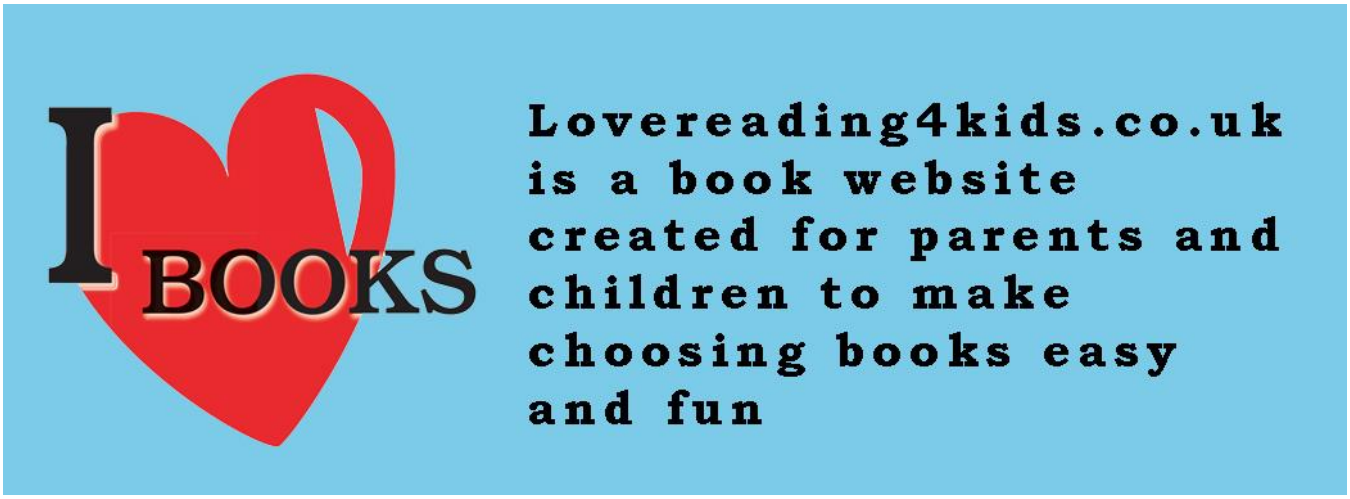


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For John Mullins
1966–2015
Sorely missed

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Then (she had felt it only this morning) there was the terror; the overwhelming incapacity, one's parents giving it into one's hands, this life, to be lived to the end, to be walked with serenely; there was in the depths of her heart an awful fear.

–Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*

This pain
It is a glacier moving through you
And carving out deep valleys
And creating spectacular landscapes

–John Grant, *'Glacier'*

Adam would have to get the flowers himself.

His mom had enough to do, she said; she needed them this morning, pretty much *right now* if the day wasn't going to be a total loss; and in the end, Adam's attendance at this little "get-together" with his friends tonight may or may not hinge on his willingness/success in picking up the flowers and doing so without complaint.

Adam argued – quite well, he thought, without showing any overt anger – that his older brother, Marty, was the one who'd run over the *old* flowers; that he, Adam, *also* had a ton of things to do today; and that new chrysanthemums for the front path weren't exactly high in the logical criteria for attendance at a get-together he'd already bargained for – because nothing was free with his parents, not ever – by chopping all the winter's firewood before even the end of August. Nevertheless, she had, in that way of hers, turned it into a decree: he would get the flowers or he wouldn't go tonight, especially after that girl got killed.

"Your choice," his mom said, not even looking at him.

It's only the Yoke, Adam thought, getting behind the wheel of his car. And the Yoke isn't forever. Still, he needed a few deep breaths before he started the engine.

At least it was early. The late summer Saturday stretched ahead, with its hours to fill, hours he *had* filled with a schedule of things (he was a scheduler): he needed to go for a run; he had a few hours' stock-taking to do at the Evil International Mega-Conglomerate; he had to help his dad at the church; he had to stop by Angela's work to make sure the pizzas were still on schedule for the party–

Morning, his phone buzzed in his lap.

He smiled in a small way. There was that today, too.

Morning, he typed back. *Wanna buy flowers?*

Is that code?

He smiled again and backed out of the driveway. Fine, let go of the anger, because what a day ahead! What fun it promised! What laughs! What drinks and food and friends and sex! What a stab in the heart at the end of it because the party was a going-away one! Someone was going away. Adam wasn't sure whether he wanted them to go away or not.

What a day ahead.

What time are you coming by? asked his phone.

Around 2? he typed back at a stop sign.

The reply was a thumbs-up emoji.

He pulled out of his wooded neighbourhood onto the wooded road into town. "Wooded" in fact described everything within fifty miles; it was the overwhelming

feature of the town of Frome, indeed the overwhelming feature of the state of Washington. Take it as a given, a sight so often seen it became invisible.

Adam thought about two o'clock this afternoon. There was so much happiness to be had there. So much secret happiness.

And yet, a sinking of the stomach, too…

No, stop that. He was looking forward to it. Absolutely. Yes. In fact, think about–

In fact, yes, *that*.

