WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT LOVE

by Raymond Carver

My friend Mel McGinnis was talking. Mel McGinnis is a cardiologist, and sometimes that gives him the right.

The four of us were sitting around his kitchen table drinking gin. Sunlight filled the kitchen from the big window behind the sink. There were Mel and me and his second wife, Teresa—Terri, we called her—and my wife, Laura. We lived in Albuquerque then. But we were all from somewhere else.

There was an ice bucket on the table. The gin and the tonic water kept going around, and we somehow got on the subject of love. Mel thought real love was nothing less than spiritual love. He said he'd spent five years in a seminary before quitting to go to medical school. He said he still looked back on those years in the seminary as the most important in his life.

Terri said the man she lived with before she lived with Mel loved her so much he tried to kill her. Then Terri said, "He beat me up one night. He dragged me around the living room by my ankles. He kept saying, 'I love you, I love you, you bitch.' He went on dragging me around the living room. My head kept knocking on things." Terri looked around the table. "What do you do with love like that?"

She was a bone-thin woman with a pretty face, dark eyes, and brown hair that hung down her back. She liked necklaces made of turquoise, and long pendant earrings.

"My God, don't be silly. That's not love, and you know it," Mel said. "I don't know what you'd call it, but I sure know you wouldn't call it love."

"Say what you want to, but I know it was," Terri said. "It may sound crazy to you, but it's true just the same. People are different, Mel. Sure, sometimes he may have acted crazy. Okay. But he loved me. In his own way, maybe, but he loved me. There was love there, Mel. Don't say there wasn't."

Mel let out his breath. He held his glass and turned to Laura and me. "The man threatened to kill me," Mel said. He finished his drink and reached for the gin bottle. "Terri's a romantic. Terri's of the 'Kick-me-so-I'll-know-you-love-me' school. Terri, hon, don't look that way." Mel reached across the table and touched Terri's cheek with his fingers. He grinned at her.

"Now he wants to make up," Terri said.

"Make up what?" Mel said. "What is there to make up? I know what I know. That's all."

"How'd we get started on this subject anyway?" Terri said. She raised her glass and drank from it. "Herb always has love on his mind," she said. "Don't you, honey?" She smiled, and I thought that was the last of it.

"I just wouldn't call Ed's behavior love. That's all I'm saying, honey," Mel said. "What about you guys?" Mel said to Laura and me. "Does that sound like love to you?"

"I'm the wrong person to ask," I said. "I didn't even know the man. I've only heard his name mentioned in passing. I wouldn't know. You'd have to know all the particulars. But I think what you're saying is that love is an absolute."

Mel said, "The kind of love I'm talking about is. The kind of love I'm talking about, you don't try to kill people."

Laura said, "I don't know anything about Ed, or anything about the situation. But who can judge anyone else's situation?"

I touched the back of Laura's hand. She gave me a quick smile. I picked up Laura's hand. It was warm, the nails polished, perfectly manicured. I encircled the broad wrist with my fingers, and I held her.

"When I left he drank rat poison," Terri said. She clasped her arms with her hands. "They took him to the hospital in Santa Fe. That's where we lived then, about ten miles out. They saved his life. But his gums went crazy from it. I mean they pulled away from his teeth. After that his teeth stood out like fangs. My God," Terri said. She waited a minute, then let go of her arms and picked up her glass.

"What people won't do!" Laura said.

"He's out of the action now," Mel said. "He's dead."

Mel handed me the saucer of limes. I took a section, squeezed it over my drink, and stirred the ice cubes with my finger.

"It gets worse," Terri said. "He shot himself in the mouth. But he bungled that too. Poor Ed," she said. Terri shook her head.

"Poor Ed nothing," Mel said. "He was dangerous."

Mel was forty-five years old. He was tall and rangy with curly soft hair. His face and arms were brown from the tennis he played. When he was sober, his gestures, all his movements, were precise, very careful.

“He did love me though, Mel. Grant me that,” Terri said. “That’s all I’m asking. He didn’t love me the way you love me. I’m not saying that. But he loved me. You can grant me that, can’t you?”

“What do you mean, He bungled it?” I said.

Laura leaned forward with her glass. She put her elbows on the table and held her glass in both hands. She glanced from Mel to Terri and waited with a look of bewilderment on her open face, as if amazed that such things happened to people you were friendly with.

“How’d he bungle it when he killed himself?” I said.

