

LBPS

We know
books

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THE LAMB

Lucy Rose

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One

On my fourth birthday, I plucked six severed fingers from the shower drain.

The tub yellowed near the plughole and there was a peachy hue up the curve of the bath. It was the same colour as my skin. Milky and a little buttery, like the outer edges of a bruise. Mildew and dried-up water peppered the glass screen. Black mould had crawled up the plaster and between the grout. The bathroom was small and the dark corners harboured cobwebs, rings of damp and hairline cracks.

I wanted to lick the black speckles of mould littered along the wall. I hoped it would taste as it smelt. Like musty brambles or rain splashing in a muddy puddle.

The first finger I picked up had purple polish flaking away from its nail. The second was clean of cosmetics, but it was short, bitten at, and uneven along its ridge. My fingertip followed the edge of the nail. When I looked down at the plughole, I realised the rest of the

fingers were too far gone to tell anything about who they'd once been attached to.

All I knew is that, at some point along the way, strangers had come to our homestead and Mama had gladly taken them in. There had been at least one girl, wearing purple nail polish, and a clean-cut boy who nibbled at his fingernails when he was nervous.

The boy was especially nervous around Mama, wide-eyed and alert. They had strayed too far from the main road and ended up here, tangled up among the knotted hair gathered in our shower drain.

The girl liked Mama very much. Before she was reduced to just a couple of fingers at my feet, Mama plied her with wine and they danced to old cassettes in the living room until it was dark.

We'd mixed the wine with mashed-up hemlock. Just enough to make a stray woozy, but not enough to harm us when we later consumed them. Mama told me it was a hex – one that took them to slumber, calm and quiet. It made their lungs slow to a pulse.

The boy sat, taking up very little space. He watched as Mama slowly took the girl's clothes off. It started with one of Mama's bony fingers sliding beneath a spaghetti strap and plucking it from the girl's shoulder. Then she left a trail of messy lipstick kisses across the girl's collarbone, probably imagining just how she would taste after being seared. Mama told me she loved the strays she took, and this is how she showed them.

The girl danced as Mama stripped her down one piece of clothing at a time. Their eyes were locked. That was

when I knew Mama was hungry. She told me a good meal had to feel happy and whole before it was consumed, otherwise the meat would taste bad.

We are what we eat, Mama always said. I wondered if it was worth the fuss of making them feel loved if we were only going to pull them apart in the end.

I put the severed finger with the purple nail polish back down onto the drain. Following the freckles of black mould along the wall, I traced my fingers. It was dark like charcoal. In my wake I left the outline of a Ferris wheel and a pirate ship on the wall. As I looked at my blackened hands again, I *had* to know how the mould tasted. When I put my fingers in my mouth and sucked, the dusty blackness I'd dreamt of had the same earthy must as dried-up summertime brambles. The black mould was probably crawling down my throat, leaving little black pinpricks across my lungs.

I wish Papa could have been here to see the mess, but he'd left a long time ago and I didn't know if he was going to come back.

I spent the night helping Mama make stock out of the bones.

Two

Mama had roasted the nervous boy's rump slowly, toasting it off with a few drops of vegetable oil. Peeling away his skin and plucking out her favourite organs, she'd stripped him head to toe and frozen the rest of his body in pieces. Only minutes after serving him up, her plate was licked clean. Mama ate quick and messy before going to the hearth. Sleeping by the fire and breathing in the embers, Mama dreamt. A big meal always made her tired. Even though her hair was matting in the soot and ash, in slumber she was beautiful.

In this little pebble-dashed cottage, we packed everything we could into one room. There was a battered old couch before the fire, kept company by an old telly that dithered on static every time we changed the channel. The antenna was duct-taped to the top, leaning towards the window. The kitchen counters were on the far side of the room near a small dining table, big enough to seat three. Maybe four at a squeeze. Photographs and memories were rare here, with blank spaces grieving

picture frames that had once lived upon the wall. There was a mirror, which Mama had hung from a small hook. How Mama loved to watch herself.

'Four whole years since you came out of here,' Mama whispered, rolling her fingers over her belly and taking a deep breath of the red wine in her glass. 'It doesn't feel like four years at all.' She put the glass to her lips and tipped it back. Down it went. Every last drop swallowed into the deep black of her gullet. 'Happy birthday,' she whispered to herself.

