

ALL THE LIGHTS

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Introduced by Stuart Evers



LITTLE DEATH

'See you around,' she says, picking up her bag from the bed. I nod and she leaves.

I hear her in the hallway. I haven't got a light out there and it takes her a while to find the door. I turn to face the wall, but she closes the front door very carefully. The leaving, the goodbye, the hand slipping down a shoulder and an arm into thin air, the lying still. And the dreams. The little death. No, death comes later, when you're alone and nobody comes any more.

I hear a train crossing the bridge. I turn my head and see the lights of the double-decker carriages through the blind. The train moves slowly; I can still hear it long after the lights have disappeared. I reach behind me for the table, looking for the cigarette I always put there, every time. I stopped smoking a while back now, it's just this one cigarette every time. I always go up to the guy with no teeth who lives right at the top, beforehand, a scrawny little man who lives with a fat woman.

'The cigarette,' he mumbles, grinning. He always calls me 'Christian', even though that's not my name, and I gaze at the last brown stumps left in his mouth. I always stay at the door, and he turns around, walks down the hall to the bedroom. I hear him rummaging around in there, and then the fat woman looks around the bedroom door. She's wearing some kind of nightshirt, her breasts resting on her stomach. She smiles, and I'm scared she'll come out. But the guy with no teeth shouts something, and she disappears. The place smells pretty strongly of spirits, and the guy with no teeth stinks like a meths-drinker once he's standing at the door again, clutching the cigarette in his scrawny hands. I hardly understand him when he talks, and it's not because almost all his teeth are gone. Sometimes I imagine the fat woman chewing his food for him. I take the cigarette and light it up. I turn onto my back and feel for the pillow, but I can't find it.

'You're so cold,' she says to me sometimes. I gaze at the ceiling. She's pulled the pillow over to her and she's lying a good way away from me with the pillow. I stretch my arm out towards her, but I only touch the pillow. I get up. I walk over to the window and look out through the blind over to the railway embankment. Stairs lead up to the station, lights glowing yellow. Here comes a man, walking down the stairs very slowly, and I turn away. 'You're so cold,' she says, and I feel my face with both hands, but it's warm.

'Are you going to the dole office tomorrow?' she asks. I nod. 'You didn't last week.'

'No. But I will tomorrow.' I flick the ash onto the

Little Death

windowsill and lie back down next to the pillow. There's ash on the bedside table, and I blow it away. I've smoked the cigarette down to the filter and I balance the filter very carefully on the bedside table with the tip upwards. I watch the smoke rising, very straight, in a thin line. The glow at the tip slowly disappears and I close my eyes. I hear a train crossing the bridge, they come every twenty minutes until ten, I'll go and sign on, and if I get there early in the morning and it's quick and I can leave again quickly, then I can use the same ticket on the way back, but that's only happened two or three times over the years.

I walk down the bright white corridors, I'm tired and I see the numbers next to the doors, I fell asleep on the train, and the short man with the moustache woke me up, 'Appointments,' he says, 'appointments', he lives a couple of doors down but I didn't see him getting on. He signs on a lot, and I often see him on the train at other times, on his own by the window, maybe he sometimes rides from one end of the line to the other.

I walk down the bright white corridors, the short man's disappeared somewhere, I see the numbers next to the doors, chairs, people, and I sit down. Doors open, people disappear, people come out again and walk down the corridors, I look at the numbers next to the doors again, something's not right, and I get up. 'But this used to be ...'

'No,' says the woman with the tag on her chest, I'm tired and I don't want to look at her chest, 'they're over in House B now.'

'House B,' I say and look around, but she's not here

any more. I push my sleeve back, but I haven't got a watch, where's my good silver watch? It was a present, but that was a few years back now. 'Appointments,' she says, 'so you always remember your appointments.'

I walk down the bright white corridors, the short man with the moustache is back again, standing in an open doorway, his back slightly bent.

He must be saying something, his head's moving, but all I hear is a woman's voice: 'And you've only come now?'

