

Saturday Birthdays (from FATHER MUST)

by Rick Rofihe

Today, in the pizza shop, Johnny almost said “Wow!” about his own mother. When he'd first started helping her all day there back in January, he'd already twice meant to tell her about the boy the summer before last who'd said “Wow!” about her. He'd meant to tell her, but then he'd started to think it would be better to just wait for someone to say it again, and if this time his mother would hear. And then, in the first week of March, even though he was still only eight years old, what he'd figured out was much better: someone loved his mother.

Every Saturday now, after walking with his mother to work, Johnny goes to get fresh basil. The new owners don't really care if there's fresh basil in the pizza sauce, but they're not around on Saturdays anyway.

Before the shop opens for the day, he brings it back and washes it, but his mother likes to chop it herself. And when she's through sprinkling the cut pieces into the tomato-y sauce, his mother runs her hands smelling of fresh basil from her nose to his, and then past it. And week after week she always says the same thing, “It's completely different from dried basil, isn't it?”

Johnny had always wondered why she always says that, and why she always moves her hand past his nose, as if reaching outward. Because when she says it there's no one there up front in the shop at all yet, just him and her. Maybe there's the guys prepping main courses and salads in the big kitchen all the way in the back, but they wouldn't hear.

Why did she always say and do that? At first Johnny had thought maybe it was just one more thing that he didn't understand because he was only eight but that maybe he would when he was nine. Then, as the weeks went by, he had begun to think it might not

be necessary to be a whole year older to understand new things—lately, it seemed that even just from Saturday to Saturday he could do that.

Since Johnny's father sold the shop, of course the three of them don't drive there and open up early like they used to. But the new owners were glad when his mother offered to keep working on Saturdays if she could. So it had become the new thing for Johnny, walking his mother to work, helping her until the place opened; then he'd go home or go somewhere and find something to do for the rest of the day. That's the way it had gone all last year, but then so many things changed, at least they'd seemed changed to him, from December to January.

That had scared him, on New Year's Eve, when his mother said she wanted to be by herself. There, in the living room, in the dark, smoking a cigarette. He'd never seen her like that. Then he'd spent a lot of time watching her on New Year's Day, and the day after that. And when school started again, he thought it might be a good idea to try to spend more time with his mother. And no one seemed to mind when that first Saturday in January he stayed all day in the shop to help her. Nobody minds still. Of course, he's not getting paid, but he gets his allowance anyway. They do let him keep his tips at the shop, but he always just gives them to his mother to save for him. And since he's started to spend all day in the shop, he's noticed how quickly each Saturday passes. Each Saturday does, and the weeks between them do—it's already May.

On New Year's Eve, Johnny almost told his mother something he thought she should know. About the time the summer before last, when he and his mother and father had gone to a wedding someplace in the country. The people had rented a hall for the reception, and his mother had been dancing and came outside to cool off. On her way to go sit in a lawn chair, she stopped and spoke to him and smoothed his hair back and straightened his tie. After she went and sat down, another guest, an older boy he didn't know,

who had been watching, came up to him and asked, "Is that your sister?"

"Sister? That's my mother."

"Your mother?" The boy had then looked over at her.

"Wow!"

Johnny hadn't known right away what to think of the boy saying that, but he thought he was glad that his mother hadn't heard. Then, as the boy did, he, too, looked over at his mother in her red-and-white striped dress, sitting by herself in the chair on the grass, under a tree, fanning herself.

How could he let the boy get away with saying something like that, he'd thought, even if the boy was older and bigger. Even if his mother hadn't heard. Then that older boy turned to go into the hall, saying it one more time, but more softly, as if to himself, and shaking his head as he said it, "Wow!" Johnny had stood there thinking and it was almost at the same moment that his father came up behind him that Johnny started to feel glad for his mother, that the boy had said what he did. Johnny had almost told her about it on New Year's Eve, but that would have meant getting out of bed and going into the living room again. He'd decided it would be better to tell her New Year's Day, but when on New Year's Day things around the house had more or less returned to normal, he didn't want to ruin that by doing or saying anything out of the ordinary, because it might remind his mother of the night before.

When his mother was all dressed up on New Year's Eve, and his father, even though they had tickets for the dance, announced to her he wasn't going to go, Johnny had gone into his room, put on a white shirt, a dark suit, his dress shoes, and a clip-on tie, walked into the living room where his mother was sitting alone in the dark, and said, "I'll take you."

She turned her head and looked over her shoulder at him, then turned it away. "Never mind," she said. "It's all right."

"I'll take you. We can go."

She just shook her head.

