


# THE BOY FROM THE BASEMENT



SUSAN  
SHAW





# THE BASEMENT

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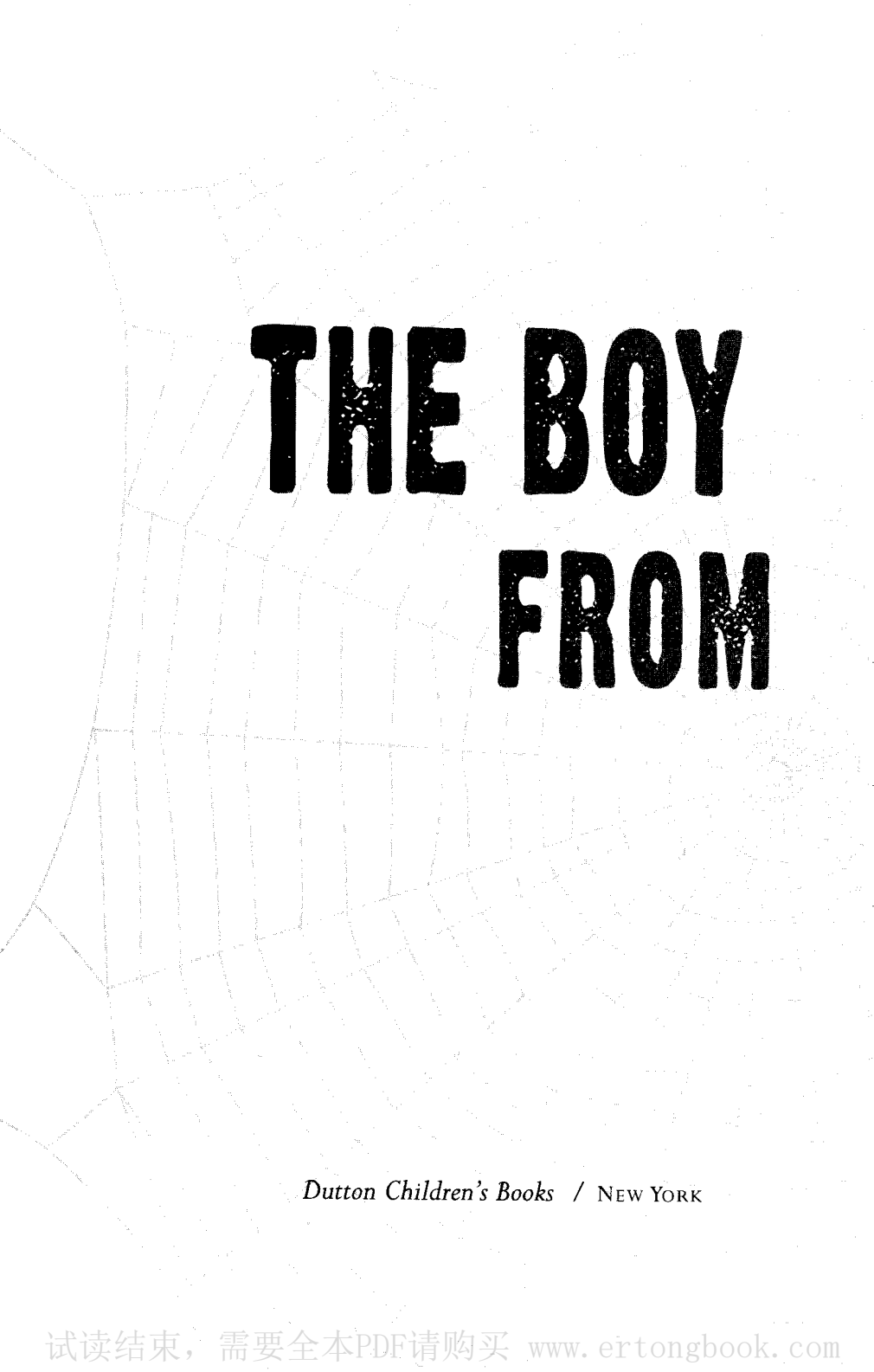
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*To my parents,  
David and Jean Wetherill,  
with great, great love*

THE BOY FROM THE BASEMENT

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## PART ONE



## CHAPTER ONE

I'm sitting in a basement smelling of old, burned furnace oil. Empty and raw, no feeling of ease or well-being. Just being. The floor is brown, flaking linoleum, cold to my legs below my shorts. It's dusty. No shirt, and the shorts—Father's old ones—don't fit. I am alone down here.

