

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

THE ANSWER IS NO



A SHORT STORY

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

FREDRIK BACKMAN

TRANSLATED BY ELIZABETH DENOMA

Table of Contents

[TITLE PAGE](#)

[COPYRIGHT PAGE](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

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Chapter 1

It's a frying pan that ruins Lucas's life.

We'll get to that.

Chapter 2

Lucas is happy. This is a very provoking thing to the world. Because people aren't supposed to be happy, they're only supposed to *want* to be happy, because how otherwise are you supposed to be able to sell things to them? More than anything people are supposed to pretend to be happy on the internet so that other people are reminded of how unhappy they themselves are by comparison. Humanity has a system. But Lucas? He's just happy. It wasn't even particularly difficult. All he did was to remove the one thing that makes almost all people unhappy: other people. Whatever they want, the answer is no.

Now, there's probably some poor reader out there who's going to protest with some nonsense along the lines of "Um, well actually, humans are herd animals!" And that may be true. But more than anything else, humans have historically proved to be in-need-of-therapy animals. And do you, dear reader, happen to know what the reason for all this therapy is?

That we have company.

Absolutely zero people go to therapy because yesterday they were sitting in a comfortable chair, eating a perfect pizza, drinking a good glass of red wine, watching a really funny movie. So that's how Lucas lives, all the time.

If you imagine how you would spend a free evening, not an evening where you've planned things out but an evening in which all your plans have suddenly been canceled, and now you find yourself in your comfiest pants in a warm, cozy apartment, thinking: So . . . I can do whatever I *want* all night?

That's Lucas's entire life.

Lucas doesn't have a single thing in his fridge that he doesn't think is good. Lucas likes all of his shoes. Every morning he wakes up in his bed with the entire blanket on him. Because Lucas doesn't have relationships. No loved ones, no unloved ones, no one at all. He works from home, it's something having to do with computers, if he had friends he might have

been forced to explain exactly what that means but now he doesn't. Lucas is a man with no strings attached, he has never taken part or joined in or been a member of anything. He doesn't want you to call or email and he most certainly doesn't want you to ever circle back. He would rather be hit by a truck than be in your group chat. He doesn't want exclusive opportunities or once-in-a-lifetime experiences of any kind. How about a none-in-a-lifetime? For everything else: No. Just no. Because happiness for Lucas is very easy, it's everything he already has minus humans. He is in his thirties, he is not young, but also not old. He is a perfect combination of nothing. If he had a partner he might have had to answer questions all day, like "What are you thinking about?" and "Are you annoyed?" But now? No. Lucas is a person who has no idea whether he loads the dishwasher in the correct way or not. Lucas has the exact number of pillows he needs and his remote control is always right where he left it. He has never once asked anyone "What would you like to eat tonight?" and gotten the answer "I can eat anything!" which just happen to be words that never ever in the history of humankind have been uttered by someone who will actually eat any of the FIFTEEN things then suggested to them. This never happens to Lucas. He is satisfied with all of his meal choices. He plays just the right amount of video games and drinks a perfect amount of alcohol. Not once tonight will Lucas have to pause a movie to explain that he's seen precisely as much of this movie and has the exact same amount of information as the person who just asked: "Who's that guy?"

The number of times Lucas will have to tell someone "Yes, I understand that it might have *felt* like I *sounded* annoyed, but I'm really not" today is zero. And of course, dear reader, you might now blurt out: But what about love then, Lucas? Falling head over heels? That feeling that before love your world was black and white, but this person is all of your color?

To that Lucas would answer, if he absolutely had to, which thank goodness he doesn't: How well has all this worked out for you, dear reader, so far? Instead of falling in love, have you tried to not do that? It really saves a lot of time.

Because Lucas's research into human relationships on TV has led him to conclude that love is between two people: One just wants to sit down, and the other one gets stressed out by that. One person is looking for a chair and the other one is looking for a project. Then they get married. By observing these married couples through his window on Sundays, Lucas has noticed

that they often consist of a monkey and a bird, and they have decided to go for a nice stroll together. But the monkey can't fly, so the bird has to walk. And after a while the monkey gets very annoyed with the bird, because the bird walks so very slowly. So then the bird suggests that maybe it can fly above the monkey instead? And then the monkey gets very, very hurt and says: "Oh! Excuse me then for wanting us to do something *together!*"

So love is surely great, dear reader. But have you ever tried not having to share a pint of ice cream? Or being able to buy any furniture you want without having to instruct an ogre from a swamp how to sit on it without making weird creases in the fabric? Have you tried not having to explain to an adult individual how to clean a sink?

Above all, have you tried being really content with your life and *not* immediately thinking: Wow, now everything is really perfect, maybe we should have a baby? Because do you know what children are? Another human being.

You know that feeling you get when someone's listening to really crappy music, and you put on a pair of headphones, and all that crappy stuff just vanishes? Imagine if there was a way you could live exactly like that but without headphones.

So: Lucas is happy.

It's a frying pan that ruins his life.

Chapter 3

Just to be clear: It's not that Lucas hates other people. He just really enjoys being where other people aren't. He works well in groups as long as it's groups of fewer than two people.

So then why doesn't Lucas live in some solitary cabin far out in the forest? Several reasons, but mainly that forests are uncomfortable. Forests often have slow internet, and it's really difficult to get perfect Pad Thai delivered to your door there. Lucas may not be fond of people, but he is very fond of the way they cook pad thai. So he lives in an apartment, which he would consider the perfect form of storage for people, were it not for the great virus of civilization: neighbors.

He rarely experiences *having* neighbors as a problem, but *being* someone's neighbor can be utterly challenging, as they might in a worst-case scenario want to talk to you. Therefore, to avoid your neighbors, you have to make yourself uninteresting, but not too uninteresting, because that makes you interesting. You have to position yourself somewhere right between "What a great guy!" and "He seems . . . weird." That's your sweet spot, because everyone wants a neighbor who minds his own business, but if you mind your own business too much the neighbors may be reminded that this is exactly what everyone always says about serial killers: "Him? I remember him as a bit of a loner. Kept to himself."

Best to be like dill, Lucas has concluded. Not like basil, the most anxious and ingratiating herb, but also not like cilantro, that conflict-seeking lunatic. Be dill. Nobody cares about dill. Or nobody *cared* about dill. Not until the whole frying pan thing. That's what we've come to now. Because one day Lucas's doorbell rings, and nothing good ever starts that way.

Outside the door stands the board. Which is the authoritarian creature the residents of the building who could be bothered to attend the annual building meeting have voted as their leader. The board probably consists of several people, but when Lucas opens the door he gets the distinct

impression of one single body with many heads. Like a bureaucratic Hydra, a mythological monster in a sweater-vest and ergonomic slippers.

“We are the board!” the board exclaims, a little in the way that the police announce that they’re the police.

When Lucas doesn’t immediately respond appropriately, for example with a slight bow, the board reacts as God might react if God called the tax agency and was put on hold.

“We are the *board!*” the board repeats.

“Okay.” Lucas nods as neutrally as he can, very careful not to make himself a target of either their aggression or attraction. He doesn’t want enemies, but he also doesn’t want to risk making the only thing that’s worse than that: friends.

“Do you have a frying pan?” one of the board’s heads asks sternly while a second head nods eagerly and a third head peers curiously into Lucas’s apartment.

“Yes?” Lucas answers, as if this were a knock-knock joke.

“We need to take a look at it. May we come in?” says the first head of the board.

“In? Into my . . . apartment?” Lucas asks in a tone that you might use when offered a free proctoscopy.

“Correct. We need to inspect that frying pan. Anyone who doesn’t have a frying pan is a suspect!” announces the first head.

“A suspect for what?”

“During the night someone left an old frying pan on the ground outside the recycling room!” the first head explains, as if this were the beginning of a detective novel where a dead body’s been found in a lake, and a divorced police officer from the big city who has just returned to her childhood home is drawn into an investigation that forces her to confront her past, but which may or may not also give her the chance to fall in love with a man in a flannel shirt who has a golden retriever and a charming down-to-earth view of life.

“A . . . frying pan?” Lucas asks incredulously.

“Correct! On the ground outside the recycling room! It’s practically on the sidewalk,” the first head says.

“One is not allowed to throw old frying pans on the ground! Not in the recycling room, either, for that matter! Frying pans must be taken to the landfill!” the second board head informs.

“This is a violation of building rules! The culprit must be found! Anyone without a frying pan is a suspect!” thunders the first head.

“What a lovely place you have,” chirps the third head of the board, peering into Lucas’s apartment.

“Not now, Linda!” hisses the first head.

“Sorry,” says the third head.

Then Lucas does something very, very misguided. He tries to help.

“Shouldn’t it be anyone who has a *new* frying pan who’s a suspect? If you throw away a frying pan, wouldn’t you already have gotten a new one?” he suggests.

All the heads take this into consideration.

“He’s right,” says the first head in wonder.

“Anyone who has a *new* frying pan is a suspect!” The second head nods.

“Unless the person who threw away the old frying pan has bought a new frying pan, but it’s a used one . . .,” the first head points out.

