

"A charming debut . . . You'll laugh, you'll cry, you'll feel new sympathy for the curmudgeons in your life."

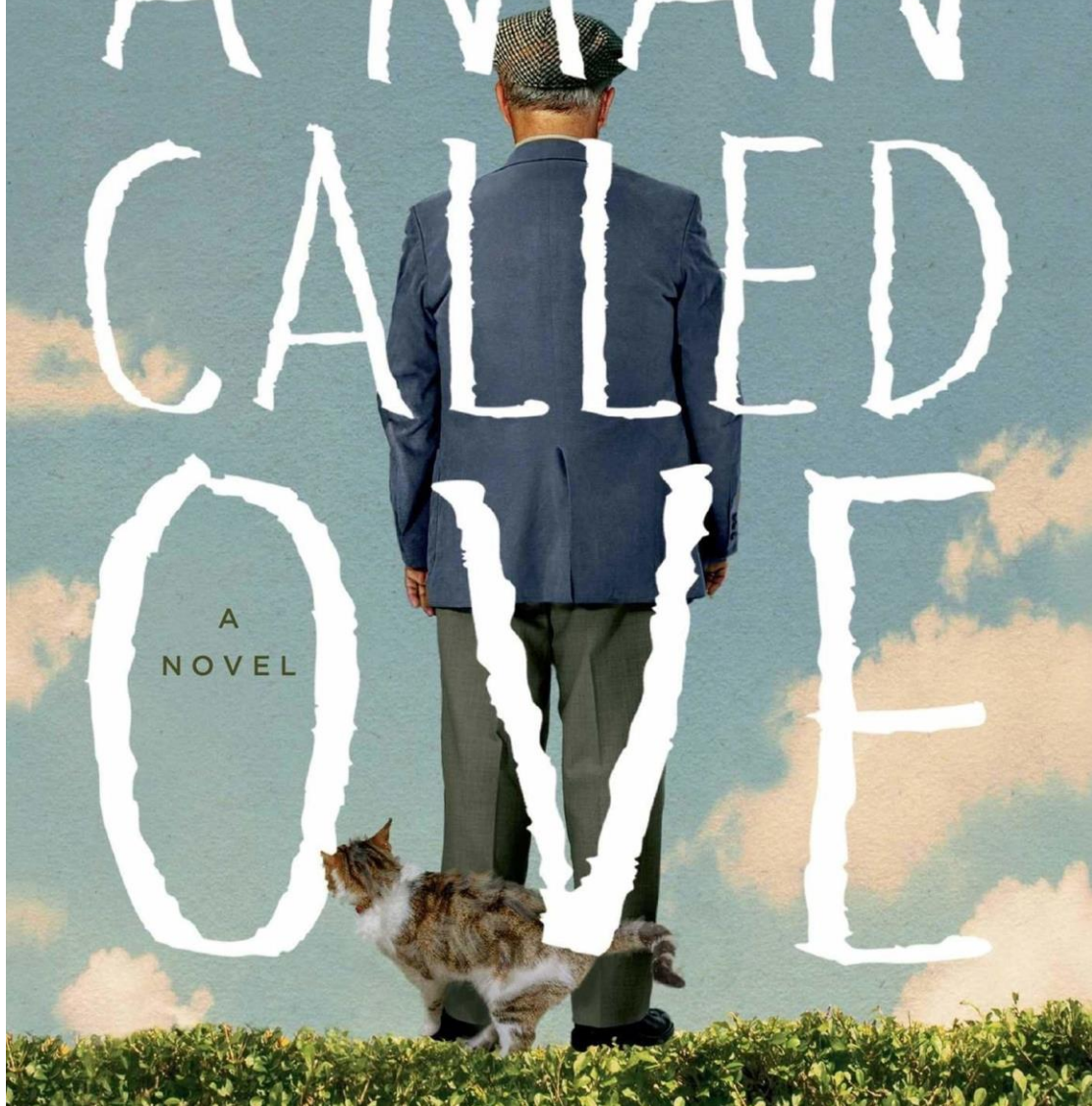
—PEOPLE

FREDRIK BACKMAN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

A MAN
CALLED
OVE

A
NOVEL



CHAPTER 8

A MAN WHO WAS OVE AND A PAIR OF HIS FATHER'S OLD FOOTPRINTS

She believed in destiny. That all the roads you walk in life, in one way or another, “lead to what has been predetermined for you.” Ove, of course, just started muttering under his breath and got very busy fiddling about with a screw or something whenever she started going on like this. But he never disagreed with her. Maybe to her destiny was “something”; that was none of his business. But to him, destiny was “someone.” It’s a strange thing, becoming an orphan at sixteen. To lose your family long before you’ve had time to create your own to replace it. It’s a very specific sort of loneliness. Ove, conscientious and dutiful, completed his two-week stint on the railways. And to his own surprise he found that he liked it. There was a certain liberation in doing a job. Grabbing hold of things with his own two hands and seeing the fruit of his efforts. Ove hadn’t ever disliked school, but he hadn’t quite seen the point of it either. He liked mathematics, and was two academic years ahead of his classmates. As for the other subjects, quite honestly he was not so concerned about them. But this was something entirely different. Something that suited him much better. When he clocked off from his last shift on the last day he was downcast. Not only because he had to go back to school, but because it had only occurred to him now

