

# What We Talk About When We Talk About



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RAYMOND CARVER

Raymond Carver, born and raised in the Pacific Northwest, was the son of waitress and retail clerk Ella Beatrice Carver and sawmill worker Cleve Raymond Carver. Carver married his first wife, Maryann Burk, at an early age and supported the couple's two children by working a wide variety of jobs. After relocating to California with his family, Carver enrolled in Chico State University, where he became interested in creative writing. He published his first short story in 1961. Carver continued his education at Humboldt State University, where he wrote for *Toyon*, the college's literary magazine, and earned his BA in general studies. With a glowing recommendation from writer and professor Richard Cortez Day, Carver was then awarded an academic fellowship at the University of Iowa's prestigious Writers' Workshop program (though he never completed his MFA). In the years that followed, Carver worked various jobs while continuing to publish his writing and intermittently enrolling in and dropping out of different graduate programs. He began gaining critical acclaim when his stories appeared in well-known publications like the annual *Best American Short Stories* anthology and *Esquire* magazine. In the 1970s, Carver also taught at colleges like UC Santa Cruz and UC Berkeley and was a lecturer at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Throughout the 70s and 80s, Carver enjoyed continual success as a writer, publishing over a dozen short-story and poetry collections that garnered him accolades like the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. However, he also began abusing alcohol during this time—an addiction that wreaked havoc on his marriage and led to multiple hospitalizations before he got sober in 1977. Carver and Maryann divorced in 1982. He married his second wife, Tess Gallagher, in 1988—just six weeks before he died of lung cancer.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although there's no clear indication of when "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" takes place, it's likely set around the late 1970s or early 80s. The story focuses on relationship dynamics between men and women, which were greatly impacted by increasingly liberal social attitudes that became normalized in 1960s and 70s America. For instance, Terri lived with her boyfriend Ed without being married to him, a choice that would have been seen as taboo as recently as the 1950s. Divorce was also becoming more commonplace and acceptable at this time, as reflected by the fact that Mel, Nick, and Laura were all married to other people

prior to their current relationships. Additionally, laws like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Education Amendments of 1972 protected women against discrimination in the workplace or in education, respectively. It thus became more common for men and women to work or study alongside one another, as Laura and Nick do in the story. As the strict gender roles and social norms of the early 20th century fell by the wayside, men and women were navigating a new landscape in terms of how to relate to one another. In a society where two people in love were no longer defined by their marital status or obligated to stay together for life, people like the characters in "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" were left wondering what exactly love meant or how exactly one should cope with heartbreak.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Hemingway's "The Three-Day Blow" explores love in the context of a lost relationship (Nick's breaking up with Marjorie but having lingering feelings for her), which loosely echoes Mel's complex feelings for his ex-wife, who's conveniently named Marjorie. (And that there's also a Nick in Carver's story leads one to wonder if he did, in fact, pull inspiration from Hemingway.) Carver's technique of using dialogue to indirectly imply his characters' thoughts and motivations also mirrors that of Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" is a lot like "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" in that its two main characters spend the entire story in conversation, alluding to their interpersonal problems with very little exposition on Hemingway's part. In both Carver and Hemingway's stories, the audience is left to read between the lines and make their own inferences. Writers like J.D. Salinger (*Franny and Zooey*), Anton Chekhov (*The Seagull*), and Shirley Jackson ("The Lottery") are also known to use dialogue in this way. As a story whose characters are trying to make sense of their romantic relationships, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" is similar to Cate Kennedy's "Flexion" and Edith Wharton's "The Other Two." More generally, Carver's writing style is often described as "dirty realism" in that it depicts mundane or unsavory aspects of life in a candid, straightforward manner. Richard Ford (*Rock Springs*) and Tobias Wolff (*This Boy's Life*) are two other well-known writers of this genre.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** What We Talk About When We Talk About Love
- **When Published:** 1981
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short Story

- **Setting:** Mel and Terri's kitchen in Albuquerque, New Mexico
- **Climax:** Nick hears his heart beating along with Mel, Terri, and Laura's as the four friends sit in silence.
- **Point of View:** First Person

## EXTRA CREDIT

**True to Life.** Carver was said to have physically abused his first wife, Maryann, during their marriage. She refused to leave him, however, saying, "I really wanted to hang in there for the long haul. I thought I could outlast the drinking. I'd do anything it took. I loved Ray, first, last and always." A similarly toxic dynamic plays out between Terri and her abusive ex-boyfriend, Ed, in "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love."



## PLOT SUMMARY

Two married couples—Mel and Terri, and Nick and Laura—sit around Mel and Terri's kitchen table as the afternoon sun streams in through the window. The four friends are drinking gin and tonics and talking about love, which Mel (a cardiologist and former seminarian) believes is spiritual in nature. Terri recounts how her ex-boyfriend, Ed, used to beat her while telling her that he loved her. Mel is adamant that this wasn't real love, but Terri is sure that it was. Mel asks Nick and Laura what they think, but neither of them have an opinion since they didn't know Ed personally. During this exchange, Nick touches Laura's hand, and Laura smiles at him. Mel remains firm that the kind of love he's talking about is something absolute and nonviolent.

As the friends continue sipping their gin, Terri and Mel recount Ed's two botched suicide attempts: first by drinking rat poison, and later shooting by himself in the mouth. The gun Ed used to shoot himself was also the one he later used to continually threaten Terri and Mel—he was clearly unhinged over his breakup with Terri. Eventually, Ed shot himself in a hotel room, and he was brought to the hospital on a night when Mel was on call. The shot didn't initially kill Ed—he lived for three days, his head swelling to twice its normal size. Terri and Mel had gotten into a fight about Terri wanting to visit Ed and sit with him while he died (which she eventually did). Presently, Terri insists that Ed really loved her because he was willing to die over their failed relationship. Mel, however, remains staunch in his belief that this doesn't constitute real love. After this story, Terri finishes off the bottle of gin, so Mel goes to get another from the cupboard.

Laura then chimes in to say that she and Nick know what loves is for them. She playfully bumps Nick's knee with hers, and in response, Nick makes a show of kissing Laura's hand. Terri teases the couple about their affectionate relationship, lightheartedly warning them that things will be different once they've been together longer than a year and a half. Just then,

Mel returns with the new bottle of gin and proposes a toast "to true love." As the friends toast, the sun washes over them, making them feel warm and comfortable.

Mel abruptly declares that he knows "what real love is," and he goes on a long ramble about what happens to the love between couples who break up. After all, he once loved his ex-wife, Marjorie, and Terri once loved Ed. Nick and Laura were also both married to other people before they met each other. Mel says that it's sad yet beautiful that if any of them were to die, their respective spouse could move on and fall in love again. If that were to happen, the love they're discussing now would fade into memory. He asks whether this makes sense and prompts the others to correct him if they disagree. A concerned Terri asks Mel if he's drunk, but Mel snaps back that he doesn't have to be drunk to say what he's thinking. They both sip their drinks.

Mel then changes the topic to a story about something he experienced a few months ago, hoping it'll prove the point he's trying to make about what love is. Terri and Mel have another tense exchange about Mel being drunk, and then Mel begins his story as he passes the gin around the table. He recounts a night at the hospital when an older couple had been brought into the ER after a bad car accident on the highway. Both the husband and wife were severely injured and in critical condition—but against all odds, the couple made it through their extensive surgeries and survived.

At this point, Mel interrupts his own story to suggest that they all go out to dinner after they finish the second bottle of gin. He says that he loves food and wishes he could have been a chef. But what he'd really love to be, he says, is a medieval knight who carries women around with him on horseback. He also likes the idea of being safely encased in a suit of armor. Terri questions what would happen if Mel came back as a serf instead, and then she and Mel get into a spat when Mel uses the word "vessels" instead of "vassals." Mel spits that it doesn't matter which word he uses if they all know what he means, and then he sarcastically says that being a heart surgeon is no different than being an uneducated mechanic.

As the sunlight in the room begins to dissipate, Laura and Nick ask Mel to continue his story. Terri interjects with a joke about the old couple, which offends Mel, prompting him to tell Laura that he'd fall in love with her if Terri and Nick were out of the picture. Then, Mel gets back on topic, recounting how he checked on the old couple every day during their recovery. The husband and wife were both in full-body casts, and the husband grew depressed because he couldn't turn his head to look at his wife. Mel repeats this point several times, clearly moved by the idea of a man's heart breaking over not being able to see his wife. He again asks the others if they understand what he's saying, but they just stare at him.