I walk past him to the lift. I press both buttons, one arrow pointing downwards, one pointing upwards, and I wait. There's a *ding*, but it's somewhere else, and I wait, and the lift comes very quietly, the doors open, and I walk in. No one else in there, and no mirror either. I press 'Ground Floor', the doors close, and we're on our way.

We're on our way. I look at my good silver watch. She holds onto my arm and says: 'We'll be late, you'll be late, they won't give you it because you're too late.'

I want to say something, but all I do is look at the hands on my watch. We're sitting on the train, she's holding onto my arm so tightly it hurts, and I look around for the short man with the moustache. 'Because you haven't got a car,' she says, and I try to push the sleeve of my jacket over my watch and her hand. I close my eyes and hear the train crossing the bridge. I open my eyes and see four cigarette filters balanced on the bedside table next to me. There's a *ding* and then a *dong*, and I get up. I walk over to the window and look outside through the blind. There's a man standing outside the door, behind him a small silver VW. Another *ding*

Little Death

and then *dong*, I want to go to the bell and disconnect it, I've been meaning to do that for a while now, but I walk over to the bed and lie down.

The bell goes quiet. He'll try somewhere else in a minute, but the building's empty, only the two beauties live at the very top, and I hope they're not in or that the fat woman's lying on top of him and he can't get to the buzzer, and that by the time she makes it to the door the little silver VW's disappeared.

I pull the cover up to my face, only my eyes are still there, and then, after a while – or was it just a few seconds? – I hear a car door slamming, and then another pause, engine noises. Then it's quiet. It's so quiet I'm scared the telephone might start ringing. I listen and wait. I don't want to pull the plug out, and maybe the line's been dead for ages already. They don't have to come round to cut you off.

'The cigarette,' mumbles the scrawny guy with a grin, and then he asks, 'Want to come in for a beer?' but I say, 'No, she'll be here soon,' and he grins at me, and it seems as if he has fewer teeth every time.

'Christian,' he mumbles with a wink. Once I did go in his flat, must have been a couple of years ago now because I still had a car back then, a silver VW Golf, something's not right, I had a little Japanese make and it was white. We watch TV, the scrawny guy drifts off to sleep, a bottle of spirits between his legs. I want to wake him up, but she holds onto my arm and takes the bottle. 'You're on your own a lot, Christian,' she says. 'No, no,' I say, 'she'll be here soon . . .'

'Christian,' she says, holding my hand now. Why don't

they know my name? I took the name sign off my door, but that was only a couple of weeks ago, and they've been living here for years, just like me. 'You're so cold,' she says.

We're on our way. Autumn's coming, and the last time we went to the lake was at the beginning of August, or was that the summer before? 'It's too cold to swim,' she says, but I say: 'We can just look at the water.' And I look. I've leant my bike against the tree and I look out at the lake. No one else here. It's a pretty small lake. The water's dark, that's because of the sky. There are a few letters in my jacket pocket, from the dole office, from the electricity board and from people I don't know. There's one from her too, and I walk up to the water so it's almost touching my shoes. A little wave comes now, there's a bit of a wind, but I stay where I am and throw the letters in the lake. They stay close to the bank for a while, then they spread out. I turn away and walk back to the tree. Behind the tree is a little embankment and after that the motorway. I can hear its humming. We're on our way. Along the embankment are little piles of rubbish, empty bottles, cigarette packs, paper. I ride slowly, turning around and looking at the water, but the letters have disappeared. When I turn around again I see one, a tiny speck of white by the bank. I ride and I don't look back again, because I know the little speck of white has disappeared.

