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A Regular Guy

A NOVEL

MONA SIMPSON

A Regular Guy

“Perfectly pitched.... [A] true reflection of our time.”

—*The Philadelphia Inquirer*

“[Simpson’s] best so far.... [Tom Owens] is the ‘regular guy’ of the title, high irony in that he is hardly regular.... He is one of the great fictional creations of our era.... Lyrically rendered.”

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“Simpson has never written a novel so teeming, nor one so technically daring.... Her language is as compelling as ever, and so is her wonderful way of prying into all the crevices of the human heart.”

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“What’s mesmerizing is the razor-sharp way Simpson unveils delicate levels of human covetousness and greed [and the] lyrical flow of her assured, inventive prose.”

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“*A Regular Guy* is rich in scale, funny and bitterly poignant.... A beautifully crafted story.”

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“The kind of narrative writing—poetic but rooted in the real sights and sounds and smells of living—of which [Simpson’s] in total command.... My, how imaginative and ambitious a writer is Mona Simpson.”

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“A marvelous chronicler of the fractured American family.”

—*Washington Post Book World*

“In her luminous and most brilliantly realized novel to date, Mona Simpson ... has finally proven Tolstoy’s axiom wrong for this age: Not all happy families are alike and not every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.... Simpson never loses her fine command of perfectly tuned speech, nor does she ever falter in her subtle observations about relationships between men and women, friends and lovers, parents and their children.... Completely absorbing.”

—*Detroit News-Free Press*

“Simpson’s intensity and poetic capabilities are as engaging as they were ten years ago.... This is indeed Simpson territory, and territory worth travelling.”

—*The Boston Book Review*

“Simpson captures the subtleties of personality and syntax in beautifully modulated voices ... [and] brings emotional surrealism to vivid life with ... sympathy and intimate detachment.”

—*Newsday*

“Sparks in its confrontations and provocations.”

—*Los Angeles Times*

“Wryly comic.... Simpson’s most powerful and moving writing is reserved for the fragile, makeshift alliances that sustain her characters, though she turns her deadly irony even on these.”

—*Sunday Times* (London)

“*A Regular Guy* is a minor classic.... Could it be the start of a wonderful series like Updike’s *Rabbit* quartet? ... Mona Simpson’s talent is a match for a task that ambitious.”

—*Scotland on Sunday*



MONA SIMPSON

A Regular Guy

Mona Simpson's work has been translated into fourteen languages. She is a recipient of the Whiting Writer's Award, a Guggenheim grant, and the Hodder Fellowship at Princeton University. Since 1988 she has taught at Bard College, where she is now the Sadie Samuelson Levy Professor of Languages and Literature. In 1996 she received a grant from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Foundation and was selected as one of *Granta's* Best Young American Novelists. She lives with her husband and son.

ALSO BY MONA SIMPSON

The Lost Father
Anywhere But Here

A Regular Guy

a novel by

MONA SIMPSON

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For Ye, who now has faith

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Acknowledgments

Prologue: Monuments



*H*e was a man too busy to flush toilets. More than most people Jane had known, he was oblivious to the issuance from his body that might offend. He didn't believe in deodorant and often professed that with a proper diet and the peppermint castile soap, you would neither perspire nor smell.

This inability, not just to pander, but to see any need to pander to the wishes or whims of other people, was unusual in a man who had political aspirations. It was fortunate, for him, that he was wealthy. Also, he was handsome, so even before his prosperity, he had not been lonely in love. His favorite art was art in the classical mode, particularly public art, in the form of monuments. He was as interested in the Louvre itself as he was in the paintings inside, which, beautiful as some were, and arresting, seemed to him just so many details. If a man wants the face of the earth to look different after his life upon it, he must think on a certain scale.

This afternoon he was taking his daughter to see the Eiffel Tower for the first time. Although he had limited patience for many things, he would never tire of showing places to his children—works, gardens or even states of feeling he had known. Someday, he would show her Italy. Next winter he intended to teach her how to ski. That, for the most part, made up what he believed a father should do for his children: introduce them to the wonders of the world.

