

WILLIAM BLACK

Wildcats

My father talked to us from the hospital, the special one all the way down in Philadelphia, through a cassette player that sat in the middle of the kitchen table. My mother had gathered us up, my little sister and me, her two youngest, her precious, innocent ones, and poured iced tea into the fancy glasses with dimpled patterns, each one a different color, the last three of a set. She held Sally on her lap and wrapped her arms around her.

“Okay, you guys,” she said to us. “Get ready for Daddy.”

She pressed PLAY, and the machine spooled out whispery static. Then our father’s voice came through the speaker, saying, “Hey there, everyone.” He spoke each of our names, our mother’s, Sally’s, mine, and Nick’s, though Nick had taken the car and gone out somewhere. Our father sounded as though he were speaking through a waxed paper bag with a hole cut in it, distorted and faraway, with a thin, brittle vibration running through every word. He said, “My throat is pretty good today, it’s a good day, so I thought I would make a message for you.”

Other sounds came through—car horns from the city outside his window, a shout that made Sally flinch, the rise and fall of mumbly voices that were probably from doctors or nurses and

the other men who shared our father’s room.

Though my mother drove down every week, Sally and I had been to the hospital only once. It was a giant red brick building with dozens of dark windows in rows across the front and a white cupola that stood high up from the roof. Our mother was nervous about driving in the city. The hospital’s underground parking garage scared her, so she drove through the streets lined with row houses until she found a spot. The neighborhood turned out to be filled with people like we’d never seen before. Our mother kept us close as a black boy with a pad of paper followed Sally, shouting, “Hey, hey! Can I draw your face?” Our mother gripped Sally’s hand and hurried her along. “Hey!” the boy called after us. “I can’t tell if you have a good person face or a bad person face!”

“Don’t listen to him,” our mother said. “You are a good person, you’re a very, very good person. Who would even say such a thing?”

We found the hospital, and in the gift shop she bought three balloons, one from each of us, and some candy and a sports magazine. Then we took the elevator upstairs to deliver them to our father. That had been several months before, in spring. We had gone to show him how much we

still loved him even though he had been away from home for a month.

The tape player made a constant, slowly pulsing hiss beneath his voice. He cleared his throat. "Some days," he said. "Some days I can barely make a sound. But today it's pretty good. Maybe the doctors will send me home soon. Wouldn't that be great? Wouldn't that be just perfect?"

Our mother's mouth went tight. Our father said this on every tape. When we had gone to visit him he asked me, "What's the first thing you want to do when I get home?"

"Go for a drive," I said.

Our father managed a couple of soft syllables in reply, but then he coughed like he did then, deeply and convulsively in a way that suggested he might never stop. Until he did stop, and he spit what he'd brought up into his bedside cup and wiped his lips. When he had got himself back together he gave me one of his plastic-mask-like smiles and said hoarsely, "Take the Buick for a spin with your old man, huh?" He meant the lemon-colored Wildcat he had bought a couple of weeks before he went into the hospital.

"Mom too," I said. "Mom in the front seat and me and Nick and Sally in the back."

I meant with the windows down. The first taste of summer was in the air, but on the drive down that morning our mother would not let us stick our heads out the windows. I wanted to close my eyes and feel the wind against my face, hear it rushing in my ears.

Our mother said, "Nick will be driving soon."

"I told him what to do with that car," our father said. His plastic face slackened. "When the time comes."

Sally said, "Do I have a good person face or a bad person face?"

In the kitchen, Sally swung her legs between our mother's, back and forth, back and forth, and I folded my arms on the table and lay my cheek against them. I closed my eyes and traced the dimples on the iced tea glass. I remembered the three glasses that had broken. I remembered the sound of them shattering against the wall. When I thought of it, I imagined our father covering his head with his arms and ducking.

"Listen to your daddy," our mother said.

"I can hear him fine," I said.

"I can hear him too," Sally said.

