

Short Story 159*: How I Got Three Zip Codes/Kid Sister

The Urth list — 3 messages, 2 voices, 28 Apr 2015

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Marc Aramini — 28 Apr 2015, 03:49

#HOW I GOT THREE ZIP CODES AND KID SISTER/INTRODUCTION TO PHOENIX

"How I Got Three Zip Codes" first appeared in *The Mammoth Book of Comic Fantasy II* in 1999 and has not been collected.

##Summary and Commentary

In much the same phantasmagoric style as the short story "To The Dark Tower Came", Wolfe employs his shifting semiotic symbolism in a far more playful autobiographical sketch - one which basically establishes his grandfather as a teller of tall tales and expresses Wolfe's disappointment with the post office, necessitating a PO Box, a house address, and an independent mail box at a Mail Boxes R Us type business, all while metafictionally playing with the ideas going through Wolfe's mind to write an article encapsulating all of that which will actually sell.

The story begins, "The sun was sinking slowly in the Gulf, having been torpedoed by a Nazi sub." This sets the tone for the type of story Wolfe has crafted - one in which the literal symbolic meaning is displayed but which also recreates a historic event - in this case, the sinking of a vessel named *Sun* by a Nazi U-boat, a historical war time event turned into an absurd one of the setting sun actually being torpedoed. As they fish upon a pier and Wolfe imagines how to write the story that we are reading, his grandfather is with him, probably summoned up for his advice on how to write something historical (a war time experience which may or may not have involved the real wooden-legged grandfather of Gene Wolfe - a grandfather who will not be identified as anything except "the old man" until almost the end of the story).

His grandfather tells him that there are three ways to start an article (or catch a catfish), as he spits out his tobacco. Wolfe tries to block out the cries of the drowning sailors in his mind while his grandfather tells him that he can hook an audience or purchasing editor like a frog, through the top and bottom lip, using a dramatic event at the start. The grandfather extends the metaphor, saying that if the frog had a sinus condition, it certainly couldn't breathe with its mouth pinned shut in that fashion, and goes on to say, "Some folks don't think. I seen a man down in Sonora got his head cut clean off with a machete. This's in a saloon. A cantina, they calls it." [A metaphor on the cusp of insulting a non-reflective audience].

In response to the incorrect tense of his grandfather's digression, Wolfe comments he thought they were now sitting on a pier. The grandfather continues the story of the decapitation, with the head spinning around trice and the body being unable to think (having no brains.) "'Some people never do,' I reminded him gently, still wondering how to begin this article."

The grandfather continues that the headless body ran out in the street to the next cantina, determined to spend its money and demanding a drink: "Couldn't talk, a-course, didn't have no

mouth, but ya could see from the expression a its shirt buttons that wuz what it meant."

The body tried to drink its shot, but alas, had no mouth. Wolfe's grandfather tried to tell it its head was back in the other cantina, but it had no ears to hear. Wolfe responds:

"I see," I said. I had lost interest already, and was wondering what had become of the girl I had observed removing a yellow bathing suit behind the creosote tree to my left. A girl like that, I mused ...

[The creosote would be in the desert setting of border Mexico and the Southwestern United States described by his grandfather, rather than on the pier in Chicago ...]

The grandfather continues his [folk medicine?] advice: "Put salt on it," the old man told me. "Don't ya lay it on no windowsill, neither, if'n ya sees no doctor. Did I say how that head *ate* ever' crumb a sawdust it could reach? With its tongue, ya know?" He goes on to describe how the body poured the shot in its shirt pocket and then fell down dead, as an example of drama sure to hook an audience, and perhaps even get *Reader's Digest* on the line with this dramatic event as bait.

As day draws to a close, Wolfe traces the letters HOW I GOT THREE ZIP CODES in the dark, cloud-tossed sky. "This wasn't in Mexico ... It was in Chicago." His grandfather asks if one of his zip codes starts "six-ought-six", and the marginally non-sequitur (or perhaps simply somewhat inscrutable) dialogue continues:

I shook my head. "The little bubble in that gadget can't possibly tell you that." [The most enigmatic statement in the text ... the grandfather's fishing pole, perhaps?]

Stop rattling' like that ... It's real destractin', but I'll have me a pair a Genes anyhow." [Are they here referring to Levi's 606 jeans? Or the U-606 German sub? Though of course this is also playing on Wolfe's genetic ancestry and name]

I waited for him to add on rye toast and hold the mayo. He did not.

"Didn't ya shake your head like that before, back there 'bout a page?"