By this point, the sun has mostly left the kitchen, and Nick thinks that they're all a bit drunk. Mel encourages everyone to

finish the gin so that they can go to dinner, to which Terri suggests that Mel is depressed and needs to take a pill. Suddenly, Mel feels compelled to call his children, but Terri reminds him that he'll feel worse if he talks to Marjorie. They tell Nick and Laura about how Mel wants Marjorie to either remarry or die so that he can stop paying her alimony. Mel then shares a fantasy about releasing bees into Marjorie's house so that she'll get stung to death. He pretends that his hands are bees, buzzing them around Terri's throat.

Mel then concedes that it isn't a good idea to call his kids, and he suggests they go to dinner instead. Nick says that he'd be equally content going out to eat or continuing to drink; Laura, on the other hand, is starving. Terri offers to go get some cheese and crackers, but she doesn't get up to do so. Suddenly, Mel intentionally spills the rest of his drink onto the table, declaring that the gin is gone. Terri asks what they should do next, but the four friends just sit without speaking as the kitchen goes dark. Nick hears all of their hearts beating together in the otherwise silent room.



## CHARACTERS

**Mel McGinnis** – Mel is Terri's husband and Nick and Laura's friend. He's a tall, 45-year-old man with curly hair. The story takes place in Mel and Terri's kitchen in Albuquerque, where the two couples are drinking gin and discussing the meaning of love. Mel, who's a cardiologist, is confident that he knows what "real love" is. Having been harassed and threatened by Terri's unstable ex, Ed, in the past, Mel is now adamant that violence and love are entirely separate. This viewpoint sparks a disagreement with Terri that persists throughout the story, as she believes that Ed truly loved her in spite of his physical and verbal abuse. However certain Mel is about what love *isn't*, he struggles in vain to arrive at a clear definition of what love *is*. He incoherently rambles about his thoughts on the matter, embarrassing his wife and confusing his friends. And as Mel monopolizes the conversation, it becomes increasingly clear that although the meaning of love is deeply important to him, his ideas are muddled and inconsistent. Additionally, it seems that violence and love aren't as neatly compartmentalized for Mel as he'd like to think: in addition to his frequent spats with Terri throughout the conversation, he shares fantasies of being a medieval knight who captures women and of murdering his ex-wife, Marjorie. As the story draws to a close, Mel falls silent and dejectedly rests his head in his hands, his former confidence having evaporated as Terri, Nick, and Laura have thoroughly misunderstood the points he's tried to make. Mel's failure to articulate his deeply held beliefs about love and his ensuing frustration points to the inadequacy of language to convey profound truths.

**Terri** – Terri is Mel's wife and Nick and Laura's friend. She's a thin, attractive woman with long brown hair and dark eyes. As

the group of four discusses love, Terri brings up her former relationship with a man named Ed, who would physically abuse Terri while telling her that he loved her. After they broke up, Ed continually threatened Terri and Mel, eventually growing so distressed that he attempted suicide and died in the hospital. Terri still feels sorry for Ed and is adamant that he truly loved her in spite of his violent behavior, whereas Mel doesn't think that "real love" and violence can mix. This is a significant disagreement that seems to make Terri insecure: she continually asks Mel to validate her belief that Ed really did love her. Importantly, there's a confusing mix of love and violence within Terri and Mel's own relationship, as they rapidly switch between declarations of love and hostile outbursts at each other. Mel also dominates Terri in conversation, demeaning her in front of their friends and putting words in her mouth without letting her speak. Notably, Terri easily forgives Mel for being cruel to her just as she forgave Ed in the past. This complicated dynamic demonstrates how love and violence (whether physical or verbal) can't be neatly separated.

**Nick** – Nick is the narrator of the story; he's Laura's husband and Mel and Terri's friend. Nick is 38, and though he doesn't give away much about himself, it's implied that he's a lawyer (he and Laura, a legal secretary, "met in a professional capacity"). Nick and Laura have been together for 18 months, and they were both married to other people prior to their relationship. Unlike the other characters in the story, Nick doesn't claim to know what love means, and he expresses his affection for Laura solely through nonverbal gestures like touching her leg or kissing her hand. Whereas Mel and Terri are set on coming to a precise definition and understanding of love, Nick is seemingly comfortable with having an emotional and bodily experience of romance without needing to analyze it. Indeed, toward the end of the story, the conversation has died down, and the characters are trying to decide what to do next. In this moment, Nick comments that he'd be content heading "right on out into the **sunset**"—and though he says this in passing, it's symbolically significant. The diminishing sunlight in the kitchen where the four friends are talking parallels their gradually diminishing confidence and clarity about love, and Nick's comment suggests that he isn't afraid of this looming uncertainty. Ultimately, as everyone falls completely silent and sits still in the dark room, Nick hears their hearts beating together. This final image suggests that matters of the heart are indeed mysterious and unknowable, but that love is something universally and deeply felt.

**Laura** – Laura is Nick's wife and Mel and Terri's friend. She's a 35-year-old legal secretary who met Nick through work. Laura, like Mel and Terri, believes that she knows what love is, though none of them are able to arrive at a clear definition. As the two couples discuss love, Nick and Laura never say "I love you," preferring to communicate their affection for one another nonverbally through facial expressions, body language, and

physical touch. Their relationship is portrayed as more stable and affectionate than Mel and Terri's, perhaps because they place greater emphasis on the emotional and bodily experiences of love. Nick and Laura's unspoken yet deep bond points to the insufficiency of language to describe love and the impossibility of ever knowing its exact nature.

**Ed (Terri's ex-boyfriend)** – Terri tells Nick and Laura anecdotes about her ex-boyfriend, Ed, whom she lived with before she dated Mel. Ed used to physically abuse Terri while telling her that he loved her, which led to Terri's somewhat confusing outlook about what constitutes love. She believes that Ed truly loved her despite his brutal treatment of her, whereas Mel doesn't think that love and violence can coexist. After Terri broke up with Ed, he relentlessly terrorized and threatened Terri and Mel, to the point that Mel kept a gun in his car out of fear. Emotionally unstable and distraught over the situation, Ed attempted suicide twice: first by drinking rat poison, second by shooting himself in the head. A few days after the second attempt, Ed succumbed to the gunshot wound and died in the hospital, with Terri by his side (much to Mel's chagrin). As Terri shares this story, she says that she still feels sorry for Ed.

**Marjorie (Mel's ex-wife)** – Mel was married to Marjorie before his relationship with Terri. Marjorie currently lives with her boyfriend and her and Mel's children, all of whom Mel supports through his alimony and child support payments. Although Mel waxes poetic about how much he used to love Marjorie, he also resents having to give her money and wishes that she would either get remarried or die. Mel openly fantasizes about unleashing a hive of bees into her house to sting her to death, an image that complicates Mel's professed opinion that love and violence are entirely separate.

story's mysterious ending seems to suggest something more positive. The couples' conversation about love is a failure, but once they fall silent, their beating hearts are all audible. Perhaps, then, Carver proposes that love cannot be understood or explained but instead must simply be felt and appreciated. Love, in other words, might reside more in the body than in the mind.

At the beginning of the story, when the characters begin discussing love, they seem confident that they know what love is. Mel McGinnis is the first to weigh in on the topic, saying that he believes "real love [is] nothing less than spiritual love." While it's hard to say what this vague statement actually means, the fact that nobody disagrees or asks him to explain further leaves the impression that what he said is clear and true. Likewise, the story's other couple seems initially confident about their understanding of love. Laura tells everyone that "Nick and I know what love is," and while Nick doesn't elaborate on this, he previously thought to himself that, "In addition to being in love, we like each other and enjoy one another's company. She's easy to be with." This points to his belief that their love is clear and straightforward—that he understands what it is and how it works. Furthermore, even when the couples begin disagreeing, everyone initially maintains their confidence. Mel's wife, Terri, describes a man who "loved her so much he tried to kill her," and Mel pushes back, saying, "I sure know you wouldn't call [that] love." He and Terri arrive at an impasse: Terri insists that this was love, and Mel insists that it wasn't, but both of them remain clear about what they themselves believe.

This clarity dissolves quickly: the more the two couples talk about love, the more confused and agitated they all become. Mel, for instance, initially had the clearest ideas about love—but as the story progresses, he becomes uncertain. "I love Terri and Terri loves me," he says. "But sometimes I have a hard time accounting for the fact that I must have loved my first wife too [...] What happened to that love?" Mel never answers this, but the question points to his growing awareness of love's complexity. Furthermore, Mel contradicts his initial certainty that love can't involve cruelty or violence. Once, when Terri gently points out that he's drunk, Mel tells her—in front of the others—to "shut up for once in your life." Later on, as he describes his fantasy of killing his ex-wife by letting a swarm of bees into her house, he pretends that his fingers are bees and he buzzes them by Terri's throat. Mel clearly loves both of these women in some way, but this love is entangled with violence and cruelty. The truth of his relationship to love is much darker and more complex than his initial clarity let on.