Another voice came through the tape, a woman who spoke very sweetly. She said hello to our father and then something else, and I opened my eyes to watch our mother's face. Our father said something to the woman, and then we heard his careful laugh, the one that kept clear of the deep breaths that turned into coughing. There were other sounds: rustling cotton, glass against hard plastic, the whir of the machines by his bed, all of them rising out of a darkness to reach my ears. Then he said, "Well now." He was speaking into the tape recorder again. "It's ice cream time. I get so much ice cream you should all be jealous. But really it's for my throat, so don't be too jealous. It's like medicine."

We heard the spoon against his teeth, and he hummed, a leisurely, indulgent sound. "I'll

admit, though, it is the best tasting medicine money can buy.”

Our mother stopped the tape and sat with her eyes closed. She swallowed hard and lifted Sally off her lap and told us to just sit still a minute. She went to their bedroom and returned with her cigarettes and our father’s Zippo lighter. I watched her walk. She wore a short plaid dress with no sleeves and her thick white belt that matched the boots our father had bought her, which meant we would be going to the Ritz to see a movie after the sun went down, or else a babysitter was coming over and our mother was going out for the night. Her arms and neck were suntanned and warm-looking, and underneath the cigarette smoke she smelled like cocoa mixed with brown sugar and coconut, a warm, summery smell that I loved.

She lifted Sally back onto her lap, and when she turned the tape player back on there was static and a long, raspy inhale before our father fell into his wet, deep-from-the-lungs coughing. “Hang on,” he told us, though he barely had breath to get the words out. When the coughing stopped we listened to his wheezing breaths. They emerged from the static and then fell back into it, emerged and worried us and fell back again.

Sally answered the breaths, saying, “I got married.” She thrust her hand toward the black machine, showing it the purple plastic ring around her finger.

“You’re stupid,” I said, and our mother’s hand shot out and swatted me on the elbow, which was all she could reach of me, and I closed my eyes

again and touched the dimples on the glass. I imaged pitching the glass against the wall.

I told myself I knew things. I was a nothing, a rail-thin, eleven-year-old nothing, but I was certain I knew things. I remembered my mother’s voice rising from behind their bedroom door. “It’s a sin against God,” she shouted. “Thou shall not commit adultery. Remember that one?” and the door swung open and our father came stomping through the house, cursing God and Jesus and priests and every other thing too, and slamming the front door behind him, rattling the glass in the panes. He started the car and drove off into the dark, the engine revving loud and tight. That was in his old Chevy Impala, the car he traded in for the Wildcat. Sometimes, on nights like that, he took Nick with him. It was a way of punishing our mother, though it took me a long time to understand that. At first I thought Nick was being rewarded. Our father drove out to a bar called Beam’s, and my mother would not come out of their bedroom for the rest of the night, leaving Sally and me to stay up as long as we wanted, sitting at the kitchen table, Sally drawing, me shushing her babbling and her humming so I could hear our mother behind her closed door. If we stayed very quiet I could hear her feet on the carpet and the snap of her lighter and the soft sound she made pulling the covers back over her. I could smell cigarette smoke and, a little while later, somehow always just before our father’s car pulled back up the driveway, his headlights shining through the windows of the front door and swooping across the kitchen walls,

illuminating the wallpaper with its fading pattern of wildflowers, I could smell her perfume, warm and spicy smells, oranges, vanilla, and patchouli. Our father's headlights went dark, the car door closed, and our father came in through kitchen, passing by us without a word, his face tight and serious. On those nights he had taken Nick with him, our brother came in behind him, gave us a long, superior look, and went off to listen to music through his headphones, as our father closed the door to their bedroom and I braced for what would come next. Though sometimes, instead of yelling, our father spoke in tense whispers, and when he was finished, our mother's voice took on a soft, soothing tone, a way of talking she had when she wanted something. It slowed my heartbeat and made our father's voice deepen, and I knew it would be okay for the rest of the night.

