



The Deepest Water

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1

Afterward everyone said the memorial service had been poignant yet beautiful, exactly what Jud would have wanted. But not yet, Abby protested despairingly, silently, not at forty-eight years old! For days she had said little or nothing, as if her vocal cords had frozen, she had lost the power of speech. People held her hand, embraced her, patted her, and she understood that they were trying to express something, but she could feel herself adding layer after layer of protective, invisible shielding against every touch, removing herself in a way that kept her numb and rigid, unresponsive to their sympathy, unable to stop adding to the cocoon that might keep her safe. Shock, they said; she was still in shock.

Exactly what her father had ordered, the funeral director assured her, even to the box that Jud had provided along with his instructions. He placed the box in her hands deferentially, then walked away with his head bowed until he had cleared the crematorium chapel, when he straightened and walked more briskly. “Honey, we have to leave now,” Brice said at her elbow. He took the box from her, held it under his arm, and put his other arm about her shoulders, guided her toward the door. People were waiting. Jud’s parents from California, Lynne—Abby’s mother from Seattle—Brice’s parents from Idaho, friends, strangers... Lynne had said the family would have to go back to the house after it was over; everyone would expect coffee, wine, something to help ease them back to the world of the living. She would take care of things, she had promised, that’s what she had come for, to help Abby; then she wept. Abby had looked at her in wonder. Her parents had been divorced for so many years, why was she crying now?

“Mrs. Connors?” Another stranger, another outsider.

She paused, expecting him to hold out his hand, kiss her cheek, something.

“I’m Lieutenant Caldwell,” he said apologetically. “State special investigations. I need to talk to you—”

Brice’s hand tightened on her shoulder. “You can’t be serious!” he said. “Not now!”

“No, no,” he said quickly. “Of course not now. But tomorrow? Around ten in the morning?”

Abby accepted this as numbly as she had accepted everything else. She nodded.

“We’ve already told the police everything we know,” Brice said. He tugged at her shoulder; she started to move again.

“I understand,” Caldwell said, still apologetic. “I’ll explain in the morning. I’m very sorry, Mrs. Connors.” Then he was gone, and they walked out into a fine light rain.

There were a lot of reporters, a camera crew, others waiting. After years of struggling, Judson Vickers had become an overnight best-selling author; his death by murder was news, at least today it was news. Abby walked past the crowd blindly.

That night, after the mourners had gone, and only her mother remained for one more night, Lynne said almost pleadingly that she didn’t have to go back to Seattle yet if Abby wanted her to stay on a few days.

Abby shook her head. “There’s no point. In the morning the police are coming to ask more questions, and in the afternoon Christina Maas is coming. There are things we have to talk about. That’s how it’s going to be for awhile.” Her voice sounded strange, as if muffled by layers of cotton.

Lynne looked at Brice and he shrugged helplessly. “It’s been a tough few days,” he said. “We’ll be okay after we’ve had a little rest. I’ll take you to the airport in the morning.”

Her mother was going to cry again, Abby thought guiltily, and she still didn’t know why, and couldn’t ask. Not now. And Brice... She knew she was closing him out exactly the way she was closing out everyone else, and she knew it was unfair, even cruel, but she couldn’t help that either. He wanted to hold her, to comfort her, to wait on her, do whatever he could, and she was like a stick in his

arms. Silently she began to gather plates, cups and saucers... Her friends Jonelle and Francesca had brought food, she remembered; it all looked strange and unfamiliar.

“Honey, please, go take a long bath, try to relax,” Brice said. “We’ll take care of this.”

With the unquestioning obedience of a good child she left the room to go take a long bath. She could hear their voices as she went up the stairs, talking about her, the state she was in, she thought distantly. The house was usually spacious-feeling, with three bedrooms, two baths, stairs with a plush, pale green carpet, a nice Aubusson rug in the living room, carpet in the den, drapes throughout, room enough, with sound-deadening furnishings, so that voices carried no farther than from one room to another, yet she imagined she could hear them all the way up the stairs, through the hallway, the bedroom, on into the bathroom, even after she turned on the water. She went back to the bedroom for her gown and robe, and came to a stop holding them.

