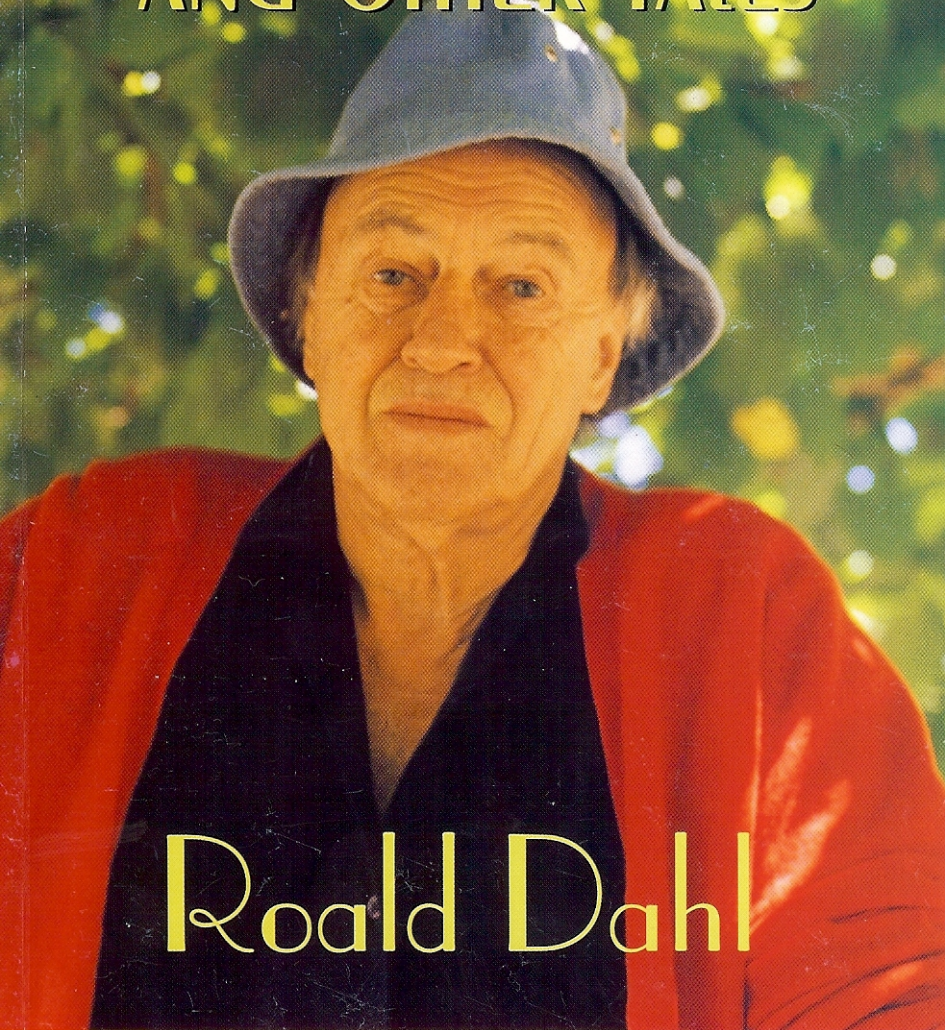




TASTE

AND OTHER TALES



Roald Dahl

PENGUIN READERS

*Taste
and Other Tales*

ROALD DAHL

Level 5

Selected and retold by Michael Caldon
Series Editors: Andy Hopkins and Jocelyn Potter

bottle, poured some iodine onto the cotton wool and began to rub it into both cuts. He kept one eye on Klausner, who was standing completely still with the axe in his hands, watching him.

'There you are,' the doctor said. 'It's done.'

Klausner came closer and carefully examined the two wounds in the tree. 'You'll come and look at the tree again tomorrow, won't you?'

'Oh yes,' the doctor said. 'Of course.'

'And put some more iodine on?'

'If necessary, yes.'

'Thank you, Doctor,' Klausner said. He dropped the axe, and smiled a wild, excited smile, and the doctor quickly went over to him and took him gently by the arm and said, 'Come on, we must go now,' and suddenly they were walking away, the two of them, walking silently, rather hurriedly across the park, over the road, back to the house.

The Leg of Lamb

The room was warm and clean, the curtains were closed, the two table lamps were lit — hers and the one by the empty chair opposite. On the table behind her there were two tall glasses, some bottles and a bucket of ice. Mary Maloney was waiting for her husband to come home from work.

