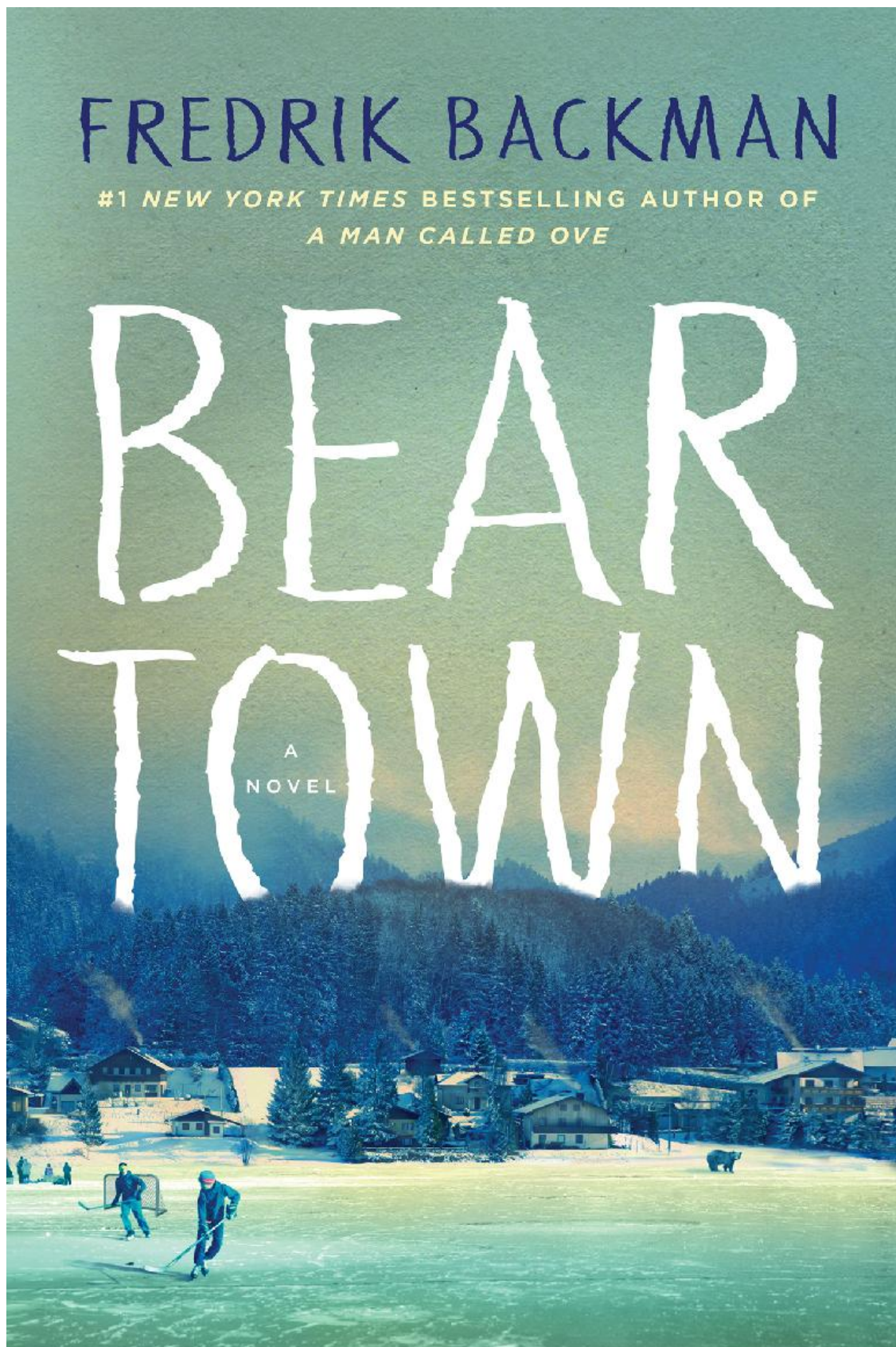


FREDRIK BACKMAN

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
A MAN CALLED OVE

BEAR
TOWN

A
NOVEL





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BEARTOWN

- A NOVEL -

FREDRIK BACKMAN

Translated by Neil Smith

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For my grandmother, Saga Backman, who taught me to love sports. What a quiet life I would have lived without her. I hope that the big bar in heaven serves proper dry martinis, and that they always show Wimbledon on the big screen. I miss you. And for Neda Shafti-Backman, my funniest, smartest, most argumentative best friend, who picks me up when I need it, and keeps my feet on the ground when I deserve it. Asheghetam.

1

Late one evening toward the end of March, a teenager picked up a double-barreled shotgun, walked into the forest, put the gun to someone else's forehead, and pulled the trigger.

* * *

is is the story of how we got there.

2

B ang-bang-bang-bang-bang.

It's a Friday in early March in Beartown and nothing has happened yet.

Everyone is waiting. Tomorrow, the Beartown Ice Hockey Club's junior team is

playing in the semifinal of the biggest youth tournament in the country. How

important can something like that be? In most places, not so important, of course. But Beartown isn't most places.

Bang. Bang. Bang-bang-bang.

The town wakes early, like it does every day; small towns need a head start if they're going to have any chance in the world. The rows of cars in the parking

lot outside the factory are already covered with snow; people are standing in

silent lines with their eyes half-open and their minds half-closed, waiting for

their electronic punch cards to verify their existence to the clocking-in

machine. They stamp the slush off their boots with autopilot eyes and

answering-machine voices while they wait for their drug of choice—
caffeine or

nicotine or sugar—to kick in and render their bodies at least tolerably

functional until the first break.

Out on the road the commuters set off for bigger towns beyond the forest;

their gloves slam against heating vents and their curses are the sort you only

think of uttering when you're drunk, dying, or sitting in a far-too-cold
Peugeot

far too early in the morning.

