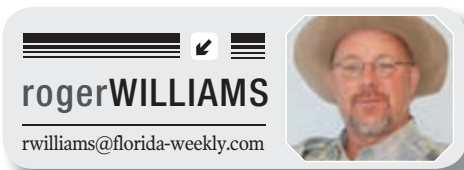


COMMENTARY

Recollections on recycling and love



Part I

I know a guy, John Claydon, who had a truck he used only sometimes, the way trucks should be used — not to commute, or look good, or put flags on, or park prominently in front of diners or bars, or sport advertising license plates that say “Beef,” or gallivant around town, but to haul something.

As the years went on, and after his wife had bottled the last jars of jam and green beans and many other things they’d grown together in their big garden, and died young of cancer, he hauled a lot less. So finally the truck became a fixture on his driveway. Its bed faced the street and its tires melted into the driveway a few feet below the stone cottage where he lived.

It was an ancient powder-blue thing that looked like it should be driven by a gay ex-Marine, which it wasn’t; instead, it was driven by a former rodeo cowboy turned writer who had read nigh-on everything. Close enough, I suppose.

One day a neighbor from one of the big nearby houses marched past the property and told him his truck was a disgrace and should be moved — I think he said the damn thing was lowering home values in the neighborhood.

The guy was such a bonehead that he sicced the city code enforcers on Johnny C.

John, of course, refused to move his truck. Instead, he left it near the road and ran a mostly invisible irrigation system from his house all the way down to the truck. Then he filled the bed with rich dark dirt he picked up somewhere,

and began to plant seeds. He planted that truck in layers of things that grew thick, and bloomed in delicious clouds of summer color, at different levels. He had flowers that spilled over the back of the pickup almost to the bumper, like nasturtiums. And he had things that stood up so high and proud you couldn’t see over them, like giant sunflowers. And he had other things that floated in the middle, roses maybe. No, not roses, something else like cosmos in reds, pinks, purples and whites.

He turned that truck into a garden. I think he even had things growing out of the cab, through the side windows, which were rolled down. But that might just be my imagination.

Pretty soon along about 5 p.m., Johnny C. would fix himself a drink and wander outside. Not 15 minutes would go by before he was deep in conversation with five or six passersby, all of whom wanted to know how he did it.

That truck became a thing of beauty, and that’s the truth (which might have impressed John Keats, but he died at 24. What did he know, besides how to wield the English language?).

Before long, John had to hide inside during the walking-jogging hour. One day, I looked out the window and spotted about 30 women, all in jogging shorts, passing his truck. A jogging club. They were stopping in clusters of two or three, to study the truck and the flowers and the house behind them.

They wanted him to appear so badly that they stood and smiled at the house itself — think about it, these energetic women, healthy as horses, smiling at stones.

The next year, the flowers were even more beautiful.

Part II

Today is my anniversary. When I met my wife, Amy, I didn’t meet her. I wrote her back.

I had traveled from Fort Myers to Colorado

and back to Fort Lauderdale in a not-quite-closed circle that started the night my brother called me. I was sitting in the Veranda restaurant downtown, the first night of summer, drinking with my friends and colleagues. My brother was crying through the phone. My father was dying.

The next morning, Evan and I drove west (my oldest son was 18 then, and living with me). When I got to Colorado 34 hours later, I had left my job of 4 years, all of my friends, and any semblance of a career. I traded that for love, pure and simple — the love of my family, the only true love I’d ever known.

So I came home to live in my parent’s house, where I could stand by them while daddy tried to live, a single long one-round battle. I was three weeks shy of my 45th birthday.

About 14 months later, Amy wrote to me in Colorado, offering me a writing job. I’d never met her, and I had just accepted another job — back in Florida, but this time on the other coast. It was easy to say no to Amy, for the first and last time.

Being a wise guy and a hot-air bag, however (the foremost requirements for a columnist), I said no in about 800 words. And she said, “Fine, but...” back to me, in about 1,000 words, and we went from there.

We wrote each other every single day for a couple of months — that’s about 60 letters each — and I knew before I’d ever seen her that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her.

I had no idea, however, what her personal life was like, except that she had a bright, precocious son of 4. I was afraid to ask anything else — was she married, perhaps, or attached? So I just pressed on, with language.

As the fall unwound, our letters became — not breathless-seeming protestations of need and adoration — deep inquiries and candid revelations and uninhibited reflections. With plen-

ty of need and adoration layered into them.

Her language sizzled like exposed wires. She could think through issues faster than a hot round, and she seemed to have the tenacious mind of a person unwilling to accept boundaries established by others, unless they contributed to a full life, as she chose to define it. But there was no swagger or braggadocio in her, about that independence. I remembered my father telling me that Rocky Marciano never looked his opponents in the eye, or tried to intimidate them, either, before he knocked them out.

On the evening we met for the first time, Amy was bound for a concert with her sister, Gwen. Before that, we wandered out on the Tarpon Street pier, downtown — me with a basket of food and drink, her with passion fruit from the vines she’d grown at her Buckingham home. Two hours later I licked the last of the sweet fruit off her fingers and brushed the bread crumbs from her lips with my own, while dusk purpled the long sky and darkening waters of the Caloosahatchee in a single breezy blush that slipped toward velvet darkness.

That was December. I asked her to marry me in January, and she said yes.

The next day she said no. Another man was interested in her, she told me — a good man, a smart man — and she appreciated him. Her family, too, who felt free to insist, counsel, frown at, encourage, question and advise, especially since they’d concluded her judgment was superb in everything except men, had told her she shouldn’t make any decisions about a man or marriage until she’d known him at least a year. My own mother told me to do what I thought I should, but suggested Amy’s clan didn’t have such a bad idea, in theory.

Now Amy and I have been married 7 years tonight, and I’m wondering when it’s going to start: you know, the hard stuff, the work, the struggle.

Daddy’s laughing somewhere — right here, really. This isn’t a fight, he’s saying. This is something else.

True Love, Round 2. ■

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