

The Deserter

Edward Arruns Mulhorn



First published in Great Britain in 2025

Copyright © 2025 Edward Arruns Mulhorn

The right of Edward Arruns Mulhorn to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This book is a work of fiction.

All characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

This book has been written without the use of AI.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission in writing of the copyright owner, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Paperback ISBN 978-1-0685054-0-9

ebook ISBN 978-1-0685054-1-6

Printed by Kindle Direct Publishing

Available in paperback and ebook format

www.edwardarrunsmulhorn.com

Home is where one starts from.

East Coker, Four Quartets, T.S. Eliot

‘What was that?!’

‘What was what?’

‘That noise...’

‘I didn’t hear anything.’

‘Ssh. Be quiet. Stop moving. Don’t speak.’

Katie looked towards Angel. Her brother was knelt in their haven of hay, his body rigid, his head to one side, as he strained to hear through the silence. She crawled up to him, slithering with stealth, pressing her face up close to the bales to spy through a sliver of window.

In the barn below, the dull day searched through cracks in the walls, slicing shards of light on the shadows, teasing the shapes into being and form. The threatening bulk of a hostile tractor. The wheels and cogs of a plough. The curve of a roller. The barrel of a thresher. The tarpaulined outline of unknown machines. And farther still, in the hidden darkness, in the cavernous bowels of the secret barn, the sense of objects beyond.

But no people. No sign of movement. No sound.

‘I thought I heard something.’

‘What did it sound like, Angel?’

‘Like the door. Like footsteps.’

‘It could have been the wind.’

‘It wasn’t the wind. I think it may have been Ward.’

‘It can’t have been Ward.’

‘Why not?’

‘He would have said something.’

‘Maybe he’s being quiet on purpose. He’s waiting for us to come down.’

‘He won’t be. Anyway, he doesn’t even know that we’re here. No one can see us from down there.’

‘Maybe he’s hiding.’

‘Of course he’s not hiding.’

‘Well, let’s wait for five minutes. Please, Katie.’

She nodded, turning back from the safe of their den to stare from the ramparts again. The air in the barn was stale. Thick with dust and heavy with straw. Soundless and hollow and dry. Posts like tree trunks ran up to the roof, supporting the weight of a mezzanine floor which was reached by a steep set of stairs. Nailed onto the posts were reins and stirrups, horse brasses, collars and chains. Against the walls hung ropes and harnesses, snares and sickles and scythes. If Ward was here, then he was well-hidden, lurking in wait and ready to trap them instead of being out in the open – out where he should be – working the fields.

She felt a hand on her arm. She looked down. Tom had crawled up beside her, pressing his body into her own, wanting to put his head in her lap. She sensed he was scared – he was more scared than Angel for feeling the fear of them both. She hugged him into the warmth of her coat, feeling the sweat on his skin turning icy now that they had stopped building their den. They had stayed out too long in their home in the haystack, and now both of her brothers were tired. In the thrill of the build, she had lost track of time. She feared her grandmother, Biddy, would notice. She would be wondering where they all were. In the imposing darkness, the insistent silence, Katie scolded herself.

She could feel that Angel was slowly retreating, backing away to the entrance. She let go of Tom and pushed past him consciously, deliberately wanting to lead the way out.

She wanted to be the first through the gap in case Ward was waiting for them by its base. She wanted to take all the blame.

She pushed her head between the bales, feeling the gentle pinch of their fibres against her face and her hair. She wriggled her body out through the opening, emerging from their close-confined hollow carved out from the core of the body of bales, into the choking heart of the barn. She surveyed the vast vaulted room minutely. Every nook, every shadow where someone might hide.

‘There’s nobody here. You can come out now.’

Angel’s head appeared through the crack, a tangle of broken stalks in his hair, puckering his eyes as he peered through the gloom. He let his body drop onto the floor, then turned around to help Tom. She stood the boys to stubborn attention, removing hay from their coats and their hair, rubbing the dirt from their cheeks.

‘I want to go back now.’

‘Yes, Tom. We will.’

‘We shouldn’t be out after dark.’

‘Yes, I know. We can go as soon as I’ve got all the hay out of your hair. Next time we won’t stay so long. I promise.’

‘I wish... I wish we could go back home!’

‘We’ll be back home before it gets dark. Biddy is waiting.’

‘I mean, I want to go back home. Our real home.’

‘Soon, Tom. I hope. As soon as we can.’

Katie led the boys through the barn, feeling her way with her feet and her eyes until they came to the doors. She peeped through a slit in the heavy wood before opening it onto the day.

