

The Fountain of Neptune

by Kate Wilhelm

Kate Wilhelm's most recent books include the novels *The Unbidden Truth* and *Sleight of Hand* and a short book for writers and readers called *Storyteller: Writing Lessons and More from 27 Years of the Clarion Writers' Workshop*.

Here she presents us with the story of a young woman whose life changes abruptly.

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She did most things right, got a second opinion, did not panic, did not go on a drinking binge, or search for a third opinion. What she failed to do was take a friend with her or tape record the conversations with both brain surgeons. Consequently, her memory of what one or the other said proved to be sketchy, but key phrases were ineradicable. Inoperable. A baseline CAT scan. More blurred vision likely, more frequently. Possible double vision. Possible distorted images, illusions. Possible hallucination. Probable headaches.

"Live your life normally," one or the other said. "I'd like to see you again in three months."

"Why?"

"With another CAT scan we can better predict what to expect."

Her question had covered both parts, live a normal life, as well as a return appointment. A normal life meant working every day for a corporation that cared as little about her as she cared about it. She remained in her apartment for several days, spending time weeping, then she added up her assets, including the sale of her car, cashing in her retirement plan, selling most of her possessions. She bought a laptop computer, a beginner's Italian language CD, and a new digital camera. And she made a reservation for a flight to Rome. At the last minute she made it first class.

She had been to Rome once for a three-day conference and one day of sightseeing. At the near demand of a tour guide, she and everyone else in the group had dutifully tossed a coin into Trevi Fountain. "Rome will call you back," the young guide had said.

She did not tell her mother, who would berate her for leaving a job

with health benefits at a time like this. Nor did she tell her sister, who would scream and wail and insist that she come live with her and her family of four noisy children under the age of twelve and a husband who worked when it was convenient. She told them both that she was being transferred to the Rome office. She did not burden her few good friends who would grieve helplessly, or her ex, who would not. And she did not tell anyone in the office. She knew it would be on her insurance record, and she never would be insurable again.

She was forty-two years old and more than likely she would be dead within six months. So she flew to Rome first class.

She had found an apartment on the Internet, and chose it because it had Internet access, sparing her the search for a cyber café. Her landlord thought she was a writer, and in a sense she was. She had spent more than a decade writing meticulous reports for an R&D department, and now she began keeping a record of the progression of her inoperable tumor. At first there was no particular reason, but after she missed her appointment scheduled for early May, she decided to send the medical record to the brain surgeons.

The blurred vision came more often, sometimes embarrassingly in public, more often when she was in her apartment.

She spent one week in Florence, awestruck by David and the Pietà, overwhelmed by the Tivoli gardens, and the Uffizi museum, but her call had issued from Rome and she was not tempted to leave again. There were days in the Vatican museum; operas in a gothic church; days wandering around the Colosseum, populating the arena with gladiators, the forum with politicians; a special exhibition of Leonardo's work reproduced full size; a close-up view of the Last Supper....

She was in love with Rome, with the streets strewn with litter that came alive in any breeze, with the gelatos and pizza slices topped with anything edible, the espresso, all the food. And most of all she was in love with the magic of its sunlight, the complexity of Rome's agelessness, where contemporary glass and steel structures stood side by side with those from a past of almost inconceivable antiquity—a monument here, a stele there, remnants of a temple, a statue, the juxtaposition of an ephemeral flicker in time and the mute eloquent endurance of millennia.

In the evenings she studied Italian, wrote her daily report, and downloaded her pictures onto her computer, deleted many, manipulated others, enhanced some, and put the saved images on a CD, to be sent to

her sister eventually.

That evening, the last day of May, she gazed at her latest pictures of Neptune's Fountain in Piazza Navona. It was her favorite so far and she had visited it several times. Neptune doing battle with an octopus and nymphs mounted on horses rising from the fountain basin. Neptune was as muscular as a body builder. All the male statues were, and the females were all lissome, willowy, with not a muscle or bone in sight. The steeds looked wild and beautiful. But something was wrong.

She looked for previous pictures she had taken of the fountain, then printed the versions to compare them, find the cause for her unease. It came as a mild surprise to see that she had been to that one fountain four different times. The pictures were dated, and the first one had been taken April eleventh, one in early May, one mid-May, and the most recent on the last day of May.

After putting them in chronological order to examine them, she gasped, and stood up so quickly, so urgently that she knocked her chair over. Steadying herself with a hand on the table, she closed her eyes hard, rubbed them, and without looking again at the pictures yet, she backed away from the table, and only then opened her eyes and crossed the few feet to her tiny kitchen for a glass of water.

