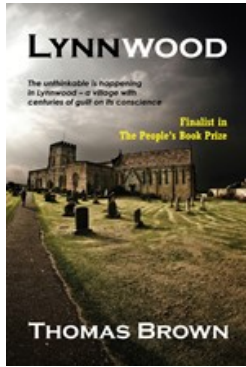


Lynnwood



The unthinkable is happening in Lynnwood - a village with centuries of guilt on its conscience.

By Thomas Brown

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Thomas Brown has spent the best part of his life reading and studying fiction of all kinds, but his heart beats for Horror and Fantasy.

In 2010, he won the University of Southampton's Flash Fiction Competition for his short story, 'Crowman'. In 2014, he won the Almond Press Short Story Competition, 'Broken Worlds'. In the same year, his first novel, LYNNWOOD, was a finalist for The People's Book Prize. In 2018, he completed a doctoral degree at the University of Southampton examining the limitations of language and how to navigate them to better communicate meaning through fiction.

He lives and works in a small market town bordering the Cotswolds, where he still writes every day.

About the book

Who wouldn't want to live in an idyllic village in the English countryside like Lynnwood? With its charming pub, old dairy, friendly vicar, gurgling brooks, and its old paths with memories of simpler times.

But behind the conventional appearance of Lynnwood's villagers, only two sorts of people crawl out of the woodwork: those who hunt and those who are prey.

Reviews

"A dark and disturbing horror story set in a picturesque village. Full of rich description, it depicts the horrifying, ravenous secret lurking beneath the surface of the village. I would recommend this to fans of classic English horror as well as fans of Stephen King." - *Lucy O'Connor, Waterstones bookseller, UK*

"A quintessentially British folk horror chiller, with an escalating power of dread that is rendered deftly. A new voice in British horror, that you'll want to read, has entered the field." - *Adam Nevill, Author of Apartment 16 and The Ritual*

"The plot line is new and exciting, I won't say any more about that because I don't want to give it away! But I know I was surprised more than once at what was happening. If you are looking for a good book, definitely pick up this one." - *Alison Mudge, Librarian, USA*

"...A dark journey not only of the mind, but of the soul. This beautifully crafted tale of the horror that lurks in a picturesque English village is hopefully the first of many to come from this brilliant young author. Mr. Brown's extraordinary talent is evident as he paints a virtual feast for

the reader with eloquently chosen prose in this powerfully engaging novel.” - *Nina D’Arcangela*

“An exciting, on the edge of your seat gothic that will have readers begging for more.” - *Rosemary Smith, Librarian and Cayocosta Book Reviews*

“An exciting début from a new young writer with a dark imagination. Thomas Brown’s beautifully written novel proposes a modern gothic forest far from the tourist trail, a place filled with strange events and eerie consequences.” - *Philip Hoare, historian of the New Forest, UK*

“It was a pretty creepy story. I kept thinking along the premise of the book ‘It’ by Stephen King with an English twist.” - *Naomi Blackburn, A Book and a Review Blog*

“This book was great! I thought I would give it a try, but when I picked it up I couldn’t put it down! It was a quick read, and the story was so creepily wonderful. I loved the author’s writing style - the words flowed perfectly. Reading this was less like reading a book and more like watching the movie in my mind’s eye. Fantastic! I highly recommend it! I can’t wait to see what else Thomas Brown has in store for readers in the future.” - *Laura Smith, Goodreads Reviewer*

“This is really rather good.

“Can we talk about the thing I loved most first? The writing. Oh, my word, the writing. It was the sort of writing that makes you marvel at how good it is, flowing and swirling and building until it’s created whole worlds of dread and fear around you.

“The story itself is fairly simple, though it is given a new dimension through being told out of order, with flashbacks and the recovery of lost memories being a major part of the storytelling. Lynnwood wouldn’t be nearly so creepy or scary if told straightforwardly, from beginning to end.

