

YESTERDAY'S TOMORROWS

And Other Stories



KATE WILHELM

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YESTERDAY'S TOMORROWS
AND OTHER STORIES

Kate Wilhelm

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This collection includes: Yesterday's Tomorrows; Forget Luck; The Happiest Day of Her Life; Earth's Blood; The Merry Widow; Plan B; The Moment; Strangers When We Meet; The Haunting House; The Man on the Persian Carpet; Don't Get Caught.

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Yesterday's Tomorrows

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KATE WILHELM

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Yesterday's Tomorrows

Hal

I saw her walking on the shoulder of the road, a woman wearing a big straw hat, jeans, boots, and a backpack. I passed her, and could tell no more about her through the rear-view mirror than I had already seen: a young woman hitching. I kept going for another mile or two, then I slowed down, and finally pulled over and stopped. A stupid young woman asking for trouble, was my only thought.

When traffic was clear in both directions I made a quick U-turn and went a few miles back to a gas station, where I turned once more, and retraced my path. I stopped in front of her on the side of the road, opened my door enough to lean out, and called, "Do you want a lift?"

She kept walking steadily, and I had the impression that she was studying me as intently as I was studying her. She could not have gotten any more out of the careful scrutiny than I did; we were both wearing sunglasses, and her hat shaded her face. She nodded.

When she came to the passenger side I unlocked the door. "Put your gear in the back."

She rooted around in her backpack, rearranging things before she opened the door, then tossed the pack inside, and climbed into the passenger seat. She unclipped a water bottle from her belt and put it on the floor at her feet, stashed a handbag on the seat next to her, and fastened her seat belt.

"Tilly," she said then. She took off the straw hat and tossed it in the back. Her hair was dark blond and shaggy, thick, and cut short.

"Hal Whitcombe." I shifted gears and started to drive again. The car was a six-year old Acura. I had bought it the week after my ex-wife filed for divorce.

"Now you tell me how dangerous it is for a woman to hitchhike," she said, looking straight ahead. "And I tell you how dangerous it is to pick up strangers."

"Consider it said."

For a long time neither of us spoke again. Big fleecy clouds were

forming; later they would swell, darken, and turn into thunderheads. The landscape there in Ohio was pretty, rolling hills, lush-looking dairy country, farming country, rain-fresh and bright green. This time of year, early June, it was also thunderstorm country, even tornado country.

“Where are you heading?” I asked, breaking the prolonged silence.

“Marin County, California.”

Right, I thought. She had noticed my California license plate. She continued to gaze out the windshield.

“You intended to walk to California?”

“Walk, take buses, maybe rent a car or hop a flight somewhere. I’m in no hurry.”

It was like that: I drove and she watched the landscape ease by; now and then one of us said something inconsequential. When I passed a bunch of kids on bikes, she said, “That never occurred to me. I could buy a bike, or even a motorcycle.”

Later, as she turned to gaze at a flock of sheep on the incredibly green grass, I said, “Last week I was in Vermont visiting my daughter, who raises goats on an organic farm.”

“And kids?” she murmured.

“Both kinds. She has two children, one coming along.”

“A vegan? Natural birth, herbal teas?”

“All the above.” And, I added silently, with a master’s in French literature.

She was giving me a long appraising glance now. “You don’t look like a grandfather. You started pretty young.”

“Forty-seven.”

“Thirty, thirty-one next month.”

“You don’t look it.”

“I get carded all the time.”

I was slowing down again as we approached a small town. “Lunch time,” I said.

“Okay. I’ll pay for mine. All my own expenses. Not the gas, unless you want me to figure how much an extra hundred forty pounds adds to the consumption.”

“One forty?”

“The backpack is close to twenty-five pounds.”

“You could figure out how much gas your presence requires?”

She nodded. “It would be easier with a calculator.”

I laughed, and was still laughing when we pulled into the parking lot of a tiny restaurant. Inside, she took off her sunglasses; her eyes were the blue/green of ocean water far out at sea. There were deep shadowed hollows under them. Over soup and salads I laid out my plan. “I’m going to San Luis Obispo, and I’ll take you to Marin County if you want me to. But I intend to stay off freeways, interstate highways, and turnpikes. It’s going to take time, and I’m in no hurry either. When you give the word we’ll head for the nearest city or town and you can go on your way, buy a motorcycle.”

“You have things to think through?”

