



DOING THE DEAD  
1983

ALSO BY K. C. WILSON  
*The Route*

Doing the Dead -1983  
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Published by Faraway Publishing.  
[www.FarawayJournal.com](http://www.FarawayJournal.com)

DOING THE DEAD  
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*A Novella*

*by*

K. C. Wilson



## I. The Life and Times of Baby Brenda

That book was never going to be written, not by me. And I was Brenda's one hope of ever being remembered.

I sat by her hospital bed and listened to her snore, remembering how that snore had trained me to endure it, to protect and serve it, to tune my ears to its nuances and to love the perverse and tender duty of watching over it. I used to lie awake next to her wondering how she ever made it through a night alone. The sound her shallow breathing made was a pitifully faint wheeze until her chronic sleep apnea disorder kicked in. All through the night, at irregular intervals, sudden constrictions in her throat would block the fitful rhythm of her snore. Her lungs agonized and strained, expanding and contracting without drawing breath while she slept on, oblivious, until by some angel's hand or a nudge from me, she'd gasp in one more breath through the blockage and resume her shallow breathing pattern.

It seemed impossible to me, sole suffering witness to her silent suffocations, that without my help she would ever see the morning. Things we believe when we want to feel needed. I thought my nudges were keeping her alive.

I sat by her bed and remembered that I was well past my old hurt feelings. We'd had our time; lived together, fought, separated, run into each other again a few times. I still cared about her.

I never called her Baby Brenda. Someone else had christened her with that endearment.

She was always someone else's Baby Brenda.

I looked back on our time together with huge relief that it was over mixed in with remnants of every old feeling. She was still having hard times, but that was the nature of her life and times. Ahead of her was more of the same. I was never going to write her story, but though I had no intention of even inadvertently giving her the impression that someday maybe I would, she seldom missed an opportunity to remind me of the title she had chosen: *The Life and Times of Baby Brenda*.

My responses to such reminders were invariably noncommittal, hardly verbal contracts. If I ever felt a twinge of obligation, it was because she took my word, however lightly given, as my bond. She believed I could do it if I wanted.

I was an arrogant young man, and it seemed to me no more than my due that she should believe in the shining future of my literary career. Certainly no one believed as blindly as I did in that bright vision. For her kindness, if it was kindness, for her faith, if it was faith, she deserved better treatment from me than an anecdotal mention in my romantic chronolog, but even that was more than she had any reason to expect.

I had learned not to promise more than I could deliver.

When she called me from the hospital and asked me to visit, I was annoyed at first, but I realized from her tone that she was sedated.

Brenda's timing was always bad. Her calls anymore were always requests. What did she want from me this time? "It's important," she said, in a low, weak whisper.

"Is it about Fran?" I asked, knowing it had to be. The previous weekend, her best friend, Fran, had shot and killed her common law husband, Dave, in the bus that was their home.

"Just come," said Brenda. She gave me the room number and hung up.

It was raining, of course, and the wipers were still broken on my '66 Rambler American. I held the detached wiper arm in my left hand and reached out the window as I drove through the storm, manually wiping my windshield.

I was used to the inconvenience. The heap was falling apart on me. The strut rod bushings were shot. The brakes were weak and it needed a new radiator. Wipers were low on the list.

I bought that car the day I met Brenda. I was driving a cab down a side

street when I spotted the Rambler in a driveway. A surfer dude was putting a FOR SALE sign in the window. I hit the brakes and backed up.

“How much?” I asked him.

“Six hundred.”

It was clean, green with a white roof, upholstery not ruined, no mildew or rips on the headliner. I counted out the money right then and signed the paperwork.

“It was my wife’s car,” he said. “She loved it.”

I had a cab take me back to his house after my shift and drove it home.

I was living like a student in a two-room cottage on Sturdivant Street. After one term of grad school, I was back in the cab, driving sailors up and down Mayport Road, from the base to the beach and back to the base. The novel I was trying to write was slowly going nowhere.

Brenda was shooting pool that night in Fred’s Saloon on Mayport Road. She wore a faded black knit dress under a thin black leather jacket and was beating sailors for beers.

I watched her game. She had a soft touch with the cue and used a smooth push stroke that made her style look effortless. She was pretty good, better than the sailors. But those beers went down fast. I had her pegged as a lush from the start.

Later, she hit me up for a ride and I drove her to the babysitter’s house to pick up Fran’s son, Dan, and take him home. The boy blinked his eyes once at me and climbed in. He fell asleep on the seat between us and leaned into Brenda. He was used to her coming to get him.

