

Suzanne

The Urth list — 5 messages, 3 voices, 07 May 1998

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/571>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Peter Westlake — 07 May 1998, 15:25

At 12:00 1998-05-07 -0400, Alice Turner wrote:

Peter,

We don't allow for spoilers here--in other words we simply assume that everyone has read everything, and let the unwary reader beware. What you found in "Suzanne"--I assume it's different from mantis's discovery of the Proust connection (which was amazing enough!)--do tell.

Well, I'll start with a couple of hints, and then put the spoiler right at the end.

First, why do we see Suzanne's daughter? I think she's there to tell us what Suzanne looks like. I would have been surprised if she had been a tanned redhead, for instance. We don't meet Suzanne herself because that would be too much like the Stoppard parody of Waiting For Godot - "there he is now". It would undo the plot.

Second, the narrator wonders if Suzanne belongs to any cliques. I think she belongs to at least two: the Pie Club, and one other group of people, mentioned in the story.

Final hint: what's the problem with looking for Suzanne in the picture of the Pie Club?

Okay, last chance. ** SPOILER follows **

Here's the sentence, and in particular the phrase, that still gives me the shivers:

Suzanne is listed among those "Unable to be photographed".

And the girls in the Pie Club photo are too loosely grouped to be identified easily. But I bet they wouldn't have looked that way at the time when you could see Suzanne.

Peter.

adam louis stephanides — 08 May 1998, 16:03 · follows Peter Westlake

On Fri, 8 May 1998 Peter Westlake wrote:

Second, the narrator wonders if Suzanne belongs to any cliques.

I think she belongs to at least two: the Pie Club, and one other group of people, mentioned in the story.

Which? The "dazzlingly beautiful ones"? That's certainly what one interpretation of Suzanne's daughter's appearance, but see below.

Here's the sentence, and in particular the phrase, that still gives me the shivers:

Suzanne is listed among those "Unable to be photographed".

And the girls in the Pie Club photo are too loosely grouped to be identified easily. But I bet they wouldn't have looked that way at the time when you could see Suzanne.

I hate to pour cold water on your theories, especially since this story has always mystified me. But if, as you seem to be implying, Suzanne is some sort of supernatural being who doesn't show up in photographs, I think the narrator would have heard about it and remembered it, along with the entire town. And if Suzanne had been absent from the Pie Club photo, instead of just unidentifiable, wouldn't the narrator have noticed that the caption contained one too many names? I think "loosely grouped" means only that the girls are posed as if in the middle of cooking, rather than lined up in rows as is usual.

I really would like an explanation for this story. The best I've been able to do is: if Suzanne's daughter had really been as strikingly beautiful as the story's next-to-last paragraph describes, then the narrator would certainly have noticed Suzanne. Ergo, the daughter is really not so remarkable, and the flowery prose of the description reflects the sentimentality of a lonely middle-aged man. But if that's all there is to it, it's not much of a story. And the way Wolfe writes it, it feels to me that there should be some greater payoff.

--Adam

Peter Westlake — 09 May 1998, 00:01 · follows adam louis stephanides

At 16:03 1998/05/08 -0500, Adam wrote:

On Fri, 8 May 1998 Peter Westlake wrote:

Second, the narrator wonders if Suzanne belongs to any cliques. I think she belongs to at least two: the Pie Club, and one other group of people, mentioned in the story.

Which? The "dazzlingly beautiful ones"? That's certainly what one interpretation of Suzanne's daughter's appearance, but see below.

No, the ones who don't show up in photographs.

Here's the sentence, and in particular the phrase, that still gives me the shivers:

Suzanne is listed among those "Unable to be photographed".

And the girls in the Pie Club photo are too loosely grouped to be identified easily. But I bet they wouldn't have looked that way at the time when you could see Suzanne.

I hate to pour cold water on your theories, especially since this story has always mystified me. But if, as you seem to be implying, Suzanne is some sort of supernatural being who doesn't show up in photographs, I think the narrator would have heard about it and remembered it, along with the entire town.

I did wonder about that myself. But as Craig has just reminded us, the story starts with the narrator reading about the idea that everyone has had some truly extraordinary experience and forgotten all about it. Mirrors might be more of a problem.

And if Suzanne had been absent from the Pie Club photo,

instead of just unidentifiable, wouldn't the narrator have noticed that the caption contained one too many names? I think "loosely grouped" means

only that the girls are posed as if in the middle of cooking, rather than lined up in rows as is usual.

It would depend on what and who was in the background, I think.

However ... looking again, I see that the narrator isn't quite certain of the name of the Pie Club. So maybe Craig is right and it is the "Pudding Club" instead! Suzanne's daughter is only about fifteen, so that would mean the story takes place only about sixteen years after high school, and we are told the narrator has retired; but "much sooner than most men", so it might still work.

One more small bit of evidence for the supernatural theory, and the vampire theory in particular, is the way the narrator's mother is so exhausted by her trips with Suzanne's mother, but is always so keen to go again. Not much to go on, I admit.

Another theory is that Suzanne never was at the school, and her mother didn't die while the narrator was at college, but rejuvenated herself and then invented a high school career to account for her appearing on the scene in her teens. Then we really *do* meet her at the end. I'm not entirely convinced by this, though.

Peter.

Alice Turner — 09 May 1998, 18:17 · follows Peter Westlake

I hate to pour cold water on your theories, especially since this story has always mystified me [snip] I think "loosely grouped" means only that the girls are posed as if in the middle of cooking, rather than lined up in rows as is usual.

I really would like an explanation for this story. The best I've been able to do is: if Suzanne's daughter had really been as strikingly beautiful as the story's next-to-last paragraph describes, then the narrator would certainly have noticed Suzanne. Ergo, the daughter is really not so remarkable, and the flowery prose of the description reflects the sentimentality of a lonely middle-aged man. But if that's all there is to it, it's not much of a story. And the way Wolfe writes it, it feels to me that there should be some greater payoff.

I tend to go along with Adam's explanation here, but I don't agree that it diminishes the story. I think there is something powerful and poignant about a middle-aged man's shock of realization that his entire life could have been entirely different, had it not been for the coincidences of fate. I think you're all looking too hard for a fantasy element. The godfather of this story is Proust (and for once that is proven, not conjectural), not Kafka or Borges. The flavor of regret is bittersweet.

-alga-

Peter Westlake — 11 May 1998, 00:00 · follows Alice Turner

At 18:17 1998/05/09 -0400, alga wrote:

I tend to go along with Adam's explanation here, but I don't agree that it diminishes the story. I think there is something powerful and poignant about a middle-aged man's shock of realization that his entire life could have been entirely different, had it not been for the coincidences of fate. I think you're all looking too hard for a fantasy element. The godfather of this story is Proust (and for once that is proven, not conjectural), not

Kafka or Borges. The flavor of regret is bittersweet.

That **does** make a lot of sense. In fact, I shall enjoy reading that version of the story very much even if another explanation proves to be the true one, just as I enjoyed reading "my" version. So do you think that never seeing Suzanne is sufficiently odd to fit the notion at the start of the story? Actually, I suppose it is, and the narrator hadn't called it to mind before he read the idea.

It certainly is a powerful and poignant story, and at the moment I think you're right.

Peter.