

STEELE HIMSELF
by Peg Daniels

Author's Note: Steel yourself. Disturbing subject matter.

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But I didn't go down to the creek. He was whining now. His previous protests had gone from strong to weak in the face of her continuing disbelief. She'd told him to never go down to the creek and he hadn't he really hadn't.

You're lyin' to me.

No! He put up his hands to ward off the blow.

She grabbed him and hit him and hit him and blood warm and wet gushed from his nose and sprinkled the floor when his head jerked from side to side from the force of her blows and there was so much of it and it kept coming and coming and he tried to pull away but he couldn't break free and when he was big no one was ever going to hit him again he'd make sure of it.

She finally stopped and she yanked him across the room and shoved him into his corner and pushed his face to the wall banging his poor nose again and the blood was still coming and dripping all over his shirt.

When you die I hope God sends you to hell. But he didn't say it out loud he wasn't supposed to say things like that even thinking them was enough to get himself sent to hell but he knew he was going there anyway so he might as well think it and maybe God would realize he was right and send her to hell too but to a different part so he would suffer the torment of not seeing God's face without the torment of having to see hers.

To hell with this to hell with them all. He knew he was in deep trouble now, God-wise, but he didn't care he was never supposed to say the word hell even though the grownups said it all the time. Hell hell hell. Now he was damned for sure.

The corner it actually wasn't a bad place he was safe here he could make up stories and maybe hum when she'd gone into the kitchen. You had to keep your eyes closed though otherwise

they'd cross permanent from looking at the wall so close.

He was getting worried now the blood kept on coming it 'd never done that before maybe she broke something and it was never going to stop and all the blood of his body was pouring out his nose and he was going to die and go to hell a lot sooner than he'd thought.

I'm bleedin'. She didn't answer him. She was going to be sorry when she saw all this blood. I'm bleedin'. He said it louder and he dared turn around and started to go to her to show her and she threw down her mending and came at him all red-faced and started screaming at him and hit him again and dragged him back to the corner and he couldn't believe it and he was afraid she was going to kill him right then and there and the devil was going to have his worthless soul to torture for all of eternity and eternity lasted forever he wasn't sure what that meant but he knew it was a very long time.

Didn't she understand? He opened his eyes there was blood spattered all over the wall all over the floor all over his shirt. Couldn't she see? He was bleeding and it wasn't stopping. He tilted his head back hoping she wasn't looking at him cuz if she was she'd come over and push his nose to the wall. He put his hands to his nose one to each side and pressed it and he tried to sniff in the blood and he swallowed it and it left a raw place in his throat and the blood on his hands felt all soft and slippery thicker than water and maybe he should pray if this was his last moment on earth.

Our Father which art in heaven halloed be thy name. He knew art was a fancy way for saying are and thy was for your but he didn't know what halloed was. Maybe it was just a way to say hello and all that part meant was hello God I know you live in heaven which seemed a stupid thing to say. Er. What came next. Give us a steak and our daily bread. That was a good thing to pray for even though he'd never gotten a steak and didn't know anyone who had but still, no harm telling God exactly what you wanted. And lead a snot into temptation. Now of all the sayings in all of the prayers he had ever heard, that was the queerest one. It didn't seem right they should be praying for that but when he'd snuck a peek at the others during prayers no one else seemed to find it odd so he'd shrugged and thought it must be one of those mysteries of the cross the brothers and nuns were always going on about. Snot he figured must be short for snot-nosed brat cuz he couldn't imagine they were talking about boogers. He screwed up his eyes trying to think who out of all the many choices he had he should ask God to lead into temptation. Roan. Roan was always telling him after he'd fallen down and skinned his knees that it was God punishing him cuz he was a bad person and Roan should talk Roan was just a bully but he didn't say that to Roan's face cuz Roan was twice as big as him and would think nothing of beating the crap out of him so he'd offer Roan to God as his choice.

His stomach made a noise. He carefully lifted his hands from his nose but kept them close by in case they were needed his prayer must have worked cuz the bleeding had stopped. He sniffed a few more times swallowing more blood and probably snot but better than blowing it onto his shirt and getting cuffed for it and besides if he blew the bleeding might start again. He slowly lowered his face with his hands held at ready but they weren't needed the bleeding really had stopped. Thank you Jesus Amen. His stomach made that noise again and it felt all empty inside

and he was really really – I'm hungry! She didn't answer and he couldn't hear her behind him.

