

[Home](#)

[Current Issue](#)

[Summer 2008](#)

[Spring/Summer 2008](#)

[Winter/Spring 2008](#)

[Autumn 2007](#)

[Summer 2007](#)

[Spring 2007](#)

[Winter 2007](#)

[Autumn 2006](#)

[Summer 2006](#)

[Spring 2006](#)

[Winter 2006](#)

[Fall 2005](#)

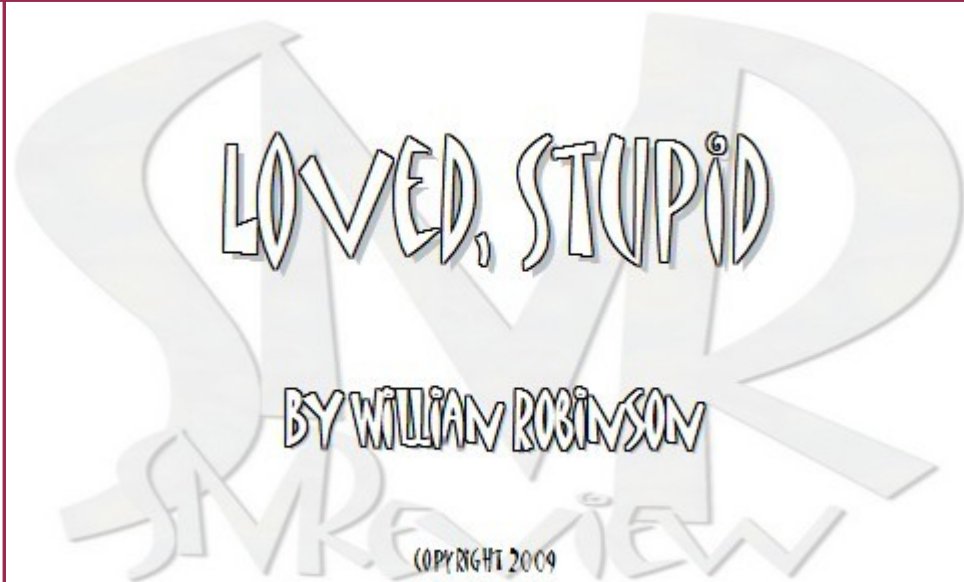
[Summer 2005](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[SNR's Writers](#)

[Contact](#)



Annie claims the tires were Dunlop, D60A2, all-season. In bed together, I tilt my head like a chocolate lab, dazed and confused.

"Don't give me that, Bruce," she says. "Bill and I know it was you."

My father caught my mother having an affair in their seventeenth year. He waited outside the boyfriend's house and when he walked out my father tried to run him down with his '92 Celica. All I did was mow down this chump's rose garden.

She dismisses me with a flip of her dark, braided hair, tasty as black licorice. I can't honestly say why I did it. On my way back from P.J.'s in Ardmore, a couple of frosty Rolling Rocks in my gut, surely an impulsive thing. A hit on the ol' adrenaline bong.

"Bruce is scared shitless of you now," she says.

"Of me?"

"I know. I told him you once didn't fare so well with a girl scout."

Story: after I bought two boxes of the Thin Mints and Do-Si-Dos, the little tyke stomped back the next day, accusing me of shorting her one. I smirked, got kneed in the shin, then nailed with an uppercut.

"Who thinks Mike Tyson is out there selling cookies?" I ask.

One month ago, Annie says, "You and Bill are different conflagrations. You're full of fire and oxygen and burning timbers."

"And he?"

A soft smile creeps across her lips. "A gentle lasting flame."

I'm a poet, three chapbooks to my name, Annie none, and in the two years of our semi-cohabitation my iambic pentameter has finally rubbed off on her.

Deep in Annie's cerebellum she wishes to leave me for good. It's not so easy. Three times

already we've left each other "for good." We know each other the way any two people can know each other who've been together awhile, only she's no longer so sure she knows herself, with me. But three months with this guy, Bill, and still we're doing it, and after climbing off my pelvis a few minutes ago, she says, "He didn't mind us at the beginning because, you know, he couldn't say so." She lifts her head off my bare chest. "Now he's saying so."

I reach over on the night table and light up the half-finished Virginia Slim Annie has started. "I don't need to pee all over my territory," I puff and shrug.

Annie swivels her legs around off the bed. "Great. And I'm the fire hydrant." She wiggles into her panties, snaps her bra back on, then peers at me quizzically. "He wants to be with me solely, is that so horrible?"

I jack my head from deep within the crevice of the pillow, prop myself on elbows. "I'm just not a drag-a-woman-around-by-her-hair kind of guy. It ain't the Stone Age, Wilma."

Annie sighs. "Bill thinks you have a Casanova Complex."

