



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  
1983

*A Novella*

*by*

K. C. Wilson

### III. Painter's Eye

By the time Lyle Stone moved in, I was well ensconced in my abode. T.S., my friend from North Carolina, had a problem with Russell, his father. Rondele and Fatima, the two lesbians T.S. rented a room from, had decided they had put up with Russell Sharpe long enough.

They liked Russell fine when he was sober. They had met him at the train station when he arrived, brought him home and let him stay on the couch for a couple of weeks, no problem. He painted their house. He was sober at first, then he wasn't. Then they came home and found him sprawled out drunk on the living room floor beside an empty bottle of cooking sherry and they put their feet down.

"What am I going to do with Hoss?" T.S. turned to me for help.

"I guess bring him on by." A sudden, short deliberation.

Russell was actually there before Lyle. He was sleeping on the floor for some reason, and the house was still dark from too few light bulbs, or no light bulbs, and, coming in late, Lyle tripped over Russell in the dark and fumbled a twelve pack of beer.

"What the hell's going on?" Lyle blustered.

T.S. cut a flashlight on. "Hoss fell off the couch."

Lyle had never met Russell. "Who'd I trip over?"

"That's my Dad," said T.S. "Floyd said he could stay."

"Howdy, son," said Russell, a spry old gent. "How about one of them beers?"

Lyle shook Russell's hand, and the three of them tapped on the cans with their fingers before popping the tops. I came out of my room and cut the kitchen light on in time to see the triple foaming overflow hit the floor as they toasted each other, the house, and fatherhood.

"I don't have a Dad," said Lyle to Russell. "He sucked a muffler, the son of a bitch."

I drew Lyle into the kitchen to explain how Russell had come to be there. "I couldn't let the girls humiliate him. I told T.S. he was welcome here. He's going to buy him a bus ticket home to North Carolina."

"What's the hurry?" said Lyle. "I just didn't know who he was, that's all. Is T.S. living here, too?"

"No, he's just hanging out."

"Well, I don't care," said Lyle. "Where's my room?"

I showed him his room, lighting matches along the way. "We lack light bulbs."

"It's cold in here," said Lyle.

"The kerosene heater won't stay lit. Fuel tank's empty. We'll need more blankets."

"I hate this house," said Lyle, tossing his suitcase into a corner.

"You're just bummed because of Doris. It's a great house."

"I hate it," Lyle said, throwing himself on his bed.

Lyle was never unhappier than he was when Doris broke up with him and he, against his better will and judgment, had agreed to move. The sudden blow after five years of living together had left him feeling betrayed, not nearly as much by Doris as by me.

I stayed out of his way as much as possible, leaving him to stew in his own juices. He figured beer would help, over time, and it did. Beer and time and other women. Lots of beer and lots of time and lots of other women. If that prescription failed, it would take both of us at least six months to know.

T.S. loved his father like a brother. The two of them were like a hill-billy comedy team. The old man greeted every dawn with a beer. In the dead silence of the house, the sound of that first pop top opening was like a rooster crowing. He'd pop it open in his sleeping son's ear.

"Got to be tough," he'd say.

On hungover mornings, T.S. was worthless. He'd miss work about twice a week, lay up in blankets in front of the black and white television and

watch Barnaby Jones reruns. He couldn't stomach a beer on such mornings. Lyle, on his way out the door, would toss down a beer every morning with Russell.

Russell began collecting cans. Every time T.S. threatened to buy him a bus ticket home to North Carolina, Russell would take off for a few days and go collect cans. He was getting too old to paint. He'd walk down the highway, filling up plastic bags with cans and stashing them in the woods. Then he'd call his buddy, Pete Fry, to come get him and drive him back to pick up the bags.

Once, Russell came back to the house with two dollars he'd borrowed from me. "Here, son," he said, offering it. My fingers closed on the bills, but they remained in Russell's grip until I wrestled them loose.

