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What It Meant to Love You

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What It Meant to Love You

By Caleb Jackson

Abstract

“What It Meant to Love You” is a short snippet of my longer novella about the relationship between two young adult loners, Joshua and Anna, who find comfort in one another. It is purposefully scatter-brained, much like the characters as they are blinded by nostalgia, love, and lost memories. Although brief, this work is for all those forgotten by those they could never forget.

The Story

To become “great” requires a certain aptitude towards a certain reputation. Joshua Stockwell was not one of these greats.

Joshua eyed the clock on the cream-colored wall, with a scowl across his face as the clock ticked along. Driver’s Ed was killing him. Not physically, but Mr. Dolus was ranting about his dead kid, and Joshua wanted anything but to hear it again. It sent shivers down his spine about how casual Dolus could be about something so tragic. Even with the shades pulled up in the second-floor health room, the room always darkened when Dolus’ smile faded, as he melancholically stared at the floor. The room was silent as he talked, mindless words filling the students’ ears. Some yawned, arms outstretched like lazy cats, while others remained attentive, their beady eyes locked on Dolus like moths to a flame. But to Joshua, most just looked bored out of their flipping minds. Or maybe that was just him. Either way, he raised his hand, drawing a few eyebrows as Dolus quizzically looked over mid-sentence,

“Then he- uh- yes Joshua?”

“May I use the restroom?” Joshua said, already regretting his decision.

“Yeah, after I explain your assignment,” Dolus said, his smile aging him by ten years, which, for a bald however-old-he-was, made him look even more like a creepy doll than he already did.

Joshua simply nodded and buried his head in his notebook as Dolus finally moved on to the actual content of the class. With an audible sigh, Joshua twiddled his pencil in his hand and began to draw. He could not care less; he always got good grades.

What was the point of trying? Plus, this character is starting to develop well, Joshua thought as he tweaked the girl’s expression from a curled frown to a slight smile. Grunting, Joshua found his left arm had

smudged the hair, causing grey to cloud all over her face. Lifting his hand, he saw it covered in pencil lead. He called this phenomenon of being forced to write on a right-handed desk as a leftie the “WWI hand.” He could not remember where the term came about, perhaps his love of history, perhaps some random comment by a teacher. Regardless, this third-grader’s explanation had stuck for over a decade, and he was not about to let it go.

“Alright, everyone,” Dolus said, as his clapping made Joshua wince. “Your project is to create a planned drive to Disneyland in Anaheim, California. I am going to pass out a paper with all the instructions you need, including the restrictions you are under for this planned trip. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask.” As people began to shift about as Dolus came around and dropped the assignment off, Joshua simply rolled his eyes.

At least this assignment sounded somewhat entertaining compared to the tests. Gosh forbid, it sounded like heaven compared to watching another hour of those awful 80s and 90s driver “safety tip” videos, he thought as Dolus came around and dropped a sheet off at his desk. As Joshua looked down at the “context,” aka, that he was a poor father with two malnourished kids and a barely functioning vehicle, he wondered what father would take their kid to Disney when they obviously had more pressing issues at hand.

Granted, this all came from a few simple words: father, 2 kids, poor, old vehicle. So, what the heck do I know? Joshua thought as he slipped out his garbage-show Chrome computer, which he had won in 8th grade. As he opened a new tab and began to work, he sighed lightly as he glared at his drawing, the grey smudges making it look like she was crying. But even with the smile, Joshua knew they weren’t happy tears.

“Anna?” said a tall, blonde-haired woman carrying multiple bags in her hands.

“Yes, mother?” Anna replied, raising her head out of the cage of the rabbit, whose tiny, grey, spotted head was trying to poke out.

“When you are done, can you go and help your sister with the dishes, so we won’t be late for church?”

“Yeah, sure, I can do that.”

“Thank you.”

“Of course,” Anna said, a warm smile filling her face.

Anna calmly closed the door to Marshmallow’s cage and gazed into his beady black eyes. She saw herself in that reflection, a tiny spec. She chuckled to herself for a moment, then blurted out:

“Wow, I really do look like a guy with short hair.”

Perking up quickly, Anna raised her hands to her knees as she locked her eyes on her father as he came into the room, dressed appropriately for the occasion. She smiled to herself as he fiddled with his black tie. Although he frequently buried these types of folks, he clearly still felt uncomfortable embodying aspects of his future, often unwilling, clients. When he cut his pepper-flecked beard, he looked like a younger man, but those wrinkles around his eyes betrayed the weariness of three kids. Anna was glad she would never have any children. Just as soon as he appeared, he disappeared upstairs, softly gliding up like a phantom as he muttered about “preparations.”

Anna chuckled, “Alright Marshmallow, I better get ready.”

Marshmallow stared at her and squeaked.

Anna sighed, “You had enough to eat Marshmallow, soon enough you’ll be as round as one.”

Glancing up at the clock, Anna smiled sadly as she walked her way to the kitchen.

Another day of church, Anna thought. What possibly could go wrong?

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to remember everything? he thought to himself as he rounded the corner to the front of the school. The snow crumbled around him as he walked towards the sign that read *Fate High School* in big bright yellow and black lettering.

Below, they had the oh-so-obvious, yet stupid slogan: *Fate is Great!* It wasn’t, at least for today.

As Joshua stood there next to the ten-foot sign, the wind whipped about him and sent a shiver down his spine. With only a T-shirt and jeans, he should have worn a jacket, but nope. He felt the

prickles of cold spreading across his body, but stood as still as a statue as he waited for his grandmother. He breathed into his hands, the CO₂ billowing out and right back into his face as the wind played its cruel tricks around him. Checking his phone, it was a causal -10 degrees Fahrenheit, or -23 Celsius for the layman. As he waited, his mind wandered towards his environment.