Brenda hooked her arm over Dan’s little body like a wing. “Dan’s a good boy,” she said. She was used to looking out for Dan.

At Fran’s rented house, the roof had leaked. Brenda kicked aside a pile of clothes that were soaked through to a bare mattress in the garage. The smell of mildew made my eyes water.

“You live here?”

“We’re moving,” she said.

She stayed with me that night. Before she started snoring I heard her mumble, “I should just carry my ass back out on the street.”

I lay awake awhile thinking about that “ass back out on the street” part. I knew I hadn’t satisfied her. It was like a gauntlet being thrown down, not to

mention the subtext of professionalism.

“Don’t worry, my little night crawler,” I crooned in her ear, “I’ll have you honking like a goose. Barking like a dog, cooing like a turtledove.” I fell asleep stringing together a list of animal noises for her emulate.

In the morning I drove her back to Fran’s and met the woman who was Brenda’s best friend. From the first, the undying friendship Fran and Brenda professed for each other seemed too much like the ineffable bond addicts tend to revere as the pinnacle of all human empathy. A female Damon and Pythias, so they appeared to be. And so, perhaps, they were.

Fran looked me over, unimpressed. Her older, newly married son, James, was moving the last of his things out of the house. James shook my hand with a grip of iron, smiling only as he released it. He towered over his mother, a short blonde woman with hard features, leaning up to kiss him goodbye. Fran had had her boobs done in the early days of mammoplasty, and though they were reputedly hard as rocks, she was justly proud of their sculpture and her bearing stood the more erect for her pride.

By the end of the month, Brenda had moved with Fran, Dan and Dave to the campgrounds at Hanna Park, where they lived in a remodeled hippie schoolbus painted in psychedelic colors with “Pandora’s Bus” lettered in script across the front. Fran and Dave shared an Oldsmobile named Esmeralda.

Two weeks later, Brenda was living with me. She never moved in. A few of her things accumulated then she was there.

On Mayport Road, at Happy Hour, Fred’s Saloon served ten-cent drinks from five to six each weekday. Fran held daily court there with a bevy of admirers in her reserved seat at the end of the bar. Dave, whose garage was close, came in for a drink in the afternoons, lingered as long as he could and often left her there on her stool with ill-concealed reluctance.

His demeanor in accommodating Fran’s least request was one of pathetically dogged worshipfulness. A slow burn roasted in the mind behind his eyes, but Dave was an ex-biker, a biker without a bike, rather, with that subculture’s peculiar reverence for slatternly, hard-drinking, matriarchal Janis Joplin replicates.

I didn’t spend much time in Fred’s. It was a sailor bar. Brenda liked it. She liked the Happy Hour.

We had long since parted ways when she called me out of the blue and asked me to come see her in the hospital. It was March of 1983. I was a

few months away from turning thirty. Brenda and I had split up nearly a year ago, yet there I was, watching Brenda Rosedale groaning over the prospect of exploratory throat and neck surgery.

Two floors above her, in the Fourth Floor Ward reserved for mental patients and aberrational criminals, her best friend, Fran, was lodged in a semi-private room under “observation,” a euphemism for “suicide watch,” since her arrest following the shooting death of Dave, late of Dave’s Garage.

Her proximity to Fran in the hospital was a modest little feat. Brenda’s medical file was a voluminous document, a noted case study in the teaching hospital. Interns lined up for a look at her throat. A veteran patient, Brenda’s history included several bouts of reconstructive neck surgery following a car accident in which her neck was fractured. She was on record as subject to frequent discomfort and recurrent neck pain. Related symptoms included a severe case of sleep apnea, a disorder manifesting as a silent, breathless snore.

Getting admitted was only part of her plan. Getting prescriptions for serious drugs and getting released prior to surgery were the goals and risks of her mission. Her ulterior motive was simple and secret: to find a way to talk to Fran.

I had no stake in Fran’s troubles. I barely knew Dave, enough to nod in passing. It was Brenda’s trauma, what to do about Fran, whether or not to testify at Fran’s upcoming trial.

She expected to be called upon to testify in Fran’s behalf, and the prospect of perjuring herself weighed heavily on her conscience. She did not believe that Dave had ever harmed or threatened Fran and she felt morally bound not to tarnish his name.

