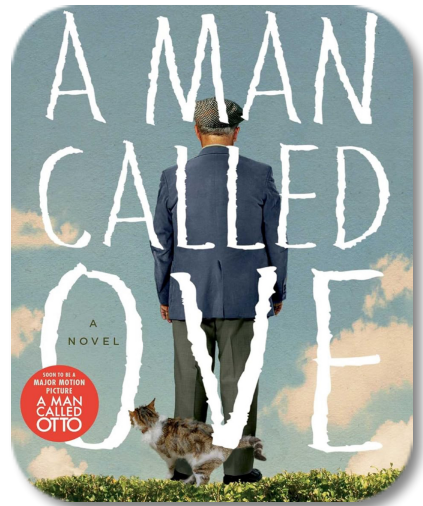


# A Man Called Ove; a novel

He's not even smiling on the inside (a summary by Pat Evert)

## • Introduction

Ove is getting older. He's the kind of man who points at people he dislikes as if they were burglars caught outside his bedroom window. He has staunch principles, strict routines, and a short fuse. People in Ove's neighborhood call him "the bitter neighbor from hell." When an accident-prone young couple with two young daughters moves in next door... Ove is forced to change and learn to understand his neighbors and the modern times into which he has been grudgingly dragged. They must band together to protect each other in **a struggle that** will leave no one, including Ove, unchanged.



## • His Neighborhood Inspection

**A middle-aged man who expects the worthless world outside to disappoint him.** Then he made his morning inspection of the street. On 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**. Ove had never skipped one of his inspections either. Not that anyone had asked Ove to do it, but if men like Ove didn't take the initiative there'd be anarchy.

## • Ove doesn't pay the three-Kronor charge

Ove's wife often quarrels with Ove because **he's always arguing about everything**. But Ove isn't bloody arguing. **He just thinks right is right**. It's been six months since she died. But Ove still inspects the whole house twice a day to feel the radiators and check that she hasn't sneakily turned up the heating.

## • A man called Ove

Ove knew very well that her friends couldn't understand why she married him. He couldn't really blame them. People said he was bitter. Maybe they were right. People also called him antisocial. Ove assumed this meant he wasn't overly keen on people. Her friends couldn't see why she woke up every morning and voluntarily decided to share the whole day with him. He couldn't either. One morning he boarded a train and saw her for the first time. That was the first time he'd laughed since his father's death. And life was never again the same. People said Ove saw the world in black and white. **But she was color. All the color he had.**

• *Ove drills a hole for a hook*

Those bastards are not coming in here, scratching up Ove's floor with their shoes. Whether over Ove's dead body or not. **You miss the strangest things when you lose someone.** Little things. Smiles. The way she turned over in her sleep. Of all the imaginable things he most misses about her, the thing he really wishes he could do again is hold her hand in his. Of all the things he could miss, that's what he misses most.

• *A pair of his father's old footprints*

It's a strange thing, becoming an orphan at sixteen. To lose your family long before you've had time to create your own to replace it. It's a very specific sort of loneliness. And if this hadn't happened, he would never have come off his shift that morning and caught sight of her. She often said that "all roads lead to **something you were always predestined to do.**" And for her, perhaps, it was something. But for Ove it was someone.

• *Ove Bleeds a radiator*

It was more an argument where the little disagreements had ended up so entangled that **every new word was treacherously booby-trapped, and in the end it wasn't possible to open one's mouth at all without setting off at least four unexploded mines from earlier conflicts.**

• *A woman on a train*

And then one morning he saw her. She had brown hair and blue eyes and red shoes and a big yellow clasp in her hair. Then there was **no more peace and quiet for Ove. Ove realized that he wanted to hear her talking about the things she loved for the rest of his life.** She was too good for Ove, that's what they'd thought. And Ove felt very silly about that. Mostly because he entirely agreed with their opinion. And she'd liked the way he listened to her. And made her laugh. She said that had been more than enough for her. As if she were the only girl in the world.

• *A cat annoyance in a snowdrift*

He mumbles to himself about why it has to be so damned difficult to get any peace and quiet on this street. Considering how they are constantly preventing him from dying, these neighbors of his are certainly not shy when it comes to driving a man to the brink of madness and suicide.

• *Countries where they play foreign music in restaurants*

Ove did his best not to like any of it. But Sonja got so worked up about it all that in the end it inevitably affected him too. She laughed so loudly when he held her that he felt it through his whole body. **Not even Ove could avoid liking it.** When Ove protested she just smiled and took his big hands in hers and kissed them, explaining that when a person gives to another person it's not just the receiver who's blessed. It's the giver.

