

Chapter 2.

On a different farm, I do like to travel, the same thing happened– sort of. I was working for another outdoor piggery in the heart of Suffolk. I walked along the bottom of the rows and noticed a sow at the far end. She was standing around and just didn't look happy. I trudged off up the centre roadway, where the tractor usually drove to feed them.

When I drew near I saw the hole in the dirt next to her. She was panting a lot and I could tell she'd have a piglet trapped inside her. I calmed her by talking to her and letting her know what I was about to do. Whether she understood me or not I didn't know, but she stood there, unmoving. There was no time to go back for the lube, so I rolled up my sleeve and soaked my whole arm with water from her trough.

All soaked down I went over and knelt behind her. I slid my arm in as far as I needed to and found the piglets head in the usual place. It was in that awkward position they sometimes find themselves in. I knew what to do and carefully hauled it out, working with the contractions of the mother-to-be. It came out easy and with it in hand I rushed to the farrow ark to get some straw. I dried it off and held it a while to see if the sow would settle. When she didn't I placed the piglet out of harm's way inside the ark and went back to have another feel inside its mother.

Again with clean arm I pulled another, then another out. Both were alive and again I dried them with straw. I left her alone and went back to the snack room; a port-a-cabin at the bottom of the field. In there I found the bottle of lube, and off I went back to her. When I got back this time though, she'd turned into a mad thing. There she was all nice and settled in her hole, seemingly getting on with farrowing; I counted two heads. The moment my foot stepped into her paddock, she upped and ran straight at me.

The sow had spent however many hours in agony, struggling to get her first born out, I came along and relieved the blockage to make it easier for her, and that's the thanks I got: charming.

I left her a while longer and went to feed the other paddocks. Someone else was driving the tractor and it allowed me to go check on my girl.

I ran in and hid behind her ark, when she wasn't looking. Carefully I took the three piglets from inside the ark and had to place them so they could get at her milk. On all threes, I kept as low as I could. I managed the first two easy, but the last squealed right as I placed it with its litter mates. I've never jumped so fast in all my life. Luckily she'd dug her maternal pit beside the fence line, and in that leap I cleared the wire twice over. When I looked back, the sow was as she'd been, lying on her side suckling her piglets: typical.

She did fine and farrowed, in her own dirt made bed, a nice healthy litter of ten. I left her till the very end of the day, but there was no way I'd leave her all night. On my own I took all her piglets and put them in her ark. The stupid mare had no idea what I was doing and fought me all the way. I lost count how many times I ran round that ark, but I managed on some of the passes to grab a piglet here and there. I popped them in through the opened back window. It sounds rough, but they had a soft landing in amongst the straw and none were harmed in the process.

Thankfully, she realised where I was throwing them and once the last was inside she stopped chasing me and went in after them, through her doorway I might add. I think I ran round twice more before I saw her head pop out of the back window. I slept well that night, I tell you.

Despite all that, the outdoor pigger's worst nightmare isn't the sow's pigging antics. Oh no. The outdoor pigger's worst nightmare is walking along and hearing your fence, 'clack, clacking,' telling you it's lying on the ground.

Some farmers are good. They run theirs on 3 or 4, some though don't like to risk it and insist on having theirs run at 7. (Piggers will know what I'm on about, for everyone else, just remember that 7 is far more powerful than 4.) But they don't always tell you, oh no. You have to find that out all by yourself and you only ever really do this research when you have to. In other words, only when you hear the blasted, 'clack, clacking'. By does it hurt.

The trick, I learned the hard way, is to never pick one end up and then the other. (If you've ever had morphine, with its shooting element all through your body; imagine that but ten times over.) No, what you do is pick up one end and create a loop. Pull it as far as it can reach, then put it on the ground again. If you can weight it do so, I usually just step on it, bending the end so that my loop is suspended in the air. Then, once you've let it go, pick up the other end and feed it through your loop. If you are lucky the fence was never that taut in the first place, if not, you have a lot of walking to do. Sometimes uphill too, all the way to the end of the fence line, undo it from its post and then you have a swift walk all the way back down. And once the broken parts are connected you walk all the way back up the hill again.