The sky was colourless and blank, as if the dawn had yet to break, as if the day had shrugged off time, as if the dusk had died. Dew still clung to the splintered lawn, and a sunken breeze was hung in the air, gliding seemingly nowhere. In front of her was the ambling trail of their darkened footsteps pressed in the grass, in the virgin silver-green ocean before her, betraying the route they had come. Beyond them, the paddock lay on a rise, with a stable stood in its heart. It was overshadowed by the trees in the spinney, stretching their gnarled and leafless limbs over a belt of dead bramble and thorn, casting a greyness over the land, smudging out life which lay on their rim, hunched in conspiracy, guarded. To her right, where the lawn began to flatten, was a picket fence round Ward's little cottage, and a hedge which hid the vegetable patch. And farther beyond it were sheds and barns clustered around the sides of a courtyard, somewhere just out of sight. There were no other footprints; no movement, no noise. No sign that Ward might have seen them.

Katie could feel Tom's hands on her back, stretching towards her in mute entreaty; she could sense he was straining to stand on tiptoe, reaching out for her neck. She obliged, and lifted him onto her back, placing her hands on the seat of his shorts, turning away as she did so. They traced the line of the paddock fence, meandering down the dripping verge that lay to the side of the pond. Beneath Tom's weight, she could hear the crush of dew-wet grass, the brittle whisper of each stride, as it met with the sole of her boots. She looked up towards the top of the drive, where Hareham Court lay, staunch and undaunted, watching them as they slowly approached through a hundred lustreless diamond eyes.

As they were shuffling over the gravel, the door opened and Biddy appeared. She saw them and waved. Mugger, her spaniel, barged past her knees, charging down the murky slope, delighted to welcome them home.

‘Well, there you all are! What have you been up to? Come in. Let’s have some tea. I hope you haven’t caught cold.’

They followed Biddy into the kitchen. She had made a fresh loaf of bread and some scones, and the oven still gave off its warmth. They crowded around it with outstretched hands, feeling into the glow.

‘Why now, you must be cold. You’ve been out for most of the afternoon.’

‘We were running around to keep warm. Anyway, it’s not nearly as cold as it was in the winter. Then the Thames froze over.’

‘Yes, yes. That’s as may be. But it’s plenty cold enough for us now. Besides, that was then, and now you are here. So come and sit down for some tea.’

They sat at the kitchen table, watching as Biddy carved the loaf, as she put a steaming slice on their plates. She gave a scone to them each. There was homemade jam, and a cup of weak tea that she poured out without adding milk. Tom scowled at Katie, as if to object, but she glowered at him to be silent. She spread a thin layer of jam on some bread and pushed it into his mouth. Then she cradled the cup in the snug of her hands, feeling its warmth embrace her numb fingers, tingling into her palms. She glanced through the windows, across the lawn, at the fading day, at the creeping shadows; at the spinney which stole the light from the sky, which snagged the pale afternoon in its claws.

When they were done, she cleared the table, emptying what was left in the kettle into the sink to scrub the plates. Then she went to the hall and picked up a trug, calling to Angel to join her. Together, they strode down the drive to the courtyard, past the workshop where Ward stored his tools, past the barn where Codger's car was locked away every night. Here, beyond it, was a caged patch of earth, with a lean-to stood to its side.

Katie unfastened the gate. Inside, the soil was barren and bruised, littered with troughs and trays filled with seed, surrounded by walls of chicken-wire that were buried into the ground. They walked to the henhouse and climbed up the ramp. Inside were a startled brood of hens, clucking in outraged indignation – some on the floor and some in their holes, some on a low chest housing their feed.

They made their way down the line of boxes, inspecting the contents of each. In most, an egg lay waiting for them: a treasure part-buried in straw. In one or two boxes a hen was roosting, watching them beadily, flustered and ruffled, seeming unwilling to move. Katie picked up the eggs one by one, placing them into the bed of the trug that Angel had clutched in his arms.

When they reached the end of the line, they searched on the floor, on the shelves and in cupboards, for other rogue eggs they might find. The hens imperiously clamoured around them, flapping their wings and squawking displeasure, annoyed by unwanted intrusion.

‘It’s all right, Angel. They won’t bite you. They are probably just a little bit scared.’

'I don't like being this close. Sometimes they almost fly into your face.'

'You don't have to be here if you really don't want to. I can collect the eggs on my own. Honestly, I don't mind.'

