

Short Story 76: Seven American Nights

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Marc Aramini — 10 Sep 2014, 06:37

SEVEN AMERICAN NIGHTS

"Seven American Nights" first appeared in *Orbit 20* in 1978 and is collected in *The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories.*

OBJECTIVE SUMMARY:

Nadan Jafferzadah's notebook has been sent to his family in Iran with a note from Hassan Kerbelai, the private investigator they have hired to find him. The note asserts Kerbelai found the notebook in Delaware and that he will discontinue the search if more money is not forthcoming.

DAY ONE:

Nadan arrives on the *Princess Fatimah* after a 12 day voyage to the coast of America and voices his excitement and love of arriving: "Like the delight a condemned man must feel when a letter from the shah snatches him from beneath the very blade of death." He is astonished by the yellow waters close to America and comments upon them to the ironically named Mr. Tallman and to the grain merchant Golam Gassem — both of whom react with disdain. The captain of the ship comes up and tells him that it is Tallman's country bleeding to death. (On this night, he has a dream of a loaf of bread "smeared with gray mold." He wonders why the Americans would wish such a thing - "yet all the historians agree that they did, just as they wished their own corpses to appear living forever.")

DAY TWO:

Nadan begins writing the next day of his room with its two beds, and tells of the "red- and purple- clad strangers, who mob their own streets like an invading army" in the ruins of Washington D.C. He sleeps late and describes the trucks with oxen and horses. He is on Maine Street and comments on the widespread genetic damage to the people of America — hunchbacked, deformed, and twisted. The hotel manager tells him to go north for the buildings, south for the theater, and west for the park, but to take security. Nadan says he has his pistol. At night he starts writing of his afternoon visiting the buildings to the north where he encountered several beggars, but first states that his girlfriend back in Iran must never read his journal and asseverates that he believes he was drugged on the ship.

He recounts America's reputation for chemicals and drugs that alter consciousness, poison vermin, prevent bread from going stale, and create mad visions that never end. During the afternoon, the locals show him the White House, but he believes its name has been lost. A beggar without a jaw takes him to the Smithsonian where he sees a man working on a machine. The beggar, who confuses m's and n's, says "Someday we will be great again" (though it is possible he actually said "Sunday we will be great again.")

That night Nadan goes out to eat and then attends the theater, where Vidal's **Visit to a Small Planet** is playing. Its contents have been modernized "just as we sometimes present **Rustam Beg** as if Rustam had been a hero of the war just past." The curator from the Smithsonian sits right next to Nadan, who is impressed with the female who plays Ellen in the play and the clubfooted man who plays the alien Kreton.

Nadan begins speaking to the elderly man from the museum, buying him a sandwich and engaging him in conversation. The curator talks of the principal of extended abstraction, in which the true essence of communication is smell. "When you smell another human being you take chemicals from his body into your own, analyze them, and from the analysis you accurately deduce his emotional state. .. When you speak, you are telling another how you would smell if you smelled as you should and if he could smell you properly." He goes on to say that writing is the third level of abstraction.

Nadan appreciates some features of the play, such as Kreton and Ellen (a fact which he tells the Curator) and the reading of the family cat's mind by the alien. He is offended by the presentation of the Turks. The curator is dismissive of modern drama and says "Ellen is a trollop, and Powers a drayman. That lame fellow Kreton used to snare sailors for a singing house on Portland Street." Nadan buys the old man some marzipan eggs which he finds unpleasant and stashes the last six in his pocket.

The curator tells Nadan of writing, and the concept of the closed and open curves. He says he has a machine which imitates handwriting and another which composes it for a "national psychological effect." One of the papers he shows Nadan has the word **Sardinia** on it amidst other handwriting, the other is blank — his example of an open curve.

Nadan notes that the final scene hinges on "the device our poets call the **Peri's asphodel**, a trick so shopworn now that it is acceptable only if it can be presented in some new light. The one used here was to have John — Ellen's lover- find Kreton's handkerchief and, remarking that it seemed perfumed, bury his nose in it — conveying to the audience that John had, for that moment, shared the telepathic abilities of Kreton, whom all of them had now entirely forgotten."

Nadan takes the curator home, walking beneath the stark overpasses and thinking

It occurred to me then that there may be a time flaw, such as astronomers report from space, somewhere in the Atlantic. How is it that this western shore is more antiquated in the remains of a civilization not yet a century dead than we are in the shadow of Darius? May it not be that every ship that plows that sea moves through ten thousand years?

He vows to cleanse his journal before letting Yasmin see it and writes of how he bought a hallucinatory drug from the woman who helped him get the old man from the museum in bed, commenting that the museum has no income save in selling relics of the past. He soaks one of the eggs in the drug and vows to eat one per day so that he can speak with knowledge of America's hallucinogens.

