

BY
K. C.
WILSON

part of me, and I was never going to write her story, but I wanted to say hello and maybe hum a few lines from the other pages on the page.

I was never going to write her story, but I wanted to say hello and maybe hum a few lines from the other pages on the page.

from the base to the beach and back to the water.

of professionalism.

of people and a quiet room where I was.

and I was.

the ship was used to be

no intention of even heading out to sea.

and I wanted to say hello and maybe hum a few lines from the other pages on the page.

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ALSO BY K. C. WILSON
The Route

Doing the Dead -1983
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DOING THE DEAD
1983

A Novella

by

K. C. Wilson

IV. Susan

“So. How exactly do you go about running over a mailbox?”

One morning, I asked Lyle that question as he was giving himself a haircut with scissors over a towel spread in the bathroom sink. “What’s the procedure?”

“I hallucinated,” he growled. “I thought it was you.”

His gruffness discouraged repartee.

“You’re an idiot,” I said.

“And you, my friend, know nothing of serious matters.”

A sidelong glance belied his mood of gravity. “I met a friend of yours last night,” he said, squinting through the wisp of rising mentholated smoke. The cigarette projecting from the corner of his mouth vibrated like a tuning fork when he spoke. “Apparently, she knew you in your formative years.”

I leaned one hand on the paneling outside the doorway and waited for Lyle to finish trimming his mustache and continue. Once his teeth were visible again below his Pancho Villa mustache, he flashed a grin and gestured silently to peek inside his door.

“Just tell me if you’re going to tell me,” I said. “I don’t want to peek in there.”

“How many Susans do you know?”

“Susan McInerny?” I guessed.

Lyle made an aperture of his circled thumb and finger, held it to his eye and narrowed it to the size of a dime. “She’s got the tiniest little pussy.”

“Is she asleep?”

“No,” came an old familiar voice from behind the door to Lyle’s room. “How can anyone sleep when their ears are burning?” The door opened and Susan McInerny, Susie Q, the same short, full-breasted girl whom trouble followed like a shadow, who loved Quaaludes and strong drink, was accident prone beyond belief, unlucky at love and seemingly fated to find only the most ill-starred attachments, emerged from Lyle’s room in his maroon velour bathrobe with a broad smile for me and her characteristic throaty chuckle.

“Hey, Floyd.” She gave me a warm hug.

Lyle wet and combed his shortened hair while we brought each other up to date in the hall. She’d been in prison for writing bad checks. I was painting houses. She touched her belly self-consciously, affecting a light laugh. “I put on some weight since I got out,” she said, “but it’s bought and paid for.”

“Gut by Bud,” said Lyle. “I got one.”

“I’m building me a little shed, too,” I said.

We all touched our stomachs in sequence.

“I’ve got to get into that bathroom, Lyle,” said Susan.

“It’s all yours, girl,” said Lyle, stepping aside. She closed the door.

Lyle took a tall boy out of the freezer in the kitchen and drank it on the way to the door, dropping the can in Russell’s bag on the screen porch. Russell was up and moving around in a pair of shorts that hung low on his hips.

I heated water for a cup of instant coffee and thought about Susan while she showered. I knew about her bad check habit. They were all to the same store, the checks. She couldn’t help it. She had a real problem with impulse buying. She’d bought clothes at the Vogue store with her mother’s Vogue charge card all her young life until it was taken away or canceled. She did like the Vogue store a lot. They knew her there and liked her and knew her mother and sister and her whole family. Susan knew they’d take a check from her so she wrote that first check for a blouse and a skirt. Then, she wrote a few more after that, always for clothes. Once she started, she couldn’t stop. She was like that with everything.

Susie Q. from the old neighborhood, deep Shadville Beach, where the sidestreets curved and wound in patterns laid out in olden days by a self-bemused cartographer. She knew the old neighborhood game we played on strangers to those looping streets. The game was, when given rides home by strangers, to direct them right and left a few times, get them lost in elliptical

suburbia and note their levels of distress when they were reduced to begging for directions back to the main road.

It was a game thought up by idle teenage boys with nothing better to do than hitchhike from one end of Shadville Beach to the other and back, or wherever, meeting people and other kids at random, looking for something to do. Before we had cars, we hitchhiked. Strangers and new acquaintances often gave us rides home and dropped us off only to realize that they were in a minor maze.

If they asked, they were given directions. But they were at our mercy. That game.

It wasn't much, that tiny taste of power, not enough to go to anyone's head, at any rate, but it lingered, that taste; that feeling stayed with you and kept you alert and aware of other people's games. It meant as much as any old school tie.

