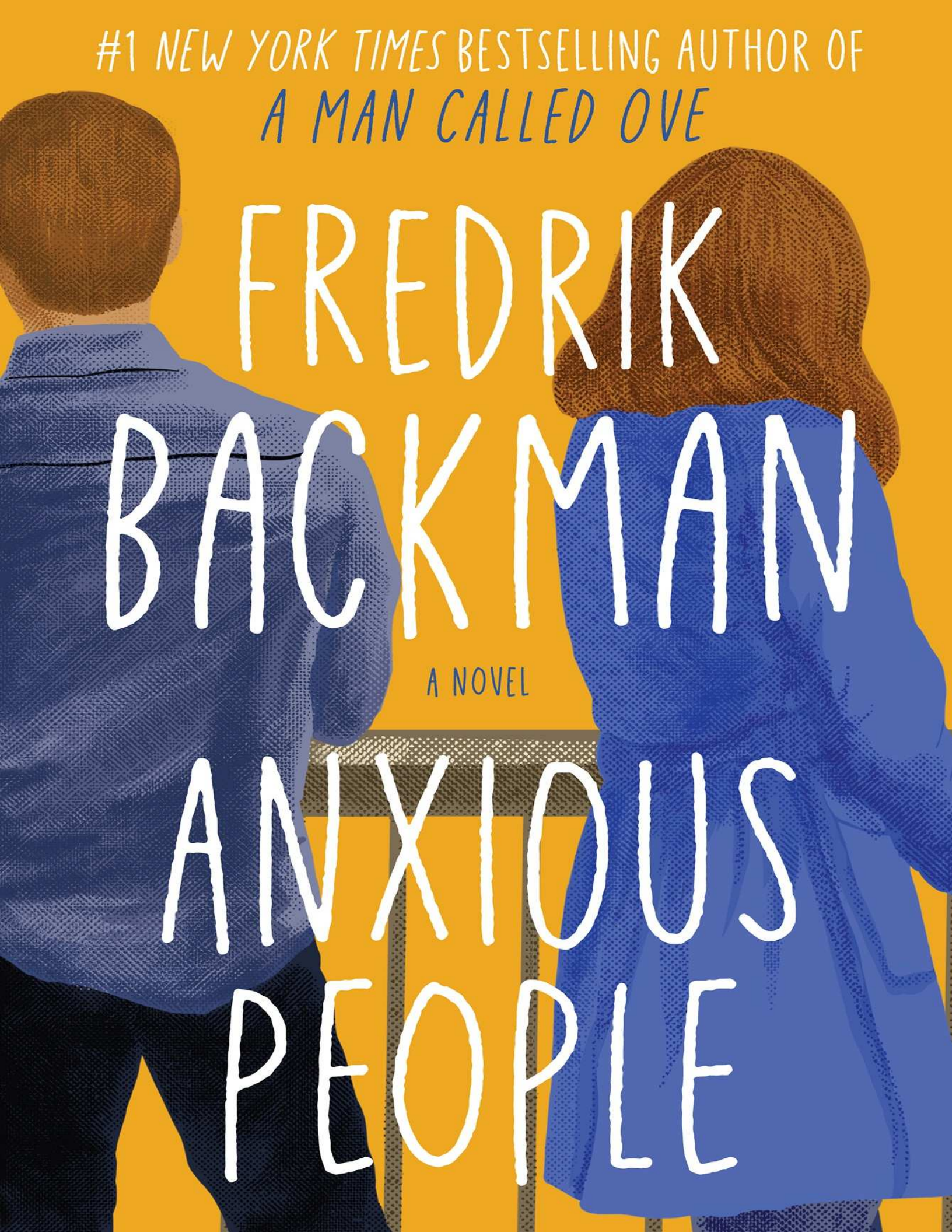


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FREDRIK
BACKMAN

A NOVEL

ANXIOUS
PEOPLE

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ANXIOUS PEOPLE

- A NOVEL -

FREDRIK BACKMAN

Translated by Neil Smith

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*This book is dedicated to the voices in my head, the
most remarkable of my friends.*

And to my wife, who lives with us.