The sunlight in the kitchen had shifted. It had begun to drain away, and my mother lifted her head and looked out the window. The first stars had appeared. A jet burned a long, white contrail across the sky.

"Or maybe," our father said above the cassette tape's hiss. He had stopped coughing, but his voice had weakened. He cleared his throat and started again. "Or maybe I won't go home. Maybe I don't want to give up all this delicious ice cream."

"But don't worry about me," our father said. "I get lonely sometimes and I miss you all like crazy, but I'm okay. The guys here are good company.

You met Red when you were here. You remember what a cut-up he is? We got a new guy last week, and he fits in with us perfectly. They make the days go by all right, but they're not my family. Nothing is more important to a man than his family."

Sally leaned back into our mother's arms and reached up and touched her face. She was too young to understand that everything our father said was hurtful. "Stupid. Stupid," I whispered, but our mother did not seem to notice. She only looked at her wristwatch and began jiggling her knee, making Sally giggle, though it was only our mother's impatience. Her lipstick was fresh and red, though she would freshen it again soon. Sally opened her mouth and went, "Ahhhh-Ahhhh-Ahhhh," vibrating her voice with the bouncing of our mother's knee. Our mother laughed and kissed Sally's cheek and kept her leg jiggling, deliberately now, as though it had never been for any other reason, and I heard the quicker, thinner vibrations in my father's voice, and I whispered, "Stupid. Stupid. Stupid."

"Hey," my mother said to me. "Quit that now. Be nice."

The movies at the Ritz started at 8:45, almost an hour after Sally's bedtime, but sometimes our mother took us and bought our tickets and sent us in to see whatever was playing while the usher said hello and followed her with an idiot grin on his face. She with her warm, spicy scents, her matching belt and boots. Like a model, I thought of her, or a go-go dancer. Like Julie Christie, our father had said when he had made a show of

giving those boots to her as a present. Like Julie Christie in *Dr. Zhivago*, and I had not been sure if my mother was happy about her present or not. The usher stood by the door to the manager's office, waiting, while our mother led us into the dark to find our seats.

What can I say about Jack Braz who managed the Ritz? He was always nice to me. He coached my little league team and started me at catcher. Sometimes his breath smelled of wine, and I liked that. Once, in the dugout, he looked up into the stands and told the other coaches he would keep his subscription to *Playboy* if only my mother's pictures might show up in it. Then he looked at me, and I could see in his face he felt real shame that he had let me hear him.

"My voice is starting to go," my father said. "I'm not sure how much longer I can go on talking," he said. "How's school? How's the swimming lessons, Sally Swee'Pea? How's baseball, little buddy? Did you get your license yet there, Nicky?"

Nick had gotten his license. He kept the keys to the Wildcat in his room, hanging on a hook beside his bed, and when he woke he reached for them and put them in his pocket. Even if he wasn't driving anywhere, he owned those keys. No one else could touch them. That afternoon, when my mother told us that our father had sent a new tape, Nick had pretended not to hear, only reached into the fridge and drank straight from the pitcher of orange juice, spilling some down his chin, which he wiped with the back of his hand. Then he went out to the driveway and

fired up the Wildcat. He backed it out, lined it up on the road, and revved the engine. When he threw it into gear the tires screamed and spit gray-white smoke that smelled of burning rubber. Sometimes he let me ride with him. There was no place to go. He turned up the volume on "Gimme Shelter" and drove fast down the straightaways that ran between the river and giant culm dumps where hardly anyone ever went. Hanging from the rearview mirror, dangling from a piece of rough twine, was a black lipstick tube Nick said he had found under the passenger seat. He had believed our father when he said he would not be in the hospital for long, and the first thing he did once he had his license was take the Buick down to Prospect Street to be washed by the guys who worried over every detail. Then he picked up Armor All and tire cleaner from the auto parts store and brought them home, where he made me help him. We spent an hour or two buffing the shine on the dashboard and making the seats gleam and the steering wheel reflect the sun that slanted in through the windshield, and while he was vacuuming under the passenger seat he found the lipstick. He sat back on his haunches, looking at it in his hand, and then put it in his pocket, dropped his cheesecloth on the driveway, and went inside.

