A Great Gift

I allowed them to come for the sake of the photograph. I wanted our photograph taking. More than anything else that's what I wanted, just at that time. So it was like a stroke of destiny, really, when Menghi brought me the note from V. P. Kadzhikin. Much as I'd thought about a photograph, much as I wanted it, I knew there probably wasn't a camera within two hundred miles. But then the note that Menghi had carried from Langki-pei, that Academician Kadzhikin and some other chaps I knew, and Sasha Ivanovna, were coming up the Pass towards the plateau, hoping to see me. Hoping they might camp near my shack, and pay a call on an old comrade.

I went out each day cutting fresh ice. Menghi moved on the next morning of course. He was heading for the summer pastures ahead of his uncle's yaks. We smoked and reminisced, it was much like his usual visits. Meu-ggen always did stay away, not liking the fire. We talked about the cub. He offered to take it, as one of his uncle's women was lactating. But I decided to stick to my idea of the goat. He offered to buy Meu-ggen's necklace from me, he offered a good yak. I said it was staying exactly where it was. He agreed that was right, and nodded, patting me on the shoulder. After he'd gone, giving me one last wave from the crest, as he does every spring, I found he'd left the yak anyway. Tethered to the goat-pen where Meu-meu was crying.

I knew what they wanted of course. Flora and fauna survey, the note said: they just wanted to camp nearby and pay a social call. But Academician Kadzhikin hadn't come all this way in person for routine flora and fauna; and he certainly hadn't come to talk of old times with his most disappointing pupil. Menghi confirmed that all their enquiries when they summoned him in Langki-pei were about Kishi-kiyik (and the many different pronunciations). About whether anyone had ever seen one, had ever encountered a wild man. As well as who might take a message to the so-called wild man from the west.

I thought you wouldn't be pleased, said Menghi. But I thought you could always shoot them, like you did the Chinamen. He was surprised how I took the news, how pleased I was to hear they were coming. It was the photograph, I told myself. It was how badly I wanted our photograph taking. Along with the sense that even thinking of anything so ridiculous, out here, so far from any cameras, must count as a kind of premonition. But perhaps, for once, under the circumstances, I yearned for the company of my own people. For conversation in my own tongue, for news from what even yet I think of as home.

I should tell you where we are, so that you can orient yourself. We're miles from anywhere. The nearest monastery is a hundred miles that way, as near as matters. That was where I first had evidence of the

Kishi-kiyik, or anyway, where I finally started believing. It's probably in China. You don't really know. The mountains are the boundary, but there's a lot of mountain. I'm on the Kazakh side of course, just below the summer pastures, on the winter snow line. In fact traditionally the summer pastures start here, I suppose it's a mere ten thousand feet or so. So I'm not as isolated as my reputation says. The nomads, the herders and their caravans, pass one way and the other, twice a year. I wave to the ones I don't know very well, and those who are my friends pitch their tent and pass an evening with me. Menghi being an entrepreneur, a merchant he calls himself, I sometimes see four or even five times a year.

Menghi's uncle and his wives are usually my nearest neighbours. But you can't always be sure. The joke is my next-door neighbour's tents might be thirty miles in that direction or seventy miles in the other. They think I'm very odd living in a shack and not moving. How do you tolerate the smell of your own dung, after a season? they say, in all seriousness. They may *call* me the wild man from the west, but it's just to humour me. They think I'm disgustingly civilised, as well as unsanitary.

It's a plateau. I think the local name for it, in the peculiar part-Kazakh part-Mongolian part-incomprehensible dialect the nomads speak, means shelf of the ceaseless wind. I don't mean it's a ledge. Except for the rise immediately behind, and the snow-covered peaks over there, it's an endless plain, as far as the eye can see. You travel almost an hour westward before you begin to see it slope away, towards far-away lowlands. The sun usually sends you a glimmer from Lake Tchernine, like a little silvery worm in its winding valley. In fact when you reach it (if you go that way) it's enormous, the lake, and beautiful, and curves on for miles and miles before giving way to the dry plains. But you don't go that way if you're heading for civilisation. You go down into the steep-sided overgrown ravine on the south. At the further mouth of which, invisible from the distance, is Langki-pei.

It's a town only in the loosest sense of the word. Smaller than the railway workers' shanty towns back home, but in a similar tradition of makeshift. It has a place (just the one place) where you can eat and drink (mainly drink), sleep (with a woman for a little extra), buy supplies (if they've got any), and sit for hours across a table from some petty commissar who will have forms to fill in and papers to stamp and thick manuals of duplicated typescript regulations sent from Moscow twenty years ago that he must thumb through, to see whether you can go any further or must turn back. And it's where your mule or ox-cart caravan departs for the railway line. Langki Halt, they call it, though it's not much short of a hundred miles beyond Langki-pei, where the train to Omsk will stop for you if it's in the mood (or if the commissar has allowed you to telegraph ahead).

Or if you're coming rather than going, like my friends from Leningrad, the Langki-pei Hilton is where the ox-cart drops you and you have to fend for yourself, finding local guides and animals to take you, should you want to go further. Such as to search for Kishi-kiyik, or to seek out the honorary Kishi-kiyik from the west. You have to do your own deals in Langki-pei. And paper money with hammers and sickles doesn't help much: yaks and butter and wives and furry skins are currency hereabouts. And necklaces of quartz. Academician Kadzhikin knew the ropes, of course. And the local petty commissar was running about after him as if he were Kosygin, Menghi said. He thought it was very funny. We laughed about it. It was the first time I'd laughed in a while. He was glad they had their own arrangements, Menghi, so they didn't slow him down. They sent for him to bring me the letter ahead. He told them he was setting out on his spring itinerary in less than a month, so they were pleased. Letters usually take longer round here.

As I was going to say, I realised I'd have to do a deal, of sorts. About the photograph. I knew why they were coming, in spite of V. P. Kadzhikin's cageyness. And if I wanted my photograph I knew I'd have to cooperate. In a sense they were just too late; in a sense they were just in time. I looked forward throughout the spring to their arrival. I was disappointed it wasn't them when the first tiny nomads and their herds, like ants from twenty miles, trailed slowly across the plateau in the distance. It turned out to be Barud-weng and his people. He didn't stop, but he sent one of his running boys with a cheese. The boy drank his fill and rested, then ran back with a few little white stones I'd been polishing. Gifts are a language of their own out here.

Of course I kept up my twice-daily journeys for ice. And of course I sat with her, mostly about sunset, our favourite time. And now and then combed her hair. For of course they would want to see her. And I wanted them to see her. In truth I knew they'd want more. But I had my limits clearly in mind, what I would allow and where to draw the line. If I wanted them to photograph us, and I wanted it more than ever once I knew it wasn't a dream, once I knew they were coming with a camera, then I'd have to give them something in return. There would be no point playing the wild man, the stubborn recluse who'd turned his back on such things. I'd have to give them a fair deal.

I wasn't feeling all that reclusive, the way things had turned out. The idea of smoking with old comrades, talking of old times, letting them tell me how wise or foolish I'd been, to have escaped from civilised life, the idea quite appealed. Of seeing my old teacher again, his kindly scowl, his balding head. Of seeing Sasha Ivanovna. I was looking forward to telling them our story, Meu-ggen's story. I intended telling them everything, or almost everything. It was at least a true story, one they could rely on. Unlike the fairy tales told by the peasants, unlike the tall tales of boastful or self-deceived travellers, mine was (is) down-to-earth reality. A human tale, to be sure: a love story. But at long last an account they can trust, and verify. Not knowing who to

believe, not knowing the difference between exaggerated legends cultivated over long evenings in the nomads' tents, and honest facts, is one of the problems with research into Kishi-kiyik. Into Albast or Almas, or Kang-mi, or Mao-zhyn. Under whatever of their hundred-and-thirty-one names you call them.