My shoulder aches, and I'm hungry. I lean against the bottom step of the basement, waiting for my parents to go to bed. Maybe there will be food.

*Click!* as Father unlocks the basement door, but I don't move. Not yet.

The steps to the second floor creak as my parents climb up to bed. My mother answers something my father says. I wait through the shower and the toilet flushes. I wait until all is still and creep softly up to the door. I open it.

As usual it is dark in the kitchen except for what comes in from the streetlight. I open the bread drawer. Something's left in there. I pull it out, leaving the drawer open. I check to make sure there's more than a couple of slices. It can't look like I've taken anything. Then I remove a knife from the drainer and use it to spread peanut butter thickly on my hand-held slice before eating over the sink. I don't linger over the food, but I thrill to the stickiness filling my mouth.

Oh, food! It tastes so good, and my whole body hums as the sandwich trails down to my stomach. Between bites I tilt

my head beneath the chained cabinets for long drinks from a thin, silent stream of water from the faucet. Upstairs, they can't be allowed to hear anything. Then I wash the knife under the same stream. I silently replace it in the drainer and put the bread back into the drawer. Close it.

I check the bathroom off the kitchen. Locked. As usual.

Then I do the riskiest thing. I open the back door and stand in the cold blackness of the little back porch to pee onto the grass. No one will see, and I can't go in the basement anywhere.

Sometimes the b.m.'s force me out into the backyard. I bunch my towel into a doorstep, then leave the porch for a spot in the darkness behind the pine trees. Father never goes back there, so it's all right. Someday, when the punishment is over, I'll take a shovel through the yard and bury it all. In the meantime, I hope for hard rain.

Tonight it's just pee. There is no breeze to shut the door behind me, but I hold it with one hand just in case. My bladder shrinks. Oh! Relief!

I stand for only a few seconds, the night air crisp on my skin. Outside—where the wind and rain run free—but I keep my hand tight on the door. Tightly, I also hold down my wish to be as free as the wind.

Then back inside, pull the door shut—*Click!*—and I'm tiptoeing down the basement steps again. Made it through one more day.

## CHAPTER TWO

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I wake in the morning with the *tramp-tramping* on the kitchen floor overhead. I imagine my father eating his oatmeal, my mother stirring her coffee. I smell the coffee, hear the *Clink, clink!* of teaspoon against china. White china with one pink flower on the cup.

No other sounds. My parents don't say much in the morning—an occasional word, maybe.

*Slam!* from the front door. Father's gone for his morning jog.

"Charlie?" Mother calls through the basement door. Father's locked it by now. "Are you making it?"

I cough before I speak. "I'm making it."

"There's an apple behind the cookbooks," she says.

"Thanks."

There's a pause, but I know she hasn't moved.

"Charlie?"

"Yes?"

"I'm so sorry."

"I know."

"Someday, Charlie."

Father's key clicks in the front door. He must have only made a run to the mailbox at the corner. Mother's footsteps hurry—tile to carpet—to the computer in the dining room. She's at work now.

I lie still under the old towel I stole from the bottom of the linen closet when I knew no one was home. That was before lock-ins. Father wouldn't miss the towel, and I had to have something. The basement is cold.

I wonder how Mother managed to keep the apple for me with Father always counting everything. An apple. I haven't tasted one for a while. The last thing Mother saved for me was an onion. Boy, did it taste good! But an apple . . . my mouth waters.

Used to be Mother brought down food and juice when Father went jogging, but twice he caught her. Then there was the third time—*Quick! Up the steps!*—when we heard his key in the door. She just made it.

He must have known, though, because that was the end of it. Now, the door is locked all day. "You OK, Charlie?" "I'm OK, Mother" is about all we can do now. But there is usually peanut butter, and it always tastes wonderful.