Through T.S., Russell's stories of the painting life were passed on to me. "A painter's like a gunfighter of the Old West," Russell used to say, "closest thing there is, making a living with a brush instead of a gun." Russell had handed down the old traditions of painting to his son, the love of anecdote and story, the mystique of craft, the archetypal persona of the drunken painter. T.S. recalled the tale of a superintendent on a job who noticed Russell looking rough one morning, and he asked Pete Fry, Russell's foreman, partner and friend, why he kept an old drunk like that on the job. They were painting a hospital wing and a horizontal pencil line divided the walls to be painted in two different colors.

"Russell, come over here," Pete called. Russell came up his brush and bucket. "Cut to that pencil line and leave the line," said Pete. Russell walked the wall, cutting a dead straight line to the bottom edge of the pencil line. Pete grinned at the superintendent, who walked away shaking his head.

I tried to cut to a pencil line after hearing the story and found it took an unerring hand. Russell's hands might shake a little bit in the mornings, but his right hand would stop shaking as soon as his brush hit the wall.

"I'm not shaky, I'm just quick," Russell liked to say.

Until I could cut to a pencil line with ease, I could lay no claim to mastery of my chosen trade, a craft as near to art as any other, yet mortally humble and unprepossessing in the extreme. I had more occasion to cut next to windows and jambs and bricks than to pencil lines, but lines were lines. There was a difference between straight and compulsive. The idea was to let it flow naturally.

As eager as I was to join ranks with the masters, I was hindered by in-

intermediate skills, merely introductory knowledge, and no tools to speak of but a few flayed brushes. Unlike T.S., who knew everything about painting, having grown up with a brush in his hand, literally running to keep up with Russell, I was still challenged by minor paint problems. I was not keen to admit apprenticeship to my friend, T.S., though it was understood between us that T.S. was sharing his birthright with me each time he disclosed one of Russell's old trade secrets.

I had to concede, when it came to interior enamel trim, that my work was not as smooth as T.S.' I did not get that dust free finish.

A painter's eye seeks perfection. Finding it not, it detects the flaw; the clot of carpet hair in the base, convex patchwork, the dull spot in the shine. A painter's eye comes to rest on the flaw.

T.S.' enamel work shone like glass. His prep was immaculate. His talent had to compensate for the vagaries of his temperament. He didn't always feel like working; that was the drawback to working with him. About twice a week, T.S. was liable not to show.

Russell was similarly inclined toward leisure, though in his day he was known as a tireless worker. He hardly drank until later in life, after his daughter, Roxie, died. Roxanne had cerebral palsy. A representative of the state of North Carolina once came to their house when she was about the age to start going to regular school, and he told Russell that the state wanted to put Roxie in a home for special children. When T.S. told me the story, he stopped working and his eyes welled up as he repeated the part where Russell told the man, "As long as there's a breath in my body, she won't be put in a home. She'll stay here where she's loved and her family will take care of her."

Roxie was fifteen when she died. Up to then, Russell worked all the time. T.S. said he about quit giving a damn after that, decided he was going to have a good time, no matter what happened. He moved his family to North Florida as the massive construction boom projected to last for twenty years at least was gathering momentum.

Thirteen years later, the boom was still technically on, despite the recession. Rich people kept buying ostentatious new plantation mansions in prestigious gated communities and they all had to be painted. Of the tens of thousands of painters who came and went through those houses on their anonymous wage earning ways, precious few became bona fide painting legends like Russell Sharpe, of whom tall tales were told. I was proud to have him around,

doubly proud to have a house big enough to accommodate Russell and Lyle and T.S. and anyone else that came along, within reason.

On New Year's Day, there was beer galore, cases and cases of beer. The house, by then, was a full-scale party house. Everyone sat around the table wrapped in blankets drinking beer. I had seen Doris at her party a few days before Christmas where she had given me a present. She cornered me in the kitchen, teasingly, "You didn't get me anything, did you?"

