

Short Story 25: The Packerhaus Method

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Marc Aramini — 18 May 2012, 02:12

The Packerhaus Method

First published in 1970 in Infinity One, this is a fairly straightforward SF exploration of embalming technology for Wolfe, but there are a few interesting tropes that we will see later, especially concerning dualism.

SUMMARY:

An elderly woman, the cousin of the Col. Packerhaus who invented a rather animated embalming process, describes in detail how the method works to a social worker as a meter man named Frank and her own father wander in on small electrical platforms. She is speaking to the social worker who is sitting there rather placidly and demurely, explaining how the method involves electric stimuli and saturating the brain with phenolic resin, and, though the embalmed cannot breath, a fan provides the power of speech. Supposedly no long term memories will be preserved, though limited movement and speech are possible. The old woman's cat is also dead and preserved, as is the social worker, and it is clear the cousin of Col. Packerhaus is poisoning everyone who stops in in order to have a full house of perennial guests. While it seems that these departed people are stuck in a loop, Frank the meter man and the first social worker seem to come to a marriage arrangement in their short time together, and the salesman for the process, Col. Packerhaus himself, is stated to be remembering events for longer periods of time. Another social worker comes in and is poisoned by the tea left for her, dying in the other room as the elderly woman continues to plan on expanding her life in death menagerie.

COMMENTARY: Well, of course the old woman is packing her house with company, but the interesting part of this story is that her murderousness is a bit less than sinister — everyone who came in to keep her company seemed to understand her loneliness, and perhaps it is this desire to avoid it that has led her to this “packrat” mentality — an eternal tea party in her house that she herself will join when she dies.

The subjects seem to be set in a cycle and doomed to repeat the actions over and over without ever learning anything, but Col. Packerhaus' ability to improve as a salesman and the engagement of Frank and the social worker indicate that they are indeed “adapting” somehow to their situation, though they are clearly dead. This is possibly a hint of the dualistic philosophy of Wolfe — though physically the brain has been set in immutable resin and this seems to be the random response of dying brain waves and muscles to electrical stimuli, the processes of life are continuing — an engagement is made, Col. Packerhaus is remembering things longer. Where then is the spirit? Is it chained to the dead brain, still there, or is it free? Of course there are no answers, but it is interesting to ponder the implications of this method for those who believe in the soul.

Her murders and the “cramps” may be premeditated, but they are not malicious — the poisoner herself plans to be there forever with her guests, a eternal full house. The loneliness of youth and the elderly is something that Wolfe's stories often confront. In this case, preventing that loneliness has taken a rather drastic turn.

ALLUSIONS: This is clearly a riff on the short story “The Landlady” by Roald Dahl published in 1959, and it was also made into an Alfred Hitchcock presents? TV program, in which a 17 year

old boy named Billy is poisoned by an old landlady who keeps a rather lifelike stuffed parrot and dog near her. This keeping of the dead for company for those who fear abandonment is a theme that might also be found in "A Rose for Emily", but I feel the Dahl story is much more of an influence on Gene in this tale.

FUTURE ECHOES: This feels a rather slight exploration for Gene, but the sinister lurking under the innocuous will certainly be seen again, in works such as "Peace" or "In the House of Gingerbread". This examination of death as a continuation of life seems a particular obsession of Wolfe, and there are even hints in the solar cycle of eidolons continuing in patterns long after the physical body has died — are they then partly alive or completely dead? Children and the forgotten elderly are a special moral case in Wolfe's fiction — they may do things without a lot of evil motive that are very selfish and destructive to others.

Next up is The HORARS of War in Endangered Species.