

Curtains

by Charles Lambert

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WHEN HELEN GETS BACK FROM THE HOSPITAL the house is empty. She leaves her weekend bag by the door and wanders from room to room, the kitchen, the hall, the living room, and then upstairs, pausing for breath on the halfway landing, her hands folded over her stomach. She rests her hand on the door to David's study, glances into their bedroom but doesn't enter, then stands at the threshold of the smaller room she had begun to think of as *his* bedroom or *her* bedroom, she wasn't sure, not then, until a twinge of pain across her abdomen sends her scuttling to the bathroom. David knew I'd be home this morning, she thinks, blouse pulled up, leaning her bare skin against the basin. He could have closed the shop for half an hour or asked one of the Saturday girls to come in. She waits for the pain to pass, then splashes her face with cold water.

She is sitting in the kitchen holding an empty mug when the key turns in the lock and David is home. He puts down a roll of material before hurrying across the hall, his coat half-off, to take her hand and help her up from the chair.

'You told me you wouldn't be back until this afternoon,' he says. He sounds apologetic. She can't remember what she told him, except that they would bring her home. There was no need for him to worry,

it's probably her fault. He drops his coat on the floor, holds both her hands and looks into her eyes until she glances down. She wants to pull herself free and pick up the coat.

'There was no point their keeping me in any longer. All I need is rest, apparently.' She pauses, tries to smile. 'And lots of TLC.'

David lets go her hands. 'I'll make you a cup of tea.'

She shakes her head; he hasn't understood. 'No. not tea. Make me some real coffee, will you? With the thing.' She makes a plunging gesture. 'The coffee in that place was dreadful.'

'You are feeling all right, aren't you?' He has a right to sound anxious, she thinks.

'I feel fine, David,' she says. 'Apart from, you know.'

He hugs her, finally. She rests her chin on his shoulder and stares at the material by the door. Some remnant from the shop, she imagines, some end of roll he'll expect me to do something with. To keep me busy until I'm back to normal.

'It's for the best.' He lets her go, moving her away from him as though she has no will of her own, each competent hand squeezing a shoulder, both affectionate and dismissive. She stands in the kitchen.

His best, her best? Their best? David says there's no difference. For better or for worse. In sickness and in health. When the pain comes she presses her legs together to relieve it. A trickle of something warm, which must be blood, runs down her inside thigh. She watches him search for the thing she can never remember the name of, to make her coffee.

Two weeks later he walks into the kitchen with a cardboard box. It is late afternoon. She has been washing spinach; the leaves, with their thread of red, are coarse and gleaming in the colander. It makes her feel sick just to look at them.

'I've been finishing the curtains for the living room.' He moves his head rapidly to one side as if he is trying to dislodge something from his ear. The box will contain some bone he's had sent to him for his study, some fossilised knuckle from Uzbekistan he's ordered on the net. He doesn't have time to think about curtains.

'Look what I've brought you.'

She wipes her hands. He'll expect something from me, excitement, she thinks, some sign of pleasure. She's relieved, she's

not sure why.

‘What?’ she says. She waits for him to kiss her; he always does since she came back from the hospital, a kiss on her cheek, sometimes the back of his fingers, his knuckles, against her skin. Once he took her face in his hands and stared into her eyes until she blushed, she felt like a suspect with a terrible secret. But today he holds out the cardboard box. It is large and has no writing on it, as though it has no business being.

‘What is it?’ She doesn’t trust him, it strikes her. She hasn’t the slightest idea what he wants. She has no secrets.

‘Look inside,’ he says. A noise from the box, a rustling or grating, startles her; she steps back.

He smiles. ‘Don’t be afraid. Open it.’ He puts the box down on the table she has just cleaned and lifts a flap, as if to show her how boxes open. Lifting another, she peers inside to see something pale and soft rise towards her. She jumps back.

Impatient, David lifts out a blonde plump wriggling thing no bigger than his two cupped hands.

‘It’s a Labrador,’ he says. ‘A golden Labrador.’

Not knowing what to do, she takes the puppy and presses it to her, in the hollow just below her chin. It wriggles until it can lick her hand, its tongue warm, oddly dry. She lifts its face to her face; it paws her cheek, and she drops her head slightly as if for a kiss, then tilts the body to see what sex it is. Male. A twist of blond hair like a paintbrush.

‘Their eyesight isn’t up to much at this age,’ David says. ‘It’s probably wondering what you are. All it can see is a great big lump.’

‘How old is he?’ She stresses the *he* a little.

‘Six weeks.’

‘Isn’t that too young to be taken away from the mother?’