“So: *anyone* with a frying pan is a suspect!” the second head decides.

“And everyone who *doesn’t* have frying pans!” adds the first head.

“It could be anyone!” the second head whispers in horror.

“It could be me,” chirps the third head.

“Not now, Linda!” Heads One and Two hiss.

“Sorry,” Head Three says.

Then Head One stares at Lucas so viciously that the hairs on Lucas’s arms stand up, and then the head says the absolute most terrifying thing a grown man in an apartment building can ever hear: “You know, we are always looking for new board members.”

Head Two nods enthusiastically:

“Yes! You should help us with the investigation of the frying pan. You seem smart.”

Lucas curses himself. Being smart is the worst thing one can be in modern society. All it ever means is more work.

“I’m very busy,” he mutters.

“With what? Cooking?” says Head One suspiciously.

Lucas clears his throat.

“No. I mostly order takeout. But I have a lot of . . . work.”

Lucas doesn’t really. But he has just started playing a new video game.

“It’s your duty to serve your building,” says Head One.

Lucas really doesn’t want to do that. Yet he hears himself suggesting:

“I guess I could just . . . go down and get the frying pan and take it to the dump, if you like?”

Because Lucas is making the mistake of thinking that the board wants to solve the problem. But people actually almost never want to do that.

“You absolutely cannot go down and get the frying pan!” shouts Head One.

“Under no circumstances whatsoever!” agrees Head Two.

“What would it look like if people could leave old frying pans anywhere without consequences? It’s the person GUILTY of the crime who must pick up the frying pan! Penalties must be imposed, to set an example, otherwise anarchy will break out!” persists Head One.

Lucas nods slowly.

“Well, okay. But that sounds very complicated. Are you sure it wouldn’t be easier if I just . . .”

“The board forbids it!!!” screams Head One at that point, in a way that actually justifies the use of at least three exclamation marks.

“It looks so cozy in here. Do you live by yourself?” Head Three wonders with her nose halfway into Lucas’s hallway like a telescope with freckles.

“Let’s go, Linda!” Heads One and Two hiss.

“Sorry,” says Head Three.

Then the entire board animal marches off and rings the doorbell of the next poor neighbor.

At that point Lucas shrugs his shoulders, forgets all about it, goes back into his apartment, and continues playing his new video game. When he falls asleep that night, he is still happy.

That’s not going to last.

Chapter 4

The first time Lucas sees the woman in the green shirt is when she steals his food, but he doesn't know that yet. He opens his apartment door to pick up his pad thai from the floor in the stairwell, and just then he sees a green shirt lift something outside another door and close it again quickly. Lucas doesn't give it a lot of thought, because Lucas is giving most of his thoughts to his pad thai. He ordered it through an app on his phone, it's been cooked and transported and delivered to his doorstep without him having to talk to a single person, and that's really the peak of how a civilization should work, if you ask Lucas. He's ordered this pad thai a hundred times before, so he's already left a tip and five stars in his app before even opening the box. At which point he gets a terrible shock.

Or maybe *terrible* is overstating it a little. It's not like there's a dead fish or a human finger in the box, *that* would really be terrible. *Shock* isn't really the right word, either, if we're being honest. Maybe more like a *mild surprise*. Lucas is mildly surprised, okay? Because his pad thai has no peanuts. Lucas is certainly not a dramatic person, but the peanuts really are a quite central ingredient in a pad thai, the rest of the dish is pretty much just a means of transportation for peanuts into Lucas's mouth. Pad thai without peanuts is like buying a balloon and just getting the air.

Just as Lucas is going through this trauma, or maybe not *trauma* but at least this *inconvenience*, his doorbell rings. It's the second time in two days, and *that's* actually something of a trauma. What's wrong with people? If one wants to contact other people, surely the civilized thing to do is to send an email? Or even better: not contact them at all? When Lucas reluctantly opens the door, an excited but very out of breath woman in a purple dress is standing outside it.

"Hello! Did you change your password?" She gasps for air.

"Excuse me?" Lucas says.

"Hold on . . . I'm so out of breath . . . I live in the apartment below you. I walked up that whole flight of stairs . . ."

“It’s *one* flight of stairs,” Lucas points out, and the woman nods in disgust.

“An . . . entire . . . flight . . . of . . . stairs! I . . . hate . . . stairs. Have you . . . changed your password . . . or not?”

“For what?”

“Your Wi-Fi.”

Lucas looks just as confused by this as you might expect.

“Yes. I actually have.”

“Why?”

“My internet was really slow. I thought maybe it was because someone else was using it.”

“Yes! Me!” pants the woman, whose face has now turned as purple as her dress.

“So . . . I was right?” Lucas says.

“Yes, but now you know it’s me! So now you can change it back again!” she replies.

“But wait, how did you have my last password?” he asks, to which the purple woman rolls her eyes.

“*1991sacuL*? Your year of birth plus your name backwards? Yes, hooow could I possibly figure that one out? Unbreakable!”

“How do you know what year I was born . . . ,” Lucas begins, more than a little offended, but the woman just impatiently waves her palm at him as if he’s the motion sensor in a public restroom.

“You can find anything on the internet, Lucas! Now, you’ll have to excuse me, I’m a little busy. Can you just give me your new password?”

Lucas clears his throat, since he’s really very reluctant to start a conflict with his neighbors, as conflict inevitably leads to interaction. He therefore proceeds with extreme caution.

“But why . . . are you using my Wi-Fi?”

“Well, I’m really not,” the purple woman protests.

“But . . . you are,” Lucas feels compelled to insist.

The woman sighs like someone might sigh to a child who has just dropped their ice cream on a dog.

“No. I only use what leaks out. You use all the Wi-Fi in your apartment, but there’s also a lot of Wi-Fi leaking out into my apartment, and I use that.”

“But that’s . . . theft,” says Lucas.

The woman gasps.

“That’s the most absurd thing I’ve ever heard. That’s like saying it’s theft if I take a little bit of cheese out of a bag of groceries that’s outside of your door. How is it theft if we’ve never even met?”

Lucas scratches his hair.

“Hold on . . . Have you been taking cheese out of my grocery bags?”

“It was just an example! Don’t worry about it!” the purple woman says quickly.

“I’ve actually had some cheese missing sometimes . . . ,” Lucas recalls, but at that point the purple woman gives him a stern look and says:

“You know what? You’re a busy man, I’m a busy woman. Either we stand here arguing about this all day, or you just give me the password and I disappear from your life.”

It is an offer that cannot be refused, Lucas must admit. The woman in the purple dress has clearly understood the value of her own absence, it’s an unbeatable negotiating tactic. So Lucas gives up and confesses:

“The password is *PadThaiPadThai*.”

The purple woman taps her temple as if she and he are now part of a secret conspiracy.

“Ah! Clever! Because someone might figure it out once, but no one figures it out twice!”

“Okay, thanks for coming,” says Lucas, as you do if you’re in the absolutely nicest way possible trying to say: Go away.

But the woman doesn’t disappear. Instead, she asks:

“Did you hear about the frying pan?”

“Yes.” Lucas sighs.

“Crazy, huh? To just put it on the ground like that? Why not sell it on Facebook?”

Lucas doesn’t answer because he is busy imagining the nightmare of strangers ringing your doorbell, wanting to buy your frying pan. Lucas would rather set his entire apartment on fire.

“Do you live alone?” the woman asks with a sudden interest.

“Yes,” says Lucas and slowly, slowly tries to close the door.

“Do you know that involuntary loneliness is as dangerous to your health as cancer? There is research!” the woman says, leaning into the doorway.

“It’s highly voluntary. I have a new video game, so if you’ll excuse me . . . ,” Lucas begs her.

“I don’t live alone, I have a cat. People with cats live longer. There’s research!” the woman informs him.

“Okay,” says Lucas in the way you say that if you really mean: But would one really want to live longer if one has to have a cat?

The woman nods in a way that looks encouraging but feels condescending, like she’s watching a Tyrannosaurus rex trying to learn to play the piano.

“The first sign of depression is often denial. I’m in a Facebook group where you can talk about it. Do you want the name of it? Unfortunately, a lot of people feel ashamed to talk about their feelings, but . . . ,” she explains.

“Who?” Lucas mutters and immediately regrets it.

“What do you mean, ‘who’? Who who?” the woman asks.

“It was . . . nothing,” Lucas tries.

“No! Tell me what you said!” the woman demands, whereupon Lucas takes a deep breath and mumbles:

“I just wonder who is ashamed to talk about their feelings. I’ve been on the internet, and it seems to be the *only* thing people talk about there . . .”

The woman seems to have a lot of feelings about this, mildly put.

“It’s actually a stigma!”

“Okay.” Lucas sighs, and then says in the most pleasant of pleasant tones:

“So, anyway, now you have my password. Thanks for coming.”

“You don’t have to get snippy with me just because you’re unhappy!” the woman replies.

It should be noted that Lucas is certainly not proud of himself when he hears himself shouting back:

“I AM VERY HAPPY!”

Or at least he was, until very recently.

