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Anxious People

FREDRIK
BACKMAN

The

WINNERS

a novel

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THE WINNERS

A Novel

FREDRIK BACKMAN

Translated by Neil Smith

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

1

Stories

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

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

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

Boys like Benji die young. They die violently.

2

Storms

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

Only everything.

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

like it or not, so stuck together that if one bugger rolls over too quickly in his sleep, some other bugger loses his shirt on the other side of the district.”

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

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

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

less and less about “the scandal” until it was almost like it had never happened.

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

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

matches they would have come in at the bottom and been relegated to a lower division.

So everything that seemed so utterly improbable when Maya and Benji left now feels, two years later, like merely a question of time: the green town is on the way up and the red town is on the way down. Every month Beartown seems to gain new sponsors and Hed has fewer, Beartown's rink has been renovated while the roof of Hed's is close to collapse. The biggest employers in Beartown, the factory and the supermarket, are advertising for staff again. The largest employer in Hed, the hospital, has to make cutbacks every year. Now it's Beartown that has the money, this is where the jobs are, we're the winners.

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

But do you want to understand the people? Really understand them? Then you also need to understand that very soon a terrible natural disaster is going to destroy things we love. Because while we may live in a hockey town, first and foremost we are forest folk. We are surrounded by trees and rocks and land that has seen species arise and be wiped out over thousands of years, we may pretend that we're big and strong, but we can't fight the

environment. One day the wind starts blowing here, and during the night that follows it feels like it's never going to stop.

Soon Maya will sing songs about us, we who are close to wilderness, inside and out. She will sing that the place where she grew up is defined by tragedies, the ones that hit us, and the ones we were guilty of instigating. She will sing about this autumn, when the forest turns against us with full force. She will sing that all communities are the sum of their choices and that all that holds us together in the end are our stories. She will sing:

It started with a storm

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

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

the hood and the metal crumples so violently that she's thrown against the windshield. No one hears them.