

Ordinary Love & Good Will

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ORDINARY
LOVE
&
GOOD WILL

TWO NOVELLAS BY

Jane Smiley

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*It seems appropriate to dedicate this book to
Delores Wardenburg, of Iowa City,
Carol Mullally, of West Branch,
Nancy Lewis, of Ames,
the Iowa State students who baby-sat, and to
the teachers at the Ames Community Preschool Center
whose kindness, care, and hard work made
this and all of my other books possible.
Thank you.*

ORDINARY
LOVE

 I don't want Joe to find me on my knees, buffing the kitchen floor with an old cotton turtleneck, but he does, and says, "Mom! What are you doing? Relax!"

I sit back on my heels and say, "It's only six-thirty. What's with you?"

But I know. We both know. He crosses the kitchen and pours himself his first cup of coffee. He drinks them three at a time, I've noticed this summer, hot and with lots of milk and sugar. Now he turns away from the coffeemaker, and the cup is half empty before he sits at the table. He is grinning. Michael will be here today. Michael, Joe's identical twin, has been teaching mathematics in a secondary school in Benares, India for two years. That is why I am buffing the floor, why neither of us can relax.

The floor is pegged maple, about seventy-five years old. The boards vary in width from two inches to five, and are laid diagonally. In the last fifteen minutes, I have worked my way from the pantry to the back door, into a long bronze leaf of sunlight that colors my forearms and turns my hands muscular with shadows. I like this floor, troublesome as it is: caring for it, I remind myself of my mother, and this city, in spite of all its trees, seems rather like Nebraska,

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where I grew up. The long, rhythmic motions with the rag are soothing and productive at the same time.

Joe says, "I think I'll leave for the airport about nine." He is bouncing in his chair. I smile and say, "Why don't you leave now?"

"I'm relaxed, Mom. What makes you think I'm not relaxed?" His expression is almost maniacal. They are twenty-five, and they have not seen each other in two years. "You, woman, get up and have a cup of tea or something." And so I do, simply for the pleasure of sitting at the kitchen table with my son. I let him make me toast and peel me an orange, and pour milk on my Rice Krispies. We talk about the geraniums in the window box and the broken lawnmower and the courses Joe is going to take when school starts again in two weeks. We don't talk about Michael. It is a family ritual, not to allude to the returning traveler while he or she is in transit. Usually we just don't speak the name, but this time Joe hasn't even said "he" or "my brother."

Joe has been with me all summer, the longest time we've spent together in six years, and I've gotten used to him. Joe was nervous about living with his mother all summer, but it has been one of the great summers of my life, the brush and thump and rattle of a congenial presence in the house every day. I'll be sorry when he goes back to school, and he knows it. He gets up from the table and goes into the dining room. He puts on some record, though only after carefully cleaning it off, and here comes Hank Williams, a compromise. I get back to the floor. He brought home his record collection and all summer his gift to me has been surprise music, but he can be pretty demanding—he's made me listen to Elvis Costello, The Talking Heads, The Flamin' Groovies, Dire Straits. I pretend I can hear the melodies. He says, only half joking, "This is pretty central to your mom-project, I would say, if you want to do it right." Doing it right involves learning to tolerate weirder har-

monies than I was accustomed to before, but as a part of his "son-project" he plays the opera and the folk music I like.

He was living in Chicago, but his girlfriend broke up with him in June. After he got here, she wrote him four letters in two days, then that was it. Louise, her name is. She'd visited here four or five times, and I'd liked her, found her a pleasant, straightforward young woman. At lunch after he had been here a few days, he pushed one of the letters across the table for me to read. The important thing, she wrote, was that she didn't have the power to make him happy. Joe got up then and went to pull weeds in the flower beds. I remembered that feeling, life with a moody man, the ceiling lifting and lowering hour by hour, some days minute by minute. I thought she was wise to recognize her capacities before marriage, before children, but when Joe passed the kitchen window, I saw from the angle of his shoulders that he was devastated, and tears came into my eyes for him. Since then he hasn't dated.

His whole social life here revolves around Barbara and Kevin, friends from high school who got married at the end of college. When they come over, she always wants to sit me in the kitchen and talk about furniture and he always wants to take me outside (No eavesdroppers? I wonder) and probe my knowledge of state government. I am fifty-two years old, which turns out to be the age when your children and their friends are suddenly eager to plunder the knowledge and experience they once wouldn't admit you had for nuggets they now find useful. I am an accountant for the state, in the DOT, which must explain Kevin's interest.