A bank robbery. A hostage drama. A stairwell full of police officers on their way to storm an apartment. It was easy to get to this point, much easier than you might think. All it took was one single really bad idea.

This story is about a lot of things, but mostly about idiots. So it needs saying from the outset that it's always very easy to declare that other people are idiots, but only if you forget how idiotically difficult being human is. Especially if you have other people you're trying to be a reasonably good human being for.

Because there's such an unbelievable amount that we're all supposed to be able to cope with these days. You're supposed to have a job, and somewhere to live, and a family, and you're supposed to pay taxes and have clean underwear and remember the password to your damn Wi-Fi. Some of us never manage to get the chaos under control, so our lives simply carry on, the world spinning through space at two million miles an hour while we bounce about on its surface like so many lost socks. Our hearts are bars of soap that we keep losing hold of; the moment we relax, they drift off and fall in love and get broken, all in the wink of an eye. We're not in control. So we learn to pretend, all the time, about our jobs and our marriages and our children and everything else. We pretend we're normal, that we're reasonably well educated, that we understand "amortization levels" and "inflation rates." That we know how sex works. In truth, we know as much about sex as we do about USB leads, and it always takes us four tries to get those little buggers in. (Wrong way round, wrong way round, wrong way round, there! *In!*) We pretend to be good parents when all we really do is provide our kids with food and clothing and tell them off when they put chewing gum they find on the ground in their mouths. We tried keeping tropical fish once and they all died. And we really don't know more about children than tropical fish, so the responsibility frightens the life out of us each morning. We don't have a plan, we just do our best to get through the day, because there'll be another one coming along tomorrow.

Sometimes it hurts, it really hurts, for no other reason than the fact that our skin doesn't feel like it's ours. Sometimes we panic, because the bills need paying and we have to be grown-up and we don't know how, because it's so horribly, desperately easy to fail at being grown-up.

Because everyone loves someone, and anyone who loves someone has had those desperate nights where we lie awake trying to figure out how we can afford to carry on being human beings. Sometimes that makes us do things that seem ridiculous in hindsight, but which felt like the only way out at the time.

One single really bad idea. That's all it takes.

One morning, for instance, a thirty-nine-year-old resident of a not particularly large or noteworthy town left home clutching a pistol, and that was—in hindsight—a really stupid idea. Because this is a story about a hostage drama, but that wasn't the intention. That is to say, it was the intention that it should be a story, but it wasn't the intention that it should be about a hostage drama. It was supposed to be about a bank robbery. But everything got a bit messed up, because sometimes that happens with bank robberies. So the thirty-nine-year-old bank robber fled, but with no escape plan, and the thing about escape plans is just like what the bank robber's mom always said years ago, when the bank robber forgot the ice cubes and slices of lemon in the kitchen and had to run back: "If your head isn't up to the job, your legs better be!" (It should be noted that when she died, the bank robber's mom consisted of so much gin and tonic that they didn't dare cremate her because of the risk of explosion, but that doesn't mean she didn't have good advice to offer.) So after the bank robbery that wasn't actually a bank robbery, the police showed up, of course, so the bank robber got scared and ran out, across the street and into the first door that presented itself. It's probably a bit harsh to label the bank robber an idiot simply because of that, but... well, it certainly wasn't an act of genius. Because the door led to a stairwell with no other exits, which meant the bank robber's only option was to run up the stairs.

