

Short Story 79: Kevin Malone

The Urth list — 2 messages, 1 voices, 02 Aug 2014

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Marc Aramini — 02 Aug 2014, 18:57

Kevin Malone appeared in **New Terrors** in 1980 and is collected in **Endangered Species**.

SUMMARY: After getting married to Marcella in April, the narrator loses his job by June and in desperation answers an ad calling for an attractive young couple that brings them to The Pines, an estate imitating the palaces of the Italian Renaissance. They are greeted by a servant named Priest, and though they do not meet the master, are given drinks and eventually dinner. When they retire, they are served by the staff at the Pines, and in the morning the narrator is even shaved by his servant Bateman and finds money in his pockets. When he inquires if anything out of the ordinary happened overnight, since they were in separate chambers, Marcella denies it and fails to mention the money. He is certain someone attempted something with her and she did not protest, though given her later straightforwardness, she doesn't seem the type to conceal. They live for a time there masquerading as the masters of The Pines, until the weather turns sour in October.

He puts his arm around Marcella and she reacts explosively, saying that Priest is more of a man than her husband, revealing her materialistic superficiality when she says, "If you want me, take me. If this house is yours, you can have me. We'll send him to Vegas — or throw him on the dump." When the narrator threatens to throw Priest on the fire unless he can see the master, Priest agrees, saying it was because of the narrator, not Marcella. Then "Kevin Malone" appears, with a gust of wind from the French windows, and "night entered with him, and remained in the room for as long as [they] talked". He immediately claims that the house owns him and reveals that his father was the man-of-all-work, and his mother the maid. He says, "I grew up here, washing the cars and raking leaves out of the fountains." He admits that this is his attempt to recreate the world of his childhood, and playing the part of house-owner had no appeal to him, so he hires young couples to be the wealthy and handsome young pair in the house, while he lives above the stables. Malone says that he was put in an orphanage at 12 but always wanted to recreate The Pines of his childhood, so through luck and industry he amassed a fortune, but found that being master of the house did not serve his purpose, so he would play the part of a servant, maintaining a fiction to create his own sense of home. The narrator offers to stay, but Malone says that his fiction requires actors who do not know what kind of role they are playing.

When the narrator asks why Malone had to enter the orphanage, he says it is a local legend — and Priest tells him that the elder Mr. Malone, the stableman, "murdered Betty Malone, who was one of the maids. Or at least he was thought to have — They never found a body and it's possible he was accused falsely." Malone adds that she was buried on the estate, and that "they found bloody rags and the hammer, and he hanged himself in the stable." When the narrator apologizes, Malone says that the maid was a much younger tramp; these things happen.

In the morning the narrator packs his bags without assistance and says that he saw his wife for the last time, with circles under her eyes but a steady hand, dusting. He ponders, "I have

sometimes wondered if I were wholly wrong in anticipating a ghost when the French windows opened. How did Malone know the time had come for him to appear."

He reviews the case and finds no mention of a child, and seems to think that the identical surnames of the victim and murderer were coincidental. He ends, "Sometimes I wonder if it is possible for a man — even a rich man — to be possessed, and not to know it."

COMMENTARY: There are two interesting themes present in "Kevin Malone" which perhaps illustrate something of the rather complex ideology Wolfe explores concerning freedom, service, and control. Even though the couple enjoys an easy existence, they cannot escape who they are — there is a reason that "Marcella's family had disowned her", and that, even in poverty, she is still "lying with her cocktail shaker on the chaise longue". Her entitlement continues at the estate, clear when she asserts that they can "live like human beings" again there. There is an immutability to the character of the young couple that almost belies the idea of free will. In the static environment of The Pines, they are still jealous, quibbling, and angry, though it seems they have very little to do save be themselves and play the part of wealthy young couple. However, the passing of summer definitely escalates their discomfort, and perhaps the double death has infiltrated the estate itself.

Malone rules like God — unseen and acting with a different set of understandings than the couple who are expected to never seek concrete answers to their masquerade. However, the parallels with Malone and the divine break down once he shows up with the angry wind from the windows and we sense that he, too, is subject to the same unseen, determined control, beyond his understanding. While Priest is the mediator between Malone and the couple, he seems to fear the direct presence of Malone.

The repetition of the wind blowing in through the windows, equated with the expectation of "a ghost, or some turbulent elemental spirit" and even with "that pricking at the neck that comes when one reads Poe alone at night" adds the supernatural hint to the story that cannot be ignored, though on the surface the mundane nature of the plot remains free of science fiction.