I've been married once, almost married a second time. I have five children, four grandchildren, which must explain Barbara's interest, even though furniture is the closest she can get to the real topic of children and family life. My younger daughter, Annie, who had a baby in May, calls

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about everything now, though for years I hardly heard from her. My elder daughter, Ellen, lives a mile from here. She has two daughters of her own, and she talks to me or stops by every day. Daniel, a year younger than Ellen, lives in New York. He has one son, and calls every weekend. Once I was the font of wisdom about babies that they think I am now. My hip was made for carrying an infant; I could thread my way among toys and toddlers without stumbling, hardly looking down, except to admire a scribbled drawing. I thought four high chairs at the kitchen table and two big Labrador retrievers milling around them hoovering up the jetsam was unremarkable.

After buffing the floor, I go into the bathroom and scour the tub and the sink. I love this house. I used to drive past it every day on my way to work, and then it came up for sale, and I bought it. It is a four-bedroom Colonial Revival, on a huge corner lot, with a wraparound porch downstairs and a second-story walk-out balcony, too much for a single woman, but just enough, in a way, for me. I think of it as my acreage. Here alone, the way I usually am, I appreciate the largeness of its peace—no grandeur, but plenty of roomy quiet. There are three chestnut trees in the yard that must be indestructible, since there aren't three chestnuts so close together anywhere else in the state. By the time I have done the bathroom and straightened the living room, it is nearly nine. Joe is whistling through the house, making himself, I know, wait until the exact minute before letting himself depart. I stand in the shadow of the living room doorway, and soon enough he comes downstairs, putting his things into his pockets, jaunty with anticipation. I admire him. He is tall and square-shouldered. He stands up straight. He is slender, with large hands and feet, and though he doesn't have the air of physical know-how that, say, Daniel has, he has repaired a lot of things around the house this summer, and cut a lot of wood with the chain saw he bought when

he got here. The man he is going to the airport to get now is his exact copy, top to toe, hair, fingers, feet. I haven't seen them together in years. He shouts, "I'm going now, okay?" I say, softly, "Okay," and he turns. He exclaims, "No big deal, Mom!"

"Oh, yeah. Right. I remember. Who cares?"

Just after he leaves, the phone rings, and it is Ellen. She says, "What time did you say he's getting here?"

"Joe just left. I'd say they'll be back before noon."

"Can I come over?"

"Of course."

"We knew this guy in Philadelphia who came back from India after two years. He was very weird."

"How was he weird?"

"Well, he would pick up the napkin you'd given him at dinner and he would say, 'This cloth is big enough to make a whole garment for an Indian child.' He would say that sort of thing all the time. I worry that Joe doesn't know what to expect."

"They've written a lot."

"Letters are very deceptive, I think."

"Well, I, for one, can't wait to see him." I am tempted to say his name, but at the last second I don't dare.

"I hate this," she says. Then, "Are you coming here tomorrow night?"

"What time do you want us?"

"Six. I don't think I'll come over there today after all. Jerry's out and I have too many errands."

"That's fine." I wait a long moment for her to decide to hang up the phone.

As I turn toward the kitchen, an ancient wave of terror seems to unroll from my head downward. I know exactly where it comes from. When Ellen was ten and the twins were five, and there were two in between, Pat, their father, and I parted, and he sold our house without telling me and

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took the children abroad. The morning I saw them for the first time in almost a year, this terror was so strong that I staggered from one side of the walk to the other as I approached his new house. I knew they were watching from the windows, and I was trying with all my concentration to walk normally, but I was literally unbalanced by the prospect of seeing them. There are things we can do in our family—eat peacefully, lend money, confide—but reunions are fraught with echoes.

When Michael walks into the house, he is not Joe's twin, but a shadow of Joe, dressed all in white cotton and cadaverous. He greets me in a Michael-like way, "Hey, Ma! I'm back. Any calls?"—grinning, grabbing me around the waist, and kissing me on the lips, but his biceps are like strings, and his ribs press into me through his shirt. It is all I can do not to recoil in surprise. We try to maintain a light, ironic (though sometimes rueful) atmosphere around here, but I look at Joe, and see by his subdued smile that Michael's figure has pierced him, too. He sets down the bags. In the moment we wait for Michael to signal us what to do and how to act, I think an irresistible thought—that we have gotten back less than we sent out:

Michael says, "You changed the pictures."

