
State of Grace
by Kate Wilhelm

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First published in Orbit 19, ed. Damon Knight, 1977

Fictionwise Contemporary
Science Fiction and Fantasy

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THE THINGS IN THE TREE were destroying my marriage. I think they were driving my husband crazy, but that is less easily demonstrated. I started a diary when I first saw them; after three entries I burned it. He would find it, I knew, and he would go out with nets and poles and catch them and sell them to a circus, or to a think tank for vivisection. He would find a way to profit.

This is all I know about them: they are small; their faces are as large as my fist; they are nut brown; they excrete their toxic wastes, if they have any, directly into the air. (Perhaps they are nuts that hatched the ultimate product. Perhaps all over the world walnuts are hatching walnut people; hazel nuts are hatching hazels; Brazil nuts are hatching wee brown Brazilians.) I don't think they ever come out of the tree. I stayed awake twenty-seven hours watching and none ever descended. I spread flour under the tree, pretending to Howard it was lime to sweeten the soil, and it was undisturbed for three days, until it rained. I wouldn't have used lime for fear of harming them if they did creep out during the darkest part of the night when my eyes were too heavy to stay open every single moment. The previous time, when I really did stay awake for twenty-seven hours, I never closed my eyes more than the normal time for blinking, and I drank nine cups of coffee during the last six hours. (I sneaked into the bushes when I had to, but I didn't close my eyes or go inside.)

Howard didn't want me to stay home and collect my unemployment. He was afraid his job as an airplane mechanic would vanish. He wants everyone to start flying again, to anywhere. Use credit if you don't have money. He thought the circles under my eyes were caused by financial worries, but I always leave worrying about money to him, because he's so good at it, and I often forget for days at a time.

He also thought that if I did stay home I should start having children. It was as good a time as any, he said, and even if he did get laid off, too, by the time the kid was born things would be back to normal again. What he really wished was that I would stay home and have his dinner ready every day and darn socks and spin and weave and churn butter and draw down an income too.

In the beginning I realized that he would make money with them, if he didn't decide they were parasites. He is more afraid of parasites than he is of other garden pests. He might have sprayed them with a biodegradable, not-harmful-to-warm-blooded-animals spray. The kind that has all sorts of precautions on the side in small print.

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* * * *

I began to worry about water for them and bought a birdbath. It cost twenty dollars and we fought about it. More marriages break up because of financial disputes than any other one thing, even sexual incompatibility. But people often lie to data gatherers, and this may not be true. I got a birdbath without any paint in the bowl, and I had to shop all day for it, and used most of the gas in the tank. (\$0.58 per gallon. He noticed, of course.) I scrubbed it thoroughly, even used steel wool, just in case there was something harmful in the finish. I have to scrub it every morning, because the birds enjoy it also, but I can't believe birds drink that much water in a day. It

holds two gallons.

One day for a treat I'll put gingerale in it, or juice. They might like orange juice.

I began to worry about what they were finding to eat. There are green acorns on the tree, but they are very bitter. I tried one. That's when I got the bird feeder, and during the day I kept birdseed in it, but every night after dark I slipped out and put raisins and apples and carrot sticks on it for them. Sometimes they were gone the next day and sometimes they dried up, or the squirrels got them. Howard became suspicious of the feeder and he explained to me that birds don't feed at night. I caught him watching me later when I took out the supply of food. He was solicitous for several days. Then

he made a joke of it, but soon after that he was watching me again, and, I fear, watching the tree.

The tree is in the center of our back yard, mature, dense, the perfect home for them, as long as no one suspects their presence. Our house is forty years old, with as much charm as a wet dishrag, but it was cheap, and the tree was there. An oak tree inspires confidence. I wonder if they watched the builders of our house, fearful that one day one of them would bring an ax. I think they are very brave to have stayed.

I worried about other things, too. What if a young one got scraped? I left out a box of Band-Aids. What if the squirrels were too aggressive? I bought

a dart game and left the darts on the feeder. What if they really wanted to communicate and didn't have any way? I bought a tiny pad, the kind that has a three-inch pen attached by a chain. When we had a barbecue, I tried to fan the smoke away from the tree. They know I am their friend.

* * * *

Howard brought home a dog, a great monster of a dog, with a foot-long, dripping tongue. The dog adores me, tolerates Howard, and from day one he stared at the tree for long periods of time, not barking, not threatening, but aware. Howard knew something, but he couldn't believe what he knew.

"All right," Howard said, finally,

holding my shoulder too hard.

"What's in the tree?"

The dog growled, and Howard released me and stood with his hands on his hips. Howard's hips are too broad for a man. I told him he should ride a bicycle to work to trim off a couple of inches. He reached for me again and the monster dog ambled over.

"Acorns. Squirrels. Leaves. A nest of cardinals."

"You know damn well what I mean!" Perhaps they are aliens, come to save the world. They are biding their time waiting for the eve of the final cataclysm before they act. Jung says most people who believe in flying saucers believe the aliens will save us. Perhaps they are

aliens, come to take over the world. They are biding their time, waiting for their forces to gather, to generate enough energy to make it a decisive victory when they act. The ones who don't believe the above tend to believe this.