I hadn't quite finished my dinner. There were still bits of the nervous boy left at the edge of my plate. Cabbage and carrots nestled by the stray, keeping him warm. Mama had even roasted potatoes and made Yorkshire puddings to soak up the gravy. The nervous boy was the best I'd ever eaten, the best birthday present I'd ever been gifted, but he didn't taste nervous at all. After I'd chewed for too long, he tasted contrary and difficult, like he didn't want to settle in my mouth. He wanted me to spit him back out onto the plate.

I used a small bone to pluck a tuft of meat from between my two front teeth. As it dropped onto my tongue, I realised the meat had lost its taste. Now, it was just tough.

Three

Nestled between the groves, we spent our days waiting for strangers to find us. Some nights, the rare sound of cars sang me to sleep as they raced up and down the distant roads. I liked it when dim headlights cut between the curtains. Those nights were easy. I'd fall into a slumber fast and happen upon dreams of rabbits and their kits. One dream, with Mama's blade in my hand, had led me to a burrow keeping newborn kits. It was always the quiet and dark nights that kept me awake. The ones vacant of far-off engines, stormy weather and headlights. Keeping to ourselves, we shared a provincial homestead just off a quiet road. One rarely used. It was half hidden among the trees, littered with potholes and puddles.

When Mama felt kind, she told me bedtime stories. She sometimes spoke of the trees.

The giants sprinkled the trees here to guard us from the outside world, Little One.

The day before my eleventh birthday, there was

a knock at the front door. Mama had already made dinner. The plate harboured something modest but meaty. Impatient for a bite, Mama had made sure the food was still a little undercooked by the time it reached the plate. The meat, a small ruby kidney, tasted rotten next to a side of beans and a crusty potato waffle fished from deep within the freezer. I took my plate to the rug and sat in front of the telly, picking at the waffle and separating the baked beans into their little tribes.

That's when the knocks came. Smiling for the first time in weeks, Mama basked in the echo they left behind. Her yellowed teeth ground together. She wouldn't have to be hungry anymore. And neither would I.

'Little One, a couple of strays have come to our door. Would you put on the hot water and heating? We want them to be toasty warm.' She always spoke softly when strays were near, as though the small offering of our homestead was a safe one, but leaks came from the ceiling and rusted pots caught almost every drop of water that fell. Light bulbs flickered, unburdened by shades. Beds were free of the fine linens and sheets people used to make their resting place soft and safe. A plain blanket and pillow would do us just fine.

I dropped my fork on my plate and went to the boiler, which was hidden in the kitchen cupboard close by. When I turned it on, it roared to life, pipes clanking from within the wall as Mama cleared her throat and put on a disarming smile. She answered the door to the new strays, who had wandered too far from the woodland paths. I watched them both. Two young men,

one with rounded glasses and the other with chapped lips, soaked through as they stumbled to the mouth of our homestead. Exhausted, they dropped to their knees as they stepped over the threshold, leaving behind a trail of shallow puddles. They looked hungry and cold as Mama coaxed them inside. She smiled as she settled them on the couch.

Mama touched their knees with her fingers. But when the men saw me closing in from behind Mama, they looked right through me. They wanted Mama's fingers on their skin. That's when I realised that, as adults look at children, they don't really see them. They see a body without a mind. Something that does what it's told. Something that will only understand when it's older.

Mama sent me to our bedroom and shut the door. We'd shared a room since Papa disappeared. Two cast-iron single beds sat across from one another on either side of the window.

Mama and Papa's old double mattress had been fly-tipped at the side of the road somewhere far away. After that, their bedroom had been locked, with only the bare frame left inside. Their bedroom was desperate for human touch now, and it only received it when strays ventured into our home. It stank of rot and the floorboards were stained auburn from the cut of a sharp knife and the spill of blood.

I'd heard Mama tell many folk tales. I heard her whispers through the door, now. Mama told stories to the strays to make them settle. It was a way of pulling them in. Making them trust us. All strays loved stories.

We'd had all sorts of strays here. Some of them had come away from car crashes, but what they didn't know was that Mama had a little habit of leaving nails and glass on the back roads when she left the house. Some of the strays were lost, trying to hike across the fells without knowing that this gloom was where they'd spend the rest of their short lives. Mama could tell a stray just by looking at them – it was something in their soul.

The thing that bound them together was the flood of relief they felt when they found our little house tucked away between the trees. When they saw our modest pebble-dashed homestead, they saw sanctuary. They felt lost, and that is what beckoned them to us.

