

The Lamb

I

The small supermarket in Musselburgh is open until 10 p.m. and the staff look offended by me as I walk in at 9.35. I imagine how I must appear after eight hours in the car. I splashed my face with water in a service station near Durham and my hair has dried strangely. I am unkempt enough to present as a shoplifter.

I have parked towards the back of the supermarket by the cash machines, to remind myself to get some on the way out because the shops nearer the house prefer not to accept cards.

I spend a long time at the herbs. There's fresh ginger and the chillies and I wonder how I would go about making something with them. I put some lemon thyme in my trolley instead. Perhaps I will roast a chicken tomorrow. Or a couple of thighs. I'm not a good cook – I like thighs because when I forget them they don't dry out.

I always overdo it on the fruit – but it's hard not to feel excited. They have all different colours of plum from Kenya – yellow, orange, purple, red and black – and I put a carton of each in my trolley. That's thirty plums for me to eat in a week, which is only a little over four a day and feels like something I could accomplish. Two in the morning, two at night. If I were the kind of person who could preserve things,

I'd preserve a jar of each variety and just have them to look at. But they would grow a film of mould, like the time I made chilli olive oil and the bottle went black. I am missing some fundamental element of preservation. I suspect it's cleanliness. I move on, and though I try to think of something new and interesting to cook, by the time I get to the frozen aisle, I have spaghetti, tinned tomatoes and tinned clams. A box of eggs I will never use and some sliced brown bread and the herbs. None of it I want to eat tonight. But it is at least food that suggests a certain seriousness. I am the sort of woman who is here to work. Who is doing her family a favour, not the other way round. I am no longer the person who failed every day last June to get out of bed before midday. Who stopped going to work and seeing her friends and answering the phone, and had to be driven by her sister to the hospital when the breath stopped coming in and going out, and who could only make one long lowing noise. I did not spend seven days in a room with no edges, with a sign on the door that said *No Cutlery Whatsoever (including teaspoons!)*.

The tannoy announces that the store will be closing in five minutes and it feels a message to me in particular.

There is a woman in the frozen aisle, which I am only in because it marks the completion of my shopping trip. She has no trolley or basket even; she's looking at the choc ices. She picks out a box of four expensive mint ones that have a woman's mouth large and rude on the front cracking through the chocolate.

She has an unlit cigarette in her mouth, ready to go, big curly hair that has been teased and sprayed and she's wearing pink lipstick. She smiles at me, and says, 'Late-night ice cream?' and I feel so flustered I go red and then I laugh too loudly

and just say, ‘Plums.’ She smiles back and turns to leave. I’ll be hearing myself saying *plums* all night.

At the end of the frozen aisle is a display of Mr Freeze’s Jubbly orange ice lollies. When we were kids, Dad, in his best moods, when he wanted nothing more than to make Katherine and I laugh, would sing a song from the advert that was on TV when he was young, *lovely jubbly, lovely jubbly orange drink*. Why that was the thing that made us laugh the most is hard to pinpoint, but I think it had more to do with him wanting us to laugh, than the song itself. Even so, I am standing still because, like so many small things discovered every day, I am faced with never hearing that song in his voice again. I have forgotten the fucking chicken thighs and so I speed back to the meat fridge and all the nice chicken is gone, there’s only the stuff that has had an awful life and tastes of fish. I put a tin of sardines in my trolley, put the herbs back on the shelf. Pre-sliced Swiss cheese, a bar of chocolate and some celery, just for show.

There is only one till left open, a small queue of us trying to project that shopping this late is not usual for us. I flick through a magazine. There’s a moody image of a man thumbing his upper lip to show off either his cufflinks or his watch. He wrinkles his forehead in a way that is supposed to be sexy. And then opposite him, a pale stick of a girl with hair parted down the middle, lips painted into a red bow, a puppet at rest. She stares off into the distance, sad. She’s there to be looked at by the man with the cufflinks and the wrinkled brow, but she is not there to look back.

My mother’s voice in my head – *Why do all these women want to look like deer in the headlights? Why do all these men want to look like they laugh too loudly in public?*

I am glad that the time spent thinking about how other people will respond or not respond to my body and face has passed. I'm older than my mother somehow because at least she participated in her life at my age – she had a husband and children and then lost part of that and now lives as it seems she always meant to, alone and with her work. She's been working on poisonous fungi of France for nine months now. The only framed picture in my flat is one she gave me as a moving-in present three years ago, a fly agaric with a stag beetle meandering past it, for scale. It leans unhung in my bedroom. There is probably a house spider nestling behind it. My mother has found being alone a new beginning. Her house is tidy. She eats what she wants, when she wants: nothing for a day and then a dressed crab at eleven at night, or a bowl of frozen peas, uncooked, which she eats like peanuts for breakfast. I admire the singleness that she has embraced since Dad died. I think I could aspire to that, but without having to be widowed first.

Sometimes, though, it would be nice to fuck and to be fucked.

I look now and again online at single men and women, older than me, I always go older, not because I am looking for someone mature or experienced, but because the young have filters on their profiles to get rid of the elderly, which, at close to forty, I have become all of a sudden.

There have been a few matches: Steven from Harringay, fifty-six; Philip from Clapton, forty-nine; Isabella from Hampstead, sixty-two. And if they don't have filters, like Marco, Tooting, thirty-six, it is possibly because of some sort of fetish. My phone was low on memory, and so I deleted the app, I did it while my sister watched so that she could throw back her head and cluck in an exasperated way.

