

THE NEW YORKER

PRIMARY SOURCES

“BEGINNERS,” EDITED

The transformation of a Raymond Carver classic.

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The following document compares the original draft of “Beginners” with the final version of the story, retitled “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” edited by Gordon Lish, and published in a collection of the same name by Alfred A. Knopf. Additions to Carver’s draft appear in bold; a strike-through indicates a deletion; and paragraph marks indicate paragraph breaks that were inserted during the editing process.

My friend ~~Mel Herb~~ McGinnis, a cardiologist, 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. ~~It was Saturday afternoon.~~ Sunlight filled the kitchen from the big window behind the sink. There were ~~Mel Herb~~ and ~~me~~ I and his second wife, Teresa—Terri, we called her—and my wife, Laura. We lived in Albuquerque; ~~then.~~ **But** ~~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 Herb~~ thought real love was nothing less than spiritual love. **He said** ~~When he was young~~ he’d spent five years in a seminary before quitting to go to medical school. ~~He~~ ~~He’d left the Church at the same time,~~ but he said he still looked back **on** ~~to~~ those years in the seminary as the most important in his life.

Terri said the man she lived with before she lived with ~~Mel Herb~~ loved her so much he tried to kill her. ~~Herb laughed after she said this. He made a face. Terri looked at him.~~ Then **Terri** she said, “He beat me up one night, ~~the last night we lived together.~~ He dragged me around the

living room by my ankles. ~~He kept saying, , all the while saying,~~ 'I love you, don't you see? I love you, you bitch.' He went on dragging me around the living room. ~~My , my head kept knocking on things.~~" Terri ~~She looked around the table at us and then looked at her hands on her glass.~~ "What do you do with love like that?" ~~she said.~~ ¶ 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. ~~She was fifteen years younger than Herb, had suffered periods of anorexia, and during the late sixties, before she'd gone to nursing school, had been a dropout, a "street person" as she put it. Herb sometimes called her, affectionately, his hippie.~~

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

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

Mel Herb let out his breath. He held his glass and turned to Laura and me. "The man He threatened to kill me, ~~me~~ too." 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 ~~He~~ reached across the table and touched Terri's ~~her~~ cheek with his fingers. He grinned at her.

"Now he wants to make up," Terri said. "~~After he tries to dump on me.~~" She wasn't smiling.

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

~~"What would you call it then?" Terri said.~~ "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 ~~now~~, and I thought that was the last of it.

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

I ~~shrugged.~~ "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. Carl. I wouldn't know. You'd have to know all the particulars. ~~Not in my book it isn't, but who's to say? There're lots of different ways of behaving and showing affection. That way doesn't happen to be mine.~~ But I think what you're saying, Herb, is that love is an absolute. ?"

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

Laura, my sweet, big Laura, said evenly, "I don't know anything about Ed Carl, or anything about the situation. **But who** Who can judge anyone else's situation?" But, Terri, I didn't know about the violence."

I touched the back of Laura's hand. She gave me a quick smile, then turned her gaze back to Terri. I picked up Laura's hand. ~~It~~ The hand was warm to the touch, the nails polished, perfectly manicured. I encircled the broad wrist with my fingers, like a bracelet, 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.** ~~where we lived then and they saved his life, and his gums separated.~~ I mean they pulled away from his teeth. After that his teeth stood out like fangs. My God,” Terri she said. She waited a minute, then let go of her arms and picked up her glass.

“What people won't do!” Laura said. ~~“I’m sorry for him and I don’t even think I like him. Where is he now?”~~

“He’s out of the action **now**,” Mel Herb said. “He’s dead.” ¶ Mel He handed me the saucer of limes. I took a section of lime, 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 but** he bungled that too. Poor Ed Carl,” she said. Terri She shook her head.

“Poor Ed Carl nothing,” MelHerb said. “He was dangerous.” ¶ Mel Herb was forty-five years old. He was tall and rangy with curly soft wavy, graying hair. His face and arms were brown from the tennis he played. When he was sober, his gestures, all his movements, were precise, very and careful.

“He did love me though, Mel. Herb, **Grant 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? ~~That’s not much to ask.~~”

“What do you mean, ‘He bungled it?’” I said asked. ¶ Laura leaned forward with her glass. She put her elbows on the table and held her glass in both hands. She glanced from Mel Herb 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** knew. ~~Herb finished his drink.~~ ¶ “How’d he bungle it when he killed himself?” I said again.

“I’ll tell you what happened,” Mel Herb said. “He took this twenty-two pistol he’d bought to threaten Terri and me with. **Oh oh**, I’m serious, the man was always threateninghe wanted to use it. You should have seen the way we lived in those days. Like fugitives. I even bought a gun myself, and I thought I was a nonviolent sort. **Can you believe it? A guy like me?** But I did. I bought onea gun for self-defense and carried it in the glove compartment. Sometimes I’d have

to leave the apartment in the middle of the night. ~~you know, To~~ 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** he was crazy. He was capable of wiring a bomb ~~to my ear~~, anything. He used to call my ~~answering~~ 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. ~~She sipped her drink and gazed at Herb. Herb stared back.~~

"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. ~~lots of other people around, but we'd talked and I'd asked her to have dinner with me.~~ 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.

