

LINDA HODSON

## MAKING HORSE BLANKETS IN THE HIMALAYAS

This is a tale of horses and horsemen, and the sewing of blankets and bonds. In a land of riven stone, scorched and barbed like the spines of dragons, raised in homage to the sun. It is a tale of encounters with monks and shepherds, garbed in dusty cloaks. And dancing the seasons of reaping and sowing with village women in ancestral robes.

In the July of 1993, my travelling companions and myself, along with our horseman and his four horses walked the remote valleys of the Greater Himalayan Range, where the jut of India reaches out towards Tibet; following the Zankar valley, via Alchi to Leh. From Leh, we took the Ghadi route over the high plains of Rupshu to the ‘good grass’ of Marhi, as Ramesh, our horseman, liked to say.

Marhi is a summer grazing pasture for horses, thick with ‘good’ grass. It is fertile ground for a story that weaves memories of clothes and, in particular, of making horse blankets for Tiku, Lilu, Kalu and Titu, with encounters with horses and horsemen, monks, monasteries, and white wolves, in a land of mountain gods.

### WELL PAST MIDWAY

It was a rest day, and one well-deserved. We had been walking for ten days, through snow-storms and white-outs, ears wringing with wind. But today the sun was out; the snow melting and the horses were already halfway along the valley nosing up stones, on the lookout for unwary sprigs of grass.

Ramesh emerged from his shelter, a little tousled but smiling at the sight of the sun. He unfurled the swathe of horse blankets from which he had made his bed, slinging them over the saddles that formed the backbone of his canvas tent.

“Good day for resting” he said, taking his seat in the middle and priming the kerosene stove for the first coffee of the day.

“Coffee?” Yarron croaked, emerging from his corner of the shepherd shelter, roused by the waft of kerosene. He was bundled in his bedding; a pair of horse blankets dangling from his shoulders to the seat of his pants. The dank woollen beanie jammed down on his forehead was not quite able to hold the furl of curls that had unwound themselves overnight.

“How was your sleep Yarron?” Conor asked. “No icicles?”

This brought a chortle from Ramesh who was searching for coffee in amongst the crumbs. He pulled out a cucumber missing a sizeable part of its head and wiggled an accusatory finger at Titu, the baby mule, who had her head under a rock

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nearby. Titu had a thing for cucumbers, although she would bite the head off a carrot in a pinch.

“Ha” Yarron said. “I like this shelter, the rocks are very warm. Much warmer than my sleeping bag.” He looked at the decapitated cucumber, and grinned. “Even my mouth is not that big.”

Everyone laughed. It was good to see Yarron waking without frost on his beard. Despite advising Yarron of the need for a good sleeping bag and tent before our departure from Leh, he had opted for an Indian army bag at the bargain price of ten American dollars and had wheedled a place in Ramesh’s tent. Unfortunately, the rain had started the first day out of Hemis, followed by snow-storms that had yet to abate. A bright icy crust took root on the mountains and spread over the valleys, forming a patina of violet white.

Yarron’s faith in his purchase was quickly undermined and he pronounced the Indian army bag as a “little no good,” borrowing a phrase from Ramesh. Beads of ice clung to the side of his nostrils and the beanie that he slept in had frozen solid enough to set to his curls. Our tent wouldn’t hold a third person but he had Conor’s down jacket for sleeping and a stash of horse-blankets that Ramesh didn’t need.

After a breakfast of hand-made chappatis and Ramesh’s best fiery dhal, Yarron headed down river to bathe. His first yelp brought a wry look from Ramesh, who raised his brow at the struggling sun that had barely peaked over the ridge. Ramesh put the pot on for more coffee and set to clearing a patch of stony earth of its more serious rocks. He spread out one of the old horse blankets over the top and deposited another bundle of blankets close to his seat, setting down his horseman’s pouch.

“What’s in the bag?” Conor asked, as Ramesh pulled out a package, carefully spreading the contents on the covered ground. A length of cotton was revealed, tightly woven, yet soft to the hand, embroidered with twisting lines; in bright red and blue, interspersed with spangles and little crescent moons.

“It’s beautiful” I said. “So, what are you making?”

