

FREDRIK BACKMAN

A Man Called Ove

Translated from the Swedish by
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SCEPTRE

First published in Great Britain in 2014 by Sceptre
An imprint of Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is
available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 444 77579 2
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 444 77580 8
eBook ISBN 978 1 444 77582 2

Typeset in Sabon MT by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Hodder & Stoughton policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and
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Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.sceptrebooks.co.uk

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A MAN CALLED OVE BUYS A COMPUTER THAT IS NOT A COMPUTER

Ove is fifty-nine.

He drives a Saab. He's the kind of man who points at people he doesn't like the look of, as if they were burglars and his forefinger a policeman's torch. He stands at the counter of a shop where owners of Japanese cars come to purchase white cables. Ove eyes the sales assistant for a long time before shaking a medium-sized white box at him.

'So this is one of those O-Pads, is it?' he demands.

The assistant, a young man with a single-digit Body Mass Index, looks ill at ease. He visibly struggles to control his urge to snatch the box out of Ove's hands.

'Yes, exactly. An iPad. Do you think you could stop shaking it like that . . .?'

Ove gives the box a sceptical glance, as if it's a highly dubious sort of box, a box that rides a scooter and wears tracksuit trousers and just called Ove 'my friend' before offering to sell him a watch.

'I see. So it's a computer, yes?'

The sales assistant nods. Then hesitates and quickly shakes his head.

'Yes . . . or, what I mean is, it's an iPad. Some people call it a "tablet" and others call it a surfing device. There are different ways of looking at it . . .'

Ove looks at the sales assistant as if he has just spoken backwards, before shaking the box again.

‘But is it good, this thing?’

The assistant nods confusedly. ‘Yes. Or . . . How do you mean?’

Ove sighs and starts talking slowly, articulating his words as if the only problem here is his adversary’s impaired hearing.

‘Is. It. Gooooood? Is it a good computer?’

The assistant scratches his chin.

‘I mean . . . yeah . . . it’s really good . . . but it depends what sort of computer you want.’

Ove glares at him.

‘I want a computer! A normal bloody computer!’

Silence descends over the two men for a short while. The assistant clears his throat.

‘Well . . . it isn’t really a normal computer. Maybe you’d rather have a . . .’

The assistant stops and seems to be looking for a word that falls within the bounds of comprehension of the man facing him. Then he clears his throat again and says:

‘. . . a laptop?’

Ove shakes his head wildly and leans menacingly over the counter.

‘No, I don’t want a “laptop”’. I want a *computer*.’

The assistant nods pedagogically.

‘A laptop is a computer.’

Ove, insulted, glares at him and stabs his forefinger at the counter.

‘You think I don’t know that!’

Another silence, as if two gunmen have suddenly realised they have forgotten to bring their pistols. Ove looks at the box for a long time, as though he’s waiting for it to make a confession.

‘Where does the keyboard pull out?’ he mutters eventually.

The sales assistant rubs his palms against the edge of the counter and shifts his weight nervously from foot to foot, as young men employed in retail outlets often do when they begin

to understand that something is going to take considerably more time than they had initially hoped.

‘Well, this one doesn’t actually have a keyboard.’

Ove does something with his eyebrows. ‘Ah, of course,’ he splutters. ‘Because you have to buy it as an “extra”, don’t you?’

‘No, what I mean is that the computer doesn’t have a *separate* keyboard. You control everything from the screen.’

Ove shakes his head in disbelief, as if he’s just witnessed the sales assistant walking round the counter and licking the glass-fronted display cabinet.

‘But I have to have a keyboard. You do understand that?’

The young man sighs deeply, as if patiently counting to ten.

‘Okay. I understand. In that case I don’t think you should go for this computer. I think you should buy something like a MacBook instead.’

‘A McBook?’ Ove says, far from convinced. ‘Is that one of those blessed “eReaders” everyone’s talking about?’

‘No. A MacBook is a . . . it’s a . . . laptop, with a keyboard.’

‘Okay!’ Ove hisses. He looks round the shop for a moment. ‘So are *they* any good, then?’

The sales assistant looks down at the counter in a way that seems to reveal a fiercely yet barely controlled desire to begin clawing his own face. Then he suddenly brightens, flashing an energetic smile.

‘You know what? Let me see if my colleague has finished with his customer, so he can come and give you a demonstration.’

Ove checks his watch and grudgingly agrees, reminding the assistant that some people have better things to do than stand around all day waiting. The assistant gives him a quick nod, then disappears and comes back after a few moments with a colleague. The colleague looks very happy, as people do when they have not been working for a sufficient stretch of time as sales assistants.