I'm sitting on a bench by a country road. A few hundred yards ahead of me is a village, after that another one and then the city. Evening's coming, and the sky's red behind my back. I'm smoking a cigarette, I don't know where I got it from, it's not the brand the scrawny guy smokes. I

Little Death

haven't been to see him in a long time, sometimes I just hear his beauty, that's what he calls her, dragging the empty dustbins through the building and out into the yard when the bin men have been. Maybe the cigarette's from the short man with the moustache, but he rolls his own. 'Got into the habit when I was doing service,' he says. 'Where did you do your service?' I ask. 'Here and there,' he says, 'I did plenty of it,' and I know what he means. He has a couple of tattoos and a couple of kids, who play up on the railway embankment almost all day long. 'Because I was away so long,' says the short man and raises his shoulders so high that his head almost disappears, 'I did plenty of service.' His wife is just as short as he is; I see her sometimes fetching the kids in from the embankment. There are two flies perched on my leg. They're not moving, not even when I try to blow them off. It's the time of year when the flies die. They're just perched on my leg, close together, now one of them moves its wings, just for a moment, and I get up carefully.

Ten o'clock. The blue zero turns into a one. It took me a long time to find an alarm clock with a blue digital display. We were in a shop where they only had clocks and watches. Did she buy me the good silver watch there? The little blue one turns into a two. I'm standing in the dark, not moving. It's not getting light this morning, that's because of the sky. The digital display on the alarm clock is empty, but I watch the hands on my wrist. The electricity board came round, and the flat's dark. I don't know how long now, and I miss the little blue numbers. I want to lie back down, but I can't make out the pillow. They rang up a lot; the phone works even in

the dark. 'Why didn't you come to your appointment?' I want to tell them about the short man with the moustache, who doesn't take the train any more, but all I say is, 'I've been very tired recently.'

'We're going to have to cut your benefits.'

'It's because of my alarm clock,' I want to say, but they're sure to know about the good silver watch on my wrist.

'It's me,' she says somewhere, and I say, 'How's it going, where are you?'

'I'm fine,' she says, 'I rang your bell, a couple of times.'

'Must have been out for a walk,' I say, and then there's a click, somewhere out there where she is, and I know that sound. It's a lighter, and she doesn't smoke.

I hold the phone away from my head; the click's still moving in my ear. 'Where are you?' I say and hear her voice and then I stay quiet and wait for it to click again, a different sound, a very different sound, and she's gone. I walk over to the bedside table and pick up the lighter. I flick it on and off again and on again. I've arranged the filters in a circle. I let the flame burn for a bit, and then I want to hear the sound again. The little death. Not a sound in the flat, even the fridge is silent in the kitchen. I put the lighter carefully on the pillow and walk over to the window. I look out through the blind over to the railway embankment. The lights are glowing yellow; it must be evening already.

I stand in the yellow light and look at the street and then at my building. All the windows are dark, even the scrawny guy and his beauty are sitting in the dark; or maybe they've gone out, it's the beginning of the month. There's a bar down

Little Death

the road, but maybe they've gone to the Italian place a bit further away, the scrawny guy sucking spaghetti into his toothless mouth, and her watching him with a smile.

I sit down on the stairs, jamming the bottle between my legs. I screw off the top and throw it away. A couple of cars drive past, it's turned cool now, and I drink. Then the light goes on, right at the top on the fourth floor. The curtains are pulled back but there's no one to see at the window, just a big teddy bear sitting on the windowsill. I feel myself smiling. I hear the train behind me and the cars down on the road, but all I can see is the big teddy bear in the middle of the windowsill. I don't know how long I look at it, I feel the smile in the corners of my mouth, then I pick up the bottle and put my head back and drink. There's a plane in the sky, it leans slightly to one side and curves round to the airport outside the city.

'How's it going?'

I take the bottle from my lips and hand it to the short man. His moustache has gone, his face is swollen, his top lip hidden under a large plaster. He puts his head back and drinks and watches the plane.

Then he sits down next to me. 'They gave me magic stitches,' he says with a tap of his top lip. 'They dissolve after a while, all on their own.' He tries to smile but stops again; it must hurt. 'Magic stitches,' I say, and he nods. He hands me one of his roll-ups. 'Do you still take the train?' I shake my head, and he nods again. He's sitting pretty close to me, and I feel him going all limp and leaning his shoulder against me. We drink, in silence.

Clemens Meyer

I'm standing at the window, looking out through the blind over at the railway embankment. The lights are glowing yellow; it must be evening already. There's a man standing in the yellow light. He turns away.