

Short Story 37: Beech Hill

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 04 Jul 2012

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Marc Aramini — 04 Jul 2012, 18:10

Beech Hill

Beech Hill first appeared in 1972 in Infinity Three. It is on pg 22 of Storeys From the Old Hotel. I have included some interpretation in the summary, so this time it is probably worth reading.

SUMMARY AND INTERPRETATION OF THE GUN:

R. Roberts, called Bubba by his sister and Bobs at Beech Hill, works 51 weeks out of the year and then disappears for a week, and his “crippled” sister berates him for it. He recalls her derision as he “pretends” to read at Beech Hill, which is his escape from his banal life of belittlement at the hands of his sister where he pays to role play a life of intrigue. The story jumps around and delves into Mr. Roberts fantasies quite a bit; at Beech Hill he plays the role of a double agent or spy like James Bond, while other ordinary people also pay and show up to live out the fantasy life they have constructed.

The 3rd person narrator does not distinguish very much between what is merely fantasy in Bobs’ head, especially when it describes his gun, which shifts from a Walther PPK to a Beretta to a Luger to an HSc Mauser to a harmless replica by the end of the story.

The action at Beech Hill begins at 7 in the morning, the same time he is normally at work relieving the “night man”. [Is he a day security man?] His daily real life routine revolves around work and caring for his sister. He meets with a man pretending to be a physicist, Preston Potts, who stutters and a woman who fancies herself the Countess Esterhazy who cannot sleep. They talk up Bobs importance as someone who “protects the things [Potts] discovers ?and occasionally arrange that [Potts] discover what someone else has just discovered on the other side.”

He thinks about taking the bus to Beech Hill, the same stop at the same hotel every year, and about his fantasies there, of having to kill his sister with his Luger if she comes across his “secret papers,” a murder his organization will cover up. “There’s devotion for you.” Of course this is in his mind and is something of an ironic bit of self-serving catharsis as well.

This year while heading to his fantasy role playing retreat with the others, he stopped to get a haircut and saw one of the men from Beech Hill on TV being interviewed about some problem: “a strike — pollution — Washington”. Bobs says that he recognizes the man and the barber indicates the man owns much property there. This is the moment that ruins the fantasy for Bobs and sets him on the path to contemplate murder: either the rich man had set them all up to laugh at them or he had made his dreams come true and actually become the billionaire he played at Beech Hill.

His fantasies and ability to free associate sensations are pretty interesting: when he places his replica in its holster (which he sees a Beretta) he pretends that the weight of it is actually the woman next to him leaning against him, and then further imagines a scene from ten years ago in which she becomes Wally Wallace, the man who talked him into signing on to Beech Hill and paying for it.

The final scene is at the beach, where he watches the scarred animal trainer Claude Brain go into the water after complaining about what a hard life a trainer of exotic animals has, with minimal breaks even in Hollywood. His anger at the hypocrisy of the billionaire he saw on TV, who might be the real deal or the creator of Beech Hill, who just comes to watch others live out their false fantasies while his life is real, spoils Bobs enjoyment. He talks to a minor actress and

says that people come there to “look at the nuts”, then asks her what she perceives of his gun. She says it is a replica with the words British Imperial Manufacture — MADE IN HONG KONG. He casts it into the lake and tells her to remember that in case she is called to testify later. While it may be an absurd ending, there is the chance that he yearns for revenge on those who spoiled either his normal life or his fantasy life: his sister or more probably the billionaire, who he will no doubt keep an eye out for at this year’s Beech Hill retreat.

COMMENTARY: This is a great little story that combines some of Wolfe’s best techniques of blending the fantasy of his protagonist with his 3rd person not entirely omniscient narrative technique. It unfolds in a somewhat cryptic fashion because it is somewhat difficult to distinguish timeline, fantasy and reality, but one or two re-readings and the contextualizing idea makes it fairly straightforward: that once a year for a week people with lame stultifying lives try to buy a fantasy where they can live out their drama with other similarly trapped people and be whatever they want to be.

The problem arises when Bobs realizes that one of the poseurs is in fact the real deal — and perhaps he feels that he is being mocked there just as he was constantly mocked at home. The nature of his work at home seems unclear, but he might be a day security guard and have access to a real gun.

AMBIGUITIES: Is Wally Wallace just a “recruiter” for Beech Hill? Why does Bobs superimpose Wally’s image onto the girl he later asks to identify the gun as a toy? What is the jungle in which Wally is lost — the sales world or something more sinister? Does Bobs intend to kill that rich owner for making a mockery of his escape from real life by intruding his own genuine, privileged position in it, or is he going to lash out at a much easier target — his crippled sister, whom he fantasized about shooting with a luger earlier in the story?

We have already discussed that the gun suits whatever role Bobs feels at the time: when he feels like James Bond, it is the signature Walter PPK, when he feels like killing his sister, it is a Luger, though all along it was almost certainly a replica, unless he carries a real gun in carrying out his day to day job of relieving the night man.

I believe that every gun mentioned is of German design except the Beretta: The Walther PPK, the Luger, and the HSc Mauser. Is there a significance to this? Both the Beretta and the Walther PPK are associated with James Bond, the Luger and the Mauser with WWII Germany.

NAMES: R. Roberts, called Bubba by his crippled sister at home and Bobs in his fantasies, has a very ordinary name. “Many of these individuals have chosen alter egos that suit their aspirations, one believing himself to be a physicist involved with the Lunar Landing (Preston Pots) and others having names that are equally picturesque and evocative.

Countess Esterhazy was a patroness of Almack’s Assembly Rooms in the 19th century, one of the earliest social clubs to welcome both men and woman.” These clubs to some degree came to denote genuine “society”. “This clearly mirrors the club of wannabes that Bobs spends his extra income on, though it actually did represent society and this group is composed of a bunch of wishful thinkers.

Claude Brain is an odd name, and though I hesitate to ascribe any “mastermind” role to the scarred animal trainer who has obviously lived a round life, there was a famous neurologist named Henri Charles Jules Claude who discovered a brain condition called “Claude’s Syndrome” in 1912 which is “a midbrain syndrome characterized by oculomotor palsy on the side of the lesion and ataxia on the opposite side.”

RESONANCE WITH OTHER WORKS:

The blending of the protagonist’s fantasy with the 3rd person narrator is something Wolfe will continue to do in works such as “There are Doors”, “An Evil Guest”, and “Castlevue”, and the theme of imitation becoming reality is simply enormous. Here, someone being or becoming what they pretend to be is enough to unhinge Bobs — his fantasy has been shattered when even successful and romantic reality intrudes. This story does seem to have a hint of role play

and presage the concerns of cyberpunk and the virtual community — the creation of artificial personalities to fulfill disappointed ambitions. In terms of the lack of fantastic elements, it does seem to be fairly unique section, though a rich man pretends to be a servant in “Kevin Malone” — that is perhaps the closest story to this one in Wolfe’s oeuvre.

Next up is the uncollected “It’s Very Clean” — I will be sending out a few typed lines that ran of the scan soon for that story to those on my mailing list.