when Ove and the cat met for the first time. The cat instantly disliked Ove exceedingly. The feeling was very much reciprocated. Ove had, as usual, gotten up ten minutes earlier. He could not make head nor tail of people who overslept and blamed it on “the alarm clock not ringing.” Ove had never owned an alarm clock in his entire life. He woke up at quarter to six and that was when he got up. Every morning for the almost four decades they had lived in this house, Ove had put on the coffee percolator, using exactly the same amount of coffee as on any other morning, and then drank a cup with his wife. One measure for each cup, and one extra for the pot—no more, no less. People didn’t know how to do that anymore, brew some proper coffee. In the same way as nowadays nobody could write with a pen. Because now it was all computers and espresso machines. And where was the world going if people couldn’t even write or brew a pot of coffee? While his proper cup of coffee was brewing, he put on his navy blue trousers and jacket, stepped into his wooden clogs, and shoved his hands in his pockets in that particular way of a middle-aged man who expects the worthless world outside to disappoint him. Then he made his morning inspection of the street. The surrounding row houses lay in silence and darkness as he walked out the door, and there wasn’t a soul in sight. Might have known, thought Ove. On this street no one took the trouble to get up any earlier than they had to.

Nowadays, it was just self-employed people and other disreputable sorts living here. The cat sat with a nonchalant expression in the middle

of the footpath that ran between the houses. It had half a tail and only one ear. Patches of fur were missing here and there as if someone had pulled it out in handfuls. Not a very impressive feline. Ove stomped forward. The cat stood up. Ove stopped. They stood there measuring up to each other for a few moments, like two potential troublemakers in a small-town bar. Ove considered throwing one of his clogs at it. The cat looked as if it regretted not bringing its own clogs to lob back. "Scram!" Ove bellowed, so abruptly that the cat jumped back. It briefly scrutinized the fifty-nine-year-old man and his clogs, then turned and lolloped off. Ove could have sworn it rolled its eyes before clearing out. Pest, he thought, glancing at his watch. Two minutes to six. Time to get going or the bloody cat would have succeeded in delaying the entire inspection. Fine state of affairs that would be. He began marching along the footpath between the houses. He stopped by the traffic sign informing motorists that they were prohibited from entering the residential area. He gave the metal pole a firm kick. Not that it was wonky or anything, but it's always best to check. Ove is the sort of man who checks the status of all things by giving them a good kick. He walked across the parking area and strolled back and forth along all the garages to make sure none of them had been burgled in the night or set on fire by gangs of vandals. Such things had never happened around here, but then Ove had never skipped one of his inspections either. He tugged three times at the door handle of his own garage, where his Saab was parked. Just like any other morning. After this, he detoured through the guest parking area, where cars could only be left for up to twenty-four hours. Carefully he noted down all the license numbers in the little pad he kept in his jacket pocket, and then compared these to the licenses he had noted down the day before. On occasions when the same license numbers turned up in Ove's notepad, Ove would go home and call the Vehicle Licensing Authority to retrieve the vehicle owner's

details, after which he'd call up the latter and inform him that he was a useless bloody imbecile who couldn't even read signs. Ove didn't really care who was parked in the guest parking area, of course. But it was a question of principle. If it said twenty-four hours on the sign, that's how long you were allowed to stay. What would it be like if everyone just parked wherever they liked? It would be chaos. There'd be cars bloody everywhere. Today, thank goodness, there weren't any unauthorized cars in the guest parking, and Ove was able to proceed to the next part of his daily inspection: the trash room. Not that it was really his responsibility, mind. He had steadfastly opposed from the very beginning the nonsense steamrolled through by the recently arrived jeep-brigade that household trash "had to be separated." Having said that, once the decision was made to sort the trash, someone had to ensure that it was actually being done. Not that anyone had asked Ove to do it, but if men like Ove didn't take the initiative there'd be anarchy. There'd be bags of trash all over the place. He kicked the bins a bit, swore, and fished out a jar from the glass recycling, mumbled something about "incompetents" as he unscrewed its metal lid. He dropped the jar back into glass recycling, and the metal lid into the metal recycling bin. Back when Ove was the chairman of the Residents' Association, he'd pushed hard to have surveillance cameras installed so they could monitor the trash room and stop people tossing out unauthorized trash. To Ove's great annoyance, his proposal was voted out. The neighbors felt "slightly uneasy" about it; plus they felt it would be a headache archiving all the videotapes. This, in spite of Ove repeatedly arguing that those with "honest intentions" had nothing to fear from "the truth." Two years later, after Ove had been deposed as chairman of the Association (a betrayal Ove subsequently referred to as "the coup d'état"), the question came up again. The new steering group explained snappily to the residents that there was a newfangled