“This book is very good indeed, if you want to be actually horrified, yet spellbound as well. The beauty of the language contrasts with the horror of the events and it all works together very well...I’ve said before that it’s hard to review books that are genuinely, objectively good. I’ve always found it harder to discuss things I like. So just trust me that this is good, and go buy it, will you?” - *Caitlin Blanchard, Reviewer, UK*

“It’s a well-crafted tale of horror in a quaint, remote English village, that reminded me of gothic horror classics, and gave off a disturbing, claustrophobic feel. Excellent writing, and a plot that surprised me and chilled me to the bone.” - *Majanke Verstraete, Reviewer, Belgium*

“Lynnwood, a debut novel by Thomas Brown, is an absorbing, atmospheric dip into mystery, suspense and horror.

“This short novel is set in and around the English village of Lynnwood, which, although only a dozen miles from Southampton, is buried deep in the New Forest. It is an ancient village and to outward appearances, is an idyllic place to live. Freya has lived there all her life, originally with her parents, then her husband, Robert and their children. When the story begins, Robert is no longer on the scene and almost immediately, one begins to feel that all is not well in this beautiful village. As the story progresses, we learn about some of the myths attached to the area - these appear to be echoed in dreams being experienced by Freya and some of the people she knows. Freya’s son, George, has had some strange experiences down by the disused railway tunnel and speaks to his mother of a “friend” who dwells in the tunnel.

“To tell more of the story would spoil it for other readers, but I will say that this is a well-written piece. The descriptions of the Forest are so good; Thomas Brown is able to create a setting which comes alive. He builds the suspense gradually, until the chill creeps from the pages and you wonder what exactly the mystery behind the strange happenings in Lynnwood is.

“I will certainly be looking out for more books by Thomas Brown!” - *Angela Thomas, Reviewer, UK*

“When I started reading this one, it stopped me in my tracks. Holy. Cow. There is a young and unknown author, telling a tale with the eloquence, stylishness and vivid atmosphere of a seasoned Poppy Z. Brite and Anne Rice. Seriously – the way Brite and Rice evoke Louisiana and the Deep South, he paints a vivid picture of the New Forest into your very soul. A dark picture, and, I take it back, he doesn’t paint it, he carves it into you with a knife. It takes skill to scare this here book lady: I’ve devoured dark fiction of any kind since I was about 9, from the classics to the vilest splatterpunk, and I thought, I’m dead inside, man. Dead. I can count on one hand the books that truly made me pull up the duvet to my nose at night and stare into the shadows, or that enchanted me with their ability to create a film in my head or punch me straight in the guts. This is one of them. The way it morphs from the quaint and picturesque to the feral is deeply unsettling and fascinating in equal measure, making you question how stable our sense of civilisation really is. It has the earthy, eerie folklore flavour of Adam Nevill, Clive Barker and the Wicker Man, in spookiness easily rivalling Susan Hill and Henry James. Yet Brown’s voice is powerfully and uniquely his own. An incredible debut and an author I’ll be keeping an eye out for! And I’ll be buying a hardcopy for my collection of doom!” - *Patty Dohle, Waterstones Bookseller, UK*

“I read this book in two sittings, a fast read, and I found it to be very interesting. A dark gothic type of tale that will have you chilled to the bones. A quaint little town that has people going missing in the Midwinter each year, this has been going on for a long time. Outer appearances show Lynnwood to be a nice little village with nice people, an ideal place to live, away from the hustle and bustle of a big city. But not all is what it appears to be as an evil lurks beneath the surface of this village. It took me awhile to figure out what was actually going on, as the author’s writing was very poetic and gave nothing away. This is the type of book to read curled up in front of a fire, just don’t be alone...I enjoyed it immensely.” - *Kathleen Kelly, Reviewer, USA*

“This book took me a little while to get into. I’m not a horror fan in the sense that I read it very often. I will say that I love my YA and my Fantasy/Dark Fantasy first and foremost. However, I love reading other genres too, but I gravitate towards YA/Fantasy/ParaRomance. However, now that my warning has been stated, I will say that this book was pretty enjoyable. I would say it is a cross between, for me, Torchwood meets Stephen King. Which was really interesting when you see it meshed together.