It should be noted that this particular bank robber had the same level of fitness as the average thirty-nine-year-old. Not one of those big-city thirty-nine-year-olds who deal with their midlife crisis by buying ridiculously expensive cycling shorts and swimming caps because they have a black hole in their soul that devours Instagram pictures, more the sort of thirty-nine-year-old whose daily consumption of cheese and carbohydrates was more likely to be classified medically as a cry for help rather than a diet. So by the time the bank robber reached the top floor, all sorts of glands had opened up, causing breathing that sounded like something you usually associate with the sort of secret societies that demand a password through a hatch in the door before they let you in. By this point, any chance of evading the police had dwindled to pretty much nonexistent.

But by chance the robber turned and saw that the door to one of the apartments in the building was open, because that particular apartment happened to be up for sale and was full of prospective buyers looking around. So the bank robber stumbled in, panting and sweaty, holding the pistol in the air, and that was how this story ended up becoming a hostage drama.

And then things went the way they did: the police surrounded the building, reporters showed up, the story made it onto the television news. The whole thing went on for several hours, until the bank robber had to give up. There was no other choice. So all eight people who had been held hostage, seven prospective buyers and one real estate agent, were released. A couple of minutes later the police stormed the apartment. But by then it was empty.

No one knew where the bank robber had gone.

That's really all you need to know at this point. Now the story can begin.

Ten years ago a man was standing on a bridge. This story isn't about that man, so you don't really need to think about him right now. Well, obviously you can't help thinking about him, it's like saying "Don't think about cookies," and now you're thinking about cookies.

Don't think about cookies!

All you need to know is that a man was standing on a bridge ten years ago. Up on the railing, high above the water, at the end of his life. Don't think about that anymore now. Think about something nicer.

Think about cookies.

It's the day before New Year's Eve in a not particularly large town. A police officer and a real estate agent are sitting in an interview room in the police station. The policeman looks barely twenty but is probably older, and the real estate agent looks more than forty but is probably younger. The police officer's uniform is too small, the real estate agent's jacket slightly too large. The real estate agent looks like she'd rather be somewhere else, and, after the past fifteen minutes of conversation, the policeman looks like he wishes the real estate agent were somewhere else, too. When the real estate agent smiles nervously and opens her mouth to say something, the policeman breathes in and out in a way that makes it hard to tell if he's sighing or trying to clear his nose.

"Just answer the question," he pleads.

The Realtor nods quickly and blurts out:

"How's tricks?"

"I said, just answer the question!" the policeman repeats, with an expression common in grown men who were disappointed by life at some point in their childhood and have never quite managed to stop feeling that way.

"You asked me what my real estate agency is called!" the Realtor insists, drumming her fingers on the tabletop in a way that makes the policeman feel like throwing objects with sharp corners at her.

"No I didn't, I asked if the *perpetrator* who held you *hostage* together with—"

"It's called *House Tricks*! Get it? Because when you buy an apartment, you want to buy from someone who knows all the *tricks*, don't you? So when I answer the phone, I say: Hello, you've reached the House Tricks Real Estate Agency! HOW'S TRICKS?"

Obviously the Realtor has just been through a traumatic experience, has been threatened with a pistol and held hostage, and that sort of thing can make anyone babble. The policeman tries to be patient. He presses his thumbs hard against his eyebrows, as if he hopes they're two buttons and if he keeps them pressed at the same time for ten seconds he'll be able to restore life to its factory settings.

"Okaaay... But now I need to ask you a few questions about the apartment and the perpetrator," he groans.

It has been a difficult day for him, too. The police station is small, resources are tight, but there's nothing wrong with their competence. He tried to explain that over the phone to some boss's boss's boss right after the hostage drama, but naturally it was hopeless. They're going to send some special investigative team from Stockholm to take charge of the whole case. The boss didn't place the emphasis on the words "investigative team" when he said that, but on "*Stockholm*," as if coming from the capital was itself some sort of superpower. More like a medical condition, the policeman thinks. His thumbs are still pressed to his eyebrows, this is his last chance to show the bosses that he can

handle this himself, but how on earth is that going to work if you've only got witnesses like this woman?

"Okeydokey!" the real estate agent chirrup, as if that were a real Swedish word.

