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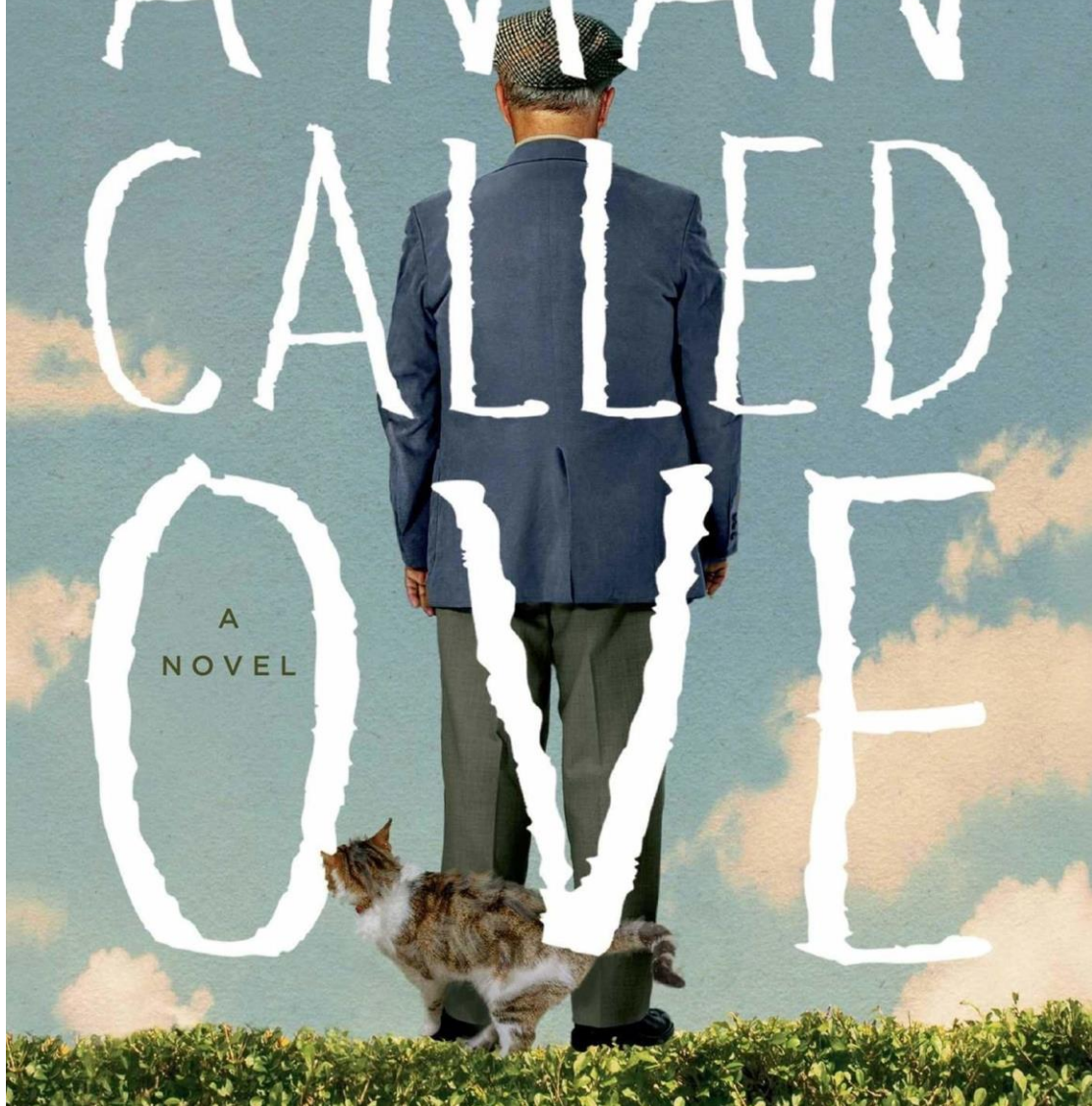
—PEOPLE