“The story had a good flow and a nice steady pace. At 192 pages it isn’t terribly long but it was enough to get the story told and to do it well. I read about the author as he is an MFA student. Since I am heading into my application season ... I do my best to check out what graduates and current students are putting out there. I will say this: I can see why they accepted him into the program. His writing was clean, fluid, and all the blocks fell into place with each other.

“This is an exceptionally well written story that I really enjoyed reading. It is set in the UK with their style of speaking, etc. So, if you aren’t familiar with some of the subtle changes between the US and the UK English this will definitely teach you a little bit. But, I felt that it strengthened the story and really brought a great connection between the characters and myself. I definitely enjoyed reading it. The horror was there and he definitely reminded me of King, but the best parts of him. Brown isn’t overly wordy but does give good description. I loved Stephen King’s *The Talisman* and if you’re a fan of King ... well, to put it nicely, we all know how long winded Mr. King can get. Brown is nothing like that. While he gives you great narration and description, he doesn’t make you go, ‘oh my god ... can we get to the point already?’ He goes off and adds the beauty of the words but doesn’t get into the long winded mode some writers can do.” - *Amanda Harris, Reviewer, USA*

“It’s difficult to pinpoint what makes horror drip from the spine of LYNNWOOD without spoiling its main course. It disturbs without resorting to a single horror cliché. Upon first glance,

LYNNWOOD dictates the story of Freya, mother of two, who lives in the quaint English countryside. Blessed by the fortune left from deceased parents, Freya spends much of her time wandering the town and surrounding forest. Without the sparse mentions of modern luxuries and dates in the recent years, the simplicity of the villagers' lifestyles would leave readers believing this story occurred in the middle ages rather than the modern age.

"Using terminology and British spellings for words, the atmosphere is strengthened by the expertise of the author's word choice. The descriptions are so crisp that I could nearly smell the bacon and egg breakfast that Freya cooked and gorged herself with every morning or hear Freya's footsteps through her well-travelled path through the forest. I felt the hairs on my arms prickle when the setting switched to the abandoned railroad tunnel.

"The frequent flashbacks into Freya's blissful childhood illuminated the cracking sanity and simple 'wrongness' of the villagers' behaviour when the focus shifted back to present day. A hunger builds from the first scene until the last and as a reader I didn't feel satisfied until the last page was turned in this psychological horror.

"And so I leave you with a review that aims to tease your taste buds rather than stuff you with fillers (mostly because its too easy to spoil the surprise). As with any horror book done well, how the story unfolds matters as much as the content and this book doesn't disappoint." - *Lizzy Lessard, Reviewer, USA*

"This atmospheric chiller is perceptibly menacing from the first sentence. Set in the idyllic village of Lynnwood, set on the edge of the New Forest in England, the truth of the village's heritage is glimpsed through the eyes of villager, Freya. She discovers the charred remains of a pig on a morning walk with her dog, and this stirs a hunger in her. Freya has been a vegetarian for years, ever since her husband, inexplicably and suddenly left her; and this renewed hunger for meat is disturbing.

"The villagers are a superstitious lot, friendly to the tourists that come to visit, but always glad to see them leave. However, there have been disappearances of visitors and villagers alike over the years; put down to being either lost in the Forest, or the victim of the legendary Bauchan, the hungry spirits of the local brook and Forest since the fourteenth century. These skeletal creatures can be seen only from the corner of the eye slipping between the trees of Forest. But that's what they are; a local legend; a story told to children to keep them safe from falling into the waters of Bauchan Brook. Or are they? As Midwinter draws nigh, it is said that the hunger of the Bauchan intensifies, and the villagers can do naught but lock their doors tight against the night, peeking through drawn curtains with fear filled eyes.

