



DEATH QUALIFIED

A MYSTERY OF CHAOS

KATE WILHELM

A BARBARA HOLLOWAY MYSTERY

ISBN-13: 978-1-62205-023-9

DEATH QUALIFIED: A Mystery Of Chaos
Kate Wilhelm

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First published in 1991 by St. Martin's Press

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Cover: Richard Wilhelm

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Portland, OR 97217

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ONE

THEY ALWAYS CALLED him Tom. The maintenance crew, the doctors, everyone called him that, and although he knew it was not really his name, he responded. *Tom do this, do that. Tom come here, help with this.* Sometimes he could almost think of another name for himself, but it never seemed to finish forming in his mind. It started—a thought, an idea, an impulse to say a different name, not to look around when they said Tom—but then he was swept by terror and it vanished again. *Good morning Tom. How are you? Any more episodes, any dreams? Here's your medicine. That's a good boy. Go on to work now. See you in the morning Tom.*

He lived in a small apartment on the grounds. Some times he made his meals there, but most of the time he ate in the cafeteria. He had a meal ticket. *Good morning Tom. Bacon, eggs. What'll it be?* From the cafeteria to the doctor's office. From the doctor's office to the maintenance office. Out on the grounds, sometimes cleaning up in the buildings, running the waxer, or carrying out trash. He liked waxing best of the inside work, but he liked to work on the grounds best of all. Weeding, spreading mulch, riding the mower, making long, sweeping patterns in the grass that smelled like a memory. Once they made him repair some windows, and he had hated that. Looking in through the glass, like seeing into a separate world that was not his world and was not even real, had made him edgy. It was not that he was afraid of windows, he had told the doctor; it was that the windows were wrong. That wasn't how it was.

Then how is it Tom? Tell me what you mean.

He couldn't tell her. He had tried to guide her hand to the window-like shell around him, not hard like the building windows, but yielding, stretching when it had to stretch, coming back to fit snugly, but always there. He had tried to make her feel her own casing, her shell, tried to explain that it didn't have to fit so tightly. When he tried to touch her shell, she had called for someone to

come, and someone had given him a shot. Yesterday. This morning. Sometime. Everything that was not right now was sometime.

They made him wash windows sometime, and they asked him if the windows were frightening. He said no. They asked him if he could see their shells. He said no. He said he didn't know what they meant. They asked him if he had a shell that could expand and contract. He said no. He said he didn't know what they meant. He was afraid of the doctor. If he told her the truth she called someone who gave him a shot. And then when he walked outside it was different. Instead of green leaves, they might be gone altogether, or there might be snow on the ground. Or it could be different in some other way that made him edgy. He never told them about the leaves' not being right.

Sometime. He woke up in front of his television, clutching a piece of paper with writing on it: *Don't take the medicine*. He threw it away.

Sometime. He woke up in a chair in his tiny living room, clutching a slip of paper: *Don't take the medicine*. He threw it away.

Sometime. He woke up clutching his hand, which was bloody. When he cleaned it he saw scratches on his palm, as if made with a pin: *Don't*.

Good morning Tom. How are you? Any more episodes? Any dreams? Here's your medicine. That's a good boy. Go on to work now. The medicine was a long red capsule in a little white paper cup, with another little cup of water by it. He put the capsule in his mouth and took a drink and walked out toward the maintenance office for his daily assignment. On the way he spat the capsule into his hand and thrust it down into his pocket.

He touched the capsule in his pocket several times. Sticky. He broke it with a touch and felt grains like fine sand in his pocket.

Tom weed out those dandelions in the daffodils. He bent over to start, but he was shaking, chilled. *Hey Tom you sick or something? Must be flu. Everyone's getting it. Go on home Tom. Pile up in bed a day or two, you'll be okay.*

Sometime. *Good morning Tom. They said you were sick so I brought your medicine over for you. You want to see the doctor?*

When she was gone he spat out the red capsule. He was shaking

so hard he dropped it. No doctor. No medicine. No doctor. No medicine. No doctor. He slept.

