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Little Deaths

Written by Emma Flint

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LITTLE DEATHS

EMMA FLINT

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*For everyone who believed in me when
I didn't believe in myself.*

*Especially for Janet and Rebecca,
who have been with me through everything.*

*And for Alfie,
who is always with me, and who I miss every day.*

1

On the rare nights that she sleeps, she is back in the skin of the woman from before.

Then: she rarely slept neat in a nightgown, pillows plumped, face shining with cold cream. She sometimes woke in a ruffled bed with a snoring figure beside her; more often she woke alone on the sofa with near-empty bottles and near-full ashtrays, her skin clogged with stale smoke and yesterday's makeup, her body tender, her mind empty. She would sit up, wincing, aware of the ache in her neck and of the sad, sour taste in her mouth.

Now she wakes, not with the thickness of a headache or the softness of a blurred night behind her, but with forced clarity. Her days begin with a bell, with harsh voices, clanging metal, yelling. With the throat-scraping smells of bleach and urine. There's no room in these mornings for memories.

Then, she would make her way across the hallway each morning, and into the kitchen to put coffee on the stove. She would light her first cigarette of the day, and listen to the morning come alive around her: to the blast of Gina's radio overhead, Tony Bonelli's heavy tread on the stairs. Doors slamming, cars starting up. Nina Lombardo yelling at her kids next door.

She would go into the bathroom at the end of the hallway and lock the door behind her. More than a year since Frank moved out, and she still didn't take her privacy for granted. She would strip off

yesterday's clothes, and wash in the tiny basin: her hands, her face, under her arms, under her breasts, between her legs. Sometimes she could smell herself—that ripe, yellow odor that she still thinks of as peculiarly her, and that embarrassed her on those days she woke up with company.

Like a bitch in heat ain't ya, honey?

She would scrub between her legs with the rough blue washcloth, hard, so that it hurt, and then harder still. Would rub herself dry, pushing along her thigh with the heel of her hand, making it look firm for a moment before letting it fall back into the familiar dimples. Hang up the towel, shrug into her robe, back down the hallway into the kitchen where she poured coffee, thought about the sugar in the jar, never tipped a spoonful into her cup.

Into the bedroom, where she pulled on slacks and a shirt. If she was working a shift at Callaghan's later, she would take out her uniform, hang it on the outside of her closet, check for loose threads and spots. A crisp blouse ironed on Sunday evening. A skirt, just a shade too tight. Shoes lined up, toes together, the heels too high to be practical for a cocktail waitress on her feet all night. But the eyes on her gave her a certain glow that made the tips increase, that made the hours go by faster.

Then she lit another cigarette, slipped her feet into her house slippers, and took her coffee back to the bathroom. Only then, awake and alert, her clothes protecting her, could she look in the mirror.

Skin first—always skin first. On a good day, it was as pale and smooth as a black-and-white photograph. On a bad one, blemishes and old scars speckled the surface and needed to be hidden. She set her cup on the edge of the basin, took another drag on her cigarette, and balanced it in the ashtray that sat on the shelf.

Each morning she smeared on foundation with fingers that trembled depending on how much the view in the mirror had upset her, or on what kind of night she'd had. There were days when her hands were shaking and sweating so that her makeup was patchy,

or when her skin was so marked that two layers of foundation seemed to make little difference. On those days, she slapped her face as she applied it. Punishing. She watched her eyes in the mirror as she did it. Hard enough to hurt, not hard enough to mark.

Then the powder, patted into the familiar mask. She pursed her lips, stroked blush into the hollows made beneath her cheekbones, squinted until the face in the mirror became a blurred oval, and she could see that the stripes of color were even. Enough. She blinked, took up her pencil, focused. The eyebrows first: high, surprised arches framing her long eyes. Shadow, liquid liner, three coats of mascara. She worked like an artist: blending, smudging, deepening colors. Occasionally she took a drag on her cigarette, a mouthful of coffee. A final dusting of powder; a coat of lipstick, blotted; a comb through her hair, teasing it taller; a silver spiral of hairspray. And it was done. For the first time that day, she could look at her face as a whole.