He cannot sleep and daydreams that he is Kreton, and that Ellen is bringing him the six eggs. He gets the hotel manager to bring him a woman, and he brings three. The last of them looks like Yasmin, but has a club foot similar to Kreton's. He writes of this in the morning of the next day.

DAY THREE:

Nadan goes to the park to sketch, taking a boat and exploring Hains Point and most probably East Potomac Park as well. He sees giant ratholes and rabid packs of dogs. He kills one of them with his pistol while he sketches. Four or five able Americans pretending to be beggars accost him, and he says that he has killed one of their own. He eats one of the eggs, finding it more frightening than the park, then goes out to dinner.

He thinks of ending his account but portrays his visit to the theater to see Barrie's *Mary Rose, *starring the same girl who played Ellen in the previous play, listed as Ardis Dahl on the playbill. During the title character's disappearance from the stage during the play, he sees her sitting in the audience but is unable to talk to her. After the play, remains sleepless and manages to push open the manager's door and attain a directory, learning that there is a Dahl family close to the theater.

Nadan speculates that Ardis is such a great actress because — in some part of her mind her stage became her reality?. He walks to the house overcome with emotions, then thinks that perhaps they are all born of the drug in the egg; he bites the insides of his cheeks and strikes at a building before regaining his composure. Attempting to pay the man who answers the door at the Dahl house to let him stay, the man says he cannot let Nadan in and prompts him to try the house on the corner. Through the door the man's wife reminds Nadan of the fallen Statue of Liberty.

On his way back, he glances up to see a red flash and beastly figure in the night leap at him. He does not think he has time to raise his pistol fully, but when Nadan comes to his senses the beast is dead before him, a female with a chest wound. He thinks it both a feral dog and a human being. He mentions that over ten years ago he had read of such things in a book by Osman Aga, *Mystery Beyond the Sun's Setting*.

Here Nadan reveals what happened to America:

In the last century, when the famine gripped their country and the irreversible damage done to the chromosomal structures of the people had already become apparent, some few turned to the eating of human flesh. No doubt the corpses of the famine supplied their food at first; and no doubt those who ate of them congratulated themselves that by so doing they had escaped the effects of the enzymes that were then still used to bring slaughter animals to maturity in a matter of months. What they failed to realize was that the bodies of the human beings they ate had accumulated far more of these unnatural substances than were ever found in the flesh of the short-lived cattle. From them — rose such creatures as the thing I had killed.

DAY FOUR:

In the morning, he resolves to go cut the head of the creature off, but it is gone without a trace. Nadan goes forth to buy a gift for Ellen and selects a bracelet made of old coins. He returns to dinner and takes his second egg. He fears that perhaps the drug rendered visible that which had previously been invisible on the previous night. He naps and dreams that Ardis/Ellen is caressing him with long fingered hands before going to see *Mary Rose* again. He talks to the actor who plays Kreton and attempts to enlist his aid in meeting Ardis. Kreton calls the current play a "turkey". Here Kreton asks him if he drinks, and Nadan replies that he does not but will gladly buy him one. As they walk, Kreton comments on his leg and the excuses he must always use in the play, then

mentions that perhaps sometimes the potter is simply angry. He quotes the Persian **Rubaiyat**: "None answered this; but after Silence spake /A Vessel of a more ungainly Make: /They sneer at me for leaning all awry; /What! Did the Hand then of the Potter shake?" and Nadan claims that he is unfamiliar with it (It is Fitzgerald's translation).

Kreton indicates that not all Americans are unsightly, thinking of himself. Nadan offers him twenty rials to introduce him to Ardis after Kreton mentions that there should be other things he is interested in besides knowing who Ardis is entertaining, like the secret hidden beneath Mount Rushmore. Nadan reveals he is a pupil of Akhon Mirza Ahmak who came to America thirty years ago to examine the miniatures in the National Art Gallery.

He feels Kreton reaching into his pocket and starts a scuffle. The police arrive and arrest Kreton, insisting that Nadan press charges after beating the actor down. As Nadan lies in bed, Ardis comes to plead with him so that they can gain the actor's release. He offers to claim that it was a misunderstanding with the police. She reveals that they have breathed life into the theater in the past two years and their next production will be **Faust**. She says that Americans were never polite culturally and that they feel betrayed and cheated. "When we feel cheated we are ready to kill; and maybe we feel cheated all the time."

Ardis claims she must get some things at home, and Nadan offers to take her, even if she lived in Kazvin or Mount Kaf (known as the farthest point of the Earth to Persia). He sees a note from her after she leaves offering real love if he can procure Bobby's freedom (the actor who plays Kreton is named Bobby O'Keene).

