

Short Story 88: A Cabin on the Coast

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 11 Aug 2014

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Marc Aramini — 11 Aug 2014, 21:17

"A Cabin on the Coast" first appeared in **Zu den Sternen** in 1981 and is collected in **Endangered Species**.

SUMMARY: In his father's cottage, Tim Ryan Neal plans to elope with Lissy. Tim swims alone and sees something which resembles a crude drawing of a ship on the horizon. He then returns naked to the cottage, where he and Lissy exchange some rather pointed banter which brings up his father, who is running for office as a Democrat. His mother died near Tim's birth, but named her ninth child and seventh son after the father, who goes by the name Ryan Neal. He resembles his father greatly, and Lissy vows to call him "Little Tim" and his father "Big Tim". After a bit more frolicking near the water, he carries Lissy to bed.

In the morning, she is gone, her damp bathing suit hanging up in the cottage. Tim tries to find her and eventually goes to the police, who understand his delicate political position because of his father's career and will file a missing person's report in 24 hours. He returns to the cabin, watches the strange ship a bit longer, and then swims out searching for it until the ship is suddenly before him. Once he reaches its oars, he instantly appears on deck next to a man with an Irish speech pattern smoking a pipe. The man identifies himself as Daniel O'Donoghue, the High King of Connaught. After a discussion of the nature of faerie folk and even aliens, he says that Tim must get Lissy back with his blessing or drown, and that the only way to do it is to serve him. First he asks for a hundred years, and then, when Tim agrees, shortens it to twenty.

He bursts through the water, and vaguely remembers "drudging, dancing, buying, spying, prying, waylaying and betraying when he walked in the world of men. Serving something he had never wholly understood. Sailing foggy seas that were sometimes of this earth. Floating among the constellations. The years and the slaps and the kicks were all fading, and with them .. the days when he had begged."

He makes his way into the cabin, and returns on the day before he left to find Lissy in bed. She says, "Big Tim — You did come. Tim and I were hoping you would — we're going to be married."

COMMENTARY:

While this is a supernatural story, it is also one which explores class distinctions in relationships, something that is perhaps relegated to wealth, education, and status rather than titles, blood, and birth in much American fiction. Many fairy tales confront this class separation, and the root of the modern realistic novel can also be said to underline this stratification in society. Here we have an eloping couple representing obviously different stations in life, but the story soon drops its realistic basis and returns to the fairy tale root — and we soon see that a bond between two different people, whether they are mortal and fairy or not, often comes at a rather stern price.

The first thing to note is that Tim Ryan Neal is a seventh son of a seventh son, and this explains why Daniel O'Donoghue, or whatever his real name is, maintains an interest in his service.

These seventh sons were reputed to not only have extraordinary talents as healers, but to also have skills of prognostication and magic. For this reason, he attracts the faerie folk. His name also hints at kingly greatness and importance, and Daniel succeeds in casting him down to the point of begging.

The word “cabin”, which Lissy insists on calling the cottage, has another implication: a room or partition in a vessel, and this, coupled with the strange dialog between the two and her reluctance to submerge herself in the water (though her bathing suit is wet and she does claim that she wants to learn how to swim) casts some suspicion on both her motives and on her identity. Lissy seems to hint that Tim's mother knew that her seventh son would resemble his father almost exactly.

The dialog between the two flows almost as vaguely sinister non-sequiturs, involving castration and consumption — let's trace the interchange between them for a brief feel for this banter:

[On seeing him naked, when he explains it is too early for people] - “Get into bed then. How about the fish?”

?Salt water makes the sheets sticky. The fish have seen them before. Here, he implies his genitals, and immediately she suggests, “They might bite 'em off. Sharks, you know. Little ones.”

In a few lines, when he implies that people will think she might not be swimming because it's “that time of the month”, she threatens, “I'm going to bite your ears off.”

He calls her a castrating woman, and later, as she takes a bite of a hot dog and repeats his description, her remark is unintelligible. “Cuff tough woof.”

She won't submerge in the water: “She was afraid of the water. We went in yesterday, and even with me there, she would hardly go in over her knees.” While the name Lissy might be short for Alice or Elizabeth, there is one other mythological name that might sound slightly like it, discussed below.

Finally, we have the police officer, when he thinks of her possible fate, saying this: “People think drowners holler like fire sirens, but they don't — they don't have that much air.” Even though the cup is bringing up the sound of a fire truck or alarm here, Wolfe places the term siren there for a reason, for this trip to the coast with Lissy, fraught with the lingering disapproval of his father, symbolically resembles the call of the sirens, luring men away from safety.

