

Seven American Nights

The Urth list — 4 messages, 3 voices, 06 May 2002

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Robert Borski — 06 May 2002, 06:42

Possibly Gene Wolfe's best work of short fiction is "Seven American Nights." Certainly it's one of my favorites.

But how, given that Nadan's journal only chronicles six nights, are we to reconcile this with Wolfe's title? And equally mysterious, what has happened to the missing hallucinogenic egg--the one that Nadan would have us believe was stolen from his room?

Joan Gordon, in her Starmont Reader's Guide, speculates that while Nadan believes an egg to be missing, "The sixth egg may have been the one containing the hallucinogen, and its effects may have caused him to lose a day."

Kathryn Locey, writing in her NYRSF essay, "Three Dreams, Seven Nights, and Gene Wolfe's Catholicism," has quite another explanation: "My suggestion is that the seventh night refers to the one which will follow the early morning in which Ardis is killed. It will be the holiest night of the year--the Easter Vigil, the time of resurrection, and of hope." She does not attempt to account for the missing egg, and the implication is that she believes Nadan's entry about it.

Of the two explanations I prefer Gordon's, since I don't think there's any way to reconfigure the ending of "Seven American Nights" and wrest from it a note of resurrection or hope--quite the contrary. And yet even Gordon's solution fails to satisfy fully, being no more substantial than one of Nadan's visions; having a hallucinogen-caused lacuna also strikes me as cheating on the part of Wolfe.

I'd therefore like to offer my own solution as a third alternative.

My own belief about both the missing egg and the missing night is simple: Nadan's account of taking the egg, and what happens afterward, is among the material he excises from his journal.

Let us briefly reprise the circumstances involved with this.

Nadan, returning to his room on what seems to be Night 5, makes the following entry: "When I came back from Ardis's apartment tonight there were only two candy eggs remaining. I am certain--absolutely certain--that three were left when I went to meet Ardis. I am almost equally sure that after I had finished making the entry in this book, I put it, as I always do, at the left side of the drawer. It was on the right side." Nadan speculates that a maid may be responsible for the notebook's moved position; but then overcome by the notion that he is being spied upon by the government, he removes everything from his journal about an as-of-yet unspecified mission that might incriminate him ("Now I have gone through the book and eliminated all the passages relating to my reason for visiting this leprous country.") Locey seems a little vague about the mission, but Gordon nails it dead-on, citing Nadan's hope near the end when he states "I might seek to claim the miniatures of our heritage after all." Nadan, in other words, is a would-be thief (an art patriot?), and moreover it appears he's already staked out the National

Gallery of Art, where the Persian miniatures are, because he knows it's guarded. (After he's discovered Ardis's deformity, he speculates that he "might even allow the guards to kill me.") If the notebook is spiral-bound as many notebooks are, it would be a simple matter to tear out the pages containing Nadan's account of his trip to the Gallery; if the account was started on a clean page, and short, the same page (or its opposite side) might even include Nadan's detailing of the taking of that day's egg. More likely, however, Nadan would be effusive about his mission, perhaps even running away with the romantic notion about how he would be received in Iran once he returned with the retrieved miniatures. This might then color all of that day's chronicle, including the taking of the egg, and thus require the elimination of several pages. Regardless, if Nadan wishes to continue his travel book, he must now account for the missing egg in case his journal is ever found again. It seems likely someone has earlier replaced his journal in the other drawer, triggering his paranoia; whether it's a maid or special operative probably doesn't matter, but given that Nadan has spent Day 5 with Ardis visiting various federal enforcement agencies, he may very well have aroused suspicion about himself and prompted an investigation. Nadan thus pens the fictitious account about the missing egg--because the true account, containing the incriminating evidence about his visit to the National Gallery, as well as his taking of the egg, has been eliminated.