‘Hi, how can I help you?’

Ove drills his police-torch finger into the counter.

‘I want a computer!’

The colleague no longer looks quite as happy. He gives the first sales assistant an insinuating glance as if to say he’ll pay him back for this.

In the meantime the first sales assistant mutters, ‘I can’t take any more, I’m going for lunch.’

‘Lunch,’ snorts Ove. ‘That’s the only thing people care about nowadays.’

‘I’m sorry?’ says the colleague and turns round.

‘*Lunch!*’ He sneers, then tosses the box on to the counter and swiftly walks out.



(THREE WEEKS EARLIER)
A MAN CALLED OVE MAKES HIS
NEIGHBOURHOOD 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, got 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 any other morning, and then drunk a cup with his wife. One measure for each cup, and one extra for the jug – no more, no less. People didn’t know how to do that any more, 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 bit 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 terraced houses lay in silence and darkness as he walked out of the door, and there wasn't a soul in sight. Might have known, thought Ove. In 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 scrutinised 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 round 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 registration numbers in the little pad he kept in his jacket pocket, and then compared these to the registrations he had noted down the day before. On occasions when the same registration 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, thankfully, 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 bin 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 rubbish "had to be separated". Having said that, once the decision was made to sort the rubbish, 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 rubbish 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 bin room and stop people turfing out unauthorized rubbish. To Ove's great annoyance, his proposal was voted out. The neighbours felt 'slightly uneasy' about it; plus they felt it would be a headache archiving all the video

tapes. 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 new-fangled 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 bin 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 spelled it with a capital ‘I’ and accentuated the ‘-net’ even though his wife nagged that you had to put the emphasis on ‘inter’. The steering group realised soon enough that the internet would watch Ove throwing out his rubbish 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 bin room he locked the door, just like he did every morning, and gave it three good tugs to ensure it was closed properly. Then he turned round 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 neighbours 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 noticeboard.

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 cancelled his telephone line rental and his newspaper subscription. He mended the mixer tap in the small bathroom. Put new screws into the handle of the door from the kitchen to the veranda. Reorganised boxes in the attic. Rearranged his tools in the shed and moved the Saab's winter tyres 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 top 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-storey terraced house with the half-sized attic at the back and stares out of 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 on to 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 odds. 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 skirting board. This terraced 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 any more, 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 round the block for three quarters of an hour?

And the poser has a girlfriend. Ten years younger. The Blonde

Weed, Ove calls her. Tottering round the lanes like an inebriated panda on heels as long as box spanners, 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 worktop. It's not supposed to be a job for a Tuesday afternoon.

He looks out of 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 one of those non-gender-specific cardigans they all have to wear these days would put up a bog-standard hook. But Ove's hook is going to be 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 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 'homely'. 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 spanner sets and that sort of thing. People don't have useful things any more. People just have shit. Twenty pairs of shoes but they never know where the shoe-horn is;

houses filled with microwave ovens and flat-screen televisions, yet they couldn't tell you which plug 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 plugs. He stands there looking at them as if they were chess pieces. He doesn't stress about decisions concerning wall plugs for concrete. Things have to take their time. Every plug is a process, every plug has its own use. People have no respect for decent, honest functionality any more, 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 the 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 centred, 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.

3



A MAN CALLED OVE REVERSES WITH A TRAILER

Ove whips open the green floral curtains, which for many years Ove's wife has been nagging him to change. He sees a short, black-haired and obviously foreign woman aged about thirty. She stands there gesticulating furiously at a similarly aged oversized blond lanky man squeezed into the driver's seat of a ludicrously small Japanese car with a trailer, now scraping against the exterior wall of Ove's house.

The Lanky One, by means of subtle gestures and signs, seems to want to convey to the woman that this is not quite as easy as it looks. The woman, with gestures that are comparatively unsubtle, seems to want to convey that it might have something to do with the moronic nature of the Lanky One in question.

'Well I'll be bloody . . .' Ove thunders through the window as the wheel of the trailer rolls into his flowerbed. A few seconds later his front door seems to fly open of its own accord, as if afraid that Ove might otherwise walk straight through it.

'What the hell are you doing?' Ove roars at the woman.

'Yes, that's what I'm asking myself!' she roars back.

Ove is momentarily thrown off balance. He glares at her. She glares back.

'You can't drive a car here! Can't you read?'

The little foreign woman steps towards him and only then

does Ove notice that she's either very pregnant or suffering from what Ove would categorise as selective obesity.

'I'm not driving the car, am I?'