DAY 5

Nadan dreams of walking with Ardis and being stalked by the beast. The power on his pistol is running out. He spends all day with Ardis at the police and then at the penitentiary seeking to gain Bobby's freedom. Here he says that Ardis showed him where she lived, "a few doors from the theater". They go to the Federated Enquiry Division to procure his release, but Ardis insists part of it is rented by the Washington Police Department. Nadan feels that they wield far more authority than they pretend to. He is interviewed by a woman with forty or fifty teeth who mentions that some of the oldest coins show heads of wheat and that this is a fertile part of the country in her small talk. He explains that he only requires the release of the thief. At two they go to the other side of the river to look at the inmates in a penal colony where they fail to find Bobby.

That afternoon they wind up in a restaurant near Ardis' apartment where Golam Gasseem and Mr. Tallman from the ship are also eating, and Ardis acts suspiciously, wanting to leave before she is seen with Nadan, claiming that she is "friends" with the two men and that she wants to maintain their mutual trust. When Nadan and Ardis show up at the theater, Bobby is free.

That night Nadan is drafted into playing a role in **Mary Rose** since an actor named Terry has disappeared (Nadan does not think that Ardis is really surprised by his disappearance). As Mary Rose's husband Simon, he is introduced as Ned Jefferson. Nadan insists his dramatic personality came from growing up on Persian literature such as the **Shah Namah**. Afterwards, Ardis and Nadan caress and kiss in the dark, but she refuses to let light enter. She says that tomorrow he will see her, and that the theater will be closed for Easter; they will go to a party. After she leaves, Nadan finds that only two of the eggs remain (there should be three) and that his journal has been moved to the other side of the bed. He eliminates from his journal any indication of why he came to America. He ends the entry by claiming that he will make the taking of the eggs significant, and that the love he and Ardis will share will be something worthy of great intrigue and lasting significance.

DAY 6:

Ardis comes before noon and they walk north to the park. They rent a boat and Ardis asks if he intends to spend all his time in Washington. Nadan insists his original plan was to head north after a week to Philadelphia, but now he would stay forever if she so desired. She invites him to the interior of America to seek its great prizes and reveals that her father is a map maker who used to search out that treasure himself. Ardis also says that “there are people in the interior who are no longer people. Our bodies are poisoned — all of us Americans. They have adapted — but they are no longer human.” Her father trades with them and sells the maps they bring him.

She also states that Bobby and she have been using Mr. Tallman and Golam Gassem to finance an expedition to the interior. She says there is a better one and that after they attain it they will return to Teheran together. They go back and prepare for the evening's party, and Nadan sees a Christian procession with a priest and smoking censers. He notes “the entire procession — from the flickering candles in the clear sunshine, to the dead leader lifted up, to his inattentive, bickering followers behind — seemed to incarnate the philosophy and the dilemma of these people. — I realized that its ritualized plea for life renewed was more foreign to them than to me.”

The notebook then remarks that it is very late and Nadan has resolved to burn his notebook. He asks how he could have loved “that”, referring to Ardis. The party was a masque, and after they had made love in the dark Nadan used his pistol to light up the alcohol waiting in a nearby glass to behold her.

Nadan claims that the eagle is dead and “Ardis is the proper symbol of [America's] rule.” He has eaten both of the last eggs, one before the party and one after probably killing Ardis. He hopes that what he saw was only an illusion of the egg.

If hallucinations now begin, I will know that what I saw by the light of the blazing arrack was in truth a thing with which I have lain, and in one way or another will see to it that I never return to corrupt the clean wombs of the women of our enduring race. I might seek to claim the miniatures of our heritage after all, and allow the guards to kill me — but what if I were to succeed? I am not fit to touch them. Perhaps the best end for me would be to travel alone into this maggot-riddled continent; in that way I will die at fit hands.

Nadan later hears Kreton walking outside his door with footsteps like an earthquake and hears the word *police* like thunder. He sees “My dead Ardis, very small and bright, has stepped out of the candle-flame, and there is a hairy face coming through the window.”

The final section switches to Nadan's mother and Yasmin, who speculates that Nadan is still alive as they look over the journal, but must be imprisoned or ill. The old woman asks, “You think this is his writing” — Perhaps. Perhaps.

THESIS:

The American plot to regain global ascendancy involves the grain merchant Golam Gassem and poisoning Iran and perhaps all of Europe and the Middle East. Nadan's dream of the moldy bread, the old man from the Smithsonian who talks of smell as true communication, and America's reputation as the greatest creator of hallucinogens and chemicals reveal the plot — gaining revenge on the powers of the world as the Americans have poisoned themselves via a kind of airborne mold-spore. The actors in the play are simply playing another drama in every

interaction with Nadan, and it is likely that during his stay in America he is replaced and the remainder of his journal forged by the machine in the Smithsonian at the termination of Maundy Thursday.