All the pictures were different. "It's started," she said under her breath.

Distorted images, one of the doctors had said. Illusions.

She had entered the next phase, she thought dully, and forced herself to return to the table, to study the set of pictures, seeking to learn when the new phase had started without her noticing.

Some of the views were from different places around the fountain, single shots, but the four she singled out had all been taken from the same location. She had been seated on the same bench for each of the four. The changes were subtle, but unmistakable. They presented a sequence in time. First the nymph's head was turned away slightly, her hair streaming behind her; the horse's head was lowered, and towering over them Neptune was straining in a struggle with the octopus that had one arm wrapped around the god's leg. Next the nymph's head was turned more to the front, and the horse had lifted its head. The octopus was lower down on Neptune's leg.

They were not illusions, she realized, but full-blown hallucinations. She was telling herself a story and providing graphic images to illustrate it. In the last picture the nymph had finished turning her head, and was smiling up at Neptune, and he was done with his mock battle, and now was looking down on the nymph, his hand extended toward her. Even the horse was looking at him in that picture.

Slowly, moving with care, she gathered all the printouts and slipped them into an envelope. Hallucinations, the final phase?

A church bell tolled the hour of eight, her daily signal to leave the apartment, drop in at a newsstand to buy a newspaper, go to dinner at a neighborhood trattoria. She stifled a giggle as she wondered if she would hear Pan's pipes, see his mad dance.

She walked the block to the newsstand, purchased her newspaper, and on impulse asked for a picture of the Fontana di Nettuno in Piazza Navona. The shopkeeper smiled at her Italian baby talk and answered in English, as he always did.

"Neptune's Fountain, poster size? Postage?"

She didn't know how to say about eight by ten, and held up her hands to indicate the size.

He found one in a stack of glossy prints and as she counted out money, he said, "You should visit it at dawn, the first light of the sun. Some say that's the time of magic."

"Grazie," she said and he answered that she was welcome.

That night she was not surprised when the glossy professional print proved to be unlike any of her own. Again, not glaring differences, but significant, meaningful.

That night she also recalled another of the phrases one or the other doctor had used: need a companion. Of course, she thought, she couldn't be left alone acting out a hallucinatory experience. She could harm herself or, worse, harm others. A companion. Institution? It was just as well she had put it out of mind for four months. She marveled at how her mind was protecting her from remembering too much.

There were things she had to do: address the envelope to her sister, write her a letter, include a copy of her will, details about her bank account,

some passwords, name and address of her attorney who had drawn up the will. Edit the ongoing report of her situation for the doctors, make two printouts, address those envelopes.

And she had to arrive at the Fountain of Neptune at dawn to see the magic of the first rays of light. That had to wait until after she had taken care of more mundane things.

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The days were becoming quite warm, even hot, but the predawn twilight was pleasantly cool, and there was a slight mist in the air. She was disappointed to see another person at the fountain that early morning, a man seated on the bench she had come to regard as her own. He rose and moved to a different bench as she approached. They were the only two people in sight at that hour.

“Good morning,” he said as she drew near. “It’s a lovely morning, a lovely time of day.”

An Englishman? Canadian? Possibly even an American. He had no trace of an accent. She nodded at him and sat down.

The light was changing from the soft pearliness of predawn to a more luminous, sharper light, the mist was dissipating and the world was taking on distinct edges, defined shapes where there had been suggestions of shapes.

She blinked. Before her was an expanse as black and smooth as polished ebony. Then there was a ripple, another, and with astonishing swiftness a golden aura spread over the surface, to be shattered by a roiling eruption, a crashing turbulence that cast golden waters into the air like glittering beads of gold, showers of gold, geysers of gold, fountains of gold. Arising in the waves were horses, snorting, neighing, tossing their heads, scattering more gold. Their riders were maidens bent low over streaming manes, and in their midst stood a powerful man who commanded the waves to cease, and there was calm.

She didn’t know when she had risen, if she had cried out, but the stranger was at her side, his hand steadying her, and the Fountain of Neptune was a fountain.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

She moistened her lips, nodded. "A dizzy spell," she said weakly. "It's over."

"Perhaps a coffee?" he said. "You're very pale. You're trembling."

She groped for the bench and sat down. "I just need a moment," she said. Her heart was thumping wildly, her breathing ragged.

He sat on the same bench, and they both gazed at the fountain.

"They call this the Eternal City," he said in a reflective manner. "People link the phrase to the Catholic Church, of course, but it was an eternal city long before the church was founded. Eternity stretches both ways, to forever. Some say the old gods are still alive in the real eternal city. Perhaps they do yet live. Perhaps, like the city, they are eternal."