He turned his head as slow as he could in case she were behind him and ready to whack him as soon as she saw he wasn't doing as she said. When he'd turned his head as far as it went he slowly began to twist his body listening for any sound of her but she wasn't there she must have left when he was praying. He got up on his tiptoes and sneaked into the kitchen to nick an apple and maybe some bread he could see her out of the window she was talking to that man who sometimes came around and her voice got real loud and the window was cracked open a bit and he heard her say I don't want him and he nearly choked on his apple cuz he knew she meant him.

Whist! he'll hear you, how can you do this to him, the man said, he's yours now.

He's not mine I don't want him he's nothing but trouble he won't mind me he's the son of the devil –

He whirled from the window he didn't want to hear any more and he threw down the apple as hard as he could and he ran out the other door so they wouldn't see him and he ran and he ran and he'd been so proud of himself cuz he hadn't cried once when he was being hit like he used to when he was little but now he could hardly see and he was nothing but a baby after all but when he was big enough he was going to run away to America he'd heard a cousin well they called him his cousin though he had his doubts the cousin said that in America they had big cars with wings and imagine that! in America they flew from house to house when they went to visit with family and friends and even though he'd have no family he'd have lots of friends cuz he'd make up stories about who he was and they wouldn't know any different and they'd think he was fine and grand.

He stopped when he realized where he was he was near the creek and he wasn't supposed to go there but what did it matter she didn't believe him when he'd said he hadn't gone there and she didn't want him anyway so what did it matter?

He was scared even though it didn't look very deep and the water didn't rush very fast but you never knew what could happen. He'd just hide in the tall weeds close by though he wasn't sure what he'd do if no one found him.

He looked at his hands with the blood dried on them on the front of his shirt it had dried to brown on his face he could feel crusts of it but now it was mixed with snot and tears from his blubbing he cautiously went to the edge of the creek and swished his hands in it and when they were clean he brought them to his face but he didn't want to touch it with all that sticky stuff all over it so he lay down and he took a big breath puffing out his cheeks and he squeezed shut his eyes and he prayed please God don't let me drown and he plunged his face into the creek and he thought he would die it was so cold his heart stopped. He came up sputtering and gasping for breath and he rubbed his hands all over his face and cupped more water onto it until it was clean and he was shivering now he pulled off his shirt and used the back of it to dry his face and he lay it in the sun and he got up and he ran back and forth back and forth until he started to feel warm again.

He plucked at the weeds and carried a handful to a clear spot and he began making a house with them. Then he built several more until he had a small village but he needed stones to fence things in so he got up to go back to the creek to find some and then he saw her. He ducked back down it was too late she had seen him and he thought of running but it was no use it was never any use cuz she was too big and he was too small so he stood there and waited for her to hit him. But she didn't this time she yanked him hard and she started pulling him trampling over his village. You ruined it, you ruined it, he screamed at her but she jerked him harder and snatched up his shirt and walked so fast his legs couldn't keep up and he would run and trip and she would drag him until she slowed enough so he could get his feet under him then she'd pick up speed again and it would start all over and he thought his arm was going to be wrenched right off his body.

She dragged him back into the house and pulled off his clothes and took a rag soaked in water and scrubbed his face so hard he thought it might come off and she brought out his Sunday clothes and dressed him and yanked him outside to the cart hitched to the horse where a man sat waiting and she lifted him over the side.

Where'm I goin'?

To the Brothers.

No! He tried to plead with his eyes but she looked at him hard and he would not beg he just wouldn't. He didn't want to go to the Brothers they were always strapping him cuz he couldn't remember his prayers right and they'd call him omadhaun omadhaun omadhaun he once thought that was his name.

What's my name? He stood up and swayed and he hung onto the back of the cart as it jolted down the lane and he screamed at her What's my name what's my real name what's my name but she turned and started back into the house and he was furious now what's my name he screamed it as loud as he could but no one not even his own echo answered him

The End.

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