



DOING THE DEAD  
1983

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



## 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.

## 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.

### 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.

## 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."

## V. Ingrid

Meanwhile, in Arkansas, Ingrid Smythe, nee Thorvald, was embarking on a separate vacation from her third husband, Andre'. She had relatives to visit and various friends to look up in Florida, and if she had time in five days, she also planned to drop in on me.

On the next to last day of her vacation, she knocked on my door. I hadn't seen her for five years, not since the lost weekend we spent together in a Flagler Beach motel.

"Surprised?" she asked, flashing her megawatt smile. She did a little pirouette on my doorstep. She'd kept her figure.

"Very."

"I thought you would be."

I opened the screen door for her. "How's married life?" I asked.

"Like being married."

We spent a few hours unraveling the pretense of resisting our physical attractions to each other. I expected no other visitors, yet remained wary of her intentions and kept nodding toward propriety all along, until it grew late and Lyle and Susan had gone to bed and the last question between us was whether I would kiss her first or continue to wait for an unmistakable word or gesture from her before succumbing to her allure.

We were leaning side by side against the countertop in the kitchen, not touching, observing the glare from the bare bulb overhead on the grimy yellow linoleum floor at our feet.

“So,” I said, vapidly, “still married.”

“Yes,” she said. “Maybe not for long.”

“I don’t want to be a factor in your marital dispute,” I said.

She turned her arch and foolproof gaze my way and challenged, “What do you want?”

I could not resist her any longer. She was warm for me and suddenly next to me, her arms around me, her lips hungrily on mine.

“I wasn’t going to let this happen,” she said later, in a languorous afterglow. “I know you don’t believe that.”

“Me either,” I said. “I had the best of intentions.”

She had until noon the next day before she had to go. She began to sigh and reminisce over the years of brief encounters that we’d strung together and called a relationship. There was something on her mind that she could have told me then, that she wanted to tell me, but instead, she gushed on about how in all the years she had known me she had never had me to herself for more than a weekend or a week, and now, once again, her heart was fluttering at my very touch.

She had given me up for the last time, she said, when she married Andre.’ Perhaps that had been a mistake . . . If I loved her now . . . If I still loved her . . .

Love, that splendid standby, I thought. I was amazed at the avid faith of her perspective, and more than a little leery of its single-minded intensity. A shadow flitted across her features, a reaction to my indifferent response. It was neither necessary nor possible for her to understand the way I felt, about love, about anything. She was not staying. I could keep her visit short and pleasant, joke good naturedly about her library donations, see her again in a couple of years. It did not have to be love. Couldn’t we be friends and lovers too, that sort of thing? That was how it always was before. She wasn’t always so serious.

In the morning, she informed me that she had not slept well, that my snoring had made such a racket she had barely managed to close her eyes. I scoffed that she did not know what real snoring was if she thought I snored, and furthermore, if I ever did snore, at least it was a tolerable, refreshingly normal kind of snore and not a rusty oil derrick, sump pump, constant death rattle sleep apnea snore. And she could thank her lucky stars for that, because woe betide the woman who could not tolerate my snoring, after what I’d endured

getting used to Brenda. There was no comparison. None.

Ingrid wondered quietly about Brenda, the subject of my diatribe. She did not like the idea of her or the casual use of another woman's name as a means to dismiss her complaint.

But she let it pass.

We spent a pleasant morning with Lyle and Susan, the four of us in the back porch sunshine. Some hasty packing, then Ingrid had to go.

"I have this feeling I'll be back soon," she said. "Will you write to me? Don't worry, Andre' never opens my mail."

I told her I would. She said she loved me one more time, then pulled out for Arkansas. She was gone a couple of days before I wrote her a letter full of crass references to dented headboards and well oiled springs.

Upon her departure, Lyle sat me down like the younger brother he often pretended to regard me as and initiated a man-to-man talk with me.

"Floyd, I'm telling you," he said, "that Ingrid, she's the one for you."

"She does make a good first impression," I conceded.

"You are so incredibly shallow," he said. "You wouldn't know real love if it walked up and bit you on the ass."

"Is that what we're talking about, real love?" I said.

"If you really don't see it, I feel sorry for you. I do," said Lyle. "I always thought you had a brain, even if you do lack integrity. But you just want to slut around with your eyes closed, feeling bodies in the dark."

"You don't even know her," I said.

"I'm just telling you," said Lyle. "She's the one."