The voices were not her mother’s and Brice’s, she realized, but her mother’s and her father’s, or her father’s voice talking to her, telling her something important. That’s what he would say, “This is important, listen up now.”

She took a step and staggered, and only then recognized her fatigue, that she was reeling, maybe even hallucinating from sleeplessness. Tonight, she told herself, tonight she would take one of the pills her doctor had prescribed. She would give herself half an hour and if by then she was still wide awake, she would take a pill. Dimly she remembered that she had made the same promise the previous night, but instead had sat huddled in a blanket on the couch in the dark living room, dreading today, the relatives, the memorial service, remembering Jud, denying his death, willing him not to be dead, willing it not to have happened, afraid of the pill that promised sleep, because it seemed to offer a kind of death to her.

Later, while Brice was getting ready for bed, Abby went to tell her mother goodnight, to thank her for coming. She felt awkward, as if in the presence of an acquaintance, not her mother.

Lynne was in the guest room, the room Abby called her study.

She stood in the middle of the room, wearing her robe, holding the dress she had worn earlier, and for a moment they simply regarded each other. Then Lynne dropped the dress and took Abby in her arms. "I wanted to be with you," she said softly, "but I didn't know what to say, how to act with you. Abby, baby, please say something, talk to me. Yell at me. Anything!"

Abby gazed past her mother silently and offered no resistance to the embrace, but neither did she return it. People always had said she looked like her mother, and she had denied it, had seen only the difference, not the similarities; they were the same height, and Lynne was only a few pounds heavier, her hair was as dark as Abby's, and, out of the chignon she had had it in, it hung straight to her shoulders, like her daughter's. They both had dark blue eyes and heavy eyebrows, bold and thick, without a curve much less a peak. The likeness, remarkable as it was, appeared superficial to Abby. The image of her mother that rose in her memory was of a face contorted with anger, a mouth pinched in fury or down-turned in resentment, glaring, red-rimmed eyes, her voice loud and shrill, out of control in her rage, or whining in self-pity.

She disengaged herself and drew back, picked up her mother's dress and took it to the closet, placed it on a hanger.

"I can't talk right now," she said, her back to Lynne. "Not right now. I'll come visit you in a few weeks."

"No, don't come up to Seattle. Call me and I'll come down here. We'll go to the coast for a day or two. Will you do that?" She was pleading again.

Abby closed her eyes hard for a moment, then opened them and turned around. "Yes. I'll call you when things settle down again. We'll go to the coast." She didn't know if she was lying or not. But they both had known she wouldn't go to Seattle; she didn't like Lynne's husband, or her own half-brother Jason. "Goodnight, Mom. Sleep well. I'm glad you came. Thanks."

Back in her own room Brice was already in bed. They had twin beds pushed together, his mattress not as firm as hers, but he was on her side, waiting for her.

"I need a little more time," she said taking off her robe. "I'm sorry, but I need a little more time. I took a pill and I think I'll sleep okay

tonight.”

“I just want to hold you,” he said. When she got in beside him, he held her tenderly, stroking her shoulder, demanding nothing. She stared dry-eyed into the darkness of the room.

Later, when he kissed her cheek and moved to his own bed, she pretended to be asleep, and listened to his breathing change. He had a little snore, one that she was used to and sometimes even found comforting, but she felt herself go tense when he snored now. She waited longer, then silently got up, felt for her robe, and left the bedroom.

The third bedroom had been turned into a study where Brice often worked at home. She entered and closed the door. There was no need for a light; his computer monitor was enough. An endless stream of aircraft flew silently by: Zeppelins, the Wright brothers’ first plane, SSTs, 747s, biplanes, helicopters, forever flying from the void, going nowhere. Their ever-changing light flowed over the top of the funereal box, which Brice had placed on his desk.

She had seen the box before; it was mahogany so dark it looked black, finely carved all over with intricate patterns of flowers and birds—a souvenir from his R&R on Bali, Jud had said.

“They carve everything,” he had said that afternoon at the lake. “They’ll start carving a living tree while it’s still standing, the damndest thing you can imagine, demons, birds, gods, snakes, flowers... And they carve it for eight feet up, ten feet... They carve the undersides of stairs, where no one will ever see the art. They carve the concrete walls at the airport...”

