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***Beginners: The Manuscript Version of  
What We Talk About When We Talk About Love***

*Beginners* is the manuscript version of the 17 stories that were published in book form as *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* by Alfred A. Knopf on April 20, 1981. The manuscript, which Carver’s editor Gordon Lish shortened to less than half its original length in two rounds of close line-editing, is preserved in the Lilly Library of Indiana University. The editors of this volume have restored the stories to their original forms by transcribing Carver’s typewritten words that lie beneath Lish’s alterations in ink on the typescripts. For ease of comparison, and because Carver’s manuscript included no title page or table of contents, the stories in this section are arranged in the same sequence as in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. The title, *Beginners*, has been provided by the editors because the story “Beginners” corresponds to the title story of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*.

Lish was a literary mainstay during Carver’s alcoholic years of the 1970s. He published Carver’s fiction in *Esquire*, recommended him to editors and agents in New York City, and made possible the publication of his first collection of stories, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, in 1976. In the years that followed, Carver’s life changed. On June 2, 1977, he stopped drinking. In 1978 his first marriage ended in separation (divorce would follow in 1982), and in 1979 he began living with the writer Tess Gallagher. After years of temporary jobs and unemployment he was appointed senior professor of English at Syracuse University, where he began teaching in January 1980. During these same years Lish left *Esquire* and joined the publishing firm of

Alfred A. Knopf. The two men kept in contact by letter and discussed the possibility of publishing a new collection of Carver's fiction under Lish's editorship at Knopf. In early May 1980 they met in New York City, where Carver gave Lish a manuscript of new and revised short stories.

From Carver's perspective, the manuscript he gave Lish was substantially complete. Lish had previously edited several of the stories, and the bulk of them had been published in periodicals and/or small-press books. Nonetheless, shortly after returning to Syracuse, Carver evidently received a query. In a letter dated May 10, 1980, he told Lish "not to worry about taking a pencil to the stories if you can make them better." He added, "If you see ways to put more muscle in the stories, don't hesitate to do so." He valued his editor's skills so highly that he offered to pay the cost of retyping if the marked-up manuscript required it.

While Carver finished the semester in Syracuse and prepared to travel to the Pacific Northwest for the summer, Lish edited the manuscript. As he later said, what struck him in Carver's writing was "a peculiar bleakness." To foreground that bleakness, he cut the stories radically, reducing plot, character development, and figurative language to a minimum. Some stories were shortened by a third, several by more than a half, and two by three-quarters of their original length. The overall reduction of the manuscript in word count was 55%.

Lish worked quickly, cutting the stories to his pattern for the book. The project was on a fast track. Five weeks after receiving the manuscript, he mailed a revised and retyped version to Syracuse. It arrived just as Carver and Gallagher were departing for Alaska. After failing to reach Lish by telephone, Carver mailed him a note on June 13, 1980, and promised to call later. "The collection *looks* terrific, though I haven't been able to read more than the title page—which title is fine, I think." He enclosed payment for the typist, gave a mailing address in Fairbanks, and left without examining the edited manuscript.

While Carver and Gallagher participated in the Midnight Sun Writers' Conference, Lish edited the collection a second time. Once again he had the manuscript retyped. At the end of June, while Gallagher remained in Port Angeles, Carver briefly returned to Syracuse. There he awaited the second edited version of the manuscript, apparently without having read the first revision. On July 4, 1980, he wrote Lish that the "revised collection" had not yet arrived. Time was short, since he was scheduled to fly back to Washington State in ten days. To cover the second round of typing costs, he enclosed a blank check. On July 7 he received what Lish presented as the finished text of the book. When he read the edited manuscript he was

shocked by the extensive changes that he found. "A Small, Good Thing," a 37-page story, had been cut to 12 pages and renamed "The Bath." A 26-page story, "If It Please You," had been cut to 14 pages and renamed "Community Center." (Lish later changed the title to "After the Denim.") A 15-page story, "Where Is Everyone?" had been shortened to five pages and renamed "Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit." "Beginners," a 33-page story, had been cut to 19 pages and renamed "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." Even "Mine," a 500-word story previously edited by Lish and published twice, had been further condensed and renamed "Popular Mechanics."

After a sleepless night, early on the morning of July 8, 1980, Carver wrote an anguished letter.

