

A winter's tale

25th December, 3am. Shaun's phone rings. He picks it up quickly. It is Nigel, his boss. The storm has brought trees down right across the county. It's an emergency. Shaun reaches for the light switch but there is no power. Helen is fast asleep beside him. Her girls are in bed in the room next door. Soon they will be rushing in to wake her up on Christmas morning.

As Shaun puts on his working clothes and adds extra layers against the cold. He'll be out on call, driving through the night, or maybe up an electricity pole, who knows. The van is parked outside. The light of his head torch doesn't disturb anyone.

Shaun briefly thinks about the effects of his own power cut. No turkey, no Christmas dinner, no TV. What will they do? Well he can't stop now. He jumps into the van, full of tools and cables.

When he gets to the site, Ryan and Dave are already there, setting up the gear next to the fallen tree that has brought the power line down. The wires are looped and twisted on the ground but Shaun knows exactly what to do. He has been a linesman for fifteen years and there is not much that he has not seen before. Ryan is still learning, but he is quick to pick things up. They make a good team.

Dave is on the phone to Nigel. 'Yes. Yes. OK, we will be as quick as we can'. Shaun fetches the chainsaw out of the back of the van. He checks the oil. None. He knows exactly where to look. Everything is in its place. Soon he is at work, clearing the way for a new pole. This is the first of who knows how many he'll be having to deal with today.

He loves every aspect of his job - putting his skills into practice, coping with surprises and fixing the network on which so many people depend. All that and the close-knit bond of his little team. They trust each other with their lives, day in, day out. How much closer can you get than that? The gusts of sleet are unrelenting, but inside his protective gear, Shaun is momentarily content.

The three of them take a break – squashed up close in the front seat of the van. Ryan is on the phone, chatting to his family. Their power is on, the sprouts are peeled, but it won't be so good without him. It is the same with Dave. 'keep the crackers, we can have them tonight. Yes love, Yes, I love you too, Yes, I love you to bits'. Dave had just moved in with his girlfriend and this would have been their first Christmas together. Shaun says nothing. It was exactly two years since Helen and the girls moved in with him. At the time he was as happy as Dave is now. He thought that was it. At last he would be a family man. Little did he know what a mistake he was making. Too bad he thought, no way out now. He sighed and sent a quick text. 'Sorry, I won't be back till late'.

After they'd finished the first job Shaun helped Dave to pack up. They worked in silence, as they often did. Shaun thought about his text. To be honest, he wasn't really sorry. Out here he was away from Helen's incessant chatter and from the girls, always looking at him suspiciously, always wary. He didn't have to pretend – they were not the happy family of his dreams, and they never would be.

The second pole went in easier than the first, but there were so many to do. Shaun and his team worked on. The afternoon sky darkened and night fell. Nigel phoned again. It is 7pm already and it really is time for them to knock off. The emergency team has arrived from Darlington and yes, it is fine for them to go home. Yes, Nigel knows the power is still off all up the valley, but that is not going to be fixed any time soon.

When Shaun got home the house was dark. No hurricane lamps glowing, and no one to greet him. The light of the ever-reliable headtorch was all he had. It was enough. He spotted a sheet of paper on the kitchen table. It was a handwritten note from Helen. That's it, she can't take it anymore. She and the girls have gone to her mother and she won't be back. Ever. She will not be abandoned like this again. Now it is her turn to leave without warning.

The wind is still howling and whining in the chimney and outside it is snowing hard. There is an uncooked turkey in the fridge and some sausage casserole from the night before. That's fine. He can heat the leftovers up on the top of the wood-burner. The kindling catches immediately. The warm glow of the fire is delicious, and so is the calm quiet of the house. Shaun felt nothing but an overwhelming sense of relief. A new year lay ahead.