

HAIRY NIGHT BATTLING THE SNOW

AS we quietly slide into summer, I catch myself thinking back to winter, and the snow.

Here in the frozen north, we had three feet of snow in many places for nearly three months. You southerners don't know what snow is. Two inches does not count and certainly doesn't justify the whole of the south grinding to a halt.

When you have trudged through snow up to your waist with a blizzard blowing sideways at you, obscuring your vision, to visit a cow down in a field with a broken leg, and having risked life and limb to drive there in the first place, only then can you say you have had snow.

When you have had to abandon TB testing because

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finds the chills are multiplying, and she's losing control – but her driving skills aren't electrifying

the tuberculin in the TB guns has frozen solid, only then can you say it's cold. But just when we thought the worst of the weather was past, logistics took a turn for the worse, as many remote roads and tracks that had not been cleared turned to solid, compacted ice. Thus, I suffered a hairy night in the snow in the wee small hours.

I work in mixed practice in rural Northumberland. Some pretty remote farms are up here, especially up in the Chev-

iot Hills, in among the Otterburn army ranges.

In the sheet (ice)

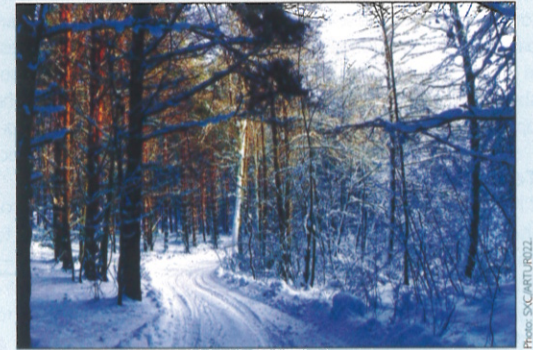
I was called to a calving at 1am at the beginning of February. By this time, the snow had been compacted on the roads and turned to solid sheet ice, with melted water running down gullies within it.

My transport at the time was a Vauxhall Astra hatchback with snow tyres on. Now, the suitability of this vehicle for a

farm vet working in rural Northumberland has been a bone of contention with my bosses for some time, but bless my car's little cotton socks, it tries its best and we have got many places other cars haven't. So, with the Labrador for company, I set off for the calving cow in the back of beyond in the hope that we would get through, knowing full well we'd have no mobile phone signal for the last 16 miles of our journey.

We got there in one piece more than an hour later on some hairy roads, and I remember thinking at the time: "I hope we get home". But, focused on the job in hand, we set to work on calving the cow.

After a short time, I realised



Snow business like vet business.

the big Charolais calf needed to come out of the side door. So at -12°C, I set to, preparing for a caesarean.

We subdued the very reluctant patient with xylazine and strapped her to a fence with ratchet load straps – which is highly recommended for restraining a cow that insists on swinging round and attempting to crush the vet, when said vet is clinging on to a precarious uterus that is hanging out of a gaping caesarean wound. It also reduces the cow's ability to throw itself on the floor in a huff.

Once the patient was restrained, we extracted a large bull calf from the side door and began to stitch up the patient. After a wash down and pack away, I said a cheery goodbye to the farmer with a joke of: "If I get stuck on that hill, I'll be coming back for you." I then set off for home.

Once back on a surfaced road I realised that the roads had got even worse since I had arrived, as the temperature had dropped even further. I got three miles and hit the hill I was worried about. Six hundred yards of sheet ice on a one in four gradient. I took a run up, keeping the revs down to help with traction. I got 100 yards and just sat spinning. I slid back down to the bottom in first gear while accelerating.

I reversed further and then took a second run up – this time I got 150 yards, just to the point where the hill gets really steep, and then started sliding back down the hill, out of control, and landed in the bank of snow at the side of the road. I got out and, after slipping over on the road, managed to cling to the car while getting my wellies, head torch and shovel. I began to dig the back tyres out of the deep snowy verge, and, after much rocking back and forwards, I managed to free the car from the bank, only to slide a little more gracefully back down the hill.

At this point, in the pitch black with only a head torch and a shovel, I went to investigate the grit piles at the side of the road. Unfortunately, because of free-roaming sheep, the grit is only grit with no salt in, and in

those temperatures had frozen solid. After trying to hack at the piles with the shovel, I gave it up as a bad idea and decided to take a really long run up this time. I got 200 yards before I spun out of control, turned 180 degrees and was facing back down the hill.

I was faced with a dilemma. Risk getting the car stuck and having to walk the three miles back to the farm in the middle of nowhere in the freezing conditions in pitch black or drive back? I decided on the latter.

I went back and raised the farmer out of his bed, who came with the tractor, shovel and tow chains.

After assessing the situation, we decided against him towing me up, as the risk of him slipping back into me in the tractor was quite high.

So we set off using the tractor headlights to light the way, and the tractor loader to break up the grit piles. We slowly chipped away at the grit piles and gritted the entire hill by hand while desperately trying to stay on our feet.

The tractor went up the hill to try to break the ice and leave two tyre tracks for me to drive in. With a long run up, I went for it, spinning a little on the steepest point. I breathed a sigh of relief when I made it.

Looking back

The rest of the journey home was pretty hairy but I made it. The phone call was 1am; I got there by 2.15am and left the farm the first time at around 4am. It was 7.10am when I eventually got home.

I showered and had breakfast and went out to do a day's work. However, my boss did take pity on me and did my evening surgery, otherwise it would have been a very long day, finishing at 7.30pm. I can look back on that night now and smile – it makes for a good tale – but that tiring cold night in the pitch black in the middle of nowhere, desperate to get back to my nice warm bed, was not a pleasant experience.

I love my job, I wouldn't be anywhere else or do anything else in the world, but sometimes it tests your limits – and your driving skills. ■

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