

“Lamb to the Slaughter”—Roald Dahl (1953)

The room was warm, the curtains were closed, the two table lamps were lit. On the cupboard behind her there were two glasses and some drinks. Mary Maloney was waiting for her husband to come home from work.

Now and again she glanced at the clock, but without anxiety. She merely wanted to satisfy herself that each minute that went by made it nearer the time when he would come home. As she bent over her sewing, she was curiously peaceful. This was her sixth month expecting a child. Her mouth and her eyes, with their new calm look, seemed larger and 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 car tires on the stones outside, the car door closing, footsteps passing the window, the key turning in the lock. She stood up and went forward to kiss him as he entered.

“Hello, darling,” she said.

“Hello,” he answered.

She took his coat and hung it up. Then she made the drinks, a strong one for him and a weak one for herself; and soon she was back again in her chair with the sewing, and he was in the other chair, holding the tall glass, rolling it gently so that the ice knocked musically against the side of the glass.

For her, this was always a wonderful time of day. She knew he didn’t want to speak much until the first drink was finished, and she was satisfied to sit quietly, enjoying his company after the long hours alone in the house. She loved the warmth that came out of him when they were alone together. She loved the shape of his mouth, and she especially liked the way he didn’t complain about being tired.

“Tired, darling?”

“Yes,” he sighed. “I’m thoroughly exhausted.” And as he spoke, he did an unusual thing. He lifted his glass and drank it down in one swallow although there was still half of it left. He got up and went slowly to get himself another drink.

“I’ll get it!” she cried, jumping up.

“Sit down,” he said.

When he came back, she noticed that the drink was a very strong one. She watched him as he began to drink.

“I think it’s a shame,” she said, “that when someone’s been a policeman as long as you have, he still has to walk around all day long.” He didn’t answer. “Darling,” she said, “If you’re too tired to eat out tonight, as we had planned, I can fix you something. There’s plenty of meat and stuff in the freezer.” Her eyes waited for an answer, a smile, a nod, but he made no sign.

“Anyway,” she went on, “I’ll get you some bread and cheese.”

“I don’t want it,” he said.

She moved uneasily in her chair. “But you have to have supper. I can easily fix you something. I’d like to do it. We can have lamb. Anything you want. Everything’s in the freezer.”

“Forget it,” he said.

“But, darling, you have to eat! I’ll do 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.” It wasn’t until then that she began to get frightened.

“Go on,” he said, “Sit down.” She lowered herself into the chair, watching him all the time with large, puzzled eyes. He had finished his second drink and was staring into the glass.

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

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

He became absolutely motionless, and he kept his head down. “This is going to be a big shock to you, I’m afraid,” he said, “But I’ve thought about it a good deal and I’ve decided that the only thing to do is to tell you immediately.”

And he told her. It didn’t take long, four or five minutes at most, and she sat still through it all, watching him with puzzled horror.

“So there it is,” he added. “And I know it’s a tough time to be telling you this, but there simply wasn’t any other way. Of course, I’ll give you money and see that you’re taken care of. But there really shouldn’t be any problem. I hope not, in any case. It wouldn’t be very good for my job.”

Her first instinct was not to believe any of it. She thought that perhaps she’d imagined the whole thing. Perhaps, if she acted as though she had not heard him, she would find out that none of it had ever happened.

“I’ll fix some supper,” she whispered. When she walked across the room, she couldn’t feel her feet touching

the floor. She couldn't feel anything except a slight sickness. She did everything without thinking. She went downstairs to the freezer and took hold of the first object she found. 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.

All right, then, they would have lamb for supper. She carried it upstairs, held the thin end with both her hands. She went into the living room, saw him standing by the window with his back to her, and stopped.

"I've already told you," he said, "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 might as well have hit him with a steel bar.

She stepped back, waiting, and the strange thing was that he remained standing there for at least four or five seconds. Then he crashed onto the carpet.

The violence of the crash, the noise, the small table overturning helped to bring her out of the shock. She came out slowly, feeling cold and surprised, and she stood for a few minutes, looking at the body, still holding the piece of meat tightly with both hands.

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

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 what the punishment would be. It made no difference to her. In fact, it would be a relief. On the other hand, what about the baby? What were the laws about murderers with unborn children? Did they kill them both—mother and child? Did they wait until the baby was born? What did they do? Mary Maloney didn't know and she wasn't prepared to take a chance.

She carried the meat into the kitchen, put it into a pan, turned on the oven, and put the pan inside. Then she washed her hands, ran upstairs, sat down in front of the mirror, fixed her makeup, and tried to smile.

The smile was rather peculiar. She tried again. "Hello, Sam," she said brightly, aloud. The voice sounded peculiar, too. "I want some potatoes, Sam. Yes, and perhaps a can of beans." That was better. Both the smile and the voice sounded better now. She practiced them several times more. Then she ran downstairs, took her coat, and went out the back door, through the garden into the street.

