

Prologue

Warm liquid spread underneath him, waking the child. His heart thudded. Cold sweat joined the urine soaking his sheet. Panic made his breath come in short sharp spurts. Tears welled in his eyes. He tried to calm down with no avail. He must think. He reasoned with himself. She warned him if he wet the bed again she would whip him with the cord from the sewing machine. His back still hurt from the last beating. She said she would whip him worse than before.

He knew she meant it. He had endured her wrath before. Last night after his bath, he stood before the mirror. He looked over his shoulder at his back. The red marks were fading, leaving long jagged scars. He turned away; he couldn't bear to look at the image of himself. He was ugly, his mother told him so. Loneliness and despair overwhelmed him.

Last Sunday he had been excited. The church at the corner was having a Sunday school campaign. They were inviting children in the neighborhood to join their small group.

Someone had thrown away the flier advertising the drive. He picked it up off the street. He looked around to see if anyone saw him. He hid the paper inside his shirt. Running behind the garage he eagerly read it. He decided to go. He was excited. Here at last he would be loved.

His mother would never know. As long as he was out of the house, she didn't care where he went, just as long as he wasn't bothering her. At 9 AM on Sunday morning, he walked to the church and entered through the side door.

Everyone else was coming in the front. He watched the other boys and girls stream down the hallway. They stared at him. He huddled against the wall out of their way. He wasn't sure he would be welcome in this house of God. After all, no one had given him the invitation he just found it. He thought of all the birthday parties he was excluded from. Several times at school, he overheard others whispering about him. Their unkind comments hidden behind hands covering their mouths.

Maybe this would be different. He followed the children. One room seemed to be filling up with those his own age.

A pretty woman in a flowered dress was standing behind a small podium. She greeted each child by name. He sneaked in and sat with his back against the wall hoping they wouldn't run out this uninvited guest. The other students moved their chairs away from him, crowding up against each other. The teacher, a woman in her late twenties, actually smiled at him once or twice. It made him feel warm inside. His mother never smiled at him.

Afterward he wanted to speak to her. To tell her how delighted he was to be in her class. How much he enjoyed her stories. He approached the room thinking she was alone. He heard another female voice.

"If that child is going to attend this church my husband and I are leaving. He will attract others just like himself. I will not have my son associate with children like that."

The Sunday school teacher said something unintelligible.

"I don't care, I'll not have my Howey in the same class with that dirty little boy."

He knew they were talking about him. He left never to return. No one pursued him. No visit to his home, just a general sigh of relief from the church. If this couple pulled out their membership, the finances would suffer.

What was the price of losing one little poor boy compared with the loss of this wealthy family.

Ashamed of his ragged clothes, he closed the holes with safety pins. During rainy days, he wore plastic bags over his feet. He was aware he was different. The pitying expressions of teachers, the taunts of the children.

He came home the first day of school and didn't want to return. His mother laughed at him and called him a coward.

Soon after that, he started wetting the bed. His mother was livid. She snatched him out of a sound sleep and threw him to the floor.

"You're 6 years old, you little creep. If you do this again I will whip you," she screamed. "Now get downstairs and wash these sheets. " She ripped off the wet bedding and flung it at him. He struggled down the stairs tripping and almost falling. Finally, he wrestled the soaked sheets into the laundry room. Stuffing them into the washer was another matter. Even with the big bird stool, he had to stand on his tiptoes. He could not reach the soap.

Running into the bathroom, he grabbed the liquid hand soap. He was pushing down the pump when her hand caught him up the side of his head. He fell off the stool his head smacking the wall. Tears filled his eyes. Reaching into the overhead cabinet, she took out the bottle of Wisk. She turned to him her face a mask of rage.

"Now get up there and sleep on the floor and if you wet on the rug I'll mop it up with you." His heart pounding he ran back up the stairs. He curled up on the floor, shivering in his wet underwear.

He didn't wet the bed that night or the next or the next. A week later, he went to bed in confidence and woke up in horror. His mother gripped his shoulder. Her fingers digging into his flesh like the claws of a cat. The pool of urine underneath him was turning cold. She jerked him off the bed and dropped him on the floor. In her hand, she clutched the electrical cord from the sewing machine. Before he could react, she brought it down across his back. He howled in pain. Five more times she struck him, the cord cutting into his flesh.

She left him blubbering on the floor, his back oozing blood.

"Clean up this mess and get to bed and don't you get blood on the sheets." Then she was gone, leaving her son weeping in pain and humiliation.

Now, five weeks later he woke in a wet bed quaking in fear. Jumping up he tore the sheets off and stuffed them under the bed. Running to the chest, he replaced the wet sheets with clean ones. He stretched them out the best he could and leaped into bed. He heard his mother coming up the stairs. Her steps approached his room. He pretended to be asleep. She flung open the door.

"Get up and get to school." She said. Turning, she left. He breathed a sigh of relief. She would be at work when he came home from school. He could wash the sheets then and his mother would never know.

That afternoon he hurried home, running all the way. He took the shortcut through old man Bleven's yard. Rounding the house, he stopped dead in his tracks.

His mother's car was in the driveway. Ever so quietly, he entered through the front door and tiptoed up the stairs. There was thunder in the air. It boomed shaking the house. He used it to cover the squeak on the fifth step.

In his room, he dropped to his knees and looked under the bed. His heart almost stopped. The space was empty, the sheets were gone. Suddenly a hand closed around his upper arm. There was a ripping sound as his mother tore his tattered shirt from his back.

For the next five minutes, he endured the worst whipping of his young life. Blood trickled down his back pooling in the waistband of his pants. He shrieked in agony and despair.

"Didn't think I would find them did you? You're worse than worthless." She screamed, her arm pounding away. "I should have killed you when were little, I should have given you away. Now you're too big, nobody wants you."

She finished with a cut across his shoulder that reached to his stomach catching his bellybutton. She flung him away from her.

"Now get out of here." She whipped the cord at the child catching him on the leg. Limping he ran for the stairs.

Halfway down he stumbled, falling the rest of the way. Picking himself up he charged out of the house and across the porch.

Hidden behind the garage he curled up on the ground. In misery, he began to sob. A cold rain peppered the ground. He barely felt it. No one loved him. No one cared. His own mother wished he was dead.

Mercifully, he slept. Two hours later, he awoke in the dark.

Rain still fell. He shivered. Things had changed. He was no longer the little boy everyone picked on. They would never hurt him again. He felt dead inside. They might beat his body but they would never touch his inner self. His heart was dead, unfeeling, uncaring.

Quietly, the demon entered him.