FREDRIK BACKMAN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

A MAN
CALLED
OVE

A
NOVEL



CHAPTER 7

A MAN CALLED OVE DRILLS A HOLE FOR A HOOK

Ove has put on his best trousers and his going-out shirt. Carefully he covers the floor with a protective sheet of plastic, as if protecting a valuable work of art. Not that the floor is particularly new (although he did sand it less than two years ago). He's fairly sure that you don't lose much blood when you hang yourself, and it isn't because of worries about the dust or the drilling. Or the marks when he kicks away the stool. In fact he's glued some plastic pads to the bottoms of its legs, so there shouldn't be any marks at all. No, the heavy-duty sheets of plastic which Ove so carefully unfolds, covering the entire hall, living room, and a good part of the kitchen, are not for Ove's own sake at all. He imagines there'll be a hell of a lot of running about in here, with eager, jumped-up real estate agents trying to get into the house before the ambulance men have so much as got the corpse out. And those bastards are not coming in here, scratching up Ove's floor with their shoes. Whether over Ove's dead body or not. They had better be quite clear about that. He puts the stool in the middle of the floor. It's coated in at least seven different layers of paint. Ove's wife decided on principle that she'd let Ove repaint one of the rooms in their house every six months. Or, to be more exact, she decided she wanted a different color in one of the rooms once every six

months. And when she said as much to Ove he told her that she might as well forget it. And then she called a decorator for an estimate. And then she told Ove how much she was going to pay the decorator. And then Ove went to fetch his painting stool. You miss the strangest things when you lose someone. Little things. Smiles. The way she turned over in her sleep. Even repainting a room for her. Ove goes to get his box of drill bits.

These are single-handedly the most important things when drilling. Not the drill, but the bits. It's like having proper tires on your car instead of messing about with ceramic brakes and nonsense like that. Anyone who knows anything knows that. Ove positions himself in the middle of the room and sizes it up. Then, like a surgeon gazing down on his instruments, his eyes move searchingly over his drill bits. He selects one, slots it into the drill, and tests the trigger a little so that the drill makes a growling sound. Shakes his head, decides that it doesn't feel at all right, and changes the drill bit. He repeats this four times before he's satisfied, then walks through the living room, swinging the drill from his hand like a big revolver. He stands in the middle of the floor staring up at the ceiling. He has to measure this before he gets started, he realizes. So that the hole is centered. The worst thing Ove knows is when someone just drills a hole in the ceiling, hit-or-miss. He goes to fetch a tape measure. He measures from each of the four corners—twice, to be on the safe side—and marks the center of the ceiling with a cross. Ove steps down from the stool. Walks around to make sure the protective plastic is in position as it

should be. Unlocks the door so they won't have to break it down when they come to get him. It's a good door. It'll last many more years. He puts on his suit jacket and checks that the envelope is in his inside pocket. Finally he turns the photo of his wife in the window, so that it looks out towards the shed. He doesn't want to make her watch what he's about to do, but on the other hand he daren't put the photograph facedown either. Ove's wife was always horribly ill-tempered if they ever ended up in someplace without a view. She needed "something to look at that's alive," she was always saying. So he points her towards the shed while thinking that maybe that Cat Annoyance would come by again. Ove's wife liked Cat Annoyances. He fetches the drill, takes the hook, stands up on the stool, and starts drilling. The first time the doorbell goes he assumes he's made a mistake and ignores the sound for that very reason. The second time he realizes that there's actually someone ringing the bell, and he ignores it for that very reason. The third time Ove stops drilling and glares at the door. As if he may be able to convince whoever is standing outside to disappear by his mental powers alone. It doesn't work. The person in question obviously thinks the only rational explanation for his not opening the door the first time around was that he did not hear the doorbell. Ove steps off the stool, strides across the plastic sheets through the living room and into the hall. Does it really have to be so difficult to kill yourself without constantly being disturbed? "What?" fumes Ove as he flings the door open. The Lanky One only manages by a whisker