And it was true, years later, long after she'd forgotten walking into the powder room while he was talking cross-continentially to his girlfriend too long on the phone, Jane remembered her father's tall form, riding with her in the crushingly crowded elevator, to the second-to-top landing of the Eiffel Tower, then walking up the metal stairs in his slant way, standing on the top balcony, his longer-than-most-fathers-of-his-day hair whipping against his round forehead, lips pressed together in a kind of patriotic awe, a smile breaking down towards her. That was him. His hair disheveled by wind, his voice raised to be heard over nature, he strode at the very end of the balcony like the mascot on a ship, invested in the future of the world. He was an American industrialist, a believer in the potential accomplishments of state, and, in a way he couldn't explain, proud. He was her father. And they saw all of the planned city of Paris spread below them.

He whispered, "I'm kind of thinking of running for office. Hey, doesn't this remind you a little of the Statue of Liberty?"

He had just told her he might run for office. She assumed he meant running

for president. It never occurred to her then that the choice would be anyone's but his.

That evening, in the hotel, he picked her book out of her hands, flipped through and then returned it. "Have you read anything by Abraham Lincoln?" he asked, dismissing the book issued by her old school. "You should read his speeches. I feel I can learn from people like Abraham Lincoln. See, I think it's individuals who make history." He paused a moment. "I think sometime when you're older, you're going to understand a lot better."

"Understand what?"

"I don't know, why I'm so busy. Why I wasn't always around when you might have wished I was." He knocked the cardboard cover of her book. "In school you study history; well, Genesis probably made a few of the great inventions of our time."

"It's a company."

"It's a company but it's more than a company." He fixed a look on her. She was too young to break in at the moment an adult would have, to force his own claims upon himself. His eyebrows went the way they did when he was serious. "You'll understand when you're older. A lot more about me."

"Here," he said, on the top landing of the tower, "we'll remember this." He pulled out two candy-colored franc notes, big bills, folded one into a paper airplane and sailed it down, over the metal railing. "Now yours."

"I'm keeping mine," Jane said.

Over the years, he took her to see the Empire State Building, the Lincoln Memorial and his favorite mountain lodge, built in the 1930s. He showed her Yosemite, his favorite place on earth, save home.

She led him, once, to an old abandoned factory at night.

"You like this?" he said, features like an owl's. "Why?"

"Never mind," she said, turning back, face parallel to the ground. She'd found it beautiful, the moonlight on hundreds of half-cracked-out windowpanes.

But he truly was only curious.

He made various thwarted efforts to erect his own monuments. All his life, he was impressed with architects and listened with his head cocked a certain way when they were talking, but each of their collaborations failed because the men he hired fell short of his standards and he did not have the time to direct the projects himself.

He bought a tower once, and he bought an orchard. He also owned a cave in Italy. Usually, he demanded that no statements involving money enter his sphere at all, but because of an odd carelessness of the accountant, Jane had seen a credit card bill on his dressertop. "Grotta," it said, and then converted a phenomenal amount of lire into eighteen thousand American dollars.

When she asked him about it, his face changed, his lips self-happy, remembering. "That's where Olivia and I made love one time. We fell asleep

on this little haystack right outside the cave. And then while she was asleep, I hid her dress.”

All of these purchases took place when he was living in a drafty upstairs wing of rooms with a roof that leaked and floors that bloomed fungus and an outside terrace where weeds grew up, cracking the tiles. A colony of bees made their home in a corner of the dining room.

He was not—as she had long hoped—a man inclined to ordinary dwelling.

What Existed, Far Away, While He Never Wondered



*I*t would take Jane years to reconcile her father with the man she'd grown up imagining, on the strange dark slide into sleep. One long-ago morning, she'd gone with her mother to a post office in a small Sierran town and seen a picture of a very young man, wanted for armed robbery. He appeared delicate and misunderstood in the grainy photograph, fugitive as an angel.