I knew what he was thinking, but it could have been our mother's.

One rainy night several years earlier our mother made us get in her car. No time to put on make-up or put our toys away or get an umbrella from the closet, just get in the car, now, let's go

already. She carried Sally wrapped in her bundle and sucking on her pacifier. She was not yet a year old. Our mother shooed us into the old Rambler Classic, Nick up front with her, me holding the baby in the back. She drove as she always did, slowly, lumberingly, leaning far forward and holding tight to the wheel with both hands. We passed under streetlamps whose light was fractured through the rain on my window. Our mother kept a cigarette burning in the ashtray but would not let go of the wheel long enough to drag from it. The windshield wipers blasted the rain away, the suspension complained around every turn, and Nick helped himself to the cigarette that was quickly dissolving into ash, lifted it to his lips and inhaled. "Nick," our mother said, "Jesus, Nick, what are you doing, put that down, throw it out the window right *now*, Nick, I'm not kidding around," and Nick took another drag and coughed, and smoke plumed all around him. She said, "Nick—goddam it, Nick—" and Nick rolled down the window and tossed the cigarette, and the car smelled of damp and smoke at the same time, like an ashtray doused with water, and our mother found what she'd been looking for. She slowed even further, I didn't know cars could go that slow, and crouched nearer to the wheel and squinted. She said, "Get ready to say hi to Daddy, everyone. Get ready to say hi to Daddy."

Very, very slowly she brought the Rambler alongside a parked car that turned out to be our father's Impala and stopped. Through the rain-streaked windows, the Rambler's and then the Impala's, I saw only blurry shapes at first. Then

I understood I was looking at the back of a dark-haired woman's head. I wondered what we were doing here, and our mother laid on the horn and the woman turned suddenly around, a look of shock across her melting features, and behind her our father's rain-dripping face, or not his face but his sad eyes and his long, stubbly jaw, and our mother smiled and waved like a child and said, "Hi, Daddy! Everyone say hi to Daddy."

A couple of days later our father came home from work with a giant white box bound by a wide ribbon of red velvet, as though it were Christmas when it was only September. He held his finger to his lips. "I got a surprise for Mommy," he told us, "Shhh," and when she came out from the bedroom to see who had come in, he told her, "I got you a little something. I think you'll love it."

She stood with her hand on her hip. She was not going to be swayed by some guilt-purchased present, but we were excited for it, we were stupid then, and we pleaded until she sat with us around the kitchen table. She made a series of angry faces before she opened the box to find the tall white boots, which looked beautiful and extravagant to me, but she did not relax the winched tightness of her lips.

"Try 'em on," our father said. "Go on. We want to see you in them," and we did. "Try them on," we told her, until after some sighing and an effort to her keep her anger intact, she pulled them on and stood and lifted her skirt to her thighs so she could look down and consider them. They glinted like polished glass and rose to her knees, and her mouth twitched and twitched,

uncertain whether to winch itself tighter or open into a smile, and our father said, “Damn. Damn damn damn. You look just like Julie Christie in that movie. Boring as hell movie, but that woman is a stunner, and your mom looks just like her, doesn’t she, kids?”

I said, “You have that big belt that goes with them.”

And she raised her head and looked at me in the strangest way, and I could not stop looking back at her.

Nick never said a word about the lipstick, not even to me, not even the first time I saw it swaying from the rearview mirror of our father’s Wildcat, the twine twisting up and spinning free, and I looked at it the way I looked at our mother’s face that night when she tried on her boots and gazed at me from a far away place as though she could not quite remember who I was or how she knew me. Not even when I reached out and touched it, and Nick turned up the volume, and the Rolling Stones snaked out from the speakers and coiled up in the car and slid out through the open windows.