Finally, the woman in the purple dress turns to leave, and for a blissful second Lucas thinks he is going to get his life back. But just then the door to the apartment next to his opens. The woman in the green shirt peeks out.

“Are you Lucas?” the green shirt asks, disgruntled.

“Yes, that’s him. Do you need the password for his Wi-Fi?” the purple dress asks helpfully.

The green shirt looks very uncomfortable.

“No, no, but I think you’ve accidentally stolen my food.”

"I certainly have not!" says Lucas.

He, a man who never gets annoyed, has now suddenly been annoyed twice in as many minutes. This is what you get for meeting people.

"Pad thai without peanuts?" the green shirt asks.

Lucas clears his throat in embarrassment.

"All right. Fine. I do happen to have that here. But I didn't *steal* it!"

"Sure. Sure. You just happen to have it," says the green shirt, as though that's most definitely theft.

Purple Dress interjects helpfully:

"It's not theft if it happens outside your apartment. It's a bit like Wi-Fi. And cheese."

Lucas sighs rather deeply at both of them and goes inside to get what is not his pad thai. It is actually not, if you would ask him, even pad thai at all.

"Who orders it without peanuts?" he mutters.

"I don't like peanuts," says the green shirt sourly.

"Peanuts are the whole thing!" Lucas replies even more sourly.

"Yes, and that's exactly the thing I don't like," the green shirt points out.

They exchange pad thai. Or whatever one of them is.

"Thank you," the green shirt says quickly and tries to disappear back into her apartment, but this she can of course forget about. Because the woman in purple has been readying herself for the cruelest form of interpersonal terrorism: small talk.

"Did you hear about the frying pan? The board still hasn't found the culprit." She nods, clearly expecting an answer.

"No," says the green shirt, which of course is the wrong answer, because now the purple woman starts to *explain*. From time to time during the story she looks sternly at Lucas so as to make him nod to confirm that what she's saying is indeed the case. At one point he even hears himself say "mmm," and that makes him immediately want to go and wash his mouth with soap and water. The green shirt, meanwhile, tries to get away as soon as the story seems to be ending.

"Okay, sorry about the frying pan, but now I really have to . . ."

"Wait! Have you just moved in?" the purple woman asks curiously.

The green shirt suddenly looks a bit uneasy.

"No, no, I'm . . . only staying here temporarily. I'm borrowing the apartment from an . . . acquaintance."

“Oh! The tall woman with glasses who used to live here?” the purple woman asks.

“Yes.” The green shirt sighs.

“She’s a doctor, right?”

“Yes.”

“Is she your doctor?” the purple woman interrogates.

“I don’t really feel comfortable answering that . . . ,” Green Shirt mumbles.

“Oh, you don’t? Well, we can either stand here and argue about it all day, or you can just tell me the whole story right away and I’ll disappear from your life!” the purple one informs her, ice cold, as if she were holding a gun loaded with annoyance.

This makes the green shirt groan and whisper:

“Okay, but please don’t tell the board that I’m staying here, in that case. It’s against building rules. But I . . . well, officially, I suppose I’m in what is medically called a . . . coma.”

“Excuse me?” Lucas exclaims with his mouth full of peanuts.

The green shirt looks a little defeated.

“I was in an accident. I was hit by a car while cycling to my children’s school,” she explains.

“Oh no! Did you have the kids with you?” the purple dress yells anxiously.

“No, no, the kids were already in school. But they called me because my daughter had forgotten her backpack and my son had gotten the wrong color apple in his lunch bag for the field trip. And my husband had taken my car to work, because his car was in the repair shop and he has a very important job, so I had to ride my bike. And then I got hit by a car.”

“And went into a coma?” the purple one asks.

The green one shakes her head.

“No, no, not really. I was only unconscious a little while. But when I woke up in the hospital, the doctor and the nurses had . . . well, met my family. And apparently my daughter had asked if the doctor knew where her backpack was before she even asked how I was doing. And my son had been rather impatient asking when I was coming home, because he had no clean underwear, because my husband doesn’t know how to work the washing machine. Or the dishwasher. Or the vacuum cleaner, even though that was my husband’s Christmas gift to me . . .”

Even Lucas is looking at her with some compassion now.

“Your family doesn’t seem very helpful.”

The purple dress nods angrily.

“They seem to take you for granted!”

The green shirt blushes.

“Yes . . . well, that’s what the doctor said too. So she offered for me to be in a coma for a few days. Or, you know, not that I’d be *in* a coma, but pretend to be. So every time my husband calls the hospital now, the doctor says, ‘Oh no, sorry, she hasn’t woken up yet.’ But actually she’s lent me this apartment. Apparently this doctor does this sometimes when she feels that mothers need . . . a break.”

“Wow,” the purple dress says, “like a coma vacation? What do you do with all your time?”

The green shirt beams.

“I watch TV shows! I haven’t had time to watch TV for years, but the last few days I’ve been watching so much TV that I’ve even had time to watch *bad* shows . . .”

“You’ve also had time to have pad thai without peanuts,” Lucas interjects, in a tone that indicates he would maybe encourage her to broaden her horizons a bit.

“Yes!” The green shirt nods without taking the hint at all.

“We won’t say anything to the board about you staying here!” promises Purple Dress, looking sternly at Lucas.

“Mmm,” says Lucas.

So the three neighbors part ways. The purple dress goes home to her Wi-Fi, the green shirt goes home to her TV shows, and Lucas goes back to his peanuts and his video game. He almost has time to go back to being happy before his doorbell rings again. Outside stands the board. All three heads shout at once:

“Now there are TWO frying pans on the ground out there!”

So: It’s a frying pan that’s ruining Lucas’s life. We’re getting to that now.

Chapter 5

Okay, yes, it's actually two frying pans. And a rug, actually. And pretty soon there's a broken TV, four electric candlesticks, one ice skate, and something that looks like a black fur hat. That's how the pile becomes a pile.

Because this is how things have turned out: While the board has been chasing the frying pan culprit, other people have seen an opportunity to get rid of some junk. Because a funny thing about rule-loving people is that to them it seems more important to impose punishment than it is to actually solve problems, and a funny thing about rule-breaking people is that they seem to find breaking rules a lot easier to do if someone else has broken them first. Very few people are really the "throw a frying pan on the sidewalk like it's nothing" kind of people. But if there is a frying pan there *already*, and you happen to have a frying pan of your own that you would like to get rid of? Is that even really a crime, then? It really doesn't feel that way, does it? Someone's going to have to haul the first frying pan away anyway, aren't they, so what difference does another frying pan make? Like almost none, right? And then a person with a rug comes along, thinking, Well, if somebody has to take those two frying pans to the landfill anyway, surely it won't make much difference if this teeny-weeny rug is there too? And that's how the pile becomes a pile. And then other people walk by, thinking to themselves, How horrible! A pile of garbage right here on our nice sidewalk! What kind of criminal would do something so disgusting? Fine, upstanding, selfless citizens like ourselves would certainly never initiate a pile of junk like that! But . . . you know . . . what if the pile's like . . . already there? Then maybe our small piece of garbage won't make such a big difference after all?

The board is very, very upset. They look the way small children do when they first learn that fried chicken comes from actual chickens.

"Someone snuck in last night and put all this junk in the pile! Ice Skates! Candlesticks!" Head Number One stammers, as if these are clear signs that

they are dealing with a soulless monster.

“Snuck! Like a ninja! There was only one ice skate, so it could be a one-legged ninja!” declares Head Two.

“Those candlesticks were actually really lovely. Candles are the best chance of starting a fire in your home, did you know that?” chirps Head Three.

Lucas scratches his chin a little awkwardly.

“You mean . . . *risk* of fire? Not *chance*?”

Head Three nods briskly.

“Yes, yes, of course, of course. But a fire can be quite lovely, too, I think!”

“Not now, Linda,” whispers Head Two.

“Sorry,” mumbles Head Three.

Head One shushes both of them, then gestures with a whole hand at Lucas.

“What do you think we should do?”

It takes a long time before Lucas, with horror, realizes that the question is being addressed to him.

“You’re asking . . . me?”

The entire board animal nods.

“We’ve taken a vote and decided that you should be the president of the Pile Committee. Because you seem to have good ideas,” says Head One.

“Good ideas?” Lucas repeats.

“You came up with the idea that anyone who has a new frying pan should be a suspect!” says Head Two.

“I didn’t actually,” Lucas attempts to clarify but is interrupted by Head One.

“So now you’re the president of the Pile Committee! Congratulations! You can’t change the name of the committee because it took a whole extra meeting just to decide on it!”

“I wanted to call it the Pyramid, because it sounds really pretty, plus I think it’s really exciting to think that pyramids were actually burial sites,” chirps Head Three.

“Not now, Linda!” hiss Heads One and Two.

“I absolutely do not want to . . .” Lucas starts but doesn’t get any further before Head One declares:

“It’s already decided! If you didn’t want to be elected president, you should have come to the meeting. Those are the rules!”

“That’s the most illogical thing I’ve ever . . .,” Lucas stutters.

“What are your orders?” Head One interrupts, like it’s an order.

Lucas stares at them in despair.