Ove stares silently at her for a few seconds. Then he turns to her husband, who's just managed to extract himself from the Japanese car and is approaching them with both hands thrown expressively into the air and an apologetic smile plastered across his face. He's wearing a knitted cardigan and his posture seems to indicate a very obvious calcium deficiency. He must be close to two metres tall. Ove feels an instinctive scepticism towards all people taller than one eighty-five; the blood can't quite make it all the way up to the brain.

'And who might you be?' Ove enquires.

'I'm the driver,' says the Lanky One expansively.

'Oh really? Doesn't look like it!' rages the pregnant woman, who is probably a half-metre shorter than him. She tries to slap his arm with both hands.

'And who's this?' Ove asks, staring at her.

'This is my wife.' He smiles.

'Don't be so sure it'll stay that way,' she snaps, her pregnant belly bouncing up and down.

'It's not as easy as it loo—' the Lanky One tries to say, but he's immediately cut short.

'I said RIGHT! But you carried on reversing to the LEFT! You don't listen! You NEVER listen!'

After that, she immerses herself in half a minute's worth of haranguing in what Ove can only assume to be a display of the complex vocabulary of Arabic cursing.

The husband just nods back at her with an indescribably harmonious smile. The very sort of smile that makes decent folk want to slap Buddhist monks in the face, Ove thinks to himself.

'Oh come on. I'm sorry,' he says cheerfully, hauling out a tin of chewing tobacco from his pocket and packing in a ball the size of a walnut. 'It was only a little accident, we'll sort it out!'

Ove looks at the Lanky One as if the Lanky One has just squatted over the bonnet of Ove's car and left a turd on it.

‘Sort it out? You’re in my flowerbed!’

The Lanky One looks ponderously at the trailer wheels.

‘That’s hardly a flowerbed, is it?’ He smiles, undaunted, and adjusts his tobacco with the tip of his tongue. ‘Naah, come on, that’s just soil,’ he persists, as if Ove is having a joke with him.

Ove’s forehead compresses itself into one large, threatening wrinkle.

‘It. Is. A. Flowerbed.’

The Lanky One scratches his head, as if he’s got some tobacco caught in his tangled fringe.

‘But you’re not growing anything in it . . .’

‘Never you bloody mind what I do with my own flowerbed!’

The Lanky One nods quickly, clearly keen to avoid further provocation of this unknown man. He turns to his wife as if he’s expecting her to come to his aid. She doesn’t look at all likely to do so. The Lanky One looks at Ove again.

‘Pregnant, you know. Hormones and all that . . .’ he tries, with a grin.

The Pregnant One does not grin. Nor does Ove. She crosses her arms. Ove tucks his hands into his belt. The Lanky One clearly doesn’t know what to do with his massive hands, so he swings them back and forth across his body, slightly shamefully, as if they’re made of cloth, fluttering in the breeze.

‘I’ll move it and have another go,’ he finally says and smiles disarmingly at Ove again.

Ove does not reciprocate.

‘Motor vehicles are not allowed in the area. There’s a sign.’

The Lanky One steps back and nods eagerly. Jogs back and once again contorts his body into the under-dimensioned Japanese car. ‘Christ,’ Ove and the pregnant woman mutter wearily in unison. Which actually makes Ove dislike her slightly less.

The Lanky One pulls forward a few metres; Ove can see very clearly that he does not straighten up the trailer properly. Then he starts reversing again. Right into Ove’s letter box, buckling the green sheet metal.

Ove storms forward and throws the car door open.

The Lanky One starts flapping his arms again.

‘My fault, my fault! Sorry about that, didn’t see the letter box in the back mirror, you know. It’s difficult this trailer thing, just can’t figure out which way to turn the wheel . . .’

Ove thumps his fist on the roof of the car so hard that the Lanky One jumps and bangs his head on the doorframe. ‘Out of the car!’

‘What?’

‘Get out of the car, I said!’

The Lanky One gives Ove a slightly startled glance, but he doesn’t quite seem to have the nerve to reply. Instead he gets out of his car and stands beside it like a schoolboy in the dunce’s corner. Ove points down the footpath between the terraced houses, towards the bicycle shed and the parking area.

‘Go and stand where you’re not in the way.’

The Lanky One nods, slightly puzzled.

‘Holy Christ. A lower-arm amputee with cataracts could have reversed this trailer more accurately than you,’ Ove mutters as he gets into the car.

How can anyone be incapable of reversing with a trailer, he asks himself? How? How difficult is it to establish the basics of right and left and then do the opposite? How do these people make their way through life at all?

Of course it’s an automatic as well, Ove notes. Might have known. These morons would rather not have to drive their cars at all, let alone reverse into a parking space by themselves. He puts it into Drive and inches forward. Should one really have a driving licence if one can’t drive a real car rather than some Japanese robot vehicle, he wonders? Ove doubts whether someone who can’t park a car properly should even be allowed to vote.

