



# R i b - e y e d B r e a k

a s h o r t s t o r y

J u l i e t M c H u g h

# **Rib-eyed Break**

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Pulling in to the camp site, the Milligan family were already at loggerheads with each other. After a five hour drive with only one brief stop, all four of them were desperate to get out of the mobile tin box that had kept them all trapped together since leaving home. Jean and Martin had rowed for the last two hours, Sam and Scott had begun punching each other and jabbing at legs an hour ago. Sam had stabbed Scott in the leg with a pen and Scott had twisted his brother's wrist viciously in retaliation. Even the dog was grumpy and restless. Family holidays were not what they used to be, Jean reflected and blamed Martin. Now that they boys were older, he refused to pay the air fares to take them on even a cheap package holiday abroad, insisting instead on loading up the trailer with a four person tent, and driving them all across half the country to a camp site where the water may or may not be working, the showers may or may not be warm and the toilets may or may not be clean.

He had some deluded memory of camping with his parents as a child. What he failed to recall was that he had been much younger than the boys were now and his mother had never gone along. Jean knew this from her parents-in-law and knew also that her husband had never enjoyed the holidays, that his father had spent the time fishing and to avoid listening to his son whining about flies and mud and wanting his bed, dropped him off at the children's activity group whenever he could. The sole aim of the father-son getaways had been to give Martin's mother a well-deserved break. There was no telling him that he was making up his blissful memories in order to fool himself that his own kids would have a good time roughing it miles away from anywhere with no access to any of their staple pastimes and not even a signal on their phones. It hadn't worked last year, or the year before that, but he believed fervently that this year it would be fun.

Martin got out of the car and straightened his clothes. He held his head high, sticking his chin out and appeared to be pretending that everything was just as he'd planned. The boys looked thoroughly unimpressed, bored, even slightly dejected, slumped in their seats avoiding their father's eye. They seemed embarrassed to be with him and Jean had to admit she could see their point. Dressed in the clothes he thought were appropriate, Martin looked roughly three decades out of date and at least two older than his years. His manner, loaded with forced enthusiasm, reminded her of something from a road-trip comedy she'd seen on daytime TV. He was a parody of himself and the archetypal wilderness man combined. She didn't recognise this man so she knew he was faking it completely. It irritated her and she'd made it known for at least two hours. She'd hoped he would take a huff and drive them all back home again but no such luck.

Sam got out of the car first of the two boys leaving older brother Scott to sit in silence on his own. He had to go to the toilet or, not relishing the idea of being ordered about like a soldier on parade, he would have stayed put until his dad had done all of the necessary unpacking and assembly. At fourteen, he had little interest in being here. He couldn't understand why they didn't go to Spain for the summer holiday anymore. They could be lounging by the pool or swimming to cool off in glorious sunshine instead of looking for something to do between rain showers and having nothing at all to do while it was raining. It wasn't cold, but it wasn't warm either so there wasn't even the freedom of shorts and t-shirt to enjoy. There was the small mercy that the temperature wouldn't make things too unbearable in the tent when all four of them were crammed in there later.

He trudged sullenly to the toilet block. Even if he hadn't known which of the small concrete buildings it was, the smell would have led him right to it. So, either the drains were backed up or some people on site had no manners. The drains were backed up, he discovered. An attendant informed him that someone would be there tomorrow to try and clear them, but until then he couldn't flush unless he wanted his contribution to contents and those of the people before him to wash over his feet. Sam was almost sick as he stood over the bowl. If he had to go again today, he'd go into the woods and would advise his mother and brother to do the same. He'd let his dad find out for himself, if indeed his dad would work out what to do to avoid the vile filth and stench or tough it out as 'part of the experience'.

Jean and Scott were dismayed and disgusted when he told them about the facilities. Jean thought for a moment and evidently had the same idea as her son since she didn't tell her husband. What she did instead was take the car keys from him and tell her sons to settle in again. As far as Martin was concerned, they were going to look for fresh supplies like eggs, milk and bread. Jean had spotted a sign not far back on the road for a service station with toilets, showers and dining. If she had to drive them to the bathroom, so be it, but she wasn't going to put her children or indeed herself through the worse than slum conditions in this place.

