

Rambling Man

by **Wendy J. Thornton**

Once, long ago, when roving bands of hippies traveled the country, moving from place to place, drawn by dreams of freedom or just by the idea of living in a place with better weather, I met a young man who was kind enough to save me from sadness. See, I had fallen madly in love with a surfer who lived on the east coast of Florida while I lived on the west coast. The surfer was charming, popular, so handsome he practically made my heart stop and he didn't know I was a nerd. We had a wonderful fling that I thought was the love of my life, but that he thought was—strangely enough—a fling.

When the surfer dumped me, I fell into a severe depression. I wrote bad poetry about my lost love, poems that included lines like, “Let me winterize my spirit so I will feel no pain.” I played mournful music like Simon and Garfunkel's “Bridge Over Troubled Water” and Dionne Warwick's “I'll Never Fall in Love Again”. It got so bad my parents begged me to turn the stereo down or let them buy me headphones. I read tragic stories of lost love, *Wuthering Heights*, *Anna Karenina*, and even, God help me, the insipid *Love Story*. Echhh. I contemplated becoming a Buddhist. Then I could give up everything, including my never-ending crush on Surfer Boy.

One day I was walking on the beach, reading. That's what I did to avoid talking to anyone. I walked up and down the beach with my nose in a book, daring anyone to interrupt my contemplation. But on this particular day, someone managed to insinuate himself into my consciousness.

He swam just offshore, and as I walked by he leaped in and out of the waves like a dolphin, laughing and yelling, “Hey girl.” I looked over at him reluctantly. I didn't want to be disturbed by happy.

His hair was curly and wild, and he wore thick glasses even in the water. But he didn't look or act like an intellectual. He had on baggy black shorts with bright flowers, and he picked up his towel from the edge of the shore and started dancing with it,

twisting it across his shoulders, wearing it like a skirt, acting like he was a matador brandishing his cape for a bull. I tried not to watch, but whenever I looked up, he was dancing, watching me. When he saw me look, he'd let out a maniacal laugh.

"Whacha reading?" he asked suddenly, appearing so close beside me that I could reach out and touch him. I was startled. I didn't know how he got there. He was magic, teleporting. He grabbed the book out of my hand. "*To Kill a Mockingbird*? Why don't you just cut your wrists now?"

"This is a classic," I protested.

"Classic depressive," he said. "My name is Billy and you're too young to be reading such sad books."

"I'm not that young," I said. "I'm sixteen." *And I have lived forever in this agony...*

Billy waved his fingers in the air. "Ewww hoo, ancient woman. Pardon me, oh ancient one for not recognizing your sage wisdom."

I tried not to like him. Really. He was quite obviously a hippie, one of the first I'd ever met. He talked about traveling around the country, hitchhiking from place to place, with no discernible means of support. I had a huge family, two very overprotective parents, two brothers, two sisters, and lots of other relatives, all of whom felt it was absolutely necessary to tell me what they thought about everything I did all the time. Truly, I could not imagine what it would be like to travel the country alone. It sounded like heaven. Particularly in my current state of depression and sadness. To me, Billy was very lucky.

We talked a lot over the next few days. I even skipped school to visit him. He told me that he was sleeping in a stand of woods just off the beach near my house. So one morning, as the sun came up, I got dressed as if I were going to school, and slipped out to visit him. I walked into the woods, looking for a tent or something, some kind of campsite. To my surprise, once I got fairly deep into the forest, I found Billy curled up in a sleeping bag, a backpack by his side, and nothing else. Did he really just sleep out in the open like that?

I slipped up beside him in the early morning light. "Excuse me," I said politely. "Uh, good morning."

Billy looked at me, then scrambled up, a startled look on his face. “Girl, are you crazy, coming here by yourself? Don’t you know I could rape you? How do you know I’m not some kind of crazy murdering fuck who’s going to stomp you to death and rip out your heart?”

“I just know,” I said.

“You have too much trust.”

“Actually, I don’t care what happens to me.”

“Now that’s a really stupid statement.”

“I have some money,” I said. “Would you like to go somewhere for coffee?”

Billy thought about it for a moment. A very long moment. I so wanted to talk to him. There was something about him, something so free of the normal attachments, the usual accessories of life. I wanted that freedom. I wanted to stop thinking about my lost boyfriend, about our recent move to a new city I hated, about my old friends I would never see again. I wanted to take off and travel the world, be independent with no ties to anyone. I thought Billy could make that possible.

For hours, he let me talk about all the things in my life that seemed to have gone wrong. He nodded and smiled and sipped coffee and never seemed to judge me. “You’re having a tough time,” he said.

Well, finally! Someone understood. I mean, yes, I was a sixteen-year-old white girl living in an upper-crust middle-class neighborhood on St. Armond’s Key cherished by multiple family members, but damn it, *I was suffering!*

Only thing bothered me: Billy didn’t seem take me seriously. He had to be at least ten years older than me, maybe fifteen. But he seemed so youthful, not like the adult men I knew, men like my dad who worked long hours, who always seemed to do what was right. I knew without even bothering to ask that my father would absolutely hate Billy. Billy did what he wanted to do. He was a free spirit.

At breakfast, he told me that he had gone over to New College, a local liberal arts school, and sat in on some classes. This small college had been designed by the famous architect, I. M. Pei. In my new high school, I’d demanded that our high school newspaper cover some of the concerts held at the college, instead of just covering sports and cheerleading.

New College was considered very liberal and its students were supposedly a little “loosey-goosey” as my father would say, but I couldn’t imagine someone walking into a strange classroom and listening to lectures without permission. Billy said he liked the lectures, but not as much as the ones he’d attended at Antioch and Oberlin. I was so jealous—I wanted to go to Antioch or Oberlin. I couldn’t wait until I graduated from this nerdy high school in Sarasota so I could go somewhere they could teach me something important.