Sometime. *Good morning Tom. Are you any better? Half the maintenance crew is down with it, whatever it is. The doctor says just rest and drink plenty of fluids and take aspirin if you feel too bad. Here's your medicine. Go on now.*

She watched so long that the sticky red capsule started to melt in his mouth and he felt the grains like sand. He coughed it out into a tissue. She backed away.

He sweated and got chilled. His heart raced, slowed, pounded. Deep whole-body spasms doubled him over with pain, and when they subsided he shook so hard he could not hold a glass, could not hold a spoon to eat the soup with. When they asked how he was he always said better. They brought food every day, and one day he picked up the bowl and drank all the soup, then drank all the milk and juice. He had not eaten for a long time.

The day he ate the soup, he realized that he was dirty, that he was unshaven, that he had not changed his clothes since.... He didn't know since when. He showered. At the mirror, shaving, he studied his face, the way he sometimes did. *His* face, not Tom's. When he did this, it was with great eagerness, as if maybe today that stranger face would become familiar, that stranger mouth would open and tell him something he needed to know. Blue eyes, badly bloodshot as if he had been crying. He remembered curling up on the bed crying like a baby. Brown hair with a slight wave. Thin face, thin lips, sharp chin. He was well nourished, well muscled.

For a second, he thought his mirror self would tell him the other name; he almost knew it, his real name; it was there, waiting for him to say it. He opened his mouth as if to encourage that other self to speak, and the terror flashed through him, made him clutch the rim of the sink bowl and squeeze his eyes closed. When he could breathe normally again and opened his eyes again, he did not look at himself in the mirror.

He finished shaving and quickly got clean clothes on: blue jeans, undershirt, heavy sweater, socks, boots. Then he sat down on the side of his bed. He didn't know what he was supposed to do next.

He began to shake, but this was only a tremor, not the wrenching spasms that he had been enduring. He waited for the shaking to pass, then got up and began to look over his apartment.

It was very small. A sofa and chair and one lamp were in the living room, and a television on a stand. Everything was brown or tan, even a shabby rug. A small kitchen with a half-size refrigerator; a three-burner stove; two tiny cabinets that held a couple of plates, a few glasses, a single cup. A tan Formica-topped table with two metal and plastic chairs took up most of the space. In the bedroom it was more of the same, barren and institutional: a single bed, a narrow chest of drawers, and a small closet that held working clothes like the ones he now wore.

And something else, he thought vaguely, but nothing more than that came. Something else. He looked in the refrigerator: milk that had gone bad, a few eggs, cheese, juice, apples.... Something else, he thought again.

He went back to the living room and tried the television. Three channels came in clearly, a game show, a children's show, and a show about lions. He became aware of two windows across the room, darkness beyond, and hard rain hitting the glass. He started to get up to pull down the shades, then checked himself. Tom never had noticed that he was like a fish in a bowl. He knew all about Tom, what he did, how he spent his time in front of the television, falling asleep in front of it most nights, dragging himself to bed in a stupor when snow filled the screen. Never noticing if the shades were up or down. He knew all about Tom. He knew that he and Tom were the same man, and he knew his name was not Tom, and in some way he could not comprehend, he knew that Tom was not real and that he could not let anyone know he had learned this.

He forced himself to sit in front of the television, on which people were jumping up and down and screaming and hugging one another. His head was starting to ache, and his eyes burned again, but the tears were contained, and this time they were not caused by fear or pain, but by frustration because he hated the shades' being up, hated being watched from out there in the darkness, and he did not know what to do about it. His fear of the doctor was greater than his hatred of being watched.

The rain beat against the windows harder than before, swept against them by gusting winds. Sleet, he thought then. It was sleeting. The idea made him shiver. He became very still, considering, and abruptly got up and went to the bedroom, pulled a blanket off the bed, and wrapped it around himself. When he returned to the living room, he pulled down the shades. He went to the kitchen and pulled down the shade on the single window there, then did the same in the bedroom.

