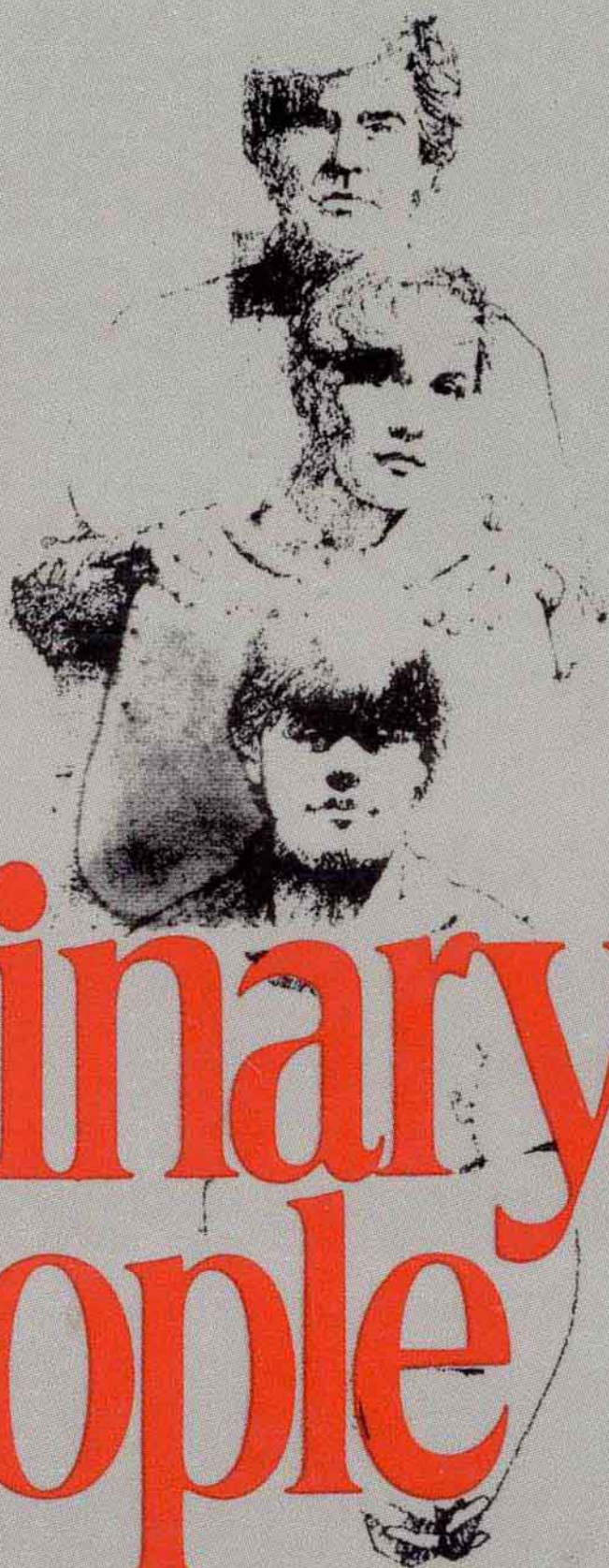
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Ordinary People

Judith Guest

Author of SECOND HEAVEN

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*for Sharon and Con
and for my husband*

*all their words,
spoken and unspoken,
being worth remembering.*

SONNET CLXXI

But what a shining animal is man,
Who knows, when pain subsides, that is not that,
For worse than that must follow—yet can write
Music, can laugh, play tennis, even plan.

—*Edna St. Vincent Millay*

To have a reason to get up in the morning, it is necessary to possess a guiding principle. A belief of some kind. A bumper sticker, if you will. People in cars on busy freeways call to each other *Boycott Grapes*, comfort each other *Honk if You Love Jesus*, joke with each other *Be Kind to Animals—Kiss a Beaver*. They identify, they summarize, they antagonize with statements of faith: *I Have a Dream, Too—Law and Order; Jesus Saves at Chicago Fed; Rod McKuen for President*.

