



“Father” by Abigail Woodward  
1<sup>st</sup> Place, Short Story 10-12

Father

You found yourself in a dank alleyway, wondering how you got there. Yes, you thought. It was *only a dream*. You thought about the dream you had been woken up from, now only sand slipping out of your earth-beaten hands. You remembered it was a strange dream, an intriguing one, but the residue was behind a smog so thick it would be nearly impossible to retrieve now.

The sun had only just risen, beckoning its warm rays towards you. If only you could reach the sun through the misty streets, the muddy alleyways. The sun was simply begging you to stay, to let it consume you. But, in this state, you could not get up, out from the alleyway, in the exhausting cold. You snuggled up to your knees, wishing for a ray of hope.

Hours passed, and you became weaker. You hurt, you hurt in a way you never had before. Slowly but surely, you were becoming transparent, invisible. You knew you would never walk again, and tried to close your eyes, ready for a final dream.

You could feel nothing but a burst of energy as you opened your eyes, and could see nothing but a man made of shadows approaching you. You came up to your muddy feet, and looked the man in the eye. "Why am I so...energetic all of a sudden?" you asked out of instinct, of hope, though you already knew. "You are dead." The man replied, returning your gaze. His gaping hood did not hide his wrinkles, his smiling brown eyes. The man's

friendly smile faded a little. "Where am I going?" you replied. He gave you an inquisitive look. "To a better place."

"Get me back to my body." You said, out of excuses. You didn't care about pain anymore, for you were painless. You didn't care about anything, for it was the end. Was this the way it was supposed to be? "You're pretty determined, huh?" Maybe you were determined, but was that really a bad thing? The man looked at you, with a look you could tell meant sympathy. You felt your feet stamp against the ground, a rush of anger filling your body-or soul, you presumed. You had never been determined, you thought. You had accepted death, after all. If you were determined, you would have kept a fire in your heart, would have stayed alive somehow.

"Why?" the man said. In reality, you didn't know why. You were leaving a life of pain, of sadness, to, presumably, a better place. Your face drooped and your eyes looked down into the murky road, hoping to see something. "Come with me," the man said, in his sympathetic tone.

You walked in silence, wondering how long it would take to leave this place, when the man looked down at you and asked. "Why do you want to stay alive? What does it mean?" You could barely think through the rush of mist that clouded your mind. "I feel like there's something...unfinished, something I could have done to make the world a better place." The man laughed his tinkling laugh, a laugh that set a fire in your chest and made you want to punch something. "Every human has a set purpose, a set expiration date, and you have

reached yours. There is nothing you could have done." "How do you know that?" you said. "Do you not know what it means to be living?"

The man stopped, his warm smile and grace turning into sadness. "I have never been alive. I am Charon, the ferryman of the dead. I have always been. As soon as I burst into consciousness, a man, the same as I am now, I was told my purpose." Now you were the one with the sympathetic look on your face. "So... you have never had a father? Did you never have hope, the strive to accomplish something You never had any wonder about anything?" He looked down. "I have always known my purpose. I do not need to strive to achieve it."

You both paused, feeling sympathy for each other. You were the homeless boy, looking for purpose. He was the eternal man, doomed to know his path. Two opposites, yet you still connected. Finally, you found the strength to look up at the man, ask him the question that burned in your heart.

"I...never had a purpose, did I?" you asked, a sinking feeling in your heart. "No." he said, the tearful crinkle falling out of his voice. "No." "Then why was I alive? Doesn't everyone have a purpose?" He looked back at you. "It is true that you affected nobody's lives in a major way. So I too wonder why you are here." You felt worthless, you felt stupid, you felt like an accident. His smile had faded entirely, but his eyes had more of a sparkle to them than ever. The man paused and gave you a look that seemed very unnatural for such a joyous face. "You?" he asked, with a crinkle to his voice. "You... you affected one, perhaps."

"Me," he uttered. "I have never felt anything like this before, have never wanted for something more than to guide souls to heaven. But now, you have shown me what the world might have been to me. I could have been a father, a son. I could live without a path in front of me, without a purpose. I envy you." You looked at him. "Is that what you'd have asked for? You don't want to be known, to be heard? ...That was my dream." You were always a straight-faced boy. You would not cry now, or ever. Even if it meant closing your eyes, trying not to blink the tears out. "I don't know," said the man. "I will never know." He walked on, trying to ignore your gaze.

Soon enough, you found yourself on a bridge. The sun was falling in a glorious show of oranges and purples and blues. It seemed to be putting on a dance for you, beckoning you still towards its reaches. You could not think anymore, but you managed to pull a few words out of the reaches of your brain. "I never knew my father." He looked at you. "I know." Of course he knew. He knew everything about you, everything you wanted for, everything you needed, everything you, even now, were missing.

You sighed as you drew closer to the man, knowing in your heart that all had been done. You watched the sunset, appreciating the dance as more than a sunset, as a phenomenon, all put on for you, the worthless boy, the homeless boy who had finally found a home. Your feet were grounded, feeling the earth below them for the last time. And as the day turned to night, you walked on to another world, to the promise of a happier place, holding the man's hand. And at that moment, you knew the answer to every question. You knew why

you had been born onto the earth. At that moment, he became a father, and you became a son.