

Short Story 92: Checking Out

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Marc Aramini — 14 Aug 2014, 14:33

Checking Out

“Checking Out” first appeared in 1986 in **Afterlives** and is collected in **Storeys from the Old Hotel.**

SUMMARY: A nameless protagonist is awoken by the slam of a door. He is lying on a blue satin coverlet fully dressed in his best suit but without shoes. He believes himself to be in a small, shiny, and cheap hotel room and sees his suitcase nearby. He opens his bag and realizes his blue-eyed wife Jane didn't pack it, thinking it must have been his cleaning woman, Martha, before he remembers “Martha was dead.” He sees a picture of Jane's clear blue eyes, and thinks that she would say that she would miss him, “Though he knew the only time she really relaxed was when he was gone — when he was gone, and she could pretend they were rich for life, and there would never, never be a need to make anything more, no need for late nights at the office, for flights to New York with [his secretary] Jan.”

He remembers a flight and decides he is in the Algonquin in New York, and wants to go out and get a magazine but can't find his shoes: “Well, to hell with them.” He finds Jan's picture while looking for his slippers, and thinks Martha must have put it there. He tosses it “toward the wastebasket.” He thinks she must love him “in a way Jane never had”, at least since the birth of their child.

He finds a picture of his adolescent sweetheart Joan under Jan's picture, and hears the air conditioner like an “unending sigh”. He recalls a childhood desk and is astonished to think that Joan was probably a virgin then. He tries to throw “both” pictures at the wastebasket again, and steps on the balcony to see a huge atrium, with flooding below and the sky above, but no way to leave the room. “Tiny figures moved slowly across the lobby, wading in water nearly waist deep ?. The room was dark and gloomy behind him, like a cave in which something slept.” He returns to the room to see Jan's picture once again on his clean clothes, and reaches for the phone to confess to Jane.

The story cuts to Jane and Mrs. Clem discussing how nice he looked in all that pretty blue at his funeral — Jane bought an air tight dome to keep water from getting to her dead husband. She answers the phone but hears nothing, not even breathing, as the main character, despite his resolve to return to his wife Jane, becomes confused again and calls out all three names before the cleaning woman comes in to turn down the bed so that it is ready for him to lie in once more.

COMMENTARY: The first thing that jumps out is the style of the story, rather unusual for Wolfe at this point in his career: simple declarative sentences that repeat the same pattern over and over. The simple repetition will be the narrator's fate. He tosses Jan's picture toward the wastebasket three times, and many thoughts recur incessantly. “No doubt” starts at least seven sentences in a fairly short story — but our main character has been plagued by doubts

and uncertainty all his life, especially when it comes to women. The fragments that stick out are “Flights — Space. — an atrium - ? a flood - ...” Even the names of the women involved (Jan, Jane, and Joan) have a sameness to them that makes them seem like a repetitive part of a cycle, and no doubt this symbolizes his difficulty in separating his feelings for them while he was alive. He tries to get rid of unwanted pictures now with little success. The picture of Jan keeps cropping up, in the frame and on his clothes, whenever his attention waivers — no matter how he resolves to throw it away, he fails.

The overwhelming blue of the sky and the water in the atrium and his own coverlet of course reflect the blue of his coffin — but he is trapped in that small room, sealed off from the blue water and infinite sky he can only glimpse from the closed balcony. More than this, however, the blue also represent Jane and her blue eyes. At the end of the story, she has erected an air tight barrier around him so that the water can't reach him, the blue theme her choice, and he has been sealed off from her love. His ending decision, to return to Jane, comes too late — unable to truly make up his mind in life, in death the decision has no power, and he is trapped in the limbo, with only the repetitive sameness of trying to throw away the things he never could in life.

The sighing might seem like the slow exhalation of a final breath, but it probably implies regret now that things can no longer be fixed and he has finally made his choice. Even with his resolution, which seems firm, when Jan does not hear him, he immediately begins to call out the wrong name once more. This final scene is the hardest to pin down as “after-life” or not. It is doubtful there is any intersection between his existence in the hotel limbo and Jan's continuing life without him, but whether or not his spirit can actually succeed in making the call, it is clear he can no longer communicate with her. The only female presence he will have here is probably “dead” Martha the cleaning woman, who refuses to do windows. His failure to see clearly in life and appreciate the things he had has doomed him to this.