"**W**hat happened?" Laura asked again.

~~Mel Herb waited a minute and turned the glass in his hand. Then he 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, ~~in to the emergency room. I was there on another case. He was still alive, but past recall beyond anything anyone could do for him.~~ **The man** Still, he lived for three days. ~~His I'm serious though,~~ 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** ~~2d want to 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** ~~regained consciousness, and there was no hope for him, but~~ I sat with him. He didn't have anyone else."

"He was dangerous," ~~Mel Herb~~ 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** ~~but~~ he was willing to die for it. He did die for it."

"I sure as hell wouldn't call it love," ~~Mel Herb~~ said. "I mean, **no one knows what he did it for.** ~~You don't know what he died for.~~ I've seen a lot of suicides, and I couldn't say anyone

close to them ever knew **what they did it for** for sure. And when they claimed to be the cause, well I don't know." ¶ **Mel** He put his hands behind his neck and **tilted his chair back** leaned on the back legs of his chair. "I'm not interested in that kind of love.," he said. "If that's love, you can have it."

After a minute, Terri said, "We were afraid. **Mel Herb** even made a will out and wrote to his brother in California who used to be a Green Beret. **Mel** He told him who to look for if something happened to him mysteriously. Or not so mysteriously!" She shook her head and laughed at it now. She ¶ **Terri** drank from her glass. She said, went on. "But **Mel's right**—we lived did live a little like fugitives. We were *were* afraid of him, no question. **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 to him, they couldn't arrest him or do anything unless he actually **did** *did* something to Herb. Isn't that a laugh?" Terri said. ¶ She poured the last of the gin into her glass and **waggled** ~~waggled~~ the bottle. **Mel Herb** got up from the table and went to the cupboard. He took down another bottle of gin.

“**W**ell, Nick and I know **what love is** are in love,” Laura said. “**For us, I mean, Aren't we, Nick?**” **Laura** said. She bumped my knee with her knee. “You're supposed to say something now,” **Laura** she said, and turned **her** a large smile on me. “We get along really well, I think. We like doing things together, and neither of us has beaten up on the other yet, thank God. Knock on wood. I'd say we're pretty happy. I guess we should count our blessings.”

For an answer, I took **Laura's** her hand and raised it to my lips with a flourish. 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** that's why you can act like this. You're still gaga, **for crying out loud** over each other yet. 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, still flushed and smiling.

“**Oh, now** You're still on the honeymoon,” Terri said again. “Wait a while.” ¶ She held her drink and gazed at Laura. ¶ “I'm only kidding,” **Terri** she said.

Mel Herb had opened the gin and went gone around the table with the bottle. ¶ “**Terri,** Jesus, you shouldn't talk like that, even if you're not serious, even if you are kidding. It's bad luck. Here, you guys,” he said. “Let's have a toast. I want to propose a toast. A toast to love. To true love,” **Mel Herb** said. ¶ We touched glasses.

“To love,” we said.

Outside, in the backyard, one of the dogs began to bark. The leaves of the aspen tree that leaned past the window **ticked against the glass** flickered in the breeze. The afternoon

sunlight was like a presence in **this room, the spacious light of ease and generosity.** There was suddenly a feeling of ease and generosity around the table, of friendship and comfort. 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** onee.

"I'll tell you what real love is," **Mel** said finally, ~~breaking the spell.~~ "I mean, I'll give you a good example. **And of it, and then you can draw your own conclusions.**" He poured a little more gin into his glass. He added an ice cube and a **sliver** piece 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 Herb** said. ~~"It I kind of mean what I'm saying too, if you'll pardon me for saying it. But it seems to me we're just rank beginners at love. We say we love each other and we do, I don't doubt it. We love each other and we love hard, all of us. 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 Sexual 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 attraction to the other person, the partner, as well as just the plain everyday kind of love, love of the other person's being, the loving to be with the other, the little things that make up everyday love. Carnal love then 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 guess before you can say anything, I am am like Terri in that regard. Terri and Ed Carl."~~ He thought about it a minute and then **he** went on. **"There was a time when** ~~But at one time~~ I thought I loved my first wife more than life itself, ~~and we had the kids together.~~ But now I hate her guts. I do. How do you **explain figure** that? What happened to that love? ~~Did that love just get erased from the big board, as if it was never up there, as if it never happened?~~ What happened to it, is what I'd like to know. I wish someone could tell me. Then there's **Ed Carl.** Okay, we're back to **Ed Carl.** He loves d Terri so much he tries to kill her and **he** winds up killing himself." **Mel** He stopped talking and **swallowed from his glass shook his head.** "You guys have been together eighteen months and you love each other. I, it shows all over you. **You, you simply glow with it. But, but you've both** loved other people too 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 partner,** would **grieve mourn** for a while, you know, but then the surviving party would go out and love again, have someone else soon enough. **All and all** this, all of this love **we're talking about** —Jesus, how can you figure it?—it would just be a memory. Maybe not even a memory.

