

Short Story 80: The Adopted Father

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Marc Aramini — 03 Aug 2014, 16:34

"The Adopted Father" first appeared in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* in 1980.

SUMMARY:

In a system where human beings have been replaced with a highly mechanized and automated work force and the preferred method of contemporary construction implies the cheapest possible materials, John Parker is certain there is something amiss and that his three children are not really his. He complains at the hospital to an automated screen nurse when she says that no other records of his children, Robert, Marian, and Tina exist beyond the ones he already has. According to his recollections, he paid for their deliveries, but the nurse assures him the births of the children were financed by the North American Division of World Assurance. There are no humans working at the hospital.

He returns to his untidy building, which is entirely modern in its cheap mediocrity. He recalls that the elevator had randomly stopped on the 67th floor a few days before and he had gone to an apartment that he mistook for his own save for the graffiti on the door. Today he returns to his own floor, "liberally besprinkled with short words, though most of the boys in this part of the building were supposed to be afraid of Robert." He sits down to draw another park after thinking of how fair, tall and blond haired Robert and Tina are, and how little they resemble his wife Roseanne and himself. The other child, Marian, is small and dark, and what concerns Parker most is that "none of them thought the way he did, they all thought he was eccentric or worse, and that mattered a great deal."

His son Robert boasts and then fails to find a way through a maze his father designed in his plans and gives up, even though Parker gave him the necessary clue.

John then goes to an adoption agency and asks rather oddly to be adopted by a group of children in need. He says, "So much can be done with our minds now — Implanted learning and so on. It should be possible to erase whole areas of experience. After it was over, the man could forget it wasn't his own family" didn't they think of that long ago? The attendant pushes a button and he leaves, but no one tries to stop him.

He returns to the 67th floor and, after knocking, decides to kick it down. He sees signs of someone living in the living room, though it is very cold, and determines from examining the food remaining that a child must be living there — after all, only ham and lima beans, liver and onions, and smoked tongue are left in the cabinets. He finds a dead woman in the bedroom. He does see an empty pill bottle and he hides it, probably to conceal the suicide.

He finds a boy named Mitch as small and dark as his daughter Marian who reveals he didn't want to leave after his mother died in the hopes of finding his father. He tells the boy that his mother died of a heart attack and comforts him with "whatever it was that hurt her can't hurt her anymore. Did you ever play some game when you knew the other kid was going to beat

you” — Then remember how when he does beat you, the game is over and you can go away.

Here Parker says that what really makes a father-child relationship involves them being “more or less like you”. He sees a final notice of unpaid rent and modifies one of his own checks by altering it and putting his son’s name on it to delay the automated services. He complains of humanity’s lack of imagination in repeating the same methods of antiquity, and says that he and Mitch need to stop looking seriously for their kids and dad, respectively, and that they must simply have fun.

When they are leaving together, he is accosted by a small gang of three young men, and John pretends to have a gamma ray pistol in his pocket, quite absurdly. They let him go and John asserts that maybe crazy people win in the end, and he uses his match box as a faux Star Trek communicator to say, “We’re in trouble down here — but don’t beam us up quite yet” before hailing a cab.

DISCUSSION:

Many of Wolfe’s dystopian futures with a slightly critical slant are of necessity easier to analyze than his meditations on identity. The solution for living in a world so abysmally ordered for Parker is “the principle of play” — he criticizes the coal fuels used simple because they have always been used as the tried and true energy source, when people “could have conquered the solar system and harnessed the sun.” Without an imagination to seek fantastic and unlikely solutions, the world is doomed to this bleak mediocrity.

In a way, the story is a metaphor for many of the things that science fiction in general and Wolfe in particular seek to do — escape rigid and mundane reality to find a higher, better existence. It even shows how fantasy can protect us from reality — he hides evidence that the mother of Mitch might have killed herself, saying it was a heart attack, and later uses crazy science fictional behavior to avoid a beating.

While John Parker has been looking for someone who resembles him more than his disparate children, he comes to the final conclusion that little barriers like reality and actual kinship don’t matter. The arrogant but uncreative implied bullying of Robert is no doubt one of his biggest indications that his children are nothing like him. While he is excited about certain things, others treat them as every day repetitions: “This is the big day. This is the day I’m going to do the park”. His wife’s response is, “Another park?”

