A BATTERED CHILD

When my mother died I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue
Could scarcely cry ‘weep! ’weep! ’weep! ’weep!’
So your chimneys I sweep, and in soot I sleep.

William Blake, Songs of Innocence.

She stood trembling with fear in front of her father. He was red with rage.

“Now say you are sorry”, he said, “and say it on your knees.”

She knelt down with some difficulty — her legs felt stiff and sore.

“I’m sorry, Pop”, she said, “I won’t ever say that again.”

She barely understood what had happened; her father seemed to have gone mad all of a sudden. He had belted her before but never as bad as this.

Beth’s father liked to wrestle and he would spend hours showing the kids how to do this ‘hold’ or that. He thought that girls should know how to defend themselves.

“You never know when someone may attack you”, he would say, “and if you can’t protect yourself you might get hurt.”

Sometimes he was a bit rough. This particular day he was showing Beth some kind of an ‘arm twist’.

Beth was not so keen on his instruction but she put up with it to please him. She said, “that hurts Pop, cut it out or you’ll break my arm.” He kept twisting and laughed when she cried out again.

“You have to be tough,” he said.

“Stop it, you silly fool”, Beth cried, “let me go.”

With that her father let forth a stream of curses and let her go. Beth looked up at him, laughing with relief, but stopped, puzzled. Her father looked odd — his face was puffed and his eyes were staring. He picked up a toy wooden cricket bat belonging to her brother. He grabbed her by the arm and started to whack her on the backside with the bat — it shattered into pieces. Beth started crying in pain and fright.
Her father then picked up another piece of wood and began to beat her across her back and legs. She screamed and broke free. She ran up the side path but the gate was locked. He grabbed her again and dragged her back into the yard. She was terrified and started calling out – no one seemed to hear. She ran into the lavatory and hid behind the door. Her pants were wet; she had wee’d in her terror. Her legs were bleeding and she could feel the warm blood on her back.

Her father pushed against the door; she screamed at him to go away. The door opened.

“Come out”, he said harshly, “or you’ll get some more.”

Beth slowly came out – she could scarcely move. She thought her legs and back must be broken.

“Don’t ever call me a fool again,” he said. She knew she never would.