camera available, activated by movement sensors, which sent the footage directly to the Internet. With the help of such a camera one could monitor not only the trash room but also the parking area, thereby preventing vandalism and burglaries. Even better, the video material erased itself automatically after twenty-four hours, thus avoiding any “breaches of the residents’ right to privacy.” A unanimous decision was required to go ahead with the installation. Only one member voted against. And that was because Ove did not trust the Internet. He accentuated the net even though his wife nagged that you had to put the emphasis on Inter. The steering group realized soon enough that the Internet would watch Ove throwing out his trash over Ove’s own dead body. And in the end no cameras were installed. Just as well, Ove reasoned. The daily inspection was more effective anyway.

You knew who was doing what and who was keeping things under control. Anyone with half a brain could see the sense of it. When he’d finished his inspection of the trash room he locked the door, just as he did every morning, and gave it three good tugs to ensure it was closed properly. Then he turned around and noticed a bicycle leaning up against the wall outside the bike shed. Even though there was a huge sign instructing residents not to leave their bicycles there. Right next to it one of the neighbors had taped up an angry, handwritten note: “This is not a bicycle parking area! Learn to read signs!” Ove muttered something about ineffectual idiots, opened the bike shed, picked up the bicycle, put it neatly inside, then locked the shed and tugged the door handle three times. He tore down the angry notice from the wall. He would have liked to propose to the steering committee that a proper “No Leafleting” sign should be put up on this wall. People nowadays seemed to think they could swan around with angry signs here, there, and anywhere they liked. This was a wall, not a bloody notice board. Ove walked down the little footpath between the houses. He stopped

outside his own house, stooped over the paving stones, and sniffed vehemently along the cracks. Piss. It smelled of piss. And with this observation he went into his house, locked his door, and drank his coffee. When he was done he canceled his telephone line rental and his newspaper subscription. He mended the tap in the small bathroom. Put new screws into the handle of the door from the kitchen to the veranda. Reorganized boxes in the attic. Rearranged his tools in the shed and moved the Saab's winter tires to a new place. And now here he is. Life was never meant to turn into this. It's four o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon in November. He's turned off the radiators, the coffee percolator, and all the lights. Oiled the wooden countertop in the kitchen, in spite of those mules at IKEA saying the wood does not need oiling. In this house all wooden worktops get an oiling every six months, whether it's necessary or not. Whatever some girlie in a yellow sweatshirt from the self-service warehouse has to say about it. He stands in the living room of the two-story row house with the half-size attic at the back and stares out the window. The forty-year-old beard-stubbled poser from the house across the street comes jogging past. Anders is his name, apparently. A recent arrival, probably not lived here for more than four or five years at most. Already he's managed to wheedle his way onto the steering group of the Residents' Association. The snake. He thinks he owns the street. Moved in after his divorce, apparently, paid well over the market value. Typical of these bastards, they come here and push up the property prices for honest people. As if this was some sort of upper-class area. Also drives an Audi, Ove has noticed. He might have known. Self-employed people and other idiots all drive Audis. Ove tucks his hands into his pockets. He directs a slightly imperious kick at the baseboard. This row house is slightly too big for Ove and his wife, really, he can just about admit that. But it's all paid for. There's not a penny left in loans. Which is certainly more than one

