

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

# THE ANSWER IS NO



A SHORT STORY

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# FREDRIK BACKMAN

TRANSLATED BY ELIZABETH DENOMA



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THE ANSWER  
IS NO

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FREDRIK  
BACKMAN

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# Chapter 1

**I**t's a frying pan that ruins Lucas's life.  
We'll get to that.

## Chapter 2

**L**ucas 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

**T**he 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

**D**uring 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 theeeeeere!” 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.