



2019 Shortlist

William and the Ham

by

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William and the Ham

I've always loved pets but I was always bad at looking after them. When I was two, I cut my cat's ear with scissors, presumably because the cat was white and her ears looked like paper. When I was eight, I poured salt and washing up liquid into the fish tank because I wanted turtles instead. I immediately felt guilty and changed the water, but still. At around ten, I had a hamster but I wanted a rabbit. My mum bought me a rabbit but then I got bored and asked for a guinea pig. We gave away the rabbit to someone who eventually left it out in their back garden and the rabbit got killed by a ferret or a fox. What happened to the guinea pig after that? I can't remember. I think I gave it away too because I wanted a rat.

I had many rats. The first one was called Hermesinde. When I bought her, she was pregnant. She gave birth to eleven babies. Her cage was in my room. At first when it happened, I didn't understand, I thought she was haemorrhaging, we didn't know she'd been pregnant. When the babies grew up, they were cute. One of them had a swollen paw, a birth defect. My friend Pierre wanted me to kill it but I didn't. I did think about it though. Then when the babies got big enough, we took them back to the pet shop; we just couldn't keep twelve rats. A friend told me they probably ended up being sold as snake food but I don't know if that's true. I'm also not a vegetarian so who would I be to complain about snakes eating rats?

Hermesinde died of natural causes during my first year at university. I buried her on a coke comedown with my best friend at the time. We'd been out clubbing the night before; it was my first time taking drugs. In the morning, I ended up snogging the dealer on a bench to get more coke and in the afternoon, I headed home to my mother's to bury the rat. I'd let the body fester in the basement for two weeks so it was rotting and covered with maggots. I let my mother dig the grave.

A couple of years later, I bought William.

I don't live at home anymore. I always wanted to leave that suburb and I finally did it. I moved to London. I am an expat as they call it, a migrant. I try to come back as much as I can to see my mother but Eurostars are expensive and I am broke, so I don't spend so much time there anymore. It's not like I ever really decided to move countries though, it just happened. One day I crossed the channel and then I stayed, but I never really had to tell my mother I was going. It was always temporary, then I was gone.

As an only child, I sometimes feel bad for abandoning her but she doesn't hold it against me. She says she understands. She says she is happy to see me happy. And whenever I feel guilty for leaving her behind on her own, she says:

“I'm fine, you're young, go do your thing, live your life, I'm fine....”

And so I do.

One summer, I am doing an online French literature course at the Sorbonne and as the exams take place in Paris, I am back home for two weeks. Every day I sit through two to three exams. Things I can't remember. Things I tried to learn the day before. Books I skimmed through at 2am. Every night I sleep for three hours and in the morning I take the RER C, then the Metro to Censier. In the evenings I come home to the flat, located in one of Paris's boring, sleepy suburbs. The buildings all look the same, white, tall, and surrounded by green patches that read "No Children-No Ball Games", but where people walk their dogs, so the grass is always covered in shit.

Evening. I come home after another day of exams. My mother is still at work. The cat died shortly after Hermesinde and the dog followed suit a few years later so now the flat feels empty, quiet. No greeting at the door, no noise, no barking. The hallway smells of sisal, the new eco-

flooring my mother has laid across most of the flat. It smells like glue, like new, like something unfamiliar I need to get used to. I take off my shoes, I go to the kitchen. I put down my backpack and I say hello to William.

William is the last pet standing. I got him a year before moving to London. A white rat with red eyes. My mother was scared of rats, she was scared of the tail, she said it was disgusting. But she was also nicer than me, so she took him in after I'd left.

I bend over the cage, William pushes his white nose through the bars and I tickle his whiskers. I sit at the table feeling tired, hungry. I grab my backpack and take out the leftover ham sandwich I made myself the night before. Cured ham, my favourite. My mother buys it especially for me because she knows I like it. Because it's expensive and she knows I would never buy it for myself. I tear away at the foil. The sandwich is full of vinegar, stuffed with meat and shallots and at the corner of the ham, slivers of white fat stick out from the bread. William looks at me hungrily. Rats are omnivores. I give him a small chunk, he snatches it with his teeth, runs into his favourite corner of the cage and pulls at the meat with his front paws, hunching over it like rats do; the ham disappears into his mouth.

