

Lamb to the Slaughter

1953/Roald Dahl

Wife kills husband with frozen leg of lamb, then disposes of the 'weapon' by feeding it to the cops. Serviceable-enough Dahl offering, though Lambiase questioned whether a professional housewife could successfully cook a leg of lamb in the manner described – i.e., without thawing, seasoning or marinade. Wouldn't this result in tough, unevenly cooked meat? My business isn't cooking (or crime), but if you dispute this detail, the whole story begins to unravel. Despite this reservation, it makes the cut because of a girl I know who loved James and the Giant Peach once upon a time.

– A. J. F.

On the ferry from Hyannis to Alice Island, Amelia Loman paints her nails yellow and, while waiting for them to dry, skims her predecessor's notes. 'Island Books, approximately \$350,000 per annum in sales, the better portion of that in the summer months to folks on holiday,' Harvey Rhodes reports. 'Six hundred square feet of selling space. No full-time employees other than owner. Very small children's section. Fledgling online presence. Poor community outreach. Inventory emphasizes the literary, which is good for us, but Fikry's tastes are very specific, and without Nic, he can't be counted on to hand-sell. Luckily for him, Island's the only game in town.' Amelia yawns – she's nursing a slight hang-over – and wonders if one persnickety little bookstore will be worth such a long trip. By the time her nails have hardened, her relentlessly bright-sided nature has kicked in: *Of course it's worth it!* Her specialty is persnickety little bookstores and the particular breed that runs them. Her talents also include multi-tasking, selecting the right

wine at dinner (and the coordinating skill, tending friends who've had too much to drink), houseplants, strays and other lost causes.

As she steps off the ferry, her phone rings. She doesn't recognize the number – none of her friends use their phones as phones any more. Still, she is glad for the diversion and she doesn't want to become the kind of person who thinks that good news can only come from calls one was already expecting and callers one already knows. The caller turns out to be Boyd Flanagan, her third online dating failure, who had taken her to the circus about six months back.

'I tried sending you a message a few weeks ago,' he says. 'Did you get it?'

She tells him that she recently switched jobs so her devices have been screwed up. 'Also, I've been rethinking the whole idea of online dating. Like whether it's really for me.'

Boyd doesn't seem to hear that last part. 'Would you want to go out again?' he asks.

Re: their date. For a time, the novelty of the circus had distracted from the fact that they had nothing in common. By the end of dinner, the greater truth of their incompatibility had been revealed. Perhaps it

should have been obvious from their inability to reach consensus on an appetizer or from his main-course admission that he disliked ‘old things’ – antiques, houses, dogs, people. Still, Amelia had not allowed herself to be certain until dessert, when she’d asked him about the book that had had the greatest influence on his life, and he’d replied *Principles of Accounting, Part II*.

Gently, she tells him no, she would rather not go out again.

She can hear Boyd breathing, fluttery and irregular. She worries that he might be crying. ‘Are you all right?’ she asks.

‘Don’t patronize me.’

Amelia knows she should hang up, but she doesn’t. Some part of her wants the story. What is the point of bad dates if not to have amusing anecdotes for your friends? ‘Excuse me?’

‘You’ll notice I didn’t call you right away, Amelia,’ he says. ‘I didn’t call you because I had met someone better, and when that didn’t work out, I decided to give you a second chance. So don’t be thinking you’re superior. You’ve got a decent smile, I’ll give you that, but your teeth are too big and so is your ass and you’re not twenty-five any more even if you drink like you are. You

shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth.' The gift horse begins to cry. 'I'm sorry. I'm really sorry.'

'It's fine, Boyd.'

'What's wrong with me? The circus was fun, right? And I'm not so bad.'

'You were great. The circus was very creative.'

'But there must be a reason you don't like me. Be honest.'

At this point, there are many reasons not to like him. She picks one. 'Do you remember when I said I worked in publishing and you said you weren't much of a reader?'

'You're a snob,' he concludes.

'About some things, I suppose I am. Listen, Boyd, I'm working. I have to go.' Amelia hangs up the phone. She is not vain about her looks and she certainly doesn't value the opinion of Boyd Flanagan, who hadn't really been talking to her anyway. She is just his most recent disappointment. She has had disappointments, too.

She is thirty-one years old and she thinks she should have met someone by now.

And yet . . .

