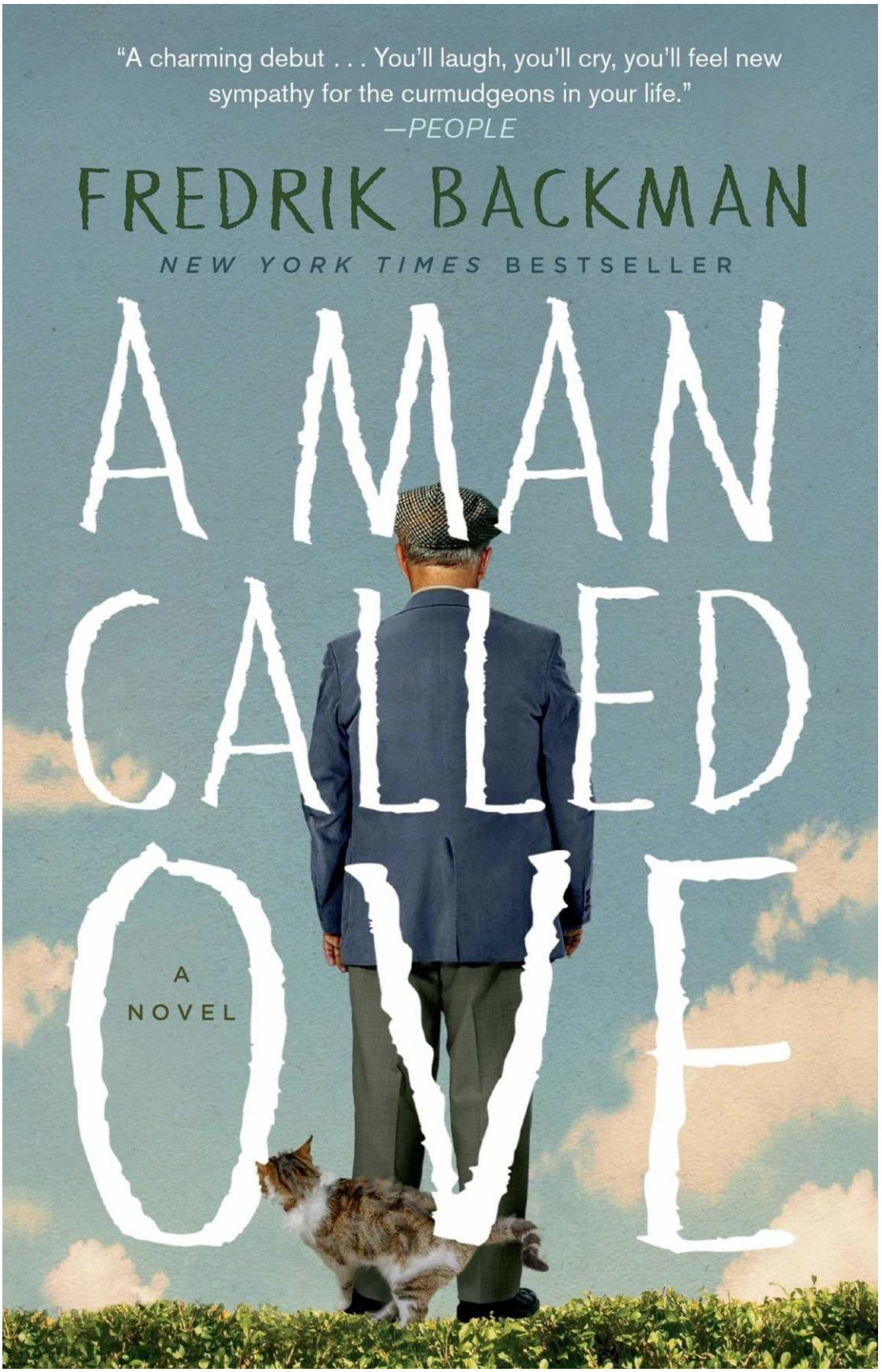
"A charming debut . . . You'll laugh, you'll cry, you'll feel new sympathy for the curmudgeons in your life."
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FREDRIK BACKMAN
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER
A MAN CALLED OVE
A NOVEL

