

Lamb to the Slaughter (1953) by Roald Dahl

The room was warm and clean, the curtains drawn, the two table lamps alight - hers and the one by the empty chair opposite. On the sideboard behind her, two tall glasses, soda water, whiskey. Fresh ice cubes in the Thermos bucket.

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

5 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. There was a slow smiling air about her, and about everything
she did. The drop of a head as she bent over her sewing was curiously tranquil. Her
10 skin - for this was her sixth month with child - had acquired a wonderful translucent
quality, the mouth was soft, and the eyes, with their new placid look, seemed larger
darker than before. When the clock said ten minutes to five, she began to listen, and
a few moments later, punctually as always, she heard the tires on the gravel outside,
and the car door slamming, the footsteps passing the window, the key turning in the
15 lock. She laid aside her sewing, stood up, and went forward to kiss him as he came
in.

"Hullo darling," she said.

"Hullo darling," he answered.

20 She took his coat and hung it in the closer. Then she walked over and made the
drinks, a strongish one for him, a weak one for herself; and soon she was back again
in her chair with the sewing, and he in the other, opposite, holding the tall glass with
both hands, rocking it so the ice cubes tinkled against the side.

25 For her, 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 to luxuriate
in the presence of this man, and to feel-almost as a sunbather feels the sun-that
warm male glow that came out of him to her when they were alone together. 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 intent, far look in his eyes
30 when they rested in her, the funny shape of the mouth, and especially the way he
remained silent about his tiredness, sitting still with himself until the whiskey had
taken some of it away.

"Tired darling?"

35 "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, at least half of it
left. She wasn't really watching him, but she knew what he had done because she
heard the ice cubes falling back against the bottom of the empty glass when he
lowered his arm. He paused a moment, leaning forward in the chair, then he got up
and went slowly over to fetch himself another.

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

40 "Sit down," he said.

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

"Darling, shall I get your slippers?"

"No."

45 She watched him as he began to sip the dark yellow drink, and she could see little oily swirls in the liquid because it was so strong.

"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."

50 He didn't answer, so she bent her head again and went on with her sewing; but each time he lifted the drink to his lips, she heard the ice cubes clinking against the side of the glass.

"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.

55 "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."

Her eyes waited on him for an answer, a smile, a little nod, but he made no sign.

"Anyway," she went on, "I'll get you some cheese and crackers first."

60 "I don't want it," he said.

She moved uneasily in her chair, the large eyes still watching his face. "But you must eat! I'll fix it anyway, and then you can have it or not, as you like."

She stood up and placed her sewing on the table by the lamp.

"Sit down," he said. "Just for a minute, sit down."

65 It wasn't till then that she began to get frightened.

"Go on," he said. "Sit down."

She lowered herself back slowly into the chair, watching him all the time with those large, bewildered eyes. He had finished the second drink and was staring down into the glass, frowning.

70 “Listen,” he said. “I’ve got something to tell you.”

“What is it, darling? What’s the matter?”

75 He had now become absolutely motionless, and he kept his head down so that the light from the lamp beside him fell across the upper part of his face, leaving the chin and mouth in shadow. She noticed there was a little muscle moving near the corner of his left eye.

“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.”

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

85 “So there it is,” he added. “And I know it’s kind of a bad time to be telling you, bet 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.”

90 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 none of it had ever happened.

“I’ll get the supper,” she managed to whisper, and this time he didn’t stop her.

95 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 steps 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. It was wrapped in paper, so she took off the paper and looked at it again.

A leg of lamb.

100 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.”

105 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 might just as well have hit him with a steel club.

110 She stepped back a pace, waiting, and the funny thing was that he remained standing there 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 her shock. She came out slowly, feeling cold and surprised, and she stood for a while blinking at the body, still holding the ridiculous piece of meat tight with both hands.

115 All right, she told herself. So I've killed him.

120 It was extraordinary, now, how clear her mind became all of a sudden. She began thinking very fast. As the wife of a detective, she knew quite well what the penalty would be. That was fine. It made no difference to her. In fact, it would be a relief. On the other hand, what about the child? What were the laws about murderers with unborn children? Did they kill then both-mother and child? Or did they wait until the tenth month? What did they do?

Mary Maloney didn't know. And she certainly wasn't prepared to take a chance.

125 She carried the meat into 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, tidied her hair, touched up her lips and 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."

130 That was better. Both the smile and the voice were coming out better now. She rehearsed it several times more. Then she ran downstairs, took her coat, went out the back door, down the garden, into the street.

It wasn't six o'clock yet and the lights were still on in the grocery shop.

"Hullo Sam," she said brightly, smiling at the man behind the counter.