“Horse blankets” he replied, pulling out one of the stitched blankets that softened the load on their backs. “This one old now, a little no good. I buy best material to make blankets for horses.”

Conor and I offered to help with the sewing, and Ramesh seemed pleased. We had come to love his crazy horses and their errant deeds.

Over the months of walking, I had come to know ‘our’ horses as ‘people,’ along with the subtleties of their language, with its shooshes, urrrghes, and clicks. Ramesh was an expert, having become his own horseman at twelve years of age. At our very first meeting, it was his shooshing and uurgghing that coaxed them out of the “good grass” of Marhi into a less inviting enclosure where food sacks, sleeping gear and more packs lay in wait. Ramesh had been apprenticed in horse lore by his father, with whom he had walked these mountains from a young age; learning each step of the routes, along with the best campsites; those places where good grass could always be found. His father had died when Ramesh was twelve and left him his horses. Tiku was boss then, as he was now. Nothing got past Tiku.

“You shopped up big” I said, as Ramesh took a bag out that held needles the size of dessert forks, along with a spool of thick looking thread, wax coated to keep the stitches strong and fresh. He unwrapped another package of ribbed red ribbon for trimming, along with plaits and tassles in assorted hues.

Ramesh grinned, taking out his giant scissors. “This very good season; good money for family and horses. Maybe next year I buy another mule, like Titu.”

“How much does a mule cost?”

“Maybe thirty two thousand rupees for young one,” Ramesh said, using the old horse blanket as a pattern to cut out the padding for the new blankets. He folded the old ones and laid them over each other to form a pad of swaddling for the horses backs and side flanks. “Mule very smart. Maybe even smarter than Tiku.” He added, turning to check that Tiku was out of earshot.

Once the padding for the new blankets was cut, Ramesh spent some time pondering the best way to cut four matching horses blankets from the lovely cotton without spoiling the symmetry. Finding the main run of the pattern, he took out the other horse blankets and laid them out in a loose square.

By this stage, Yarron had come back from his drubbing and let off another squeal of fright. Seeing Ramesh cutting up the old horse blankets had raised his concerns about freezing to death during the night. Ramesh reassured him that there was no need to worry; there were plenty more horse-blankets to warm his bed. At this, Yarron relaxed and wrapped himself in one that Ramesh proffered, declaring the river the same temperature as his sleeping bag; just above freezing to death.

“You spent long enough in there” Conor remarked, and Yarron laughed pointing at his wet locks of hair.

“You try washing this” he said. “I also washed my clothes. They were on my nose. I could hear my mother saying: ‘Yarron you filthy boy, I bring you up better than this.’”

Yarron had a particular talent for impressions of his mother and her reactions to his trek. He had told us that he hadn’t called to tell her he was going on a thirty day journey in the remote Himalayas with two people and a horseman he’d only just met. He called a friend of the family and asked them to tell his mother a few weeks after he had left.

“I do this so I don’t have to face the yelling down the phone” he said. “When I get back to Israel, my mother will make me a special room and put in those books that tell you about everything – what do you call them?”

“Encyclopedias” Conor offered.

“And when I say I want to go on a trip somewhere, she will say, ‘What is point of taking this trip, I buy you encyclopedia. You can read everything, no need to leave Israel.’” Yarron had nestled himself down near the blanket parade that Ramesh was cutting and looked on with interest.

“What are we sewing?” he asked, picking up one of the needles. “Giant’s pyjamas?”

“Horse-blankets” I said, holding up the cloth Ramesh bought in Leh.

“I can help too,” Yarron offered. “Just not with the sewing; I am no good at this. My mother can tell you; useless, she says. You call when you need help. I am off

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to make a clothes horse. There are no places to hang clothes in this valley; so you will see soon my ingeniousness with the sticks.”

Ramesh had finished cutting the blankets and had the material now ready to fold over the top. He took out a little wallet made of cotton where he kept rows of stout long legged pins. Laying the embroidered cloth over the layers of blankets, he folded one side over the top. I pinned, while he held until we had all sides tucked in. When I asked whether we should set out all four horse blankets in the same way, he shook his head. It was almost lunch time and more grey clouds were gathering to the south.

