

To every thing
there is a season

Book 1

Edward Arruns Mulhorn



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I thought the dead had peace, but it is not so;
To have no peace in the grave, is that not sad?
But up and down and to and fro,
Ever about me the dead men go;
And then to hear a dead man chatter
Is enough to drive one mad.

Maud, Alfred Lord Tennyson

So this is it. This is how it begins. This is where it begins. Somewhere along the A12. It started in London. Now it is happening. I am making it happen. I am making it happen as it has to happen. Each minute, each mile, inevitable. This is my now. This is me.

Did I want it to happen like this? Did I plan it, did I dream it this way? How strange. This bit, this actual moment, this turning my back, this driving away: this I never saw. I think, perhaps, I conjured an image, or stole it from a black and white movie: a romanticised version of me, stood in high heels in a smoky station, clutching a suitcase in my hand. But not this. Not the rain, not the night, not the car.

I think I blocked it out, this transition between two states, this gap between two paragraphs. If I had planned it, I would have filled it with substance. With something striving for meaning. With an action, a gesture, a speech. With a songlist of feminist anthems to blast in the car as I drive through the heartland of Essex. With something elaborate and ultimately absurd. I guess some parts of my life can't be planned. How can you plan for something like this without questioning what it has led from?

So how has it come to the point where it is? Such an innocent question with such an impossibly long answer. And I cannot answer it, because there is no complete answer. At the core, there is only a feeling. A feeling which at times seems absolute. Which at others is subject to the vagaries of doubt. And then, if you were to look at me then, could I say I know I am right? At the core there is you and me. We could go round and round forever, caught in the stranglehold of changeable feelings and moods. For years, that is precisely what we have done. For years, guided by

our instincts, our emotions, our fears. The determination to make it work; the certainty it can't. Round and round in an endless mind-game.

And have we moved anything on? Sure, we are still alive; but being alive isn't the same as living. Not being vital, alert, engaged. We haven't progressed our lives through the relationship that ties us together. We have reached an imperfect stasis, an indefinite pause, where there is no advance nor decline. A lull which might never have been broken if we chose to stay where we were. Something needed to be done. Something; anything. Then we could let the planning take over; then we could lose ourselves in the detail and be distracted by it. And now, Dan, now we have made that decision, I find myself passing Hatfield Peverel, wherever Hatfield Peverel is. The planning phase has kicked in at last, breaking this whole desperate cycle.

Something had to give. The decision could have gone either way. So easily. I could have lain down; I could have buried desire; I could have filled my world so full of routine – of work, home, friends, and mundane pursuits – that the hollowness would suffocate beneath its weight, reducing to a tiny voice which cried to me in the depth of night, which whispered in my half-conscious ear. I could live with that; I could endure. For months, for years. Perhaps forever. I could take it, and in taking it I could retain all the comforts it entails. Our house, our savings, our friends, and Matty. All that is certain and known. Perhaps I could have endured. But the decision didn't go that way.

We know each other so well. We will never know another person quite as we know ourselves. Ours is total familiarity. Every pore, every habit; each action, each thought – almost

before it arrives. That's good, surely, isn't it? But then, I would question how we use that knowledge. We are able to wind each other up. We know exactly each little thing that infuriates and annoys. Each twist, and what it will do: the inevitable pain it will cause. We have hurt each other on purpose sometimes, as though we relish witnessing pain, as though that pain can compensate for the shame of being together. Have you used your knowledge differently? Have you used it any more wisely than me? Have you used it to build on our love, and to nourish? Have you used it to keep us together?