"You got your house back," I reminded her.

She didn't laugh, but it was true. I did not want her to forget that I had facilitated the split with Lyle that she had all but despaired of engineering alone. What a grand bit of meddling that was, I thought, albeit a thankless task.

Around the drinking table, Lyle pressed me for information about Doris. He knew I had attended Doris' Christmas party, to which he had pointedly not been invited. Lyle had stood enraged on her front lawn that night listening to roils of derisive laughter at the mention of his name inside. He had no difficulty distinguishing my own snarking hiccough of a laugh among the others mingling inside the enemy camp. He could have climbed the tree and leapt to the roof and burst through the window to spoil Doris' party but good, and was of half a mind to do just that, but instead, he had screamed out Doris' name in the street at midnight until the gloating celebrants all came to the windows and saw him under the streetlight, cursing and howling and ineffectually pulling his pants down to moon the party people.

On New Year's Day, his mood was more jovial. Doris had a friend named Christine, also a nurse, whom I had dated once. "What happened with you and what's-her-name, the nurse, the other one?" he asked.

I shrugged. It did no good to evade Lyle's direct questions. "I tried to talk to her once, in a tender moment," I said. "I told her I was fresh from being ravaged by a prior relationship and was trying not to be bitter about it. She said that was macho. And here she's chasing after some married Iranian doctor who thinks American women are all whores and treats his wife like cattle. He's not macho. I'm macho for trying to rise above my own petty heartache."

"What else happened?" Lyle asked.

I shrugged again. Frankness was fast becoming a way of life around the house.

"After I came in her mouth, she wouldn't have any more to do with

me.”

Lyle poured a tall beer down his throat, suppressing a grin. “Was she a spitter?” he asked.

Four months into the lease, the house had grown considerably on Lyle, though he continued to hold in low esteem its sparse appurtenances. Remaining sour toward me for my collusive role in the debacle with Doris was his right, unbegrudged, but beside the point, finally, as far as the house was concerned. We each had what we needed most, a home and a job.

Every morning with a will of steel, Lyle adhered to his regular pattern, carrying with him a sorrowful heart through the motions of his responsibilities, which encompassed the management of an entire warehouse of hosiery. His employer, a vast corporation, recognized his personal qualities and had advanced him to a managerial level despite his lack of a higher education. Lyle had studied and learned what he needed to know, but was continually challenged to his capacity by the daily mounds of paperwork he diligently completed. Without Doris, the job was his only anchor. No matter how late he went to bed, by five forty-five, he was up and showered. By six, he was gone, which was good for me, because were it not for the demands of his employment, Lyle might have dwelt even more than he did on the outrage and anger he felt toward me, his friend, whom he regarded as having conspired behind his back with Doris and who had the temerity afterward to expect him to share not merely a table but a house with him, as if a grievous wrong had not been done to him, as if, in fact, all was forgiven, which, in all candor, it was not.

The house eventually won him over. The anger gradually ebbed out of Lyle. A river of beer washed through the house, extinguishing resentments and cleansing all and sundry.

Russell collected cans all through the winter. He came and went. The porch was his. T.S. was there so much it seemed like he lived there, too, but he never officially moved out of the room he kept at Rondele and Fatima’s house. Sunday mornings, we watched Shirley Temple movies on a tiny black and white and made depraved remarks about her. We observed the fine points of her first growth with a tremulous glee. T.S., a self-styled master of lust, would describe in a hillbilly accent the deflowering of Shirley Temple in an infinite variety of debased poses.

Laughter filled those days when T.S. was entertaining. The other times, when he was too drunk to work, debilitated by drugs or otherwise needful of a

ride or a friend, were of equal standing to me. We laughed; it scarcely mattered at what. So little was sacred, nothing, really.