The couples' failure to arrive at a definition of love is partially due to their inability to grapple with its darkness. But Carver also suggests that it's impossible—and maybe even undesirable—to talk about love, since love is primarily felt rather than understood. Throughout the story, the warmest moments between characters are unspoken: Nick touches the



## THEMES

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### THE NATURE OF LOVE

In "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," two married couples spend an afternoon together drinking gin and debating the nature of love. Initially, they all believe that they know exactly what love is, and they feel certain that their own marriages are loving. However, as they struggle to define and defend their ideas about love, the conversation devolves into uncertainty and disagreement. Their heated (and at times cruel) debate, along with their collective inability to separate violence from affection, point to a darkness at the heart of love—but the

back of Laura's hand, or Mel reaches for Terri's cheek. Once, when Laura tries to goad Nick into defining what love means for the two of them, his response is purely physical: "For an answer, I took Laura's hand and raised it to my lips." It's possible to interpret this as Nick deflecting attention from his inability to answer, but perhaps he's being honest: what love is, to them, is something bodily and unspoken. Carver also suggests that love is physical rather than verbal when Mel tells a story about an elderly couple who miraculously survived a car crash. Afterward, the husband became depressed, but Mel clarifies that this wasn't because he was traumatized over the accident: the man was upset because his full-body cast made it so he couldn't "turn his goddamn head and see his goddamn wife." The man could speak to his wife (his cast had a mouth hole, and his wife was in the same room), so it's significant that what he really cared about was seeing her. This suggests that the power of their love is physical and intuitive—it cannot be spoken.

At the end of the story, the gin runs out, and the couples—exhausted and confused by their conversation about love—fall silent. They're drunk and sitting in darkness, likely stewing about all the frightening aspects of love they've just discussed. It's certainly possible to see this ending as a pessimistic commentary on how little they understand about the darkness and uncertainty of love. But there's also an optimistic interpretation: the story ends with Nick hearing everyone's hearts beating, which seems to mark a transition from talking to feeling. As Nick listens to the heartbeats, he calls them a "human noise," and the word "noise" is conspicuous. Unlike "sound," "noise" suggests unintelligibility. Maybe feigning certainty about love and trying to define it leads only to confusion and dismay; maybe the heart simply can't be understood.



## LOVE AND VIOLENCE

At the beginning of "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," Mel McGinnis—a heart surgeon—insists that love and violence cannot coexist: "The kind of love I'm talking about, you don't try to kill people," he says. But the remainder of the story contradicts him. As the couples discuss love, they constantly invoke violence: Mel's wife, Terri, believes that violence can prove the existence of love; Mel reveals his own violent fantasies toward his ex-wife; and Terri talks about her ex-boyfriend who killed himself when she didn't reciprocate his love. Throughout the story, Carver suggests that violence and love are not as different as they may seem: they're emotionally linked, arising from intense feelings for another person, feelings that these characters cannot rationalize or fully control.

At the beginning of the story, the characters openly debate whether love and violence can coexist. Terri sets the stage for this debate when—after describing how her abusive ex-boyfriend would beat her while telling her how much he loves

her—she asks, "What do you do with a love like that?" Instead of answering her question, Mel rejects the premise: "My God, don't be silly. That's not love and you know it," he says, implying that real love cannot be violent or abusive. Over the course of several pages, Terri and Mel continue to disagree, with Terri insisting that this man did love her. She momentarily offers a compromise—that love means different things to different people—but neither one of them seems to accept this. Mel won't concede that anyone could call this behavior love, while Terri continues to ask Mel to agree with her: "You can grant me that, can't you?" she pleads. That this debate is so prolonged and emotional hints at its stakes: Terri and Mel seem unsettled that, despite believing themselves to be in love with each other, they have radically different definitions of love. Perhaps they wonder if, since they each understand love so differently, their shared love is shakier than it once seemed.

Mel and Terri never resolve their disagreement, but as the story progresses, Mel's behavior suggests that he doesn't separate love and violence as neatly as he claims. For one, Carver portrays Mel as demeaning and hurtful to Terri, linking her ex-husband's physical abuse with Mel's emotional cruelty. As Terri expresses concern about how drunk Mel is getting, for instance, he tells her to "Just shut up for once in your life." Afterward, Nick observes that Terri "seemed anxious," but then, moments later, she accepts her husband's behavior: "'I love you, hon,' she said." Terri's willingness to quickly forgive Mel echoes how she forgave her ex-boyfriend's physical abuse, writing it off as an expression of love. Mel's mixing of violence and love isn't only emotional: several times, he implies that he has physically violent fantasies that are tied to love. The first instance of this is easy to miss. When Mel imagines being a medieval knight, he describes how he could carry a woman with him everywhere. Laura's playful yet cautious response ("Shame on you") emphasizes that Mel's fantasy reduces women to objects. And this objectification is arguably violent, given that in his fantasy, Mel is physically forcing a woman to accompany him. Later, after drinking more gin, Mel says that if he weren't married to Terri, he would abduct Laura under the guise of love. Needless to say, he never asks Laura what she thinks about this. Mel's imaginary scenario echoes something Terri described about her ex-boyfriend: that he would physically drag her around a room while telling her that he loved her. This conflation of love and violence, coupled with Mel's sudden resemblance to the ex-boyfriend, suggests that Mel's clean separation of love and violence is false.

Without resolving the debate between Terri and Mel, the story does suggest that violence and love are linked. This is consistently apparent in Mel's erratic behavior toward Terri. For instance, after Mel berates Terri for interrupting him, she interrupts him again. Instead of snapping at her, as he did previously, Mel responds by kissing her and declaring his love. That these two back-to-back interruptions are met first with

hostility then with love suggests that Mel's angry and loving reactions are related—or even interchangeable. Mel's feelings for Terri are intense; sometimes they manifest lovingly, other times with a hint of violence. The blending of love and violence is even clearer in Mel's confusion over his love for his ex-wife, which suddenly transforms into hatred without him understanding why. He says, "There was a time when I thought I loved my first wife more than life itself. But now I hate her guts. I do. How do you explain that?" What links this love and hatred is intensity of emotion; one replacing the other so quickly suggests that they are, in some way, two sides of the same coin. Carver later makes this link even more explicit when Terri describes Mel's two desires for his ex-wife: "he wishes she'd get married again," Terri says. "Or else die." Mel's wish that his ex-wife would remarry is somewhat selfish (he wants someone else to financially support her), but it's still revealing to see love and death directly juxtaposed, as though they're similar fates.

Near the end, there's a moment that encapsulates the story's attitude toward love and violence. As Mel describes his violent fantasy of killing his ex-wife with a swarm of bees, he moves his buzzing fingers around Terri's throat, explicitly blending Mel's violent fantasies toward his ex-wife, his playful love for Terri, and the violence toward her that has been simmering throughout the story. It's a confusing image, but one that suggests the ease with which love and violence can mix. The story does not end with a moral about violence and its connection to love, nor does it judge or condemn the characters. It does, however, suggest that love and violence—which are linked by an intensity of feeling—cannot be neatly separated.



### THE FAILURE OF LANGUAGE

The title "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" implies that language will play a central role in this story: for its duration, the four

characters are in conversation with one another, trying to define the meaning of love. However, they struggle to clarify what love means—it's a complex phenomenon, and language seems inadequate to describe love (or anything else). Over the course of the story, language continually fails: the characters misspeak, miscommunicate, or find themselves at a loss for words altogether. This is not, however, a bleak picture of social isolation. By paying attention to other kinds of communication (body language, for example), Carver demonstrates that spoken language is just one of many ways to communicate—and often, other forms of communication are more effective at conveying complex ideas or deep emotions.

Throughout the characters' conversation, they fail to properly express themselves or understand one another through language. Mel McGinnis is adamant that he knows the definition of love, and in a moment of vulnerability, he rambles

out loud about what love is and what happens to love when a couple separates. He then asks the others to evaluate his thoughts: "Am I wrong? Am I way off base? Because I want you to set me straight if you think I'm wrong. I want to know. I mean, I don't know anything, and I'm the first one to admit it." Mel is trying to convey something profound about love to the other characters, and he's clearly worried that they won't understand where he's coming from. Indeed, they are confused about what Mel is trying to say: after Mel candidly shares his thoughts, his friends Nick and Laura are unsure of how to respond. Mel's wife, Terri, asks him, "Are you getting drunk? Honey? Are you drunk?" Mel replies, "Honey, I'm just talking [...] I don't have to be drunk to say what I think." Terri seems to be embarrassed of Mel, and so she tries to distance herself from what he's just said. Mel, however, doubles down on his points and insists that he was being honest. Though his diatribe wasn't particularly lucid or logical, he spoke at length about a topic he deeply cares about. Now, he's hurt that his wife and close friends don't understand him and so can't share in his emotions. This exchange thus shows how language can easily be muddled and misconstrued (especially when alcohol is involved). In this instance, it's an insufficient way to communicate profound truths about love.