Amelia the bright-sider believes it is better to be alone than to be with someone who doesn't share your sensibilities and interests. (*It is, right?*)

Her mother likes to say that novels have ruined Amelia for real men. This observation insults Amelia because it implies that she only reads books with classically romantic heroes. She does not mind the occasional novel with a romantic hero but her reading tastes are far more varied than that. Furthermore, she adores Humbert Humbert as a character while accepting the fact that she wouldn't really want him for a life partner, a boyfriend, or even a casual acquaintance. She feels the same way about Holden Caulfield, and Misters Rochester and Darcy.

The sign over the porch of the purple Victorian cottage is faded, and Amelia nearly walks past it.

ISLAND BOOKS

Alice Island's Exclusive Provider
of Fine Literary Content since 1999
No Man Is an Island; Every Book Is a World

Inside, a teenager minds the till while reading the new Alice Munro collection. 'Oh, how is that one?' Amelia asks. Amelia adores Munro, but aside from vacation, she rarely has time to read books that aren't on the list.

'It's for school,' the girl replies, as if that settles the question.

Amelia introduces herself as the sales rep from Knightley Press, and the teenager, without looking up from the page, points vaguely to the back. ‘A.J.’s in his office.’

Precarious stacks of Advance Reading Copies (ARCs) and galleys line the hallway, and Amelia feels the usual flash of despair. The tote bag that is embossing her shoulder has several additions for A.J.’s piles and a catalogue filled with other books for her to pitch. She never lies about the books on her list. She never says she loves a book if she doesn’t. She can usually find something positive to say about a book or, failing that, the cover or, failing that, the author or, failing that, the author’s website. *And that’s why they pay me the big bucks*, Amelia occasionally jokes to herself. She makes \$37,000 per year plus the possibility of bonuses, though no one who does her job has made a bonus for a very long time.

The door to A. J. Fikry’s office is closed. Amelia is halfway to it when the sleeve of her sweater catches on one of the stacks, and one hundred books, maybe more, crash to the ground with a mortifying thunder. The door opens, and A. J. Fikry looks from the wreckage to the dirty-blond giantess, who is frantically trying to repile the books. ‘Who the hell are you?’

‘Amelia Loman.’ She stacks ten more tomes and half of them tumble down.

‘Leave it,’ A.J. commands. ‘There’s an order to these things. You are not helping. Please leave.’

Amelia stands. She is at least four inches taller than A.J. ‘But we have a meeting.’

‘We have no meeting,’ A.J. says.

‘*We do*,’ Amelia insists. ‘I e-mailed you last week about the winter list. You said it was fine for me to come by either Thursday or Friday afternoon. I said I’d come on Thursday.’ The e-mail exchange had been brief, but she knows it was not fiction.

‘You’re a rep?’

Amelia nods, relieved.

‘What publisher again?’

‘Knightley.’

‘Knightley Press is Harvey Rhodes,’ A.J. replies. ‘When you e-mailed me last week, I thought you were Harvey’s assistant or something.’

‘I’m Harvey’s replacement.’

A.J. sighs heavily. ‘What company has Harvey gone to?’

Harvey is dead, and for a second Amelia considers making a bad joke casting the afterlife as a sort of

company and Harvey as an employee in it. ‘He’s dead,’ she says flatly. ‘I thought you would have heard.’ Most of her accounts had already heard. Harvey had been a legend, as much as a sales rep can be a legend. ‘There was an obituary in the ABA newsletter and maybe one in *Publishers Weekly*, too,’ she says by way of apology.

‘I don’t much follow publishing news,’ A.J. says. He takes off his thick black glasses and then spends a long time wiping the frames.

‘I’m sorry if it’s a shock to you.’ Amelia puts her hand on A.J.’s arm, and he shakes her off.

‘What do I care? I barely knew the man. I saw him three times a year. Not enough to call him a friend. And every time I saw him, he was trying to sell me something. This is not friendship.’

Amelia can tell that A.J. is in no mood to be pitched the winter list. She should offer to come back some other day. But then she thinks of the two-hour drive to Hyannis and the eighty-minute boat ride to Alice and the ferry schedule, which becomes more irregular after October. ‘Since I’m here,’ Amelia says, ‘would you mind if we went through Knightley’s winter titles?’

A.J.’s office is a closet. It has no windows, no pictures on the wall, no family photos on the desk, no knick-

knacks, no escape. The office has books, inexpensive metal shelves like the kind for a garage, a filing cabinet and an ancient, possibly twentieth-century, desktop computer. A.J. does not offer her a drink, and although Amelia is thirsty, she doesn't ask for one. She clears a chair of books and sits.