A crisis of conscience was not what I needed right then. It was not as if I had led Ingrid on or astray. None of that applied. If she did leave her husband, it would not be because I had asked her to or suggested that maybe the two of us might someday live together again in some abstract fantasy of love. No, it would be because she had damn well decided on her own to leave her husband. It had nothing to do with me.

## VI. Dawn of the Dead

My younger sister, Kate, often came by the house and parked in front when she went to the beach. She was dating a doctor who was also a Grateful Deadhead with an extensive library of live recordings, which I had been borrowing a few at a time for several months. Kate was excited about the upcoming tour. Through her doctor friend, Doc, she was connected to a vast network of other Deadheads. She herself was “a Dead virgin,” and looking forward with great anticipation to her first Dead concert.

She had extra tickets for me if I wanted to go. Two shows, at Hampton, Virginia and Morgantown, West Virginia.

“It’s pretty much worked out,” she said. “We get to Charlotte and park the car. Pick up another ride there.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it,” she said. “How do you feel about driving Gloria to Charlotte? Think she’ll make it?”

“If it doesn’t rain,” I said.

“My car’s too small. So is Doc’s.”

“It would be better if we had windshield wipers,” I said.

“You’re kidding, right?” said Kate.

“Well, no.”

“Doc knows a good mechanic. Maybe he can get them fixed for you.”

That became the tentative plan. The upcoming shows were a week

away. Doc's good friend, the mechanic, passed the word along for me to bring the Rambler in and let him have a look at it. To my great surprise, there was no charge for making the single wiper on the driver's side work again. It was not raining at the time, and did not rain again until late in the week. During that time, I enjoyed the feeling of security that comes from knowing, or believing, that the windshield wipers will work. I was ready to drive to Charlotte. People were depending on me.

I came home from work on Thursday and found in my mailbox a letter from Ingrid, a frighteningly fat, bulging wad of sixteen pages furiously scrawled and mailed in a panic of haste. I showered and left the house in a hurry with nowhere to go but the tavern, where I sat and nursed a beer and felt the uncompromising heft of Ingrid's letter outsizing my shirt pocket. Under the bar, I unfolded and read it again, my mind tumbling over phrases like "leaving today," and "bags packed in the car," and the final endearment, "see you soon."

She had done it! Left Andre' and Arkansas. Her bags and everything she could pack were in the car with her and she was on her way to my house to start a new life with me. Postmarked two days ago, she might have hand delivered it sooner. I had no doubt that she was near.

In the morning, I was leaving for Charlotte and points north, doing the Dead thing with my little sister and her friends. The untimely matters at hand were slated to be tabled for the weekend, at least. One ticket only. The plan was in motion.

Susan came up and took a stool beside me. "Floyd, you look like you have a lot on your mind," she said.

"Want to hear about it?" I asked, in quiet desperation.

"Yes. No. Yes." She laughed uncertainly after each word, as if it might be a trick question.

"This," I showed her the weighty envelope in my hand, "is a letter from Ingrid. She's on her way back. She's probably at the house right now with her suitcases in her car."

"What are you going to do?"

"Do? I'm out of here in the morning. I don't have to do anything."

"Can she go?"

"She doesn't have a ticket. And she's talking about moving in or us getting a place, living happily ever after. She must not even remember the last

time. We lasted exactly one day. One day, then she threw me out.”

“For what?” One thing about Susan, she could ask the right questions.

“For freaked out baseless jealousy. And now she’s in love and moving here to move in with me because she thinks we’re in some kind of love. But I’m not in love.”

“Not even with Loretta?”

“Not yet. Who do these women think they are?”

“Be kind, Floyd,” said Susan. “You didn’t know you were so lovable, did you?”

Susan could always turn on a smile. She vacated her stool as Loretta suddenly appeared.

“I’ll leave you two alone,” she said.

“I can’t stay, anyway,” said Loretta. “Don’t go, Sue.”

“I need cigarettes,” said Susan, fading off into the crowd.

Loretta apologized for the scene that had occurred the previous Saturday. She was deeply hurt by it but still believed there was something between us and she had to know from me if it was real or not. “I’ve missed you,” she said. “I think about you all the time.”

Over her shoulder, I saw Brenda and Angie down the bar. Brenda caught my eye and mouthed a little kiss.

“Things are confused right now. I’ve got a lot of people at my house,” I said. “That’s how it is. It’s how I live.”