I heard the cassette player switch on and the popping cork from an old wine bottle. She'd had trouble with the men before, but she knew how to handle them now. She'd learnt to make them feel invincible. She made them feel in control. *Men are stupid when they feel powerful, Little One. They become complacent.*

That night, they didn't scream much. It must have been quick.

Four

Mama was once in love with the local gamekeeper. He always wore green. He kept a blade strapped to his thigh and his combat boots were always laced in a firm knot. He visited Mama after his daughter got home from school – something he knew would occupy his wife’s attention. He came to us, always the same, with dirt speckled across his cheeks from riding his quad bike across the fells. I used to think the dirt was freckles until I wiped his cheek and they brushed away. I counted each speck. Dirt crumbled on my palm like grains of sand.

The gamekeeper’s palms were large and coarse, and he used his stubby fingers to push the dirt I’d collected into the creases of my palm. He liked holding my hand in his. A warm smile emerged when our fingers found themselves entwined. He used to measure the size of his fingers and palms outstretched next to mine. *I forget I am a giant*, he once said. *Did you know giants sleep under the crust of the fells? If you look carefully, you’ll see them breathing in and out as they slumber.*

The gamekeeper’s daughter was called Abbie. We sat near each other at school, but she didn’t know her papa was visiting Mama and retreating to the shadowy corners of our homestead. Neither did his wife. They were blissfully unaware of the new memories Mama and he made together, both in shadows and sunspots. Wherever they pleased.

In the spring, I heard him and Mama talking in the kitchen. I was watching a bluebottle bump its soft head against the window over and over again. It was woozy from a long day. Mama’s words were lost in the air, but I could still hear the sounds their mouths made. Euphoric, languid echoes. When I looked through the slip of the door, they were moaning, bundled together on the surface of our kitchen table. The table legs scraped over the floor. Back and forth. Mama’s head draped off the back edge as her neck craned. The buttons on her church dress were loose and her breasts hung free. Papa wouldn’t have been happy, but Papa was gone. Keeping himself hidden somewhere we couldn’t reach.

In our homestead, it was easy to pass through unseen. I wandered between our bedroom and living room, following the wall towards the kitchen in the back corner. Their bodies twisted together over the table.

Mama slipped her hand over his, twining their fingers. A wicked smile captured the gamekeeper’s lips. Eyes wide, he was red in the face. Mama was breathless but in control. She cried out one last time and so did he. As he pulled away from her, she buttoned up her church dress and bit her lip. The gamekeeper went to the

window and gathered his breath. The sunlight touched his skin. Sweat dripped down from his forehead to his thighs. Mama came to her feet and wrapped her arms around him, brushing her fingers over his hip bones.

'I've felt nothing like this before,' she said, but I knew she didn't love him the way she thought she did. She'd *loved* others before. Not quite strays. Not quite passers-through. People who would satisfy Mama while she waited for the next infatuation. But the hole in her chest was never filled. And, with every passing day, it grew.

The gamekeeper turned and pressed her palm against his cheek. 'I want you,' he whispered, but there was something in his words that felt hollow. The words were spoken like a half-truth. I wondered if he was as fickle as she was. His breath brushed lone strands of her hair back onto her cheeks.

Mama caught his eyes in hers and led him away from the kitchen table. She passed by, brushing me to the side as though I were not there. Together, they wandered into our bedroom. And he closed the door behind them.

I tried to remember the gamekeeper's name, but I couldn't quite form it in my mouth.

Mama's hoarse cries echoed like songs through our homestead. The floorboards groaned, toadlike.

I glanced in the mirror that hung on the living-room wall. It was old and dirty with speckles across it. When my reflection stared back, I saw the nuisance everyone thought I was. Always in the way. Bright-green eyes that did a bad job of hiding my feelings. My teeth were gappy, crooked and overlapping. I was an ugly child on

the outside, but even more ugly on the inside. Maybe a changeling. Or something worse.

When Mama was finished with the gamekeeper, he cleaned himself up, buttoned his camouflage trousers, splashed water on his bashful face and left with a smug grin across his mouth. He went back to his family, and kissed his wife and child with the same mouth that kissed Mama.

Mama lay naked in her bed and daydreamed of things she liked about him. The gamekeeper didn't mind that Mama was a lonely woman. That's why she let herself enjoy him. He wasn't observant like others were. He was someone who only saw what he wanted and nothing else. But Mama was fickle. More fickle than most. Her wants faltered on a whim.