The policeman looks down at his notes.

"Isn't this an odd day to have a showing? The day before New Year's Eve?"

The real estate agent shakes her head and grins.

"There are no bad days for the HOUSE TRICKS Real Estate Agency!"

The policeman takes a deep breath, then several more.

"Right. Let's move on: when you saw the perpetrator, what was your first react—"

"Didn't you say you were going to ask about the apartment first? You said 'the apartment and the perpetrator,' so I thought the apartment would be first—"

"Okay!" the policeman growls.

"Okay!" the real estate agent chirrup.

"The *apartment*, then: Are you familiar with its layout?"

"Of course, I'm the real estate agent, after all!" the real estate agent says, but manages to stop herself adding "from the HOUSE TRICKS Real Estate Agency! HOW'S TRICKS?" seeing as the policeman already looks like he wishes the ammunition in his pistol weren't so easy to trace.

"Can you describe it?"

The real estate agent lights up.

"It's a dream! We're talking about a unique opportunity to acquire an exclusive apartment in a quiet area within easy reach of the throbbing heart of the big city. Open plan! Big windows that let in plenty of daylight—!"

The policeman cuts her off.

"I meant, are there closets, hidden storage spaces, anything of that sort?"

"You don't like open plan apartments? You like walls? There's nothing wrong with walls!" the real estate agent replies encouragingly, yet with an undertone that suggests that in her experience, people who like walls are the same sort of people who like other types of barriers.

"For instance, are there any closets that aren't—?"

"Did I mention the amount of daylight?"

"Yes."

"There's scientific research to prove that daylight makes us feel better! Did you know that?"

The policeman looks like he doesn't really want to be forced to think about this. Some people want to decide for themselves how happy they are.

"Can we stick to the point?"

"Okeydokey!"

"Are there any spaces in the apartment that aren't marked on the plans?"

"It's also a really good location for children!"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"I just wanted to point it out. The location, you know. Really good for children! Actually, well... apart from this whole hostage thing today. But apart from that: a brilliant area for kids! And of course you know that children just love police cars!"

The real estate agent cheerily spins her arm in the air and imitates the sound of a siren.

“I think that’s the sound of an ice-cream truck,” the police officer says.

“But you know what I mean,” the real estate agent persists.

“I’m going to have to ask you to just answer the question.”

“Sorry. What was the question, again?”

“Exactly how big is the apartment?”

The real estate agent smiles in bemusement.

“Don’t you want to talk about the bank robber? I thought we were going to talk about the robbery?”

The policeman clenches his teeth so hard that he looks like he’s trying to breathe through his toenails.

“Sure. Okay. Tell me about the perpetrator. What was your first reaction when he—”

The real estate agent interrupts eagerly. “The bank robber? Yes! The bank robber ran straight into the apartment in the middle of the viewing, and pointed a pistol at us all! And do you know why?”

“No.”

“Because it’s open plan! Otherwise the bank robber would never have been able to aim at all of us *at the same time!*”

The policeman massages his eyebrows.

“Okay, let’s try this instead: Are there any good hiding places in the apartment?”

The Realtor blinks so slowly that it looks like she’s only just learned how to do it.

“Hiding places?”

The policeman leans his head back and fixes his gaze on the ceiling. His mom always said that policemen are just boys who never bothered to find a new dream. All boys get asked “What do you want to be when you grow up?” and at some point almost all of them answer “A policeman!” but most of them grow out of that and come up with something better. For a moment he finds himself wishing he’d done that, too, because then his days might have been less complicated, and possibly also his dealings with his family. It’s worth pointing out that his mom has always been proud of him, she was never the one who expressed disapproval at his choice of career. She was a priest, another job that’s more than just a way of earning a living, so she understood. It was his dad who never wanted to see his son in uniform. That disappointment may still be weighing the young police officer down, because he looks exhausted when he focuses his gaze on the Realtor again.

