

Short Story 23: Sonya, Crane Wessleman, and Kittee

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Marc Aramini — 30 Apr 2012, 05:46

Sonya, Crane Wessleman, and Kittee

This first appeared in Orbit in 1970. It is on pg 96 of Stories from the Old Hotel.

SUMMARY:

The speaker is telling a story to a “you” that seems contemporary to the late 60s or 1970 about a time within the child’s lifetime but perhaps 65-70 years in the future. Sonya is a poor girl (the same age as the “you” hearing the story) who has an odd relationship called a “suspended” courtship with Crane Wessleman, a slightly older man. Once upon a time she resembled Debbie Reynolds in her youth.

Sonya receives a frugal stipend as all citizens do in this future (a more socialist one?) and lives very simply. One day she is accidentally invited to a bridge party and meets Crane Wessleman, who wants her to be at future parties. She does not quite fit in, asking for Sherry instead of tea, but her empathy or card sense lead her to be a wonderful playing partner for the older and wealthier Crane Wessleman.

He asks his old business partner to invite her to future gatherings. Eventually the partner’s wife dies of a brain malignancy and the partner moves to Bermuda. As a result, bereft of social contacts, Crane no longer leaves his house and dresses in pajamas.

Sonya believes she is no longer invited because of a faux pas. “It was not only that Crane Wessleman was rich and widowed, although it was a great deal that. She liked him knowing happily and secretly as she did that he was hard to like; and, deeper, there was the thought of something else: of opening a new chapter, a wedding, flowers, a new last name, a not dying as she was”.

Four months after the last bridge night she gets an invitation to meet Crane at his own house. She borrows evening attire and takes a helicopter bus to his apartment, facing resentment from the driver for her reduced rate due to a golden age card (she must be over 80 years old, in that case — that is what a golden age bus card signifies). She notices that the shrubbery, courtesy of Wessleman’s dead wife, does not jive with her aesthetics and she sets roses on the pillars leading up to the tudor estate in which Wessleman lives. The front has a sign saying C Wessleman and Kittee, at which point Sonya knows Crane has a new companion. She wants to leave but is tired, and the text states that “people like Sonya are often quite tough underneath”. The naked (but for a small rear facing apron) Kittee opens the door, and Sonya realizes right away that she is a companion grown from the germ plasm of a beast (possibly a cat, dog, or gibbon). Crane shows her a magazine called Friends and asserts they really don’t know exactly what these friends are anymore, showing her a handsome man with his mouth drawn back over teeth. Sonya returns every week for a year.

On the second to last trip Crane reveals he wants to buy a young handsome one to keep Kittee

company after he is dead. "I want her to be happy".

One week Crane does not call to invite her, and she goes a few days after their normal time, finding a key in the shrubbery. He was dead in his favorite chair, and Kittee had eaten part of his left leg. "You must have been very hungry, weren't you, Kittee, locked in there with no one to feed you."

She finds some Mouton Sainte Menebould in the kitchen and calls for Kittee to come and get it, thinking that Crane "might have left her a small legacy after all."

COMMENTARY: the first thing we should discuss is the tone — it is conversational to some degree, and acknowledges a "now" point of telling (circa 1970) in which the story is being told to a young, celebrity/pop culture obsessed listener (Sonya is compared to Debbie Reynolds at the time of John John Kennedy's future inauguration, Kittee to Catwoman Julie Newmar, etc.) Perhaps it could be a bed time story. This is an interesting narrational strategy, one that posits a future in which the child hearing it would be as old as the main character. Perhaps there is a moral that the listener "you" should be pulling from the tale.

Once again, Wolfe is offering up some social commentary about right and left wing — the stipend these individuals receive is sufficient for life but seems inordinately poor — I think, because Wessleman still has his money and can live somewhat more securely, that this future distribution of wealth is more socialist than communist, but I really can't tell. There is a slight indictment of the right who claim that the stipend is too generous — it is clear Sonya has to live extremely simply to make ends meet and has very few possessions or things to keep her happy.

Kittee as a Julie Newmar look alike is interesting. (As a ten year old boy, one may watch Julie Newmar's Catwoman tempting Batman Adam West and think, "don't fall for it, Batman." As a thirty year old man or thereabouts, one may watch Catwoman tempting Batman and think, "fall for it, Batman".)

In any case, the empathic Sonya understands Kittee's hunger and now it seems probably she will become an old stereotypical cat lady, alone too long and left only with a "pet" to care for. This is about loneliness, the eccentricity of the old, the need for companionship, and the voraciousness that even innocuous pets can or people can display when their basic needs are not met. Are Sonya's needs met here by anyone, whether it be the government, Crane, or through inheriting Kittee?

It is perhaps disturbing that the originators of these friends no longer even know what they are implying their identity as human, feral, or domestic might be equally murky. The feral and carnivorous nature of Kittee is of course the punchline of the tale, but its depiction of lonely old age yearning for meaning will become a trope in Wolfe.

ALLUSIONS: Harlan Ellison is mentioned by name as someone who would call Sonya an "empath", so the stories that come to mind are "Try a Dull Knife" in which empathic emotions lead to the destruction of someone who tries to give his all to others, and then perhaps the story "A Boy and his Dog" in which a man must choose between his girlfriend or his telepathic dog.

The references to pop culture and politics include Debbie Reynolds as Sonya (probably some plot similarities to her movie "Tammy and the Bachelor" on a superficial level), Catwoman Julie Newmar as Kittee, and John John Kennedy as future president, and this cements the rapport the speaker and the listener in the story(who is the same age as Sonya) have, based on TV and glamor celebrities. Clearly the little girl who is presumably hearing the tale would empathize

with these kinds of celebrities, and this is the key feature of her doppelganger in the story, Sonya. At one point the speaker even states that his listener has seen Sonya distributing some pamphlets on the unfairness of death and excreting - making them overtly contemporaneous.

The famous Boswell is also mentioned — helicopter buses are identified as the “ascendants” of the transportation he used in his trip to Germany.

The mutton she feeds Kittee is called Sainte Menebould, which is a real place, but normally mutton prepared in such a fashion is called Sainte Menehould. That distinction does not seem vitally important.

FUTURE ECHOES: Women as chattel is about to kick into full gear in Wolfe as brothels/ the temptress become a more prominent fixture of his story telling. In this case it is interesting that Sonya will be left with Kittee. Crane comes across as something of an unsympathetic character, worrying more for Kittee though that does not seem ignoble in and of itself) than for Sonya — of course because of appearance. The socialist/communist and anti-authoritarian bogeyman has been strong in 1970 Wolfe, but I think this fear of America degenerating away from free enterprise fades from prominence in later stories.

AMBIGUITIES: what was the mix up that got Sonya called to attend the bridge party? Simply her name? Most importantly, what is the moral of the story for the “you” listening to the tale? Why select this frame strategy for the narration?

Next up is the masterpiece, “The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories”.