

A FISH STORY

Gene Wolfe

[21 may 2002—proofed for #bookz]

Once upon a time, the story goes, Gene Wolfe sent an editor a gingerbread house for Christmas. That editor left the treat beside the coffee machine so the entire department could enjoy it. For half a day the house sat untouched. Then one brave assistant editor finally broke off a large piece, and within minutes only a few shreds of gingerbread remained. "I think everyone was afraid to mess up anything so beautiful," said one witness. "That hardly seems likely--" came the reply. "These people are editors."

*This anecdote has no bearing whatsoever on "A Fish Story," but it's too good to leave untold. Gene's first F&SF story was "Car Sinister" in the January 1970 issue and we're delighted he took time out from working on his new novel *On Blue's Waters*, to tell us a new one...*

I am always embarrassed by the truth. For one thing, I am a writer of fiction, and know that coming from me it will not be believed, nor does it lend itself to neat conclusions in which the hero and heroine discover the lost silver mine. So bear with me, or read something else. This is true--and because it is, not quite satisfactory.

We three were on a fishing trip along a certain river in Minnesota. We had put Bruce's boat in the water that morning and made our way in a most dilatory fashion downstream, stopping for an hour or two at any spot we thought might have a muskie in it. That night we camped on shore. The next day we would make our way to the lake, where Bruce's wife and mine would meet us about six. Rab, who had never married, would ride as far as Madison with my wife and me. We had not caught much, as I remember, but we had enough to make a decent meal, and were eating it when we saw the UFO.

I do not mean that we saw a saucer-shaped mother ship from a far-off galaxy full of cute green people with feelers. When I say it was a UFO, I mean merely what those three letters indicate something in the air (lights, in our case) we could not identify. They hovered over us for a half minute, drifted off to the northeast, then receded very fast and vanished. That was all there was to it, in my opinion, we had witnessed a natural phenomenon of some sort, or seen some type of aircraft.

But of course we started talking about them, and Roswell, and all that; and after a while Bruce suggested we tell ghost stories. "We've all had some supernatural experience," Bruce said.

And Rab said, "No."

"Oh, of course you have." Bruce winked at me.

"I didn't mean that nothing like this has ever happened to me," Rah said, "just that I don't want to talk about it."

I looked at him then. It was not easy to read his face in the firelight, but I thought he seemed frightened.

It took about half an hour to get the story out of him. Here it is. I make no comment because I have none to make; I do not know what it means, if it means anything.

"I've always hated ghosts and all that sort of thing," Rah began, "because I had an aunt who was a spiritualist. She used to read tea leaves, and bring her Ouija board when she came to dinner, and hold seances, and so on and so forth. When I was a little boy it scared me silly. I had nightmares, really terrible nightmares, and used to wake up screaming. All that ended when I was thirteen or fourteen, and since then I've despised the whole stupid business. Pretty soon one of you is going to ask if I've ever seen a ghost, so I'll answer that right now. No. Never.

"Well, you don't want my life history. Let's just say that I grew up, and after a while my mother and

father weren't around anymore, or married to each other either. My sister was living in England. She's moved to Greece, but I still hear from her at Christmas.

"One day I got home from work, and there was a message from Dane County Hospital on my machine. Aunt Elspeth was dying, and if I wanted to see her one last time, I had better get over there. I didn't want to. I had disliked her all my life, and I was pretty sure the feeling was mutual. But I thought of her alone in one of those high, narrow beds, dying and knowing that nobody cared that she was dying. So I went."

"It was the most miserable four or five hours I've ever spent. She looked like hell, and even though they had her in an oxygen tent, she couldn't breathe. She kept taking these great gasping breaths"

Rab demonstrated.

"And in between breaths she talked. She talked about my grandparents' house, which I've never seen, and how it had been there when she and Mom were kids. Not just about them and my grandparents, but the neighbors, the dogs and cats they'd owned, and everything. The furniture. The linoleum on the kitchen floor. Everything. After a while I realized that she was still talking even when she wasn't talking. Do you know what I mean? She would be taking one of those horrible breaths, and I'd still hear her voice inside my head.