* * *

If they keep quiet they can hear it in the distance: *Bang-bang-bang. Bang.
Bang.*

* * *

Maya wakes up and stays in bed, playing her guitar. The walls of her room
are

covered in a mixture of pencil drawings and tickets she's saved from
concerts

she's been to in cities far from here. Nowhere near as many as she would
have

liked, but considerably more than her parents actually consented to. She loves

everything about her guitar—its weight against her body, the way the wood responds when her fingertips tap it, the strings that cut hard against her skin.

The simple notes, the gentle riffs—it's all a wonderful game to her. She's fifteen

years old and has already fallen in love many times, but her guitar will always

be her first love. It's helped her to put up with living in this town, to deal with

being the daughter of the general manager of an ice hockey team in the forest.

She hates hockey but understands her father's love for it; the sport is just a different instrument from hers. Her mom sometimes whispers in her

daughter's ear: "Never trust people who don't have something in their lives that

they love beyond all reason." Her mom loves a man who loves a place that loves a game. This is a hockey town, and there are plenty of things you can say

about those, but at least they're predictable. You know what to expect if you live here. Day after day after day.

Bang.

Beartown isn't close to anything. Even on a map the place looks unnatural. "As

if a drunk giant tried to piss his name in the snow,” some might say. “As if nature and man were fighting a tug-of-war for space,” more high-minded souls

might suggest. Either way, the town is losing. It has been a very long time since

it won at anything. More jobs disappear each year, and with them the people,

and the forest devours one or two more abandoned houses each season. Back

in the days when there were still things to boast about, the city council erected

a sign beside the road at the entrance to the town with the sort of slogan that was popular at the time: “Beartown—Leaves You Wanting More!” The wind and snow took a few years to wipe out the word “More.” Sometimes the entire

community feels like a philosophical experiment: If a town falls in the forest

but no one hears it, does it matter at all?

To answer that question you need to walk a few hundred yards down

toward the lake. The building you see there doesn’t look like much, but it’s an

ice rink, built by factory workers four generations ago, men who worked six

days a week and needed something to look forward to on the seventh. All the

love this town could thaw out was passed down and still seems to end up devoted to the game: ice and boards, red and blue lines, sticks and pucks and

every ounce of determination and power in young bodies hurtling at full speed

into the corners in the hunt for those pucks. The stands are packed every weekend, year after year, even though the team's achievements have collapsed

in line with the town's economy. And perhaps that's why—because everyone

hopes that when the team's fortunes improve again, the rest of the town will get pulled up with it.

Which is why places like this always have to pin their hopes for the future on young people. They're the only ones who don't remember that things actually used to be better. That can be a blessing. So they've coached their junior team with the same values their forebears used to construct their community: work hard, take the knocks, don't complain, keep your mouth shut, and show the bastards in the big cities where we're from. There's not much worthy of note around here. But anyone who's been here knows that it's

a hockey town.

Bang.

Amat will soon turn sixteen. His room is so tiny that if it had been in a larger apartment in a well-to-do neighborhood in a big city, it would barely have registered as a closet. The walls are completely covered with posters of NHL players, with two exceptions. One is a photograph of himself aged seven, wearing gloves that are too big for him and with his helmet halfway down his forehead, the smallest of all the boys on the ice. The other is a sheet of white paper on which his mother has written parts of a prayer. When Amat was born, she lay with him on her chest in a narrow bed in a little hospital on the other side of the planet, no one but them in the whole world. A nurse had whispered the prayer in his mother's ear back then—it is said to have been written on the wall above Mother Teresa's bed—and the nurse hoped it would give the solitary woman strength and hope. Almost sixteen years later, the scrap of paper is still hanging on her son's wall, the words mixed up, but she wrote them down as well as she could remember them:

If you are honest, people may deceive you. Be honest anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfishness. Be kind anyway.

All the good you do today will be forgotten by others tomorrow. Do good anyway.

Amat sleeps with his skates by his bed every night. “Must have been one
hel of

a birth for your poor mother, you being born with those on,” the caretaker at
the rink often jokes. He’s offered to let the boy keep them in a locker in the
team’s storeroom, but Amat likes carrying them there and back. Wants to
keep

them close.

Amat has never been as tall as the other players, has never been as muscular
as them, has never shot as hard. But no one in the town can catch him. No
one

on any team he’s encountered so far has been as fast as him. He can’t
explain it;

he assumes it’s a bit like when people look at a violin and some of them just
see

a load of wood and screws where others see music. Skates have never felt
odd

to him. On the contrary, when he sticks his feet in a pair of normal shoes he
feels like a sailor stepping ashore.

 e final lines his mother wrote on the sheet of paper on his wall read as
follows:

*What you create, others can destroy. Create anyway. Because in the end,
it is between you and God. It was never between you and anyone else
anyway.*

Immediately below that, written in red crayon in the determined handwriting

of a primary school student, it says:

ey say Im to little to play. Become good player any way!

Bang.

Once upon a time, Beartown Ice Hockey's A-team—one step above the juniors

—was second-best in the top division in the country. It was more than two

decades and three divisions ago, but tomorrow Beartown will be playing

against the best once more. So how important can a junior game be? How

much can a town care about the semifinal a bunch of teenagers are playing in a

minor-league tournament? Not so much, of course. If it weren't this particular

dot on the map.

A couple of hundred yards south of the road sign lies "the Heights," a small

cluster of expensive houses with views across the lake. The people who live in

them own supermarkets, run factories, or commute to better jobs in bigger

towns where their colleagues at staff parties wonder, wide-eyed:

"Beartown?"

How can you possibly live that far out in the forest?" They reply something

about hunting and fishing, proximity to nature, but these days almost everyone

is asking themselves if it *is* actually possible. Living here any longer. Asking

themselves if there's anything left, apart from property values that seem to fall

as rapidly as the temperature.

* * *

When they wake up to the sound of a *bang*. And they smile.

