

What the Father Said

by William Black

What the father gave was a warning: "You are not invited," he said. "Do you understand?" When the mother said nothing he said, "And do not try to follow me. I swear to God. If I see your car, that's it. I'm steering into the nearest tree, case closed. Won't even bother with this thing. Do you understand me?"

The mother was silent. Then there were the father's (the boy assumed) footsteps across the carpet, trailing away. There was the front door closing, the car starting up and driving off.

The boy came out of the bathroom to find his mother seated on the edge of the sofa. She looked up, startled to see him, as if he'd materialized before her. Her face was swollen and pale.

The boy put a hand on his mother's shoulder. "Don't worry," he said. "He didn't mean it."

The mother nodded, almost imperceptibly, and bit down. It was okay then to go outside.

Behind the house was an unmowed field cut through by a path of his making. The path led him into the woods and to a falling-down old windmill: a thin, rusted, tapering scaffold, propeller-less, set atop a sinking shed. Inside, dirty cloth sacks and a handsaw hung from nails; unused storm windows were stacked beside the rot-wood trapdoor. Lift the door and there was the hole he'd come for. When he told his father of the hole he had to promise he would not go near it before the windmill had been torn down. But yesterday he had seen a snake sliding beneath the front yard brushes. He had thought about it and decided it must have come from a nest at the bottom of this hole. He peered down into it. It was all black, but he could see the bottom was undulating, shining with reflective black skin and undulating.

He stepped out into the sunshine to find a long enough branch. His legs were stiff from squatting so long in the bathroom.

Available online at *«<http://fictionaut.com/stories/william-black/what-the-father-said>»*

Copyright © 2010 William Black. All rights reserved.

He found a felled branch that would reach to the bottom and carried it back to the windmill and lowered one end into the hole. The end found something. He held the branch against it, waiting for the something to move. When it didn't he stirred the branch, hunting. Then it occurred to him the snakes might wrap themselves around the branch and twist a silent ascent. He wouldn't see them until they had nearly reached his hand. He could feel the stick growing heavier; snakes had affixed themselves, were winding slowly up, and then a sound, an animal's growl, sharp and aggressive, that set his pulse throbbing in his neck. He dropped the branch and scurried backwards out of the mill. He tripped across the threshold, fell back, and lay looking up at the sky. Then the playmate's mean, bony face leaned in, crew-cut, dirty, and delighted. The playmate leaning over him, laughing. "Got ya," the playmate said. And the boy laughed, impressed by the prank, happy the playmate had found him.

They ran. Follow the Leader along overgrown trails, over boulders, through dried up creek beds. Then they were soldiers of a magnificent war. Then they waged for opposing armies. The playmate atop a hillock, raining down with rocks, staving off the besieging forces. The boy hid behind a tree, dodged a rock, fired cover uphill. He sprinted and ducked behind the next tree. Until a rock got him in the shoulder. He spilled grandly backwards, tumbled downhill, came to rest in a bed of browned pine needles, and died.

So this was death. The soul lifting up from the body. He could feel it. Then he hovered above himself: a twisted corpse below, all spirit above, gazing down with benevolent eyes. Around him the battle raged on. The heavy percussion of artillery fire. The crackling gun battle. Smoke that drifted thickly on the wind.

"Bet you can't never catch me," the playmate said.

And he launched himself up and after the playmate, howling, barking, feeling himself huge and feral. He had the playmate on the run—over downed branches, twisted roots, jutting rocks—until he tripped. Over what, who can say. There is so much

to trip a boy headlong into his game. He fell hard, arms outstretched, and he felt the pain at once—sharply, right there at the point of the fracture—even before his elbows and knees and chest scraped along the ground. The pain was acute at first, and it throbbed the length of his forearm. There came the impulse to cry out, to wail, but he crawled over top of the arm, cradled it beneath the weight of his chest. The comforting pressure and one hard swallow and the shock of it was gone. So the pain became something else, a sensation to indulge. There was an odd kind of pleasure to it, to the way the nerves were stimulated, the arm both numb and oddly stinging as if with cold, though it felt almost hot, especially at the wrist, as if molten sunlight were pouring though. And soon the arm felt huge, swelling out in all directions—

“Hey.”

It became, as he lay there facedown in the woods, the warm, radiant center of him—

“Hey!”

He lifted his head to see the playmate standing over him. It's his throwing arm, the boy realized. He had gone and cost them the game. His throat swelled up, he wanted to apologize, but the playmate burst into laughter, the delight of it lifting his chin, and so the boy laughed, too, wild and full-throated, and tears spilled from his eyes.