A few think they would be passive, engaging in yet another spectator sport when the end comes.

I don't think they are aliens.

Howard thought they were monkeys, escaped from a zoo or a laboratory many years ago, that managed to survive in the wild. The wild of Fairdale, Kentucky, twenty minutes from the airport where Howard mechanics. He didn't get as good a look as I did. It is my fault he glimpsed them at all, of course, so

possibly I am not the tried and true friend to them that I would like to be.

* * * *

Howard bought a camera for several hundred dollars. Airplane mechanics make very good money, more than many lawyers, especially those who work for the government. He took seven rolls of film, with thirty-six exposures on each roll. He had two hundred fifty-two pictures of oak leaves. He took the ladder out to the tree and climbed it, but didn't stay long. All he saw was more leaves. I tried that, too, in the beginning. They are very clever at hiding. They have had thousands of years of practice. I am the first living person to have seen them clearly, and Howard, who

glimpsed something that he prefers to call monkey, is the second, who almost did. We could have our names in the Guinness Book of World Records. Howard called in exterminators. He didn't want them to kill anything, only identify the varmints in his tree.

The exterminators found the cardinal nest, and the squirrels, and they told us we have an infestation of southern oak moths. They produced three leaves with very small holes in them, which I am certain they made with their Bic pens. For fifty dollars they would spray the tree.

* * * *

We were hardly speaking to each other. When he came home, the first

thing he did was inspect the special shelf in the refrigerator where I kept things like bing cherries, emperor grapes, Persian melons. Then he gulped down his dinner, holding his plate on his lap in order to turn around and keep the tree under observation. After dinner he sat on the patio and watched the tree until dark. Then he studied the pictures he had taken, using a magnifying glass, poring over each one for half an hour at least. By twelve he would stagger off to bed. He was looking haggard. He gave up bowling, and haircuts. He thought they might migrate in the fall. He was getting desperate for fear they would leave one stormy night and his chance to make hundreds, even thousands of dollars

would leave with them. One Saturday he went out and returned hours later with a tall, sunburned man who was the director of the zoo.

Howard took him to the tree and the man didn't even glance at the foliage, but began a minute examination of the ground, taking almost an hour. He was looking for droppings, and there are none. I visualized the tiny toilets, the complicated plumbing, or else the nightly chamber pot ritual, the menial who must empty and clean it in the gray dusk of dawn ... Howard was furious with the director. He shook him and pointed upward. The man looked past him to where I was standing on the patio and I tried to achieve a tortured smile,

like Joan Fontaine's. I shrugged just a little bit, sadly. Howard whirled about and saw this, but of course the monster dog was at my side, watching him very closely.

The zoo director left by the side gate while Howard stared at me, his lips moving silently.

The next morning before I got up, Howard climbed the tree again. I saw the ladder and waited, sipping coffee. He was up a long time and when he came down he said nothing, didn't even comment on the scratches on his hands, his cheeks, even his ankles. I never knew an oak tree had stickers. I imagined a tiny brown hand streaking out, a sharp dart raking, fast as thought, withdrawing

...

He tried to smoke them out in the afternoon, and the fire marshal paid a call and explained the no-burn ordinance and how much the fine would be if it happened again.

He bought Sominex and emptied it into the birdbath, and the next morning there were two dopey squirrels draped over the lowest branch of the tree, their tails inches away from the jaws of the dog when it leaped, as it did over and over. The dog was exhausted.

* * * *

He bought sparkling burgundy. When I became giggly, he begged me to tell him what was in the tree.

"A-corns and squir-rels, and a nest of

car-din-als," I chanted and giggled and hiccupped and, I think, fell asleep. It is possible I said it more than once, because something made him angry enough to sleep on the couch, and the next morning the phrase was like a refrain in my head. For over a week we didn't speak at all, not even a grunt, and the next week he muttered something about being sorry and it was the heat, and worry about his job, and maybe I should put in an application someplace or other. He heard that International Harvester was hiring secretarial help again. He wanted me to go to bed and I said I'd rather sleep with a crocodile. He slammed the door on his way out.

He came back with a string of

perfectly awful beads, all iridescent and shiny and it is impossible to tell what they are even supposed to be. One of us forgave the other and I made him promise to leave them alone and triumphantly he disclosed that he had had a tape recorder going all the time and now he had proof that I knew something was in our oak tree and there was no point in my pretending he was crazy. I am certain he is a secret Nixon Republican.

