



ALSO BY K. C. WILSON  
*The Route*

Doing the Dead -1983  
Copyright 2008 by K. C. Wilson.  
All rights reserved.

Cover design by Jeff Hendrickson. Book design by Daniel Sawyer.  
Lyrics to Brown-Eyed Women, Sugaree and Bertha by Robert Hunter,  
copyright Ice Nine Publishing Company. Used with Permission.

Published by Faraway Publishing.  
[www.FarawayJournal.com](http://www.FarawayJournal.com)

DOING THE DEAD  
1983

*A Novella*

*by*

K. C. Wilson

## II. Take a Number

In the late half of my thirtieth year, I was making an effort to take stock of my life. Moving acted as a catalyst. Certain tenets and theorems of my philosophy regarding women were drawn into high relief and reconsidered.

Moving was easy, then. All my possessions went in one carload from Doris and Lyle's apartment, where I was staying in their guest room, to the beach house on 28th Avenue.

Doris and Lyle's relationship was dying a slow and torturous death. They took me in when I was flat broke, after Darla, the dancer, flew back to New York, and they let me stay there with them for several months while their relationship disintegrated.

The week after Thanksgiving, I found the big drafty house, extracted half the rent from Lyle in a weak moment, and signed a six month lease on the downstairs apartment before Lyle ever saw it or had a chance to change his mind. His Plan A, at the time, was still to change Doris' mind and remain in her apartment and in her life.

She was not expecting such a swift and timely assist from me, and masked her surprise with skeptical gratitude.

I had a picture of Doris in her nurse uniform, leaving her house to go to work with a smile and a little wave as she passed the low clipped hedges on her front walk. It was a picture of my great good friend, despite Lyle's suspicious mind. Doris and I were old friends before I ever met Lyle Stone.

I spent the first two nights in the apartment alone without electric-

ity. In the living room, there was basic furniture, two hard couches and some chairs. I placed candles on the round dinette table and sat there in the candlelight with the shadows on the dark paneled walls reflecting only my own presence. I sat there thinking about my life for a long time. Too many women had been doing me wrong. On the near edge of thirty, I was exactly nowhere, starting over again, from zero.

I had lived in a series of small rooms and tiny apartments. For the first time, if I wanted to, I could swing a cat in the living room without hitting any walls. It wasn't just the roominess. The place felt good to me. It felt like my place.

To hear my own voice in the dark house I spoke out loud to the shadows. "This is how it will be. This house is mine for six months. Nothing will change that as long as I live here. No one, no woman, not Lyle, no one will change that. That's how it is. I like it. I'm staying."

I chose the front bedroom. The windows opened onto the front porch, a convenience for bashful women who might come tapping on my window late at night. Ah, women, thought I.

I dug through my things and collected a handful of photographs of women I had known. In the flickering candlelight, I looked at each one individually, arranged a sequence and looked at them again, adding two love cards I had recently received, one from Darla the dancer, postmarked New York, and one from Loretta, a married woman, a sweet little message in glittering gold and purple script.

Loretta had no idea who she was playing with, I mused with a vulpine swagger. Her marriage of ten years was not sacred to me. I would as soon blast her sheltered life apart as go to the movies.

In several months, I had seen Loretta several times. Observing her entrance on a Sunday afternoon, coming through the doorway of the beachside tavern, TanFanny's, her red hair caught the corner of my eye. Then I saw the ring on her finger. She could be fun, I thought. No woman so soon after Darla was likely to move or touch me greatly, not, not assuredly, some little housewife. My sense of bravado was deeply rooted in a well of testosterone.

She and a girlfriend shot a game of pool on a nearby table, and, as she stood close enough to my stool for me to catch her attention, I remarked offhandedly, "You're married, I see."

"Yes," she smiled, moving off to take another shot. When she returned

to the same spot near me again, maybe a little nearer, I asked in a low tone, boldly, "Want to go out anyway?"

Twice we had met at the tavern. She came out on Tuesday nights with the same girlfriend. I took them both for rides in my car, to smoke joints and listen to tapes, then brought them both back to TanFanny's. Both women were married. They flirted lasciviously between themselves, as if I were driving a cab, as if they were out for a bit of night air with each other, repeating sordid bits of gossip and lewd propositions old men had made to them in bars.

The second time, when I returned them to the parking lot, they recognized their husbands' trucks and scrambled to get out of my car. A side door opened to the tavern and Loretta's friend's husband leaned out of the doorway under an amber bulb. He saw them shutting my doors and waving to me as I sped off from a close encounter with dual species of husbandus eruptus. I chastened myself roundly, decrying the urge for devilment that had led me to the brink of marital meddling. In future, I vowed, I would do well to leave married women alone. In future, I vowed, I would do well to leave all wanton redheaded married women alone.