David’s face goes hard and closed, the way it does when she tries to talk to him about his fossils, about what he sees in them. Soon after they met he told her, *You’ll think it’s wrong, I know, but I can’t bear criticism of any kind.* And she said: But why should I want to criticise? You’re perfect. She remembers this often and the one thing she can never remember is what she meant when she said *You’re perfect.*

‘Well? Do you want it or not?’

She looks into the puppy's eyes, moving him closer until the outline blurs, and they don't change at all, they are turned towards hers, both deep and flat. It's true, she thinks, he really can't see me. He can't see what a great big lump I really am.

'Of course I do,' she says.

Helen has spent the last fortnight making curtains from the roll of Indian silk David brought home from the shop. It was his father's shop before him, but David's never really settled. He told her before they were married he'd dreamed of becoming a palaeontologist, not of working behind a counter, that no son of his would be trapped the way he's been, not without seeing the world. That was when she agreed that children weren't needed to make a marriage work. The silk was damaged in transit, he said, but *Look how beautiful it is*, and he rolled it out in front of her across the living room floor, the way he does with the customers along the counter. He's right, of course, it is beautiful, a rippling mustard yellow shot with threads of red and royal blue. It should have been saris, he says, but the colours have muddied along one border, it must have been left to stand in filthy water at some point. So now she is making curtains for all the windows, cutting and

sewing and lining them with beige cotton, also from the shop. All the windows except for the one in the small bedroom. She goes in there every day and lies down on the bed that should have been a cot, with a pillow on her stomach, staring at the bare glass. She never imagined he'd take her at her word.

David takes her out to the hall and shows her the basket he has brought for the puppy. He has been planning this, Helen thinks, this surprise. She wonders if everything in her life will be a surprise from now on, with this same flatness. The basket is made of wicker and lined with tartan, with a tartan cushion. She puts the puppy down and he sniffs the cushion, lifts its corner with his claws. He falls onto his side and lets out a startled yelp. His belly is hairless, white, with pale brown marks like coffee stains.

‘We’ll have to come up with a name for it,’ says David, standing back, arms crossed in judgement.

‘Him,’ she says. ‘It’s a him.’

‘A name for him.’

She thinks for a moment.

‘Chester,’ she says.

Chester amuses and irritates Helen in equal measure. She sits at her sewing machine, working at the curtains, her right foot rocking the treadle, and the puppy darts and stumbles around her, only to totter and sit down abruptly on his haunches. He’s like a toy, she thinks, all fur and softness, his large brown eyes too liquid to be real. It is hard to believe he has a heart and brain; hard to believe he can feel and think. She almost wants to hurt him, sometimes, to make sure. She picks him up and he snuffles at her neck. When she tickles him he bites her finger with needle-sharp teeth until she squeals with pain and pulls away. Now and again, she forgets he’s there. Her foot works the treadle more slowly and finally stops and she only realises she is crying when she feels Chester’s cold damp nose against her ankle, the puppy’s claws on her bare calf as he tries to scramble up to her lap, to drag his way up to her lap and nestle there. She doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry, but she’s already crying, so she laughs and scoops him up. She walks around with him cradled in her arms, belly up, his penis plump with its honey brush. Then, out of the blue, a wave of sadness overwhelms her and she puts him down, almost throws him to the

floor.

She doesn't take him upstairs, into the small bedroom. Later, coming down, distracted by his yapping, she sees that he has peed on the hall carpet. He whines and capers around her feet, beside himself with excitement, while she scrubs at the stain with a damp cloth. I could do anything to you, she thinks, picking him up, holding him out as far as she can reach, watching him wriggle in her hands in his attempt to lick them. You're as helpless as a child.

She doesn't tell David about the pee. When he takes off his coat and says 'Have you two had a good day?' she smiles and nods. 'I've finished the curtains for the living room,' she says. 'I'll need your help to put them up.'

She follows him through the door, his narrow shoulders before her. 'There's enough left over for cushions. I thought I might make sausage ones, for the sofa.' But David is examining her hems, his glasses on, lips pursed. 'Lovely work,' he says after a moment, during which Helen feels as though she has turned on the TV to see familiar people whose names escape her, in a room she knows but can't recognise. She watches, fascinated but anxious. I've lost the plot, it occurs to her, and she wants to giggle because she has never

understood this expression before today. David has taken off his jacket and is waiting by the window, one foot on a low stool, his shoes taken off and placed beside the stool. He is wearing those fine sheer cotton socks that look like stockings, Helen can't bear them. David must have them dry-cleaned, or wash them himself, in secret. If they turned up in the laundry basket she'd lose them, one by one, she'd tear them open with her hands. He'd last two seconds digging for fossils, she thinks. 'You've done a lovely job,' David says. They both step back to see how beautifully the curtains hang.