~~Am Maybe that's the way it's supposed to be. But am I wrong? Am I way off base? Because I want you to set I know that's what would happen with us, with Terri and me, as much as we may love each other. With any one of us for that matter. I'll stick my neck out that much. We've all proved it anyhow. I just don't understand. 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 Herb, for God's sake," Terri said. ~~This is depressing stuff. This could get very depressing. Even if you think it's true,~~ she said, ~~"it's still depressing."~~ She reached out to him and took hold of his forearm near the wrist. "Are you getting drunk, Herb? Honey? ; Are are you drunk?"

"Honey, I'm just talking, all right," Mel Herb said. "All right? I don't have to be drunk to say what I think 's on my mind, do I? I'm not drunk. I mean, we're We're all just talking, right?" Mel Herb said. Then his voice changed. "But if I want to get drunk I will, goddamn it. I can do anything I want today." He fixed his eyes on her.

"Sweetie Honey, I'm not criticizing," Terri she said. ¶ She picked up her glass.

"I'm not on call today," Mel Herb said. "Let me remind you of that. I am not on call I can do anything I want today. I'm just tired, that's all."

"Mel Herb, we love you," Laura said.

Mel Herb looked at Laura. He looked at her It was as if he couldn't place her, for a minute as if she was not the woman she was. She kept looking at him, holding her smile. Her cheeks were flushed and the sun was hitting her in the eyes, so she squinted to see him. His features relaxed. ¶ "Love you too, Laura," Mel said. "And you, Nick-, love you too. You know something?" Mel said. "You guys are I'll tell you, you're our pals," Mel Herb said. ¶ He picked up his glass.

Mel said, "I was going to tell you about something. I mean, I was going ~~"Well, what was I saying? Yeah. I wanted to tell you about something that happened a while back. I think I wanted to prove a point. You see, this , and I will if I can just tell this thing the way it happened. This happened a few months ago, but it's still going on right now, and . You might say that, yeah. But it ought to make us all feel ashamed when we talk like we know what we were talking about, when we talk about love."~~

"Come Herb, come on now," Terri said. ~~"You are too drunk. Don't talk like this. Don't talk like you're drunk if you're not drunk."~~

"Just shut up for once in your life, a minute, will you?" Mel Herb said very quietly. "Will you do me a favor and do that for a minute? So as I was saying, there's this ~~"Let me tell this. It's been on my mind. Just shut up for a minute. I told you a little about it when it first happened. That old couple who had this car wreck get into an accident out on the interstate? A~~

kid hit them and they were all **torn to shit battered up** and **nobody was giving them** not given much chance to pull through. ~~Let me tell this, Terri. Now just shut up for a minute. Okay?"~~

Terri looked at us and then looked back at **Mel Herb**. She seemed anxious, **or maybe** that's **too strong** a ~~the only~~ word for it. ¶ **Mel was handing** Herb handed the bottle around the table.

~~"Surprise me, Herb," Terri said. "Surprise me beyond all thought and reason."~~

~~"Maybe I will," Herb said. "Maybe so. I'm constantly surprised with things myself. Everything in my life surprises me." He stared at her for a minute. Then he began talking.~~

"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** an accident out on the interstate. **Drunk A drunk** kid, a teenager, had plowed his dad's pickup into **this** a camper with this old couple in it. They were up in their mid-seventies, **that couple**. The kid—, he was eighteen, or nineteen, **something**—he was DOA when they brought him in. **Taken** He'd taken the steering wheel through his sternum and must have died instantly. **The** But the old couple, they were still alive, **you understand. I mean**, but just barely. **But they** They had **everything. Multiple multiple** fractures and contusions, **internal injuries, hemorrhaging, contusions, lacerations, the works**, and they each **of them** had themselves a concussions. They were in a bad way, believe me. And, of course, their age was **two strikes** against them. **I'd say she was** She was even a little worse off than he was. **Ruptured** She had a ruptured spleen and along with everything else. **Both**, both kneecaps were broken. But they'd been wearing their seatbelts and, God knows, that's **what the only thing that 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. Herb McGinnis**, talking. Listen up now," Terri said and laughed. "**Mel,**" she said, **sometimes**, then lowered her voice. "Herb, you're just too much sometimes. **But I love you, hon,ey .?" She said.**

~~We all laughed. Herb laughed too. "Honey, I love you," Mel said. But you know that, don't you?"~~ ¶ He leaned across the table, Terri met him halfway. **They**, and they kissed. ¶ "Terri's right, everybody," **Mel Herb** said as he settled himself again. "**Get those seatbelts on Buekle** up for safety. Listen to what Doctor Herb is telling you. But seriously, they were in **some** bum shape, those oldsters people. By the time I got down there, ~~the intern and nurses were already at work on them.~~ The kid was dead, as I said. He was off in a corner, laid out on a gurney. ~~Someone had already notified the next of kin, and the funeral home people were on the way.~~ 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** I'll try and make a long story short. ~~The other fellows showed up, and we took the old couple up to the operating room and worked on them most of the night.~~