While words tend to mislead or confuse, other forms of communication, like body language, can offer better ways of demonstrating things like love. While Nick and Laura discuss their love, Mel believes that the couple's body language tells a fuller story. "You guys have been together eighteen months and you love each other. It shows all over you. You glow with it." Language sometimes deceives, but outward signals like a body's "glow" are harder to fake. Indeed, although Mel and Terri speak to each other throughout the story, readers don't get a sense that there's deep understanding or intimacy between them. Nick and Laura, on the other hand, express their affection nonverbally—by holding hands, for instance, or exchanging smiles. Their love for each other is made clear in these simple moments of touch or eye contact, their bond transcending words. Communicating through body language strips away the variables associated with speech—like tone of voice or word choice—allowing Nick and Laura to express themselves without the pitfalls of spoken language. When Mel eventually tells a story about an elderly couple involved in a car crash, he explains why the husband became depressed: it wasn't trauma over the accident, but rather that he "couldn't see [his wife] through his eye-holes" while he was in a full-body cast. The elderly man survived against all odds and could talk to his wife, but he clearly felt like he'd lost something more important than language: the ability to make eye contact with his wife. This further implies that nonverbal, bodily communication can be more meaningful than speech. Such an unspoken connection, Mel believes, is "what we're talking about when we talk about love."

As the story draws to a close, the characters fall silent. Nick hears all of their hearts beating as though united, an image which suggests that deep human emotions, like love, are universally felt even though they can't always be described. The anatomical heart has long been used as a symbol of love, a parallel that's particularly ironic given Mel's career as a cardiologist. He's an expert at heart surgery, yet he doesn't have any more clarity about the figurative heart—that is, love—than other people do. No one, it seems, can explain love. Indeed, that the story ends with the four friends' hearts beating together, with nothing left to say to one another, sends the message that matters of the heart are better left unsaid. Love is something that resonates with everyone on a level that transcends language—words don't do it justice.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## SUNLIGHT

The sunlight in the kitchen as Mel, Terri, Nick, and Laura talk about love represents the four friends' gradually diminishing clarity during their conversation. At first, the sun fills the room "like a presence [...] the spacious light of ease and generosity" while the friends sip gin and tonics. The bright, direct sunlight parallels the friends' clarity and confidence as they begin discussing love—Laura believes that "Nick and I know what love is," and Mel declares that "I'll tell you what real love is." But Mel proceeds to go on an incoherent ramble about what happens to love after a breakup or a death, which only leaves Terri, Nick, and Laura confused and worried about Mel. Accordingly, the sunlight begins to dissipate as the friends get drunk and lose track of the topic at hand, mirroring their diminishing certainty about what love is.

Mel goes on to tell a personal story that he hopes will prove his point about love, but the others still don't understand what he's trying to say. After this, Nick immediately notes that they're drunk and that the light has almost entirely left the room. Importantly, though, "nobody made a move to get up from the table to turn on the overhead light," suggesting that the friends have not only moved from confidence to confusion about what love is, but that they've lost any hope or will to find clarity again. The story ends with Mel, Terri, Nick, and Laura having run out of ideas of what to talk about or do next, "not one of us moving, not even when the room [goes] dark." This final image of the four friends sitting in silence in a dark room symbolizes the idea that words often fail to articulate profound truths, like the definition of love. The friends' conversation, rather than guiding them to a solid conclusion, leaves them both literally and figuratively in the dark.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Library of America edition of *Raymond Carver: Collected Stories* published in 2009.

### What We Talk About When We Talk About Love Quotes



☞ "He was dangerous," Mel said. "If you call that love, you can have it."

"It was love," Terri said. "Sure, it's abnormal in most people's eyes. But he was willing to die for it. He did die for it."

"I sure as hell wouldn't call it love," Mel said. "I mean, no one knows what he did it for. I've seen a lot of suicides, and I couldn't say anyone ever knew what they did it for."

Mel put his hands behind his neck and tilted his chair back. "I'm not interested in that kind of love," he said. "If that's love, you can have it."

**Related Characters:** Mel McGinnis (speaker), Laura, Nick, Ed (Terri's ex-boyfriend), Terri

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 313

#### Explanation and Analysis

As Mel, Terri, Nick, and Laura discuss love, Terri shares some anecdotes about her abusive ex-boyfriend, Ed. Ed used to beat Terri while telling her that he loved her, and after they broke up, he was so distraught that he attempted suicide twice. Terri believes that Ed loved her in spite of all this, whereas Mel is adamant that such violence is entirely separate from love. Mel is a heart surgeon and has seen an immense amount of pain and suffering in his line of work—he was actually on call when Ed was brought into the hospital after shooting himself in the mouth. This is perhaps why Mel is reluctant to acknowledge that love and violence can sometimes coexist: he views "real love" as something spiritual and pure, a kind of escape from life's more violent aspects.

Terri, on the other hand, seems to romanticize Ed's loving side while downplaying his violent side, believing that his words were more important than his actions. In her mind, the fact that he was "willing to die" over their failed relationship wasn't just a marker of his mental instability—it was also evidence of his unyielding commitment to her. But although Mel and Terri disagree on what love is, they're both adamant that their respective views are correct,


meaning that there is a clear definition of love one way or the other. This sets up one of the story's central concerns: whether or not the true nature of love can ever be fully analyzed or understood.

“Well, Nick and I know what love is,” Laura said. “For us, I mean,” Laura said. She bumped my knee with her knee. “You're supposed to say something now,” Laura said, and turned her smile on me.

For an answer, I took Laura's hand and raised it to my lips. I made a big production out of kissing her hand. Everyone was amused.

“We're lucky,” I said.

**Related Characters:** Nick, Laura (speaker), Ed (Terri's ex-boyfriend), Terri, Mel McGinnis

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 314

### Explanation and Analysis

As Mel and Terri argue about the nature of love, Laura interjects to say that she and Nick know what love means for their relationship. Importantly, though, they *show* their love rather than *telling* Terri about it: instead of presenting a clear definition of what love is, Nick simply kisses Laura's hand. This seems to suggest that love is something that's felt rather than something that can be articulated using language—love is an emotional and bodily experience more so than a phenomenon that can be neatly defined, analyzed, and understood through language.

Just prior to this, the story established Terri's own view of love and affection: she essentially thinks that what a person says is more important than how they act. For instance, she believes that her ex-boyfriend, Ed, was telling the truth when told her that he loved her—even though he physically abused her at the same time. Nick, on the other hand, seems to be suggesting the opposite through his wordless gesture of affection: how a person *shows* love is more important than saying “I love you.”

“I'll tell you what real love is,” Mel said. “I mean, I'll give you a good example. And then you can draw your own conclusions.” He poured more gin into his glass. He added an ice cube and a sliver of lime. We waited and sipped our drinks. Laura and I touched knees again. I put a hand on her warm thigh and left it there.

**Related Characters:** Mel McGinnis (speaker), Terri, Nick, Laura

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 314

### Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the story, Mel is adamant that he knows what “real love” is. Yet for all his confidence that he has profound wisdom about love, Mel continually fails to convey his points to Terri, Nick, and Laura. His ongoing struggle to put love into words furthers the idea that doing so is actually impossible, and that love only grows more mysterious and unknowable as people try to analyze it.

It's also significant that Mel's arrogant statement is juxtaposed with Laura and Nick communicating through physical touch. Laura and Nick's relationship is portrayed as much more stable and affectionate than Mel and Terri's—and the fact that their affection is nonverbal suggests that this is a more appropriate and meaningful way to express love than language is. Whereas Mel tries and fails to explain love using words—making sweeping declarations about love and telling stories in an attempt to back up his points—Laura and Nick effortlessly show love through body language, touch, and facial expressions. This is especially true when alcohol is thrown into the mix, as it is throughout the story. Verbal communication is particularly vulnerable to external factors like this, as it's even easier to misconstrue words when people's speech is impaired and their inhibitions are lowered.

“But sometimes I have a hard time accounting for the fact that I must have loved my first wife too. But I did, I know I did. So I suppose I am like Terri in that regard. Terri and Ed.” He thought about it and then he went on. “There was a time when I thought I loved my first wife more than life itself. But now I hate her guts. I do. How do you explain that? What happened to that love? What happened to it, is what I'd like to know. I wish someone could tell me. Then there's Ed. Okay, we're back to Ed. He loves Terri so much he tries to kill her and he winds up killing himself.”



