

“Lamb¹ to the Slaughter²”

Four extracts from A short story by Roald DAHL

I

As usual, Mrs. Maloney is waiting for her husband to come home from work. As soon as he comes in, looking rather tired, she takes his coat, serves him a drink, and proposes to get him something to eat. But he's "got something to tell" her.

5 "This is going to be a bit of a shock to you, I'm afraid, he said. "But I've thought about it a good deal and I've decided the only thing to do is to tell you right away. I hope you won't blame me too much."

And he told her. It didn't take long, four or five minutes at most, and she sat very still through it all, watching him with a kind of dazed horror and he went further and further away from her with each word.

10 "So there it is," he added. "And I know it's kind of a bad time to be telling you, but there simply wasn't any other way. Of course I'll give you money and see you're looked after. But there needn't really be any fuss. I hope not anyway. It wouldn't be very good for my job." My first instinct was not to believe any of it, to reject it all. It occurred to her that perhaps he hadn't even spoken, that she herself had imagined the whole thing. Maybe, if she went about her business and acted as though she hadn't been listening, then later, when she sort of woke up again, she might find none of it had ever happened.

"I'll get the supper, " she managed to whisper, and this time he didn't stop her.

15 When she walked across the room she couldn't feel her feet touching the floor. She couldn't feel anything at all - except a slight nausea and a desire to vomit. Everything was automatic now - down the stairs to the cellar³, the light switch, the deep freeze, the hand inside the cabinet taking hold of the first object it met. She lifted it out, and looked at it. It was wrapped⁴ in paper, so she took off the paper and looked at it again.

A leg of lamb.

20 All right then, they would have lamb for supper. She carried it upstairs, holding the thin-bone end of it with both her hands, and as she went through the living room, she saw him standing over by the window with his back to her, and she stopped.

25 "For God's sake, " he said, hearing her, but not turning round. "Don't make supper for me. I'm going out." At this point, Mary Maloney simply walked up behind him and without any pause she swung the big frozen leg of lamb high in the air and brought it down as hard as she could on the back of his head.

II

After hitting her husband, Mrs. Maloney puts the meat into the oven, goes upstairs to the bedroom to tidy her face, then goes out to the grocers to buy some potatoes and a can of peas. Then she comes back home and tries to "do everything right and natural ".

30 A few minutes later she got up and went to the phone. She knew the number of the police station, and when, the man at the other end answered, she cried to him,

" Quick! Come quick! Patrick's dead! "Who's speaking?"

"Mrs. Maloney. Mrs. Patrick Maloney."

35 "You mean Patrick Maloney's dead?"

"I think so," she sobbed⁵. "He's lying on the floor and I think he's dead."

"Be right over," the man said.

40 The car came very quickly, and when she opened the front door, two policemen walked in. She knew them both - she knew nearly all the men at the precinct⁶ and she fell right into Jack Noonan's arms, weeping⁷ hysterically. He put her gently into a chair, then went over to join the other one, who was called O'Malley, kneeling by the body.

"Is he dead?" she cried.

"I'm afraid he is. What happened?"

45 Briefly she told her story about going to the grocer and coming back to find him on the floor. While she was talking, crying and talking, Noonan discovered a small patch of congealed blood on the dead man's head. He showed it to O'Malley who got up at once and hurried to the phone.

¹ Lamb: *agneau*.

² Slaughter: *tuerie*.

³ Cellar: *cave*.

⁴ wrap: *envelopper*.

⁵ sob: *sangloter*.

⁶ precinct: *commissariat*.

⁷ weep: *pleurer*.

LAMB TO THE SLAUGHTER

Soon, other men began to come into the house. First a doctor, then two detectives, one of whom she knew by name. Later, a police photographer arrived and took pictures, and a man who knew about fingerprints. There was a great deal of whispering and muttering beside the corpse⁸, and the detectives kept asking her a lot of questions. But they always treated her kindly. She told her story again, this time right from the beginning, when Patrick had come in, and she was sewing⁹, and he was tired, so tired he hadn't wanted to go out for supper. She told how she'd put the meat in the oven - "it's there now, cooking" - and how she'd slipped out to the grocer for vegetables, and come back to find him lying on the floor.

III

One of the detectives, who has been to the grocers, comes back with a page of notes.

After a while, the photographer and the doctor departed and two other men came in and took the corpse away on a stretcher¹⁰. Then the fingerprint man went away. The two detectives remained, and so did the two policemen. They were exceptionally nice to her, and Jack Noonan asked if she wouldn't rather go somewhere else, to her sister's house perhaps, or to his own wife who would take care of her and put her up for the night. "No," she said. She didn't feel she could move even a yard at the moment. Would they mind awfully if she stayed just where she was until she felt better? She didn't feel too good at the moment, she really didn't.

Then hadn't she better lie down on the bed? Jack Noonan asked.

No, she said, she'd like to stay right where she was, in this chair. A little later perhaps, when she felt better, she would move.

So they left her there while they went about their business, searching the house. Occasionally one of the detectives asked her another question. Sometimes Jack Noonan spoke to her gently as he passed by. Her husband, he told her, had been killed by a blow on the back of the head administered with a heavy blunt¹¹ instrument, almost certainly a large piece of metal. They were looking for the weapon. The murderer may have taken it with him, but on the other hand he may've thrown it away or hidden it somewhere on the premises.

IV

The men go on searching the house, but it is getting late now, nearly nine. Mrs. Maloney proposes them some whisky, and then the leg of lamb for supper.

There was a good deal of hesitating among the four policemen, but they were clearly hungry, and in the end they were persuaded to go into the kitchen and help themselves. The woman stayed where she was, listening to them through the open door, and she could hear them speaking among themselves, their voices thick and sloppy because their mouths were full of meat.

"Have some more, Charlie?"

"No. Better not finish it."

"She wants us to finish it. She said so. Be doing her a favour."

"Okay then. Give me some more."

"That's the hell of a big club the guy must've used to hit poor Patrick," one of them was saying. "The doc says his skull¹² was smashed all to pieces just like from a sledge-hammer¹³."

"That's why it ought to be easy to find."

"Exactly what I say."

"Whoever done it, they're not going to be carrying a thing like that around with them longer than they need.

One of them belched¹⁴.

"Personally, I think it's right here on the premises."

"Probably right under our very noses. What you think, Jack?"

And in the other room, Mary Maloney began to giggle¹⁵.

**Abridged from Roald Dahl's "Lamb to the Slaughter"
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⁸ corpse: *cadavre*.

⁹ sew: *coudre*.

¹⁰ stretcher: *brancard*.

¹¹ blunt: *contendant*.

¹² skull: *crâne*

¹³ sledge-hammer: *marteau de forgereon*.

¹⁴ belch: *avoir un renvoi*.

¹⁵ giggle: *rire nerveusement*.