"Freya is friends with the vicar; Joan Andrews, a seventy-one year old, steady woman who whispers of a dark recurring dream she has each night. Of a fly faced woman that draws ever nearer, one step closer with each dream. Freya convinces her to confront her night-time fears by visiting the clearing in the Forest where the dream occurs. Together they go to the Forest, but the vicar never returns. Bereft by the loss of Ms. Andrews, Freya seeks solace with her best friend, Catherine, the local vintner, both drinking large quantities of wine to drown their loneliness and growing sense of dread. Then, one day, Freya goes to Catherine's house to find her gone.

"Freya, in clearing our the old Vicarage, comes across diaries of those who came before, and learns of the history of Lynnwood. That its first years were filled with starvation; a hunger so deep and desperate that some committed unspeakable acts. And that the hunger remains to this day.

"This gripping gothic novella drew me in and kept me turning the pages until the horrific revelations of the last pages. This debut novella is a fast read, good for both young adults and adults that enjoy horror that is more edgy than gory." - *Maria Wolff, Librarian, USA*

“I gave this book 5 stars for being well-written...The village of Lynnwood is tucked away in England’s New Forest, a bucolic and slow-moving locale with much evidence of its historic past. Indeed, the schoolchildren attend classes in a building constructed several centuries ago for that very purpose. But the bucolic peace of Lynnwood is a misnomer, or rather an illusion cast upon the villagers, for there are inexplicable forces in the Forest and in the abandoned railway tunnel, forces that cause the inhabitants to disappear.” - *Mallory Heart Reviews, USA*

“I really enjoyed Lynnwood, and will be recommending it a lot. Really well written gothics are kind of rare, and such well written debuts are not to be missed.

“Hard to believe this is a first novel. Thomas Brown writes with a tremendously polished style and creates scenes that you can not only see, but also smell and even taste. He is also a master at building suspense and horror. I read this book quickly because I had to see what was coming next, and it was a chilling Gothicky experience--delightful! This book would appeal to fans of Shirley Jackson and MR James, really to anybody who likes a good Gothic spiced with horror and a lot of style.” - *Sue Buchman, Librarian, USA*

Excerpt

Dedication

For Christopher Robin, who was so patient, and provided wine when it was required, and often when it wasn't.

CHAPTER ONE

When Freya discovered the pig's remains, on the third of September, they stirred unseemly urges deep inside her. She often circled the village with Eaton, keeping to the surrounding paths, and this day was no different. They passed beneath the alder trees, which grew near Mawley Bog, and around the outskirts of Lynnwood. It was a Sunday, both in name and temperament; an air of sleepiness hung over the village, its inhabitants reluctant to rise, save a nameless few, undaunted by the hour.

As she moved beneath the trees, her thoughts turned to the village's history. There were few in Lynnwood who did not know it well. The village dated back to the fourteenth century when settlers first flocked in real numbers to the Forest, and by all accounts it had changed very little since. Ancient oaks hemmed in the village, and beech and yew and holly. Together they kept the place their own. There was a single bus that went as far as Lymington, which left and returned once each day, and one long, vermicular road. These were the only ways in and out of the village. Many visited the Forest each year, drawn by the herds of wild ponies, the allure of the woodland and its seasonal beauty; the wild gladiolus, found nowhere else in Britain; the carpet of late summer heathers, a sliding scale of purples; even snowdrops, when winter was nigh and the days were at their shortest. It was no wonder that those who ventured into Lynnwood chose to remain. What sane man or woman would want to leave such a place; the sweet, isolating scent of flowering viola, the old Forest paths, the light?

Freya set a brisk pace that morning, her hands buried firmly in her Parka pockets. Tall, dark green wellingtons protected her jeans from the worst of the mud and blonde hair spilled out beneath a faux coonskin cap. It fluttered fiercely in the wind.