• *A Bus that never got there*

He felt his child kicking, for the first and last time. In a bus accident and pregnant, they lost the child and she remained a paraplegic. The day after Sonja was allowed to leave the hospital, she went back to her teacher training. There was an advertisement in the newspaper for a teaching position in a school with the worst reputation in town, with the sort of class that no qualified teacher with all the parts of her brain correctly screwed together would voluntarily face. It was attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder before attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder had been invented. "There's no hope for these boys and girls," the headmaster soberly explained in the interview. "This is not education, this is storage." Maybe Sonja understood how it felt to be described as such. The vacant position attracted only one applicant, and she got those boys and girls to read Shakespeare. It pained her infinitely to see Ove's shoulders so loaded down with the will to destroy. Destroy that bus driver. The travel agency. The crash barrier of that highway. The wine producer. Everything and everyone. Punch and keep punching until every bastard had been obliterated. That was all he wanted to do. But everywhere, sooner or later, he was stopped by men in white shirts with strict, smug expressions on their faces. And one couldn't fight them. Not only did they have the state on their side, they were the state. The last complaint was rejected. The fighting was over because the white shirts had decided so. And Ove never forgave them that. And she looked up, softly caressed his cheek, and smiled. "It's enough now, my darling Ove." And then it was enough. The next morning Ove got up at dawn, drove the Saab to her school, and with his own bare hands built the disabled ramp the council was refusing to put up. And after that she came home every evening for as long as Ove could remember and told him, with fire in her eyes, about her boys and girls. The ones who arrived in the classroom with police escorts yet when they left could recite four-hundred-year-old poetry. Ove could never make head nor tail of those impossible kids, but he was not beyond liking them for what they did to Sonja. Every human being needs to know what she's fighting for. That was what they said. And **she fought for what was good. For the children she never had. And Ove fought for her.** Because that was the only thing in this world he really knew. He misses her so much that sometimes he can't bear existing in his own body.

• *A society where no one can repair a bicycle anymore*

Many people find it difficult living with someone who likes to be alone. It grates on those who can't handle it themselves. But Sonja didn't whine more than she had to. "I took you as you were," she used to say. **A woman who insisted on seeing more potential in certain men than they saw in themselves.**

• *A man who was Rune*

He knows that the animosity between him and Rune to some extent ruined the possibility of Sonja and Anita becoming the great friends they could have been. But when a conflict has been going on for long enough it can be impossible to sort out, for the simple reason that no one can remember how it first started. And Ove didn't know how it first started. **There would never be a clearer explanation as to why these two**

**men had become enemies for life.** Maybe their sorrow over children that never came should have brought the two men closer. But sorrow is unreliable in that way. When people don't share it there's a good chance that it will drive them apart instead.

• *A Society without him*

One could not fight a diagnosis. Sonja had cancer. "We have to take it as it comes," said Sonja. And that was what they did. **"God took a child from me, darling Ove. But he gave me a thousand others."**

• *Ove backs up a trailer again*

The care taker for Rune has been more like a machine than a person. Just like all the other white shirts Ove has run into in his life. The ones who said Sonja was going to die after the coach accident, the ones who refused to take responsibility afterwards and the ones who refused to hold others responsible. The ones who would not build an access ramp at the school. The ones who did not want to let her work. The ones who went through paragraphs of small print to root out some clause meaning they wouldn't have to pay out any insurance money. The ones who wanted to put her in a home. "I know who you are, Ove. I know everything about all the letters you've written about your wife's accident and your wife's illness. You're something of a legend in our offices, you should know," said the man in the white shirt, his voice quite unwavering. And this was the reason why Ove did not die today. Because he was detained by something that made him sufficiently angry to hold his attention. As if his mask has slipped a little, just a fraction. His heart thumps so hard that it feels like his ears are about to explode. The pressure on his chest, as if an enormous darkness has put its boot over his throat, doesn't begin to release till more than twenty minutes later. And then Ove starts to cry.

• *Ove Isn't running a damned hotel*

**So this should have been the day Ove finally died.** Instead it became the evening before the morning when he woke with not only a cat but also a bent person living in his row house. Sonja would have liked it, most likely.