July 8, 8 a.m.

Dearest Gordon,

I've got to pull out of this one. Please hear me. I've been up all night thinking on this, and nothing but this, so help me. I've looked at it from every side, I've compared both versions of the edited mss—the first one is better, I truly believe, if some things are carried over from the second to the first—until my eyes are nearly to fall out of my head. You are a wonder, a genius, and there's no doubt of that, better than any two of Max Perkins, etc. etc. And I'm not unmindful of the fact of my immense debt to you, a debt I can simply never, never repay. This whole new life I have, so many of the friends I now have, this job up here, everything, I owe to you for WILL YOU PLEASE. You've given me some degree of immortality already. You've made so many of the stories in this collection better, far better than they were before. And maybe if I were alone, by myself, and no one had ever seen these stories, maybe then, knowing that your versions are better than some of the ones I sent, maybe I could get into this and go with it. But Tess has seen all of these and gone over them closely. Donald Hall has seen many of the new ones (and discussed them at length with me and offered his services in reviewing the collection) and Richard Ford, Toby Wolff, —Geoffrey Wolff, too, some of them. This new issue of TRI-QUARTERLY, out a few days ago, has a story by Toby W, one by Ford, Kittredge, McGuane, and "Where Is Everyone?" ("Mr. Fixit"). How can I explain to these fellows when I see them, as I will see them, what happened to the story in the meantime, after its book publication? Maybe if the book were not to come out for 18 months or two years, it would be different. But right now, everything is too new. Why TRI-

QUARTERLY has just taken another one, but that will not, cannot, come out until Fall-Winter 1981-1982. Gordon, the changes are brilliant and for the better in most cases—I look at “What We Talk About . . .” (“Beginners”) and I see what it is that you’ve done, what you’ve pulled out of it, and I’m awed and astonished, startled even, with your insights. But it’s too close right now, that story. Now much of this has to do with my sobriety and with my new-found (and fragile, I see) mental health and well-being. I’ll tell you the truth, my very sanity is on the line here. I don’t want to sound melodramatic here, but I’ve come back from the grave here to start writing stories once more. As I think you may know, I’d given up entirely, thrown it in and was looking forward to dying, that release. But I kept thinking, I’ll wait until after the election to kill myself, or wait until after this or that happened, usually something down the road a ways, but it was never far from my mind in those dark days, not all that long ago. Now, I’m incomparably better, I have my health back, money in the bank, the right woman for this time of my life, a decent job, blah blah. But I haven’t written a word since I gave you the collection, waiting for your reaction, that reaction means so much to me. Now, I’m afraid, mortally afraid, I feel it, that if the book were to be published as it is in its present edited form, I may never write another story, that’s how closely, God Forbid, some of those stories are to my sense of regaining my health and mental well-being. As I say, maybe if I had 18 months or two years, some distance from these pieces and a good deal more writing under my belt, I could and would go with it. Likely so. But I can’t now. I just can’t, I don’t know what else to say.

Please help me with this, Gordon. I feel as if this is the most important decision I’ve ever been faced with, no shit. I ask for your understanding. Next to my wife, and now Tess, you have been and are the most important individual in my life, and that’s the truth. I don’t want to lose your love or regard over this, oh God no. It would be like having a part of myself die, a spiritual part. Jesus, I’m jabbering now. But if this causes you undue complication and grief and you perhaps understandably become pissed and discouraged with me, well, I’m the poorer for it, and my life will not be the same again. True. On the other hand, if the book comes out and I can’t feel the kind of pride and pleasure in it that I want, if I feel I’ve somehow too far stepped out of bounds, crossed that line a little too far, why then I can’t feel good about myself, or maybe even write

again; right now I feel it's that serious, and if I can't feel absolutely good about it, I feel I'd be done for. I do. Lord God I just don't know what else to say. I'm awash with confusion and paranoia. Fatigue too, that too.