Malone serves as a mouthpiece to all the themes at play: "You're still re-creating the life you had as a child, or trying to. — None of us can be happy any other way, and few of us even want to try. — That's right, you can't go home. There's one place where we can never go — haven't you thought of that" We can dive to the bottom of the sea and some day NASA will fly us to the stars, and I have known men to plunge into the past — or the future — and drown. But there's one place where we can't go. We can't go where we are already. We can't go home, because our minds, and our hearts, and our immortal souls are already there. Of course the immortal soul at home over the stables is that of a murderer.

Even trying to live as a rich man gave Malone little satisfaction, and he claims "Home is three rooms above the stables. I live there now. I live at home, as a man should." Yet the fiction of his servitude must remain fiction: "Another owner would have wanted to change things — when I was a boy this estate belonged to a fashionable young couple. Suppose a man of my age had bought it" Or a young woman some whore. — The only actors who can really do justice to their parts are the ones who don't know what they are. He is visibly agitated when he speaks of a young woman as a "whore" here, and having his home above the stables certainly equates him with the malevolent spirit of the first Kevin Malone.

THE MURDER:

The local legend runs that the stableman, Kevin Malone, murdered Betty Malone, one of the maids, though "They never found the body, and it's

possible he was accused falsely.” Yet immediately the present Kevin Malone says, “Buried her on the estate — They found bloody rags and the hammer, and he hanged himself in the stable.” This is the same stable that Malone claims was, and is, his home. Upon this statement, the wind whips the drapes “like wine-red flags.” Malone says, “She was twenty years younger and a tramp — Those things happen.” Of course this knowledge of her whereabouts and the murder in general seem intimate, considering that there was no corpse recovered, and the only witness, the elder Kevin Malone, hung himself. Since the clippings make no mention of the child, it seems possible that Malone himself is unreal, though it seems more likely, as the Wolfe-wiki concludes, that he was a wealthy man who came into possession of the house — perhaps even the child of the original wealthy homeowners, though now he is possessed of the malevolent spirit of Kevin Malone. However, if he is in fact the wind spirit born of the death of the Malones, then perhaps the recreation of “his” birth involves the same pattern of murder, jealousy, and discontentment.

The twenty year age difference between Priest and Marcella echoes the difference in age between the Malones. Priest does claim that all of this occurred “before his time”, so his identity and involvement seems second hand. He is, however, afraid to close the windows when Kevin Malone is present, granting some credence to the idea that Malone is something like an evil wind spirit. The death of the maid does not bode well for Marcella, and if this Kevin Malone is a possessed man, perhaps his life, too, will be caught up in the murderous and suicidal circle of repetition — another actor who does not fully understand his role.

LITERARY ALLUSIONS:

“Kevin Malone” is fairly obvious in its references to the freeloading Klipspringer in **The Great Gatsby** and Poe in general, and while Marcella seems every bit as decadent and inclined to alcoholism as the stereotyped jazz age girl of money, that seems to be her natural character even before coming to live at the house. (However, the economy she displays with a steady hand in dusting the Sevres porcelain figures with a steady hand despite her immense hangover does seem to imply the spirit of the maid Betty Malone at work).

It seems Thomas Wolfe’s **You Can’t Go Home Again** plays the part of the wolf mention in this story in addition to its catch phrase nature in Malone’s discussion of home.

NAMES:

While most of the names don’t seem to connote very much, that of Lloyd Bateman, who shaves the master and whose name means grey boatman, certainly does seem to resonate with some sinister crossing over imagery.

Marcella: the name means warlike and strong. The Wolfe-Wiki also claims, “Marcella is the name of a saint, from a noble family in ancient Rome. She had been rich but devoted herself to asceticism. She was martyred by being beaten to death.”

Kevin means handsome by Birth, Malone means a servant or disciple of St. John.

The Pines: the narrator speculates that estate was originally called La Capanna (the hut or cabin) or Il Eremo (the hermitage or monastery).

Priest: the butler who serves as the intermediary between the couple and the master — his name means exactly what it says, a priest of holy man.

Carter: the footman who holds the tray, his name means transporter of materials.

The names on the picture include James Sutton (he who supplants, from the south farm), Edna DeBuck (Edna means wealthy friend), Lloyd Bateman (grey boatman).

The firm for which the narrator worked consisted of Jim Bruce (one who seizes or supplants, the willowlands) who actually told him he was through, Ketterly (while the meaning is unclear, an incompetent and importance seeking practitioner of magic from C.S. Lewis' Narnia books, who fails in his ambitions), and Drake (snake or dragon).

