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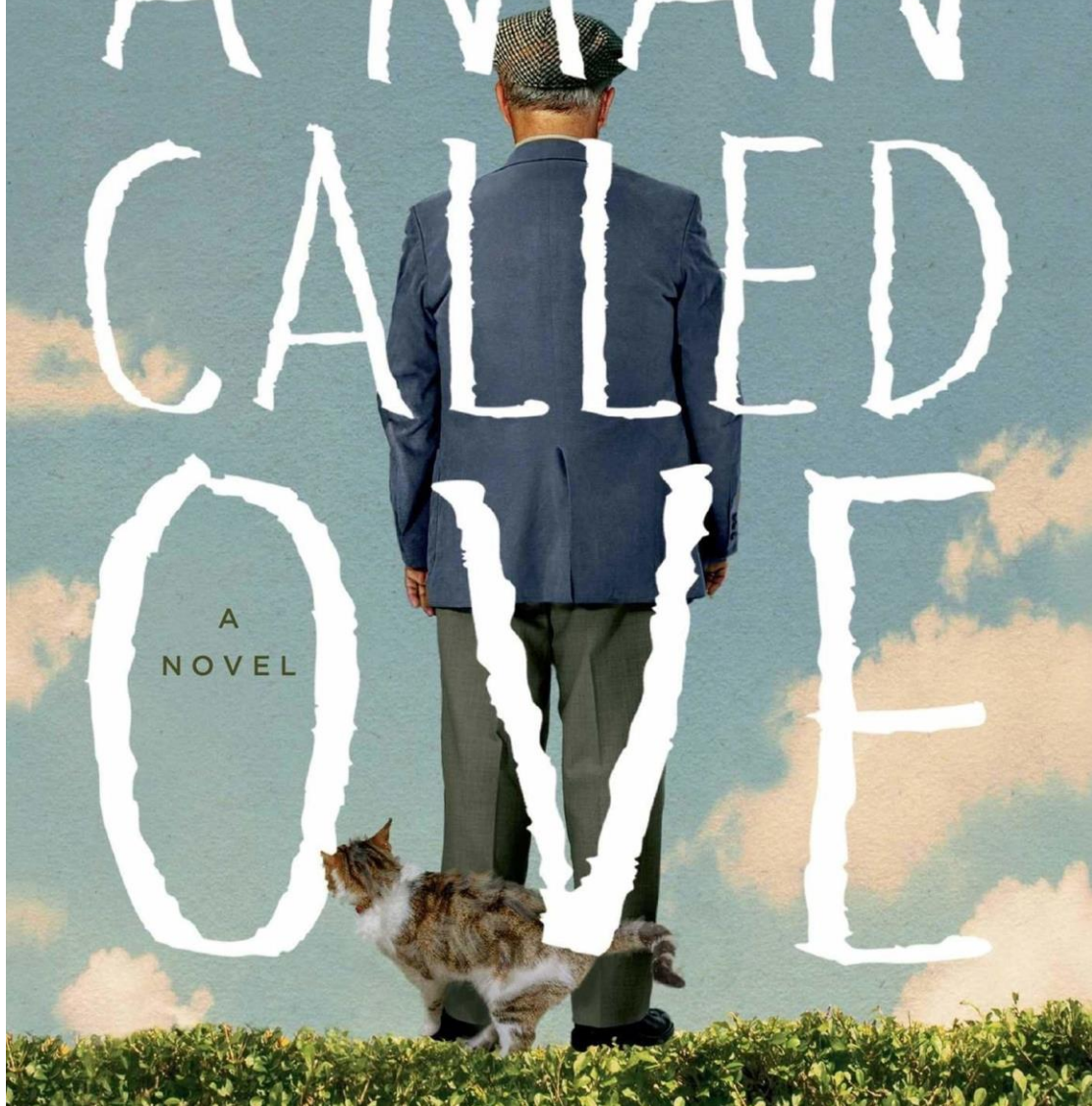
—PEOPLE

FREDRIK BACKMAN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

A MAN
CALLED
OVE

A
NOVEL



CHAPTER 6

A MAN CALLED OVE AND A BICYCLE THAT SHOULD HAVE BEEN LEFT WHERE BICYCLES ARE LEFT

Ove just wants to die in peace. Is that really too much to ask? Ove doesn't think so. Fair enough, he should have arranged it six months ago, straight after her funeral. But you couldn't bloody carry on like that, he decided at the time. He had his job to take care of. How would it look if people stopped coming to work all over the place because they'd killed themselves? Ove's wife died on a Friday, was buried on Sunday, and then Ove went to work on Monday. Because that's how one handles things. And then six months went by and out of the blue the managers came in on Monday and said they hadn't wanted to deal with it on Friday because "they didn't want to ruin his weekend." And on Tuesday he stood there oiling his kitchen worktops. So he's prepared everything. He's paid the undertakers and arranged his place in the churchyard next to her. He's called the lawyers and written a letter with clear instructions and put it in an envelope with all his important receipts and the deeds of the house and the service history of the Saab. He's put this envelope in the inside pocket of his jacket. He's paid all the bills. He has no loans and no debts, so no one will have to clear up anything after him. He's even washed up his coffee cup and canceled the newspaper