Together. There are times when together we are both marooned. So isolated, so estranged. When we find we are living around each other, not through and with and because of the other. That is not togetherness; that is convenience. You know that. You know you cannot fabricate closeness, you cannot pretend it exists. When did we last share a laugh together? When did we last make love? Christ, Dan! Can't you see? What is the point of having so much if at the core there's a void? There is something not there. Something so absent it makes all else seem utterly futile. There are times when I've never been so alone as when we are together. You feel it, too. You know you do. I see it in your eyes sometimes. You know it. And you know that what's missing can't just be bought and plugged in to allow us to reconnect. What's missing is inside ourselves. This is a cliché – this whole thing is a big fucking cliché – but I'm going to look for what's missing now. And you would too, if you weren't the coward, if you cared about what you might find more than feared about what you will lose. For that is all you have now. Look into your heart, and you'll see. You have lost me already. And I you. We are both lost.

Kelvedon. Silver End. Coggeshall. Feering. Where am I? What are these places? How can I never have heard of them? I'm an hour out of London, and already I'm lost. I'm stuck in some parallel world. It was foolish to leave at night. Why did I do it? I could go back. I could start off again tomorrow. Then at least I could see. Sod it, Dan, we could just start over again ourselves. I could climb back in bed beside you. I could smell the freshness of the sheets. I could fall asleep in the warmth of your shadow. And then, tomorrow. The day. Not worse – not better, nor worse – than today. Continuing the existence we know so well, the life we have lived for so long. Bound to each other. Apart.

But that's just it, isn't it? We're not together at all. Not really together. We might appear to be; we might be told so by the system we live in, reinforced by the people we know. But what do they actually know? They see us living in the same house, and guess at the life within. It is only us who know what is shared behind the secrecy of those walls. And, in truth, what we share is so meagre. The boundaries of our worlds themselves are like walls. They are rigid and high, closed off from the other. With no intersection, no overlap. Our interests and passions are different. Our pleasure is always apart. Whether music, politics, friends, holidays, food – we are poles apart. We come together for the mundane, out of sheer necessity. Only then, and even then, resenting it when we do. When one of us moves a million miles to look in upon an alien place, and the other shudders their horror in seeing us there.

Was being together unbearable? No, it was tolerable. I could endure. But living to tolerances and degrees of endurance is like giving up on life itself. A resignation of selfhood, ambition, desire. How can a person do that?

Thinking and knowing that this is the limit, that this is all that there is. More mediocrity, more of the same, with nothing exciting beyond. With nothing more. An entirely predictable course until death; fused together forever in a cocoon of ostensible ease. Wouldn't it drive us both mad? If not now, then at some point in the future, when we looked back at what we did – at what we could have done – when this, the moment, came.

And it has come. This is a chance for us to seize. We both know the truth, and we still have time. Let's use it to find life, to breathe. Not squander our lives away in a palace of superficial comfort where we stick pins into each other to cure our bitterness. What we have falls short; it lacks fulfilment. This cannot be all that there is. Opportunity cannot be over. Not over already. There has to be more. If it won't come to us, then we have to go looking for it. We have to break through our numbing mundane and create some purpose to life.

Dedham. What's in a name? We have been dying, not living, for years. Existing with our hearts closed off to each other; both of us closed to the world. We have not dared to look for fear of seeing, for fear of finding the truth. Fear. That is no reason for staying together; that is no mantra for life. Let me give you another, Dan. Passion. Do you remember that? Where has that gone? When did that go? There was a time – surely there once was a time – when you looked at me, when I looked at you, and we both felt that something was there. There once was a time of holding and loving; a time of being in love. A time that we had, that we shared together. An innocence, a happiness, a hope.

Surely, once.

What made it go? Was something said or done that led it to die? No, it drifted. Day by day, month by month, year by year. A gradual erosion; a decay so slow that we didn't see. A rot we hid from our eyes, as we hid from ourselves. Not thinking to look till it came to this. So now, when all I need is the warmth of a hug to squeeze out all this pain in my heart, I cannot turn towards you. Or if I did, it would be to see you as the cause, not the cure, of my grief. For that is what you've become. There's no disguising it. There's no more need for lies.

No lies. Not now. Not to each other. Not to ourselves. This is the truth. I am here with Matty; I am driving past Copdock; I am driving away from you. The truth. I wish I knew what that was. In truth, is what I am doing here – right now – an act of strength, an affirmation, or is it just running away? Am I forging my own salvation tonight; or am I a teenager, sneaking out, unable to confront her own fears, too confused to know what is right?

