The Jonnybulls

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The Jonnybulls

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"An old man, maybe sixty, he lived not far from L'École St. Antoine, and I would see him limping around the school sometimes, but I did not take much notice. Kids in my second-grade class called him "le vieux Gidoone," because of his English accent, and sometimes he would lean against the schoolyard fence eyeing us as we played futbol during recess. Usually I hung around with Tu-tur Laroche, a third grader. Neither of us paid any attention to Monsieur Gidoone, until the day he called us from the open door of his shack."

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An old man, maybe sixty, he lived not far from L'Ecole St. Antoine, and I would see him limping around the school sometimes, but I did not take much notice. Kids in my second-grade class called him “le vieux Gidoone,” because of his English accent, and sometimes he would lean against the schoolyard fence eyeing us as we played futbol during recess. Usually I hung around with Tu-tur Laroché, a third grader. Neither of us paid any attention to Monsieur Gidoone, until the day he called us from the open door of his shack.

On our way home from school Tu-tur and I had paused to watch a man inch his way to the top of the Bonford chimney, up the thin metal ladder fastened from top to bottom. It took the man a long time to climb, stopping every few minutes to rest. That giant chimney, planted in the middle of the mills, towered over the town, was almost as high as nearby Mt. Hope. No matter where you lived in Bonford, you could see it. Now, the man was going to tear the whole thing down, brick by brick.

“You'd never catch me climbing that thing,” Tu-tur said.

I nearly got dizzy just looking up at the man. “How's he going to get the bricks down?”

“Drop them down the chimney hole,” Tu-tur said with authority. “So nobody below gets hit.”

It made sense. Still, I hated to see the chimney being chopped to death. It had been built by those whom Papa labeled “Jonnybulls”; they spoke only English, not French Canuck like us. Now the Bonford mills were shutting down and moving south.

“Qu'est-ce que tu vas faire,” Papa often said, “Les Jonnybulls don't want to pay us no money.”

“Now, now, George, don't worry so much,” Moman would say, “We’ll manage.”

Papa hated the Jonnybulls because, he said, they took advantage of the French Canadians who had emigrated to Maine for better jobs. When he heard an English accent on the radio, he would pound his fist on the table and say, “Tiens! C’est un autre goddam Jonnybull.” Papa usually mixed English with his French, especially when he was angry.

The voice of Monsieur Gidoone startled me. He flapped his arm, like a pigeon with a broken wing. I looked at Tu-tur. He shrugged.

“He wants to see us.”

“You go, if you want.”

“Aw, I don't want to go alone.”

Tu-tur hesitated, then reluctantly headed toward the shack.

Monsieur Gidoone's large teeth glinted yellow; his wrinkled hands, bird-like, small and dirty, were too small to hurt anyone, and he had a big funny nose. When he rubbed it, twisting the tip, I almost laughed, but did not, because Moman told me to be polite to grownups. He pulled a half-dollar from his pocket and, pointing the coin at Tu-tur, said, “C'mon inside with me.” His voice was raspy, like a rusted door hinge.

“What for?” Tu-tur asked.

“I'll show you,” Tu-tur glanced at me, and Monsieur Gidoone continued quickly, “Come inside, and yer'll have this half-dollar.”

“You going?” I wondered why Tu-tur was hesitating.

“Why don’t you go?”

“He wants you. I'll stay here.”

Monsieur Gidoone waited. I nudged Tu-tur forward, but he elbowed me back.

“Know what they say about him?” Tu-tur whispered.

“I haven't heard anything.”

“Well, you should have...”

“C'mon, it's a whole half dollar." Finally he went in after the old man. The door shut solidly.

A few people strolled by on Mechanic Street. The shack stood alone in the dirt, except for a few houses across the street. It looked ready to be torn down. Mechanic Street faced the church and school building, and because this was Friday after school, the playground was empty. After school Moman sent me out to fetch beer bottles to cash in, so I would not be teasing my two-year old brother, Jokob. She
did let me keep some of the money. I began to think of how many bottles I would have to find to earn fifty cents. On a good day I could track down twenty-five cents worth, a half dozen or so two-penny bottles and, if lucky, a couple of nickel ones. Lately Moman had been telling me Papa was going to lose his job, that there might be hard times for the family, and every bottle would count. So to please Moman, I went hunting for them every chance I could.