“What about her?” she asked, meaning Brenda, whom she knew was behind her.

“Brenda’s history,” I said. “We’re friends, still. Mostly.”

“Look,” she said, “I know we’re not there yet. I just need to know if you want me. If you don’t,” her voice began to quaver, “I just want to give you this.” She took a card in a red envelope from her purse and handed it to me, a tender message in scripted golden letters afloat on a glittering mauve sea.

“I’m going away for the weekend,” I said, “to Morgantown, West Virginia, to see the Grateful Dead.”

“I’ll see you when you get back, then?” she said, less a question than a statement of fact.

“Okay.”

“Okay.” She curled her leg around the back of my knee for all to

see and kissed me goodbye. Triumphant, she sauntered past Brenda, waving brightly over her shoulder at me.

Susan reappeared on the stool beside me. "Ready for Act Two?" she asked.

"What?"

She nodded toward the side doorway, as Ingrid entered and leisurely approached us at the bar. She slid onto a stool beside me and smiled sheepishly.

Susan nudged me as she backed away, "Floyd, remember what I said."

"What did she say?" Ingrid asked.

"To be kind," I said, surreptitiously folding and stuffing Loretta's card into my back pocket.

"Oh?"

I ordered two more beers. "You didn't leave Andre' because of me, did you?"

"No," she said, "but I left him. I'm not going back."

"You can stay at the house if you want," I said, "but this weekend, your timing's not good. I'm going with my sister and her friends to see the Dead in Virginia and West Virginia. We're leaving in the morning."

"That's fine," she said, with perfect equanimity. "I know this is a lot to put on you all at once."

"Yes, it is."

"I'll drive," she offered.

"There are no more tickets. The plans are set. Sorry."

"It's all right. I don't have to go." Her lower lip pouted. "Wish I could, though."

"Now, about this letter," I tapped the envelope bulging out of my shirt pocket. "It's got me a little on edge."

"I was jacked up when I wrote it," she said. "I shouldn't have mailed it. I feel like a fool."

"There's something I don't get," I said.

"What?"

"Why me? Why now? All these years I probably never told you I loved you. Maybe once. Maybe twice. A weekend here, a weekend there. Ten years went by and now you love me enough to leave your husband on a whim. What's in your mind? Who do you think I am?"

Ingrid had made up her mind to tell me the truth, her whole story, when the time was right. There were too many other things going on at the moment. A woman came in from the beach with a toddler in hand. Ingrid watched the mother brush the sand off the boy's bathing suit with her hand. Her eyes dampened and she turned her head away.

"I always loved you," she said.

"I don't deserve that kind of devotion," I said. "I don't."

Down the bar, Brenda and Angie were calling my name. Brenda beckoned. I left Ingrid and approached her at the far end of the bar. She and Angie wanted a ride to Mayport Road. Rain was threatening. I refused. I was busy with Ingrid. Brenda gripped my hand and pleaded while Angie stared at me with menacing, feral eyes, as if, given the power, she would gnaw on any sign of weakness.

"Call a cab," I said, thinking 'No one should ever have to deal with so many crazy women at one time.'

Brenda would not let go of my hand. "Honey, take me out to dinner. I need to talk to you."

I told her about the Dead shows I was going to that weekend.

"I'll get you some acid," she said.

"I don't want any acid."

"Somebody else might. It's good."

"No fucking acid," I said.

She let go of my hand. "Okay, bye."

Angie inhaled and blew smoke at me, impolitely stifling a contemptuous giggle. Head games she might once have excelled at meant nothing to me. I was not to be drawn into the fixity of that blue-eyed stare of hers that had no doubt mesmerized a raft of sailors and scruffy gents of yore. No, she could turn up the amperage full high and still not get a rise out of me. I did not want to get to know her any more than I had ever wanted to get to know Fran. I knew Angie was still trying to fix Brenda's deposition regarding Fran and Dave's relationship. That thing was between them. It followed that Angie was looking to get a handle on me as a way to intimidate or humiliate Brenda. That much I was able to surmise. The rest was all a dead mystery in the cold blue eyes of a tough little biker chick.

"Call a cab," I repeated, turning back to Ingrid.

She and Susan were playing a game of pool. I bought a beer and took it

out to the back deck by the ocean. The wet wind sent me quickly back inside. Ingrid masked her curiosity with chatter. She and Susan were hitting it off. I sat down to watch them play. Ingrid came and sat beside me and laid a reassuring arm on my shoulder.