My brother’s deep and steady silence. He got that from our father. Those months before our father needed our mother to drive him to the hospital, when his lungs were filling faster than he could empty them, when he coughed so violently the muscles in his neck and back clenched and knotted and fissured, and he walked like an old man, or a weak man, which he was then, his skin suddenly the color of rain, his shoulders and arms suddenly thin and boney,

not frail, not yet to where I couldn’t look at his wrists or ankles without imagining the sound of their breaking, but through the last days of that winter and into the strange, wet spring when there were always heavy, gray tumbles of cloud blowing out over the northern rim of mountains, trailing a hazy sheet of rain behind it, and at the same time a new storm emerging from the south or west, always, casting off threads of dark cloud—by then he was weak and bent under his load. He shifted, seeking some sweet spot that evened out the weight and gave him relief enough that he could take in a deep breath and enjoy the oxygen spreading through his blood, lending some vividness to the muscles in his fingers and around his eyes and mouth, enough that he could smile toward us and touch, even for a moment, the things he loved. He was always petting our mother’s hair, and he never once complained, never once said a single word about pain or weakness or sleeplessness, even when he moved out of their room and slept on the living room couch so he could cough through the night without worrying too much about waking us, though none of us slept those nights. We all lay awake and listened to him, and when our mother, whose face showed its first deep lines that spring, whose eyes were always wet with worry—when she put her hand on the back of her neck and stretched it to the side, our father told her, “Come on over here, babe. Let me work that out for you,” and she let herself be coaxed into sitting on the floor in front of him and lifting her hair out of the way to make room for his hand.

That's how our father was, and our mother loved this about him, even then, after everything.

He had gone to see the doctor. Nearly all the coal that had once lain under our feet had been mined. A dozen miles of tunnel had been filled with water that left them useless. Most of the companies that had come here to get rich had left. Those that remained were shrinking. They would have pulled up their stakes and gone with the others, but there was nowhere for them to go. Still, the union could pay his medical bills and see that some decent part of his pension remained when the worst inevitably came down on us.

The doctor told him what he already knew, and our father stood from the chair across the doctor's desk and offered his hand to shake. He saw himself out of the office and walked the long corridor lit by fluorescent lights, passed the nurses and receptionists, saying to them, "See you soon, girls, take good care," and stepped into the parking lot. Those minutes, he told our mother, and then a long time later our mother told us, were the strangest minutes of his life, and he wondered if he was already dead. He leaned his head back and looked up at the sky intending to pray, but what he saw was the sky empty of cloud for the first time in weeks. He decided right then, he told her, that it was time for a new car. He drove the old Impala to Jimmy Balco's lot and traded it in for the Wildcat. "When the time comes," I heard him tell Nick, "you take it back to Jimmy. He'll buy it back from you, he already promised me that. I ain't gonna stick you guys with these payments. If there was any risk of that,

I wouldn't have bought the thing."

The day he bought the Wildcat he came home a sick man, all of him gaunt and graying, but with his old grin on his face, and he told us, "Come on, kids. Let's get your mom and we'll go for a drive," and our mother rode up front with him, me and Sally and Nick in the back. The sky was clear but the air was cold. Patches of melting snow lay along the roadside. The top of the northern ridge was white with it. Everything smelled of cold, wet ash. But we rolled the windows down anyway, and Sally sat on my lap and we stuck our heads out the window and closed our eyes, and we let the wind blast our faces clean.