Suddenly the door slapped open and Tu-tur came out. No expression on his face, so I asked if he got the money. He nodded. Then Monsieur Gidoone’s head stuck out the door, and his arm waved for me to come in.

“Tu-tur, wait for me. OK?”

Tu-tur nodded again, though he did not seem glad for me, and I scampere toward Monsieur Gidoone. He held the door open for me, like a movie usher. Once inside, he shut the door and maneuvered me toward his bed next to a small window. The shade was down, the room so dark it took a while for me to see. He stuffed a dollar bill in my fist. I could have the whole thing, he said, if I stayed longer than Tu-tur.

For that I would have stayed the whole afternoon. Then he gently turned me so I could face the head of his unmade bed, covered with only a wrinkled sheet. He did not look at me, just sat on the bed and quickly unbuttoned my belt.

That startled me. I stepped back, but he pulled me forward, and tugged briskly at my pants until they glided down to my feet. He seemed terribly anxious. Then the same with my underpants. I was embarrassed when I thought he might notice pee stains on my underpants. Moman tried to get me to change every day, but I usually held off for a few days, sometimes a whole week. Monsieur Gidoone did not seem to mind, so I just stood there, hoping he would not hesitate to tell me what it was he wanted.

My eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness. Monsieur Gidoone’s hair had not been cut in a long time, so white hairs curled up on his neck. He had a strong beer odor. And his breath was hot against my thighs, but he just sat there leaning into me, on the edge of the bed, staring, staring. Once in a while he would touch my piou politely, inspecting it like Moman did after my bath.

I held my dollar tightly. Having to do so little to earn it greatly relieved me. Only I got awfully tired standing. To break the monotony I reached for the shade and peeked out. Tu-tur, hands in his pocket, was pacing slowly. Now and again, he looked up at the Bonford chimney, then stared at the ground, nervously. I waved to catch his attention, and finally he looked up at the shack, saw me, and motioned for me to hurry up.

I turned away from the window, not wanting to distract my benefactor. The bells of St. Antoine announced Friday afternoon mass, and I wished Monsieur Gidoone would finish. I tapped his shoulder lightly and asked if I could go. He leaned back and held my shoulders with both hands like my uncle, grinning. If I came back next week, he said, he would give me another dollar.

I told him I could come Thursday. Since it was Ascension Day, a holy day of obligation, there would be no school. He said, oh good, good, and I yanked up my pants, thanked him and left.

“How about that?” I asked. “A dollar?”

“What he do to you?”

“Nothing much. Just took down my pants and, you know, looked at my piou.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“A dollar! Isn’t that great!”

“I don’t like him. He’s creepy.”

He wasn’t impressed or even jealous about me getting a whole dollar, and when I told him Monsieur Gidoone asked me to come back, he only looked away, “We shouldn’t go there.”

“Why not? Can you think of a faster way to make a dollar?”

Tu-tur was silent.

“It would take me three days of bottle picking to make a dollar.”

Tu-tur just kept on walking. I even dangled my dollar in front of his nose.

“That old Gidoone must be bad to do that kind of thing,” said Tu-tur. “I’m not going back.”

Papa, home from work, sat in the kitchen reading his newspaper. Moman was preparing dinner, and Jokob was rocking back and forth on the living-room sofa, which he did all the time. Me-mère, my father’s seventy-year-old mother, sat in her favorite chair, watching Jokob. She spoke no English, was deaf in one ear, and knitted and prayed all day long. Once Moman explained to her that rocking kept Jokob out of mischief. I didn’t like Jokob because Moman favored him.

“On va manger tout de suite,” Papa harked at me as I walked in. Papa always wanted to eat right away. First at table, first to eat, first to finish, and then he’d stare at the family to hurry us along. Moman wanted us to eat slowly, chew our food well, and eat everything on our plates.

“Go wash your hands.” Moman said.

I tucked at her apron and proudly displayed my dollar.

“Mon Dieu!” she exclaimed. “Regardez donc!” She took the dollar to Papa, and he immediately put his paper aside and looked at my dollar as if he couldn’t believe it.

“Ha! Don’t tell me!” he said. Now that I was the center of attention, Jokob stopped rocking. Even Me-mère quit knitting.