SETTING:

The precise environs in Washington DC can be located — down to a Holiday Inn on Maine Street. The year seems to be approximately 2050-2060. Nadan states that Persia has suffered a 2300 year eclipse (its empire subjugated and its power waning during the Greco-Persian conflict, with Alexander the Great defeating Darius III by 333 BC). America's collapse was sudden and complete and tied to chemically tampering with food to both preserve grain products and to vastly accelerate the maturation of livestock.

COMMENTARY:

In **Attending Daedalus**, Peter Wright notes that **Seven American Nights** is not really “a conundrum designed to ensnare the reader in a series of interminable puzzles” but that Wolfe emphasizes “early in the narrative that the mysteries of the story cannot be solved, [indicating] that the text is an insoluble self-referential puzzle about the conundrum of perception rather than an enigma for the reader to solve by detection.” This is prompted by the various levels of reliability of the narrative: any given day could be a hallucination of the egg, Nadan has excised his true reason for coming to America and embellished early descriptions, a machine can forge handwriting in the story, and the detective also has a motive to present the notebook to give Nadan’s family hope (which might have a forged subplot so that in the case of detection he can always say he was not involved in the forging of the document).

As with so many of Wolfe’s interpreters, while this sounds like a nifty way to approach the story (it’s like — about the infinite indeterminacy of perception, man ?) we should know better. This is the least useful interpretation of **Seven American Nights**, and we will discard it here. There is only one story I am willing to venture does not have a single bottom in Wolfe written during the first half of Wolfe’s career, and that is “Forlesen”, due to its theme of the meaninglessness of the modern life Forlesen must live.

How many levels of abstraction can we have before the original subject disappears? The Smithsonian man philosophizes on all communication being based on scents, of which writing (an abstraction of verbal communication) is already at the third level. In the above scenarios, we see even more levels of abstraction — and most assuredly, our original subject, Nadan, will disappear in the abstraction. There are two compelling pre-existing theories to explain the action in **Seven American Nights**, but our preferred thesis here will modify one of them slightly.

EXPLANATION 1: Borski's Combination of Days 5 and 6 and Ardis' Lycanthropy

In his essay “The Far Plutonian Shore”, Borski posits that Nadan, observed by the American Government, who have perhaps determined his true motive for coming to America (stealing the Persian miniatures guarded at the National Art Musuem), excises the end of Day 5 and the start of Day 6 from his journal, combining the days and hiding his visit to the museum. Borski then believes that Nadan is lying about the eggs being disturbed — that he ate one as usual and had two remaining, but creates a cover story, perhaps hiding behind the oblivion of the hallucinogen as an excuse if he is detained (though if he is truly being watched, the government should know how long he has been in the United States). However, Borski thinks the hallucinogen is in one of the eggs eaten on the last day, when Nadan has visions of Ardis in his candle, a hairy face at the window, and hears Kreton's thundering steps outside.

Borski posits that the beast which was killed but whose body disappeared is simply Ardis, whose chest has been furrowed and wounded on the second night. The problem with these theories lies in the almost magical presence of a lycanthropic character and the relative ineffectiveness of purging an entire day from the journal this late in his visit after attracting police attention? if Nadan is being watched, by that point the police or F.E.D.'s know how long he has been in the United States and when Bobby was arrested.

EXPLANATION 2: Tallman's Early Excision, the American Plot, and the Replacement of Nadan after Maundy Thursday

David Tallman provides a much more convincing explanation for many of the small details in **Seven American Nights** which makes use of the plots of the plays that Nadan watches as well as his visit to the Smithsonian and the resentful presence of Golam Gasseem. In Tallman's scheme, when Nadan witnesses the man at the Smithsonian working on a machine, he brings attention to himself as someone who might be on to an American intrigue (especially since he arrived on the same ship as Mr. Tallman and Golam Gasseem). Later the same museum man shows up at the final showing of **Visit to a Small Planet** to determine how much Nadan understands.

At this meeting, Nadan reveals that his hands have been cramped from writing, that he is much taken with the two actors playing Kreton and Ellen, and it is from a woman who helps Nadan put the Curator to bed that he buys the "hallucinogen" with which he douses one of the eggs. While Tallman agrees that the true purpose of Nadan's visit is to regain the Persian miniatures from the National Art Musuem (a small elaborate painting comparable to those in Western illuminated manuscripts), he sees the subtext as a vast and extensive plot first to kill Nadan which then transforms into an attempt to minimize leakage when he does not immediately die.

Tallman also proposes that the second day is the point at which Nadan altered his manuscript by excising material for the following reasons, as posted on the WolfeWiki, which I am presenting here in their original form:

I count seven full nights if Nadan's first day of sightseeing didn't go all the way to the ruined capital buildings. There are a few hints that this is the case:

1.