“About the pile? Well, how would I know? But maybe I can just go down and . . . take everything to the dump? Will that solve the problem?”

“NO! That’ll teach people that you can throw anything out on the street without consequences! This is about standing up for principles!” shouts Head One.

“So . . . it’s better to have a big pile of junk on the street than to sacrifice our principles?” Lucas wonders.

“Of course! And that’s why we put the barrier tape around the pile! Like with crime scenes in movies!” Head Two says in a way that doesn’t make it entirely clear whether the tape is there mainly to prevent anyone from adding to or removing things from the pile.

“And set up surveillance cameras!” adds Head One.

“Tonight, we’ll identify the culprit and catch them!” Head Two nods.

“And kill them and bury them in the pyramid!” chirps Head Three happily.

Heads One and Two, and Lucas, look at Head Three, somewhat shocked.

“Sorry, it was just a suggestion,” Head Three whispers, a little embarrassed.

“Not now, Linda,” Head One says, before turning impatiently to Lucas and declaring: “Now the pile is your responsibility!”

“Thank you for your commitment!” says Head Two, patting Lucas on the shoulder.

Lucas shudders, because “responsibility” and “commitment” are actually two of the easiest ways of ruining any perfectly good day.

But now it’s too late. Now the unhappy people have already caught him in their trap.

Chapter 6

During the following night the pile grows even more. Nobody knows how it happens, because of course nobody who's asked about it is the kind of person who would throw their garbage on a pile, that's the kind of thing only other people do. On Facebook all the building tenants express their outrage, but no one makes any suggestions about how the pile might be removed, because everyone is too busy arguing about whose fault it is in the first place. By coincidence, those people who complain the second most seem to be the ones who've just recently bought new frying pans. But, of course, the people who complain the *most* are people who don't even live in the area, but would still love to guess what kind of people are throwing away frying pans, which somehow always seem to be people who don't look like the people who are doing the guessing.

Several neighbors call the police, but the police claim to have more important things to do, so the neighbors then call the most powerful legal authority in the country, a small man who works at City Hall.

The small man from City Hall is carrying documents and rings Lucas's doorbell early one morning. When Lucas doesn't answer within four seconds, the small man rings the bell again, as though he thinks Lucas's apartment is the size of a closet.

"I have been informed that you are responsible for the pile!" the small man says impatiently when Lucas finally opens his door.

"I'm really, really not." Lucas yawns, dressed in his pajamas.

This is information that the small man completely ignores. Instead, he exclaims in an authoritative voice:

"I am here to inform you that there is nothing City Hall can do about it. Unfortunately, the pile is too big to be classified as a pile."

"What does that mean?" asks Lucas sleepily.

The small man throws out his arms, as if this should be completely obvious.

“We have received complaints from neighbors in the area about a small pile of junk. But after my inspection it is clear that this is, in fact, a *large* pile of junk. In fact, it is so big that it is actually not plausible that it even is a pile of junk.”

“I’m not following,” Lucas admits.

“It cannot be a pile of junk,” the small man states.

“But . . . you do see the pile?” Lucas tries.

“Yes. But it is not plausible,” the man informs him.

“But it’s . . . there,” says Lucas.

“Plausibly: no,” the man corrects.

“But you can see it!” Lucas insists.

An impressively large sigh comes from such a small man when he answers:

“That is not how the city’s classification system works. We only take into consideration what is plausible. *If* there were to be a pile of junk as big as this one is, there would be no laws deciding what the city should do. Because there are no laws covering things that aren’t plausible.”

Lucas is starting to get a headache.

“But the pile is right there,” he reiterates, but at this point even he is beginning to feel doubtful.

The small man then proceeds to imitate Lucas in a really somewhat mocking manner, if you ask Lucas.

“The pile is right theeeeeeeere!” the small man whines.

“It’s kind of immature to mimic people,” Lucas mutters.

The small man steps forward and reaches up and puts his index finger on the tip of Lucas’s nose, growling:

“You know what is immature? Telling city officials how to do our jobs! I am sure it is very convenient for you citizens that you get to assess what is reality according to what you can see with your own eyes! But we city officials actually have a responsibility to stick to what is p-l-a-u-s-i-b-l-e.”

Lucas backs up a little so the tip of his nose is out of finger range. Then he asks as politely as he possibly can bring himself to:

“Then how would you classify the pile? If it’s not a pile?”

The man throws his arms out again.

“According to the city’s assessment, it is more plausible that it is a hill.”

“A hill?”

“It is not plausible that it is a mountain, because it is simply not plausible that there would be a mountain here in the city that the city is not aware of. And if it is not a mountain, and also not a pile, then it has to be a hill. And hills are not the responsibility of my department.”

“Then whose is it?” Lucas asks.

“Plausibly it would fall under the jurisdiction of the Agricultural Agency,” the small man says with great certainty.

He then picks up a pad, tears off the top sheet of paper, and hands it to Lucas.

“Here is the ticket for your fines.”

“Fines? For what?” Lucas exclaims.

The small man rolls his eyes.

“When I inspected the hill, I looked for junk with a name on it, because my department is not permitted to classify anything as junk if we don’t know who the junk belongs to. Junk without an owner could very well be *things*, which is a completely different matter. And the only items I found with names on them were two surveillance cameras. It says they belong to the president of the Pile Committee, and then it gives your address.”

Lucas starts to sweat.

“Yes . . . yes, the board of our building set up cameras to monitor the pile! So someone who wanted to throw garbage in the pile must have taken them down, so they wouldn’t be caught on tape, and . . .”

“That seems plausible,” the man agrees.

“Well then?” Lucas nods with relief, trying to hand the ticket back.

The man shakes his head with bureaucratic determination.

“Rules are rules. It is illegal to dispose of cameras on a hill.”

“BUT IT’S NOT A HILL!” Lucas says, possibly in all capital letters.

“It is illegal to shout at a city official,” the man informs him.

So Lucas gets another ticket. Then the small man walks away, and the plausible hill stays put.

Chapter 7

Over the next few nights the pile keeps growing. Despite crime scene tape, surveillance cameras, and several angry notes from the board saying that this will under no circumstances be tolerated. Early one morning the board stands outside Lucas's door again, this time announcing that the whole building is really very disappointed in Lucas's performance as president of the Pile Committee. The board demands that Lucas come to a meeting and explain himself to all the neighbors. This, of course, Lucas doesn't do. Because Lucas is not completely insane. Instead, he opens a nice bottle of wine and eats some pad thai with extra peanuts and continues playing his video game. Like a normal, happy person.

At night, the pile keeps growing even more. The next morning it's so big that the top of it is almost level with Lucas's balcony. At lunchtime the doorbell rings, and there stands the board, angry as a Santa Claus who has just been told by a child that he doesn't exist. The board informs Lucas that since he didn't come to the meeting last night, several neighbors have demanded that he be removed as president of the Pile Committee.

"That sounds fantastic! Thank you!" Lucas says.

But then Head One of the board animal snarls:

"No! You can't remove someone who isn't at the meeting!"

"That wouldn't be in good democratic order! The accused must be there to defend himself!" Head Two nods.

"But many of the neighbors were very angry. One said that you should die," Head Three chirps.

"Not now, Linda, please," Heads One and Two whisper in unison.

And so Lucas is informed that he's still very much the president of the Pile Committee, and then the board of directors serves him with a new fine from the city.

"It's because we put up angry notes saying that littering is forbidden. Unfortunately, those notes blew down. And now the city says that they count that as littering on a public hill," the board explains.

“But that’s not my fault!” Lucas protests.

“Unfortunately, it does fall under your responsibility as president of the Pile Committee,” says Head One.

“Thank you for your commitment.” Head Two nods.

“What is it that smells so good? Is that pad thai?” Head Three asks.

“Mmm,” Lucas says, disgruntled.

“With peanuts?” Head Three asks.

“There are no peanuts in pad thai, Linda,” Head One says condescendingly.

“Then it’s not an authentic pad thai,” Head Two chimes in.

Lucas clenches his jaw so hard that his teeth grind.

“It’s precisely the peanuts that MAKE it a pad th . . . ,” he begins but gets cut off by Head Three.

“I usually keep my peanuts next to a jar of peanut butter, so they understand what I’m capable of!”

“Well, look at the time. We need to go,” states Head One, as if it is Lucas who has been ringing their doorbell and not the other way around.

And so the board animal disappears. Lucas closes the door. He *almost* has time to go back to being happy before the doorbell rings again.

Chapter 8

He-he-hello! Ugh . . . I hate stairs . . .” The woman in the purple dress is panting.

Lucas is standing in his doorway looking slightly confused, because he sees that there are two men standing behind her, and when the men see Lucas, they immediately fall to their knees and start crying.

“Now who are these people?” Lucas sighs the way you do when you’re just starting to realize that you’ll probably never, ever get to finish your video game.

The woman in the purple dress smiles awkwardly, leans forward, and explains in a low voice:

“Well, you know . . . this is a little embarrassing, but I’m in this Facebook group about good neighbors. You know how social media can be so negative, but this is a group where people give examples of all the good things in the world. It’s called Are There Angels? It’s intended to be humorous. It’s a very joyous group, really. So anyway, I posted there about how you’d given me the password to your Wi-Fi. And then I wrote that you were a real angel.”