They ~~must have had these~~ incredible reserves, those ~~two old people,~~. You you see that once in a while. So we ~~We~~ did everything that could be done, and toward morning we' were giving them a fifty-fifty chance, maybe less than that, ~~maybe thirty-seventy for her the wife.~~ So here they are, Anna Gates ~~was her name,~~ and she was quite a woman. But they were still alive the next morning. So, okay, ~~and~~ we moved 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. ~~where we could monitor every breath and keep a twenty-four-hour watch on them. They were in intensive care for nearly two weeks, she a little longer, before their condition improved enough so we could transfer them out and down the hall to their own rooms."~~

Mel Herb stopped talking. "Here," he said, "let's drink this **cheapo gin the hell up.** ~~Let's drink it 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.** We'll go when we finish this 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. "It's called The Library," Terri said. "You haven't eaten there yet, have you?" she said, and Laura and I shook our heads. "It's some place. They say it's part of a new chain, but it's not like a chain, if you know what I mean. They actually have bookshelves in there with real books on them. You can browse around after dinner and take a book out and bring it back the next time you come to eat. You won't believe the food. And Herb's reading *Ivanhoe*! He took it out when we were there last week. He just signed a card. Like in a real library."

"I like *Ivanhoe*," Herb said. "*Ivanhoe*'s great. If I had it to do over again, I'd study literature. Right now I'm having an identity crisis. Right, Terri?" Herb said. He laughed. He **fingered** twirled the ice in his glass. ¶ "I've been having an identity crisis for years. 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 ~~twenty-two-pistols~~ came along."

"Mel Herb would like to ride a white horse and carry a lance," Terri said ~~and laughed.~~

"Carry a woman's scarf garter with you everywhere," Laura said.

"Or just a woman," Mel I said.

"Shame on you," Laura said. "That's right," Herb said. "There you go. You know what's what, don't you Niek?" he said. "Also, you'd carry around their perfumed hankies with you

wherever you rode. Did they have perfumed hankies in those days? It doesn't matter. Some little forget-me-not. A token, that's what I'm trying to say. You needed some token to carry around with you in those days. Anyway, whatever, it was better in those days being a knight than a serf," Herb said.

"It's always better," 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 have never had it good," Mel Herb said. "But I guess even the knights were vessels to someone. Isn't that the way it worked in those days? 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? man. No drunk teenagers to tear into your ass run over you."

"Vassals," Terri said.

"What?" Mel Herb said.

"Vassals," Mel said. "They were called vassals ~~vassals~~, not vessels ~~vessels~~."

"Vassals, vessels," Mel Herb said, - "what the fuck's the difference? You Vassals, vessels, ventricles, vas deferens. Well, you knew what I meant anyway. All right You're all better educated in these matters than I am," Mel Herb said. "So I'm not educated. I learned my stuff. I'm a heart surgeon, sure, but really I'm just a mechanic. I just go in and I fuck around and I fix things that go wrong with the body. I'm just a mechanic. Shit," Mel said.

"Modesty somehow doesn't become you, Herb," Terri Laura said, and Herb grinned at her.

"He's just a humble sawbones doctor folks," I said. "But sometimes they suffocated in all that armor, Mel Herb. 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 Herb said. "That's a terrible image, Nicky. I guess they'd just lay there then and wait until somebody someone, the enemy, came along and made a shish kebab kabob out of them."

"Some other vessel vassal," Terri said.

"That's right, some other vassal," Mel Herb said. "There you have it. Some other vassal would come along and spear the bastard his fellow knight in the name of love. Or whatever the fuck it was they fought over in those days." ¶ "Same things we fight over these days, I guess," Mel Herb said.

"Politics," 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 Herb poured himself another drink. He looked at the label closely as if studying a long row of numbers the little figures of the befeater guards. Then he slowly put the bottle down on the table and reached for the tonic water.

“What about ~~the this~~ old couple, Herb?” 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 light~~ inside the room was different now, changing, getting thinner weaker. ~~But the The~~ leaves outside the window were still shimmering, and I stared at the ~~fuzzy~~ pattern they made on the panes and on the Formica counter under it. They weren’t the same patterns, of course ~~There was no sound except for Laura striking her matches.~~

“What about that old couple?” I said. ~~after a minute. “The last we heard they were just getting out of intensive care.”~~

“Older but wiser,” Terri said.

Mel Herb stared at her.

“Herb, don’t give me that kind of look,” Terri said, “Go on with your story, hon. I was only kidding. Then what happened? ~~We all want to know.~~”

“Terri, sometimes,” Mel Herb said.

“Please, Mel Herb,” Terri she said. “~~Don’t Honey, don’t~~ always be so serious, sweetie. ~~Please go on with the story. I was joking, for God’s sake. Can’t you take a joke?~~”

“Where’s the joke? ~~This is nothing to joke about,~~” Mel Herb said. ¶ He held his glass and gazed steadily at his wife her.

“What happened then, Herb?” Laura said. “~~We really want to know.~~”

Mel fastened Herb fixed his eyes on Laura. He said, Then he broke off and grinned. “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.

