

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author of  
*Anxious People*

FREDRIK  
BACKMAN

*The*

WINNERS

*a novel*



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# THE WINNERS

A Novel

FREDRIK BACKMAN

Translated by Neil Smith

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*To you who talk too much and sing too loud and cry  
too often and love something in life more than you  
should.*

# 1

## *Stories*

Everyone who knew Benjamin Ovich, particularly those of us who knew him well enough to call him Benji, probably knew deep down that he was never the sort of person who would get a happy ending.

Obviously we still hoped. Dear God, how we hoped. Naive dreams are love's last line of defense, so somehow we always convince ourselves that no terrible tragedies will ever afflict those we love, and that our people will succeed in escaping fate. For their sakes we dream of eternal life, we wish for superpowers and try to build time machines. We hope. Dear God, how we hope.

But the truth is that stories about boys like Benji hardly ever end with them as old men. They don't get long stories, and they don't die peacefully in old people's homes with their heads resting on soft pillows.

Boys like Benji die young. They die violently.

## 2

### *Storms*

“Keep it simple.” That’s a common piece of advice in hockey, as it is in life. Never make things more complicated than they need to be, don’t think too much, and ideally not at all. Perhaps that ought to apply to stories like this as well, because it shouldn’t take long to tell, it starts right here and ends in less than two weeks, and how much can happen in two hockey towns during that time? Not much, obviously.

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Only everything.

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The problem with both hockey and life is that simple moments are rare. All the others are a struggle. This story doesn’t start today, it’s been going on for two years, because that was when Maya Andersson moved away from here. She left Beartown and traveled through Hed on her way south. The two forest communities lie so close to each other and so far from everywhere else that it felt like emigrating. One day Maya will sing that the people who grow up this close to wilderness maybe find it easier to access the wilderness within them, that will probably be both an exaggeration and an understatement, almost everything that’s said about us is. But if you take a trip here and get lost and find yourself in the Bearskin pub, and don’t get slapped for being stupid enough to ask how old she is, or asking for a slice of lemon in your drink, maybe Ramona behind the bar will tell you something important: “Here in the forest, people are more dependent on each other than in the big cities. People are stuck together here, whether we like it or not, so stuck together that if one bugger rolls

over too quickly in his sleep, some other bugger loses his shirt on the other side of the district.”

You want to understand this place? Then you need to understand its connections, the way everything and everyone is tied to everything and everyone else by invisible threads of relationships and loyalties and debts: the ice rink and the factory, the hockey team and the politicians, league position and money, sports and employment opportunities, childhood friends and teammates, neighbors and colleagues and families. That’s made people stick together and survive out here, but it’s also made us commit terrible crimes against each other. Ramona won’t tell you everything, no one will do that, but do you want to understand? Truly understand? Then you need to know what led us to this point.

One winter, two and a half years ago, Maya was raped at a party by Kevin Erdahl. The best hockey player anyone had ever seen in these parts up till then. No one uses the word “rape” these days, of course, they speak of “the scandal” or “that thing that happened” or “well, you know...” Everyone is ashamed, no one can forget. The sequence of events that started at that party eventually affected political decisions, and money was moved from one town to another. That in turn led to a spring and summer of terrible betrayals, then to an autumn and winter of violence. It started with a fight in the ice rink and almost ended with war on the streets, the men in black jackets who the police call “hooligans” but who everyone in Beartown knows only as “the Pack” attacked their enemies over in Hed, and the men from Hed responded by setting fire to the Bearskin pub. In their hunt for revenge the Pack lost one young man whom they loved above everything else, Vidar, in a car accident. That was the culmination of everything, the final consequence of years of aggression, after that no one could bear it any longer. Vidar was laid to rest, two men from Hed ended up in prison, and a truce was declared among the hooligans, but also between the towns. The truce has largely held since then, but is feeling more and more fragile with each passing day now.

Kevin and his family moved away from here, they’ll never come back, no one would allow that. The whole of Beartown has done its best to erase all memory of Kevin, and even if no one here would admit it, that was much easier to do after Maya had also packed her bags. She moved all the way to the capital, started studying at the College of Music and almost became a different person, meaning that everyone who was left could talk less and less about “the scandal” until it was almost like it had never happened.



