Tool of the trade: the American-made Remington Model 700 .270 calibre rifle used by the author

things I can make out with any certainty are sheep, and even they seem smudged and muddy. Finally, by following a line up from the tip of a boulder, taking my time and keeping my hand as steady as I can, I spot the deer's antlers, blonde and twig-like against grass that, at its tips, is turning a reddish brown.

As Donal and I crawl closer, the military overtones feel stronger than ever, and not just because I'm wearing a Russian army outfit. I've taken three dull but deadly golden bullets out of my jacket pocket and as I slide them into the magazine and engage the bolt action, the scraping metallic sound, the assertive downshift, means that my rifle's now fully loaded. It hits me that I'm actually carrying a weapon that can kill – man or deer. Suddenly, predictably perhaps, images of Robert De Niro in *The Deer Hunter* come flooding into my mind. I can see him out in the woods of Pennsylvania shouting: "One shot. That's what it's all about. One shot." I can hear the terrible twang of John Williams's guitar playing "Cavatina".

WE'RE LYING FLAT ON THE GROUND, NO MORE THAN 30 YARDS FROM THE ANIMAL, speaking in whispers while Donal manfully shakes my hand. I slip back the safety catch and look through the rifle sight, but again I've lost him. I can see Donal looking incredulously at me: to him, it's as if the deer from the Gary Larson cartoon – the stag with the bummer of a birthmark, a huge target in the middle of his body – is parading up and down in front of us, waving red flags. But the stag's still down, hidden by the long grass, and I'm trying to stay composed, to focus and to find him. Suddenly his antlers twitch and I've got him in my sights, and I realise what Donal meant by "seven-pointer": three tines on one antler, four on the other. This makes him a fine prize, perhaps even a trophy.

Donal's boss John has already told me that an honourable stalker never shoots a stag while he's down: that, while I'm carrying an American-made, maple-barrelled, Remington .270 calibre rifle that could kill him from 300 yards or more, it's part of the eternal contest to give the stag a sporting chance, however slim. So Donal starts an impressive array of calls and cries, and uses the whistle that mimics the alarm call of a doe. Nothing happens. All I can sense is my mouth drying, my heart jarring and my breathing becoming heavier. Though I'm lying flat on my stomach, my elbow supported firmly on the ground, the longer I look through the sight the more difficult I find it to keep my hand still.

"Ah, but he's a cheeky one. He knows we're here. Watch him, mind," warns Donal. Then, just as he is about to throw a stone in the stag's direction, I see the animal quickly stand up and face me, as if he had been picking his moment all the time. I can tell in a split second that this stag, a sika deer darker and smaller than I imagined, is about to turn and bolt for it. Hesitate now – and afterwards I realise how great the temptation was both practically, waiting for the best possible shot, and psychologically, unconvinced that I really want to kill him – and he would be gone. So, quick as a reflex yet strangely frozen in time, while concentrating on keeping both eyes open, I squeeze the hair trigger gently, purposefully. The explosion of brute power and black noise, even though I've experienced it on the practice ground, is awesome and terrifying. The bullet feels like it could go on for miles, and the shot's dull double thud, from barrel to beast in the flash of an eye, booms around the mountains and resounds in my ears for more than half an hour afterwards.

"Got him," says Donal. "Great shot. Neck shot." I've been aiming, as I've been told to, for the largest area: his body, his chest, his heart. Clean and fatal is what you're looking for – the last thing you want is to injure the animal and have to chase him across the countryside to put him out of his misery. But somehow – and this is way more luck than judgement – I've struck him clean in the neck, which I later learn is the quickest way to get him down and the best way to preserve the meat. And drop he does, jerking and tensing backwards with the massive shock and impact before swaying sideways and going down.

We wait 20 seconds and then head over to him. It's not like at shooting practice, when you can't wait to scamper up to the target to see how close you've got to the bullseye. I reload and we approach stealthily, making sure that the deer is dead and not stunned or wounded. Up close, as the stag lies in the rushes, I can see his eyes; they are milky and unblinking. This is a solemn and serious business: something living is now dead, and almost instantly waves of respect and remorse wash over me. If I'm honest, there's a certain thrill, too.

As Donal returns for the others, I'm left alone with the consequences of my action. The Germans who stalk here, I've been told, often perform a ceremony with the dead animal, placing blades of grass, sprigs of holly or a twig between its teeth, as if he is about to take his last supper. Russian hunters have been known to take bites out of the beast's liver or still-warm heart and drink its blood. It is apparently all about taking on the power of the stag. In some parts of Britain there's a tradition, as with fox hunting, of blooding a stalker who's bagged his first stag, usually with a stripe across the cheeks but sometimes with a gorier full facial.

