

Sold!

It was hectic in the kitchen this morning, and Mali saw that there was very little hope of getting any breakfast that involved putting food on a table. There were saucepans, casseroles, huge bags of bread rolls, towering stacks of paper cups, a big tea urn by the back door ready to be taken to the car. And in the middle of it all, her mother was puffing and panicking. 'Where's that green ladle? Will anyone want ketchup? Someone always does. Oh, help, is that the time?'

Mali squeezed past and opened the fridge door just a little, without knocking over the stack of picnic chairs leaning dangerously close to it, and whipped out two tubs of chocolate mousse. She wouldn't get away with it on any other day, but today was Sheep Sale Day, and today her mother was well and truly distracted. Frazzled. Panicking. All she had on her mind was her stall, selling Homemade Welsh Cawl and Best Lamb Curry to all the farmers who would flood into Blackmill village, all of them hungry and thirsty. Mali could do absolutely anything today and her mother wouldn't notice. Or so Mali hoped.

'Where's that sign you made, Mali? Have you put a string on it for me to hang it up?'

'Yes, Mam, don't worry. Here it is. Grandad will help us put everything up, won't he?'



Mali thought the poster she'd made was brilliant. She'd used fluorescent pens, especially lime green, her favourite. There was a drawing of a steaming plate of curry and it did look a bit peculiar in green, but never mind. She'd also missed out the 'p' in 'scrumptious' to start with, but she'd squeezed it in later. Never mind. At the last minute she'd added a little joke – a cartoon of her mother with steam coming out of her ears. She was sure Grandad would love it.

'Mali, put your pinny on, sharpish,' said her mother.

Huh, thought Mali. It was going to be another day of playing waitress and making tea. How was this going to help her CAREER?

Ever since Grandad had taken Mali to her first Sheep Sale, she had loved listening to Mr Jones the auctioneer. He stood in his trailer high above the pen where the sheep and lambs were brought in to be viewed, and called out, 'Where shall we start the bidding for these twenty store lambs? Fine lambs these, from Pwlllyfelin.'

But what Mali loved most of all was when he started to chant the numbers, 'Fifty, fifty, fifty, fifty-five, fifty-five, I have sixty. Sixty-sixty-sixty-sixty. Any advance now on sixty pounds? I have seventy. Seventy-seventy-seventy. . .' He didn't stop to take a breath!



Mali didn't want to be serving cawl today at her mother's stall. Luckily there wasn't much scraping of plates to do because hungry sheep-farmers ate every scrap. Even so, it was hard work traipsing back and forth with orders. Grandad brought his friend, Lili, to help, and she was strict with anyone who tried to push in. 'You wait your turn, Watkins, or I'll put hot pepper in your cawl!'

Mali's mother was teased about the cartoon. 'You must have been at boiling point when they got that picture,' one farmer chuckled.

'That's Mali for you,' she said. 'She's very naughty sometimes.'

'No, no,' said Grandad, 'she's not naughty – just mischievous.' He gave Mali a big wink and whispered, 'Tell you what, they won't miss us if we have five minutes to ourselves.' He had a PLAN, Mali could tell. 'Take that pinny off and come with me.'

And off they went to the field where the Sheep Sale was in full swing. It was quite hard to get there, with all the farmers and tourists blocking their path. There were Land Rovers and 4 x 4s parked up on pavements, which made Grandad pretty grumpy. 'All these new-fangled vehicles,' he said. 'When I was a young-un we just jumped on a pony and drove the sheep down here.'

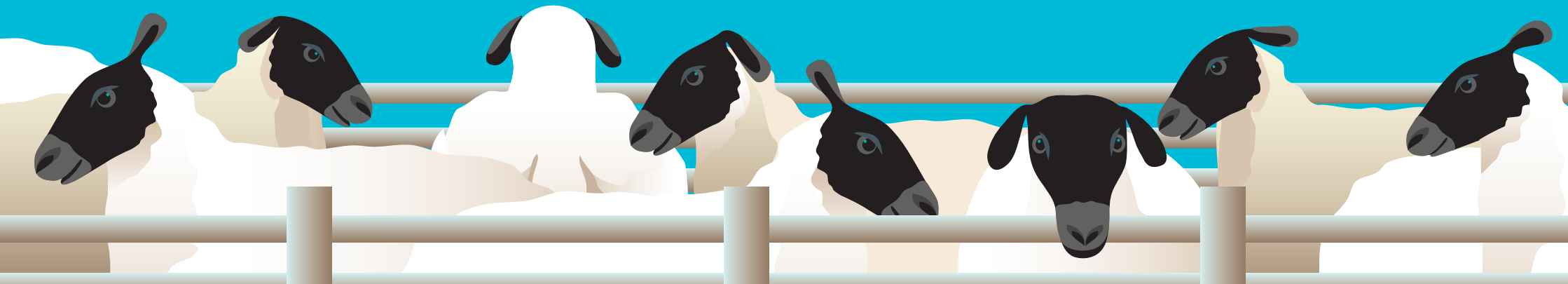
Mali loved to imagine her Grandad on a pony, giving orders to the sheepdogs and coaxing all those bleating animals to behave.

Mr Jones was wearing a flashy check jacket today and he was in fine voice. Store lambs were fetching good prices, so there would be a lot of happy faces in the Ogmores Junction tonight. That was Grandad's local pub, and he'd be down there later on, enjoying the stories. 'Sixty-sixty-sixty, sixty-five now, seventy I have. Seventy pounds to the Gloucester buyer. Do I see seventy-five now?'

Grandad was talking to a man with an enormous beard. Mali couldn't stop staring.

'This your granddaughter, Griff?' And when Grandad nodded, he asked, 'You going to be a sheep-farmer then, lass, when you grow up?'

'No,' she answered, 'an auctioneer.' And when Beardman laughed at her rudely, she turned her back on him and watched the auction.



50 > 55 > 65 > 75 > £1 > 1.50 > 1.75 > £2 > 2.25 > 2.50

When they got back to the stall, Mali's mum glared at them.

'It's frantic here,' she barked, nodding at the queue.
'Pinny on. Put the chocolate muffins out on the counter.'



Right at the front was Beardman. 'Hello, hello,' he said.
'A waitress. Not an auctioneer then?'

Mali blushed. 'I will be,' she said.

Then, a PLAN landed in her head. She held up a big plate of muffins, cleared her throat and said loudly: 'Where shall we start the bidding for these marvellous chocolate muffins? Who'll give me fifty pence?'

Beardman laughed, and so did most of the queue, but one of the men raised his hand. 'I see fifty! Thank you,' said Mali. 'Fifty-fifty-fifty . . .' And she was off. Two other people joined in – Mali sold the first muffin for two pounds fifty! She banged a spoon on the table and proudly declared, 'Sold to the gentleman in the blue baseball cap!' And everyone cheered.

Grandad was proud as Punch. In seventy years of Sheep Sales, he'd never seen a better auctioneer!

'You need that little bit of mischief in you to get the bidding going,' he said.

Mali smiled and jingled the coins in her pocket. Now, she decided, her CAREER had well and truly started!

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