'I like eggs. I just don't like chickens. They're so smelly. And so stupid. And they all look the same.'

'Do you think so? They all look different to me. I'm going to give them all names. Look at this one. She's very distinctive. I'm going to christen her Gloria.'

'That's not a chicken's name!'

'How do you know what hens should be called? Gloria is a handsome name. Don't worry, Gloria. He's a big nasty boy. But I'll make sure you're all right.'

They slipped down the ramp and back to the gate, which Katie fastened behind her. As they were coming into the courtyard, they saw a bicycle enter the drive. It slowed as it met with the gravel.

'Quick! It's Ward. Hide!'

They dropped to their knees, crawling back towards the enclosure, then they lay on their bellies close to the wire, the trug on the ground beside them. They saw Ward dismount and steer his bicycle into the shadows of his unlit workshop. They heard the snap of a padlock. Now he was lurching back into the yard, standing quite still in its leaden heart, glancing warily round him. For a moment they feared he had seen them. He took a cigarette from his pocket and searched in his overalls for a match. The flame burnt bright in the dull afternoon; the acrid smell of singed tobacco wafted over towards them. He turned and made his way up the drive, limping and dragging his tired left foot over the uneven gravel.

When he reached the lawn, he veered to the left, following the path they had taken themselves, which led past his cottage and then to the haybarn.

Katie and Angel stood up. She picked up the trug, and they ran together across the yard to Ward's shed. They crouched close to the ground as they crept to its corner, as they cautiously peered round the edge. Ward had entered the vegetable patch. From behind the speckled screen of the hedge, they could see the faintest shadow of movement. He was holding a metal blade in his hands. He was bending over the barren earth.

'Careful. He mustn't see us, Katie.'

'He can't possibly see us from here.'

'What do you think he's doing?'

'I think he's doing what you usually do in a vegetable patch. What do you think he's doing?'

'Something suspicious.'

'What? Like digging?'

'Maybe. But digging for what?'

'Turnips?'

'For all you know, he's burying secrets. He might be one of the Hun.'

'O tosh! He's just digging.'

'He might be pretending to dig. He's hoping to catch us. He's waiting for us to go to the spinney.'

'We're not going to the spinney. Codger told us we can't.'

'But suppose that we did, he would come in and get us. He'd chase us out with a stick.'

'O, don't be so ridiculous.'

'I bet he'd tell Biddy and Codger we went there.'

'Well, I suppose that he might. Who knows what he'd do? Which is why we're not going to go there.'

For a while they watched on, expectant. Though Katie had scorned her brother's conjecture, she feared that Ward might come out and see them; she feared she might see him burying something, or unearthing something that shouldn't be found. She watched Ward methodically turning the soil. He was so unhurried, precise. As if he was merely tilling the land, preparing the tilth for the seed. The faceless sky grew close and more sullied. A cool breeze plucked at their hair and their hands. Her eyes strayed from the vegetable patch to the barn where they built their home in the haybales, to the spinney which stood to its rear. The tree trunks rose as a solid mass, seemingly fused as a single tree, as a grim and sullen colourless wall, shutting them out from the rest of the world, snuffing out semblance of life. The longer she looked, the taller they seemed, the more they appeared to tower above her, swaying so faintly, as if threatening to topple, scratching their boughs on the sky.

Angel was pulling her sleeve. He was bored of watching, bored of waiting. He was cold and wanted to leave. They backed away till they reached the drive, then went back into the house. In the kitchen, Biddy was sitting and knitting, while Tom was reading a book. Mugger was busy licking his paws, fat and full from his evening feed.

'I was wondering where you had got to. It's nearly dusk. Put the eggs in the box by the door, if you will. The ladies will come and collect them on Thursday. They'll grind them up into powder.'

'What's the point?'

'Eggs last much longer if they're powdered, Angel. And they're easier to transport. Now you do that, while Katie does the curtains.'

‘It’s not even properly dark yet, Biddy.’

‘I know it’s not, but it will be soon. And it’s better to be ready than late. Make sure you close the fabric completely, so there aren’t any gaps for the light.’