“Herb, you shit,” Terri said. “Tell your story,” Terri said. “~~If I weren’t in love with you, I damn sure well wouldn’t be here in the first place, you can bet on it. Honey, what do you say? Finish your story. Then we’ll go to that new place, okay The Library. Okay?~~”

“Okay,” Mel Herb said. “Where was I? ~~Where am I? That’s a better question. Maybe I should ask that.~~” he said. He stared at the table and then he began again He waited a minute, and then began to talk.

“When they were finally out of the woods we were able to move them out of intensive care, after we could see they were going to make it. I dropped in to see each of them every day, sometimes twice a day if I was up doing other calls anyway. C They were both in easts and bandages, head to foot, the both of them. You know, you’ve seen it in the movies even if you haven’t seen the real thing. ~~But they were bandaged head to foot, man, and I mean head to foot. That’s just the way they looked, just like these phony actors in the movies after some big~~

disaster. Little eye-holes and nose-holes and mouth-holes. But this was the real thing. Their heads were bandaged — they just had eye holes and a place for their mouths and noses. And she had to have her legs slung up on top of it. Well, the husband Anna Gates had to have her legs elevated too. She was worse off than he was, I told you that. Both of them were on intravenous and glucose for a time. Well, Henry Gates was very depressed for the longest while. Even after he found out that his wife was going to pull through and recover, he was still very depressed. Not just about the accident itself, though of course that had gotten to him as those things will. 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 becayse he couldn't *look* at the fucking woman."

We all looked at Mel.

"Do you see what I'm saying?"

There you are one minute, you know, everything just dandy, then blam, you're staring into the abyss. You come back. It's like a miracle. But it's left its mark on you. It does that. One day I was sitting in a chair beside his bed and he described to me, talking slowly, talking through his mouth hole so sometimes I had to get up to his face to hear him, telling me what it looked like to him, what it felt like, when that kid's car crossed the center line onto his side of the road and kept coming. He said he knew it was all up for them, that was the last look of anything he'd have on this earth. This was it. But he said nothing flew into his mind, his life didn't pass before his eyes, nothing like that. He said he just felt sorry to not be able to see any more of his Anna, because they'd had this fine life together. That was his only regret. He looked straight ahead, just gripped the wheel and watched the kid's car coming at them. And there was nothing he could do except say, "Anna! Hold on, Anna!"

"It gives me the shivers," Laura said. "Brrrr," she said, shaking her head.

Herb nodded. He went on talking, caught up in it now. "I'd sit a while every day beside the bed. He'd lay there in his bandages staring out the window at the foot of his bed. The window was too high for him to see anything except the tops of trees. That's all he saw for hours at a stretch. He couldn't turn his head without assistance, and he was only allowed to do that twice a day. Each morning for a few minutes and every evening, he was allowed to turn his head. But during our visits he had to look at the window when he talked. I'd talk a little, ask a few questions, but mostly I'd listen. He was very depressed. What was most depressing to him, after

he was assured his wife was going to be all right, that she was recovering to everyone's satisfaction, what was most depressing was the fact they couldn't be physically together. That he couldn't see her and be with her every day. He told me they'd married in 1927 and since that time they'd only been apart from each other for any time on two occasions. Even when their children were born, they were born there on the ranch and Henry and the missus still saw each other every day and talked and were together around the place. But he said they'd only been away from each other for any real time on two occasions—once when her mother died in 1940 and Anna had to take a train to St. Louis to settle matters there. And again in 1952 when her sister died in Los Angeles, and she had to go down there to claim the body. I should tell you they had a little ranch seventy-five miles or so outside of Bend, Oregon, and that's where they'd lived most of their lives. They'd sold the ranch and moved into the city of Bend just a few years ago. When this accident happened, they were on their way down from Denver, where they'd gone to see his sister. They were going on to visit a son and some of their grandchildren in El Paso. But in all of their married life they'd only been apart from each other for any length of time on just those two occasions. Imagine that. But, Jesus, he was lonely for her. I'm telling you he *pined* for her. I never knew what that word meant before, *pined*, until I saw it happening to this man. He missed her something fierce. He just longed for her company, that old man did. Of course he felt better, he'd brighten, when I'd give him my daily report on Anna's progress—that she was mending, that she was going to be fine, just a question of a little more time. He was out of his casts and bandages now, but he was still extremely lonely. I told him that just as soon as he was able, maybe in a week, I'd put him into a wheelchair and take him visiting, take him down the corridor to see his wife. Meanwhile, I called on him and we'd talk. He told me a little about their lives out there on the ranch in the late 1920s and during the early thirties." He looked around the table at us and shook his head at what he was going to say, or just maybe at the impossibility of all this. "He told me that in the winter it would do nothing but snow and for maybe months at a time they couldn't leave the ranch, the road would be closed. Besides, he had to feed cattle every day through those winter months. They would just be there together, the two of them, him and his wife. The kids hadn't come along yet. They'd come along later. But month in, month out, they'd be there together, the two of them, the same routine, the same everything, never anyone else to talk to or to visit with during those winter months. But they had each other. That's all and everything they had, each other. 'What would you do for entertainment?' I asked him. I was serious. I wanted to know. I didn't see how people could live like that. I don't think anyone can live like that these days. You think so? It seems impossible to me. You know what he said? Do you want to know what he answered? He lay there and considered the question. He took some time. Then he said, 'We'd go to the dances every night.' 'What?' I said. 'Pardon me, Henry,' I said and leaned closer, thinking I hadn't heard right.