For above and beyond my story, they would see her for themselves, and examine her. Hopefully that and the photographs would compensate for what I was not going to permit. It goes without saying that I had no intention of letting them take her. I knew they would want to, I knew V. P. Kadzhikin would ask. He would not be doing his job if he didn't. But I was steeled to refuse. I knew they might well want to dissect her, I couldn't blame him for asking that either. But I would firmly, courteously refuse. I would allow them to examine her thoroughly and photograph her. Measure her in all the usual ways. I'd noted a few statistics for them myself (the scientist in me not entirely subdued by my self-imposed exile). And they could take a few non-intrusive samples: hair, nail clippings, smears. Obviously they must return with good DNA material for rigorous laboratory tests. I would allow that of course, and encourage it.

And I would tell them our story, the whole story, near enough. With all this they would have to rest content. As I would have to be content with my photograph. The memento I so longed to have. A photograph of Meu-ggen and I together. You are wondering about the cub: no, not the cub. I had already turfed over the goat-pen. Being spring there were a couple of baby goats bleating away too. They would not know the difference. They would not even know Meu-meu was there.

They came at last. Part of me still wanted to be the gruff wild man who'd turned his back on what they stood for, aloof behind my fur coat and whiskers. Part of me wanted to rush up to them waving my arms and yelling halloo like an excited idiot, and hug every one of them in the traditional Russian way. I did something nearer to the second. Particularly as not only Alexandra I. Baldeskaya but to my great surprise S. J. Vadalko as well, brought up the head of the caravan, with old Zotki and his youngest son who were their guides.

Serge Josefovich I yelled, and hugged him like a bear. I'm lucky he didn't shoot me, he probably thought I was one. A bear who knew his name. I was so pleased to see him. I never dreamed Serge Josefovich would have come with them. And Alexandra Ivanovna, I said, more gently, and after a timid handshake I hugged her too. More gently. My dear Sasha. And a second hug of each. The circle of old comrades is complete, I tried to say (speaking a whole Russian sentence out loud sounded very odd). My best contemporary and rival when we were students, and Sasha Ivanovna, who was always ahead of us and whom we always loved. Both of us, back then, didn't we? I said. I said it out loud. They shook their heads and smiled. She looked a lot older.

I was more restrained with V. P. Kadzhikin, of course. But I was pleased to see him too, of course. A good deal balder than when he used to hold us mesmerised from the floor of the anthropology theatre. I greeted him with the words My honoured teacher; he countered with My greatest failure. I taught you everything I knew, and here you went and became a wild man. You look like Herr Marx. Then we both laughed. I retire next year, he said later, when Zotki's sons were putting up their tents and he'd lit his pipe. This is my last expedition for the Agriculture and Anthropology Commission. If you'd stayed with us at the faculty, you could have been poised to step into my shoes. That I could never do, Honoured Valentin Piotrovich, I replied. He drew on his pipe in that casual way of his. So where's this wife of yours, that I've waited all my career and come two thousand miles to meet?

❄

It began, as I said, at the monastery. That curious moment when it dawns on you that something you didn't believe in might be true. Appropriate to have such an experience in a monastery: a 'more things in heaven and earth' moment. The odd feeling that what you were searching for might well have been there all along, peeping at you from the long grass. Not that I'd been much of a searcher. I'd long-ago decided there was either nothing in it (the legend of the Kishi-kiyik, the wild man of the snows) or, if there was, what there was was too elusive to be worth pursuing. Too slight ever to pin down to tangible reality. In truth I always was more of a folklorist than an anthropologist. But in Leningrad and Moscow folklore wasn't a science, it wasn't respectable. You had to tuck it away within something else. So in a sense I was never too interested in the Kiyik in a crypto-zoological sense. I was searching for the stories they tell of them in the nomads' winter tents and in the mountain monasteries.

Which was how I found myself listening to a story that the friendly lama, Runpok, who spoke a little Russian, swore was exactly true, and happened to him. And the creature it related to still came, and still remembered, he said. You could almost think them animals, for how faithfully they remember you. Runpok had a humorous, humble way of turning things on their head like that. I've thought since that he was probably a true holy man (something else I didn't used to believe in). Though he would not have claimed it. He's dead now, though he wasn't old. I don't know what he died of. His story merges into mine. He made me his heir, in a way. I inherited his part in the story, along with the gift he'd been given, as he called it: the gift of their trust, of their love. Or one of them anyway.

It was a common thing with him, a casual thing, referring to the wild men (and women) who raided the monastery gardens. Runpok claimed he caught glimpses of them from a gazebo where he meditated. Sitting so still and so silent for so long, they probably thought he was made of

bronze, he said. At one period one of them always brought a cub. From a tiny suckling clasping her back or breast he watched it grow into a mischievous and very mobile child. They're agile and go anywhere with ease, of course. Which is what combines with their timidness of human encounters in making them so elusive. But like children of all species, the little one grew curious and fearless and explored everywhere. It once came into the gazebo and walked around him and ran away. I held my breath, he said, and my heart paused from beating to honour the moment. I wouldn't be at all surprised.

One day she (though he didn't know until it grew older that the little one was a she-Kiyik) got herself into a dangerous position on the rocky cliff. For like all respectable monasteries it was perched on a high rock. The Kiyik, like Almas and so on everywhere, are renowned for their command of rock and snow surfaces. They climb cliffs and ice sheets as casually as walking on the flat. Doubtless the parent could have rescued her without difficulty had it known. But the adult had sloped around, mewing softly as they sometimes do, and seemingly concluded the child was lost or run home. Of course it disappeared in a blink when Runpok came out of his gazebo, curious about its odd behaviour. Something told him, whether instinct or god (he said), that the little one was in danger. He too looked about on the parent's behalf. On nearing the edge of the cliff he heard the squeakier mewing of the cub.

She was rather hard to get to, he said, with undoubted understatement. But barefoot and using his outer blanket as a rope he got to where he could reach down with one hand. He feared of course that she would not take it, even that she'd step backwards to her death, their avoidance of human contact being legendary. But some similar instinct as his own (or the same god) must have told her to trust him. She grasped his hand with both of her long arms or forelegs, and up she came. She was light as an angel, he said. She ran home without a backward glance, as far as he could tell. While Runpok (still in danger himself, I suspect, though he wouldn't say so) slowly inched back from the cliff edge. Being wise and humble he expected no reward. It was enough that a fellow creature had pitied his foolishness and extended him a helping hand, he said. He thanked god in his prayers for the blessing of mutual trust, and the lesson it had taught them both that day.

I spied on the mountainside what I thought was a wild beast. As I came closer I saw it was a human being. As I got right up to him I found it was my brother. It was an old saying from the India of his birth. I'd heard versions of it before, but never spoken with such serene humility. And as I clasped his hand I knew we had one soul. I think Runpok added the last part himself.

But although he didn't expect it, he *was* to receive a reward. And I, I was to receive it too. Though I'd done nothing to earn it, or deserve it. Runpok bequeathed it to me. A reward unique in any stories of encounters with the snow people. The next time they raided the garden

while he was squatting in his gazebo, as he sat there silent and motionless in his discipline of self-control, the little child emerged quietly from the vegetation and placed a gift by his knees. Paused looking at him, unafraid. And tip-toed away. It was produce from his own garden, but it was the nicest gift he'd ever received (he said). And she did this every time she came from then on.

And now, although she's grown rapidly, almost an adult and evidently a young female, she still does so, he said. She still remembers. She doesn't even run away if he moves or speaks. And once or twice when he's held out his hand (the hand that saved her) she's reached out and touched it in response. Thus, by his kindness and valour, and some instinct of common sentience, common humanity Runpok would say, he had accomplished a little miracle. One that my colleagues back in the faculty and on the Agriculture and Anthropology Commission have travelled the world and come nowhere near to achieving. He had formed a bond. He had unintentionally pursuaded one of the Kishi-kiyik out of their legendary timidity and elusiveness.

