

Introduction

John met Jackie one day in the park. They were sitting side by side on a bench watching people feeding the ducks and they got chatting and discovered they had things in common. They exchanged numbers and met up again a couple of times and got to really like one another. On the third meeting John told Jackie he wanted to sleep with her, at which point Jackie paused for a moment and said, 'Do you love me?'

There was another pause before John said, 'I thought we could have dinner beforehand – I know this great little Greek place on . . .'

'I said do you love me?' Jackie repeated.

There was yet another short pause and then John said, 'Yes'.

'Then say it.'

'I love you,' said John.

'Do you mean it?'

'I love you,' said John again, with meaning.

'Or are you only saying it because I asked you to?'

There was a longer pause while John attempted to hide his exasperation, and then he said, 'What do you mean by love anyway?'

That's where our eavesdropping ends, before Jackie gets to answer the million dollar question. Because the point is Jackie was me, or you, as there were times in my life as there may have been in yours when it seemed vitally important to introduce the word 'love' into a relationship, not least because way back when it was considered beyond the pale to sleep with anyone unless it was for love.

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What *does* the word 'love' mean, anyway? If all we need for a peaceful and happy world is to love one another, why don't we simply do so? Why do we have to complicate it? If love conquers all why don't we just sit back and wallow in love?

The answer is that love, like truth, is 'rarely pure and never simple', to borrow from Oscar Wilde. It's not just singers who croon about love gone wrong. Most classic tales of love are of love forbidden (*Abelard and Heloise, Romeo & Juliet*), or withheld (*Dido & Aeneas, Medea & Jason*). True, Elizabeth Bennet gets her man eventually, as does Jane Eyre. But the world has it in for Cathy and Heathcliffe, not to mention Anna Karenina and Jay Gatsby. In the real world William Hazlitt's love for his landlord's daughter Sarah nearly drove him mad, and of course Wilde's 'love that dare not speak its name' for Bosie was not just illicit and mostly unreciprocated but led him to prison, disgrace and early death.

At the same time it wasn't love that did for Romeo and Juliet, it was tribal conflict going back so far nobody could remember the original cause. It was Jason's selfishness and Medea's justified jealousy that brought about their tragedy; and class and, again, jealousy, that kept Cathy and Heathcliffe apart. Gatsby and Hazlitt were doomed by their obsession and Anna Karenina by her impulsive despair. Wilde's real enemy was not the law that disgraced him and put him in prison, it was his terrible choice of lover. There is certainly such a thing as too much love, or too little, and when you come to think of it the chances of both sides loving one another equally in order to create the perfect relationship are pretty slim.

Love is more than romantic love of course. The following stories, written over a period of around fifteen years and with one exception pre-Covid, are about love in various forms: familial love; love of a country or a belief; love of a people or a pet or a work of art; love between friends; love undemonstrated, as well as love withheld, unrequited or unwanted. Many of them are true, or based on truth. The one thing they have in common is that they demonstrate the belief that love is like a red red rose: beautiful, prickly and not always easy to find.