

Rabbits

John Ravenscroft.

Martin wasn't looking forward to killing the rabbit.

In fact, he was dreading it. He was dreading it like murderers dread the hangman's noose, or deep-sea divers dread the bends, or unhappy schoolteachers dread Monday morning.

"You don't have to do it," his wife Mary said, her face softening with concern, and that was kind of her, but they both knew it wasn't true.

The reality was, he did have to do it. If he didn't do it, then what exactly were the two of them playing at here? Bill and Ben? The Woodentops? A re-run of *The Good Life*? If he couldn't bring himself to kill one single, solitary rabbit, all their talk of self-sufficiency, of getting out of the rat-race, of living a more sane life... it would be no more than that. Just talk. And he could already hear Mary's mother, already see her arched eyebrows, her told-you-so smile, her vindicated sneer: "Oh yes, you've always been very good at *talking* about things, haven't you, Martin..."

Well, she didn't deserve that satisfaction, and anyway, they were in way too deep for back-peddalling, long past the point of no return. They'd given up their jobs, given up their flat, moved to a decidedly rural part of the country. And now - wonder of wonders - they were actually doing the thing they'd spent the past two years dreaming about. Against all the odds, they were finally running their very own smallholding.

Their first few weeks getting the place into some kind of shape had been hard, but deeply satisfying. Sure, the cottage was rough around the edges, and there was still some building work to do, but the setting was perfect. They had eight acres of decent soil, crops planted and growing, chickens clucking, ducks quacking, geese honking, a few sheep bleating - and of course they had rabbits, busy doing what rabbits like to do best.

How could Martin put all that at risk, just because he couldn't face up to a little butchery - something that was central to this new life of theirs?

No. It was crunch time. Crunch time for him, crunch time for the rabbit.

Her name was Tag, and she was one of three New Zealand Whites. The big buck rabbit they'd named Bobtail, and the other doe was called Rag. Rag was heavily pregnant, and if Tag had followed suit, their little *ménage à trois* would soon have been well on the way towards providing them with their target of two hundred pounds of meat per year. That's what the books said, anyway.

But there was a problem. However hard Bobtail tried (and to give the boy his dues, he tried very hard indeed) Tag refused to play ball. Week after week after week Bobtail performed his manly duty with stunning enthusiasm, but Tag remained stubbornly barren.

*If a doe is not productive, said the self-sufficiency experts, the only place for her is the pot!* And Tag, sweet-natured rabbit though she was, was definitely not productive. Well, there was no room for freeloaders on Martin's little farm. Tag would have to go.

"If she's not pregnant by the end of the week," he said to Mary, "then that's it. We'll get another doe, and I'll just have to... you know."

Before he knew it the end of the week had arrived, and as far as he could tell Tag remained as barren as ever.

"Tomorrow," he said, reaching for the switch and turning off the bedside lamp. "I'll do it tomorrow."

In the darkness he heard Mary breathing.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," he said. "It's time."

The clock ticked, but he couldn't sleep. He'd drop off for a few moments, and then the thought of what he had to do in the morning would come hopping into his dreams like some broken and twisted Bugs Bunny, fifteen feet tall, lurching its way

through a Hammer Horror film set.

He lay there, eyes wide open, staring into the darkness, thinking, remembering...

Back when their decision to downshift had still been at the talking stage, their friends had enjoyed quizzing them about their new lifestyle and what it was going to involve. They were especially interested in the butchery part. Nobody seemed to have much of a problem with chickens, geese and sheep, but many were horrified at the idea of Martin and Mary breeding, killing and eating rabbits.

Their closest friends, Steve and Pauline, owned a couple of fluffy, bouncy, aren't-we-cute rabbits - pets for their kids - so it was hardly surprising that they were particularly appalled.

"You'll never be able to do it," Steve said to Martin one night over a pint in the pub. "Not when you look down and see those big, brown eyes looking up at you, that little twitchy nose..."

"New Zealand Whites have pink eyes," Martin said.

Pauline shook her head. "Steve's right. I still remember the state you got into when you reversed over our cat."

Martin winced. Squashing their cat had been the worst thing that had ever happened to him. He'd long ago realised that Pauline was never going to let him forget it.

"It's not the same thing," he replied, hiding behind his beer. "Not the same thing at all."

"Poor little creatures," she'd said, half-glaring, half-grinning. "Just don't expect me to be nice to you after you've murdered millions of innocent baby bunnies, that's all. Talk about blood on your hands..."

They were right, of course. He'd always known he was going to have a problem with this killing business, but while it was still far off in the future he could distance himself. He'd found it was possible to cultivate a frame of mind in which he

could talk about killing, skinning, hulking etc. in cool, practical terms, like they did in all the smallholding books. He'd also learned to distract himself from the less pleasant aspects of a downshifted reality by imagining how fantastic it would be to live somewhere bucolic with Felicity Kendall.

But as he gave up on the idea of sleep altogether, as pale light began to seep through the curtains, he had to accept the fact that he couldn't distance or distract himself any longer. Crunch time. And as for Felicity Kendall - she was nowhere to be seen.

At about five o'clock he slipped out of bed, got dressed and crept downstairs, leaving Mary twitching in dreams of her own. He wanted to get this over and done with as quickly as possible, preferably while she was still sleeping.

Outside, there was an early-morning mist rolling over the ground. That seemed appropriate, somehow.

Rag, Tag and Bobtail were in their separate hutches in the small barn behind the cottage. They twitched their noses as Martin came close, and Bobtail stamped his foot.

He had several books that told him how to kill a rabbit. He'd studied them all. You had to take the rabbit's hind legs in your left hand, grab its head in your right, and then twist the head backwards. At the same time you had to force your hand downwards to stretch the neck. If you did it correctly, the neckbone would break and death would be almost instantaneous.

He'd read through the instructions dozens of times. He knew them backwards. He'd even practiced the killing technique using a tea towel as a substitute rabbit. But regardless of his preparations, as he took Tag out of her hutch his hands were shaking.

He carried her outside so Rag and Bobtail wouldn't be able to see what was about to happen. He stroked her, told her he was sorry, and then as quickly and

efficiently as possible, he killed her.

It was horrible, and he knew he'd never forget it. Never forget how hard he had to pull. Never forget her strength, and the sound of her neck snapping.

But he did it right. At least he did it right. If she suffered at all, it could only have been for a few seconds.

Having killed her, he wanted to get the skinning and hulking done, too. He knew the theory - you nicked the hind legs just above the foot joint and hung the rabbit up on two hooks. Then you made a light cut just above the hock joint on the inside of each rear leg and cut up to the anus. After that you could peel the skin off the rear legs and then just rip it off the body.

He did all of that, and did it well. He felt he'd mastered something fundamental, confronted a situation he'd been dreading, acted like a man. He was actually starting to feel pleased with himself.

But when he opened her up to gut her, all his good feelings drained away.

Mary came downstairs and found him sitting at the kitchen table, his head in his hands.

"Martin?" she said. "What's wrong?"

So he told her.

He told her how he'd killed the rabbit, opened her up, recognised the liver, heart, kidneys - everything where it should be. Then he told her about the other objects he'd found nestling in the warm darkness - objects he didn't recognise at all. Objects that simply weren't in any of the books.

Ten of them.

"I should have waited, Mary," he said.

"Waited?"

He nodded and looked up at his wife.

"She was full of them, you see," he said.

"Full of what?" whispered Mary, although he could tell by her tone that she already knew.

Martin stared at his hands.

"Full of babies, Mary," he said. "Tag was full of babies."

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