**Related Characters:** Mel McGinnis (speaker), Laura, Nick, Ed (Terri's ex-boyfriend), Terri, Marjorie (Mel's ex-wife)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 315

### Explanation and Analysis

After Mel claims that he can tell Terri, Nick, and Laura what “real love” is, he proceeds to go on this rather incoherent rant about lost love. Although it's clear that Mel has a deep emotional connection to the topic at hand, he isn't able to convey his overarching point in an intelligible way, nor is it clear that he even knows for himself what that overarching point is. Mel's struggling in vain in this passage further challenges the idea that love is something concretely knowable and definable, particularly when trying to explain it using language.

Mel's meditations about his first wife, Marjorie, also complicate his opinions about love and violence. The fact that he remembers his past love for her while hating her in the present implies that such emotions (though seemingly opposite) are rooted in a similar level of passion. This is also true of Terri's ex-boyfriend Ed, who was so distraught over their breakup that he threatened Terri and ended up killing himself. While the story doesn't provide any clear-cut answers about the relationship between love and violence, that multiple characters exhibit such a confusing mixture of the two does suggest that they can't be neatly separated.

“Am I wrong? Am I way off base? Because I want you to set me straight if you think I'm wrong. I want to know. I mean, I don't know anything, and I'm the first one to admit it.”

“Mel, for God's sake,” Terri said. She reached out and took hold of his wrist. “Are you getting drunk? Honey? Are you drunk?”



“Honey, I'm just talking,” Mel said. “All right? I don't have to be drunk to say what I think. I mean, we're all just talking, right?” Mel said. He fixed his eyes on her.

“Sweetie, I'm not criticizing,” Terri said.

She picked up her glass.

“I'm not on call today,” Mel said. “Let me remind you of that. I am not on call,” he said.

**Related Characters:** Terri, Mel McGinnis (speaker), Laura, Nick

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 315-316

### Explanation and Analysis

After Mel goes on a rant about heartbreak and loss, he questions whether or not what he's said makes sense and encourages Terri, Nick, and Laura to correct him if they think he's wrong. Rather than acknowledge what he's said, Terri simply asks Mel if he's drunk. Mel's ramble was circular and incoherent, which seems to have embarrassed Terri—her question is a way of distancing herself from Mel and invalidating everything he's said. But Mel doubles down and insists that he was just being honest, clearly hurt and frustrated that Terri and his friends have misunderstood and brushed him off after he tried to share something profound. This is one of the clearest examples in the story of language's failure to adequately express complex ideas, as words fall short of capturing whatever point Mel was trying to make.

This passage also hints to some underlying tension in Mel and Terri's relationship: their interactions here (and intermittently throughout the story) are rather hostile, and Terri embarrasses and demeans Mel in front of their friends. Despite Mel's belief that violence and love are wholly separate, there is clearly some level of animosity between the couple that exists alongside their more loving interactions.

“If I could come back again in a different life, a different time and all, you know what? I'd like to come back as a knight. You were pretty safe wearing all that armor. It was all right being a knight until gunpowder and muskets and pistols came along.”

“Mel would like to ride a horse and carry a lance,” Terri said.

“Carry a woman's scarf with you everywhere,” Laura said.

“Or just a woman,” Mel said.

“Shame on you,” Laura said.

**Related Characters:** Laura, Terri, Mel McGinnis (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 318

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, Mel shares a fantasy about coming back as a medieval knight in a different life. By carrying a woman with him, Mel seems to mean that he would capture a woman against her

will and take her as his companion on horseback—this is why Laura responds, “Shame on you.” Prior to this, Mel has been adamant that love and violence aren’t compatible—yet his fantasy clearly proves that he is willing to objectify women and perhaps even to force them into nonconsensual romantic or sexual relations with him.

Just prior to this, Mel shared a story of his former patients who were in a terrible car accident. And later, Mel says that he would enjoy being a knight because of the armor—and because car accidents didn’t exist in the Middle Ages. With these two details in mind, it seems that Mel is attracted to being a knight because modern life is so dangerous and vulnerable by comparison. And perhaps this is why he’s so reluctant to admit that love and violence can occur concurrently, even when the two are obviously intertwined in his own desires. Mel seems to view sex and romance as an escape or a balm against life’s suffering, and he’s therefore unwilling to directly acknowledge the ways in which these things can manifest violently.


●● “Vassals,” Terri said.

“What?” Mel said.

“Vassals,” Terri said. “They were called vassals, not vessels.”

“Vassals, vessels,” Mel said, “what the fuck’s the difference? You knew what I meant anyway. All right,” Mel said. “So I’m not educated. I learned my stuff. I’m a heart surgeon, sure, but I’m just a mechanic. I go in and I fuck around and I fix things. Shit,” Mel said.

**Related Characters:** Mel McGinnis, Terri (speaker), Laura, Nick

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 318

### Explanation and Analysis

In this exchange, Mel and Terri get into a spat about Mel using the word “vessels,” instead of the correct word “vassals,” to refer to medieval serfs. Mel is clearly frustrated, making the point that it doesn’t matter which word he uses as long as they all understand the point he’s trying to make—a sentiment that echoes his previous annoyance when Terri, Nick, and Laura misunderstood what he was trying to say about love. He goes on to sarcastically suggest that his job as a heart surgeon is no different from that of a mechanic, essentially making the point that despite obvious differences, their primary duty (fixing broken things) is the

same.

In the same way that Mel thinks job titles are somewhat arbitrary and interchangeable, he seems to generally believe that the particulars of how a person speaks—such as word choice or tone—shouldn’t matter as much as the *content* of what’s being said. The problem, though, is that these factors *do* matter when it comes to conveying one’s ideas, since they can change or obscure the meaning of language. This makes the case that language can often be an ineffective means of communication due to all the variables influencing how language is perceived. This is especially true when compared to the ease and directness of Nick and Laura’s nonverbal communication throughout the story.

●● “Well, the husband was very depressed for the longest while. Even after he found out that his wife was going to pull through, he was still very depressed. Not about the accident, though. I mean, the accident was one thing, but it wasn’t everything. I’d get up to his mouth-hole, you know, and he’d say no, it wasn’t the accident exactly but it was because he couldn’t see her through his eye-holes. He said that was what was making him feel so bad. Can you imagine? I’m telling you, the man’s heart was breaking because he couldn’t turn his goddamn head and see his goddamn wife.”

Mel looked around the table and shook his head at what he was going to say.

“I mean, it was killing the old fart just because he couldn’t *look* at the fucking woman.”

We all looked at Mel.

“Do you see what I’m saying?” he said.

**Related Characters:** Mel McGinnis (speaker), Laura, Nick, Terri

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 320

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mel is telling Terri, Nick, and Laura an anecdote about his former patients, which he hopes will help prove his point about the meaning of love. This older husband and wife were in a serious car accident that left them both in full-body casts, and the husband grew depressed over not being able to turn his head to see his wife. Throughout the story, Mel has claimed to know what “real love” is, yet he’s failed to come up with a solid definition that his wife and friends can understand. Here, he seems to

be vaguely suggesting that love is bodily and emotional in nature, hence why the husband was depressed over not being able to see his wife even though he could still hear and speak to her. With this, the story drives home its point that love is something that can't be readily understood or analyzed—it's something that one deeply feels and that transcends language.

Yet, ironically, Mel tries to share this deep truth through words, the very channel that he's suggested is insufficient to convey complex ideas or emotions. He's clearly moved by this story, and readers may be able to infer the point he's trying to make—yet he fails to convey his underlying meaning to his wife and friends using language.

“There isn't a day goes by that Mel doesn't say he wishes she'd get married again. Or else die,” Terri said. “For one thing,” Terri said, “she's bankrupting us. Mel says it's just to spite him that she won't get married again. She has a boyfriend who lives with her and the kids, so Mel is supporting the boyfriend too.”

“She's allergic to bees,” Mel said. “If I'm not praying she'll get married again, I'm praying she'll get herself stung to death by a swarm of Ricking bees.”

“Shame on you,” Laura said.

“Bzzzzzz,” Mel said, turning his fingers into bees and buzzing them at Terri's throat. Then he let his hands drop all the way to his sides.

**Related Characters:** Laura, Mel McGinnis, Terri (speaker), Nick, Marjorie (Mel's ex-wife)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 321

### Explanation and Analysis

As Mel and Terri discuss Mel ex-wife, Marjorie, Terri comments that Mel wishes Marjorie would either get remarried or die so that he could stop paying her alimony. While this statement is likely an exaggeration meant to amuse Nick and Laura (Mel probably doesn't really want the mother of his children to die, after all), it's telling that Mel seems to associate death and marriage so closely—as if the two are similar fates. This once again implies that love and violence aren't as neatly compartmentalized as Mel would like to think, which becomes even clearer when he goes on to share his fantasy of Marjorie being killed by a swarm of bees. Mel has claimed that he once loved Marjorie “more

than life itself”—that he's able to recall his feelings for her alongside this violent fantasy suggests that these two impulses are intertwined within Mel.