The service station was bright and clean and the food was excellent. They ate half pound burgers with hand cut fries and salad, savouring every last bite, not knowing when they would have something that hadn't been burned on a barbecue or left half raw on a camping stove. They took their time and bought the provisions they'd claimed to be searching for from the little grocery store attached to the petrol station. Jean would say after driving round for ages they'd opted for the convenience store even if it was a little dear. It

## Rib-eyed Break

would have cost too much in petrol to continue searching for a farm store that was open. Martin would never know the difference and based on petrol costs she knew he wouldn't argue. Both she and the boys reluctantly headed back to the camp site, hoping to find the tent set up and the sleeping bags rolled out.

While Jean and the boys were away, Martin battled with the tent and met with little success until a local man, presumably something to do with the site, wandered over and offered to help. What Martin saw as helping was in fact doing the job for him completely. He couldn't admit to himself that he'd been wholly unable to pitch a tent. The guy seemed friendly enough and when he'd finished, disappeared only to return with some cans of strong cider, offering one to Martin. Feeling he deserved a drink for all his standing watching in veiled humiliation, he accepted and offered a seat on one of the folding chairs. The chairs at least he had managed to sort out by himself. "Much appreciated" he said, raising his open can in a toast.

"Family gone out?"

"Searching for provisions."

"Oh, well we have a special barbecue every week now. Come along and bring them with you."

"Might just do that. Is it in with the fee?"

"Free of charge, mate. Bring your own drink though."

"Sounds good."

"Eight o'clock over by the barn." The man, whose name Martin never thought to ask, drained his cider and stood up. "Doesn't look like rain so should be good." He wandered off without a see you later or even a gesture of farewell.

Martin sipped his cider slowly. It was strong stuff and he wasn't used to afternoon drinking. When Jean and the boys got back they found him asleep in his chair, open mouthed and dribbling, about to fall to the ground. Jean resisted the temptation to let him tumble but was careful not to wake him gently. The dog was excited to see them and they realised Martin hadn't given her any water. She drank every drop she was given and then half of the next bowl too. It did nothing to lighten the mood to see her neglected.

Sam became very quickly bored in the tent. Books and hand-held games didn't help to break through the dismal mood. He mumbled something about having nothing to do and

going to explore. Jean called after him “Be careful!” but knew it was the obligatory mother instruction and would for that reason alone most likely be ignored.

It didn’t take long for sixteen year old Scott to say he was going to keep his brother company. He’d left it just long enough that it was his own idea and just long enough that he wasn’t copying the younger sibling or so Jean thought. Scott was the only one aware of the horrible sense of foreboding he felt. He struck out in the direction he thought Sam had taken, his mother’s words “You be careful too” barely registering with him.

Sam was not content with climbing trees and chasing wildlife. He wanted to see how the small farm adjacent to the campsite operates and how the preparations for the barbecue were coming along. There was not a soul to be seen in the yard. He’d at least hoped for a friendly dog he could entice into a game. He wandered on a little farther, and thought he heard voices from inside a large corrugated iron structure, painted grey with large patches of reddening rust at the joins. He trudged up, not being too careful about the noise he made and peered through a crack in the door. What he saw didn’t quite hit home at first.

This had evidently been a meat locker at some point. Rows of hooks dangled from rafters slung between the straight walls, below the arched roof. He’d seen something similar on TV once. It might have been his age, or he might have just presumed in his own ignorance, but he didn’t register that the building wasn’t refrigerated. He didn’t register the smell at first either. An older, wiser nose that had been to the butcher’s shop more than once would have instantly recognised the sickly scent of thick blood.