Another stop sign. *Blood is flowing places*, he messaged. *Engorging things*.

The reply was two thumbs up emojis.

So consider Adam Thorn, as he pulls out onto the further main road – wooded, naturally – the one that leads to the garden centre, the one with ever-increasing traffic, even at this early hour on a Saturday. Adam Thorn, born almost but not quite eighteen years ago in the hospital ten miles along this same road. The furthest from here he's been in his life is when his family went on a fun-free driving holiday to Mount Rushmore. He didn't even get to go on the mission trip to Uruguay with his father, mother and Marty when Adam was in the sixth grade. Afterwards, his dad had made it sound like a nightmare of mud and evangelical-resistant locals, but Adam – deemed too young and sentenced to three weeks of 4.30 suppers with Grandpa John and Grandma Pat – couldn't help but feel that wasn't the point.

Twelve more months, he thought, and the Yoke is off.

Senior year started in just over a week.

After that, the sky.

For Adam Thorn wants to get away. Adam Thorn longs to leave, with an ache in his gut so acute it feels like vertigo. Adam Thorn wishes he was going away with the person going away at the end of tonight's going-away party.

Well, maybe he does.

Adam Thorn. Blanched blond, tall, bulky in a way that might be handsome but is only just starting to properly agree with gravity. A-student, fighting for the college of his choice, fighting for college at *all* as the money troubles that are supposed to be passing don't seem to be doing so, not helped by pointless purchases of chrysanthemums because "preachers' houses have to look a certain way", but he is focused on a goal, focused on what will get him the hell out of Frome, Washington.

Adam Thorn, keeper of secrets.

His phone rang as he pulled into the garden centre. "Everyone's up early today," he answered as he parked.

"How many times do I have to tell you I'm not everyone?" Angela grumped.

"*Everyone* is everyone. Whole point of 'everyone'."

"The whole point of everyone is for them to constantly do stupid things while we – not everyone – make fun of them for it and feel superior."

"Why are you up?"

"Why else? The chickens."

"The chickens are every reason for everything. They'll rule us one day."

"They rule us now. Why are *you* up?"

"Replacement flowers. For my mom's garden of punishment."

"You are so going to need therapy."

"They don't believe in it. If you can't pray it away, it's not a real problem."

"Your parents. I'm amazed they're letting you go tonight. Especially after Katherine van Leuwen."

Katherine van Leuwen was the girl who was killed, which seemed impossible with a name so strong. She'd gone to Adam's school, a year ahead, but he didn't know her. And okay, so, fine, she *had* been murdered last week at the same lake where the get-together was planned (Adam had never used the word "party" with his parents as that would have closed discussion immediately), but the girl's killer, her much older boyfriend, had been caught, had confessed, and was awaiting sentencing. She had always hung out with the meth heads and it was meth her boyfriend was amped up on when he killed her, raving about – of all things – goats, according to an equally methed witness. Angela, Adam's closest friend, raged against anyone's even slight suggestion that Katherine van Leuwen had brought it on herself.

"You don't know," she'd nearly shout at whoever. "You don't know what her life was like, you don't know what addiction is like. You have no idea what goes on inside another person's head."

That was certainly true, and thank God for that, in the case of Adam's parents.

"They think it's a quote *get-together* with three or four of my friends to say goodbye to Enzo," he said now.

"That sentence is factually true."

"While at the same time omitting much."

"Also true. When pizzas? Because, pizzas."

"I've got a run to do, then work, then I'm seeing Linus at two, and I have to help my dad set up for church tomorrow–"

"Dad and church post-coitus with Linus? You dirty boy."

"I was thinking seven? Then we could go straight to the party."

"Get-together."

"There will be together to get, yes."

"Seven. Good. I need to speak to you."

"About what?"

"Stuff. Don't worry. And now chickens. Because, chickens."

Angela's family had a working farm. She swore they'd adopted her from Korea because it was cheaper than hiring a labourer for the livestock. This wasn't true, even Angela knew it; Mr and Mrs Darlington were unobtrusively decent, always good to Adam, always giving him an implicitly safe place to get away from those parents of his, even if they were too kind to say such a thing out loud.

"When is it that you've got my back again, Adam?" Angela asked, in their usual farewell.

He grinned. "Always. Until the end of the world."

"Oh, yeah. That's right." She hung up.

He got out of his car into the early morning sunshine. The lot was nearly full at a little past eight. Serious gardeners around here, getting ready for the approaching fall. He stopped a minute under the sky, only cleared of trees for the parking lot but still: open sky. He closed his eyes, felt the sun on his eyelids.

He breathed.

The Yoke wasn't even his word. It was Biblical. It was his dad's. Big Brian Thorn. Former professional football player – three seasons as a tight end for the Seahawks before the shoulder surgery – now long-time head preacher at The House Upon The Rock, Frome's second-largest evangelical church. "Until you leave my house," he'd bellowed right into Adam's face, "you are under my Yoke." Adam's car had been taken away for a month that time. For missing curfew by ten minutes.

He breathed again, then went inside for chrysanthemums.

