



The
Fullness
of Time

Kate Wilhelm

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CAT

CAT CALLED IN LATE MAY to invite me to lunch and said she would pay. That meant she had a job for me. Cat—Caitlin Alexis Thorne—and I had been friends ever since we roomed together at Penn State as freshmen, where we were, despite our pretensions of sophistication, two scared, small-town girls, fresh out of high school, each as aimless and ignorant as the other. Now, fifteen years later, she had made several award-winning documentaries and, while I was a researcher for various GUWs, Great Unidentified Writers, whose readers thought were geniuses, I was no less aimless than I had been earlier.

First thing that day in the restaurant she asked if I was in tow to a GUW. She never asked for a name. She knew I had to sign a confidentiality clause in my contracts.

“Yes. I’ll wrap it up in a couple of weeks, and then Warren and I are taking off for a vacation, a cruise in the West Indies, a week in Antigua, home. Tied up until late June, or even the end of June. What’s up?”

“You could take your laptop,” she said.

She very likely had never taken a vacation in her life. Thin when I first met her, perhaps even thinner now, she always acted as though driven by demons. Sharp, edgy, with a sort of careless, Katherine Hepburn beauty, and no time for vacations.

I shrugged it off. Maybe I would and maybe I wouldn’t take a laptop. What I was planning was to be less a vacation than a test.

Warren was a sports writer, my sometimes lover, away as much as he was with me, and I had come to believe that the only reason we were still together at all was the fact that we were apart as much as we were. I no longer felt certain we could endure two weeks or longer together in a single room, a single cabin, a single island. He wanted to talk about sports—was someone or wasn't he on steroids? How many RBIs would so and so make this season? I didn't know and didn't care, and he was equally bored if I brought up anything to do with the research I did. If it weren't for our terrific reunions, we probably would have drifted apart a long time before, and never quite gotten around to drifting together again. Maybe it was time to start drifting and not look back. I wanted to find out.

"Hiram Granville," Cat said. "Did you read any of his obits?"

I thought for a moment. "Inventor. Thousands of patents. Old, old, old. What else?"

"A modern Leonardo, an authentic American genius, reclusive, extremely rich, possibly crazy," she said. "He never gave an interview in his life and neither has anyone in his family."

A waitress came and we ordered, then sipped wine as Cat said, "I got interested in the old boy, the range of his inventions, and it seemed a natural since so little is known about him."

She had picked up a few tidbits about Granville, enough to build on at least. He had never attended a university, or any other school as far as was known, and never manufactured a thing. He invented, patented, and collected royalties.

She also said that Jack Hynek would be on the team. Cracker Jack Hynek was a nerd's nerd, a geek's geek, a guy who knew how everything worked. Cat was going to have him start with the patents, the subsequent uses, whatever he could find.

My part was family, friends, employees, anyone who might know something about the Granville clan and be willing to talk about what they knew.

Antigua was wonderful, sunny, warm, romantic, and except for the fact that Warren flew off to watch a golf match in Scotland it would have been perfect. That was it, I decided, again. Done, kaput,

finished. Even as I made that decision, I heard Cat's caustic voice in my head: "For God's sake, Mercy, marry him. It's easier to ditch a spouse than a boyfriend." She had two exes, while Warren and I had been not quite semi-engaged for nearly five years. Everyone else called me Mercedes, but Cat made her own rules. For her I was always Mercy.

So, free of Warren, done with the G UW, I went to work on the Granville business, and it wasn't long before I decided that for once Cat was after the wrong bird in the wrong tree. I called her to say so.

"He was nuts," I said, "and so is the entire bunch. You can't do a documentary about a family of crazies."

"Crazy or not, first him, and now his son John, two of the richest men in the country, in two completely different areas," she murmured. "Isn't that interesting?"

John apparently was as much a genius as his father had been, but his energies were focused on investments and it appeared that he had an infallible instinct about when to buy and sell.

