
Our Little Lamb

Cath Delaney

Abi was more than disappointed at her role in the Christmas play. “Lambs are boring,” she muttered.

But she filled her role beautifully—until . . .

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The “ohs” and “ahs” died down as the Nativity play got under way. Abigail stood at the side of the stage dressed as a lamb, with stray locks of red hair escaping from the fur hood. Although she looked adorable, Ben and I knew from the set of her mouth that our daughter was not fully reconciled to her role in the play. But surely nothing could go wrong now.

Abi had come out of school with a frown fit to eclipse the sun. “It’s not fair. I wanted to be Mary. Or a shepherd. Not a stupid lamb.”

At five years old, Abi refused to accept that life was often unfair. It caused her—and us—quite a lot of anguish.

“But darling, you’ll make a lovely lamb.”

Secretly, I shared Abi’s disappointment. Show me a mother who doesn’t want her child to demonstrate what a star she is. But if I were honest, I was surprised Abi was in the Nativity at all. It was rather brave of Lisa Barlow, her teacher.

“Lauren always gets the bestest. I knew she’d be Mary.

And Luke’s Joseph. That’s better than a lamb,” Abi grumbled.

“Best, not *bestest*,” I corrected automatically. “And I’m sure lots of girls wanted to be Mary, not just you. And Luke’s a boy. A girl can’t be Joseph.”

All conversations with Abi went this way. It was exhausting. Privately, I knew just why Lauren was chosen to be Mary. She did as she was told. Unlike our darling daughter.

“It’s not that she’s outright defiant or anything,” Lisa Barlow said when she explained her decision to make Abi a lamb. “She’s just a bit—unpredictable. I thought a lamb was the safest bet.”

“Say no more. I understand perfectly,” I replied. “I’m grateful you let her have a part.”

“Oh, she was so keen I couldn’t just put her in the choir with the others, bless her.”

Abi always wanted to do things her way, and we were convinced it had nothing to do with our child-rearing methods. She’d been like that from the start.

“Been here before, this one,” the midwife said as she handed me Abi, who immediately fixed me with a fierce gaze.

Exhausted and besotted, I never thought to ask what she meant. After a few weeks I didn’t have to. Abi accepted none of the childcare regimes in the numerous books we read on the subject.

Fortunately for me, Ben and I did a role swap for the first three years—I went out to work while he cared for Abi. Ben coped much better than I would have done. I think he admired her spirit.

Although there had been an outcome we hadn’t considered.

“You can be Daddy and I’ll be Mummy,” Abi said to her best friend Luke in a pseudo grown-up voice. “So change the



baby's nappy and feed her while I go to work. And don't forget to do the washing-up."

And with that, Abi had thrust her doll into Luke's arms and tottered off in her dressing-up high heels. Luke's face was a picture. Only his easy-going nature saved their friendship.

The lamb outfit I made was beautiful, even if I say so myself. Curly white nylon fur with black mittens, bootees, and ears. Abi was impressed when she looked in the mirror. Well, for a few minutes, at least.

"Lambs are boring," she muttered.

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The big day arrived. Even Abi was excited. We just prayed that she would play her part without variation. It was asking a lot.

I recalled the previous Christmas, when Ben and I had taken Abi to see Santa Claus at the local store. Abi sat down and stared at him.

"Where's your reindeers?" she demanded.

Give him his due, he'd recovered well from the onslaught.

"In the stable, having some hay."

"I want to see them, please."

Santa told her that he had to stay and



see what all the girls and boys wanted for Christmas. He looked relieved that he'd managed to come up with an explanation.

Unfortunately, it wasn't one that satisfied Abi.

"But I want to see the reindeers. That's what I want for Christmas," she wailed.

So you see why anticipation was somewhat marred by apprehension.

But, bless her, she was wonderful, standing with the other two lambs. She watched as the kings came with gifts and put them in Baby Jesus's cradle. She sang the hymns beautifully, and as Mary rose to lift Baby Jesus from the cradle, Ben and I breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Then, disaster!

As Mary, alias Lauren, moved to the front of the stage to hold up Baby Jesus in benediction, she tripped over her long gown. Baby Jesus shot out of her arms, up in the air, and described a perfect arc across the stage, shooting past an impassive cardboard Angel Gabriel hanging from the ceiling.

The audience gasped, and the whole tableau froze in horror. Lisa Barlow, behind the piano in the wings, half rose. It seemed nothing could stop Baby Jesus from crashing down to earth.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Abi move. With a look of intense concentration on her face, our little lamb stepped forward and neatly caught Baby Jesus on his downward trajectory.

There were huge cheers from the audience and a look of enormous gratitude from Lisa Barlow. Abi held Baby Jesus tightly and moved across the stage to a bemused-looking Joseph, alias Luke.

"Here," she said, handing Baby Jesus to him. "You can look after your baby now."

Stunned, Luke took the doll obediently.

Abi moved to Mary, who was still frozen in horror. She took her hand and led her back to her seat.

"You have a nice rest. I 'spect you're tired," she said, patting Lauren's shoulder kindly before moving back to her place at the side of the stage.

The applause and laughter from the audience shook the rafters. Ben and I looked at each other, tears of mirth and pride in our eyes. Lisa Barlow struck up "Away in a Manger," and never had it been sung with more vigor and enthusiasm.

When we finally escaped the congratulations and thanks, accepted proudly by Ben and me, and as her due by Abi, she turned to us.

"Miss Barlow said I really saved the day."

Ben opened his mouth to agree but before he could speak Abi continued.

"I 'spect she really meant I saved Baby Jesus." She leaned closer to us confidingly. "But grown-ups get things wrong sometimes, don't they?"

I opened my mouth to explain, but Ben got there first.

"Indeed they do, darling," he said, smiling at me over the top of our daughter's head. "Indeed they do."

Cath Delaney writes from her home in Lancaster, England.