She was Ruth, then.

Now she is one of twenty shivering women in a tiled room, huddled beneath thin trickles of lukewarm water. Twenty slivers of cheap green soap. Twenty thin towels on twenty rusty hooks.

In here, she closes her eyes, blocks out the echoing shouts, the singing, the cursing. Tries to pretend she's alone, and concentrates on getting clean. She never feels clean enough. In her first week, she asked for a nail brush, and she digs the bristles into the soap, focuses on picking up the shards of slimy green, on working it into a thin lather between her palm and the brush. And then she scrubs, the way they used to scour her face at the convent school until her skin burned. She closes her eyes and sees herself as she was then—thirteen and tiny; flat-chested; lank-haired; her face a film of oil, covered in red and white pimples. She feels the water sting her skin in the same way, inhales the same smells of bleach and steam, and she isn't sure where she is any longer and she knows that it hardly matters.

And when the guards shout at her to move it along, she opens her eyes and takes her rough towel and rubs her skin until it smart.

Later she will take the tiny mirror they have allowed her, and look at a fragment of her face and see the shine, the oil, the pimples and know that she is still being punished.

Just occasionally she will lift the mirror to her eyes—quickly, so as not to see the worst—and smooth out her eyebrows, lick her finger and curl it up her lashes, wipe away some of the shine, and try to see herself in her reflection. Tiny vanities are all she has left of herself.

She dresses quickly in the graying underwear and cotton dress they have given her, and pulls on a sweater because she is never warm enough. She waits for the inspection—of her bunk, her cell, herself—and then it's time for breakfast.

At one time, *breakfast* meant magazine-perfect thoughts of coffee pots and warm toast and sunshiny pats of butter. Of a mommy and a daddy and tousle-headed children with milky mouths. Of smiles and kisses and the start of an ordinary day. She thought pictures like these would help lift her out of here, until she learned that the sunshine images would return at night, and the brightness of those breakfast smiles would make her sob into the darkness. Now she concentrates on one moment at a time. On the echoing sounds of the stairwells. The cold metallic handrails. Then the feel of the tray and the plastic cutlery. The smell of eggs and grits and grease. The taste of bitter coffee and the noises that three hundred and twenty-four women make when they chew.

There is a long line of these moments, one after another, like beads on a rosary. She need only hold one at a time, and then they are over, and she can walk to the library and say good morning to Christine. Christine is the librarian and a lifer, and therefore has certain privileges. She was a schoolteacher in Port Washington until she killed her husband with an ice pick and a kitchen knife.

Christine is almost sixty: slender, dark-haired, unfailingly courteous and serene. Her husband wanted to leave her for his

twenty-two-year-old secretary, and she had to use the kitchen knife to finish it when the ice pick stuck in his shoulder. She skips breakfast because she is always watching her weight, so the books will often be piled ready by the time Ruth arrives.

Ruth's job is to load the books onto the cart, spines facing outward, giving a little thought to the order of her route and to who might want to read what. Then she sets off on her rounds, collects the books she distributed on previous days and gives out new ones, making a note of who has read what, which books are returned and which are so dog-eared and tattered they will need to be taped up or pulped.

And every day, as she pushes the cart along each landing, and peers into each doorway and says hello to the women she knows will answer, she thinks of that last morning. She has learned not to think of *breakfast* but she cannot help remembering this. The figures curled up on their beds napping or reading, keeping pace with the words using their fingers, never fail to remind her.

On that last day, she finished putting on her face and closed the bathroom door behind her. Minnie circled in the hallway, whining softly. Ruth clicked her tongue and cooed at her, fumbled for her shoes and keys, and headed out into the morning. The air was bright with the promise of another hot day in Queens. They walked for fifteen minutes, past neat, sun-bleached lawns, past rows of identical apartment buildings, Minnie tugging at the leash, Ruth smiling at the men they passed, nodding to one or two women from behind her sunglasses.

