

Birthing the Demons

Winner, Scarlet Stiletto Prize 2001, Short Crime Story

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For the hand that rocks the cradle

Is the hand that rules the world.

- William Ross Wallace, What Rules the World

We're still blaming mothers

- Joyce Flint (Jeffrey Dahmer's mother)

There is no escape.

When you realize that fact there is a small measure of acceptance. A slight, cooling breeze of relief...No escape. No escape. No escape.

Tears can flow then. Anger can escape at different times, but at least these states are preferable to the early shock. The numbing denial. No escape. Even the night is not a friend. Odd little memories come creeping, whispering malevolently into your ear, waking you up screaming. I'm as much as prisoner as he is.

Jim refuses to discuss it with me, as he has refused to discuss so many things over the years, but I know that the same demons embrace him in the night. I've heard the agonised sobbing into the pillow in the early hours before dawn.

Last night I walked into a room. It felt like a room from my childhood, but it was not familiar to me. Fresh flowers were in the vase, there was a fire in the grate. The hearth, there was something on the hearth, cold, dark and wet. An icy wet communication spurts in my veins. I know, I know what the horrible thing is. Her. Bits of her. Skull and hair and brains and blood, all over my nice clean hearth.

Then I wake up with a rush and I begin to cry quietly. But not quietly enough, for Jim hears. "Leave it, Evie," he says wearily. I spend the rest of the night listening to the sounds of traffic gradually increase, cats fighting on the roof next door, a light shower of rain around 4am. Then light, gradually breaking. No escape. I lie there, trying not to cry, trying not to think, to remember her. Him. Her. Her. Him. I wait for dawn.

It is hard to believe that one act can alter so many people's lives, that your routine can change so quickly overnight. And how, after that one act all the old rules of the game have been replaced, but nobody has told you the new ones. Yesterday, I walked into the butcher's on High Street, thinking that Jim might like a nice roast. I couldn't remember the last time I had cooked him a proper meal. There was once a time that I wouldn't have gotten away with that. If a clean cloth wasn't on the table, butter in the butter dish, fresh bread rolls and a cooked meal with four veg, he would have been complaining. Now he doesn't seem to notice or care. We sit with trays on our knees in front of the TV, eating scrambled egg, fish fingers, finger food. In the butcher's the conversation ceased as soon as I entered. Enid McKillop and Rita Davies were there. I went to school with Rita. They said hello. Their faces had that half interested, half embarrassed look, and they hurried out together, clutching their bundles of white-papered meat, as if I was a bad smell.

I cooked the lamb and vegetables. They were too soggy, and we ate on trays in front of the TV. Once, I looked over at Jim, and he was sitting there quietly crying.

That night I stood in the darkened sunroom, looking out the window at the house across the street. Shadows surrounded it. The For Sale sign, dim in the moonlight, mocked me of the change to come. I watched the shadows move silently around the house for hours, remembering another distant night, when those shadows had come to life and entered that house...

I asked the house for answers, for I had long given up on asking God. I could feel the lamb sitting heavily in my stomach. I would have to take some Normacol before I went to bed tonight. Steam from my breath frosted the glass, and for a wild moment I thought I saw Joy sitting on her floral outdoor sofa, a pile of glossy magazines beside her. She would often cut out little recipes for me that she imagined that we would like to try. "Here's an easy recipe for Thai coconut soup, Evie. Do you think that they will carry the ingredients for it down at Warrens?" "Bloody interfering old busybody," Jim never failed to complain. "Probably only hoping for a free feed at our house." But I enjoyed the little ritual, that small attention. My parents had long retired to the warmth of a Queensland retirement village, and Joy's little clippings had made me feel nurtured.

Our son Leslie had never taken to her. "She's a snob," he'd say if I tried to encourage him to do chores for her. "She has evil eyes," he would add. A part of me knew what he meant. Joy did have unusual eyes. Vivid blue, hardly the eyes of an old woman approaching her 84th birthday. Perhaps there had always been some ominous warning in those young girl's eyes that I had failed to see. Then a darker thought. A memory I had once - for I had been there - but had blocked out. What did those eyes look like when they had found her? Were they open or closed?