Lucas tilts his head.

“So you admit it’s my Wi-Fi?”

The woman frowns.

“Let’s not get hung up on that now. You’ve got bigger problems.”

She gestures at the two men. They look like they are worshipping Lucas.

“What’s . . . happening now?” whispers Lucas.

The woman adjusts the purple dress slightly around her stomach.

“Yes, well, I’m just getting to that. So, I’m also in a couple of other Facebook groups like Are There Angels? And unfortunately I accidentally posted the message about you to the wrong group. I posted it in a group called There ARE Angels!, which these two men are members of. It’s, well, how can I put this? It’s not quite as joyous a group as Are There Angels? The members of There ARE Angels! believe that angels are very real. So

now . . . well . . . to make a long story short: they believe that you're an angel."

Lucas looks at the weeping men, looks back at the woman.

"But I'm not," he says firmly.

The woman nods apologetically, whispering:

"Of course not. But you see, the problem is that the more you try to explain that, the more these men here will interpret it as proof that you are. It's very typical of angels to be humble."

Lucas leans forward, placing his palms on his knees, looking as if he might vomit.

"Please. I just want one free day. I've got this new video game, I . . .," he begs.

The woman peeks into his apartment and spots his TV.

"Oh? I've played that. What level are you on?"

"Thirty-two," Lucas mutters hopelessly.

"Wow! Wicked! Is it because of your angelic superpowers, do you think?" The woman whistles, impressed.

"I don't have . . ." Lucas sighs, but the woman has already turned to the weeping men.

"He doesn't like it when I refer to his superpowers as superpowers. Angels are supersensitive about that, you see."

At this point Lucas is starting to feel that enough really has to be enough.

"Thank you for coming!" he says.

The woman whispers back:

"What you really mean is 'go away,' right?"

"Yes." Lucas nods with absolutely as much politeness as he can muster.

The woman nods seriously and whispers:

"You absolutely cannot say that to members of There ARE Angels! They'll do anything an angel says. If you tell them to go away, there's an actual risk that they'll run out into oncoming traffic and become nonliving."

Lucas looks like he is talking to someone who communicates by picking random words out of a hat.

"You mean that they'll . . . die?"

"Oh, no, you can't say that online anymore, Lucas. It's considered very inappropriate. The term is *nonliving*," the woman corrects.

Lucas puts his palms on his knees again.

“Okay. But then maybe just tell these nice gentlemen to go and do something fun, okay? Have a beer, watch a good movie, eat something nice . . .”

One of the men immediately clears his throat and calls out:

“Eat what, angel?”

“Pad thai?” Lucas suggests exhaustedly.

The other man asks:

“Does that have peanuts, angel?”

“Yes.” Lucas sighs.

“I’m allergic to peanuts, angel! Can I replace them with cashews?” the man asks.

“Sure. Do whatever you want,” Lucas says with a hopeful nod and tries to close the door.

But then the other man calls out:

“I’m a vegetarian, angel! Can I replace the chicken with Halloumi cheese?”

“Sure, sure.” Lucas nods.

“Is there a gluten-free option?” the first man wants to know, at which point Lucas loses his patience and exclaims:

“I thought people who believed in angels were a bit more fundamentalist than this!”

The woman in the purple dress smiles sympathetically, whispering:

“It’s really hard to find good cult member these days, Lucas. Believe me, I’ve tried.”

One of the men raises his hand and asks:

“Sometimes I’m lactose intolerant. Can I replace the chocolate with something else?”

“There’s no chocolate in pad thai,” says Lucas.

“I see, angel. So what should I have instead?” the man asks.

Lucas groans.

“You can have whatever you want. Isn’t that what the religious scriptures say? That man has free will?”

“We try not to use those kinds of labels,” the second man says in a suddenly stern tone.

“Believing in God is optional in our Facebook group.” The first man nods, slightly annoyed.

“But you believe in angels? Don’t those things go together?” Lucas asks, confused.

“Don’t be so prejudiced, Lucas, they don’t like that on the internet!” the woman in the purple dress warns.

And that’s the way it happens, when two weeping men set up camp outside Lucas’s door, eating gluten-free, lactose-free pad thai with cashews and Halloumi without chocolate.

Chapter 9

The next morning the men who believe in angels are still in the stairwell. That's why Lucas doesn't dare order pad thai from his usual place, so instead he eats a ham and cheese sandwich with mayonnaise. Then his phone rings, and of course Lucas tries to decline the call, because what normal person *answers* their phone? But unfortunately he's got mayonnaise on his fingers, so he accidentally pushes the wrong button.

"Hello?" says the voice on the other end.

"Mmm," Lucas grunts discontentedly.

"Hello! I'm a real estate agent! I represent one of your neighbors who's selling his apartment," the voice bubbles.

"Okay. But I don't want to sell my apartment. Thanks for calling," Lucas says, munching his sandwich.

"No! No! I wonder if you want to *buy* the neighbor's apartment!" says the estate agent.

"Why would I want that? I have my own apartment," Lucas points out.

The real estate agent takes a very deep breath, as though what he's about to say is actually so stupid it needs a little run-up.

"Well, here's what I'm thinking: Because of the pile of garbage on the street outside your building, of course no one wants to buy an apartment there right now. But then I thought, you live there already! So you obviously don't mind living there? So then maybe you want to buy your neighbor's apartment?"

"But . . . then what would I do with my own apartment?" Lucas asks with a mouthful of sandwich, causing some of the sandwich to get on the phone, and when he moves his phone he then gets a little sandwich in his ear. Pad thai would never have treated him this way.

"Well, I'm sure you can sell your own apartment with the help of a good real estate agent. I can recommend a colleague!" the agent promises.

"But . . . you're a real estate agent?" Lucas points out.

"Yes, but not a *good* one," the agent admits.

Lucas promises he'll think about it, because it's the nicest way he can think of to say: I think you should be locked up. When he hangs up the phone, he's got mayonnaise almost everywhere, and as he's trying to wipe himself down along with his phone, his doorbell rings. He tries to pretend he's not home, but unfortunately the board shouts from outside:

"We know you're home! We heard you talking on the phone!"

Lucas opens the door with the defeated manner of a sausage that dressed itself up as a carrot to avoid being eaten by a bear, only to be found by a rabbit.

"Yes?" he sighs.

"We've been informed that you've started a cult," Head One of the board animal says.

"Cults are forbidden in the building," Head Two informs him.

"What kind of cult is it? Is it a murder cult?" Head Three asks curiously.

Lucas closes his eyes and counts to ten, because he's seen unhappy people on TV do that when they're upset, and at this point he's ready to try anything.

"I . . . have . . . not . . . started . . . a . . . cult," he says, clenching his jaw so hard that he discovers he still has quite a bit of mayonnaise at the corner of his mouth.

"What do you call this then?" the entire board animal wonders with an agitated gesture toward the two men, who unfortunately are now no longer two men but more like about ten men and an equal number of women. The whole stairwell is actually full of cult members, all eating pad thai but in entirely different versions. One of them, as a matter of fact, looks like he is eating a spaghetti Bolognese. When the cult members see Lucas, they all start chanting:

"ANGEL! ANGEL!"

"It's forbidden to be an angel in this building," says Board Head Two.

"All right. All right," Lucas groans, giving in to the fact that this seems to be the kind of situation where trying to apply logic and common sense will only make things exponentially worse.

"Also, eating is not permitted in the stairwell," Head One of the board adds, handing Lucas a piece of paper.

"Are these more fines?" Lucas sighs.

"No, this is the guard-duty schedule. You didn't come to the guard-duty-schedule meeting, so you've been assigned a shift between two a.m. and

three a.m. tonight,” Head One informs him.

“Excuse me?” Lucas says.

“We have to guard the pile!” says Board Head Two.

“With violence, if necessary!” Board Head Three chirps, clenching her small fists.

“Not now, Linda, please,” Heads One and Two whisper.

This is when Lucas does something very, very stupid: he tries to be constructive and solve the problem. Any middle manager on the planet could of course have told him that this is a terrible decision, because the truth about problems is that the problem itself is never actually the problem. It’s always the people involved who are the problem. But unfortunately there are no middle managers around. So Lucas points to the men and women who are standing in the stairwell shouting “ANGEL! ANGEL!” and says to them:

“Listen! Do you really think I’m an angel? If so, I hereby order you to go down and guard the pile of junk all night!”

The men and women immediately get up and hurry down the stairs, eager to be the first to obey the angel’s instructions.

Lucas looks at the board with great satisfaction and says:

“There! Problem solved!”

Then he goes back into his apartment and plays video games and drinks wine. He falls asleep very, very happy. He is awakened by the sound of sirens.

Chapter 10

When Lucas steps out onto his balcony, he can't see the building across the way. He can barely even see the sky. All he sees is the pile.

"Good morning! The pile grew again last night!" he hears a voice shout over the sound of the sirens.

