

The Finest Cuts

L I A M B R O W N

I TURNED THIRTEEN the summer Dad moved out to the car. It was an ancient Volvo, a rusting blue wreck that someone had rear-ended years ago and we'd never bothered to fix. Every morning he'd be waiting for me at the gate as I left for school, his shirt spilling out the back of his trousers, his suit as crumpled as the car's back bumper.

Sometimes Mum would stand watching from the doorstep, a cigarette throttled between bone-white knuckles, smoke leaking out between her gritted teeth. Though she never said a word, I could feel her eyes scorching the back of my blazer as Dad stooped to kiss me goodbye, my own eyes scrunched tight against the aniseed burn of his overproof breath.

As the days and weeks wore on, I began to see less and less of Dad. School had broken up for the holidays, and by the time I managed to drag myself from my bed in the morning, the Volvo would be gone, with only an oil-spotted patch of tarmac to signal that he'd been there at all. More than once I found myself shivering at my bedroom window with my face pressed to the glass, searching the darkness for the faint orange glow of his cigarette. I wondered if he was out there somewhere, looking back at me.

Summer inched towards autumn, and one morning I woke to realise I hadn't seen Dad in over a month. Life rumbled on all the same. I returned to school, finding myself a part-time job delivering papers in the evenings. Meanwhile Mum's boyfriend, Harry, started spending longer and longer at the house.

He would show up at dinnertime in his new Toyota, an over-buffed sports car with hideaway headlights and a private plate.

Truth be told, I didn't mind Harry too much. He worked as an advertising executive for an artificial flavourings company and most nights he would bring over samples of their latest experimental products for us to try, earnestly recording our responses on a checklist. I would sit at the dinner table and take tentative licks of chorizo-flavoured yoghurt or swig from a can of prawn cola while Harry sat around in Dad's old bathrobe, the belt loose around his waist to reveal a flash of sun-lamp shrivelled flesh each time he crossed his legs. For a while at least, the idiosyncratic contents of my lunchbox transformed me into a minor playground celebrity.

It was almost Christmas before Dad showed up again. The three of us were sat around after dinner one Friday evening, Mum and I chewing on sticks of venison bubble gum while Harry asked us questions about the flavour, consistency – whether or not we were experiencing any breathing difficulties – when the front door gave a solitary, shattering thump. Our house was never one to entertain unexpected callers, and as Mum rose from the table to investigate there was an air of unspoken dread that followed her. Only bad news would dare knock at this hour.

Harry was up from the table at the first sound of raised voices, my mother yelling about broken restraining orders and missed child support payments while I stayed in the kitchen, drumming my fingers on the counter and trying to scrape the rancid slick of synthetic deer from my tongue with my teeth. Eventually the clatter died down and Mum came back in to the room, Harry trailing sheepishly behind her.

“Your father would like to know if you'd like to spend the weekend with him?” she said, the words so clipped she almost swallowed them entirely.

“Now?” I asked.

“Tell him he doesn't have to go if he doesn't want to,” Harry said, hissing at my mother through clenched porcelain veneers.

“Tell him no-one’s forcing him. That man has no right turning up here like this, Helen.”

“Jesus, Harry. He knows no-one’s forcing him,” she said, turning back to me. “You know no-one’s forcing you, right?”

I stood there for a moment, my tongue still excavating my gums. Somewhere beyond the kitchen I heard the groan of a car door, an engine clearing its throat.

“I want to go,” I said.

The inside of the car smelled like stale smoke and spilt beer, the forest of Magic Trees hanging from the stalk of the rear-view mirror doing little to mask the stink.

“Hey,” said Dad.

“Hey.”

“You hungry?”

“Uh-uh.”

“Fine.” Dad shrugged and released the handbrake.

Dad’s new apartment was above a small Bangladeshi take-away. The only way to enter was down a dingy alley that led to an ancient metal fire escape, the extractor fans at the back belching out a constant fug of singed aloo gobi and rancid ghee. The front door was jammed up with junk mail and old pizza boxes. Dad had to pin it back with his shoulder while I scrambled through the gap under his arm into a grimy bedsit, the sink in the corner overflowing with festering cups, a stained sheet strung across the window to act as a curtain.

“I haven’t got round to picking up a bed yet,” he said as he closed the door and hit the light switch, a bare 40 watt bulb spilling a jaundiced glow across the carnage. “You’ve got the chair or the floor.”

I glanced down at the wood effect vinyl, noticing the loose topsoil of old tobacco, matted hair and broken glass.

“I’ll take the chair,” I said.

I woke to the sound of bacon spitting. Thin winter sunlight poured in through the gap between the sheet and the window. As I sat up and rubbed the crust from my eyes I saw the room looked a little sharper somehow, the coffee table clammy from

a recent wiping. At the foot of the chair I noticed a long canvas sack.