It had been the flies that had warned me. A great swarming mass of them. I could hear them as I stood

behind the screen door. "Joy?" Jim had been furious at me for not listening to him, for ignoring his commands to stay home and not cross the street to see if Joy was alright. I hadn't seen her for days. Jim sulked in front of one of his wildlife specials; gorillas in the wild, or chimps, some monkeys anyway. Leslie had screamed at me when I voiced my concerns out aloud. "Leave it Evie!" he said. "Don't go interfering and encouraging the old bitch. You do too much for her now!" He hadn't forgiven me for telling Joy that he would mow her lawns and do some handiwork around the house. He'd been sulking for weeks over that one. Jim and Leslie were like two peas in a pod at times. It was depressing... It had been the flies on that hot summery day. I could hear them buzzing as I wondered what to do. "Joy? I've made you some caramel slice," I called, trying to balance the slice and the weekly magazines I had finished with. The door behind the screen was ajar. Without thinking, I pushed it open and stepped into the cool hallway I had been in a thousand times before. There was a faint smell. Something rotten. Oh, God. I had been preparing myself for this for years. I had always known when I had befriended Joy there would come a day when I would visit her to find her lifeless body in the bath, or in bed.

"Joy?" The flies buzzed angrily back at me. I could hear the loud annoying tick of Joy's antique grandfather clock. I walked into the small loungeroom, placing the plate of caramel slice down carefully on the table. God, the place was such a mess. Drawers were pulled out, a broken glass lay on the fire hearth. I pulled my cotton t-shirt up over my nose. I knew, but I had to see. The rotten smell intensified as I approached the bedroom.

I had often sat, looking at the television, eyes fastened on the pages of a book, trying to trace meaning and reason in my mind. If I hadn't nagged him to help out next door. If I hadn't befriended Joy. If I hadn't sent him to the local high school. If I had taken more attention of the reports from his primary school of behavioural problems, of his fights with other children. If he had not made friends with Jude Ward and Timothy Bailey.

IF, IF, IF, IF, IF, IF, IF, IF, IF, IF. The word had seared into my brain. IF I had bought him more pets. IF I had fed him less meat. IF I had been able to have another child. IF we had never hit him to discipline him. IF we had hit him harder when he was caught shoplifting. IF I had monitored his television viewing, his Internet access. But there was one IF that I inevitably returned to, I a one-way nightmare ending in a dirty truth. IF I had never given birth to him. IF I had never conceived him.

The pregnancy had been far from easy. I had vomited constantly, head always over a toilet bowl. That was how I remembered most of my pregnancy. The smell, and the off-white colour of the porcelain. Even back then it was as if my body had somehow known and tried to eject the dangerous seed it nurtured. Then

there were the nightmares. I would wake screaming, bathed in sweat, the sheets soaked and Jim trying to calm me. My hands would be on my stomach, my body stretched flat and rigid and tremors rippling through my body. Mine was never the glowing, radiant pregnancy I had dreamed of. My body had seemed alien to me. Death filled my head with fear, and death had lingered in my nostrils and in my mouth. I became convinced I was going to die in childbirth. I often dreamt a black seed was sprouting within me, filling my body with dark hairy roots, with dark octopus tentacles. Then there were the dreams I felt too ashamed to discuss with well-meaning friends who smiled benignly and gave me coloured booties and stuffed animals. I knew my dreams were not normal. If only I had said something. IF, IF, IF, IF.

The birth was agony. A baptism of pain. I had longed for death, for oblivion. I hated everyone for concealing the pain of delivery from me, and when they had cut the cord I felt only relief that the thing inside me was free. Jim cried over the fact that it was a boy, but I had remained weirdly detached. Between shit and piss we are born. My grandmother liked to cackle that phrase before my mother had her committed to the nursing hospital. It used to hurt and anger my mother when she said it, but now I knew what she meant.

Over time, I gradually recovered from the crippling depression that had filled me when Leslie was born. My initial rejection of him was replaced by an intense love that rippled through every facet of my life. His first steps, his first tooth, his first Christmas. These were all symbolic milestones to be treasured. Time now contained a depth it had always lacked. I longed for another child, quickly forgetting the pain of birth, but Jim already had two grown up children in a previous marriage and balked at the idea. If we had had more children, would things have been different? IF, IF, IF, IF.