Lying on his back in bed, he gazes around the walls of his room, musing about what has happened to his collection of statements. They had been discreetly mounted on cardboard, and fastened up with push pins so as not to deface the walls. Gone now. Probably tossed out with the rest of the junk—all those eight-by-ten colorprints of the Cubs, White Sox, and Bears, junior-high mementos. Too bad. It would be comforting to have something to look up to. Instead, the walls are bare. They have been freshly painted. Pale blue. An anxious color. Anxiety is blue; failure, gray. He knows those shades. He told Crawford they would be back to sit on the end of his bed, paralyzing him, shaming him, but Crawford was not impressed.

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Lay off. Quit riding yourself. Less pressure more humor go with the stuff that makes you laugh.

Right, of course. Right again. Always right: the thing that is missing here is a Sense of Humor. *Life Is a Goddamn Serious Big Deal*—he should have that printed up to put on his bumper—if he had a bumper, which he doesn't, not Conrad Jarrett the Anxious Failure dress this guy in blue and gray. A thousand-word book report due Wednesday in English Lit. The book has not been read. A test over the first six chapters in U.S. history. A surprise quiz in trig, long overdue.

He rolls onto his stomach, pulling the pillow tight around his head, blocking out the sharp arrows of sun that pierce through the window. Morning is not a good time for him. Too many details crowd his mind. Brush his teeth first? Wash his face? What pants should he wear? What shirt? The small seed of despair cracks open and sends experimental tendrils upward to the fragile skin of calm holding him together. *Are You on the Right Road?*

Crawford had tried to prepare him for this. "It's all right, Con, to feel anxious. Allow yourself a couple of bad days, now and then, will you?"

Sure. How bad? Razor-blade bad? He wanted to ask but he hadn't, because at that point his suitcase was packed and his father already on the way to pick him up and remarks like that only got you in trouble, pissed people off. Cancel the visa. Passport Revoked: they stamp it in red across your forehead. Uh uh. He'd had enough of that place. In the last months he had been able to spot the permanent residents every time. That unmistakable shuffling shoulders-bent walk. Mostly old men but some younger ones, too, in the dull, dusty-maroon bathrobes, sides flapping loosely, like the drooped wings of dying birds. Never. It was too damn small a world. Except that you always knew where you were. Mornings you talked first, then had O.T.—macramé, painting, woodwork-

ing, clay. Afternoons you could take a nap, go for a walk, work out in the gym—a well-equipped, exclusive YMCA—basketball, handball, racquetball, you name it. Evenings there were card games, small get-togethers in the corners of the lounge, Scrabble, backgammon. Leo told him once, “Stop worrying. You’re okay. You can play Scrabble, that means you can concentrate. You’re ready.” He had laughed. “It means you can spell,” he said. “That doesn’t mean shit.” “Well,” Leo said, “it’s nice to be good at something.”

His father calls to him from the other end of the house. He thrashes to a sitting position, connected at once to sanity and order, calling back: “Yeah! I’m up!” and, miraculously, he is up and in the bathroom, taking a leak, washing his hands and face, brushing his teeth. Keep moving, keep busy, everything will fall into place, it always does.

He takes a quick look in the mirror. The news isn’t good. His face, chalk-white, is plagued with a weird, constantly erupting rash. *This is not acne*, they assured him. What it was, they were never able to discover. Typical. He tries to be patient as he waits for his hair to grow out. He had hacked it up badly, cutting it himself the week before he left. “I didn’t think they would let you have scissors,” his grandmother said to him. “They shouldn’t have,” he answered her, oh, so casual, thereby relieving the listeners of shock and embarrassment while exhibiting his poise, his Sense of Humor, see folks? Everything’s okay, he’s here, wearing his jeans, boots, and jersey shirt, just like everybody else, all cured, nobody panic.

This house. Too big for three people. Straining, he can barely hear the early-morning sounds of his father and mother organizing things, synchronizing schedules at the other end of the hall. It doesn’t matter. He doesn’t need to hear, and they would certainly not be talking about anything important. They would not be talking, for instance, about him. They are people

of good taste. They do not discuss a problem in the presence of the problem. And, besides, there is no problem. There is just Phase Two. Recovery. A moving forward.

