

## LAMB TO THE SLAUGHTER by Roald Dahl

Mary Maloney was waiting for her husband to come home from work.

Now and again she would glance up at the clock, but without anxiety, merely to please herself with the thought that each minute gone by made it nearer the time when he would come.

When the clock said ten minutes to five, she began to listen, and a few moments later, punctual as always, she heard the tyres on the gravel outside, and the car door slamming, the footsteps passing the window, the key turning in the lock.

"Hullo darling" she said, kissing him.

"Hullo," he answered.

She took his coat and hung it in the closet. Then she mixed some drinks, a strongish one for him, a weak one for herself.

For Mary, this was always a blissful time of day. She knew he didn't want to speak much until the first drink was finished, and she, on her side, was content to sit quietly, enjoying his company after the long hours alone in the house. She loved him. She loved him for the way he sat loosely in a chair, for the way he came in a door, or moved slowly across the room with long strides. She loved the intent, far look in his eyes when they rested on her, the funny shape of his mouth, and especially the way he remained silent about his tiredness, sitting still with himself until the whisky had taken some of it away.

"Tired, darling?"

"Yes," he said. "I'm tired." And as he spoke, he did an unusual thing. He lifted his glass and drained it in one swallow although there was still half of it left. Then he got up and went slowly over to fetch himself another.

"I'll get it!" she cried, jumping up.

"Sit down," he said.

When he came back, she noticed that the new drink was dark amber with the quantity of whisky in it.

"Darling, shall I get your slippers?"

"No."

"I think it's a shame," she said, "that when a policeman gets to be as senior as you, they keep him walking about on his feet all day long."

He didn't answer.

"Darling," she said. "Would you like me to get you some cheese? I haven't made any supper because it's Thursday."

"No," he said.

"If you're too tired to eat out," she went on, "it's still not too late. There's plenty of meat and stuff in the freezer, and you can have it right here and not even move out of the chair."

"I don't want anything," he said.

She moved uneasily in her chair. "But you must have supper. I can easily do it here. I'd like to do it. Anything you want. Everything's in the freezer."

"Forget it," he said. He had finished the second drink and was staring down into the glass, frowning.

"Listen," he said, "I've got something to tell you."

"What is it, darling? What's the matter?"

He had become absolutely motionless.

"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 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.

"So there it is," he added. "Of course I'll give you money and see you're looked after. But there really needn't be any fuss. I hope not anyway. It wouldn't be very good for my job."

Her 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 that none of it had ever happened.

"I'll get the supper," she managed to whisper, and this time he didn't stop her. When she walked across the room she couldn't feel her feet touching the floor. She couldn't feel anything at all. Everything was automatic now - down the stairs to the cellar, 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.

A leg of lamb.

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.

"For God's sake," he said, hearing her, but not turning round. "Don't make supper for me. I'm going out."

At that 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.

She stepped back a pace, waiting, and the funny thing was that he remained standing for at least four or five seconds, gently swaying. Then he crashed to the carpet.

The violence of the crash, the noise, the small table overturning, helped bring her out of the shock. She came out slowly, feeling cold and surprised, and she stood for a while, blinking at the body, still holding the piece of meat tight with both hands. All right, she told herself. So I've killed him. She began thinking very fast.

She carried the meat to the kitchen, placed it in a pan, turned the oven on high, and shoved it inside. Then she washed her hands and ran upstairs to the bedroom. She sat down before the mirror and tidied her face. She tried a smile. It came out rather peculiar. She tried again.

"Hullo Sam," she said brightly, aloud.

The voice sounded peculiar too.

"I want some potatoes please, Sam. Yes, and I think a can of peas."

That was better. She rehearsed it several times more. Then she ran downstairs, took her coat and went out.

It wasn't six o'clock yet and the lights were still on in the grocery shop. "Hullo Sam," she said brightly.

"Why, good evening, Mrs Maloney."

"I want some potatoes please, Sam. Yes, and I think a can of peas." The man turned and reached up on the shelf behind him for the peas.

"Patrick's tired and doesn't want to eat out," she told him. "We usually go out Thursdays, you know, and now he's caught me without any vegetables in the house."

"Then how about meat, Mrs Maloney?"

"No, I've got meat, thanks. I got a nice leg of lamb from the freezer."

When the vegetables were all wrapped up and paid for she put on her brightest smile and said, "Thank you, Sam. Good night."

And now, she told herself as she hurried back, all she was doing was returning home to her husband and he was waiting for his supper; and she must make it as tasty as possible because he was tired; and if, when she entered the house, she happened to find anything unusual, or tragic, or terrible, then naturally it would be a shock and she'd become frantic with grief and horror.

That's the way, she told herself. Do everything right and natural and there'll be no need for any acting at all.

Therefore, when she entered the kitchen by the back door, she was humming a little tune to herself and smiling.

"Patrick!" she called. "How are you, darling?"

When she went through to the living room and saw him lying there on the floor it really was rather a shock. All the old love for him welled up inside her and she ran over to him and began to cry her heart out. It was easy.

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

The police car came quickly, and when she opened the front door, two policemen walked in. She knew them both - she knew nearly all the men at that station - and she fell right into Jack Noonan's arms, weeping 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?"

Briefly, she told her story about going out to the grocer and coming back to find him on the floor.

Soon, other men began to come into the house. A doctor, then two detectives and later a police photographer and a man who knew about fingerprints.

After a while, the photographer and the doctor departed and two other men came and took the corpse away on a stretcher. Then the fingerprint man went away. The detectives remained and so did the two policemen. They were exceptionally nice to her 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 with a heavy blunt instrument, almost certainly a large piece of metal. They were looking for the weapon.

"It's the old story," he said. "Get the weapon, and you've got the man." Later, one of the detectives came up and sat beside her. Did she know, he asked, of anything in the house that could've been used as the weapon? A very big spanner, for example.

She didn't think so, but there might be some things like that in the garage.

The search went on. It began to get late, nearly nine, she noticed by the clock on the mantel. Jack Noonan came out of the kitchen and said, "Look, Mrs Maloney. You know that oven is still on, and the meat still inside."

"Oh dear me!" she cried. "So it is. Would you do me a small favour, Jack? You and these others?"

"We can try, Mrs Maloney."

"Well," she said. "Here you all are, and good friends of dear Patrick's too, and helping to catch the man who killed him. You must be terribly hungry by now because it's long past your supper time, and I know Patrick would never forgive me if

I allowed you to remain in his house without offering you decent hospitality. Why don't you eat up that lamb that's in the oven? It'll be cooked just right by now."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Jack Noonan said.

"Please," she begged. "Please eat it. Personally, I couldn't touch a thing. But it's alright for you. It'd be a favour to me if you'd eat it up."

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 speaking among themselves as they ate.

"Have some more, Charlie?"

"No. Better not finish it."

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

"Ok then."

"That a hell of a big club the guy must have used to hit poor Patrick," one of them said. "The doc says his skull was smashed all to pieces just like from a sledgehammer."

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

"Exactly what I say."

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

"Personally" said one of them, "I think it's right here on the premises."

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

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