

Father Must (from The New Yorker)

by Rick Rofihe

The question he asked me didn't start with "Father" or anything like that—I'm not his father. It wasn't the words in his question that made me think of the question I'd once asked my father.

The kid's a good kid. He's full of good questions. And while it's true that I haven't let him call me anything, that doesn't stop us from talking.

I did, different times, consider all the names he might call me, like Father or Papa or Daddy, but none ever seemed right. I could have let him call me by the name his mother and others do, but since I really don't care for it, that would miss the whole point.

I just once, early on, asked about the father, and she said it had been only one night; then, smiling and pretty, she said it gets dark at night. She said it takes more time than she took to know how a person really looks, so it was a very good thing that the kid looked like her.

When I'm with the kid and someone says he must look like his mother, I just say, "O.k." I don't say, "He's not only her." I don't say, "She's the one who had him, and now, mostly, I have him." I don't say, "She says that even though I don't let him call me anything she thinks that he likes me."

It's a nice place, this place; in the day, it has very good light. It's the same place that it was when she first brought me here—same full cupboards, same clean table. I did paint the ceilings, but everything else is the same, except for a few things now that are mine and more stuff that's the kid's.

By the way, I do like him, and it's not just because he's not my own age. When we go out for a walk—well, at first he was two in

that red-and-blue stroller—I always ask him about something, because after he answers, and it's always a good answer, I like to ask anyway, “Now, are you sure?” I do it just to see that firm way he nods yes, and when I nod back, that dreamy look he gets because he likes being sure.

Billy Blair's my own age. He was my best friend in sixth grade, but now I don't see him often. The last time I did, I asked, “Hey, Billy Boy, does your mother still sing?” He said his mother never sang, and that's a bad answer, so I said, “But she did. When she was folding the wash, she would sing.” And then, you know, he said something, and I didn't say back to him how maybe I was a drunk now but that I was just a plain pure boy in sixth grade when his mother sang.

Should I find a good doctor, or go to the meetings, meet people? I'd rather—really, I'd like to—go see Mrs. Blair. She's not my own age, so the question would work fine, and she'd even call me Jacksie, my name to people from then.

What if I was the only boy who ever noticed her singing? What I mean is not just the only boy but only man. (Someone should tell her. She really could sing.)

Of course, I'm not going to see Mrs. Blair. From the Blairs' house you can see my old house—diagonally across the street, on the next block, the house without trees. Well, there might be trees there now; it's been twenty years. My father wouldn't plant trees around the house. He said trees around a house get big by making the house small.

Did my mother like trees?

I'm not saying my father was wrong; I know what he meant, and what that meant, but it would have been nice to have trees.

Am I thinking of my father because of Billy Blair's answer, or because of the kid's question, or because today's Sunday? Just because the sun's not up yet doesn't mean it isn't Sunday. I'm here in the kitchen, drinking black coffee.

In Japan, there are now big factories that operate all night without lights—robots don't need lights. These factories of robots are dark in the dark; all black in black. You can hear these factories long before you can see them; you can be almost next to them and still not see them; you might have to touch them to see them.

I don't know why, but on Sunday mornings my father never got drunk. It wasn't because the liquor store wasn't open—he'd buy his week's supply on Saturdays. And it wasn't because he was religious. He used to say, "Don't tell anybody, but I've got some different angles on the cross." Maybe that's part of an old joke, I don't know. My father also used to say something else like that, but he'd recite it like poetry: There's only one God / God sees the little sparrow fall / There's only one God / He's for sparrows.

I never went to Sunday school, because my father, who wore suits and ties, didn't want to see me wearing suits and ties.

The sky, except for a few stars, is still dark. The moon has gone down without waiting for the sun to come up.

I was only thirteen when my mother died in the spring. I still think that spring is a strange time for someone to die. It was about noon when the people came back to the house from the funeral. My father came charging through a crowd of them shouting, "Take off that tie! Go to your room and change out of that suit!" That day wasn't a Sunday, but it was like a Sunday. I don't care what everyone thought, he hadn't been drinking that morning; he wasn't drunk, he was wild.

My father didn't last long—four-and-a-half years isn't long. I wore a suit and tie at his funeral and I thought, and people said, that I looked pretty good.

They let me stay in my house while I finished twelfth grade. I just wasn't supposed to be alone, although it turned out that a lot of the time I was. When anyone was staying in the house with me, I would sleep in my room, but when nobody was I'd move out into the den and sleep on the rug between lots of blankets.

A housekeeper would come in from ten until two five days a week, so I'd come home for lunch and when I'd finished eating she'd pour herself and me fresh coffee. I'd never liked coffee before. Because she hadn't known my parents, we talked about just anything while she mostly kept moving around the kitchen. When the housekeeper did sit, it was in my mother's chair. The housekeeper didn't know whose chair it had been, and I didn't mention it.

I was o.k. for money and had accounts at some places. When I had to go to a doctor or dentist or something, I'd take a taxi. The first snowy day that winter, I got a driver who had just moved from China and had never seen snow before. I remember now that he kept saying, "So white. So beautiful." over and over again. Although he didn't speak English very well, he had a way of making the word "white" sound white and the word "beautiful" sound beautiful.

On Saturdays, the housekeeper would come for just two hours in the morning, so weekends were pretty quiet. Sundays were really quiet.

After the house was sold for me, I never went back there.

I'd been thinking again lately if I should let the kid call me something. If it doesn't work out between his mother and me, and I leave, he should be able to call me by a name if he sees me

somewhere. I'd have no reason not to let him, and, who knows, sometime he might want to introduce me to someone.

If he called me by the name I'm called now, I still wouldn't like it, and especially not from him, because the name was my father's, so I'd been thinking, Why not Jacksie or Jacks? Until yesterday, I'd pretty much settled on Jacks, which was what people called me when I lived alone in the house.

If I let him just once call me something, I was thinking, then it would be up to him—he's almost seven—whether or not to call me that from then on. But then I thought should I let him start calling me something right away or wait to see how things work out with his mother and me.

It might not seem easy to breathe any love into a name like Father. It's a stiff word—it's not soft, like, say, Papa—but sometimes you have to breathe love into names you don't choose.

Yesterday, Saturday, in the afternoon, the kid had a question he came in the house to ask me, and the question didn't start with "Father" or anything like that—he knows I'm not his father—and there was nothing like "must" in his question. (As the sun comes up, this kitchen will get brighter; the ceiling, the table, the cupboards are white.)

The kid's question was just one about a picture on the box the Wiffle ball come in, which shows the curve and the slider, but because he was looking lower than my eyes, at the bottle I'd just opened, it made me think of the question I'd once asked my father, who I called Father.

It's only now that I'm thinking that my father might have heard my question before, not from being asked but by asking, and the answer he might have been given could have been the same one he, a glass at his lips, gave me.

When the kid asked me his question yesterday about the curve and the slider, what he wanted was for me to come outside and catch the ball for him, and throw it to him. He wanted to watch his own throw and see mine, and then talk it over, so he could be sure.

So I went outside with him and the Wiffle ball, but first I used the same answer I'd been given to a different question. Now the kid can call me that or not that, whatever he likes; he doesn't have to worry. And I know that he heard me—he looked up at my eyes when I said, "Father must."