I said rather casually I should like to see her, more than half-expecting him to think of an excuse. The lamas are as good at spinning tall stories as the nomads. Stay another few days and sit with me in the gazebo, he said, and you might well. I couldn't remotely compete with Runpok at the squatting like a statue. But I hadn't much to do and meditating of sorts isn't entirely against my nature. So we took the risk, and I waited with him a couple of times. That's all it took. The second day, after an hour or so, Runpok whispered They're here. I hadn't seen or heard a thing. But somewhere in a distant part of the garden were the wild people, silently stealing his vegetables. I don't know if his hearing was specially acute, or his sense of smell (for one thing they always say about the Kiyik is how they stink). Or perhaps it was telepathy or an alteration in the behaviour of birds, or a message from god, that told him they were there.

The first thing I could detect, hunter as I am, was the long grass rustling. A stooped dark-reddish figure emerged from it. Then a slightly rank smell. We kept very still. Runpok was so good at it I felt I was alone. It was to all intents and purposes a monkey that slinked out of the grass, holding vegetables in its two front feet or hands. It made no sound. It saw me, I think, but didn't hesitate. It came up to the step, the entrance of the gazebo, two feet from Runpok's intertwined legs, leaned forward and put down the vegetables. On doing so it looked aside at me. It looked me directly in the eye. Runpok moved slightly, and slowly his hand reached out. The ape didn't take fright or even seem undecided. She touched his fingers with hers, and then calmly turned round and walked away.

A few things struck me (trying to think as a scientist). It was certainly an ape. And it had some very human features. The skin beneath the covering of hair, or on the less hairy parts such as face and chest, was

white. I mean the flesh 'white' of so-called caucasian human beings, not black or grey like gorillas and chimps. The face though ugly was flattish, or mongoloid as anthropologists say, not so extended at the snout and jaw as non-human apes. The small, adolescent breasts looked human, and cute in their way. And as she walked away I was looking at a bottom, also less hairy and more human in shape, but more importantly, without a tail. Another striking thing (less scientific) was that, for those moments that our eyes met, the eyes I was looking into, regardless of the physical being around them, seemed somehow deeply human. Very expressive, very trusting, very connected with me somehow. I wasn't just gazing into *her* eyes, she was gazing into mine. It's hard to describe. I thought of Runpok's words: we had one soul.

Otherwise, apart from these things, and apart from the lack of fear peculiar to this individual, and the bringing of the gift, and therefore a capacity for memory and gratitude, apart from such considerations, it was an animal I'd seen. Not a human being. It's easy to be overly impressed by the giving of the gift. There's no question it requires high intellect. But all apes and many other social animals (elephants, dolphins, dogs, wasps) have that. Presumably a behavioural zoologist would say the same as an anthropologist: that the trait of remembering Runpok and paying him respect was no more than acknowledging him as an avuncular troop-member to whom she'd bonded. Social and pack animals, and domestic pets, live and survive by such codes of mutual altruism. So sentiment and gazing into one another's eyes aside, nothing about this monkey girl necessitated classifying her as human.

A primate though, indeed, an ape, and (so far as my scientific education equipped me to judge) an unrecorded one. A cross between a chimp and an orang-utan, with anthropoid characteristics like the lack of a tail and the ability to walk comfortably on two legs. There's much talk of Kishi-kiyik being locally variant sub-species of wolves or bears, adapted to the demands of the steep or snowy terrain. It's a perfectly sensible and feasible hypothesis. The other sceptical theory is that each one reported is an instance of a feral human, a real human child brought up by animals. That it sounds improbable is also its strength, for it explains why they're so rare. But I had seen neither of these. I had seen an unfamiliar species of anthropoid great ape. In that sense I had indeed experienced something very special. I'd met an unknown, unacknowledged cousin. That much I was prepared to admit. And I wouldn't see that as diminishing Runpok's achievement. A newly recorded primate is a zoological discovery of paramount importance; an anthropoid ape, a new member of the exclusive family of great apes, would be hardly less spectacular than a newly recorded species of hominid.

Yet even allowing for the exceptions I've mentioned, I wasn't prepared to take that last leap. I don't think I could honestly conclude on reflection that I'd met any kind of true human being, nor a parallel species, neither a Missing Link nor a Neanderthal (which is what my

colleagues such as V. P. Kadzhikin expect they will turn out to be – Remnant Hominids they call them). I don't think mature reflection left me (on that first encounter I mean) feeling, or admitting, that it was any more human than a chimpanzee. A cat can look at you with trust and gratitude in its eyes after all; and bring you a mouse as a gift. And cats can also be bred without tails.

You are resisting the whisper of your soul, Runpok said, finally. After we'd talked well into the night about his so-called she-Kiyik. After he'd listened to me weighing up the pros and cons in my cautious way. After I'd ended up persuading myself, for all my honorary wild-man status, to remain supremely bolshevik and unconvinced.

It wasn't all that long after, when a Kazakh I knew from above Dzhan-lok Pass met me at the back of the mountain and told me the sad news. I was on my way home, and there was nothing to be gained by changing my plan. But somehow you feel you must be there, when you hear, like making a pilgrimage. I turned back and made my way to the monastery. They're always hospitable of course, I knew I'd be welcomed. I've come to mourn for my friend, I said, I came as soon as I heard. He has left a message for you, they said, to my surprise. His message is, to sit in his gazebo and accept a great gift.

What could I do? I sat the next day in his gazebo. It was full of vegetables. And the next. And the next. On the third day she came. Out of complete silence the long grass rustled, the stooped figure emerged, the slight smell wafted towards me. She came straight up to the step of the gazebo, looking me in the face. I'm certain she recognised me, brief as our previous encounter had been. I'm equally certain she was mourning too. Her eyes were full of moisture, her expression was sad. She looked from me to the place where Runpok had sat, in the centre, where there was now a mound of vegetables. She added her two tomatoes.

I couldn't believe my eyes. She held her hand out. As if in imitation of Runpok, as if she missed his gesture. She held her hairy arm, her childlike hand, steadily towards me. For some reason I was reluctant, or afraid. Then our eyes met. It was the same as before. I lifted my hand and touched her fingers. She didn't flinch, she didn't draw away. Across ten million years of evolution we looked each other in the eye, we tenderly held each other's fingers. I don't know what it was broke the spell. She turned and walked quietly away. But she didn't leave the garden: she was squatting in the grass, chewing something.

The great gift was not the tomatoes. I didn't know what to do. I'm not too sentimental, but something had happened, inside me, something had clicked. And Runpok had anticipated it. He meant me to experience it. But more than that. He meant me to perpetuate the link he'd forged, the relationship. That was the gift he was bequeathing me. The gift of her trust. But how? Did he expect me to become a lama and

take up his place in the gazebo permanently? I spent a restless, undecided night, and had morning porridge with the brothers. Then I forced myself to leave. Against my instincts, or rather, against a sense that I was turning my back on something, I headed home. Telling myself there was nothing I could do about Runpok's monkey girl; I couldn't be expected to adopt a whole new life on her behalf. I didn't revisit the gazebo. I set off on the long trek over the snowy mountain. I didn't look back.

All across the snow I had the strangest feeling I was being followed. I was being followed by my own guilty conscience, I told myself. By Runpok's betrayed spirit. In a sense I was. Some way across the great snow slope, where there was nowhere for either of us to hide, I finally gave in and looked round. There was a dark spot in the distance. It was still, as long as I was still. I continued a little way and looked again. It had moved with me, and stopped with me. I looked at my rifle. But I knew what it was, or who. I don't give the slightest credance to it, but I felt at the time as if Runpok's spirit was within the creature, somehow. I thought it was Runpok making her follow me. Spirit or not, he had left me a message, he had asked me to accept a great gift. It looked as if I was stuck with it.

I got home, exhausted and hungry as usual, and very cold. I decided to put the creature that had trailed me out of my mind and carry on as normal. If Runpok's sad-eyed she-Kiyik had followed me across the broad mountain, she'd have to make the best of it and fend for herself. Like wild creatures do; like I do. I wasn't responsible for her. Soon I nearly did forget about her, as I got a fire going and tucked into good food. And slept. And woke to a new day.