“You don't have to dance with me,” he pressed on. Even if he was now almost as tall as she was, it was better if he didn't go that far. But someday, he thought, he should get his mother to teach him to dance. “You don't have to dance with me.” He said it again. “There'll be plenty of people there you could dance with.”

“If I can't dance with my own husband...” That's when he saw, by whatever light was in the room, that her cheeks were wet.

My own husband. He'd never heard her put it like that before. He didn't know why, but he thought it was something he wasn't old enough to hear. He thought about it as his mother thanked him, as he walked back to his room, as he took off his dress shoes and his suit, unclipped his tie, unbuttoned his white shirt, and as he put on his pajamas and got into bed. He didn't stop wanting to do or say something to make his mother feel better. He thought maybe he should go back and tell her about how the boy at the wedding said, “Wow!” about her, or at least he could tell her how nice she looks in that black dress, even if no one else was going to see her in it. He wasn't sure if he stayed awake all the way to midnight, but until he fell asleep he kept thinking for sure that every woman in the world that night was in someone's arms dancing, except for his mother.

Johnny woke up on the first day of the year trying to remember another time like that when it might have, but until he'd had to leave his mother alone with tears on her cheeks, smoking a cigarette in the living room in the dark on New Year's Eve, it had never even started to occur to him that his own love wasn't enough for her.

Then, when on New Year's Day, and all through January and February, she seemed O.K. again to him, that was something he just couldn't understand. Not until the first Saturday in March, as his mother was about to put her hand smelling of fresh basil past his nose, with him wondering what he always did, which was why does she always do that, and how can she keep going like she does if his own love isn't enough, did it come to him. As he watched her stir the

basil into the sauce while telling him it was time to unlock the door, all of a sudden he couldn't believe that it had taken him two whole months to figure it out, that somebody loved his mother.

By the end of work that Saturday, as the gates were being pulled down, he thought about it and was sure it had to be someone who had been there that day, but who? He was quiet as he walked home with his mother, but he couldn't help just looking at her and smiling now and then. Whenever she smiled back, he thought she looked so different to him now, and that made him more sure.

The next Saturday his own smile was confident and knowing. All day in the shop, it was as if he were in on a pact or a secret. Johnny was hoping his face would say to whoever it was that just because I don't know who you are doesn't mean that I don't know that you do—do love my mother.

Yes, he was sure of it. After all, he himself did, so somebody else could.

The difference between February and March became for Johnny like what the difference between New Year's Eve and Christmas Day had been. It was partly because of the way Christmas Day went that he was so confused as he tried to get to sleep on New Year's Eve.

On Christmas, his father wouldn't drive over to her sister's place. "Three hundred days a year I'm tied up with driving," his father had said. His mother didn't say back to him that nobody asked him to put the money he got from selling the pizza shop into the limousine business, or that it was only a couple of miles to her sister's place. She didn't even say, "But it's Christmas."

As Johnny thought about it, he'd noticed for quite a while then that whenever his father was like that, she wouldn't say anything, but just set into motion a way to do what she wanted to do. Even Johnny's putting on his scarf and boots while his mother put on hers that morning seemed to him something that kept life steady, from falling apart and floating away.

A few things surprised Johnny that day. Since it was a long walk to his aunt's place on Henry Street, and he knew his mother wouldn't be much on driving over herself, especially as it had snowed, he was sure she'd call a car service. But she didn't. He and his mother walked. And then she didn't even turn her head at any of the taxis that went by while they walked.

Even before they left the house, Johnny had been amazed to see the coat his mother put on. Her very best coat, one she hardly ever wore. And it was only morning, even if it was Christmas, and she was going somewhere not with his father, but just him, and not someplace fancy, but just her sister's. Johnny had tried not to show his mother any special look on his face when he saw the coat, but whether she did see one or was just speaking more to herself when she said, "I can wear any coat of mine when I want to," he couldn't figure out.

The snow that had fallen through the night made for other surprises. One was that, for a lot of the way that they took, there were no footprints yet, so theirs were the first. Another thing was that, block after block, they never met anybody walking. It *was* early, and it was Christmas; everybody if not in their cars in their houses, he'd guessed.

What a nice walk. For some reason he'd even started flipping the clean dry snow of tree branches and parked cars onto his mother. Onto her best coat. During that walk he'd felt as if she was not only his mother but maybe more, also like what it might be like to actually have a sister. And as much as he did it, his mother let him get away with flipping the snow; she smiled almost as if she was proud of him for doing it.

They had a good time at his aunt's house. All her children were quite a bit older than he was, and there was something about that he liked. And one of them had kids who were quite a bit younger than he, and that was fun too. So he had a good time.