There were two men inside the shed and they were discussing something he couldn’t quite hear. One of them drew a hunting knife from a sheath on his belt and pulled aside a heavy plastic curtain. Sam almost fell through the door. Hanging by the wrists, gagged and bound were people, some of them older, some of them young, some of them fat, some of them thin. He watched, wide-eyed as the man with the knife lifted down the first in the row, a girl, maybe seventeen or eighteen. She stirred slightly and groaned then seemed to come to a little more and tried to shout out though the gaffer tape across her mouth. Her eyes were wild as she tried to wriggle free. The man held her fast and didn’t seem at all concerned. He slung her, face down over a wooden structure with a white plastic half pipe below it. The other man was on his feet now and pulled out a stopper in the half pipe. Sam tried to see what was going on but couldn’t quite make it all out. The knife flashed and the first man grabbed the girl by the hair, stretching her neck, using his body weight to keep her steady and then slit her throat.

Sam wanted to scream and turned to run, slamming straight into the belly of a third man who caught hold of him and with one hand clamped tight over the boy's nose and mouth, dragged him kicking and fighting into the shed. "Look what he have here!" he announced to his friends.

"Bit on the small side, but he'll do the kids, hang him up."

Sam tried to fight his captor as he was tied, wrists and ankles and a length of tape stuck across his mouth. He was carried to the back of the rack past dozens of other prisoners and hung by the wrist bindings on the next available hook. He squirmed and tried to shake himself free, grunts and muffled cries escaping from his nose. He didn't notice the man coming up behind him with a syringe in his hand until he felt it jab into his buttock. The shed became fuzzy at first, difficult to see, then it went black.

Scott couldn't find Sam anywhere. He began to feel quite panicked and sick. The only place left to look was the farm. He was really unsure about this. It was probably trespassing and farmers had guns and dogs, he was sure, so he kept low and quiet. It must be two hours since he'd started looking for his brother. There was a good chance he'd been right behind him, following him in a huge circle the whole time, but he didn't think so.

Peering round the wall through the only gate into the yard, his first confirmation was footprints from trainers, a bit smaller than his own. They went in but there were none coming out. Sam was in there. Scott skirted round outside of the wall again and snuck around to the back of the yard. He climbed the old stone structure quite easily and dropped down into thick undergrowth on the other side. It wasn't very well maintained for a working farm. He reasoned that the campsite was the main business now and then imagined all of the rusty tools and equipment lying round on which Sam might have injured himself. For a fourteen year old, his brother lacked a certain care and caution and he blamed himself and his parents for never leaving him to find his own way out of trouble.

Scott thought he heard something in the rusty grey building near the back. He kept down in the overgrown greenery until he was certain there was no door or window through which he might be seen then he darted toward the back of the metal structure. It was badly corroded in places, probably hadn't been weatherproofed in years, and holes peppered the back wall. The sun was at the other side so this must be the north end. His shadow wouldn't alert anyone inside to someone walking past. He was glad he'd read that SAS survival guide his Granddad had given him for Christmas a couple of years ago. He put his eye to one of the rough edged gaps and tried to see what was going on inside. He almost threw up and fought

to stay silent and control himself. There were dozens of bodies, all hanging up in rows. They still had their clothes on. He watched as closely as he could. They were still breathing! Their ribs swelled and shrank in steady individual rhythms. Adjusting his angle so he could see more to the right hand corner, the rear left if he'd been inside, his blood ran cold. His brother was on the last hook in the row. Breathing hard, he looked around the inside of the shed to the best of his ability. Three men were busy at the other end. One was talking about feeding the livestock; another that he couldn't see was complaining that "this one" was proving hard to cut up. One was brandishing a hunting knife and although he couldn't quite see what was done with it, he could hear what he somehow knew was someone's throat slashed. Scott was frozen to the spot for a time. His mind whirled over the possibilities. The barbecue in a few hours. The reference to livestock. Cutting someone up. They were going to feed people to the guests at the barbecue. He had to get help.

He made it back over the wall without being seen or heard and ran for all he was worth back to the tent where his parents would be waiting for both boys to return. His lungs were burning from the sprint as he tumbled into the tent. The dog jumped up and ran to him, licking his face. He put his arm around her. "What do you think you're playing at?" Martin exclaimed.