Benji Ovich, who was once best friends with Kevin, also packed his bag. It was much smaller than Maya's—she left to go somewhere whereas he just left. She sought answers in the light and he in the darkness, she in art and he at the bottom of bottles. Neither of them probably really succeeded.

In the place they left behind, Beartown Hockey was on the brink of collapse. In a town that had always dreamed impossible dreams, hardly anyone dared to dream at all anymore. Peter Andersson, Maya's dad, resigned as general manager and gave up hockey altogether. The sponsors fled and the council even discussed shutting down the entire club and letting Hed Hockey take over all the resources and grants. In fact it was only at the very last minute that Beartown was saved by new money and stubborn local businessmen. The factory's new owners saw the club as a way of being accepted by the local community, and an optimistic politician named Richard Theo saw an opportunity to win votes, and between them just enough capital was conjured up in time to prevent the club's demise. At the same time the old committee members were replaced, meetings about the club's "brand" took place, and soon they were able to proudly present an entirely new "values system." Brochures were sent out with the wheedling message: "It isn't just easy to sponsor Beartown Hockey, it's also the right thing to do!" And against all odds things did actually turn around, first on the ice, then outside the rink. Beartown's coach, Elisabeth Zackell, applied for a job with a larger club but didn't get it—the job went to Hed's coach instead, so he left the forest and took several of Hed's best players with him. Suddenly Hed was without a coach, and was soon digging in the same trench of plots and power struggles that all clubs in that situation seem to end up in. In the meantime Zackell put together a new team in Beartown, appointed a young man named Bobo assistant coach, and gathered a ragtag band of players with a sixteen-year-old called Amat at their head. Amat is now eighteen and easily the biggest star in the whole district, such a serious talent that there were rumors last winter that he was going to be drafted to the NHL and turn professional in North America. He dominated every game throughout the whole of last season until he got injured in the spring, and if that hadn't happened the whole town was convinced that Beartown would have won the league and been promoted to a higher division. And if Hed hadn't managed to gain a few miraculous points from their final matches they would have come in at the bottom and been relegated to a lower division.

So everything that seemed so utterly improbable when Maya and Benji left now feels, two years later, like merely a question of time: the green

town is on the way up and the red town is on the way down. Every month Beartown seems to gain new sponsors and Hed has fewer, Beartown's rink has been renovated while the roof of Hed's is close to collapse. The biggest employers in Beartown, the factory and the supermarket, are advertising for staff again. The largest employer in Hed, the hospital, has to make cutbacks every year. Now it's Beartown that has the money, this is where the jobs are, we're the winners.

Do you want to understand? Then you need to understand that this is about more than maps. From above we probably look just like two ordinary forest towns, hardly more than villages in some people's eyes. The only thing that actually separates Beartown and Hed is a winding road through the trees. It doesn't even look that long, but you'll soon learn that it's a serious walk if you turn up and try it when the temperature's below freezing and there's a headwind—and there aren't any other sort of temperatures and winds here. We hate Hed and Hed hates us. If we win every other hockey game throughout the entire season but lose just one game against them, it feels like a failed season. It isn't enough for things to go well for us, things also need to go to hell for them, only then can we be properly happy. Beartown plays in green jerseys with a bear on them, and Hed plays in red with a bull, which sounds simple, but the colors make it impossible to say where hockey problems end and all the other problems start. There isn't a single picket fence in Beartown that's painted red, and not one in Hed that's painted green, regardless of whether the home owner is interested in hockey or not, so no one knows if the hockey clubs took their colors from the fences or vice versa. If the hate gave rise to the clubs, or if the clubs gave rise to the hate. You want to understand hockey towns? Then you need to understand that here, sport is about much more than sport.

But do you want to understand the people? Really understand them? Then you also need to understand that very soon a terrible natural disaster is going to destroy things we love. Because while we may live in a hockey town, first and foremost we are forest folk. We are surrounded by trees and rocks and land that has seen species arise and be wiped out over thousands of years, we may pretend that we're big and strong, but we can't fight the environment. One day the wind starts blowing here, and during the night that follows it feels like it's never going to stop.