CHAPTER 5

A MAN CALLED OVE

Ove knew very well that her friends couldn't understand why she married him. He couldn't really blame them. People said he was bitter. Maybe they were right. He'd never reflected much on it. People also called him antisocial. Ove assumed this meant he wasn't overly keen on people. And in this instance he could totally agree with them. More often than not people were out of their minds. Ove wasn't one to engage in small talk. He had come to realize that, these days at least, this was a serious character flaw. Now one had to be able to blabber on about anything with any old sod who happened to stray within an arm's length of you purely because it was "nice." Ove didn't know how to do it. Perhaps it was the way he'd been raised. Maybe men of his generation had never been sufficiently prepared for a world where everyone spoke about doing things even though it no longer seemed worth doing them. Nowadays people stood outside their newly refurbished houses and boasted as if they'd built them with their own bare hands, even though they hadn't so much as

lifted a screwdriver. And they weren't even trying to pretend that it was any other way. They boasted about it! Apparently there was no longer any value in being able to lay your own floorboards or refurbish a room with rising damp or change the winter tires. And if you could just go and buy everything, what was the value of it? What was the value of a man? Her friends couldn't see why she woke up every morning and voluntarily decided to share the whole day with him. He couldn't either. He built her a bookshelf and she filled it with books by people who wrote page after page about their feelings. Ove understood things he could see and touch. Wood and concrete. Glass and steel. Tools. Things one could figure out. He understood right angles and clear instruction manuals. Assembly models and drawings. Things one could draw on paper. He was a man of black and white. And she was color. All the color he had. The only thing he had ever loved until he saw her was numbers. He had no other particular memory of his youth. He was not bullied and he wasn't a bully, not good at sports and not bad either. He was never at the heart of things and never on the outside. He was the sort of person who was just there. Nor did he remember so very much about his growing up; he had never been the sort

of man who went around remembering things unless there was a need for it. He remembered that he was quite happy and that for a few years afterwards he wasn't—that was about it. And he remembered the sums. The numbers, filling his head. Remembered how he longed for their mathematics lessons at school. Maybe for the others they were a sufferance, but not for him. He didn't know why, and didn't speculate about it either. He'd never understood the need to go around stewing on why things turned out the way they did. You are what you are and you do what you do, and that was good enough for Ove. He was seven years old when his mum called it a day one early August morning. She worked at a chemicals plant. In those days people didn't know much about air safety, Ove realized later. She smoked as well, all the time. That's Ove's clearest memory of her, how she sat in the kitchen window of the little house where they lived outside town, with that billowing cloud around her, watching the sky every Saturday morning. And how sometimes she sang in her hoarse voice and Ove used to sit under the window with his mathematics book in his lap, and he remembered that he liked listening to her. He remembers that. Of course, her voice was hoarse and the odd note was more

discordant than one would have liked, but he remembers that he liked it anyway. Ove's father worked for the railways. The palms of his hands looked like someone had carved into leather with knives, and the wrinkles in his face were so deep that when he exerted himself the sweat was channeled through them down to his chest. His hair was thin and his body slender, but the muscles on his arms were so sharp that they seemed cut out of rock. Once when Ove was very young he was allowed to go with his parents to a big party with his dad's friends from the rail company. After his father had put away a couple of bottles of pilsner, some of the other guests challenged him to an arm-wrestling competition. Ove had never seen the like of these giants straddling the bench opposite him. Some of them looked like they weighed about four hundred pounds. His father wore down every one of them. When they went home that night, he put his arm around Ove's shoulders and said: "Ove, only a swine thinks size and strength are the same thing. Remember that." And Ove never forgot it. His father never raised his fists. Not to Ove or anyone else. Ove had classmates who came to school with black eyes or bruises from a belt buckle after a thrashing. But never Ove. "We don't fight in this family," his father used to

state. “Not with each other or anyone else.” He was well liked down at the railway, quiet but kind. There were some who said he was “too kind.” Ove remembers how as a child he could never understand how this could be something bad. Then Mum died. And Dad grew even quieter. As if she took away with her the few words he’d possessed. So Ove and his father never talked excessively, but they liked each other’s company. They sat in silence on either side of the kitchen table, and had ways of keeping busy. Every other day they put out food for a family of birds living in a rotting tree at the back of the house. It was important, Ove understood, that it had to be every other day. He didn’t know why, but that didn’t matter. In the evenings they had sausages and potatoes. Then they played cards. They never had much, but they always had enough. His father’s only remaining words were about engines (apparently his mother was content to leave these behind). He could spend any amount of time talking about them. “Engines give you what you deserve,” he used to explain. “If you treat them with respect they’ll give you freedom; if you behave like an ass they’ll take it from you.” For a long time he did not own a car of his own, but in the 1940s and ’50s, when the bosses and directors at the railway started buying