He was talking to calm her, she thought. Maybe he had been afraid she would faint, fall down, and now he was waiting to make certain she was all right. She glanced at him. "You're not Italian, are you?" she said, not for information, but in order to let him know he could leave now, she had recovered. Just a momentary dizzy spell.

"No. I'm a Roman. Antonio Mercurio. Are you certain you don't want a coffee?"

"Thank you, but no. I'll be on my way in a minute or two."

"You saw them, didn't you?" he said in that same reflective tone he had been using.

She stood up quickly, adjusted her shoulder bag, and started to walk away fast, without speaking.

"Don't be afraid, Julia," he said. "I'll be here for you when you return."

She stopped moving and for a time she did not even breathe. Dear God, she thought then, he was part of it, part of her hallucination, no more real than the golden water of the sea, no more real than the snorting, neighing horses. He knew her name. Of course he did. He was her creation and knew whatever she knew. Suddenly she wanted a cup of coffee, hot and black and very strong coffee, but she did not move. Her vision had become too blurred to dare take a step. Shapes that minutes before had had hard distinct edges had become shadow figures.

“Now we will have coffee,” he said at her side, his hand firm on her arm. She did not resist, but let him lead her through a world of shadows, around a corner, to a chair.

“It passes quickly,” she said. “Please do not concern yourself with me.”

It was already passing. An awning overhead, tables with place mats, an elderly gentleman reading a newspaper with an espresso before him. He lowered the paper, smiled broadly at her companion, and spoke in rapid-fire Italian, too fast for her to follow.

The man across the table from her returned the smile and replied briefly. She bit her lip. Stock phrases she had memorized? Something she had learned and consciously had forgotten?

“Why would the Roman gods alone be eternal?” she asked, and felt that the question had come almost out of desperation for something to say, something that was not the something that needed to be said. Was the table, the other customer, all of it one big hallucinatory experience? Where was the start and end of it?

“Not just the Roman gods,” he said, smiling slightly at her. “Perhaps all of them. These are the gods you heard and responded to. Few hear, fewer respond, and even fewer admit the evidence of their senses.”

“If I had responded to Vishnu, I would be in Calcutta sipping tea,” she murmured. “Is that your meaning?”

He laughed.

She looked away from him, at the street where shopkeepers were starting to open awnings, to put out signs advertising their wares, arrange pastries in windows, open freezer cases with gelato.... Although it all looked real, concrete, she no longer felt any trust in the evidence of her senses. The evidence of her senses was being warped by a growth in her head.

“Perhaps it is granting you freedom to see for the first time what has always been there,” he said.

Resolutely she kept her gaze averted. A waiter came and greeted her companion as an old friend, volubly, effusively, including her in his obvious welcome.

When a fast-paced dialog ensued, she felt her hands trembling again. The waiter laughed, spread his hands, and bowed to her before he withdrew, shaking with laughter.

“Who are you?” she whispered.

“I told you. Antonio Mercurio.”

She resisted the temptation to look at his feet clad in sandals, and he laughed again. “No, no wings on my heels.”

“I’m going mad,” she said in the same low voice, hardly above a whisper. “I see illusions, hallucinations. I don’t know what’s real, what isn’t.”

“Reality has many faces,” he said. “You have completed the first two parts. There is one remaining. You must admit the evidence of your senses.”

She shook her head. The waiter returned with coffee and they spoke words she could not understand. She gripped her coffee cup, welcoming the heat.

“What did you see in your pictures?” Mercurio asked when the waiter left once more.

“Changes, a sequence of changes. I hallucinated them to illustrate a story in my head. There weren’t any real changes.”

“Was the sequence finished?”

“I don’t know.”

“And at dawn, what did you see?”

She shook her head harder, risking blurred vision again.

“When we leave, you must choose. Turn left and I’ll walk with you to your bus and wait for it with you. Turn right, and we return.”

“Back to the Fountain of Neptune.”

“Fontana di Netunne,” he said. “And you must then tell me what you saw at dawn.”

Back to her apartment, probably a doctor, hospital. She pushed her coffee cup back and rose from her chair, and they took the few steps to the sidewalk where she paused, then turned right.

“I saw a golden sea, horses rising with maiden riders, I saw Neptune command the waves to stop roiling and crashing, and there was a calm golden sea.”

They approached the fountain, and now the sequence was finished. Neptune had completed his gesture. His gaze was on her, his extended hand reached out to her, and with Mercury at her side she walked into the warm, golden water of Netunne’s sea.