Dad was whistling as he came over, a breakfast balanced in each enormous hand.

"I thought we'd go camping," he said, handing me a plate of blackened bacon and eggs.

"Today?" I asked. Despite the sunshine there was a chill in the air; the skin on my arm puckered even indoors.

Dad's smile flickered slightly as he gripped the brown sauce bottle, "Why, are you doing something else today?"

I shook my head, "No."

"Well then."

"It's just... It's winter."

Dad smiled again, "What are you? A man or a mouse?"

This was a trick, a question he used to ask back when I was a kid whenever I'd moan about tidying my bedroom or mowing the lawn.

I made a squeaking sound and wrinkled my nose.

By the time we'd dressed and loaded the car it was almost midday. Most of the real camping equipment was still packed away in boxes in Mum's garage, so we had to improvise with bits and pieces scavenged from around the apartment. Pans and cutlery from the stagnant washing up bowl. Half a bag of Doritos and a fresh case of Carlsberg. The tent was on loan from one of Dad's old drinking buddies, Denny, who was apparently something of a keen angler.

"Not that he's ever caught squat," Dad said with a laugh as he swung the boot shut. "Nothing except hepatitis, anyway."

The traffic was bad for a Saturday and my stomach growled as we crawled down the high street, Dad chain smoking out the window.

"Can we stop and get a bite?" I asked, nodding towards a McDonalds a little down the street.

"There?" Dad asked, turning his attention away from the pensioner he was mid-way through giving the finger to. "Have you ever considered the amount of crap they pump into that stuff? Franken-burgers they call 'em. Kind of things that Harry

Palmer and his pals cook up in their fancy lab I wouldn't wonder."

I didn't say anything after that. It was the first time I'd heard Dad use Harry's name. It felt strange, as if a small but dangerous animal had crawled through the window and fallen asleep on the back seat. I didn't want to be the one to wake it.

A little while later Dad pulled the car over to the side of the road and hit the hazards. Then, without a word, he unhitched his seatbelt and got out. A few minutes later he was back, a small sack of charcoal over his shoulder and a lumpy white bag gripped tightly in his fist.

"You ever had a dirty steak son?" he asked.

I shook my head.

He grinned, "Your grandad used to cook 'em up all the time when I was a kid. Used to freak Nana out something rotten. What you do is you take yourself a couple of T-bones," he paused to shake the bag. "Nice tender, butcher's cuts. None of that vacuum-sucked supermarket muck. After that, you build yourself a nice big fire. You can't cheat on that bit neither. No petrol or paraffin blocks, else you'll poison yourself. Once you've got your fire nice and hot you add your charcoal, wait for the lumps to glow, then toss your steaks on top. No oil, no seasoning. Just meat and fire the way God intended." Dad laughed, tossing the bag of steak into my lap. "Wonder what Harry Palmer would have to say about that, huh?"

The traffic thinned out as we left the city. Dad didn't like listening to music while he drove so we kept the radio tuned to the football, the penalties and off-side calls interrupted by increasingly large yawns of static as the signal faded, until eventually we lost the commentary altogether. After that we sat in silence, eating Doritos and listening to the rattle and squeak of the Volvo's suspension on the pockmarked gravel, each lost to our own thoughts.

"That a Toyota he's got?"

I swallowed hard, Dad's question yanking me back into the present.

"Hmmm?"

“Red one, up on your Mum’s drive. What is it? An MR2”

I shrugged.

Dad cleared his throat, unrolled the window a couple of inches and sent a missile of spit streaking into the wind.

“Never liked Toyotas,” he said as he wound it back up. “Poor man’s Ferrari if you ask me.”

I didn’t mention the disconcerting rattle coming from the undercarriage of the Volvo.

It was almost dark by the time Dad pulled off the track and killed the engine. I peered into the trees, trying to imagine where we might set a tent. It was impossible to see more than a few feet into the dense thicket.

“Come on then!” Dad said, as he reached for the door. “Are you a man or a mouse?”

I gave a small, dutiful squeak.

We seemed to walk for a long time. It was hard going, with brambles tearing at our ankles and mossy stumps rearing up out of the darkness, the perfect height to jar a shin or crack an unsuspecting kneecap. Several times we had to stop to scramble around blindly amongst the dead leaves and dirt to retrieve items that had slipped from our grasp. Indeed, the light was so bad I could hardly make out Dad a few feet in front of me, with only the dim glow from his cigarette leading the way.

Eventually we came to a small clearing and staggered to a halt. Dad dropped the bags and immediately cracked a beer to celebrate.

“Didn’t I tell you?” he asked.

I nodded, hoping he couldn’t make out my expression in the dark.