Her mother found her staring forlornly at that picture among the sad gallery. Jane was still a young child, but her face assumed an expression of concealment. For years afterwards, Jane would stare at certain men on streets and try to follow them. Her mother, Mary, would nod sadly and say no, he doesn't look like Owens at all, because it was the criminal's young face.

Mary wanted to correct the error, but she'd burned every photograph she had of Tom Owens.

Jane was born in Gray Star, a settlement in remote southeastern Oregon, where her cries were lost in miles and miles of orchards, stilled by a constant, omniscient rain. One of the people who lived in the communal house drove to town to wire Mary's message to Owens. Eight days later, she'd heard nothing. Staring out at the endless gray, she wrote a letter to her mother and told her she'd named the baby Jane, the name she'd once given her only doll.

They'd moved many times in the decade since, always because of a man. First there was the one who repaired string instruments and lived with nine cats. He gave Mary a guitar and made a high chair, where he allowed Jane to eat with her hands. Then, for a long time, there was the man who constantly traveled, following the greatest band on earth; he left them a truck, after he'd only begun to teach Mary how to play chords. Then came their months in Seattle, with the man who almost eclipsed Owens because he was beautiful, although he wanted to see them only weekends and said goodbye every Sunday by noon. Though he professed little aptitude for children, he taught Jane to read, because he couldn't stand the garbled language of toddlers and wanted to rush her to the age of conversation. It was this man who first showed them Owens' picture in the newspaper. With the small photograph, composed of dots, Mary tried to prove to Jane that her father was not the thief whose face she'd memorized from a post office wall.

In the article, Owens said he was the father of no children.

The city man's weekends shrunk. He started to come on Saturday morning, still leaving punctually before Sunday lunch. When his visits began at midnight, they moved again. But by then Tom Owens seemed to them the most famous man in the world.

They moved to a place with natural hot springs, where they tried to learn to sit and not think. There, in a mud whirlpool, Jane told a group of children her father was rich.

"And I'm heir to the crown of Curaçao," a boy replied. Actually, it wasn't unusual for the children Jane met in communes and ashrams to claim lineage so distant it would be impossible, ever, to trace, while they lived in trailers and trucks, on bare mattresses. She once befriended a family of Hungarian royalty whose only proof was a rare hereditary disease called porphyria. They had never been to school and their mother taught them out of a book of Elizabethan plays and a video of the movie they watched over and over again in their van.

Finally, a woman called Bixter led them to a mountain town, where they lived in a wooden cabin at a camp once operated, during the warm months, by the park service. Most nights, the men built a bonfire and the women cooked, everyone watching the weather, sniffing for the hidden pith of bread that meant snow in the sky.

Jane understood that no place they had ever lived was where they were from. Auburn was the name of that place, and although she'd never seen it, she knew it from her mother's stories. She drew the one wide Main Street blue with yellow lanterns and ended it in a pink square, where there was a newspaper-and-tobacco shop and a movie palace. She rimmed the town with stunted peach groves and palms full of dates, and set houses in every direction, each with its own yard and fruit-bearing tree. At night, she imagined the town sighing as the sky turned pink, then slowly dark. Jane had seen only one picture, on an old postcard they'd found in a dusty drugstore, showing horses and carriages instead of cars.

Unlike most towns, Auburn had been started by one person who'd had an idea. He had stopped not because the place was beautiful or different. In fact, it so exactly resembled land he'd already covered that only the collapse of his young wife made him stop. She had been called Auburn for the color of her hair, which had grown dark years before. Once she was buried there, he would never leave. Others in his party, however, noticed the kindness of the evening, a faint sweet smell emanating from white flowers in the dark. The man envisioned a clean town, no saloons, where ordinary people could grow their living. Over the next decades, more immigrants arrived, wealthy New Englanders from the long sail around the Horn, midwesterners in covered wagons, off the overland route, and eventually the patient citizens came on Pullman coaches, with modest expectations for the smell of fruit trees wafting through their afternoon rest. By then, Auburn had become an apricot town.