“Qu’est que c’est ça?” Me-mère usually wanted to know what was important. Papa told her briefly.

“So many bottles!” said Moman.

“Oh,” Papa said, snapping my dollar in front of him.

“His first dollar!” Moman announced. Jokob poked his head in the kitchen and stared hard. “Jean is getting to be quite a man,” she said.

Papa placed the dollar next to his plate and asked Moman if the fish was ready. It was, and we all waited for Me-mère to come to the table before sitting down. She walked slowly, with out a cane, her body bent forward, and made me think of a thick bush weighted by wet snow. As he ate, Papa kept looking up and winking at me, though, as usual, he did not say much, just gobbled his food. After dessert, he surprised me by telling Moman to tack the dollar to the kitchen wall, near the cruxifix, for everyone to see. Moman hoped that more dollars would come later. Me-mère nodded approvingly, and said, “Un bon garçon.” And when she smiled, I couldn’t have been
proader.

On Sunday, M’Oncle Théophile, Ma Tante Hélène and my little cousin, Joseph, dropped by after mass. Papa wasted no time in boasting about my achievement.

“Regarde ça, mon vieux,” said Papa, pointing at the wall. “C’est lui qui a gagné ça. And all by himself! What you think of that, Eh?” Papa nodded and winked.

“Oh, ho! Stink o’ that!” said M’Oncle. I liked the way he made fun of my English. He picked me up in his arms, looked me square in the eye, “Jean here is a good boy.” He smiled gravely, pinched my nose and jounced me a little. Usually he bragged about his own son, who now sat on the couch next to Jokob. But Joseph had never made a dollar.

Jokob stared evilly at me, bouncing back and forth. I said nothing, just absorbing all of this attention. Papa patted my head, shuffling my hair around. It was better to be quiet, an exhibit only, and let Papa be the master of ceremonies.

“But you know, George,” M’Oncle Théophile continued, putting me down. “It won’t be long before my Joseph will be seven and old enough to make money. He’ll be five in August. And bring in dollars just like Jean.”

“Oui, oui,” replied Papa. “It won’t be long.”

“When the mill is finished,” said M’Oncle, narrowing one eye, “we’re going to need it.”

On Ascension Thursday Papa had to work, so I went to mass alone. On my way back home, I hurried to my benefactor’s house. As before, Monsieur Gidoone stood outside and waved when I got near.

“What d’yer think o’ that man on top o’ that chimney?” he asked.

I looked up and saw a tiny speck of a man, working. The chimney was much smaller now, like a giant carrot with the end bitten off. “Don’t like it much,” I said.

“Town’s not goin’ ter be the same.”

I told him I was sorry to see the mills go. Then, “What’s wrong with your leg?”

“It’s nothing, nothing . . . the war . . . a long time ago . . . come in, come in,” he said and limped in ahead of me.

It did not seem so dark this time. The room was still messy. Dirty clothes scattered everywhere, paper bags stuffed with beer cartons, half the bed sheet on the floor. Moman changed our linen every week and kept telling Papa to pick up his socks and underwear. She wouldn’t have approved of my coming here, because of the sloppiness. There was an awful smell of stale beer. I was shocked to discover he drank so much. I started to count the beer bottles, which I hoped he would give me, but he pulled me close to the bed as before.

The same thing again. Down with the pants and underpants, staring and touching, nothing more. While he was busy with me, I scanned the room and counted all the bottles I could see, adding up their potential worth. They were sprinkled everywhere, like fallen toy soldiers. I saw half-eaten, dried-up tomato rinds on the table. The window shade was not completely drawn. I stared at the sunrays filtering through the small holes and crack at the sill. It reminded me of early Sunday masses at St. Antoine, when the sun was most golden and would peep through the tops of the stained glass windows. Sometimes when it was hot, Father Parenteau, when not serving mass, would go outside and open the windows a bit wider. Then all the parishioners watched his shadow move from window to window. Soon wide rays of warm sunshine would pour in, causing many to shield their eyes.

Now, Monsieur Gidoone knelt in front of me, and I waited. In a while I asked, “Can I go now?”

“No, no, a little more,” he said.