3

For more than ten years now the neighbors have grown accustomed to the noises from the Erdahl family's garden: *bang-bang-bang-bang-bang*. Then a brief pause while Kevin collects the pucks. Then *bang-bang-bang-bang-bang*.

He was two and a half years old the first time he put a pair of skates on, three

when he got his first stick. When he was four he was better than the five-year-

olds, and when he was five he was better than the seven-year-olds. During the

winter following his seventh birthday he got such a bad case of frostbite that if

you stand close enough to him you can still see the tiny white marks on his cheekbones. He had played his first proper game that afternoon, and in the

final seconds missed a shot on an open goal. The Beartown youngsters won 12–0, and Kevin scored all the goals, but he was inconsolable. Late that evening his parents discovered that he wasn't in his bed, and by midnight half

the town was out searching for him in the forest. Hide-and-seek isn't a game in

Beartown—a young child doesn't have to stray far to be swallowed up by the

darkness, and a small body doesn't take long to freeze to death in thirty degrees

below zero. It wasn't until dawn that someone realized the boy wasn't among

the trees but down on the frozen lake. He had dragged a net and five pucks down there, as well as all the flashlights he could find, and had spent hour after

hour firing shots from the same angle from which he had missed the final shot

of the match. He sobbed uncontrollably as they carried him home. The white marks never faded. He was seven years old, and everyone already knew that he

had the bear inside him. That sort of thing can't be ignored.

His parents paid to have a small rink of his own constructed in the garden.

He shoveled it himself every morning, and each summer the neighbors would

exhume puck-graveyards in their flowerbeds. Remnants of vulcanized rubber

will be found in the soil around there for generations to come.

Year after year they have heard the boy's body grow—the banging becoming

harder and harder, faster and faster. He's seventeen now, and the town hasn't

seen a player with anything close to his talent since the team was in the top

division, before he was born. He's got the build, the hands, the head, and the

heart. But above all he's got the vision: what he sees on the ice seems to happen

more slowly than what everyone else sees. You can teach a lot about hockey,

but not that. You're either born with that way of seeing or you aren't.

“Kevin? He's the real deal,” Peter Andersson, general manager of the club, always says, and he ought to know: the last person in Beartown who was as good as this was Peter himself, and he made it all the way to Canada and the NHL, matching up against the best in the world.

Kevin knows what it takes; everyone's been telling him ever since he first stood on a pair of skates. It's going to demand nothing less than his all. So every morning, while his classmates are still fast asleep under their warm

comforters, he goes running in the forest, and then he stands here, *bang-*
bang-

bang-bang-bang. Collects the pucks. *Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang*. Collects the
the

pucks. Practices with the junior team every afternoon, and with the A-team
every evening, then the gym, then another run in the forest, and one final
hour

out here under the glare of the floodlights specially erected on the roof of
the

house.

* * *

is sport demands only one thing from you. Your al .

* * *

Kevin has had every sort of offer to move to the big teams, to attend hockey
school in a bigger town, but he keeps turning them down. He's a Beartown
man, his dad's a Beartown man, and that may not mean a thing anywhere
else,

but it means something here.

So how important can the semifinal of a junior tournament be? Being the
best junior team around would remind the rest of the country of this place's
existence again. And then the politicians might decide to spend the money
to

establish a hockey school here instead of over in Hed, so that the most talented

kids in this part of the country would want to move to Beartown instead of the

big cities. So that an A-team full of homegrown players could make it to the

highest division again, attract the biggest sponsors once more, get the council

to build a new rink and bigger roads leading to it, maybe even the conference

center and shopping mall they've been talking about for years. So that new

businesses could appear and create more jobs so that the townspeople might

start thinking about renovating their homes instead of selling them. It would

only be important to the town's economy. To its pride. To its survival.

It's only so important that a seventeen-year-old in a private garden has been

standing here since he got frostbite on his cheeks one night ten years ago, firing

puck after puck after puck with the weight of an entire community on his

shoulders.

* * *

It means everything. That's all.

* * *

On the other side of Beartown from the Heights, north of the road signs, is the

Hollow. In between, the center of Beartown consists of row houses and small

homes in a gently declining scale of middle-classness, but here in the Hollow

there are nothing but blocks of rental apartments, built as far away from the

Heights as possible. At first the names of these neighborhoods were nothing

but unimaginative geographic descriptions: the Hollow is lower than the rest of

the town, where the ground slopes away toward an old gravel pit. The Heights

are on the hill side overlooking the lake. But after the residents' finances divided

along similar lines, the names came to signify differences in class as much as in

districts. Even children can see that the farther away you live from the Hollow,

the better things will be for you.

Fatima lives in a two-room apartment almost at the end of the Hollow. She

drags her son out of bed with gentle force; he grabs his skates and soon they're

alone on the bus, not speaking. Amat has perfected a system of moving his

body without his head actually having to wake up. Fatima affectionately calls

him "The Mummy." When they first reach the rink, she changes into her

cleaner's uniform and he tries to help her pick up the garbage in the stands until she shouts at him and drives him off and he goes to find the caretaker.

The boy is worried about his mom's back, and she worries that other children

will see him with her and tease him. As long as Amat can remember, the two of

them have been alone in the world. When he was little he used to collect empty beer cans from the stands at the end of the month to get the deposit back on them. Sometimes he still does.

He helps the caretaker every morning, unlocking doors and checking lights, sorting out the pucks and driving the zamboni, getting the rink ready for the day. First to show up will be the figure skaters, in the most antisocial time-slots. Then all the hockey teams, one after the other in order of rank. The best times are reserved for the juniors and the A-team. The junior team is now so good it's almost at the top of the hierarchy.

Amat isn't on the junior team yet, he's only fifteen, but maybe next season.

If he does everything that's demanded of him. One day he'll take his mom away from here, he's sure of that. One day he'll stop adding and subtracting income and expenditures in his head all the time. There's an obvious difference

between the children who live in homes where the money can run out and the

ones who don't. How old you are when you realize that also makes a difference.