“I’ll tell you what happened,” Mel aid. “He took this twenty-two pistol he’d bought to threaten Terri and me with. Oh, I’m serious, the man was always threatening. You should have seen the way we lived in those days. Like fugitives. I even bought a gun myself. Can you believe it? A guy like me? But I did. I bought one for self-defense and carried it in the glove compartment. Sometimes I’d have to leave the apartment in the middle of the night. To go to the hospital, you know? Terri and I weren’t married then, and my first wife had the house and kids, the dog, everything, and Terri and I were living in this apartment here. Sometimes, as I say, I’d get a call in the middle of the night and have to go in to the hospital at two or three in the morning. It’d be dark out there in the parking lot and I’d break into a sweat before I could even get to my car. I never knew if he was going to come up out of the shrubbery or from behind a car and start shooting. I mean, the man was crazy. He was capable of wiring a bomb, anything. He used to call my service at all hours and say he needed to talk to the doctor, and when I’d return the call he’d say, ‘Son of a bitch, your days are numbered.’ Little things like that. It was scary, I’m telling you.”

“I still feel sorry for him,” Terri said.

“It sounds like a nightmare,” Laura said. “But what exactly happened after he shot himself?”

Laura is a legal secretary. We’d met in a professional capacity. Before we knew it, it was a courtship. She’s thirty-five, three years younger than I am. In addition to being in love, we like each other and enjoy one another’s company. She’s easy to be with.

“What happened?” Laura asked again.

Mel said, “He shot himself in the mouth in his room. Someone heard the shot and told the manager. They came in with a passkey, saw what had happened, and called an ambulance. I happened to be there when they brought him, alive, but past recall.The man lived for three days. His head swelled up to twice the size of a normal head. I’d never seen anything like it, and I hope I never do again. Terri wanted to go in and sit with him when she found out about it. We had a fight over it. I didn’t think she should see him like that. I didn’t think she should see him, and I still don’t.”

“Who won the fight?” Laura said.

“I was in the room with him when he died,” Terri said. “He never came up out of it. But I sat with him. He didn’t have anyone else.”

“He was dangerous,” Mel said. “If you call that love, you can have it.”

“It was love,” Terri said. “Sure it was 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.”

Terri said, “We were afraid. Mel even made a will out and wrote to his brother in California who used to be a Green Beret. Mel told him who to look for if something happened to him.”

Terri drank from her glass. She said, “But Mel’s right—we lived like fugitives. We were afraid. Mel was, weren’t you, honey? I even called the police at one point, but they were no help. They said they couldn’t do anything until Ed actually did something. Isn’t that a laugh?” Terri said.

She poured the last of the gin into her glass and waggled the bottle. Mel got up from the table and went to the cupboard. He took down another bottle.

“Well, Nick and I know what love is. 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.

“You guys,” Terri said. “Stop that now. You’re making me sick. You’re still on a honeymoon, for God’s sake. You’re still gaga, for crying out loud. Just wait. How long have you been together now? How long has it been? A year? Longer than a year.”

“Going on a year and a half,” Laura said, flushed and smiling.

“Oh, now,” Terri said. “Wait a while.”

She held her drink and gazed at Laura.

“I’m only kidding,” Terri said.

Mel opened the gin and went around the table with the bottle.

“Here, you guys,” he said. “Let’s have a toast. I want to propose a toast. A toast to love. To true love,” Mel said.

We touched glasses.

“To love,” we said.

Outside in the backyard, one of the dogs began to bark. The leaves of the aspen that leaned past the window ticked against the glass. The afternoon sunlight was like a presence in the room, the spacious light of ease and generosity. We could have been anywhere, somewhere enchanted. We raised our glasses again and grinned at each other like children who had agreed on something forbidden.

“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.

“What do any of us really know about love?” Mel said. “It seems to me we’re just beginners at love. We say we love each other and we do, I don’t doubt it. I love Terri and Terri loves me, and you guys love each other too. You know the kind of love I’m talking about now. Physical love, that impulse that drives you to someone special, as well as love of the other person’s being, his or her essence, as it were. Carnal love and, well, call it sentimental love, the day-to-day caring about the other person. 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.” Mel stopped talking and swallowed from his glass.

“Going on a year and a half,” Laura said, flushed and smiling.

“Oh, now,” Terri said. “Wait a while.”

She held her drink and gazed at Laura.

“I’m only kidding,” Terri said.