“Something like that.”

“Me, too.”

“When we stop for the night, I want a good bed in a good motel. We’ll tell them you’re my daughter or something, separate rooms.”

“Why tell them anything? We’re traveling together and we want separate rooms.”

I was prepared to pay for our lunches, and, I thought somewhat grudgingly, for dinners and even her motel room. I had considered the alternatives and didn’t like any of them: let her sleep outside, share a room, offer her the car for overnight—and have her hot wire it and leave. But then she pulled a twenty from her wallet and I glimpsed a lot more of them, and the edges of credit cards, and by the time we returned to the car I was fuming.

“You’re hitching with money like that in your possession? And credit cards? Are you insane?”

She shook her head. “That was your opening speech, remember, and we considered it said and done with.”

Then she said, “What we should do is consult a map, figure out how much farther you want to get today, then stop at a motel and reserve rooms ahead. This time of year we might not find anything if we wait too long.”

We did that, and it uncomplicated life a great deal. Also, I learned her last name, or at least the name on the credit card she used. Tilly Dunning.

We stopped that evening in a town in Illinois, and at dinner she could hardly keep her eyes open. “Last night I was on a bus from Pittsburgh to Columbus,” she said. “We stopped about a thousand times. A bed will feel pretty good.”

I walked to her door with her, where she said, “Are you superstitious? Do you believe things happen in threes?”

“No. Do you?”

“No. Last week I lost my job, lost my boyfriend, had my car stolen, and my grandmother died. Fours. They happen in fours. Good-night, Hal.”

A gentle warning to keep my distance? That her distress was genuine, she really did have things to think through? Probably. In any case, prudent, and unnecessary. In my own room, I turned on the television and watched the weather channel, but I didn’t need anyone to tell me thunderstorms were building. The air was tremulous with the threat of storms, and the entire sky had turned an ominous shade of gray-green. At eleven the first storm hit, and then another rolled in, and another, or just one big storm separated by breathing spells of ten or fifteen minutes at a time.

She was much refreshed when she joined me in the café next to the motel the following morning. What storm? she said when I asked if it had kept her awake. We consulted about roads; she would be navigator and keep an eye out for our turns, and we would stop and make advance reservations as we had done before.

We fell into a pattern that became more and more surreal as the day passed. Little conversation, and then in disjointed bursts, followed by silence.

Corn country, as far as I could see, just corn with silky leaves gleaming in the sunlight. Late in the day we were still in corn country when a storm hit; we parked at the side of the road and waited it out, sweating, steaming in the car, while hail like buckshot pelted the windshield. The corn swayed and bent low but when the storm passed and the sun was back in place, the corn stood up again as straight as ever.

“Another day another test,” I said.

“What do you teach?” she asked as she put the car into gear and

started to drive again. She had offered, and even offered to show me her driver's license, which I waved away.

"History. In a very small private college, veddy expensive." And so we learned things about each other in driblets, a word or phrase now and then, assumptions, guesses, inferences. I learned that she was a biologist. I blinked at that. She had worked for the Herbert Mandrill Institute; I had to blink harder at that. It was like having a physics grad go to work for Einstein. Straight to the top.

She and Peter—no explanation—had had a fight and she had gone off to be alone; her mother had called with the news that Tilly's grandmother had died. The funeral was last Friday, a day she had spent walking in Pittsburgh.

Another time she said, "You know about chaos theory?"

"Butterfly in Brazil, tornado in Kansas."

"That's it. Easier to accept than simple coincidence. Everything caused, everything connected. Grandmother fell and broke her hip the year I was supposed to go to graduate school; instead, I went and stayed with her. Then Dr. Mandrill came to our school, Stanford, and gave a talk, and we met. I would have missed him if I kept to my schedule. A headhunter from the institute came around and interviewed some of us, and I was chosen."

I was driving again; her gaze was fixed on a distant point, or nothing, done with this bit of dialogue. A flock of geese began to circle, playing follow the leader, spiraling in lower and lower until they vanished. It was still corn country.

"I watched my son get his MBA last week at Ohio State," I said, surprising myself. I had watched him kiss his girlfriend and hug his mother, and after a brief embrace I watched him take off with the girlfriend. Vacation, then a job with a brokerage firm in Cleveland. "He'll start with a higher salary than I made after twenty years teaching."