“Yes. That’s what I’ve been trying to explain to you: we believe the perpetrator is still in the apartment.”

The truth is that when the bank robber gave up, all the hostages—the real estate agent and all the prospective buyers—were released at the same time. One police officer was standing guard in the stairwell outside the apartment when they emerged. They closed the door behind themselves, the latch clicked, and then they walked calmly down the stairs, out into the street, got into the waiting police cars, and were driven away. The policeman in the stairwell waited for his colleagues to come up the stairs. A negotiator phoned the bank robber. Shortly after that the police stormed the apartment, only to discover that it was empty. The door to the balcony was locked, all the windows were closed, and there were no other exits.

You didn't have to be from Stockholm to realize pretty quickly that one of the hostages must have helped the bank robber to escape. Unless the bank robber hadn't escaped at all.

Okay. A man was standing on a bridge. Think about that now.

He had written a note and mailed it, he had dropped his children off at school, he had climbed up onto the railing and was standing there looking down. Ten years later an unsuccessful bank robber took eight people hostage at a viewing of an apartment that was for sale. If you stand on that bridge, you can see all the way to the balcony of that apartment.

Obviously none of this has anything to do with you. Well, maybe just a little. Because presumably you're a normal, decent person. What would you have done if you'd seen someone standing on the railing of that bridge? There are no right or wrong things to say at a time like that, are there? You would simply have done whatever it took to stop the man from jumping. You don't even know him, but it's an innate instinct, the idea that we can't just let strangers kill themselves.

So you would have tried to talk to him, gain his trust, persuade him not to do it. Because you've probably been depressed yourself, you've had days when you've been in terrible pain in places that don't show up in X-rays, when you can't find the words to explain it even to the people who love you. Deep down, in memories that we might prefer to suppress even from ourselves, a lot of us know that the difference between us and that man on the bridge is smaller than we might wish. Most adults have had a number of really bad moments, and of course not even fairly happy people manage to be happy the whole darn time. So you would have tried to save him. Because it's possible to end your life by mistake, but you have to choose to jump. You have to climb on top of somewhere high and take a step forward.

You're a decent person. You wouldn't have just watched.

The young policeman is feeling his forehead with his fingertips. He has a lump the size of a baby's fist there.

"How did you get that?" the real estate agent asks, looking like she'd really prefer to ask *How's tricks?* again.

"I got hit on the head," the policeman grunts, then looks at his notes and says, "Did the perpetrator seem used to handling firearms?"

The real estate agent smiles in surprise.

"You mean... the pistol?"

"Yes. Did he seem nervous, or did it look like he'd handled a pistol plenty of times before?"

The policeman hopes his question will reveal whether or not the real estate agent thinks the bank robber might have a military background, for instance. But the real estate agent replies breezily: "Oh, no, I mean, the pistol wasn't real!"

The policeman squints at her, evidently trying to figure out if she's joking or just being naive.

"What makes you say that?"

"It was obviously a toy! I thought everyone had realized that."

The policeman studies the real estate agent for a long time. She's not joking. A hint of sympathy appears in his eyes.

"So you were never... frightened?"

The real estate agent shakes her head.

"No, no, no. I realized we were never in any real danger, you know. That bank robber could never have harmed anyone!"

The policeman looks at his notes. He realizes that she hasn't understood.

"Would you like something to drink?" he asks kindly.

"No, thank you. You've already asked me that."

The policeman decides to fetch her a glass of water anyway.

In truth, none of the people who were held hostage knows what happened in between the time they were released and the time the police stormed the apartment. The hostages had already gotten into the cars down in the street and were being driven to the police station as the officers gathered in the stairwell. Then the special negotiator (who had been dispatched from Stockholm by the boss's boss, seeing as people in Stockholm seem to think they're the only ones capable of talking on the phone) called the bank robber in the hope that a peaceful resolution could be reached. But the bank robber didn't answer. Instead a single pistol shot rang out. By the time the police smashed in the door to the apartment it was already too late. When they reached the living room they found themselves trampling through blood.