"Can't you see something's wrong, Martin?" Jean intervened for her son. "What's happened?"

Scott recounted the whole tale to his parents in ragged uneven breaths, telling them everything he'd seen, especially the bit about Sam. "What a vivid imagination" Martin finally said, sarcastically. The distress on Scott's face told Jean there was more than a young, fertile mind at work here, but she wasn't convinced that what her son had seen was what he thought it to be.

"Come on son, we'll go back together and find out what's really happening up there. Sometimes a side of beef can look awfully human you know."

"Wearing clothes and breathing?"

"Well, I don't know about that. If you didn't see it clearly, it could be anything."

Scott realised he couldn't convince her otherwise. He slipped his Swiss army knife into his pocket and went out with her across the camp ground, his frustration mounting at her lack of urgency.

When they reached the farmyard, Jean strode right up to the door of the house and knocked. There was no answer. She knocked again, a bit louder. The sound of footsteps



## Rib-eyed Break

came around the house from the direction of the shed. The man Scott hadn't been able to see approached. He wore a butcher's white apron, filthy and stained with blood. He wiped his hands on a rag tugged in to the back of his grubby jeans. "Can I help you?" He smiled and seemed pleasant enough.

"My son would like to see the barbecue preparations. He's wondering how you get everything ready" she lied. Something approaching disgruntled passed across the man's face. "Of course, if you're too busy, we'll just see the results tonight" she added, not wanting to cause any trouble.

"No, no, right this way. We're hard at it, mind you so it's a bit of a mess."

"We don't mind a bit of mess, do we Scott?" Scott looked like he wanted to scream at her.

The man's attitude changed when he saw the boy's face. "This way then" he said. Scott noticed as soon as his mother was ahead of them the smile faded from the farmer's face and a look of suspicion replaced it. He slipped his knife into his hand and folded out the blade.

At the door of the shed, Jean hesitated. She couldn't see what was behind the plastic curtain but knew it was crucial to settling the issue. On a bench against the wall to her right, joints of fresh meat were laid out next to a mincing machine, and an enormous amount of ribs coated in some sort of marinade lay to the left of them. She felt quite sick but imagined it was the butchering process that she never normally saw that was upsetting her. "See, Scott..." she began as a strong arm grabbed her from behind and a hand was placed firmly over her nose and mouth.

The other two men had appeared by the door. Scott leaped forward at his mother's attacker, knife at the ready, only to be dragged down in a heavy rugby tackle by one of the others. He kicked upward and caught his assailant in the groin. He was free as the burly man creased up with the pain.

The first man held on to Jean and couldn't help his friends. The third man ran at Scott who sprang to his feet and lunged forward with his knife, slashing the arm that launched towards him. Ducking under the arm, he buried his blade in a leg and made a break for the door. If his dad wouldn't listen, someone else would have to. His hands and his knife were slick with the third man's blood. He'd almost made it when the wounded man swung round and threw his own knife. The blade lodged in Scott's leg and he fell to the ground. Before he could gather himself, he was scooped up by the man he'd kicked who grabbed him by the belt

and carried him like a living bowling bag. Scott flailed and kicked but the man didn't seem to notice the blows.

Scott saw with panic that his mother was already bound and gagged and being carried toward the back of the shed. He saw her wildly frightened face, streaked with tears. He fought as hard as he could despite the wound in his leg, gushing blood and sending flashes of searing pain through his young body. It seemed a minor inconvenience to the farmers as they taped first his mouth and then his wrists and ankles. One of them had pocketed his Swiss army knife. He resolved to get out of this and get it back. His granddad had given him that knife.

Martin waited at the tent until eight o'clock. The dog was bored but he'd remembered to feed her and give her more water. Neither the boys nor Jean had returned so he assumed they'd either stayed up at the farm or gone off exploring the grounds together. He'd see them at the barbecue, no doubt.