It's the woman in the purple dress. She's standing on the balcony below Lucas, peering up between the spaces in the flooring.

"What's that noise?" Lucas shouts back.

"Police cars! Your cult members got into a fight last night!"

"What? What kind of a fight? Who with?"

"With each other! They couldn't agree on exactly what the angel, that is to say you, meant when you said 'guard the pile.' So there was an argument, and they divided into factions that interpreted your words differently. Some thought you meant they should watch so that no new things were added, but others thought you meant that no things should be taken away!" the woman in the purple dress shouts up at him.

"Shouldn't the result of guarding the pile be exactly the same, no matter how I meant it?" Lucas shouts back in frustration.

"Have you ever met human beings?" she asks.

Finally, the sirens stop, and the police cars down in the street take the violent cult members away. That's when Lucas first hears the protesters. They're standing across the street, chanting something.

"Who are those people?" he asks.

The woman lights up.

"Oh! Those are the protesters! Four different groups of them!"

"Four?"

"Yes! That one group there is protesting against the pile. They're anti-pile! But that second group is protesting *for* the pile, because they're of the opinion that piles have rights too. And that third group is protesting against protesters, because they think this whole protesting thing has gone too far."

"And the fourth group?" Lucas asks.

“Oh! They’re protesting against you!”

“I . . . beg your pardon?”

“They are members of the Facebook group Angels Are Fake. They’ve heard about you, and now they want to prove that you’re not an angel.”

Lucas squints over the railing, slightly worriedly.

“What are they yelling?”

“Oh, they’re yelling that you should jump off the balcony. Because if you really are an angel, you’d be able to fly.”

Lucas takes what is possibly the deepest breath he’s ever taken in his life.

“If I don’t get to finish my video game soon, I might actually do that,” he mutters.

“But it’s kind of fun, though, isn’t it? That something is happening!” The woman in the purple dress grins from down on her balcony.

“Excuse me?” Lucas asks.

“It’s great that there’s something *happening*! Nothing’s happened in my life for a very long time!” The woman smiles excitedly.

That’s the most insane thing Lucas has heard in a while, which is really saying something.

“You think it’s fun that a bunch of lunatics are protesting me? And fun that a bunch of other lunatics think I’m an angel and started fighting each other?” he asks.

The woman shrugs.

“They weren’t very good at fighting. I mean, it was a lactose intolerant versus a gluten allergic. I think they hurt each other worse with their farts than with their fists. Also, I think all those lunatics down there were just waiting for something to happen in their lives too.”

Lucas stares at her through the spaces between the floorboards.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

The woman shrugs again.

“You know, I’ve seen a lot of Facebook groups. One is called We Who Are Ninjas. Get it? That’s how badly people want to be something, anything at all, that not even ninjas want to live in secret now. The lunatics are just trying to find a little thing to give their lives meaning, Lucas. Just like the rest of us. They’re just trying to be happy.”

Lucas looks at her somewhat curiously, which is not a common look for him. “Are you a . . . ninja?” he asks.

“If I was, I’d be great at it, and you would never know.” She smiles, although her eyes are sad. Down on the street the protesters are shouting at each other, and at Lucas, but most of all they’re probably shouting just to shout. Just to be heard. Lucas stands quietly for a very, very long time, thinking about how awful it must feel: to be a person who so desperately wants something to happen. Lucas never wants anything to go on at all.

Finally, he says in a soft voice down to the woman in the purple dress:

“I’m . . . no expert. But I think most people who want to be happy try to add things to their lives. But really what maybe they should be doing is taking something away.”

The woman in the purple dress seems to ponder this for quite a while before deciding that Lucas is completely wrong.

“You’re fortunate, Lucas. You view loneliness as taking people away. But for most of us, loneliness is just adding more loneliness.”

Lucas peers down between the floorboards. He sees cat toys, but no cat.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers when it finally occurs to him what must have happened.

The woman in the purple dress looks up at him with tears on her cheeks and whispers back:

“People who have cats live longer. There’s research. I think maybe it’s because you don’t want to live as long after it dies. My cat was very old, at the end he was almost blind, I used to wake up at night because he’d accidentally knock things over on the floor. I miss that all the time now. It’s hard to get used to a silent apartment.”

Lucas doesn’t really know how to respond to that. He doesn’t think much about death. Not much about life either. He has found that the easiest way to be happy is to think about time in about eight-hour increments, and to always have something to look forward to at the end of those hours: pad thai, video games, wine. Small, great things. But then again, Lucas has never loved a cat, so what does he really know about life?

“Good morning,” a voice beside him says suddenly.

It’s the woman in the green shirt, standing on the balcony next to his.

“Good morning!” the purple dress shouts from the balcony below, wiping away her tears.

“Good morning,” says Lucas, horrified to find that he’s smiling slightly. He’s slowly transforming into one of them.

“How’s your video game going?” Green Shirt asks kindly.

“How did you know . . . I play video games?” Lucas asks suspiciously.

She smiles as though doing so isn’t the least bit exhausting to her face muscles at all.

“I hear the music through the wall. My children play that game too. It seems fun.”

Lucas nods, and before he can stop himself, he hears himself saying:

“Yeah, it’s a lot of fun. You should try playing it.”

Who is he? A motivational speaker? He can’t believe his ears. The woman’s smile becomes a little sadder as she whispers back:

“Maybe. Maybe I can ask my kids if I can join in, when I . . .”

She falls silent. Looks embarrassed.

“How’re your TV shows coming along?” Purple Dress interrupts from her balcony.

“Oh, good, thank you. I’ve watched so many now that I almost . . . ,” Green Shirt begins, but then she cuts herself off, blushing.

“So many that you almost what?” hollers Purple Dress.

“Oh, never mind. It’s stupid . . . ,” mumbles Green Shirt.

“No, come on, I’m sure it’s not stupid at all,” Lucas hears himself saying. It’s like he can’t control his mouth anymore, as if he’s becoming social. He shudders like the word is a terrible disease.

Then the green shirt, her voice quivering with longing, admits:

“Well, I was just thinking that I’ve . . . well, I’ve seen so many good TV shows on my own now that I almost miss watching a bad TV show with my family.”

There is silence on the three balconies for quite some time after that. Finally Lucas clears his throat and asks:

“Are you still in a coma?”

Green Shirt nods slowly.

“Yes. But the doctor called from the hospital yesterday. My husband and our children were there. The doctor said they were very sad. The children had drawn pictures, they put them on the door of my room. My daughter wrote that she’d cleaned her room so that it would be nice when I came home. My son wrote that he had learned to wash his own underwear. And I looked at my husband’s Facebook profile this morning. He’s joined a group where members give tips on how to keep your home tidy. My husband had posted pictures in the group of how he had made the beds up all by himself and how he had put all the dishes in the dishwasher. He was very proud.”

“About time!” Purple Dress shouts.

Green Shirt nods, looking somewhat moved but also a little bit annoyed.

“Yes, it was very nice. Only that, unfortunately, he’d done it all wrong.”

“How do you put dishes in a dishwasher . . . wrong?” Lucas asks.

“Isn’t that obvious?” both women ask in unison.

Not remotely obvious at all, actually, Lucas thinks to himself. You just push the dishes in where they fit, right? But he doesn’t have time to say that, thankfully, because Green Shirt continues irritably:

“My husband had put the pillowcases inside out on the pillows too . . .”

“Nooo? Yuck!” shouts Purple Dress in disgust.

“How does that matter?” Lucas wonders out loud. Big mistake.

Green Shirt looks at him as if she is looking at a five-year-old holding a chain saw inside a bouncy castle.

“If it makes any *difference*? The pillowcase is . . . inside out!”

“Sure. But it still accomplishes the exact same thing no matter what, right, the pillowcase?” Lucas mutters uncomprehendingly.

“You should really find a partner to live with,” Green Shirt says firmly.

“These are exactly the kinds of things that make me think I reeeaaally shouldn’t,” Lucas protests, terrified.

“Lucas is happy alone!” hollers Purple Dress from her balcony below.

Then Green Shirt smiles again. This time a little enviously. And so she tells him:

“You know, I tried the pad thai with peanuts, as you suggested. I always thought I didn’t like peanuts, just because my husband and our kids don’t like peanuts, but now I’m actually starting to think that maybe I’ve just forgotten what I actually like and don’t like for myself.”

“So you *liked* pad thai with peanuts? I told you so!” Lucas nods with enormous satisfaction, like a raccoon who’s fallen into a trash can filled with cotton candy.

The woman makes a disgusted face.

“Ugh, no! Peanuts in food? It was horrible!”

But then her face softens and she adds, her voice full of gratitude:

“But it was very nice to find that out for myself. What I don’t like.”

Lucas smiles again, which makes his jaws ache a little from the unnatural movement. And so they just stand there for a long while, three humans together, on separate balconies.

“Do you miss your family?” Purple Dress asks after a while.

“Very much,” admits Green Shirt.

“What is it that you miss most?”

Green Shirt ponders this for a long, long time.

“I miss making up. I don’t miss the fights, I don’t miss nagging and arguing and getting upset about the ways in which we’re so different, but I miss . . . making up. It’s like we’re choosing each other all over again when that happens.”