“Maybe more snow coming tonight” he said. “Horses not going BBBBBSSHHH after grass.” He flicked his hand in an imitation of a naughty horse making a run for it.

This was a portent of bad weather coming, as the horses were apt to go BBBBBSSHH whenever the chance was at hand; Tiku and Titu had both perfected it and could get into the nearest field of barley in the blink of an eye. Our very first morning, Ramesh had lined up Tiku, the lead horse, for packing, telling us that he was always first to be packed, because then Lilu and Kalu and, on most occasions, Titu would fall into line. However, this was the first trek of the season and Tiku, no doubt, knew what was coming, the pile of bags at hand was a sure sign.

When Ramesh lowered the bridle and looked him in the eye, Tiku seized that slip of a moment to make his first attempt at flight; pulling his nose back sharply so Ramesh lost his hold. It took Ramesh some time to catch Tiku and coax him back to the fold. Seeing that more mutiny was likely in sight, Ramesh assigned Conor and Stewart to each side of Tiku’s bridle, while he secured the padding. The padding consisted of old horse blankets –folded over so that they covered each horse’s back and hung down the side to protect their flanks from rubbing where the load took hold. Over the top of these went the ‘proper’ horse blankets; those that we were making; with their fine layer of top cloth and thicker padding for settling the little wooden saddle atop.

The saddles were not for riding but securing the ropes around the loads on each horse’s side. Ramesh took his time weighting the sacks and roping them into a kind of double sling – to ensure an even load. This was important for balance and comfort; uneven loads could cause the horse to stumble and fall. This knowledge of weights and balance had worked its way into Ramesh’s hands. He had no scales or machines to learn from or work with, but an intimate knowledge of each horse and its ways of carrying a load.

Still, the horses were easily startled, with Kalu the most likely to resist reassurance and take sudden flight. On the way to Alchi, the trail had not been difficult to find, not having been walked for two seasons. Then the valley narrowed, and the path rose, cutting through a steep wall of rock that fell straight down to the river below. In places, it became thin and unstable, but Ramesh would continue as long as he led with Tiku and we kept up with the other horses following behind.

This worked fine until we rounded on a rock that jutted out level with the horses sacks. Ramesh edged Tiku around it and was on his way back to walk the others

one by one when Kalu took fright. He rushed at the corner, catching his load on the jut, and bouncing, front feet first, over the edge. Ramesh reacted quickly grabbing his rope from behind while Stewart got the end of his tail in time. Together they pulled Kalu up before he spun over the side. There followed intense discussion, unloading and a reversing of tack and it was some ten hours later before we were able to camp for the night, all sore and shaken, but thankful the horses were alright.

Yarron had finished his clothes horse and brought it over for praise. It was an edifice of skeletal twigs, with two sticks wedged in their fork joints at either end. A fifth stick sagged in the middle under the weight of his dripping jeans. He declared it a testimony to his training in the Israeli army and, catching the end of the previous conversation, asked anxiously.

“You think more snow is coming?”

Ramesh nodded, pointing to the horses who had edged further towards camp, and were watching us intently in their nonchalant manner.

“Horses no going BBBBBRRSSH, no good weather coming, maybe.” Ramesh liked to put a maybe at the end of his statements, not just as an out in case things did not come to fruition, but also as a kind of comforter that bad news was not always certain, with the effect that any utterance of maybe was taken as a sure sign.

The possibility of snow spurred on the sewing, with Conor and Ramesh brandishing their needles and Yarron and myself left to supply the coffee and tea. The conversation turned back to the topic of the horses and their BBBBBRRSSHing, of which Yarron had, as yet not had the same opportunity to see.

Ramesh looked up from his stitching. It was small and very neat. He was feeding the needle in through the cloth he had folded over and tucked up a little to make an even hem. He secured the thread through the square of blanket that covered the underside and began sewing in a tight cross stitch. Conor was following instructions and doing okay, not quite as tidy as Ramesh’s fine stitching but it looked better than expected, and Ramesh was pleased.

“If Tiku say ‘BBBBRRSSH,’ all going ‘BBBBRRSSH,’” Ramesh observed. “If Tiku no go, all stay.”