~~'We'd go to the dances every night,' he said again. I wondered what he meant. I didn't know what he was talking about, but I waited for him to go on. He thought back to that time again, and in a little while he said, 'We had a Victrola and some records, Doctor. We'd play the Victrola every night and listen to the records and dance there in the living room. We'd do that every night. Sometimes it'd be snowing outside and the temperature down below zero. The temperature really drops on you up there in January or February. But we'd listen to the records and dance in our stocking feet in the living room until we'd gone through all the records. And then I'd build up the fire and turn out the lights, all but one, and we'd go to bed. Some nights it'd be snowing, and it'd be so still outside you could hear the snow falling. It's true, Doc,' he said, 'you can do that. Sometimes you can hear the snow falling. If you're quiet and your mind is clear and you're at peace with yourself and all things, you can lay in the dark and hear it snow. You try it sometimes,' he said. 'You get snow down here once in a while, don't you? You try it sometimes. Anyway, we'd go to the dances every night. And then we'd go to bed under a lot of quilts and sleep warm until morning. When you woke up you could see your breath,' he said.~~

~~"When he'd recovered enough to be moved in a wheelchair, his bandages were long gone by then, a nurse and I wheeled him down the corridor to where his wife was. He'd shaved that morning and put on some lotion. He was in his bathrobe and hospital gown, he was still recovering, you know, but he held himself erect in the wheelchair. Still, he was nervous as a cat, you could see that. As we came closer to her room, his color rose and he got this look of anticipation to his face, a look I can't begin to describe. I pushed his chair, and the nurse walked along beside me. She knew something about the situation, she'd picked up things. Nurses, you know, they've seen everything, and not much gets to them after a while but this one was strung a little tight herself that morning. The door was open and I wheeled Henry right into the room. Mrs. Gates, Anna, she was still immobilized, but she could move her head and her left arm. She had her eyes closed, but they snapped open when we entered the room. She was still in bandages, but only from the pelvic area down. I pushed Henry up to the left side of her bed and said, 'You have some company, Anna. Company, dear.' But I couldn't say any more than that. She gave a little smile and her face lit up. Out came her hand from under the sheet. It was bluish and bruised looking. Henry took the hand in his hands. He held it and kissed it. Then he said, 'Hello, Anna. How's my babe? Remember me?' Tears started down her cheeks. She nodded. 'I've missed you,' he said. She kept nodding. The nurse and I got the hell out of there. She began blubbering once we were outside the room, and she's a tough lot, that nurse. It was an experience, I'm telling you. But after that, he was wheeled down there every morning and every afternoon. We arranged it so they could have lunch and dinner together in her room. In between times they'd just sit and hold hands and talk. They had no end of things to talk about."~~

~~“You didn’t tell me this before, Herb,” Terri said. “You just said a little about it when it first happened. You didn’t tell me any of this, damn you. Now you’re telling me this to make me cry. Herb, this story better not have an unhappy ending. It doesn’t, does it? You’re not setting us up, are you? If you are, I don’t want to hear another word. You don’t have to go any farther with it, you can stop right there. Herb?”~~

~~“What happened to them, Herb?” Laura said. “Finish the story, for God’s sake. Is there more? But I’m like Terri, I don’t want anything to happen to them. That’s really something.”~~

~~“Are they all right now?” I asked. I was involved in the story too, but I was getting drunk. It was hard to keep things in focus. The light seemed to be draining out of the room, going back through the window where it had come from in the first place. Yet nobody made a move to get up from the table or to turn on an electric light.~~

~~“Sure, they’re all right,” Herb said. “They were discharged a while later. Just a few weeks ago, in fact. After a time, Henry was able to get around on crutches and then he went to a cane and then he was just all over the place. But his spirits were up now, his spirits were fine, he just improved every day once he got to see his missus again. When she was able to be moved, their son from El Paso and his wife drove up in a station wagon and took them back down there with them. She still had some convalescing to do, but she was coming along real fine. I just had a card from Henry a few days ago. I guess that’s one of the reasons they’re on my mind right now. That, and what we were saying about love earlier.~~

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 Herb went on. “Let’s finish this **fucking** gin. There’s about enough left here for one **shooter** drink all around. Then let’s go eat. Let’s go to the **new place** The Library. What do you say? I don’t know, the whole thing was really something to see. It just unfolded day after day. Some of those talks I had with him . . . I won’t forget those times. But talking about it now has got me depressed. Jesus, but I feel depressed all of a sudden.”~~

~~“**He’s depressed** Don’t feel depressed, Herb,” Terri said. “**Mel Herb**, why don’t you take a pill, honey?” She turned to Laura and me and said, “Herb takes these mood elevator pills sometimes. It’s no secret, is it, Herb?”~~

~~Herb shook his head. “I’ve taken everything there is to take at one time or another. No secret.”~~