None of that happens in the west of Ireland. Stalking here is at once a professional skill, a rural tradition, a challenging sport and a countercheck to the dangers of deer overpopulation. There is no

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bluster, no overblown blokey-ness, no braying aristocrats rampaging over sprawling sporting estates. There's just me and a dead deer.

On certain hunts the immediate disembowelling of the stag to avoid contamination of the meat and reduce the deer's weight might be left to the stalker or his ghillie (professional hunting guide). In Ireland, though, this practice is heavily frowned upon: the simple rule out here is that if you're man enough to shoot the stag, you should be man enough to empty it out. It's about guts, both metaphorical and literal. Guts that I'm not quite sure I possess. So while John rolls the stag over onto its back and hauls it up by its front legs, exposing the underside and spreading the hind legs, I steel myself for a task the magnitude of which I have no real comprehension. This is the part I've been dreading. The only plus is that it's now almost dusk and the mist has thickened and begun to sweep around us, making it a little harder for them to see the terror in my eyes.

"BY THE TIME YOU GET DOWN TO THERE, HE WON'T BE NEEDING THOSE ANYMORE," says John, directing me expertly as I pinch the stag's skin away from its body, being careful not to pierce the stomach wall or intestines, and slice the animal open from rib cage to (and hence his

quip) pizzle with a small but extremely sharp hunting knife. The skin peels away easily as I get lower and lower, but seeing my hesitation and dismay, Donal takes over to rudely remove the testicles, which he throws sideways. He then makes a deep circular cut inside the stag's anus, removing the prostate and the bladder, a skilled job that's vital if no urine is to spill on and bespoil the meat. Cutting away inside the animal, he loosens its stomach and intestines and I put both hands into the gaping cavity to pull out things that are huge, rubbery, alien. I can smell blood and dung. I can see little pellets of droppings in its intestines, and blood trickling out from him onto the mountain grass. Then Donal's high up inside his abdomen again, cutting away the diaphragm and windpipe, making it easier, he tells me, to remove the rest of the internal organs. Again two-handed, from inside that black, sticky mess I drag out kidneys, liver and lungs and finally his heart, which I hold guiltily in the palm of my hand. It's surprisingly hard and still warm. "Bit like Jamie Oliver, isn't it?" I hear Donal say, and I laugh but I can't think of any way in which it actually is. The dimensions of the stag's chest and belly are almost human, and its heart and internal organs near enough in proportion to ours. It's more like those cable stations that show hospital operations and open-heart surgery. In fact, it's more Jeffrey Dahmer than Jamie Oliver.

It's also one of the toughest things I've ever done. Sure, some of the things I've done in my life have taken a bit of backbone, but when it comes down to it, I know who I am. I'm not a war reporter; I'm not particularly brave. I didn't grow up in the country skinning rabbits and slaughtering sheep. I'm a city softie, and mostly I'm proud of it. That's why stalking deer, more than most things I can think of, seems to hold up a mirror to who you are. It's as if the true hunter is only really hunting himself. It's not like fishing, which undoubtedly has the similar skill of the chase and respect for the beauty of the prey, but no fisherman I know feels any great sense of loss when the fish has been landed and dies. And it's not like rough shooting game birds, which mostly flail and flutter out of woods in their dozens and are just asking to be shot. There's something more majestic, medieval, maybe even more magical about a deer – even now as Donal and I drag his 70lb body awkwardly behind us, along sheep paths and the high mountain moor, down through fields of ferns and bog cotton to where we've left the cars. It's all that *Monarch of the Glen* stuff, the stag as symbol of power and masculinity, of fertility and regeneration. It's those Stone Age paintings and Victorian landscapes, the Celtic folklore, Arthurian legends, the white hart hero, the Lord of the Forest. It's also royalty and Robin Hood. Of course, it's also – and here's where we can start to get sentimental and anthropomorphic – about shyness, innocence and sweet, doe-eyed Bambi.

The next morning, Don and I head over to John's hunt centre to take a closer look at the stag. For £210, I could get him stuffed and mounted but, to be honest, I don't feel proud enough of what I've done. I'm not interested in having my stag looking down at me, chastisingly, from the walls of my London flat. Perhaps, in the end, I don't have that killer instinct.