In the staffroom of the police station the young policeman bumps into an older officer. The young man is fetching water, the older man is drinking coffee. Their relationship is complicated, as is often the case between police officers of different generations. At the end of your career you're trying to find a point to it all, and at the start of it you're looking for a purpose.

"Morning!" the older man exclaims.

"Hi," the younger man says, slightly dismissively.

"I'd offer you some coffee, but I suppose you're still not a coffee drinker?" the old officer says, as if it were some sort of disability.

"No," the younger man replies, like someone turning down an offer of human flesh.

The older and younger men have little in common when it comes to food and drink, or anything else, for that matter, which is a cause of ongoing conflict whenever they're stuck in the same police car at lunchtime. The older officer's favorite food is a service station hot dog with instant mashed potatoes, and whenever the staff in the local restaurant try to take his plate away on buffet Fridays, he always snatches it back in horror and exclaims: "Finished? This is a buffet! You'll know when I'm finished because I'll be lying curled up under the table!" The younger man's favorite food, if you were to ask the older officer, is "that made-up stuff, algae and seaweed and raw fish, he thinks he's some sort of damn hermit crab." One likes coffee, the other tea. One looks at his watch while they're working to see if it will soon be lunchtime, the other looks at his watch during lunch to see if he can get back to work soon. The older man thinks the most important thing is for a police officer to do the right thing, the younger thinks it's more important to do things correctly.

"Sure? You can have one of those Frappuccinos or whatever they're called. I've even bought some of that soy milk, not that I want to know what the heck they milked to get hold of it!" the older man says, chuckling loudly, but glancing anxiously toward the younger man at the same time.

"Mmm," the younger man murmurs, not bothering to listen.

"Getting on okay with interviewing that damn real estate agent?" the older man asks, in a tone that suggests he's joking, to cover up the fact that he's asking out of consideration.

"Fine!" the younger man declares, finding it increasingly difficult to conceal his irritation now, and attempting to move toward the door.

"And you're okay?" the older officer asks.

"Yes, yes, I'm okay," the younger man groans.

"I just mean after what happened, if you ever need to..."

"I'm fine," the younger man insists.

"Sure?"

“Sure!”

“How’s...?” the older man asks, nodding toward the bump on the younger man’s forehead.

“Fine, no problem. I’ve got to go now.”

“Okay. Well. Would you like a hand questioning the real estate agent, then?” the older man asks, and tries to smile rather than just stare anxiously at the younger officer’s shoes.

“I can manage on my own.”

“I’d be happy to help.”

“No—thanks!”

“Sure?” the older man calls, but gets nothing but a very sure silence in response.

When the younger officer has gone, the older man sits alone in the staffroom drinking his coffee. Older men rarely know what to say to younger men to let them know that they care. It’s so hard to find the words when all you really want to say is: “I can see you’re hurting.”

There are red marks on the floor where the younger man was standing. He still has blood on his shoes, but he hasn’t noticed yet. The older officer wets a cloth and carefully wipes the floor. His fingers are trembling. Maybe the younger man isn’t lying, maybe he really is okay. But the older man definitely isn’t, not yet.

The younger officer walks back into the interview room and puts the glass of water down on the table. The real estate agent looks at him, and thinks he looks like a person who's had his sense of humor amputated. Not that there's anything wrong with that.

"Thanks," she says hesitantly toward the glass of water she hadn't asked for.

"I need to ask you a few more questions," the young officer says apologetically, and pulls out a crumpled sheet of paper. It looks like a child's drawing.

The real estate agent nods, but doesn't have time to open her mouth before the door opens quietly and the older police officer slips into the room. The real estate agent notes that his arms are slightly too long for his body, if he ever spilled his coffee he'd only burn himself below his knees.