Amelia launches into the winter list. It's the smallest list of the year, both in size and expectations. A few big (or at least promising) debuts, but other than that it is filled with the books for which the publisher has the lowest commercial hopes. Despite this, Amelia often likes the 'winters' the best. They are the underdogs, the sleepers, the long shots. (It is not too much of a stretch to point out that this is how she sees herself, too.) She leaves for last her favourite book, a memoir written by an eighty-year-old man, a lifelong bachelor who married at the age of seventy-eight. His bride died two years after the wedding at the age of eighty-three. Cancer. According to his bio, the writer worked as a science reporter for various midwestern newspapers, and the prose is precise, funny, not at all maudlin. Amelia had cried uncontrollably on the train from New York to Providence. Amelia knows *The Late Bloomer* is a small book and that the description sounds more than a little

clichéd, but she feels sure other people will love it if they give it a chance. In Amelia's experience, most people's problems would be solved if they would only give more things a chance.

Amelia is halfway through describing *The Late Bloomer* when A.J. puts his head on the desk.

'Is something wrong?' Amelia asks.

'This is not for me,' A.J. says.

'Just try the first chapter.' Amelia is pushing the galley into his hand. 'I know the subject matter could be incredibly corny, but when you see how it's writ—'

He cuts her off. 'This is not for me.'

'Okay, so I'll tell you about something else.'

A.J. takes a deep breath. 'You seem like a nice enough young woman, but your predecessor . . . The thing is, Harvey knew my tastes. He had the same taste as me.'

Amelia sets the galley on the desk. 'I'd like the chance to get to know your tastes,' she says, feeling a bit like a character in a porno.

He mutters something under his breath. She thinks it sounds like *What's the point?* but she isn't sure.

Amelia closes the Knightley catalogue. 'Mr Fikry, please just tell me what you like.'

'*Like,*' he repeats with distaste. 'How about I tell you

what I don't like? I do not like postmodernism, post-apocalyptic settings, post-mortem narrators or magic realism. I rarely respond to supposedly clever formal devices, multiple fonts, pictures where they shouldn't be – basically, gimmicks of any kind. I find literary fiction about the Holocaust or any other major world tragedy to be distasteful – non-fiction only, please. I do not like genre mash-ups à la the literary detective novel or the literary fantasy. Literary should be literary, and genre should be genre, and crossbreeding rarely results in anything satisfying. I do not like children's books, especially ones with orphans, and I prefer not to clutter my shelves with young adult. I do not like anything over four hundred pages or under one hundred fifty pages. I am repulsed by ghostwritten novels by reality television stars, celebrity picture books, sports memoirs, movie tie-in editions, novelty items and – I imagine this goes without saying – vampires. I rarely stock debuts, chick lit, poetry or translations. I would prefer not to stock series, but the demands of my pocketbook require me to. For your part, you needn't tell me about the “next big series” until it is ensconced on the *New York Times* Best Sellers list. Above all, Ms Loman, I find slim literary memoirs about little old men whose little old wives have

died from cancer to be absolutely intolerable. No matter how well written the sales rep claims they are. No matter how many copies you promise I'll sell on Mother's Day.'

Amelia blushes, though she is angry more than embarrassed. She agrees with some of what A.J. has said, but his manner is unnecessarily insulting. Knightley Press doesn't even sell half of that stuff anyway. She studies him. He is older than Amelia but not by much, not by more than ten years. He is too young to like so little. 'What *do* you like?' she asks.

'Everything else,' he says. 'I will also admit to an occasional weakness for short-story collections. Customers never want to buy them though.'

There is only one short-story collection on Amelia's list, a debut. Amelia hasn't read the whole thing, and time dictates that she probably won't, but she liked the first story. An American sixth-grade class and an Indian sixth-grade class participate in an international pen-pal programme. The narrator is an Indian kid in the American class who keeps feeding comical misinformation about Indian culture to the Americans. She clears her throat, which is still terribly dry. '*The Year Bombay Became Mumbai*. I think it will have special int—'

‘No,’ he says.

‘I haven’t even told you what it’s about yet.’

‘Just no.’

‘But why?’

‘If you’re honest with yourself, you’ll admit that you’re only telling me about it because I’m partially Indian and you think this will be my special interest. Am I right?’