They got a drive back. Then, while his mother got everything ready for their Christmas dinner, he went into the den, where his father was watching TV. Johnny didn't like the show that

was on, but he thought he should sit there and watch it, no matter what. Not just because it was Christmas. "He's your *father*." How many times had he heard his mother say that? "Your father *loves you*. *You* love your father."

When people look at Johnny looking at his mother, he thinks they probably could tell that he does—of course, they can tell that he loves her. But how can he tell who else does? He can't even talk about it with anyone, because he's afraid that would somehow ruin it.

He thinks it's something you learn after a while; after all, it took over two months of Saturdays to figure out that someone loves his mother. Maybe a few more Saturdays and he'll figure out who, he'll get it right.

He doesn't always do everything in the pizza shop right. Sometimes he might hear, "Johnny, you're giving too many napkins." Or, "Johnny, you forgot to give a cup with that Pepsi at table 4." He wonders if anyone notices how he turns his head right and left as he zigzags through the tables. If somebody loves his mother, he thinks, it's got to be someone who sits in a seat facing where she's working. Or maybe that's exactly the opposite of what someone who loves her might have to do. Sometimes Johnny looks at his mother, trying to see if there's some special direction she seems to be looking in. That doesn't help either, but he's sure that sooner or later he'll figure it out.

Since April now, they've been letting Johnny take phone orders. Not every kid's birthday is on a Saturday, but it sure seems like that when you help out in a pizza shop, since most of the parties are. Starting early, people phone in orders for pizzas for kids' birthday parties, usually little round mini pizzas, usually plain, and then they drive to pick them up themselves so they get them back to the party at just the right time. Whoever picks them up couldn't be whoever it is that loves his mother, Johnny's sure of that. Because that wouldn't be someone who comes into the shop every Saturday.

Still, he's always on his best behavior, even with anyone like that who couldn't possibly be the one, because whoever it is might be in there, sitting at a table, or might come in just when he's helping his mother pack the order. He thinks whoever it is who loves his mother shouldn't have any reasons for not loving him, too.

Johnny used to go to parties like that. Some of the orders he takes are for little kids' birthdays, but some are for friends of his' parties, ones he could have been at. But how could he go to one now and have a good time if he thought he might miss finding out. His mother is always telling him, "Johnny, you should go to a few of those parties." She can't believe it when he says it's more fun being at the shop, but then, he would never say to anyone, especially her, why that's so.

Every once in a while, when there's a lull in the place, Johnny looks around and thinks to himself, It's somebody who is here or was here. After all, how could she do all that she does and put up with what she does unless somebody loves her with as much love as is enough for her?

Today, something did happen in the shop, and it had to do with a boy, but not one saying "Wow!" One of the older boys from the neighborhood must have got hold of some wine, and had too much of it, and got into a fight. No one saw who gave him the punch that sent him against the swinging glass door of the shop, which, luckily for the boy, was the kind that opens in.

As he lay there, half in and half out of the shop, Johnny's mother had rushed out from behind the counter and cradled the boy's head and got someone to give her a wet towel. She didn't even seem to care that some blood was getting on her hands and her arms as she wiped his face from his nose to his chin. "Thank you, Mrs...." The boy had trailed off.

As some of the guys there helped the boy up after a while, Johnny noticed blood even on his mother's apron and dress. Then he thought, Maybe this is the time. He looked around at everyone there. Because whoever it is would have the same look as he's sure

he has on his own face. He tries that, but either whoever it is isn't there or it just isn't the week when he can figure it out yet.

As Johnny walks home with his mother in the evening, he asks if she knows whether that boy has a mother.

"I don't know, Johnny. I wonder."

"Is he old enough to get married?"

"He's a little young for that, but I suppose he's getting there."

His mother probably didn't know why he was asking so many questions, but he was stringing the answers together for himself. After all, it wouldn't be that many years until he'd be as old as that boy is now. And, also, if that boy didn't have a mother and no one loved him who knew his mother, he'd have to get married to someone who didn't know his mother.

When they got to the house, his father still wasn't home yet. He'd see his father tomorrow. Did he love his father? He'd see. Tomorrow. His father wouldn't be working and, the three of them with Johnny in the back seat, would drive over to his mother's sister's tomorrow.

But it's still Saturday. Even when he gets into bed, there's still some Saturday left. It's Saturday and he's seen who it is, even if he doesn't know who it is.

Even after his mother reaches her arm into the room to flip off the light, it'll still be Saturday, right up to midnight. It's not nearly that late, but he's tired. He starts to think of the boy who said "Wow!" but then he starts to think of the boy who got punched. He begins wondering what it must be like to almost be old enough to get married and to maybe not have a mother. Then to have too much to drink and get knocked down and have blood wiped from your face by someone else's mother.