"Hello! I just thought I'd see if there was anything I could do to help in here..." the older officer says.

The younger officer looks up at the ceiling.

"No! Thanks! Like I just told you, I've got everything under control."

"Right. Okay. I just wanted to offer my help," the older man tries.

"No, no, for God's... No! This is *incredibly* unprofessional! You can't just march in in the middle of an interview!" the younger man snaps.

"Okay, sorry, I just wanted to see how far you'd got," the older man whispers, embarrassed now, unable to hide his concern.

"I was just about to ask about the drawing!" the younger man snarls, as if he'd been caught smelling of cigarette smoke and insisted that he was only holding it for a friend.

"Ask who?" the older officer wonders.

"The real estate agent!" the younger man exclaims, pointing at her.

Sadly this prompts the Realtor to bounce up from her chair at once and thrust her hand out.

"I'm the real estate agent! From the HOUSE TRICKS Real Estate Agency!"

The Realtor pauses and grins, unbelievably pleased with herself.

"Oh, dear God, not again," the younger police officer mutters as the Realtor takes a deep breath.

"So, HOW'S TRICKS?"

The older officer looks questioningly at the younger officer.

"She's been carrying on like this the whole time," the younger man says, pressing his thumbs against his eyebrows.

The older police officer squints at the real estate agent. He's gotten into the habit of doing that when he encounters incomprehensible individuals, and a lifetime of almost constant squinting has given the skin under his eyes something of the quality of soft ice cream. The Realtor, who is evidently

of the opinion that no one heard her the first time, offers an unwanted explanation: “Get it? HOUSE TRICKS Real Estate Agency. HOW’S TRICKS? Get it? Because everyone wants a real estate agent who knows the best...”

The older officer gets it, he even gives her an appreciative smile, but the younger one aims his forefinger at the Realtor and moves it up and down between her and the chair.

“Sit!” he says, in that tone you only use with children, dogs, and real estate agents.

The Realtor stops grinning. She sits down clumsily, and looks first at one of the officers, then the other.

“Sorry. This is the first time I’ve been interviewed by the police. You’re not... you know... you’re not going to do that good cop, bad cop thing they do in films, are you? One of you isn’t going to go out to get more coffee while the other one assaults me with a phone book and screams ‘WHERE HAVE YOU HIDDEN THE BODY?’”

The Realtor lets out a nervous laugh. The older police officer smiles but the younger one most definitely doesn’t, so the Realtor goes on, even more nervously: “I mean, I was joking. They don’t print phone books anymore, do they, so what would you do? Assault me with an iPhone?”

She starts waving her arms about to illustrate assault by phone, and yelling in what the two officers can only assume is the real estate agent’s imitation of their accents: “Oh, hell, no, I’ve ended up liking my ex on Instagram as well! Delete! Delete!”

The younger police officer doesn’t look at all amused, which makes the real estate agent look less amused. In the meantime the older officer leans toward the younger officer’s notes and asks, as if the Realtor weren’t actually in the room: “So what did she say about the drawing?”

“I didn’t get that far before you came in and interrupted!” the younger man snaps.

“What drawing?” the real estate agent asks.

“Well, as I was about to say before I was interrupted: we found this drawing in the stairwell, and we think the perpetrator may have dropped it. We’d like you to—,” the younger officer says, but the older officer interrupts him.

“Have you talked to her about the pistol, then?”

“Stop interfering!” the younger man hisses.

This makes the older officer throw his arms up and mutter: “Okay, okay, sorry I’m here.”

“It wasn’t real! The pistol! It was a toy!” the real estate agent says quickly.

The older officer looks at her in surprise, then at the younger officer, before whispering in a way that only men of a certain age think is a whisper: “You... you haven’t told her?”

“Told me what?” the real estate agent wonders.

The younger police officer sighs and folds the drawing, as carefully as if he were actually folding his older colleague’s face. Then he looks up at the Realtor.