The founder's daughter declared a swap meet every month, where people

brought things found or no longer wanted and gave them to anyone who craved. A weekly clemency was instituted to encourage criminals' remorse and the return of the stolen to its owners.

Over the years, the swap meet had grown into a dump. Mary sometimes ached, missing the soft blurry start and end to the days in Auburn, the scent of wild rosemary and sudden mint rising from patches of refuse. When she was a child, the farthest she'd imagined going was San Francisco, the City of Clouds, which was no doubt still beautiful and corrupt. Now, though, when she felt far away, it was the homely valley town she remembered.

But when Jane asked if they'd return, she replied, "That cow town? What do you want to go there for?"

Mary di Natali had grown up on an old road in the part of town where overland settlers had built small brick houses like what they'd left, matchboxes on big yards with ancient trees, and lived for generations without the suspense of weather. People kept chicken coops or tied goats to trees. Mary never knew her father, but she had read his forty-three letters, which in small penmanship complained of a ship's damp cold and relished an imagined future, when he would again be a baker of bread and live his life in front of fire.

Mary's mother supported herself with her husband's small bakery. In later years she became famous as far away as Fresno for her wedding cakes that gave a mysterious happiness, caused by a secret ingredient only Mary knew was wildflowers, broken into the batter.

Although she'd never been there, Jane felt she would recognize the dead-end road near the train tracks, where prim brides of all ages stood in line. As a girl, her mother played in white ruffled dresses, with a bow in her hair. These came from the dime store or Browns' catalogue, the same as other children's, but Jane's grandmother favored the less durable styles.

Mary had never fit in. But in the places Jane had already lived, she'd fallen in with the pack. In the camp, she was a leader, calling out games and rules. Her clothes, like the others', were muddy colors from being collectively washed. When Jane heard her mother's stories, she wanted that white dress with the white bow.

"Can't you write to her and ask if I can have it?"

Mary sighed. "Someday we'll go back. I don't want you wearing dresses anyway." This was an idea she'd heard once from a man and kept because her own childhood dresses had no pockets and she couldn't collect things except in her skirt, and then her underpants showed.

"By the time we go back, they won't fit anymore."

"I'm sure she saved a few. Like the communion dress. That she'll have."

Jane's grandmother had delivered eighteen intricate cakes with small beans in their pale-bellied centers so Mary could have her first communion with a silk dress and her own wedding veil, cut down. Wax orange blossoms held the

lace on her head.

“You look just like a little bride,” Phil the milkman had whispered.

It was windy that day and Mary felt so light from fasting, having eaten only paper-thin wafers, that when the old nun led them up a hill by a rope that had hoops for their hands, she believed it was to keep them tethered, to prevent them, in their white dresses, from billowing away.

“Why don’t I get to have a first communion?” Jane asked.

“Because the Pope’s a liar,” her mother said.

Jane’s grandmother silently conducted two hundred and eighty-four weddings in Auburn. She baked the brides’ cakes, wired mortified bees and pressed butterflies into attendants’ bouquets and took the festal photographs. She’d thought about her own daughter’s wedding since the day Mary was born and every year, on her birthday, presented her with a silver knife, fork or spoon to contribute to an eventual nuptial set. When Mary announced that she was moving out to live with Owens, her mother immediately disowned her. She had never liked Owens—not then or later, when he appeared on the covers of magazines—because he didn’t know decent manners.

By then, Mary had become slovenly and lank-haired, a disgrace to her mother, who tried to maintain the standards of a Frenchwoman in Auburn, wearing a permanent bun so no one could have the slightest apprehension of finding a strand of hair in his cake.

“She says she’s from France,” Mary heard them say, behind her mother’s back, “but we all know she’s a Belgian.”

