

Rash

by Megan Taylor

Copyright 2019 © by Megan Taylor. All rights reserved

The rash began the night that Fran heard the news, when she was back at her father's house, which she supposed wasn't actually her father's any longer, but only hers. Because there was only her. No Father.

There had been the call from the hospital and then the rush to the station, fumbling over tickets, coins showering the concourse. And then the jogging train that had mocked her panic, its sluggish hours interrupted solely by the refreshment trolley, clanking up and down the aisle.

Similar rain-soft fields rolled by outside, grey and spectral. Sometimes a horse or a pony appeared, and once, a flurry of sheep, but it was the horses who kept returning so that it was like watching the same looped footage. The drops against the window provided scratches, static, frame after frame.

Fran remembered the click and whir of cine-film and her eyelids flickered, but she didn't sleep. Nor did she cry, not then, and of course the journey wasn't truly endless, but something real because there, suddenly, was the poky, familiar station with its rust-bitten benches – benches she'd shivered on years ago, her best friend, Hazel, at her side.

Except there wasn't time for reminiscence; later, Fran supposed, some of that was bound to come, but there was the taxi to negotiate first and then the hospital itself, where uniforms fluttered about her, crisp and blue, and the ceiling lights seared white.

Once Fran had finished form-filling, she was led to a smaller room. There, the lighting wasn't quite so harsh, but the air-conditioning churned, puffing out metallic gusts. It was a shock – shocking – for Fran to see her father, but not in any way that she might have anticipated. Her astonishment was quiet. It fell through her in clumps like melting snow.

Her father's hair had been combed. It looked surprisingly silvery, scraped away from his dry forehead. Pinned beneath a starched sheet and then wrapped further in pale paper, he lay in the very centre of the bed, neat and little. Fran had never seen him look little before.

“Larger than life,” that's what people said of him – not because he was gregarious, *the life and soul* (god, and god forbid), but because of his voice, which was all the more booming because mostly he was silent. And then there was his stature too – the village had always known him as a strong, brave man. Upstanding, literally, with that ram-rod spine.

Fighting disbelief, Fran wondered if there hadn't been some mix-up? Maybe that shrunken figure wasn't her father after all; she'd taken a misplaced call, completed the wrong questionnaires... It wasn't just his size, but his stillness too – although that was madness, obviously. Did she honestly expect him to go on sawing, lifting, determinedly walking, now that he was dead?

Fran found that she was holding herself soldier-rigid in response. Only her twitching fingertips betrayed her urge to reach out, to break that frozen spell by brushing her father's powdery cheek or his new glimmering hair – except that then she wondered about that impulse too. Was it driven by curiosity rather than affection? How would her father *feel* now? Like cardboard? Pastry? Candle stubs?

She remembered the waxwork museum she'd visited when holidaying with Hazel as a child, a faded seaside place crammed with giant dolls you had to squint at to recognise: the Royal Family, the Prime Minister, Mohammed Ali and John Lennon – possibly. She recalled the Chamber of Horrors, stuffed with murderers. Apart from Ruth Ellis in a lopsided wig, they were all men, weasel-like men mostly, spectacled and suited. Yet it had been disconcerting, that cluttered room; as if their creator had thought it a prerequisite, each figure had

worn the same half-grin – a purple twisted smile like Mr Punch’s, out on the sand.

It wasn’t long before Fran had bolted, deliciously hysterical, with Hazel shrieking at her side. It was the summer when they were at their most inseparable, and unstoppably, Fran remembered other things: the single black of sea and sky beyond the pier and the thrill of eating as they strolled – steaming doughnuts, fish in batter, chips. Heading back to the hotel, to the over-blanketed bed they’d had to share, the girls had sucked hot sugar and stringent vinegar from their fingers. And everywhere, that sting of salt...

Abruptly, Fran stepped away from her father. She felt sick, sickened by his frailty, that vacancy, but mainly sick at herself. She wasn’t thinking any of the right things. She couldn’t touch him. In the end, she just left, nodding as she passed the desk uniforms, who scarcely glanced up from their folders.

At least, Fran told herself as she waited for another cab, her father hadn’t been smiling – not like Hazel’s waxworks. Like Hazel.

As soon as she reached her father’s house – her house – Fran’s

exhaustion set in. She'd imagined that she might spend some time wandering the rooms, reacquainting herself with the peeling paint on the kitchen cupboards, perhaps running her hands over the dents in her father's chair. Instead she took herself straight off to her old bedroom, turning on the lights only as she needed them and clicking them off again quickly as she went. She wanted only sleep –

But in the night, the rash came.