• *A Boy in the house next door*

"You get so damned worked up when I fight with people, I know that. But the reality of it is this. You'll just have to wait a bit longer for me up there. **I don't have time to die right now.**"

• *Ove And a whiskey*

Sonja used to say that Ove had only admitted he was wrong on one occasion in all the years they had been married, and that was in the early 1980s after he'd agreed with her about something that later turned out to be incorrect. Ove himself maintained that this was a lie, a damned lie. By definition he had only admitted that she was wrong, not that he was. "Loving someone is like moving into a house," Sonja used to say. "At first you fall in love with all the new things, amazed every morning that all this belongs to you, as if fearing that someone would suddenly come rushing in through the door to explain

that a terrible mistake had been made, you weren't actually supposed to live in a wonderful place like this. Then over the years the walls become weathered, the wood splinters here and there, and you start to love that house not so much because of all its perfection, but rather for its imperfections. **It is difficult to admit that one is wrong. Particularly when one has been wrong for a very long time.**

• *A Man called Ove*

Death is a strange thing. People live their whole lives as if it does not exist, and yet it's often one of the great motivations for living. Some of us, in time, become so conscious of it that we live harder, more obstinately, with more fury. Some need its constant presence to even be aware of its antithesis. Others become so preoccupied with it that they go into the waiting room long before it has announced its arrival. We fear it, yet most of us fear more than anything that it may take someone other than ourselves. For **the greatest fear of death is always that it will pass us by. And leave us there alone.** People had always said that Ove was "bitter." But he wasn't bloody bitter. He just didn't go around grinning the whole time. Did that mean one had to be treated like a criminal? Ove hardly thought so. Something inside a man goes to pieces when he has to bury the only person who ever understood him. There is no time to heal that sort of wound. **It wasn't as if Ove also died when Sonja left him. He just stopped living.** Grief is a strange thing. Love is a strange thing. It takes you by surprise. "Ove's heart is too big; I think I'm going to die," says Parvaneh. "It's me who's bloody dying!" Ove objects. "Oh, don't concern yourself about that. **Ove is quite clearly UTTERLY LOUSY at dying!**"

• *AN epilogue*

With tender and gentle words, they explain that they have to take the body away. Then Parvaneh leans forward and whispers, "Give my love to Sonja and thank her for the loan," into his ear. Then she takes the big envelope from the bedside table on which is written, in longhand, "To Parvaneh," and goes back down the stairs. It's full of documents and certificates, original plans of the house, instruction booklets for the video player, the service booklet for the Saab. Bank account numbers and insurance policy documents. The telephone number of a lawyer to whom Ove has "left all his affairs." A whole life assembled and entered into files. The closing of accounts. At the top is a letter for her. She sits down at the kitchen table to read it. It's not long. As if Ove knew she'll only drench it in tears before she gets to the end.

*Adrian gets the Saab. Everything else is for you to take care of. You've got the house keys. The cat eats tuna fish twice per day and doesn't like shitting in other people's houses. Please respect that. There is a lawyer in town who has all the bank papers and so on. There is an account with 11,563,013 kronor and 67 öre, from Sonja's dad. The old man had shares. He was mean as hell. Me and Sonja never knew what to do with it. Your kids should get a million each when they turn eighteen, and Jimmy's girl should get the same. The rest is yours. But please don't let Patrick bloody take care of it. Sonja would have liked you. Don't let the new neighbors drive in the residential area. Ove*

At the bottom of the sheet he's written in capitals "YOU ARE NOT A COMPLETE IDIOT!" And after that, a smiley, as Nasanin has taught him. There are clear instructions in the letters about the funeral, which mustn't under any circumstances "be made a bloody fuss of." Ove doesn't want any ceremony, he only wants to be thrown in the ground next to Sonja and that's all. "No people. No messing about!" he states firmly and clearly to Parvaneh. More than three hundred people come to the funeral. When Patrick, Parvaneh, and the girls come in there are people standing all along the walls and aisles. Everyone holds lit candles with "Sonja's Fund" engraved on them. Because that is what Parvaneh has decided to use most of Ove's money for: a charity fund for orphaned children. Her eyes are swollen with tears; her throat is so dry that she has felt as if she's panting for air for several days now. The sight of the candles eases something in her breathing. And when Patrick sees all the people who have come to say their farewells to Ove, he elbows her gently in her side and grins with satisfaction. "Shit. Ove would have hated this, wouldn't he?" And then she laughs. Because he really would have. In the evening she shows a young, recently married couple around Ove and Sonja's house. The woman is pregnant. Her eyes glitter as she walks through the rooms, the way eyes glitter when a person imagines her child's future memories unfolding there on the floor. Her husband is obviously much less pleased with the place. He's wearing a pair of carpenter's trousers and he mostly goes around kicking the baseboards suspiciously and looking annoyed. Parvaneh obviously knows it doesn't make any difference; she can see in the girl's eyes that the decision has already been made. But when the young man asks in a sullen tone about "that garage place" mentioned in the ad, Parvaneh looks him up and down carefully, nods drily, and asks what car he drives. The young man straightens up for the first time, smiles an almost undetectable smile, and looks her right in the eye with the sort of indomitable pride that only one word can convey. "Saab."