Amat knows his options are limited, so his plan is simple: from here to the junior team, then the A-team, then professional. When his first wages reach his

account he'll grab that cleaning cart from his mother and never let her see it again. He'll allow her aching fingers to rest and give her aching back a break.

He doesn't want possessions. He just wants to lie in bed one single night without having to count.

The caretaker taps Amat on the shoulder when his chores are done and passes him his skates. Amat puts them on, grabs his stick, and goes out onto the empty ice. That's the deal: the caretaker gets help with the heavy lifting and

tricky swing-doors that his rheumatism makes difficult and—as long as Amat

floods the ice again after he practices—he can have the rink to himself for an

hour before the figure skaters arrive. Those are the best sixty minutes of his day,

every day.

He puts in his earphones, cranks the volume as loud as it will go, then sets off with speed. Across the ice, so hard into the boards at the other end that his

helmet smacks the glass. Full speed back again. Again. Again. Again.

* * *

Fatima looks up briefly from her cart, allows herself a few moments in which

to watch her son out there. The caretaker catches her eye, and she mouths the

word “ thanks.” The caretaker merely nods and conceals a smile. Fatima

remembers how odd she thought it when the club’s coaches first told her that

Amat had exceptional talent. She only understood snippets of the language

back then, and the fact that Amat could skate when he could barely walk was a

divine mystery to her. Many years have passed since then, and she still hasn’t

gotten used to the cold in Beartown, but she has learned to love the town for

what it is. And she will never find anything in her life more unfathomable than

the fact that the boy she gave birth to in a place that has never seen snow was

born to play a sport on ice.

* * *

In one of the smaller houses in the center of town, Peter Andersson, general manager of Beartown Ice Hockey, gets out of the shower, red-eyed and

breathless. He's hardly slept, and the water hasn't managed to rinse his nerves

away. He's been sick twice. He hears Kira bustle past the bathroom out in the

hall, on her way to wake the children, and he knows exactly what she's going to

say: "For heaven's sake, Peter, you're over forty years old. When the GM is more nervous about a junior game than the players, maybe it's time to take a

tranquilizer, have a drink, and just calm down a bit!" The Andersson family has

lived here for more than a decade now, since they moved back home from Canada, but he still hasn't managed to get his wife to understand what hockey

means in Beartown. "Seriously? You don't think all you grown men are getting

a bit too excited?" Kira has been asking all season. "The juniors are seventeen

years old, practically still children!"

He kept quiet at first. But late one night he told her the truth: "I know it's only a game, Kira. I know. But we're a town in the middle of the forest. We've

got no tourism, no mine, no high-tech industry. We've got darkness, cold, and

unemployment. If we can make this town excited again, about anything at all,

that has to be a good thing. I know you're not from round here, love, and this

isn't your town, but look around: the jobs are going, the council's cutting back.

The people who live here are tough, we've got the bear in us, but we've taken

blow after blow for a long time now. This town needs to win at something. We

need to feel, just once, that we're best. I know it's a game. But that's not all it

is. Not always."

Kira kissed his forehead hard when he said that, and held him tight, whispering softly in his ear: "You're an idiot." Which, of course, he knows. He leaves the bathroom and knocks on his fifteen-year-old daughter's door until he hears her guitar answer. She loves her guitar, not sports. Some days that makes him feel sad, but on plenty more days he's happy for her.

* * *

Maya is still lying in bed, and plays louder when the knocking starts and she hears her parents outside the door. A mom with two university degrees who can quote the entire criminal code, but who could never say what icing or

offside meant even if she was on trial. A dad who in return could explain every

hockey strategy in great detail, but can't watch a television show with more than three characters without exclaiming every five minutes: "What's happening now? Who's that? What do you mean, be quiet? Now I missed what

they said . . . can we rewind?"

Maya can't help both laughing and sighing when she thinks of that. You never want to get away from home as much as you do when you're fifteen years

old. It's like her mom usually says when the cold and darkness have worn away

at her patience and she's had three or four glasses of wine: "You can't live in this

town, Maya, you can only survive it."

* * *

Neither of them has any idea just how true that is.

4

Al the way from locker room to boardroom, the boys and men of Beartown Ice Hockey Club are brought together by a single motto: "High ceilings and thick walls." Hard words are as much a part of the game as hard checks, but the building is solid and spacious enough to keep any fights that take place

inside from spilling outside. It applies both on the ice and off it, because everyone needs to realize that the good of the club comes before anything else.

It's early enough in the morning for the rest of the rink to be more or less empty, apart from the caretaker, the cleaner, and one solitary member of the boys' team who's skating up and down the ice. But from one of the offices on

the upper floor, the loud voices of men in smart jackets echo out into the hallways. On the wall is a team photograph from about twenty years ago, from

the year when Beartown Ice Hockey's A-team was second-best in the country.

Some of the men in the room were there then, others weren't, but they've all made up their minds that they're going back. This is no longer going to be a town languishing forgotten in the lower leagues. They're going back to the elite

again, to challenge the very biggest teams.

The club's president is sitting at his desk. He's the sweatiest man in the whole town, constantly worried, like a child who's stolen something, and he's

sweating more than ever today. His shirt is littered with crumbs as he munches

a sandwich so messily that you can't help wondering if he's actually

misunderstood the whole concept of eating. He does that when he's nervous.

is in his office, but he has less power than any of the other men there.

Seen from the outside, a club's hierarchy is simple: the board appoints a president, who is in charge of the day-to-day running of the club, and the president in turn appoints a general manager, who in turn recruits A-team players and employs coaches. The coaches pick the teams and no one pokes their oar into anyone else's job. But behind closed doors it's very different, and

the club's president always has reason to sweat. The men around him are board

members and sponsors, one of them is a local councilor, and collectively they

represent the largest investors and biggest employers in the whole district. And

of course they're all here "unofficially." That's how they describe it, when the

men with all the influence and money just happen to gather to drink coffee together in the same place so early in the morning that not even the local reporters have woken up yet.