She was Belgian and the dumpman’s daughter.

Owens and Mary lived together one summer. In September, he went to Harvard. Mary sent him a twelve-inch nasturtium chiffon cake in the mail and received no letter of thanks.

By Christmas, when Owens returned, he renounced all food but rice and beans and the smallest increment of green vegetables. He rented a cheap house near Auburn’s only highway, splitting it with Mary and his friend Frank.

In the house that shook with the rumble of trucks, this was a period of giggling love, repeated chases that ended with her caught on the soft bed, and pancakes for dinner at midnight. But at her job at the dime store cash register, Mary sometimes cried because she and Owens hadn’t known each other as children. Owens had roamed the family junkyard with his father, looking for car parts. Once, they tore a fender off a wreck for a Caddy his father was working on, and that day, Owens told Mary, he saw a little girl in a white dress and a white bow, walking in a path through the debris.

Mary tried to show him bits of nature, because it was hard to talk after he came back from college. One night, she pulled him to the top of a hill, where, among the ancient, broken oaks, they watched the sunset spill for miles over

the valley they'd always known. His eyebrows lifted: he was glad to see. She reached for his hand, but even then he didn't acknowledge it. The sunset was the sunset, with or without her.

She wanted to get him off alone, somewhere simple and small. Her dreams at that time were always dreams of closure. And he did sometimes say, "Well, maybe if this thing doesn't work, I'll just go and live on an apple farm. In the mountains somewhere."

Owens wanted to establish a business where everyone was young. He had already proven himself unable to work with bosses. He and Frank both had the nightshift now, at the company that employed half the valley. The nightshift was where they put misfits and Mexicans.

Mary got pregnant accidentally, and from the day she told him, he made it clear that her condition held no enchantment.

He was every day up and out of the house by noon. At that time, Owens and Frank were inventing the business that would later make them famous and put their drowsy valley town on the map of the world.

The last day of her life in Auburn, Mary did the unthinkable and burst in on him at work. She had never been to the place where he and Frank planned their empire, because it was the basement of Owens' parents' house. She'd expected test tubes, Bunsen burners, petri dishes, chemicals, wires, smoke and possibly a conveyor belt, but instead she found Frank whistling "I've Been Working on the Railroad" while Owens stirred his beans and rice on a hot plate. The only evidence of scientific activity was an open ruled notebook with penciled equations. The rest of the basement seemed to be a woodshop.

"Owens," she said, "we've got to decide what to do."

He lifted his hands to a loose position of prayer while Frank climbed the stairs.

"You can stay, Frank," Owens called, but the whistling became fainter and then they heard the door bang.

"I can't have a baby now, Mare." With one cupped hand, he touched her hair. He couldn't give her anything in words, and this wouldn't count. His voice built the last wall, but for a moment, Mary closed her eyes and basked. Her neck weakened and the weight of her head fell to his hand. It had been a very long time since he was kind to her. But it occurred to her that she would have to choose, between him and his child.

"I've just started something," he whispered. "It's brand-new. I've got to give it time."

"I'm starting something too."

"I didn't ask you to get pregnant."

"But now it's happened and we have to deal."

Their fight escalated until he threw the beans at her. He noticed, as she walked away with the mess on her shirt, that her breasts had become large. The only vanity he'd ever suspected in her was the tendency to wear tee shirts backwards. Some girls in high school said she did it to show off her figure, but

he knew now that was a lie. Mary was guileless.

Mary had been pregnant at nineteen with the bewilderment she still carried like a halo of bees. She had gone with her predicament and asked strangers for advice, as if carrying the small globe of her life and offering it to them. This made a mission of a youth that had previously lacked direction. Mary kept asking until she found someone to tell her yes.

She had her tea leaves read by an old woman near the railroad tracks, who told her that life is a long time and good-for-nothing young men are always abundant, plenty to pick from, like weed flowers. The milkman's daughters, who went to church every Sunday, their heads covered by thin veils of spiderwebs, whispered the ingredients of remedies to flush out the mistake.