There had been no signs. That was another detail I had tormented myself with. He had always seemed happy enough. I knew he worried about his weight and had been depressed over Bill and Cynthia's daughter rejecting him. But most teenage boys went through things like that, didn't they? I found it difficult to recall my youth, but I was sure I had copped my fair share of rejection. I knew he could be antisocial and didn't make friends easily, but I just put that down to shyness. I could be like that myself. That was why Joy's friendship was so important to me. Was important to me. Then there were the times he had sat staring into space for hours on end, vacant-faced like a zombie, his mind seemingly void of thoughts. Jim blamed Leslie's friends for what happened, but I wasn't convinced. "They needed a bullet between the eyes," he said once, his voice low and intense, his hands shaking. From what I had been able to gather from the different policemen who had spoken to me over the weeks, all of the three boys were equally responsible, and each had taken their turn mutilating the body. But there had been no signs! I had read in the newspaper

a list of symptoms that you were meant to observe: bedwetting, fire-starting, cruelty to animals. There had been nothing, nothing, well nothing that had stood out, so I felt cheated of even those small signs from God that might have helped me. Lavender and roses. That was the overriding impression when I closed my eyes and thought of Joy. The sweet fragrances of crabtree and evelyn. It would have been Crabtree and Evelyn that she liked to anoint herself with I thought. Not just any old supermarket floral talc or spray like I'd put in my shopping trolley. No, Joy was about quality. I wasn't used to luxuries -there'd never been enough money for too many extras when I grew up - but there was no mistaking the sheer quality of Joy's possessions. The fine bone china crockery, the simpering china figurines, the gold fountain pen that she wrote her shopping list with, in flowing copperplate script.

I could see Joy now, in her smart brown slacks and her cream silk blouse, immaculately pressed. She'd peer through her tortoiseshell glasses, carefully considering each item on her list, then open the wooden camphor chest from Thailand where she kept her large green purse and count out her money for me to take to the shops for her. I loved to visit that house. Its mellow, measured tones spoke of other, exciting lifetimes, of people who thought nothing of eating out in restaurants, of reading books by Proust and Jane Austen which had bindings of red leather. Around the house there were large black-and-white photographs of Joy and James when they had been young and glowing with health. On safari in Africa, outside the Eiffel tower. These places were as remote to me as the Moon. Joy looked like a young Jane Russell with her shoulder-length, dark crimped hair and her bright lipstick, and James was a fair-haired Clark Gable. But time was cruel. James had died years ago of bowel cancer, and now Joy... Joy, or what had remained of her, had been carried from her home by faceless paramedics. As the covered stretcher disappeared into a vehicle I floated in a tranquillized haze, where pain lurked like the neighbours twitching behind their curtains. Joy wasn't a local. She had moved to the quiet little seaside community of Oricheno on the central coast from Sydney. Many of the locals had thought her too uppity for the town, and watched with resentful eyes when she would make her way up our street with the tortoiseshell walking stick she had bought in Italy. They had used that walking stick to...I had to fight to control the mental picture I knew would follow. I was local, but it was me that the locals had turned on like a pack of rabid dogs. Just a few days after it happened I went to the shop for some milk. The stares, the comments, the people who I had known all my life crossing the street to avoid me! Then Jilly Edwards - she always was a dirty slag - had stepped up to me and spat at me in front of everyone. "You're responsible!" she hissed. "You gave birth to that creep!" She pushed me suddenly and I stumbled into the gutter. "Leave her alone!" A man's voice called, and slowly the spectators drifted away to gossip about it behind closed doors. Jilly waddled into the schoolyard and I had

watched her fat bottom disappearing whilst I had attempted to pick myself up. A part of me wanted to go after her and engage in a screaming match in front of the whole town, but it was useless. I was defeated and I knew it. For I agreed with her. I felt responsible. I was the one who had birthed him. Between shit and piss we are born. I could feel my grandmother cackling triumphantly over me.