that he didn't know how to earn a living. Dad had been good in many ways, of course, but Ove had to admit he hadn't left much of an estate except a run-down house, an old Saab, and a dented wristwatch. Alms from the church were out of the question, God should be bloody clear about that. Ove said as much to himself while he stood there in the changing rooms, maybe as much for his own benefit as God's. "If you really had to take both Mum and Dad, keep your bloody money!" he yelled up at the ceiling. Then he packed up his stuff and left. Whether God or anyone else was listening he never found out. But when Ove came out of the changing rooms, a man from the managing director's office was standing there waiting for him.

"Ove?" he asked. Ove nodded. "The director would like to express his thanks for doing such a good job over the past fortnight," the man said, short and to the point. "Thanks," said Ove as he started walking away. The man put his hand on Ove's arm. Ove stopped. "The director was wondering whether you might have an interest in staying and carrying on doing a good job?" Ove stood in silence, looking at the man. Maybe mostly to check if this was some kind of joke. Then he slowly nodded. When he'd taken a few more steps the man called out behind him: "The director says you are just like your father!" Ove didn't turn around. But his back was straighter as he walked off.

And that's how he ended up in his father's old boots. He worked hard, never complained, and was never ill. The old boys on his shift found him a little on the quiet side and a little odd on top of that. He never wanted to join them for a beer after

work and he seemed uninterested in women as well, which was more than weird in its own right. But he was a chip off the old block and had never given them anything to complain about. If anyone asked Ove for a hand, he got on with it; if anyone asked him to cover a shift for them, he did it without any fuss. As time went by, more or less all of them owed him a favor or two. So they accepted him. When the old truck, the one they used to drive up and down the railway track, broke down one night more than ten miles outside of town, in one of the worst downpours of the whole year, Ove managed to repair it with nothing but a screwdriver and half a roll of gauze tape. After that, as far as the old boys on the tracks were concerned, Ove was okay. In the evenings he'd boil his sausages and potatoes, staring out the kitchen window as he ate. And the next morning he'd go to work again. He liked the routine, liked always knowing what to expect. Since his father's death he had begun more and more to differentiate between people who did what they should, and those who didn't. People who did and people who just talked. Ove talked less and less and did more and more. He had no friends. But on the other hand he hardly had any enemies either, apart from Tom, who since his promotion to foreman took every opportunity to make Ove's life as difficult as possible. He gave him the dirtiest and heaviest jobs, shouted at him, tripped him up at breakfast, sent him under railway carriages for inspections and set them in motion while Ove lay unprotected on the cross ties. When Ove, startled, threw himself out of the way just in time, Tom laughed

contemptuously and roared: "Look out or you'll end up like your old man!" Ove kept his head down, though, and his mouth shut. He saw no purpose in challenging a man who was twice his own size. He went to work every day and did justice to himself—that had been good enough for his father and so it would also have to do for Ove. His colleagues learned to appreciate him for it. "When people don't talk so much they don't dish out the crap either," one of his older workmates said to him one afternoon down on the track. And Ove nodded.

Some got it and some didn't. There were also some who got what Ove ended up doing one day in the director's office, while others didn't. It was almost two years after his father's funeral.

Ove had just turned eighteen. Tom had been caught out stealing money from the cash box in one of the carriages. Admittedly no one but Ove saw him take it, but Tom and Ove had been the only two people in the carriage when the money went missing. And, as a serious man from the director's office explained when Tom and Ove were ordered to present themselves, no one could believe Ove was the guilty party. And he wasn't, of course. Ove was left on a wooden chair in the corridor outside the director's office. He sat there looking at the floor for fifteen minutes before the door opened. Tom stepped outside, his fists so clenched with determination that his skin was bloodless and white on his lower arms. He kept trying to make eye contact with Ove; Ove just kept staring down at the floor until he was brought into the director's office. More serious men in suits were spread around the room. The

director himself was pacing back and forth behind his desk, his face highly colored, and there was an insinuation that he was too angry to stand still. "You want to sit down, Ove?" said one of the men in suits at last. Ove met his gaze, and knew who he was. His dad had mended his car once. A blue Opel Manta. With the big engine. He smiled amicably at Ove and gestured cursorily at a chair in the middle of the floor. As if to let him know that he was among friends now and could relax. Ove shook his head. The Opel Manta man nodded with understanding. "Well then. This is just a formality, Ove. No one in here believes you took the money. All you need to do is tell us who did it." Ove looked down at the floor. Half a minute passed. "Ove?" Ove didn't answer. The harsh voice of the director broke the silence at long last. "Answer the question, Ove!" Ove stood in silence. Looking down at the floor. The facial expressions of the men in suits shifted from conviction to slight confusion. "Ove . . . you do understand that you have to answer the question. Did you take the money?" "No," said Ove with a steady voice. "So who was it?" Ove stood in silence. "Answer the question!" ordered the director. Ove looked up. Stood there with a straight back. "I'm not the sort that tells tales about what other people do," he said. The room was steeped in silence for what must have been several minutes. "You do understand, Ove . . . that if you don't tell us who it was, and if we have one or more witnesses who say it was you . . . then we'll have to draw the conclusion that it was you?" said the director, not as amicable now. Ove nodded, but didn't say