Oh and once you've done all that, if the broken fence was between two paddocks, you have to go and check that the sows are all in their respective places. Usually you can tell them apart later when they are walking the fence line alone. If your searching has shown no sows in the wrong place, otherwise they will be the ones, right at the farthest reach of the paddock, either fighting with other sows, or all alone. Occasionally, they'll be the ones who've just returned to service, that you either haven't seen yet, or weren't quite on when you had them in earlier. You can tell these apart easy enough, they're the ones giving, err, piggy back rides.

Then there was the case of the missing sow. I was feeding some farrowings, on a different farm, with individual paddocks. Or paddocks made close to one another to hold only one sow, yep a lot easier than worrying over ten or less running at you. Anyway, there were 5 rows of 28, and being on my own and hand feeding I parked between 4 paddocks, fed all four, then I went off in a big circle to check all the arks. I always fed the rows where the sows were due to farrow first. These would always take longer than the others, what with taking down the sows numbers, litter sizes and what-not.

Any sows not darting from their arks at the sound of the tractor, were usually either farrowing or had just farrowed. Sometimes sows stay in their arks for a few days after farrowing, venturing out only when they know you have left the area. On doing this one day, I noted that two sows hadn't come running, two had and were busy eating. I checked the four arks to find that, one was in the process of farrowing and ignored my rattling bucket and the other was not home. That's right, she was gone, vanished.

I kept on feeding the row, thinking that she'd probably jumped a few fence lines and found an old friend to share an ark with. But no, she wasn't in any of the nearby arks. I fed all the other 100 or so sows and could I find her, could I heck. I looked everywhere; in with the boars at the top of the hill, in all the dry sow paddocks. I even went to one of the other fields to see if she'd maybe gone there. (To explain, the farmer had in total 1500 sows. He had a huge amount of acreage so split the sows into three groups, two 600 and one 300 lots. They were spaced out on different fields on the farm, with maybe a field between each.) She was nowhere.

Later, when I was at the serving radial, or big circular paddock for those non piggin' readers. I swore I saw a little pink speck near some of the old disused arks at side of the field. After I'd finished with the serving I walked down there.

Sure enough, I had seen a little pink speck. It was huddled in a ball near the opening of the wrecked ark. Poor thing was shivering from not getting its colostrum. I picked it up and

looked inside the ark. There was the missing sow, happily feeding her new brood. She was lying on the hard dirt and covered in mud, but she was happy. I placed the piglet inside and waited till it found a teat. She was quite relaxed with me being there and never flinched when she saw my face.

I had to laugh. I spent all that time putting straw in fully functioning arks, making them a nice soft bed, when here she was farrowed on the hard dirt getting blown at by the wind coming in through the holes in the sides of the ark.

When I came back with the tractor and livestock trailer; an astonishing machine designed especially for pigs. It drops right to the floor for easy loading. I backed up to the ark and when I was in place the sow shot out. She ran off in the direction of the home I'd made for her, clever girl. The rest was easy. I picked up all the piglets, all 11 of them and took them up to their new, nay proper home. The sow was busy feeding on the remnants of the food I'd left for her earlier. She never lifted her head once while I put her piglets in amongst the straw in the ark. I waited to make sure she knew where they were and then left her to it: simples.

Then there was the case of the disappearing piglets. For days I was feeding a sow, on the same farm, waiting on her farrowing. When she was late I got suspicious that she'd aborted. It dawned on me two days later that she had actually farrowed. Her belly was slim, not bulging and her udder was full. It struck me as very odd, but no matter how many blades of grass I turned in her paddock, I simply couldn't find those blasted piglets and duly left her alone.

When I came back that afternoon, I noticed she hadn't slept in her ark. Not uncommon, but the thing was, she too had disappeared. I immediately went to the disused cluster of arks but she wasn't there. I looked around the other arks but she was nowhere to be found.

The next morning, she was back in her paddock. I kept an eye on her as I fed the others. At about the halfway stage she slipped under the fence of her paddock and ran down the

hill. I watched as she ran along the side of the field and disappeared into the woods. The last place I thought of looking. I noted her down in the book as farrowed with ten and never said a word to anyone. I figured she was happy so why upset her, plus ten was a nice figure and I'd play about with the number later if need be.

Two weeks later, I noticed she didn't go on her jollies down to the woods. She stayed at home. I hadn't thought to bother looking in her ark earlier that morning, knowing it was empty. Sure enough, when I walked across after feeding all the farrowings, I found her happily suckling a litter of ten piglets in her ark.