Back at the apartment, Ruth drank a tall cold glass of water, reheated the coffee and poured another cup, watched Minnie eat for a moment. Then she decided it was time to wake the kids.

Only they were always awake already. She knew before she lifted the hook-and-eye catch each morning and opened the door to their room what she was going to see. If it was winter, they would be

snuggled together in one bed under the blue blanket, Frankie's arm around Cindy as he read to her. His eyes would be fixed on the page, the book balanced on his raised knees, his other hand following the letters. When he reached a word he couldn't pronounce, he would skip over it or look at the pictures and make it up. Cindy would be holding her doll, her thumb in her mouth, eyes flickering between the book and her brother's serious face. When he read something funny or did one of his special voices, she would clap her hands and laugh.

But on hot days like that July morning, they were always up, standing on Cindy's bed, looking out of their first-floor window, waving at everyone who passed by. Even the faces they didn't know would smile back at those wide toothy grins, those soft baby cheeks. Ruth knew she should be proud of these kids. She should be proud of herself, bringing them up practically alone. They had toys and books, their clothes were neat and clean, they ate vegetables for dinner every night. They were safe here. It was a friendly neighborhood: when they climbed out of their window back in the spring, an old lady brought them home before Ruth even knew they were gone. She had to hide her surprise. The woman looked a little crazy—bright red hair and a shapeless flowered dress—but she hugged and kissed the kids good-bye before they ran inside. She clearly wanted to come in after them, but Ruth held the door and stood in the gap.

"It's hard, Mrs. Malone. I know. I am alone a lot of the time too. It's hard."

Her voice was harsh, heavily accented. German or maybe Polish. She looked at Ruth and there was judgment in her eyes.

Ruth smiled tightly at her and opened her mouth to say good-bye.

"I want to say, Mrs. Malone, if you need help, you must only ask. We are just living over there"—pointing—"number forty-four. Come by any time."

Ruth stopped smiling and looked her right in the face.

“We don’t need help. We’re fine.”

And she slammed the door and walked into the kitchen where she took down the bottle that was never opened before six at night, and took a long swallow. Then she went into the kids’ bedroom where they were waiting for her and she laid into them both with her tiny hands. Because they’d made her take a drink. Because of the way the old woman had looked at her. Because she was so tired of all this.

On that last day, she heard a faint giggling as she approached their room. She lifted the catch and there was a thud as they jumped down from Cindy’s bed and pattered toward the door. When she opened it, Frankie scooted past her, turned right to go to the bathroom. He wouldn’t use Cindy’s potty any more. He was a big boy, he said, almost six. Cindy was only four—still her baby. Ruth bent and picked her up, buried her face in the soft golden hair, headed left down the hallway. Cindy’s legs circled her waist; one plump arm curled around her neck. She felt her daughter’s eyes on her, stroking her powdered cheeks, her sooty lashes, the sticky cupid’s bow of her lips. Felt those tiny fingers like kisses, patting her skin, tugging and twisting her hair. Sometimes Cindy told her, “You look like a princess-lady,” and she drew pink mouths and round pink cheeks on her dolls, colored their hair red with her finger paints.

Princess Mommy.

Ruth reached the kitchen, let Cindy slide to the floor. Frankie came in, his hands wet, took his seat, frowned at his cereal.

“Can we have eggs?”

Inwardly, she sighed. Nine in the morning and she was already exhausted.

“No. Eat your cereal.”

He pouted. “I want eggs.”

“For Chrissakes, Frankie, we don’t have any fucking eggs! Eat your cereal!”

As she walked out of the room, she saw Cindy’s face crumple,

heard the start of a wail. She opened the screen door, let it slam behind her, breathed deeply.

She was aware of the crying behind her, of Minnie barking, of the eyes on her from the surrounding windows. Carla Bonelli up on the third floor. Sally Burke's nosy bitch of a mother in the next building. Nina Lombardo looking out from next door. Fuck them. They weren't bringing up two kids single-handed, trying to hold down a job, trying to make a living, dealing with a crazy ex-husband. They didn't understand what her life was like.