At twenty-nine, with my life and hopes of a career in print media or public relations, or even as an air traffic controller in shambles, limbo, or abeyance, I was learning that a painter unwilling to cultivate a warped sense of humor was doomed to grow anemic of mind in a brief span of years with nothing more figurative occupying his wit than dirty mineral spirits. It was part of the job to know how much and how little to take seriously. None of it mattered much. Exigencies were strictly vernacular; sardonic tales of putty and caulk, surface preparations lovingly described in terms reminiscent of foreplay and the sensual subtext of sanding. With T.S., entertaining yourself and each other was part of the job. Nonsense made sense, when nothing else did.

T.S. knew Brenda and had met Fran. Once, with the three of them in the car and Fran's young son, Dan, we went for a ride. T.S. was wildly forward with Fran, and, as she was laughing, she passed a look to Brenda, who suggested we stop by the garage to drop Dan off with Dave, a foolhardy idea, on reflection. Dave scowled out from the door of his shop at Fran, who waved at him from the back seat of the Rambler with T.S. coolly whistling beside her, his long hair and beard doing little to disguise his intent as innocuous.

"Never mind," said Fran, "just go."

I sped off wishing I had an ejector seat that would shove Fran out of the car. Dan stayed with us so we rode to Mayport and took the ferry over to Fort George Island, not because we wanted to go there but because we did want to go somewhere and there was really nowhere to go. We drank a few beers, threw some oyster shells in the water and headed back across the ferry. We dropped Fran and Dan off at the bus and T.S. somewhere else. Brenda and I were still living together then.

Sometime in the year that had passed since then, T.S. and Brenda got together for a night of drugs and guilt and easily assuaged regret; it was a secret they both agreed to keep from me. Though we were split up at the time, they assumed correctly that the news would have hurt me.

Brenda didn't have to explain anything to T.S. I'd gone off to Orlando with Darla, consigning Brenda to yesteryear. She, in her orbit, had done the same to me. T.S. was my friend, though first, a dog among dogs in an omnivorous world.

Blessed with keen instincts about people, T.S. knew that if I did find

out about him and Brenda I might better understand Lyle's determination to hold a grudge against me for my so-called conspiracy with Doris.

T.S. understood how Lyle felt. He was out drinking and drugging with him the night Lyle ran over the mailbox. One fender of Lyle's Toyota was crumpled the next morning. Riding around snorting cocaine after the bars closed, up half the night hearing Lyle's side of his bitter story as he ran over a mailbox, in the back of T.S.' ingenious mind a rationale of blind justice balanced out the circumstances, in the event, that is, of me finding out about him and Brenda. So he confessed to me, to get the secret off his chest.

"You were gone. She was out there. It was just one night. We both felt bad about it."

"I don't care," I said, absolving him as if it had ceased to matter. Brenda was never strictly faithful to me, even in the best of times. It was over between us. I was resolved to let it all go.

Upon hearing the story from me about Fran shooting Dave in the stomach on the bus, T.S.' first reaction was to assume that cocaine had played a major role, as it did in the case of Brett and Sally Moody.

We were tediously painting a load of movable shutters with white enamel by hand, with T.S. on one side and me on the other, dabbing at crevices and holidays with small sash brushes, conversing through louvers and wishing we had borrowed a spray machine instead of attacking the shutters by hand.

All of our friends had heard or read in the paper how Brett Moody, a former classmate and friend, whose wedding T.S. had attended and from whom he occasionally purchased quality sinsemilla or coke, had grown so jealous of his wife, Sally, the younger sister of another old friend, that he had ceased accepting jobs as a merchant seaman and was afraid to leave her alone for any length of time whatever. Fueled by constant cocaine use, his paranoia had grown progressively ugly until one morning, Sally was found beaten to death by her husband's fists, by Brett, who loved her to distraction, who had always loved her.

The story was a disgrace. Brett was contrite, and T.S. had heard that he intended to plead guilty. No one who had ever known Sally Anderson was inclined toward mercy, or would ever speak a word in Brett's behalf.