“Why?”

“I think it’s a religious act,” he said thoughtfully. “Nothing else quite explains it. They’re expressing their religion through art. Little boys, four years old, five, they’re already artists. They do the traditional things the same way their ancestors from the beginning of time did them, and then they do their own thing on the back of stairs, on boxes, whatever is at hand. In that climate nothing lasts very long except stone, and when the paint fades, gets washed away, or eaten by mold, they repaint it exactly the way it had been before. If a wooden object or building crumbles, they rebuild it exactly as it was before. You can’t tell by looking if anything was made that

morning or a hundred years ago. They're preserving the past, keeping the faith, but here or there, hidden away, they express whatever it is they need to say through their art."

She had felt the box all over, the delicate tracery of flowers and stems, and thought it was a magic box, that it contained secrets that no one would ever decipher, except the boy who had carved it.

"Honey," Jud had said that day, "this is important, listen up. When I die, I want my ashes to be buried in this box, here by the lake. I might never ask another thing of you but this is important. Will you do that for me?"

She had nodded solemnly. At ten years of age, she had not yet believed in dying. It did not occur to her to ask why he was telling her and not her mother. The divorce came two years after that. Perhaps he had already known Lynne would not be around to carry out his wishes.

She touched the box on Brice's desk, and again felt the mystery of the carved wood, the unknown, unknowable mystery of the artist who had carved it.

She felt the mystery of the man whose ashes were inside it, her father, unknown, unknowable forever now.

2

She ended up taking the sleeping pill that night and slept until Brice shook her awake at nine.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

Human, she thought, human monster with a watermelon for a head, and leaden legs; that's what sleeping pills did to her. But feeling anything at all was an improvement. She said, "Okay," and pulled herself up and out of bed.

"You should have gotten me up," she said in mild protest at the kitchen table when Brice said he already had taken her mother to the airport.

"Honey, you were a walking zombie, out on your feet. I just wish that idiot cop hadn't said ten this morning; I would have let you sleep

until noon, or even all day.” He was opposite her at the breakfast table, studying her face anxiously.

She drank her coffee, and when she started to rise to get the carafe, he jumped up and hurried across the kitchen; in passing, he kissed the top of her head.

“Let me wait on you for just a little while. You don’t know how I’ve felt, wanting to do something, anything. I watched you sleeping,” he said, pouring the coffee, “and I wanted to sit there and not even breathe, just watch you.”

“I’m... I’m sorry,” she whispered, not looking up at him. “Oh, Christ! I didn’t mean to dump a guilt trip on you. I’ve just been so goddamn helpless.”

“I know.”

She did know. They had been married for four years and it was a good marriage; he was a tender and passionate lover; he brought her unexpected presents, listened attentively when she talked about the museum, her work there, her dissertation that was going nowhere; he, in turn talked about his clients, the others in the office, his plans. They were lucky, she knew, especially when her friends talked about this couple or that, or their own failed marriages or affairs, or when she remembered her first marriage, especially at those times she realized again how lucky they were. She understood and cherished what they had, but this week she had not wanted anyone to touch her, not her mother, not friends, not relatives, and not him.

He touched her hair now, a fairy touch, light and tentative; although she willed herself not to flinch away, not to stiffen, something was communicated, and he drew back. “Well,” he said in a strained voice, “that cop is due any minute now. After he leaves I have to check in at the office for a few hours. Will you be okay?”

She nodded, aware only then that he had on a suit and tie, dressed for the office. She couldn’t remember if he had gone in at all that week. Had he gone in to report on the weekend meeting? He must have, she thought miserably; his world hadn’t caved in the way hers had. She simply hadn’t paid any attention, like now, not noticing that he was dressed for clients, dressed for business in a good gray suit, maroon silk tie, shirt dazzling white. At thirty-four, he was even more handsome than when they married. Marriage agreed with

him, he sometimes said jokingly. She wondered if his folks had left town yet, if they were driving home to Idaho, the potato farm. His father's hands had been spottlessly clean, she thought, and her mind skittered off in yet another direction.

