

## *All My Children*

A rock. A rock, would you believe? How much can a mother take from her son? That the window behind my shoulder was shattered — all right, so it's another expense. I've so many, that . . . I found thick cardboard, boarded up the hole and will have the glass replaced when I can afford it. A widow's pension is scarcely a gold-mine. But poor Benjy sleeping inside! If not for the bars of his cot, who knows that rock might have — I dread to think of it — might have smashed his little skull. Four months old and so brittle. An eggshell is harder. And Seamus just stood there at the gate clenching his fists, laughing, swearing, taunting "you won't get me, you hag, you won't get me!" while on the lawn the twins, Darren and Mickey — bless their innocent souls — were prancing about as if the whole thing were an adventure and Becky clung to my skirt and Claudia was out somewhere gallivanting about the streets, getting up to goodness knows what with the boys, and behind me, poor Benjy, awakened, was wailing out his miserable heart.

I rushed inside. Becky, hanging on to me, nearly tripped over the step.

By the time I came out, carrying Benjy, still sobbing in my arms, Seamus was gone, fled with the two dollars I caught him stealing from my purse. The twins pointed excitedly to a side-street, but by the time I reached the corner, running with Benjy who clung for dear life to my blouse, he was nowhere in sight. He didn't come home for his dinner, nor even when Claudia, moody and insolent as usual, finally went to sleep. "School day tomorrow," I said to her at ten, "better get to bed now." "Get off me back," she snapped, "I'll go when I'm ready." But mercifully she went. I remained at the kitchen table, my eyes on the clock, counting the minutes as I had done so often waiting for Alex to return home from one of his drinking sprees. Finally — how I hated myself — I rang the police. They found him smoking in the back of a van, and drinking — can you imagine it? a fourteen-year old boy — and brought him home just after midnight. They were pleasant enough, those young officers, but they asked so many questions. They insisted on knowing what had

happened. Seamus, leaning against the fridge, a habit he learnt from his father, glared at me with such a mixture of fear and taunting that I said merely that I had punished him so severely earlier in the day for being disobedient that he had run away. — What could I do? Betray my own son? When, for what he is, he isn't really to blame?

I wonder sometimes whether Alex is not still in our house haunting us. If I were at all superstitious. . . My mother believed in spirits, but I don't. And yet when I remember the nights he came home dead drunk carrying a dozen bottles of beer he had stolen, *stolen*, from the hotel where he worked and boasted about it, what's more, in front of the children, or when he brought home whole cartons of cigarettes in his arms, also stolen, though he seldom smoked, and then I look at Seamus, I wonder . . . I wonder — the same red hair, in both unruly, the same flushed cheeks, the puffy eyelids, thick lips and those large blazing eyes, in Alex darting with suspicion, in Seamus with mischief; and even the words, the language, "You hag, you hag," when, drunk, he beat me about the head as though I had been the source of his calamities, of the repeated sackings from his jobs, of our poverty, as though I alone were to blame for our six kids, our overgrown garden, the cracked flaking walls of our house, the torn linos, the draughty lavatory that froze his backside — I won't repeat his expression — whenever he pulled his pants down. And there was that other word, "bitch", which he spat out between pursed lips and which caught the twins' fancy as they paraded up and down the corridors, mere four-year-olds chanting "bitch-bitch, bitch-bitch" whenever they saw me. Go thrash their hides when they can't even know what it means.

Or maybe it's in the blood, or goodness knows, in the stars. Is such a thing possible? Alex's father drank himself to death before he was forty, his mother was killed by a train, and his only sister died from some mysterious cause. She was barely thirty-five. There is a rumour that she was strangled in a hotel in Fitzroy, but the matter has always been kept hushed. He had an unhappy childhood, I know. I knew it even when I married him. Perhaps that was *why* I married him, despite the warnings of my mother who believed in the stars and read tea leaves and palms. But I thought I could make him happy (isn't that love?) — he was such a child. I couldn't help but give in to him, though it was long before I heard him say that

girls were good for one thing only, something I'm sure explains Claudia's freeness with the boys in the neighbourhood. I can't tell her that I was already carrying Seamus when I married her father, but how prevent her from making my mistake, Claudia, a thirteen-year-old, self-willed, not unattractive, with sharp breasts, a smooth figure, long blonde hair and tantalising eyelashes, a coquette and a tease as eager as Adam's Eve? The horror of it is that my mother, before she died, predicted for Claudia a fate similar to her aunt's. . . .