their own vehicles, a rumor soon spread in the office that the quiet man working on the track was a person well worth knowing. Ove's father had never finished school, and didn't understand much about the sums in Ove's schoolbooks. But he understood engines. When the daughter of the director was getting married and the wedding car broke down rather than ceremoniously transporting the bride to the church, Ove's father was sent for. He came cycling with a toolbox on his shoulder so heavy that it took two men to lift it when he got off the bicycle. Whatever the problem was when he arrived, it was no longer a problem when he cycled back. The director's wife invited him to the wedding reception, but he told her that it was probably not the done thing to sit with elegant people when one was the sort of man whose forearms were so stained with oil that it seemed a natural part of his pigmentation. But he'd gladly accept a bag of bread and meat for the lad at home, he said. Ove had just turned eight. When his father laid out the supper that evening, Ove felt like he was at a royal banquet. A few months later the director sent for Ove's father again. In the parking area outside the office stood an extremely old and worse-for-wear Saab 92. It was the first motorcar Saab had ever manufactured, although it

had not been in production since the significantly upgraded Saab 93 had come onto the market. Ove's dad recognized it very well. Front-wheel-driven and a sidemounted engine that sounded like a coffee percolator. It had been in an accident, the director explained, sticking his thumbs into his suspenders under his jacket. The bottle-green body was badly dented and the condition of what lay under the hood was certainly not pretty. But Ove's father produced a little screwdriver from the pocket of his dirty overalls and after lengthily inspecting the car, he gave the verdict that with a bit of time and care and the proper tools he'd be able to put it back into working order. "Whose is it?" he wondered aloud as he straightened up and wiped the oil from his fingers with a rag. "It belonged to a relative of mine," said the director, digging out a key from his suit trousers and pressing it into his palm. "And now it's yours." With a pat on his shoulder, the director returned to the office. Ove's father stayed where he was in the courtyard, trying to catch his breath. That evening he had to explain everything over and over again to his goggle-eyed son and show all there was to know about this magical monster now parked in their garden. He sat in the driver's seat half the night, with the boy on his lap,

explaining how all the mechanical parts were connected. He could account for every screw, every little tube. Ove had never seen a man as proud as his father was that night. He was eight years old and decided that night he would never drive any car but a Saab. Whenever he had a Saturday off, Ove's father brought him out into the yard, opened the hood, and taught him all the names of the various parts and what they did. On Sundays they went to church. Not because either of them had any excessive zeal for God, but because Ove's mum had always been insistent about it. They sat at the back, each of them staring at a patch on the floor until it was over. And, in all honesty, they spent more time missing Ove's mum than thinking about God. It was her time, so to speak, even though she was no longer there. Afterwards they'd take a long drive in the countryside with the Saab. It was Ove's favorite part of the week. That year, to stop him rattling around the house on his own, he also started going with his father to work at the railway yard after school. It was filthy work and badly paid, but, as his father used to mutter, "It's an honest job and that's worth something." Ove liked all the men at the railway yard except Tom. Tom was a tall, noisy man with fists as big as flatbed carts and eyes that always seemed to be

looking for some defenseless animal to kick around. When Ove was nine years old, his dad sent him to help Tom clean out a broken-down railway car. With sudden jubilation, Tom snatched up a briefcase left by some harassed passenger. It had fallen from the luggage rack and distributed its contents over the floor. Before long Tom was darting about on all fours, scrabbling together everything he could see. “Finders keepers,” he spat at Ove. Something in his eyes made Ove feel as if there were insects crawling under his skin. As Ove turned to go, he stumbled over a wallet. It was made of such soft leather that it felt like cotton against his rough fingertips. And it didn’t have a rubber band around it like Dad’s old wallet, to keep it from falling to bits. It had a little silver button that made a click when you opened it. There was more than six thousand kronor inside. A fortune to anyone in those days. Tom caught sight of it and tried to tear it out of Ove’s hands. Overwhelmed by an instinctive defiance, the boy resisted. He saw how shocked Tom was at this, and out of the corner of his eye he had time to see the huge man clenching his fist. Ove knew he’d never be able to get away, so he closed his eyes, held on to the wallet as hard as he could, and waited for the blow. But the next thing either of them knew, Ove’s father was