That was how she had been all week, unable to focus on any one thing for more than a few seconds, and left with no memory of what she had been thinking. A persistent thought recurred: if he had had a fight with his father, he had to make amends now, before it was too late.

Just then the doorbell rang. She had forgotten that the policeman had said he would come at ten, and she glanced down at herself in dismay; she was in jeans and an old sweater.

"Finish your coffee," Brice said. "I'll take him to the living room."

She left the coffee and followed him to the front door, where he was admitting the policeman and a woman with short brown hair so curly it was almost too frizzy.

"Lieutenant Caldwell, and this is Detective Varney," the policeman said politely, as if aware that she had no memory of their names.

She nodded, and Brice said briskly, "Well, come on in. Do you want to take off your jacket and coat?"

Caldwell was wearing a windbreaker, Detective Varney had a long dark green raincoat. She pulled it off, then held it, but he shook his head. "It's okay. Beautiful day out there, just right, not too hot, not too cool. And not raining," he added, making a leisurely examination of the foyer, of Brice and Abby, everything. He was a stocky man, in his forties, heavy through the shoulders and chest, with dark hair turning grey at the temples, and dark eyes. Everything about him seemed too deliberate, too slow, as if he never had rushed in his life and would not be rushed now.

"This way," Brice said, steering them toward the living room, where he and Abby sat on the sofa, and the lieutenant and detective sat in identical tapestry-covered chairs across a coffee table from them. The detective did not relax, but Caldwell settled back, crossed his legs, and examined the living room with the same methodical scrutiny he had given the foyer.

"Nice house," Caldwell said finally.

Abby could feel her stomach muscles tightening harder and

harder. The house was nice, with good, maybe-Danish furniture, good original art on the walls even if not very much of it. There was a grouping of netsukes on the mantel; the lieutenant's gaze lingered on it as if in appraisal.

Expensive, she wanted to say. Too expensive. Brice had brought home two of them from a trip to Los Angeles, her first anniversary gift, startling her. Take them back, she should have said; we can't afford them. But they were so beautiful—

"Well, we're not selling and you're not buying, so let's get on with it," Brice said, glancing at his watch. "I already told you we've given statements to the local police. What more do you need?"

Lieutenant Caldwell faced Abby and Brice then. "You see, Mr. Connors, that place where the crime happened is sort of in a no-man's-land, the lake and all. Part in one county, part in another, it makes for confusion. In cases like this they often call in the state investigators, and that's what happened this time. And just to keep things straight in my own head, I'd like to go over your statements again, get it first hand, so to speak." He shrugged, almost apologetically, it seemed. "And, of course, you might have remembered something during the past few days that you didn't think of when the sheriff talked to you."

"I can only repeat what I said before," Brice said wearily. "On Friday I drove to Portland for a business meeting with associates from my company. We had dinner together and talked until about ten-thirty. I went to bed around twelve. I had to make notes about the meeting; it took awhile. On Saturday morning I checked out, drove down to Salem and had breakfast there, and then I drove home. I gave the sheriff copies of the log of my trip and my receipts. And they already took our fingerprints, they said for elimination purposes. That's all I can tell you."

Caldwell had been listening intently, consulting a notebook from time to time. He nodded. "Your firm is Hartmann and Fine Financial Services?"

"Yes. The head office is in Bellingham; there's an office in Spokane, one in Olympia, in Portland, Salem, and here in Eugene. A representative from each office attended the meeting."

"Your company in trouble?"

"No. It's not like that! If you read the newspapers, you know how

the market's been for over a year, crazy swings up and down. We have clients who get antsy when it gyrates like that. We've been having these meetings once a month over the past year. Purely routine."

"You always go?"

"No. There are three of us here in the Eugene office: we take turns. They aren't exactly pleasure jaunts, Lieutenant. It happened to be my turn."

Caldwell nodded, as if everything Brice said checked out with the notes he had. Then he said, "I understand that some of the associates share rides. Do you do that?"

"No," Brice said stiffly. "Dave Fulton is in Salem, and I would have stopped and picked him up, but I planned to stay over Friday night, and he didn't. So we drove up separately."

"Do you usually stay up there overnight?"