Now and again she looked up at the clock, but without anxiety: she simply wanted to please herself with the thought that each minute that went by made it nearer the time when he would come. There was a slow, smiling quality about her, and about everything she did. The position of her head as she bent over her sewing was strangely peaceful. Her skin had a wonderful clearness, since there were only three more months before the birth of her child. Her mouth was soft 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, at the usual time, she heard the car tyres on the drive, the car door closing, the footsteps passing the window, the key turning in the lock. She stood up and went forward to kiss him as he came in.

'Hello, darling,' she said.

'Hello,' he answered.

She took his coat and hung it in the cupboard in the hall. 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, opposite, holding the tall glass with both his hands, and rolling it gently so that the ice knocked musically against the side.

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 happy to sit quietly, enjoying his company after the long hours alone in the house. She loved to feel the presence of this man and the male warmth that came out of him when they were alone together. She loved him for the way he sat loosely in a chair, for the way he came in through a door, or moved slowly across the room. She loved the distant 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 alcohol 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 emptied it in one swallow although there was still half of it left. She was not really watching him, but she knew what he had done because she heard the ice falling back against the bottom of the empty glass when he lowered his arm. He paused a moment, leaned forward in his chair, then he got up and went slowly over 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 new drink was a very strong one. She watched him as he began to drink.

'I think it's a shame,' she said, 'that when a policeman has as much experience as you have, they keep him walking around on his feet all day long.'

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

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

Her eyes waited for an answer, a smile, a little movement of his head, but he made no sign.

'Well,' she went on, 'I'll get you some bread and cheese first.'

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

She moved anxiously in her chair, her large eyes still watching his face. 'But you *must* have supper. I can easily do it here. I'd like to do it. We can have lamb. Or something else. Anything you want. Everything's in the freezer.'

'Forget it,' he said.

'But, darling, you *must* eat! I'll do it, 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 back slowly into the chair, watching him all the time with those large, confused eyes. He had finished the second drink and was looking down into the glass.

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

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

He had become completely still, and he kept his head down so that the light from the lamp beside him fell across the upper part of his face, leaving his chin and mouth in shadow. She noticed that 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 that the only thing to do is to tell you immediately. 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 in shock as he went further and further away from her with each word.

'So there it is,' he added. 'And I know it's rather a bad 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 looked after. But there needn't really be any problem. I hope not, in any case. It wouldn't be very good for my job.'

Her first reaction was not to believe any of it. She thought that perhaps he hadn't even spoken, that she herself had imagined the whole thing. Perhaps, if she went on with her normal life and acted as if she had not been listening, then later, when she 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 - except a slight sickness. She did everything without thinking. She went downstairs to the freezer, put her hand inside and took 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.

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 by the window with his back to her, and she stopped.

'I've already told you, haven't I?' 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 might just 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 to the floor.

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 strange, now, how clear her mind became all of a sudden. She began thinking very fast. As the wife of a policeman, she knew what the punishment 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 them 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.

She carried the meat into the kitchen, placed it in a roasting pan, turned the cooker on high, and put the pan inside. Then she washed her hands and ran upstairs to her bedroom. She sat down in front of the mirror, tidied her face and tried to smile. The smile looked rather strange. She tried again.

'Hello, Sam,' she said brightly, out loud.

The voice sounded strange, too.

'I want some potatoes please, Sam. Yes, and perhaps a can of beans.'

That was better. Both the smile and the voice sounded better now. She practised them several times more. Then she ran downstairs, took her coat, and went out of the back door, down the garden, into the street.

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

'Hello, Sam,' she said brightly, smiling at the man behind the counter.

'Good evening, Mrs Maloney. How are *you*?

'I want some potatoes please, Sam. Yes, and I think a can of beans.'

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

'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 haven't got any vegetables in the house.'

'Then how about meat, Mrs Maloney?'

'No, I've got meat, thanks - I've got a nice leg of lamb, from the freezer. I don't much like cooking it frozen, Sam, but I'm taking a chance on it this time. Do you think it'll be all right?'

'Personally,' the shopkeeper said, 'I don't believe it makes any difference. Do you want these potatoes here, Mrs Maloney?'

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

'Anything else?' The shopkeeper put his head on one side, looking at her pleasantly. 'How about afterwards? What are you going to give him afterwards?'

'Well — what would you suggest, Sam?'

The man looked quickly around his shop. 'How about a nice big piece of my cream cake? I know he likes that.'

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

And when it was all wrapped and she had paid, she put on her brightest smile and said, 'Thank you, Sam. Good night.'

'Good night, Mrs Maloney. And thank *you*!'