Soon Maya will sing songs about us, we who are close to wilderness, inside and out. She will sing that the place where she grew up is defined by tragedies, the ones that hit us, and the ones we were guilty of instigating. She will sing about this autumn, when the forest turns against us with full

force. She will sing that all communities are the sum of their choices and that all that holds us together in the end are our stories. She will sing:

*It started with a storm*

It's the worst storm in a generation in these parts. Maybe we say that about every storm, but this one was beyond compare. It's been said that the snow might be late this year, but that the winds are early, August ends with sultry, ominous heat before autumn kicks the door in at the end of the month and the temperature tumbles in free fall. The natural world around us becomes erratic and aggressive, the dogs and hunters feel it first, but soon everyone else does too. We notice the warnings, yet still the storm arrives with such force that it knocks the breath out of us. It devastates the forest and blocks out the sky, it attacks our homes and our towns like a grown man beating a child. Ancient tree trunks collapse, trees that have stood as immovable as rocks are suddenly no stronger than blades of grass beneath someone's foot, the wind roars so loudly in our ears that the people nearby just see the trees fall without even hearing them crack. In among the houses, roof panels and tiles are torn off and thrown heavily through the air, razor-sharp projectiles hunting out anyone who is simply trying to get home. The forest falls across roads until it is as impossible to get here as it is to leave, the power cuts that follow leave the towns blind at night, and cell phones only work intermittently. Anybody who manages to get hold of anyone they love yells the same thing into their phone: stay indoors, stay indoors!

But one young man from Beartown is driving, panic-stricken, in a small car along narrow roads to reach the hospital in Hed. He doesn't dare really leave home, but he doesn't dare stay either, his pregnant wife is sitting beside him and it's time now, storm or no storm. He prays to God the way atheists in the trenches do, she screams as the tree crashes mercilessly onto the hood and the metal crumples so violently that she's thrown against the windshield. No one hears them.

# 3

## *Firemen*

Do you want to understand the people who live in two hockey towns? Really understand them? Then you need to know the worst that they are capable of.

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The wind isn't whistling across the building on the outskirts of Hed, it's howling. The walls are sucked outward, the floor is vibrating, making the red Hed Hockey jerseys and pennants hanging all around the walls swing. In hindsight, the four children in the house will say that it felt like the universe was trying to kill them. Tess is the oldest, seventeen, followed by fifteen-year-old Tobias, thirteen-year-old Ted, and seven-year-old Ture. They're scared, like all children, but they're awake and prepared, because they aren't altogether like other children. Their mother is a midwife, their dad's a fireman, and sometimes it feels like crises are the only occasions in which this family truly functions. As soon as they realized what was happening the children were out in the yard gathering together the patio furniture and swings and climbing frame so that they wouldn't be thrown through the windows when the wind caught hold of them. Their dad, Johnny, ran off to help in a yard down the street. Their mother, Hannah, called everyone they knew to ask if they wanted anything. That was a lot of calls, because they seem to know everyone, both of them were born and raised in Hed, and seeing as one works at the fire station and the other at the hospital, there isn't really anyone who doesn't know who they are. This is their community, their children learned to ride their bikes in the same cul-de-sac where they themselves learned, and are being brought up according to simple principles: love your family, work hard, be happy when Hed Hockey wins a game, and even happier when Beartown Hockey take a thrashing. Help people who need help, be a good neighbor, and

never forget where you come from. The parents don't teach this last point to their children by saying it, but by doing it. They teach them that you can argue about everything, but when it really matters you stick together, because no one stands a chance if they're alone.

The storm outside the window interrupted a different sort of storm inside, the parents were having another one of their fights, one of the worst. Hannah is a small, slight woman and she's standing by the kitchen window biting her cheeks now, rubbing her bruises. She's married to an idiot. Johnny is tall and broad-shouldered, with a thick beard and heavy fists. As a hockey player he was known for being the first to drop his gloves and start fighting, the mad bull in Hed Hockey's badge could easily have been a caricature of him. He's fiery and stubborn, old-fashioned and prejudiced, one of those stereotypically mouthy high school guys who never really grew up. He played hockey as long as they let him, then he became a fireman, swapped one locker room for another, and carried on competing in everything: who can bench-press the most, run faster through the forest, drink the most beer at the barbeque. She knew from the very first day with him that what made him charming could turn dangerous one day, sore losers can become aggressive, a passionate temperament can turn to violence. "A long fuse but a lot of powder, they're the worst," as her father-in-law used to say. There's a vase in the hall that was once smashed into a hundred pieces, then carefully glued back together again, so that Hannah wouldn't forget.

Johnny comes in from the yard. He glances at her to see if she's still upset. Their fights always end like this, because she's married to an idiot and he never listens, so something always gets broken.