The dog, Eaton, caught the scent first and as they broke from the tree line he slipped under the wooden gate, bounding into the adjoining field. At first Freya was unconcerned. Even for a Lurcher, Eaton was a spirited animal. She had bought him for her thirty-fifth birthday, almost eight years ago, and he had been a part of the family ever since. She could only imagine how exciting the world seemed to him and his keen canine senses; the scent of rabbits, of edible things

concealed in the grass, even other dogs, a number of which they would usually encounter each morning. Even when she caught an acrid tang on the air, she gave it little thought. McCready must have been burning things. He often ventured into the village, his hands still black, his clothes stinking with smoke.

“What’ve you found, boy?” she said, smiling into the wind. “Yes, aren’t you a clever dog! What’s that, then?”

The corpse of the pig stopped her in her tracks. The lingering damp of Mawley Bog was replaced by the smokiness of scorched flesh, which carried on the breeze. Shivering, she brought her hand to her mouth. Fat had bubbled and popped across heat-cracked bone, then cooled in slick, waxy pools between the ribs. Even the surrounding grass was dead; a crisp, ashen elf ring. Flies hovered over the corpse, accountable for the buzzing sound that filled her head as her eyes settled on the skull. It grinned back at her with a sooty, feral smile.

* * *

She left McCready’s field quickly, dragging Eaton from the pig by his collar. Arriving home, she first cleaned the dog with a towel. Then she headed upstairs to the bathroom. She wouldn’t usually shower after each walk, but that day it felt important. Her skin still shivered, her body unclean, the stink of burned flesh haunting her nostrils.

The blasted pig had deeply unsettled her, but worse were the feelings it had stirred: loathing, fear and the fluttering of hunger. She told herself that she had been mistaken. She had felt a ripple of revulsion, perhaps; the knotting of her stomach at the sight of such a horrid, unexpected thing in the grass, but not hunger! The very thought of bringing her mouth to the charred flesh, of tasting it, cold and crisp on her tongue, was monstrous.

Hot water splashed her skin. For what seemed like the longest time she stood under the spray. Eyes closed, she relished the water as it ran down her body. An antique mirror hung on the opposite wall from the shower, rectangular in shape and framed with golden ornament. Green Men studied her from the frame, their faces wreathed with vines. Her mother had been especially fond of the mirror, and many were the times Freya had stood in the doorway, when just a little girl, watching the older woman as she made herself presentable; hiding the human beneath lipstick and blusher and long, black lashes.

There was no hiding as Freya stepped from the shower, a smudge of exposed pink in the reflection. She glanced at herself only once, then dressed with her back to the ornament. Birds sang whimsically outside the window while she clothed herself.

Changed and refreshed – physically, if nothing else – she returned to the kitchen. She filled the kettle and prepared a drink, moving stiffly, as though dazed. Eaton followed her around the room, an auburn shadow at her feet.

She had not eaten meat since Robert left her. Though she encouraged her children to eat it, she had not touched it herself for over ten years. She associated the food with him and their last meal together, which stuck so vividly in her mind.

Steam whistled from the kettle’s spout like the scream of burning swine. Moving the kettle from the hob until the shrill sound trailed off, she poured her tea and drank it. They said that tea was good for dealing with shock. She poured another, which she supped more slowly, savouring the sweet warmth that rose from the surface of the liquid.

* * *

It was a dizzying experience to walk the frosted village in December. Cobbled pavements were slippery and hard with ice. The warmth of mulled liquor and brandy burned throats while the

cold weather bit red cheeks. Carollers moved from cottage to cottage, singing righteous songs in celebration of the season. Nor were theirs the only voices to be heard, for the night was Midwinter and on that night, without fail, the dogs of Lynnwood tossed back their heads and added their own anxious howls, their chorus carrying far over the New Forest. The skies were cloudless, the constellation Orion, the Hunter, visible as he chased his quarry through the blackness and the stars.

From the comfort of her front room, Freya watched, as she did every year, a small group of children finish carolling at Granary Cottage across the street. Their failing voices were whisked away by the wind. The ancient hymns made her happy, infusing her with festive spirit. She wasn't a religious woman, like Ms. Andrews of the Vicarage, but it warmed her heart to see the children playing together. They skittered across the icy road, past the parked cars and streetlights to the next cottage, and she turned from the window, the dark silhouette of her reflection doing likewise in the glass.