“You guys have been together eighteen months and you love each other. It shows all over you. You glow with it. But you both loved other people before you met each other. You’ve both been

married before, just like us. And you probably loved other people before that too, even. Terri and I have been together five years, been married for four. And the terrible thing, the terrible thing is, but the good thing, too, the saving grace, you might say, is that if something happened to one of us—excuse me for saying this—but if something happened to one of us tomorrow, I think the other one, the other person, would grieve for a while, you know, but then the surviving party would go out and love again, have someone else soon enough. All this, all of this love we're talking about, it would just be a memory. Maybe not even a memory. 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."

"Mel, we love you," Laura said.

Mel looked at Laura. He looked at her as if he couldn't place her, as if she was not the woman she was.

"Love you too, Laura," Mel said. "And you, Nick, love you too. You know something?" Mel said. "You guys are our pals," Mel said.

He picked up his glass.

Mel said, "I was going to tell you about something. I mean, I was going to prove a point. You see, this happened a few months ago, but it's still going on right now, and it ought to make us feel ashamed when we talk like we know what we're talking about when we talk about love."

"Come on now," Terri said. "Don't talk like you're drunk if you're not drunk."

"Just shut up for once in your life," Mel said very quietly. "Will you do me a favor and do that for a minute? So as I was saying, there's this old couple who had this car wreck out on the interstate? A kid hit them and they were all torn to shit and nobody was giving them much chance to pull through.

Terri looked at us and then back at Mel. She seemed anxious, or maybe that's too strong a word.

Mel was handing the bottle around the table.

"I was on call that night," Mel said. "It was in May or maybe it was June. Terri and I had just sat down to dinner when the hospital called. There'd been this thing out on the interstate. Drunk kid, teenager, plowed his dad's pickup into this camper with this old couple in it. They were up in their mid-seventies, that couple. The kid—eighteen, nineteen, something—he was DOA. Taken the steering wheel through his sternum. The old couple, they were alive, you understand. I mean, just barely. But they had everything. Multiple fractures, internal injuries, hemorrhaging, contusions, lacerations, the works, and they each of them had themselves concussions. They were in a bad way, believe me. And, of course, their age was two strikes against them. I'd say she was worse off than he was. Ruptured spleen along with everything else. Both kneecaps broken. But they'd been wearing their seatbelts and, God knows, that's what saved them for the time being."

"Folks, this is an advertisement for the National Safety Council," Terri said. "This is your spokesman, Doctor Melvin R. McGinnis, talking." Terri laughed. "Mel," she said, "sometimes you're just too much. But I love you, honey."

"Honey, I love you," Mel said.

He leaned across the table. Terri met him halfway. They kissed.

"Terri's right," Mel said as he settled himself again. "Get those seatbelts on. But seriously, they were in some shape, those oldsters. By the time I got down there, the kid was dead, as I said. He was off in a corner, laid out on a gurney. I took one look at the old couple and told the ER nurse to get me a neurologist and an orthopedic man and a couple of surgeons down there right away."

He drank from his glass. "I'll try to keep this short," he said. "So we took the two of them up to the OR and worked like fuck on them most of the night. They had these incredible reserves, those two. You see that once in a while. So we did everything that could be done, and toward morning we're giving them a fifty-fifty chance, maybe less than that for her. So here they are, still alive the next morning. So, okay, we move them into the ICU, which is where they both kept plugging away at it for two weeks, hitting it better and better on all the scopes. So we transfer them out to their own room.

Mel stopped talking. "Here," he said, "let's drink this cheapo gin the hell up. Then we're going to dinner, right? Terri and I know a new place. That's where we'll go, to this new place we know about. But we're not going until we finish up this cut-rate, lousy gin."

Terri said, "We haven't actually eaten there yet. But it looks good. From the outside, you know."

"I like food," Mel said. "If I had it to do all over again, I'd be a chef, you know? Right, Terri?" Mel said.

He laughed. He fingered the ice in his glass.

Terri knows. Terri can tell you. But let me say this. 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.

Terri said, "Suppose you came back as a serf. The serfs didn't have it so good in those days," Terri said.

"The serfs never had it good," Mel said. "But I guess even the knights were vessels to someone. Isn't that the way it worked? But then everyone is always a vessel to someone else. Isn't that right? Terri? But what I liked about knights, besides their ladies, was that they had that suit of armor, you know, and they couldn't get hurt very easy. No cars in those days, you know? No drunk teenagers to tear into your ass."

"Vassals," Terri said.