As an escape from the maze of the modern world, Parker eventually realizes, “looking seriously only finds little things — we need to have fun — Be crazy. Nobody bothers crazy people.”

Parker’s interactions with the automated nurse culminate in the fear of many dystopian visions:

“Is there some way I can talk to a human being?”

?Not in my hospital, Mr. Parker. Not in any modern hospital.

With a hundred million on unemployment, most human tasks are left undone, and only highly centralized groups like the police still operate. How can a human being enjoy life in that kind of reality, when even his home life is probably an artificial sham?

The dualistic beliefs of Wolfe once again inform the ending and the solution — the game is over for Mitch’s mother; it was time for her to walk away from a game everyone loses, and Parker’s refusal to accept reality as it is given to him, even using fantasy to get himself out of a

potentially disastrous situation, involves a belief in something behind the curtain of reality — his final **Star Trek** inspired plea also echoes the humorous plea of St. Augustine: “Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet.” While he knows that the world is in trouble, he begs not to leave it just yet, as he is now ready to laugh at reality and enjoy playing the game, even knowing that he will lose. Finding the boy who needs him gives his life more meaning.

TERRAFORMING:

Parker’s comments on terraforming are interesting to consider in light of some of Wolfe’s other science fiction, such as “Tracking Song”: “It would be perfectly possible to make Mars a world much like Earth. A cloud of finely powdered aluminum behind it would reflect back enough heat to raise the night temperature. Bringing down Deimos and Phobos and a little of the asteroid belt would increase the planet’s mass enough to let it hold an atmosphere, which you can make by breaking down the stony matter in the asteroids and moons. Pretty soon you’d turn the red planet green.”

NAMES:

The names of the couple, John and Roseanne (it is probable her maiden name is Roberts), seem but a few phonemes away from Gene and Rosemary, but we will simply assume this is a coincidence, even though John is something of a planner, which is perhaps not too distant from engineering, and escapes by creating a fun fantasy world for his new ward, something which is probably not too philosophically removed from writing fantastic stories that belie the mundane in the world.

John implies God is gracious, and Parker, of course, implies keeper of the park. John designs parks that should serve to amuse and entertain children, but they are never going to become “real” parks. He finds someone who can enjoy the mental amusement park and the escape from reality he creates. The park is within his mind.

Roseanne implies grace and favor, Roberts renown or fame. (Note that she feels her husband must be important, so sends his plans to the mayor and prompts him to do so as well).

Mitch can mean “gift from God” or “Who is like God?”

Marian implies “bitter” or “from the sea”.

AMBIGUITIES:

While some may think that Parker checking the deceased mother’s body for blood and marks on the neck might at least hint at vampirism, the completely science fictional exploration here probably negates that possibility — he is looking for signs of beatings, and strangulation, as the gangs who frequent the lobbies employ chains, tire irons, and other primitive weapons, perhaps more reminiscent of the gangs depicted in the film version of **A Clockwork Orange**, for example, than a modern inner city gang. He concludes she probably died of a heart attack — or at least, pretends to. The empty pill bottle probably indicates a suicide, intentional or otherwise, and the heart attack a white lie he tells the boy, a fantasy to protect him from reality.

John Parker’s willingness to use his “son” Robert’s name on the fraudulent check is fascinating, though certainly it probably won’t result in much trouble for Robert.

Ultimately it doesn’t matter if the children are genetically his, even though they probably aren’t. He is looking for someone who will appreciate his fantasies, so that these children can

adopt him as their father — perhaps in much the same way a writer of fiction preoccupied with the loneliness of children understands that fantastic tales and stories experienced in youth can create a surrogate kind of fabulous paternity as well.

CONNECTION TO OTHER WORKS:

The highly automated future harks back to the work of the early 70s — “Going to the Beach”, “Slaves of Silver”, and perhaps thematically with “Mathoms from the Time Closet”, though the tone of “The Adopted Father” is distinct. *Home Fires*, with its implanted personalities, memories, and personality manipulation, is a direct but more tragic outgrowth of this story.