But given how Nadan's journal reads, with its daily and nightly record of events (though he does tend to jump around a lot), there seems to be no huge gap between the chronicle of one day and the next--and many times each new day's events seems contiguous with or built upon the previous day's record. How therefore do we interpolate the missing pages with their events in a narrative that seems relatively unbroken?

I believe the answer can be found in the entry we are meant to believe details Day 5--although it is actually a cobbling together of two days, with the excised portions constituting Nadan's visit to the Gallery and subsequent oöphagy.

Day 5 begins with Nadan eating breakfast. (p. 400, IODD&OS&OS, Pocket). Ardis arrives later, then together the pair set about in an attempt to free Bobby O' Keene, the actor who's been arrested for trying to rob Nadan the previous night. A frustrating afternoon follows as the two attempt to navigate the police bureaucracy; Nadan on the previous night has told Ardis that he will now tell the police that he was mistaken about Bobby--that he only bumped against him on the steps and tried to catch his sketchbook as it fell. But the police apparently remain skeptical, "obsessed by the idea that something more lay behind the simple incident we described over and over again." Later, Ardis and Nadan attempt to find Bobby in a penal facility, forced to look for him "among five hundred or so miserable prisoners, all of whom stank and had lice." Having no luck, they're subsequently subjected to another round of interviews at the F.E.D. building, but are then told to leave at five o' clock. Nadan walks Ardis home, then asks her what they will do without Bobby to play his designated role at the theater that night. "The best we can, I suppose, if we must. At least Paul will have someone to stand in for him tonight." Nathan closes his journal entry with one final sentence--"We shall see how well it goes"--indicating his intention to go to the theater. And then there is a break in the narrative.

When the narrative recommences it's with the passage I quote at the beginning of paragraph 9, wherein Nadan wants us to believe that someone has broken into his room, relocated his journal, and eaten the missing egg. Actually, however, I believe this is being written an entire day later, on the night that concludes Day 6. Nadan makes it seem as if the break-in and the events preceding it are still part of Day 5, but I believe Wolfe provides us with several clues that it isn't when he has Nadan reprise the evening's activities. As we expect, Nadan goes to the theater; when he arrives, however, much to his surprise, he discovers that Bobby O' Keene is already there and preparing to go on-stage. "You are free," Nadan says. But given Nadan's and Ardis's previous frustrations with the police (who, remember, seem to believe there's something

more to the alleged robbery than a simple mistaking of intentions), in addition to the sorry state of the prisoners, is it likely that O' Keene is going to be this well groomed and composed--especially since Nadan describes him as having been beaten to the ground by the crowd that's witnessed the robbery--and ready to trod the boards?

Ardis, in turn, then asks Bobby, "Was it very bad?" To which the actor responds, "It was frightening, that's all. I thought I'd never get out." But if he was arrested late the night before, and released the following day, perhaps being confined, at the most, 16 hours, this hardly seems to warrant a comment about never getting out. In addition, when Bobby says, "I hear you missed me last night," Ardis responds, "God, yes." But if Bobby has actually been confined in jail for a day-and-a-half, Ardis may well be commenting on the poor performance of his stand-in (the fact that Bobby has been missed by her is obviously communicated by someone else). A longer period of confinement also allows more time for Bobby to rue his imprisonment and recover from his beating, as well as for the police department to do the necessary papershuffling involved with his release. But because Nadan's journal is now missing his account of the Gallery visit--the second day of Bobby's confinement--he can never directly mention how long the actor has been incarcerated.

Here then with page numbers and journal events is how I break everything down.

Day 5. p 396-399. Nadan eats breakfast, spends afternoon with Ardis trying to liberate Bobby O' Keene, fails, goes back to room, takes third egg.

Chronicles, but later excises, evening visit to theater, where Bobby O' Keene's stand-in performs poorly. Goes back to room, sleeps.