Bill used to be a stockbroker. Then he went to god knows where for a Masters in Counseling just so he could tell others what's wrong with them.

"So he traded in his cell phone for a leather couch and an egg timer. In my book he's still a putz."

Annie squirms into her jeans and, in front of the mirror, begins stroking her twisty locks with a huge honeycomb brush. "And in his book you're the typical tragic figure."

"And why is that, pray tell?"

"Because you'll never want what can be easily had." She gives an under-the-breath giggle. "That's why you've resorted to stalking us."

I came across them leaving Bella Trattoria in the trendy Manyunk District outside Philly. "Billy the Kid" wasn't what I pictured. He was skinny, but fit, a cross between geekster Jeff Goldblum and a buffed and bronzed Jean Claude Van Damme. I followed them, until I did a "Dick Van Dyke," tripping over some tin trash cans.

"I'm so bad I'd be run out of the stalkers' association," I kibitz.

Annie is leaning on her left leg with her hand on her hip, fully dressed, ready to go. She wags her pointer digit in my direction as she swings 180 out the front door toward her Milano red Honda Fit parked at the curb. With a blanket wrapped around my waist, I wobble to the front door to catch her. "Some call it stalking, some call it love," I yell back.

She ducks into the driver's seat. "You don't love anything, Bruce Johnson," she says. "Not even yourself."

She crosses her eyes and sticks out her tongue, then, in a flash, she zips away.

Annie's last boyfriend, Derek, had come east, from Oklahoma, to Scranton, Pennsylvania, an industrial town, where they met at a court hearing for her friend who sprayed mace into the face

of her ex-husband's girlfriend. Derek was the ex-husband's brother. But not long after he went east for her, she went south for herself. I was diving in Bermuda, away myself. We met under the thatched roof of a tiki bar. Three stools apart, with Macy Gray hair, and legs smoky and lean and long, like two-perfectly-rolled Cubans.

"What's a dame like you doing in a place like this," I tried in my best Bogey lisp.

"My pimp sent me." She had a mouth like Kathy Griffin, crude and funny.

We were living parallel existences: my girlfriend, her boyfriend, dumped on the same day. Still, she was sad, and in a way, so was I.

I had just learned to read tarot cards. I shuffled the deck and Annie chose the Magician Card.

"A new romantic beginning is at hand and a great love affair is imminent," I said.

"That's a lie," she said.

"Maybe, but you got any plans other than to sit here and drown in sorrow?"

She skipped out on her plane ride back, forfeited the fare, sailed with me from Marsh Harbour to Opa Locka. From there we rode on my Honda Shadow from Pensacola to Biloxi to Galveston up to Albuquerque to Los Angeles. Once in Los Angeles, it wasn't much farther to Oakland, and from there not much farther to Seattle. From Seattle we headed up to Nome, Alaska. Then we hopscotched back through the Grand Tetons, down through Great Falls and over to Cedar Rapids. We ended up in Philadelphia, my home town. When it was about time for her to leave, I said, I think you should stay a while, figure things out here.

She said, I think I like this town.

I show up at the Philadelphia Zoo unannounced, where Annie's moved from junior nature docent to full-time animal attendant. It's African white lions and red pandas for her, and good riddance to the marmosets, tamarins and black and white colobus monkeys, who, she says, "Just throw feces and jerk off all day."

"Yeah, but who doesn't?" I kid.

During her break, we sit on a park bench, gobble up wieners smothered in mustard and relish, chips, split a Dr. Pepper through a single straw. A pair of South African bush elephants flap their ears lazily at us from their pen.

"If you could be any animal," I say, "what kind would you be?"

"Umm...a Galapagos marine iguana," she says. "They used to live on land, but there wasn't any food. So they went to the water. Now tell me that's not adapting!"

"I'd be a polar bear," I say. "Can you beat a deep, wonderful dream six months of the year?"

We are talking. Even laughing. But then I say, "Name one thing Buffalo Bill gives you I don't?"

"Orgasms," she laughs.

But then she stops. Head bowed, eyes on the last nub of hot dog on her lap. "I'm almost into my third decade," she says, somberly. "I think it's time I got serious."

I say, "What do you think are the philosophical differences between Engels and Marx?"

My parents seemed to have loved each other for a long time, then came the affair and the deceit and I started scribbling in tiny notepads humorous little limericks, so when faced with all that loathsomeness, what billows up is smarmy comedic angst.

Annie gives her lips a slight upturn. At best, a chuckle.

Ever since Billy "Don't Be a Hero" came along, she's been contemplating cataclysms of conventionality: picket fences, clingy kids, bourgeois dinners at the in-laws'. But Annie knows my point: marriages end.

So lately, volley is what we do:

"But you're great with kids."