His mother was distracted. All through supper she looked over her shoulder and out the kitchen window as if she were expecting his father, though she had set only two places at the table. He touched his food with his fork but had no appetite. And though his mother asked him why he was so quiet, and why he didn't seem eager to get back outside after supper, and why, when it was still so hot out, even as the sun was setting, and when he'd been out running around all afternoon (God knows where he gets off to half the day like he does) and she could see plainly he was perspiring right there at the table, perspiring and yet so drained of color that

one might expect he was cold, perspiring—and was he shivering too?—and mopping his brow with his sleeve no matter how many times she told him not to— *Why in heaven's name*, she wanted to know, *did he insist on wearing long sleeves?*

Though his mother asked, he met her with a series of mute shrugs, and she did not press him but seemed to forget her questions as easily as they had come to her.

She looked over her shoulder, then set down her fork and went to the sink. She lay a hand on the spigot but only looked out at the driveway. There was no car coming up it.

Like this he was able to hide his bruised and swollen wrist. Even when, directly after supper, he went up to his room, she seemed not to take notice.

At night, instead of sleep, there were new and secret pleasures. The forearm swollen inside the sleeve. The hand thick-feeling and numb. His fingers, their range of motion constricted, confined. Every little extension, every tiny contraction—he had never been so aware of muscle and ligament and bone, all encased in restricting fluids. He lay in bed, the arm stretched along his side, and gently, indulgently, he curled his fingers in and then slowly extended them. Half-awake lessons in dexterity, in the limber material of human life.

Sleep, when it came, was feverish and strange. He dreamt the hallway lit in blue. Blue light washing his parents' bedroom door. Blue light splashing across the threshold of his room. He lay on his back. If he didn't move, it no longer felt like pain. It no longer felt like an arm at all. An appendage of water. He dreamt his forearm a rising river; he felt it threaten its muddy banks. His father standing in the blue light, in the hinge of hallway between their room and his. His father too tall and slightly stooped, squinting through the blue. He was trying to see the arm. If he asked—if his father simply asked—the boy would happily tell him.

He would show him the spreading bruise, the stretched-tight skin with a river trapped inside it.

He woke to a crash of thunder. A storm suddenly upon them. Wind and rain. The room coruscated with lightening. The hallway flared white and then darkened. No father squinting in. His arm throbbed; the pulse of it matched to his heartbeat. The pain was back, an angle cutting all the way through him, and the hallway wasn't blue; his father did not stoop and squint from it. The boy lay perfectly still, held his breath, listened. The silent strobe again. No sounds within the house. No thunder. He counted the seconds—*six Mississippi, seven Mississippi*. If his father had come home he would know it. Won't he? Thunder rumbled. The window pane rattled. Already the storm was trailing away.

How badly one wants to roll over! The bumps in the mattress. Like nuts tucked inside. Like gravel. They pressed against his back. How badly he wanted to roll over, but that always sharpened the pain. Best not to move. Why can't you spend a night without moving? How hard can it be? *That* was a sound—a creak, like floorboards underfoot. He looked and the hallway strobed with lightning. His father had said, "You are not invited." He dreamt he could breathe underwater.

And then it happened: his father there in the doorway. His mouth was moving; he was making sounds, but the sounds were not words. There was only a single note, loud and high, a ceaseless wailing. The pain in his arm—it had sprung free and claimed him; the wrist burned from inside. Then the words reached him—"What is it? What's wrong?" Not his father but his mother in her bathrobe; her hair wild, panic across her face. He had rolled over, in his sleep, on top of it. He had given himself away.

"Hey there, buddy. Looks like you had yourself quite a fall, huh? Nothing a big guy like you can't handle though, right? Though you did suffer a break. Your mother said you kept quiet about it all day yesterday. Not a peep. That true? Well, you're a

tough kid. Makes your dad proud, I'll bet. Bet you're gonna try out for football, right? My boy plays football. Tough kid—though I've patched him up plenty of times.

“So I see your mother's not back yet. Don't think I can wait for her, so let's have a look at these pictures. Maybe she'll come back while we're looking. So that's what your arm looks like, from inside your skin. The bones of your arm. And see that, up by the wrist, right there? That's the break. You had your arm outstretched—like this—when you fell, right? And you hit the ground with your hand like this, right? So the bones—you're young. Tough but still a kid, still developing. So the bone couldn't handle the sudden pressure of it and it split, right along here. See? These black lines? And all around it, that's the swelling. Interstitial fluid—that's what we call it around here. It helps to protect the fracture, it helps you heal.

“Colles fracture. That's what it's called, this particular fracture. The official name, the fancy name. After Abraham Colles, this Irish doctor who set his son's arm in the cast—like the one you'll have soon enough—when his son broke his arm just like you did. Everything's got a name. You can tell your dad that—Colles fracture. He'll be proud of you for knowing that.

“So your mother's not back yet. I want her to hear this part—I'll have the nurse tell her, but you remember so you can tell her, too, all right?

“In a couple of minutes someone will come by to set your arm—from the elbow down—in a cast. You'll have to wear that cast for six weeks, so no rough-housing while you're wearing it, okay? You have another fall, and we have to start all over again—another cast for another six weeks. I know it won't be easy, you'll be itching to get back out there and play, but you've got to rein it in, okay?