"My voice, guys. My voice isn't going to last much longer," our father told us. He was quiet a long time, and we listened to his breathing and the voices of the other men in his room and the traffic in a hurry outside his window and the hum and click of the machines near his bed and the constant staticky hiss of the cassette player, and I surprised myself by thinking, *Come home, Dad. Just come home now*, as though I didn't know things, and the blue outside deepened and the trees went black and there were suddenly stars in the sky. That morning, when my mother was ready to drive to Philadelphia and visit our father, the Rambler wouldn't start, so Jack Braz drove her and waited in the underground parking garage for her to finish her visit, and then he drove her all the way back home. In the afternoon I heard his car pull into our driveway, but no one got out. Our mother and Jack Braz just sat there for a

while. I could hear the engine running, but I did not look out the window to see them. I believed I knew everything I needed to know, and I did not want my mother to look up and see me spying on her, though in my room I stayed very still and listened, and I wondered what it would be like if Jack Braz became our stepfather. I heard the car door open, and our mother got out of the car and said, "I will, I will, but honestly, Jack, I really just can't thank you enough," and he said, "It's never a problem. It's an important thing to do. I'm happy I could help," and he said, "If the kids ever need a ride to go see him"—and he stopped, maybe because she had shaken her head or held up her hand, or maybe because his point had already been made. Then he said, "Okay. I'll see you later, right?" and I did not hear our mother reply.

But we did not go see him again, our father. A long time later our mother told us it had been our father's idea to keep us away. "His pride, you know. He wanted you to remember him like he was when we went for a ride that day." And Nick never went to see him at all, not after he found that lipstick in the car and ceased wanting to know him.

Once I heard Jack Braz's car backing out, I did go to the window, and I watched my mother straightening her skirt and patting her cheeks outside the front door, as though checking herself one last time before a date or a job interview. She patted down her hair and adjusted the set of her mouth, trying to relax it, trying not to look as though she might dissolve into tears, and then she came in.

In the kitchen I watched her go through the mail to find the tape she must have known was coming. When Nick came stomping in, she held it up and said, "Nickie, there's a new tape from your dad. We can listen to it after dinner."

Nick reached into the refrigerator and helped himself to the pitcher of orange juice. He wiped his chin with the back of his hand. "Nick," she said. "Nickie, did you hear me? Please don't do this to me," and Nick crossed the kitchen and pushed open the screened door and got into the Wildcat. He backed out of the driveway, revved up the engine, and took off, leaving that blue-gray cloud of rubbery smoke behind.

The men in my life, our mother must have thought. Why do they not speak in words? Why do they speak only with their cars?

"Listen," our father said. "Sorry to kill the mood here, guys, but I need to be serious a minute. This is important, all right?"

Our mother's leg started going again. She lifted her wrist and looked at her watch, and it occurred to me only much, much later that it might not have been impatience. It might have been some other kind of nervousness that got her leg going like it did.

"You need to listen to your mother," our father said. "And you need to look out for her." He paused and breathed. Long, thick, watery inhalations, his lungs filling with stuff he could not continue to breathe through for very much longer. He inhaled hard and deep and held his breath a moment, gathering his thoughts and his energy, and said, "She needs you guys to do that

more than ever. You hear me, boys? It's important that—" He paused and breathed. "It's," he began. "It's—" But he did not finish his thought.

I laid my head back down on my folded arms. I wanted to close my eyes, I wanted not to hear the tape anymore, but there was no way not to hear it. I watched our mother's face. She blinked slowly and her leg went. I studied her face, wanting to find something in it, something good or something bad, I don't know what, but I could no longer see the new lines around her mouth and eyes. I could not see what she was thinking at all. The kitchen had gone that dark.

"Okay, everyone," our father said. "I'll make another message soon. Make one for me when you can." He coughed. We waited quietly for

him to finish. We listened to him clear his throat and spit. He said hoarsely through the phlegm, "I love you all."

"Goodbye," he said.

Sally said, "Goodbye, Daddy."

There were the staticky sounds of our father moving the tape recorder, bringing it to his face so he could find the right buttons to press, as I imagined it, and then the hard final sounds of his hitting STOP. But our mother did not reach out and shut off the player. Its sounds went thin and flat, the hissy spooling through of coppery ribbon with nothing on it, the soft, slow, steady pulse of the machine's old gears turning on and on, and none of us moved. Not even when tape reached its end and the machine shut itself off. 