to pull his big head back and avoid an impact with his face. "Hi!" the Pregnant One exclaims cheerfully beside him, though a foot and a half lower down. Ove looks down at her, then up at him. The Lanky One is busy touching every part of his face with some reluctance, as if to check that every protuberance is still where it should be. "This is for you," she says in a friendly sort of voice, and then shoves a blue plastic box into Ove's arms. Ove looks skeptical. "Cookies," she explains encouragingly. Ove nods slowly, as if to confirm this. "You've really dressed up," she says with a smile. Ove nods again. And then they stand there, all three of them, waiting for someone to say something. In the end she looks at the Lanky One and shakes her head with resignation. "Oh, please, will you stop fidgeting with your face, darling?" she whispers and gives him a push in the side. The Lanky One raises his eyes, meets her gaze, and nods. Looks at Ove. Ove looks at the Pregnant One. The Lanky One points at the box and his face lights up. "She's Iranian, you know. They bring food with them wherever they go." Ove gives him a blank stare. The Lanky One looks even more hesitant. "You know . . . that's why I go so well with Iranians. They like to cook food and I like to . . ." he begins, with an over-the-top smile. Then he goes silent. Ove looks spectacularly uninterested. ". . . eat," the Lanky One finishes. He looks as if he's about to make a drumroll in the air with his fingers. But then he looks at the Pregnant Foreign Woman and decides that it would probably be a bad idea. "And?" Ove offers, wearily. She stretches, puts her hands on her stomach. "We just wanted to introduce ourselves, now

that we're going to be neighbors. . . ." Ove nods tersely and concisely. "Okay. Bye." He tries to close the door. She stops him with her arm. "And then we wanted to thank you for backing up our trailer. That was very kind of you!" Ove grunts. Reluctantly he keeps the door open. "That's not something to thank me for." "Yeah, it was really nice," she protests. "No, I mean it shouldn't be something to thank me for, because a grown man should be able to back up with a trailer," he replies, casting a somewhat unimpressed gaze on the Lanky One, who looks at him as if unsure whether or not this is an insult. Ove decides not to help him out of his quandary. He backs away and tries to close the door again. "My name is Parvaneh!" she says, putting her foot across his threshold. Ove stares at the foot, then at the face it's attached to. As if he's having difficulties understanding what she just did. "I'm Patrick!" says the Lanky One. Neither Ove nor Parvaneh takes the slightest notice of him. "Are you always this unfriendly?" Parvaneh wonders, with genuine curiosity. Ove looks insulted. "I'm not bloody unfriendly." "You are a bit unfriendly." "No I'm not!" "No, no, no, your every word is a cuddle, it really is," she replies in a way that makes Ove feel she doesn't mean it at all. He releases his grip on the door handle for a moment or two. Inspects the box of cookies in his hand. "Right. Arabian cookies. Worth having, are they?" he mutters. "Persian," she corrects. "What?" "Persian, not Arabian. I'm from Iran—you know, where they speak Farsi?" she explains. "Farcical? That's the least you could say," Ove agrees. Her laughter catches him off guard. As if it's

carbonated and someone has poured it too fast and it's bubbling over in all directions. It doesn't fit at all with the gray cement and right-angled garden paving stones. It's an untidy, mischievous laugh that refuses to go along with rules and prescriptions. Ove takes a step backwards. His foot sticks to some tape by the threshold. As he tries to shake it off, with some irritation, he tears up the corner of the plastic. When he tries to shake off both the tape and the plastic sheeting, he stumbles backwards and pulls up even more of it. Angrily, he regains his balance. Remains there on the threshold, trying to summon some calm. Grabs hold of the door handle again, looks at the Lanky One, and tries to quickly change the subject. "And what are you, then?" He shrugs his shoulder a little and smiles, slightly overwhelmed. "I'm an IT consultant." Ove and Parvaneh shake their heads with such coordination they could be synchronized swimmers. For a moment it makes Ove dislike her a little less, although he's very reluctant to admit it to himself. The Lanky One seems unaware of all this. Instead he looks with curiosity at the hammer-action drill, which Ove is holding in a firm grip, like a guerrilla fighter with an AK-47 in his hand. Once the Lanky One has finished perusing it, he leans forward and peers into Ove's house. "What are you doing?" Ove looks at him, as one does at a person who has just said "What are you doing?" to a man standing with a hammer-action drill in his hand. "I'm drilling," he replies scathingly. Parvaneh looks at the Lanky One and rolls her eyes, and if it hadn't been for her belly, which testified to a willingness on her part to contribute to the