"Cat," I said, "listen up. The family lives on a great big estate, half of Pennsylvania big, and they don't come out and don't let outsiders in. They have seizures or something, maybe they stash the nuts away in their own hospital. They have their own landing pad and helicopter, and no one's seen them in public since the Flood. There aren't even any pictures of them available. Nada."

"Keep digging," she said and hung up on me.

I cursed her, and dug deeper.

By the end of August I was ready to give Cat a formal report on what little I had learned, and I was ready to quit and go after another G UW where my research yielded real results even if I never had any credit acknowledged. Warren and I were back together. He was writing a book about sports, probably baseball. He didn't talk about it and that was wise of him.

When I called Cat, she told me to come out for a day or two for a conference. A few years before, she had inherited a house from her aunt. It was old and a bit shabby but comfortable and, best of all, with no rent and no mortgage, in a small town in New Jersey

with mountains all around, about an hour by train from New York.

I was a little surprised that Cracker Jack met me at the station. He was five feet eight inches, slender, with auburn hair down past his shoulders. He had a crooked nose, and a bad complexion, and probably lived on candy bars, chips, and cheese. When he wasn't working, he was almost as twitchy as Cat, but as any just-off-the-drawing-board electronic marvel previously unknown to humanity, he was as focused as a laser beam. He scorned manuals, just looked at whatever the thing was, felt around it, examined connections, and then made it do its thing. And he did not have an iota of the same intuitive sense about people. His first words to me were, "Hi, Mercedes, gained a few pounds, haven't you? Looks okay, though."

I had gained about five pounds, but now that Warren and I were trying it again, I'd shed them. It was a familiar pattern.

"I hope you're having more luck than I am," I said, ignoring the insult. Might as well, I knew. He'd just be puzzled if I held it against him.

"Better believe it," he said, motioning toward Cat's Civic that she used for local trips. It wouldn't have occurred to him to help with my overnight bag or laptop.

Then, driving, he didn't say another word. He paid attention to his driving with the same kind of concentration he showed deciphering a spaghetti mass of wires.

Cat's house was at the edge of town, which I always thought of as Netskinny. Beyond her house there were two more, then a field, and woods that started uphill on the Kittatinny Mountains. Compared to that brutally hot summer in the city, it felt cool in the country, and the air smelled clean and sharp, pine-scented. Her house needed painting, as always, and the grass was unkempt, more weeds than lawn, but asters were in full bloom, a purple and violet tsunami rising above the sea of weeds.

Cat had converted most of the first floor of the house into an extended studio: a computer room with a lot of gear, video cameras, still cameras. There was a screening room, an office with piles of papers, boxes of miscellaneous items, and rows and rows of boxed CDs and DVDs, cassettes, videos in every format possible on floor-

to-ceiling shelves. The living room, dining room, most rooms were for business, but the kitchen was untouched, as was a small breakfast room and three upstairs bedrooms. That early evening good food smells were coming from the kitchen. Dorothy, a village woman, was there cooking. She was an indifferent housekeeper, but an excellent cook. Cat didn't cook. I suspected that she subsisted on Dorothy's leftovers and, when they ran out, peanut butter and sardines.

Cat waved a greeting and said, "We'll talk after dinner."

But she was all business when we got down to it later that night. "You first," she said to me.

"There's nothing there. The old man, Hiram, was an only child, doting mother, father a well-to-do farmer. Hiram had seizures, maybe epilepsy, that kept him out of school. And he began inventing things as a kid and didn't stop inventing until he was in his eighties. Died at ninety-one years of age. They lived about twenty miles outside of Allentown until he was fourteen, when they built a big house back on the farm property and moved. Later they erected a fence around the entire acreage. The original house was converted into a museum for Hiram's inventions. He married Elaine Courtney at an early age. Four kids, John, the financial wizard, in his sixties now, and three daughters. Mary, possibly afflicted with the same epilepsy, or whatever it is. It, or something, killed her when she was a teen. Daughter Audrey, a suicide at age fourteen, and Shirley.