It wasn't meant to be this way. Everything about Frank that had once made her heart race—his way of saying her name, the way he looked at her—after nine years and two kids together, all of that had become like the throb of a familiar headache.

Her eyes were suddenly full of tears and she blinked her way down a couple of steps and sat heavily, took her cigarettes and lighter out of her pocket.

For a moment, she was back outside another apartment building in another summer. She was sitting on the stoop, her hand cradling the swell of her stomach. The door opened and her husband was there beside her, crouching low. She turned to him, and he kissed her cheek, put his hand over hers, felt the baby kick.

"How you doing, honey?"

"I'm okay. Tired." She stretched, yawned. She was always tired. It had been the same when she was carrying Frankie: the last two months, all she'd wanted to do was sleep.

He reached into his jacket pocket. "Got you a present."

She took the small package, tugged at the paper. There was something soft inside: not jewelry, then. Maybe stockings? A nightdress?

It was a toy rabbit: soft plush fur, glassy eyes staring up at her.

"It's for the baby."

She nodded, struggled to her feet, saying something about dinner. Left the rabbit on the step, only noticing later that he'd brought it inside and put it in the nursery, up on the shelf where Frankie couldn't grab it.

She wonders sometimes if that's when she started to resent him.

On that last day it took her a moment to come back to herself. She blinked again, realized her cigarette had burned down to the filter. Stood and turned to go back inside, nodding toward Maria Burke's window. The curtain twitched and Ruth smiled to herself.

Now, as she pushes the library cart from cell to cell, this is what she remembers. She remembers that she went back inside, into the kitchen, poured more coffee, looked at the kids over the rim of the cup.

Cindy was chewing on her cereal, her blue eyes on her brother. Frankie was staring down into his half-empty bowl, his face sullen, his lip sticking out. Just like his father.

She took another mouthful, asked, "Did you have fun with Daddy yesterday?"

They looked up at her. She could see they didn't know what was the right thing to say.

"What did you do?"

Cindy dropped her spoon with a clatter. "He took us to his new house. It was nice."

"Yeah? I didn't know Daddy had moved out of Grandma's place."

She was surprised his mother had let him go again. Surprised he'd had the balls to do it.

She asked, "Does Daddy live by himself now?"

Cindy shook her head, her mouth full again. Ruth waited and it was Frankie who answered.

"He's got a room in a big ol' house. He shares a bathroom with three other men. An' a kitchen. They got one cupboard each for their stuff. The cupboards have *padlocks*."

She nodded, took another sip of her coffee to hide her broadening grin. How the hell did Frank expect to get custody when he didn't even have a house for his kids? She put her cup down.

“Okay, Mommy doesn’t have to go to work today. What do you want to do?”

Cindy stopped chewing, her spoon dangling from her hand. Frankie looked up, sulk forgotten.

“Really?”

“Really. Do you want to go to the park?”

Cindy started to whoop, dropped her spoon again, did a wiggling dance in her chair.

“The park! The park!”

Frankie looked at Ruth from under his long eyelashes. “Can Daddy come too?”

There was a stillness, like breath drawn in. She took a last drag on her cigarette, turned away, and crushed it in a saucer. Still with her back to them, she said, “You saw Daddy yesterday, Frankie.”

She turned back. “Do you want to go to the park or not?”

Frankie nodded and Cindy beamed again. “Can I wear my dress with daisies, Mommy?”

She smiled at her daughter. Her easy, angelic daughter. “Sure. Finish your cereal and we’ll go get you washed and dressed. Frankie, you want to wear your Giants shirt?”

He shrugged, staring down at his bowl.

“Frankie, I asked you a question.”

“Yes, Mommy.” Still not looking up.

“Okay. Mommy’s going to finish getting ready. Frankie, put the dishes in the sink when you’re done, then you can watch cartoons with your sister.”

He nodded. She decided to let it go this time, took her coffee into the bathroom. Checked her face. Reapplied her lipstick.

She did not know that this was the last morning she would be able to do this freely. That it was the last morning her face would be hers alone.