Please, Gordon, for God's sake help me in this and try to understand. Listen. I'll say it again, if I have any standing or reputation or credibility in the world, I owe it to you. I owe you this more-or-less pretty interesting life I have. But if I go ahead with this as it is, it will not be good for me. The book will not be, as it should, a cause for joyous celebration, but one of defense and explanation. All this is complicatedly, and maybe not so complicatedly, tied up with my feelings of worth and self-esteem since I quit drinking. I just can't do it, I can't take the risk as to what might happen to me. I know that the discomfort of this decision of mine is at its highest now, it's rampant, I feel nearly wild with it. But I know it will cause you grief as well, explanations, more work, stopping everything in its tracks and coming up with valid reasons for why. But, eventually, my discomfort and yours, will go away, there'll be a grieving, I'm grieving right now, but it will go away. But if I don't speak now, and speak from the heart, and halt things now, I foresee a terrible time ahead for me. The demons I have to deal with every day, or night, nearly, might, I'm afraid, simply rise up and take me over.

Of course I know I shouldn't have signed the contract without first reading the collection and making my fears, if any, known to you beforehand, before signing. So what should we do now, please advise? Can you lay it all on me and get me out of the contract somehow? Can you put the book off until Winter or Spring of 1982 and let them know I want to have the stories in the collection published in magazines first (and that's the truth, several of them are committed to places with publication way off next year)? Tell them I want the magazine publications first, and then the book out when I'm up for tenure here that spring of 1982? And then decide next year what, for sure, to do? Or else can or should everything just be stopped now, I send back the Knopf check, if it's on the way, or else you stop it there? And meanwhile I pay you for the hours, days and nights, I'm sure, you've spent on this. God-damn it, I'm just nearly crazy with this. I'm getting into a state over it. No, I don't think it should be put off. I think it had best be stopped.

I thought the editing, especially in the first version, was brilliant, as I said. The stories I can't let go of in their entirety are

these. "Community Center" (It Please You) and "The Bath" (A Small Good Thing) and I'd want some more of the old couple, Anna and Henry Gates, in "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" (Beginners). I would not want "Mr. Fixit" (Where Is Everyone) in the book in its present state. The story "Distance" should not have its title changed to "Everything Stuck to Him." Nor the little piece "Mine" to "Popular Mechanics." "Dummy" should keep its title. "A Serious Talk" is fine for "Pie." I think "Want to See Something?" is fine, is better than "I Could See the Smallest Things." Otherwise, with the exception of little things here and there, incorporating some of the changes from version #2 into #1, I could live with and be happy with. That little business at the end of "Pie" (A Serious Talk) him leaving the house with the ashtray, that's just inspired and wonderful. There are so many places like that the ms is stronger and clearer and more wonderful. But I could not have "Mr. Fixit" published the way it is in the present collection. Either the whole story, the one that's in TRIQUARTERLY now, or at least the better part of it, or else not at all.

I'm just much too close to all of this right now. It's even hard for me to think right now. I think, in all, maybe it's just too soon for me for another collection. I know that next spring is too soon in any case. Absolutely too soon. I think I had best pull out, Gordon, before it goes any further. I realize I stand every chance of losing your love and friendship over this. But I strongly feel I stand every chance of losing my soul and my mental health over it, if I don't take that risk. I'm still in the process of recovery and trying to get well from the alcoholism, and I just can't take any chances, something as momentous and permanent as this, that would put my head in some jeopardy. That's it, it's in my head. You have made so many of these stories better, my God, with the lighter editing and trimming. But those others, those three, I guess, I'm liable to croak if they came out that way. Even though they may be closer to works of art than the originals and people be reading them 50 years from now, they're still apt to cause my demise, I'm serious, they're so intimately hooked up with my getting well, recovering, gaining back some little self-esteem and feeling of worth as a writer and a human being.

I know you must feel angry and betrayed and pissed off. God's sake, I'm sorry. I can pay you for the time you've put in on this, but I can't begin to help or do anything about the trouble and grief I may be causing there in the editorial and

business offices that you'll have to go through. Forgive me for this, please. But I'm just going to have to wait a while yet for another book, 18 months, two years, it's okay now, as long as I'm writing and have some sense of worth in the process. Your friendship and your concern and general championing of me have meant, and mean still, more to me than I can ever say. I could never begin to repay you, as you must know. I honor and respect you, and I love you more than my brother. But you will have to get me off the hook here Gordon, it's true. I just can't go another step forward with this endeavor. So please advise what to do now. I'm going out of town tomorrow, but I will be back Saturday. Monday morning I'm leaving for the West Coast, Bellingham and Pt. Townsend, as I think I mentioned, and I'll hook up with Tess out there and return here on the 30th of July. My address here is

832 Maryland Avenue  
Syracuse, NY 13210

As I say, I'm confused, tired, paranoid, and afraid, yes, of the consequences for me if the collection came out in its present form. So help me, please, yet again. Don't, please, make this too hard for me, for I'm just likely to start coming unraveled knowing how I've displeased and disappointed you. God almighty, Gordon.