With the meaning of the female names discussed below, Mrs. Clem's minor mercies involve saying how nice he looked in death and in suggesting to Jan that she hang up the phone, but all that is left for the main character is the bitterness of separation and the return of his dead cleaning woman.

There is some speculation as to whether this afterlife is more like a hell or a purgatory, but from the sighing and the main character's exclamation, “To hell with them”, it seems to be more like the first circle of Dante's Hell, Limbo, the start of the huge vertical prison, rather than any Catholic idea of Purgatory, for even when he makes his decision to return to Jane or throw away Jan and Joan, immediately they are back to haunt him. There is no indication that he can ever throw them away, failing to do so in life — when Jane does not hear his voice, the cycle of confusion starts over.

LITERARY ALLUSIONS-

Because of the name, “Checking Out”, and the sighing that is heard throughout the story, the thought that this was something like Wolfe's version of Bierce's “Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” presented itself, but the blue satin coverlet and the dead man's shoeless state matches a bit too much with the coffin (most are buried without shoes, after all) that his wife has spent so much money on to believe that he was actually still in the process of “checking out”. It seems far more likely that the literary allusion at work is to Dante's *Inferno**, where the souls in Limbo constantly sigh, lamenting their separation from God. Even though Dante's vision of purgatory is also vertical, like the huge atrium that our narrator sees, the sighing found throughout Limbo and even the idea of Virgil in Limbo as a fountain and the “sea of all good sense” makes it seem as if our main character is more closely situated to the *Inferno* than

Purgatory. Our nameless main character has no way to ascend or leave the hotel room, even though he insists on checking out of it.

NAMES

Obviously, all three female names are so similar in their root that they mean the same thing.

Jan — God is gracious, it can also mean gift from God

Jane — God is gracious, gift from God

Joan- God is gracious, gift from God

One gets the impression that part of the narrator's failing in life was in lacking appreciation for God's gifts until it was too late.

Bruce — implies thick brush (if there is a deliberate Dante reference at work in this story, ironic that the start of his poem involves getting lost in the woods -

IN the midway of this our mortal life,

I found me in a gloomy wood, astray

Gone from the path direct: and e?en to tell,

It were no easy task, how savage wild

That forest, how robust and rough its growth,

Which to remember only, my dismay

Renews, in bitterness not far from death.

Martha — the sister of Lazarus and Mary, her name means bitter, (just as the names of the wife of the narrator in "Redbeard" and the daughter in "The Adopted Father" do).

Mrs. Clem — the name Clem implies merciful. Her mercy extends to advising Jane to hang up and in admitting that the dead man looked nice in all that "pretty blue".

THE EFFECT OF THE NARRATIVE VOICE:

The immediacy of first person might create a more personal look at our narrator's dying or dead experiences, but the third person allows distance and a passive powerlessness that suits the isolated, trapped man — he is about to lose the "I" of ego, isolated in the watery hotel room of his spirit. His attempt to assure his wife that he is returning and that he is making his choice comes far too late.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

What is the significance of the flood, and why would Jane erect an air tight barrier around his coffin to avoid the entrance of water? Symbolically I think this represents the separation from her, but is the water imagery truly as benign as Jane's blue eyes when there are figures in the lobby wading in water up to their waists?

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS:

I feel as if Wolfe has done several stories where the narrator is about to die, namely "The Recording" and "Melting", and several that involve consciousness after death - "The Dead Man", *Peace, *and some of the stories from *Strange Travelers*. However, even though there are some small gestures that this one is located on the cusp of dying, the overall effect is that of an after-life story where our narrator deals with the regrets and mistakes of his life, and in that regard it is closest to *Peace*. It is also like a more figurative "Packerhaus Method", though this one is more overtly dualist, with the intersection between the afterlife and the purely physical world fleeting, ineffectual, and perhaps illusory.