"What?" Mel said.

"Vassals," Mel 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.

"Modesty doesn't become you," Terri said.

"He's just a humble sawbones," I said. "But sometimes they suffocated in all that armor, Mel. They'd even have heart attacks if it got too hot and they were too tired and worn out. I read somewhere that they'd fall off their horses and not be able to get up because they were too tired to stand with all that armor on them. They got trampled by their own horses sometimes."

"That's terrible," Mel said. "That's a terrible image, Nicky. I guess they'd just lay there and wait until somebody came along and made a shish kebab out of them."

"Some other vessel," Terri said.

"That's right," Mel said. "Some vassal would come along and spear the bastard in the name of love. Or whatever the fuck it was they fought over in those days."

“Same things we fight over these days,” Mel said.

Laura said, “Nothing’s changed.”

The color was still high in Laura’s cheeks. Her eyes were bright. She brought her glass to her lips.

Mel poured himself another drink. He looked at the label closely as if studying a long row of numbers. Then he slowly put the bottle down on the table and reached for the tonic water.

“What about the old couple?” Laura said. “You didn’t finish that story you started.”

Laura was having a hard time lighting her cigarette. Her matches kept going out.

The sunshine inside the room was different now, changing, getting thinner. But the leaves outside the window were still shimmering, and I stared at the pattern they made on the panes and on the Formica counter. They weren’t the same patterns, of course.

“What about that old couple?” I said.

“Older but wiser,” Terri said.

Mel stared at her.

Terri said, “Go on with your story, hon. I was only kidding. Then what happened?”

“Terri, sometimes,” Mel said.

“Please, Mel,” Terri said. “Don’t always be so serious, sweetie. Can’t you take a joke?”

“Where’s the joke?” Mel said.

He held his glass and gazed steadily at his wife.

“What happened?” Laura said.

Mel fastened his eyes on Laura. He said, “Laura, if I didn’t have Terri and if I didn’t love her so much, and if Nick wasn’t my best friend, I’d fall in love with you. I’d carry you off, honey,” he said.

“Tell your story,” Terri said. “Then we’ll go to that new place, okay?”

“Okay,” Mel said. “Where was I? he said. He stared at the table and then he began again.

“I dropped in to see each of them every day, sometimes twice a day if I was up doing other calls anyway. Casts and bandages, head to foot, the both of them. You know, you’ve seen it in the movies. That’s just the way they looked, just like in the movies. Little eye-holes and nose-holes

and mouth-holes. And she had to have her legs slung up on top of it. Well, the 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?"

Maybe we were a little drunk by then. I know it was hard keeping things in focus. The light was draining out of the room, going back through the window where it had come from. Yet nobody made a move to get up from the table to turn on the overhead light,

"Listen," Mel said. "Let's finish this fucking gin. There's about enough left here for one shooter all around. Then let's go eat. Let's go to the new place."

"He's depressed," Terri said. "Mel, why don't you take a pill?"

Herb shook his head. "I've taken everything there is."

"We all need a pill now and then," I said.

"Some people are born needing them," Terri said. She was using her finger to rub at something on the table. Then she stopped rubbing.

"I think I want to call my kids before we go eat," Mel said. "Is that all right with everybody? I'll call my kids," he said.

Terri said, "What if Marjorie answers the phone? You guys, you've heard us on the subject of Marjorie. Honey, you know you don't want to talk to Marjorie. It'll make you feel even worse."

"I don't want to talk to Marjorie," Mel said. "But I want to talk to my kids"

"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 fucking 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.

“She’s vicious,” Mel said. “Sometimes I think I’ll go up there dressed like a beekeeper. You know, that hat that’s like a helmet with the plate that comes down over your face, the big gloves, and the padded coat? I’ll knock on the door and let loose a hive of bees in the house. But first I’d make sure the kids were out, of course.”

He crossed one leg over the other. Then he put both feet on the floor and leaned forward, elbows on the table, his chin cupped in his hands.

“Maybe I won’t call the kids, after all. Maybe it isn’t such a hot idea. Maybe we’ll just go eat. How does that sound?”

“Sounds fine to me,” I said. “Eat or not eat. Or keep drinking. I could head right on out into the sunset.”

“What does that mean, honey?” Laura said.

“It just means what I said. It means I could just keep going. That’s all it means.”

“I could eat something myself,” Laura said. “I don’t think I’ve ever been so hungry in my life. Is there something to nibble on?”

“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.