JD McLaren was working the flower department. They had world literature and chemistry together. "Hey, Adam," he said, with his usual plump friendliness.

"Hey, JD," Adam said. "I didn't even know you guys opened this early."

"They saw how many people were lined up at the drive-thru Starbucks at five every morning and thought there was business they were missing out on."

"They're probably right. I need chrysanthemums."

"Bulbs? Wrong time of year to plant those."

"I need the full, blooming flowers. My brother

flattened the ones bordering our driveway. My mother had a stroke."

"Oh, my God!"

"She didn't really have a stroke, JD."

"Oh. Okay."

"But I need to procure them or be denied social occasions."

"You mean Enzo's thing tonight?"

"I do. You going?"

"Yeah. I heard there's going to be kegs because his parents are European and don't care if we drink."

"Angela and I are bringing pizzas from her work."

"Better and better. Does it matter what colour chrysanthemums?"

"Probably, but as she didn't specify, I have the chance to blame her if they're wrong."

"I'll get you the most garish."

"And maybe…"

JD waited. Adam couldn't quite meet his eye. "Maybe not the most expensive?"

"Not a problem, Adam," JD said, seriously, and headed off into the massive field of flower pallets. Those were all in dirt, to be planted into your own gardens, but the garden centre had a cooler of cut flowers, too, if you needed a bouquet. Adam wandered over to it, his brain idly moving through the day ahead, coupled with a song he was presently unaware of even humming.

A red rose, alone in its plastic bucket. He reached for it, though it didn't really register in his consciousness

until it was in his hands. A single red rose. Could he buy it? Was that something that was okay? That boys did? If it was for a girl, obviously, yes, but if it was for…

He had no rules for this. Which was liberating some of the time because that meant there were none to obey, not even with Linus. But sometimes a guide or history or a long-established literature would have been useful. Could he buy a rose? And give it? How would Linus take it? Did everyone else in the world know the answer except him?

If it was even Linus he gave it to.

He placed the pad of his right thumb onto one of the rose's thorns – which, along with "crown of", was one of the two "jokes" people told about his last name, never making anyone laugh but themselves – and slowly but firmly pressed. It pierced the skin and in the quickness of the drop of blood that flowed there, he saw–

–an entire world, fast as a gasped breath, of trees and green, of water and woods, of a figure that followed in the darkness, of mistakes made, of loss, of grief–

Adam blinked and put his bloody thumb to his lips. It was gone. Like a dream. Like vapour. Leaving behind only a feeling of disquiet and the tang of blood on his tongue.

When JD returned, Adam bought the rose. It was only two bucks.

She wakes, suddenly, to the smell of blood, of roses, as if her heart has been pricked by a thorn. She is drenched. Has she walked up from the water's edge? Has she stepped out of the water itself?

She doesn't know. There was flurry, there was rush, there was release–

And then a snag, as if on that thorn in her heart, a drop of blood pearling itself…

She sits up and the water pours off her like she passed through a waterfall seconds before. But the shore is dry, as shores go, the mud beneath her damp but firm. She runs her palm over it, like she is mystified by it, and maybe she is. It is coarse under her fingertips. She pinches a bit between her thumb and index finger, bringing it to her nose, inhaling deeply. Rich, peaty, the smell of earth, but not the source of the blood scent.

But then why would it be? she thinks, of a sudden. She is surrounded by wild rose bushes, she knows this,

she doesn't know how, but she does. She is surrounded by thorns–

And the scent shimmers away, like a voice heard before waking.

She stands, still dripping into the newly formed puddle at her feet. This dress is hers, she thinks. This dress is not hers, she thinks. The contradiction is true. It is patterned floral, light, tasteful, a young woman's dress but either ironically retro or actually from another time.

Do I wear dresses? she thinks.

Yes. No.

There are pockets in the dress, which would seem to mark it out as very old-fashioned, but they're distended, stretched, heavy. She reaches for the weight inside each and pulls out two solid bricks, dense enough to drag her down.

To drown her.

She stares at them for the longest while.

She drops the bricks. They each bounce once on the mud.

"Death is not the end," she speaks aloud.

What? What was that? What does that even mean? She puts a hand over her mouth as if to keep it from speaking again, holding the words in.

A song. It's a song. She feels the tune humming itself in her diaphragm, a melody emerging, words that she knows. A song for funerals, gravesides. Or perhaps one only written to sound so, perhaps done with the same irony that wove this dress.

She closes her eyes against the sun breaking in the trees. She sees the veins and capillaries on the insides of her eyelids, red as murder.

She breathes.

Then she vomits up more water than her stomach could possibly contain. It is only water, no bile or food, clear in the cataract that rushes from her mouth. She eventually has to kneel from the force of it, until the overwhelmed puddle beneath her opens a channel to the lake.

Finally, there is no more. She pants, gathering herself. When she stands again, her hair, her skin, her dress, are all dry, not a hint of dampness anywhere.

She breathes once again.

"I will find you," she says, and on bare feet, she begins to walk.

Behind the rose bushes, the faun watches her go. After a moment, he follows, worried.