My job was to pitch the tent while Dad gathered wood for the fire. My hands were so cold that it was hard to get the bag’s zipper open. When I eventually did, I knew at once it wasn’t going to work. It was a dome tent, a two-man, but even in the dark I could see there was something missing. No matter how many times I flipped over the canvas or rethreaded the pole through the meshed fabric of the inner flaps, I couldn’t get

the thing to slot together. I was still standing over it when Dad returned, his arms laden with branches.

“What are you...?” he snapped, but quickly stopped as he stooped to examine the crumpled debris at my feet. “You’re missing a pole. Have you checked the bag?”

“I’ve checked,” I said.

“Well check again.”

Dad stayed on the ground for a couple more minutes, fiddling with the canvas before letting it slump to the floor.

“That bastard Denny,” he said, more to himself than to me. “He said he used it just this summer.”

I stood there, shivering under my coat. I didn’t know what to say.

As if waking from a trance, Dad clapped his hands together.

“It’s fine,” he said. “We can just sleep under it like that, army-style. It’ll be like a big sleeping bag. We’ll get the fire going and everything will be just fine. Sleeping out under the stars with your old man huh? Now that’s what I call an adventure.”

I nodded as Dad laughed and cracked another can. Glancing up, I couldn’t help noticing there wasn’t a single star in the sky.

Dad spent about half an hour meticulously laying out the wood, talking me through the process as he first raked out a bare soil bed with his hands, then placed a springy ball of dry leaves and grass in the centre. I watched as he built a small tepee around it with pencil-thin twigs, leaving one side open so that the air could get in and feed the fire. Finally, he stacked the larger branches around the outside and then pushed his hand through the gap, holding his lighter to the bundle. I leant closer, watching as the grass smouldered and popped under the flame. Yet it refused to take. As the minutes passed Dad’s movements became less precise. He jabbed the lighter towards the branches and several times the pile collapsed. He dropped to his chest and began huffing into the smoking leaves, curse words escaping with every breath.

“It’s wet,” Dad said, taking a stick from the pile. It bent but didn’t snap. “Did it rain this week?”

The question sounded like a threat.

I kept very still, staring into the heap and willing it to catch. And then, quite unexpectedly, it did.

At once Dad redoubled his efforts, circling the fire and steadily blowing as the ball of tinder glowed first orange then blue, the flames at last creeping upwards and licking the kindling. In no time at all the fire was roaring. Dad stood proudly back, draining a can and reaching for another.

“What did I tell you?” he said. “Isn’t this great?”

Basking in the warm bubble of light, it was hard to argue with him. The fire had transformed the clearing completely, casting strange, crooked shadows all around us. It was as if a flickering spotlight had been suspended above our heads, illuminating this single perfect spot amongst the endless acres of darkness. As if we were chosen, somehow.

“Right, time to eat,” Dad said after a couple of minutes. The light and heat instantly faded as he shook the coals over the fire, but I was too hungry to complain. I felt around in the shadows until I found the bag of meat, tearing open the polythene. I was hit immediately by the sour stink of ammonia. Tilting the bag, I saw how the surface of the steak glistened green in the dull light.

“Dad... I don’t think these are right.”

He was over at once, all brag and bluster as he snatched the bag from my grip. He lowered his face to take a sniff, then jerked away as he retched violently, a string of drool swaying from his open mouth.

It was a while before he straightened up, and even once he had he didn’t say anything. He just stood there, staring at the bad meat, a crinkle of disbelief on his brow, almost lost amongst all the other lines and creases. Then all at once his body seemed to stiffen, a white anger boiling through him as he took a couple of steps backwards and, with a roar, pitched the bag high into the air.

There was a soft crack somewhere above us. Looking up we saw the bag had snagged on a low branch just overhead. Blood was already trickling through the shredded plastic. In the dying light we stood together and watched it drip.

It's a funny thing to hear an adult cry. No matter how big or old or broken they are, they always sound like children. That night as I lay shivering under the canvas, I heard the wavering high-pitched whimper of my father weeping. I'd gone to bed long before him, leaving him to his beer and the fire while I coiled myself in what was left of the tent. I didn't sleep though. Rather, I lay there with my eyes closed as the unfamiliar, private sounds of the forest unfolded all around me.

I was still awake hours later when Dad leant over and shook me. Acting on some long-forgotten impulse, however, I feigned sleep, keeping my eyes shut and my body stubbornly limp. He sighed, swore, shook me again. Still I didn't move. Then, with a strength I'd long forgotten he possessed, I felt him squat beside me and slide his hands under my ribs, hoisting me out from under the fabric and into his arms. And even as he staggered through the undergrowth, gasping under the weight of me as he headed back to the car, and later to the city, to Mum and Harry, I kept my head still against his shoulder and my eyes squeezed tight, listening to him struggle as he carried me like a child, deep into the night.