

Short Story 102: Cherry Jubilee

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Marc Aramini — 23 Aug 2014, 18:29

“Cherry Jubilee” appeared in *Isaac Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine** in 1982 and is reprinted in *Storeys from the Old Hotel*.*

SUMMARY: On Captain Bogdanoff’s *Red Star**, the famous escape artist Merry Houdini and her four year old adult clone Cherry are in transit to Soviet controlled Mars with their sponsor, Koroviev, to begin a tour. An American agent named Smith is invited to dinner with Bogdanoff, the girls, Koroviev, a dark woman named Vera Oussinko (who works for the KGB), and Pasik and Anna Petrovsky (a bureaucrat and his biochemist wife). Smith talks with Cherry, the woman in red, at the dinner quite extensively. Her intellect is that of an adult and she reveals her plans to someday work independently of Merry. Her eyes brighten up at the cherry jubilee desert, and Smith explains the concept of the Jewish jubilee — every fifty years, “all tribal lands were returned to their possessors — even if they had been leased or sold — they held a celebration, because everybody was getting his birth right back.” At this, she looks solemn and states that she “likes it” while tasting the dessert.

On ship, they plan to shoot Merry out into space in a locked coffin from which she will escape. The clone ties a safety line which the captain insists upon using for the act to tether the coffin to the ship. When Smith bumps into the clone, she smiles and he “attempt[s] to smile in return.” As they leave the airlock to watch, they see a coffin in space and eventually perceive a hand spring forth from it. Smith runs back to the airlock to find globules of blood floating in the zero gravity environment, “like cherries.”

That night Vera attempts to talk her way through the case. She asserts that Cherry has been murdered, stabbed with Vera’s own steak knife, which she noticed was gone before the table was cleared. Only those at the dinner table had access to the knives. Merry says that she had no reason to kill her clone, who cost her “over two hundred thousand”. Vera states her motive was an affair with Captain Bogdanoff. She says that Smith might have been sent by his government to keep the clone from being studied by Soviet scientists. The KGB agent also explores whether Pasik Petrovsky could have been Cherry’s lover, but he denies it and he and his wife hold hands. Koroviev says that his career with the Ministry of Art is finished and he has no conceivable motive, though Anna asserts that a murder would generate interest on Mars amongst engineers, geologists and astronomers, attracting them.

Next Vera explores the positions of all of the suspects. Koroviev was absent during the launch of the coffin, and the Petrovsky family returned to the airlock briefly to look for an earring which had floated away. The weight of the gold earring and how far it travelled in that short time leads Smith to posit that the stabbing was very recent with the blood so near to Cherry’s body when he came upon it.

Because the safety tether to the coffin was cut, Vera concludes that someone was trying to kill both Merry and Cherry. She asserts that the lock used on the coffin would have disintegrated when exposed to the vacuum of the airlock, and that Merry could have kept her head with a

concealed oxygen mask and used air pressure to return to the ship while the coffin was in darkness (Merry will not reveal how her trick worked). Vera dismisses Koroviev's suggestion that the Petrovsky's could have killed Cherry together because of the timing of the cut rope — it was cut before they were close enough to assault Merry. She believes Cherry stayed behind at the air lock to let the floating Merry back in, and that the murderer closed the lock, so Merry went to a utility entrance where her second confederate, Koroviev, was waiting to let her in. Since Vera has accounted for everyone's presence at the time of the murder, she believes the murderer must have had a confederate, and accuses Bogdanoff with his subordinates and robotic staff, which he can reprogram. She believes he cut the rope before it was brought out, concealed in the coil, and that his position at dinner made him an ideal candidate for stealing her knife. Since his father in law is an important official and he was having an affair, she thinks Bogdanoff wanted to silence Cherry and Merry.

All her conclusions unravel after an abrupt cut where it is revealed that Vera herself has been arrested for the murder. Smith goes to talk to the surviving Houdini. He hints that it would be possible for them to be together most of the time during her tour on Mars. She rejects him. He says she was friendlier the first night at the table and calls her Cherry, which she says is a guess. They wonder that Vera's KGB status did not protect her, and Smith says, "It's the same for us Americans, Cherry. If you go too far and the law finds out, it's all over."