I've always liked the view from the kitchen window. When the sun starts setting, the light hits the glass on the building across from the flat and the world outside is so bright everything around me feels dark by contrast. When I was about ten, I once sat at the kitchen table, on this exact same spot, sucking whipped cream straight from the dispenser. My mother was drinking tea opposite me, we were chatting and eating biscuits- our ritual after school *goûter*- when I absent-mindedly started squeezing the whipped cream nozzle. As I listened to her, I suddenly found myself watching her thick swirly black hair, that specific silhouette of hers, curl and distort against the bright light. The world began to warp, with all the building's windows across from us tilting to the left. The words coming out of her mouth became muffled, the sky grew darker and I felt myself swimming in

warmth like a happy saturated sponge. I was floating, flying, engulfed in cotton. I let the feeling travel through my fingers and my entire body. I was happy.

I don't know if my mother realised I was getting high off the fumes. All the gas minus the cream was escaping into my mouth; I was giving myself an early balloon experience. I didn't know this either at the time, but I was enjoying myself so I let her carry on talking as the corners of my eyes sparkled with nitrous oxide tingle. Eventually she did see something in my eyes, this letting go, the disconnect, but she just thought I was feeling light-headed -too much sugar, maybe?- and I let go of the whipped-cream. Now every time I watch the sun set through the window, I feel a little bit high.

I bite into the ham sandwich and I stare at the light till my eyes go black. Then a sound, something unusual. I look down. Only gold patches, light larvae suspended in mid-air across the kitchen landscape. When my eyes finally adjust, I look into the cage. I see the shape of William, the tail curling and uncurling. His body ripples, like a stop and start, back and forth and back and forth, gasping, rasping. I realise that he is choking. A chunk of white fat sticks out from his mouth, the rest must be lodged in his throat. I drop my sandwich and I open the cage. I yank at the fat, William opens his mouth, I pull and the whole chunk of ham comes out.

He wheezes. He sneezes. He is fine. My heart is beating faster than usual.

William looks confused. This wandering, this vacant inwardness, the eyes wide and red, probably similar to what I must have looked like on whipped cream. He stays still for a while, composing himself, then the paws rub the nose, the whiskers move again. I stroke his forehead, I catch my breath; he's only a rat, I know, but I would hate to see him die. My mum has grown to like him, she updates me on his health whenever I call her from London.

The wide chunk of fat is still stuck to my finger, I run the edge of my nail against the kitchen table and the meat clings to the surface, white and shiny against the dark wood. I leave it there. I feel relieved. I wait to make sure that William is fine and I wait for my heartbeat to slow down, then I finish my sandwich.

When I'm done, I head for a power nap in the living room, knowing my mother will wake me up when she comes back. The sofa is brown. Fake leather. It's slightly too small for me; I need to bend my knees to fit in. The armrests are covered with scratches from when the cat was still alive, white padding showing where the cuts are deep enough. The adrenaline still pounds. I feel like I've drunk ten coffees. Above me on the wall, my mother keeps a Japanese etching of a giant wave, white and blue with silver sparks, always on the edge of breaking. It is her favourite painting. She says it soothes her. Across from it on the opposite wall, she hung something I painted when I was twelve: an exploding star, red and yellow on a black background, swallowing all space. It's not a very nice picture, I was never very good at drawing. It's not even finished but my mother treats it like it has value. I try to focus on the colours, on the areas I didn't blend well enough. I count the small white stars speckled across the black emptiness and my whole body tingles but eventually the feeling slows down. I fall asleep.

A noise. How long was I asleep for? I semi-wake but I don't open my eyes, floating halfway between dream and wakefulness and something knocking at my ears but I am so deep in a well of comfy-warm-closed eyes I want to stay where I am. I let the noises from the outside world wash past me. I know it's the sound of my mother coming home from work. The sound of the front door she closes, of the handbag she drops on the floor, of the shoes she takes off. The particular swoosh of the kitchen door opening, like a vacuum bag being ripped. The kitchen is tiled and it echoes; opening or closing the door sounds like a tear in the empty space.

Then another noise, something I don't know. And only one, two minutes later. Footsteps on the living room carpet. My mother says my name.