[snapping himself from his fantasy of the girl and the creosote, no doubt].

"I don't think so," I said.

"Mebbe that wuz a real snake, then. Better have another drink."

Wolfe says that he was going to describe how he got three zip codes, "Sweet One Oh Three in Lake Zurich, Illinois" [Ste. 103, obviously - the puns are getting overwhelming]. Wolfe asks how editors and catfish are truly alike, since "editors have scales of payment, while catfish have no scales at all. How do you resolve the contradiction?"

The grandfather asks how much Leah is paying Wolfe for the article, and Wolfe says that he stands corrected [by implication, the scales of payment being so low they might as well not exist].

Wolfe says that his zip codes are 60011, 60011, and 60047 (two from Barrington, one from Lake Zurich). He notes that their sum is 180,068, and when his grandfather asks their product, he says that his calculator can't express a number that large without using logarithms [but would be 216,244,865,825,170 - it occurs to me that I am a pedant].

"I tol' yer ma ya wouldn't be normal. How 'bout the cube root?"

Wolfe responds, 6023 and 2/3rds, and the grandfather asks if people could write to him at that

zip code.

"I don't see why not." The grandfather asks the average, and Wolfe says that it is the same number [the product of the three numbers and the product of the average three times is the same number, at least to 7 significant figures].

Wolfe says the numbers are large and differ by small amounts, implying the cube root can be estimated as the average, but the grandfather asks him to write them down for him. "I moistened my forefinger (receiving a poignant reminder of the nightcrawler with which I had baited my hook earlier) and wrote them out on the salt-rimmed boards."

His grandfather says those numbers aren't so large compared to the "three" up in the sky which must be a half mile high and six long "if'n it's a inch."

The grandfather says maybe Wolfe has seen bigger numbers over in Switzerland, but Wolfe says the 60047 zip code is over in Lake Zurich [the word play of which Wolfe is so fond, doing much the same thing with Paris, Texas and Paris, France in "At The Point of Capricorn."]

Wolfe says people don't use the United States Mail much anymore. The metafictional dialogue below highlights Wolfe's new mailing address in Lake Zurich, selected for its superior convenience and hours of operation:

"Whar do they stick their stamps then?"

"Don't tempt me like that, Grandfather [Where the sun doesn't shine, of course ...] Mailing's too easy, I suppose. There are mail boxes on every corner, post offices everywhere, and so on."

"Always closed, though." The old man scratched the ankle of his wooden leg reflectively.

"I suppose that may be the reason. Our post office in Barrington opens at nine-forty-five and closes at four-thirty, and at noon Saturday. Naturally it's closed all day Sunday and on every conceivable and inconceivable holiday."

"That isn't no way to catch a catfish!"

"I know. That's why I waited until this page."

"That place over to Switzerland -?"

"Mail Boxes She's Us. It's open a lot more, and the guy there gave me a key to the front door, as well as the key to Sweet 103."

"Ya mean box, don't ya, boy?"

"Yes, but you have to saw *sweet*, it's a tradition. Write me at 830 West

Main, Sweet 103. Or send me packages O.O.P.S., Fed X -"

"That one a them monster books or always readin'?"

"Close enough. But the rest are worse, really."

Wolfe goes on to describe how an editor in England was going to send a manuscript via "International Soup-Or-Swift" which should have been in his hands in six hours. A week later "Soup-or-Swift" said they didn't deliver to his area (for Wolfe lives northwest of Chicago, and his manuscript was in an office on the far south side of Chicago - in Kentucky.)

His grandfather suggests that he could have the mail come to his house at 60010, but Wolfe says:

"I've had packages left next door and down the block and a whole lot one street over. ... I'm not through yet. In fact, I'm not anywhere close to it. I've had packages left in cars in my driveway. Half a dozen wedding presents were left in our garage and found before the wedding only by accident. An envelope containing ten thousand dollars in cheques was left on the stoop in the rain."

The old man was no longer listening. Shading his eyes to scan the lightless horizon, he muttered, "Ya think mebbe some of them solar sailors got off in the lifeboats?"

I doubt it. That's a Leslie Fish album. ... I'd better be getting home."

[Leslie Fish is a filk musician - a musical genre tied to the SF and Fantasy fandom - and her 1977 album was titled **Solar Sailors**]

Looking down into the dark and swirling waters of the bay, the old man grunted, "Huh! Which 'un, boy?"