135 "Why, good evening, Mrs. Maloney. How're you?"

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

The man turned and reached up behind him on the shelf for the peas.

140 "Patrick's decided he's tired and doesn't want to eat out tonight," 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.”

“Oh.”

145 “I don’t know much like cooking it frozen, Sam, but I’m taking a chance on it this time. You think it’ll be all right?”

“Personally,” the grocer said, “I don’t believe it makes any difference. You want these Idaho potatoes?”

“Oh yes, that’ll be fine. Two of those.”

150 “Anything else?” The grocer cocked his head on one side, looking at her pleasantly. “How about afterwards? What you going to give him for afterwards?”

“Well-what would you suggest, Sam?”

The man glanced around his shop. “How about a nice big slice of cheesecake? I know he likes that.”

“Perfect,” she said. “He loves it.”

155 And when it was all wrapped and she had paid, she put on her brightest smile and said, “Thank you, Sam. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Mrs. Maloney. And thank you.”

160 And now, she told herself as she hurried back, all she was doing now, she was returning home to her husband and he was waiting for his supper; and she must cook it good, and make it as tasty as possible because the poor man 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. Mind you, she wasn’t expecting to find anything. She was just going home with the vegetables. Mrs. Patrick Maloney going home with the vegetables on
165 Thursday evening to cook supper for her husband.

That’s the way, she told herself. Do everything right and natural. Keep things absolutely 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.

170 “Patrick!” she called. “How are you, darling?”

She put the parcel down on the table and went through into the living room; and when she saw him lying there on the floor with his legs doubled up and one arm twisted back underneath his body, it really was rather a shock. All the old love and

175 longing for him welled up inside her, and she ran over to him, knelt down beside him, and began to cry her heart out. It was easy. No acting was necessary.

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?"

180 "Mrs. Maloney. Mrs. Patrick Maloney."

"You mean Patrick Maloney's dead?"

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

"Be right over," the man said.

185 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 that precinct-and she fell right 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?"

190 Briefly, she told her story about going out 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.

195 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 corpse, 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 sewing, and he was
200 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.

Which grocer?" one of the detectives asked.

205 She told him, and he turned and whispered something to the other detective who immediately went outside into the street.

In fifteen minutes he was back with a page of notes, and there was more whispering, and through her sobbing she heard a few of the whispered phrases - "...acted quite normal...very cheerful...wanted to give him a good supper... peas...cheesecake...impossible that she..."

210 After a while, the photographer and the doctor departed and two other men came in and took the corpse away on a stretcher. 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.

220 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 at her gently as he passed by. Her husband, he told her, had been
225 killed by a blow on the back of the head administered with a heavy blunt 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 have thrown it away or hidden it somewhere on the premises.

"It's the old story," he said. "Get the weapon, and you've got the man."

230 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? Would she mind having a look around to see if anything was missing—a very big spanner, for example, or a heavy metal vase.

They didn't have any heavy metal vases, she said.

235 "Or a big spanner?"

She didn't think they had a big spanner. But there might be some things like that in the garage.

The search went on. She knew that there were other policemen in the garden all around the house. She could hear their footsteps on the gravel outside, and
240 sometimes she saw a flash of a torch through a chink in the curtains. It began to get late, nearly nine she noticed by the clock on the mantle. The four men searching the rooms seemed to be growing weary, a trifle exasperated.

"Jack," she said, the next time Sergeant Noonan went by. "Would you mind giving me a drink?"

245 "Sure I'll give you a drink. You mean this whiskey?"

"Yes please. But just a small one. It might make me feel better."

He handed her the glass.

“Why don’t you have one yourself,” she said. “You must be awfully tired. Please do. You’ve been very good to me.”

250 “Well,” he answered. “It’s not strictly allowed, but I might take just a drop to keep me going.”

One by one the others came in and were persuaded to take a little nip of whiskey. They stood around rather awkwardly with the drinks in their hands, uncomfortable in her presence, trying to say consoling things to her. Sergeant Noonan wandered into
255 the kitchen, come out quickly and said, “Look, Mrs. Maloney. You know that oven of yours is still on, and the meat still inside.”

“Oh dear me!” she cried. “So it is!”

“I better turn it off for you, hadn’t I?”

“Will you do that, Jack. Thank you so much.”

260 When the sergeant returned the second time, she looked at him with her large, dark tearful eyes. “Jack Noonan,” she said.

“Yes?”

“Would you do me a small favour-you and these others?”

“We can try, Mrs. Maloney.”

265 “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 terrible hungry by now because it’s long past your suppertime, and I know Patrick would never forgive me, God bless his soul, 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
270 right by now.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Sergeant Noonan said.

