

Thomas Brown

Lynnwood



Sparkling Books

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Praise for *Lynnwood*

'I would recommend this to fans of classic English horror as well as fans of Stephen King.'

Lucy O'Connor, Waterstones bookseller

"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 anymore 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

'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 'one of the world's most famous and celebrated chroniclers of the New Forest and its history'

'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



Thomas Brown is a postgraduate student at the University of Southampton, where he is studying for an MA in Creative Writing.

He has been Co-Editor of Dark River Press and has written for a number of magazines, websites and independent publishers.

In 2010 he won the University of Southampton's Flash Fiction Competition for his story: *Crowman*.

He is also a proud member of the dark fiction writing group: Pen of the Damned.

Literary influences include Friedrich Nietzsche, S. T. Joshi and Russian novelist Andrei Makine.

Dedication

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

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And finally to you, the reader, for taking a chance on me and my voice. Without you, the writer is a lonely man or woman. If nothing else, enjoy.

Thomas Brown
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Oxfordshire

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'And this also...
has been one of the dark places of the earth.'

Joseph Conrad, *The Heart of Darkness*

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.