##Unanswered questions

While it is clear that despite all the dialogue, Wolfe's grandfather is still considering a Zip Code primarily as a place to live, there are at least two interactions that are difficult. Why would the grandfather ask if one of the zip codes starts with 606? What gadget and bubble is Wolfe talking about here? Is this related to Levi jeans or a German submarine, or completely different, like a 606 spincast fishing pole?

When the grandfather looks up at the "gull-smeared" sky and says there is a huge three there, is he simply talking about a cloud, the setting sun, or is this some kind of literal invocation of the trinity, the "big three" in the sky?

What kind of advice is the grandfather providing when he says to put salt on "it" if he doesn't see a doctor, but not to put "it" on a windowsill? Is this a priapic erection from thinking of the girl or some other folk remedy? [Or am I the perverted one, rather than Wolfe?]

##Kid Sister and Further Autobiographical Family Information

In "Kid Sister", autobiographical tales of encounters with the paranormal are described by various authors of fantasy and horror. Wolfe's contribution begins with a story of driving his mother shortly before her death from Virginia Beach to Logan, Ohio, where she had lived with Wolfe's father from his retirement until his death in 1973. However, he begins with a description of his mother and her family which will reveal why I combined these very different accounts:

When I trace my mother to the end of memory, I find a beautiful young woman bending over the little bed she has made for me on a seat in a railway chaircar. Her eyes are blue, and a strand of auburn hair peeps from under her cloche. A friend of mine jokes about "sharp nosed English redheads"; I heard her use the phrase for years before it struck me that my mother had been one.

We were going from New Jersey to North Carolina, supposedly to visit her family but in fact to visit her father. As if by magic we were there, and he was an old man who sat on the porch grasping the cane with which he threatened me each time I came too near, a large old man with a jug of corn whiskey beside him and a wooden leg stretched stiffly before him. I admired him for the pit dog chained to a tree across the road and the fighting cocks cooped behind the house; I did not know then that he had begun life as a sailor, or that he had fought Indians and Mexican bandits as a cavalryman, or that he had been a circus performer.

Nor did I know that he was a hard and violent man who had lost his leg when a gang of workmen he bossed had tried to murder him; or that he beat his wife and all but one of his children. The one he never struck had been

Mary, his favorite. Mary was my mother.

We returned home and he died. Because her father had favored her, my mother was not well liked by her numerous brothers and sisters. For her and for me, her family virtually ceased to exist for about fifty years.

This, then, is the basis for the man in "How I Got Three Zip Codes", an autobiographical sketch involving an article about mail and perhaps a Nazi submarine sinking the sun (but just to get an editor's or reader's attention) in which Wolfe tries to summon the memory of his grandfather for help and advice in its composition, who proves as ornery in spirit as in life.

Kid Sister goes on to describe Wolfe's father's funeral and the subsequent request after several months that he assist his mother in moving, and he includes this information:

When she was a young woman courted by many young men, it had been customary for such suitors to bring candy or flowers. When they went home, she had quietly put the boxes of candy beside the bed of her younger sister, Emily. ... Emily had invited her sister to live with her.

Wolfe's wife Rosemary drives Wolfe's mother in a different vehicle and, separated, Wolfe arrives at his aunt's house alone - an aunt he instantly recognizes because she looks exactly like his mother (but talked like Carol Channing). Within a year, his aunt Emily dies, and he goes to Virginia Beach to haul his mother's belongings back to Logan, Ohio. The man who rents him the U-Haul does not seem to know how to hook up the trailer very well, but Wolfe proceeds anyway. At the house of his deceased Aunt Emily, his mother tells him that Wolfe will be forced to sleep in his aunt's bed:

I lugged my suitcase in, and found the bedspread stiff with blood. Emily had lain on it, my mother explained, and the chemotherapy treatments that had not cured her cancer had given her hives. She had scratched them raw.

Wolfe attempts to read a biography of Zelda Fitzgerald to fall asleep, but the bedside lamp will not light up. He sees that the 100 watt lightbulb in it has burnt out, seemingly too powerful for such a small lamp. In the morning his mother reveals that Emily had kept that lamp switched on all night, every night.

I thought about that as we drove away - the frilly little bedside lamp that had kept Death at bay, and Death's coming quietly through the night when the little lamp's brilliant light failed at last.

During their car journey through the mountains, the dark, and the snow, Wolfe tells his mother of a man he knows who was complaining of his new car, because the doors would not open from the inside, save for the driver's door. The man had to go outside and manually open every door to let people out.

When they stop at a gas station, his mother's door will not open, something which had never happened before. Wolfe reaches across to try and open it, pounding on it with his greater strength.

