

Short Story 60: Forlesen part 2

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 14 Sep 2014

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Marc Aramini — 14 Sep 2014, 18:11

THE ANSWERS OF THE EXPLAINER:

Even on a first reading the final answer of the Explainer is poignant and powerful, embodying the uncertainty anyone who has spent their entire life as Forlesen has with no hint of transcendence, respite, or the big picture without tension and worry. Is what he has suffered worth it? ?No — Yes. No. Yes. Yes. No. Yes. Yes. Maybe. There are three explanations for this string of responses besides the obvious one (that even the Explainer isn't sure if it was worth it).

The first explanation involves matching up the nine professions named by the Explainer and their respective answers to the question of whether Forlesen's life was worth it.

Doctor: No — From a biological perspective, Forlesen's life has been pointless, producing offspring that will have the same useless lives with no concern for their own true health.

Priest: Yes — A divine presence, with an eternal salvation, might make struggle worthwhile.

Philosopher: No — Even existentialism can't save this miserable system — the model is innately nihilistic in its ends. Even if it does seek fleeting wealth and profit, what good does that do?

Theologian: Yes — Even fallen systems can be redeemed. Was this the right Emmanuel?

Actor: Yes — The role itself and the entertainment might have proven instructive to whoever was watching through the partition as a lesson on how not to exist — and the actor can always walk away from the role. Forlesen's life might be part of an ongoing debate.

Warlock: No — There was no magic or secret knowledge to be found in this system.

National Hero: Yes — The sacrifice of the self for family and economic prosperity might be worth something.

Aged Loremaster: Yes — We can learn things from the mistakes of history, even if they depict oppressively evil systems.

Novelist: Maybe — In its attempt to depict a particular kind of very real hell accurately, the story itself may not have any hint of true redemption or value, and instead simply diagnose a problem currently beyond our means to fix. The diagnosis and ambiguous chronicle of human strife might achieve some kind of universal appeal.

The second possibility is suggested by Robert Borski on the Urth Mailing List: that the entire experience is a computer simulation with "Hidden Drives" and even defragmentation — in his sketch, the string of yes and no correspond with binary code. While I think it is a model and

re-enactment of something real meant for instruction (Model Pattern Products), I think there is more physical or spiritual reality to Forlesen's day than a computer program. The text does mention rumors of Frick trying to talk to the computer, however.

The third possibility is that the Explainer is answering whichever questions Forlesen asked in his life which received no answers. After a careful perusal, there do not seem to be enough unanswered questions, unless we pose the scenarios of the Explainer as questions, too. The possibility of misaligning these answers is huge, and perhaps this scheme is forced.

"Can I tell you what it was I saw?" (referring to the shifting columns under the bridge, speaking to the cop) No.

"Are they falling down?" Yes.

"Have you been noticing cracks?" No.

"You may have been oppressed by demons." Yes.

"Or revived by unseen aliens who — have sought to re-create the life of the twentieth century." Yes.

"Or it may be that there is a small pressure exerted by a tumor in your brain." No.

"Those are the explanations?" Yes.

"I want to know if it's meant anything." Yes.

"If what I suffered — it it's been worth it." Maybe.

Some of those separations are forced, and perhaps making such parallels with all the half answered and repeated questions is impossible.

THE TECHNICAL PROBLEMS:

Clearly this is a slapped together reality which is reassembled every day. The buildings are consumed by black and orange machines (the same color as construction signs), the pillars move (or are they simply clouds?), the policeman is connected to his car by wires, and everything tastes of oil — the world is continually under construction, even in the meeting rooms. The Creativity Group exercises show reenactments of events which were already done — a debate between real teachers then re-enacted and filmed again, and many of the details in Forlesen seem as if everything is following a kind of model pattern (thus Model Pattern Products).

The problem of Forlesen is that of course many of the explanations in text will work, and perhaps none of them are necessary to "get" the point of the story, which is quite obvious — the dehumanizing and farcical attempts at creativity and morality enforced by modern business corporations are contrary to nature and the normal human condition — but it still seems that all of these things should add up to something greater than merely the assertion that Forlesen might be dead and in hell (unless he is Frick meant to endure the business model he helped create). One does feel that Forlesen is in Frick's world regardless, wondering why he is not the master for whom the universe has been made. It is fascinating that Abraham Beale and Adam Bean have the same face, almost as if the company is the "seed" Abraham planted which came to nothing.

