

# Cold Snap

*A harsh Vermont winter teaches bittersweet lessons of love and hope.*

BY LEELEE GOODSON

IN WINTER, I'M GRATEFUL FOR SMALL THINGS: A STEAMING MUG OF COFFEE; warm, dry socks; a plowed path to the manure pile. Here in north-central Vermont, it seems too much to ask that the water not freeze in the horses' buckets in the barn by morning, or that the truck turn over without complaint on the first try.

Last week we had a cold snap. A friend driving by on Stagecoach Road stopped in to say that as he was passing our place, his car's outside thermometer registered lower than it ever had:  $-36^{\circ}$  Fahrenheit. Our house and the adjacent veterinary clinic lie in a low valley flanked by two rivers, with mountain ranges east and west. On clear winter nights, the cold settles deeply around us.

These cold snaps don't usually last long, but four or five days of temperatures well below zero strain both mechanical and organic things. Bolts refuse to turn, keys break, pipes burst, conversations are truncated. My husband, Gregg, and I arise to set about our daily chores with resignation and little discussion. Everything is an effort.

Even the barn chores take longer. Manure freezes hard onto stall floors, and we have to whack it with a shovel to pry it loose. We keep a pickax next to the shavings pile to break the frozen sawdust into manageable chunks. We keep a hair dryer in the barn on a hook above the hose bib so that we can defrost the valve enough to fill buckets. Our fingers go numb and refuse to work properly, and we know how much they'll hurt when they thaw.

A FEW YEARS AGO, AFTER TURNING OUT THE HORSES ON JUST SUCH A MORNING, Gregg looked out the kitchen window and noticed Nibbs swinging his head repeatedly to look at his flank. Then Nibbs dropped to his knees and began to roll.

"Damn," Gregg said.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

Gregg had moved to the door and was struggling into his one-piece insulated barn suit. "I think Nibbs is colicking," he said. He tugged his woolen hat low to cover his ears, picked up his veterinary kit, and went outside.

Colic, Gregg has told me often, is the equivalent of a human stomachache, except that horses can't vomit—and for that reason, colic can be life-threatening. In Gregg's estimation, horses have two significant design flaws: delicate legs and a detached colon (part of the large intestine). The majority of the organ isn't anchored to anything internally, so its loops slide about as the horse moves. Sometimes the loops will twist, causing a pinch or a blockage, and perhaps even cutting off the blood supply.

Many colics can be treated by administering oil and medications designed to ease discomfort and relax the intestine. But sometimes colic requires surgery. The trick is to

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know which kind you're dealing with. Until you determine that, you must keep the animal up and walking to encourage peristalsis, the internal movement of digestion. A horse in pain will desperately want to lie down, roll, and bite or look at its sides. If a colicking horse makes manure, it's a hopeful sign—things are moving north to south again.

I struggled hurriedly into my own one-piece barn suit and followed Gregg outside. Despite the frigid temperature, Nibbs looked sweaty, with moisture freezing on his heavy coat. I blanketed him and walked him in circles while Gregg drew up a syringe of Banamine, a pain reliever and muscle relaxant.

We worked on him late into the morning, taking turns walking him, thawing our fingers, and praying for him to feel better. Gregg passed a lubricated tube up Nibbs's nose and into his stomach to pump in warm water and mineral oil. He inserted an intravenous shunt. Every 20 minutes or so, he checked Nibbs's heart rate and respiration and took his temperature, trying to determine whether or not his colic was surgical.

Performing colic surgery, especially when you're several hundred miles from a veterinary school or specialist equine facility, is a high-risk endeavor. Horses don't recover from anesthesia easily. They flail violently and can break their legs or otherwise injure themselves. Add to that the risk of infection from abdominal surgery, and the possibility that the intestine has already ruptured, and the prognosis is guarded.

Nibbs was 18 years old, bordering on geriatric status. He was also our teenaged daughter's beloved first horse.

By midday, he appeared a bit better. His temperature had dropped, and he seemed less distressed, but he hadn't yet made any manure. He plodded beside me uncomplainingly, head down, eyes heavy from the medicine. We wore a circular path about 50 yards in diameter into the snow of the pasture. With each step I silently chanted: *Come on, get better, come on, get better, come on, get better.*

THE BITTER AIR BURNED MY NOSE AND lungs, forcing me to inhale through the fabric of my scarf. Our breath plumed

and lingered in the still air around us. The only sound was Nibbs's heavy breathing and the snow squeaking under our steps in the dry cold. Gregg and I took turns, saying little, but glancing meaningfully at each other.

By 3:30, Gregg had already made a few calls. The nearest veterinarian with a large-animal surgical facility was out of town and unavailable. The next nearest place was Manchester, about a two-hour drive south on icy roads. Our horse trailer was blocked by a snow bank and didn't have snow tires.