The woman at the till says ‘Good evening’, as if she is booking me in at a police station.

I am walking to my car with my small bag of food, when I see the woman with the ice creams is there, just outside the sliding doors. She is eating one and drumming her long fingernails on the packet with the other hand. My car is the only one in the car park. She must be waiting for someone to pick her up. I try not to catch her eye. ‘Hey!’ she calls. I smile but don’t make eye contact – is she going to try to engage me in conversation again? Should I explain the plums?

‘Hey!’ she says again. ‘Good to see you, hen! How are you?’ She seems to think we know each other.

Perhaps she wants money. Suddenly I feel very alone in the car park – the security guard has started to put the shutters down, and I glance back at him but he’s not looking.

‘Um, sorry, I’m not sure I know you,’ I say and start to walk quickly to the car – I won’t get cash out tonight.

‘Yes,’ she hisses, trotting to keep up with me, ‘but pretend that you do, there’s a man hiding behind your car.’ I stop and she bumps into me. I can’t see anyone by the car from where we’re standing, but the cash machines are lit brightly, which means everything around them is a deeper dark.

‘I got you an ice cream,’ she says, in the loud voice. She hands me one from her box. I take it automatically.

‘What do we do? We should get the security guard.’ As I whisper the light at the front of the supermarket goes out.

I still don’t see anyone there, and have a sudden and bad feeling. Who goes shopping that late at night, no car, just to buy choc ices? It’s not normal behaviour. Get to your car, I think, shake this woman off, give back her ice cream, which

is making the whole situation much more difficult to navigate, physically and mentally. I push the button to pop open my boot, and the woman says, ‘It’s been so long, I haven’t seen ye since school – what’ve ye been up to?’

I open my mouth in confusion and as I fumble for an answer, remembering as I do that it doesn’t matter, we didn’t go to school together, a figure rises up out of the dark from the passenger side of my car, and all I can see is that his hand is in the pocket of his jacket and he is wearing dark clothes and is away from us quickly without running. I stand there watching him go, my heart beating in my throat. I have the terrible feeling that I might cry.

‘Feckin creep,’ she says, and opens another ice cream.

‘Should we tell someone?’ I say.

‘Tell them what? There’s a man being creepy? There are men being creepy all over the place, hen. Believe me.’

‘Um, look, thanks so much, I’m sorry, I didn’t know what was going on.’

‘Hey, no drama,’ she says.

‘Here’s your ice cream back,’ I say.

‘Ha!’ she says. ‘You keep it, hen – I got two more right here.’ She bites into the new one and the chocolate cracks loudly. ‘So, take care,’ she says and turns to walk down the pathway towards the main road.

‘Wait. What if he comes back?’ I say. ‘Can I give you a lift somewhere?’ It is unlike me to offer a lift at any time of day, let alone in the dark, to a complete stranger, but it is out of my mouth before I can stop it.

The woman turns round, smiles.

‘You know what? That’d be great.’

Inside the car, I wonder what I am doing.

‘You mind?’ she asks, gesturing to her ice cream.

‘Not at all.’

We drive out of the car park and up the hill. ‘I always have to have ice cream when I’m stoned, you know.’

She directs me, and tells me where she is from, and I forget immediately what she says.

‘It’s pretty shitty,’ she says, ‘but then I’m from a pretty shitty part of it.’

I nod. I can’t think of a single question. There are no street lamps as we head towards the coast, and my high beams haven’t worked in years. I expect to see something slinking after us, its eyes lit red in the headlights. She seems completely unaffected by the incident in the car park. I feel as homesick as an eleven-year-old.

‘What do you do?’ she asks.

‘Freelance stuff.’ I try to make cleaning out my great-aunt and grandmother’s house sound like a job. ‘Archival stuff, mostly. I’m just up for the weekends, about to start a new project.’ I clear my throat for a long time.

‘Cool!’ she says. ‘Art?’

‘Yes. And other stuff.’

I have said stuff too many times.

‘That’s cool. I like art, me.’

There is a long, long silence.

‘How did you get into that?’

‘I did my degree in history of art,’ which is almost true, I did the first year anyway, and it was so long ago that any influence it might have had on the direction my life has gone in feels only tangential. ‘My mother’s a botanical artist, so that sort of thing is in the family.’ Except that it’s not really. I almost tell her my father has just died, to try and gain some ground, as though it happened that morning and actually it’s incredible that I’m buggering on, but no one accepts that now

that two years have passed. *It's time to move on*, they may not say it but you see it on their faces.

'Like, plants and that?'

'Yes, well, fungi really.'

'Oh aye,' she says. And then the silence is back.

I realise too late that I should ask what she does; the silence has ended that strand of conversation. A light rain begins to fall.

'I'm Maggie. Not short for anything. Just Maggie,' she says.

'Viv. For Viviane.'

'I've never met a Viviane before,' she says like it genuinely surprises her. I feel the need to elaborate.

'My mother said she liked the name because it sounds sharp.'

'Ha!' she says. 'My mother thought Maggie sounded like a fluffy chick.'

I have nowhere to go, nothing to say. I wish I could stop bringing up my mother.

On the coastal road, by the golf course, she tells me to stop.

'I walk from here. Nice stroll under the stars.'

'Are you sure?'

She puts out her hand and we shake like we've completed some kind of business.

'See y'around, hen.' There are no other cars on the road, and I watch her disappear down the slope towards the beach, her gait loose and comfortable like she walks to music. Somewhere, out in the darkness, I can hear waves breaking against the Bass Rock though I cannot see it.