“Laurane...Laurane...Laurane...”

I open my eyes, she stands at the feet of the sofa. Her face is a composite, an aggregate of a smile and something else. Something ambiguous, something uncomfortable.

We share this family trait, we smile when bad things happen. I've always found it very hard not to smile when breaking up with someone for example. It's not something I can control, it's like my lips have a will of their own and arrange themselves into a curve at every worst possible moment even though all I want to do is cry.

My mother is the same. She holds her hands together. Teeth showing through the lips.

She stands and she smiles and she says:

"Laurane, I think William is dead..."

And she keeps standing still, her hands curled into one another. Corners of the mouth, lifting.

The leather sticks to my skin. I rub one eye. I force myself to wake up. Somewhere at the back of my mind, I picture the chunk of ham left on the table and instinctively I know what happened: she gave William the ham. Hidden under the layer of sleep, a voice tells me to shut up, not to say anything. If I don't mention the ham, she will simply believe that William has died, like pets sometimes do, of natural causes, for no particular reason. But the voice screams from the depths and it's not that I ignore it, it's just that the words come out too quickly and I speak even though I know I shouldn't say anything and I immediately regret it.

I say:

"...Did you give him the ham?"

She hesitates.

"I did..."

"You gave him the piece of ham that was on the table?"

"Yes. Why?"

I prop myself up on one elbow. The words roll down like marbles on a slope, I say:

"Shit..."

"What? What?"

I feel the corners of my mouth, lifting:

“I’m so sorry... I gave him that piece when I came back from school and he started choking...”

She brings her hands to her face, the eyes swelling. The words tumble out of my mouth, I hate myself for saying them:

“I’m sorry, I gave him the ham but I heard him choke so I pulled it out from his mouth...He must have been choking on the fat and I don’t know why I didn’t throw it away. I should have done but I didn’t, the piece was too big, I should have thrown it away, I didn’t think you would give it to him...”

She stops smiling. In fact, the corners of her mouth fall downward. They crumble.

She cries. She covers her eyes. She says:

“I’ve killed him, I have killed William, it’s my fault, I’ve killed him...”

I feel removed. Like drowning, far away. I just want her to stop crying.

“It’s not you mum, it’s me. It’s my fault. I left the ham on the table, it’s my fault. I’m sorry, I don’t know why I didn’t throw it away, I’m sorry..”

But she carries on, her words tumble too:

“No, no, it’s me... I gave him the ham, I killed him...what am I going to do now?”

She rubs her eyes, her hands swallow her face:

“What am I going to do? What am I going to do?”

I say nothing. She sobs.

“I’m going to be on my own...At least he was company...’

I want to help but I've always been bad at comforting people so I don't know what to say. I don't know if I should cry too. Maybe I should stand up and go to her and maybe give her a hug but I can't. I am stuck on the sofa. My entire body feels laden with metal. Eventually she comes and sits next to me and I wrap my arms around her. I say "It's ok, it's ok, I'll buy you another rat". But then I remember that she doesn't even like rats. She says:

“I don’t want another rat.”

When she eventually stops crying, she says the body should go in a box. She goes to the kitchen. I hear the sound of cupboards being opened and closed, of plastic lids hitting more plastic lids. She tells me she found a box, her voice echoes through the corridor and into the living room. She was a midwife before I was born so I guess she is used to blood and life and death but I'm not. I refuse to enter the kitchen. I stay on the sofa. I don't want to see William now. Dead things scare me, they radiate something I can't face. I've never even seen a dead body.

When I was thirteen, just before my father was cremated, my mother asked me if I wanted to see the body. I said no. I told her and myself and everyone else it was because I wanted to remember him alive, but the truth is I was scared.

A few days before that, I'd come back from school and found the door locked from the inside, with my mother and the firemen trying to knock it down. I was with two friends. My mother told them to go and asked me to stay, but I said I'd rather leave with them. I didn't know what was happening, I only knew I didn't want to be there. The next evening when she told me my father was dead, I hid in the bathroom. I couldn't bring myself to cry in front of her. Later that night, I went to my best friend's house.