There was a gift on my doorstep every morning. Nor did she hide. I regularly glimpsed her coming and going from the hillside, ferreting around the paddock and the goat shed, squatting in the long grass gnawing at some unripe vegetable. For winter she made herself a little hollow in the ground beside the goat-pen, lined with moss and straw. I didn't feed her or encourage her. At times she irritated me, to be honest, sneaking silently around. Stealing things from my vegetable patch to eat or to leave as gifts. The goats didn't like her much either. I suspect she stole milk from them. Mostly it was like having a rather irksome but harmless feral dog about the place. Except that every now and then, she'd come up to me, if I was still. If I was sitting on my porch watching the sunset as I used to do. She'd come quietly out of the grass and slink up to me, put down a vegetable or a coloured stone, and hold out her hand. And our eyes and our fingers would unite.

One thing she brought me, instead of my own vegetables, was these little shiny stones. Nothing precious, I doubt if there is anything precious hereabouts. Though the nomads value the brightest white ones, and make them into diamond necklaces for their special woman, their favourite wife. Love-stones they call them. They're quartz,

needless to say. And extremely brittle and fracturous, as I know from long hours spent drilling them to make Meu-ggen's necklace. I've quite taken to the business, actually, polishing and drilling them. It started as a convalescent activity, and a penance. But it's my hobby now.

❄

It was before that, before I took up jewellery, that my life really changed. The wild woman didn't reform me, whatever Runpok may have intended. She was just something you put up with. Out here, anything living within a mile is sharing your back-yard. Or invading it. Like the dogs that drift away from the caravans and hang around waiting for scraps. You shoo them away when you're in a no-nonsense mood; you tolerate them as fellow wilderness dwellers grubbing for their survival when you're mellower, or watching the sunset. Perhaps you even throw them a scrap or a kind word.

I can't say it made much difference, whether I was sharing the mountain-side with dogs or Kiyik. I was mystified why her attachment had transferred to me. I never fathomed the psychology of it, I never have. Nor Runpok's apparent anticipation of it. I mused over it, now and then, over my friend's strange legacy to me. And for a long time that's as far as it went. I wasn't even all that interested in her scientifically, to be honest. I did make some notes, and I eventually wrote a letter to Comrade Baldeskiya (I didn't know if it would reach her, or even where she was now). Conscious, as I've said, that spotting a hitherto unknown species of anthropoid ape was a considerable scientific bombshell itself, whatever its implications for solving the mystery of the Kishi-kiyik. But largely I'd left all that behind. I'd gone native, as they say. My life was here, the business of daily survival was my study.

Being more of a folklorist anyway, strange as it may seem, Menghi's fireside tales, and his recollections of his grandmother's superstitions and sayings, continued to fascinate me more. It made, for a while, little difference that I was probably, as Menghi himself reminded me more than once (though he was forgetting Runpok), the first man in a million years that they didn't run away from. Perhaps you've got some real Kiyik in you after all, he added. Yet paradoxical as it seems, I was actually more interested in legends of his ancestors' encounters with them, than in the real-life Kishi-kiyik skulking about my goat-pen.

My apathy dissolved suddenly one bitterly cold winter's dawn. The most horrible screaming woke me. I had no idea what it was, I'd never heard an animal noise like it. It was nearby and insistant. A mountain fox had become starved enough to tackle my goat, was all I could think as I fumbled for my rifle. Yet there was something in the cry, something in the urgency of it. There was something about it, even before I realised what it was, that I felt deep in my being. It cut into

me, as if it was desperately personal. A fellow creature screaming to me, to me personally, in terrible urgency and fear. Screaming for *me*, like a child for its parent. Pleading for my help.

It was fading rapidly into the distance by the time I got round the back of the hut, blinking to coax my eyes into seeing through the grainy light of dawn. A group of figures was making quickly for the snowsheet. They merged into one another, two or four I couldn't tell. But I could tell what they'd done, what they'd come for. A reddish blur in the middle of them, a smaller stooped figure, was being pulled along jerkily. They had kidnapped Meu-ggen.

I fired my rifle. Not *at* them of course. They were too far away to take aim in the poor light, and too near for an unaimed shot not to kill one of them. I thought they would halt in astonishment, give up their prize and run away. The nomad youths who try a bit of rustling are renowned for their cowardice. I fired a second warning. They took no notice.

It was several hours before I set out after them. I admit to only the slightest indecision though, minutes at most of wondering why it mattered, why I should bother. Why I *was* bothering. For even while I wondered I was busying myself with the sort of preparations you have to make for a winter trek in this landscape, in this climate. I remember asking myself why I was so fired with indignation. But the point is, I was. Even as part of me told myself I was just being possessive or vengeful, I was systematically making my preparations to hunt them down and get her back.

Chasing them as I was would have been ridiculous. They would have beaten me back easily. The tracks subsequently confirmed there were three of them. In fact they wouldn't have needed to beat me back. I'd have dropped from exhaustion and cold in no time. I hadn't even got proper shoes on my feet. I hadn't any bullets but what were in my rifle. Which wasn't any, after I'd fired it. I hadn't eaten. It sounds awfully leisurely, but one of my main preparations was making myself a wonderful goulash. One of my best, I remember it to this day. The most important thing you need to track someone over the snowsheet, over the vast mountain, is fuel. And it goes in your belly.

So I set out carefully prepared and equipped. Mentally prepared too. Hunting in anger is a bad idea; hunting without purpose or plan is simply foolish. By the time I set out every hint of uncertainty had drained from me. With every mouthful of my meal, my she-Kiyik's screams fired my guts and tore at my heart. There was no question whatever that my instinct had been right. She was calling to me, to *me*, she was desparately screaming for her protector, her companion. I owed it to a dependent, a fellow creature. I owed it to Runpok. I set out with all the equipment you need to hunt over the mountains, and with the steely determination you also need. An absolute resolve to get her

back. Or if they'd killed her by the time I caught up with them, to avenge her in full. Or die in the attempt. Though I hadn't much thought of dying in the attempt. You're not thinking of failing when you set off with a hundred miles worth of supplies, and your pockets full of bullets.

I had plenty of time to think about other things as I followed their tracks over the huge snowsheet, over the great hundred-mile whale-back of the mountain's southern slope, into Sinkiang. I thought plenty about her screams that dawn. And at other times her occasional, almost inaudible mewing sounds, which had given me my nickname for her. Her screams, her fear, her ordeal, churned my emotions, fuelled my resolve. Filled me with anger and emptiness. I thought of her sad eyes looking into mine, our fingers touching. Runpok would have understood.

No, that's not right at all. He wouldn't have given a tugrik for understanding. Runpok would have *accepted*. Did accept. That's the trouble with western civilisation. Paradoxically that's what I became a wild man to get away from, yet carry within myself. Meu-ggen and Runpok, perhaps even Menghi in some degree, in spite of being nicknamed the civilised nomad, wouldn't even think of trying to fathom something as impenetrable as the human soul, or even an animal's. They would just accept. What god or fate or whatever you like to call it had bestowed on them. What god or fate or man's inhumanity and greed made it necessary for them to do.

I actually began to feel guilty. About my grudging tolerance, at times my irritable resentment, of the Kiyik's attachment to me. I was long since fed up of her bringing me unripe vegetables from my own patch. I'd even shouted at her a couple of times. She just slinked off. After a surprised thankyou the first time she brought me a piece of quartz, I'd tended to chuck the little stones in a bowl on the sideboard and show that superior indifference to them that human beings are so good at. What I found myself wondering, for the first time, was if she was hurt. I don't mean by her kidnappers, I mean by me. If my ingratitude for her childishly thoughtful offerings upset her. After she'd left her home and her family and her well-stocked monastery garden and followed me over the mountain, to a meaner, lonelier, hungrier life. A loveless life. I wondered if it had hurt her feelings, the unappreciative way I treated her. I'd never thought about her like that before. I was already thinking, as I trudged through the snow, how I might make amends. How I must.