Beartown Ice Hockey's coffee machine is in even greater need of a serious cleaning than the club's president, so no one is here on account of the contents

of their cups. Each man in the room has his own agenda, his own ambitions for a successful club, but they have one important thing in common: they agree on who ought to be fired.

* * *

Peter was born and raised in Beartown, and he has been a lot of different men

here: a kid in skating classes, a promising junior, the youngest player on the A-

team, the team captain who almost made them the best in the country, the big

star who went professional in the NHL, and finally the hero who returned home to become GM.

And at this precise moment he is a man who is swaying sleepily back and forth in the hall of his small house, hitting his head on the hat rack roughly every third time and muttering, "For God's sake . . . has *anyone* seen the keys

to the Volvo?"

He hunts through all the pockets of his jacket for the fourth time. His twelve-year-old son comes down the hall and skips nimbly around him without having to take his eyes off his cell phone.

"Have you seen the keys to the Volvo, Leo?"

"Ask Mom."

“Where’s Mom, then?”

“Ask Maya.”

Leo disappears into the bathroom. Peter takes a deep breath.

“Darling?”

No answer. He looks at his phone. He’s already received four texts from the club’s president telling him he needs to get to the office. In an average week Peter spends seventy to eighty hours at the rink, but even so, barely ever has time to watch his own son’s training sessions. He’s got a set of golf clubs in the

car that he uses maybe twice each summer if he’s lucky. His work as GM takes

up all his time: he negotiates contracts with players, talks to agents on the phone, sits in a dark video-room studying potential recruits. But this is only a

small club, so when he’s done with his own work he helps the caretaker change

fluorescent light bulbs and sharpen skates, reserves buses for away matches, orders equipment, and acts as a travel agent and building manager, spending as

many hours maintaining the rink as he does building the team. at takes the rest of each day. Hockey is never satisfied being part of your life, it wants to be

all of it.

When Peter accepted the post, he spent a whole night talking on the phone to Sune, the man who has been coach of Beartown's A-team since Peter was a

boy. It was Sune who taught Peter to skate, who offered him a place to stay when the boy's own home was full of alcohol and bruises. He became far more

of a mentor and father figure than a coach, and there have been times in Peter's

life when the old man has been the only person he felt he could really trust.

"You need to be the lynchpin now," Sune explained to the new GM.

"Everyone's got their own axe to grind here: the sponsors, the politicians, the

supporters, the coaches and players and parents, all trying to drag the club in their direction. You have to pull them all together."

When Kira woke up the following morning, Peter explained the job to her in even simpler terms: "Everyone in Beartown has this burning passion for hockey. My job is to make sure no one catches on fire." Kira kissed him on the

forehead and told him he was an idiot.

"DARLING HAVE YOU SEEN THE KEYS TO THE VOLVO?" Peter yelled to the house in general.

No answer.

* * *

The men in the office go through what has to be done, coldly and dispassionately, as if they were talking about replacing a piece of furniture. In

the old team photograph, Peter Andersson is standing in the middle; he was team captain then, GM now. It's the perfect success story—the men in the room know the importance of building up that sort of mythology for the media as well as the fans. Next to Peter in the photograph stands Sune, the A-

team coach, who persuaded Peter to move home from Canada with his family

after his career as a professional player came to an end. The pair of them rebuilt

the youth team with the ambition of one day having the best junior team in the country. Everyone laughed back then, but no one's laughing now.

Tomorrow those juniors are playing a semifinal game, and next year Kevin Erdahl and a few of the others will be moving up to the A-team, the sponsors

will pile millions into the club, and their challenge to get back to the elite will begin in earnest. And that wouldn't have happened without Peter, who has always been Sune's best pupil.

One of the sponsors looks at his watch irritably.

“Shouldn’t he be here by now?”

The president’s phone slips between his sweaty fingers.

“I’m sure he’s on his way. He’s probably dropping the kids off at school.”

The sponsor gives him a condescending smile. “Has his lawyer wife got a more important meeting than him, as usual? Is this a job or a hobby for Peter?”

One of the board members clears his throat and says, partly in jest and partly not, “We need a GM with steel-toed boots. Not slippers.”

The sponsor smiles and suggests, “Maybe we should employ his wife instead? A GM with sharp stilettos would work pretty well, wouldn’t it?”

The men in the room laugh. It echoes, all the way to the high ceilings.

* * *

Peter heads for the kitchen in search of his wife, but finds his daughter’s best

friend, Ana, instead. She’s making a smoothie. Or at least he thinks she is,

because the whole countertop is covered with an evil pink sludge that’s oozing

steadily toward the edge, preparing to attack, conquer, and annex the parquet

floor. Ana takes her headphones off.

“Good morning! Your blender’s super-complicated!”

Peter takes a deep breath.

“Hello, Ana. You’re here . . . early.”

“No, I slept over,” she replies breezily.

“Again? That makes . . . four nights in a row now?”

“I haven’t been keeping count.”

“No. So I see. Thanks. But don’t you think it might be time to go home one evening and . . . I don’t know . . . get some fresh clothes from your own closet

or something?”

“Don’t have to worry about that. I’ve got pretty much all my clothes here anyway.”

Peter massages the back of his neck and really does try to look as delighted at this as Ana does.

“That’s . . . just great. But won’t your dad be missing you?”

“No worries. We talk a lot on the phone and stuff.”

“Yes, of course. But I suppose you’ll have to go home one day and sleep in your own bed? Maybe?”

Ana forces rather too many unidentifiable frozen berries and pieces of fruit into the blender and stares at him in surprise.

“Okay. But that’s going to be seriously complicated now that all my clothes are here, isn’t it?”

Peter stands motionless for a long while, just looking at her. Then she switches on the blender without putting the lid on first. Peter turns and goes out into the hallway, and yells with rapidly increasing desperation:

“DARLING!”