survival of the Lanky One's genetic makeup, Ove might have found her almost sympathetic at this point. "Oh," says the Lanky One, with a nod. Then he leans forward and peers in at the living room floor, neatly covered in the protective sheet of plastic. He lights up and looks at Ove with a grin. "Almost looks like you're about to murder someone!" Ove peruses him in silence. The Lanky One clears his throat, a little more reluctant. "I mean, it's like an episode of Dexter," he says with a much less confident grin. "It's a TV series . . . about a guy who murders people." He trails off, then starts poking the toe of his shoe into the gaps between the paving stones outside Ove's front door. Ove shakes his head. It's unclear to whom the Lanky One was primarily aiming what he just said. "I have some things to get on with," he says curtly to Parvaneh and takes a firm grip on the door handle. Parvaneh gives the Lanky One a purposeful jab in the side with her elbow. The Lanky One looks as if he's trying to drum up some courage; he glances at Parvaneh, and looks at Ove with the expression of someone expecting the whole world to start firing rubber bands at him. "Well, the thing is, we actually came because I could do with borrowing a few things . . ." Ove raises his eyebrows. "What 'things'?" The Lanky One clears his throat. "A ladder. And an Eileen key." "You mean an Allen key?" Parvaneh nods. The Lanky One looks puzzled. "It's an Eileen key, isn't it?" "Allen key," Parvaneh and Ove correct at the same time. Parvaneh nods eagerly at him and points triumphantly at Ove. "He said that's what it's called!" The Lanky One mumbles something inaudible. "And you're just

like ‘Whoa, it’s an Eileen key!’” Parvaneh jeers. He looks slightly crestfallen. “I never sounded like that.” “You did so!” “Did not!” “Yes you DID!” “I DIDN’T!” Ove’s gaze travels from one to the other, like a large dog watching two mice interfering with its sleep. “You did,” says one of them. “That’s what you think,” the other one says. “Everyone says it!” “The majority is not always right!” “Shall we Google it or what?” “Sure! Google it! Wikipedia it!” “Give me your phone.” “Use your own!” “Duh! I haven’t got it with me, dipshit!” “Sorry to hear that!” Ove looks at them as their pathetic argument drones on. They remind him of two malfunctioning radiators, making high-pitched whines at each other. “Good God,” he mutters. Parvaneh starts imitating what Ove assumes must be some kind of flying insect. She makes tiny whirring sounds with her lips to irritate her husband. It works quite effectively. Both on the Lanky One and on Ove. Ove gives up. He goes into the hall, hangs up his suit jacket, puts down the hammeraction drill, puts on his clogs, and walks past them both towards the shed. He’s pretty sure neither of them even notices him. He hears them still bickering as he starts backing out with the ladder. “Go on, help him then, Patrick,” Parvaneh bursts out when she catches sight of him. The Lanky One takes a few steps towards him, with fumbling movements. Ove keeps his eyes on him, as if watching a blind man at the wheel of a crowded city bus. And only after that does Ove realize that, in his absence, his property has been invaded by yet another person. Rune’s wife, Anita, from farther down the street, is standing next to Parvaneh, blithely watching