He offers to tell her how the trick actually worked: the looped coil tightened up so that the coffin never left the hold, and Koroviev was at another exit casting a second coffin into space with its cord already cut — the hand they witnessed in outer space just a prosthetic. She had used sealant inside the lid to protect her air supply when the air lock was opened, and the other Houdini stayed behind to close the airlock after everyone was gone. It was at that point that the woman inside the coffin struck.

He believes the clone was simply life insurance to do the dangerous tricks, and the surviving Houdini admits to Smith she stabbed her assistant as she opened the coffin. She also says that Smith is "a more dangerous person than I am. You're a spy of some sort, aren't you" — Part of the reason you won't turn me in is that it looks better if a Russian killed Cherry than if I killed Merry. He says he won't turn her in when they return to Earth if things go well between them on Mars.

He admits he was first "put on to" her when her eyes got round discussing the jubilee year. Merry Houdini (whom Smith now erroneously believes is Cherry) then says he has gotten himself a girl on Mars through "radical economics". He says he wishes he could have gotten his girl the way she got her man instead (with beauty rather than blackmail).

COMMENTARY:

In **Bibliomen**, Wolfe talks of a fictional detective story written by Adam Poor called **A Salted Mine** which I feel is worth quoting:

A man is found murdered in a Washington, DC subway station; he is without identification. A detective is seduced and beaten, and solves the crime. A second detective appears who shows the solution to be false, clues having been planted and altered by the first detective. A third detective (who is in fact the attorney of the first detective) shows that the accusations made against the first are without foundation, he having been accused by the second to further his career. At the conclusion of the book, the reader realizes that the third detective is in fact the murderer- or rather, that he is meant to be the murderer, the clues that implicate him having been planted by a fourth party, Poor himself.

I can't help but feel that this synopsis matches up better with "Cherry Jubilee" than with any other story in Wolfe's body of work. Wolfe's own introduction states that it "is a science fiction mystery story, among other things. Alex Schomburg gave it a marvelous illustration showing dinner aboard the spacecraft; if you're going to try to solve the mystery, you'd be wise to draw a picture — or at least a chart — of the same sort."

Even after a seating chart is produced, which clockwise would show at the head Captain Bogdanoff, to his left "Merry" Houdini in white, then the American Smith, the supposed clone "Cherry" Houdini in red, Pasik Petrovsky at the foot, his wife Anna, then the Soviet member of the Arts Council Koroviev, and finally KGB agent Vera Oussinko to Bogdanoff's right, there are still some interpretational problems. The Petrovsky family takes great interest in the Houdini in red, ostensibly Cherry Houdini, and this involves an interpretation — are they watching her so closely because she doesn't seem to be a clone and exhibits suspicious behavior, or simply because they are interested in clones? The Houdini in white is far closer to Vera Oussinko to steal her knife, as is Bogdanoff, so we must choose whether to believe the surviving Houdini in the end who says she grabbed Vera's knife because it was the farthest away, or disbelieve it as impractical (though she is a magician, or at the very least a magician's apprentice). Luckily, there are more concrete details in the story to let us know that indeed Smith's deductions can be trusted (except for one major assumption in which he is incorrect).

In light of Wolfe's introduction, it seems that the solutions offered by the two detectives in the story, first Vera Oussinko, who is herself arrested, and then Smith, are both somehow unsatisfactory, though Smith's assumptions prompt a confession of the crime.

The entire interpretation which we are about to present hinges on one very important bit of trust. Smith's explanation for the trick and how it was accomplished explains the cut line as part of the set up for the illusion and seems more reasonable than a person surviving the vacuum of space without an atmospheric suit (a completely different coffin released by Koroviev is seen outside the ship — the other one never left the airlock because of the manner in which the assistant Houdini attached it).

His earlier identification of Koroviev as KGB seems to be an example of his judgment failing, however. Should we trust Smith in recognizing that the girls switched colors and identities after the dinner? After the girl in red, ostensibly Cherry, bumps into him after the girl in white is sealed in the coffin for the escape act, he "attempted to smile" — he doesn't feel the same way for the girl in red as he did at dinner because she is significantly more shallow and vapid.