The suburban sprawl was a bother, though not as much as the nursing home that felt like a pro-to-cemetery. At least once a week, there would be an ambulance rushing towards the place and paramedics lifting a bag into their vehicle. One day, Joshua just knew, whether it be from intuition, nihilism, or his plain old gut, he knew he was going to be there sooner rather than later. He grimaced as he heard sirens growing in the distance.

Two Days Later

“Hey, I was wondering if you, maybe, I don’t know, would like to go to prom with me? As a friend, of course,” Joshua quickly added, tension and sweat consuming his body while Anna could do nothing but smile with infinite warmth.

“Well, that was a mess, I can understand if you don’t wanna now,” Joshua said with a laugh.

“Haha, no, no, I want to go with you, it sounds lovely,” she said, genuine sincerity flowing from her voice.

“Really? Wow. Okay then!” Joshua exclaimed, butterflies filling his chest as he caught a twinkle in her grey eyes.

“Guess we will have to plan something then for outfits!” Anna said. “But I gotta go now, Marshmallow needs dinner!”

“When doesn’t he?” Joshua snickered.

He closed his eyes as Anna’s laugh filled his ears and the tension in his body deflated.

A smile crossed his face as he replied, “Well, I guess I’ll let you go. Talk to ya later, Anna?”

“For sure! Later Josh!” Anna replied as she turned and strolled up the stairs.

“Byeeeeeeeeee!” Joshua said, waving towards Anna while he walked backward, miraculously not tripping. As he lost sight of her, he gently sighed.

He was an idiot, but gosh did he want to be her idiot.

Explication

Friendship and love have a long history, most famously outlined in *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he describes friendship as encompassing the vital components of utility, pleasure, and virtue for a happy life (eudaimonia).¹ Throughout the centuries, Aristotle’s work has been accepted and tested, but the philosophy scholar Mark Phelan argues for expanding the term “friendship” to include “lesser friends,” as friendships are the “product of significant collaborative norm manipulation.”² *What It Meant to Love You* takes this presumption that friendships are the product of norm manipulation and runs with it, exploring friendship between members of the opposite sex and the implicit expectations placed on the individuals (i.e., Joshua and Anna) by themselves and society.

One of these expectations is the perception of a friend-to-romantic-partner pipeline. For example, in one study, around 68 percent of adults had been friends before becoming romantic partners.³ In fact, much of the initial formation of friendships tends to be shaped by criteria such as physical appearance, economic status, and physical presence, with men tending to focus on appearance, and women on the latter two.⁴ It is a progressive timescale, from strangers to partners. One potential consequence of that perception is that any friends of the opposite sex *must* have romantic feelings for one another. Studies continue to assert that “Romantic and sexual desire for an opposite-sex friend is common,” in which one individual’s projection of their desires onto their friend “may motivate people to take a leap of faith and pursue a romantic relationship.”⁵

In *What It Meant to Love You*, the character of Joshua helps explore these perceptions and projections. His scenes provide insight into his worldview, specifically his reinforcement of a negative thought process and his sense that life is seemingly meaningless. For example, in the story, Joshua is listening to Dolus, the Driver’s Ed instructor, talk about his dead son. Joshua, out of boredom, asks to use the restroom to get Dolus back on track to the class. Yet, even with that effort to avoid a perhaps uncomfortable topic, he audibly sighs, as “He couldn’t care less; he always got good grades. What was the point of trying?” Joshua continues that with the nursing home scene, where he states that “One day, Joshua just knew, whether it be from intuition, nihilism, or his plain old gut, he knew he was going to be there [dead] sooner rather than later.” As one can note, the society around Joshua

really shapes his attitude, whether it be the boring and uncomfortable stories from Dolus, or just the physical presence of a nursing home and its implications, Joshua’s mind locks onto those negative aspects of his life, which leads to a self-repeating cycle of seeming meaninglessness.

Yet, we see how this is ultimately changed when he is around Anna. As exhibited through the last line of the story, after Joshua successfully asked Anna out to prom, he thinks to himself about how “He was an idiot, but gosh did he want to be her idiot.” In this line, there is a powerful indicator of how Joshua is projecting his feelings onto Anna. Because she said yes to his offer, Joshua is now considering developing a romantic relationship with Anna, whereas in all the other scenes, he did not think about her at all. A societal circumstance of prom and the expectation that you need someone to go with drives Joshua to ask Anna out, and in turn, that societal pressure makes Joshua fall in love.

Although brief and scattered, *What It Meant to Love You* is not just another short story but the beginning of a deeper narrative about love and how it develops and is challenged in the context of friendship. Exhibited primarily through Joshua’s character, the perception and projection of love onto Anna, his opposite-sex friend, showcases how expectations and norm manipulation can dramatically shift an individual’s perception of others. Any further additions to the story would analyze the societal impacts on Joshua and Anna’s friendship, specifically the pressure to become a romantic couple and the tension that arises when one of the pair does not feel the same way. Overall, though, *What It Meant to Love You* goes to show how love and friendship are far more complicated and deserve much more investigation than they have been given.

About the Author

Caleb Jackson is a senior in the History-Teaching program at Montana State University. Academically, Caleb has worked with the McNair program to research the intersections between creative fiction and its cultural themes throughout time. In his spare time, Caleb is an avid hiker and writer who plans on publishing a book in the near future. After pursuing his bachelor's, Caleb plans to take a few years to travel before settling down in a rural Montana town for his foreseeable future.



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