Only one person said yes: a Taoist priest who lived on a high ridge of the coastal range, eclipsed half the day and all the night in fog. He had not mastered English and he only said, "Child is miracle," but that was enough to start Mary on the journey that led her to seek refuge on a communal apple farm in southeastern Oregon, where everyone was responsible for cleaning up and every meal included apples.

Forever after, Jane's mother blamed the Taoists, because the priest never sent even the smallest check to help.

Owens visited them once, in the mountain camp that finished the first decade of Jane's life. He came at night, while she was asleep, and Jane remembered the visit afterwards as in a silver dream. She'd heard the racket of a car and felt the milky heat of headlights, but then she rolled over and fell into an embracing sleep like a spot of kinder water in a lake or the first sensation of warmth when she wet the bed.

He and Mary hauled Jane up, opening her from a curled position. He spread her across his outstretched legs, measuring. Mary tilted down to the floor with a candle. Mary had always believed her daughter was a rare beauty, and she had a mother's pride.

Owens put his fingers on Jane's knee, through a hole in her green stretch pants. For a long time, those pants had been her favorite thing; they had once been yellow.

"She has your forehead," Mary said, pulling back her daughter's bangs, to show.

They did that all night, isolating a part of her anatomy and saying it was one of theirs or the other's. And they both looked at her with wonder, because she was a physical marvel—the only thing they had in common now and could agree on.

They played a game on the floor, drawing a grid with their fingers in the dust.

"I'm five ahead of you and eight ahead of Mom," Jane said, grabbing her

feet and rocking her small body. Jane competed avidly, sucking her hair for inspiration, shrieking when she won. The score finally finished with him first, Jane second, her mother far behind. And that seemed to settle them all.

The next morning, the floor was swept and there was no trace of him, except the stack of new, unbent money on the kitchen table. It was late but the air still felt early, thin and cool with a lace of frost, as if they had confessed and all was forgiven, for a little while. Jane couldn't remember what he looked like.

Mary believed she'd finally found the cure for love: she'd become more Owens than he was. Passing wishes he'd mentioned were her life. She really had lived on an apple farm.

There was another man now, Mack Soto, who had two boys of his own and a fat short wife who had once been petite. He gave Mary white-bordered photographs of his sons, and from then on, Mary made sure to have Jane's picture taken in a machine booth every season, and she sent these to Owens, with Jane's age penciled on the border.

Mack drove to the wintercamp one night a week, while his wife had her book club. His coming made a party. They lit candles and drank long ribbons of brandy, which tangled in Jane's stomach, her arms and legs loosely knotted, like a doll she'd once seen, held together with rubber bands.

In the deep middle of one night, they sent her outside to walk. She put on her jacket, jammed her hands in the pockets.

"It's safe out there, isn't it?" she heard her mother say, behind the door.

Mack's voice slowed, stony and arrested, in a permanent state of nostalgia. "I used to walk with my grandfather here when I was a boy." He told them what he'd already told his sons, but his sons never listened fully because while he talked their mother rolled her eyes.

There was noise that was branches swaying, pine.

"We're lucky he has no girl," Mary had said. "He always wanted a girl. She did too, I suppose." The fat short wife who had once been petite took to bed when her second son was born. She got up again two months later wanting no more children and refused to let him touch her, except to rub her head.

Jane and Mary were always like this, knowing intricate stories about other people while the other people knew nothing about them, not even that they were alive. Jane wondered if her father understood how they ran out of money and worried what they would eat. The time he came in the middle of the night and they played checkers on the dusty floor, she asked for his phone number. He shrugged and said, "You already have it." She made him write it again, with his finger on the floor, but it was only the number of a phone at an office and other people answered; they sometimes left five messages and still didn't hear.

Jane walked the long road, her shoes so soft the bottoms of her feet felt pine needles. Stars touched the tops of her hands like bites, and trees on both