" 'Cause I'm one myself."

"You're just afraid."

"How a person can be a full-time artist and a full-time husband is beyond me."

"But isn't art what happens when life gets in the way?"

"I probably wouldn't tell you half the secrets I do if we were married."

Here are the things I know: I'm unreligious, moody, an odd parakeet. A Leo cusp Virgo, wild and untamable, ruled by the sea.

There's a lull in our talk. I smack the cup's plastic bottom to release an ice cube into my mouth, but they all hold hands, spilling out together onto my Polo cotton knit.

"Ice cubes work in packs, you ever notice?" I say.

But Annie responds, "And Bill doesn't care about being adored, either."

We once stayed with the Havasupai tribe in an Arizonian side canyon. Lying at night, cuddled in thick blankets amid dashing streams and ruby walls, I asked her which would she prefer, to be loved, or adored.

"Loved, stupid," she said.

I want to be adored for something and chose poetry to be that something adored for. But Annie doesn't see why anyone would ever choose anything over love.

"To be adored," I said, "is to be loved forever."

"Why can't you be a famous poet who is loved for love?" she asked.

"Because a poet is after truth, and love is not truth, because truth can't be changed, while love can."

Annie snickered at all this pessimism. She thinks it's just an act, because here are the things she knows: I get choked up when I see watercolored paintings, quilt-makers (believe it or not), and alas, obscure poetry. When Annie says, You should just be happy, I tell her my father was not a happy fellow.

"The man sat in his car outside my mother's lover's house. For three days the door never opened. When he came home, eyes swollen from a night of sobbing, he said, "You think everything is fine, and you find out you're not even close."

And with that Annie managed to explain the world down to its most basic element. That nothing comes from nothing.

I take Annie's hot dog wrapper and squish it into mine.

"I want to be with you," she says.

"You can be," I say.

"No," she says. "A different you."

Because Bill is called away to Boston on some seminar (*Men are from Mars, Bill's from Uranus*, I jest), I invite Annie to Devon Seafood Grill for a few savory mussels and late-night partying.

"Throw on some clothes."

"It's ten-fifteen," she says.

"I'm lonely."

She grows quiet on the phone.

"Meet me. Please."

Annie strolls in with all the confidence of a supermodel in a Chanel perfume ad. Out on the town, she's full-throttle, with frothy hair and strawberry-frosted lip gloss, and smoking becomes *de rigueur*, as is wearing sensationally extravagant and impractical pale green leather pants. Unbeknownst to her, there's a friend of mine along for the ride.

"Tom trains police dogs," I say. "Tom, Annie works with animals, too."

Tom is tall and handsome, but blond and not Annie's particular flavor.

After a while, I say to Tom, "Why don't you get us some of that buttery Sonoma-Cutrer."

As he saunters off to the bar, I say, "What do you think?"

"About what?"

"About Tom."

"He's nice, I guess," she says.

"He's single."

And suddenly she flees, storming out, past Tom and glasses in hand on his way back. At my apartment, at one in the morning, I dial, waking her.

"What is your problem?"

"I don't like surreptitious set-ups."

"Wow, aren't you the philanthropist," I say.

Not a sound over the line, and I suspect Annie might be sniffing in silence.

But she's not. In a voice full of told-you-so contemptuousness, she says, "Bill said you might react this way."

"What way?"

"Nothing. Just that you're afraid things might actually work out between him and me, and you might try to sabotage it."

In bed sometimes, I pry Annie to enlighten me on the jingoistic crap Bill "The Wonder Shrink" feeds her: "Love correctly, and you will live correctly"; "Never getting over something is never having been loved correctly yourself"; "Anger is simply misdirected passion."

But Bill's not for her. He's boring, dead pan humor without the pan, a snoozer, C-SPAN in the flesh. So over the phone, I say, "I got news for you. That rainbow you're walking toward, there's no Bill at the end of it."

"What!? How would you know?"

"Of all the words you've ever used when talking about him never once have you used the word love."

She tells me to fuck off. Five days later, she hears back from me.

I grovel, "I want to make it up to you."

She says, "Bill proposed."

The small apartment I rent is squeezed between the park and the Delaware River. "Squeezed for style," Annie likes to say, where the living room shutters are freestanding columns that flank the windows. I've got one armoire, which holds blankets, vases, electronics, and one bedroom pine sideboard that I call "the most functional piece I've ever owned." My kitchen is no bigger than a large pantry.

Tonight, it's vegetarian lasagna for Annie, my specialty. I put in layers of noodles, ricotta filling, jazzed-up pasta sauce with bits of spinach and mushroom, pop the entire *chef d'oeuvre* into the oven for an hour, then set candlelight and multi-colored, long-stemmed roses as centerpiece, about to embark on a UN-sized peace offering.