We looked at each other. And then - very slowly - looked into the back seat. There was nothing to see there and nothing to hear, no shadowy figure, no ghostly laughter. But the sensation was overwhelming: a third person was sitting there, an impish passenger who found our efforts with the door very amusing indeed.

Wolfe gets out to open his mother's door with the key from the outside. Wolfe notes that that was almost the end of it, save that the U-Haul attendant at Logan comments that the way the

trailer is hooked up, he shouldn't have been able to get ten miles.

Thus "Kid Sister" gives us a glimpse of not only Wolfe's family, but of his belief in the supernatural: that what was perhaps his mother's sister was somehow there, preventing an accident or tragedy on the road, but still exerting some strange influence on reality even after her death.

In his introduction to Brian Hopkins's short story collection *Phoenix*, Wolfe relates much the same story in a more highly stylized fashion. Wolfe begins his intro by stating, "[Brian Hopkins] is a better writer than I am, and I hate him for that. Everybody who writes ought to write just as well as he or she can, unless it's better than me. In which case, they ought to tone it down. I've told Brian this, but he doesn't listen. I hate him for that."

He goes on to tell that Brian is "horror-haunted", and proceeds to tell his own "true ghost story."

"I won't get into the actual ghost (yes, there was one and I could name her), because the actual ghost was nowhere near as horrifying as the beginning had led Me to expect. Actual ghosts, you see, can surprise us as well as horrify us." Wolfe tells the same story, referring to himself as Me throughout, of going to visit his Aunt and her later death, precipitating Wolfe's retrieval of his mother. Throwing the bloody covers on the floor and trying to turn on the lamp, Wolfe says, "Me had, you see, tumbled into a Brian Hopkins story. Me just didn't know it. Things like that happen. Close your eyes and look up, and you may see the person writing it." In the morning, Wolfe has the same conversation with his mother, and the introduction claims, "The friendly woman who talked like Carol Channing had been horror-haunted, you see. She had known that It was out there in the dark, and in the dark It would come for her. That small and frilly lamp had been her sentinel, keeping It away all night, every night. But in the end, the bulb had burned out; and It had come for her."

##Connection with other works

"How I Got Three Zip Codes" shows how strange Wolfe can make autobiographical information - something as simple as an article expressing dissatisfaction with the postal service (which were his real mailing zip codes at one time, when he lived in Barrington) becomes a truly bizarre tall tale, headless bar hopping body and sun sinking Nazi submarine included, resembling something like a Lafferty story, though it is perhaps the character of his boisterous grandfather that brings that idea to the forefront. It is conceivable that the wooden leg of his grandfather has been echoed in Wolfe's fiction multiple times.

##Resources

-Wolfe, Gene. "How I Got Three Zip Codes". *The Mammoth Book of Comic Fantasy II, ed. Mike Ashley. New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 1999. Print.

-Wolfe, Gene. "Introduction". *Phoenix*, Brian A. Hopkins. Terradan Press, 2013. Print.

-Wolfe, Gene. "Kid Sister". *Dancing with the Dark*. New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 1999. Print.

David Duffy — 29 Apr 2015, 01:32 · in reply to Marc Aramini

On Mon, 27 Apr 2015, Marc Aramini wrote:

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"I don't see why not." The grandfather asks the average, and Wolfe says that it is the same number [the product of the three numbers and the product of the average three times is the same number, at least to 7 significant figures].

ie 60023

RE: Sighting at Twin Mounds

I thought it might also allude to Lovecraft (and Bishop) _The Mound_:

"I had gone into Oklahoma to track down and correlate one of the many ghost tales which were current among the white settlers, but which had strong Indian corroboration...

"The tale, outwardly, was an extremely naive and simple one, and centred in a huge, lone mound or small hill that rose above the plain about a third of a mile west of the village a mound which some thought a product of Nature, but which others believed to be a burial-place or ceremonial dais constructed by prehistoric tribes. This mound, the villagers said, was constantly haunted by, two Indian figures which appeared in alternation; an old man who paced back and forth along the top from dawn till dusk, regardless of the weather and with only brief intervals of disappearance, and a squaw who took his place at night with a blue-flamed torch that glimmered quite continuously till morning. When the moon was bright the squaw's peculiar figure could be seen fairly plainly, and over half the villagers agreed that the apparition was headless...

"The blue light! the blue light!... muttered the object, 'always down there'"

Marc Aramini — 29 Apr 2015, 01:37 · in reply to David Duffy

I need to fix that section ... it is 60010, 60011, and 60047. Wrote too much in one day. 60023 and 2/3

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