The frustration of the text is that despite its clear didactic and moral message, the pattern which it models remains opaque. Some of the characters Forlesen encounters map to a particular type of dead mentioned in the book, such as Fields, whose sports metaphor match up with the fourth kind of dead, or Abraham Beale, who seems to have returned in his grandchildren's time, but it does not seem that every type of dead is represented in the text.

HIDDEN DRIVES SIGNS

The signs for hidden drives are black and orange — orange is usually reserved for construction signs, something which seems to be consistent with the imagery that we have throughout — the set is being constructed and altered as needed. Their obverse at lunch reads SLOW CHILDREN and at night, YIELD. This might connote the need to perpetuate the species, even in the midst of the veneer of useless work life — the motivation that is never discussed on the job.

GLASS

Why do the partition glass and mirrors show Forlesen different things? Partition glass exists to separate something, and this time it looks like perhaps there is an observational element, as Fields, through the glass, becomes a fastidious and neat man with glasses. When asked if partition glass could be used as window glass, Fields responds, "Hell no."

THE WINGED BEINGS

When Forlesen first sees the winged being on the cover of the red book, which details the types of dead, he asks "What is it?" His wife replies, "It's supposed to tell you how to be good, and how to live — everything like that." At one point he feels himself such a winged being or like a hawk when he is on top of the undulating highway, but his descent and the motif of the bird cage in the bet-your-life game no doubt show that the spiritual wings are fettered. It is possible that Forlesen is not human, as the first paragraphs of the novella speculate. Perhaps this is all an act that copies human life as part of a "debate" on its utility and the manner in which it should be judged after the fact.

CREATIVITY GROUP

In the creativity group, the employees are to "create creativity itself" and watch a movie on creativity which is the most derivative scenario imaginable. When Forlesen supposes actors would understand creativity better than teachers, the response is: "It's a re-creation of an actual meeting of real teachers — They photographed it and taped it, then had the actors reproduce the debate." This feels like the scenario for Forlesen — a recreation of old business practices, possibly for part of a larger debate or quest for understanding.

One gets the sense that this entire novella is based on such a recreation — put on by creatures who have no comprehension of the reasons for the business world or human life. The doubletalk in this creativity scene is mind-numbing:

"What creativity is going to do for you in the way of problem study is point the way to new ways of seeing your problem — not necessarily successful — if by successful what you mean is permitting you to make a nontrivial elaboration of the problem definition."

"I think we're all agreed [that problem definitions don't limit creativity] when they're creative problem definitions. Right, Ned?"

?Of Creative problems.

With names like Abraham, Adam, Emanuel, and Edna (a name derived from the Garden of Eden) involved in this broken system, the problem is one inherent and systemic in creation similar to the problem of evil — how could life come to this? Forlesen even suggests they form clay and start in — clearly derivative of the earliest conception of Jewish and Christian creation traditions on the manner in which man was formed.

The idea of the conflict in Forlesen being nothing but a recreation is recapitulated in one of the Explainer's options: "You may have been oppressed by demons — or revived by unseen aliens who, landing on the Earth eons after the death of the last man, have sought to re-create the life of the twentieth century". Perhaps a spiritual spin on this is possible — a model incited by angelic beings ignorant of good and evil attempting to understand and judge something so vapid and all consuming as the middle-management business model of Model Pattern Products, but without true comprehension — the pages of books in the model don't match up well, and something is lost in translation.

THE GRADING SYSTEM:

The computer grades answers to the sample leadership problems and assigns a grade between a high score of 757 and a low score of 49 (757 is the sum of seven consecutive primes, 49 is seven squared). The quorum necessary to change pages from the brown book is never seven or less. This repetition of seven is in stark contrast to the overwhelming "hell" comments made by the management staff.

BET-YOUR-LIFE MINIGAME

The bet your life minigame, "the management-managing real-life pseudogame" involves eight and twelve sided die in small birdcages. It is a bidding and selling kind of game, but several of the "harmless" wagers made actually mirror the condition of Forlesen. He tastes oil everywhere and sees oil stains, and his first thought is that his feet are "shoes". Mr. Fleer's instructions are "BID 17 ASK 18 — SNOWMOBILE 5 — UP — OPEN NEW TERRITORY SHUT DOWN COAL OIL SHOES FLEER." Note the shutting down of oil (ubiquitous in the text), shoes, and coal there, and after Forlesen goes into the hall it feels glacial, "filled with quiet wind and the memory of ice." Forlesen's area of the game is being shut down, eaten by the black and orange machines late in the day. Earlier the text made clear there were twelve types of dead, and perhaps the 12 and 8 sided die represent them and the — quorum (never seven or less) necessary to change the rules of the game. If that quorum is reached, then the pages in the brown book can be altered — the book which contains the script of Forlesen's life.