~~“**We all need a pill now and then** My first wife took them too,” I said.~~

~~“**Did they help her?**” Laura said.~~

~~“**No, she still went around depressed. She cried a lot.**”~~

"Some people are born **needing them** depressed, I think," Terri said. ~~"Some people are born unhappy. And unlucky too. I've known people who were just plain unlucky in everything. Other people—not you, honey, I'm not talking about you, of course—other people just set out to make themselves unhappy and they stay unhappy. She was using her finger to rubbing at something on the table with her finger. Then she stopped rubbing.~~

"I think I want to call my kids before we go eat," Mel Herb said. "Is that all right with everybody? I won't be long. I'll take a quick shower to freshen up, then I'll call my kids, ~~Then let's go eat.~~" He said.

Terri said, "What if Marjorie answers the phone? ~~You might have to talk to Marjorie, Herb, if she answers the phone. That's Herb's ex-wife. You guys, you've heard us on the subject of Marjorie. Honey, you know you don't want to talk to Marjorie. You don't want to talk to her this afternoon, Herb. It'll make you feel even worse.~~"

"No, I don't want to talk to Marjorie," Mel Herb said. "But I want to talk to my kids. ~~I miss them real bad, honey. I miss Steve. I was awake last night remembering things from when he was little. I want to talk to him. I want to talk to Kathy too. I miss them, so I'll have to take the chance their mother will answer the phone. That bitch of a woman.~~"

"There isn't a day goes by that Mel Herb doesn't say he wishes she'd get married again. Or, ~~or else die,~~" Terri said. "For one thing," Terri said, "she's bankrupting us. ~~Mel Another is that she has custody of both kids. We get to have the kids down here just for a month during the summer. Herb 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 them, too, so Mel and Herb is supporting the boyfriend too him as well.~~"

"She's allergic to bees," Mel Herb said. "If I'm not praying she'll get married again, I'm praying she'll ~~go out in the country and get herself stung to death by a swarm of fucking bees.~~"

"Shame on you, Herb, that's awful," Laura said ~~and laughed until her eyes welled.~~

"Awful funny," Terri said. ~~We all laughed. We laughed and laughed.~~

"BZZZZZZ," Mel Herb said, turning his fingers into bees and buzzing them at Terri's throat and necklacc. Then he let his hands drop **all the way to his sides** and ~~leaned back, suddenly serious again.~~

"~~She's a rotten bitch. It's true,~~" Herb said. "She's vicious," Mel said. "Sometimes when I get drunk, like I am now, I think I'll I'd like to go up there dressed like a beekeeper. You you know, that hat that's like a helmet with the plate that comes down over your face, the big thick gloves, and the padded coat? ~~I'll I'd like to just knock on the door and let loose release a hive of bees in the house. But first First I'd make sure the kids were out of the house, of course.~~" ¶ He ~~With some difficulty,~~ 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, right now after all. Maybe you're right, Terri. Maybe it isn't such a hot idea. Maybe I'll just take a quick shower and change my shirt, and then we'll just go eat. How does that sound, everybody?"

"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, turning a look on me.

"It just means what I said," I said honey, nothing else. "It means I could just keep going and going. That's all it I means meant." It's that sunset maybe." The window had a reddish tint to it now as the sun went down.

"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 just realized I'm hungry. What is there to snack on?"

"I'll put out some cheese and crackers," Terri said, but she just sat there. ¶ 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.

Herb finished his drink. Then he got slowly up from the table and said, "Excuse me. I'll go shower." He left the kitchen and walked slowly down the hall to the bathroom. He shut the door behind him.

"I'm worried about Herb," Terri said. She shook her head. "Sometimes I worry more than other times, but lately I'm really worried." She stared at her glass. She didn't make any move for cheese and crackers. I decided to get up and look in the refrigerator. When Laura says she's hungry, I know she needs to eat. "Help yourself to whatever you can find, Nick. Bring out anything that looks good. Cheese in there, and a salami stick, I think. Crackers in that cupboard over the stove. I forgot. We'll have a snack. I'm not hungry myself, but you guys must be starving. I don't have an appetite anymore. What was I saying?" She closed her eyes and opened them. "I don't think we've told you this, maybe we have, I can't remember, but Herb was very suicidal after his first marriage broke up and his wife moved to Denver with the kids. He went to a psychiatrist for a long while, for months. Sometimes he says he thinks he should still be going." She picked up the empty bottle and turned it upside down over her glass. I was cutting some salami on the counter as carefully as I could. "Dead soldier," Terri said. Then she said, "Lately he's been talking about suicide again. Especially when he's been drinking. Sometimes I think he's too vulnerable. He doesn't have any defenses. He doesn't have defenses against anything. Well," she said, "gin's gone. Time to cut and run. Time to cut our losses, as

my daddy used to say. Time to eat, I guess, though I don't have any appetite. But you guys must be starving. I'm glad to see you eating something. That'll keep you until we get to the restaurant. We can get drinks at the restaurant if we want them. Wait'll you see this place, it's something else. You can take books out of there along with your doggie bag. I guess I should get ready too. I'll just wash my face and put on some lipstick. I'm going just like I am. If they don't like it, tough. I just want to say this, and that's all. But I don't want it to sound negative. I hope and pray that you guys still love each other five, even three years from now the way you do today. Even four years from now, say. That's the moment of truth, four years. That's all I have to say on the subject." She hugged her thin arms and began running her hands up and down them. She closed her eyes.