Across the greens of three pool tables, I watched Brenda exit into the brewing storm with Angie close behind her. Ingrid and Susan were done with their game.

“We’re heading for the house,” said Susan. “Ingrid and I’ll cook dinner.”

“I got wipers,” I said.

“I’ll still ride with her,” said Susan.

Angie returned without Brenda as I was leaving. She asked me nicely for a ride to Mayport Road.

“Where’d Brenda go?” I asked.

“As far as I’m concerned, she’s dead,” said Angie.

I gathered from that that she was still alive and well.

“She picks up the first fool who flashes money at her,” said Angie, shaking her head like a moral aunt.

Her cold stare had softened some, like she was trying a new tact. Lightning cracked in the evening sky. “All right,” I said. “Mayport Road.”

Almost as soon as she got in the car, Angie passed out and laid her head on my lap.

My wipers worked against the onslaught of wind driven rain for about five minutes. We were about halfway to the trailer park that was her destination when the smell of burnt rubber started wafting in through the dash, followed by a high pitched squeak and the total failure of the wiper motor.

A strand of drool hung from Angie’s open mouth, leaving a wet spot on my jeans. If she was pretending, it was taking method acting too far, I thought, as I grabbed the other wiper off the dash and reverted to manual wiper mode, with my left arm out the window clearing a bleary path through the down-pour.

At the trailer park, I idled the car and jostled her, gently, at first, to wake her up. She wouldn’t wake up. “Hey! Snap to!” I said. “Jump up! Get out!” Finally, I shook her. “Get up! Get out!” I had to bark at her to roust her up.

She sat up and looked around, as if she’d never seen the inside of my car

before. I waited for her to compose herself and make a dash out of the car.

“Brenda sure mixes herself up with some low characters,” she said, enigmatically.

“She sees the good in people,” I said.

“Evidently,” said Angie, stepping out into the rain.

Wipers broken, I drove through subdivision side streets back to the garage where they were fixed. Doc’s mechanic friend, a white haired gentleman, scowled at me when I told him the problem and said, “Get that piece of shit off my lot.”

“Piece of shit?” I fumed, heading back into the storm. “Piece of shit?”

The rain came down harder. Driving Gloria to Charlotte was out of the question.

With a little grace to spare, I made it back to the bar. Soaking wet from the manual mode, I joined the other damp denizens inside. T.S. was bellied up to the bar. I sat down and told him about the mechanic who insulted my car.

Kate appeared at my elbow and asked if I was ready. I told her about the wipers and she took off to arrange a backup plan.

“I’ll be at the house if it stops raining,” I told her. “Otherwise, I may stay here.”

She called on the bar phone a half hour later to tell me she had scored our Dad’s Cougar.

The plan was still on.

When the rain began to let up, T.S. and I headed back to the house.

Brenda was sitting on the living room couch talking to Russell. She gave us both a nod and a wink as we came in and walked past her toward the kitchen, where Ingrid and Susan and Lyle were gathered. I went to my room for a dry shirt.

Susan teased me, “Did you get lost?”

“Hey, remember those wipers I used to have?” I said.

T.S. put one twelve pack in the freezer and broke the other open to pass around. He said hello to everyone, was introduced to Ingrid, and returned to the living room with beers for Russell and Brenda.

Ingrid’s vegetarian pizza was the hit of the evening.

“We saved you some,” said Ingrid.

I joined them in the kitchen. “Smells good.”

“Your new wipers broke already?” said Lyle.

"It was the same old one, fixed. It broke."

"Too bad."

"You should have seen it in that storm when the wind was whipping, that vacuum motor burned right up, gave a minute throb and died. That worthy little motor."

A certain sense of being ever so smug pervaded my jubilation.

"Kate's got our Dad's car. She's driving to Charlotte. We're gone."

I picked out a piece of pizza.

"Don't let him eat it all," said Lyle.

"There's plenty for everyone," said Ingrid.

Brenda hung near the edge of the kitchen circle, declining another piece of pizza. She touched my arm. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"As long as it's a very important matter," I said.

She nodded that it was.

"Let's go out back," I said, leading her onto the back porch off the kitchen.

Ingrid turned her head as Brenda passed by, following me outside.

"I'm seeing entirely too much of that bitch," she said, smiling with her teeth on edge.

