

The background of the cover features a dark, out-of-focus silhouette of a bird in flight against a grey, textured wall. On the left side, there is a vertical, rusty metal pipe or structure with a brown and orange patina. The overall mood is somber and industrial.

# The Bird Cage

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# THE BIRD CAGE

GRACE WOOTEN STOOD at a wide window facing outward, seeing little of the vista before her—grounds keepers going about their work, and beyond them steel bars with half a dozen chimpanzees going about their own day on the other side. At a nearby window Edward Markham was also gazing out. She knew without looking that his hands were shaking, his head jerking now and again in a spasmodic motion he could not control. It took an effort to keep her own hands from clenching as she waited for him to speak, to respond to her report.

“Dr. Wooten,” he said finally, swinging around from the window, “you don’t have six more months to try any new parameters. I know what that means. New parameters, new tests, new waiting periods. New analyses. New tests. The answer is no!” He had started off in a relatively mild tone, but his voice rose even as it quavered.

“I’m fifty-three years old, Dr. Wooten. I watched my father die of Parkinson’s. I saw my brother die. And I have no intention of dying from it! You’re going to suspend this goddamn disease until they come up with a cure. First it was gene therapy and that didn’t work. Drugs don’t work. Now they promise stem cell research will do it. And the years go by. I don’t have years! You have two weeks!”

“I can’t proceed before I know what those anomalous brain waves mean,” she said. “We’re working around the clock here, trying to analyze our data, but it takes time.”

“Those goddamn monkeys can’t tell you what you want to know. How many brains have you examined? What did they tell you? Nothing! You won’t get a thing from them. You need a person, someone you can wake up and ask questions! Someone who can tell you what it was like. Those monkeys out there act just like all the others. No change. No lasting effects. Nothing happened to them!”

That's all you need to know. Nothing happened!"

"We did find differences in those we sacrificed," she said. Her mouth felt dry, the words sounded raspy. "We agreed to wait at least two years to see if a change in behavior occurs. Brain trauma sometimes requires a period of time to manifest in overt behavioral changes. It has been only thirteen months for two of the subjects."

"And then you'll want two years to wait to test the new parameters, then two more. Dr. Wooten, I don't have that kind of time! I hauled you out of a scruffy university laboratory where you had a few horny students to help, underfunded all the way, forever begging for pennies. I haven't denied you anything, not a goddamn single thing you said you need. More assistants, more lab space, more computers, the monkey compound, more monkeys. It's time for a human experiment. Tomorrow I intend to stop all my medications, prepare myself exactly the way you said I have to. I've taken care of the business and legal matters already. Between now and two weeks from now, get a volunteer, put him under for a week and ask him questions when you bring him out. And get ready to treat me. You get that? Two weeks!"

"I've explained why I can't find a volunteer just like that," she said. "It's illegal to—"

"You'll do it or I'll bring in someone who will!" he yelled. "I'll get you a volunteer! You just be ready to start on him when he gets here. Dr. Wooten, understand this. All this is mine. Mine alone. You work for me and I can fire you faster than you can blink. You'll do it or someone else will."

Immobilized, she stood at the window and watched his lurching walk to the door. When it closed behind him, she moved to her desk and sank down into her chair, staring at her spacious office, the handsome furnishings, pale wood, pale green cushions, coffee table... A door at the side of her office opened and Dale Sumner entered carrying a bottle and two glasses.

"You heard?" she asked.

"Every word. Ugly bastard, mean as they come. Let's have a drink." He poured scotch into a glass and handed it to her, pulled a chair closer to her desk and sat down, then poured a second glass. "Cheers," he said before taking a long drink.

She sipped her own and put the glass down. “He’s deteriorated a lot in the past month,” she said in a low voice. “He’s terrified.”

“Grace, how long’s it been? Six and a half years?”

“Sixteen,” she said.

“Not from when you started, just here in paradise. Six and a half years. I’ve been working with you for twelve. Time flies. Walk out, Grace. Leave it. You don’t need any more of his money. You haven’t taken time off to spend a cent on a thing beyond the barest of necessities for the last six and a half years. You need a break, a long vacation. Now’s the time.”

“Sixteen years,” she said, raising her glass. This time she took a real drink. She laughed. “You were one of those horny students he mentioned.”

“That I was,” he said grinning.

“Go home, Dale. How long has it been since you got home in time for dinner with Staci? Before Bridget was in bed. Take the day off tomorrow. Take them to the park or for a boat ride or something.”