Early on, he is writing with closed shutters and a candle (p. 340, Orb edition of IODDAOSAOS). Something outside is beating on the shutters (A wild animal? Moths?), which seems to indicate late at night. On the day he visits the ruins, he opens the shutters and the sun is just setting.

2.

He's fearful and homesick that first day. The second day he's brave enough to go out to a restaurant and to the theater at night.

3.

His attitude about going to the park changes. On p. 339 he wants to postpone it until he has seen other things. On p. 344 he is ashamed he didn't go that day. This seems more likely if they are two different days.

4.

He says he spent the whole day at the ruins on p. 347. The other day mentions sleeping late, listening to musicians, and people-watching. His first writing for that day is at about 4:30pm (midnight Iran time with local daylight savings time p. 338) back in his room, which doesn't allow that much time for ruin explorations.

Nadan arrived in Washington on a Saturday (based on the parade being on Good Friday). On Sunday, he headed north to see the National Art Gallery first. (Why would he bypass the place his famous uncle visited and see the old ruins first? The gallery was on his way there.) That night, he wrote of his fears.

On Monday, his second day of sightseeing, he visited the capital building ruins, the Smithsonian, and the theater.

Why did he write so little about that first day, and let it run into the next day with such an abrupt transition? The answer is he removed some pages from the journal after he found it was disturbed. In [writing] about the gallery he must have revealed his intention to steal certain "miniatures of our heritage" (p. 382). He excised the pages to protect himself from the police (far too late, alas).

Here is David Tallman's timeline for the story:

1.

Saturday

Nadan arrives in Washington.

Angers Mr. Tallman by pointing out yellow water.

Begins to be fearful, but will not admit it in journal for Yasmine.

Has dream about moldy bread.

2.

Palm Sunday

Nadan heads north to see the buildings.

Visits the National Art Gallery.

Writes of his intent to steal miniatures.

Late that night, writes of his fears.

3.

Monday

Nadan goes back and visits the ruined buildings.

The beggar with no lower jaw shows him the Smithsonian room.

The beggar boasts "Sunday we will be great again," knowing that he will be misunderstood as saying "Someday we will be great again."

Nadan's visit is noticed by F.E.D. informers among the beggars.

Nadan seeing the face of the "curator" along with the forging machine is a problem.

The police tail him to the theater.

The "curator" goes in, sits in his row, and draws him into conversation.

Curator can tell he was recognized.

Curator pretends to be ill. Nadan escorts him home.

Nadan is sold poison, which he is told is a hallucinogenic. (It might be an overdose of a recreational drug.) He is supposed to take it and die that

night, with any letters he might have written during the day still unmailed.
Nadan doses the eggs. Unknown to himself, he is playing real Russian Roulette.
4.

Tuesday

Police are now in a bind. Nadan didn't take the poison. Where is it?
Why didn't he take it? Could he be a spy? They have to be cautious.
If he dies some other way and the poison is found, the plot may be revealed.
Nadan visits the park during the day.
Police following him save his life from a dog-pack attack. The howling was not because the dogs were "mourning their fallen leader" but because the police were killing more dogs.
Nadan could have been aware of their assistance but chose to omit it to make himself look more heroic.
Nadan attends the theater again and sees "Mary Rose."
Eats egg one.
Goes out to try to find Ardis.
Police follow him and save him from the werebeast. The "flicker of scarlet" he saw was the targeting laser of his shadower's gun on the beast.
Nadan had no time to aim, so the shot that killed the beast was probably not his own.
Police clean up the body of the beast and remove other traces as much as possible.
5.

Wednesday

Buys gift for Ardis at the Washington Monument fair.
Police have given up on his taking the poison on his own. They contact Bobby and Ardis with a plan.
Nadan eats egg two.
Attends first part of "Mary Rose."
Bobby fakes an attempt to pickpocket Nadan, gets arrested.
Ardis comes to Nadan's room to intercede for Bobby.
She is prepared to have sex with Nadan, but not spend the night. She must make her report to the police.
She leaves a scented note promising future favors.
6.

Thursday

Nadan spends most of the day trying to get Bobby out of jail.
While he is occupied, the secret police search his room. They are experts and leave no trace.
They make a copy of his journal and get it translated.
Nadan returns home, eats egg three.
He goes out to the play, where he ends up performing.
The police return while he is absent.
They found the mention of the eggs in the journal.
Using a sniffing dog or other detector, they find the poisoned egg and remove it. They are no longer concerned that Nadan will see his room is disturbed.

Nadan goes to Ardis' apartment.

Ardis falsely promises that the next day will be a picnic in the park.

She says the theater will be closed for Easter, but tomorrow is actually Good Friday.

Nadan returns, finds the journal disturbed. He tears out the incriminating section about the Art Museum visit (shortening the record for Sunday).

Nadan writes his last entries in the journal.