From what? Toward what? He dresses himself (Progress!), looking out of the window, studying the lacy line of Russian olives that separates their property from the next-door neighbors'—what's their name? Nice couple, but no kids, they've lived there for years—dammit, dammit, that's the kind of stuff that scares you, not being able to remember names. He stares in concentration at the tall hedge of cedars hiding the house from the road. Cahill. Their name is Cahill. Okay, now relax.

But he cannot relax, because today is a Target Date. Tuesday, September 30. One month, to the day, that he has been home. *And what are you doing Jarrett? Asking weird questions like From what? Toward what?* Questions without answers. Undermining. A serious affliction. Worse than acne, worse, even, than an unidentifiable rash. So what the hell kind of cure was that? In the rec hall one night they showed a movie on insects, *The Something Chronicle. Hellstrom*, that was it. The May fly has a life-span of eighteen hours. It spends that entire time laying eggs for the next generation. May flies, the narrator explained, know the answer. Because they never even have to ask the question. Nice for the May flies.

There is a prickly sensation at the back of his throat. He turns away from the window, picking up his books from the desk. Then he puts them down again. No. Follow routines. First, the bed; then line up the towels in the bathroom; then pick up books; then eat breakfast; then go to school. Get the motions right. Motives will follow. That is Faith. Vainly, he has taken to reading bumper stickers again, but they belong to other people. They are not his statements. *I Am a Hockey Nut. Christ Is the Answer—What Was the Question?*

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Vaguely he can recall a sense of calm, of peace, that he had laid claim to on leaving the hospital. There were one or two guiding principles to get him through the day. Some ambitious plans, also, for putting his life in order. But the details have somehow been lost. If there ever were any.

Razor in hand, he stands before the rectangular, gold-trimmed mirror, offering up a brief prayer: *Thanks. Appreciate all you've done so far. Keep up the good work*, while, beside him, his wife brushes her hair. Her face is soft in the morning, flushed, slightly rounded, younger than her thirty-nine years. Her stomach is flat almost as if she never had the babies. She raises her hands to the back of her neck, pinning her hair into a neat coil at the back of her head. Beautiful hair, the color of maple sugar. Or honey. Natural, too. The blue silk robe outlines her slender hips, her breasts.

"Did you call him?"

"Yeah, he's up."

She sighs. "I hate to play golf when it's cold. Why doesn't anybody in this league know enough to quit when the season's over? Leaves on all the fairways, your hands frozen—it's ridiculous."

He leans toward her; gives her a kiss on the neck. "I love you."

"I love you." She is looking at him in the mirror. "Will you talk to him this morning? About the clothes. He's got a closetful of decent things and he goes off every day looking like a bum, Cal."

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"That's the style. Decency is out, chaos is in—" As her brows lift, he nods. "Okay, I'll talk to him."

"And the other thing, too."

"What other thing?"

"Stopping by Lazenbys' on the way home. Carole called again last week. It's such a little thing. . . ."

"I don't want to pressure him about that. He'll do it when he wants to. Carole understands."

She shrugs. "When people take an interest, it would seem courteous—"

"We all know he's courteous." He turns his attention to his beard. Every morning the same face, the same thoughts. A good time to take stock, though. Calvin Jarrett, forty-one, U.S. citizen, tax attorney, husband, father. Orphaned at the age of eleven. He has caught himself thinking about that lately, thinking of the Evangelical Home for Orphans and Old People, an H-shaped, red brick building on Detroit's northwest side, where he grew up. Wondering if after all these years it is still in existence. Strange that he has never bothered to check. An odd kind of orphanage: most of the kids had at least one living parent; some even had two. He had moved there when he was four, leaving the tiny apartment where he was born. His mother sent him gifts on his birthday, and at Christmas. Occasionally she visited him. Periodically she explained why he was living there, and not with her; there was no room for him in the apartment, no money; it was no neighborhood in which to bring up kids. She had a friend who knew people that were connected with the Home; just luck. The director had told him once that the Home was financed by "religious benefactors."