I don't believe in sin either, but perhaps Seamus is a punishment of sorts.

When the police left, warning Seamus, "Be a good boy, son, and you'll stay out of trouble," he moved from his place beside the fridge and kicked the leg of a chair which scraped across the floor and toppled against the stove where Benjy's bottle stood in a pot ready for warming. "Don't scare me, they don't," he said, "and you neither. Never caught Dad they didn't and you wouldn't pimp on me, would you?" Already at his age, Alex's smell of beer couched his words. The wonder was that he could hold the drink without staggering or dropping to the floor. And where he got the stuff from, the devil knew, though I had a good idea. Even with the two dollars he stole from me — who would sell him grog? He is a minor, after all. The police he told he got it from one of his older mates. And the cigarettes, too. I didn't want to create a scene. The children were asleep, and to wake them . . . "Where'd you get the beer?" I asked quietly, not to get his back up. "And the cigarettes?" Behind his grin, he showed all his teeth. The dull kitchen light couldn't do justice to their astonishing strength and whiteness. "A cinch," he said. "They way the pubs leave their windows open. Dad would've been proud of me." Go, beat him when his skin is as thick as hide? Throw him into the street at midnight like a common thief? Curse him, threaten, warn? What does a mother who loves her children do? Even when one of them has thrown a rock at her and nearly killed his brother and stolen and taunted and then gone out and stolen again? He's Alex all over, my mother used to say . . . I moved nearer to him, not knowing what I would have done even had I come close, when Becky padded in, timidly, shielding her eyes with a puffy hand and murmuring that she'd had a bad dream. As in the morning, she clung to my skirt. Seamus, leering, his

eyes darting, was drawing away. "Go to bed," I said, "we'll have a good talk tomorrow," knowing with relief, I must admit, that the talk would never come to be. He left all right, but not before he slammed a fist into the wall beside the door and spat out "Hag" with all of Alex's beer-sodden venom. It was as if . . . as if I were hearing Alex's own voice rising from the grave. Almost instinctively, I cowed to escape his blows. his blows.

Becky should have brought me a measure of peace, but she is such a fretful child whose eyes have seen more than seven-year-old eyes should ever have seen. How she would cringe in a corner during Alex's rantings when, bustling about the house in blind fury, he would lash out and slap and punch and thump and blame me for everything that was wrong in his life and threaten to kill himself to pay me back. He fed me the same medicine for five years. But when does someone begin to believe? His threats always seemed to be a means to get his own way. As I said, he was a child and even after we married, he never really grew up. And though he kept on giving me children — he refused to let me have my tubes tied — I believe that he was terribly jealous of them. Perhaps he even hated them. I know that he never kissed them. Besides, he was so selfish, always thinking of himself first, that to kill himself, for whatever reason, seemed so much against his nature. But that first overdose frightened me to hell. And of all the children to find him, it had to be Becky, who came running into the backyard where I was hanging out the washing, crying, "Daddy's on the floor. He knocked the lamp over and it's broken." The ambulance took him to hospital. Five days later, he was home again, threatening to do a better job next time. For weeks I didn't sleep. How could I? Always afraid that I might wake to find him blue or in a fit or . . . or dead. I became so desperately exhausted. With five kiddies at the time and him. And he was out of work, roaming about the house from morning to night in a dressing-gown, drinking, swearing, bickering, bashing. I pushed myself with every ounce of strength. I had to, but . . . but a human being is not a machine, is it? A little oil, grease, a tune-up and it keeps on working. One day, I collapsed, took to my bed, wouldn't eat, wouldn't drink, wouldn't talk to anyone. How the children suffered, poor darlings. Alex was in a dither, coaxing me to eat or at least to rinse my mouth out one minute, the next screaming that he couldn't

cope, ordering me to get up to feed the children, threatening that if I didn't instantly leave the bed, he would walk out and find himself another place to stay. The twins were impossible, pouncing on my bed, pulling my arms, tugging at the covers while all I wanted was peace, peace, peace. It was on Claudia's shoulders that all the housework fell. And how she and Alex quarrelled over every little thing. She was forced, poor creature, to grow up too early; she stayed home from school for a month. And the things she didn't see then, or hear! The doctor who was called in — Alex wouldn't hear of it at first, ("The money, the money," he repeated like a broken record) — recommended a complete rest, suggested I put the youngest children in a foster home for a while, even advised that I go away. He was a nice doctor, a kind young man really, but . . . but — well — he wasn't wearing my shoes, was he? So he prescribed pills, a tonic, gave me an injection and patiently explained to Alex what I needed most. Alex clung to his every word, nodding, promising, reassuring the doctor that he would do everything in his power to help. — Help. Some help! No sooner had the doctor crossed the threshold than Alex darted for his bottle, and by evening was his old predictable recognisable self. It was about that time that I became pregnant with Benjy.

