

If you're going to kill a kid, the trick is to get mum first. With her dead the little ones won't know what to do and you can deal with them easily. No need to worry about Dad – let him live. Who'd want to eat an old billy anyway?

Young goat's another matter of course. I'd happily eat one roasted, stewed or curried - which is part of the reason I'm inching down a wet hillside on a sunny winter Sunday in ridiculous camouflage clothes, cradling a rifle.

The other part has to do with sorting out my feelings on hunting.

Being a sentimental city type, I haven't murdered a mammal larger than a mouse since I was ten, yet hunting fascinates me. I've even convinced myself it's in my genes: my eyes have always flicked up at movement; picked out the rabbit in the long grass - and last autumn when my friend let me tag along while he stalked deer in Te Urewera National Park... well, we came back empty-handed, but the feeling of being in the bush. Of moving so slowly. Of sending your senses far from you - listening, listening, smelling - turning your head to look with glacial slowness before taking the next careful step – it all felt so *right*.

Whereas what feels more and more wrong lately is browsing the shiny mounds of plastic-wrapped protein in the supermarket. There's something unsettling about knowing that other people, out of sight, are doing my dirty work for me; clocking up bad karma on my behalf so I can shop for steak. I guess these thoughts are part of the whole know-where-your-food's-from movement that's had everyone digging up their lawn lately to grow veges, but the truth is potagers, companion planting and crop rotation leave me cold. I just wasn't born with a green thumb. But do I have a red finger?

Well I'm about to find out. An experienced friend has agreed to guide me for a first kill and has taken me into some scrub north of Auckland. Two hours into it, we've spotted three goats far below and have been working down a treacherous hillside towards them. We've sucked our fingers and held them high to judge wind direction - we don't want them to smell or hear us – skirted a ridge to stay out of sight, and even held fire as a billy goat crashed out of cover at our feet: we want to shoot something that's good to eat, and a hasty shot at him will only scare our tastier targets. Plus, I'm very anxious about making an animal suffer – or suffer too much – and when I watch the billy through the rifle's telescopic sight the crosshairs weave wildly over his body. Sure, a yank on the trigger might

get lucky and put a shot through his heart or head, but more likely it would wound him horribly, and the idea of an animal thrashing and bleating in agony – or worse, running off injured to die days later – sickens me, so when he stopped side-on to eyeball us we let him go; kept working down towards our prey – a mother with two kids - and now all three are in range.

So what do I dislike about hunting? Quite a lot, when I think about it. Hunters seem unable to pronounce a ‘g’ after ‘i’ and ‘n’ - so that hunting becomes *huntin’* and fishing *fishin’* – and if I get into it, am I expected to drink a shittier beer? It also bugs me that it comes with a set of assumed political views. Plus I think it’s dishonest when people dismiss the targets of their bloody pastime as *just pests* – as if that status somehow reduces an animal’s suffering – or as if pest control would be your motive for waking at 4am in winter. As if pest control could make your mouth go dry and heart thump.

Beyond that, I’m not even that crazy about meat. I could go either way really - vegetarians kind of impress me – and issues of pain and suffering aside, killing an animal for its flesh strikes me as kind of... well, theft. A wild animal owns nothing but its body, and here I am trying to deprive it of that. They don’t belong to me, you tell it, but I will take from you your legs, your muscles, your skin - and all your future days.

So I guess you could call me hunt-curious. I don’t know if I’ll hate it, or love it – I feel so mixed – and that’s probably why my hands are shaking, now that it’s time to find out.

I’ve crawled to a spot where a raw red slip has been halted by the roots of an old stump. By lying on my back with one leg dangling down the slip and the other hooked around the stump I can rest the rifle on it steady enough for a quick, clean kill – yet I’m still unsure. I gesture to my friend – under whose supervision I’m using the gun – to crawl closer so I can whisper.

“If I shoot the little one, there’s not much meat, but if I get the mother, the kids might die. So should I just bowl over the adolescent?”