The other thing I had plenty of time to think about on my journey was what they were up to, her kidnappers. What their motive was. It wasn't a mystery. Whoever they were, they'd encountered some nomad or traveller with the story (a new legend in the making) of how a Kishi-kiyik had taken up residence in the back-yard of the wild man from the west, on the plateau of endless wind above Langki Pass. They'd seen

an opportunity to grab a Kiyik that wasn't so elusive as usual, and perhaps not so shy. They'd come deliberately, overnight, like burglars, well equipped and well planned. Like I was coming after them. They had come like thieves to take her.

And not from the scientific curiosity that motivates academics like V. P. Kadzhikin. It wasn't even going to be the freak-show motivation that also sends people in quest of them. Both are very western notions. I suppose they might possibly have been acting on a commission from some American circus owner or Korean zoologist, wanting to make a fortune or a reputation respectively. To be honest I considered it unlikely. Not that there were crazy Americans and corrupt Koreans, but unlikely they'd have heard. Unless my hunch was mistaken, there wasn't much doubt about the kidnappers' motive and intention. And that was another thing that fired my indignation and my determination to get her back, alive or dead.

For one of the main superstitions about the Kishi-kiyik, and by far their greatest commercial value, was that they made powerful medicine. Even where they were nothing more than legend, where their existence was less firmly believed than among the Kazakh and Kirghiz nomads, or the Mongolians, anyone purporting to be selling Almas or Kang-mi or Kishi-kiyik in little packets would do wonderful trade. Any town apothecary would have a jar on his shelf, and assure you it was genuine. If you said how can it be? it's unheard of except in legend for anyone to catch one, he'd nod agreeably. That's why it's so expensive comrade sir, it's very very rare. My brother-in-law's cousin nearly died in the taking of this one, up on the high mountain, the last that was ever caught.

The belief that dried and powdered wild man was the most effective of all medicines, against anything, was virtually universal in this region. It even cured witchcraft and bolshevism. It wasn't genuine of course. Even if wild men exist, I doubt if any of the powdered version was genuine, in modern times. But that very fact put an even more sinister twist on my predicament. Selling a quack medicine to the gullible is easy. You don't have to mount a kidnapping expedition across the mountains to put some powder in a packet and tell a sick peasant it's true Kang-mi, cures everything. Having an authentic source, a genuine captive wild man, was only an advantage under certain conditions. And that was both good news and bad. It was why they hadn't killed her, and wouldn't, just yet. But it was also why she could be in for an ordeal that would make her wish they had.

At the very least, to authenticate their product, the Mongolian kidnappers (by the time I was thinking this the tracks had veered north, once the steep mountainside was behind us, and we were well into that indeterminate bit of sub-Mongolian China that's mostly populated by Mongolians), at the very least they would exhibit her, preferably alive. A corpse could easily be phoney, and wouldn't stay fresh very long.

Not exhibit in the American way, as entertainment or curio, but to advertise and authenticate their medicine. They'd drag her around for months, to as many towns and market places as possible. There are stories of it being done, centuries ago. They still do it with bears. Then, with witnesses, they'd butcher her and begin the process of drying her and turning her into (who knows?) millions of tugriks, or even dollars. Dragged around, exhibited, and butchered alive in front of a bunch of quack medicine salesmen. That would be the merciful way.

What they do with bears, god help them ... it's almost too horrible to contemplate. And the legend is, it was once done with wild men too. What they do with the bears is keep them alive in a cage no wider than their shoulders. Make fistulas in them and drain off bodily fluids. They make the medicine from the fluids, and although it's not as expensive as the real powdered flesh, it's easier to prove it's authenticity. You can see the bears in the back of the apothecaries' shops. And it's a long-term investment. So long as you keep the bear alive, just, it doesn't have to be happy, or even healthy, the supply continues. It eats worthless scraps, its dung manures your cannabis patch, and when it eventually dies, of boils or heart disease, you've still got a small fortune in actual body medicine. And a valuable rug.

I'm afraid I believe it now, that wild men have been milked (as they call it) in the same way. Centuries ago, when they were less scarce and perhaps more trusting, they were probably systematically hunted and abused. What better explanation for their deeply-ingrained dread and avoidance of humans? A possible origin of the use of bears is that they were a substitute, as the wild men became rarer or shyer. The legends imply as much. The whole notion of the medicine's pharmacological, or rather magical, efficacy is based on a primitive philosophy of correspondences. Runpok's philosophy turned on its head in a distortion so grotesque I'm ashamed to have thought of it. The supposed medicinal value derives precisely from its coming from the nearest thing to a human you can get. That's why the medicine's called Mummy in many old cultures.

For the ultimate elixir of life is life itself. It's the same doctrine that underlies the European vampire myth: the blood is the life. The presumed ideal or pure practice is anthropophagy. Sorry, I'm reverting to a scientific bore as I drone on: cannibalism to you and me. When eating your relatives or neighbours, even for strictly medicinal purposes, became a bit abhorrent, as homos slowly became sapiens, the line of descent was probably: eat your ancestors (mummies literally), eat your enemies (other races, captives), eat other hominid species like Neanderthals, as long as there were any, and Kishi-kiyik; then eat the next nearest species, apes or bears. We know that bears aren't primates, but folklore ignores such details. You still occasionally hear of monkeys being used, but they're very hard to handle. Bears are surprisingly resigned and docile once caught. And though stronger, they aren't as hard to trap as monkeys or men, being lumbering and

stupid. So my theory is that bear medicine got accepted as equivalently effectual, once the preferred sources got scarcer or more difficult to catch.

A bear's a poor substitute when you've heard there's a semi-tame Kishi-kiyik just over the mountain. So that was the other fate I was picturing for Meu-ggen. My sad-eyed little friend. Years of being held immobilised in a cage, in unbearable unstoppable unimaginable pain, longing for death. Years of standing in her own piss, covered in flies, longing for death. I'd rather kill her myself. Mewing pitifully, long after the screaming stops. Remembering perhaps how Runpok once rescued her from the cliff; making an inner prayer for *me* to come and save her now. For I couldn't doubt it any more. My journey across the mountain cleared my head. This was a being far closer to full human individuality and sentience, and emotion, and fear, than a bear or my goat, or even a chimp.

Well all right, it didn't necessarily make her more human than a true ape. But I gave up splitting such hairs as I stumbled down the mountainside into lowland Sinkiang. Cold mountain air's good for the brain. Human inhumanity's good for correcting your priorities. Runpok was right. We have one soul. Her trust and her love was a great and precious gift. If she was another living species of true human being then she was truly my sister; if she was a species even just one evolutionary step inferior, wasn't that the more reason to accept a duty to protect her? Wasn't that cause enough for the outrage and anger I was feeling? And the guilt?

I finally stopped thinking of her as only an animal; I finally awarded her human feelings and needs, and rights. I even realised how alike we were, she and I. Creatures of the wilderness, reclusive yet sometimes lonely, as hermits sometimes are. How I look forward to Menghi coming by, four or five times a year; how reluctantly I unclasp his hand as he leaves. Protective of our independence yet needing attachment, or companionship. I'd have said I didn't. I'd have said I was self-sufficient and indifferent. But in that case why was I here, on this bitter mountain, with my pockets full of bullets and my heart burning with rage? Burning with love.

To be contradictory is to be human. Animals, non-humans, are much more consistent and predictable. I'd left human society and lived like a wild man myself (well, a bit like one) only to reject the existence of the true wild man, and sit in the evening on my porch contemplating the meaning of life and the beauty of the sunset. Which isn't what wild men do at all. I could hear him saying it, in my mind's ear. She is your sister; you have one soul. I could picture her extending her arm, touching my fingers, looking me in the eye. They weren't an end in themselves, such acts. They were a beginning.