Staircase creaking under Father's feet. The creaks are loudest when he's the one going up. They creak a little under Mother, and when they're both going up at once, it sounds like something coming loose. I can do it with no creaking. Or, at least, I could. I haven't been on those steps in a long time.

The shower comes on, and Father's singing voice travels down to me through the running water. I like his singing. It means he feels good. Maybe he feels good enough to end the punishment and call me upstairs.

The staircase creaks again. A couple of words I don't understand rumble to Mother as Father walks through the din-

ing room. A soft answer from her, the scuff of footsteps from the carpet to the kitchen tiles, and Father's at his desk. Right on the other side of the door at the top of the basement steps. An invisible but uncuttable line attached to him pulls on my chest. I crawl up the steps and touch the door. He must know I'm here.

I want to call him. Father! Do you feel me like I feel you? Is it hard for you to work knowing there's only a door between us? You would see me if you opened it. True and real. You could hear me breathe like I hear you—if you tried. Is it hard not to open the door and say, "Charlie, come on up!"

It has to be as hard for him as it is for me. So I don't call. I crawl down again—silently. I have to wait until he says it's time. That's what he told me. I have learned to believe what he says.

I sit back on the floor, lean against the bottom step. The spider on the ceiling above me spins her web. How she takes her time! After all, why hurry? She's not going anywhere. As long as she doesn't weave a web to catch me—that idea always lurks in the back of my mind. On my good days, I know I'm too big for her to want, but still I worry. As long as she has smaller things to catch, I'm all right.

She swells up while I look, then flattens down again so I can hardly see her. How did she do that? I watch to see if she'll do it again, but she doesn't. Then right as I turn my head, I see her puff up once more out of the corner of my eye. When I turn my head, though, it's like nothing happened. The spider taunts me with her sameness. I watch a long time this time, but she doesn't move at all.

I hear the leaves shifting under the wind, losing myself in the rolling, *shhshhing* sound.

I pick up my pencils from behind the steps. Mother sticks them under the door once in a while. Sharpens them for me sometimes. There's paper behind the steps, too—old computer paper left by the people who lived here before. Stacks of it.

I feel the ridges in the wood of a pencil, touch the marks stamped in the yellow paint, let the blackness transfer from the point and stain my fingertips. Then I slide a paper into a patch of sunlight trapped by the window well and draw. I've drawn everything in the basement over and over—the furnace, the water heater, the old red wagon with two wheels missing, and the gray clothesline still dotted with clothespins. All from the people who lived here before us.

I feel myself at the kitchen table when I draw, and it's the way things used to be. I'm *there*. Mother and Father work, and I draw—*there*. But when the drawing ends, the table goes, and I am still, still here.

Today I draw random lines without thinking too much about what it is. Like the spider, I'm in no hurry. There's plenty of time.

But right now I don't feel like drawing. I'm tired of the endless stretch of time. I've been down here so long, and I don't feel real good. When is Father going to let me upstairs again? When will my punishment be over?

Was what I did this bad?

I drop my pencil and roll onto my back. I'm sick of drawing. The spider's up on the ceiling, as always. Dark red with



black markings like two bent fingers facing each other. And a bunch of black legs busy, always busy. The spider's head turns to look down. Father's face bulges out at me. I blink. No. It's only the spider. Father's upstairs, of course. What made my eyes play that trick?

After I lie here for a while, I begin to shiver. I'm colder suddenly. I pull the towel around me. Then I'm too hot, sweating, even. I blot my sweat with the towel, but that takes too much energy. So I just sweat, feeling the gathering liquid drip onto the floor. I'm cold again.

What's happening? I can't be sick. Can't. There's no extra energy for that. Only for just making it through the day.

Drowsiness creeps over me, and my body feels heavy, ready to sink into the floor. I gladly give in to sleep, the sweetest time taker. . . .

I wake up, holding onto the shield of sleep until I can no longer pretend. I'm still sick, and the presence of the spider and her web is strong. She's going to get me, and I'm afraid, so afraid.

Sick with a terrible thirst and scared, scared.

Calm, Charlie—stay calm. No energy to be upset. Don't have any to waste.

I lie still and wait. Upstairs, a clock chimes. I count four. Count five. Count six.