We had learned this the first night of trekking, after walking over the Rhotang Pass, into the barren beauty of Lahual. No more forests of spruce and Kharsa oak, but stones cast in monumental hues. We camped in a patch of rocks, musing up the intense silence with our raggedy breathing, while the horses snorted unhappily. Ramesh had tied them up for the night, securing a rope through their bridles to a large immovable rock.

“Must tying, especially Tiku.” Ramesh had informed us, securing Tiku’s rope first and foremost. “Otherwise horses go BBBRRSSH.”

Going BBBBBRRSSH, though, was not just something the horses did close to home, or when there was particularly good grass to be had in a previous camp, they also went BBBBBRRSSH, when there was a temptation like a barley field at hand. This had happened when Ramesh was at the Likir monastery, undertaking puja as he regularly did.

“They went BBBBBRRSSH at Likir” I said, as Ramesh handed his needle to Yarron for a refill of thread. “Ramesh went to the gampa with Stewart and Shona,

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and Conor and I were left on guard. We were having a quiet wash, with our eyes on the horses, who were munching their way up the bank. We only took our eye off for a split second but the next thing you know they were bolting for the barley, with Titu out in the lead.”

“The best bit was watching Conor” I added, with a grin. “He took off after them barefoot and they ran while he chased, until I lost sight. Then, suddenly I see the horses running in the opposite direction with Conor stumbling and yelling behind, like an old farmer Joe, stubbing all of his toes.”

“That bugger, Tiku, gave me the slip,” Conor said, shaking his head. “I was getting up close when he turned and charged, taking off with the others up the path of stones. My toes got a good kicking. And I know he did it deliberately.”

“How did you catch them?”

“Linda ran for Ramesh and he came running-fast.” Conor replied, rolling his eyes. “Having your horses chomp up a field of barley doesn’t make you a popular guy. Ramesh cornered Tiku from the other side. Anyway, they got their come uppence; they all got tied that night.” Conor gave Tiku a miffed look.

Tiku looked up, hearing his name. He snorted at Conor and went back to chewing his grass.

The afternoon passed quickly, with the retelling of escapades of horses intermixed with those of women and men, while Conor and Ramesh sewed the new fronts onto two horse-blankets. Ramesh rewarded us with chapattis for dinner and dangled the promise of puris at our next rest stop. He hoped to have the blankets all sewn up and sequinned so that he could show off his horses before our trek came to an end.

By late afternoon, the clouds had regrouped and a thin sleet began to fall. Yarron took his clothes horse into the shepherds’ shelter, as his jeans were not yet fully dry and the horses, who had gorged themselves to a standstill, turned into mournful statues, beads of moisture glistening on their manes.

#### SNOW STORMS AND WOLVES

The next day was dark and drizzling and we started out late. No-one, horses included, liked walking in the thickening rain. We all set out in our layers; that we usually shed. Yarron was in jacket and beanie and Ramesh in the layer of blankets with which he began the day; wound over his head and shoulders, to the letter of the horseman’s code. By mid-morning, a slim smiling man would emerge in long pants, shirt and a horseman’s vest; a home-made knit, thin but warming on the chest.

That morning though, the cold was determined; and a grim wind whipped up the valley heading for the pass, so there was no unravelling of layers, just more tucking up as the morning grew dark. The air crackled and stiffened and the sky had a spectral hue; there was no sign of rock on the mountains; from the peaks down to the river, the slopes were vested in white. Yarron was truly delighted and scrambled up a small incline. Declaring himself in a snow desert, he set about some impromptu sledding, using his parka as a ride. This didn’t bode well for later,

when his Parka turned stiff with ice. Ramesh was still coming with the horses, who had to be urged through the snow. The valley floor kept on rising and the whiteness roared up ahead, lashed by purple wellings of sky. In the midst of my steps, I felt eyes upon me, and turned towards the slope on my right; on a near ridge a white wolf waited, its coat merging into snow, still and almost invisible, except for the green flash of eyes. He looked at us for a moment and then he was gone; taking off up the mountains as quietly as he had come.

That night we camped on top of a bluff of earth that rose up from the valley floor. Although it was flanked by a high ridge, a steep ravine separated us from its walls. Ramesh was thinking of his horses, after hearing of our encounter with the wolf. He was taking no chances, he would tie them all and keep them close. Although the horses were much stronger and bigger than any wolf, Ramesh said that wolves were clever and could kill large horses in packs.