Later, when we cuddled by the ashen fire and cinders, Mama told me I was to forget the gamekeeper and all the times he'd made her scream. She told me he'd scampered back to his obedient wife and child. *Coward.*

'The people out there, Little One, they will never understand us.' Her words were gospel. 'We aren't like them. We're woven from different cloth.'

Mama paused, taking my hands in hers. They were warm and I let my fingers explore the creases near her thumb.

'They will never accept us.'

So, we both forgot about the gamekeeper and loneliness found us once again.

Five

The bedding tickled my calves with its fibres. I scratched my skin with the ridge of my fingernail, but, finding my thigh, the sensation climbed my leg. Red bites and stings paved their way up and down my calves, followed by a trail of clumsy white scrapes. The bedding wasn't cleaned often. Sometimes a little woodlouse would scale the high peaks of the blankets, twisting through the curves of the fabric.

Mama slept with her mouth open. Beneath her blanket she sounded like an old vacuum. Her breaths, in and out, were coarse like whispers. Though I couldn't see her mouth, I knew a string of drool would slip between her lips. Come morning, her pillow would be damp.

The trees sometimes kept the light from us. Mama liked to sleep with the window open, no matter what time of year. Silver showers or snow, Mama wanted nature's touch, which usually came with a red nose in the morning after a long night in the cold.

Just like Mama, I buried myself. My spine curved

and my knees met my chin. She once told me I was her sweet ammonite fossil and I was only hers to unearth. Since then, I'd grown fond of the idea of becoming lost under layers of muck and rock and sand. I coiled up in my blanket, squeezing my eyes shut. I pretended to be a well-slept ammonite fossil just like Mama wanted.

Though it was dark out, I thought of sunrise. When the sun would surface, Mama would wake me, tapping my forehead with her dirty fingernail. She sometimes liked to leave a groove on the crest of my brow, before pressing a kiss on top of it to make it all better.

The distant road was silent. Mama slept through the quiet. Always. She fell quick and deep, grasping onto dreams. Sometimes she murmured and trembled, entwined in her linens. It made me wonder what she was dreaming of. I hoped she dreamt of love. Of me and her and sunsets and tree bark binding us all together.

Deep in slumber, Mama unbundled herself from her blankets. Her flesh looked blue in the dark. Or grey. Her teeth ground together. Such crooked teeth. Never cleaned properly, they had a thick layer of plaque near her gums. Mama rarely brushed her teeth. She washed her mouth out with water from the beck and gargled it in her throat. Sometimes she wore red lipstick to try and make her teeth look pretty.

Mama told me her teeth were the only thing she wanted to change about herself. *Even though I am beautiful, Little One, people don't trust women who have bad teeth. I've met men who called me a savage because of*

these things, she once said, pulling up her lip with her finger to show me her canines.

Mama wore lipstick if she brought men home with her. I watched her drag the deep red paint across the plump of her bottom lip before I hid beneath the bed and counted her heavy breaths, springs tensing and relaxing. When she was done with the men, they'd leave our homestead and head out into the night. The lipstick would be smeared across Mama's cheek like a bruise. Strays were not the same as the men she wanted to keep.

But tonight, we were alone together. Mama's lips were free from lipstick, and she slept soundly as the quiet wind shushed the trees outside. She was dreaming again. I knew she was because her mouth mumbled a string of words I couldn't understand.

'I hope we are in a deep forest together, Mama. I hope it is deep and dark, and a place that no one will ever find us.'

Six

'I can't sleep,' I whispered into Mama's ear. Her breathing slowed and her eyes stilled beneath their lids.

'What time is it?' she asked, keeping her eyes closed.

'I don't know,' I said.

Mama opened her eyes and sat up. 'I was deep in my sleep,' she whispered. Mama shuffled out from beneath her blankets and took me by the hand. 'Come, then.' When I couldn't sleep and her heart was warm and full, her stories were abundant.

I followed Mama to the living room. She led me to the ashes of the fire and left me at the foot of the hearth. 'The cinders brushed my legs.

'Are you listening?' she asked, lighting a match and putting it to the coals and wooden splints broken up in the fire.

I nodded, watching the flame take light.

'The first time I found a stray, I was eleven years old. I had my father's green eyes and my mother's fair hair. But I wasn't like them in my heart. They always felt different.