I should have realised, I should have accepted. If she'd been a cat I would have. I'd have fed her and given her an old fur for a bed. Yet elevating her to the status of a pet wasn't what was happening. Somehow, and who can tell how these transformations take place in the human mind (dare I say in the human heart?), somehow she became entirely human to me as I chased her across the snow. I could hear him saying it, Runpok, as if he were squatting up there on a cloud. Accept a great gift. And what is the greatest gift of all, after all?

❄

A storm on the last day obliterated their tracks. I wasn't lost though, it was obvious where they were heading. The Chinese town of Chung-wei, Kang-wiy as the nomads call it. Quite a big town, by the standards of this empty region. And the furthest (or nearest) trading post of the sub-Mongolian Chinese. They all come to Kang-wiy, from a vast region, at least once every couple of years, to trade, and to see what useful modern things like wirelesses or flashlights have turned up, and to buy long-term supplies. Like medicines. There was quite an underground in Kang-wiy too. We thought Langki-pei very un-Russian with its smattering of prostitutes and pickpockets. But in Kang-wiy every other comrade was a prostitute or a pickpocket, except the enterprising ones, who were smugglers and yak rustlers and drug dealers. Crime was its staple trade.

It wasn't difficult finding her once I was there. I didn't hurry, worried as I was that they'd hurt her. As with the start of my journey, its end was best approached with a cool head. I don't think they were clever enough to realise they'd been followed. They were too far ahead of me of course. I never saw them once, though their tracks were unmistakeable. Three of them, and a small barefoot person sometimes walking unaided, sometimes dragged. Flattened snow and a few scraps and turds here and there indicated their night-time bivouacs and their eating places. There was some reddish hair at one point, but there wasn't any blood on the trail at all, thank goodness. Really they should have posted a back marker, a couple of times on the way, to make absolutely sure I wasn't following. But I suppose it didn't cross their minds I'd do anything so foolish.

I booked into a sleazy dossing place cum brothel, very Chinese, lots of smoke and no privacy. I chose it deliberately. I asked openly where I could get Almas medicine, or Mummy. I was referred to various shady apothecaries. Eventually I asked one of them who looked particularly slimy where the wild man was that had recently been brought into town. You've come to the right man, he said, I'm well connected and know everyone. I only sell real Almas medicine, you can take my word for it, if you've got kopeks or dollars I'm your man. He plonked a big bag of it on the counter. Fresh, I said. I want it from the specimen that was recently brought from the high mountain. I want to see the living source. Then I'll have kopeks a-plenty (I rattled my pocket full of

bullets). I'm your man, he said, I'm very well connected. These people with the Almas are my relatives. Come back tomorrow and I'll have arranged something.

I suspect he wasn't my man at all, and didn't know about it. But he *was* well connected enough to find out, once he thought he could cream off some kopeks as middle-man. The next day he took me straight to them. They had no idea who I was, they were too stupid or confident to put two and two together or even to wonder. Why a scruffy caucasian, speaking nomad with a Russian accent, turned up only days after their return from their kidnapping expedition. One thing relieved me. They were freebooters, who'd had the idea for themselves. If they'd been commissioned by a mister big, or by one of those Koreans or Americans, she'd have been more difficult to get to.

But she was there, in their back shed. I knew. They said she was. But somehow I knew anyway. I made an excuse not to see her. For she'd almost certainly have recognised me and given me away. You don't expect me to have trusted a fat slob like Mr Sing do you? I said. I obviously didn't bring any cash in case he was taking me to his pickpocket friends for a working over. But I've got a big bag full in a safe place. I'll come back tomorrow.

I shall want to see him alive, mind you, this wild man you say you've got. Stuffed monkeys don't interest me, I want to see the living source. Then if he's real and alive I'm talking several kilos with a down-payment. Or are you going to milk him? They laughed. It's a she-Almas, they said, so we might well milk her. Or put her with a dog and get a breeding programme going. That'll make you millionnaires, I said. Though a dog won't do, unless she's a she-wolf. If she's real Almas you might have to do it yourselves. For what you pay those Chinese whores *you* can have her, one of them said. Then I shall want the pick of the litter, I said. They thought I was a very witty fellow, for a Russian.

I went back the next day with my rifle. I shot the first one clean dead without a word, and shoved the rifle under the chin of the other. He took me down to the shed and fumbled with the padlock, but as he was doing it my attention drifted and he grappled me. The rifle went off, into the air, and I had no choice but to drop it and wrestle with him. I'd been prepared for a fight, but it's not my forte. A shoot-out was more my style. It was very slow and grunty, and painful. Though I think I was fitter. I was taller, but I wouldn't have been stronger, in build, had it not been for my outdoor life on the mountain. Anyway, I was fit enough to outlast him. It's not like in movies: we rolled boringly to and fro until he just faded with fatigue.

I reloaded the rifle as he lay watching and I shot him twice in cold blood, and reloaded again. I don't regret it. Runpok frowns from his cloud. I was never expected in his heaven anyway. I'm not saying I

didn't feel bad, that's why I'm explaining. I stood over him as he bled to death. Unlike the first, he spent ten minutes gurgling. I stood over him with tears in my eyes and said in Russian You made me do this, you had no right to kidnap my ..., you just shouldn't have come to my house and taken my ... my Meu-ggen. He deserved it, they both did. I refuse to have nightmares over it. Bear in mind what horrific torture they were planning for her.

She was mewing quietly from the shed. She knew my voice. I kicked the door in. She was chained to the wall, from her neck. I couldn't get it off. I had to shoot it off the wall. She was terrified, but she followed me out with the chain hanging from her neck. I didn't know where the third kidnapper was, but I wasn't going to hang around to kill him. We went over the back wall and headed out of town. I'd brought most of my kit from the doss-house and left it in the alley. Within minutes we were well up the mountain.

I couldn't get the noose and chain off her, not without hurting her. Once we were on the scree I broke the chain with a stone, rather than frighten her by shooting again. So at least it didn't drag on the ground. But I felt very bad about not being able to remove it altogether. I think she understood, she knew I was trying my best. But walking beside me with a chain round her neck didn't seem right. I kept telling her I'd got tools at home, I'd get it off her the moment we got home, she'd never ever be chained again. And then I'd make her a true necklace, from the beautiful stones she'd brought me. A quartz-diamond necklace like the nomads make ... as a love token.

I vowed it to her and I vowed it to myself. I'd make the necklace as a penance. For not valuing her companionship and devotion before. For her having to walk home with a chain round her neck. You'll find it hard to believe how angry and guilty it made me feel. I sat on a rock after my last attempt and wept. Of course I was emotionally disoriented and drained by what I'd done, the shooting, the fight, the whole adventure. The point where the adrenalin that's carried you ebbs away and you just fall to pieces. But I think my rage against this chain was real enough. Exaggerated as it seems, I'm not ashamed to find revulsion and remorse in my heart at the idea of a human creature in a chain.

I pledged over and over that I'd replace it with a necklace of love-stones if it was the last thing I did. In truth I didn't think I'd live long enough even for that. I don't know if perhaps I'd sustained an internal injury from the fight. I felt very unwell and increasingly weakened on the journey back, much more than I'd have expected from the psychological backlash alone. I shivered with cold and nerves, and slept only fitfully. By the third night Meu-ggen was hugging me. We weren't as well equipped going back of course, what with our hurried departure and now our sluggish pace. Perhaps I'd not planned and prepared as well as I ought. Our food supplies were soon exhausted.

There was nothing much to hunt on the barren slopes, though I wasn't in a fit state to hunt anyway. Meu-ggen, an expert forager of course, came up with handfulls of grass and roots, so that's what we ate.

She wasn't cold of course, the cold never affected her much. But she was hungry. And although I was relieved that her trust of me hadn't been ruined by her experience, she was nervous too, forever looking back, as if she thought they, or someone, might come after us. I was worried about that as well. Not so much the third kidnapper or their cronies, as the authorities. If there was any law in Kang-wiy (and in China there always is) they would take a dim view, whoever the victims and whatever the reason, of a Russian invading their country with rifle blazing and murdering two of their enterprising citizens.