Susan and I went out with each other once in high school and became fast friends. We stayed friends while all around us the all-important romances failed. Friends for life. It was possible in those late childhood days to have a friend for life and realize it only later. Seeing her now, a little scarred and rounder, I still saw the teenage childhood in her, the willful mischief and doomed innocence of the short loud girl with big tits and even bigger problems looming on her horizon. She'd kept bobbing like a cork on rough water through the last decade, staying pretty much the same on the inside while her hide toughened. The dewy-eyed term had fallen out of usage, but I knew I still had a friend for life in Susan.

Susan had introduced me to Nico Brown. For that alone she could stay in my good graces forever, though it had not ended well. Neither had Sue's romance with Gerald Berenson, whom her Dad had greatly hoped would marry her.

So few of those high school romances panned out. Yet none dare call them trivial, because they are so formative. So much is expected, so little known. It could be that Susan was not over Gerald Berenson yet, and never would be. I understood the degree to which that could be true, for my young love had marked me, too, and I knew Susan knew it.

In the Florida room of her mother's house was a jukebox full of memories that linked us through our separate sorrows to each other. Songs as sweetly sad as *The Rain, the Park, and Other Things*, or *Have You Seen Her?* by the

Chi-Lites held secret meanings for the sorrowful, as did Lou Christie's songs, especially the one about the windshield wipers that seemed to say "Together-together-together-together..." Susan loved Lou Christie. She'd make windshield wipers with her fingers and swish them in front of her eyes when that part of the song came on.

Her parents' house was always open to her friends. I spent a great deal of time in that Florida room during my formative teenage years, playing and replaying a selection of merry melodies on a free jukebox. My social life began in earnest in that room, before I ever met Nico Brown.

Those old jukebox songs hardly ever made me cry anymore. My days of crying over songs were mostly done. Then came the eighties, when men were encouraged to betoken sensitivity with occasional tears. Not to cry was held to be macho, though there were altogether too many whiners already in the world. If I did break down and cry now over a sad or silly song, it was nobody's business for whom the tear dropped. Sue would know, but my secret was safe with her. There was no chance of it being devalued.

She came out of the shower refreshed and we talked for an hour until I left for work. She was looking for a bartending job and Lyle had already told her she could stay at the house if she wanted.

"What's with you two?" I asked. "You an item?"

She lit a cigarette, waving the thought aside like smoke. "I like Lyle. He's a good man."

"How about you and me, Sue? When are we going to be bouncing around? You've been avoiding me all these years."

"Hush, Floyd," she said, "I don't sleep with the people I love. It's something I learned."

"Well, why don't we go get a beer then, later? After work, about five?"

She fluffed her short brown hair with the towel. "Okay."

I waved to Russell on my way out the door. I was going to pick up T.S. to go to work on a glorious Friday morning in March, a payday, if we could finish those moveable shutters.

The sun was shining. Life was good. The Rambler, jewel in American Motors' crown, dubbed "Gloria" by Darla the dancer, started up as it always did, on the first try. I'm one of those people whose cars have names, I realized, as I sang the refrain to the song spelling out the letters of her name. The

manual windshield wiper arm lay across the dusty dash. "One of these days," I placated Gloria with another empty promise, "one of these days I'll fix your wipers."

The antique vacuum powered system was near the bottom of my maintenance list, but every so often, for her sake, I renewed my tired pledge to someday tend to her many needs.

That afternoon, Susan and I sat at the bar at TanFanny's drinking beer and enjoying the oceanfront atmosphere of springtime in a beach town. The passing parade through the open double doors afforded entertainment in counterpoint to the blaring jukebox. A boisterous din prevailed above which conversation did not soar but somehow penetrated, ventilating, as it were, the microcosm.

Loretta strode in through the side door, her eyes magnetized upon mine, her smile brightening a shade for Susan, whom she did not know. I introduced Loretta to my old friend, Susan, and Loretta smiled in equipoise, taking Susan's measure at a glance, sensing friendship, non-malignant, and relaxed without ever appearing to have been tense.

"I might stop by in the morning if I can," she said, demurely hurried. Loretta was always in the middle of some errand whenever she found me at the local bar.

"What time?" I asked.

"I don't know, exactly. Why?"

"I just wondered. If I should set the alarm."

"I don't know for sure," she said. "I don't."

"I'll be there," I said.

She brushed her lips briefly across mine and departed with a lilting wave to Susan. They would be friends, but not good friends.

Susan didn't miss a beat. "I haven't seen you look at anyone like that since Nico."

"You haven't been here," I said, after a moment, irked a bit by her sensing the parallel. "Nico's so far in the past. Come on. She's got a family, kids. I don't even think about her."

"Does Loretta have any kids?"

"A daughter."

Susan shook her head. "You've changed, Floyd."

"Not much."

“When did you become this person who doesn’t care?” she asked.

“Oh, that,” I said. “That just happened, I think. Last year. I finally grew up.”