Gregg tried to cheer me. "Sometimes the motion of a trailer ride gets things going again," he reassured me, "and when you drop the tailgate at the other end, there's manure." He didn't muster much enthusiasm, though. We knew we had to make a decision before Kelsey got home from school. If we chose surgery, we'd have to truck Nibbs immediately. He might not survive, and if he did, his chances of recolicking were great. Even with a professional-courtesy discount, colic surgery would run into thousands of dollars, payable regardless of the outcome. If we chose to forgo the surgery, he would likely die slowly, or Gregg would have to shoot him.

We looked up to see Kelsey stepping off the school bus. "I'll go dig out the horse trailer," Gregg said. He had to jump-start the tractor, because the diesel fuel turns viscous at subzero temperatures. It took about 20 minutes to work the trailer free, and another 20 minutes to hook it up to the truck.

Our fingers refused to cooperate, and the plug for the trailer lights shattered in the cold. Dusk was already deepening, but we'd have to make do without the trailer lights.

Kelsey had taken over walking Nibbs around the snow-packed circuit, changing direction every so often and encouraging him to stay on his feet. She had draped her arm around his neck and was whispering to him as they circled slowly.

It was fully dark by the time we led Nibbs through the barn to the waiting trailer. The other four horses stretched their heads over their stall doors to sniff curiously as he went by. He stopped momentarily in front of Jazz's stall. The



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two geldings were fast friends and pasture buddies. They held their heads close, quietly exchanging exhalations. I wondered whether they knew that this might be their last meeting. Even Jane, who ordinarily pinned her ears and grimaced menacingly at Nibbs, nickered as he went by.

THE RIDE TO MANCHESTER WAS LONG and silent. Kelsey kept glancing back to make sure that Nibbs was still standing. I thought of them cantering in our pasture the previous summer, both brown manes blown back. Gregg was likely thinking about how powerless he was to make everything better.

Nibbs's head hung even lower when we backed him out of the trailer in Manchester. He hadn't made any manure. Steam rose from under his blanket and crystallized in the freezing night air. Our only comfort was the glow of light from inside the animal hospital, where we hoped he could get some relief.

The veterinarian on call, a tall, efficient woman, consulted with Gregg and checked Nibbs's vital signs. He was staggering now, barely able to stand. She listened through her stethoscope for gut noises. "We should tap it," she said.

Gregg nodded. I held Nibbs's head and stroked him while they shaved a small patch and scrubbed it with disinfectant. They tapped his side with a large syringe and drew out serum, tinged ominously with blood and fecal matter. No one said anything. No one had to. Surgery wasn't a viable option once the intestine had ruptured.

Gregg put his arm gently around Kelsey's shoulders and drew her aside, talking softly to her. I stroked poor old Nibbs's head and told him what a good horse he was and that I loved him.

Gregg led Nibbs away through the clinic while I took Kelsey back to the truck. I rolled his leg wraps and tucked them behind the seat. Kelsey cried silently. Gregg came back a few minutes later, looking suddenly much older.

THE TEMPERATURE THAT NIGHT DROPPED to a record  $-38^{\circ}$ . The old farmhouse furnace churned and struggled to keep the house at  $62^{\circ}$ . The next morning, despite how we felt, the chores had to

be done. I dreaded going into the barn, but knew I had to.

In the still-dark morning air, I forced open the barn door and flipped on the lights. The pony jutted his black nostrils out between the bars of his stall and murmured a low, warm welcome. Jane rustled her bedding as she turned to face the aisle. She blinked in the sudden brightness. Shavings clung to her flank and tail, betraying which side she'd slept on.

Jazz leaned his head and heavy chestnut neck over the top of his stall. He

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stamped impatiently on his rubber mat, banging his door. As I pushed past him with his bucket of grain, he blew sweet hay breath on me and nudged me—horse language for "It's breakfast time, damn it. Where have you been?"

After feeding and watering, I sat for a while on a hay bale, trying not to think about Nibbs's empty stall. The windowpanes were frosted in crazy patterns. I closed my eyes and focused instead on the warmth emanating from the horses' bulk. They munched quietly and shifted their weight, bumping their grain buckets rhythmically. Those small, normal sounds served as reassuring reminders of their unaltered need to adhere to routine. Gradually my thoughts shifted from yesterday's tragedy to the bittersweet blend of joy and pain that comes with loving animals.

AT LAST I STOOD AND BRUSHED THE chaff from my backside. I spent a few minutes stroking each horse and whispering thanks for this consolation. Finally I turned to the wheelbarrow to resume my chores.

In the harshness of a Vermont winter, it's so easy to turn inward, to close ourselves down a bit, and yet the gentle, comforting presence of animals helps us resist. In winter, I am grateful for small things. ❧