Though tired of standing, I wanted to be polite. Finally he lifted his head and sat back on the bed. He pulled a crumpled dollar from his pocket and presented it to me, breathing hard, watching me piously while I buckled my pants.

“Come back Saturday, and I’ll give yer another one.”

“Sure,” I said and asked if I could have his empties.

“Here,” he said, handing me a brown paper bag, “put ‘em in there. Be sure they’ll be more when yer come back.”

When I left, I had two bags full, and felt so excited that I couldn’t wait to get to the store. After cashing them, I had forty cents more to show Moman.
"My goodness!" she exclaimed. "Dites moi pas! Another one! Well, aren't you my little man." She lifted the dollar from my outstretched hands in disbelief, kissed my cheek with a loud smack and hugged me tightly. I stood, rocked as he always did if something unusual happened. Moman held the dollar for Me-Mère to see. She nodded and smiled.

"Show this to your father when he comes in, M'Oncle Théophile is coming too. I'm telling you, are they going to be proud of you! You're getting to be quite a man."

That night when Papa came home, he sounded tired and was in a complaining mood.

"C'est terrible, Théophile," said Papa, talking about the mills. "J'ai jamais vu une place comme ça."

"N'y-a-t-il pas, it don't look too good," said M'Oncle. He said money was becoming scarce in Bonford, especially for the French Canadians.

"On travaille fort, and where does it get you? Eh?" said Papa.

"Quand ça marche pas, ça marche pas." Moman replied in the soothing voice Papa could always count on. "Everything will work out for the best. Don't you worry."

Moman poured Papa and M'Oncle each a small glass of beer, and the two went into the living-room, Papa to his favorite chair, next to Me-Mère.

Papa shook his head and pounded his fist in his knee. "Je te dis, it's those maudi Jonnybulls. They're so damn tight with their money. They think they're going to save money in the South, but you wait."

"They might," said M'Oncle. "It costs less, you know, to run a mill down there. Cheap labor."

"Just the same, we do more for our money. They're not going to find better workers than us."

Moman came in from the kitchen, wiping her hands, and smiling. "Jean," she said, "montre Papa."

That was my cue. I placed my second dollar on Papa's lap, stood back, and waited. I felt like a messenger bringing in good news.

"Un autre?" Papa said.

"Oh, oh! Another one?" said M'Oncle Théophile. He paused. "Who gave you this one, Jean?"

"Hmm," Papa said, eyeing M'Oncle. "Yaa, who give you this one? He purred straight in my eyes, half-serious, half-smiling. I suddenly felt a little scared, and did not answer right away. When Papa spoke slowly, it meant I had done something wrong.

"Well," said Moman, "aren't you going to say anything?"

Papa glanced at M'Oncle, then stood up directly in front of me, put both hands on his knees and lowered his face to mine. "Jean," he said in a low, calm voice. "How did you get this dollar?"

I looked at Moman.

"Eh?" Papa said louder. "Qui te l'a donné?"

"Jean?" said Moman.

"Monsieur Gidoone gave it to me," I said.


I nodded.

"What Gidoone? Qui'est ce Monsieur Gidoone?" asked Papa.

"A man."

"Eh? What man?"

"The one in the shack near school," I repeated.

Papa slowly raised his head. His eyes grew larger. He looked at Moman who now had her hand over her mouth. There was complete silence, and all eyes were on me.

"Ah... GIDOONE!" exclaimed M'Oncle Théophile, as though suddenly understanding. "Je le connais, celui-là. He's that old Jonnybull, the one who was in the war."

"Ecoute-moi, Papa."

"Oh, you know him. He's that cripple," M'Oncle then squinted one eye. "George, they say he's a little..., and he twisted his hand over and under. "Un fort."

"Mon Dieu Seigneur!" exclaimed Moman.

"Qu'est qui a? Qu'est qui a?" Me-Mère demanded. M'Oncle shook his head making believe it was nothing, told her not to worry. I stood still, scratching my palms with my fingers, feeling the wetness.

"Jean," Papa began. "What were you doing there?"

"Monsieur Gidoone called me and Tu-tur over," I said, looking around the room. Me-Mère had stopped knitting, and M'Oncle Théophile leaned forward in his chair. Even Jokib looked worried.

"And?"