“Wolves coming like this, horses running” Ramesh said, demonstrating their mode of attack with his hands. “Wolves chase horses up mountains and run from every side, until horses fall off.”

In the days that followed, the weather eased, returning the sun to the valleys; that, for the first time in a long time, were home to some thickets of spindly trees. We met a wandering shepherd who was herding his goats downstream. He had taken shelter in an abandoned hut, waiting out the rain and snow. He warned us of wolves up the mountains in the valleys beyond. In one of the shepherds’ summer camps some goats had been taken and a dead horse had been found.

Wolf talk gave Ramesh the shivers so we walked further than intended over valleys and bluffs until we reached a place where the vale opened into an eddy of streams. Patches of bristling plants grew on their edges, yellow fronds hanging low, fanning out across the pebbles, at the behest of the wind. A wide blue horizon stretched in every direction and Ramesh called a rest day.

We rose early, knowing there was lots of stitching to do. Ramesh and Conor had to sew the covers on the last two blankets, while I stitched the brocade, which had to be pinned round the edges and sewn tightly on either side. This suited my fingers, as did the size of the needle I would have to wield. The brocade was of shiny red cotton, ribbed on its top size. It looked perfect with the material Ramesh had selected; with its red spangles and crescents of silver blue.

Yarron was in charge of the tassles and sewing them on after I had finished the brocade. Ramesh chose the tassles well; giving Tiku a blue royal enough for a king, and forest green for Lilu to befit her steady temperament. Kalu’s tassles were smaller in greedy shades of gold, while Titu would be resplendent in stormy indigo blue.

We started after breakfast; one of Ramesh’s special treats, fresh puris made from besan flour that puffed up like crispy mits. After kneading the dough, he spun little balls with the palm of his hands, then flattened them with his fingertips before dipping them in boiling oil. I was in charge of the rescue; of pulling them out so that they were crisp but flaky on the inside. There was an accompanying sambal, made from dhal and chilli and mustard seeds, that was so delicious Yarron begged

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for more. But he would be rewarded on the provision that he made a good job of sewing on the tassles by the end of the day.

By mid-morning, we had found our rhythm for sewing; hypnotised by the land. I felt the mountains in my fingertips and the river in my hands. I have never enjoyed sewing as much as I did that day, but then I have never enjoyed eating as I have under rafts of stars, or washing clothes in mountain streams. It feels like a kind of a freedom: I have never felt that way about a washing machine.

#### OF MONKS AND MONASTERIES

Yarron broke my reflections, asking for advice on how to stitch the tassles so you couldn't see the thread. I showed him how to tuck the thread at the join and he said,

"I am so glad I come here. It is something you cannot imagine, not in picture books or TV. No matter what my mother says."

"No."

"But you know, here there are no monasteries. Tell me about the ones you see."

"Phuctal is magic." Conor responded. "Just the way it stands in the cliff like an old King's lair."

"It's like a giant nest made of honeycomb," I said, adding a little flair. "You take a side valley up the Sarap River, about halfway between Darcha and Padum."

"No good path for horses," Ramesh said. "I no go, I take horses to the camp."

"Yes." Conor remarked. "You told us about your cousin's shortcut on the other side of the river, just a bit around the bend. Good path, you said. It was like a wall of moving shale with a couple of footsteps thrown in."

Ramesh looked sheepish and shook his head. "I never go, but other way, long long way to camp."

"But we got to cross the river on a rope bridge" I said, sticking up for Ramesh. "That was a feat of engineering, just like Yarron's clothes horse, shaky as you please."

"Ha!" Yarron retorted, pretending injured pride. "What about Phuctal?"

"It's a labyrinth" I said. "With monks in red robes and floppy hats, popping out of little hidden doors. There are tunnels winding up the mountain, joining libraries and schoolrooms and lots of lama's cells."

"The monks I see have amazing faces" Yarron said. "They look like those magic men. What do you call them?"

"Wizards" I replied, knowing exactly what he meant.