“Ah, here's your mom. So remember that, it's important, all right? I was just telling your boy here that a nurse will come by to explain—”

The first thing was the light in there, the soft, sickly yellow of it. It turned the white paint dingy; it filled the cracks and stains on the walls. It made for black-brown shadows—under the folding metal chair, behind the machines that lit up and beeped. Under the bed, a perfect, flat, duplicate shape the color of a hole in the ground. Someone had told the boy that florescent lights flicker a thousand times a second. If he held real still and didn't blink, he could almost see it. Or at least he could feel it. It felt like a room that pulsed a thousand times a second. Pulsed with sickly yellow light.

That wasn't really the first thing.

The first thing was the cast. Then his mother took him by the hand and led him to the fourth floor. Then off the elevator and down a hall as hard and white as the room would feel pulsing with sad, sickly yellow. Past the nurses who looked up from their stations and smiled at him, or else did not look up at all. Then they stood outside the room while a nurse went to see if they were allowed to go in.

When the nurse came back she said OK, and then the boy and his mother went in to see the boy's father.

Here is why (looking back) the light in the room felt like the big first thing: His father's face was pale and grayish and swollen. So swollen his eyes squinted almost shut. He looked like the blind baby mice he'd dug up that time with the tiller. And there were colorless tubes hooked to his arms with needles. And the wires spidering out from his shirt to monitors on stands. And the heartbeat that shot across in jags of green light that did not match the boy's own heart at all.

The boy stood three steps behind his mother and leaned past her hip to watch. The father tried to open his eyes at the boy's mother. His lips where white and cracked. Slowly, as if it weighed as much as a stone, he rolled his head toward the boy, and the boy remembered: His father had shoveled the mice into a bag, knotted the bag closed, and dumped it in the garbage can.

The boy turned away, looked for shadows, counted cracks and stains on the walls, tried to catch the florescent light blinking. He came up close behind his mother, leaned his face against her back, and squeezed his fingers through her belt loop. He heard his father say in a strange, slurry voice, "I do. I want to."

There was his mother reaching behind her, setting a firm hand on the boy's shoulder. "Come see your father," she said.

The father's swollen face, his squinted-shut eyes. His too-big head as still as a stone on the pillow. His father lifted a hand, reached with it. "You. Don't. Talk—anymore?" the father said. His voice like wet breaths. The boy closed his eyes. A nurse came in and looked at the papers, at the machines, at the papers again. Her uniform glowed in the room's yellow light. She handed a paper cup to the boy's mother. "You can give him some of these." A cup full of ice chips. "But I can't let you stay more than a couple of minutes."

What the father said was, "Boo-boo," two half-curved fingers aimed at the cast. "I have. Boo-boo. Too," and with his other hand he lifted the neck of his hospital gown so the boy could see the bruises and the blood-dark trail of stitches along his sternum.

There was another nurse, a different one, suddenly at the bedside. She said, "We need to let him sleep now." She opened a valve on one of the tubes.

"We both," the father said groggily, so like a near-asleep little boy. "We both have. Boo-boos."

And like that the father was sleeping, snoring gently, and the nurse took the arm still pointing at the cast and folded it in. The boy looked at his cast—radiantly yellow, changed but unblemished in the room's pulsing light. With his good hand he touched the bone in the middle of his chest, traced a line like the line of stitches.

"Okay," the mother said. "It's time to go home."

No, the boy told his wife. I have to go alone. It is not the place for you.

And what could she say? She knew he was right. He could tell by the set of her mouth, by her dumb, almost imperceptible nod. He touched her hair sympathetically.

It's too dangerous for you.

And it was. Snipers in the hills, half a hungry battalion behind those rocks. Fire, when it came, would come hard from three sides. He must be quick. Quick and silent and surprising. Otherwise, he will never hold his wife again. He sees her lift the photograph in its silver frame, sees her blink away tears. He swallows against the heavy swelling in his throat. It's time.

He is down on his belly, pulling himself, with his elbows, across the dirt and downed leafs and the clover and the freshly mown grass. The cast on his arm is awkward; he struggles to hold his rifle. He will have to fire it with his opposite hand. Then there at the tree line is the target, the general in his black uniform, strutting back and forth before his troops, shouting commands and insults.

The boy lifts his rifle, steadies the barrel against his cast, but it's too late—they've spotted him. Six of them, eight, a dozen—they spring out from behind their rocks; they open fire. He squeezes off a round, two rounds, but in vain. Bullets rip through his chest, and he falls back against the soft, sun-warmed grass. Life seeps out of him, as warm and liquid as the sunlight. His thoughts—he knows they are his last—are of his wife. There is the sad, giddy, practiced realization that he'll never see her again, and he reaches toward her with one arm, then opens an eye, cautiously, to see that she's still there in the kitchen window, watching over him.