The speech patterns of "Cherry" Houdini in red at the dinner are fairly complex and well developed. She talks far more than "Merry" in white — indeed, almost all the dialogue is voiced by her. Smith is under the impression that the woman in red at the dinner is the woman in white at the outset of the trick — that they have switched places. How can we be confident that Koroviev's belief in their switch is accurate? Besides his natural attraction to the woman on his left during dinner, his instincts are actually quite good. He has deduced exactly how the trick works.

At the escape trick, the woman in red (Cherry) says, "Five minutes is plenty of time for poor Merry to suffocate in the vacuum, but my gosh, isn't it fun! She promised to let me try it on the way home — This is a new one she's just worked out."

Earlier at the dinner table, the girl in white (Cherry pretending to be Merry) had a similar exclamation: "My God, what a relief — I thought Cherry and I were the only Americans on board." She boasted, "Wait until you see what I am going to do here on the Red Star!"

In contrast, the dialogue of the woman in red at dinner (Merry, who actually survives), supposedly the four year old clone, seems more sophisticated: “[The Captain] is a little obvious, isn’t he? But he’s a dear, and you can’t blame him for wanting to make Merry feel at home — I have an adult mind, and of course while we were travelling in the Soviet Union I had many opportunities. Now I’m learning Merry’s techniques by assisting her. When I’m good enough, I’ll go off on my own — perhaps tour South America. When Smith is attempting to blackmail her into being his girlfriend, her dialogue never seems boastful or exclamatory. She says, “You said it was radical economics, and it was. This is too, I suppose. You’ve just gotten yourself a girl on Mars- all through radical economics.”

If we trust Smith’s assertion that the woman in red at the dinner actually is the woman in white at the escape, then it is mighty curious that her speech patterns are so much more sophisticated at the age of four than Merry Houdini’s. “My gosh”, “My God”, and even “she promised to let me try it on the way home” sound a bit more juvenile than calling the captain obvious (but a dear) in inviting the American to the table. The narrative voice refers to the assistant in white as a clone in the third person voice during the escape scene — this narrative voice can actually be trusted, despite Smith’s conclusions. In the opening scene, the clone is pretending to be Merry, and during the trick, Merry has resumed her rightful position and intends to keep it.

As far as the title: Smith explains the jubilee as follows: “In the ancient civilization of Israel, all tribal lands were returned to their possessors — even if they had been leased or sold — every fifty years. That fiftieth year was called the jubilee. They held a celebration, because everybody was getting his birth-right back.” This causes the Houdini in red’s eyes to light up, creating Smith’s attraction for her.

Smith is correct in all his assumptions save one — Cherry and Merry have switched before dinner, as the clone, Cherry, has been blackmailing Merry and attempting to keep her birthright. Her methods are quite simple — Merry has trusted her with the secret to her tricks, and Cherry has probably threatened to reveal them if she is not given the glory. In order to reclaim her identity even for a brief time, Merry has to come up with a new trick that the actual Cherry cannot yet perform. Thus the murder of the clone Cherry is a reclamation of Merry’s birthright, and Smith is correct in every particular but fails to realize that the girls have switched both before and after the dinner — he only recognizes the later switch.

POINT OF VIEW AND RELIABILITY IN WOLFE:

Overall, the narrative third person voice is trustworthy in identifying the clone as such during the set up of the escape scene, but the voice feels no obligation to provide complete narrative closure. This trend appears as early as “The Green Wall Said” and “Forlesen”, but the tendency of the third person narrative to obfuscate through serious omission in Wolfe has not yet reached its peak (*Home Fires, An Evil Guest, Castleview*, and perhaps “The Ziggurat” and *There Are Doors* are all primarily third person narrations with the kinds of elided implications we would expect of a first person narrator, but without discernible motive, save that it is a trademark of Wolfe). A subjective narrator, motive, and personal bias or handicap can provide the necessary key to interpretation quite easily, but in other narratives, we must accept that it is simply a hallmark of Wolfe’s style. Without the introduction to the story, would we have ever doubted Smith’s conclusion? Likewise, in the hands of another author, less careful with dialogue, would there even be a mystery to discuss at the end of the story?