Someone would come with his dinner tray and find him huddled on the sofa, wrapped in a blanket, freezing. It was okay that the television sound was turned all the way down; Tom often watched it without sound. He sat with his eyes closed, the blanket ready, and he thought about Tom's routine. This week it had been different; they had brought him his food every day. He had to stop and try to think if week was the right length of time, and he realized he didn't know. He had been too sick to notice. Suddenly he knew he had not been suffering from the flu, but withdrawal. Withdrawal, he repeated silently. The red capsules. He could have died, withdrawing like that. He dismissed the thought; he didn't even know what it was he had withdrawn from. A heavy-duty tranquilizer; the answer came as fast as he phrased the statement of ignorance.

Just as suddenly the thought came to him that he didn't know how long he had been Tom. He didn't know the month, the day, even what year it was. He moistened his lips, then did it again.

He was almost too startled to grab the blanket when he heard a key turning in the lock on his door. The door opened and one of the men from the cafeteria entered with the tray.

"Hey, how you doing? You pulled down the shades. Thought you'd gone out dancing or something."

"Cold," he mumbled, clutching the blanket, burying his face in it.

"Yeah. It's a mean one out there tonight. Freezing rain, sleet, snow by morning. Springtime in the Rockies." He went on through to the kitchen and returned with the lunch tray. "You stay bundled up, stay warm. See you tomorrow."

He felt his shell touch the young man, stretch to accompany

him as he ran across the parking lot that separated the apartments from the dormitory cafeteria. The sleet was driving in like icicles. Inside the big building across the way the young man stopped to wipe his face with a napkin.

“Oh, Michael, glad I caught you. How is he?”

The shell almost snapped back when the doctor approached the young man. She was gray-haired, wearing a burgundy raincoat, carrying an umbrella. Her eyes were very dark, the darkest eyes he had ever seen. The most frightening eyes he had ever seen.

“Hi, Dr. Brandywine. Better, I’d say. At least he ate lunch. First time. He’s freezing, all wrapped up in a blanket, watching TV. Shades all down, trying to keep out the sleet, I guess.”

“Well, if he’s eating, that’s an improvement. This is a nasty bug going around.”

Michael left for the cafeteria, and she looked the other way and called, “Are you coming, Herbert?”

The man who joined her was tall and overweight with white hair and light blue eyes—Dr. Margolis. He was grinning. “I heard what he said. Too bad. Better luck next time.”

“Oh, stop. That isn’t funny.”

He laughed. He had on a raincoat and now pulled a hat from his pocket and pushed it into shape, jammed it on his head, and they left the building. They hurried to a parked car, got in, and she drove them away.

The man they called Tom got up slowly and went into the kitchen to eat his dinner. The food was hot and quite good. Roast beef, mashed potatoes, more soup.... He ate everything, drank the carton of milk, and got up to make coffee before he remembered that Tom didn’t drink coffee. There was a jar of instant decaf in the cabinet. He looked at it, then put it back.

All right, he said under his breath. Tom wasn’t a prisoner; he had a little money. He even went shopping alone now and then. He found forty-three dollars in the chest of drawers in the bedroom, and several singles and some change in the pockets of the dirty jeans he had worn earlier. No wallet, no car keys, no identification. A key to the apartment that made little difference since *they* all had keys also. He got his poncho from the closet, put it on with

the hood down nearly to his eyes, and walked out into the spring storm. That way was the cafeteria, and over there the maintenance office, and opposite both a path through the trees to the sidewalk that led to the nearest grocery store, a convenience store where Tom was a familiar figure. In the other direction, farther away, was another store, a mini market that he had been in only once. He turned in that direction.

He hadn't known what he expected to happen after reading the newspapers and magazine articles. Nothing did. He made strong coffee and drank it, then a second cup. The caffeine made him dizzy and he couldn't sit still. March 1989. It was not a surprise; after all, Tom had watched television every night, through the weekends. He had seen the changing seasons, had been aware of time in a dim way. At last he went to bed, more frustrated than before, and exhausted. He wondered for the first time if perhaps he really had had the flu.