Amelia imagines smashing the ancient computer over his head. ‘I’m telling you about this because you said you liked short stories! And it’s the only one on my list. And for the record’ – here, she lies – ‘it’s completely wonderful from start to finish. Even if it is a debut.

‘And do you know what else? I love debuts. I love discovering something new. It’s part of the whole reason I do this job.’ Amelia rises. Her head is pounding. Maybe she does drink too much? Her head is pounding and her heart is, too. ‘Do you want my opinion?’

‘Not particularly,’ he says. ‘What are you, twenty-five?’

‘Mr Fikry, this is a lovely store, but if you continue in this this this’ – as a child, she stuttered and it occasionally returns when she is upset; she clears her throat – ‘this backward way of thinking, there won’t be an Island Books before too long.’

Amelia sets *The Late Bloomer* along with the winter catalogue on his desk. She trips over the books in the hallway as she leaves.

The next ferry doesn't depart for another hour so she takes her time walking back through town. Outside a Bank of America, a bronze plaque commemorates the summer Herman Melville had spent there, back when the building had been the Alice Inn. She holds out her phone and takes a picture of herself with the plaque. Alice is a nice enough place, but she imagines she won't have reason to be back anytime soon.

She texts her boss in New York: *Doesn't look like there'll be any orders from Island.* ☹️

The boss replies: *Don't fret. Only a little account, and Island does the bulk of its ordering in anticipation of the summer when the tourists are there. The guy who runs the place is weird, and Harvey always had better luck selling the spring/summer list. You will, too.*

At six o'clock, A.J. tells Molly Klock to leave. 'How's the new Munro?' he asks.

She groans. 'Why does everyone keep asking me that today?' She is only referring to Amelia, but Molly likes to speak in extremes.

‘I suppose because you’re reading it.’

Molly groans again. ‘Okay. The people are, I dunno, too human sometimes.’

‘I think that’s rather the point with Munro,’ he says.

‘Dunno. Prefer the old stuff. See you on Monday.’

Something will have to be done about Molly, A.J. thinks as he flips the sign to CLOSED. Aside from liking to read, Molly is truly a terrible bookseller. But she’s only a part-timer, and it’s such a bother to train someone new, and at least she doesn’t steal. Nic had hired her so she must have seen something in the surly Miss Klock. Maybe next summer A.J. will work up the energy to fire Molly.

A.J. kicks the remaining customers out (he is most annoyed by an organic chemistry study group who have bought nothing but have been camped out in magazines since four – he’s pretty sure one of them clogged up the toilet, too), then deals with the receipts, a task as depressing as it sounds. Finally, he goes upstairs to the attic apartment where he lives. He pops a carton of frozen vindaloo into the microwave. Nine minutes, per the box’s instructions. As he’s standing there, he thinks of the girl from Knightley. She had looked like a time traveller from 1990s Seattle with her

anchor-printed galoshes and her floral grandma dress and her fuzzy beige sweater and her shoulder-length hair that looked like it had been cut in the kitchen by her boyfriend. Girlfriend? Boyfriend, he decides. He thinks of Courtney Love when she was married to Kurt Cobain. The tough rose mouth says *No one can hurt me*, but the soft blue eyes say *Yes you can and you probably will*. And he had made that big dandelion of a girl cry. *Well done, A.J.*

The scent of vindaloo is growing stronger, but seven and a half minutes remain on the clock.

He wants a task. Something physical but not strenuous.

He goes into the basement to collapse book boxes with his box cutter. Knife. Flatten. Stack. Knife. Flatten. Stack.

A.J. regrets his behaviour with the rep. It hadn't been her fault. Someone should have told him that Harvey Rhodes had died.

Knife. Flatten. Stack.

Someone probably *had* told him. A.J. only skims his e-mail, never answers his phone. Had there been a funeral? Not that A.J. would have attended anyway. He had barely known Harvey Rhodes. *Obviously*.

Knife. Flatten. Stack.

And yet . . . He had spent hours with the man over the last half-dozen years. They had only ever discussed books but what, in this life, is more personal than books?

Knife. Flatten. Stack.

And how rare is it to find someone who shares your tastes? The one real fight they'd ever had was over David Foster Wallace. It was around the time of Wallace's suicide. A.J. had found the reverent tone of the eulogies to be insufferable. The man had written a decent (if indulgent and overlong) novel, a few modestly insightful essays and not much else.

'*Infinite Jest* is a masterpiece,' Harvey had said.