“Please,” she begged. “Please eat it. Personally I couldn’t touch a thing, certainly not what’s been in the house when he was here. But it’s all right for you. It’d be a favour to me if you’d eat it up. Then you can go on with your work again afterwards.”

275 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, their voices thick and sloppy because their mouths were full of meat.

“Have some more, Charlie?”

280 “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.”

285 “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 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 done it, they’re not going to be carrying a thing like that around with them longer than they need.”

290 One of them belched.

“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 giggle.

Lamb to the Slaughter – Questions

1. Which of these comments do you agree with?
 - a. Mr Maloney gets what he deserved for treating his wife the way he does. This is a moral story with a very satisfactory ending.
 - b. This is simply a witty, amusing story: morality has got nothing to do with it. Dahl's purpose is to make the reader laugh, not to judge the characters.
 - c. This story is immoral. At the end Mrs Maloney doesn't show any regret for what she has done. She even seems glad, and it looks as though she isn't going to be found out.
2. The reader is given a number of clues that Mr Maloney is preoccupied by something. List them.
3. Is there anything that makes the reader think that Mr Maloney is a rather unpleasant man?
4. Choose the phrase that best completes the following sentence. Sometimes your choice will depend on evidence in the story, sometimes on your personal interpretation.
 - a. When Mr Maloney tells his wife something that will be 'a bit of a shock' to her
 - i. It is the confirmation of something that she has suspected for a long time.
 - ii. It comes as a complete surprise to her.
 - iii. It is the confirmation of something that she has suspected ever since he came home that evening.
 - b. Mary Maloney thinks of killing her husband
 - i. Soon after he finishes speaking to her.
 - ii. When she finds the leg of lamb in the freezer.
 - iii. When he says 'For God's sake, don't make supper for me. I'm going out.'
 - iv. She never thinks of it: she does it unconsciously.
 - c. When Mary puts the lamb in the oven
 - i. She has just invented a plan to hide the murder weapon.
 - ii. She is following a plan she had thought of when she killed her husband.
 - iii. She does it unconsciously: she would have done this anyway.
 - d. When Mary sees her husband dead on the floor after she comes back from the shop
 - i. She is genuinely shocked.
 - ii. She pretends to be shocked.
 - iii. She is shocked, even though she knew what to expect.
 - e. Mary begins to cry when the police arrive because
 - i. She deeply regrets killing her husband.
 - ii. She is acting: she thinks this is the reaction the police will expect.
 - iii. She is terrified of what might happen to her.
 - iv. She is in a state of shock: she feels a variety of emotions.

- f. When Jack Noonan asks her if she would like to spend the night somewhere else, she refuses because
 - i. She want to keep an eye on what the policemen are doing.
 - ii. She is too shocked to move.
 - iii. She has already thought of the idea of inviting the policemen to eat the lamb.
- g. Mary asks for a drink herself, and offers a drink to the policemen because
 - i. She needs a drink to calm her nerves.
 - ii. She want to create a diversion, as the policemen are still looking for the murder weapon.
 - iii. She feels sorry for the policemen, who are friends of hers.
- h. Mary invites them to eat the lamb because
 - i. She wants to destroy the evidence.
 - ii. She feels sorry for the policemen, who must be feeling hungry by now.
 - iii. The lamb reminds her of what she has done, and she can't bear to have it in the house.
- i. At the end of the story, Mary giggles because
 - i. She is rather drunk: she has been drinking whisky on an empty stomach.
 - ii. The policemen are so stupid.
 - iii. She feels a mixture of emotions: relief, nervousness, and even an appreciation of the absurdity of the situation.
 - iv. She is still nervous and worried about being found out.
- j. Why does Mary decide not to confess to the murder?
- k. Choose the interpretation of the title you most agree with. If you think none of the interpretations is satisfactory or sufficient by itself, you can write an interpretation of your own.
 - i. Mr Maloney has done nothing wrong; or if he has done something wrong he has, at least, acted honestly. He is the innocent lamb in the title who has been slaughtered. It may even be that his wife has always been unbalanced, and he has finally found the courage to leave her.
 - ii. The lamb in the title refers to gentle, harmless Mrs Maloney, who finds herself, because of the circumstances and without any premeditation, killing her husband.
 - iii. The title is a joke: it makes the reader think of a common expression meaning 'death without protest', but its real meaning is that a leg of lamb is used as the murder weapon.
 - iv. The title is ironic. Neither Mr Maloney nor Mrs Maloney is a *lamb* (he is certainly not gentle, she is certainly not obedient), and there is no *slaughter* (only one person is killed).
 - v. Your interpretation?