

# Bleeding heart

By Chris Smith

## A coolant leak at Christmas causes consternation for Russia-transit trucker

**A**t 5 am on Christmas Day, 1993 the water-level warning light glowered an angry red from the rows of its darkened neighbours on the dashboard as I readied K123 YOF's immense 12-litre engine for another long day.

A torchlight investigation confirmed my worst fears: antifreeze was steadily dripping onto what was already a large area of aquamarine slush beneath the radiator.

Expert help in the shape of the nearest Volvo workshop lay over 400 miles away across the Finnish border, and any attempt to locate and plug the source of the leak would have to be postponed until daybreak – still nearly four hours away.

The best course of action in the circumstances would have been to go back to sleep, but my mind was already feverishly examining options, calculating probabilities, weighing up alternatives and ruthlessly

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assessing my ability to cope with the loss of antifreeze in the frozen heart of a Russian winter. Sleep, however advantageous it might prove in the long run, was manifestly impossible.

Deciding that I might as well alert HQ to my predicament, I placed the keyboard of the satellite telex upon the steering wheel and inexpertly typed out a message, groping for the right keys: 'Drone 17 to Queen Bee: K123 YOF has developed a serious water leak approximately half way between Moscow and St Petersburg. I am waiting for daylight before investigating the problem. Happy Christmas!'

I lit the stove, made myself a coffee and pensively munched a peanut-butter sandwich.

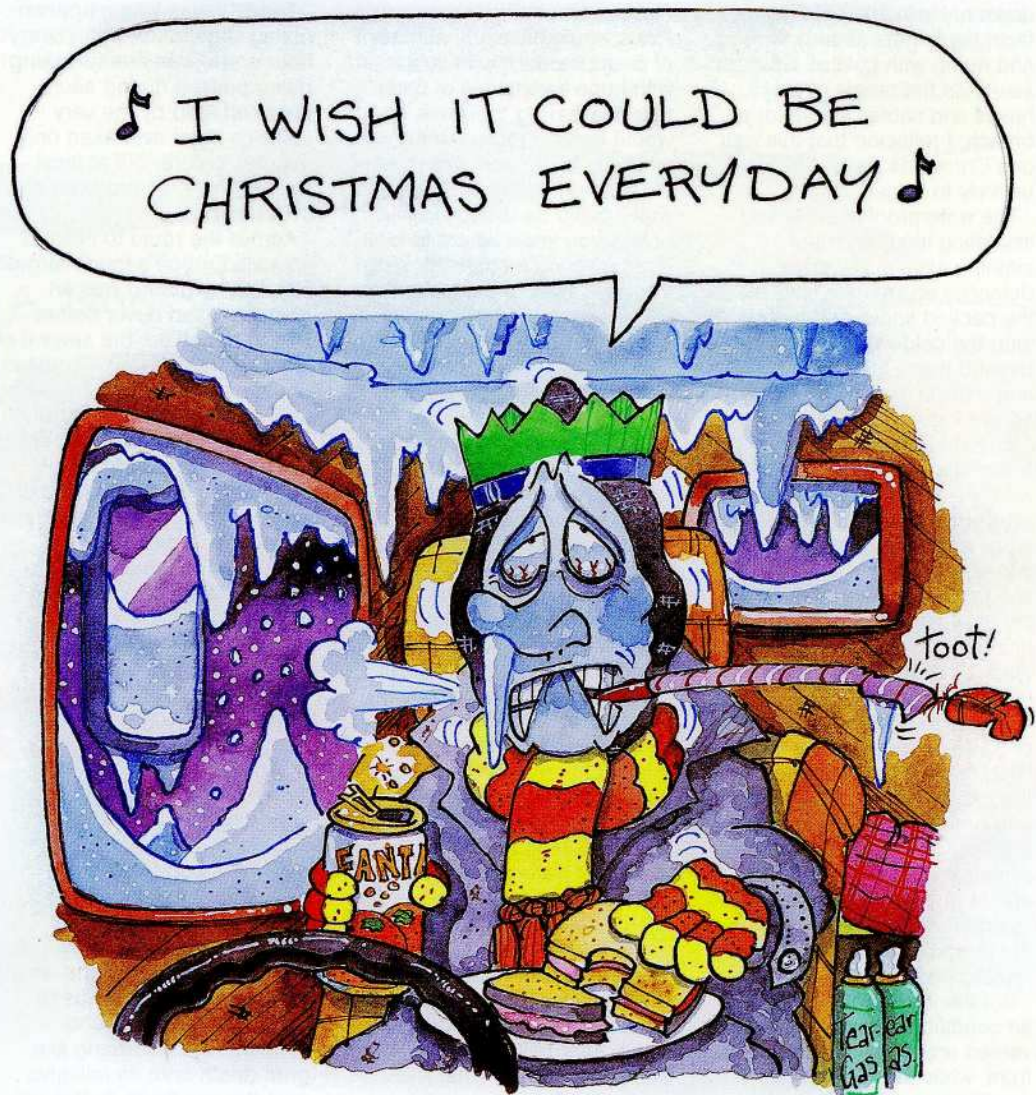
There is never a convenient time or place to break down, but the situation in which I found myself nevertheless threatened to be more than averagely awkward, for the Soviet institutions of oppression had been succeeded in 1991 by an altogether more random, unpredictable form of brutality; the Russian Mafia had grown with extraordinary swiftness to