When I got to my friend's flat that evening, her parents already knew. They were nice to me, we had dinner and pretended that everything was fine, we laughed, we made jokes. My friend made a bed for me on the floor right next to hers, and her father came to the room to give me a hug and tell me he was there if I needed anything. A few years later, he would move to the south of France under the pretence of opening a business before it transpired that he had another family there and that's where all the money had gone. But that night, he told me he was there for me if I needed a father figure. I didn't start crying till I was sure my friend was fast asleep in her bed.

William the rat in his metal cage must have died pretty much in the exact same spot as my father. On the floor. Between the kitchen door and the kitchen table. I don't even know if this is true; I didn't see the body, but that's always where I imagined it to be. I didn't see the blood either, my

mother dealt with it. She said our cat and dog at the time were both near him when the firemen finally broke down the door, they were keeping watch.

A few months later, when my aunt accused my mother of killing my father, claiming she was toxic and would eventually kill me too, my mother responded by doing the only thing a serious, responsible adult could do: she threw the cat at her face. Our beautiful cat. Completely white, with a long, thin nose. My mother had bought it as a kitten so I would not feel so lonely, and my dad had taught it to climb the carpeted walls when it was little. As a child, I coloured it in with my felted pens whenever I was bored, drawing straight on the fur: orange nose for Halloween, red and green back for Christmas, sometimes one ear pink, one ear blue, the rest of the head in purple. It was a very patient cat, who would let me dress it in my doll's clothes, and who would sit in my doll's pram whilst I pushed it around the flat. I wasn't there when it eventually died of old age. I was already in London and I didn't care anymore. But that day, months after my father died, our beautiful white cat flew through the air and landed square on my screaming aunt's face.

Growing up, I spent most of my time on the floor, curled up in a ball, working, reading, watching TV on the carpet, probably as a side effect of growing up with pets instead of siblings. When I was about nine, I begged my mother to get me a puppy and one night after school, we went to the neighbour's house. Their dog had just had a litter. My mother said we were just going to have a look, that we couldn't bring any of the puppies home. We stepped into the neighbour's living room and the carpet was covered with miniature poodles, their fur the colour of warm champagne and so young their eyes were barely open. They each wore a pink or a blue collar. I chose a pink-collared one, so adventurous it kept escaping. Despite what she'd originally said, my mother found that she couldn't take it away from me and I carried it all the way home against my chest, its tiny shaking body nestled inside my coat so it wouldn't be cold. My father didn't want a dog. He was, in fact, firmly opposed. But how could he resist once we turned up with the cute puppy?

A few years after he died, my grandmother also told me that he didn't want a child either and probably wouldn't have killed himself if I hadn't been born. That he only got trapped in this life,

in this city because of me, and that if I hadn't existed, no one would miss me anyway, because they wouldn't have known me to begin with. But that's not a very nice thing to say. And my father did end up loving the dog, once he got used to the idea.

My mother finally finds the right Tupperware and lines the inside with kitchen roll. William is now asleep in a see-through coffin. We want to bury the body in the forest, next to Hermesinde, but it is sunny outside and the front of the building is full of people having a picnic. Burying pets in the forest is technically forbidden, in case dogs dig them out, so we have to sneak out with the box, each holding a plastic shovel that we found in the cupboard, from when we used to go to the beach. Looking back, we must have looked comical. Even at the time, I think we did manage to laugh about how ridiculous we looked, shovels, tears, and Tupperware.

We never talked about William again. I spent the next two days crying in between exams, then I felt guilty for months and maybe still do. Luckily though, my mother recently bought a hamster so she's not exactly alone anymore. The hamster is a girl; my mother called her Mademoiselle Michmuche. She said she'd named her after a hamster I had when I was little.

I don't think I ever had a hamster called Mademoiselle Michmuche. But she probably doesn't need to know that.

(3794 words)

About the Author

Laurane Marchive is a French writer and director living in London. Her work has recently appeared in *Mechanics' Institute Review* 15, *TSS Publishing*, *MIROnline* and the *TLS*. Marchive is a past winner of the French Escales des Lettres and, in 2018, was the joint winner of the Highlands and Islands Short Story Association competition. In 2019, she will graduate from the MA in Creative Writing at Birkbeck. She also runs a circus.