Ray [signed]

Please do the necessary things to stop production of the book. Please try and forgive me, this breach.

Not long afterward, Carver spoke to Lish by telephone. No record of their conversation is preserved, but Lish's point of view prevailed. The contract remained in force, and production of the book proceeded at full speed. By this time the mechanisms of publication were out of Carver's hands. He may not have realized this, because he spent July 10, 1980, belatedly comparing the first and second edited versions of the book. That evening he wrote Lish a letter filled with equivocations. On the one hand, he was thrilled at the prospect of a book with Knopf and deeply grateful to his editor. "It's a beauty for sure," he began, "it is, and I'm honored and grateful for your attentions to it." On the other hand, he had nagging doubts about the cuts made to the stories. He proposed specific changes to the edited text, "small enough" but "significant." These were largely restorations of material Lish had deleted during the second editing. "I have serious questions or reservations," Carver wrote, "or I wouldn't have marked the things I did." His fear was that the pared-down stories would make his writing seem disjointed. "I'm mortally afraid of

taking out too much from the stories, of making them too thin, not enough connecting tissue to them.”

Rather than attempt to salvage “Where Is Everyone?” which had been cut by more than three-quarters and renamed “Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit,” Carver requested that it be dropped from the collection. The original story was in press at *TriQuarterly*, and he understood that the editor was submitting it for a possible O. Henry Award. Moreover, as a story about an alcoholic just beginning to face his problems, “Where Is Everyone?” marked a turning point in his own recovery. “I have a lot of rampant and complicated feelings about that story,” he explained, “no matter if it is never included in a book in any form whatsoever.” He finished the letter the next morning, restating that he was “thrilled with this book and that you’re bringing it out with Knopf.” Eager to rejoin Gallagher in Port Angeles, he focused on endorsements and publicity. To build anticipation for the new book, the previously unpublished stories would need to be rushed into magazines. By the end of the letter, Carver had slipped back into the deferential posture he had assumed toward Lish during his drinking years. “I once told you I thought I could die happy after having a story in *Esquire*,” he wrote. “Now a book out with Knopf—and such a book! And there’ll be more, you’ll see. I’m drawing a long second wind.” He closed “with my love” and promised he would write again “sometime or another” in the future.

By the eve of Carver’s departure from Syracuse, the night of July 14, 1980, he had left the form of the book to his editor’s discretion. “I know you have my best interests at heart,” he said in a letter, “and you’ll do everything and more to further those interests.” Not wanting to be “a pest of an author,” he asked only that Lish “please look at” the restorations he had proposed: “if you think I’m being my own worst enemy, you know, well then, stick to the final version of the second edited version.” The resistance he had voiced a week earlier had collapsed, as had his self-confidence. “Maybe I am wrong in this, maybe you are 100% correct, just please give them another hard look. That’s all.” His only firm directive was that “Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit” should not be included in the book.

How did Lish respond to Carver’s unease about the editing of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*? In August 1998 he told *The New York Times Magazine*, “My sense of it was that there was a letter and that I just went ahead.” In due course he sent Carver proofs of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. “I still haven’t done anything but glance at the galleys you sent up,” Carver wrote on October 6, 1980. “Took the wind out of my sails some when you said to send them back to you so soon without reading them even.” Had he read them, he would have found that

the stories conformed to Lish's second edited version, to which a few more cuts had been made. Virtually none of the changes Carver proposed were incorporated, and the book included "Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit."

On February 15, 1980, Carver had written Lish to say he had on hand three groups of stories. One group had previously appeared in little magazines or small-press books but had never been published in a trade-press book. A second group either had appeared or would soon appear in periodicals. A third group consisted of newly written stories still in typescript.

The *Beginners* manuscript as presented in this volume comprises these three groups of stories. [. . .]