She often thinks about how he tries to persuade everyone how tough he is, but how incredibly sensitive and thin-skinned he can actually be. When Hed Hockey gets beaten it's as if he gets beaten too. Back in the spring, when the local paper said "Beartown Hockey represents the future, while Hed Hockey stands for everything old-fashioned and obsolete," he took it personally, as if they had simultaneously said that his entire life and all his values were wrong. The club is the town, and the town is his family—that's how unshakably loyal he is, and it always brings out the most extreme in him. He always tries to act tough, never show any fear, always the first to run toward disaster.

A few years ago the country suffered terrible forest fires, neither Hed nor Beartown was directly affected, but things were really bad just a couple of hours away. Johnny, Hannah, and the children were on holiday for the first time in ages, they were on their way to a water park down



south when they heard the news on the radio. The argument started before his phone even rang, because Hannah knew the moment it rang that he'd turn the car around. The children huddled in their seats in the back of the van because they'd seen this before: the same argument, the same yelling, the same clenched fists. Married to an idiot.

Each day Johnny was away at the forest fires the images on the television news got worse and worse, and every evening Hannah had to pretend she wasn't at all worried as the children cried themselves to sleep, and every night she went to pieces alone by the kitchen window. Then, at last, he came home, after what might have been one week but which felt like a hundred, emaciated and so filthy that some of it never quite seemed to wash off his skin. She stood in the kitchen and watched as he got out of a car down by the junction and staggered the last bit of the way on his own, looking like he might crumble into a heap of dust at any moment. Hannah ran to the kitchen door but the children had already seen him, they flew downstairs and pushed past her, tripping over each other on the way out. Hannah stayed by the window and watched as they threw themselves into Johnny's arms until all four of them were clinging to his huge frame like monkeys: Tobias and Ted around his neck, Tess on his back and little Ture clinging to one arm. Their dad was filthy, sweaty, and exhausted, but he still picked all four of them up and carried them into the house as if they didn't weigh anything. That night he slept on a mattress in Ture's room, and all the other kids ended up dragging their own mattresses in there too, and it took four nights before Hannah got him back. Before she even felt his arms around her, breathing through his sweater once more. The last morning she was so jealous of her own children and so angry with herself and so tired of holding all her feelings in that she threw that damn vase on the floor.

She glued it back together again, and no one in the family dared speak to her until she was finished. Then her husband sat down beside her on the floor, as usual, and whispered: "Don't be cross with me, I can't bear it when you're cross with me." Her voice felt like it was breaking when she managed to reply: "It wasn't even your fire, darling, it wasn't even HERE!" He leaned forward cautiously, she felt his breath on the palms of her hands as he kissed them, then he said: "Any fire is my fire." How she hated and worshipped the idiot for that. "Your job is to come home. Your only job is to come home," she reminded him, and he smiled: "I'm here, aren't I?" She hit him as hard as she could on his shoulder. She's met so many idiotic men who tell themselves that they're the sort who would be first into a burning building to rescue other people, but her idiot is the sort

of idiot who actually does that. So they have the same argument every time he goes, because every time she gets just as angry with herself for getting so scared. It always ends with her breaking something. It was a vase that time, and today it was her own knuckles. When the storm began and he immediately went to charge his phone so he was ready, she slammed her fist down onto the sink. Now she's rubbing the bruises and swearing. She wants him to go, but she hates it at the same time, and this is how it comes out.

He comes into the kitchen, she feels his beard against the back of her neck. He thinks he's so tough and hard, but really he's more sensitive than anyone, that's why he never yells back at her. The storm beats against the window and they both know that the phone will soon ring and he'll have to leave and then she'll get angry again. "You need to get worried the day she stops being angry with you, because that will mean she doesn't love you anymore," Johnny's dad told him when they got married. "A long fuse but a lot of powder in that woman, so watch out!" his dad had said with a laugh.

Hannah may be married to an idiot, but she's hardly that much better herself, her moods can drive Johnny to the brink of exhaustion, and her chaotic behavior drives him mad. He panics when things aren't in the right place so he knows where everything is, that goes for the fire engine and his wardrobe and the kitchen drawer, and he married someone who doesn't even think you need to have fixed sides in bed. Hannah went and lay down on one side one night, then on the other side the next night, and he didn't even know where to start with his frustration. Who doesn't have fixed sides in *bed*? And she walks into the house with her shoes on, and doesn't rinse the sink after her, and swaps the butter knives and cheese slicers around so that every damn breakfast turns into a treasure hunt. She's worse than the kids.