That night after dinner we walked the length of the town we had come to, then back to the motel, where we stood and watched a magnificently vulgar sunset.

"Is Hal short for Harold?" she asked, when the sky finally darkened to deep blue going into purple. "Although it shouldn't be, should it? I mean, they call the baby Harold, Har for short, and someone

says, ‘Har?’ and you end up with Har Har.”

I burst out laughing, and she murmured, “Sorry about that.”

“Actually,” I said, when I could speak again, “it’s short for Halbert, a famous ancestral name on my mother’s side.”

She nodded. “My name isn’t really Tilly. That’s short for Astilbe. My mother was into gardening for a short time. My grandmother called me Tilly from the start, then everyone else did, too.”

“Ah,” I said. “But it could be worse, you know. She could have named you *Nasturtium*.”

She started to laugh, a deep low sound far back in her throat that grew until it was boisterous, uninhibited. She was still laughing when she turned, unlocked her door and opened it. Her “Goodnight, Hal,” was sputtered almost past recognition.

In my room, lying with my hands behind my head, I kept thinking of that great laugh, and I kept telling myself that I was not attracted to her. Proximity, loneliness, an elusive fragrance she emanated, a lot of things accounted for my feelings, I told myself firmly, but not a physical attraction, or even old-fashioned lust. I just liked her. A lot. I was too old for her, a burned-out history teacher whose son would make more money in the coming year than he did, whose ex-wife made more than he did, whose daughter had turned into an alien creature; a burned-out case that no one on earth needed. Graham Greene material. Midlife crisis. Empty-nest syndrome. Onset of male menopause. I was vulnerable, and she, suffering one loss after another, was more vulnerable. I intended to be extremely careful with her.

Then it hit me: Astilbe Dunning! Only child of Marsha Dunning, who represented the great state of California in the United States House of Representatives.

But as I drifted off into sleep, I kept hearing that wonderful boisterous laugh. I wanted to hear it again.

At breakfast we studied the map. “North or south? We’ll have to decide soon. Prairie land or desert?”

We would leave Kansas that day. Even our meandering route was getting us across the country. Still, I thought, we would be another three to four days on the road.

“Flip a coin?” she suggested. “Heads it’s the desert. Tails... it’s the desert.”

“Consider it flipped.” We went to the car and pointed it more or less toward Pueblo, Colorado and started. Colorado, Utah, Nevada, and finally California. A lot of country to cover. And no one in a hurry.

Grassland, as flat as a pond, and it was getting hotter, without a cloud in the sky; the only wind that stirred was caused by the passage of infrequent traffic. At our next stop I bought a straw hat, a cooler that we filled with ice and stuff to drink, and a large-size bottle of sun screen for me. She, practical creature that she was, already had sun screen.

“Grandmother was ninety,” she said, breaking another long silence. “I guess you shouldn’t mourn anyone who lived such a long life and was contented.”

She had stayed with her grandmother more than with her mother after Marsha Dunning got into politics, when Tilly was five or six. Her father was campaign manager, fund raiser, gofer, adviser; they were both busy most of the time, gone most of the time.

“The whole family seemed to think Grandmother was a nut case,” she said. “She was interested in everything: spiritualism, parapsychology, religion, quantum mechanics, all science, in fact—Grandfather was a physicist—but they seemed to think she believed in whatever she was reading at any given time. Mother said she was so credulous she thought the show X-Files was a documentary.”

Tilly turned to gaze out the side window, away from my glances. But she continued to talk about her grandmother in a low voice, as if this was one of the things she had to think through.

“We used to have the most terrific discussions. The family said we fought all the time, but we never fought. We argued and discussed things and got excited, and we both loved it. She said I was the only one left who acted as if she was still a rational, intelligent human being.” She paused, then said, “When I was fourteen or fifteen she said I, God help me, was a reincarnated Jesuit. I said I didn’t believe in reincarnation, and she said that didn’t make a bit of difference. There it was. Or worse, maybe a reincarnated lawyer, or horrors! a reincarnated Jesuitical lawyer! She left me her house.”

She said this last with what sounded like despair. Before I could think of a comment, she went on.

“I told her not to. I had a great job with a world-famous scientist all the way across the country, and a boyfriend who was getting serious, and what would I do with her house? And besides, the family would be furious.”