It woke her in the way that dreams would sometimes. She was pulled into consciousness gasping, scrabbling. As if escaping some tunnel, fighting off black clods of collapsing earth. For a while, she simply lay there, breathing, feeling the rash even before she looked. It wasn't an itch or an ache, but something in-between.

When she flicked on the lamp, she saw it on her arms first. It was on both arms – white lines rising and scattering from the insides of her elbows to her wrists. Higher, towards her right shoulder, it became distinctly crosshatched. There, it reminded Fran of nettle marks, except it didn't hurt. She pushed back the eiderdown and found that her legs were equally patterned. She was laced from calves to hips.

She tugged off her nightdress and then hopped, naked, to the dressing table. She wanted to see clearly.

The ancient hinged mirror reflected back three Frans, each one streaked. Beyond her, the walls of her bedroom were a faded peach, her teenage posters removed long ago, but in the lamp's glow, the walls appeared duskier than usual and Fran also looked muted, almost satiny, despite the rash. More intrigued than concerned, she refocused.

It covered the whole of her. It littered her sides, her waist. It swirled in tribal stripes across her breasts and then fragmented on the path back to her stomach, breaking into the dot-dot-dots in a story. *Ellipses*, Fran recalled...

She wasn't a woman who usually took much notice of her body, apart from the basics, filing her nails and removing excess hair, moisturising after her longer baths. When she shared herself with boyfriends (*men-friends*, she supposed, since she'd grown older), sex was pleasant enough, or at least not unpleasant, although even when she'd begin to feel herself quicken, there was often a sense of disengagement, as if she was watching herself from afar.

Not that there had been anyone for months, no one since

Christopher, who it turned out had been a messy mistake. Generally, Fran didn't like mess, disorder. She liked to keep things organised and controlled – even, she supposed, her own body. Alone, between relationships, she rarely recognised the need to touch herself.

Except now, she realised, she was sliding her hands quite unselfconsciously across her skin, searching out its new lumps and heat and cold-spots. And as she explored, Fran thought of how the rash had woken her. She relived that dream of clawing fingers, although she was no longer imagining her own, pushing up through darkness. She thought about a different kind of scurrying, emerging from inside.

In the morning, Fran felt ravenous. She swept through her father's kitchen (*her* kitchen) eating his leftovers, white-edged cheese and flaking crackers, softened biscuits by the fist-full from the tin. Chewing, she remembered sleepovers at Hazel's house, midnight raiding expeditions. She glanced down at the crumbs caught between her shirt buttons and felt the rash, still bubbling, beneath the silk.

But there was a lot to do before the funeral, and wasn't it better to keep busy? Determinedly, Fran hunched over her father's telephone and

his dog-eared address book, silently rehearsing in the slow-breathing seconds between each dial.

“Hello, this is Frances Hadley. I don’t know if you remember me? You were a good friend of my father, Paul. I’m afraid I have some sad news...”

Mostly, she didn’t have to explain any further. Word had already slipped around the village and she frequently felt a sigh dragging at the line well before she’d finished blurting. Nevertheless, the repetition was draining.

“He was a rock,” someone said. “A tower of strength,” said another, and Fran felt herself grow weaker, more corroded, with each response.

After the final call, she lowered her face into her hands. Her ears were buzzing and yet the one number she’d wanted to dial, she hadn’t; she couldn’t. What was the point? She sat for several minutes hiding in her palms and longing to cry, except how could she? She felt fraudulent, suspecting that if the tears did arrive, they would have been misplaced.

Eventually, she rose. *Keep busy*, she remembered. And rolling her sleeves up before the sink, she saw that her arms were her own again,

unblemished.

During the five days that had to pass before the funeral, Fran cleaned. She threw out the ancient food in her father's cupboards, the weevil-specked flour and clumped sugar, the faded teabags leaking burnt-looking grains. When the shelves were clear, she scoured them with an even greater vigour than she applied to her own sparse flat, already becoming unimaginable, back in the city.

Her father's military standards had obviously started to slip. There was grime in the grouting and the windowpanes were clouded. Cobwebs netted the light fittings to their shades, so when with a deep breath, Fran went upstairs to face her father's room, it was a surprise to find his bed looking as rigorously made as ever. The corners were taut and below a solitary pillow, the sheet had been turned down in a pristine panel.