standing between them. Tom's furious, hateful eyes met his for an instant, but Ove's father stood where he stood. And at last Tom lowered his fist and took a watchful step back. "Finders keepers, it's always been like that," he growled, pointing at the wallet. "That's up to the person who finds it," said Ove's father without looking away. Tom's eyes had turned black. But he retreated another step, still clutching the briefcase in his hands. Tom had worked many years at the railway, but Ove had never heard any of his father's colleagues say one good word about Tom. He was dishonest and malicious, that was what they said after a couple of bottles of pilsner at their parties. But he'd never heard it from his dad. "Four children and a sick wife," was all he used to say to his workmates, looking each of them in the eye. "Better men than Tom could have ended up worse for it." And then his workmates usually changed the subject. His father pointed to the wallet in Ove's hand. "You decide," he said. Ove determinedly fixed his gaze on the ground, feeling Tom's eyes burning holes into the top of his head. Then he said in a low but unwavering voice that the lost property office would seem to be the best place to leave it. His father nodded without a word, and then took Ove's hand as they walked back for almost half an hour

along the track without a word passing between them. Ove heard Tom shouting behind them, his voice filled with cold fury. Ove never forgot it. The woman at the desk of the lost property office could hardly believe her eyes when they put the wallet on the counter. “And it was just lying there on the floor? You didn’t find a bag or anything?” she asked. Ove gave his dad a searching look, but he just stood there in silence, so Ove did the same. The woman behind the counter seemed satisfied enough with the answer. “Not many people have ever handed in this much money,” she said, smiling at Ove. “Many people don’t have any decency either,” said his father in a clipped voice, and took Ove’s hand. They turned around and went back to work. A few hundred yards down the track Ove cleared his throat, summoned some courage, and asked why his father had not mentioned the briefcase that Tom had found. “We’re not the sort of people who tell tales about what others do,” he answered. Ove nodded. They walked in silence. “I thought about keeping the money,” Ove whispered at long last, and took his father’s hand in a firmer grip, as if he was afraid of letting go. “I know,” said his father, and squeezed his hand a little harder. “But I knew you would hand it in, and I knew a person like Tom wouldn’t,” said

Ove. His father nodded. And not another word was said about it. Had Ove been the sort of man who contemplated how and when one became the sort of man one was, he might have said this was the day he learned that right has to be right. But he wasn't one to dwell on things like that. He contented himself with remembering that on this day he'd decided to be as little unlike his father as possible. He had only just turned sixteen when his father died. A hurtling carriage on the track. Ove was left with not much more than a Saab, a ramshackle house a few miles out of town, and a dented old wristwatch. He was never able to properly explain what happened to him that day. But he stopped being happy. He wasn't happy for several years after that. At the funeral, the vicar wanted to talk to him about foster homes, but he found out soon enough that Ove had not been brought up to accept charity. At the same time, Ove made it clear to the vicar that there was no need to reserve a place for him in the pews at Sunday service for the foreseeable future. Not because Ove did not believe in God, he explained to the vicar, but because in his view this God seemed to be a bit of a bloody swine. The next day he went down to the wages office at the railway and handed back the wages for the rest of the month. The

ladies at the office didn't understand, so Ove had to impatiently explain that his father had died on the sixteenth, and obviously wouldn't be able to come in and work for the remaining fourteen days of that month. And because he got his wages in advance, Ove had come to pay back the balance. Hesitantly the ladies asked him to sit down and wait. After fifteen minutes or so the director came out and looked at the peculiar sixteen-yearold sitting on a wooden chair in the corridor with his dead father's pay packet in his hand. The director knew very well who this boy was. And after he'd convinced himself that there was no way of persuading him to keep the money he felt he had no right to, the director saw no alternative but to propose to Ove that he should work for the rest of the month and earn his right to it. Ove thought this seemed a reasonable offer and notified his school that he'd be absent for the next two weeks. He never went back. He worked for the railways for five years. Then one morning he boarded a train and saw her for the first time. That was the first time he'd laughed since his father's death. And life was never again the same. People said Ove saw the world in black and white. But she was color. All the color he had.