the spectacle. Ove decides the only rational response must be to pretend that she's doing no such thing. He feels anything else would only encourage her. He hands the Lanky One a cylindrical case with a set of neatly sorted Allen keys. "Oh, look how many there are," says the imbecile thoughtfully, gazing into the case. "What size are you after?" asks Ove. The Lanky One looks at him as people do when they lack the selfpossession to say what they are thinking. "The . . . usual size?" Ove looks at him for a long, long time. "What are you using these things for?" he says at last. "To fix an IKEA wardrobe we took apart when we moved. And then I forgot where I put the Eileen key," he explains, apparently without a trace of shame. Ove looks at the ladder. "And this wardrobe's on the roof, is it?" The Lanky One sniggers and shakes his head. "Oh, right, see what you mean! No, I need the ladder because the upstairs window is jammed. Won't open." He adds the last part as if Ove would not otherwise be able to understand the implications of that word, "jammed." "So now you're going to try to open it from the outside?" Ove wonders. The Lanky One nods and clumsily takes the ladder from him. Ove looks as if he's about to say something else, but he seems to change his mind. He turns to Parvaneh. "And why exactly are you here?" "Moral support," she twitters. Ove doesn't look entirely convinced. Nor does the Lanky One. Ove's gaze wanders reluctantly back to Rune's wife. She's still there. It seems like years since he last saw her. Or at least since he really looked at her. She's gone ancient. People all seem to get ancient behind

Ove's back these days. "Yes?" says Ove. Rune's wife smiles mildly and clasps her hands across her hips. "Ove, you know I don't want to disturb you, but it's about the radiators in our house. We can't get any heat into them," she says carefully and smiles in turn at Ove, the Lanky One, and Parvaneh. Parvaneh and the Lanky One smile back. Ove looks at his dented wristwatch. "Does no one on this street have a job to go to anymore?" he wonders. "I'm retired," says Rune's wife, almost apologetically. "I'm on maternity leave," says Parvaneh, patting her stomach proudly. "I'm an IT consultant!" says the Lanky One, also proudly. Ove and Parvaneh again indulge in a bit of synchronized head-shaking. Rune's wife makes another attempt. "I think it could be the radiators." "Have you bled them?" says Ove. She shakes her head and looks curious. "You think it could be because of that?" Ove rolls his eyes. "Ove!" Parvaneh roars at him at once, as if she's a reprimanding schoolmistress. Ove glares at her. She glares back. "Stop being rude," she orders. "I told you, I'm not rude!" Her eyes are unwavering. He makes a little grunt, then goes back to standing in the doorway. He thinks it could sort of be enough now. All he wants is to die. Why can't these lunatics respect that? Parvaneh puts her hand encouragingly on Rune's wife's arm. "I'm sure Ove can help you with the radiators." "That would be amazingly kind of you, Ove," Rune's wife says at once, brightening. Ove sticks his hands in his pockets. Kicks at the loose plastic by the threshold. "Can't your man sort out that kind of thing in his own house?" Rune's wife shakes her head mournfully. "No,

Rune has been really ill lately, you see. They say it's Alzheimer's. He's in a wheelchair as well. It's been a bit uphill. . . ." Ove nods with faint recognition. As if he has been reminded of something his wife told him a thousand times, although he still managed to forget it all the time. "Yeah, yeah," he says impatiently. "You can go and breathe their radiators, can't you, Ove!" says Parvaneh. Ove glances at her as if considering a firm retort, but instead he just looks down at the ground. "Or is that too much to ask?" she continues, drilling him with her gaze and crossing her arms firmly across her stomach. Ove shakes his head. "You don't breathe radiators, you bleed them . . . Jesus." He looks up and gives them the once-over. "Have you never bled a radiator before, or what?" "No," says Parvaneh, unmoved. Rune's wife looks at the Lanky One a little anxiously. "I haven't got a clue what they're talking about," he says calmly to her. Rune's wife nods resignedly. Looks at Ove again. "It would be really nice of you, Ove, if it isn't too much of a bother. . . ." Ove just stands there staring down at the threshold.

"Maybe this could have been thought about before you organized a coup d'état in the Residents' Association," he says quietly, his words punctuated by a series of discreet coughs.

"Before she what?" says Parvaneh. Rune's wife clears her throat. "But, dear Ove, there was never a coup d'état. . . ."

"Was so," says Ove grumpily. Rune's wife looks at Parvaneh with an embarrassed little smile. "Well, you see, Rune and Ove here haven't always gotten along so very well. Before Rune got ill he was the head of the Residents' Association. And before

that Ove was the head. And when Rune was voted in there was something of a wrangle between Ove and Rune, you could say.”

