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Opening Extract from...

A Man Called Ove

Written by Fredrik Bakman

Translated from the Swedish by Henning Koch

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FREDRIK BACKMAN

A Man Called Ove

Translated from the Swedish by
Henning Koch



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1



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. Goooood? 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.

2



(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 steamrollered 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.