"Lions are so much easier to take care of than monkeys," Annie says, as she has taken a glass of Chardonnay while elaborating on how her new position have given her a fresh perspective. Something, she say, I should get. I swear, Annie can jump from job to job without a blink of an eye. When I graduated college, I didn't know what I wanted to do. But I had rent to pay. I took a job as a copywriter, though was told I could move up if someone left, got canned, or died. I've been a copywriter for ten years running.

But I've known freedom, too.

The week before Annie arrived in Bermuda, I spent diving the 3,000-foot walls of the world-famous reef, sea kayaking to neighboring islands, and snorkeling out the door of my thatched-roof cabana, all the while eating coconut-encrusted fresh fish. Nights spent wrapped in a blanket on green fields with waterfalls echoing me to sleep.

After dinner, the door bell rings, and it's a group of people, three men and two women, huddled together like Christmas carolers. They hand us information on how to protect ourselves from a spate of muggings in the neighborhood. The flyer begins with a warning: *Travel in twos. Never alone.*

Once they leave, I throw on a pair of jogging shorts and running shoes and do calisthenics, sidebends, at the front door.

"I should go with you," Annie says. "It's dangerous."

"Nonsense. I'll be back in a jiff."

Before I head out I say, "I know you're hesitating about Bill."

Her head lurches a little.

"We'll talk when I get back," I add.

Annie cleans off the table of dishes and wipes down the counter top, then watches *Jeopardy* until I return. I rinse off in the shower and take a beach towel, grab a water with lemon, then head out to the tiny terrace where Annie is leaning back on the hind legs of a plastic lawn chair. Not enough room for the two of us out there, so I stand in the doorway. From the light inside, her eyes glisten emerald, like a cat's.

I say, "I was thinking, maybe Bill's not the right person. Maybe I'm the right person."

Two days later it's Friday night, and Annie wants to meet in Rittenhouse Square at a bar called Rouge, the perfect place, with its distinct European-sidewalk café feel and lots of resplendent Fellini-esque characters, to start a romantic weekend. I park my fanny at one of the tables, start in on a Mad Hatter, and watch from my perch passers-by and a street mime, who, decked out in clownish whiteface and rainbow suspenders, sneaks up behind unsuspecting couples, only to mimic their walks with sashay and exaggeration.

Annie arrives from across the street in a colorful Grass Roots T-shirt carrying a brightly-colored tote bag. She has to dance around the mime before crossing the street of rushing cars to get to me. Her breathing is rapid, as her hand drops beneath the table to plunk down her bag. She gestures for a sip from my glass.

"What's mime is yours, and what's yours is mime," I joke.

Annie orders a swanky summer drink herself, settles in, then glances at the mime and thinks what I think: suddenly we break into a round of droll repartee about things that are nearly as annoying as mimes, but not quite.

"Festering, pustulating blisters," I quip.

"Any song by Michael Bolton," Annie wisecracks.

"A shotgun to the head."

"Circus clowns."

"People who whistle tunelessly," I say.

Annie stops again, like the other day at the zoo, a mood change as swift as the passing rain cloud that has suddenly appeared overhead, about to crack open the sky.

"Remember Africa?" she asks.

Heart of Darkness. Our one, big international trip together. Wind-carved desert dunes. Wildebeast. And the scent of sweet perfume from the ylang ylang flower. What Annie remembers is a death in a tribe and the *laibon* who read the future in colored stones. Bones tossed from a gourd onto a green cloth spread out in the shade of an acacia tree. As a symbol of moving on, the *laibon* told us we had to desert the area, never to go back.

Annie is silent, as if she has stunned herself into emotional paralysis. Suddenly I know her answer.

"I can't stay," she says.

"Sure you can," I say.

For a while we watch passers-by and the mime trap himself in a box. Dollops of rain begin plinking the pavement, an awning rolls out above us, and the mime pretends to pack shirts into a suitcase.

When a couple kiss under a canape, out of the rain, I want to tell Annie that I can't breathe, speak, or sleep without her. If she's there when the world comes crashing down, I suspect I'll have a better chance with her. These things I should say. The rain bounces off the cobblestone with repetitive splats. My pulse pounds.

I want to lean over, kiss her, but Annie is distracted. Her eyes to sky, the rain softens. Clouds separate, revealing patches of blue.

"Who you love and what you need aren't always the same thing," Annie says, her eyes watery, now glued to mine.

"Whom you love," I think to say. In a few seconds she reaches for her bag, then pushes back her chair to stand. In the wavy heat, she waits for a response, a facial gesture. I glance across the street. The mime is unpacking.

I say, "Mime in ancient Greek means, "He who gets his lights punched out."

I wait for a laugh.

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