"Three grandchildren by way of John and his wife Suzette. Stephen, Cynthia, a suicide or fatal accident at age fourteen, and Lorraine. Hiram's daughter Shirley married Matthew Scanlon, divorced twenty-three years ago, and they produced three more grandchildren: Felice and Grace, and a son Cary." I looked up from my notes. "Cat, no one sees them. No one knows them. No one who works up there goes to town to talk about the family. Maybe they import help from the Philippines. Maybe they have robots. Maybe they don't live up there at all."

"You must have talked to someone," Cat said, "to have learned as much as you did."

“Their births and deaths are a matter of public record. And there’s not a word about what goes on from the one event to the other. Everything else is the sum total of rumors. I located one old woman in a retirement home in Philly, the daughter of a housekeeper who worked for the family before they moved. Everything I got from her is in the notes I sent you. Nothing direct, only a couple of anecdotes from her mother.”

She nodded. “Jack hasn’t heard any of it. Just go over it again.”

Exasperated, I reported it fast. “All she could tell me was what she remembered her mother saying. Things like Hiram was clever with his hands from the time he was very small, made things like paper clips, but he had seizures, she called them fits. They’d put him to bed and keep him there a couple of days. They took him to the hospital a few times and to doctors in Philadelphia, then just had a doctor come to the house when he was having a fit. Mrs. Skaggs is eighty-three and barely remembers him.”

I glanced at my notes again. “Shirley’s ex lives in Florida. Both unmarried since the split. He had a Fiat that he took to a mechanic in town now and then before Shirley booted him out. The mechanic, Joe Federico, is the source of all rumors, and they all came from the ex, who, he said, had taken to drink.” I closed the notebook and leaned back in my chair. “And that’s it.”

Cat turned to Cracker Jack. He had been fidgeting a lot while I talked. “I’ve got a pretty exhaustive list of Hiram’s inventions,” he said, “and a funny thing about them is that most, if not all of them were patented just ahead of someone else who had the same idea, often in a patent-pending situation, sometimes just days ahead, sometimes months. And the stuff he patented almost always was taken up by someone who knew how to make use of it within the next few years. Sometimes a patent sits there for half a century before it gets put to use. Sometimes it never does, or at least hasn’t yet. Perpetual-motion-machine kind of thing. Granville’s inventions found users unusually fast. It didn’t matter who had the patent-pending gizmo, Joe Blow, a basement inventor, or a great big group that had been doing the research for a long time. Granville skipped all that and went straight to the key patent. He was investigated

more than once for possible industrial spying. Nothing ever came of it.” He looked dreamy-eyed, as if Hiram Granville had been his kind of guy.

“Let me tell you about the son, John Granville,” Cat said.

“Investigated for insider trading several times, never charged. He just happened to be on hand within a year and a half ahead of stock splits, or mergers, or a plummeting stock. I talked to some brokers, always the same story. They began to follow his example even if it went against the grain. They said he never lost a cent. And made the right investment decision up to eighteen months ahead of time. Without fail.”

I shrugged. “Luck, good memory, paid attention to trends. That’s what a good investor does, isn’t it?”

Cracker Jack was eyeing Cat narrowly, as if confronted with a gadget he had not instantly understood. “Straight to the basic principle, without the research,” he said after a moment. “Beating the competition every time, without fail. Anticipating mergers, stock splits months in advance, without fail. You can’t do that in the real world.”

“For crying out loud,” I said. “Knock it off! So they made a pact with the devil. Hard to film a done deal like that, signed in blood at midnight in a cemetery.”

Cat shook her head, smiling slightly. “No one can predict the market eighteen months ahead of time with infallibility. No one. And no one invents gadgets there’s no use for only to find an overwhelming demand for them within a few years. Everything Jack’s come up with so far is in that category. No pact with the devil, but there’s something going on there.”

I stared at her, then at Cracker Jack. He had stopped fidgeting, his brow was furrowed, and his eyes looked almost blank, as if he had withdrawn mentally. Cat’s Mona Lisa smile was infuriating. She was as serene as a cat on the hearth.

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That concludes the sample pages of *The Fullness of Time*.



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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.