But now, as she reaches up with her hand and runs her fingers through his beard and his hands clasp together on her stomach, none of that matters. They've gotten used to each other. She's accepted that life with a fireman has a rhythm that other people can never understand. For instance, she's learned to pee in the dark, because the first few times after they moved in together when she turned the light on in the middle of the night, he woke with a start, thinking it was the light at the station alerting them to a call out. He flew out of bed and got dressed and made it all the way out to the car before she caught up with him wearing just her underwear, wondering what the hell he was doing. It took several more confused

nights before she accepted that he wasn't able to stop behaving like that, and realized that deep down she didn't really want him to either.

He's the sort of person who runs toward a fire. No hesitation, no questions, he just runs. People like that are rare, but you know who they are when you see them.

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Ana is eighteen years old. She peers out of the window of her dad's house on the outskirts of Beartown. She's limping slightly because she recently injured her knee at martial arts training after a boy the same age said something about girls not being able to kick properly. She cracked his ribs with a kick, then kned him in the head, and even if his head was empty it was still hard, so now she's limping. She's always had a lightning-fast body but slow judgment, she's bad at reading people but good at reading nature. She can see the trees moving outside the window now, she noticed them this morning and knew that the storm was on its way long before most other people. Children of dads who are good hunters eventually learn to feel that sort of thing, and there's no better hunter around here than her dad. That man has spent so much time in the forest that he often forgets the difference between a hunting radio and a telephone, and says "over" at the end of each sentence when the phone rings at home. So Ana learned to crawl and walk in that forest, it was the only way she could be with him. The forest was her playground and her school, he taught her everything about wild creatures and the invisible forces of the earth and the air. That was his gift of love to her. When she was little he showed her how to track prey, how to shoot, and when she got older he took her along on searches when the council called him after accidents involving game animals, when wounded animals needed to be found and put down. If you live surrounded by forest you learn to protect it, but also how it can protect you. In the end you look forward to the same things as the plants, like spring and warmth, but you also fear the same things: fire, of course, but now, almost even more, the wind. Because the wind can't be stopped or extinguished, tree trunks and skin don't stop it, the wind crushes and snaps and kills whatever it wants.

So Ana could hear the storm in the treetops and sense it in her chest when everything was still calm and quiet out there. She filled all the tubs and buckets with water, fetched the paraffin stove from the cellar and put new batteries in the headlamps, dug out candles and matches. And finally she chopped wood, mechanically and determinedly for several hours, and

hauled it into the main room. Now, as the storm reaches Beartown, she closes the windows and doors, noisily does the dishes in the kitchen, and plays her best friend Maya's songs on the stereo, because her voice calms Ana, and because the sound of Ana doing everyday things calms the dogs. When she was little they used to protect her, but now it's the other way around. If you ask Maya who Ana is, she'll reply: "A fighter." But she doesn't just say that because Ana can beat the shit out of anyone, but because life has tried to beat the shit out of Ana since she was born, only it never stood a chance. Ana is unbreakable.

She's in the last year of high school in Beartown, but she's been an adult for a long time, the daughters of parents who take refuge in the bottom of bottles grow up faster. When Ana was little her dad taught her to watch the fire in the open hearth, to put more wood on at just the right time, to make sure it never burned out completely. When he has one of his episodes, sometimes for days, sometimes for months, he watches over his drinking in the same way. He never gets mean, never even gets loud, he's just never properly sober. He'll sleep through the whole of this storm, snoring in his chair in the living room surrounded by Ana's martial arts trophies that he's so proud of, and all the photographs of her as a child, which she has so carefully cut her mother out of. He's too drunk to hear the phone ring. Ana is washing up, and turns up the volume of the stereo, the dogs are lying at her feet, they don't hear it either. The telephone rings and rings and rings.

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Eventually the doorbell rings instead.

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"It's nothing to worry about, just a bit of wind," Johnny whispers. Hannah tries to believe that. He's not going off to fight a fire this time, he and the other firemen are setting out with chain saws to clear a path through the fallen trees so that the other emergency vehicles and responders can get through. He often complains that being a fireman means being a lumberjack ninety percent of the time, but she knows he still takes pride in that. He belongs to this forest.