'*Infinite Jest* is an endurance contest. You manage to get through it and you have no choice but to say you like it. Otherwise, you have to deal with the fact that you just wasted weeks of your life,' A.J. had countered. 'Style, no substance, my friend.'

Harvey's face had reddened as he leaned over the desk. 'You say that about any writer who was born in the same decade as you!'

Knife. Flatten. Stack. Tie.

By the time he gets back upstairs, the vindaloo is cold again. If he reheats it in that plastic dish, he'll probably end up with cancer.

He takes the plastic tray to the table. The first bite is burning. The second bite is frozen. Papa Bear's vindaloo and Baby Bear's vindaloo. He throws the tray against the wall. How little he had meant to Harvey and how much Harvey had meant to him.

The difficulty of living alone is that any mess he makes he is forced to clean up himself.

No, the real difficulty of living alone is that no one cares if you are upset. No one cares why a thirty-nine-year-old man has thrown a plastic tub of vindaloo across a room like a toddler. He pours himself a glass of Merlot. He spreads a tablecloth on the table. He walks into the living room. He unlocks a climate-controlled glass case and removes *Tamerlane* from it. Back in the kitchen, he sets *Tamerlane* across the table from him, props it against the chair where Nic used to sit.

'Cheers, you piece of crap,' he says to the slim volume.

He finishes the glass. He pours himself another, and after he finishes that he promises himself that he's going to read a book. Maybe an old favourite like *Old School* by Tobias Wolff, though his time would certainly be better spent on something new. What had that dopey rep been going on about? *The Late Bloomer* – ugh. He had meant

what he said. There is nothing worse than cutesy memoirs about widowers. Especially if one is a widower as A.J. has been for the last twenty-one months. The rep had been new – not her fault that she didn't know about his boring personal tragedy. God, he misses Nic. Her voice and her neck and even her armpits. They had been stubbly as a cat's tongue and, at the end of the day, smelled like milk just before it curdles.

Three glasses later, he passes out at the table. He is only five foot seven inches tall, 140 pounds, and he hasn't even had frozen vindaloo to fortify him. No dent will be made in his reading pile tonight.

'Ajay,' Nic whispers. 'Go to bed.'

At last, he is dreaming. The point of all the drinking is to arrive in this place.

Nic, his drunken-dream ghost wife, helps him to his feet.

'You're a disgrace, nerd. You know that?'

He nods.

'Frozen vindaloo and five-dollar red wine.'

'I am respecting the time-honoured traditions of my heritage.'

He and the ghost shuffle to the bedroom.

‘Congratulations, Mr Fikry. You’re turning into a bona fide alcoholic.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he says. She lowers him into the bed.

Her brown hair is short, gamine-style. ‘You cut your hair,’ he says. ‘Weird.’

‘You were awful to that girl today.’

‘It was about Harvey.’

‘Obviously,’ she says.

‘I don’t like it when people who used to know you die.’

‘That’s why you won’t fire Molly Klock, too?’

He nods.

‘You can’t go on like this.’

‘I can,’ A.J. says. ‘I have been. I will.’

She kisses him on the forehead. ‘I guess what I’m saying is I don’t want you to.’

She is gone.

The accident hadn’t been anyone’s fault. She’d been driving an author home after an afternoon event. She’d probably been speeding to catch the last automobile ferry back to Alice. Possibly she had swerved to avoid hitting a deer. Possibly Massachusetts roads in winter. There was no way to know. The cop at the hospital asked if she’d been suicidal. ‘No,’ A.J. said. ‘Nothing

like that.’ She had been two months pregnant. They hadn’t told anyone yet. There had been disappointments before. Standing in the waiting room outside the morgue, he rather wished they *had* told people. At least there would have been a brief period of happiness before this longer period of . . . He did not yet know what to call *this*. ‘No, she was not suicidal.’ A.J. paused. ‘She was a terrible driver who thought she wasn’t.’

‘Yes,’ said the cop. ‘It wasn’t anyone’s fault.’

‘People like to say that,’ A.J. replies. ‘But it *was* someone’s fault. It was hers. What a stupid thing for her to do. What a stupid melodramatic thing for her to do. What a goddamn Danielle Steel move, Nic! If this were a novel, I’d stop reading right now. I’d throw it across the room.’

The cop (who was not much of a reader aside from the occasional Jeffery Deaver mass-market paperback while on vacation) tried to steer the conversation back to reality. ‘That’s right. You own the bookstore.’