"It was getting pretty late, and I thought I'd better go. But there was something I wanted to say to her first--I told you how much I hate ghosts and all that kind of crazy talk. Anyway, I cut her off while she was telling about how she and my mother used to help my grandmother can tomatoes, and I said, 'Aunt Elspeth, I'd like you to promise me something. I want your word of honor on it. Will you do that? Will you give it to me?'

"She didn't say anything, but she nodded.

"I want you to promise me that when you're gone, if there's any possible way for you to speak to me, or send me a message--make any kind of signal of any sort--to say that there's another life after the life we know here, another existence on the other side of the grave, you won't do it. Will you give me your solemn promise about that, Aunt Elspeth? Please? And mean it?'

"She didn't say anything more after that, just lay there and glared at me. I wanted to go, and I tried to a couple of times, but I couldn't make myself do it. There she was, about the only person still left from my childhood, and she was dying--would probably die that night, they had said. So I sat there instead, and I wanted to take her hand but I couldn't because of the oxygen tent, and she kept on glaring at me and making those horrible sounds trying to breathe, and neither of us said anything. It must have been for about an hour.

"I guess I shut my eyes--I know I didn't want to look at her--and leaned back in the chair. And then, all of a sudden, the noises stopped. I leaned forward and turned on the little light at the head of her bed, and she wasn't trying to breathe anymore. She was still glaring as if she wanted to run me through a grinder, but when I got up and took a step toward the door, her eyes didn't move. So I knew she was dead, and I ought to call the nurse or something, but I didn't."

Rab fell silent at that point, and Bruce said, "What did you do?"

"I just went out. Out of room, and out of the Intensive Care Wing, and out into the corridor. It was a pretty long corridor, and I had to walk, oh, maybe a hundred steps before I came to the waiting room. It was late by then, and there was only one person in it, and that one person was me."

Rab gave us a chance to say something, but neither of us did.

"I don't mean I went in. I didn't. I just stood out in the corridor and looked inside. And there I was, sitting in there. I had on a black turtleneck and a whiskey-colored suede sports jacket. I remember that, because I've never owned those clothes. It was my face behind my glasses, though. It was even my haircut. He--I--was reading Reader's Digest and didn't see me. But I saw myself, and I must have stood there for five minutes just staring at him.

"Then a nurse pushed past me and said, 'You can go in and see your aunt now, Mister Sammon.' He put down his magazine and stood up and said, 'Call me Rab.' And she smiled and said, 'You can see your Aunt Elspeth now, Rab.'

"I stepped out of the way and the nurse and I went past me and down the corridor toward the Intensive Care Wing. I watched till they had gone through the big double doors and I couldn't see them anymore. Then I went into the waiting room and picked up that copy of the Reader's Digest that I had laid down and slipped it into my pocket, and went home and went to bed. I still have it, but I've never gotten up the nerve to read it."

Rab sighed. "That's my story. I don't imagine that yours will be true--I know both of you too well for that. But mine is."

"When you woke up in the morning was your aunt still dead?" Bruce wanted to know.

Rab said, "Yes, of course. The hospital called me at work."

That bothered me, and I said, "When you started telling us about this, you said that there was a message from the hospital on your answering machine when you got home from the office. So the hospital didn't have your number there, presumably at least."

Rab nodded. "I suppose he gave it to them."

Nobody said much after that, and pretty soon we undressed and got into our sleeping bags. When we had been asleep for two or three hours, Rab screamed.

It brought me bolt upright, and Bruce, too. I sat up just in time to see Rab scream again. Then he blinked and looked around and said, "Somebody yelled. Did you hear it?"

Bruce was a great deal wiser than I. He said, "It was an animal, Rah. Maybe an owl. Go back to sleep."

Rah lay back down, and so did I; but I did not go back to sleep. I lay awake looking at the clouds, the moon, and the stars, and thinking about that midnight hospital waiting room in which the man who stood outside sat reading a magazine, the wondering just how much power the recently dead may have to twist our reality, and their own.

There actually was something shrieking up on the bluff, but I cannot say with any confidence what it was. A wildcat, perhaps, or a cougar.