I drove straight to Doris and Lyle's apartment, where they still lived, but were out of town. I had planned to bring Loretta there later, if that had worked out, but as I flipped the lights on, I felt only relief from the dubious entanglement so narrowly escaped. An hour later, when she knocked on the door downstairs, she had changed into a silky peach colored blouse. I cut the porch light on and off for her and she smiled, "Surprised?"

Upstairs, she marveled at the rooms. "A woman lives here," she noticed.

"This is Doris' apartment. She and Lyle are gone for the weekend." I kept the explanations short. There was time for talk later. I had not escaped.

Subsequently, we took a bath together and I showed her the birthmark on my inner right thigh shaped curiously like the continent of Australia, at which sight, she exclaimed, "Why, it does!" without any consideration of comparing it to a map. Of course, it no more resembled Australia than it did a potato, but her credulity was disarming. It warmed me, and warned me, as well, that this was not really a game we were playing.

When I called her at work, she responded with an enthusiastic yet generic endearment, "Hey Darlin," in an intimate tone I did not know her well enough yet to recognize as her regular phone voice. I did not mind the flatter-

ies she showered upon me. I meant to have her and toy with her as I saw fit. With the weight of rectitude lifted from my shoulders, I was able to philosophize an acceptable rationale: that my status in life as an insignificant painter ameliorated occasional instances of moral laxity, rendering such considerations moot. Plus, I didn't care. There was a margin of safety I persuaded myself to believe, and a mighty power in not caring.

Her husband had an ulcer. "Let's give him another one," I joked.

We were still toying with each other; unemotionally playing a game that was not really for keeps. With Loretta, I had yet to begin, yet to arrive at the nadir of my apotheosis.

Her daughter was eight years old. Loretta wanted me to meet her. That one step I was reluctant to take. A child would disrupt the inert equation. We had agreed to a tentative date. The Twelfth, we jested blithely, of Never.

I was headed toward something like all or nothing with her. I could see it coming from a long way off. She wanted out of her marriage and saw me as the key to unchain her melody.

So quick she was to mention love. Sure, I might have told her that I loved the excitement of brazenly having her, loved the reckless abandonment of our stolen hours, but I could not tell her anything resembling the truth, that I believed in impermanence more than in love, that she reminded me of someone else I had once really loved, or that, unless I considered her child, I could not bring myself to care very much about her marriage.

In my mind, only one marriage was sacrosanct. To spare one, I would wreak havoc freely on others as I pleased. Such was the bargain I had struck with my conscience.

A black and white photo of Nico Brown, my very young and early love, before she had met or married Eric Reins, her face faded to a smear from too many years in a wallet lost long ago in a couch, belonged apart from the other photos on the table, but it was there within easy reach because I cherished every vestige of her memory and did not often indulge in self-flagellation. In a world that had denied me her love, I had reveled in caddish wrath and vowed to be no respecter of marriages.

I held the photo of Nico to the light and studied the blurred lines of her minidress and the traces of laughter, once so clear, that now were barely visible. In five fricative years at the bottom of a couch, a single grain of sand in the glassine sleeve had all but obliterated her features in the photo. I re-

membered her as she was when the photograph was taken, a seventeen year old beauty, laughing.

The lost wallet with the lone picture in it, found years later and returned to me, was long ago left pocketed among the cushions of her mother's white couch.

Six years earlier, an acquaintance from high school, Brian Boudreau, had looked me up to tell me he had my old lost wallet. His mother had bought the couch from Mrs. Brown some time after Mr. Brown had died and the house the Browns had lived in was sold. Brian's mother found the wallet and asked him if he knew me. Brian remembered our high school days when I had dated Nico Brown. He found the circumstances amusing, to be returning the wallet after so many years. "It was pushed way down in the upholstery," he said, grinning with lurid bonhomie, "in that old white couch."

My old wallet contained what was left of the photo of Nico, laughing.

In all those years, I had never sought her out. But once, oh, once upon returning from a journey, I stopped by to see her mom. Mrs. Brown was fond of me. I wanted to say hello and maybe hum a few bars of *Mrs. Brown, You've Got a Lovely Daughter*. Nico happened to call while I was there and asked me to come by the hospital where she worked just to visit for a few minutes.