"Yeah, he's a nice animal, and a tough enough fella to stalk, all right," says John, holding up the stag's head ceremonially by the antlers. "Sika deer are a big challenge, whereas shooting reds is just like shooting cows." John is keen to stress that stalking is not just about the shooting: the skill lies in beating the deer's senses, in getting as close as you can to the animal without being detected. Stalking is about patience and, of course, about keeping a cool head under pressure. "A good stalker needs a reasonable level of fitness, stamina and determination," says John, "but mostly he's someone who's very calm." As I mistakenly point an unloaded gun in John's direction ("Jaysus, careful now") it becomes clear that a good stalker is also someone for whom safety is paramount. There's an old saying in Kerry: always check twice because the Devil loads the gun once a year.

To John, Donal and the other stalkers I meet, stalking is not just a part of nature but, curiously, a way of preserving it. With no natural predator such as wolf or lynx, the sika have become so numerous and destructive in some parts of Kerry – they voraciously eat grass, crops and trees, break down fences, and can be a road hazard – that culling them is a form of population control accepted by all but the anti-hunting lobby. "Well, it's either we do it or the wildlife people do it, but try telling a local farmer that no one should do it," says John. "If he's got marginal grassland that deer are eating instead of his sheep and lambs, he'd kill them himself if he could." Still, culling is a by-product of stalking rather than its *raison d'être*. Reduced to its core, stalking is about killing for pleasure, and what you feel about that depends on your moral criteria and philosophical position.

"DO YOU THINK IT HAS AFFECTED YOU SHOOTING THAT DEER, THAT KILLING CHANGES YOU?" asks Don McCullin as we stand over the stag and peer down at its gaping stomach and empty eyes. He's a photographer who has seen more death and human suffering in his lifetime than I can imagine, and who has spent most of his life trying to prevent people using guns and spilling blood. It's the most difficult question so far, and one to which I still don't have an adequate answer. At first I think, "No". I don't have a problem with stalking. I eat meat and I like venison. I liked the idea of eating something I'd killed myself. I'm not an animal lover especially, and I'm not anti-fox hunting. But later I think "Yes". I can now not only appreciate the intense sport, skill and excitement of stalking, but also its splendour. Stalking makes you as alert to the beauty of what surrounds you as the deer are to our incursion into their natural habitat. It compels you to really see and feel the landscape; you move from observer to participant. Stalking is a reflection and celebration of the countryside, and something bigger besides. Rarely have I felt closer to understanding nature and all its cruel harmonies.

"A good stalker is not a cold-blooded killer," says Donal when he joins us later. "Stalkers understand nature – not just the wind, the weather and the land but that it looks after itself, that culling increases the quality and ultimately the number of the deer. A true hunter doesn't destroy nature. He loves and respects it – and then he does everything in his power to outwit it."

Stag weekend

How to organise a stalking trip

Esquire went stalking with JMM Killorglin Ltd (00 353 66 976 1393; www.jmmhunting.com). You need to pay for two sika stags (£211 each) when you arrive, but you can pay for them individually from then on. JMM provides self-catering accommodation (a good idea because of early starts and late nights) which sleeps up to five and costs £385 per week, as well as car hire. You will also need one guide for every two stalkers, at a cost of £98. JMM can also organise rough shooting of woodcock, snipe, duck and other game, sea and salmon fishing, sightseeing and golf trips (www.golfinternationalireland.ie). Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) flies direct to Kerry from Stansted.

What you'll need Two licences are required to stalk deer in Kerry. JMM will arrange the free Irish hunting licence. However, unlike in the UK, where beginners can hire rifles from sporting estates and use them under supervision but without a gun licence, you'll need to be a little more serious about stalking to hunt in Ireland, and have first obtained a rifle and a UK firearms certificate. Besides, skilled stalkers always use their own rifles, and the licence is a formality as long as you don't have a criminal record or a history of serious psychological problems. JMM can then obtain an Irish gun licence for you at a cost of £36. If you don't fancy taking a gun to Ireland, JMM rent rifles (up to cal .270) for £7 per day.

Before you go Beginners can get training through the British Deer Society (01425 655 434; www.bds.org.uk); short courses cost £275. Holland & Holland (01923 825 349; www.hollandandholland.com) also offers shooting courses.

When to go The season for shooting male sika stags in Ireland runs from 1 September to 28 February. For stalking trips in the UK, contact sporting agencies Strutt & Parker (020 7629 7282) and CKD Galbraith (01738 451 600).

Gun shops Holland & Holland (020 7408 7912); James Purdey & Sons (020 7499 1801)

Media 'The Shooting Times' lists UK stalks and second-hand equipment.