another word. The director scrutinized him, as if he were a bluffer in a game of cards. Ove's face was unmoved. The director nodded grimly. "So you can go, then." And Ove left. Tom had put the blame on Ove when he was in the director's office some fifteen minutes earlier. During the afternoon, two of the younger men from Tom's shift, eager as young men are to earn the approval of older men, came forward and claimed that they had seen Ove take the money with their own eyes. If Ove had pointed out Tom, it would have been one word against another. But now it was Tom's words against Ove's silence. The next morning he was told by the foreman to empty his locker and present himself outside the director's office. Tom stood inside the door of the changing rooms and jeered at him as he was leaving. "Thief," hissed Tom. Ove passed him without raising his eyes. "Thief! Thief! Thief!" one of their younger colleagues, who had testified against Ove, chanted happily across the changing room, until one of the older men on their shift gave him a slap across the ear that silenced him. "THIEF!" Tom shouted demonstratively, so loudly that the word was still ringing in Ove's head several days after. Ove walked out into the morning air without turning around. He took a deep breath. He was furious, but not because they had called him a thief. He would never be the sort of man who cared what other men called him. But the shame of losing a job to which his father had devoted his whole life burned like a red-hot poker in his breast. He had plenty of time to think his life over as he walked one last time to the office, a bundle of work clothes clutched in

his arms. He had liked working here. Proper tasks, proper tools, a real job. He decided that once the police had gone through the motions of whatever they did with thieves in this situation, he'd try to go somewhere where he could get himself another job like this one. He might have to travel far, he imagined. Most likely a criminal record needed a reasonable geographical distance before it started to pale and become uninteresting. He had nothing to keep him here, he realized. But at least he had not become the sort of man who told tales. He hoped this would make his father more forgiving about Ove losing his job, once they were reunited. He had to sit on the wooden chair in the corridor for almost forty minutes before a middle-aged woman in a tight-fitting black skirt and pointy glasses came and told him he could come into the office. She closed the door behind him. He stood there, still with his work clothes in his arms. The director sat behind his desk with his hands clasped together in front of him. The two men submitted one another to such a long examination that either of them could have been an unusually interesting painting in a museum. "It was Tom who took that money," said the director. He did not say it as a question, just a short confirming statement. Ove didn't answer. The director nodded. "But the men in your family are not the kind who tell." That was not a question either. And Ove didn't reply. The director noticed that he straightened a little at the words "the men in your family." The director nodded again. Put on a pair of glasses, looked through a pile of papers, and started writing something. As if in that very moment Ove had

disappeared from the room. Ove stood in front of him for so long that he quite seriously began to doubt whether the director was aware of his presence. The director looked up. "Yes?" "Men are what they are because of what they do. Not what they say," said Ove. The director looked at him with surprise. It was the longest sequence of words anyone at the railway depot had heard the boy say since he started working there two years ago. In all honesty, Ove did not know where they came from. He just felt they had to be said. The director looked down at his pile of papers again. Wrote something there. Pushed a piece of paper across the desk. Pointed to where Ove should sign his name. "This is a declaration that you have voluntarily given up your job," he said. Ove signed his name. Straightened up, with something unyielding in his face. "You can tell them to come in now. I'm ready." "Who?" asked the director. "The police," said Ove, clenching his fists at his sides. The director shook his head briskly and went back to digging in his pile of papers. "I actually think the witness testimonies have been lost in this mess." Ove moved his weight from one foot to the other, without really knowing how to respond to this. The director waved his hand without looking at him. "You're free to go now." Ove turned around. Went into the corridor. Closed the door behind him. Felt light-headed. Just as he reached the front door the woman who had first let him in caught up with energetic steps, and before he had time to protest she pressed a paper into his hands. "The director wants you to know that you're hired as a night cleaner on the

long-distance train; report to the foreman there tomorrow morning,” she said sternly. Ove stared at her, then at the paper. She leaned in closer. “The director asked me to pass on another message: You did not take that wallet when you were nine years old. And he’ll be deuced if you took anything now. And it would be a damned pity for him to be responsible for kicking a decent man’s son into the street just because the son has some principles.” And so it turned out that Ove became a night cleaner instead. And if this hadn’t happened, he would never have come off his shift that morning and caught sight of her. With those red shoes and the gold brooch and all her burnished brown hair. And that laughter of hers, which, for the rest of his life, would make him feel as if someone was running around barefoot on the inside of his breast. She often said that “all roads lead to something you were always predestined to do.” And for her, perhaps, it was something. But for Ove it was someone.