We sat in a harshly lit break room on hard plastic chairs across from each other, grinning and laughing as the minutes rolled by. My stories of faraway places all sounded to my own ears like self-important adventures unworthy of the time it took to tell them while the constant light in her eyes reminded me of all I had lost when I lost her. She told me that she loved me then, that she had always loved me, an unforgettable kindness. I retreated from her, walked away in a daze, neck deep in doomed chagrin over the durability of her marriage. I raised my eyes to a starlit sky and thanked God for the pure gift of allowing me to hear her say those words. I dared not act upon them. In that one instant I understood my life in terms of sacrifice. But, if love's denial was to be my saving grace, it was too much to ask of me to reverence all marriages equally. All others, by nature, were secondary, and none were so very sacred.

The card from Darla showed a woman in sunglasses holding a heaping tablespoon of cocaine up to her nose. I put the card aside and looked at the photograph of her, standing in a dingy kitchen in front of a stove, wearing the leopard skin top she had on the day I met her, stirring a big pot of spaghetti sauce, smiling at the camera and licking the fingers of her left hand. I had sur-

vived her departure, my most recent loss, as I had survived all the others. After her, they could all take a number.

In a country song that topped the charts a few years later, the sort of ritual I was indulging in was called "*Digging up Bones*." The photographs represented the phases and stages of my life. To each woman, even those long departed, I still felt connected by intangible threads.

There were gaps and inequities, women I had no pictures of, and too many pictures of Brenda, none of them inspiring. There was something so world-weary in her eyes that made even her smiles seem patronizing, like little allowances, concessions to my own naivete' and cuckoldry.

A framed desk photo of a blonde with perfect teeth, which I had kept stored in a box for years, stared back at me with avid, Nordic passion. Ingrid, my first older woman, my first divorcee. I'd met her soon after Nico was married, too soon for Ingrid with her young daughter to be granted such a rare thing from me as love's commitment. When I became her daughter's godfather, she had given me the framed desk photo of herself with her daughter, long before I ever had a desk. Over the years, she had astonished me with insistent professions of love, which I repeatedly let pass, wary as I was of her devouring nature, until once, when I did try living with her, our cohabitation lasted less than twenty-four hours.

On that day, upon returning from work at dusk, she had entered her darkened living room and found me keeping a friend of hers company. Misinterpreting the circumstances, Ingrid assumed the worst, when, in fact, nothing at all had happened between her friend and myself. Her friend, whose name I had never tried to remember, whose identity was unknown to me, had merely sat and chatted with me for a half hour or so.

I had just moved in and was admiring the arrangement of my books on Ingrid's shelves beside the fireplace. I had not turned on a lamp because, as the daylight faded, my eyes had acclimated and I had not noticed a lack of light. Upon entering what appeared to her as total darkness, (although, in my memory, Ingrid's entrance was silhouetted in the doorway by the red glow of sunset) Ingrid announced quite suddenly that she had changed her mind about our living arrangement. Concern for what her daughter might think was the issue she mentioned, though she was sure now beyond all doubt that we were incompatible and that it would be best for all concerned for me to leave at once.

I left my books with her and she kept them for several years afterward, moving often, carefully packing them up each time, until they became a nuisance to store. When her second husband insisted she get rid of them, she had donated them to a library in California.

I felt like I owed her for that one still, though at the moment, she was far away, in Arkansas with her third husband, and I felt magnanimous toward her. The incident had not damaged our friendship, which sustained itself intermittently through letters, postcards and the occasional surprise visit.

Her daughter had grown to adolescence without me. I might have been more than an absentee godfather to her had I chosen contentment and love for love's sake instead of the life of a wastrel and a cad, questing perennially after romance and experience and squandering the pith and fortitude of my youth in a series of unresultant couplings. At the precipice of thirty, I was still vain enough to consider the loss of my youth.

Accompanied by mementoes or not, I felt like hoisting all of woman-kind on their own petard. The marriage and family scenario, I had missed it. All my questing gone to naught, despite the roaring in my blood. At any rate, I was single, owing allegiance to no one.

"Not you," I spoke aloud, addressing Ingrid's image, and each of the others in turn, "nor you, nor you, nor you, nor you, nor even you," with mock reverence gently secreting Nico's antique photograph into its historic niche in the old wallet, "have any claim on me. You may each be seated in the antechamber of my heart's desire, where you may each kindly take a number and await your respective turns."

So high and mighty did my lofty bombast swell that night that I, as with a gimlet eye, foresaw a circling of time's lifelong tapestry and the women from my past returning one by one in the fullness of time to pleasure me. I intended, when those days arrived, to be merciful, yet just. Until then, my advice to them all was the same: take a number.