subscription. He is ready. And all he wants is to die in peace, he thinks, as he sits in the Saab and looks out of the open garage door. If he can just avoid his neighbors he may even be able to get away by this afternoon. He sees the heavily overweight young man from next door slouching past the garage door in the parking area. Not that Ove dislikes fat people. Certainly not. People can look any way they like. He has just never been able to understand them, can't fathom how they do it. How much can one person eat? How does one manage to turn oneself into a twin-size person? It must take a certain determination, he reflects. The young man notices him and waves cheerfully. Ove gives him a curt nod. The young man stands there waving, setting his fat breasts into motion under his T-shirt. Ove often says that this is the only man he knows who could attack a bowl of chips from all directions at once, but whenever he makes this comment Ove's wife protests and tells him one shouldn't say things like that. Or rather, she used to. Used to. Ove's wife liked the overweight young man. After his mother passed away she would go over once a week with a lunchbox. "So he gets something home-cooked now and then," she used to say. Ove noticed that they never got the containers back, adding that maybe the young man hadn't noticed the difference between the box and the food inside it. At which point Ove's wife would tell him that was enough. And then it was enough. Ove waits until the lunchbox eater has gone before he gets out of the Saab. He tugs at the handle three times. Closes the garage door behind him. Tugs at the door handle three times. Walks up the

little footpath between the houses. Stops outside the bicycle shed. There's a woman's bicycle leaning up against the wall. Again. Right under the sign clearly explaining that cycles should not be left in this precise spot. Ove picks it up. The front tire is punctured. He unlocks the shed and places the bicycle tidily at the end of the row. He locks the door and has just tugged at it three times when he hears a late-pubescent voice jabbering in his ear. "Whoa! What the hell're you doin'?!" Ove turns around and finds himself eye to eye with a whelp standing a few yards away. "Putting a bike away in the bike shed." "You can't do that!" On closer inspection he may be eighteen or so, Ove suspects. More of a stripling than a whelp, in other words, if one wants to be pedantic about it. "Yes I can." "But I'm repairing it!" the youth bursts out, his voice rising into falsetto. "But it's a lady's bike," protests Ove. "Yeah, so what?" "It can hardly be yours, then," Ove states condescendingly. The youth groans, rolling his eyes; Ove puts his hands into his pockets as if this is the end of the matter. There's a guarded silence. The lad looks at Ove as if he finds Ove unnecessarily thick. In return, Ove looks at the creature before him as if it were nothing but a waste of oxygen. Behind the youth, Ove notices, there's another youth. Even slimmer than the first one and with black stuff all around his eyes. The second youth tugs carefully at the first's jacket and murmurs something about "not causing trouble." His comrade kicks rebelliously at the snow, as if it were the snow's fault. "It's my girlfriend's bike," he mumbles at last. He says it more with resignation than indignation. His

sneakers are too big and his jeans too small, Ove notes. His tracksuit jacket is pulled over his chin to protect him against the cold. His emaciated peach-fuzzed face is covered in blackheads and his hair looks as if someone saved him from drowning in a barrel by pulling him up by his locks. "Where does she live, then?" With profound exertion, as if he's been shot with a tranquillizer dart, the creature points with his whole arm towards the house at the far end of Ove's street. Where those communists who pushed through the garbage sorting reform live with their daughters. Ove nods cautiously. "She can pick it up in the bike shed, then," says Ove, tapping melodramatically at the sign prohibiting bicycles from being left in the area, before turning around and heading back towards his house. "Grumpy old bastard!" the youth yells behind him. "Shhh!" utters his soot-eyed companion. Ove doesn't answer. He walks past the sign clearly prohibiting motor vehicles from entering the residential area. The one which the Pregnant Foreign Woman apparently could not read, even though Ove knows very well that it's quite impossible not to see it. He should know, because he's the one who put it there. Dissatisfied, he walks down the little footpath between the houses, stamping his feet so that anyone who saw him would think he was trying to flatten the tarmac. As if it wasn't bad enough with all the nutters already living on the street, he thinks. As if the whole area was not already being converted into some bloody speed bump in evolutionary progress. The Audi poser and the Blond Weed almost opposite Ove's house, and at the far end of the

row that communist family with their teenage daughters and their red hair and their shorts over their trousers, their faces like mirror-image raccoons. Well, most likely they're on holiday in Thailand at this precise moment, but anyway. In the house next to Ove lives the twenty-five-year-old who's almost a quarter-tonner. With his long feminine hair and strange T-shirts. He lived with his mother until she died of some illness a year or so ago. Apparently his name is Jimmy, Ove's wife has told him. Ove doesn't know what work Jimmy does; most likely something criminal. Unless he tests bacon for a living? In the house on the other side of Jimmy live Rune and his wife. Ove wouldn't exactly call Rune his "enemy" . . . or rather, he would. Everything that went to pot in the Residents' Association began with Rune. He and his wife, Anita, moved into the area on the same day that Ove and Sonja moved in. At that time Rune drove a Volvo, but later he bought a BMW. You just couldn't reason with a person who behaved like that. It was Rune who pushed through the coup d'état that saw Ove deposed as chairman of the association. And just look at the state of the place now. Higher electricity bills and bicycles that aren't put away in the bike shed and people backing up with trailers in the residential area in spite of signs clearly stating that it's prohibited. Ove has long warned about these awful things, but no one has listened. Since then he has never showed his face in any meeting of the Residents' Association. His mouth makes a movement as if it's just about to spit every time he mentally enunciates the words "Residents' Association." As if they were