“Let me take you home first,” he said.

She shook her head. “I want to walk out there in our own private park for a bit. I need a little time to think.”

Jean Biondi glanced out from the work room of the fabric shop, withdrew. “They’re still at the catalogues,” she said.

Dora looked up from her sewing machine and nodded. “Bet she won’t buy a thing. She’ll have to think about it, take a few samples home, consult with hubby... Whatever.” She went back to sewing.

Jean nodded, grinning. There was little for her to do in the room, but neither did she want to go out to the show room, where she was certain that customer would beckon her to come and voice an opinion about drapery fabric. If she had a living room with a window wall to decorate, she thought, her drapes would be pale, primrose background with giant red poppies. Her grin broadened. That customer would reel. She glanced out again.

“She’s actually leaving,” she said, then waited until the door closed behind the customer before she walked out herself.

Lizzie was leaning back in her high chair. “Honey,” she said

when Jean approached, “will you check and see if we have a full bolt?” She scribbled the stock number on a note. Lizzie’s Fine Fabrics did a good business, which Jean attributed as much to Lizzie’s good humor and patience as to the high quality of her stock and her all-encompassing knowledge about drapes, slip covers, curtains, everything that made a house a home, she sometimes said. She treated Jean more like a daughter than an employee.

“What did she finally pick?” Jean asked, peering at the open samples catalog. “That?”

“That,” Lizzie said with a grimace.

“She’ll be back within a year to get something else,” Jean said, shaking her head. The sample was a shiny gold brocade. “A window wall that puts your eyes out guarantees a repeat customer.” She reached across the wide counter—

Cody resists her nudge. “You go first,” he says.

The pond looks different, shinier than before. They came here all the last week to slide on the ice, not far out, just near the edge. They aren’t supposed to come this way after the school bus drops them off, but they do. It’s very cold again after a lot of weekend rain, and they were afraid the ice might be gone, but it’s still there, only different.

“Go on,” she says. “Don’t be a scaredy cat.”

He shakes his head. “I want to go home. I’m cold.”

“You first!” she yells and gives him a shove onto the ice.

He tries to catch himself, but he plunges forward, and the ice breaks. He screams in panic as he falls, first to his knees, then full out. She screams, too, and backs up. Cody is pulling himself out, dripping, screaming, terrified.

She backs away farther as he drags himself to the bank, trying to reach for something to help get him out. His mitten keeps slipping off a rock. Now he is screaming, “Mommy! Mommy!”

She turns and runs with his screams in her head. At home she races to her room and into the closet, shaking, freezing, crying. She has wet herself—

“Jean, my God, what’s wrong? You’re shaking like a leaf! What happened to you?”

Lizzie was holding her arm, and Dora was kneeling by the chair,

rubbing her hand. Jean was cold, shivering, terrified. She didn't know how she had gotten to a chair, why she was sitting down with both older women there rubbing her, patting her. She couldn't stop shivering.

"I don't know," she mumbled. "I don't know what happened."

"You're like ice," Lizzie said. "I'll put on coffee, something hot. You're coming down with something."

They insisted on taking her home, with Lizzie driving Jean's car, Dora following to take Lizzie back to the shop. It was a warm day, June eighteenth, and Jean was chilled throughout her body. Lizzie and Dora checked to make sure she had everything she might need, and hovered until Jean begged them to leave.

"I don't know what that was all about," she said. "But I'm fine, really fine, and I won't go out or anything for the rest of the day, just to make sure it isn't the flu or something coming on. Promise."

Finally alone, she thought about that day, twenty five years ago, when she and Cody had been in first grade together. She didn't even know exactly where her family had lived then, out in the country somewhere, and Cody's family had lived beyond them. Where? She shook her head.

She had not thought of that incident for years, maybe never after moving in to Portland. But she had left him, she had run away and left him struggling to get out of the water, to get home soaking wet in freezing weather.

She felt tears of shame fill her eyes and shook her head. Only six years old, she told herself. She had been six years old. Panic, terror... His screams, his terror had overwhelmed her own, and she had not helped him, had run away.

She didn't even remember his last name. Just Cody, the boy who lived down the road. They had an orchard, an apple orchard. And strawberries.

Had he caught pneumonia? Had he been injured? She didn't remember. Her family had moved to Portland that spring before school was out. She had not thought of Cody for more than twenty years, and now she wept for him, for her cowardice, her failure to help him, and his screams of terror echoed in her head.

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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.