* * *

Maya is still lying on her bed, slowly picking at the strings of the guitar and letting the notes bounce off the walls and ceiling until they dissolve into nothingness. Tiny, desolate cries for company. She hears Ana on the rampage

in the kitchen, she hears her frustrated parents push past each other in the hallway,

her dad barely awake and vaguely surprised, as if every morning he wakes up

somewhere he's never been before, and her mom with the body language of a

remote-controlled lawn mower whose obstacle-sensor has broken.

* * *

Her name is Kira, but she's never heard anyone in Beartown say that. In the end she just gave up and let them call her “Kia.” People are so sparing with their words here that they don't even seem to want to waste consonants. Back

at the start Kira used to entertain herself by saying “You mean Pete?” whenever

anyone in town asked after her husband. But they all used to look at her so seriously and repeat, “No, Peter!” Like everything else, irony freezes here. So

now Kira merely amuses herself by noting that her children have names that demonstrate an exemplary economy with consonants, Leo and Maya, to stop

anyone’s head exploding at the council registry office.

She moves through the little house with practiced movements, getting dressed and drinking coffee simultaneously as she progresses ever onward through the bathroom, hallway, and kitchen. She picks up a sweater from her daughter’s bedroom floor in passing and folds it in one fluid motion without for a moment interrupting her exhortations that it’s time to put the guitar down and get up.

“Go and have a shower; you smell like you and Ana set the room on fire and tried to put it out with Red Bull. Dad’s driving you to school in twenty minutes.”

Maya rolls out from under the comforter, reluctant but wise from experience. Her mom isn’t the sort you argue with; her mom is a lawyer, and

she never quite stops being one.

“Dad said you were driving us to school.”

“Dad has been misinformed. And will you please ask Ana to clean the kitchen when she’s finished making her smoothie? I love her dearly, she’s your

best friend, I don’t care if she sleeps here more often than she sleeps at home,

but if she’s going to make smoothies in our kitchen she’s going to have to learn

to put the lid on the blender, and you need to teach her at least the most basic

functions of a damned dishcloth. Okay?”

Maya leans the guitar against the wall and heads toward the bathroom, and when her back is turned she rolls her eyes so far that an X-ray would have confused her pupils with kidneys.

“And don’t you roll your eyes at me. I can see you doing it even if I can’t see

you doing it,” her mom snarls.

“Speculation and hearsay,” her daughter mutters.

“I’ve told you, people only say that on television,” her mom retorts.

Her daughter responds by closing the bathroom door with unnecessary force. Peter is yelling “*Darling!*!” from somewhere in the house. Kira picks up

yet another sweater from the floor and hears Ana exclaim, “Oh, hell,” just before she redecorates the kitchen ceiling with smoothie.

“I could have done something else with my life, you know,” Kira says quietly to no one at all as she slips the keys to the Volvo into her jacket pocket.

* * *

The men in the office are still laughing at the joke about stilettos when the sound of a tentative throat clearing reaches the desk from the door. The club's

manager beckons the cleaner in without looking at her. The cleaner apologizes

to them all, but most of the men ignore her, even if one of them helpfully lifts

his feet when the woman reaches to empty the wastepaper bin. The cleaner thanks him, but no one notices. It doesn't bother her; Fatima's greatest talent is

not disturbing anyone. She waits until she's in the halfway before clutching her

back and emitting a short groan of pain. She doesn't want anyone to see and tell Amat. Her beloved boy always worries too much.

* * *

Sweat is stinging Amat's eyes as he glides to a halt by the boards down on the

rink. His stick is resting on the ice, the moisture in his gloves makes his fingers

slip a bit, his breath catches in his throat as lactic acid fills his thighs. The

stands are empty but he keeps glancing up at them every now and then. His mom always says they must be grateful, the pair of them, and he understands

her. No one is more grateful than her, toward this country, this town, these people, and this club, toward the council, their neighbors, her employer.

Grateful, grateful, grateful. That's the role of mothers. But the role of children

is to dream. So her son dreams that his mother will one day be able to walk into a room without having to apologize.

He blinks the sweat from his eyes, adjusts his helmet, and pushes his skates into the ice. One more time. One more time. One more time.

* * *

Peter has now missed four calls from the club's president, and glances anxiously

at the time as Kira enters the kitchen. With a smile she looks at the sticky disaster on the countertop and floor, and knows that Peter must be screaming

hysterically inside. They have different ideas about cleanliness: Kira doesn't like

clothes on the floor, but Peter really loathes anything sticky and messy. When

they first met his entire apartment looked like he'd been burgled, apart from the kitchen and bathroom, which looked like operating rooms. Kira's

apartment was the exact opposite. It would be safe to say they weren't an obvious match.

"Here you are! I'm late for my meeting at the rink. Have you seen the keys to the Volvo?" he splutters.

He's tried to put on a jacket and tie, with mixed results, as usual. Kira's outfit is impeccable, as if the fabric were in thrall to her body. She's drinking coffee and pulling her coat on in the same fluid, one-handed gesture.

"Yep."

He stands there red-faced, his hair on end, his socks smeared with smoothie, and asks: "Do you feel like telling me where they are?"

"They're in my pocket."

"What? Why?"

Kira kisses his forehead.

"That's a very good question, sweetie. I suppose I thought they'd come in handy if I was going to drive the Volvo to work. Seeing as it might be thought a little inappropriate if my clients' lawyer turned up in a hot-wired car."

Peter scratches at his hair with both hands.

"But . . . what the . . . You can take the other car, can't you?"

"No, because you're taking the other car to the garage. After you've dropped

the kids off at school. We talked about it.”

“We *haven't* talked about it.”

Instinctively, Peter wipes the bottom of her coffee cup with a piece of paper towel. She smiles.

“Darling, it’s written on the calendar on the fridge.”

“But you can’t just put things on there without talking to me.”

She carefully raises one of her eyebrows.