When he’s pulled forward and straightened up the trailer – as civilized people do before reversing with a trailer – he puts it into reverse. Immediately it starts making a shrieking noise. Ove looks round angrily.

‘What the bloody hell are you . . . why are you making that noise?’ he hisses at the instrument panel and gives the steering wheel a whack.

‘Stop it, I said!’ he roars at a particularly insistent flashing red light.

At the same time the Lanky One appears at the side of the car and carefully taps the window. Ove rolls the window down and gives him an irritated look.

‘It’s just the reverse radar making that noise,’ the Lanky One says with a nod.

‘Don’t you think I know that?’ Ove seethes.

‘It’s a bit unusual, this car. I was thinking I could show you the controls if you like . . .’

‘I’m not an idiot, you know!’ Ove snorts.

The Lanky One nods eagerly.

‘No, no, of course not.’

Ove glares at the instrument panel.

‘What’s it doing now?’

The Lanky One nods enthusiastically.

‘It’s measuring how much power’s left in the battery. You know, before it switches from the electric motor to the petrol-driven motor. Because it’s a hybrid . . .’

Ove doesn’t answer. He just slowly rolls up the window, leaving the Lanky One outside with his mouth half-open. Ove checks the left wing mirror. Then the right wing mirror. He reverses while the Japanese car shrieks in terror, manoeuvres the trailer perfectly between his own house and his incompetent new neighbour’s, gets out, and tosses the cretin his keys.

‘Reverse radar and parking sensors and cameras and crap like that. A man who needs all that to reverse with a trailer shouldn’t be bloody doing it in the first place.’

The Lanky One nods cheerfully at him.

‘Thanks for the help,’ he calls out, as if Ove hadn’t just spent the last ten minutes insulting him.

‘You shouldn’t even be allowed to rewind a cassette,’ grumbles Ove. The pregnant woman just stands there with her arms

crossed, but she doesn't look quite as angry any more. She thanks him with a wry smile, as if she's trying not to laugh. She has the biggest brown eyes Ove has ever seen.

'The Residents' Association does not permit any driving in this area, and you have to bloody go along with it,' Ove huffs, before stomping back to his house.

He stops halfway up the paved path between the house and his shed. He wrinkles his nose in the way men of his age do, the wrinkle travelling across his entire upper body. Then he sinks down on his knees, puts his face right up close to the paving stones, which he neatly and without exception removes and re-lays every other year, whether necessary or not. He sniffs again. Nods to himself. Stands up.

His new neighbours are still watching him.

'Piss! There's piss all over the place here!' Ove says gruffly.

He gesticulates at the paving stones.

'O . . . kay,' says the black-haired woman.

'No! Nowhere is bloody okay round here!'

And with that, he goes into his house and closes the door.

He sinks on to the stool in the hall and stays there for a long time. Bloody woman. Why do she and her family have to come here if they can't even read a sign right in front of their eyes? You're not allowed to drive cars inside the block. Everyone knows that.

Ove goes to hang up his coat on the hook, among a sea of his wife's overcoats. Mutters 'idiots' at the closed window just to be on the safe side. Then goes into his living room and stares up at his ceiling.

He doesn't know how long he stands there. He loses himself in his own thoughts. Floats away, as if in a mist. He's never been the sort of man who does that, has never been a daydreamer, but lately it's as if something's twisted up in his head. He's having increasing difficulty concentrating on things. He doesn't like it at all.

When the doorbell goes it's like he's waking up from a warm slumber. He rubs his eyes hard, looks around as if worried that someone may have seen him.

The doorbell rings again. Ove turns round and stares at the bell as if it should be ashamed of itself. He takes a few steps into the hall, noting that his body is as stiff as set plaster. He can't tell if the creaking is coming from the floorboards or himself.

'And what is it now?' he asks the door before he's even opened it, as if it had the answer.

'What is it now?' he repeats as he throws the door open so hard that a three-year-old girl is flung backwards by the draft and ends up very unexpectedly on her bottom.

Beside her stands a seven-year-old girl looking absolutely terrified. Their hair is pitch black. And they have the biggest brown eyes Ove has ever seen.

'Yes?' says Ove.

The older girl looks guarded. She hands him a plastic container. Ove reluctantly accepts it. It's warm.

'Rice!' the three-year-old girl announces happily, briskly getting to her feet.

'With saffron. And chicken,' nods the seven-year-old, far more wary of him.

Ove evaluates them suspiciously.

'Are you selling it?'