Even though Seamus most resembles Alex to look at and the twins have picked up their father's swearing and Claudia has been warped — horrible word, isn't it? — by his ideas, it is Becky who reminds me most strongly of him. And Benjy. Those fears of hers, the nightmares, the bedwetting, nail biting, cringing, whimpering — they are all his work. They are the scars in her that he left behind. As well as the rest of the mess. In the end, he did as he had threatened — on his fourth attempt. What a turmoil everything had been in just before; and what a turmoil just after. I'd scarcely brought Benjy home. He'd been born premature, a frail child, his skin like thin glossy paper, his face as thin and scrawny as a rabbit's. Whether he'd survive was touch and go. Then I developed an infection and stayed in hospital for a week longer than expected. Two days after I brought Benjy home, we had to call the doctor again. Darren and Micky had weeping school sores, Claudia developed tonsillitis; Becky complained of stomach pains which the doctor diagnosed as nerves and for which he prescribed a sedative. Seamus, I learnt, had been out during the night stealing from the

neighbours while during the day he stayed away from school. First his class teacher, then the headmaster rang to find out what the matter was (he had been seen at least three times smoking along the edge of Berri Creek). And Alex — good old Alex — while all this was going on was hitting the bottle as hard as ever. I tell you, I must have killed a Chinaman.

There, in the kitchen, with Becky on my lap, her head nestled between my breasts, her fingers tightening about me whenever I made a move to stand, the clock now showing half-past-one, my eyelids dropping, I sat. Outside was black, except for the reflections of the light in the window; and every so often a branch of the elm in the back-yard scraped against the tiles on the roof or against the spouting. I remembered Seamus hurling that rock at me and the twins prancing excitedly on the lawn, with Darren chanting "Bitch-bitch, bitch-bitch," a refrain taken up by Mickey; I remembered Claudia, growing up too quickly, loving to show off her lovely figure to the boys, stroked Becky's hair as I felt her heart throbbing fearfully through her little troubled breast. From his room, I heard Benjy begin to whimper, as I remembered Alex with his flaming red hair, his flushed cheeks, his thick lips even as they seemed to swallow the neck of the bottle, and I thought, sincerely thought, how lucky he was. And yet, and yet, I wanted him back. *Despite* his drinking, his swearing, his beatings. He'd had a hard childhood; I couldn't bring myself to blame him for what he had been. Perhaps it was in the blood or in the stars. Life had been hard with him, but without him — Benjy's whimpering increased. His bottle was in the pot upon the stove. I tried to rise but Becky clung, weighing me down. I remembered, and memory hurt. But how much more pain would the future hold? If my mother sat in my place, my mother who studied palms, tea-leaves, the stars, what would she have seen? Alex's soul running through Seamus, Claudia's belly swelling, like mine, before its time, or her body strangled lifeless like her aunt's, the twins growing up wild and unruly, (hooligans before their teens, my mother predicted), Becky set forever in the mould of a nail-biting timid mouse needing pills and tonics to help her cope? — "Cry, Benjy, yes, cry your little heart out," I said, listening to the rising wail, staying, weighed down by Becky and weariness, in my seat. Did he have his grandmother's eyes that they could see ahead? Did he cry out for what he could foresee of his own unhappy life?

I don't believe in destiny or in any ideas that the future can't be changed, regardless of what my mother used to say. I may be wrong, I know. Alex, his own father, mother, sister and now Seamus and Claudia — all of them provide sufficient evidence to prove my mother right. But I am ready to hope. For the sake of the children, if it will keep Seamus out of gaol and Claudia respectable and alive and Becky sane and the twins on a steady path and baby Benjy always innocent, yes, to hope that out of the rubble even a splinter may be saved with which to begin to build a better life and to break the dogged hold of my mother's stars.