The only real mention of coal (besides the very real possibility that all of these people are metaphorically burning in hell) might be in the real life occupation of Henry Clay Frick, the coal and railroad magnate. Abraham Beale says that once he fired on the railroad, and he also says that "the railroads and the coal mines buy your state legislatures, right?" It is probably no coincidence that these are the two areas Henry Clay Frick controlled, but these are being shut down.

Of course, it is unclear what Forlesen actually accomplishes in this game by walking out before the man with the bristly mustache can cheat him by selling back the stock he just bought at a higher price. (Forlesen and he converse in the hallway, and the man does not recognize him — there is no individuality in the business world besides trite cliches and metaphors.)

LITERARY ALLUSIONS:

While it is almost a work of Naturalism, there is the sense that these men are being forced to live life unnaturally — all society's desires are not equal. Social conditions and the environment do seem to have a kind of inescapable force in this novella. Forlesen decides to go to work so that Edna can have the peace of mind knowing that she and her children won't starve — the natural, adventurous life that Abraham Beale lived is preferable, but has somehow become an impossibility for Forlesen's life, whose existence has been hard determined from the moment of his awakening. He even finds evidence that everything is scripted in his brown book. Wolfe's indictment of the system offers no answers, merely a diagnosis. Clearly Wolfe posits that this existence, for all its naturalistic force to produce conformity and mold people in patterns based on generic models, is completely unnatural.

The clearest short story homage might be to Sturgeon's "Yesterday Was Monday", where a man awakens to find tomorrow under construction by a working crew. The "age" of the new wing and the buildings being torn down by black and orange machines at the end of "Forlesen" especially echo this idea.

NAMES:

First Generation:

Abraham Beale — Abraham means "father of many" or "a multitude"; Beale can mean "handsome or fair" or even son of Bel.

Adam Bean — Adam is the founder of Model Pattern Products, it is certainly no coincidence that he is named after the first man responsible for the fall from grace. His name could imply "man" or "redness". Bean implies a grower or planter of beans/seeds. This resonates with the idea that Abraham Beale "planted" the buy-out inheritance he received for his farm to become the highway.

Avery Beale — Avery can mean "elf ruler or counsel", though in light of his association with roosters and the bird cages extant in the bet your life game, it is conceivable that an aviary is implied.

Abner Bunter - Abraham's lawyer, Abner means "father of light" and of course a bunt is only a soft hit in baseball — perhaps he did not accomplish what he as capable of.

Second Generation:

C. D?Andrea replaced by Ed Fields. The name can imply "manly".

C. Dudley — He solved the business problem left in the wake of Bean's demise, Dudley can mean "a woodland clearing" or it can imply a descendant of black sides?. He is probably replaced by Frick.

Cappy Dillingham — Cappy is a gypsy name for "profit". The last name means "homestead of the Dull people" (a place name, though surprisingly apt).

Third Generation

Emanuel Forlesen / Forlosen — Emanuel means “God is with us” and Forlesen is an archaic form of lost or forlorn — in its German pronunciation, vorlesen, means “to read”.

Ernie Frick — the gold toothed, balding, and mole-faced person in charge of Model Pattern Products, as far as can be determined. (The name Frick became a euphemistically dirty word because of the real life Henry Clay Frick). Ernest means “serious, determined.”

Edna Forlesen — Her name means “rejuvenation, pleasure, delight.” Derived from the same source as the garden of Eden.

Miss Fawn — She is the secretary to Mr. Freeling who then becomes Mrs. Frost. While the name obviously means young deer, it is clear that her name reflects her attitude — a transformation from fawning insincerity to frosty indifference once she gets what she wants.

Miss Fedd — She was once in traffic and is a cousin to Miss Fawn.

Ed Fields — Sports analogies dominate his life, thus the last name. Edward means “guardian” and Fields implies someone who lives on land cleared of forest but not yet cultivated for use.

Mr. Fleer — His life revolves around ski analogies; he obviously invests in snowmobiles in Bet-Your-Life, but his name can mean “to flee” or indicate a refugee.