The seven-year-old looks offended.

'We LIVE HERE, you know!'

Ove is silent for a moment. Then he nods, as if he might possibly be able to accept this premise as an explanation.

'Okay.'

The younger one also nods with satisfaction and flaps her slightly-too-long sleeves.

'Mum said you were 'ungry!'

Ove looks in utter perplexity at the little flapping speech defect.

'What?'

'Mum said you *looked* hungry. So we have to give you dinner,' the seven-year-old girl clarifies with some irritation. 'Come on, Nasanin,' she adds, taking her sister by the hand and walking away after directing a resentful stare at Ove.

Ove keeps an eye on them as they skulk off. He sees the pregnant woman standing in her doorway, smiling at him before the girls run into her house. The three-year-old turns round and waves cheerfully at him. Her mother also waves. Ove closes the door.

He stands in the hall again. Stares at the warm container of chicken with rice and saffron as one might look at a box of nitroglycerine. Then he goes into the kitchen and puts it in the fridge. Not that he's habitually inclined to go round eating any old food provided by unknown, foreign kids on his doorstep. But in Ove's house one does not throw away food. As a point of principle.

He goes into the living room. Shoves his hands in his pockets. Looks up at the ceiling. Stands there a good while and thinks about what sort of concrete-wall plug would be most suitable for the job. He stands there squinting until his eyes start hurting. He looks down, slightly confused, at his dented wristwatch. Then he looks out of the window again and realises that dusk has fallen. He shakes his head in resignation.

You can't start drilling after dark, everyone knows that. He'd have to turn on all the lights and no one could say when they'd be turned off again. And he's not giving the electricity company the pleasure, his meter notching up another couple of thousand crowns. They can forget about that.

Ove packs up his useful-stuff box and takes it to the big upstairs hall. Fetches the key to the attic from its place behind the radiator in the little hall. Goes back and reaches up and opens the trapdoor to the attic. Folds down the ladder. Climbs up into the attic and puts the useful-stuff box in its place behind the kitchen chairs that his wife made him put up here because they creaked too much. They didn't creak at all. Ove knows very well it was just an excuse, because his wife wanted to get some new ones. As if that was all life was about. Buying kitchen chairs and eating in restaurants and carrying on.

He goes down the stairs again. Puts back the attic key in its place behind the radiator in the little hall. 'Taking it a bit

easy,' they said to him. A lot of thirty-one-year-old show-offs working with computers and refusing to drink normal coffee. An entire society where no one knows how to reverse with a trailer. Then they come telling him *he's* not needed any more. Is that reasonable?

Ove goes down to the living room and turns on the TV. He doesn't watch the programmes, but it's not like he can just spend his evenings sitting there by himself like a moron, staring at the walls. He gets out the foreign food from the fridge and eats it with a fork, straight out of the plastic container.

It's Tuesday night and he's cancelled his newspaper subscription, switched off the radiators, and turned out all the lights.

And tomorrow he's putting up that hook.

4



A MAN CALLED OVE DOES NOT PAY A THREE-CROWN SURCHARGE

Ove gives her the plants. Two of them. Of course there weren't supposed to be two of them. But somewhere along the line there has to be a limit. It was a question of principle, Ove explains to her. That's why he got two flowers in the end.

'Things don't work when you're not at home,' he mutters, and kicks a bit at the frozen ground.

His wife doesn't answer.

'There'll be snow tonight,' says Ove.

They said on the news there wouldn't be snow, but, as Ove often points out, whatever they predict is bound not to happen. He tells her this; she doesn't answer. He puts his hands in his pockets and gives her a brief nod.

'It's not natural rattling around the house on my own all day when you're not here. It's no way to live. That's all I have to say.'

She doesn't reply to that either.

He nods and kicks the ground again. He can't understand people who long to retire. How can anyone spend their whole life longing for the day when they become superfluous? Wandering about, a burden on society, what sort of man would ever wish for that? Staying at home, waiting to die. Or even worse: waiting for them to come and fetch you and put you in a home. Being dependent on other people to get to the toilet. Ove can't think

of anything worse. His wife often teases him, says he's the only man she knows who'd rather be laid out in a coffin than travel in a mobility service van. And she may have a point there.

Ove had risen at quarter to six. Made coffee for his wife and himself, went round checking the radiators to make sure she hadn't sneakily turned them up. They were all unchanged from yesterday, but he turned them down a little more just to be on the safe side. Then he took his jacket from the hook in the hall, the only hook of all six that wasn't burgeoning with her clothes, and set off for his inspection. It had started getting cold, he noticed. Almost time to change his navy autumn jacket for his navy winter jacket.