I had been to visit him only once. Jim had driven me there, but had refused to come in. Instead he had sat in the car, listening to talkback radio and munching his way through packets of Quick-Eze. He was so wired up smoke could have drifted from his body; he looked ready to combust before my eyes. I had been afraid to insist that he accompany me inside, afraid that he would erupt into a tirade of abuse, or strike out at me. Although when I really think about it, anything would have been preferable than his withdrawal, his half-smothered sobs in the privacy of night. I was wearing a cotton floral dress I had bought at Katies years ago on a rare trip to Sydney. I felt underdressed and frumpy as I approached the prison, or correction centre whatever they called it. I could feel John's eyes on my back, like twin rays of hate.

"What's happened to us?" I wanted to turn and call. "Once we were young and in love. You left your wife and kids for me. We dreamt of travel, and we made love in the afternoon on the sofa. How could it have all gone so quickly? When did we age?" But I knew the answer. It had all gone when Leslie was born. Slowly, irrevocably, like a miniature vampire living amongst us and feeding daily, surreptitiously on our youth, love, lust and hope.

There were forms to sign, and I was searched. Other friends and relatives were going through the same degrading procedure. A young, skinny blonde girl sat chainsmoking outside. Chinese symbols were tattooed on her fragile arms. A pram sat next to her which she shook violently, screaming into it in a futile attempt to stop the incessant crying from inside. She could have passed for fourteen. A young man was mopping the floor. I avoided his eyes, fearing that he was one of the inmates. The foyer smelt of lemon disinfectant, and there were Australian bush scenes on the walls. I was shocked when he first appeared from behind a door at the rear of the room and approached the glass where the visitors sat. He looked so different. Older, fatter. I felt tears come to my eyes at his transformation. He sat down and avoided my eyes. 'You shouldn't have come.' I began to cry, feeling that the pain would splinter me into a thousand pieces. Guards looked on with boredom; they must have seen it all a thousand times before. The skinny girl was about three chairs down from me, holding the baby up to the glass. The screaming continued and the child was now red in the face. "Where's the old man?" Leslie muttered. The words came filled with contempt. "He couldn't face it. He hasn't been well, Les. All the worry about you. And his work laid him off." My son, the stranger, looked at me directly. Did I glimpse a momentary pain in his expression? "He's in the car outside," he sneered.

"Are you eating well?" I asked. He leaned forward, ignoring the inane question.

"Go home, Evie," he said. "I don't want you here."

"Why, Leslie?" I cried from a terrible place within me. "What made you do it? Were you drunk? Did those friends of yours make you do it? Was it something I did? It's not you, Leslie! God, you gave to World Vision! You hated fights and scenes. Something happened to you! Please talk to me! Make me understand!"

He laughed. "You would never understand Evie," he said. "You would never understand. I did it because she was there, and we could. It just got out of control."

"What did I do wrong?" I asked again. I desperately needed an answer.

He looked at me with disdain. "Everything, Evie," he said. "Everything. I wish I had never been born."

In my mind I walk across the road and Joy is waiting for me. She is smiling as she opens the front door, pushing her hair back from her forehead. Her young woman's eyes are genuinely delighted to see me. The sounds of Bach waft from the house, and I hold my arms out to her and embrace her. I smell her hair which smells of lemon shampoo and I feel her warm skin and her bones. She is alive and she is filled with the sunshine that has disappeared from my life. In darker dreams, I approach my sleeping child's cradle. I tenderly place a white pillow over his peaceful little face, and hold it tightly. I take the evil that even now is smouldering inside him. IF. IF. IF. IF.

The truth is so much harder to think about. Leslie had been grudgingly doing odd jobs at Joy's for a month or so. Mostly it was the heavier tasks that were too much for her. Sometimes it was a little job inside; adjusting a mirror, cleaning a chimney. He had come to know the house, her possessions, where she kept her money. He had waited, shown a patience and slyness that I would not have guessed him capable of. The police found e-mails he sent to Jude and Timothy, detailed plans of what they called Operation Gaa-gaa. They had entered the house silently while Jim and I slept oblivious over the road. Then for the next few hours they had given rise to every perversion they carried within them.

