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MISLAID OR MISDIAL:
MISPLACEMENT OF THE JELLY JARS
IN NABOKOV’S “SIGNS AND SYMBOLS”

Over sixty short stories have been written by Vladimir Nabokov throughout his literary career, but none has attracted as much scholarly debate as the story he published in 1948, “Signs and Symbols.” The significance or lack thereof of the jelly jars has been debated by several literary critics. Carol Dole speculates that Nabokov may “have been hinting at their very lack of meaningfulness when he introduce[s] the basket of jellies as an ‘innocent trifle’” (304). But, by describing the jelly jars as “luminous” (Nabokov 14), Nabokov seems to be alluding to their ability to yield an enlightening insight. Alexander Dolinin assigns meaning to the jelly jars by “connect[ing] [them] to a theme of birth” (263). Yet, although the son is the intended recipient of these jars, the gifts lose their worth as a means of commemorating his day of birth because the day elapses without them ever being received. While analyzing the jars, critics tend to overlook the word “mislaid” (Nabokov 10) used in Part One of “Signs and Symbols.” It is used to refer to the possibility of the jars being misplaced if they are left at the son’s “miserably understaffed” (Nabokov 10) sanatorium. The author, “whose fondness for puns and puzzles is well known” (Dole 304), conceals an anagram in the word. The letters can be rearranged to form “misdial.”

There are two instances in the story where the jelly jars are mislaid. First, the mother gives them to her husband mistaking them for keys to their residence. Second, instead of being offered to the son, the assortment of jelly jars are brought home and laid upon the table inside the parents' apartment. These two examples of the jelly jars misplacement mirror the two cases of telephone number misdials. This association casts a rather doubtful impression that the third telephone call at the end of the story is a third dialing error. By proving that the parents improperly place the jelly jars twice, the jars can serve as a portent that the third telephone call will be dialed from the asylum by a doctor announcing the son's suicide.

The initial mix up of the jelly jars occurs as the parents leave the mental institution and begin the journey back to their apartment. The mother decides to buy some fish for dinner, so she hands her husband the jellies telling him to go home. But, she seems to mistake the jellies for the keys to their residence. Since she retains the keys, her husband arrives at their apartment to find himself locked outside. Impeded from entering his home, he is stuck sitting outside on the stair-landing awaiting his wife's arrival. This incident, Gennady Barabtarlo claims, represents "more than yet another mishap of that sad Friday: it assumes in retrospect a queer symbolism, as though that undelivered gift were, in another dimension, a key to the invisible over-plot" (141). It is precisely this blunder involving the key and the assortment of jelly jars that is crucial to understanding how the jelly jars are mishandled. After all, Nabokov does seem to be hinting about the "ten different fruit jellies in ten little jars" (Nabokov 9) when he indicates that the duration of time the father spends locked outside is "ten minutes" (Nabokov 12). The repetition of the word "ten" draws particular attention towards the jars. Since they are not offered to the son, they do not fulfill the parents' expectation of being inoffensive birthday gifts for him. Nor do they function as the mother desires, like a key for her husband to use to unlock their apartment door. The inability of the parents to put the jelly jars in a position to serve their intended purpose contributes to their melancholy feeling on this miserable Friday.

The basket of jellies is misplaced again when it is left standing on the table inside the parents' apartment while the parents "s[i]t down to their unexpected festive midnight tea" (Nabokov 14). The gift is not put in a position to mark the occasion of their institutionalized son's birthday. In fact, since the time is twelve o'clock at night, and the present is not in the son's possession, the birthday is over and the gift becomes meaningless. The jellies original

purpose as a symbol of the parents love for their son becomes overshadowed by the reason the parcel could not be delivered. As a nurse at the mental institution explains to the couple, the son attempts suicide earlier that day, and a parental “visit might disturb him” (Nabokov 10). The grief the parents feel regarding their son’s suicidal behavior is compounded by their inability to offer their gift as a token of their love to their son. The birthday present is fundamentally linked to the parents’ misery. It is therefore extremely odd that the jellies are brought home and placed in a festive environment. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word “festive” has “mirthful, joyous, [and] cheerful” (“festive”) connotations. The father embodies this definition by smiling and being “in high spirits” (Nabokov 13) as he announces to his wife that they should withdraw their son from the asylum. His happy mood reaches its peak as he derives a sense of “pleasure” (Nabokov 14) from examining the jars. The jelly jars bring joy to the father, as though they are his own gifts. Despite being destined for the son, these objects never reach him. Instead, they are laid on the parents’ living room table and misused by the father for his own enjoyment.

The two incidences of jelly jar misplacement serve to indicate that there will be two misdialled telephone calls. With their decision made to retrieve their son, the couple discusses how they intend to look after their mentally disturbed son at home. This conversation is interrupted twice as a result of the telephone ringing with calls made by a girl with an incorrect number. During “the second call, the wife... patiently explain[s] to the girl that she had dialed the letter O instead of the zero; hence it is unlikely that the girl should make the same mistake again” (Toker 204). Afterwards, the father puts on his eyeglasses and contemplates the jelly jars. The story ends with him reading aloud the labels on the jars as the telephone rings a third time. Even though the origin and nature of the third call is not stated in the text, tidings of the son’s suicide from the sanitarium are implied. Both the jelly jars and the telephone calls literally have words attached to them. Words are printed on the labels of the jars and the discourse of the calls involves words. Curiously enough, like the wrongly dialed telephone calls, a jelly jar label is also incorrect. As the father “spell[s] out [the] eloquent labels” (Nabokov 14) of the different fruit jellies, the third label he reads is misspelled as “beech plum” (Nabokov 14). Alexander Drescher astutely points out that “the fruit of the European and American beech trees are, of course, nuts not suitable for jellies” (342). Printed properly the label should read “beach plum.” This type of fruit has a tart taste and is commonly used to make jellies. The duality between the jars and the telephone calls is further reinforced by the interconnectedness of the letters of the words used to

describe them: mislaid and misdial. A parallel is established between the two incidences of jar misplacement and the two misdialed telephone calls. By figuratively ruling out the possibility of the third call being accidentally made, the misplaced jars can be seen as foreshadowing a deliberately placed call from the asylum declaring the son's suicide.

By associating the misplacement of the jelly jars with the incorrect telephone calls, the jars take on an ominous meaning. They become gloomy forebodings of the son's death. The two instances of the jelly jars being mislaid reflect the two telephone number misdials. Consequently, the third telephone call can be seen as being deliberately made. It is probable that a doctor is calling with news of the son's suicide from the sanatorium. Ironically, the "innocent trifle" (Nabokov 9) the parents choose for their son's birthday forecasts his death.

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