become the largest criminal organisation in the world.

Stories of armed robbery and hijackings in the chaos of the former Soviet Union were legion, and the padlock on the rear doors of the 13.6 m tri-axle reefer trailer provided only token protection to a tempting cargo of Lada spares which were destined for Norway. I'd read somewhere that the

murder count in the Russian Federation had escalated to a mind-boggling average of 80 per day.

I lay down on the bunk and, with nothing else to do until daylight, switched off the interior lights and stared into the darkness. Fear was a rational enough emotion under the circumstances; in post-communist Russia I wore it ➤



like a coat of chain mail – as a protective outer layer to deflect misfortune and ward off evil.

Fear had placed half a dozen tear-gas canisters in the locker beneath the bottom bunk and an armed guard in the passenger seat between Moscow and Tengiz, a centre of oil production situated on the north-eastern shore of the Caspian Sea.

Fear also accounted for the decision to spend the night in a lay-by next to a

police post; although I had scant regard for the Russian traffic police, I judged that their presence just less than 50 yards away ought to provide at least some deterrent to the local footpads.

When at around 9 am the blackness above the forest to the east at last became tinged with grey, I put on my jacket, gloves, balaclava, overalls and boots.

Lying on my back under the Volvo with antifreeze dripping down my arm and onto my face, my fingers already filthy and numb with cold as I searched the tangle of pipes, hoses and cables above for a breach, I reflected that this was one Christmas Day I'd be unlikely to forget.

The waterproof overalls and insulating inner layers of clothing were inadequate defences against the chill of the packed snow, and before long the cold would penetrate beyond them, infiltrating flesh and muscle and eventually advancing to my bones.

Icy rivulets of antifreeze invaded a remaining pocket of warmth in my armpit and I spat vigorously as a drop of the liquid entered my mouth. An image came to me of friends and family back home drinking my health in champagne, while I drank theirs in ethylene glycol. Wasn't the damn stuff supposed to be poisonous?

Unable to discover the source of the leak from underneath, I tilted the cab and climbed onto the engine. The pump and top and bottom hoses – the heart and main arteries of the cooling system – were evidently dry and in good condition, which indicated that the source of the problem might lie with the radiator itself.

But the intercooler and air-conditioning radiators prevented any access from the front, while the fan and fan cowling enclosed it from the rear, and I found it to be equally

impregnable to examination from either above or below.

