

Lambing.

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Walking down the gravel track towards the lambing barn, the silence broken only by each footstep on the uneven ground; a crunching, grinding cacophony amplified by the stillness of the early morning.

Stopping to look over the fence into the paddock, the beam of light from the torch picking out the ewes grazing, the lambs tucked up against straw bales giving scant protection from the early morning chill breeze.

Entering the lambing shed, its subdued light giving an atmosphere of calm, the occasional lamb bleating, its mother's returning call comforting her offspring. In the maternity yard, the grunts of ewes in early labour break the silence: trying to settle, milling around, making nests in the straw tight up against the walls, looking for what protection they can find, keeping themselves to themselves away from the main constellation of ewes.

As morning breaks, with the first tinges of daylight breaking through the dark, suppressing back drop, the morning routine kicks into place. A switch is thrown on entering another realm, the void triggered by a water container emptied from a pen containing ewe and lambs, they have the right to wake all and sundry, to the impending breakfast club. Progress is slowly made up the line of pens, increased volume; each ewe demanding to be first for their early morning meal.

Once water bowls have been emptied and buckets filled with cake, the rattle of nuts into plastic containers send ewes into a frenzy. Lambs dive for cover under the ewe, looking for safety, finding security and nourishment.

Pens checked, mishaps sorted, peace restored, anticipation with a little trepidation for what might await outside.

Bags of cake shouldered and taken to each paddock. No need to call because instinct tells food is on its way; the rustle of the bag sends ewes milling so tightly around that walking is almost impossible. A small heap here, a small heap there, progress made across the paddock. Time for observation: who is not feeding, who has lost their lambs, where are their mothers? A slow walk around brings problems to the surface. A youngster up against the hedge looks lost and empty, from the number sprayed on the lamb's side, their mum is apprehended. Together brought back to an indoor pen where love and attention are administered, the lamb fed warm milk, the ewe checked over for any problems on why she cannot feed her offspring. Together in the warm, bonding will fortify both, so entering the wide world for the second time will not be such a shock.

Back in the maternity yard progress is slow. A ewe nestles down, showing initial stages of giving birth; on every contraction her neck stretches out, top lip curls up, heavy panting. Although her progress is slow, all's ok. Across the yard another ewe on her side, not moving. Inspection reveals one leg and nose exposed to the cold elements of the morning, intervention required, shirt sleeves rolled up to the arm pit, expectant mother rolled unceremoniously onto her right side, necessary to help presentation. Once kneeling against her lower back, a protective arm length glove covered in gel is placed on the upper part of the lamb's leg that's showing, gently sliding between mother and lamb. Fingers feel the warmth of the inside of the ewe, she reacts with a contraction pressing the hand against the pelvic bone, room at a premium, time is of the essence. The other leg found backwards against the side of the lamb, easy to rectify, closing eyes and picture what you feel. Hand moved to chest of lamb, gentle pressure backwards, at the same time get middle finger behind knee

joint, bring forward so leg begins to bend, with lower part of leg cupped between fingers, gentle push upwards and draw the leg forward, until it's presented against head like the other one. Now both legs are out and nose offered forward, a little gel around the neck of the lamb and inside the ewe as she contracts, gentle pressure pulling both legs of the lamb. Within seconds, a new life enters the world. A piece of straw up the nose of the lamb to make it sneeze; the first breath of new life, a new story to be told. Placing the lamb in front of the ewe, she starts to clean her new arrival, mother-baby bond connected in smell and sound, nature's true miracle, never to be broken.

Across the straw yard a new life licked clean, yellow mucus staining white skin, steam rising from warm bodies in the chilly morning breeze, mother fussing over her charges, ensuring all is right in the world.

Watching these infants struggle on their spindly legs, is to behold life on the edge; instinct kicks in to survive, the aim of all new life. Intervention at hand, lambs lifted by front legs slowly taken away. The ewe panics, looking for her offspring, bleating their unique song; she follows the short journey indoors to the warmth of a secure pen, reunited with her brood, fussing to make sure all is in order. Panic over, life continues, bond strengthened.

Time passes and routine continues, soft fleshy navel sprayed, another shock to the system for the poor defenceless lamb, a necessary intervention to help save life. When returned to mother, she nuzzles her pride and joy to her udder where nutritious sustenance awaits, life giving energy waiting on demand.