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

"Good evening, Mrs. Maloney. How are you?"

"I want some potatoes, please, Sam. Yes, and perhaps a can of beans, too. Patrick's decided he's tired and he doesn't want to eat out tonight," she told him. "We usually go out on Thursdays, you know, and now I don't have any vegetables in the house."

"Then how about some meat, Mrs. Maloney?" asked the grocer.

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

"Do you want these potatoes, Mrs. Maloney?"

"Oh, yes, they'll be fine. Two pounds, please."

"Anything else?" The grocer turned his head to one side, looking at her. "How about dessert? What are you going to give him for dessert? How about a nice piece of cake? I know he likes cake."

"Perfect," she said, "He loves it."

And when she had bought and paid for everything, she gave her brightest smile and said, "Thank you, Sam. Good night."

*And now*, she told herself as she hurried back home, *you are returning to your husband and he was waiting for his supper*. She had to cook it well and make it taste as good as possible, because the poor man was tired; and if she found anything unusual or terrible when she got home, then it would be a shock and she would have to react with grief and horror. Of course, she was not expecting to find anything unusual at home. She was just going home with the vegetables on Thursday evening to cook dinner for her husband.

*That's the way*, she told herself. *Do everything normally. Keep things absolutely natural and there'll be no need for acting at all*. As she entered the kitchen by the back door, she was quietly singing to herself.

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

She put the package on the table and went into the living room; and when she saw him lying there on the floor, it really was a shock. All the old love for him came back to her, and she ran over to him, knelt down beside him, and began to cry hard. 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 quickly! Patrick's dead!"

"Who's speaking?"

“Mrs. Maloney, Mrs. Patrick Maloney.”

“Do you mean that Patrick’s dead?”

“I think so,” she cried, “He’s lying on the floor and I think he’s dead.”

“We’ll be there immediately,” the man said.

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 police station. She fell into Jack Noonan’s arms, crying uncontrollably. He put her gently into a chair.

“Is he dead?” she cried.

“I’m afraid he is. What happened?”

In a few words she told her story about going to the grocer and coming back, when she found him on the floor. While she was crying and talking, Noonan found some dried blood on the dead man’s head. He hurried to the phone.

Some other men began to arrive—a doctor, two detectives, a police photographer, and a man who knew about fingerprints. The detectives kept asking her a lot of questions. They always treated her kindly. She told them how she’d put the meat into the oven—“it’s there now”—and how she had gone to the grocer’s for vegetables and how she came back to find him lying on the floor.

The two detectives were exceptionally nice to her. They searched the house. Sometimes, Jack Noonan spoke to her gently. He told her that her husband had been killed by a blow to the back of the head. They were looking for the weapon. The murderer might have taken it with him, but he might have thrown it away or hidden it. “It’s the old story,” he said. “Get the weapon, and you’ve got the murderer.”

Later, one of the detectives sat down beside her. Did she know, he asked, of anything in the house that could have been used as a weapon? Would she look around to see if anything was missing?

The search went on. It began to get late—it was nearly nine o’clock. The men searching the rooms were getting tired. “Jack,” she said, “Would you like a drink? You must be extremely tired.”

“Well,” he answered, “It’s not allowed by police rules, but since you’re a friend.”

She made them drinks and they stood around with drinks in their hands. The detectives felt uncomfortable and they tried to say cheering things to her. Jack Noonan walked into the kitchen, came out quickly, and said, “Look, Mrs. Maloney. Did you know that your oven is still on, and the meat is still inside?”

“Oh,” she said, “So it is! I’d better turn it off.” She returned with tearful eyes. “Would you do me a favor? Here you all are, all good friends of Patrick’s, and you’re helping to catch the man who killed him. You must be very hungry by now because it’s long past your suppertime, and I know that Patrick would never forgive me if I let you stay in the house without offering you anything to eat. Why don’t you eat up the lamb in the oven?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Noonan said.

“Please,” she begged, “Personally, I couldn’t eat a thing, but it’d be a favor to me if you ate it up. Then you can go on with your work.”

The detectives hesitated, but they were hungry, and in the end, they went into the kitchen and helped themselves to supper. The woman stayed where she was and listened to them through the open door. She could hear them speaking among themselves, and their voices were thick because their mouths were full of meat.

“Have some more, Charlie.”

“No, we’d better not finish it.”

“She *wants* us to finish it. She said we ought to eat it up.”

“That’s a big bar the murderer must have used to hit poor Patrick. The doctor says the back of his head was broken to pieces.”

“That’s why the weapon should be easy to find.”

“Exactly what I say.”

“Whoever did it, he can’t carry a weapon that big around with him.”

“Personally, I think the weapon is somewhere near the house.”

“It’s probably right under our noses. What do you think, Jack?”

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