This plays out even further when Mel pretends that his fingers are bees and buzzes them around Terri's throat. This image is unsettling given what Mel has just said about Marjorie, and it blends together his hatred of her, his love for Terri, and the intermittent cruelty he's directed at Terri throughout the story. It's difficult to interpret this gesture, but it certainly reinforces the idea that love and violence are both derived from passion and can't be neatly separated from each other.



“I'll put out some cheese and crackers,” Terri said.

But Terri just sat there. She did not get up to get anything. Mel turned his glass over. He spilled it out on the table. “Gin's gone,” Mel said.

Terri said, “Now what?”

I could hear my heart beating. I could hear everyone's heart. I could hear the human noise we sat there making, not one of us moving, not even when the room went dark.

**Related Characters:** Mel McGinnis, Terri (speaker), Laura, Nick

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 321-322

### Explanation and Analysis

The story ends with this passage, in which the four characters' conversation fizzles out and they're left sitting in silence. Sunlight is an ongoing symbol of the friends' gradually diminishing clarity about the meaning of love, so the fact that the room goes dark here suggests that they've completely shifted to confusion and uncertainty. Up until this point, the characters have been trying and failing to use language to express themselves and come to a solid definition of love. It's significant, then, that Terri and Mel each say things here that are divorced from meaning: Terri doesn't actually intend to go get cheese and crackers, and the gin isn't technically gone when Mel spills his drink. It seems that the characters have entirely given up on trying to be precise and truthful with their language, a shift that further emphasizes the futility of words when trying to convey complex or profound ideas—like the nature of love.

The final image of Nick hearing everyone's hearts beating together is also important. The anatomical heart is a traditional symbol of love, and the fact that the heartbeats are described specifically as "noise" rather than "sound" connotes unintelligibility. This implies that matters of the heart can be recognized and appreciated but not dissected

or analyzed, an idea that the characters have been struggling with during their conversation about love. However, the image of the four friends' hearts beating as one is optimistic: it suggests that even though the exact nature of love is unknowable, the emotional and visceral experience of love is something that resonates universally.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT LOVE

The narrator (whose name is later revealed to be Nick) is listening to his friend Mel McGinnis talk—others often let Mel speak simply because he’s a cardiologist. **Sunlight** streams in through the big kitchen window at the home of Mel and his second wife, Terri, in Albuquerque. They’re sitting around the kitchen table with Nick and his own wife, Laura, drinking gin and tonics and discussing of love. Mel is adamant that real love is spiritual in nature. Before going to medical school, he’d spent five years in seminary—the most important years of his life, in his estimation.

Terri shares that her ex-boyfriend, whom she lived with before Mel, tried to kill her because he loved her so much. One night, the boyfriend beat Terri up and dragged her around by her ankles, knocking her head into furniture while telling her that he loved her. “What do you do with a love like that?” she asks the others at the table. Mel tells Terri not to be silly—what she’s describing isn’t love. But Terri disagrees: while it may not sound like love to Mel, she’s adamant that her ex did love her in spite of his violent behavior.

Mel tells Nick and Laura that Terri’s ex-boyfriend threatened to kill him. Finishing his drink, Mel reaches for the bottle of gin and says that Terri is a romantic who interprets violence as affection. At this, Terri shoots Mel a look, and he grins back at her and tenderly touches her cheek. Terri sips her drink and wonders aloud how they arrived at this topic; Mel is always thinking about love, she says. Mel retorts that Terri’s ex, Ed’s, behavior hardly qualifies as love.

Mel asks Nick and Laura what they think, and Nick replies that he wouldn’t know—he never met Ed. He says that he believes what Mel is trying to say is that “love is an absolute,” and Mel agrees that the kind of love he’s talking about is absolute and nonviolent. Laura chimes in that she can’t judge Ed’s situation either. Nick reaches out to touch Laura’s hand, and she smiles at him.

*As a cardiologist, Mel is an expert on the anatomical heart—a traditional symbol of love. The fact that Mel seems certain about what “real love” is suggests that he believes he’s an expert on the figurative heart—that is, love—as well. Yet he doesn’t give a solid definition of love here, only alluding to the fact that it’s related to the spirit. The reader can infer, then, that the four friends’ conversation about love won’t be as clear and definitive as Mel hopes. This opening passage also introduces the symbol of sunlight, the brightness and directness of which mirrors Mel’s initial certainty about love.*



*Terri’s story about her ex-boyfriend indicates that the dividing line between love and violence isn’t as clear as Mel would like to think. That Terri’s ex simultaneously abused her and professed his love for her perhaps implies that expressions of love and violence, though very different, are derived from a similar emotional state of passion. Although Terri can’t explain Ed’s love for her, it’s clear that she felt it on a deep level. And while Terri and Mel disagree about what constitutes love, they’re each certain that their respective opinion is correct—both are confident that love can be concretely defined one way or another.*



*Whether intentionally or not, Mel misconstrues Terri’s point that love and violence can exist concurrently, instead claiming that Terri mistakes violence for love altogether. It’s rather hypocritical that Mel insults Terri in this moment, as this suggests that Mel’s own love for her is tinged with animosity, if not physical violence.*



*Again, Mel is adamant that “love is an absolute,” meaning that it’s something definite with no grey area. Meanwhile, Nick and Laura’s wordless exchange of affection subtly implies that love is something that’s felt emotionally and expressed nonverbally rather than something that can be understood through language.*



Terri recalls that, when she broke up with Ed, he'd tried to kill himself by drinking rat poison. He survived but had permanent gum damage. Mel adds that Ed is dead now, and Terri remarks that Ed also botched his second suicide attempt, when he'd shot himself in the mouth. She expresses sympathy for Ed, which Mel objects to—Ed was dangerous, he reminds her. At this, Terri implores Mel to at least admit that Ed loved her. Nick interjects to ask how, exactly, Ed botched his suicide. Laura looks at Mel and Terri with a bemused expression, as though she's shocked that people she knows could have been impacted by such a tragedy.

Mel tells Nick and Laura that Ed had used a .22 caliber pistol to shoot himself—the same one he'd used to continuously threaten Terri and Mel. The couple had lived in fear while this was going on, and Mel went so far as to purchase his own gun for self-defense. Mel kept the gun in his car's glove compartment, terrified that Ed would ambush him when he was walking to his and from his car for his nighttime call shifts at the hospital. Ed was crazy, Mel says—he knew how to make bombs, and he used to call Mel at work to threaten him. Terri repeats that she feels sorry for Ed.

Laura urges Mel to get back to the topic of the botched suicide. At this point, Nick gives a brief aside that Laura is a legal secretary. The two of them met through work and quickly developed a romantic relationship. Nick and Laura are in love; they enjoy each other's company, and Nick finds Laura easy to be with.

Mel continues his story: Ed shot himself in mouth in the hotel room where he was staying. The manager came in, saw what happened, and called an ambulance. Mel was working at the hospital when Ed was brought in. Ed lived for three days, but his head swelled up to twice its normal size—a sight that disturbed Mel. Terri had wanted to visit Ed in the hospital, which she and Mel got into a fight about.

*Ed's suicide attempts after the breakup further support the idea that love and violence can be intertwined, despite Mel's objections to this idea. That Ed harmed himself as well as Terri further complicates the conversation about love, since Ed's suicidality indicates that he was likely suffering from mental illness alongside the strong feelings he had for Terri. In this situation, then, the exact nature of Ed and Terri's love for each other is difficult to determine, challenging Mel's opinion that there's a universally applicable definition of love. Terri's pleas with Mel also suggest that their differing views of love are a source of anxiety for her, as disagreeing about something so fundamental could certainly cause conflict within their relationship.*



*Though Ed and Mel's motivations for carrying guns are certainly different, the fact that Mel was seemingly willing to kill Ed to protect Terri and himself suggests that he doesn't actually view love and violence as entirely separate. Clearly, he believes that violence is sometimes a necessary element of protecting one's romantic partner—and it's possible that Ed, though obviously mentally unstable and unjustified in his actions, similarly saw Mel as a threat to Terri. Terri's sympathy is further evidence that love and violence aren't always neatly separated—she still clearly feels affection for Ed despite his threatening behavior toward her and Mel.*



*Though not as outspoken as Mel, Nick seems to have his own definition of what love is: he and Laura enjoy being with each other, and their relationship doesn't take much effort. These qualities, to Nick, are what characterize romantic love.*



*Again, Ed's self-destruction after his breakup with Terri suggests that the line between love and violence can be blurry, particularly for people who aren't emotionally stable. Meanwhile, Terri and Mel's fight over Terri visiting Ed in the hospital is another way in which they disagree over how people should navigate love. Terri thought it was acceptable to remain supportive of (and perhaps even to love) Ed in spite of his erratic behavior, as well as the fact that Terri had moved on and was in a relationship with someone else. Mel, however, thought that Terri's desire to visit Ed was inappropriate—it doesn't fit into his definition of a loving relationship.*



Laura asks who won the fight, and Terri answers that she was in the room with Ed when he died—no one else was there for him. Mel repeats that Ed was dangerous, but Terri insists that she knows Ed loved her because he was “willing to die for it.” Mel insists that he’s not interested in that kind of love. Terri admits that Mel is right—they were afraid of Ed, and Mel even wrote a will in case Ed killed him. Terri says that she called the police at one point, but they couldn’t do anything until Ed actually committed a crime. Presently, Terri pours the last of the gin into her glass, prompting Mel to go get another bottle from a cupboard.