She should have predicted nothing less. After all, every Sunday night, as a child, there had been the regular Room Inspections, but gazing at those decided lines, Fran understood that she'd expected something altogether different: a torn tangle of covers, the mattress

exposed – signs of a struggle maybe – although frankly, that was silly. No one had actually told her that he'd died in bed.

Fran swung away, towards the wardrobe. While she couldn't bring herself to strip her father's sheets, she could, she should, do *something*. With a kind of clenched tunnel-vision, she plunged among the hangers and began dividing his strange empty clothes into two sensible piles: the still-respectable, the rags.

When the house – his house – became too much, Fran walked. She'd choose a path into the woods and keep going till she started noticing the yellowish pools in the rutted earth and the musky mushroom flavours. By the time she managed to tune in to the birdsong she was able to return – when she felt suitably removed.

But on the day before the funeral, there was more to clear from Fran's head. In her father's workshop, facing the sawdust tides, she'd dropped to her knees with a dustpan and it had returned to her, in a rush, how they'd used to pray together.

Up until Fran became a teenager, her father would bow beside her each bedtime, talking of purity and honour, sacrifice and strength.

Before his rumbled *Amen*, he always left a silence in which Fran would struggle, understanding that in that space she was meant to be offering her own private pleas. She'd never known what she was supposed to make up. For a long time, she'd wanted to ask about her mother, but how could she with her father right there, next to her? Always so much more solid than any god...

Ignoring the woods that last afternoon, Fran followed the road until it forked, heading towards the farm where Hazel used to live. Hazel's family hadn't actually owned the farm – that had belonged to Mr Dawson, but they'd rented one of his leaky cottages while Hazel's parents took charge of his stables. But the farm was further than Fran remembered and as she walked, a drizzle set in. The matted fields began to look unreal; it was like being back on the train again, except that, blinking through the rain-haze, she couldn't find a single sign of horses.

She remembered them though. She remembered white striping a chestnut nose and the slow lift of hooves like treading water. But mostly, what Fran remembered was holding her fingers flat and Hazel's calm instructions while she fed them, their breath pluming on her open palm.

When Fran reached the ridge before Hazel's old cottage, she

stopped. There was no point in investigating further – considering the horses' absence, Hazel's parents were surely long gone too. And of course Hazel herself had moved out nearly two decades ago, council-housed when she'd had the baby.

Turning back, Fran slid one hand along the dry-stone wall beside the road. The wall wasn't actually dry, but clammy, and she thought of all the places she used to perch on, with Hazel, when they were kids. Not just those higgledy barriers separating the fields or the station benches, but the pub wall too, where they'd loiter after school. And although Fran struggled to recall their murmured conversations, she remembered the chill that had burnt through her skirt pleats and how Hazel had gleamed – her teeth and eyes growing luminous against the setting dusk.

When Fran woke that night, she knew that the rash had returned. She'd dreamt it more clearly this time. Again, she rose and crossed to her bedroom mirror. Again, in the lamplight, she undressed.

The rash encased her. More organically, she believed, than before. *Like plants*, she realised, vines. Once more, she studied her thighs, her

hips, her waist, her chest. She uncovered branches and blossoms, furling buds. She craned her neck and saw that her buttocks were entwined as if with ivy. In a way, she thought, the rash was beautiful. The thought stunned her.

In her dream, it hadn't been a garden, but language. Hieroglyphics or Arabic, nothing that Fran could understand. She felt scribbled on, no different from all those walls with their literal graffiti or scrawling moss – and yet somehow, beneath the rash, she felt kept safe.

But when Fran woke to full daylight, she discovered that it had grown. The rash had spread to her chin and where it littered her body, it was no longer words or foliage. At best, its scrolls suggested metalwork. Barbed-wire stars blazed across her shoulders and Fran felt caged-in. Between the bars and milky blisters, her ordinary skin looked frightened. Luridly pink.

She dressed carefully, wearing long sleeves and a high collar. She left her hair down too, although it would have been more appropriate to have it pinned up for the funeral – but it wasn't enough.

Throughout the service, Fran couldn't stop thinking about the rash.

She couldn't concentrate on the Reverend's words, even while she intoned the correct responses. Her jaw tingled and she imagined a lattice containing her whole face – there, for everyone to see. She bent low over her hymn book and refused eye contact. The church was full, but Fran doubted anyone would sympathise. While the pews were packed with people she recognised, there was no one there she knew.