He was named Calvin, for his dead uncle; Jarrett had been his mother's maiden name. When she came to see him, she came alone. No one claiming to be his father had ever been in attendance; he had no memories of being any man's son. So, if anyone should

ask, he can always point out that he had no example to follow.

And what is fatherhood anyway? Talking to a kid about his clothes. Not applying pressure. Looking for signs. He knows what to look for now: loss of appetite, sleeplessness, poor school performance—all negative, so far. His son eats, he sleeps, he does his homework. He says he's happy. Another duty: asking silly questions. *Are you happy?* He has to ask, though; pretends that he is kidding, just kidding; Conrad replies in kind. Pointless. Would the answer have been any different, even if he had thought to ask, before? Good manners have nothing to do with communication, he must remember that. And being a father is more than trusting to luck. That, too. Nobody's role is simple, these days. Not even a kid's. It used to mean minding your manners, respecting those who were bigger than you, treating each day as a surprise package, waiting to be opened. Not any more. So what's changed? Not enough surprises? Too many, maybe.

He has had a vision all these months, of boys, with their heads next to stereo speakers feeding music into their ears, their long legs draped over chairs and sofas. Or their arms, stretched toward a basketball hoop in the side drive (he had sunk the posts in cement himself, when Conrad was eight, Jordan, nine; just after they bought the house). Where are all these kids? Joe Lazenby, Phil Truan, Don Genthe, Dick Van Buren—they are all seniors in high school this year. Is eighteen too old to play touch football on the lawn? Basketball in the side drive? Is it girls? Studies? Since he has been home, Conrad has gone once to the movies. Alone. "Didn't anybody else want to see it?" Cal had asked. "I don't know," he said. "I didn't ask."

Responsibility. That is fatherhood. You cannot afford to miss any signs, because that is how it happens: somebody holding too much inside, somebody else missing signs. *That doctor in Evanston. Make sure he*

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calls him. It is for his own good. Why? Because his own vision, that of the boys hanging around, isn't coming true? It has only been a month. All the other signs seem right. Stay calm. Keep it light. Try not to lean. A balance must be struck between pressure and concern.

Back when Conrad was in the hospital, back when the visits were limited to twice a month, he could afford to take responsibility for everything: the sections of gray peeling paint in the stair wells; small gobs of dirt swept into the corners of the steps; even a scar at the side of one orderly's mouth. Now that he is home again, things are different. The responsibilities seem enormous. Staggering. His job alone, nobody else's. Motherhood is different, somehow. And what about fathering girls? He must ask Ray Hanley sometime, how it feels. Is there more, or less responsibility? He couldn't take more. *Your mother wants me to tell you, you have a closetful of decent clothes.* He will smile. "Okay. You told me." But, in a minute, he will ask, "What's wrong with what I've got on?"

Nothing. Nothing I can see. Only I don't pass up any chances to discharge these fatherly duties, this is the age of perfection, kid. Everybody try their emotional and mental and physical damndest.

Strive, strive. Correct all defects. All those Saturday trips to the orthodontist, when they were in junior high. Both of his boys had inherited from him, that long, slightly hooked nose; from their mother, the small, determined lower jaw. On them it had required thirty-eight hundred dollars' worth of work, courtesy Peter Bachmann, D.D.S., M.S. "Hell, what's a little money?" he had raved. "Overhaul their whole damn jaws if necessary, this is the age of the perfect mouth!" But, secretly, he had been proud that he was able to afford such expenses. He was supporting his family, *his boys*, in style: whatever they needed, whatever they wanted, they got. He had arrived. He was

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here. Not bad for the kid from the Evangelical Home.
And now? Where is he now?

Beth sets breakfast in front of Cal: eggs, bacon, toast, milk, juice.

Conrad looks up. "Morning."

"Morning. You need a ride today?"

"No. Lazenby's picking me up at twenty after."