Laura says that she and Nick know what love is—for them, at least. Smiling, she bumps Nick’s knee with hers and tells him that he’s supposed to say something. In response, Nick takes her hand and makes a show of kissing it. Terri goodheartedly tells them that they’re making her sick—they’re still in the honeymoon phase of their relationship. Laura says that they’ve been together for a year and a half. “Just wait,” Terri jokes. Just then, Mel returns and opens the new bottle of gin, fills everyone’s glasses, and leads them in a toast “to true love.”

As the four friends clink glasses, the afternoon sun floods the McGinnises’ kitchen like a warm presence, making them feel lighthearted and relaxed. Mel declares that he’ll tell the others “what real love is,” and then they can come to their own conclusions. He pours himself more gin, and the others sip their drinks as they wait for him to speak. Nick rests his hand on Laura’s thigh.

Finally, Mel goes on a long diatribe about love. He says that he loves Terri, and Nick loves Laura, both sexually and emotionally. But he struggles with how to reconcile the love he had for his ex-wife, or that of Terri and Ed—he wonders where that love has gone. Mel points out how Nick and Laura glow with affection for each other, yet they’ve both been married and loved other people before. He says it’s both terrible and wonderful that if any of them were to die, their respective spouse could probably move on from their grief and find someone else. Then, Mel says, the love they’re discussing would just become a memory. He then asks the others if he’s making sense and to correct him if he’s wrong.

*Terri’s adamance that Ed truly loved her because he was “willing to die” over losing her further polarizes Mel and Terri’s respective views of love. Terri readily admits that they felt afraid and helpless while Ed was threatening them—yet in her mind, this violent and erratic behavior doesn’t negate Ed’s genuine love for her. Mel, on the other hand, still staunchly believes that violence doesn’t fit into his understanding of love. Meanwhile, that the four friends are already moving onto a second bottle of gin suggests that they’re likely drunk. As the conversation progresses, then, using language to arrive at a mutual agreement about love will only become more difficult.*



*Laura, like her friends, is confident that love can be defined and understood. But while Laura claims that she and Nick know what love means for their relationship, neither of them use language to describe it. Here, they show their love for each other with displays of physical affection rather than telling Terri about it in words, which implies that love is something that is deeply felt rather than understood intellectually. Laura and Nick’s relationship seems to transcend words—instead, they express their love through nonverbal communication like body language and physical touch.*



*Here, the warmth and brightness of the direct sunlight mirrors the friends’ relaxed attitude and certainty about their conceptions of love—this is particularly evident in Mel’s self-assured declaration that he’s going to teach the others “what real love is.” That this arrogance is juxtaposed with Nick’s subtle gesture of touching Laura’s leg perhaps implies that Mel’s words will fail to properly convey what love is. Instead, the essence of love is found in simple moments of nonverbal affection and communication.*



*Despite Mel’s adamance that he knows the definition of love, his ramblings in this passage are incoherent and his logic is circular. His musings about lost love are clearly meaningful to him, but he doesn’t say anything conclusive about what love is. His self-doubt at the end of his rant indicates that even he isn’t really sure if what he said makes sense. The extent to which Mel’s drunkenness is obscuring his underlying point is unclear, but regardless, language fails to convey what he’s trying to express.*



After Mel finishes rambling, Terri grasps his wrist and asks him if he's drunk. Mel snaps back that he's just talking; he doesn't have to be drunk speak his mind. Terri assures Mel that she's not criticizing him, and she sips her drink. Mel fires back that he's not on call at the hospital today. Laura chimes in that they all love Mel, and for a moment, Mel looks at her as though he can't recognize her. Then, he replies that he loves Laura and Nick too, and he picks up his glass.

*Terri seems to be embarrassed of Mel in this moment, distancing herself from him and invalidating what he's just said by pointing out his intoxication. But regardless of the others' confusion and concern for him, Mel is adamant that he's just being honest. Having just tried and failed to communicate something that's clearly important to him, he now feels alienated by his inability to express himself through language. On another note, the argumentative way in which Mel responds to Terri demonstrates that love isn't as clear-cut for Mel as he's let on—clearly, he feels some level of animosity alongside his affection for Terri.*



Next, Mel declares that he's going to tell them all a story from a few months ago, in hopes of proving the point he was trying to make. He says it'll make them realize that none of them know "what we're talking about when we talk about love." Terri tells him not to talk like he's drunk when he's not, and Mel snaps at her to shut up. He begins his story of a couple, a husband and wife in their mid-70s, who were injured in a terrible car accident on the highway. Terri looks anxiously at Nick and Laura, and then back at Mel. Mel passes the gin around the table.

*Mel contradicts himself here: he claims that none of them know "what we're talking about when we talk about love," yet he implies that his story will provide a understanding of what love is (or, at least, what it isn't). Despite Mel's failure to articulate his point during his rant, he's still confident that he can use language to formulate a definition of something as profound and elusive as love. Terri and Mel's tense exchange, meanwhile, further indicates that there is some level of violence (albeit verbal) in their relationship, as they're willing to embarrass and demean each other in front of their friends. And again, Terri's anxious look implies that her and Mel's disagreement about love is high stakes, as such a rift could completely disrupt how they relate to each other as a couple.*



Mel continues that he was on call at the hospital on the night of this accident. A drunk teenager in a pickup truck had plowed into the couple's camper. The teenager was killed in the accident, while the couple was in critical condition: broken bones, internal injuries, and severe cuts and bruises. What saved them, Mel says, was their seatbelts. At this, Terri interrupts to joke that Mel is speaking on behalf of the National Safety Council. She says that Mel is too much sometimes, but that she loves him anyway. Mel says that he loves her too, and they lean across the table to kiss each other.

*The gruesome nature of the couple's injuries is presumably just one of many horrible sights that Mel has witnessed as a surgeon. It makes sense, then, that he's eager to compartmentalize love and violence in his mind—he doesn't want to associate the terrible suffering he's seen with the more innocent and joyous aspects of romance. Yet there is a confusing blend of violence and love in Mel and Terri's own relationship. Here, just moments after Mel snapped at Terri, the couple reconciles and shares a moment of genuine fondness. This again makes the case that love and violence can mix, as Mel and Terri are both cruel and loving toward each other almost simultaneously. With Terri's past in mind, this also might raise a red flag for the reader: Terri is just as quick to forgive Mel's cruel words as she was to forgive Ed's physical abuse.*





Getting back to his story, Mel says that when he arrived at the hospital, he and a group of other doctors performed intensive surgery on the couple for the rest of the night. The husband and wife both miraculously survived, and after two weeks in the ICU, they were moved to their own room. Suddenly, Mel diverts and suggests that they all finish the gin they're drinking so they can go to dinner at a new restaurant. He comments about how much he loves food and says that he'd be a chef if he could go back and choose a different path. He asks, "Right Terri?" But before she can answer, Mel affirms that Terri knows this is true.

Switching to a different tangent, Mel shares that if he could live in a different time, he'd be a medieval knight. Laura jokes that he could carry a woman's scarf with him, along with a lance. Mel suggests that he could carry a woman with him instead, to which Laura replies, "Shame on you." Terri asks Mel what would happen if he came back as a serf instead, and Mel says that even the knights were "vessels" to someone. Again, he asks Terri if this is right, but he continues speaking before she can answer. Mel shares that his favorite thing about knights (besides their women) is that they had armor to protect them. There were no cars and no drunk teenagers to hit you, he reckons.