could say for the clotheshorse. It's all loans nowadays; everyone knows the way people carry on. Ove has paid his mortgage. Done his duty. Gone to work. Never taken a day of sick leave. Shouldered his share of the burden. Taken a bit of responsibility. No one does that anymore, no one takes responsibility. Now it's just computers and consultants and council bigwigs going to strip clubs and selling apartment leases under the table. Tax havens and share portfolios. No one wants to work. A country full of people who just want to have lunch all day. "Won't it be nice to slow down a bit?" they said to Ove yesterday at work. While explaining that there was a lack of employment prospects and so they were "retiring the older generation." A third of a century in the same workplace, and that's how they refer to Ove. Suddenly he's a bloody "generation." Because nowadays people are all thirty-one and wear too-tight trousers and no longer drink normal coffee. And don't want to take responsibility. A shed-load of men with elaborate beards, changing jobs and changing wives and changing their car makes. Just like that. Whenever they feel like it. Ove glares out of the window. The poser is jogging. Not that Ove is provoked by jogging. Not at all. Ove couldn't give a damn about people jogging. What he can't understand is why they have to make such a big thing of it. With those smug smiles on their faces, as if they were out there curing pulmonary emphysema. Either they walk fast or they run slowly, that's what joggers do. It's a forty-year-old man's way of telling the world that he can't do anything right. Is it really necessary to dress up as a fourteen-year-old Romanian gymnast in order to be able to do it? Or the Olympic tobogganing team? Just because one shuffles aimlessly around the block for three quarters of an hour? And the poser has a girlfriend. Ten years younger. The Blond Weed, Ove calls her. Tottering around the streets like an inebriated panda on heels as long as box wrenches, with clown paint all over her face and sunglasses so big that one can't tell whether they're a

pair of glasses or some kind of helmet. She also has one of those handbag animals, running about off the leash and pissing on the paving stones outside Ove's house. She thinks Ove doesn't notice, but Ove always notices. His life was never supposed to be like this. Full stop.

"Won't it be nice taking it a bit easy?" they said to him at work yesterday. And now Ove stands here by his oiled kitchen countertop. It's not supposed to be a job for a Tuesday afternoon. He looks out the window at the identical house opposite. A family with children has just moved in there. Foreigners, apparently. He doesn't know yet what sort of car they have. Probably something Japanese, God help them. Ove nods to himself, as if he just said something which he very much agrees with. Looks up at the living room ceiling. He's going to put up a hook there today. And he doesn't mean any kind of hook. Every IT consultant trumpeting some data-code diagnosis and wearing one of those non-genderspecific cardigans they all have to wear these days would put up a hook any old way. But Ove's hook is going to be as solid as a rock. He's going to screw it in so hard that when the house is demolished it'll be the last thing standing. In a few days there'll be some stuck-up real estate agent standing here with a tie knot as big as a baby's head, banging on about "renovation potential" and "spatial efficiency," and he'll have all sorts of opinions about Ove, the bastard. But he won't be able to say a word about Ove's hook. On the floor in the living room is one of Ove's "useful-stuff" boxes. That's how they divide up the house.

All the things Ove's wife has bought are "lovely" or "homey." Everything Ove buys is useful. Stuff with a function. He keeps them in two different boxes, one big and one small. This is the small one. Full of screws and nails and wrench sets and that sort of thing. People don't have useful things anymore. People just have shit. Twenty pairs of shoes but they never know where the shoehorn is; houses filled with microwave ovens and flat-screen televisions, yet they couldn't tell you



which anchor bolt to use for a concrete wall if you threatened them with a box cutter. Ove has a whole drawer in his useful-stuff box just for concrete-wall anchor bolts. He stands there looking at them as if they were chess pieces. He doesn't stress about decisions concerning anchor bolts for concrete. Things have to take their time. Every anchor bolt is a process; every anchor bolt has its own use. People have no respect for decent, honest functionality anymore, they're happy as long as everything looks neat and dandy on the computer. But Ove does things the way they're supposed to be done. He came into his office on Monday and they said they hadn't wanted to tell him on Friday as it would have "ruined his weekend." "It'll be good for you to slow down a bit," they'd drawled. Slow down? What did they know about waking up on a Tuesday and no longer having a purpose? With their Internets and their espresso coffees, what did they know about taking a bit of responsibility for things? Ove looks up at the ceiling. Squints. It's important for the hook to be centered, he decides. And while he stands there immersed in the importance of it, he's mercilessly interrupted by a long scraping sound. Not at all unlike the type of sound created by a big oaf backing up a Japanese car hooked up to a trailer and scraping it against the exterior wall of Ove's house.