

THE

*No
Fathers*

CLUB

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The No Fathers Club
excerpt: first 4 pages out of 14

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The No Fathers Club got its start not only because my days were filled with free time, but because my friend Yôsuke took me to see a game of No Ball Soccer.

No Ball Soccer was just like normal soccer, only there was no ball. The five members of the team would pass and shoot as if one was really there. The opposing side's goalie would jump and make a save as if intercepting a ball actually flying toward the net. The shooter would be crushed. And the crowd would go wild, raising their voices to the heavens as if they truly had just witnessed an unbelievable save.

I was the only one who couldn't see the ball. The players and fans and referees all watched the non-existent ball. They'd steal this absent ball from each other, dribble it between their feet, feint one way then move the other, leaving their opponents to overcompensate and fall. Careful not to overlook a gap in the defense, the offensive player would find one and shoot the absent ball through it like a bullet. It would hit the bar. The offense would raise their hands to their heads and shouts of "GOALLLL" would fill the air. A ring of celebrating players would form. The invisible ball rolling around near the net would get a kick from the sulky, defeated goalie.

At first I felt uneasy watching, thinking I was being tricked, that everyone was in on a joke that excluded me. Or like I'd been invited unsuspectingly into a cult, listening blankly to a charismatic zealot's overheated sermon. But, as I kept watching, at some point I started to catch the fever too, to stand up and cheer with everyone else for a particularly spectacular play or boo and give "thumbs-down" to a bad call. I still couldn't see the ball, but it was really there. I even began to hear the faint thump as it connected with a player's foot.

I hadn't been this excited since I was in sixth grade, playing chicken in the dirt-filled expanse of an unfinished housing development during the summer and winning. The game was to race along as fast as our bikes could carry us, aiming for the furrows and jagged protrusions that scarred the area and launched our bikes into flight, and the one who could go the longest without braking was the winner. I wore my red windbreaker and practiced my falls for when I wiped out, and in the end I held victory in my hand, the rest of my body bloody from being scraped across the ground.

I'd just been killing time, perhaps, since the day I was born. I was raised in aimless plenty, average in my academics and athletics, in my looks and my conversation, in the economic status of my two working parents. Maybe that was why my passion had thinned. Despite my youth I already felt like I was just living out the rest of my days. When my father died in an airplane crash when I was eight, I felt as sad as anyone, but he'd hardly ever been home and I barely had any memories of him playing with me, so I became accustomed to his now eternal absence soon enough. He left a small inheritance and some

life insurance money behind for us, and between that and the settlement from the airline, there was no danger of falling on hard times, so, though both my younger sister and I felt a bit uneasy about it, our days continued to overflow with leisure just as before.

Though I should have had my time occupied when I enrolled in a mid-level high school, my free time only increased exponentially, and it started to weigh heavily on my body. It got hard to breathe. I joined the soccer team, but the interactions I had there were just like in any other school activity, and as if flipping switches within myself I first played the role of newbie, then that of the experienced senior two years later. I'd wanted to play flat out, wild and willful like Brazilian players did, but it was impossible for someone as lacking in passion as I to even figure out how to act willful or wild in the first place.

I started hanging out with Yôsuke when I found out that his father had gotten sick and died when he was in fourth grade. Don't get me wrong, though, it wasn't like we found each other and started sharing our tales of woe about our single parent households or anything.

One evening in early spring, near the end of our freshman year in high school, a particularly tiresome older teammate was threatening to keep us late after practice and Yôsuke tried to excuse himself, saying, "My father's coming home tonight after being away for a long time, so I have to be home in time for dinner." The older boy responded angrily, "What are you talking about, idiot? You don't have a father!" Yôsuke dipped his head and gave his accuser a dark look. Everything grew quiet around them. Feeling bad, the older boy muttered, "Sorry," to which Yôsuke drew himself up and replied fiercely, "He's expecting me," then gave a curt nod and left.

The next day, I greeted Yôsuke in a loud voice when he came through the door. "So was your father glad to see you?"

After a beat, he twisted his lips into a grin and said, "He gave me a whuppin', 'cause I was late."

"He hit you? Even though he comes home so rarely?" I pressed him, and he replied, "Well, it didn't hurt much, since he's dead and all."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," I said, going along, "I massage my dad's back sometimes, but it never gets any better, 'cause he's a corpse."

"You too? Don't worry, it's just your mind playing tricks on you. His back's not stiff, he's just dead."

"But I press down and it doesn't give! So you're saying he's not stiff, he's frozen?"

We couldn't help but go on and on like this.

It was thrilling. No one else could join in. First the older boys, then everyone

stopped talking to us. The atmosphere of the place grew frosty, the air palling balefully around us. Even though it seemed that we were making everyone around us angry, we couldn't stop.

After that, Yôsuke and I would talk about our fathers from time to time. Regardless of whether anyone was around to overhear, I couldn't suppress the breathless excitement I felt when we started to get carried away with our father talk. When we became sophomores, we performed a two-man stand-up routine at the welcome banquet for new members called "Let's Talk About Papa." Naturally, no one laughed, and we even heard people muttering darkly to each other, "It must be nice with their parents dead, no one to bother them. They should think about how we feel." The two of us felt our teammates' anger swell almost to bursting as we chattered away.

It was around then that I watched my first game of No Ball Soccer. It occurred to me as I did that we could use this approach for our problem. If a ball could materialize out of thin air that had more substance than any real ball just by having everyone agree to act as if it was there, wouldn't a father more real than any real father materialize if we just acted as if we believed he was there with every fiber of our beings?

So we quit our increasingly hostile soccer team and started the No Fathers Club. We admitted only those whose fathers truly didn't exist in this world, so children of divorce were out, though illegitimate children who didn't know their fathers were in. The idea was to pretend we really had fathers every second of every day, leaving no room for sharing feelings or talking about our pitiful situations, so to those seeking therapy: sorry. We announced our conditions and even required the production of official family registers as proof, so we were shocked when we ended up admitting nineteen members, including some from other schools.

At our inaugural meeting, everyone introduced themselves and then we opened the floor to a discussion called "My Father's Like...." We shared the problems and conflicts we had with our faux fathers and discussed together strategies for dealing with them. I told everyone how my father was perhaps too understanding, and that while it was nice that he let me do as I liked, I sometimes wondered if he really just didn't care.

"So when I came home all bloody from playing chicken with my bike, my mom chewed me out, but my dad just said, 'If he dies, he dies, what can we do?' I thought, is that what he'd say to the papers if I committed suicide? And then later, when I drove the car around even though I was only fourteen, all he said was, 'In Mexico they let kids your age learn to drive on their own and just get licenses for them later.' It makes you wonder, right? Aren't parents supposed to judge their children's behavior just a little, teach them right from wrong?"

And the girl who then said, “Actually, I’m envious of you, Joe. Your father sounds like he really understands children,” was the girl I ended up dating, Kurumi Kunugibayashi.

“If you told a kid who had a real interest in cars that driving around when you’re fourteen was no big deal, he’d keep driving, right? But if that kid was just trying to act big by doing it, he’d lose interest. With just a few words from your dad, you lost interest and stopped trying to sneak the car out, right Joe?”

I was dumbstruck. You got me, I thought.

“Well, actually, yeah. That’s what happened, I heard him say that and I stopped trying to drive.”

And I even muttered to myself under my breath, yeah, that’s right, my dad was right all along. Muttering to myself like that really did the trick. At that moment, my father truly felt real to me.