“Well, I was coming to that... You see, after the perpetrator released you and the other hostages, and we’d brought you here to the station...”

The older officer interrupts helpfully: “The perpetrator, the bank robber—he shot himself!”

The younger officer clasps his hands tightly together to stop himself from strangling the older man. He says something the real estate agent doesn’t hear: her ears are already full of a monotonous buzzing sound that grows to a roar as shock takes hold of her nervous system. Long afterward she will swear

that rain was pattering against the window of the room, even though the interview room had no windows. She stares at the policemen with her jaw hanging open.

“So... the pistol... it was...?” she manages to say.

“It was a real pistol,” the older officer confirms.

“I...,” the Realtor begins, but her mouth is too dry to speak.

“Here! Have some water!” the older officer offers, as if he’d just fetched it for her.

“Thanks... I... but, if the pistol was real, then we could all... we could all have *died*,” she whispers, then gulps at the water in a state of retroactive shock. The older officer nods authoritatively, takes the younger man’s notes from him, and starts to make his own additions with a pen.

“Perhaps we should start this interview again?” he says helpfully, which prompts the younger officer to take a short break so he can go out into the corridor and bang his head against the wall.

When the door slams shut the older man jumps. This business with words is tricky when you’re older and all you want to say to someone younger is: “I can see you’re in pain, and that causes me pain.” The younger officer’s shoes have left reddish brown marks of dried blood on the floor under his chair. The older man looks at them disconsolately. This was precisely why he didn’t want his son to become a policeman.

The first person who saw the man on the bridge ten years ago was a teenage boy whose dad wished he would find a new dream. Perhaps the boy could have waited for help, but would you have done that? If your mom was a priest and your dad a policeman, if you'd grown up taking it for granted that you have to help people if you can, and not abandon anyone unless you really have to?

So the teenage boy ran out onto the bridge and shouted to the man, and the man stopped. The teenage boy didn't know what he should do, so he just started... talking. Tried to win the man's trust. Get him to take two steps back rather than forward. The wind was tugging gently at their jackets, there was rain in the air and you could feel the start of winter on your skin, and the boy tried to find the words to say how much there must be to live for, even if it maybe didn't feel that way right now.

The man on the bridge had two children, he told the teenage boy that. Possibly because the boy reminded him of them. The boy pleaded with him, with panic weighing down each word: "Please, don't jump!"

The man looked at him calmly, almost sympathetically, and replied, "Do you know what the worst thing about being a parent is? That you're always judged by your worst moments. You can do a million things right, but if you do one single thing wrong you're forever that parent who was checking his phone in the park when your child was hit in the head by a swing. We don't take our eyes off them for days at a time, but then you read just *one* text message and it's as if all your best moments never happened. No one goes to see a psychologist to talk about all the times they *weren't* hit in the head by a swing as a child. Parents are defined by their mistakes."

The teenage boy probably didn't really understand what he meant. His hands were shaking as he glanced over the side of the bridge and saw death all the way down. The man smiled weakly at him and took half a step back. Just then, that felt like the whole world.

Then the man explained that he'd had a pretty good job, he'd set up his own relatively successful business, bought a fairly nice apartment. That he'd invested all his savings in shares in a real estate development company, so that his children could get even better jobs and even nicer apartments, so that they could have the freedom not to have to worry, not have to fall asleep exhausted every night with a pocket calculator in their hands. Because that was a parent's job: to provide shoulders. Shoulders for your children to sit on when they're little so they can see the world, then stand on when they get older so they can reach the clouds, and sometimes lean against whenever they stumble and feel unsure. They trust us, which is a crushing responsibility, because they haven't yet realized that we don't actually know what we're doing. So the man did what we all do: he pretended he knew. When his children started to ask why poo was brown, and what happens after you die, and why polar bears don't eat penguins. Then they got older. Sometimes he managed to forget that for a moment and