LITERARY AND MYTHOLOGICAL ALLUSIONS:

The land of Connaught in Ireland which Daniel claims to be King of is real — it's name implies “Descendents of Conn”, a legendary High King of Ireland. When the Tuatha Da Danann defeated the Firbolg, they gave the remnants of the Firbolg control of Connaught. Wolfe has overlaid this story before with American history in **Peace**, where waves of settlers, some Irish, replace the Native Americans, and this actually comes up in the story, where Tim claims that he is American rather than Irish and King Daniel inquires where his feathers are.

In many ways this is something of an inverted version of Hans Christian Anderson's “The Little Mermaid” - in that story, Melusine the mermaid falls in love with a human and must serve the good for 300 years to earn a human soul. She gives up her tongue in return for human limbs, and there are points when the dialog between Lissy (could Lissy be derived from Melusine instead of Elizabeth?) and Tim are unintelligible, such as when she has her mouth full: “cuff

tough woof”, meaning to say “castrating woman.” Lissy, like Melusine, is also reluctant to get wet, and Tim notes she would not enter the water above her knees, though her bathing suit is wet the next day. Time says that Lissy is the oldest of her parent's children, and this is also echoed in the 14th century stories of Melusine by Jean D'Arras, in which Melusine's mother Pressyne made the human father agree never to enter her chamber when she birthed or washed her children — Melusine is the oldest of her children, and when the father inevitably breaks his word, the mother and children escape to Avalon. (I will avoid making any kind of parallel here between the Irish Democrat Tim Ryan Neil and the Kennedy family's administration, with its fanciful Camelot appellation and even the later Chappaquiddick disaster that involved Mary Jo Kopechne's drowning, though I think there is a faint resonance there.)

In any case, just as there is often a high price in fairy tales in relationships between the fairy and mortals, here Tim suffers because of his need to obtain the object of his desire. When Daniel puts his foot on the back of his head, this resembles the famous image of the Archangel Michael stepping on the head of Lucifer, though here it is probably the fey or demonic asserting its dominion over man because of his all consuming lust.

NAMES AND THE FAERIE

Daniel O'Donoghue, King of Connaught: Daniel means “God is my judge” and O'Donoghue can mean a descendant of Donn Cadh, “the lord of battle” or “the dark-haired man of battle.”

Dom Daniel: a fictional cavern at the bottom of the ocean where evil beings and sorcerers gather, it is mentioned in many fantasy works, including ones by T.H. White, Hawthorne, and Lovecraft.

Daniel, perhaps sarcastically, says, “Tis the Fair Folk we are. The jinn o' the desert too, and the saucer riders ye say ye credit — Have ye never wondered why we're so much alike the world over” Or thought that we don't always know just which shape's the best for a place, so the naiads and the driads might as well be the ladies o' the Deeny Shee? Do ye know what the folk o' the Barb'ry Coast call the hell that's under their sea? ? Why, 'tis Dom Daniel. I wonder why that is now. The Deeny Shee mentioned are the Daoine Sidhe or “the People of Peace” so prominent in *Peace* and in the stories of Ireland. Here Greek, Irish, and even Arabian myths are being equated with their common denominators, and Daniel even implies that any attempt to explain the unknown, such as the concept of aliens, involves the same root of inexplicable mystery which he represents, always knowing how to appear to best serve his own goals.

Timothy Ryan Neal: Timothy means “God-fearing” or “God's honor”, Ryan implies the “little king” or “kingly”, and Neal, which is derived from “the champion”. Here, Daniel places his foot upon his head and gains his service, perhaps luring him away with Lissy. There is an exchange between them where Tim is talking of Lissy and says, “We went in yesterday, and even with me there, she would hardly go in over her knees. So it was you,” to which Daniel replies, “Yer right ? 'twas us”, rather ambiguously — whether or not Lissy is actually faerie in origin, she has served their purposes as bait for Tim, causing him to waste his life and lose the youthful love he valued above all else.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

Why does the ship resemble a child's drawing of a ship?

Does the title, “A Cabin on the Coast”, somehow refer to the ship rather than to Tim's cottage?

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS:

The mutable form of faeries began in "The Changeling" and *Peace* and will be seen over and over in Wolfe's later work, such as "The Friendship Light" and "Sighting at Twin Mounds", with a fair amount of syncretic ambiguity in their nature.