"He... ah gave Tu-tur fifty cents and me a dollar—"

M'Oncle Théophile broke in, "What did he do to you, Jean?"

"I'll handle this," Papa said firmly, then grabbed my shoulder and made me face him. "Qu'est ce qu'il fait?"

"Nothing much," I replied, my mouth feeling dry. "He... ah... brought me in his shack... and..."

"Oh, Mon Dieu!" cried Moman.

"Oh, ho!" said M'Oncle. Me-Mère looked puzzled, curious, but M'Oncle again gestured with his hand that nothing was wrong. "A-t-il fait de quoi mal?" she asked.

"Non, non, Me-Mère." M'Oncle said. "C'est rien, C'est rien."

"What about?" Papa said to me.

"He... he...

"Did he touch your—"

I nodded quickly.

Papa groaned heavily and straightened up, like a man suffering from arthritis. He looked about the room then said, "Did he do anything else?"

I thought about whether he had, then shook my head.

"My Joseph will never go there," said M'Oncle Théophile.

Papa did not look at M'Oncle, only at me. He liked to look good in the eyes of his brother; now, because of me, he was embarrassed. In a voice that was strangely calm yet fully serious, he said, "Ecoute-moi, Jean. You stay away from this man from now on... As tu compris? I don't want you to go there... jamais, jamais!" He looked at Moman. "Bon, c'est fini."

His chest heaving, Papa mumbled to M'Oncle that he'd go see the old man and take care of everything. M'Oncle said he would go with him, and quickly telephoned Ma Tante Helene that he would eat at our house. Later, during supper, Papa ate slowly, and hardly spoke.

But, before supper was finished, Papa suddenly stood up, gulped his coffee, and nodded to M'Oncle Théophile. He grabbed his jacket and pecked Moman on the cheek.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

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“We won’t be long.”

“Now, George Lajeunesse, don’t get in trouble because of this. Maybe it’s better to forget about it.”

“Don’t worry, Theophile and me, we’ll take care of everything.”

Moman stood up. “Wait until tomorrow,” she said. “It’s better to wait.”

“No,” Papa’s fist tightened. “We’re going now.”

“George, you’ll only make it worse.”

Seeing Papa so angry, so nervous, I wished that I had not told, that I had not mentioned my benefactor’s name. What was Papa going to do? What had Monsieur Gidoone done that was so wrong?

“We’re going to stop this business now,” Papa said.

“Oui,” added M’Oncle. “Now is better than later, when it could be too late.”

“Tiens! That’s right.” Papa said, nodding to Moman.

Moman looked sad. “It makes no difference.”

“Ton chapeau, George, Ton chapeau!” Me-mere said, pointing to the coat rack.

Papa grabbed his hat, then seeing my dollar on the wall, snatched it, and quickly he and M’Oncle Théophile went out. Moman said, “Go upstairs pray, pray hard,” and watched me all the way up the stairs.

But in my bedroom I couldn’t stay still. It was all my fault, and so after checking to make sure Moman was in the kitchen, I sneaked down the stairs and out.

Papa and M’Oncle were already on Mechanic Street, Papa leaning forward as he walked. I stayed behind, out of their vision, as together they marched toward Monsieur Gidoone’s shack. I took a short cut and ran hard, scared, got to the schoolyard, slipped under the fence, and crept along the side of the church wall to the front. There was Monsieur Gidoone’s shack. I hid behind the big elm tree, just in front of the church entrance, and waited.

The shack door was closed, and Papa and M’Oncle were not in sight. Were they inside? Suddenly a loud curse burst out of the shack. That, followed by loud rumblings, like chairs hurling against the wall, brought me the church. Mrs. Gagne to the open window of her house across the street. She listened, and hearing “MON MAUDI! CHIEU DE GOMMAD!” pulled her head back inside. I recognized Papa’s familiar “SALAUD!” but I had never known Papa this angry. Was he going to kill Monsieur Gidoone? I would never have expected Papa to hurt him.

After another crashing noise, I heard my benefactor moaning. I wanted to squirm closer, to see inside, but I could not move from behind the tree. Mrs. Gagne and her husband rushed out their door toward the shack.

Then I heard a siren in the distance. The shack door flew open. Papa and M’Oncle dragged Monsieur Gidoone out by his amput. Blood trickled from his nose, and he wobbled and slid, trying to stay on his feet. What had I done?