And now, she told herself as she hurried back, she was returning home to her husband and he was waiting for his supper. She must cook it well and make it taste as good as possible, because the poor man was tired; and if, when she entered the house, she found anything unusual or terrible, then naturally it would be a shock and she'd be crazy with grief. Of course, she wasn't *expecting* to find anything. She was just going home with the vegetables on Thursday evening to cook supper for her husband.

That's the way, she told herself. Do everything right and natural. Keep things completely natural and there'll be no need

for any acting at all. Therefore, when she entered the kitchen by the back door, she was quietly singing a little tune to herself and smiling.

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

She put the package down on the table and went 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 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 Maloney'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 that police station - and she fell right into Jack Noonan's arms, crying uncontrollably. He put her gently into a chair, then he went over to join the other policeman, who was called O'Malley. O'Malley was kneeling by the body.

'Is he dead?' she cried.

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

In a few words she told her story about going to the corner shop and, on her return, finding him on the floor. While she was talking, crying and talking, Noonan discovered some dried blood on the dead man's head. He showed it to O'Malley, who got up immediately and hurried to the phone.

Soon other men began to arrive. First a doctor came, then two more policemen, 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 beside the dead body, and the policemen kept asking her a lot of questions. But they always treated her kindly. She told her story again, this time right from the beginning. She said that Patrick had come in, she was sewing, and he had been too tired to go out for supper. She told them how she'd put the meat in the cooker — 'it's there now, cooking' — and how she'd slipped out to the corner shop for vegetables and how she had come back to find him lying on the floor.

'Which shop?' one of the policemen asked.

She told him, and he turned and whispered something to another policeman, who immediately went out into the street.

In fifteen minutes he was back with a page of notes, and there was more whispering, and through her crying she heard a few of the whispered phrases: '. . . acted quite normal . . . very cheerful . . . wanted to give him a good supper . . . beans . . . cream cake . . . impossible that she . . .'

After a while, the photographer and the doctor left and two other men came and took the body away. Then the fingerprint man went away. The others remained. They were extremely nice to her. Jack Noonan asked her if she would rather go somewhere else, to her sister's house perhaps.

No, she said. She didn't feel she could move even a yard at the moment. Would they mind very much if she just stayed where she was until she felt better? She didn't feel too well at the moment, she really didn't.

So they left her there while they searched the house. Occasionally, one of the men 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. The blow had been made with a heavy instrument, almost certainly a large piece of metal. They were looking for the weapon. The murderer might have taken it with him, but he might have thrown it away or hidden it somewhere in or near the house.

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

Later, one of them came up and sat beside her. Did she know, he asked, of anything in the house that could have been used as a weapon? Would she have a look around to see if anything was missing —• a very heavy tool, for example. She said that 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 drive outside. It began to get late — it was nearly nine o'clock. The four men searching the rooms seemed to be getting tired, and a little annoyed.

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

'Of course I'll give you a drink. Some of this?'

'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 extremely tired. Please do. You've been very good to me.'

'Well,' he answered. 'It's not strictly allowed, but I might take just a drop to keep me awake.'

One by one, the others came in and she persuaded them to have a drink, too. They stood around rather awkwardly with their drinks in their hands. They were uncomfortable in her presence and they tried to say cheering things to her. Jack Noonan wandered into the kitchen, came out quickly and said, 'Look, Mrs Maloney. Do you know that your cooker is still on, and the meat is still inside?'

'Oh,' she cried. 'So it is!'

'I'd better turn it off for you, hadn't I?'

'Will you do that, Jack? Thank you so much.'

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

'Yes?'

'Would you do something for me — you and the others?'

'We can try, Mrs Maloney.'

'Well,' she said. '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 supper time, and I know that Patrick would never forgive me if I allowed you to remain in the house without offering you something to eat. Why don't you eat up the lamb in the cooker? It'll be cooked just right by now.'

'I wouldn't dream of it,' Noonan said.

'Please,' she begged. 'Please eat it. Personally, I couldn't eat a thing. But it's all right for you. Then you can go on with your work again afterwards.'

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 and listened to them through the open door. She could hear them speaking to each other, 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 so. She won't eat it.'

'All right, then. Give me some more.'

'That's a big bar the murderer must have used to hit poor Patrick,' one of them was saying. 'The doctor says the back of his head was broken to pieces just like from a very heavy hammer.'

'That's why the weapon should be easy to find.'

'Exactly what I say.'

'Whoever did it, he's not going to carry a weapon like that around with him longer than necessary.'

'Personally, I think the weapon is somewhere in the house.'

'It's probably right under our noses. What do you think, Jack?'

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