He looks at me evenly and gives an ambiguous little shrug.

“Just kill them all.”

Then he tells me the trick about mum being first.

I look back down the sight. The buzz of chainsaws is drifting up the valley, softened by distance into an almost-music that only accentuates the country quiet. I ease the crosshairs along her spine, searching for the least-cruel shot, and remember the last time I killed something four-legged.

I was ten years old. We were on a family holiday in the Mackenzie Basin and back then I was the kind of kid who walked about with a pocket full of stones, dreaming of knocking over a rabbit - until one day something dashed out in front of me, looking like a red rag on legs. I unleashed.

To my surprise the third stone hit it. I walked over and found it was a weasel and that I'd broken its neck. But I knew what I had to do here: put it out of its misery, so I reached down to kill it – and it flashed its fangs.

Jeepers. Sure it was paralyzed, but this looked *dangerous*. I scratched my head, then came up with a solution: the biggest rock that I could carry.

I staggered over, bandy ten-year old arms straining, and dropped the rock on the weasel. The rock rolled off, revealing a severely pissed-off mustelid. The ground was marshy, so rock had only succeeded in pressing the poor thing into a weasel-shape indent, like a murder victim in a chalk outline furious about still being alive. I hefted the rock and dropped it again. And again. And again – until I couldn't take its thin screams of suffering any longer and sat down on the side of the road, crying with shame.

I haven't killed anything since. And the memory of that day is with me as I watch the goat through the sight – but now something's happening. The chainsaws are growing louder. Except they're not chainsaws – they're dirtbikes – and they're coming up our valley. Part of me realises that the goats will soon panic, giving me a scapegoat for escaped goats. But another, stronger, part hears the dirtbikes and thinks: *now or never*.

The goat turns side-on.

I track the crosshairs up a front leg to her chest and pull the trigger.

Later I find that the projectile – a .223 calibre bullet – passed through the top of both her lungs. A piece of shrapnel – or else fragment of bone – carved a groove through the spine, and the whole mess exited her right shoulder.

She drops instantly and starts kicking. *Oh no* – I think – *oh no*, I've wounded instead of killed and load another round. I take what I think is careful aim (though find later that I clean miss) and put in another shot – load again - and am squaring up the youngster, brain sloshing with adrenalin, when a dirt-biker revs right into view.

Jesus. Suddenly this feels like a press report about yet another hunting accident – so I slip the safety on and clear the chamber. Unbelievably none of the four bikers have heard the crack of the rifle, or sees us camouflaged on the hill, or even see the young goats - which they all buzz within four feet of.

So after they're well and truly gone we walk to the valley floor to inspect our prize and find that, despite my fears, it was a near-instant kill. After that, we walk up to the kids and kill them where they're hiding – goats in bushes; fish in a barrel – and though I know we're finishing what we started and it's the rational thing, it's bloody horrible. And after *that* my friend teaches me field butchery.

This, after all the drama, is the most interesting part. For the first five minutes my face is a wince of disgust - then suddenly I'm over it as I realise these aren't living things, they're the inanimate remains of living things which can no longer suffer - and I take to the skinning and gutting and extracting of meat with fervour, and blood smears up my forearms and there's only one really disgusting moment, which is when I have my head inside the empty chest cavity of the adult and bump it and, bellows that they are, the ribs gust a great puff of warm wet goat-guts smell into my face for me to gag on.

When we finish we put the meat into bags and I pause to take stock of what we've done. My feelings about hunting have certainly become clearer. I don't think I'd shoot a goat again – the amount and quality of the meat you take out doesn't seem to warrant the animal's suffering. But a deer for its venison? I would and will do that. I also have a new respect for the choices made by vegetarians – a new contempt for anti-hunting sentimentalists who wear leather shoes – and a strong feeling that if you choose to eat an animal, whether it's from a farm or forest, the thing to care about is how it dies.