Who can point to the truth with certainty – with even an ounce of conviction? We have one chance at life, and we have to do something; we have to believe that we can. Life in denial is no form of living. That would be running away. What I'm doing now is my own private truth. Whatever that turns out to be. Here, surrounded by infinite darkness, at night. I wish Matty was awake. I wish the rain would stop. I wish I could see. I wish I saw ten years ago the little that I can see now. I wish then I knew where I was. Then there could have been a whole second chance, erasing the past and beginning again. Then I could have found love, I could have been loved, I could have made love.

Do you love me, Dan? Did you ever love me? All I feel is that you have deprived us completely. You have strangled my love, you have restricted your own, you have denied me another man's love. I should have cheated on you when I felt myself to have been cheated by you. Then at least I would have known love, however fleeting, painful, destructive it was. These last few years I have ached to love. I have come to realise that love is all that there is, it is all we are given; it is the most elusive and exhilarating of gifts. Isn't it ironic, then, that love is the one thing I feel you have never been able to give. I have sat in our home surrounded by objects, and all I could do was ache. How could you not have seen that? How could you not have felt it yourself? Perhaps, in your heart, you are as barren as me, only you're better at hiding it. Perhaps you think that all our possessions can compensate for this emptiness. Perhaps Matty alone was enough.

Then you're a fool. You are losing him as surely as you have lost me. Now, truly, you have so little to love or be loved by. How will you survive on your own?

You must have thought this through. You can't still be in denial. I cannot care for you now. You must look after yourself. Now you are in London, and I am on the A14 heading for Needham Market. You must have known what was happening long before this. You could have stopped us from drifting as much as I could. If you had tried to do something to turn it around, I would have seen. I would have reassessed. As it was, you did nothing. We did nothing. We looked at life like casual observers; we tamely watched as the canker spread, we tamely allowed the rot to set in. Not even today did we try to prevent it.

Maybe we just don't care enough. Maybe we never have. If so, how can it be a surprise to you now, finding yourself on your own? That is the saddest thing of all – I don't think you are surprised. How could you be – you who know everything – you who disguise it so well. How strange. I know every inch of you, every fraction of being; yet some things I don't know at all. Some things resist the power to decipher. Maybe, behind that weight of knowledge, behind that burden of shared existence, we have always been strangers, Dan. Maybe there never was anything there. I would like to think there must have been something – some reason to talk, to date, to move in. But it was all so long ago. I think sometimes that what held us together was illusion, delusion, falsehood. No more.

Whatever the past, it is locked in the past. It is over. You are dead; you are buried; you are gone. What we had is truly and utterly finished. Now Matty and I are here, in the car. You are in London, alone. We are where we are, and we cannot resist it. This is the way it has come to be. It is inevitable; a natural cycle. Something greater than ourselves. We have moved apart as surely, as firmly, as if we had never been joined at all.

Whatever we once might have had is ended. You have gone from me and I from you. That is it. I hope London treats you well, and you found some food in the fridge. That is your life now, and yours alone. It is up to you what you do. You may spare a thought for me – you may think of me – turning off onto the A140 to Diss, but I don't care whether or not you do. And I would caution you not to think too much, not to regret, for it's all too late. I am moving on; I'm not coming back. I don't hate you; I don't feel hate. I just feel hollow to the core. I feel my life is over already.

And in some way, I feel it is all your fault. So, I am fixing the problem. Sitting here in the car, driving past Thornham Parva in the dark and the drizzle, I am mending my life, I am giving it back to myself. Do the same for yourself. Move on.

Move on.