She turns around and stretches up on tiptoe and nips him on the cheek with her teeth, and his knees buckle. He's biggest and strongest pretty much everywhere he goes, but no matter what other people might think, he knows that if the children were on the other side of a fire, she'd be quicker

than him. She's complicated and unruly and argumentative and really not very easy to please, but he loves her most of all for her brutally uncompromising protective instinct. "We help those we can," she always whispers in his ear after the very worst days, when he's lost someone at work, or when she has. As a fireman he has to be prepared to see death in every stage of life, but as a midwife she sees it in the very worst moments: the first seconds of life. When she says those words they are both a consolation and a way of reminding them both of their duty. We help if we can, when we can, to the extent that we can. It's a particular sort of job, but also a particular sort of person.

Slowly he lets go of her, he never gets used to the fact that a messy troublemaker like her can still turn him upside down. He goes and checks that his phone is charging and she watches him for a long time, she never gets used to the fact that a nagging pedant like him can still, after twenty years, be the sort of person she wants to rip the clothes off of if he so much as looks at her.

She hears the phone out in the hall. It's time. She closes her eyes and curses to herself, promises herself that she's not going to fight with him. He never promises to come home safely, because that would be bad luck. Instead he always says that he loves her, over and over again, and she replies: "Good thing too." The phone goes on ringing, she thinks he must be in the bathroom seeing as he hasn't answered it, so she yells his name because the windows are already rattling loudly from the wind. The children are lined up on the stairs to give him a good-bye hug. Tess has her arms around her three younger brothers: Tobias, Ted, Ture. Their dad thinks it's ridiculous that they all have names that start with the same letter, but when he and their mother first fell in love, he agreed that she could name the children if he could name the dogs. They never got a dog. She's always been a better negotiator.

Ture is crying into Tess's sweater, none of his siblings tell him to stop. They used to cry too when they were little, because you don't just have one member of the family who's a fireman, it doesn't work like that, the whole family is in the fire service. They don't have the luxury of thinking "it doesn't happen to us," they have to know better. So the parents' agreement is simple: never put themselves in danger at the same time. The children must always have one parent left if the worst were to happen.

Johnny is standing in the hall, raising his voice to speak into the phone, in the end he's shouting, but there's no one there. He thinks he must have pressed the wrong button by mistake so he checks the call log, but no one has called since he rang his mother ten minutes ago. It takes several rings



before he realizes that it isn't his phone ringing, it's hers. Hannah picks it up, slightly confused, stares at the number, hears her boss's voice at the other end of the line. Thirty seconds later she starts running.

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Do you want to understand people? Really understand them? Then you need to know all the best that we are capable of.

## 4

### *Savages*

Benji will be woken up by a bang. He won't know where he is when he sits up, his hangover will mess up all sense of scale and he'll feel too big for the room, as if he's woken up in a doll's house. That's nothing unusual, it's been going on for a long time, every morning these days he seems to open his eyes surprised that he's still alive.

It will be the day after the storm, but he won't know that yet, he won't know if he's forgotten what he was dreaming, or if he's still dreaming. His long hair will hang down in front of his eyes, every limb, every muscle will be aching, his body still has the hard musculature of a life in and around hockey, but he's twenty now and hasn't worn a pair of skates for almost two years. He smokes too much and eats too little. He will try to get out of bed but will stumble onto one knee, the empty bottles of alcohol will roll across the floor among the cigarette papers and lighters and scraps of tinfoil, and his headache will hit him so hard that even with his palms clamped to his ears he won't be able to tell if the noise is coming from outside or within himself. Then there will be another bang, the walls will shake so hard that he crouches down, afraid that the window above the bed is going to shatter and bury him beneath splinters of glass. And in the corner of the room his phone will be ringing and ringing and ringing.

Two years ago he left Beartown, and ever since then he has been traveling. He left the place where he had lived his whole life, and took trains and boats and hitchhiked for lifts in trucks until the towns along the way no longer had hockey teams. He has gotten lost on purpose, and has destroyed himself in every way imaginable, but he has also found things he didn't know he had been longing for. Glances and hands and breath on his neck. Dance floors with no questions. It took chaos to set him free, loneliness to stop him being alone. He hasn't had a single thought about turning back, going home, home could just as well be a different planet now.