a gross indecency. He's fifteen yards from his broken mailbox when he sees Blond Weed. At first he can't comprehend what she's doing at all. She's swaying about on her heels on the footpath, gesturing hysterically at the façade of Ove's house. That little barking thing—more of a mutt than a proper dog—which has been pissing on Ove's paving stones is running around her feet. Weed yells something so violently that her sunglasses slip down over the tip of her nose. Mutt barks even louder. So the old girl has finally lost her faculties, Ove thinks, standing warily a few yards behind her. Only then does he realize that she's actually not gesticulating at the house. She's throwing stones. And it isn't the house she's throwing them at. It's the cat. It sits squeezed into the far corner behind Ove's shed. It has little flecks of blood in its coat, or what's left of its coat. Mutt bares its teeth; the cat hisses back. "Don't you hiss at Prince!" wails Weed, picking up another stone from Ove's flowerbed and hurling it at the cat. The cat jumps out of the way; the stone hits the windowsill. She picks up another stone and prepares to throw it. Ove takes two quick steps forward and stands so close behind her that she can most likely feel his breath. "If you throw that stone into my property, I'll throw you into your garden!" She spins around. Their eyes meet. Ove has both hands in his pockets; she waves her fists in front of him as if trying to swat two flies the size of microwave ovens. Ove doesn't concede as much as a facial movement. "That disgusting thing scratched Prince!" she manages to say, her eyes wild with fury. Ove peers down at Mutt. It growls at him.

Then he looks at the cat, sitting humiliated and bleeding but with its head defiantly raised, outside his house. "It's bleeding. So it seems to have ended in a draw," says Ove. "Like hell. I'll kill that piece of shit!" "No you won't," says Ove coldly. His insane neighbor begins to look threatening. "It's probably full of disgusting diseases and rabies and all sorts of things!" Ove looks at the cat. Looks at the Weed. Nods. "And so are you, most likely. But we don't throw stones at you because of it." Her lower lip starts trembling. She slides her sunglasses up over her eyes. "You watch yourself!" she hisses. Ove nods. Points at Mutt. Mutt tries to bite his leg but Ove stamps his foot down so hard that it backs off. "That thing should be kept on a leash inside the residential area," says Ove steadily. She tosses her dyed hair and snorts so hard that Ove half-expects a bit of snot to come flying out. "And what about that thing?!" she rages at the cat. "Never you bloody mind," Ove answers. She looks at him in that particular way of people who feel both utterly superior and deeply insulted. Mutt bares its teeth in a silent growl. "You think you own this street or what, you bloody lunatic?" she says. Ove calmly points at Mutt again. "The next time that thing pisses on my paving," he says coolly, "I'll electrify the stone." "Prince hasn't bloody pissed on your disgusting paving," she splutters, and takes two steps forward with her fists raised. Ove doesn't move. She stops. Looks as if she's hyperventilating. Then she seems to summon what highly negligible amount of common sense she has at her disposal. "Come on, Prince," she says with a wave. Then raises her index

finger at Ove. "I'm going to tell Anders about this, and then you'll regret it." "Tell your Anders from me that he should stop stretching his groin outside my window." "Crazy old muppet," she spits out and heads off towards the parking area. "And his car's crap, you tell him that!" Ove adds for good measure. She makes a gesture at him that he hasn't seen before, although he can guess what it means. Then she and her wretched little dog make off towards Anders's house. Ove turns off by his shed. Sees the wet splashes of piss on the paving by the corner of the flowerbed. If he weren't busy with more important things this afternoon he would have gone off to make a doormat of that mutt right away. But he has other things to occupy him. He goes to his toolshed, gets out his hammer-action drill and his box of drill bits. When he comes out again the cat is sitting there looking at him. "You can clear off now," says Ove. It doesn't move. Ove shakes his head resignedly. "Hey! I'm not your friend." The cat stays where it is. Ove throws out his arms. "Christ, you bloody cat, me backing you up when that stupid bag threw stones at you only means I dislike you less than that weedy nutter across the street. And that's not much of an achievement; you should be absolutely clear about that." The cat seems to give this some careful thought. Ove points at the footpath. "Clear off!" Not at all concerned by this, the cat licks its bloodstained fur. It looks at Ove as if this has been a round of negotiation and it's considering a proposal. Then slowly gets up and pads off, disappearing around the corner of the shed. Ove doesn't even look at it. He goes right into his house and

slams the door. Because it's enough now. Now Ove is going to die.