RELIGIOUS ALLUSIONS: There really is a commentary in here somewhere about servant and master that I think applies to God and the world. In **Attending Daedalus**, Wright picks up on some of the almost deterministic elements in Kevin Malone — at first the lack of control and the determined behavior and expectations of the narrator and his wife seems to jive with soft determinism — everything is fine as long as they go along with it, but later there is a hardness to it — they must be ignorant of the roles they play for Malone to be happy, even though he never sees them directly, and Priest reacts oddly to the question, “Will the master be able to see us?” as if he can see them whenever they are in the house. The atmosphere Kevin Malone tries to recreate is one that demands the ignorance of his actors. The Wolfe-wiki mentions that the attempt to seek knowledge dooms them in an almost Garden of Eden parallel, though from my point of view the relationship was doomed and self-destructive even before the couple came to the Pines.

It also claims, “There are religious hints in the butler named Priest, the rose gardener, the lamb for dinner, etc.”

If the Pines was originally called Il Eremo, the monastery, then perhaps Priest serves an unholy spirit (the holy spirit usually depicted as a flame, and the threat of fire finally prompting the appearance of Kevin Malone on the wind)

THE HOUSE AND THE WIND:

The house itself at several points seems to hold some sway: Malone says, “this house owns me,” and Marcella stands straighter when she says, “It owns me too.” Since Betty Malone is buried on the estate and Kevin Malone killed himself in the very stable that the current Kevin Malone claims as his home, the three rooms above the stable, perhaps the estate itself has attained something of a malevolent awareness.

Whether Kevin Malone is the name of the original master of the house is open for speculation — the clean handkerchief the narrator finds in his pocket was made of Irish linen, though the two being identified as man of all work and maid preclude them from being the masters, one would assume.

There is definitely an association between the wind, the darkness of night, and Malone, and his claim to grow up washing the cars and raking leaves could very well resonate with a windy storm born of the murder “his metaphorical father’s suicide and his mother’s murder mystically creating him like an unholy spirit in their violent deaths, his childhood simply a recreation, thus his accusation, “You’re still re-creating the life you had as a child, or trying to”.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS: What has the narrator done to lose his job? Is it part of his aggressive character? Are we to assume some kind of genetic proclivity for self-destruction?

It seems that since Marcella is dusting and staying at the house at the end that she has taken up the role of Betty Malone in her black dress, and that since the narrator never sees her again, something rather permanent happens to her. She is approximately 20 years younger than the servant Priest, as Betty Malone was 20 years younger than Kevin Malone. Therefore, our question should be — how is Priest involved in all of this? There is a moment, when Kevin Malone threatens him with being thrown in the fire, when Priest asserts that “It was not the lady, sir. It was you. I want that understood this time — I’m not doing this because of what she said.” When they first arrive, he says “Very well?” and is amused when they ask, “Will your master be able to see us?” as if perhaps the master is all seeing. Why would the threat of fire impel Priest to bring the master, who immediately enters with the wind?

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS:

“Kevin Malone” is fairly straightforward as a possession story, and while, much like “Suzanne Delage”, it can be read straight without the supernatural element without truly affecting its theme, as a Wolfe story we must expect that it is still fantasy, especially since it appeared in a publication called **New Terrors**. The large, self-sufficient but ultimately unsettling house motif runs through Wolfe: “Many Mansions”, “In the House of Gingerbread”, “And When They Appear”, ?Josh?, **The Sorcerer’s House**, and **The Land Across** all feature these types of often sinister but occasionally benign dwellings. (I think the house in **Free Live Free** is intrinsically different, even though it, too, serves as a portal to a different ontological existence).

I think there is a definite switch to fantasy in 1980 which has been for the most part, except for **Peace**, “Thag”, and “The Changeling” (**Devil in a Forest** has a realistic reading) absent in Wolfe’s work up to that point, and it makes it both richer in mysticism but at the same time less subject to structural logic.

Marc Aramini — 02 Aug 2014, 21:55 · follows Marc Aramini

Wait wait ...

The twenty year difference between priest and Marcella and between Betty and Kevin Malone must resonate ... The guilt of Kevin is assumed by his namesake but Priest says it was never proven. Both Marcella and the narrator are jealous of Priest, the older man.

Could it be that Betty was the master's mistress and fell for Kevin Malone (since they were not related in fact). Yet the younger Kevin seems malevolent when he thinks of young women, and he is home in the stables where the older Kevin died, so that scenario doesn't quite pan out. It seems most likely that Kevin's spirit motivated the scenario to repeat, unless he feels that justice was not done the first time through the cycle and killed himself in grief. Was Betty ever pregnant? The news report indicates no relationship between Kevin and Betty Malone and no child... But Kevin Malone the younger exists and the new cycle has a couple jealous of an older servant ...