“I hope they’ll appreciate you more now,” says Purple Dress.

“I think . . . maybe . . . I appreciate myself more now. Ugh, that sounds stupid, doesn’t it?” Green Shirt whispers.

“No, not stupid at all,” Lucas hears himself say.

“Thank you,” whispers Green Shirt.

“Are you going to wake up from your coma?” Purple Dress asks.

“Well, maybe,” Green Shirt says, but it might be mostly because she really can’t stand the idea that all the pillowcases at home are inside out now.

Then she adds, her cheeks reddening:

“You don’t need that much appreciation as a mother. Just a little bit. You don’t need that much validation. Just . . . a little. It’s so silly, but I miss another thing, too, from when the kids were very young. They used to come running and jump into my arms when I came home. *Jump* into my arms. Have you ever experienced that?”

Lucas and the woman in the purple dress shake their heads from their respective balconies. Then the woman in the green shirt says softly:

“It’s . . . unbelievable. You never forget how it feels. Sometimes I think that children should be teenagers first, and become small afterwards, because it’s unbearable for parents to get used to the fact that they don’t jump anymore.”

“My cat used to jump,” whispers the woman in the purple dress.

Then they stand in silence, the three people, a breath away but with whole lives between them.

A gentle breeze comes through the city. It sweeps over the pile and rattles through all the junk that people have left there. But once it wasn’t junk, Lucas thinks, once it was all things. Once someone bought that frying pan or that ice skate, thinking: Maybe *this* is what will make me happy?

For a short moment, Lucas thinks that this strange feeling he is experiencing is a fever. Maybe he's coming down with a cold? But then he realizes it's something much, much worse. It's empathy.

Fortunately, his doorbell rings, and then that feeling passes almost immediately.

Chapter 11

It's the three-headed board animal, again. But the heads don't look angry this time, just exhausted. Like they've been chasing a three-headed squirrel all day.

"We've had a meeting," Head One says reluctantly.

"We've come to the conclusion that you've been right all along," Head Two admits.

"That, of course, doesn't mean we've been *wrong*," Head One clarifies.

"Certainly not! Just that you were a little less wrong than . . . we were." Head Two nods.

Lucas understands nothing of this, even less nothing than he usually does, and during this confusion Head Three has the opportunity to lean in through his doorway and hear the music coming from the TV.

"Oh! I've seen people playing that video game on YouTube! You get to kill monsters in that, right?"

"Not now, Linda, please." Lucas sighs and turns to Heads One and Two: "What do you mean I was right?"

Head One coughs a few times and then confesses:

"Well, we've had an evaluation meeting and decided that maybe we should have let you go down and pick up that very first frying pan. The way you suggested. Then it might not have become a pile. Admittedly, we would then never have found the guilty frying pan thrower-outer, but now it seems we haven't done that anyway, and now there are so many guilty thrower-outers that we don't even know who's the guiltiest anymore: whoever started the pile, or everyone else who left junk on the pile afterwards."

"We're going to have a meeting about that too! A meeting of a philosophical nature!" Head Two nods with great seriousness.

Lucas puts his hands in his pockets waiting for the board animal to say something more, but no more words come. Not even from Head Three. So then Lucas clears his throat and says:

"How would you like all this to resolve itself? If you could choose?"

This is something the board animal looks like it would need a whole separate meeting to figure out. But after considerable deliberation, Head One admits somewhat shamefully:

“It would be best, I suppose, if the pile disappeared against our will, so to speak.”

“Against your will?” Lucas repeats.

“Yes, yes, in a way so that the pile disappeared, but also in a way that we could say at the meeting afterwards that we had nothing to do with. That it was due to . . . the modernization of society. It can’t be stopped, can it, the modernization? So then it wouldn’t be our fault. That way we could appear to have been consistent in our principles,” Head One concludes.

Head Two nods eagerly.

“It would be good if we could appear consistent, yes. Being consistent is the opposite of being wrong.”

“If we’re wrong, we may be deposed at the next meeting. And then the neighbors might kill us,” whispers Head Three.

Lucas scratches his hair thoughtfully, before he says the most absurd thing he has ever heard himself say out loud:

“Come in. Let’s talk about it.”

The board animal is so stunned by this proposal that they can’t even form words. They step carefully into Lucas’s apartment, take off their shoes, and look around. Lucas makes sandwiches and lets the board animal sit on his couch. He even shows them how to play the video game. Head Three immediately shoots a monster in the head. She turns out to be a natural. Who could have guessed?

When the whole board animal has gotten really relaxed and forgets to look over its shoulders, Lucas sneaks out of the apartment, shuts the door, and locks them all inside. Then the board cries out in fear:

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING? WE CAN’T GET OUT NOW!”

Lucas replies calmly through the door:

“No, that’s right, now you can’t get out. So now you can’t stop any modernizations of society at all.”

There is silence for a moment, before the board shouts very, very happily:

“Oh no! Now we’re . . . powerless.”

Chapter 12

Lucas knocks on the apartment door of the woman in the green shirt. They go downstairs together and knock on the door of the woman in the purple dress. From there they connect to Lucas's Wi-Fi and get on Facebook.

Purple Dress is extremely enthusiastic and wants to know what his "plan" is, because she hasn't been part of a gang with a plan since she was young and was part of a gang that was planning a bank robbery, she tells them.

"Wow! How did that go?" Green Shirt asks.

"Oh, it didn't happen. The bus was late, so when we got there the bank was closed." Purple Dress shrugs.

"You took the bus to a bank robbery?" Green Shirt wonders.

Purple Dress looks a little offended.

"Well, if we could afford a *getaway car* we wouldn't have had to rob a *bank*, now would we?"

"Oh." Green Shirt nods as though that makes perfect sense.

Lucas, meanwhile, sits at the computer and looks deeply pensive, before confessing:

"I don't really have a plan. I guess I'm just going to trust human nature."

Then he enters the Facebook group There ARE Angels!, takes a deep breath, and writes: **I, the angel, hereby ask you to stop following me. You should follow yourselves instead.**

He is just about to erase the whole thing because he thinks it sounds so terribly silly, but Purple Dress stops him.

"Oh! That's good! Deep!" She whistles, impressed.

Lucas stares at her with a combination of great pride and huge annoyance.

"You think so? Do people listen to this kind of nonsense?"

Purple Dress nods eagerly.

"Oh yes! This is awesome! Write something about happiness too! People on the internet love happiness!"

Lucas thinks this over for quite a while. Then he writes:

I, the angel, ask you to choose one thing each from the pile. For what is now everyone's trash was once someone's possession. Carry this thing with you through life as a reminder of the pile within yourselves. Do not collect junk in your hearts. You can make yourself happy if you don't let others make you unhappy.

"Wow. You should write one of those self-help books," whispers Green Shirt.

"Yeah, you know, people really need to hear these things," agrees Purple Dress.

"People should really just play more video games." Lucas sighs.

"Oh! Write something about how they should stick together, too, all the people in the There ARE Angels! group. They should keep hanging out after this. Maybe start a little club?" suggests Purple Dress.

"Should they really . . . hang out? Won't that be a . . . cult, then?" Green Shirt interjects cautiously.

Purple Dress immediately changes her mind.

"Oh! Smart thinking! Definitely don't write that!"

So Lucas writes:

Don't look on the internet for someone who is exactly like you. Look for someone who isn't. Love is not to never fight. Love is always making up.

Then the woman in the green shirt sobs over Lucas's shoulder, her tears falling on the keyboard. A little while later the three of them are standing on the balcony again, watching the cult members each picking up an item from the pile and walking away, hesitantly at first, but soon with confident steps.

They will be happy, all of them. The three humans on the balcony will learn this in the years to come, the way you always learn these things: via Facebook. The happiest of all will actually be the cult member who chooses the ice skate as her thing from the pile. She will meet a police officer, he will think she's out of her damn mind, they will drive each other crazy every day for the rest of their lives. Such is love.

"Now what?" the woman in the purple dress asks after a while.

"The pile is still pretty big," Lucas admits, somewhat defeated.

"Maybe love is not enough," the woman in the green shirt says softly.

They stand there in silence for a long, long time before Lucas whispers:
“No, that’s right. Love is not powerful enough.”

And so he rushes back to his computer, opens the Facebook group Angels Are Fake instead, and writes:

I, the angel, hereby announce that I have created the pile of junk outside my home as proof of my angelic superpowers! You will never be able to make the pile disappear, because that would be proof that I am not a real angel!

He turns out to be right, of course. Love isn’t powerful enough. But spite? Spite can change the world. Soon the whole street is full of people who for hours and hours voluntarily carry away junk, just to prove that angels don’t exist. No one dares to tell them that this actually sounds very much like something that angels would do.

And so, piece by piece, the pile disappears. And surely this would have been enough, but the woman in the purple dress also takes the opportunity to locate a third Facebook group, named We Who Are Ninjas!

“I’m writing that this is the ultimate test for a ninja, if they can manage to take something from the pile without getting caught!” she says excitedly.

“Are these people . . . real ninjas?” Green Shirt asks with some hesitation.