"That was the first time," Brice said. "The other times I went I didn't get home until after two in the morning. We never know when the meetings will end, and no matter when I go to bed, I'm awake by six-thirty. I decided to stay and get some sleep this time since Abby would be gone."

"Did you check in at your office here in town before you drove up to Portland?"

Brice's impatience was clearly strained almost past endurance. "I already told them. No. Abby didn't have to go to work until nine, and we lazed about that morning. I left when she did."

The lieutenant asked more questions: where he had stayed, the names of his associates, where they had met, had dinner, where he had had breakfast. All things Brice had gone through with the sheriff, all things already in his notebook, Abby felt certain. Brice's tension was almost palpable; she took his hand and held it. At first he was as stiff and unresponsive as she had been all week, then he squeezed her hand and she could feel his tension ease. They were both like that, she thought fleetingly, coiled so hard and tight that a word, an expression, a breeze might make either of them erupt in some predictable way.

"Okay," Caldwell said at last, and turned to Abby. "Mrs. Connors, you want to tell me about Friday?"

She moistened her lips and released her hand from Brice's grasp,

which had grown increasingly hard. “I was at the coast with friends.”

He smiled at her. “In just a little more detail, maybe?”

“Jonelle, Jonelle Saltzman, picked me up when I got off work at about two and we drove out. To Yachats. Emma Olson and Francesca Tremaine came out a little later. We walked around, ate dinner, and talked until very late. On Saturday the deputy came to tell me. Jonelle brought me home.”

“This is something you do often, go spend the weekend with your pals?”

“Once a year, sometimes twice.”

“Who made the reservation?”

“I did. At the Blue Horizon Cottages.”

“Why that weekend?”

“Since Brice would be away, and the others could make it, it seemed a good time.”

“When’s the last time you folks were at the lake, Mrs. Connors?”

She moistened her lips again. “August.”

“I understand your father called you on Friday morning. Is that right?”

She nodded.

“What did he say? How did he sound?”

“He asked if I could come over for the weekend, and I said I couldn’t.” She realized that the other detective, the woman, was watching her hands, and she glanced down and saw them clutching each other almost spasmodically. She flexed her fingers and spread them, then let her hands rest in her lap. “If I’d gone it wouldn’t have happened,” she said in a low voice. “I could have gone there instead of to the coast. If I...”

“For God’s sake, Abby! You might have been killed, too,” Brice said. “You couldn’t have stopped the maniac who shot him. You would have been killed with him.”

“Do you remember exactly what he said that morning?” Caldwell said, ignoring Brice.

She nodded. “He was happy and excited. He said, ‘This is important. I have something to tell you.’ He was laughing and happy. And I said I couldn’t.”

“Did he say what was important?”

She shook her head. “I asked if he could come to town on Saturday, that we could all have dinner Saturday night, and he said he’d just stay put and work.”

Brice put his arm around her shoulders, squeezed her shoulder lightly. “Lieutenant Caldwell, tell her she couldn’t have prevented what happened out there. It wasn’t her fault.”

Abby avoided glancing at him; he sounded desperate, pleading. A glance now might be the cue that would make her erupt in tears. And she was determined not to cry now, not now. Get through this, that was all that mattered.

“Tell me about the dog,” Caldwell said, paying no attention whatever to Brice.

Brice squeezed her shoulder harder.

“Spook? What about her?” Abby asked.

“Mr. Halburton said she barked during the night, all the next morning. Did she bark a lot?”

Coop Halburton was the nearest neighbor to her father’s cabin; he always heard Spook when she barked. Abby shook her head. “No. Just if a raccoon came around, or a cougar, or a stranger, something like that.”

“Did the dog stay out every night?”

“No. Sometimes there are bears, or cougars... He kept her inside. She has a dog door and can come and go when she wants to, but he always locked it at night.” She added, “She, Spook, tangled with a skunk once and he said... He said he never wanted that to happen again.” She looked down at her hands; they were clutching each other hard.

“Mrs. Connors,” the lieutenant said then, “from all we’ve been able to find out up to now you’re probably the one who was closest to your father. You lived with him for years after your mother moved to Seattle; you kept in touch. Did he have enemies? Did he ever tell you about anyone who might have wanted to harm him, kill him even?”

She shook her head.

End of Sample

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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

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