That night, when she thinks he's asleep and she is staring at the ceiling waiting for light, he turns his whole body until it is pressed against her side, his minty breath in her face, his soft sly hand slipping down between her legs. 'I don't suppose,' he whispers. 'Oh no, David,' she says. 'Not yet.' 'A little loving,' he says, his throat dry. 'I'm sorry,' she says, but she isn't. She's appalled and disgusted. I wish I was dead, she thinks, I'll never sleep again. But she must have gone to sleep, because she wakes in shock with the image of her dead baby floating in front of her eyes, the small plump hands reaching out towards her through an impenetrable wall of water.

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David brings her coffee, but it makes no difference. Fifteen minutes later, he's back with Chester yapping and wriggling in his arms. He's holding the puppy at arm's length from his cashmere sweater. She can't resist reaching out, as much for David's sake as for Chester.

'Cushions today?'

'What?'

'You'll be starting on the cushions?'

'I expect so.'

'We could go out for a bite together this evening,' he says, cautious. 'It would save you cooking. There's a new place near the Library the girls were talking about. Turkish, I think they said. It would do us both good to get out.'

'We can't leave Chester all alone,' she says.

'Well, think about it,' he calls from the stairs. 'I'll talk to you later.'

When they get back from the restaurant, David slightly drunk, Helen

more tired than she can ever remember, as though her strength has been ripped from inside her, like stuffing, the living room floor is covered with scraps of yellow silk, chewed into rags. David stumbles to the curtains, tripping over the stool, saying 'I don't believe it' but Helen catches his arm before he can fall. 'It's only the cushion material.'

In the hall, she calls, 'Chester,' her voice low and soft, coaxing. She makes her kissing noise until he sidles over. He knows he's done something wrong, whatever the books say about guilt. David is behind her, but she doesn't turn round until she has scooped the puppy up and is holding him close.

'He needs to be punished,' David says. He's slurring in a way that revolts her. In the restaurant, he'd had a smear of hummus on his chin, like a baby. She'd left it there, not saying anything, hoping he wouldn't wipe it off before the waitress he'd been flirting with had seen him. Of course, he'd deny it. He'd say she was imagining things.

That was the first time David talked about punishing Chester. The second time, they come back from the weekly shop to find one of his

precious cotton socks chewed into a sodden hank. Helen doesn't recognise it immediately; she thinks it's something dead. David yelps, as though a sticking plaster has been ripped from his skin. She puts the bags down on the kitchen table. 'It's only a sock,' she says, taking out packets of rice, pasta, a box of eggs, searching for the treats she's bought for Chester, three months old now and stronger than she is.

'You spoil that dog. He needs a sound thrashing.'

And you're going to give him one, I suppose, she says, too low for him to hear. She wonders what kind of father he'd have made. Some days it's as if she's the one who deprived *him* of their child, not the other way round, and she feels a sort of exultation she can't explain, that frightens her, as though she were capable of anything. *You* need a sound thrashing, she wants to say. *You* need to be punished. But she doesn't move when David grabs Chester's collar and drags him across to the kitchen door. She watches him fumble one-handed with the lock while the dog resists, the blond fur on his forehead wrinkling into a frown, his front paws stretched out for purchase. She lets him lock Chester out until the dog's whimpering gets on his nerves, not *her* nerves, and David allows him back into the house.

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She's lying on the bed in the little room, where the cot would have been, thinking about post-natal depression, wondering if what those women feel is what she's feeling, or if you need to have had the child, and how different that might have been, and if what she feels is depression or something else, something nameless, something she doesn't care, or dare, to name. Chester's outside the door, crying, but she's closed herself off to that. You're David's dog, she says, out loud, to no one. He asked her yesterday evening, while they were watching television, why she'd called him Chester. She didn't answer, she pretended she hadn't heard. He'll stop in the end, he always does, and then she'll get up and go downstairs.

But she doesn't go downstairs, not immediately. She opens the door to David's study and stands at the threshold, staring at the walls with all their shelves of books and index boxes and glass-fronted displays of fossils, arranged in some way she isn't expected to grasp, and so has never tried. Lowering her eyes, she looks at the table in the centre of the room. It's covered with grey-white bones laid out in the form of an animal, she supposes, the fragile net of all that's left of something the size of an adult cat, or small dog. For one shocked

moment she imagines he's building a human child.