During the past year her grandmother had had everything in her house appraised, and afterward had given her three children the sterling silver, the crystal, the good chinaware, some antiques; she had some money in stocks and bonds, and in her will she divided everything equally. But the house was for Tilly.

“You remember that butterfly in Brazil?” Tilly said. “It started flapping its wings a long, long time ago. During the Manhattan Project it unzipped its sleeping bag, emerged, and gave a mighty flap. My grandfather worked on the project and, when they dropped the bombs, he walked out and got a job teaching. I never knew him; he died the year I was born. I told you how Dr. Mandrill came to Stanford to speak. He said it was a very special occasion for him, an important anniversary, that exactly thirty years earlier a famous physics professor, Dr. Cherny, at that same university had advised him to leave physics and do something else. My grandfather.

“Of course, my name was different; Mother married Bob Dunning, and Grandfather’s name was Theodore Cherny. There was no reason for him to suspect that the granddaughter of the man responsible for his fame and fortune was in the audience that day.” She gave a little shrug and said nothing else.

“Threes,” I said when it appeared that she was disinclined to start talking again. “Mandrill left physics for biology; your grandfather died, and you were born. Three.”

“Four,” she said. “I went to work for Mandrill.”

“Thirty years later.”

“Doesn’t matter. In chains like that time doesn’t count.”

Up ahead, the flat landscape was broken by a clump of cottonwoods and a few small gray buildings. A town. Civilization. There hadn’t been a house, a ranch, cattle, anything else for a long time. Sage and cactus had begun to appear; there were no more wide expanses of good grazing land. Clumps of desert grasses that looked

like rusty bayonets poked up through the ground here and there.

“Break,” I said, nodding toward the town.

“Good. I’m parched. This water is stale and warm. Yuck.”

I envied her the water bottle actually, and planned to buy one for myself at the next place we stopped.

“A ghost town,” she said a moment later.

A huddle of ruined buildings looked as if the barbarians had come, won, and moved on, leaving only a cluster of sad cottonwood trees, a patch of green grass, and gray falling-down houses. And silence. I wanted to stretch my legs, and I wanted to think, and I didn’t need people or a gas station.

I knew about Ted Cherny. He had become an outspoken critic of nuclear energy, the arms race, the whole scene, had written articles, made speeches, all fiery and passionate, and unheeded. I thought he had changed his field to quantum mechanics—the woo-woo branch of physics, they called it—and I knew nothing more about him.

But what he had not done, I was certain, was teach physics to undergraduates, and that meant that Mandrill had made it all the way to graduate school; then Cherny had advised him to get out. And he had. Why?

I parked on the broken-up concrete of what used to be a filling station. All that remained was a metal plate where the pump had been, and a pile of rotten wood. We took bottles of juice from the cooler and walked around the ruins to the shade of the trees.

“Spooky, isn’t it?” she said. “Probably there was a spring here with more trees, a little grove even. They cut down the trees to build the town, destroyed the spring, and moved on. We tend to do that, don’t we?”

“That’s our way. Tell me something about Mandrill, what he’s like to work for.”

She shrugged. “Slave driver. We called him Simon Legree.” She was studying the ground as she walked, as if looking for the source of the water that nourished the struggling grass. “I imagine there are rattlers around, and scorpions.”

“And Gila monsters. About Mandrill...”

She gave me a quick look, then examined the grass again. “I learned a secret about him. He has this magic closet where he keeps

his other persona, the one he puts on for public appearances, or when he is snuggling up to money men, things of that sort. He goes in as the baboon and comes out Prince Charming. He can be witty and smooth. That's who he was when I met him the first time at Stanford, Prince Charming himself. But in his lair? Pure mandrill." She gave me another quick look. "You know about mandrills?"

"Big, mean-tempered baboons, colorful, African. Does his institute make much money?"

"Bundles. He has a big staff; they do a lot of testing, DNA stuff, toxicology studies, all sorts of things. And they do a lot of pure research. Bio-engineering, plant genetics... That's his line, the research. The peons do the other work. He has a dozen or more patents on processes, on genes, I don't know what all. The money rolls in, but there's never quite enough, and never will be." Her voice had taken on a bitterness that hadn't been there before, and she gulped down the last of her juice. "Look, you can see the mountains."

Maybe she could; I couldn't. Not yet. We had a lot more flatland to get through. "Ready?" I asked.

"I'll drive for a while," she said, and we went back to the car and started again.

End of sample.