There was nothing I could do to repair a damaged radiator, but I was haunted by the possibility that the water might simply be issuing from a union between two pipes or a displaced hose, loosened by the battering the rig had received during the preceding weeks on what

passed for roads in Russia and Kazakhstan. That sort of problem was fairly easily solved with

an adjustable spanner and, spurred on by a picture of the transport manager's apoplectic rage back in Kidderminster ("We've had to spend thousands of pounds flying out a mechanic with spare parts, all because that effing idiot couldn't tighten a jubilee clip!"), I wasted a further hour in a futile search before deciding that the radiator had to be the source of the haemorrhaging and that the only course of action remaining was to try and press on up to Finland, where the Volvo-loving Finns would have any number of clean, modern workshops with huge inventories of parts.

Before leaving, however, I would have to replenish my stocks of water and, like most other commodities in Russia, water could be difficult to find unless you knew where to look. After lowering the cab, stowing the tools away in the locker and changing out of my overalls I grabbed the containers and marched up to the police post to see if anyone there could help.

"Vada nyeto," they answered, waving me disinterestedly away towards the village, which the dilapidated Cyrillic lettering on a nearby signpost proclaimed to be Yedrovo.

Deliverance came in the unlikely form of two desperate-looking men dressed in shabby suits whose battered orange Moskvitch had just been stopped by the police. Perhaps recognising a companion in misfortune, one of them signalled over to me that I was to follow their car.

"Skolka kilometres?" I asked them, not daring to drive the stricken truck far.

"Nye deliko!" came the encouraging reply.

Entering rural Russia was to find oneself transported back in time to the Middle Ages. After half a mile we stopped opposite what I perceived to be a well. An old man mysteriously appeared

from somewhere and put himself in charge of drawing up the bucket and, while my two new friends filled up the containers, I trotted back and forth across the road, emptying them into the radiator.

When it could hold no more water and the full containers had been replaced in the passenger footwell, I presented each of my helpers with a can of Fanta. Clearly delighted, they took turns to shake me warmly by the hand.

I drove as fast as I could under an enigmatic sky on roads that were covered in a treacherous concoction of snow, ice and sand, intent upon covering as many miles as possible between each reappearance of the water-warning light.

Although I had encountered far worse during the long haul back from Kazakhstan, this was a surface that commanded respect; particular care was needed when overtaking as substantial ridges of snow and dirt had built up in the middle of the road.

The F12 was losing approximately a gallon of water every hour and it was heartbreaking being passed during each enforced stop by the very vehicles I had overtaken only minutes before, but at least we were making progress of some kind.

Across the route to Finland sprawls Europe's fourth-largest city. St Petersburg was an obstacle I had never before had to negotiate, but several of the other drivers had recounted unpleasant stories about taking hours to find their way through. Getting lost in a large Russian city was a harrowing experience at the best of times, but one I could scarcely afford with an incontinent truck.

By the time I entered the suburbs it was already dark and I wended

my way through a network of broad, potholed streets,

following signs for the M10 and Vyborg.

Just as I was beginning to relax and wonder why the others had made such a fuss, I made my first mistake. Conventional wisdom held that if one was unsure of the way, the best thing to do was to find a homeward-bound Finnish truck and hang like grim death onto its taillights until the city limits. In the absence of any Finns heading

in my direction, I latched onto a Polish truck that appeared to be following the Vyborg signs. He lead me through several truck ban zones to a large parking area, and I thus found myself in the very situation I'd been trying to avoid all along: I was now utterly lost in a strange city with a seriously sick truck.

For the next half hour or so I drove around rather aimlessly, cursing all Poles indiscriminately and desperately searching for a direction sign that might give me some idea where I was.

At length I picked up a sign for the M10 and followed the road through yet another area which was banned to trucks, but by now I was past caring. After crossing the river for what seemed like the umpteenth time I picked up a sign for Mockba (Moscow), which meant I had been heading down the M10 in the wrong direction.

As soon as a gap in the oncoming traffic allowed, I executed a bumpy U-turn across a couple of the ubiquitous tram tracks that channelled their way along the centre of the streets and stopped at a busy road junction where a couple of cops were ostensibly engaged in 'Traffic Control', which in reality actually involved the harassment of local motorists with a little extortion thrown in here and there.