“We did talk. We’re talking now. We do nothing but talk. Listening, on the other hand . . .”

“Please, Kira, I’ve got a meeting! If I’m late . . .”

“Absolutely, darling. Absolutely. If I get to work late an innocent person might end up in prison. Sorry, I interrupted you. Tell me more about what happens if *you’re* late?”

He breathes through his nose, as calmly as he can. “It’s the biggest game of the year tomorrow, darling.”

“I know, darling. And tomorrow I’ll pretend that it’s important. But until then you’ll have to make do with the rest of the town thinking it is.”

She’s hard to impress. That’s simultaneously what he finds most attractive and most irritating about her. He tries to find a stronger argument, but Kira just lets out a theatrical sigh, puts the keys to the Volvo on the table, and

clenches her fist in front of her husband.

“Okay. Rock-paper-scissors, then.”

Peter shakes his head and tries to stop himself from laughing.

“What are you? Eight years old?”

Kira raises an eyebrow again.

“What are you? A coward?”

Peter’s smile vanishes in an instant as he fixes his eyes on her and clenches his own fist. Kira counts to three out loud, Peter does paper, Kira very blatantly waits half a second longer and then quickly forms her fingers into scissors. Peter yells at her, but by then she’s already snatched up the keys and is heading for the door.

“But you *cheated!*”

“Don’t be a sore loser, darling. Bye, kids, be nice to Dad. Or at least reasonably nice.”

Peter stands where he is in the kitchen, shouting:

“Don’t you dare leave! Cheat!”

He turns to look at the calendar on the fridge.

“There’s not even anything on here about taking the car . . .”

The front door closes behind Kira. The Volvo starts up outside. Ana is standing in the kitchen, grinning, with a thick smoothie-moustache on her

upper lip.

“Have you ever got the better of her at anything, Peter?”

Peter massages his scalp.

“Would you mind fetching my son and daughter and telling them to put their clothes on and get in the car?”

Ana nods eagerly.

“Sure! I just need to clean up in here first!”

Peter shakes his head imploringly and takes out a fresh roll of paper towels.

“No . . . no, Ana . . . please don't. I can't help thinking that would only make things worse.”

* * *

Once the laughter in the office has subsided, one of the sponsors looks grimly

at the club's president, taps his knuckles on his desk and asks:

“So? Is there going to be any problem with Peter?”

The president mops his brow, shakes his head. “Peter does what's best for the club. Always. You know that.”

The sponsor stands up, buttons his jacket, and empties his cup.

“Well, then. I've got another meeting to go to, but I trust you'll explain things to him. Remind him where the money for his wages comes from. We all

know how he feels about Sune, but we can't allow any leaks to the media about

internal conflict here."

The club's president doesn't have to answer. No one knows more about the thickness of the walls than Peter. He'll put the club first. Even today, when he's

going to be ordered to eject Sune from it.

5

Why does anyone care about hockey?

* * *

Perhaps that depends on who you are. And where.

* * *

No one really knows how old Sune is. He's the sort of man who seems to have

been seventy for at least twenty years, and not even he can remember exactly

how many of those he's been the A-team coach. Age has made him shorter, stress and diet have made him wider. Nowadays he has the proportions of a snowman. He's at work earlier than usual today, but is standing hidden at the

edge of the forest outside the rink when the group of men emerge from the door. He waits until they get in their cars and drive off. Not because he's

embarrassed, but because he doesn't want them to feel embarrassed in front of

him. He's known most of them all their lives, even coached many of them.
e

fact that they want to fire him and replace him with the coach of the junior team is the worst-kept secret in town. There's no need for anyone to tell Sune not to turn the matter into a public conflict; he'd never do that to the club, and he knows it's about more than just hockey now.

Beartown is in a poor part of a big forest, but there are still a few rich men here. They saved the club from bankruptcy, and now they want payback: the juniors are to lead the march back to elite level. Tomorrow they're going to win

their semifinal in the youth tournament, and next weekend the final. When the regional council decides the location of the new hockey-focused high school, they won't be able to ignore the town with the best junior team in the

country. The team will become the heart of the town's plans for the future, and

the high school will bring with it a new rink, and then a conference center and

shopping mall. Hockey is becoming more than hockey, it's becoming tourism,

a trademark, capital. Survival.

So the club is more than a club, it's a kingdom over which the strongest men in the forest are fighting for power, and there's no place for Sune there. He looks at the rink. He's given his whole life to it. He has no family, no hobbies, not even a dog. Soon he'll be unemployed; he doesn't know what he's going to live off then. Or for. Even so, he can't blame anyone—not the president and not the junior coach, and definitely not Peter. Poor Peter probably doesn't even know about it yet, but they'll force him to carry out the firing, make him wield the axe and explain his actions in the local paper afterward. To make sure that the club stands united, and that the walls remain thick.

Sooner or later any sports team has to decide what it really wants to achieve, and Beartown is no longer content merely to play. They'll replace Sune with the coach of the junior team, for one simple reason: when Sune talks to his players before matches, he gives long speeches about them playing with their hearts. When the junior team coach stands in the locker room, he says just one word: "Win." And the juniors win. They've done nothing else for ten years. It's just that Sune is no longer sure that's all a hockey team should consist

of: boys who never lose.

* * *

The little car rolls along freshly plowed roads. Maya is leaning her head against

the window like only a fifteen-year-old can. Farther south, spring has arrived,

but Beartown only seems to have two seasons, and winter is such an obvious

fact of life here that summer always seems to catch everyone by surprise. No

one has time to get used to the two or three months of sunlight that are granted to them before it is snatched away again, and for the rest of the year it

can sometimes feel as if they might as well be living underground.

Ana flicks Maya's ear hard with her finger.

"What the . . . ?" Maya exclaims, rubbing that whole side of her face.

"I'm bored! Let's play a game!" Ana pleads.