‘My wife and I,’ A.J. replied without thinking. ‘Oh Christ, I just did that stupid thing where the character forgets that the spouse has died and he accidentally uses “we”. That’s such a cliché. Officer’ – he paused to read the cop’s badge – ‘Lambiase, you and I are characters in

a bad novel. Do you know that? How the heck did we end up here? You're probably thinking to yourself, *Poor bastard*, and tonight you'll hug your kids extra tight because that's what characters in these kinds of novels do. You know the kind of book I'm talking about, right? The kind of hotshot literary fiction that, like, follows some unimportant supporting character for a bit so it looks all Faulkneresque and expansive. Look how the author cares for the little people! The common man! How broad-minded he or she must be! Even your name. Officer Lambiase is the perfect name for a clichéd Massachusetts cop. Are you racist, Lambiase? Because your kind of character ought to be racist.'

'Mr Fikry,' Officer Lambiase had said. 'Is there anyone I can call for you?' He was a good cop, accustomed to the many ways the aggrieved can come undone. He set his hand on A.J.'s shoulder.

'Yes! Right on, Officer Lambiase, that's exactly what you're supposed to do in this moment! You're playing your part beautifully. Would you happen to know what the widower is supposed to do next?'

'Call someone,' Officer Lambiase said.

'Yes, that is probably right. I've already called my in-laws, though.' A.J. nodded. 'If this were a short story,

you and I would be done by now. A small ironic turn and out. That's why there's nothing more elegant in the prose universe than a short story, Officer Lambiase.

'If this were Raymond Carver, you'd offer me some meagre comfort and darkness would set in and all this would be over. But this . . . is feeling more like a novel to me after all. Emotionally, I mean. It will take me a while to get through it. Do you know?'

'I'm not sure that I do. I haven't read Raymond Carver,' Officer Lambiase said. 'I like Lincoln Rhyme. Do you know him?'

'The quadriplegic criminologist. Decent for genre writing. But have you read any short stories?' A.J. asked.

'Maybe in school. Fairy tales. Or, um, *The Red Pony*? I think I was supposed to read *The Red Pony*.'

'*That* is a novella,' A.J. said.

'Oh, sorry. I'm . . . Wait, there was one with a cop I remember from high school. Kind of a perfect crime thing, which I guess is why I remember it. This cop gets killed by his wife. The weapon is a frozen side of beef and then she serves it to the other—'

'"Lamb to the Slaughter".' A.J. said. 'The story's called "Lamb to the Slaughter" and the weapon is a leg of lamb.'

‘Yes, that’s it!’ The cop was delighted. ‘You know your stuff.’

‘It’s a very well-known piece,’ A.J. said. ‘My in-laws should be here any minute. I’m sorry about before when I referred to you as an “unimportant supporting character”. That was rude and for all we know, I am the “unimportant supporting character” in the grander saga of Officer Lambiase. A cop is a more likely protagonist than a bookseller. You, sir, are a genre.’

‘Hmmm,’ said Officer Lambiase. ‘You’re probably right at that. Going back to what we were talking about before. As a cop, my problem with the story is the timeline. Like, she puts the beef—’

‘Lamb.’

‘Lamb. So she kills the guy with the frozen lamb chop then she puts it in the oven to cook without even thawing it. I’m no Rachael Ray, but . . .’

Nic had begun to freeze by the time they had pulled her car out of the water, and in the morgue drawer her lips had been blue. The colour had reminded A.J. of the black lipstick she’d worn to the book party she’d thrown for the latest vampire whatever. He hadn’t cared for the idea of silly teenage girls prancing about Island in prom dresses, but Nic, who had actually *liked* that damned

vampire book and the woman who wrote it, insisted that a vampire prom was good for business and also fun. ‘You remember fun, right?’

‘Dimly,’ he had said. ‘Long ago, back before I was a bookseller, back when I had my weekends and my nights to myself, back when I read for pleasure, I recall that there was fun. So, dimly, dimly. Yes.’

‘Let me refresh your memory. Fun is having a smart, pretty, easy wife with whom you get to spend every working day.’

He could still picture her in that ridiculous black satin dress, her right arm draped around the porch column and her comely stained lips in a line. ‘Tragically, my wife has been turned into a vampire.’

‘You poor man.’ She crossed the porch and kissed him, leaving a lipstick trace like a bruise. ‘Your only move is to become a vampire, too. Don’t try to fight it. That’s the absolute worst thing you could do. You gotta be cool, nerd. Invite me in.’