“Why do you just sit in on classes?” I asked. “Why don’t you sign up for college?”

“Who are you?” he replied with a laugh. “How do you think I would pay for that?”

It had never occurred to me that anyone would have to worry about such a thing. I knew I would go to college, knew that somehow my parents, who didn’t have a lot of money, would come up with the means for me to go. Of course, I’d be expected to work, to help carry my own weight. I’d get scholarships. But I thought anyone could go to college if they wanted to.

We spent the afternoon on the beach, talking. He told me about all the countries he’d visited, and all the amazing places he’d seen in America. “Have you ever seen the Grand Canyon?” he asked.

“I haven’t seen anything,” I replied morosely.

“Oh, man, you gotta ride on the Pacific Coast Highway, Kid. You ain’t lived til you’ve seen the Pacific from those cliffs. Have you ever been to the Rockies?”

I repeated, “Really. I’ve never been anywhere.”

“Poor baby.” I was young but I knew sarcasm when I heard it.

Late in the afternoon, he told me to go home. “You got to eat dinner with your family,” he said.

“They don’t care.”

“But I do. Go on. Get out of here. Don’t come back til tomorrow. And Kid?”

“Yes.”

“Wait on the beach—don’t come back into the woods, okay?”

I shrugged and walked home. It was so exciting to have a secret. I never got in any trouble. I was the kind of boring girl who answered all the questions in class before the other students had a chance. I was the “curve breaker.” My family had recently

moved from Ft. Lauderdale where I had finally started to make friends, to Sarasota where I knew no one. I'd finally found one serious boyfriend, Terry, and he dumped me for—wait for it—an older woman. She was seventeen.

Now it seemed I had something special going, a relationship with someone new. I was a virgin—I couldn't even imagine sleeping with someone. But Billy seemed safe. He seemed like someone who wouldn't take advantage of me. He didn't even try to kiss me.

The next day I showed him some of my poems. He read a couple, then paused over one particularly sad piece. "What is this?" he asked, showing me the poem.

"Oh, I was a little depressed when I wrote that," I answered.

"A little depressed? *Winterize my spirit?*" he shrieked. "What kind of crap is that?" Before I could protest, he ripped the poem into a hundred pieces and threw it into the wind like confetti. "Don't write stuff like that," he said. "You don't know how lucky you are. You're beautiful."

"You're not even a good liar."

"I always thought I'd meet a beautiful girl like you someday. I thought I was Jughead, you know? You know that cartoon?"

Confused, I asked, "Archie and Jughead?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," he said excitedly. "I was the guy who could eat and eat and eat and close all the restaurants down. Had my good friends Archie and Reggie. I was in love with poor old Betty and she was always in love with Archie. You could be Betty. You're in love with someone else."

How did he know?

Later that afternoon, I said, "You know, I've always wanted to travel. We could run away together. I could be Betty and you could be Jughead."

"Aww, Babe," he answered, "I stopped being Jughead a long time ago." He was so unutterably sad. This was the first time I realized that perhaps I wasn't the only one recovering from a broken heart.

But as the day drew to a close, I knew he'd be leaving soon. "I want to go with you," I said.

"Where?"

“Anywhere.”

“Are you fucking crazy? I live in the woods. You’re a baby. I can’t take you with me. How would you live?”

“I could live in the woods with you.”

“How would you eat?”

“I don’t eat much. I have some money.”

“How much?”

“Uh, sixty-eight dollars.”

He laughed. “Sixty-eight dollars? You’re kidding, right?”

“We’ll be living in the woods. How much money do we need?”

He shook his head and laughed again. “You’re crazier than I am, Kid. Sure, sure, you want to go with me? Let’s do it, what the hell. We’ll go. I’m heading to California. You’ll like it there.”

“When are we leaving?”

“Tomorrow. I’ll meet you at New College. You know where the Student Center is?”

I nodded. I’d been to the New College Student Center a few times.

“I’ll meet you right there,” Billy said. “At the newspaper stand. You know where that is?”

“I do,” I answered. I was finally beginning to get excited about something. I would travel the world, hitchhike around the country with this wild man, forget all the heartbreak and the boring trajectory of my old life. Billy kissed me goodbye on the forehead, and I told him I’d meet him at nine the next morning.

That night, I had serious misgivings about my plan. My family suddenly seemed so precious to me. My parents, those hopeless people who didn’t understand me at all, suddenly seemed perceptive and kind. My rotten brothers and sisters, who tormented me and made my life hell, had suddenly become funny and happy. I’d miss them all so much. But by God, I was going.

The next morning, I got up before dawn and snuck out of the house. I rode my bike to the newspaper stand in front of the Student Center. I had a paper bag full of clothes, dresses and underwear, and I had my sixty-eight dollars. I had a big sunhat and

a tiny bikini. I was going to California. I would lock my bike to the newspaper rack, leave my mother a note attached to it, and be off on a new adventure.

I waited. And waited. And waited. The sun rose on the horizon until it beat down on my shoulders and warmed my sunburned back. Finally, feeling like a lost child, I got back on my bike and pedaled into the sun towards home. I never even learned his last name. It took me years to realize what a decent thing Billy did by leaving me behind.



Wendy Thornton is a freelance writer and editor who's been published in *Riverteeth*, *Epiphany*, *MacGuffin* and many other literary journals and books. She is the author of a mystery, *Bear Trapped: In a Trashy Hollywood Novel* and a memoir, *Dear Oprah: How I Beat Cancer and Learned to Love Daytime TV*. Her latest memoir, *Sounding the Depths*, was published in October. Her work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and has appeared in England, Ireland, Australia and India. Wendy started the Writers Alliance (www.writersalliance.org).