The house was lively, excitable. An air of anticipation filled the rooms, which she cheerfully attributed to Christmas. Baubles glittered like silvery apples on the potted pine tree in the corner. From the kitchen came the sizzling scent of roast chicken and the crisp, root aroma of potatoes. Her mouth became wet and anxious and she followed the smells and the sounds of cooking to their source.

Where the front room was dim, lit only by lamps and the flickering lights of the tree, the kitchen shone brightly. Exposed oak beams lined the ceiling, an AGA cooker – black from use, even then – dominating the back wall. Robert stood by the dinner table. He stooped to pour two glasses of white, the wine making delicious glugging sounds as it decanted.

“My favourite wine for my favourite woman,” he said, turning and pressing a glass carefully into her hand.

“I'm your woman now, am I?”

He grinned, teeth bared in mockery of an ape, and tapped his chest with his fist. “Now and always.”

“Misogynist,” she said, smiling and sipping from her glass.

“What can I say? I'm an animal.”

“You're not the only one.” She nibbled his ear as she passed him, her breath sharp and zingy with the white. She tasted it against his lobe and on the air. He shivered bodily between her teeth.

They ate dinner quietly. Even when the dogs began to howl, the peace wasn't ruined. There was something beautiful and primal in the chorus of their cries. She decided then that they should get a dog of their own. He said it was a wonderful idea. Something loyal, to look after their little girl, Lizzie, and recently-born George. Both slept upstairs, lulled by the lingering howls.

It was strange, how well she could recall the details of that meal. Every flavour seemed suffused in her tongue, taste memories; of moist chicken breast, succulent and spiced; of rich gravy, thick and salty; of those hot, slender vegetables, asparagus, still crunchy, and carrots slippery and soft. She ate and drank with abandon, her head thrown back, eyes closed, mouth agape, as if the bestial howls of the dogs erupted from her own throat –

* * *

She didn't see Robert again after that night. Though she could never forgive him for walking out on her, she had loved him once, enough to share a house, a life, to father her children, and the thought of abandoning that drew a roaring panic inside her. Feelings had been unfettered in that

field, frightening and seductive, threatening her last memory of her husband with promises of crisp crackling, succulent flesh and dripping grease.

Alone in the kitchen, with only the dog as witness, she stepped slowly towards the black, cast-iron pan, hanging above the hob, and the bottle of cooking oil beside it.

When her children finally dragged themselves downstairs, almost an hour later, they were greeted by the sizzle of hot fat, the splutter of eggs and the rich, salty scent of fried bacon. They smiled sleepily at their mother and seated themselves at the dining table, oblivious to the half-eaten rasher at the bottom of the bin or the guilt behind their mother's eyes.

* * *

Though she did not know it then, Freya was not alone in her private distress. Nor was she the first in Lynnwood to suffer. Ms. Andrews, of the Vicarage, dreamt she saw a woman in the Forest with the face of a fly and great, glassy wings. Mr. Shepherd, at his bench one afternoon, crafted seven intricate brooches, each in the shape of a gaping maw, before he realised what he was doing or how long it had taken him. And McCready was woken one night by screaming. Following the sound to his sties he glimpsed a skeletal figure crouched over the body of one of his pigs. Neck craned to the night sky, it shrieked a ditty from McCready's own childhood:

Scads and 'tates, scads and 'tates.

Scads and 'tates, and conger.

And those who can't eat scads and 'tates,

Oh! they must die of hunger.

These things were not dwelt on. Dreams were disregarded, as dreams so often were, though Ms. Andrews took to wearing her rosary beads beneath the collar of her nightdress while she slept. Mr. Shepherd melted down the ugly, unsettling brooches, except for one, which he secreted into the bottom drawer beside his bed. And once McCready had finished the whisky that he saved for occasions such as this, he dragged the pig's carcass into an empty field, doused it with lighter fluid and burned it. Afterwards, when he woke quite suddenly, sweating and cold in his bed, he couldn't be sure that he had left his pillow at all.

