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The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 15 Aug 1997

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Peter Cash — 15 Aug 1997, 19:02

Alga wrote:

I have a reader's guide to Wolfe that mantis sent me, published in 1986 by Joan Gordon. She's very uneven, useless on "Traveler's Song," much better on "Seven American Nights," which obviously caught her fancy. And one thing she notes, that I'll pass along, about playing Russian roulette with the acid-impregnated eggs:

"We know that he eats five of the six eggs: his mind may be altered further on any one of these occasions, or on all, if all the eggs are tainted as the one in the theater may have been. As for the sixth egg, Nadan believes that the police may have searched his room and stolen it, but there is another explanation. The sixth egg may have been the one containing the hallucinogen, and its effects may have caused him to lose a day. Our proof? 'Seven American Nights' describes only six nights."

Holy Toledo! She's right! I sat down last night and methodically marked up the story and the egg-eating instances, and there are indeed only six nights and five eggs eaten!

It's somewhat problematic how Nadan could have lost a night, though. It has to be after he ate the third egg (E3), for at that time all eggs were still accounted for. He mentions eating E3 on the evening of the 6th day (p. 370 of the new ORB edition), just before going out to dinner with Ardis. Nadan writes of the loss of the egg on what is purportedly late on the 6th night. (I will treat everything between one breakfast and another as a "night".) After noting the missing egg, Nadan goes on to record what happened on his date with Ardis.

Thus, if there is a hiatus--a missing night--it must have happened after his date with Ardis, and before his recording of the events that took place during the date. He must have returned to the hotel and eaten another egg. If we assume that this was the psychedelic egg, he would then have spent the next 24 hours wandering about in a trance, perhaps regaining consciousness at about the same time as he consumed the egg on the previous day--and taken up the thread of his narrative where his memory left off.

The problem with this scenario is that he had already eaten an egg that night (night 5), and it would be against the rules of his little game of Russian Roulette to eat two eggs on the same night. By those rules, he should not have eaten another egg until the following evening, as he does (early on the 6th evening). I suppose it's not impossible that he should break his own rules, but why should we suppose he did? Especially after his torrid date, which he would want to set down into writing as quickly as possible (as he appears to do).

Clearly, we are supposed to think that the last egg (E5) was the psychedelic one. After taking this egg, Nadan writes of footsteps that "jar the building like an earthquake", of words that sound like thunder, of dead Ardis stepping out of the candle flame, and of a hairy face coming through the window. These all sound like acid effects. But perhaps he perceives things this way because he has suffered an enormous shock and committed a terrible crime. Maybe something is coming in the window?

Why does Gordon think that an egg was trifled with in the theater? Who did it? The museum curator? Why would he?

On some other topics in "Seven American Nights":

- The curator shows Nadan some samples of forged writing generated by a machine possessed by the museum. Is this a hint that the notebook may have been written by such a machine?
- The 6th day is in fact Easter. Is this significant? Hmm. And this means he killed the monster on Good Friday.
- Early on, Nadan makes the throwaway remark that "...someone on the ship may have administered some such drug to me". What are we to make of this?
- Apparently, Nadan's reason for coming to America (the reason he claims to have expunged all traces of after finding the missing egg) has something to do with recovering some Persian miniatures. (After the killing, he writes, "I might seek to claim the minatures of our heritage after all, and allow the guards to kill me.") Could such a mission justify major skulduggery by agents unknown, such as slipping drugs to Nadan on the ship or after the landed?

Hoping for some insights from you all,

Sgt. Rock