We can recognize that Smith’s conclusions are off by his inherent sexism —

he knows that there must be a KGB agent present and assumes it to be Koroviev, never thinking that the female Vera could be that agent. Similarly, even though he is able to tell that Cherry and Merry have switched place after the dinner, his failure to understand her motives allows him to be duped by Merry's manipulation, even though she gets him to call her Merry by the end of their interaction. The most important thing to her is maintaining the integrity of her secrets, which Cherry threatened. The master of seeking out bribes and theft is ironically unable to recognize the theft of a birthright and attempted blackmail right under his nose, even with his excellent deductive powers.

SOVIET/AMERICAN RELATIONS

The relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States is not represented frequently in Wolfe's fiction, though the idea of socialism and a redistribution of wealth coming to America, along with a stratified class distribution of funds, is especially prevalent in his short stories of the 1970s. When the Soviet Union does appear, as in "The Peace Spy", the interaction is not quite as hostile as one would expect from the cold war environment, and the lines between heroic and villainous characters are often not drawn across nationalistic lines.

Here, a female KGB agent is perhaps the most courageous character in the story, more noble than the American Smith and neither a blackmailer like Cherry nor a murderess like Merry. Even though her deductive powers are not supported by the text, she pays a price for daring to suspect someone in a position of authority. Koroviev asserts, "The time when our Soviet citizens learned English for technical purposes is past." To this, "Cherry" at dinner responds, "Isn't that wonderful — Now we can speak English when we have to keep secrets." The only mark against Vera, besides her wild speculation about the trick, is Merry's impression of her when she held her hand in such a commandeering fashion.

Smith says that he is present seeking evidence of theft and bribery in the Soviet system, then proceeds to try to blackmail Merry, taking the bribe of her affection. In light of how Merry has responded to Vera and Cherry when she feels her freedom compromised or challenged, we can imagine that Smith should be careful.

LITERARY ALLUSIONS AND NAMES:

Captain Bogdanoff, with his ship Red Star, comes from the utopian soviet novel **Red Star** by Bogdanov, which involves a socialist alien government on Mars. As an early Soviet SF novel which explores the implications of a society which operates under communal property laws, it doesn't necessarily have to resonate on the plot level to be a valid reference. The Martians in the novel do conceal quite a bit, including gender identity, and some ideologies lead the protagonist to commit murder to prevent genocide, which is being considered by Martian idealists.

Bulgakov's **Master and Margarita**, in which the devil comes to Russia, features a valet named Koroviev. The name comes from the Russian word for cow.

Pasik and Anna Petrovsky's last name implies "the rock".

Vera Oussenko's first name means faith or true, but the only truth to her assertion might be that Cherry was murdered. However, the possibility exists that Bogdanoff is an accomplice, though he seems unable to distinguish between the two girls when they switch colors (Smith can tell when they switch because he has fallen for the woman in red at the dinner and realizes those same feelings for the woman in white at the escape — Merry Houdini.)

RELIGIOUS ALLUSIONS AND SYMBOLS:

Despite the resonance Merry creating a child through asexual means and the presence of a family whose last name derives from Peter, I feel that any religious symbols are marginally unimportant in light of the dominant symbol: the clone's blood forms cherry-like spheres in the zero-gravity environment. Those blood globes resonate with "the swollen crimson sphere" of Mars through the viewport as Smith attempts to blackmail Merry. The Jewish idea of the jubilee is equally important, for Merry has regained her birthright from her clone.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

Why is Smith really there? He says he is interested in the irregular distribution of wealth through theft and bribery, but his American presence remains nebulous, though Merry indicates part of his motive in not turning her in is for the political and media ramification of having a Russian villain, regardless of the truth. What is America's current economic system? Smith knows a good deal about ancient economic ideas, but the interplanetary importance of America seems marginal in light of the waning of English as a universal language.

It seems unlikely that Bogdanov knows anything in light of his ignorance of which Houdini is which, but we must wonder if there was any tangential involvement on his part in light of Vera's name and the eager kiss he delivers to Merry.

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS:

The failure of the detectives in this story definitely shows that even Wolfe's third person narratives must be treated carefully. One tendency which appears here quite noticeably becomes a habit of narration later: a detective or privileged speaker hypothesizing about mysterious events, often from a position of incomplete knowledge or ignorance. *Long Sun, Short Sun*, and just about every novel after *Pirate Freedom* exhibit this feature from time to time. Sometimes the reconstruction of events is particularly untrustworthy, as in the case of Skip in *Home Fires*.