"Brenda's going through a bad time right now," said Lyle, taking a stab at an explanation.

"Yeah? Who isn't?" said Ingrid. "You got any music in this joint?"

There was only a small portable cassette tape player. "You have to hold your finger down on the play button," Lyle explained, as he plugged it in. "We usually take turns. Your finger gets tired." He fumbled through several loose cassettes, all of which seemed to be live Dead tapes. "This'll do," he said, inserting one. He pushed play and held it down as a tinny monophonic semblance of Grateful Dead music rose up and filled the room.

*...snowed so hard that the roof caved in  
Delilah Jones went to meet her God  
And the old man never was the same again*

"Brenda, what is it?" I pressed her. "What do you want?"

"You," she said, "you."

"Brenda," I began, "come on."

“I know you don’t want me,” she went on, “but I have to tell you. What I decided to do.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“You know the Indians took over Alcatraz?”

“I heard that, something about it on the news.”

“I’m going out there, and help them. I’ll be leaving soon after Frannie’s trial.”

“You decided what to say about Fran?”

She nodded. “I’m telling the truth.”

“What about Angie?”

She shrugged. “If she kills me, she kills me. I believe in God.”

She was sitting on the wooden railing. I stood facing her. She opened her arms to me as if for the last time and I let her fall forward sobbing on my chest. “She killed him, Floyd,” she sighed. “She knew it was Dave. You knew Dave. He never hurt her. He never.”

Her body trembled and she began coughing.

“Think of me, will you?” she said.

“I’ll think of you.”

She tried to smile. “We weren’t so bad.”

“I’ll be around,” I said.

She hopped down from the rail. “I’m going now. I’ll call a cab from upstairs.”

She started up the back stairs as I went back inside. Lyle took his finger off the play button and the music stopped. Ingrid watched me from behind a veneered expression. Susan was in the living room with T.S. and Russell, watching TV.

“Come hold this button down,” said Lyle. “My finger’s tired.”

“Use a different finger,” I said.

“I’ll not sit here with my finger on this button, mon frer,” said Lyle, “just so you can have a sound track to your ego trip.”

The music did not resume. Ingrid watched me coolly. Behind her stiff smile, she was livid. She’d come to me for nothing, it seemed, but to watch me strut like a banty rooster back and forth between her and Brenda. The concert was understandable, but the scene on the back porch with Brenda had burned her up.

There was something on her mind, a secret she had kept too long. She

might take the secret to her grave, or tell me now for the wrong reason. Her smile was a mask that told me nothing.

A taxi honked outside and T.S. slipped out and got in it. Brenda did not reappear. Lyle and Susan stayed up for awhile with Russell, watching TV. In the quiet aftermath of the evening, Ingrid and I shared a couple of beers at the kitchen counter and talked.

“I feel like such a fool,” she said. “You must think I’m so silly.”

“What did you think would happen, coming here?”

“I didn’t expect a repeat of last time.”

“I didn’t even know that girl. She was your friend. Anyway, we were just sitting there.”

“In the dark.”

“It wasn’t that dark. And so what? You jumped to conclusions.”

“Maybe,” she said. “I had my daughter to think about.”

“Suddenly. Right then, you had your daughter to think about.”

“I had a lot on my mind.”

“You never did give me a good reason. You just said it was about that girl, your friend, whoever she was.”

“I was pregnant,” said Ingrid dropping the bomb. “I’d just come from the doctor. I was upset, okay? I came home and found you with another woman sitting in the dark in my house, so yes, I jumped to conclusions.”

“Go back to the pregnant part.”

Her eyes flashed as she forced herself to look at me. “I had an abortion.”

My mind went back to the times subsequent to that time, when superficial talk and sex were all we had between us. “You never told me.”

“I didn’t think you’d care.”

“That whole weekend in Flagler Beach, you never said a word.”

“I wanted to tell you. I meant to. I just couldn’t.”

The child would have been six years old. All the things that might have been were suddenly between us, the imaginary subtext of the lives we had instead.

“I paid the cost,” she said. “Believe me, I paid. They gave me a hysterectomy. I can’t have any more children.”

”You never told me.”

“I’m not apologizing.”

The turning circles of the years converged on a single point until I saw myself in two spheres, from a distance looking forward and from where I sat now, looking back in blinding clarity at the difference between my outer and inner parts and at the whole self-centered unit that was the end result of my thirty years worth of maturity.