Day 6. Records, but later excises, daytime visit to Gallery, plus taking of fourth egg. Goes to theater after dinner with Ardis, encounters freed Bobby (p. 401). Returns to room later, discovers journal has been moved to different drawer, panics (p. 400-401), excises evening of Day 5 (since he now needs Bobby out of jail a day early), Gallery visit, and consumption of fourth egg, then appends the evening of Day 6 to the truncated version of Day 5, fabricating the lie about the missing egg.

The altered Day 5 now looks like exactly as it reads in the story: Nadan eats breakfast, spends afternoon with Ardis trying to liberate Bobby O' Keene, fails, goes back to room and takes third egg. Goes to theater after dinner with Ardis, encounters freed Bobby. Returns to room later, discovers journal has been moved to different drawer, panics, makes excisions.

Actual Day 7 now becomes Journal Day 6.

Result: one missing American night.

Still to come: Dahl's deformity.

Robert Borski

Matthew Davis — 07 May 2002, 17:18 · follows Robert Borski

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When I read the story I counted 7 Nights, so never had to try and account for a missing DAY. Unless I misread, or Americans have some other way of counting off days and nights, Nadan _does_ spend Seven Nights in America. The first night takes place between the lines "It's his country bleeding to death" and "Here it is evening again". Nothing happens during his first night in America, and it's easy to overlook since he wakes up in the hotel after getting off the ship. But it is an American Night. Then you can count off the other six.

Matthew Davis — 07 May 2002, 17:39 · follows Matthew Davis

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Ah, No I did misread. The dream of mouldy bread I thought indicated a break between days (grey mould on bread - a hint of ergotomine and hallucinogenics?). Rerereading I see it's an interjection during Nadan's journey into the north of Washington.

StoneOx17 — 24 May 2002, 02:16 · follows Matthew Davis

I think that Robert Borski has brilliantly figured out the mysteries in Seven American Nights. I want to add a corroborating piece of evidence I discovered, and try to answer one of the objections to his theory.

The corroborating evidence: If you count backwards from Good Friday, and include the missing night, you discover that the last performance of "Visit to a Small Planet" was on Sunday night, with "Mary Rose" starting on Monday. This is the usual day that repertory theaters end a run.

Now, to address one of the objections to Borski's theory. Robert Borski writes:

("I would therefore like to suggest something else to you. Is it possible that what Nadan actually notices by the ignited arrack is the burn caused by his own laser pistol and that Ardis Dahl is the werebeast he attempts, but fails, to kill on the night of the first egg?")

David DiGiacomo objects:

"No, it's not possible, because..."
"If he had seen the laser burn, it would have been obvious beyond any plausible dissociation that he had *not* killed the thing earlier in the week.

Robert Borski replies:

"What, you expect lucidity at the height of a psychedelic experience? Obviously, you've never dropped, because if you had, you would know that under such conditions, it is not only possible to believe six impossible things before breakfast, but that the werewolf you have killed is even now undulating beneath you, attempting to cover the lethal burn mark between her lupine breasts.

But Nadan has just that instant eaten the egg, and the hallucinogen hasn't taken effect yet. Let me give an alternate explanation.

Robert Borski doesn't mention it explicitly, but when Nadan shoots the werewolf, he seem to stop her in the middle of changing back to human, leaving a face with a blunt muzzle on a human torso. When Nadan writes "I know now that the thing I killed before Ardis' father's house was real," he is still hoping that what he just saw, Ardis's head on the torso of the beast he shot Monday night, was a hallucination induced by the fifth egg. He knows he didn't eat the treated egg Monday, since he couldn't have hallucinated Ardis's torso before he knew what it looked like, and so the beast was real. But he's afraid to admit to himself that he might not have killed it.

Finally, let me remark that it appears that Ardis may be a con artist who takes tourists into the interior and robs and kills them (or robs them after the werewolf kills them). If Nadan does kill her--for he is hallucinating when he writes "My dead Ardis," it was well-deserved.

= Peter (Stone Ox)