Outside, as a new day broke across the blue autumn sky, the pig's blackened bones cooled in the grass, unobserved by all except one woman and her dog.

CHAPTER TWO

Having felt the playful nip of that hunger, which risked revealing something wild inside her, Freya clung to old habits, finding herself among the village congregation next Sunday. She held no special love for Allerwood Church, but like many of the village's residents she felt a hollowness inside; a quiet corner of her being, forever empty. Some felt this most at night, when their kitchen lights failed them, or when they passed through the Forest in the evening. It was a human thing, she knew, to fear this darkness. Theirs was an epicurean herd, grown fat and contented on life. They had no mind to be stripped of their lives at the trough, by death or any other means.

For others it was dogs that frightened them; the wet stink of their fur, or their animal howls, which carried so easily over Lynnwood. Like the darkness, they reminded of human things; race memories, rank and coppery, best left forgotten. The same swine of society heard the dogs' howls and they buried their faces deeper into their feed, and their lives went on in pleasant Lynnwood.

“The service seems busy this morning,” Freya said, when she greeted their vicar, Ms. Andrews, on the church steps that morning.

“Indeed, the promise of winter brings many guilty gluttons to our doorstep.” The elderly woman smiled, then winked at Freya’s children. “Besides, the more the merrier. We need the bodies.”

“I’m sorry?”

“To warm the church, my dear. The building is old as anything in the village. Even filled it doesn’t hold heat well.”

Darkness held no fear for Freya; she who had been left in the dark already, and there was familiarity in the cries of the dogs that conjured up memories of her last night with Robert, when they had sat at their dining table and eaten to the chorus of howls. Rather, it was the fragility of that memory that kept her awake at night and in a moment of madness, alone in her kitchen, she had threatened that...

She left the old woman to her greetings, leading her children past the alcoves, where there were fewer people to disrupt. They slipped into the third-row pew and waited while the rest of Lynnwood’s church-going residents found their seats. The cruciform ground plan was typical of fourteenth-century traditions. Sitting in the third row, she had a clear view of the altar, the high place on which it rested and the transept at the head of the room. There was little of the ornament boasted by grander churches, but theirs was a practical parish. The pews were varnished oak. A table by the entrance held a vase of white-lipped lilies and the collection bowl. White plaster covered the walls and although some stained-glass windows overlooked the nave, these were of a simple design. It was a place of worship and nothing more; a church for a parish which needed spiritual nourishment, when the nights drew in and the dogs began to bay.

Beside her, George fidgeted in his seat. He looked distracted, she thought, as did his sister, their eyes staring but not seeing. She didn’t judge them. Church was no place for the wild spirits of children.

* * *

“Do I have to come?” Lizzie had said that morning, when Freya stepped into her room and flung open the curtains. The room was dark, stuffy and filled with a menagerie of shapes in the half-light; the products of her daughter’s art classes. It smelled of adolescence, and the perfumes used by teenage girls to mask it.

“Yes, darling,” she said. “This is family time.”

“But it’s pointless! You think there’s some All-Father sitting up there, nodding when you go to church and frowning when you’re bad? You think Dad lived by those beliefs? We’re not a parish of medieval sinners. No one believes in God anymore!”

“It doesn’t matter what you or anyone else believes,” she said, unlocking the window to let some air in. “It’s the done thing. The least we can manage is a Sunday, here and there.”

“This is stupid,” said Lizzie. “Mark Thomas’s parents take him to beer festivals, and Rachel’s mum cooks her three-course dinners when they need family time. With cheeseboards. And pâté starters.”

“You don’t like pâté, darling, and neither do I.”

“That’s not the point,” said Lizzie. “You’re not listening to me. I’m saying church isn’t normal anymore.”

“Your skirt’s on the bannister,” said Freya, unfaltering. “You’ve got twenty minutes, young lady.”

