
A Modern Hunting Tradition

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My father, Vern, is the hunter. My mother, Lorna, is the cook
Traditional. Cozy. Comfortable
Predictable and grounded, stewed in the Crock-Pot
Savoury, only slightly spicy, unless I get my hands on it
I like my stews the new-fashioned way,
Just a little more exotic

I am a strong, capable woman well-marinated in this tradition
People who know me well half expect me to be a hunter—
Even if only because it challenges my gender role
But I am not a hunter. Well, not any more.

I learned how to shoot a .22 at the age of 12,
and I once killed a grouse by stoning it to death
Shameful stoning

It was a loud and grisly scene, with me leading a wild pack of elementary-aged children across the barnyard and into the pine trees, hooting and screaming as we tortured and murdered that grouse.

The moment that cracked me was when it was lying on the ground, unable to move, yet still breathing, eyes half-closed. I knew that as the instigator, I had to take responsibility for what I had done. I killed it with the final stone. We left that grouse in the woods and we never told my parents.

We never spoke of that day again.

We knew that we had dishonoured the two codes that our hunting family lived by:

1. Do not cause unnecessary suffering.
2. Do not waste one ounce of a life given for your sustenance.

I can walk quietly in the woods. I can identify edible berries and see the signs of danger and promise in the earth. I can smell a campfire a kilometre away, tell time by the sun and mark a path to return by. I know how to remove a tick embedded in my scalp, and I can build a shelter to keep the night away.

I know how to tie a fly and catch a fish. I can gut a fish and help skin a deer. I know how to pluck a chicken and use every last piece of its flesh and bones for a week of meals.

But I usually leave the killing to others.

Unless I was truly starving, of course, then I would do what I had to do.

I respect it. The killing.

I can observe it. I can participate in the ritual with sadness and gratitude.

But holding a warm animal, a squirming fish, in my hand as the final after-beat of life drains slowly from its body is too much for me.

Yes, I am known as “the emotional one” in my family. What of it? Would you rather I be cold, dead-living? Let a gal cry!

So I participate in our family's modern-day hunting ritual. My husband, Jason, is not a hunter, either, but my young daughters are showing interest and I hope that their grandfather will take them one day. Grandpa Vern, achy-old and curling up at the fingers like his father did before him, but strong and bush-humping along, beautiful-functional, still has so many things to teach them and learn from them, us. Jason is the "professional venison transportation agent" (aka a healthy, young and strong body that happens to be willing and to live down the road from his father-in-law) and because he helps pack the kill, our freezer is stocked and restocked with moose and deer—and salmon, huckleberries and morel mushrooms—each fall.

Every fall, we wait for the call.

"Yeah, I got a moose. He's a big old guy this time, should be good eating though, not too tough. No, he's not too far into the bush, only a couple hundred metres over a little ridge." In Vern-speak, that is about three kilometres scrambling over rocky shale, wading through a creek and climbing rope-assisted up a small mountainside.

Vern is no road hunter. To the authentic bushmen of the Nicola Valley, that's almost like cheating. Unless, of course, you were truly starving, then you would take what you could get where it stood.

So, we plan the picnic. These days, we ask, "Is this a kid-friendly moose-packing trip?" And we pack up the snowsuits, hot chocolate, toilet paper, extra socks, snacks, the until-the-next-snack snacks, sleds, campfire kettle, and a full change of clothes for each child, "just in case." It is a little more complicated than it used to be when you'd grab a sandwich and an apple and march off into the bush with your matches, knife and packboard. The bush has taught me what it means to be prepared—if you have the room in your truck, bring it, because you never know when you might need it. If you don't have the room, hope for good weather.