I asked one of them for directions to Vyborg.

"Priama, priama!" (straight on) he answered, pointing me decisively back over the bridge.

After another halt to top up with water I eventually found myself heading out of the city and picking up speed on the main highway to Vyborg and Helsinki, but a sign indicating that the road ahead was barred by a 3.6 m bridge meant a diversion onto secondary roads

that were covered in snow and ice and free of meaningful direction signs.

As I blundered

my way uncertainly through Selenogorsk I could feel my stress levels rising once more.

At length I brought the F12 to a halt alongside a man who was engaged in changing the wheel on his car.

"Vyborg?" I asked him, pointing along the road.

To my surprise he replied in halting English: "Turn right at the police box, and then left."

Frozen moisture glistened in the light of the undipped ➤

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headlamps as a narrow and twisting road wound its way, treacherous as a cobra, through what appeared to be a forest.

At length I arrived at a police post where the road forked, and once again I slithered to a halt to check my directions. The cop pointed me wordlessly

down the right-hand fork and a few minutes later I found myself approaching a T-junction, with, to my indescribable relief, a huge Finnish drawbar rig bearing down towards me from the left. He passed with a friendly flash of his lights, and shortly afterwards I found myself back on the M10, the Volvo arrowing through the snow and darkness across the immense forests that cover northwest Russia.

With the release of tension I began to feel both ravenously hungry and very tired. The peanut-butter sandwich I had consumed for breakfast was all that had been keeping me going for the previous 14 hours; there simply hadn't been time to think about my stomach. An hour from Vyborg, during

another obligatory halt to top up the radiator, I hurriedly threw together a belated Christmas lunch consisting of German black bread and Russian bacon and wolfed it down as I drove, lubricating the oesophagus with a can of Fanta and trying not to think of

the roast turkey and plum pudding being consumed at home.

There was nothing I could do to address the problem of my tiredness, however. Although it was very tempting to park up and leave the inevitable hassle of the border until the following morning, I simply dared not risk the possibility of freezing up or running out of water while still stuck in Russia.

In Vyborg I discovered what was probably the only modern filling station in the country and seized the opportunity to replenish my dwindling water supplies from the basins in the washrooms. A mirror revealed a narrow grey streak of grease bisecting one side of my unshaven face like a weal

and a trickle of filthy oil inscribing a sinister black hieroglyph upon my forehead.

At Vaalimaa the dreaded border queues failed to materialise.

"Vodka, narkoteek, porno nyet?" enquired an official hopefully, perching on the step and peering into the cab. "Kreemeenal gaz?"

I shook my head decisively, omitting to mention the bottles of Russian champagne and the canisters of CS gas stashed in the locker underneath the bottom bunk. In earlier years I wouldn't have dared to take such a risk, but these days cab searches were usually cursory affairs and this one proved to be no exception.

At 1 am on Boxing Day I drove into Finland with the water-level warning light once again clamouring for attention, and positioned the F12 in a parking area just beyond the border.

The temperature had plummeted and I became seriously concerned that the antifreeze in the coolant would by this point have become so dilute that it

might freeze and do all kinds of damage to the radiator and water jacket.

Running the engine would prevent it from freezing up, but each time the warning light came on, accompanied by the alarm, I would have to get up (approximately every hour) to top up the radiator, which of course would further dilute the mixture.

Vowing that on subsequent trips I would carry spare antifreeze in one of the trailer boxes, I eventually gave up on this option on the grounds that it would mean a virtually sleepless night – which in my present state was just unthinkable.

I was hungry once more but I was simply too far gone to even contemplate cooking

myself a decent meal.

An absolutely horrendous Christmas Day was brought to an appropriately depressing conclusion with a Christmas dinner which consisted of some lukewarm baked beans cooked in and eaten straight from the can. □

## "I dared not risk the possibility of freezing up"

## "The dreaded border queues failed to materialise"