They had woken her. I can only imagine her terror when she opened those bright eyes to see the three boys looking down upon her. They had shown her no mercy as they bound her to the bed, taunting her the entire time. They tortured her. Jim and I had almost frozen with horror in the court when we heard what they had done to her body. They had taken their turns raping her, cheering each other on and calling obscenities as they rode her. They kept her alive for hours, smearing her face with their semen, destroying her valued items in front of her, breaking her fingers one by one and using her as a human ashtray for their cigarettes. When they had finished with their Dionysiac madness, Timothy cut her throat. Then they

dismembered her body, placing her parts in assorted corners around the room like a grotesque broken doll. I found her head first that day I walked into her fly-covered room. It sat by itself, obscenely disconnected, in its own world of blood and gore. At first I thought the shock of that discovery would kill me. But worse was yet to come.

It is not easy being the mother of a demon. At times I imagine even Jim is looking at me with suspicion in his eyes, believing that at some crucial point I must have failed him to create this evil. Jim is excused by the townspeople; it's my blood they bay for. I think of mothers across history; Hitler's mother, Judas's mother, Saddam Hussein's mother. I feel for them, mourn for their innocence lost. We have to bear the shame, the blame. We have to be the object of outrage and venom spat by people who were once friends I remember reading an article by the mother of one of the juvenile killers of James Bulger, that little boy in England. She said that everywhere she went she felt as if she had killer engraved into her forehead.

We are mothers who are mourning death, destruction and chaos, like a grotesque Pieta statue. We have been judged guilty by societies who fear the contagion of demons. We are the rotten trees that have sprouted rotten fruit. I feel like whispering to mothers as I pass them in the street; take care, take care, take care. Do not think you are indestructible, that it can never happen to you. Take care, for unknown shadows deep within your silent soul might one day shift without warning and echo in another. The house across the street continues to haunt me. I long to move and start a new life under a new name, but Jim won't hear of it. "We'll take that bloody house with us," he says with red-rimmed eyes. I sense accusation in his glance. He had always opposed me befriending Joy, had always been critical of Leslie working at Joy's. I was convinced that I represented failure in his life. Kathy, his first wife, had raised his two other children. One became a doctor, the other a teacher. Kathy hadn't harboured a killer in her womb, a monster destined become the talk of Australia. The fruit doesn't fall too far from the tree. There had been some madness in my family. My mother's mother and her brother had both killed themselves. Had there been some dark artery running through our family tree that Leslie had emerged from? Was my son the innocent victim of destructive silent demons lurking in our genetic closet?

One day a new family would move in over the road, and I dreaded the day. Their children would play in Joy's garden and their pets would chase her ghost from the house. I wanted to allow myself to somehow believe she was still inside the house, looking at her beautiful photographs, gardening, clipping out recipes for me, smiling peacefully in her refined, genteel world.

Last visit. Last memory of him. Sitting there fidgeting awkwardly across from me. There are sleep buds

in the corners of his eyes, his hands are pudgy and there are cuts over them. I hate to think of what his hands have done. I am crying openly now into a tissue, a million memories flooding through me.

The stranger sitting opposite me is my history. I have cherished all his birthdays, his early drawings, read him books, scolded him over his smutty magazines, taken him to the doctor, bandaged his knees, and yelled at him for a thousand little misdeeds. I know the smell of his sweat, the look of his dirty underwear. I nervously related the facts of life to him. I comforted him when he woke screaming from nightmares. "Stop it, Evie," he says. "Just go. You're just upsetting yourself."

"Why?" I plead again. "What did I do wrong? Or was it something else? Did something else trigger you?"

"It just happened," he says again. His eyes are wary, not wanting to have to relive that night. "There doesn't always have to be a reason, does there? You're as bad as the fucking shrinks." His eyes flicker with a trace of buried emotion. Is it remorse? Mirth? Anguish? I will never know. He leaves me quickly, without looking back at me.

I return to Jim, my feet swollen and aching in shoes that I never normally wear. I can feel a blister beginning to form on my heel and I welcome any pain that will distract me, punish me. I must deserve some punishment to have reared this monster from my flesh and blood. "Ready then?" Jim says. I can sense his curiosity, his anger. He will not ask. I will not tell. I watch the city streets, the strangers at traffic lights, all a blur. I can smell rain in the air. A headache is building within my temples. We are halfway home when the storm breaks and we are treated to a sudden lightning display over Berries Hill. We journey like familiar strangers, in silence.

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