And now, here is Marshfield. Find your own way, Dan. This path is mine. Mine and Matty's. These small quaint buildings squeezed shoulder to shoulder, like doll's houses crouched on the narrow pavement, all painted vibrantly pink. This is my world. These strange shops, each with their blinded windows, with bones of beams stuck through their skin. This is my future. These gutters rushing rain away; these bell-jar streetlamps slicing light; these broad hunched doors; these passageways; this brick clock-tower before me. This is where I begin. And now we are here in the heart of the town. It's ten at night, and there's no one in sight. No lights from the windows. No cars. No noise. No sense of life. Nothing but the sound of my windscreen-wipers; nothing but the sound of these wheels through the water. Nothing but the sound of Matty's breathing, regular and slow. Here is our chance to start again, to find new things to fill our world, to populate as we please.

Which is the way to Nettlesden? Here, to the left, to the side of the school – to the school that I think will be his. And now we are out of the town. Sparse hedges scratch scrawny fingers into the sightless void, then fade to swathes of nothingness that must be barren fields. Devoid of any substance. There are no lights but our own. No lines on the road. No horizon. No shape to what is ahead. No moon.

We will fashion a world from this emptiness, Matty. We will make this breathe and become our own.

We are moving on; we're beginning again. We will find new things in this land. Look, a white sign boasting a single word. Nettlesden. We have moved enough for the while. We need to know when it's time to stop. Here, on the left, is Mill House Cottages. There's a split in the hedge, and a grassy track that ends with the ice-white limbs of trees, spectral and cold in the headlights. The car exhales on the rain-wet turf, its underside prickled by the whispering grass.

Stop.

Matty is fast asleep. He doesn't flinch as I open the door and the light comes on in the back. There's a chill, but the rain has melted away. The air is thin; it cuts at my face. There is no welcoming light. Through the immense, clear blackness shrouding the car all I can see is the shadow of hedges, shivering slightly in a false breeze, protruding from the fathomless pitch and blending within it seamlessly. I sense a path, running diagonally to my right. The sheer frame of an ancient building rears before me: so tall it threatens to fall. With the engine cut, the single sound is the shallow breath of the empty wind in the hedge. If the stars were in motion, I feel sure I would hear them. But there are no stars in the sky. There is only this universal darkness – this endless, shapeless, stunning mass – retreating and crowding all around me, deafening in its silence.

The door is broad and squat. Here is a hole for the key. Inside, there is a deeper darkness, hunched and breathless as it awaits. To the right, high up, I search for the fuse box. I should have brought a torch. The silk of a cobweb

brushes my fingers. Now light – huge, bald, angry light – floods the room as I flick the switch.

The room is low. Beams run from a spine across the ceiling, scarcely a hand's width over my head. They are curiously hewn, part-covered with bark, as though still living and growing. The floor is an undulating brick worn into hills and shallow valleys through generations of interminable shuffling. There's a long wooden table in front of me, washed clean with lime and contoured with age. In the corner there's a large easy chair, and to its side there's a dresser. On the far wall is a brickwork chimney, a small iron grate, a black metal door of what must be an old oven. To its right, a passage half hid by a curtain, leading towards the dark heart of the house. There's a stairwell here, winding into the night; the steps are wooden and crusted and old. I follow them upward. The sound of my shoes is unnaturally loud as they strike against its dull ribs. On the first floor I come to a sudden hallway, with rooms branching off to all sides. The door before me begs me to stoop. It leads to a room with a bed. The floorboards wince beneath my tread; they are bare but for a flat-weave rug. The drapes are a faded velvet red; they are thick and warm to the touch.

I should get Matty in.

The sound of my feet on the downward stairs pierces the dust-drenched, stale cottage air. Outside, light peers through the uncurtained window. Clumpy grass stands sodden and limp on the path. The glare of the cottage dissolves to nothing the closer I come to the car. I feel blindly across the wet metal surface, reaching out for the handle. I pull at Matty's arm; he stumbles half-conscious out of the warmth, bewildered and scratching his head.

Together, we stagger across the lawn. He is leaning against me, shielding his eyes from the brightness that shines from inside. I guide him upstairs, and into his bed. His brow is hot and moist with sweat. His body shudders as it meets the fierce cold of the sheet. I half-close the door; leaving just a sliver of light to break through the gloom, to wash its comfort into the room for when he stutters awake.