Maya sighs but doesn't protest. Because she loves the smoothie-slurping idiot, and because they're fifteen and her mom is always telling her, "You never

have the sort of friends you have when you're fifteen ever again. Even if you

keep them for the rest of your life, it's never the same as it was then."

“Okay, how about this one: blind and brilliant at fighting, or deaf and brilliant at—” Ana says.

“Blind,” Maya says without hesitation.

is Ana’s favorite game; they’ve played it ever since they were little.

ere’s a degree of reassurance in the fact that there are still some things they don’t grow out of.

“You haven’t even heard the alternative!” Ana protests.

“I don’t give a shit about the alternative. I can’t live without music, but I can live without seeing your stupid face every day.”

“Idiot,” Ana sighs.

“Moron,” Maya grins.

“Okay, this one, then: always have boogers in your own nose, or go out with a guy who always has boogers in his nose.”

“Always have boogers in my nose.”

“The fact that you picked that answer says so much about you.”

Ana tries to hit Maya on the thigh but Maya swings away and punches her friend’s arm hard instead. Ana screams and they burst out laughing at each other. At themselves.

In the front seat of the car, with an ability that has been finely tuned over the years to shut out the wavelength of his big sister and her best friend and sit

isolated in his own thoughts, Leo turns to his dad and asks:

“Are you coming to watch me train today?”

“Yes . . . I’ll try . . . but Mom will be there!” Peter replies.

“Mom’s always there,” Leo says.

It’s a statement from a twelve-year-old boy, not an accusation. But it still feels like one to Peter. He’s checking his watch so frequently that he has to tap

it to reassure himself it hasn’t stopped.

“Are you stressing about something?” Ana says from the backseat in that tone that makes you want to start throwing things if you happen to be stressed.

“I’ve just got a meeting, Ana. Thank you for asking.”

“Who with?” Ana asks.

“The club’s president. We’re going to talk about the junior team’s match tomorrow . . .”

“God, everyone keeps going on about the junior team. You do know that it’s just a stupid game, don’t you? No one really cares!”

She’s joking; she loves hockey. But Maya quickly hisses: “Don’t say that to him today!”

“He’ll go crazy!” Leo agrees.

“What do you mean, crazy? Who’ll go crazy?” Peter asks. Maya leans

forward.

“You don’t have to drive us all the way to school, Dad. You can drop us off here.”

“It’s not a problem,” Peter insists.

“Not a problem . . . not for you, maybe,” Maya groans.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Are you ashamed of me?”

Ana interjects helpfully, “Yes!”

Leo adds, “And she doesn’t want anyone to see you because then everyone in her class will come over and want to talk hockey.”

“And what’s wrong with that? This is a hockey town!” Peter says, taken aback.

“Yeah, but life doesn’t only have to be about stupid hockey because of that,”

Maya can’t help retorting, and considers opening the door while the car is in motion and rolling out; the snow is still deep and she doesn’t think she’d break

anything. It feels like it might be worth the risk.

“Why do you say that? Why’s she saying *that*, Leo?” her dad demands.

“Can you just stop the car? Or just slow down, you don’t even have to stop,” Maya pleads.

Ana taps Leo on the shoulder.

“Okay, Leo, try this one: Never play hockey again, or never play computer games again?”

Leo glances at his dad. Emits a rather shamefaced little cough. Starts to undo his seatbelt and fumbles for the door handle. Peter shakes his head in despair.

“Don’t you dare answer that, Leo. Don’t you dare.”

* * *

Kira is sitting in the Volvo, heading away from Beartown. She heard Peter throwing up in the bathroom this morning. If that’s what hockey does to grown men in this town, what on earth must it be doing to the seventeen-year-

old juniors who are playing in the game tomorrow? Here’s an old joke among

the women of Beartown: “I just wish my husband would look at me the way he watches hockey.” It’s never made Kira laugh, because she understands it al

too wel .

She knows what the men of the town say about her, knows she’s a long way from the loyal GM’s wife they were hoping for when they appointed Peter.

ey don’t think of the club as an employer, but as an army: the soldiers need

to fal in whenever they’re summoned, their families standing proudly in the

doorways, waving them off. The first time Kira met the club's president was at

a golf tournament organized by the sponsors, and while they were miling about having drinks before dinner he handed her his empty glass. So few women existed in his hockey world that when he saw one he didn't recognize,

he took it for granted that she must be a waitress.

When he realized his mistake he just laughed, as if Kira ought to find the situation funny too. When she didn't, he sighed and said: "You mustn't take things too seriously, eh?" When he heard that she was thinking of carrying on

with her career in paral el with Peter's, he exclaimed in surprise: "But who's

going to take care of the kids?" She real y did try to keep quiet. Wel , maybe

not *real y*, but in hindsight she thinks she did *try*, at least. Eventual y she turned to the president and pointed at his greasy, sausagelike fingers, which were clutching a prawn sandwich, then at his stomach, which was straining against the buttons of his shirt, and said, "I thought maybe you could take care

of them. You have got bigger breasts than me, after al ."

The next time a golf tournament was organized, "plus one" had been

removed from the invitations. The men's hockey world expanded, the women's

shrank, and there has never been greater proof of Kira's love for Peter than the

fact that she didn't go down to the rink that day and punch someone. She

learned that you have to be thick-skinned in Beartown. That helps you deal

with both the cold and the insults.

Ten years have passed since then, and she has come to realize that things

feel a whole lot better if you have a really good stereo in the car. So she turns

up the volume. Plays Maya and Leo's "louder-louder list," not because she likes

the music but because it makes her feel close to them. When children are

young you think it will pass, the guilty feeling you get in your stomach when

you leave home each morning. But it never does, it just gets worse. So she has

their music collections on her phone, lists of songs that have been selected

because each is the sort that makes one of the children shout "LOUDER!

LOUDER!" when it comes on the radio. She plays them so loud that the bass

makes the door panels vibrate, because sometimes the silence of the forest

drives her mad. The early-afternoon sky hovers just above the trees almost all