And even at the graveside, the rash held her. Her handful of soil was nothing; her wrists felt more roughly gravelled, pebble-sharp where her cuffs pressed close.

After the service, there was the pub. The Bell, because it was her father's regular, although to Fran, it was barely recognisable. Every booth had been re-upholstered in creamy leather and in the Lounge a wide-screen displayed Sky Sports, which somehow blared, despite the volume muted.

Had her father honestly continued to visit this place every Friday? It seemed impossible – yet apparently he had, at least according to the bar staff and the old women who flustered about Fran, refilling her wine glass, despite her protests.

“To Paul!” The landlady insisted.

The woman was blowsy, a clear expanse of milky cleavage on display. A couple of younger girls worked alongside her, their bare arms golden and utterly smooth. Everyone clinked, the bar staff and the elderly ladies who, like Fran, were well covered.

It was difficult to see the old women’s true faces beneath their powder, but from what Fran could glimpse of their throats, they were marked by nothing more than creases and wattles and rubbery veins.

They leant close, these women, and piled a plate for her. There was a vast quantity of food – cakes and sandwiches and lukewarm sausage rolls, which they had insisted on providing. Surveying the feast, Fran recalled similar offerings from long ago, after her mother had left. Vividly, she pictured mud-like gravy and greying carrots, the dark-baked sockets of a stargazy pie...

Although unfailingly polite, her father hadn’t any patience with such hand-outs. He’d labelled the women who left them as ‘terriers’. *Terrier-women*, partly because of their unruly perms, but mainly for their enthusiasm. In a rare anecdote, he’d described the dogs that he’d rabbited with as a boy – mindlessly persistent animals, forever digging.

And although Fran had been just seven, she'd laughed, already learning, learning about what her father needed, and about women too. Years before puberty, and way before he'd forbidden her to see Hazel, she'd been on the look-out for clues – wondering what creature might be buried in herself.

Not that these women had any idea that they were terriers. They continued toasting her father, and while Fran couldn't bring herself to eat, she could hardly refuse their raised glasses.

“To your Dad,” they said. “A true gent.”

Nodding, Fran kept sipping, and then gulping, although she was aware of her empty stomach and the fact that she rarely drank, and never to excess. She was always so careful – but perhaps, just for tonight it would help. Maybe it would ease the rash, or at least her anxiety about it?

“You're a lucky girl,” she was told. “They don't make 'em like that anymore.”

“Salt of the Earth.”

When Fran reached out to refill her own glass, the room trembled. The bottle was empty. It reeled and as she clumsily caught it, she saw

that the rash had crawled up her thumb. A trail like tiny arrows, like sparrow footprints in the snow...

“Excuse me,” she said, but the old women hardly heard her. She had to push through them while the ceiling lights slid into one another, stretching like glue. She couldn’t escape to the Ladies; she was too scared of the mirrors there, and so she found herself stumbling on, past the television where a crowd roared in silence. She kept going, towards the wide back doors.

“Excuse me, excuse me...”

She was trapped among the smokers huddled beneath the awning. But ahead, The Bell’s yard spread out into shadows as it always had. In the darkness pooled beyond the pub’s glow, Fran could just make out the wall’s outline, its silvery threads. Inside her dress, her skin flared.

The rash was electricity now, a burning circuit running through her. *Hot-wired*, she thought. And then she didn’t know what she was thinking anymore; her head was spinning. She staggered backwards and in trying to right herself, accidentally caught one of the smokers’ arms.

“Hey,” said the girl.

Fran stared, and then without meaning to, began to babble.

“Hazel,” she said. “The wall. That wall...”

Hazel peered at her, her eyes glossy behind red-streaked hair – only she wasn’t Hazel, Fran realised, not at all. Not unless Hazel had become frozen in time, held eternally in her teens.

“Wait here,” the girl replied and vanished, leaving Fran to teeter across the pub garden alone.

Weaving closer to the wall, she wondered what else she might see there. Who? Two young girls sniggering, whispering, discussing kissing techniques?

Except suddenly the wall was rushing too fast towards her. Fran was tripping, falling. Her skull rocked as her head smashed into it, but for a moment, there was no pain – and then the entire blackening sky rang with it.