There didn't seem to be many people making their way across the grounds when he got up to go. Martin felt quite smug that it must be by invitation only. The guy had said a 'special barbecue' after all. He'd brought six pack of lager and some soft drinks for the boys but nothing else. The dog followed quietly behind him.

The meat was already on and cooking when he arrived – burgers, steaks and ribs crackled and fizzed on a huge griddle over an open fire. Looking around he saw no sign of his wife and sons. He assumed they'd be along shortly. He sat down and opened a can while he waited for either food or his family, whichever came first. The chatter from the other guests attracted his attention. The meat at last year's barbecues had been so tender and juicy and the ribs were absolutely to die for they said. At the last comment, the man tending the griddle smirked. When asked what the secret was, he said nonchalantly "Oh, you leave the livestock roaming free and eating a good variety of food until a couple of weeks before it's time, then you bring them in and feed them up on cornmeal for a richer flavour." Murmurs of approval and appreciation went among the group. "First lot of burgers is done, if you're ready."

Martin was at the back of the queue to collect a burger. By the time he reached the front, several people were almost finished eating their first helping. He noticed the man in charge was moving with some difficulty and had a large, fresh gash across his arm. "Looks painful."

“Oh, had a bit of an accident with one of the animals.” The kitchen roll that passed as napkins had run out. The farmer-come-chef reached for another pack and pulled a Swiss army knife from his pocket. Martin watched, thinking it was just like the one his father had given to Scott. It was put on the side for a moment and Martin’s heart skipped a beat when he saw that it was engraved. ‘S from Gramps’. It not only looked like Scott’s knife. It was Scott’s knife. He picked it up and turned it over in his hands. There were flecks of dry blood between the multiple tools folded away in the body of the knife. He put it down again quickly as the man turned back. Martin considered the implications. Scott’s story. Scott’s knife and no Scott. No Sam or Jean. Something snapped inside of him.

“Nice knife” he said, keeping his voice calm and natural.

“Yeah, it comes in handy.”

“My son has one just like it.”

“They’re fairly common.”

“Should imagine the inscription is too.”

“It’s possible” said the chef with an uneasy smile.

“Don’t suppose you’ve seen him around, have you? He was supposed to be here. And my wife. And my other son.”

“Not seen anyone all day.”

“I’ll take a look around just the same.”

Swiping all of the meat on the bench to the ground, he grabbed up the knife and at the same time a large kitchen knife from beside the griddle then in deft sideways move twisted the chef’s wounded arm up behind his back. He held it a fraction of a twist away from breaking. “Stop eating” he yelled to the people round the fire. “You don’t know what you’ve got in your hands.” Faces froze, burgers hovered in uncertain grasps, people spat out half-chewed mouthfuls of meat. Martin addressed his captive directly, “Where are they?” No answer. He twisted the arm just a tiny bit further and pressed the point of the blade against his back just above a kidney. The dog now standing beside him growled and bared her teeth. “I’ll ask you again. Where are they?”

“Sh-sh. Sh-sh-shed”

“Shall we take a little walk?” The quavering man nodded. Martin held the arm lock and marched him to the big grey building. The people at the barbecue put their plates down quietly and started to ask one another what was happening.

The door of the shed was shut. Martin used his prisoner's head as a battering ram to open it then let him fall to the ground, unconscious. He told the dog to stay, knowing she'd watch in case there was any movement. The two men inside, grinding and preparing more 'meat', looked round aghast. Martin used the tip of the kitchen knife to point at them. "You have my wife and sons. I want them back." The man on the right, the same man who'd sorted out the tent, moved quickly and threw his hunting blade at Martin. With lightning reflexes he didn't know he had, Martin dodged the blade. The other butcher held a hunting knife in one hand, a cleaver in the other. "Come on then" Martin goaded. "Try it!"

The cleaver flew towards him. He ducked. It embedded itself in the door above his head. "Two down, one to go." He kept his eyes on the pair of nervous farmers as he reached up and pulled the cleaver from the door. He now had two weapons, not counting the Swiss army knife in his pocket.

