

Pig

Mike was five minutes late. In New Zealand five minutes barely counts as 'on time'. But this was different. This was something I'd been wanting to do for two years, and finally, finally we were going — if only Mike would hurry up.

I was up at five. By moonlight I had put the kettle on and walked, silver-clad, into the garden; pulled the cover from the pool, dived in. As the eastern sky turned grey I swam the tired from my eyes and the sleep from my limbs. Tea, a hasty breakfast. Packed a sandwich, water, chocolate: not knowing for how long I'd be gone.

Long socks, boots. Chapatis. Fleece. All feeling very odd in the middle of a Marlborough summer.

I walked up the drive as the stars faded and waited in the cool air. Finally two bright headlights came into view. The Toyota was loaded for bear: dog box on the flatbed, bolt-action .308 between the front seats and a .22 for rabbits in the back. I jumped into the cab and we were off: my first pig hunt.

Down the New Renwick road, past the rows of vines. Asking after Mike's father — a shared understanding of how frightening pneumonia can be. Speed limit irrelevant. Hell, it was mid-summer and pig-hunting is a winter sport. What did we care about speed-limits?

The short-cut to the Waihopai Valley goes over a ford impassable by anything less than a four wheel drive. The owner of the vines around it wants the road closed to the public: in some kind of under-handed deal the council did not accede to the request but refuses to repair it from public fund. The Hilux has a turbo diesel engine with enough torque to stop the planet from turning. The ford was barely a warm-up for the main act.

The names of the roads are as evocative as the morning scent: Dog Point, Lake Timara Road West; Waihopai Valley and the not-so-secret secret listening station. We passed yet more vines in echelon to starboard and port, Mike describing the loss of the most productive sheep pasture in the southern hemisphere to the creeping imperative of the almighty grape.

We caught up with some cove tootling along at 80. Our age, but driving like an old man. Mike down-shifted and we shot past. Then the dead olive grove, off the tarmac and up the Avondale road.

"They'll see us coming," said Mike. "You can't see the road from the house, but they'll see the dust."

At half past six on a Sunday, we were unlikely to be the milkman.

We met up with a second Mike at a farm house on a slight rise. I wondered, drowsily, if names were in short supply. There were three hangers-on: the next-door farmer's son, his cousin from Auckland and a mate. All around fourteen, one of them with his foot in plaster. The farmer's son was our ticket through the land we were about to travel: it's not safe to trespass when every cocky has a rifle that probably saw service at El Alamein *and still works*.

From tarmac to dirt, from dirt to sheep-track. *This* is what four-wheel drives are made for. Bouncing about in the cab, I wondered about the dogs in the box behind. The Toyota seemed to cope better than Second Mike's Ford; but then the Ford was designed primarily for suburban warfare (the school run is hell, these days) and came fitted with road tyres. When Second Mike had slid backwards down a hill in it the previous year it took Mike in the Toyota to pull him out of trouble, and Second Mike had gone straight home to fit knobbly tyres.

One of the dogs — the youngest, also on his first hunt — began to whine at the scent of livestock. Mike growled at him to shut up. We don't want to frighten off our quarry. You might think that the noise of the diesel would be louder than a whining dog, and you'd be right: but the wild pigs that destroy the hillside and attack weak lambs are used to the sound of engines, and spooked by the sound of dogs.

The air was chill up here in the shadowy foothills of the Malverns, sandwiched between the Awatere and Waihopai valleys. We leapfrogged through the stock gates, a thousand or more feet above sea level, native forest rising through the mists.

On the walkie-talkie I picked up that we were looking for a particular cow carcass. Wild pigs feed on the roots of ferns and grasses, as well as carrion. If the cow we were looking for showed signs of being eaten then there was a good chance of finding pigs in the same area.

The vale widened, lush and sheltered from the worst of the summer dryness. We stopped between stock gates where the sheep-tracks forked. Four of us climbed a hillock to the north, sending the dogs up to sniff. Another two dogs went to the south, racing away with the pent-up energy of nearly two hours in the porta-kennel. The air was heavy with green-smelling bush and the pervasive odour of sheep.

But there was no sign of the carcass. Up on the hillside however there was plenty of small-scale scree, telling us that pigs had rooted here, loosening the soil and fouling the pasture. A family of wild pigs can wipe out acres of grazing land overnight. To stockmen they are a pest to be exterminated. To Mike they are food, or if too fatty to spit-roast at home, diesel in the tank when sold to a butcher.

A conflagration, and Second Mike took his rifle, wired up a dog with a radio receiver and took off towards the south. One of the lads drove the Ford, and we went through another few gates, still looking for the carcass or fresh spoor. The dogs, a couple of them wired, ran alongside.

Yet deeper into the hills. Nearly eight, and we were still in shadow, the sun visible only as a glow between peaks. We parked the trucks, leaving the lad with the plaster sitting in the Ford. We climbed over another gate, the dogs slipping through and over like mist. We walked along a low ridge, then cut back down and crossed a stream, doubling back. The two boys were a hundred yards in front of us, nearly back at the trucks, when there was a bark from the hill to the south.

"Pete's found one!" Pete — the patriarch of the pack, on his last fling before retirement — had thrown up a pig. More barking, the flash of brown and black as the other three dogs launched up the hillside and disappeared into thick bush.

“Come on!” Mike started running up the hill, his long legs carrying him easily. I followed, determined to keep up as much as best I could.

We crested a hillock, only to realize the barking was coming from the mountainside beyond that — a quarter of a mile away, three hundred feet up and receding. We took a breath and set off again. The two boys loped past us, youth and enthusiasm trumping cunning and resourcefulness for once.