* * *

Freya had heard it said once, when shopping with Robert in Lymington, that the hungry were quick to forget. This was true of the conversation; they were enjoying afternoon tea at a small café and the table beside theirs had entirely forgotten what it was they had ordered. She remembered the café well; the miniature sandwiches filled with wafers of smoked salmon, the lace tablecloths, even the serviettes, printed in patriotic colours and folded carefully for each customer by their place mat. People loved the café, as they loved all places where they could gorge themselves under the pretence of propriety. They were modern predators, snouts speckled not with blood but tea and breadcrumbs.

The saying was also true of Lynnwood, however. Perhaps that was why she had felt such guilt at her appetite, the Sunday she encountered the pig. She could not explain that morning’s weakness, which stood against everything she had upheld for over ten years, except that even as she remembered it her mouth began to fill with hot, wet anticipation. For the first time in a decade she had felt temptation, and she had succumbed to it in a moment. They might not be medieval, as her daughter had suggested, but Freya had sinned, and while she continued to sin there was Allerwood Church. The Dark Ages, it seemed, had endured to the twenty-first century, hidden beneath the boughs of the trees and in their hungry hearts.

* * *

The sky was grey and heavy with cloud when they left the service. They took the gravel-stone path through the churchyard and around the back of the church. The little chips made crunching sounds beneath their feet, like hard, dry cereal between her teeth. The three of them moved amid the headstones.

As with most old parishes of its kind, an intimate, if not generous number of graves had sprung up in its grounds over the centuries. The very first graves, the earliest, were those nearest to the church. Some of them were little more than rock piles, their inscriptions long since eroded, or hidden beneath moss. These were the first settlers of Lynnwood, resting beneath its hallowed grounds, from where they might continue to keep a quiet watch over their village. There had been a petition to have the graves restored, she remembered, several years ago. Quite a number of signatures had been gathered from the village’s more spiritual residents. They had a more than vested interest in the maintenance of the graves, she supposed, as regular attendees of the church.

Her signature had counted among those collected. She could still recall doe-eyed Ms. Andrews and Sam Clovely from the village council standing on her doorstep that morning; their beatific smiles as they talked to her about heritage, history and remembrance. She had signed, for what it was worth. They weren’t bad people and nothing had come of the appeal anyway. Clovely had disappeared one night, halfway through the local campaign, and all the signatures with him. She struggled to remember the details, which were unclear in her mind, but seemed to think they had found a book of his – a journal – in which he had written of noises at his window, late into the night, like the scrabbling of rats or light-fingered children. The general consensus was that he couldn’t have been of sound mind, the poor man. The money had gone towards refurbishing the village hall instead, and the leftovers used to fund some cookery classes there. She had attended one with Lizzie, in the spirit of the community. Her daughter seemed to have enjoyed the lesson well enough, though she had found it lacking.

The further they walked from the church, the more recent the graves became. They were still old but their condition gradually improved. They stood higher and straighter in the soil and in many cases the names were still legible where they were engraved into the stone. The most recent dotted the outskirts of the churchyard. The names were still clear, some only a year or two old –

if that. They must have been people she knew, to have been buried so recently, and yet she could think of only a handful of people who had passed away in this time. She inspected the family names on the nearest two headstones: Richards and Collins. They meant nothing to her and slipped easily from her mind.

They were almost at the gate when George wandered from the path. She waited while he approached the nearest memorial. For almost a minute he stood in front of the headstone, which was roughly his own height and fashioned after the stony style of its forbears. She couldn't see his face, standing as he was with his back to her, but she watched as he lifted his hand to touch the grey stone. The scene was strangely affecting, stirring something inside of her she couldn't explain. It might have been the sight of one so small, standing alone between the gravestones, or it might have been his fingers on the stone; the living crossing the boundary of the dead. It might have been something obscurer still; her flesh and blood remembering the forgotten. A bouquet of flowers rested at his feet and it brought her some relief to know that someone besides her little boy was caring for the graves. Someone in Lynnwood remembered the buried dead, even if she could not.

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