I said soothingly that of course something lived in the oak tree and its children lived under the lilac bush and its relatives lived in the honeysuckle and everyone knew all about them. He tried to hit me, and the monster dog was

outside guarding the tree, so I had to fend him off myself, and eventually we did go to bed, just as we both had planned from the start. After he was sleeping I got up and erased the tape. It became open warfare. Neither of us was willing to sleep while the other was awake. He began to eat the bing cherries. We both looked haggard. Someone at work told him about infrared film and he planned to spend the night taking pictures, after the air cooled so they would show up better. At dusk I climbed the tree and moved about here and there, but eventually I had to climb back down, for fear I might fall asleep and fall out. He was snoring. I finished the roll of film, taking a dozen pictures

of the monster dog, who was dreaming of the Great Chase in the Sky. He was smiling, his legs twitching, his impossible tongue now and then snaking out to wipe his chops.

It would take several weeks to have the film developed. No one does it locally. Several weeks was too long. Already, in September, the evenings were cool, and if there was an early frost, it could drive them to their southern homes. He was positive they would migrate.

He bought a cat. It refused to climb the tree even though he put it on the trunk where it clung and looked at him hissing. It turned and sprang to the ground and he caught it and put it back, higher. The

monster dog was tied to the water spigot, straining to get free, making weird tortured-dog noises. The cat twisted and jumped and jumped again, nearly halfway across the yard; the dog broke loose, and they both leaped over the fence and vanished, the dog baying like the Baskerville hound. Howard had to go after them before someone shot the dog. When they got back, the dog's feet were sore and it came to me, grinning, its tongue dripping like a hose, expecting high praise for its heroism. Howard didn't speak. The cat never came back.

* * * *

He was plotting. He was having a steak and beer party in the back yard, inviting all his bowling buddies and a

few extra men who were going to help him cut down the old rotten tree, net the possums --possums? --and then feast.

"Someone will get killed," I pointed out. "The tree is over eighty feet tall." He smiled his smuggest smile and I threw my cup at him. He ducked and dialed another number.

The next day I bought clothesline and pulleys and made them an escape route to a maple tree at the property line. I fastened a small Easter basket to the rope and if they were as clever as I thought, they would figure out the pulley arrangement. If not, they could get out hand over hand. I explained to them what they had to do, and then, to be certain they understood, I wrote it down for

them and left the message in the basket. I was still worried that they wouldn't know how to use the basket, and at three in the morning, I took out the awful beads Howard had brought home and put them in the basket and for half an hour worked it back and forth. They were watching. They watch everything; that is their strength.

Howard brought home the steaks. (Two dollars ninety-eight cents a pound, twelve of them, all more than 2 pounds. I could have cried.) There was a case of beer in a cooler on the patio. I fed steaks to the dog, but even the monster couldn't eat more than three of them. Howard bought replacements and stood by the refrigerator every time I moved. He

carried the chain saw about with him, afraid I would hex it.

"Get lost!" Howard said Saturday morning. "We're going to cut that damn tree down, catch those things and cage them and then eat steak and drink beer and play poker. Bug off!"

"We're being childish," I said. "I was bored and played a game, pretended I saw something, and you convinced yourself that you saw it too. That's what children do. I'll go look for a job Monday. No more games." He made a noncommittal noise.

"Or maybe I'm pregnant. Sometimes pregnant women imagine strange things, instead of craving strange foods." He glared at me.

The men began to gather and there was a lot of consultation about the tree, with several of them walking around it thoughtfully, spilling beer as they gestured. As if they knew something about cutting down trees. They would get drunk and he would cut someone's head off, I thought. I watched him start the saw and winced at the noise. I didn't know if they had escaped or not; there was no way to tell. Someone pointed upward and Howard stopped the saw and again they all considered the task. It had been pointed out that in movies they always cut off branches and the top first. Otherwise the tree would surely demolish the house when it fell. Someone got the ladder and Howard

climbed it and started the saw again. He brought it down to the tree limb, hesitated, turned off the saw, dropped it to the ground and climbed back down.

He was trembling. "I just wanted to give the old lady a scare. Show her who's boss. Let's eat." He didn't look at me. He got drunk and after the others had gone he told me the saw had come alive, turned on him. He had seen his leg being cut off, had seen it falling and had thought it was beautiful that way. The saw was turning in his hands when he switched it off and dropped it.

I should have had more faith in their ability to protect themselves. I don't believe it was his leg.

* * * *

Howard has forgotten about them, pretends he never believed in them in the first place. He never glances at the tree, and he burned all the pictures he took, even the infrared ones.

I have too much to do to work outside the house any more. He accepts that. I am charting all their likes and dislikes. When I left them chopped turnip, there was a grease fire that could have burned down the house. I crossed off turnips. When I find out-of-season fruits, like mangoes, cut up just so with a touch of lemon juice, something nice happens, like the telegram from my mother on my birthday. They like for me to wear soft, flowing, white gowns. My blue jeans brought a thunderstorm, and lightning hit

the pole out front and we were without electricity for twenty-four hours. There is a ritual I go through now when Howard wants to go to bed with me. He doesn't object. It excites him, actually, to see me undress under the tree.

They liked the mouse I caught for them, and I'm wondering if they would like a chick, or a game hen. The mouse got Howard a Christmas bonus. I know a place that sells live chicks

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