When he woke up he realized he had to hide the things he had bought. Someone would come with his medicine and breakfast and he couldn't let them know anything had changed, even if he didn't know yet what the change meant. It was Friday, he thought then. He was still too sick to work, and he would have the weekend to himself. Maybe things would come clearer if he had a few days to think.

He got up and hurried to the kitchen where he regarded the table with dismay and fear. What if they had come in while he slept? The doctor would know. Another shot, many more shots, and when he went to work again it might be winter, or summer. He went to the window and pulled the shade away enough to see that it was snowing hard. Then he turned back to the table.

He had bought notebooks and pens and pencils. He had coffee and recent magazines and newspapers. He had a paperback book or two. He flushed the decaf coffee granules down the toilet and filled the jar with regular, put it back in the cabinet. He started to throw the empty jar into the trash, then drew back; they might notice. Instead he put it in his jacket pocket to toss later. He hid the other things between the mattress and box spring of his bed. When the

young woman with the long braid came, he was sitting in front of the television, wrapped in the blanket.

On Monday when he went back to work, nothing was clearer. The snow was already melting. Every day he took the red capsule and spat it out later. He learned how to hold it in his mouth for longer periods, even to mumble something or other with it under his tongue. Tom never had talked very much and he didn't now. A mumbled yes or no was all he said most days.

“Any more episodes, any more dreams?”

“No.”

He always knew when Dr. Brandywine was in the lobby of her building, or in the office where he reported in every morning. If he had to, he stopped to examine a flower, or to tie his bootlace, or just to gaze vacantly into the distance in order to wait until she walked into the lab or a classroom; then he went inside and got his capsule. There were three people in there usually, none of them interested in him. They were easy. Dr. Brandywine was never easy.

On those days when he knew he could not avoid her, he pulled his shell so tightly around him he felt suffocated by it, constrained so that he moved awkwardly, and he knew that was all right, in character for Tom. He tried not to look at her directly ever. Sometimes she ordered him, “Look up here, Tom. Tell me the truth. Any dreams?”

He looked at her chin, or her iron-gray hair that was thin enough that her scalp showed through like a wad of pink chewing gum. He looked at her earlobe, or the gold chain that tethered her reading glasses.

He now knew where he was, on a college campus. Tom had simply been *here*. The campus was not very large. The school was private, very prestigious, a few miles north of Denver. The student body hovered around five hundred. Dr. Brandywine's department of psychology was housed in a red brick building. Dr. Margolis's department of computer science was in the large building where the cafeteria was located; one wing was student dormitories. Dr. Schumaker was in the department of mathematics in the science building on the far side of the campus. He was there only one day

a week. Those were the only three people he was interested in, and afraid of.

Every Friday afternoon he checked in at Dr. Brandywine's office and was handed an envelope with forty dollars in it. He never said anything, and usually neither did the person on the other side of the desk. When it was the young woman who wore glasses as large as saucers, and had a braid that went down to her waist, she spoke pleasantly, called him Tom, said something like have a nice weekend. He didn't know her name.

He was beginning to remember other places: a desert ringed by buttes and mountains; a semicircular volcanic caldera; a pine forest with sunlight streaking in horizontally; a misty, dripping forest of fir trees.

One night he came wide awake with the name *Nell* in his head, on his tongue. "Nell," he said. "Nell." No picture came with it. Just the name. He got up and prowled around the dark apartment. Nell. Nell.

Tom never woke up at night, never turned on lights after going to bed, and he didn't this night, but neither could he go back to sleep. He pulled the notebook from under his mattress, groped for the pen, and took them to the kitchen table in the dark. A sliver of light came in around the edges of the shade, not enough for him to read by, but enough to see the blank white paper. He had written nothing in the notebook yet. Now he did: *Nell*, and in a second he added another name: *Travis*. He couldn't make out the letters, but he knew what he had written.