There were things people said about Brett afterward. Paul Anderson had stopped by to see his sister that afternoon. He tried to get her to come away with him that night. She told him she was all right, but he had a feeling

something was wrong. She told him to go on and he left her there. Nobody expected Brett's mind to snap like a twig that night.

In the morning, after Sally was dead from being tied up and beaten, Brett had called for help. He called his mother, who came to the house and saw the carnage and her son in shock. Brett's mother called the police.

"It was the cocaine," said Paul Anderson. "I still do it. I'm guilty, I know, but I never hurt anybody."

T.S., at the time, was nursing a broken nose. He might have bought a gram from Brett the night it happened. He couldn't remember for sure, but if he did, he wondered if maybe some bad karma was attached to it.

There was blood on Rondele and Fatima's living room couch that morning. I found T.S. with memory loss, still drunk from the night before with his Brobdingnagian nose askew to the left forty-five degrees, and skeins of dried black blood in his beard. T.S. licked his foam-flecked lips and brandished a wilted, scrofulous joint. His nose canted like a billowed sail, wavering when he spoke. His voice was like that of a harelip saying, "Nwa nmo a no?"

He vaguely remembered being punched and thrown in a dumpster. To retrace his steps of the night before was the order of the day, but first, he had to set his nose.

T.S. stood by the bathroom sink, studied the problem in the mirror. He placed his thumbs alongside the break at uneven points, testing for grip and leverage before applying pressure. The whites of his eyes filled with blood as he exerted force on the cartilage. He pulled his nose outward, refitted it by dead reckoning and pushed it back into a rough approximation of its former position.

His eyes bled from the corners when he came out of the bathroom.

"Think I got it," he said, his old voice beginning to return.

There was a marked tilt to the left still, and a bump like a knuckle on the ridge, but nothing he couldn't live with. In the healing weeks that followed, he developed the habit of feeling the bulge of the break with both hands, the break he'd set himself.

Some people will beat up a drunk, and later say they asked for it, or that they had it coming. Those people are not likely to set their own noses if it ever happens to them.

No one remembered what led up to the incident. None of the bartenders at Pete's Bar saw anything out of the ordinary that night and no one

seemed very curious, other than T.S. himself, as to who had thrown the punch that broke his nose. A couple of names eventually surfaced, George and Victor. George, a hot-tempered volunteer bouncer, had taken it upon himself to discipline T.S. Victor, a burly young man who shot pool one-handed, was not one of George's regular cronies. He agreed that the dumpster ride was excessive, but he, too, was drunk at the time and had not meant to hurt T.S.

George didn't want to talk about it at all when T.S. made a point of going up to him, as he had to Victor, in Pete's Bar and offering to buy him a beer. With Victor, he had let it go at that. To George, he said, "No hard feelings, George, but if you ever lay a hand on me again while I'm drunk, I'll burn your house down."

George eyed him contemptuously. "You won't do nothing. I'll kill your ass," he said.

T.S. grinned. He could outgrin most people. "You don't know what I'll do," he said. "I'll haunt you. You go to kiss your wife and get a salty taste, it might be me, coming for you. You won't know."

George reared back, aghast, his color draining. No doubt, he was remembering in detail why he had punched that big hillbilly nose so hard the last time. He made a show of summoning supernatural restraint and tonelessly shook his head. Words failed him.

"You're possessed," he said.

T.S. leaned back against the bar and leered up at him, with the dark scab shadowing the bridge of his nose. "No, I just don't care," he said, draining his beer. He grinned at George again, deep laughter rumbling in his chest. "I believe I'll have another," he said leisurely, turning around to signal the bartender watching the pair from a few wary steps back.

George downed his drink and gave T.S. a cold look as he turned to go. T.S. kept grinning, but the smile was gone. George waved to the bartender on his way out. T.S. raised a fresh can of beer above the crowded, oblivious room and toasted himself, determined to have a good time, no matter what.