Police arrive and arrest him.

7.

Good Friday

Nadan is interrogated, probably tortured, and killed.

Police now know he is connected to Ahkon Mirza Ahmak, of the Iranian nobility. There is certain to be an inquiry.

They also know that Nadan showed his family the journal before he left.

His journal is fed to the story-composing computer to create a false ending.

The ending is added to the journal by the forging machine.

Since the ending calls for the death of Ardis, they kill her that night with Nadan's gun.

The reader of the forged ending is supposed to conclude that Ardis was a werewolf (or the hallucinogen made Nadan think so), and that Nadan killed her and went into the interior of America alone.

8.

Easter Sunday

The American government will pull some kind of stunt. They may use a hidden stockpile weapon (say from under Mount Rushmore) that still works to create a terrorist incident, and use forged documents to put the blame elsewhere.

A possible target is the Iranian moon colony, New Tabriz. A bomb smuggled into a grain shipment there (by Golam Gasseem) could cause great devastation.

Good ones to blame would be Turkey ("bloodthirsty race") or China (Iran had a recent war with them, as shown by the reference to a modern version of "Rustam Beg").

It may start a war (As Kreton wanted to do in "Visit to a Small Planet").

The intent may be to bring America back to more power in world, but mainly to bring down countries they hate, like Iran.

"Sunday we will be great again" is about the power to bring about destruction. They have nothing to lose.

"When we feel cheated we are ready to kill; and maybe we feel cheated all the time."

MY PROPOSED ALTERATIONS TO TALLMAN'S THEORY:

The majority of that time line looks sound (I am not confident the police are killing other dogs in the park, as later they seem to use whips, but certainly someone kills the more dangerous beast for Nadan with a laser rifle and gets rid of the body). Tallman has a firm rationale for the missing night being early in the text, and explains many of the small details, including the inconsistencies in Nadan's character (such as the possible use of alcohol) and in the tenor of the

tale throughout the last several pages, where suddenly Ardis is seen as a monster. He also makes use of the embedded plays and the religious symbolism of holy week, with the procession and triumphant entry into the city on Palm Sunday.

The character of Mollah Nadan in **The Adventures of Hajji Baba** (from which many of the Persian names come) is strict in his abstinence (at least according to his own self-description), and at one point even claims, “die rather than eat, or drink, or smoke. Do like me, who, rather than abate one tittle of the sacred ordinance, would manage to exist from Jumah to Jumah (Friday) without polluting my lips with unlawful food” (Morer 321). This mention of Friday to Friday even resonates with the text and supports the idea that Nadan in fact never consumed the hallucinogen/poison during his stay.

However, Tallman has added quite a bit to the plot by supposing that America has a weapons stockpile, and that this strike will be through Golam Gassem's grain, when there are textual bits of evidence that actually make the assault far simpler.

When it is revealed that the next play will be **Faust**, and Nadan wonders who will play the part of the Doctor if Kreton is Mephistopheles, we need look no further than the man who has made a deal with America for illusory gain: Golam Gassem, whose first name implies “slave” or “servant” with a small variation in spelling (Gholam). As the one Middle Eastern name not culled from **The Adventures of Hajji Baba** (beside Yasmin's) we can guess that it has some other meaning.

The dream of the bread with mold on it is ominous, and Nadan even wonders why America would wish it. The meeting between Mr. Tallman and the grain merchant, as well as the promise that Mount Rushmore hides something underneath (coupled with Nadan's speculation that America's chemicals and poisons have been sitting in hidden places for decades) creates a better picture of the American plot. As the curator says, the smell is the first level of communication, and America has chemicals that can destroy when sniffed. When the grain of Gassem is distributed and cooked into bread, the gray contamination Nadan dreamed of may become an airborne reality. Nadan also saw trees in the walls of the decayed buildings of Washington D.C. - **carpinus caroliniana**, whose fruit falls and disperses through the air, growing out of civilization's remains.

This scheme is far more plausible given what we know about America's current state than the smuggling of destructive weapons which can be blamed on another nation. Nadan still faces replacement, arrest, and probably execution on Friday per the religious resonances with Holy Week.

NAMES:

Since the majority of these names come from other fictional works, it is not necessary to explore their meanings assiduously.

Nadan is named after a religious figure in **The Adventures of Hajji Baba** who assiduously asserts that he never commits excess or drinks (it is also a name for an idiot or stupid individual). This might represent corroboration for David Tallman's idea that one of the huge continuity errors in the story involves Nadan and Ardis sharing a drink when he previously stated he did not drink to the man he always refers to as Kreton. In the original novel he changes clothing with the narrator and is punished in his stead.

