

The Rule

Chapter 1 of *Willis* by Beverley Conrad

Phone rings. I pick it up and say hello and hear heavy, ragged breathing. I've never had an obscene phone call before. I say hello again.

"Betty – you gotta come out here."

It's Willis.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he says, and I rewrap the tiny fear that he is old and that maybe he is ready to die and needs me to drive him to the hospital. I say all right, I wasn't doing anything anyway and will drive out to his place and see what's going on with him, why he wants me there. He says that he will talk to me when I get there and isn't it a nice day to drive somewhere.

His place, a half an hour away, is a rough stucco-covered little house, hidden from view by dark green pines. It crouches, draws its arms in, among an encroaching tract of new homes that just started springing up. Willis doesn't care. When he looks at the new houses from his window he just talks about when he was a contractor in the sixties and built places for people like – then he lists names, none which I recognize.

I signal and slowly cross the road, a main one but not a very big one, and crunch gravel as I turn into his driveway. His car, a rusted-out black Lincoln from his contractor days, sits resolute and straight in the driveway, like Willis when he's on the porch and talking. A stove with the guts out sits on the porch and a couple of straight back chairs with the old seats off and subflooring tacked on relax in its presence.

I don't ring the doorbell. It has long since been plucked out and replaced with a piece of coat hanger wire. The white door is never locked and I walk into Willis' place. It smells like a mix of dust, bacon, oil, and an occasional cigarette – impulsively lit, thoughtfully crushed.

I knock even though I'm already in – one, two, three quick raps – and he says, "Come on in," short, raspy, like he doesn't care who's there, they might as well come on in because they knocked.

"Hi," I say, standing straight to his bent. I'm in the presence of an elder and act it. "What's up?"

"Here," he says, spotted glasses focused on a blueprint. "Right here," and a finger jabs at a sketch. It isn't very technical. I can figure it out. It is a log house, a cabin, with a triangle on top.

"Yeah?"

"Here. We gotta go here today. You got any gas in your car? That's all right. I can give you some for it."

"Where are we going?" I ask. "To *that*?" and I poke at the drawing.

"No. Up to the harbor. I wants to show you some land. You gotta help me too. I gotta measure it."

"For what?"

"Come on. We can talk in the car." He reaches for his coat, long, slow, labored movements. He takes a deep breath as he moves it from the chair back to his shoulders. I almost help him but don't, because in the back of my mind I think that he will say, no, I can do it, and then I will feel foolish for ever thinking that he couldn't. He leads. I follow. That's the way it always is when we walk through a door. I am patient with his slow step, not like I am in a department store when there is a white-haired lady in front of me and I make little pushing movements with my hands to silently hurry her along and make her stop looking at things, so slow, so old.

Willis stops at the white door and looks back, not at me, but at the floor, at the wall, at the door to the shop.

“Betty,” he says. “Go in and find me my ruler.”

“Where might it be?” I ask, and think how am I going to find a ruler in there unless you bought out a bankrupt five and ten in the past two days and have a dozen of them stacked on a box at eye level.

“Here. Never mind,” he says, patient with me. “I’ll get it,” and he pushes past me, soft like a butterfly. I never feel anything except clothes against clothes when Willis pushes past me.

He comes out and is carrying a round black wheel at the end of an accordion grasper. There is a small rectangle on the side of the six inch wide wheel, and I see the number thirty-seven in it and a few lines – quarter, half, three-quarters. It is a ruler, but I don’t know just what kind.

“What kind of ruler is that?” I ask.

“Land rule,” he says. “I wheels this part on the ground and it walks off the feet.”

We get in the car and I light a cigarette. Willis doesn’t ask for one. He never asks for one when we are in the car. I figure that it is because he is old and probably doesn’t breathe very well, and I respond to the thought each time he doesn’t ask for a cigarette in the car by rolling open the window. Then I close it some until air slides through a one inch slit. He won’t catch cold. I think of that too.

Willis starts talking.

“Get on 104,” he says, a quick slide of his hand through air that is neither too cold nor too fast. “Yeah, that’s right,” he says, calm faith in me as I make the correct first turn.

“Where are we going?” I ask again. We are in the car now and he can’t evade.

“Up to the harbor to see some land I have,” he says. He sits stiff in the seat. The seatbelt buckle pokes out from beneath him. Can’t put this thing on, he always says and never does explain why not. How do I get rid of it? He always asks and I tell him, tuck it underneath you. And he always does, but with as much of a struggle as it would have been to put it on. Once I tried to tell him that I didn’t want him to fly through the windshield and sue me for injuries incurred if I crashed. He said, you won’t, and tucked it beneath himself. How does he know? No matter, he said I wouldn’t, so he tucked it.