David's decided to take control of Chester. He gets home from the shop and clips the lead onto his collar, then drags the dog out of the house and round the block. This takes just over nine minutes, nine minutes and twenty seconds to be precise; she knows because she's watched the clock. When they come back into the kitchen, Chester leaps up to lick her face, almost knocking her out of her chair, then bounds across to David, who's hanging the lead on its hook. 'That's what he needs,' he says with satisfaction. 'It would do you good as well, a little exercise.' The dog's so excited he's done a puddle by the bin. As far as he's concerned she might as well not be there, so she'll let David mop the floor clean. But he goes up the stairs. She listens to him open and close his study door, listens to him turn on the light and cross to the table, and she wonders why he doesn't take Chester with him. Dogs, after all, love bones.

The next evening, and every evening after that, David follows the same routine, arriving home from the shop and taking Chester round

the block before going up to his room until it's time to eat. She no longer checks the time. While they're out she goes to his study and walks to the table and rearranges the bones, so slightly he might not even notice. She's downstairs in the kitchen by the time he comes back; it never occurs to him to ask what she's been doing.

He doesn't seem to enjoy the walk any longer. He complains to her that Chester pulls, and barks. 'I thought you were doing it for him,' she says, but David has already gone and the dog is resting his muzzle on her knee and staring up at her with his eyes that only seem to mean something, she knows that. She doesn't have any idea how long she's been sitting there, stroking his head, when David runs down the stairs.

'Have you let the dog into my room?'

'Of course not,' she says.

'Well, someone's been in there.'

She can hear he wants to accuse her, but daren't. He's been scared of her for weeks now, ever since the hospital.

'Things have been moved,' he says.

'What things?'

‘You wouldn’t understand,’ he says and swings out of the room.

‘Try me,’ she calls out. To her surprise, he’s back within seconds.

‘If you can’t keep that dog under control,’ he says, his voice trembling, ‘I’ll have it put down.’

She was eight years old when her parents took her to Chester Zoo. They were in the mammal house when she saw a tapir lying on its side and a woman in zoo overalls hurrying across. Something damp and glossy and black was coming out of the tapir’s bottom. It’s doing a poo, she was about to giggle to her parents, but the poo began to move and the woman in overalls was waving across the compound for help as the tapir twisted its stubby trunk round to sniff at the thing it had made and lick the glossiness off. Later that afternoon, she’d been sick, after too much ice cream and pop. Let that be a lesson to you, her mother said.

David doesn’t take the dog out again. He’s taken to locking the door to his study, so her small work on the bones has been interrupted, but

that's all right. She thinks about making the cushions she planned to make, but Chester has ripped up the remaining fabric. She watches television and wonders how to ask him why he made her kill her baby, how to broach the subject in a way that won't make him feel he's being picked on. But none of this is enough. One day she takes her scissors and cuts the fabric she needs from the living room curtains, a strip the height of her knee, throwing away the lining. She sets to work, with Chester beside her. By the time David's home that evening, the cushions are finished.

But she doesn't have time to show him the cushions before he's shouting and waving the curtains at her. She's cut them so roughly they might as well have been torn, she can see that now, so it's hardly surprising he blames the dog. Well, let him, she thinks. He's left the house before she can say a word. By the time he comes back, much later, she's hidden the cushions beneath the bed in the small room, where he never goes.

She's in bed when he says, 'That's it.' He's standing at the door, his toothbrush in his hand.

'That's what?'

‘The next time that dog does anything, anything at all,’ he says,
‘I’m having it put down. I mean it this time.’

‘You’re mad,’ she says, under her breath.

Three days after that, four months after the other thing, when he’s almost certain to have forgotten what he said, she forces the lock to the study door with a screwdriver, tips up the table until all the bones of the creature – poor creature, she thinks, poor innocent creature – are scattered across the floor, then grinds them into powder beneath her heel. She’s already made the appointment at the vet’s. Chester doesn’t want to come at first, but she’s popped some treats in her pocket. She’ll stay with him right up to the end; it’s the least she can do. She’ll get back in the car, with the useless lead and collar in her bag, and drive home. She’ll be waiting in the small bedroom when David gets there. She’ll know by then that what she has done is wrong and that nothing she can do will put it right.



Charles Lambert was born in the United Kingdom but has lived in Italy for most of his adult life. His most recent novel is *Prodigal*, recently longlisted for the Polari Prize 2019. His previous novel, *The Children's Home*, was praised by Kirkus Reviews as 'a one-of-a-kind literary horror story', while *Two Dark Tales*, published in October 2017, was described by Owen King as the work of a 'terrific devious story teller'. Earlier books include three novels, a collection of prize-winning short stories and a memoir, *With a Zero at its Heart*, selected by the Guardian as one of its top ten books from 2014.