He always knows when it's about to snow because his wife starts nagging about turning up the heat in the bedroom. Lunacy, Ove reaffirms every year. Why should the power company directors feather their nests because of a bit of seasonality? Turning up the heat five degrees costs thousands of crowns per year. He knows because he's calculated it himself. So every winter he drags down an old diesel generator from the attic that he swopped at a jumble sale for a gramophone. He's connected this to a fan heater he bought at a sale for thirty-nine crowns. Once the generator has charged up the fan heater, it runs for thirty minutes on the little battery Ove has hooked it up to, and his wife keeps it on her side of the bed. She can run it a couple of times before they go to bed, but only a couple – no need to be lavish about it ('Diesel isn't free, you know'). And Ove's wife does what she always does: nods and agrees that Ove is probably right. Then she goes round all winter sneakily turning up the radiators. Every year the same bloody thing.

Ove kicks the ground again. He's considering telling her about the cat. If you can even call that mangy, half-bald creature a cat. It was sitting there again when he came back from his inspection, practically right outside their front door. He pointed at it and shouted so loudly that his voice echoed between the houses. The cat just sat there, looking at Ove. Then it stood up elaborately, as if making a point of demonstrating that it wasn't

leaving because of Ove, but rather because there were better things to do, and disappeared round the corner.

Ove decides not to mention the cat to her. He assumes she'll only be disgruntled with him for driving it away. If she was in charge the whole house would be full of tramps, whether of the furred variety or not.

He's wearing his navy suit and has done up the top button of the white shirt. She tells him to leave the top button undone if he's not wearing a tie; he protests that he's not some urchin who's renting out deckchairs, before defiantly buttoning it up. He's got his dented old wristwatch on, the one that his dad inherited from his father when he was nineteen, the one that was passed on to Ove after his sixteenth birthday, a few days after his father died.

Ove's wife likes that suit. She always says he looks so handsome in it. Like any sensible person, Ove is obviously of the opinion that only posers wear their best suits on weekdays. But this morning he decided to make an exception. He even put on his black going-out shoes and polished them with a responsible amount of boot shine.

As he took his autumn jacket from the hook in the hall before he went out, he threw a thoughtful eye on his wife's collection of coats. He wondered how such a small human being could have so many winter coats. 'You almost expect if you stepped through this lot you'd find yourself in Narnia,' a friend of Ove's wife had once joked. Ove didn't have a clue what she was talking about, but he did agree there were a hell of a lot of coats.

He walked out of the house before anyone in the street had even woken up. Strolled up to the parking area. Opened his garage with a key. He had a remote control for the door, but had never understood the point of it. An honest person could just as well open the door manually. He unlocked the Saab, also with a key: the system had always worked perfectly well, there was no reason to change it. He sat in the driver's seat and twisted the tuning dial half forward and then half back before adjusting each of the mirrors, as he did every time he got into the Saab.

As if someone routinely broke into the Saab and mischievously changed Ove's mirrors and radio channels.

As he drove across the parking area he passed that pregnant foreign woman from next door. She was holding her three-year-old by the hand. The big blond Lanky One was walking beside her. All three of them caught sight of Ove and waved cheerfully. Ove didn't wave back. At first he was going to stop and give her a dressing down about letting children run about in the parking area as if it was some municipal playground. But he decided he didn't have the time.

He drove along, passing row after row of houses identical to his own. When they first moved in here there were only six houses; now there were hundreds of them. There used to be a forest here but now there were only houses. Everything paid for with loans, of course. That was how you did it nowadays. Shopping on credit and driving electric cars and hiring tradesmen to change a light bulb. Laying click-on floors and fitting electric fireplaces and carrying on. A society that apparently could not see the difference between the correct plug for a concrete wall and a smack in the face. Clearly this was how it was meant to be.

It took him exactly fourteen minutes to drive to the florist's in the shopping centre. Ove kept exactly to every speed limit, even on that 50kph road where the recently arrived idiots in suits came tanking along at 90. Among their own houses they put up speed bumps and damnable numbers of signs about 'Children Playing', but when driving past other people's houses it was apparently less important. Ove had repeated this to his wife every time they drove past over the last ten years.

And it's getting worse and worse, he liked to add, just in case by some miracle she hadn't heard him the first time.