Crouched on the gravel, Fran put a hand to her forehead. She couldn’t feel the bumps of her rash, only an ordinary wetness. Slow-spreading blood that she could also taste, a mouthful of pennies...

“Fran?”

As the woman drew Fran to her feet, Fran saw that she was her own age. There were traces of crinkles around the woman’s mouth and

eyes, but her eyes – *her eyes shone*, and: “Hello!” Fran blurted.

And then they were both laughing, stupidly, recklessly – until Fran understood that she wasn’t laughing at all, but crying.

Behind Hazel, in the doorway, faces bobbed. Hazel’s daughter floated among them, red-streaked and wary and possibly amused.

“Come on,” Hazel said. “Let’s get you out of here, get you cleaned up.”

In Hazel’s car, Fran couldn’t stop crying. The sobs prevented her from speaking clearly, although she kept wanting to, wanting to explain how these were the first tears since her father’s death, but how it wasn’t him that had released them, but other memories, the pier and the horses. That wall...

How, after the last time that they were there, she knew that Hazel had returned for her, that she’d kept on coming back, calling outside Fran’s bedtime window, calling and calling...

Desperately, Fran wanted to explain, how she couldn’t go out to Hazel, with her father sleeping in the room next door. With the sheer weight of her father’s fears – fears that hadn’t Hazel confirmed, with

her pregnancy just a few months later?

But the tears and blood jumbled Fran's words and they became muddled with other excuses. Protestations about how she wasn't used to alcohol, how she never fell over. And she certainly never cried, *not like this* –

“Hush,” Hazel said. “Hush, now. It's ok.”

Slightly slurring, so that Fran wondered how much she'd also been drinking, and if that was the case, whether they were safe in the car – even now, a part of Fran remaining cautious – although if Hazel was tipsy, might that make things better? Forgettable, if not forgivable, at least?

But then they were back at Fran's father's house – her house – with Hazel capably managing the keys and the front door, even the stairs. And while Hazel guided Fran towards her room, with one arm around her waist, Fran went on trying to apologise. She *had* to –

Except still, she couldn't speak, even with Hazel right there, with everything there – the way they'd giggled, their legs tangling in the sheets in that seaside hotel, and the pub wall of course, the shadows wrapping them like velvet when they'd pulled close.

It was startlingly clear: the cold and grit shifting beneath her – Hazel’s fingertips, transforming on Fran’s neck. She could picture Hazel’s young face tipped back, her eyes closed – she remembered the relief of that... Until the moment when their tongues had touched and Hazel’s gaze grew wide and dazzling once more –

And Fran had realised that she couldn’t bear it. Not any of it. She couldn’t bear that looking, that *knowing* – her father was right; Hazel was wrong. She couldn’t see her anymore.

Fran had sprung away, running faster that night than ever before, chased on by a sudden wind that had sent the trees reeling, the dark hills bristling. The whole village had rippled, while something beat back, floundering, within her too, some fallen, ugly, helpless creature. A fledgling bird –

Repeatedly, Fran had tried to swallow. She’d longed for those gusts to clean her, to empty her, to drive out those other sensations. But even as she’d fled, she’d recognised her body as a trap; she’d felt those flightless wings beneath her skin –

“I’m sorry.”

Finally, Fran sputtered it, and with the words, she felt herself

breaking, walls collapsing. She was cracking like wax –

Except by then Hazel was preoccupied. The bleeding had stopped and now she was attempting to undress Fran, to put her to bed – and too late, Fran remembered the rash. Too late, she tried to tug back her clothes.

But Hazel’s eyes were already on her, and then Hazel’s hands were on her too, tracing the Braille of her skin.

“It’s ok,” Hazel said, her fingertips following the rash’s loops and whorls – “It’s all ok. I love you.”

And still, it took Fran a moment to realise; she wasn’t being read.



Megan Taylor is the author of three novels, ‘How We Were Lost’ (Flame Books, 2007), ‘The Dawning’ (Weathervane Press, 2010) and ‘The Lives of Ghosts’ (Weathervane Press, 2012), as well as a collection, ‘The Woman Under the Ground and Other Stories’ (Weathervane Press, 2014), which includes her Willesden Herald’s shortlisted ‘Rash’.

Recent short stories have been placed in several competitions, and appeared in a variety of publications, including Dark Lane’s 6th and 7th anthologies and Neon. A fourth novel, ‘We Wait’, is due out from Eyrie Press in 2019.

For further information, please visit www.megantaylor.info