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Library Journal

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The Deal of a Lifetime

Us Against You

NON-FICTION

Things My Son Needs to Know about the World

Anxious People

FREDRIK BACKMAN

Translated by Neil Smith



PENGUIN BOOKS

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

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'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 mum always said years ago, when the bank robber left 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 mum 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

LEPIS | *What*
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 on to 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 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 biscuits,' and now you're thinking about biscuits.

Don't think about biscuits!

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 any more now. Think about something nicer.

Think about biscuits.

It's the day before New Year's Eve in a not particularly large town. A police officer and an estate agent are sitting in an interview room in the police station. The policeman looks barely twenty but is probably older, and the estate agent looks more than forty but is probably younger. The police officer's uniform is too small, the estate agent's jacket slightly too large. The 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 estate agent were somewhere else, too. When the 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 estate agent 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 agency is called!' the estate agent 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 *hos-tage* 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 Estate Agency! HOW'S TRICKS?'

Obviously the estate agent 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 super-power. 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 estate agent chirrups, as if that were a real Swedish word.

The policeman looks down at his notes.

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

The estate agent shakes her head and grins.

'There are no bad days for the HOUSE TRICKS 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 estate agent chirrups.

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

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

'Can you describe it?'

The 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 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 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 van,' the police officer says.

'But you know what I mean,' the 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 estate agent smiles in bemusement.

LRDIS | We know
the truth

‘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 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 estate agent 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 mum 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 mum 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 estate agent again.

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