Today he hadn't even gone two kilometres before a black Mercedes positioned itself a forearm's length behind his Saab. Ove signalled with his brake lights three times. The Mercedes flashed its full beam at him in an agitated manner. Ove snorted at his back mirror. As if it was his duty to fling himself out of

the way as soon as these morons decided speed restrictions didn't apply to them. Honestly. Ove didn't move. The Mercedes gave him a burst of its full beam again. Ove slowed down. The Mercedes sounded its horn. Ove lowered his speed to 20. When they reached the top of a hill the Mercedes overtook him with a roar. The driver, a man in his forties in a tie and white cables trailing from his ears, held up his finger through the window at Ove. Ove responded to the gesture in the manner of all men of a certain age who've been properly raised: by slowly tapping the tip of his finger against the side of his head. The man in the Mercedes shouted until his saliva spattered against the inside of his windshield, then put his foot down and disappeared.

Two minutes later Ove came to a red light. The Mercedes was at the back of the queue. Ove flashed his lights at it. He saw the driver craning his neck round. The white earpieces dropped out and fell against the dashboard. Ove nodded with satisfaction.

The light turned green. The queue didn't move. Ove sounded his horn. Nothing happened. Ove shook his head. Must be a woman driver. Or roadworks. Or an Audi. When thirty seconds had passed without anything happening, Ove put the car into neutral, opened the door and stepped out of the Saab with the engine still running. Stood in the road and peered ahead with his hands on his hips, filled with a kind of Herculean irritation: the way Superman might have stood if he'd got stuck in a traffic jam.

The man in the Mercedes gave a blast on his horn. Idiot, thought Ove. In the same moment the traffic started moving. The cars in front of Ove moved off. The car behind him, a Volkswagen, beeped at him. The driver waved impatiently at Ove. Ove glared back. He got back into the Saab and leisurely closed the door. 'Amazing what a rush we're in,' he scoffed into the back mirror and drove on.

At the next red light he ended up behind the Mercedes again. Another queue. Ove checked his watch and took a left turn down a smaller, quiet road. This entailed a longer route to the shopping centre, but there were fewer traffic lights. Not that Ove was

mean. But as anyone who knows anything knows, cars use less fuel if they keep moving rather than stopping all the time. And, as Ove's wife often says: 'If there's one thing you could write in Ove's obituary, it's "At least he was economical with petrol."'

As Ove approached the shopping centre from his little side road, he could just make out that there were only two parking spaces left. What all these people were doing at the shopping centre on a normal weekday was beyond his comprehension. Obviously people no longer had jobs to go to.

Ove's wife usually starts sighing as soon as they even get close to a car park like this. Ove wants to park close to the entrance. 'As if there's a competition about who can find the best parking spot,' she always says as he completes circuit after circuit and swears at all the imbeciles getting in his way in their foreign cars. Sometimes they end up doing six or seven loops before they find a good spot, and if Ove in the end has to concede defeat and content himself with a slot twenty metres further away, he's in a bad mood for the rest of the day. His wife has never understood it. There again, she never was very good at grasping questions of principle.

Ove figured he would go round slowly a couple of times just to check the lay of the land, but then suddenly caught sight of the Mercedes thundering along the main road towards the shopping centre. So this was where he'd been heading, that suit with the plastic leads in his ears. Ove didn't hesitate for a second. He put his foot down and barged his way out of the junction into the road. The Mercedes slammed on its brakes, firmly pressing down on the horn and following close behind. The race was on.

The signs at the car park entrance led the traffic to the right, but when they got there the Mercedes must also have seen the two empty slots, as he tried to slip past Ove on the left. Ove only just managed to manoeuvre himself in front of him to block his path. The two men started hunting each other across the tarmac.

In his back mirror, Ove saw a little Toyota turn off the road behind them, follow the road signs and enter the parking area

in a wide loop from the right. Ove's eyes followed it while he hurtled forward in the opposite direction, with the Mercedes on his tail. Of course, he could have taken one of the free slots, the one closest to the entrance, and then have the kindness of letting the Mercedes take the other. But what sort of victory would that have been?

Instead Ove made an emergency stop in front of the first slot and stayed where he was. The Mercedes started wildly sounding its horn. Ove didn't flinch. The little Toyota approached from the far right. The Mercedes also caught sight of it and, too late, understood Ove's devilish plan. Its horn wailed furiously as it tried to push past the Saab, but it never stood a chance: Ove had already waved the Toyota into one of the free slots. Only once it was safely in did Ove nonchalantly swing into the other space.

The side window of the Mercedes was so covered in saliva when it drove past that Ove couldn't even see the driver. He stepped out of the Saab triumphantly, like a gladiator who had just slain his opponent. Then he looked at the Toyota.

'Oh damn,' he mumbled, irritated.

The car door was thrown open.

'Hi there!' the Lanky One sang merrily as he untangled himself from the driver's seat. 'Hello hello!' said his wife from the other side of the Toyota, lifting out their three-year-old.