He treats this as a piece of good news. "Great!" Said too heartily, he sees at once. Conrad looks away, frowning.

"I've got to get dressed," Beth says. "I tee off at nine." She hands him his coffee; crosses to the doorway; motes of dust flutter nervously in her wake. Conrad is studying. The book is propped against the butter dish.

"What is it, a quiz?"

"Book report."

"What book?"

He raises the cover. Cal reads, *Jude the Obscure*.

"How is it?"

"Obscure."

He sips his coffee. "No bacon and eggs this morning?"

He shakes his head. "I only wanted cereal."

He has lost twenty-five pounds in one year. Another year before his weight will return to normal, Dr. Crawford predicted.

"You feel okay?"

"Yeah, fine. I just didn't want a big breakfast."

The bony angles need to be fleshed out.

"You ought to keep trying to put weight on," Cal says.

"I am. I will. You don't have to be heavy to swim, Dad."

Back to the book, and Cal studies the crisp, dry rectangles on the tile floor. Patterns of sunlight. Familiar and orderly. "How's it going?" he asks.

Conrad looks up. "What?"

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"How's it going? School. Swimming. Everything okay?"

"Yeah, fine. Same as yesterday."

"What does that mean?"

A faint smile. "It means you ask me that every day."

"Sorry." He smiles, too. "I like things neat."

Conrad laughs. He reaches out to flip the book closed. "Okay," he says, "let's talk."

"Can't help it," Cal says. "I regard it as a challenge, people reading at the table."

"Yeah."

"So, how come Lazenby's picking you up?"

"He's a friend of mine."

"I know that. I just wondered if it meant you'd be riding with him from now on."

"I don't have a formal commitment yet. I'm gonna have my secretary talk to his, though."

"Okay, okay."

"We should have the contract drawn up by the end of the week."

"Okay."

He does a familiar thing, then; shoves his hands into the back pockets of his jeans as he rocks backward in the chair. Conrad, after all. A good sign, despite the brutal haircut; the weary look about the eyes. The eyes bother him every day. He still believes in the picture he carries in his wallet of a boy with longish, dark hair and laugh lines about the mouth and eyes; no weary look there. This gaunt, thin figure that sits across from him, hair chopped bluntly at the neck, still grins; still kids, but the eyes are different. He cannot get used to it.

His old self. That is the image that must be dispelled. Another piece of advice from the all-powerful Dr. Crawford, Keeper of the Gate. "Don't expect him to be the same person he was before." But he does expect that. As does everyone. His mother, his grandmother, his grandfather—yesterday,

Cal's father-in-law had called him at the office: "I've got to admit, Cal, that it shocked me. He looked so—" and Cal felt him hunting for the painless adjectives "—tired out. Run down. I would think, for the kind of money you paid, they would have at least seen to it that he ate properly, and got enough sleep. And he was so quiet. Just not like his old self at all."

And who was that? The kid who got straight A's all through grade school and junior high? Who rode his two-wheeler sixteen times around the block on his sixth birthday, because somebody bet him he couldn't? Who took four firsts in the hundred-meter free style last year? *Last year*. No, he is not much like that kid. Whoever he was.

He says his piece about the clothes, and Conrad nods absently. "Okay. I just haven't thought about it much. I will, though."

What, no argument? No raising of the eyebrows, no hint of sarcasm in the reply? What kind of a sign is this? Surely not good. Okay, now is the time. Lean, if you have to.

"Another thing," he says. "That doctor in Evanston, what's his name? Berger? Have you called him yet?"

An immediate reaction. The look on his face is tight; closed. The chair legs come down. "No. I don't have time."

"I think we ought to stick to the plan—"

"I can't. I'm swimming every night until six. He didn't say I had to call him, Dad."

"No, I know." He waits while Conrad stares at the table. "I think maybe you ought to. Maybe he could see you on the weekends."

"I don't need to see anybody. I feel fine."

A strained silence. Conrad pushes the cereal bowl, lightly; left, then right.

"I want you to call him anyway," he says. "Call him today."

"I don't finish practice until dinner—"