He beat his hand against the table top, then grasped the pen again and stared at his fingers. The hand had written before, unbidden: It had told him not to take the medicine. That other one who was not Tom had communicated with him. *Do it again!* He tried to relax his fingers, to ease the tightness in his arm and shoulder, and finally he wrote *forbidden name* and then let the pen drop to the table.

He got up and went to the living room window to look out at the parking lot, at the looming building beyond it. A lighted stairwell, a few lights in windows up there, no one in sight. And he thought, forbidden. Not forgotten, but forbidden.

April passed. May was hot and the drought returned, threatening to scorch the grass. He mulched, and mowed, and pruned. He waxed the floors and carried out trash.

He could walk away. No one really paid any attention to him. *Take your medicine. Any more episodes? Any dreams?* He knew they would come after him and bring him back if he left, but more than that, he had to stay because he had to find that forbidden name. It was here.

The grounds were ready for commencement exercises; a platform had been erected and draped with blue and orange, the school colors. Canopies were in place; long tables were decorated with flowers for the reception. The graduates and their families and guests had not yet arrived but would within the next half hour or so.

He was rising from pulling out a stray weed from the bed of cannas in front of the administration building when he came face to face with Dr. Schumaker. He turned and fled. He did not stop running until he was around the corner of the building, and then he walked very fast to the back where deliveries were made. He sank to the ground behind a dumpster, breathing hard. Stupid, he thought, stupid to bolt like that, give himself away through something like that. Stupid. He stared ahead, but he was watching Dr. Schumaker. Without thought he had extended his shell in order to watch and listen, to see if he had given himself away through such a stupid act as running like that.

Dr. Schumaker continued to walk. At the door, he looked back, frowning.

“Morning, Walter,” Dr. Brandywine said, joining him. “What a long face.”

“I just ran into him, Tom. Why on earth do you keep him around?”

“Tom? Why not? He’s harmless, and a good worker. Cheap, too.” She laughed softly.

“Listen, Ruth. I said this before, and I’m saying it now. He’s a danger to you, to all of us. Get rid of him.”

“Now, Walter, if I didn’t know better I’d say that’s a guilty conscience talking. Besides, where could he go? At least I can keep an eye on him here. Forget it. Ready to give a rousing send-off speech?”

His voice dropped to a near-whisper as other people began to draw near. “He knows, Ruth. That look on his face... he knows.”

“Nothing, Walter. He knows nothing. He’s good for us. A little Lucas-prod keeps us all a bit more honest.”

Lucas! The world changed. Everywhere lines and bands stretched taut, a web of shining lines encased him, choking him, smothering him. He flung up his hand over his eyes and screamed and pitched forward to the ground.



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Kate Wilhelm

Kate Wilhelm's first short story, "The Pint-Sized Genie" was published in *Fantastic Stories* in 1956. Her first novel, *More Bitter Than Death*, a mystery, was published in 1963. Over the span of her career, her writing has crossed over the genres of science fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy and magical realism, psychological suspense, mimetic, comic, family sagas, a multimedia stage production, and radio plays. She has recently returned to writing mysteries with her Barbara Holloway and the Charlie Meiklejohn and Constance Leidl Mysteries novels. Her works have been adapted for television, theater, and movies in the United States, England, and Germany. Wilhelm's novels and stories have been translated to more than a dozen languages. She has contributed to *Redbook*, *Quark*, *Orbit*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Locus*, *Amazing*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Ellery Queen's Mysteries*, *Fantastic Stories*, *Omni* and many others.

Kate and her husband, Damon Knight (1922-2002), also provided invaluable assistance to numerous other writers over the years. Their teaching careers covered a span of several decades, and hundreds of students, many of whom are famous names in the field today. Kate and Damon helped to establish the Clarion Writer's Workshop and the Milford Writer's Conference. They have lectured together at universities in North and South America and

Asia. They have been the guests of honor and panelists at numerous conventions around the world. Kate continues to host monthly workshops, as well as teach at other events. She is an avid supporter of local libraries.

Kate Wilhelm lives in Eugene, Oregon.