“So,” I said, “if there’s any question left to ask, it’s not would I have cared, but would I have cared enough? To do something about it. Other than what you did. Without me.”

“It was my decision,” she said. “For better or worse, I made it. You didn’t have to.”

“I don’t know what I would have done,” I said. “I can’t think about it now.”

“Whatever,” she said. “You never loved me.”

We were eye to eye now, with more distance between us than ever, yet we were still bound to each other by threads of incomprehensible density.

“No,” I said. “I never did.”

She was able to smile. “Are we even yet? I don’t want to play anymore if we’re not.”

There was nothing left to say. If there was, we didn’t say it. The rain outside beat hard on the panes.

She helped me pack. We slept and woke to a new day.

## VII. Daybreak on the Land

Kate came by early in the Cougar. Ingrid got up to see me off. Lyle was leaving to go to work. Susan slept. Russell sat on his couch on the porch, drinking beer and watching early morning TV on the portable black and white. The house was peaceful, calm. Ingrid waved a tender goodbye from the doorway. All I had to do was get in the car and go.

The moment of going provided a focus on the receding house. Inside the Cougar, reality and time were linked to no houses. The moment of going extended outward into a prolonged transition, like one of those endlessly changing Dead jams that segue in a hundred different directions before the full surging power of the band converges on a single resonating chord that announces the end of the song they were playing as it fades into the beginning of the next song, the next new song in the sequence. The music never stops.

Doc had fifty Dead tapes picked out, including four hours of the Cairo concerts. He plugged one into the boom box positioned between the seats and handed the box of tapes to me.

“Keep it going,” he said.

Thumbing through the cassettes, I recognized less than half the songs by name. I’d seen the Dead a couple of times, the last time three years earlier in Gainesville. I was familiar with the music, but had not kept up with the band. I’d never been swept away before by the scope and size of the canon.

A distant feeling, like the memory of another life, came slowly back to me in increments. The music embraced me, welcomed me back to the fold and

spread before me a banquet of songs.

The feeling gathered and coiled, growing with the collection of tunes. I looked out the window at the beautiful day and felt the first lump rising in my throat over one glorious line, "...she can make happy any man alive..."

Songs reached out to tease me with an eerie familiarity.

*That's why if you please  
I am on my bended knees  
Bertha don't you come around here, anymore*

It became increasingly difficult for me to retain the perspective I had left the house with only moments ago that morning. My well-timed exit was a plunging entry into a parallel world.

All the people in all of the songs, the named and the nameless, were real, as real as my friends and the characters that wove in and out of the stories they told. All of them merged together in a tapestry of infinite life and sound and legend. They came from life and they danced the dance of life and death in their own songs and stories, and in memories. The dead were all around me in my life, dying to be remembered.

I couldn't tell all their stories. I could only tell my own. In my thirtieth year, the world was changing, but the world is always changing. I felt it drawing me in, but I was lucky. I took a moment and stepped back. I got in the Cougar and entered a parallel world. Everyone should have that kind of luck at least once in life.

By Monday, the dust would settle. Ingrid always took care of herself. I had no more decisions to make after getting into the Cougar. The rest was out of my hands. I was going to get what was coming to me, if not what I deserved.

A normal life, with a wife of my own, kids and fidelity was probably more than I deserved. I might have been good at it, I thought, though it seemed idyllic at best to contemplate such a blissful situation for myself. Fear of commitment had all but paralyzed the faculty of hopeful optimism I was still pretty sure I was born with.

*Please forget you knew my name  
My darling, Sugaree*

“Nico,” I sighed, my eyes out the window, “rest easy, girl, in your safe world.”

Tears fell then on the pages of notes I was scribbling in the car. The feeling overtook me.

Deadness, a misnomer, broke like Waimea shorebreak over my head as the song flooded over and through me in waves of relentless emotional release.

The actual shows would be anticlimactic, after fifty Dead tapes. I'd learned that word in college: anticlimactic, not how to play the guitar or sing or how to write a song like that. I wondered what of any real value I had learned in thirty years, besides how to cry unabashedly at songs and stay single.



# DOING THE DEAD - 1983

*A Novella by K. C. Wilson*

On the near edge of thirty, Floyd takes stock of his life, revises his philosophy toward women and embraces moral laxity as a personal code. Arrogance, friendship, loyalty, betrayal, honor, dishonor, disregard--relationships are too much pressure. Grownups need vacations.