Brenda was determined to make Fran understand. Ailments aside, she had to tell Fran that she wouldn’t lie about Dave. A nurse was going to help her get a message to Fran. Brenda didn’t care much what happened after that, but she didn’t want to undergo surgery, either.

Pale against the starched white pillow, Brenda spoke with sighs and feeble whispers. I listened, nodded and couldn’t help but notice that her first thought when she woke was of Fran.

The campgrounds at Hanna Park had grown too full of permanent campers. An ordinance was then passed designed to oust all permanent campers. Pandora’s Bus moved to a space behind Dave’s Garage on Mayport Road, in an unruly neighborhood. “You can’t blame Frannie,” said Brenda, “for keep-

ing a loaded gun on the bus. But to shoot him in the stomach, she had to know it was Dave.”

As for what actually happened on the bus that night, Brenda wasn't there, but she had heard from Fran's sister, Angie, of Fran's intention to plead self-defense, and she wanted no part of it if it meant that she had to speak ill of Dave, a gentle man she insisted would never have harmed Fran.

Brenda squeezed my hand, weakly grateful for my company. I still didn't know what she wanted from me, maybe just to hear, to know of her intent, and to remember her life and times.

“Thanks for coming, Floyd,” she said.

“Take care, Brenda.”

I released her hand and she lowered it softly to the sheet. She closed her eyes and I left the room. I walked down the halls trying to put Brenda and her problems out of my mind.

In dealing with Brenda and her corollary, Fran, I had long since coped with a mental image of them having sex at some point in their long friendship. It seemed irrelevant, on top of her other confidences: former drug addict, mother of two, declared unfit, custody denied, a quibbling point to raise, all things considered. Their friendship offered no overt reference to sex, other than their joint projection of seen-it-all, done-it-all worldliness, though references to drug use, needles, painkillers and drugs of all varieties were common and blasé. I disapproved of intravenous drug use on principle, and was willfully gullible enough to believe that it was, but for lapses, mostly in Brenda's past. But in spite of my efforts to remain open-minded on the subject of Fran, I had grown indifferent by degrees to the otherworldly concept of Fran and Brenda's friendship, a saga fraught with too much melodrama for my taste, with Brenda holding Fran's hand through one traumatic overdose after another, speaking to her in tongues no mortal man was ever meant to understand. That scene played too many times, until it was exhausting to watch them, still so intense with each other, replaying that endless tragic death scene. And, of course, Fran never died.

When Brenda disappeared for days at a time, I almost always found her with Fran, either on the bus or in one of several bars. She insisted on little but her own personal freedom. After a two or three day disappearance, she would return with no intention of answering any of my questions. I was expected to trust her, which I was not quite young or foolish enough to do. No vows

bound us. Still, she was able to find my soft spot, time after time.

Some fraction of Brenda's heritage was Cherokee. She invariably grew maudlin when she drank. As her speech slurred, she would lapse into the street smart dialect of a mumbling junkie dispensing epigrammatic snippets of world weary wisdom. When I criticized her loathsome habit of drinking beer in bed, she rolled her eyes and called me a "milk drinker."

I had hurried to her bedside out of some kind of lingering regard. Listening to her woeful sorrows, I tried to sympathize, but that required too much effort. My involvement with her was over. She was to have no further bearing on the course of my life, which had recently taken a turn in another direction.

After quitting my job as a cabdriver and squandering my savings on Darla the dancer from New York, I had floundered through several desperate stabs at sales. Picking up a paintbrush again had refocused my life. More than another mere change of occupation, I was rediscovering an ancient skill, and my own dormant aptitude. There was a certainty in painting, a lack of doubt, an order and a framework of tradition large enough to contain an expanding philosophy. Freedom and imagination coexisted in the arcana of the craft. I had worked as a painter before, but this time around, the brush in my hand felt like more than a tool. It was a wand, a weapon: a symbol of the brotherhood of artists in an inartistic world. As a painter, my identity had scope and color and depth.

As a cabdriver, I had often met women driven by compulsion to confide in someone, anyone, and I had learned that, as a cabdriver, I was fated to remain faceless to them, much like a priest in a dark confessional. How much more gratifying it was to be recognized, to shed the cloak of invisibility, and how much more amusing it was, to grasp the ultimate revelation that women responded instinctively to the romance inherent in painting, and, in general, were inclined to find a painter infinitely more human than a cabdriver.

At the moment, I didn't have a regular job. I had some side work with T.S. and some upcoming possibilities. The March rent was paid and I was not worried. Brenda, I thought, as I turned for home, Brenda was another story.