❄

By the time I was telling Menghi, months later, I'd recovered from my illness and was making myself sound like John Wayne in righteous vengeance. If you tell it a few more times they'll make a Hong Kong movie of it, he said. I'll re-tell it for you in the winter tents all across the plateau. Before long, it'll be one of our myths. It's not a myth, it's a legend, I said. You're still the faculty pedant at heart, he said, even after killing Chinamen and marrying a Yeti. It's a good story though, my friend. You did the right thing.

I hope Runpok is saying so too, I thought. That couldn't conceivably have been what he intended, could it? He could never have anticipated such an improbable thing. Or could he? You see, all my agonised musings on the way there, on my way to rescue her, came good when we got back. I never once had second thoughts. Helped by my initial wrestlings with the chain, and my disproportionate guilt at having to leave it in place (I cut it off the instant we got home, and then collapsed); helped by sheer necessity, the need to huddle for warmth at night on the journey back; and finally clinched by my feverish illness once we were home: the ordeal brought us together. Emotionally and physically together.

For she cooperated. As I've implied, she abandoned her customary aloofness. As I abandoned mine. That, of course, is an interesting point. It was me needed the warmth. Kishi-kiyik need it in some measure, that's why they make hollows in the ground or in the snow. But I'm sure she clung to me at night on our way back, and continued to do so through the worst weeks of my illness, not because *she* was cold but because she knew I was, and unwell, and that the cold was worse for me. Potentially fatal: she may well have saved my life. The more I think of it the more sure I am, that she knew what she was doing. And the more it confirms my conviction that she is essentially human too, that emotionally and intellectually she is more human than any animal ... Or was. And that she loved me.

She was shy of everyone but me, of course. But my occasional visitors were often aware of her. I think the locals have a sensitivity to them, a kind of sixth sense about the proximity of Kishi-kiyik. An ancestral instinct perhaps, for they've lived in parallel here for thousands of years. Or perhaps it's just the smell. But Menghi got gifts. Because he was my special friend (I must attribute some perceptiveness to her in noticing it) she'd emerge at some point, as we smoked by the fire and he told one of his tales. She'd creep in, and place a vegetable or a coloured stone near his foot. Then scuttle quickly off. He felt very honoured. For thousands of years his ancestors had seen only their backsides, he said. Or that distant figure sloping across the snowfield that so fascinates you westerners.

I didn't persuade her to take up residence. She couldn't bear smoke or heat, or stay in a room warmed by a fire. She was a little afraid of fire, as most ani— wild creatures are; but really she just preferred fresh air. I'm sure she didn't like to be cooped up either, walls and roof were alien to her. But it was all OK, we were happy with our existence. She living partly indoors and partly out, me having my fire and cooked meals (and my smoke). She joined me when warm afternoons and amber sunsets are followed by those blissfully cool nights where coolness is as welcome and comfortable as warmth. Or sometimes, occasionally, I joined her, out in the cold in her hollow. I did what the nomads do, I took off my clothes and coated myself in yak's grease. She found it quite sexy.

Marriage is something two people do out here, for the most part. I mean, you don't usually bother with a priest or a petty commissar. It's not taken lightly though, the nomads aren't promiscuous. But who needs a certificate from Langki-pei? Menghi's uncle says. He has several tents full of wives. They're all faithful, Menghi says, and Uncle's faithful to them all. He's considered a wealthy man among the nomads because of how many wives and yaks he's got. If one of them strays, and another man finds it, he can keep it. But the next time he sees Menghi's uncle he must give him something in return. And that's divorce. Menghi has a wife in Langki-pei, but she doesn't travel with him. Do you trust her, leaving her for long seasons in that den of vice? I gave her a beautiful necklace of love-stones, he replies, inscrutably. Then adds But not so beautiful as the one your wife has.

Nor so arduously wrought. I imagine he bought his from a widower (it's bad luck to buy them from a woman). I sat for thousands of hours, polishing and carefully boring thin holes in the white and yellowish stones that Meu-ggen had gathered for me, splintering quite a few, usually at the very last minute, just as you break through. And threading the survivors one by one on to a string of nylon that I cannibalised from an old sleeping bag. You won't believe me but I never once lost patience, I never once got fed up. I did the whole thing in the spirit I'd vowed. I did it in penance, for members of my species desecrating her with a chain; and I did it in the spirit the nomads do, in

their romantic tales anyway. I did it in love. I did it as an act of dedication, a token of marriage.

I'm convinced now, nothing can move me from the conviction, that every single stone she gathered and brought me was a deliberate gesture of love and devotion on her part. Every single stone I polished and bored and strung was a deliberate gesture of love and devotion on mine. Finally the year or more of labour saw her wearing her necklace. She wore it proudly. Now if she'd been an animal, wild and unfettered all her life, except for those terrible days spent in chains, she'd not have liked it. If she'd had the soul of a wild animal and not a human soul, she'd not have understood. She'd not have been pleased by it. Animals don't grasp symbolism. She'd not have comprehended the meaning of it.

See it as a test, if you don't like my romantic angle. See it as a psychological test, a Turing test of her humanity. Testing the question, whether she has a mind nearer to human than any wild animal. She wore it always and she treasured it. Take my word for it – she knew exactly what it meant. She stroked it with her slender childlike fingers. When I touched it, when I stroked her hairy neck, she mewed sweetly, knowing the next thing I was going to do was place my mouth upon her mouth. Which is something else animals don't particularly do, I think I'm right in saying. Kissing was not in the least familiar to her. But she got the hang of it. She wasn't very good at it; and to be frank she was so smelly I had to close my eyes and hold my breath to do it. At first anyway. But I wanted to do it nonetheless. Because I wanted her to know, or perhaps I wanted myself to know, or possibly I wanted the spirit of Runpok that watches over us to know – that I accepted her as my sister in humanity, my soul-mate, my wife.

You'll want to know details, intimate things. I accept you'll want to know, in the name of science at least. She was capable, with some coaxing or when relaxed, of lying on her back. And curiously enough the first time, the occasion we consummated our love (which I suppose was therefore our wedding night), we did it that way. Because it happened by accident, really, as she lay with me during my illness, a week or so after we got back. It occurred naturally, when she was more than usually relaxed and I'd been a little feverish. Except for her hairiness there seemed nothing abnormal about it. Like the little Chinawomen in Langki-pei and Kang-wiy, she was affectionately submissive but not terribly excited.

I wondered later whether she'd understood what had happened, the true import of it. My question was answered a few days later, when she presented, as zoologists say. Yes, you're right, she did have a certain animal preference in that respect. She preferred it from behind. Her natural or instinctive expectation was on all fours with her bum wiggling at me. It was one of the least hairy parts of her, and quite an attractive one, as far as I could judge or even remember what human

bums look like. It doesn't make her an animal: human frontal coitus, which I think is unique among mammals, evolved late, after adoption of the permanently upright posture. And is optional anyway. I don't care what you think of it. As far as I'm concerned nothing we did was improper, it was all perfectly nice, as between loving and consenting humans. I've not the slightest qualm or regret.

It *was* nice, it wasn't difficult or awkward. We fitted together perfectly. If our souls were one, so were our bodies. I liked it best when she relaxed down on her front, rather than staying on hands and knees. It's the peculiarly human wish for mating to be accompanied by affection, which can better be expressed when there's fuller bodily contact. Which again most animals don't do. She showed every sign of liking it, the sex *and* the affection. Though I don't claim to be a great lover. I'm a simple sort: and I couldn't have wished for a better wife.

When she became pregnant I was thrilled. A whole new prospect opened. Not just of becoming (as I'd never expected, nor wanted particularly) a father and a family man. But the stranger prospect of founding an entirely new species of people. Of breeding the first recorded (I can hardly believe the first, having discovered how compatible humans and Kishi-kiyik can be), but anyway the first definitely recorded and authenticated hybrid of modern human and wild man. But if that's not profound enough in the annals of anthropology and evolution, it has a further significance.

