

Short Story 50: La Befana

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 15 Aug 2013

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Marc Aramini — 15 Aug 2013, 18:10

"La Befana" first appeared in Galaxy in 1973. It is reprinted in The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories on page 55.

SUMMARY: On an alien planet, expatriate and poor humans get by. One such family, the Bananas, have become friends with a local six footed alien named Zozz, who reclines on stones. He comes to their house one evening, the day after he brings John Bananas' supposed mother from a "pad" in his rusty wagon. "When John Bananas returns home from his day at the slaughterhouse, the children are playing around and eventually the conversation turns to two strains: the story of La Befana, the old woman who refused to go see the Baby Jesus because she had chores to do and failed to catch up with him, and of how John Bananas regrets that his mother should spend all her fortune to come here." "When he was young she was a great fat woman, but has now become a thin and twisted woman who only resembles the memories of his youth in her black dress. A poor pregnant girl identified as Jewish has labor pains next door, and the story ends with the rather sentimental examination of La Befana's curse: "Do they have the faith here, Johnny?" Zozz told Mark, "You see, the Baby Jesus has never come to my world."

Maria said, "And so she goes all over every place looking for Him with her presents and she leaves some with every kid she finds, but she says it's not because she thinks they might be Him like some people think but just a substitute." She can't never die. She has to do it forever, doesn't she, Grandma?

The bent old woman said, "Not forever dearest." Only until tomorrow night.

COMMENTARY: Like so

many of Wolfe's Christian allegories, the central conceit makes the tale fairly unambiguous. This one is interesting for the sentimental power of its concluding line and the overall feeling of a poor people who find a way to eke out an existence in sparse conditions. He takes the folk lore of the woman who refuses to leave her chores to attend to the baby Jesus, who is then doomed ever after to seek him out and give presents to all children, and turns it into an sf-nal meditation on a second (or so) coming on an alien world where people are once again in some kind of diaspora. The living conditions of the Bananas family are very sparse: the back room, with no fire, is at one point considered life threatening to the old woman in its cold austerity, and the wife, though only listed at 30-35 years of age, already has black hair "shot with gray."

The universal destitution, the desuetude of the dollar, and the need for humanity to take whatever job they can find to stay alive even on alien worlds, indicates that the future is pretty bleak. In that regard it resembles the feel of many of Wolfe's stories from the late 60s and 70s — his exploration of failed socialism and economic or morally bankrupt futures can be seen in "Remembrance to Come", "Paul's Treehouse", Operation Ares, "Morning Glory", "The Hero as Werewolf", "How the Whip Came Back", "Beautyland", even "Silhouette" "and so many others where something has defeated prosperity far and wide to the point of depression-era poverty.

RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE: The primary question from an orthodox Christian perspective is when the Theanthropos manifests as fully man and fully divine to bring salvation to the world, is this instantiation for all creation or only for the civilization which will directly receive that spiritual philosophy?" ?Is a separate incarnation necessary for each new planet with indigenous life? It does not seem as if the pregnant girl next door is necessarily a creature of the same species as Zozz — she is labeled as Jewish. Would her child still be a Theanthropos or something else — and is this new birth meant for the scattered people or the sentient creatures like Zozz?

Normally I would ascribe almost no value to this quote: "A gust of wind brought the cold in to replace the odor of the gog-hutch on the other side of the left wall. ?I tell you it's hell to have your husband's mother with you in a place as small as this" ? ? assuming a gog to be a small domestic animal kept in a cage, either for food or some other farming use (milking/breeding). In conjunction with quotes like "What Zozz, home from the pit, had licked his fur clean" and Bananas working in a slaughtering market so bloody that his trouser cuffs are red with blood, we should at least mention the biblical origin of Gog (and Magog) — some sinister power mentioned in both Ezekiel and Revelations which will stand against Israel. Blood, a pit, a hellish home environment living with a mother in law, and a place where gogs are kept captive, exuding a foul odor — not a posh future.

And when the thousand years are finished, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison, and shall come forth to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to the war: the number of whom is as the sand of the sea. And they went up over the breadth of the earth, and compassed the camp of the saints about, and the beloved city: and fire came down out of heaven, and devoured them, (Revelation 20:7-9)

Is the mere mention of a gog-hutch enough to indicate that this particular birth will have calamitous results? Probably? not — I prefer the small, sentimental reading of the story — a destitute and poor future everywhere, where resources are scant and it has become necessary for faith and salvation once again on alien shores. Or is this second coming in line with that of the second coming promised in Revelation?

In light of this being a Christmas story, I can't much countenance this spin on things, preferring the simpler and more sentimental interpretation that this is a positive and gentle redeeming presence, born through poverty to bring hope. Is identifying the girl next door giving birth as Jewish, a virtual copy of Mary

and Joseph and the birth of Jesus, a bit heavy handed? Perhaps, but the real power of the story is in the last line — her interminable search is at last over, as well as her life.

“NAMES: ?We have already discussed the presence of the gog-hutch, but otherwise the human names are highly Christian: John, Theresa, Maria, Mark.

La Befana is the old Italian character, a woman on a broomstick who delivers gifts on Epiphany eve, January 5th.” She wears a black shawl and is covered in soot. Bad children get coal or garlic, good ones candy. It is thought her name is a corruption of Epifania, which is the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi (with this in mind, perhaps He has come for Zozz and his people)

While Banana is a perfectly acceptable Italian word, as a last name there doesn't seem to be much history to it. The mob-connected Antonio Caponigro (Blackhead?)

was called Tony Bananas because his father was a banana merchant, but otherwise there seems to be little correlation. It

is a bit ironic that a man with the last name Bananas works at a slaughterhouse — simple farming no longer suffices in the environment of the future.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS: Is this woman, La Befana, who has been drawn to this alien world, really John Bananas' mother? She looks nothing like the woman he remembers. Has La Befana simply been called to the planet now and positioned herself to be next to the new incarnation?

The Jewish girl next door - a human or of Zozz' species? The way the Bananas family talks about her, she seems human.

Will this coming be one to redeem the sentient race of which Zozz is one, or is this the traditional second coming of Revelations — a far more negative and destructive coming? I

incline towards the former, for both species now on the new world.

Any significance to Bananas besides being a trade nick name once upon a time?

The tale of Jesus being born in a Manger — is that why the gog-hutch is mentioned? Is there a farm

animal parallel in the story — and if so, is it the relative position of the humans, or even Zozz?

INTERESTING FACT: In 2011 or thereabouts there was a potential law suit brewing over use of the name Johnny Bananas, which a real world star claimed that he was responsible for cultivating and growing, and that the show “Entourage” was capitalizing on that. Wolfe should have jumped on that litigation bandwagon and countersued both parties.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 15 Aug 2013, 18:22 · in reply to Marc Aramini

Any significance to Bananas besides being a trade nick name once upon a time?

Perhaps it has the significance of "crazy."