Terri interrupts to point out that Mel said "vessels" when he meant "vassals." Irritated, Mel rebuts that they all knew what he meant. He's not educated, he says annoyedly—he's a heart surgeon, but really, he's just a mechanic who fixes things. Terri tells him that he's unsuited for modesty. Changing the subject, Nick says that knights sometimes overheated in their suits of armor, dying of suffocation or exhaustion-induced heart attacks. Mel reckons that another vassal would come along and spear the dying knight "in the name of love," and Terri and Laura observe that nothing has changed—people still fight over the same things today. Mel pours himself another drink.

*Mel's diversion at this crucial moment in the story shows that language isn't always the most efficient way of communicating one's thoughts, particularly when trying to convey profound truths. Whereas nonverbal forms of communication (like body language or physical touch) are more clear and direct, speech can be subject to endless distractions or misunderstandings. Additionally, Mel asking for Terri to affirm what he's saying—but not allowing her to answer—shows how language can be manipulated to subtly dominate others and validate oneself.*



*Here, Mel complicates his own notions of the relationship between love and violence. His fantasy of carrying women with him on horseback would likely involve taking those women by force—which is presumably why Laura says "Shame on you." This suggests that objectification and violence aren't off the table in Mel's romantic fantasies, contradicting his previous statements about love being wholly separate from violence. Mel's musing about being a knight in protective armor and living in an era free of car accidents further situates romance as a kind of escape from pain and suffering. It's seemingly too difficult for Mel to acknowledge that love and violence can coexist, even within his own mind.*



*Mel's insistence that he doesn't need to use the correct word to get his point across once again showcases his frustration with language. This is further emphasized when he compares heart surgery to mechanical repair. Mel seems to be suggesting that the two jobs are essentially the same: mechanics and surgeons both fix something that's broken, the only difference being what it is they're fixing. With this in mind, he feels that it shouldn't matter how he speaks, as long as his underlying point is conveyed—but in reality, the manner in which people communicate can sometimes obscure or alter their message. Meanwhile, the friends' conversation about knights killing each other "in the name of love" once again suggests that love and violence are interconnected—something that Terri and Laura recognize is still true today.*



The **sunlight** in the room has grown dimmer. Laura and Nick urge Mel to continue his story, and Terri jokes that the old couple is just “older but wiser” now. Mel doesn’t think this is funny. Laura again asks Mel what happened, and Mel suddenly declares that if he didn’t love Terri and if Nick weren’t his best friend, he would fall in love with Laura and “carry her off” instead. Terri tells Mel to get back to the story so that they can go out to eat.

*The fading sunlight mirrors the friends’ diminishing clarity as they stray further off topic and continue to be distracted by tangents, offensive comments, and personal attacks. It seems that the more they discuss love, the less they understand it, perhaps implying that love cannot be neatly analyzed or defined. Mel’s aside about Laura here is also telling: he declares that he would “carry her off,” meaning that he would forcibly take her as his lover. And, importantly, he doesn’t seem concerned about what Laura (or Terri) thinks about this, or whether she’d consent to such a thing. This again shows that violence and love aren’t as neatly compartmentalized for Mel as he’d like to think—both his fantasies and his real-life relationship with Terri are tinged with violent impulses.*



Finally, Mel relents, telling everyone how he would check in on the old couple every day while they were recovering. Both the husband and wife were in full-body casts with holes cut out for their eyes, noses, and mouths. The husband grew depressed, but not solely because he was traumatized by the accident—what really got him down was not being able to turn his head to look at his wife. Mel is clearly moved by this, repeating that the man’s heart was broken simply because he couldn’t see his wife. “Can you imagine? [...] Do you see what I’m saying?” he asks the others—but they just stare at him.

*The anecdote about the depressed husband drives home the story’s message that love is emotional and even bodily in nature—it’s something unspoken but deeply felt. This is made especially clear by the fact that the man could still speak to his wife and hear her reply, yet what really upset him was not being able to look at or nonverbally communicate with her. With this, Mel seems to suggest that love transcends language. Yet, ironically, words fail to sufficiently convey his point about language—once again, his wife and friends fail to grasp what he’s saying.*



Nick thinks that perhaps he and his friends are a little drunk by this time. The **sun** has dissipated out of the kitchen, yet no one gets up to turn on a light. Mel encourages everyone to take a shot of gin so they can finish the bottle and go to dinner. Terri says that Mel is depressed and suggests that he take a pill, but Mel replies that he’s already tried every medication there is. Nick comments that everyone needs a pill on occasion, and Terri adds that some people are hardwired to need them.

*Again, the diminishing sunlight symbolizes the friends’ gradual loss of clarity about love, particularly as they grow drunk and the conversation becomes more heated. That no one turns on a light perhaps suggests that the friends have lost any hope or will to seek out a clear definition of love. Importantly, Terri’s comment about Mel’s depression links him to the depressed husband in his story: it seems that both men’s unhappiness is rooted in the inability to deeply and meaningfully connect with people they love.*



Mel abruptly asks whether the others mind if he calls his children. Terri asks what he’ll do if his ex-wife, Marjorie, answers the phone, reminding him that he’ll only feel worse if he talks to her. Mel agrees that he doesn’t want to speak to Marjorie, but he does want to talk to his kids.

*Mel’s wife and close friends haven’t understood him when he’s tried to express himself verbally, and his communication with his children also seems to be limited. In this way, Mel’s efforts to be understood and to understand others through language only alienate him, further emphasizing the story’s message that nonverbal forms of communication can be more effective.*



Terri shares that Mel constantly talks about how he wishes Marjorie would either remarry or die, since Mel's alimony payments to her are bankrupting them. Marjorie has a boyfriend who lives with them, so Mel is supporting him as well as Marjorie and the children. Mel says that Marjorie is allergic to bee stings, and he wishes she'd get stung to death. ("Shame on you," Laura says again.) Mel makes buzzing sounds and moves his hands toward Terri's throat, pretending his fingers are bees. He says that he wishes he could dress up in a beekeeper's protective gear and let a hive of bees loose in Marjorie's house.

*Again, it's clear that Mel's romantic and violent impulses are more interrelated than he likes to admit. Mel previously acknowledged his love for Marjorie and wondered where their love went when they separated—he still feels sentimental about her to some extent. It's significant, then, that he simultaneously harbors such violent thoughts about her. Mel's wish for Marjorie to die is likely an exaggeration, but he nevertheless associates marriage and death closely, as though the two fates aren't so different. The image of Mel buzzing his hands around Terri's throat is unsettling and confusing, as it blends together Mel's violent fantasies about his Marjorie, his playful affection toward Terri, and the intermittent hostility that he's hurled at Terri throughout the story. Again, love and violence seem to be linked by their emotional intensity, and this moment illustrates that they can't be neatly separated.*



Then, Mel slowly crosses one leg over the other, props his elbows on the table, and rest his head in his hands. He admits that it might not be a good idea to call his kids, and he suggests that the four of them go to dinner instead. Nick says that sounds fine—whether they eat or keep drinking, he'll be content either way. "I could head right on out into the **sunset**," he says, which prompts Laura to ask what he means. Nick says that he just means he could keep going.

*Whereas Mel's thoughts and speech have been rather incoherent and confusing throughout the story, his body language here is clear. His slow movements and slumped posture convey defeat, his former confidence and certainty having evaporated as his wife and friends have continually misunderstood him. Meanwhile, Nick's comment about being content heading "right on out into the sunset" is symbolically significant, as it implies that he isn't afraid of the uncertainty that darkness has represented throughout the story. Whereas the mysterious nature of love leaves Mel feeling dejected and paralyzed, Nick (who seems to have a more fluid and emotional understanding of love) is more comfortable with ambiguity.*



Laura says that she's starving. Terri offers to put out some cheese and crackers, although she stays seated instead of going to get them. Mel flips his glass over, spilling the drink onto the table, and declares that the gin is gone. Terri asks what they should do now, but they all just sit in silence. Nick hears everyone's heart beating in a chorus of "human noise," none of them moving even as the room goes **dark**.

*The friends' silence speaks volumes in this passage: they've seemingly given up on language as a means of seeking and expressing truth. The characters' speech is now divorced from meaning—Terri doesn't follow through on her offer of getting snacks, and Mel's spilled drink doesn't technically count as "finishing" the gin. That the four friends fall into silence suggests that they've given up on using language to define love—and that perhaps it's impossible to do so. That Nick hears all of their hearts beating as "human noise" further supports this idea. The anatomical heart represents love, and "noise" (as opposed to "sound") connotes unintelligibility, meaning that love is impossible to define or describe. But the story doesn't end on a pessimistic note, as the image of everyone's hearts beating together suggests that love is something that resonates with everyone. Love doesn't need to be analyzed or put into words, since it's something that people universally experience.*





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