He saw the idea enter the first man's head before he even engaged his legs to rush forward. Martin waited and at the last second bent forward and took a step so that his shoulders hit the attacker in the midriff and the momentum carried the hapless farmer right over the top, face first into the corrugated iron door where it stood open. Somewhere amidst the loud clang Martin heard a crunch which he assumed was a face. Whatever it was, there was no more movement from the second butcher.

One man remained. "Now, you can either try your luck and join your mates, or you can drop the knife and take me to my family." The hunting knife clattered to the floor. Martin moved quickly and noticing the gaffer tape on the side, grabbed it. He bound the man's wrists, turned him round and shoved him forward. When the flying assassin had hit the door, a small round of applause had gone up outside. Faces now appeared at the door. Martin threw the gaffer tape to the first man that stepped inside. "Here. Hands and feet, both of them, and leave them lying face down." Another face appeared. "You. Come and help." The guest came forward and watched as Martin marched his captive to the spot he'd indicated. "Come and open this curtain." The guest ran forward and pulled back the heavy plastic sheeting.

Seeing what was behind the screen, Martin threw the butcher down hard into the floor. "Bind him. Gag him. Then someone come and help me."

The barbecue guests were filing into the shed. More than half of them turned back and Martin heard them vomiting outside. He thought he could hear women and children crying. Gradually they came back to help. He knew it was unethical, but the first of the victims he sought were Jean and the boys. The dog, satisfied that she was able to leave the

unconscious men now, ran up and made short work of sniffing out her family. They were right at the back, evidently the newest additions. Martin lifted them down in turn. Sam stirred slightly, but all three were drugged and unconscious.

Scott was badly wounded. "Somebody find a phone and make sure we have police and ambulance here pronto." He carefully assessed the bloody gash in his son's leg. He ripped a strip from his own shirt and fastened it around the wound to stem the bleeding. It had obviously been like that for a while, and despite evident clotting was still slowly dripping. He hoped with all his heart there hadn't been too much blood loss. He checked his son's pulse and breathing, and satisfied that although they weren't strong they weren't too ragged, he left him in the care of a woman who'd come forward to help.

Jean appeared unhurt, as did Sam. He made sure they were all laid together and went to help recover the remaining victims. The sirens came much quicker than he'd expected, then he realised that someone must have called the police when he'd broken up the barbecue. That was alright though. They were here and that was all that mattered. One of the barbecue guests was explaining what had happened.

First things first, the three men, who turned out to be brothers were assessed for injuries by uniformed officers then thrown into a police van and secured. The police next found the sedative that had been used - there were several bottles of it in a metal storage box at the back of the shed. The paramedics who arrived soon after the police were able to give something to some of the unconscious victims to counteract the effects. There wasn't enough to go round them all. They radioed despatch and asked for as many ambulances as possible to converge on the scene. Jean had to be calmed down and treated for shock when she woke up then cried as an officer led Martin away for questioning. He was only glad they put him in a car and not in the van with the butchers.

Late the next morning, Martin walked in to a hospital ward to find his wife and youngest son at Scott's bedside. "I'm sorry son" was the first thing he said then he laid Scott's knife on the bed where he could reach it. "It's been cleaned. After the police swabbed it."

"I stabbed one of them Dad" Scott said in a hushed voice.

"I know. I know everything. I broke one nose, fractured one skull and smashed up a barbecue." Scott laughed. The family sat in silence for a while. It was a different sort of silence to any they'd ever known. Sam broke it.

“Everyone says you’re a hero, Dad. That means you can take that stupid hat off and stop wearing sandals. You’re cool now.” Martin took the hat off and threw it at his youngest with a smile. “So where are we going on holiday next year?”

Jean made a sharp intake of breath. Martin didn’t yell, didn’t overreact, didn’t berate Sam. He sat back casually in his chair. “You know, I was thinking about that. If you are all in agreement” he paused and looked around at their fearfully expectant faces, a glint in his eye that Jean hadn’t seen in years, “I thought we might go to Spain. All inclusive. I think I’ve had enough of camping.”