My glance follows his, and I realize that some copies I'd had of Audubon birds are missing. Joe says, "I moved the sunflower pictures down here from the guest room. Mom didn't even notice. I did it at the end of June."

"Of course I noticed." The sunflower pictures are rather nice: all five children and myself picnicking in a field of wild sunflowers on my mother's farm in Nebraska. The twins had just learned how to walk. My mother, too, ill but happy. She is sitting in a lawn chair, a profusion of sunflowers laced around her, on the only hummock for miles

in any direction. I didn't notice he moved them because this is where they used to hang, before I decided that I wanted to give the house a more decorative, impersonal look. The fact is, he's also shifted the furniture in the living room and the guest bedroom, and when he makes dinner, he always serves it on the oldest plates. All summer he has been quizzing me about our history, especially his early childhood with Michael in our old house. I don't object, but I always think, At least Michael wants to grow up and get on with his life. And he does: he looks at the pictures with only minimal interest, then goes into the dining room and puts his shoulder bag on the table. His glance around is appreciative but not lingering. From the back, he looks more like himself. His shoulders have lost none of their breadth, and he moves supplely still. I say, "Darling, are you tired? or hungry?"

He turns and smiles merrily. "Don't I look hungry?"

"Well—"

"Ma! Open your eyes! I'm starving!"

In a sense, we find out over lunch, this is literally true. Joe serves up yogurt with wheat germ and raisins, peanut-butter sandwiches, a piece of Brie cheese, fresh peaches. Michael stirs his yogurt and says in a jolly tone, "My intestines are unrecognizable. I mean, my large intestine is like a piece of PVC pipe, and it all just shoots through. That's what happens to everybody." He lifts up his cloth napkin, but doesn't say anything about how many children it could clothe.

Joe says, "What happens to everybody?"

"Oh. Amebic dysentery. I've had it for over a year. I need to get some Bactrim. Or I could get cured. You can do that here."

"Can't you get cured there?"

"You keep getting reinfected, so it isn't worth it."

"Attractive," says Joe.

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"Oh, I ran around like crazy when I first realized I had it, looking for a doctor who would make it go away, or at least be IMPRESSED. Now I hardly think about it."

"You could find a job as a pencil." They laugh.

In the middle of a peach, he puts his head in his hand and rests his elbow on the table. I say, "Tired?"

"Turned around. Jet-lagged. Twenty-four hours in transit is no joke. And they always make you leave in the middle of the night, and the night before, you were out with your friends. I'm glad I went west, though. They say it takes weeks to recover from flying through Hawaii. This stewardess on the flight was telling me that she hasn't had her period in a year, because she flies New York-New Delhi. North-south, they're regular as clockwork, but these east-west ones wonder if they'll ever be able to get pregnant." He clears his throat, and I realize that this is a new habit he has. It reminds me of my farmer uncles.

If I was waiting for tales of the exotic, and I think I was, I guess I am to be disappointed. I make one try: "Do you miss it? Did you like it?"

He looks at me thoughtfully. He says, "I got used to it." That's all.

Joe and I exchange covert smiles every so often, smiles of relief. Sometime during lunch Michael himself seems to have reappeared, swimming up through the strangeness of his clothing and his talk and his emaciation, a Michael familiar enough to recognize and love.

Once, on a trip to Washington, D.C., I saw a childhood friend in line next to me in a deli. I hadn't seen her since we were both in fifth grade, eating lunch together beside the swing set in the school yard. I recognized her by a vein that ran up the center of her forehead to a slight widow's peak. She wasn't looking toward me, so I didn't speak for a minute, and in that minute this same thing happened, the ten-year-old face I perfectly remembered blossomed on the

surface of this unknown, rather careworn woman. Before I even remembered her name, I was filled with a thirty-year-old fondness for how familiar and changeless she was.

It's tempting to believe this is going to be simple.

I am planning a picnic for this evening, out in Eagle Point Park, but I have saved the shopping. Joe stands behind me, doing the dishes. Michael is upstairs. Joe says, "Coffee filters. And ice cream. Garbage bags." I write it down. "Alfalfa sprouts. Some of their marinated tofu." Joe says, "I wish it were next week. I wish I could ignore him."