Ove looks up and points a corrective index finger at her. “A coup d’état! That’s what it was!” Rune’s wife nods at Parvaneh. “Well, yes, well, before the meeting Rune counted votes about his suggestion that we should change the heating system for the houses and Ove thou—” “And what the hell does Rune know about heating systems? Eh?” Ove exclaims heatedly, but immediately gets a look from Parvaneh which makes him reconsider and come to the conclusion that there’s no need to complete his line of thought. Rune’s wife nods. “Maybe you’re right, Ove. But anyway, he’s very sick now . . . so it doesn’t really matter anymore.” Her bottom lip trembles slightly. Then she regains her composure, straightens her neck with dignity, and clears her throat. “The authorities have said they’ll take him from me and put him in a home,” she manages to say. Ove puts his hands in his pockets again and determinedly backs away, across his threshold. He’s heard enough of this. In the meantime the Lanky One seems to have decided it’s time to change the subject and lighten up the atmosphere. He points at the floor in Ove’s hall. “What’s that?” Ove turns to look at the bit of floor exposed by the loose plastic sheet. “It looks as if you’ve got, sort of . . . tire marks on the floor. Do you cycle indoors, or what?” says the Lanky One. Parvaneh keeps her observant eyes on Ove as he backs away another step so he can impede the Lanky One’s view. “It’s nothing.” “But I can see it’s—” the Lanky One begins confusedly. “It was Ove’s wife,

Sonja, she was—" Rune's wife interrupts him in a friendly manner, but she only has time to get to the name "Sonja" when Ove, in turn, interrupts her and spins around with unbridled fury in his eyes. "That'll do! Now you SHUT UP!" All four of them fall silent, equally shocked. Ove's hands tremble as he steps back into his hall and slams the door. He hears Parvaneh's soft voice out there asking Rune's wife what all that was about. Then he hears Rune's wife fumbling nervously for words, and then exclaiming: "Oh, you know, I'd better go home. That thing about Ove's wife . . . oh, forget it. Old bats like me, we talk too much, you know. . . ." Ove hears her strained laugh and then her little dragging footsteps disappearing as quickly as they can around the corner of his shed. A moment later the Pregnant One and the Lanky One also leave. And all that's left is the silence of Ove's hall. He sinks down on the stool, breathing heavily. His hands are still shaking as if he were standing waist-deep in ice-cold water. His chest thumps. It happens more and more these days. He has to sort of struggle for a mouthful of air, like a fish in an overturned bowl. His company doctor said it was chronic, and that he mustn't work himself up. Easy for him to say. "Good to go home and have a rest now," said his bosses at work. "Now your heart is playing up and all." They called it "early retirement" but they might as well have said what it was: "liquidation." A third of a century in the same job and that's what they reduced him to. Ove is not sure how long he stays there on the stool, sitting with the drill in his hand and his heart beating so hard that he feels the pulse inside his head. There's

a photo on the wall beside the front door, of Ove and Sonja. It's almost forty years old. That time they were in Spain on a bus tour. She's suntanned, wearing a red dress, and looking so happy. Ove is standing next to her, holding her hand. He sits there for what must be an hour, just staring at that photo. Of all the imaginable things he most misses about her, the thing he really wishes he could do again is hold her hand in his. She had a way of folding her index finger into his palm, hiding it inside. And he always felt that nothing in the world was impossible when she did that. Of all the things he could miss, that's what he misses most. Slowly he stands up. Goes into the living room. Up the steps of the stool. And then once and for all he drills the hole and puts in the hook. Then gets off the stool and studies his work. He goes into the hall and puts on his suit jacket. Feels in his pocket for the envelope. He's turned out all the lights. Washed his coffee mug. Put up a hook in his living room. He's done. He takes down the rope from the clothes-dryer in the hall. Gently, with the back of his hand, he caresses her coats one last time. Then he goes into the living room, ties a noose in the rope, threads it through the hook, climbs up on the stool, and puts his head in the noose. Kicks the stool away. Closes his eyes and feels the noose closing around his throat like the jaws of a large wild animal.