Papa gripped Monsieur Gidoone’s shirt and pointed to the Bonford chimney. “Look! Look what you Jonnybulls are doing to us!” he shouted. “But no! That’s not enough! You got to go after our children with . . . with your filthy dirty hands!” And he pulled from his pocket a piece of paper, my dollar maybe, and pushed it in Monsieur Gidoone’s eyes. Then he took it violently, over and again, and flung it in my benefactor’s face. The old man was crying and trembling, and his pants looked wet.

The police car raced up, and Officer Beaulieu, a friend of Papa’s, jumped out. Papa gestured wildly, as did M’Oncle Théophile, while a small

Mule

by Joan Henson

We ferret ravines and boulders, you and I — foragers, sitting streams and turning rocks; miles into desert, ochre days are clocks we read by shadow length and shade of sky.

You echo in ancient shafts, unseen to all except my long, low ears attuned to mines; I heave in the heat near shimmery cactus spines hearing you pick and probe abandoned wall.

Emerge yellow-dusted, denim soft with sweat, vague as twilight sinking against my side, rocking your head as if the night were wide chasms you must cross or must forget.

I lick your shovel fingers, worn old and stand mute, tranfixed by you; in gold.
crowd gathered. Papa, speaking in French, paced back and forth swinging his arms, and Officer Beaulieu nodded gravely, trying to calm him.

From where I crouched, feeling helpless and guilty, I began to cry. I wanted to get on my knees and pray. But then a firm hand on my shoulder made me jump. It was Father Parenteau.

"Hallo, Jean. What is that all about over there? Why were they fighting?" he asked, squinting his eyes. "Isn't that your father?"

I nodded.

"What are you doing here?"

"My father hit Monsieur Gidoone."

"Oh?"

Officer Beaulieu shoved my benefactor into the police car, and, after pattering Papa on the shoulder, drove off. Papa and M'Oncle Theophile hurried away from the shack, still shouting with their hands.

The priest put his arm around my shoulder and said, "Well, Jean, did your father hit Gidoone because of something Gidoone did?"

I did not answer.

"Hmm," he said slowly, "I know about Gidoone."

By now I had stopped crying.

"Do you want to talk to me about it, Jean?" he said, touching my arm lightly.

I shook my head.

"Are you sure?"

I swallowed hard. "I have to go home now, Father—" and started down Mechanic Street. After I crossed the street and looked sideways back to where I had come from, I saw his black robe move slowly toward the rectory. No one was about the shack now. The door, slightly ajar, creaked loudly in the wind. It would not matter now, I thought, to get closer and see what Papa had torn up.

In front of the door, scattered in the dirt were the bits of my dollar bill. I could hardly believe Papa had ripped it up. I got on my hands and knees and scooped up the pieces carefully, looking about, fearful that someone might spot me. Fading slowly into the twilight was the Benford chimney, now a mere stump.

With all the dollar bits in my hand, I stood up, suddenly noticing Father Parenteau still in front of the rectory, hands behind his back, like a shadowy sentinel, peering at me. He made no motion, no sign, but I felt now that I should go to him. The shack door cried after me as I hurried away.

Once there Father Parenteau immediately stepped forward, and his hands reached toward me. "Yes, Jean?"

"Father?" I stopped to catch a breath.

"There's something I have to tell you." And I poured the dollar into his large cupped hands.

"Is this what Gidoone gave you?"

"And my father ripped it up," I said. "He even hit him." Father's eyes were serious, solemn, as when he gives Holy Communion. "What will they do to Monsieur Gidoone now?"

"Don't worry, he won't be hurt." He paused, "Jean, your father did what he thought he should."

"But, Father, he hit him, he hurt him."

"I know, Jean," and wrapping his arm softly around my shoulder, he led me up the short steps and inside. We walked quietly down the narrow corridor. Father Parenteau said the dollar was still good and might go for the Missions. That relieved me. "And afterward," he said, "we'll pray together for Monsieur Gidoone."

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The Truth Is

by Joan Henson

I say
I love you
but I mean
I need

I say
I can share
but I mean
I covet

I say
I will give
But I mean
I want

I say
I love you
and I don't know
What I mean

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