Katie went through the ground floor rooms, drawing all of the curtains. At the end of the hall, in Codger’s study, she peered through the diamond eyes of the window, briefly surveying the dormant roses before closing the folds on the light. She returned to the hall, stepping over the beam that stood at its threshold, lowering her head to the one above. She climbed up the curved bald steps of the staircase, hearing them creaking beneath her tread, onto the landing then into the bedrooms, stooping beneath the low-hung beams, shutting each curtain in turn. Back in the limp airless void of the landing, in the thin quietude of a stunning darkness, she gingerly felt her way down the stairwell. She slipped through the hall to the annex. She closed the bulky living-room curtains, then went to the boxroom which lay on the landing, and then to the bedrooms above. From her own bedroom window, she looked at the drive, sensing the afternoon drifting and dying, the light being drawn from the sky. The lawn was losing its focus and colour, becoming a yawning cauldron of grey: swallowing what was left of the day, sucking life from the land.

As she watched, she could hear a car approaching. She saw it emerge past the rose garden hedge, up the drive, and then into the courtyard. Then it glided into the barn. She heard a rattle as the car door was shut, a wince as the wooden gates scraped the yard, a gasp as the padlock snapped fast. Now Codger was briskly striding towards them. Katie hurried downstairs.

By the time she had skipped through the hall to the kitchen, her grandfather was already sat at the table, smoking his pipe with Angel beside him, and Tom on one of his knees. Mugger was lying down by his feet, while Biddy was busying herself by the stove. Katie went to kiss Codger's cheek before laying the cutlery out.

They ate their supper then went to their rooms. Katie took out her Latin grammar, but she wasn't able to focus. Instead, she found herself straining to hear the murmur of voices that floated upstairs from the boxroom that lay on the landing. Tom was already in his pyjamas. Biddy was trying to put him to bed.

'Now, come here beside me. That's right. Kneel down. Can you repeat what we learnt last night?'

'Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Biddy...'

'Yes, dear?'

'Why's he called "hello"?'

'He's not called "hello". His name is hallowed. That means it's very special. It's holy. Now, recite me the rest.'

'Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done. On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses. As we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation. But deliver us from evil. Amen.'

'Amen. That was very good, Tom. Now get into bed. Lie down and let me tuck you in.'

'It's not late. Can't I stay up a little bit longer?'

'You've had a long day. And you're still getting used to being here, so it's good to have an early night. You'll be bright and fresh in the morning. Now, lie down, and I'll turn off the light.'

‘Biddy.’

‘Yes.’

‘It’s very dark.’

‘Then you will sleep better for it.’

‘Biddy.’

‘Yes.’

‘Biddy. Biddy, can people really be evil?’

‘Some say there is evil in this world. Some say that evil is happening around us. That it’s happening even now. But there’s no evil here. There’s none in this house. So, you have nothing to fear.’

‘But mightn’t the evil come and get us? Will we have to hide?’

‘No, Tom. You have good in your heart. And that goodness is stronger than any evil. That goodness will keep it out. Whatever happens, you will be safe here. This is your home.’

‘But it’s not really my home, is it, Biddy?’

‘Well, it is for now. Your family are here. They are all around you. Your brother, your sister, and Codger and me. And when we are together, the power of our love is stronger than any evil could be. This is where you belong. Now, lie back. Close your eyes. Try to sleep.’

‘Biddy...’

‘Yes, Tom?’

‘Goodnight.’

Katie heard Biddy step onto the landing; she heard the brush as the base of Tom’s door caught the carpet and swept to a close. Then the sound of her feet on the lower stairs, her tread as she crossed the living-room floor. Then the click of the lock on the annex door.

She was gone.

Katie traced Biddy's path in her mind, imagining her crossing the hall to the study where Codger was sitting and smoking his pipe while Mugger lay at his feet. She imagined her standing beside the wireless, turning it on and tuning it in. The news was about to begin. She was sitting down on a chair beside Codger; and now they were listening to the crackles in silence. Perhaps, now alone, they were holding hands. Once the news was over, she was plumping the cushions while Codger was locking the doors. Now they were both in the unlit hall; they were mounting the stairs and entering their room; they were getting ready for bed.

She glanced through her doorway to what lay beyond. Angel's room was in darkness. Perhaps he had already fallen asleep. Perhaps he was lying awake. Did he worry about evil in the same way as Tom? Did he feel too old to voice the same fear?

Katie rose and extinguished her light, so the whole of the room – the whole of the annex, the whole of the house – was perfectly shrouded in pitch. Then she dared herself to open the curtains.

She looked across the lawn to the spinney. The shapeless cluster of trees was spectral, illuminated by a low full moon that gazed serene on its empty world, seeking into the void at its core, casting both shadow and light. An early frost had crusted the grass, reflecting splinters of crystal moonlight, as chaste and random as stars. There was no evil outside. There was none she could see. Only a brilliance, a cold magnificence. An awesome purity.