I stood up from the table and went behind Laura's chair. I leaned over her and crossed my arms under her breasts and held her. I brought my face down beside hers. Laura pressed my arms. She pressed harder and wouldn't let go.

Terri opened her eyes. She watched us. Then she picked up her glass. "Here's to you guys," she said. "Here's to all of us." She drained the glass, and the ice clicked against her teeth. "Carl too," she said and put her glass back on the table. "Poor Carl. Herb thought he was a schmuck, but Herb was genuinely afraid of him. Carl wasn't a schmuck. He loved me, and I loved him. That's all. I still think of him sometimes. It's the truth, and I'm not ashamed to say it. Sometimes I think of him, he'll just pop into my head at any old moment. I'll tell you something, and I hate how soap opera a life can get, so it's not even yours anymore, but this is how it was. I was pregnant by him. It was that first time he tried to kill himself, when he took the rat poison. He didn't know I was pregnant. It gets worse. I decided on an abortion. I didn't tell him about it either, naturally. I'm not saying anything Herb doesn't know. Herb knows all about it. Final installment. Herb gave me the abortion. Small world, isn't it? But I thought Carl was crazy at the time. I didn't want his baby. Then he goes and kills himself. But after that, after he'd been gone for a while and there was no Carl anymore to talk to and listen to his side of things and help him when he was afraid, I felt real bad about things. I was sorry about his baby, that I hadn't had it. I love Carl, and there's no question of that in my mind. I still love him. But God, I love Herb too. You can see that, can't you? I don't have to tell you that. Oh, isn't it all too much, all of it?" She put her face in her hands and began to cry. Slowly she leaned forward and put her head on the table.

Laura put her food down at once. She got up and said, "Terri. Terri, dear," and began rubbing Terri's neck and shoulders. "Terri," she murmured.

I was eating a piece of salami. The room had gotten very dark. I finished chewing what I had in my mouth, swallowed the stuff, and moved over to the window. I looked out into the backyard. I looked past the aspen tree and the two black dogs sleeping in amongst the lawn

chairs. I looked past the swimming pool to the little corral with its gate open and the old empty horse barn and beyond. There was a field of wild grass, and then a fence and then another field, and then the interstate connecting Albuquerque with El Paso. Cars moved back and forth on the highway. The sun was going down behind the mountains, and the mountains had gotten dark, shadows everywhere. Yet there was light too and it seemed to be softening those things I looked at. The sky was gray near the tops of the mountains, as gray as a dark day in winter. But there was a band of blue sky just above the gray, the blue you see in tropical postcards, the blue of the Mediterranean. The water on the surface of the pool rippled and the same breeze caused the aspen leaves to tremble. One of the dogs raised its head as if on signal, listened a minute with its ears up, and then put its head back down between its paws.

I had the feeling something was going to happen, it was in the slowness of the shadows and the light, and that whatever it was might take me with it. I didn't want that to happen. I watched the wind move in waves across the grass. I could see the grass in the fields bend in the wind and then straighten again. The second field slanted up to the highway, and the wind moved uphill across it, wave after wave. I stood there and waited and watched the grass bend in the wind. I could feel my heart beating. Somewhere toward the back of the house the shower was running. Terri was still crying. Slowly and with an effort, I turned to look at her. She lay with her head on the table, her face turned toward the stove. Her eyes were open, but now and then she would blink away tears. Laura had pulled her chair over and sat with an arm around Terri's shoulders. She murmured still, her lips against Terri's hair.

"Sure, sure," Terri said. "Tell me about it."

"Terri, sweetheart," Laura said to her tenderly. "It'll be okay, you'll see. It'll be okay."

Laura raised her eyes to mine then. Her look was penetrating, and my heart slowed. She gazed into my eyes for what seemed a long time, and then she nodded. That's all she did, the only sign she gave, but it was enough. It was as if she were telling me, Don't worry, we'll get past this, everything is going to be all right with us, you'll see. Easy does it. That's the way I chose to interpret the look anyway, though I could be wrong.

The shower stopped running. In a minute, I heard whistling as Herb opened the bathroom door. I kept looking at the women at the table. Terri was still crying and Laura was stroking her hair. I turned back to the window. The blue layer of sky had given way now and was turning dark like the rest. But stars had appeared. I recognized Venus and farther off and to the side, not as bright but unmistakably there on the horizon, Mars. The wind had picked up. I looked at what it was doing to the empty fields. I thought unreasonably that it was too bad the McGinnises no longer kept horses. I wanted to imagine horses rushing through those fields in the near dark, or even just standing quietly with their heads in opposite directions near the

~~fence. I stood at the window and waited. I knew I had to keep still a while longer, keep my eyes out there, outside the house as long as there was something left to see.~~

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