Ove watched repentantly as the Mercedes disappeared in the distance.

'Thanks for the parking space! Bloody marvellous!' The Lanky One was beaming.

Ove didn't reply.

'Wass ya name?' the three-year-old burst out.

'Ove,' said Ove.

'My name's Nasanin!' she said with delight.

Ove nodded at her.

'And I'm Pat . . .' the Lanky One started saying.

But Ove had already turned round and left.

'Thanks for the space,' the Pregnant Foreign Woman called out after him.

Ove could hear laughter in her voice. He didn't like it. He just muttered a quick 'Fine, fine,' without turning round and marched through the revolving doors into the shopping centre. He turned left down the first turning and looked round several times, as if afraid that the family from next door would follow him. But they turned right and disappeared.

Ove stopped suspiciously outside the supermarket and eyed the poster advertising the week's special offers. Not that Ove was intending to buy any ham in this particular shop. But it was always worth keeping an eye on the prices. If there's one thing in this world that Ove dislikes, it's when someone tries to trick him. Ove's wife sometimes jokes that the three worst words Ove knows in this life are 'Batteries not included'. People usually laugh when she says that. But Ove does not usually laugh.

He moved on from the supermarket and stepped into the florist's. And there it didn't take long for a 'rumble' to start up, as Ove's wife would have described it. Or a 'discussion' as Ove always insisted on calling it. Ove put down a coupon on the counter on which it said: '2 plants for 50 crowns'. Given that Ove only wanted one plant, he explained to the shop assistant, with all rhyme and reason on his side, he should be able to buy it for 25 crowns. Because that was half of 50. However, the assistant, a brain-dead SMS-tapping nineteen-year-old, would not go along with it. She maintained that a single flower cost 39 crowns and '2 for 50' only applied if one bought two. The manager had to be summoned. It took Ove fifteen minutes to make him see sense and agree that Ove was right.

Or, to be honest about it, the manager mumbled something that sounded a little like 'bloody old sod' into his hand and hammered 25 crowns so hard into the till that anyone would have thought it was the machine's fault. It made no difference to Ove. He knew these retailers were always trying to screw you out of money, and no one screwed Ove and got away with it. Ove put his debit card on the counter. The manager allowed himself the slightest of smiles, then nodded dismissively and

pointed at a sign that read: 'Card purchases of less than 50 crowns carry a surcharge of 3 crowns.'

Now Ove is standing in front of his wife with two plants. Because it was a question of principle.

'There was no *way* I was going to pay three crowns,' rails Ove, his eyes looking down into the gravel.

Ove's wife often quarrels with Ove because he's always arguing about everything.

But Ove isn't bloody arguing. He just thinks right is right. Is that such an unreasonable attitude to life?

He raises his eyes and looks at her.

'I suppose you're annoyed I didn't come yesterday like I promised,' he mumbles.

She doesn't say anything.

'The whole street is turning into a madhouse,' he says defensively. 'Complete chaos. You even have to go out and reverse their trailers for them nowadays. And you can't even put up a hook in peace,' he continues as if she's disagreeing.

He clears his throat.

'Obviously I couldn't put the hook up when it was dark outside. If you do that there's no telling when the lights go off. More likely they'll stay on and consume electricity. Out of the question.'

She doesn't answer. He kicks the frozen ground. Sort of looking for words. Clears his throat briefly once again.

'Nothing works when you're not at home.'

She doesn't answer. Ove fingers the plants.

'I'm tired of it, just rattling round the house all day while you're away.'

She doesn't answer that either. He nods. Holds up the plants so she can see them.

'They're pink. The ones you like. They said in the shop they're perennials but that's not what they're bloody called. Apparently they die in this kind of cold, they also said that in the shop but only so they could sell me a load of other shit.'

He looks as if he's waiting for her approval.

'The new neighbours put saffron in their rice and carry-on like that; they're foreigners,' he says in a low voice.

A new silence.

He stands there, slowly twisting the wedding ring on his finger. As if looking for something else to say. He still finds it painfully difficult being the one to take charge of a conversation. That was always something she took care of. He usually just answered. This is a new situation for them both. Finally Ove squats, digs up the plant he brought last week and carefully puts it in a plastic bag. He turns the frozen soil carefully before putting in the new plants.

'They've bumped up the electricity prices again,' he informs her as he gets to his feet.

He looks at her for a long time. Finally he puts his hand carefully on the big boulder and caresses it tenderly from side to side, as if touching her cheek.

'I miss you,' he whispers.

It's been six months since she died. But Ove still inspects the whole house twice a day to feel the radiators and check that she hasn't sneakily turned up the heating.