In through the single side door came Brenda, staggering arm in arm with Angie, Fran’s dark haired sister, also an alumna of the biker school of fashion. Angie’s cold blue eyes scanned the room as they stumbled in from the bar across the street, Ocean Liquors. Their timed entrance and the public spectacle they proceeded to enact seemed a little bit like a calculated piece of theater staged solely for my benefit. Certainly, the pool shooters and beer drinkers had nary a clue as to why Brenda, fresh from her stay in the hospital with a liverish, pallid complexion, fell to her knees a few moments later before Angie, who stood at the bar ordering beers, why she bowed her head and beat her breast, or why, then, wavering her wrists above her head, she beseeched Fran’s sister, “Kill me, then, Angie. Just kill me. Put me out of my misery.”

Brenda bowed her head and rocked on her knees like Michael rowing the boat ashore. Halleluia. Angie turned her cold stare from her and fixed her piercing blue eyes on me for a moment. Then she nudged Brenda with the toe of her boot and said, “Get up, bitch.”

Brenda brushed off the knees of her jeans as she stood. Her long sleeved white shirt still neatly tucked in, she took a seat at the bar on the far side of Angie and drank from the beer Angie put before her, never once looking down the bar at me.

“What’s all that about?” Susan asked.

“Just another day,” I shrugged.

Unsatisfied with my answer, Susan shook her head and gave me the disbelieving eye.

Because I could, I condensed for her the relevant particulars of the Brenda, Fran and Angie imbroglio, up to and including Brenda’s last dramatic scene.

“That chick’s nuts,” said Susan. “Angie is. I know her.”

“They’re both nuts,” I said.

Susan patted me on the back. “Poor Floyd,” she said, pitilessly.

Brenda and Angie wandered out arm in arm again after they finished their beers, and could be heard arguing drunkenly in the parking lot. Susan met some other friends and went off with them. A few minutes later, I headed out to my car and found Brenda still caroming around in the parking lot, try-

ing halfheartedly to elude Angie, who kept badgering her about her deposition.

“Need a ride?” I asked Brenda. Angie stood back a few steps, watching.

“No,” Brenda sighed, “Angie’s got Esmeralda. I need to talk to you. Can I come by later?”

“I’ll be busy in the morning,” I said.

“I won’t stay,” she promised.

“Brenda, I can’t do anything for you,” I said.

“Hey,” she said, poking her head in the passenger door, “have you seen Cap’n Bob?”

“Captain Bob?” I repeated, incredulously. “Captain fucking Bob?”

“He was supposed to meet me,” she said.

“Haven’t seen him.” My tone sharpened, my hand on the wheel. “Is that it?” The old salt would buy her drinks all day if she’d sit and drink with him.

Brenda leaned in and put her hand on my arm. “Hey, Floyd,” she said, “anyone tell you they love you today?”

“Not today,” I responded habitually, though the reverse was true.

“I do,” she said. “You know I do.”

“Brenda, you need a ride, or what?” I demanded, the latent cabdriver rampant.

“No.” Her forlorn demeanor sagged, then rallied. She stepped back as I started the car. “Okay, bye,” she said, her standard exit line, as I pulled away.

That night, while she bucked beneath me, whimpering and whispering drunken nonsense, my mind was on Loretta, due for a visit at an unspecified time in the morning. I grappled with the fact of Brenda’s presence as her irregular snoring droned beside me through the night. I was, impossibly, still used to her torturous night sounds. The keening whine of her trapped breath recalled the song of the humpback whale, resembled music, almost, to ears resigned to optimism.

Early in the morning, I made noise in the kitchen, frying eggs and onions and whatever I could find, hoping with an early meal that Brenda would be on her way. But no, after breakfast, she lolled about, until Loretta knocked on the door, all smiles.

She'd told her husband a lie and broken free that morning to come to me. When I failed to invite her in and stepped off the screen porch instead to talk to her outside, her features caved and flushed. Then she saw Brenda in the doorway through the screen behind me and she turned away in a hot rush of shame and anger.

"I trusted you," she said, accusing me with red-rimmed eyes.

"Wait!" I called, following after her.

"You broke my heart," she declared.

I stopped following her and stood in the gravel driveway. "Hey, it's my house," I said, "people come by." I watched her back her car out and go, her last words to me drawing ire.

The nerve, I thought, blaming me for her broken heart, when I was as blameless as the day. Who was to blame for my poor heart, battered and fragmented to splinters? As well blame me for a case of mumps, or hurt feelings, for that matter. She'd do well to count her blessings, I decided, going back inside. She got off light.

Brenda was already out the back way and gone to see a neighbor, her little bit of meddling done for the day. Susan sat at the kitchen table, smoking a cigarette. "Brenda left," she said.

"I should have asked her to stay," I said. "She'd have left last night for sure."