The men march out. Vern loves his grandchildren and would sit for hours with them on an anthill talking about ants and clouds and how to braid wild grasses into a wreath to wrap around their curly-top heads, but, "Son, we are wasting daylight. You women can see the trail, it starts right here. We'll meet you there in a few." Usually our fit, happy, childlike-wise mom-grandmother Lorna wants to stay at the truck and build a fire. She likes to sit and visit and drink tea, then go for a little exercise-walk. But she knows me better than that—sigh, she knows—I need action, I need to help with the man-woman work, and without uttering a word, she starts to pack up the lunch and the little ones for our snow-trek in the man-tracks out over the hills to the hanging moose. There are some cougar

paw prints right there, but they are not fresh, so we keep the dogs close and walk tall and loud. We wonder if the cougar got any of the meat, but Vern knows to hang it high in the trees out of reach, so we expect that it will be waiting there for us. We haul our babies in the sled to the kill tree, and this time it *is* only about a half-hour hike. Grandpa Vern wasn't exaggerating for once. When we arrive, the ritual has just begun. The skinning knife is scritch-scratch, scritch-scratching against the steel, and the tiny wisps of new campfire smoke are trailing up into the fir boughs above. Gloves off, jackets put aside. We scatter to find larger pieces of wood as the little ones crouch over Jason's fire-building shoulder, helping.

The skinning. The anatomy lesson. The hide falling away. The familiarity of a human-moose body unveiled of its coat. The tendons, joints, muscles, hair. Bled, cold. Tongue, eyes, guts, heart.

Vern takes his hunkering place at the fire. "Wanna bite of moose heart?" As he slaps his stick-roasted slice into the middle of his cheese sandwich. Vern does the roasting for the little ones. They watch, eyes flame-shiny, as it browns and sizzles. He pulls it off the roasting stick and gently breaks it in two and hands it over. They sit on their kid-log in quiet reverence as the first mouthful satisfies their well-earned gnawing autumn hiking-hunger.

Sometimes I prefer not to be there, because I'd rather after-hear my home-safe, sweaty husband tell the laughing-horror tale of how he almost slipped and fell off a cliff under the weight of a 100-pound moose head. Yes, a moose's head alone can weigh 100 pounds. Imagine the rest of it. Five, sometimes six pieces if he is a big old Mr Moose, sawed apart and sheathed in their white cheesecloth bag to keep them from getting dirty. Sometimes if you get a good hill, you can be a little bit crazy impractical and hop on to the moose-laden packboard, but be careful of hidden stumps and flailing hooves. When the terrain is right, and he can avoid strapping himself into the packboard under 150 pounds of moose, Jason will do it the new-fashioned way—winding through the scrawny birch trees, dashing ahead of an out-of-control hindquarter as it plummets down the snowy mountainside. Vern shakes his head, and keeps plodding under his burden. We walk ahead and wait for him at the truck. When Grandpa bursts out of the trees a few minutes later, screaming, "Look out! Moose meat on the loose!" we laugh as we dive into the snowbanks. You can, in fact, teach an old dog new tricks. The question is, do you want to?

My daughter saw her first dead animal hanging in my father's shed when she was two years old.

She called it "deer parts."

And it bothered her much less than the disembodied deer head trophy that my dad displays in his office.

That says something, now doesn't it?

Mostly, it says to never to put dead animal heads on display in my house

(They scare the kids—c'mon, grandpa!) But the kids, too, will learn

I witness the trophy tradition

desecrated by sport hunters who have never eaten their kill

and maligned by activists who have never killed their food

But for my dad it is not a trophy

It is a single body of worship

Of participation in the world

A world that demands our respect

At one time, if our ancestors refused to respect they would perish—remember that now

It's all one time

Our prey is watching over us

Every time I make a sandwich for a hike in the bush, or help haul a deer, or cook a moose roast, I remember that grouse

That grouse suffered, yes I regret

But it did not go to waste

A coyote dragged it off, cleaned it down to bones and remnants

Some birds picked at the remains, and others used its feathers for a nest

The worms fed off the tiny, dark stain

I, too, will be sustained by the grouse

It will remind me of what I am

What am I, in the terrible and fragile?

I will be as noble as the worm

I will not waste that grouse's life