The very fact that she became pregnant by me, and that the pregnancy was successful, proves our kinship. I don't think humans can fertilise chimps or gorillas, our other nearest relatives. I suppose it's seldom been tried in the wild (so to speak), but scientifically I think it's an accepted species diagnostic. So Meu-ggen is either entirely human (I mean a feral human, an ugly hairy dumb woman) or she's a nearer genetic relative than anthropology or zoology have yet acknowledged. Kishi-kiyik must indeed be Remnant Hominids, descendants of the Neanderthal, or Misssing Link, or Palaeoanthropus and the various other names they give them in theory. For since Runpok saw her from babyhood with her wild-man parents, and her key differences are physical, nature not nurture, the conclusion is obvious. Science must accept that there is another hominid species sharing remote bits of our planet, that Kishi-kiyik are a parallel species of homo in their own right. Unless my years in the faculty were wasted and they taught me nonsense, the plain fact is that Meu-ggen could not have borne me a child otherwise.

The characteristics and period of her pregnancy were entirely normal. Her small, hairless breasts enlarged and looked very nice. She knew what was going on and seemed pleased and proud. We patted her tummy, and squeaked or giggled when its occupant kicked. At nine months as near as matters she went into labour, without difficulty. She wanted to have the cub in her hollow by the goat-pen. She herself had

filled it with grass and moss, so that it was warm and cushioned. She gave birth in a squatting position. I stayed with her all the time, held her hand and stroked her. She severed the umbilical with her teeth, and licked the cub as it attached to her breast. I helped by washing it a little with warmed water. It was very small and very cute, and hairless. Except for which, it looked more like her side of the family.

I slept with her in the hollow the first night following. I slept in my own bed the next night, and when I came to her in the morning she wasn't feeling very well. I couldn't really tell what was wrong. The cub fed happily. Meu-ggen had been eating whatever I brought her, the things she normally liked. I wondered about diet or belly-ache, or even post-natal depression. But it must have been something more serious. By the following night she was obviously very ill. I fed fresh goat's milk from a bag to Meu-meu in order to let Meu-ggen sleep undisturbed. I stayed with them of course. I don't know what more I could have done. Sleep is often good medicine ... She died in her sleep towards dawn at the end of the third night after Meu-meu was born. In my arms, quietly and painlessly, after hours of gentle sleeping.

I could almost see Runpok up on his cloud, directing the heavens. For the moment she died it began snowing. Gentle fluffy snow, not the harsh kind. Within minutes we were all covered in beautiful cool forgiving whiteness. I carried my beloved wife to my bed indoors. And there she still lay, surrounded by ice to keep her from decaying, when V. P. Kadzhikin and my friends from the faculty arrived. I took the cub indoors too, at first, but soon realised she was better in the straw of the goat-pen pretending to be a baby goat. She (and the goat) took to the arrangement readily, and she's very well and growing quite chubby. And hairy: gingery hair all over her body. So I think she takes after me after all.

And that is our story. That's the story I told V. P. Kadzhikin and Serge Josefovich and Sasha Ivanovna, before letting them see Meu-ggen, examine her, measure her, and take some samples. Before letting them take photographs. Before asking them to photograph us together. Then they helped me bury her, and stood a while with me, hatless in the wind on the mountainside. They were very respectful. I've allowed myself rather more personal comment in telling you, of course. And I've included the one little thing I left out or adjusted for them. I thought it better to tell them Meu-meu had gone with Menghi to be reared by the lactating woman. Who knows where they are now, in a tent seventy miles up the mountain? Perhaps that way, or perhaps over in that direction, I said, with an unconcerned shrug.

I shall never see my comrades from Leningrad again. But I have given them unique and important information. I have not been disloyal, I have not let them down. They have departed very pleased with their discovery. Leaving me with my memories, and a few mementoes. And a little grave on the hillside. I never thought about it before, in all the

time I've lived in these wilds. But now I know my destiny. That's where I shall lie too. Menghi perhaps, or perhaps you, coming upon me one spring morning on the slope, slumped under my big fur coat, I trust will bury me alongside her. That is my only wish. I visit her most days, though I don't dawdle. I put down an unripe tomato, or a little stone I've been polishing, and go on my way.

Sometimes I'm carrying a bundle in my arms. For I have something else I never thought of when I exiled myself here. Something I never expected in my wildest dreams. Our bequest to the world. A great gift indeed. How exceptional, how lucky you are, my beautiful daughter, to have been conceived in such a love, in such a rare union. To have had parents who reached out to each other across the greatest of barriers ...

You'll understand when you're older. It's just a fairy story to you now, it lulls you to sleep. But you'll come to see how momentous it is, how special you are. And I hope you'll be proud. Or anyway, I hope you'll forgive us. And keep our memory. And treasure the photograph, as I do. The photograph I so wanted. More than anything else that's what I wanted, somehow, after she died. A photograph of your mum and I together. My brief companion in the wilderness. It's a nice photograph. It's a pity they didn't come sooner, but you can't really tell. It wasn't too far into the spring. You can hardly tell.

❄

Note

This story was inspired by reading the book *The Yeti* by Odette Tchernine (London, 1970), which particularly highlights the Russian investigations and evidence. It had been recommended to me as the best book on the subject (in conjunction I suppose with its companions *The Snowman and Company* and *In Pursuit of the Abominable Snowman*, 1961 and 1971), and I was looking forward to reading it because the writer is someone I admire as a poet. On that score I was sorely disappointed – it's one of the most badly-written and scrappy books I've ever read. Yet its contents are hauntingly fascinating, and remain so whether one feels convinced of the underlying premise or not. So in spite of my disappointment I think I would still dedicate the story to Odette Tchernine (c.1897-1992; pronounced churnin); leastways I've given her name to a beautiful lake mentioned in it. The notion that there are 131 different names for the legendary wild people comes from her book too, they are listed on pages 173-181. Kishi-kiyik is one of a number of variants or pronunciations in the language of the Kirghiz and Kazakh republics of the former USSR and in the dialect of the nomads of that region, and means literally 'wild man'. Almas is the more common name in Mongolian (Albast its variant among Kazakh nomads), and seems to have no literal meaning, though it's also used of demons and witches. Mao-zhyn is Chinese as spoken on the borders of

USSR/Mongolia, literally ‘hairy man’. Kang-mi is one of the names in Tibetan, literally ‘snow man’, and this is the origin of the familiar English name: being sometimes prefixed Mech or similar, which was thought to mean horrible or disgusting or stinking, it was translated with perfect polite Englishness as ‘abominable’ (it transpires that the prefix is not actually part of the name, implying it was a Tibetan swearword – who’s footprint’s that? it’s the effing snowman!). And Yeti is anglicised from the common term used in Nepalese. Gen means ‘woman’. The Indian saying which I’ve adapted as “I spied on the mountainside ...” appears on page 12 of Odette Tchernine’s book. Some idea of life among the mountain nomads of these regions wafted into the story from entirely different sources, including the travel and anthropological parts of John Noel’s 1924 documentary film *The Epic of Everest*. Though my story is set much further west in a region somewhat north of the western end of the Himalaya, in south-east Kazakhstan, where the peasants and nomads almost universally believe in the existence of Kishi-kiyik, a parallel hominid species of wild people of the snowy mountains. The description of pseudo-medicinal practices including quack medicines purporting to be made of ‘mummy’ (etc) and the horrifically cruel ‘milking’ of live bears is also, I’m sorry to say, factual. The ‘faculty pedant’ in me wants to append a glossary of the hierarchy of confusing zoological terms – human, homo, hominid, anthropoid, great ape, ape, primate, monkey, etc – but I’ve resisted; the root of the urge is that I fear they may come across as a random jumble, but in fact I’ve tried to use each one correctly in each instance where I use it.

❄

 2009/5