"Do you think he'd like acidophilus milk?"

"I wish I could say, 'Hey, great to have you back, catch ya later, okay?' "

I get up casually, and go into the pantry and look at the shelves. Joe raises his voice: "I saw this coming. I almost got a ticket to the Bruce Springsteen concert. For tonight. In Detroit. I had my checkbook out, and the guy said a hundred and fifty. I said, 'How about two hundred?' I wanted to be sure I'd go, you know."

I don't respond, and he turns off the water. "I knew I wouldn't. I knew I'd sit around here listening to him breathe."

The grocery store is my favorite place, a kind of meditation center that always refreshes me, but today it isn't enough. I'm still reluctant to go home when I pull out of the parking lot, and my reluctance grows as I near my house. The easiest thing, like stepping off a high diving board, is to roll right past it and discover myself ten minutes later at another mall, melting ice cream and acidophilus milk notwithstanding.

The mirrors behind window displays reveal me, and for a while I stand staring at myself without realizing what I am looking at. In fact, an anniversary is passing this

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weekend—it is twenty years since Pat and I parted. If my children notice, they will undoubtedly not mention it. I won't mention it, either, though this time of year often makes me think of that life.

I loved having twins, even though there were three children under five years old already running around the place. We lived in a huge old house on five acres of ground. My favorite moment of the day was in the morning, when I would be lying in bed, nursing the twins, one on each side, and then the other children would come and climb under the covers, and the dogs, too. I would be buried in flesh and noise, all thoughts scattered. We were twenty-seven, and drunk with the immensity of the world we had already made.

Pat's pediatric-allergy research was celebrated. Work he did led to the discovery that the newborn's stomach wall is a semipermeable membrane, and that nonhuman milk can cross undigested into the child's body and set up an allergic reaction. But his great hero was Piaget. He loved the idea that a child's brain development was orderly, a natural perpetual-motion machine that only had to be set going once. If anyone objected to this image as too mechanistic, he would say, "The mind is a palpable thing, as physical as anything else. It doesn't create order, it is order. It also FEELS order. Order feels good. Thinking feels good. Mmmm." (He'd rub his hands over his head, the children would laugh.) "Brains are in no danger of getting mechanical, but someday machines are going to be fleshy." He also loved the idea of researching his own children, but he recognized that even Piaget's sample would be considered laughably small these days. In the *Guinness Book of World Records*, there was a Russian woman who had sixty-nine children. This didn't seem impossible to Pat.

No matter how busy he was, Pat insisted on a nightly family dinner, and he was sparkling at the table. No matter

how young the children were, he addressed them with arresting hypotheses, pointed questions, opinions about their opinions. He was wooing them. He wooed me the same way. And, really, it was hard to take your eyes from his face, whether you were his child or his wife.

Well, in the midst of all of this, I fell in love with a man in our neighborhood. Pat sold the house and took the children to England, and my life was utterly formless, nothing, so close to nonbeing that I was surprised to find my clothes in the closet every morning. When I remember that time, twenty years ago now, the light around me seems to have been blinding. Shades could not be drawn against it. I seem to be walking down a city sidewalk and lost in the glare. I seem always to be waking up in the middle of the night, terrified to find all the lights on in my extraordinary new apartment. There is no known cause that speaks to what that time seemed like to me. It cannot be understood, really, only re-experienced unexpectedly. That sometimes happens to me.

Pat stopped doing allergy research twelve years ago, after the axle on his van broke near Winter Park, Colorado, and the van rolled over the side of the road and down into the valley. No fire, thank God. Annie, Michael, Tatty (Pat's second wife), their two children (Sara, Kenny), and Daniel were sprayed over the mountainside like a handful of gravel. Michael, Tatty, and Daniel got up and walked away. Annie broke her leg, Sara broke some ribs and her pelvis, Kenny and Pat were knocked unconscious. The little boy came to about three days later, but Pat was out for three and a half weeks, and when he came to, thinking didn't feel so good anymore—neither as sensuous nor as effective as before. His doctors didn't see how he was even going to practice medicine again, much less do research, but they underestimated his will, as I had once but wouldn't have again. The accident was a boon to me, though, because he relaxed