Mr. Ffoulks - In the bet your life mini-game, Forlesen uses his name. He is invested in toys, weapons, and is “big” in aquariums. Obviously his last name implies “people” or ?folk?. Forlesen jokes that he feels it is the age of aquariums — a pun on the age of aquarius, which would be associated with modernization, nonconformity, idealism, and freedom, among other things — whereas an aquarium is of course a confinement with transparent sides so that the captives can be observed.

Mr. Elmer Freeling — Mr. Freeling is Ed Field's chief and sailing is his dominant metaphor. Elmer is derived from a surname meaning “noble or famous”.

Mr. Flint — Mr. Freeling's boss, Flint reports directly to Mr. Frick. Obviously a Flint rock can be used to start a fire. It is not clear that we ever see him, unless he is the man carrying a coat outside of Mr. Frick's office, or perhaps the man in the red coat in the Bet-Your-Life game.

Edward Franklin — As already stated, the first name Edward implies “guardian”. Franklin indicates a free land owner.

Eugene Fine — Eugene means “well born” and Fine was originally a place name; he is the reason that the creativity meeting must be held at

Enid Fenton — Enid means “soul or life” and Fenton implies a marshy settlement. Her individuality and refusal to fit in make her the subject of the sample leadership problem.

Eric Fairchild and his mother — Eric can imply “forever or eternal ruler”, and Fairchild is obvious. His trope is to always ask if people see what he means, and to assert that he in fact does see what they mean in turn. He indicates the top grade is 757 and the the low grade is 49.

Fourth Generation:

George Howe — George's first name means “earth worker” and Howe is a place name derived

from someone living by a small hill or barrow.

Gordie Hilbert - Forlesen's orientation, his first name means "from the cornered hill", and the last implies magnificence in battle.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

Is Emmanuel Forlesen a human being at all? Is this simply an angelic recreation of a debate about the utility (or futility) of 20th century human existence? Is Frick's soul on trial for what he has done to people in life?

Why is the term hours used only once in the text, at a point which is chronologically incorrect if "ours" was meant?

What is the significance of the brown book's grammatical change from saying "good field" to "good Fields?" Is Fields the exemplary middle management man or is this a more metaphorical exhortation to plant seed in better fields than this corporate nonsense? Otherwise, that portion of the brown book indicates that there is a coach or quarterback upstairs and emphasizes teamwork.

Are the twelve kinds of dead related to the thirteen characters of Forlesen's generation present at work? Are they in turn related to the 12 sided dice trapped in bird cages in the Bet-Your-Life psuedogame?

Is there really an objective underlying principle to "Forlesen", or is meaninglessness and absurdity the true answer? The brown book serving as the rule book for Bet-Your-Life depicting events in Forlesen's life really does make the entire thing seem like a scripted recreation.

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS:

Forlesen is one of the most bleak and despairing portraits of a world stripped of freedom in Wolfe's body of work, and even though it is unrealistic in its precise details, it might be the most realistic thing he has ever written. Its unrelenting portrayal of corporate America as a place of ineffective metaphors and incompetent management is scathing and probably fairly accurate. The tense gender relationship that stems from a woman completely dependent on a man for her support is deftly painted in just a few lines of dialogue.

One can easily imagine someone who has worked their entire lives asking the question Forlesen asks at the end, and reaching the same indeterminate conclusion. The story operates effectively without ever grasping its objective situation, but perhaps pinpointing that is not as important as asking why corporations have become such dull beasts. "Forlesen" stands out in Wolfe's work because of its focus on the mechanical conglomeration completely beyond the power of any one working man to influence or change, and it has a special and unique place in Wolfe's oeuvre. Wolfe's explorations of modernism (exemplified in "Morning Glory") are equally critical but seem to offer more hope — a man can change his attitude and his beliefs, but a man who has to feed his family must conform to society's banal expectations. In the exaltation of corporations and companies to powers beyond even government or national control, perhaps the nearly contemporary "Hour of Trust" obliquely approaches the same theme, but "Forlesen" is a far more effective and universal condemnation of something which the vast majority of Americans have had to face. Wolfe may not have ever been interested in writing the stereotypical Great American Novel of 20th century life, but he comes close to capturing the true horror of modern life in "Forlesen", perhaps his greatest social commentary. The blind, inane, and pathetic company has become like a God which perhaps does not demand human

sacrifice but somehow manages to sacrifice humanity anyway.

RESOURCES:

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