I was struggling a bit; Mike kept pulling ahead and waiting for me, but having to wait longer each time. I was determined not to let him down. The upward struggle levelled off — I trusted Mike to find the best way through the scrub and ducked down to follow, amazed at how such a big man could move with seeming ease through the bush. The track — broken branches of the pig’s flight — shot upwards again. I grabbed a tree to steady myself and push off against, and came away with a broken branch stuck in my hand. No time for that — I pulled out the wood as best I could and set off after Mike, hearing the squeal of our quarry for the first time.

Past more trees, blood dripping from my hand, towards the barking of the dogs and the squealing of the pigs, nearly drowned out by the pumping in my ears. The smell of mud, dead tree bark. Sweat stinging my eyes and sticking my shirt to my back. My heart hammering against its cage. Mike pausing, pointing, un-shouldering his rifle. I made one last push, giddy from exertion; and there was the pig.

The dogs had it bailed up, one to a corner. A black tusker, bloodied from a hole in its leg, lunging at the dogs as they barked, moved forward, jumped back. A good pig dog will nip the prey and quickly move back, avoiding the sharp tusks. Sows will run at the dog, toss it out of the way and keep running. Boars are stupid; they stand and fight, which would be good for them if all they had to deal with was dogs.

Mike directed me to a rear leg, told me to grab hold of it. One of the fourteen year olds took the other back leg. The dogs moved around to the front, still barking. Another squeal, the rough bristles against my hand and I could smell the pig now, smell its fear I thought. I kept an eye on the tusks — one of the dogs had been gashed already. The rifle was against a tree, there being no way Mike could take a clear shot.

Through the rushing in my ears, the dogs, the sound of the other lad kicking the pig between the hind legs (you idiot! As if it weren’t mad enough already) and yes, a touch of nausea, I heard Mike telling me to reach under the beast and grab its opposite leg. Mike reached over its back and together we rolled 120 kg of thrashing pork over, exposing its belly.

And then he was pushing the handle of a thin but vicious-looking knife into my hand. He pointed to the pig’s throat. My head cleared: I had no idea, when it came down to it, how you went about killing a pig with a knife, but having got this far nothing was going to stop me.

I pushed the blade into the pig's neck next to the windpipe, surprised at the empty space under the skin. It squealed for the last time. I tried to cut across, changed my grip, started cutting into the trachea. Mike's hand covered mine, pushed it *down*. "Into the heart!" — held it there while the animal stopped struggling. I stepped back, my sweat mixing with the pig's blood. Time of death, half past eight.

"Well done Pete, well done boy!" The old dog was exhausted, but eyes bright with success. The injured dog was barely scratched, already sniffing the body. Mike slit the pig's belly, spilling its distended stomach. "Let's see what he had for breakfast".

Wild pigs smell bad enough on the outside, but when Mike opened its stomach the stench was almost visible. Mike pointed out the half-digested fern roots, the grass seeds, the wriggling white maggots — "He's been at the cow carcass". He scooped out the intestines and most of the liver, precipitating a swarm of hot, buzzing flies (and I suddenly appreciated the seductive draw of spontaneous generation in the days before Pasteur).

He left a serving of liver inside; in these areas cyanide is laid out in possum traps, and wild meat has to be tested before it can be sold. This beast was too fatty for Mike's liking, so would eventually find its way to a butcher shop.

My kill, so I was offered first dibs on the jawbone and tusks. I laughed, saying there was no way I could get them past Australian customs. The cousin from Auckland said he'd have them, and Mike started cutting out. I realized, later, that I should have said yes. I could have boiled the teeth clean, and paid sixty dollars for them to be gamma irradiated.

Mike handed me the rifle and rigged up a crude harness (rope through the nose and to a tree branch, more rope round the back legs) while the dogs breakfasted on innards. We took turns in pairs half-carrying, half dragging the carcass half a mile along and 800 feet down the valley. We were hot, thirsty; my hands were covered in blood — pig's on the right, my own on the left.

In the valley we heaved the carcass up and behind the dog box. Down the bank to the stream: I washed my hands and my face, and drank the beautifully cold, clear water.

We raised Second Mike on the radio. He'd missed all the action, but lost a dog. He had been sitting on a ridge, waiting for us to complete our kill, when a sow and piglets had broken cover and ran across the track in front of him. Before he could raise his rifle they, and his instinct-driven dog, had vanished into the bush. We got back into the vehicles and drove a short way out of the hills.

Here the stream fell vertically about four feet. Mike cut out the pig's arse and castrated it, and I helped him drag the carcass into the shaded pool under the waterfall. An hour after the kill and the day was already hot. The meat would spoil rapidly if not cooled.

We drove up to collect Second Mike, and toured the hills and valleys, stopping occasionally to listen with the TV antenna for the missing dog. Our biggest fear was that he'd gone clear over to the Awatere. At one stop Mike spotted a rabbit, and handed me the .22. Unfortunately, by the time I'd steadied myself on the bonnet and peered through the 'scope, Peter Rabbit was safe behind a rock. As we drove past a lush slope he pointed out where Second Mike had slid backwards fifty yards in the Ford.

The missing dog turned up — and we realized that the young pup was missing. Back into the mountains. Not bad this, driving around the hills all day, a couple of cockies with rifles and boots and nothing else to do.

Finally we were all together: dogs, Mikes, lads, teeth. We retrieved the soaking pig from the improvised refrigerator. A brief stop at the farmhouse, then back down the Waihopai, slowing to cast a covetous eye over some farmed 'wild' pigs innocently and obviously grazing among the dead olive trees.. Past the golfballs, over the Timara ford, along the New Renwick Road and finally to Mike's house.

We hoisted the carcass and Mike hosed it down. Put the dogs back into their kennels. I stripped down to my daks and dunked myself in the pool. I gratefully accepted a cold Oranjeboom from Fiona and posed for a photograph.



I could get used to this.