Now back downstairs. I should explore the house; I should unpack the car. A couple of bags, maybe. The garden seems almost familiar to me, though I have never yet seen it. The car boot opens thankfully. There's so much I brought here from London. Perhaps I ought to have left it behind – all these unwanted jolts from the past. But I'm not that strong. I pick out a bag of clothes for us both; I make one more trip for a box of food; then I close the doors and lock up the car.

In the corner of the kitchen there's a freestanding fridge. I tumble the food on its waiting shelves. At the bottom of my box is a bottle of Baileys. On the dresser I find an assortment of mugs. The thick liquid curls warmly into the cup. It is smooth as it slips down my throat – entering my insides, working its fond caress through my body, into my sinews, up to my brain – soothing away the strain of the drive, thawing and melting my bones. A small refill. Here's to me. Here's to the now, and here's to the future. Here's to the world I will forge. I shiver.

There must be some heating somewhere. In a bite in the wall behind the chimney a boiler stands ready and idle. I turn the controls on full. I hear a surge, a satisfying throb, as it blasts into life, as it breaks the silence, its motor promising heat.

I lock the front door and turn off the lights, taking the two bags upstairs. From the grey of the landing, I look in on Matty. His brow is cooler now. The duvet and blankets are snug around him, though frigid to both of his sides. I would curl up beside him; I would steal his warmth; I would steal the peace in his mind. I stoop to place a kiss on his cheek, feeling the gentle down of his skin, the smell of his warmth. His body unconsciously yielding its love.

Across the landing, there's a wooden doorframe with a padded lintel to shield my head. It's so low I must partially bend my knees as I hunch through the unwelcome entrance. Inside is a bathroom, painted dull blue. There's an enamel bath; a basin, a loo; a wicker basket for dirty clothes. There is another doorway beyond, leading through to a richer blackness. So many doors and stairs. I brush my teeth; I wipe off my make-up. I run the tap in the hope of heat, but the water's too cold to wash my face. I cross the landing, past Matty's door, and enter another bedroom.

This can be mine, if only for tonight. I pull my nightdress from my bag and close the curtains. I undress in a limp pool of dismal greyness close to the side of the bed. The room is so cold; such an empty coldness. I hurry into bed.

The sheets are colder still, like ice. If you were here, I would huddle myself against your back and hug your heat away from you. You are always warm; you radiate heat; a balminess breathes from your body. I lock my hands between my thighs, shivering the cold from my skin. There must be a hot water bottle here in the house, but the thought of going in search appals me. In bed there's at least a promise of warmth: a tingling, a would-be warming sensation, which steals between me and the sheets.

I hug the duvet tighter. You had your uses, Dan. I could use you now. I could use your certainty, your calm. It was warm and safe beside you always. I could shrug off the strain of my day, I could slow the pace of my body and mind, when I snuggled down to your side. You were my peace, my solace, my comfort. And I've never been so in need of such comfort. Never more so than now.

How ironic that I want you now. In parting from you, in being without you, I feel the need that you're here. This is almost the first time in fifteen years that I have been in a bed on my own. Even now, I am lying here to one side: to the side that I know isn't yours. There's a crack in the duvet and air creeps in because of the space I have left for you. Are you lying in bed in London like me: a mirror image of myself? Are we lying in bed beside each other, over a hundred miles apart?

Perhaps you are not there at all. At last, some feeling has snuck inside you, breaking through to your shielded soul. You have borrowed a car to follow me here. Then perhaps I should leave the hall light on, so you can find your way through the house. I should leave the door open, too. So the first thing I hear is your soft-heavy tread on the stairs as you come up to find me. Then the creak of the door, and the shape of your body, silhouetted against the dim night. Mind you don't bump your head. Then you are beside me, here beside me, and all that warmth is wrapping around me. That warmth of being.

Come.

