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WINTER



The warmth had yet to return to my fingers and toes as my car slid, slowly and gently but completely out of control, down to the bottom of the hill, towards the village of Boltby. It was deepest winter and my day had started with an early-morning call to calve a heifer at a wild and remote farm, way up in the middle of the moors. There had been a lot of snow and it was bitterly cold. Most of the roads had been cleared but the icy patches at the bottom of this hill took me by surprise. The drifts of snow piled up on each side of the road afforded some protection and I slithered to a pillowy halt in a snow-laden hedge. The car was unscathed and so was I. I needed to avoid any further accidents like this if I was to get to my next call – a cow that was down with milk fever – in Pickhill on the far side of the river Swale. Cautiously, I made my way along the winding lanes, down from the wintery hills and into the icy fog of the Vale of York. I'd rushed out of the house without even a cup of tea, and my warm bed seemed a world away. For a vet in rural North Yorkshire, winter could be a tough time of year ...



Swanny

‘Okay. So it actually came to your door, and knocked on it?’

It was the end of November and evening surgery was unusually quiet. Our receptionist, Sylvia, was on the phone. She has an amazing knack of painting a picture using one half of a telephone conversation, allowing the vet, hovering within earshot, to get an idea of what might be required. Listening to Sylvia’s commentary this evening, I could tell that it was something out of the ordinary.

‘Okay ... And it’s lifting its leg off the ground? ...’

‘Right ... And where is it now? ...’

‘Oh! It’s gone back to the lake?’

Even with this excellent narrative, I was struggling to work out what the evening might have in store for me.

The lady on the phone lived next to a fishing lake on the outskirts of town. There are a number of small lakes like this around Thirsk. They were once clay pits, dug to collect clay to make bricks. The brick kilns are long gone now, and the abandoned pits have filled up with water.

Enterprising landowners have realized that stocking them with fish provides an excellent way to attract fishermen, who come from miles around. If you own a fishing lake it offers a much more lucrative way to pay the bills than farming cattle.

The lady explained to Sylvia that the family tea had been interrupted by a knock on the door. To her astonishment, the visitors were two black swans standing side by side on the doorstep. One was a male, slighter larger, and the other was a small female. The female swan was holding her left leg off the ground and was clearly distressed. It appeared they had come up to the house to ask for help. However, as the phone call progressed, both birds had disappeared back into the darkness, to the relative safety of the lake.

How on earth was I going to find an injured black swan on a dark lake?

And even if I could find it, how was I going to catch it?

With some trepidation I collected up the various pieces of equipment I thought I might need. I had never captured a swan before, and the tales of their wings being powerful enough to break a man's arm did nothing to help my confidence. I canvassed opinion from other members of staff, but no one could come up with any helpful suggestions. There were various comments about how delicate their necks were, and that the use of a net was out of the question, because of the risk of damage to the feathers.

I definitely needed an assistant. Luckily, Sarah, our proficient and dynamic head nurse, was quick to volunteer. This was partly because she relished a challenge, but also because it was an escape from the tedious job of counting out tablets during evening surgery. So, armed with a range of equipment – a net (we decided to take it just in case