**A Child called It – excerpt**

After the knife incident, Father spent less and less time at home and more at work. He made excuses to the family, but I didn't believe him. I often shivered with fear as I sat in the garage, hoping for some reason he might not leave. In spite of all that had happened, I still felt Father was my protector. When he was home, Mother only did about half the things to me that she did when he was gone.

When Father was home, it became his habit to help me with the evening dishes. Father washed and I dried. While we worked, we talked softly so neither Mother nor the other boys could hear us. Sometimes, several minutes would pass without us talking. We wanted to make sure the coast was clear.

Father always broke the ice. "How ya doing, Tiger?" he would say. Hearing the old name that Father used when I was a little boy always brought a smile to my face. "I'm OK," I would answer. "Did you have anything to eat today?" he often asked. I usually shook my head in a negative gesture. "Don't worry," he'd say. "Some day you and I will both get out of this madhouse."

I knew father hated living at home and I felt that it was all my fault. I told him that I would be good and that I wouldn't steal food anymore. I told Father I would try harder and do a better job on my chores. When I said these things, he always smiled and assured me that it wasn't my fault. Sometimes as I dried the dishes, I felt a new ray of hope. I knew Father probably wouldn't do anything against Mother, but when I stood beside him I felt safe.

Like all good things that happened to me, Mother put an end to Father helping me with the dishes. She insisted that The Boy needed no help. She said that Father paid too much attention to me and not enough to others in the family. Without a fight, Father gave up. Mother now had complete control over everybody in the household.

After awhile, Father didn't even stay home on his days off. He would come in for only a few minutes. After seeing my brothers, he would find me wherever I was doing my chores and say a few sentences, then leave. It took Father no more than 10 minutes to get in and out of the house, and be on his way back to his solitude, which he usually found in a bar. When Father talked to me, he'd tell me that he was making plans for the two of us to leave. This always made me smile, but deep inside I knew it was a fantasy.

One day, he knelt down to tell me how sorry he was. I looked into his face. The change in Father frightened me. He had dark black circles around his eyes, and his face and neck were beet-red. Father's once rigid shoulders were now slumped over. Gray had begun to take over his jet-black hair. Before he left that day, I threw my arms around his waist. I didn't know when I would see him again.

After finishing my chores that day, I rushed downstairs. I had been ordered to wash my ragged clothes and another heap of smelly rags. But that day, Father's leaving had left me so sad that I buried myself in the pile of rags and cried. I cried for him to come back and take me away. After a few minutes of self-comfort, I settled down and began scrubbing my "Swiss cheese" clothes. I scrubbed until my knuckles bled. I no longer cared about my existence. Mother's house had become unbearable. I wished I could somehow manage to escape the place I now called the "Madhouse."