Osman Aga, the name of the fiction writer in **Seven American Nights** reputed to use his reputation to get free food and promote his next writing, is named after Hajji Baba's first master in the same book, who is trying to make a profit off of lamb skins. (It is also the name of a

historical author who was captured and wrote **Prisoner of the Infidels** — this might be a coincidence of allusion for Wolfe, though certainly Morier would have been riffing on that historic figure in his novel.)

Hassan Kerbelai, the private investigator trying to get money from Nadan's family, is named after the father of Hajji Baba, also a barber, as his son is. While there is no "Hajji Baba" character, one of the actors in the play is a barber. Mirza Ahmak is another character from Hajji Baba.

Golam Gassem's name does not come from the same source and seems to be an original Wolfe invention. I hate to note it, but I feel it is a pun — his function will be to effectively gas the dominant nations when his grain is turned into poisoned bread tainted by the chemicals of America — Gas 'em. Golam can imply a slave or servant.

Ardis Dahl's first name means "fervent" and Dahl implies "valley", but as per the verbal connotation of Gassem above, she serves the function of a doll to attract Nadan.

Bobby O'Keene's name is similarly obvious — Robert implies "famed, bright, or shining" and Keene can imply witty, sharp, or keen.

FOLIAGE

In addition to the gray mold which Nadan mentions, he also notices that in the buildings of Washington DC, trees have begun to bloom. *C*arpinus caroliniana* *is characterized by the small light seed pods which easily float on the air, and perhaps this ability to grow through the cracks of civilization is symbolic of America's plot as well.

SARDINIA

The man from the Smithsonian shows Nadan a document from which he can read the word **Sardinia**. Besides its position as a focal point into Europe, its etymological presence is that of the sardonic grin — a plant commonly found on the island makes corpses grin and grimace. The Sardonians had a ritual of killing old people with the poison while laughing loudly. This famous example of poison might support Tallman's theory that the hallucinogen given to Nadan might indeed be poisonous, and that his game of Russian Roulette with the eggs is more deadly than he thinks. If this is true, then certainly dogs being used to smell the egg would be the only viable way to detect it, and explain the shifting of the eggs from one side to the other (which would also make use of the old man from the Smithsonian's insistence on smell as true communication).

MOUNT RUSHMORE:

There is a tunnel behind Mount Rushmore which was originally envisaged as a hall of records where important documents could be kept, but this appears to be just a story. David Tallman theorizes it is a weapons cache, but I fancy that the only weapons America has left are chemical in nature, the same thing that destroyed them. Nadan says:

Americans were once the most skilled creators of consciousness-altering substances the world has ever seen — innumerable poisons for vermin, and a host of unnatural materials for every purpose, also contrived synthetic alkaloids that produced endless feverish imaginings. Surely some, at last of these skills remain. Or if they do not, then some of the substances themselves, preserved for eighty or a hundred years in hidden cabinets, and no doubt growing more dangerous as the world forgets them. I think that someone on the ship may have administered

some such drug to me.

Perhaps the tunnel beneath Rushmore is one of these cabinets, where the substances have lain in wait for an unsuspecting world.

FORGERY:

In addition to Nadan probably drinking on the final day and the problem of Ardis' deformity being so drastic that it is sickening but undetectable in clothes, it seems that the geography of the park is slightly off. The hotel should be east and across a bridge (previously mentioned in the text) from the East Potomac Park, but Nadan and Ardis walk North to reach it on the last day.

LITERARY REFERENCES:

The title is an obvious reference to **The Thousand and One Nights/The Arabian Nights**, but thankfully our tale is shorter.

Almost every Persian name in the story comes from James Morier's **The Adventures of Hajji Baba**. The emphasis the Mullah Nadan places on not drinking in the novel really does highlight the character inconsistency noted by David Tallman in his analysis of **Seven American Nights**: he went from claiming not to drink to having a half bottle of wine left in the climactic scene in which he supposedly lights the alcohol with his pistol, revealing the hideous nature of Ardis. According to the **Encyclopedia Iranica**, the picaresque novel was considered:

An Orientalist project **parexcellence*, Hajji Baba* lampoons Persians as rascals, cowards, puerile villains, and downright fools, depicting their culture as scandalously dishonest and decadent, and their society as violent — in the form of a biography of a “native,” a composite Persian character whose imagined identity was wrapped in deliberate ambiguities. ... Bizarre though it may seem, the Persian translation of **Hajji Baba** was seen as a critical depiction of Persia's backwardness and moral decadence, a self-image that begged for Westernizing remedies. (“Hajji Baba of Ispahan”)

Perhaps Wolfe employed this stereotyped vague and ambiguous character to create his novella, but this time casting the critical eye on the Americans who in the 20th century saw themselves as so great and civilized. Morier's novel was not the only satire referenced.