Purple Dress shakes her head.

“No, no, of course not. This group is full of ordinary people: janitors and librarians and middle management at IT consultant firms. They’ve just read too many inspirational books that made them think that maybe deep down they’re something . . . special. So, you know, maybe this is a way for them to get to feel, just for one night, that they . . . are?”

That evening Lucas and the two women stand on the balcony and watch the last of the pile disappear. And that night, all over the city, the streets are full of special people. When the sun rises, no junk remains. The only thing left on the ground is a small black fur hat. Lucas and the woman in the green shirt have fallen asleep in separate chairs on the balcony by then, and the board animal is asleep on the couch in Lucas’s apartment, its heads on each other’s shoulders. So no one sees the woman in the purple dress walk carefully down the stairs to throw away the fur hat. This might seem unnecessary, of course, because what difference could a single fur hat on

the ground make in the world? It's not like it could be the beginning of a pile or anything, right?

It's only when the woman in the purple dress is standing down on the sidewalk, panting after walking down all those stairs, that she realizes it's not a black furry hat. It's a black kitten. The woman's apartment is never silent again.

Chapter 13

Lucas is happy. It's not as hard as one might think to become, the hard part is just to keep being it. It's hard because it's so easy to get in your head that if you are to be happy, you have to be happy exactly *all* of the time. And who in the world has the energy for that? Happiness can be exhausting. Honestly, it's most often enough to just not be the opposite.

So, Lucas isn't unhappy. That's the secret.

Or, to be fair, he very nearly *becomes* unhappy, but he manages to escape it at the very last second. When he lets the board animal out of his apartment and they discover that the pile is gone, they immediately exclaim with great satisfaction:

"We've decided to elect you as a new member of the board, Lucas!"

"NO!" Lucas shouts in despair, but the board animal hears nothing because the heads have already started arguing with each other about what the proper order should be of all the meetings they now need to have. They decide that the first meeting must be about the pile, which is no longer a pile, but now just an empty space.

"We should build a monument in the space! In memory of the pile!" suggests Head One.

"Or maybe plant a tree?" suggests Head Two.

"Or perhaps dig a deep pit?" Head Three suggests.

"And do what, Linda? What are we going to do with the pit?" Heads One and Two ask with great concern.

"Oh, you know? Put things in? Maybe people?" suggests Head Three joyfully.

Heads One and Two quickly decide that they're of the opinion that trees are probably the better idea, all things considered. But then Head Three looks so enthusiastic about the possible usage of a tree that they get suspicious, so they decide to call together all the other neighbors in the building for a vote. This is, of course, a grave mistake. If you want to see

normal people turn into power-hungry dictators in five minutes, all you have to do is say the magic words: “We’d love to hear your suggestions!”

If you ask people what they think, they start thinking, and that’s how wars start. One neighbor wants a playground, another wants to ban children, definitely from playgrounds but preferably from the planet too. Some tension arises in the room. One neighbor wants to have a park, but another neighbor says it’ll just be full of drug addicts then. One neighbor suggests a nice lawn, another says, “Yes, and maybe some trees?” but then a third neighbor shouts: “Then it’s a park!” And so everyone discusses for three hours exactly what defines a park. After that one neighbor suggests they build a parking lot, but another would rather put up a wind turbine. The neighbor who wants a parking lot has an electric car, and the neighbor who wants a wind turbine wants to generate electricity, but they still manage to disagree. People are amazing that way. Soon everyone is fighting. Eventually someone threatens to hit someone else “right on that big nose of yours!” Facebook groups are started. Things get out of hand.

Then someone says:

“Lucas can decide! He always has such good ideas!”

“YES! LUCAS CAN DECIDE!” all the neighbors shout in unison.

That’s how close Lucas comes to responsibility and commitment. Such incredibly small margins are what make or break a life. One day you’re a happy, whole person, and the next day you’re forced into the most horrible thing on earth: making decisions.

But as everyone looks around the meeting to figure out where Lucas is sitting, a cautious voice is heard at the back of the room. It’s the woman in the green shirt.

“I’m afraid I have some terrible news,” she says sadly.

“Yes, very bad indeed,” sobs the woman in the purple dress sitting next to her.

“There was a traffic accident yesterday,” Green Shirt whispers.

“Lucas is unfortunately in a coma!” Purple Dress nods.

The two women then propose that the meeting hold a minute of silence for Lucas, and no one has the heart to disagree. By the end of the minute the two women have already snuck out.

The neighbors who remain at the meeting argue for another hour, mostly about how long a minute of silence should be, exactly. Then the meeting ends with absolutely no decisions having been made at all. The board gets

to continue being the board, and everyone goes home without anything having changed whatsoever.

The two women walk home together that evening. Purple Dress invites Green Shirt for a drink. They enjoy it on the balcony, watching the sun go down.

“I’d love to ask if you’d want me to cook dinner, but sadly I don’t have a frying pan.” Purple Dress grins.

“Maybe it’s time to buy a new one now?” Green Shirt smiles.

Then the purple dress nods very, very seriously.

“Maybe two? So I have one in reserve, in case something is . . . happening?”

They part with a warm hug. The next morning the woman in the purple dress changes into another dress. This one is purple, too, but still, she’s ready for a change now. She feeds the cat. Then she starts a new Facebook group, and sends an invite for Lucas to join. His answer is no.

In a hospital in another part of the city, in a storage room down in the basement, a not-unhappy man is sitting in a comfortable chair, playing video games and drinking wine and eating pad thai. But if anyone should ask the doctors and nurses who work at the hospital, they will of course tell you that he’s in a coma and can’t be disturbed. Because the doctors and nurses understand very well that all the modern pills and treatments are surely great, but sometimes what people really need most of all is a prescription for a break.

In the evening there’s a gentle knock on the door of the storage room in the basement, but when the man opens it there’s no one there, just an envelope lying on the floor. Inside he finds a photograph of the woman in the green shirt and her husband and their children. They’re laughing, all four of them. The woman looks so happy. On the back of the photograph it says:

“They jumped.”

Lucas closes the door. He tapes the photograph on the wall in the storage room. That night he finishes his video game.

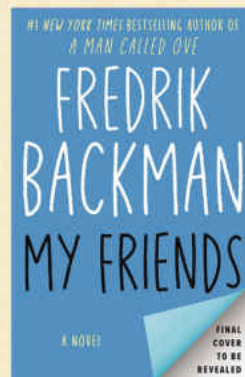
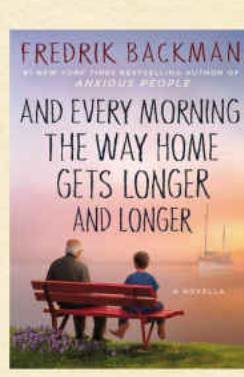
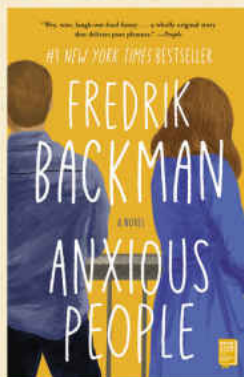
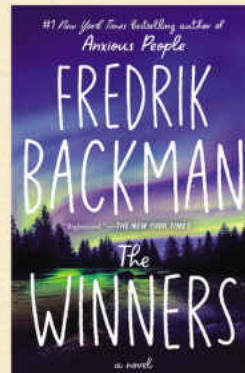
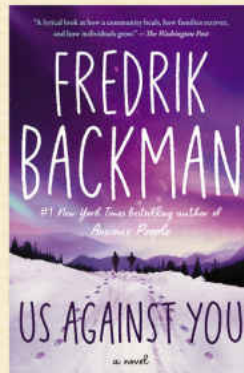
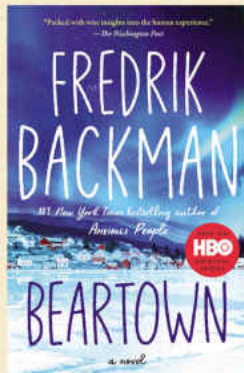
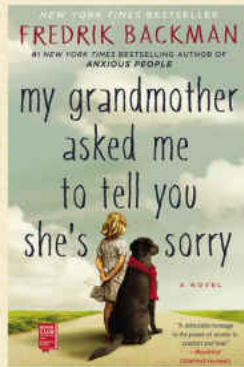
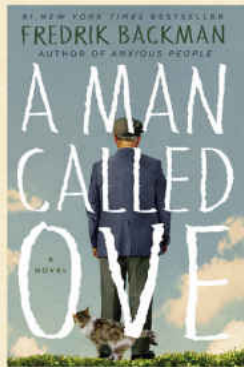
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Fredrik Backman is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *A Man Called Ove*, *My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry*, *Britt-Marie Was Here*, *Beartown*, *Us Against You*, *The Winners*, and *Anxious People*, as well as two novellas and one work of nonfiction. His books are published in more than forty countries. Fredrik lives in Stockholm, Sweden, with his wife and two children. Connect with him on Instagram ([@Backmansk](#)) or find him on Facebook and X ([@Backmanland](#)).

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