“Back in ’32,” he says, and I think, oh, this is going to be a long one. Every time he starts out in ’32, it’s a long one. Well, okay. I’ll drive and smoke and dream a little and every time it seems important, I’ll pop back in and listen. We are in nineteen hundred and thirty-two and Willis is setting out to buy some land.

“...Hundred dollars an acre... Sunday... Eva... man says... and I... hundred dollars an acre... Space... Quest... no... not then...we have to measure it... in case I want to sell... deal... thousand an acre... get gas.”

I pull into a station that reminds me of Willis’ place and of ’32. The station attendant comes out, takes the nozzle off and says, “Yeah, what’ll ya’ have?” Willis says, “Give me seven gallons.” It comes to three dollars and a quarter and three one-thousandths of a cent. I wonder for a moment if Willis has that in his pocket and the guy looks at me with a *well, if he doesn’t, I hope that you do* and Willis hands him a charge card and says, “Charge it,” then signs his name, a tiny bumpy wiggle and tells me to start driving again.

“And Manfred says that he might be interested in it for a hotel or... temple... lawyer... energy... men and women but not for... unless they want to... and turn... up this road... yeah, that’s it, Scenic Route 3. I’m writing this ad and want you to have a look at it. Isn’t this beautiful, Betty? You ever seen a view like this? Eva and I, when she was alive... arborvitae... farmed... too big now... yeah, here, pull over.”

I pull over to the shoulder, way off the road so that we won't get hit, but just shy of a ditch. There are no cars on the road with us, but it is curved at both ends and it would be easy for one to be hiding in the brush, waiting for just the right moment to speed up the highway to see the view.

I put the car in park and shut off the engine. Then I roll up the window and tell Willis to wait a minute, and I will go around and get the door for him. He cracks the handle anyway and the door flies open because we are parked on the berm and it slopes down on his side. I tell him again in the same voice because maybe he didn't hear me the first time and it isn't his fault that the door is straining on its hinges and ready to snap off. He sits still but for his head which is slowly wheeling around looking for his land rule.

By the time I get to the other side of the car, he is already putting his feet to the ground, but looks for me just in the nick of time – just before he stands up on the slope. I reach for his arm to steady him but find that there is no reason to do so.

He says, "Get me my rule and bring me a piece of paper and a pencil. I wants you to write some stuff down." I think for a minute, have I got any? And look in the glove compartment. There is always stuff in the glove compartment. I hand him the land rule and start digging for a paper and pencil.

I find some and straighten my back and look around at the view. He is right. It is beautiful. The air is cool and the breeze is warm, and it smells like the lake and I look for Willis, who's half way up the road and, I swear to God, right in the damned middle of it. What the hell's he doing? I wonder, and shout "Hey, Willis! Get outta the road!" but the words are swept behind me by the wind. He is walking in small circles, fast, faster, one end of the land rule in his hand, the wheel to it grazing the pavement as he circles. Oh, my God! I think, as I hear the whoosh of an approaching car. "Willis, get outta the road!" Willis circles faster and the car misses him and his rule by, I swear, only a foot. Willis glances up and pauses a moment as if he may have just witnessed a meteor slicing through the atmosphere but wasn't sure. He continues circling. I start with a fast walk, then trot – clip, clip, clip – up to where he is.

"What are you doing?" I ask and add before he can answer, "You shouldn't be in the middle of the road."

"I needs the pavement," he says. "There." He walks the land rule over to the berm. "I had to get this thing back to *one*. Only way to do that's to wheel it up a hundred so's it goes back there."

He keeps walking, head down. He watches his feet when he walks. Says he'll never trip that way.

"Where are you going now?" I ask.

"To the stop sign," he says. Look up. Look down. Watch feet. Stop sign will stay. Road might not. "That's where the land begins – we're walking past it now."

"This is it?" I say, amazed. I didn't know that Willis owned anything like *this*.

"Thirteen acres – on rock – but there's a well dug in it. Had it put in myself in '40. Nowadays – hundred dollars a foot to dig a well. This has one. Good for a hotel, college, restaurant. People always wants something to look at, Betty. Here, they got trees, a lake, all of that. Right up there," he says, pointing but not looking up, "Beautiful place for anything!"

We walk some more. With each step Willis gravitates toward the road and I steer him back to the shoulder. Suddenly he veers away like a planet leaving orbit. "Get back here, Willis!"

"We gotta cross," he says. His coat sleeve stretches like taffy and breaks away from me. I let him go, look both ways, and follow.