Even more ironically, the theater puts on **Visit to a Small Planet**, a farce that criticizes the age of McCarthyism in the United States, as a paragon of what once was. Written by Eugene “Gore” Vidal, it involves the spaceman Kreton arriving in the wrong time period. He telepathically communes with the Spelding's cat, named Rosemary. Out of boredom he seeks to start a war, and in this novella America will play the part of the alien. There are many changes to the play, including changing the name of Ellen's lover to John Randolph (which means “house wolf” or “protector”). The actor Terry plays John Randolph and Ardis' husband in the second play as well — and his disappearance, which does not seem to surprise Ardis, keeps Nadan busy while his room is searched (he must play the part of her husband instead in **Mary Rose**.) **This* distraction allows the poisoned egg to be removed, serving to protect Nadan for just a bit longer.

Mary Rose, from the author of *Peter Pan*, is a ghost story: it depicts a woman who disappears twice, whose development is retarded by her interaction with an ominous island which wants to keep her forever. The second time she disappears, it is for years, and her child grows up while she is gone, though she does not age in all that time. She speaks beyond her own allotted time

as a ghost, as perhaps Nadan will after he disappears. Mary Rose is also an inversion of Rosemary. No doubt Gene Wolfe appreciated the synchronicity of Eugene Vidal writing a play which included Rosemary as well. Mary Rose also involves a mother's search for her son.

The next play that they will put on is **Faust**, and Nadan (or his replacement) wonders who will play the doctor if club footed O'Keene is Mephistopheles. Most probably the man who has made a deal for power and knowledge is Golam Gassem in the role of Doctor Faust.

Nadan mentions the **Shah Nameh** as inspiration for his romanticism and dramatic nature, an ancient Persian epic which detailed the exploits of many heroes, including the Persian Hercules, Rostam. When O'Keene quotes Fitzgerald's **Rubaiyat**, another Persian work of enduring literature, Nadan does not recognize it, though perhaps this is a commentary on Fitzgerald's loose translation.

RELIGIOUS ALLUSIONS:

Given Nadan's presence in **The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan** as a holy man and his visit to Washington D.C. during holy week, it is appropriate to overlay the religious connotation on the story itself. Christ is apprehended after his last supper on Maundy Thursday and put to death on Friday. In this story, It seems much of Nadan's Thursday is spent trying to release Kreton and it is probable that Nadan will be arrested after finishing his journal that night — this puts all of Friday into the territory of "fiction". His entrance into the city proper on Palm Sunday then matches the entrance of Christ to Jerusalem, and the gaudy clothes of the celebrants echo the bright colors used to decorate churches during Holy Week.

The text stops before Easter Sunday — the only resurrection we see might be America's if they can succeed in bringing the other powers down, though here they represent something far more inimical and duplicitous than we would expect. However, the earthquake of Kreton's step, the thunder of the word police, and the time as three o'clock all resonate with the execution and death of Christ.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

Why doesn't Nadan recognize Fitzgerald's **Rubaiyat** (a very famous Persian work of literature) when Kreton quotes it? Admittedly a loose translation, is this a commentary on his inability to perceive the "spirit" of a translation or is it a clue that Nadan has already been replaced?

Is Nadan really there to regain the miniatures from the Smithsonian?

Is there really no credence to the detective Hassan Kerbelai's involvement?

Why does the prostitute who looks like Yasmin have the same deformity as the "exotic" American who plays Kreton? Is it possible that there is something ambiguous in the gender of Billy O'Keene?

Given that my thesis wholeheartedly endorses an American plot that employs the grain merchant and its insidious airborne chemicals transmitted through smell (Gas em!), do the two theories which account for the missing egg (excised day from the journal in Borski's scheme versus Tallman's idea of a drug sniffing dog stealing the egg) really have more weight than an idea which posits that the monstrous creature he kills or the final days could be something hallucinogenic in nature? It seems that in order to make use of every detail in the text, Nadan must be replaced, and his arrest before Good Friday is the best possible place for it, especially considering how that point of the text ends with the words culminating in "end": "If our love is

not a great love, destined to live forever in the hearts of the young and the mouths of the poets, it will be so before the end."

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS:

Like the other novellas of the 1970s, "Seven American Nights" explores identity, perception, and cultural motivation and alienation. It even casts America as a rather unmitigated villain, constituting one of Wolfe's most universally well-rounded works. The use of external plays and references to explore themes was present in both *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* and *Peace*. *Despite Peter Wright's assertion, there is still an objective back story which makes use of most of the details present in the text. Perhaps the truly inscrutable text from this period in Wolfe's career remains "Forlesen" rather than "Seven American Nights".

The widespread loss of America's relevance most resembles *Operation ARES*, and both works have sinister animals and the definite loss of civilization's aegis at night in the streets of the East Coast. The possibility of imprisonment and police abuse show the Kafkaesque in Wolfe, a streak which extends from *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* to *The Land Across*.

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