"We had tea with one of the high lamas that Stewart had met along the way" Conor said, remembering bit by bit. Stewart and Shona were Buddhists and they shared that bond with the monks we met.

"He invited us into his cell, and showed us pictures of his family and some other treasures he kept by his bed" I said. "There was a photo of the Dalai lama and some other well-known Rympoches; one of them that Stewart and Shona had met."

"The thing I remember was the hole in his cell" Conor ventured, changing tack. "It was cut in the centre of the floor and went all the way down to the bottom of the cliff."



“It’s a hole for the heating” I said, seeing Yarron’s confused face. “They keep a furnace going at the bottom and every cell has a hole, so the heat rises, along with the smoke.”

“Does it work?” Yarron asked, looking doubtful.

“I asked the lama about that” Conor said. “But he said that he always went home to his family in winter. Ladakh is much too cold.”

“You ever come in winter?” Yarron turned to Ramesh, who was just finishing the final row of stitching on the blankets and was ready to pass it along.

“NO” Ramesh said, looking horrified at the thought. “Too much snow.” He indicated a level just up to his waist. “Horses die, all die. No crossing in the snow.”

“What you do in winter?” Yarron asked, showing off his work. He had just finishing attaching a pair of tassles in red and blue to the corner of Tiku’s blanket and it looked very good.

“I bring family to Kulu” he said. “Horses too. Maybe five days walking, slowly, slowly.”

“Maybe?” Yarron said, smiling at Ramesh. “What do you do in Kulu?”

“Horses working; carrying potatoes and carrots and cabbages” he answered “My mother, sister and wife cooking in teashop.”

“Good business” Yarron replied. “If they cook like you.” Having stitched on another tassel and needing a refill of thread, Yarron was ready for a smoko. “I only have two cigarettes.” He added, quickly.

Yarron had calculated exactly how many cigarettes he’d need for thirty days, but he had failed to account for the occasional bumming from myself, Conor, and Ramesh.

Ramesh passed around his beadies, along with a box of matches to keep the things alight. After sacrificing half a dozen matches, he finally got his beadie to light. He took a puff and said, “And we go gompa party in Skiu, and the monks say to me – you all come gompa party. We have big celebration tonight.”

“Best party, I’ve ever been to,” Conor said, in truth. “We just happened to arrive the day they finished building the new monastery.”

We had gone to the monastery for prayers, before following the villagers down the mountain to the communal house. The elder women had already settled in at the very far wall, all dressed up in their festive best; shoulders adorned with goatskin shawls and heads atop with hats, that curled up in a showy peak at either end. These ends were trimmed in colours to match each waist sash; a riot of pink and vermilion to accompany their chat. They had brought their spools with them and were spinning yarn as they chatted.

“The festivities began with a dance of sowing and reaping, led by three young girls, who dug and twirled and clapped, as the season passed, before the crop with imaginary scythes.” I said, showing Yarron how it was done. “Then each one took a jug of chang and offered a cup to everyone.”

“They fill your glass and you take a sip and then they fill it again and again” Conor added, raising his thumb. “The three sips is a must; that took us a while to understand.”

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“Three is lucky” Ramesh said, explaining why it was that way. “The lamas bless chang three times, make it lucky for everyone.”

“And while the ladies were making Thupka – a soup of thickened barley, up in the caves, I played jacks with the younger children” I said. “As soon as they showed me the goats’ knuckles, I knew the game, so I threw them up and we played jacks until dinner came.”

“Then the lamas arrived, and after dinner, they all began to chant. A single man with a bongo drum provided the evening beat. I’m not sure what prompted it, but we were asked to sing, so we did a travesty of a Beatles song, but everyone seemed pleased.”

“Probably because we finished,” Conor retorted, and it looked like Ramesh agreed.

“After that, there was more dancing and we all danced the reaping dance. Then the beat got faster and the marriage dance began.” I said. “What was the name, Ramesh?”

“Sevelay Sevela,” Ramesh shook his head. “I say Linda, this is marriage dance, but she let ladies come with scarf and take Conor and Stewart away.”

“I knew they’d send him back” I said, and Conor pulled a face. “They just took him and Stewart off to the caves and filled them up with chang.”

“And once the head lama went off to bed, even the ladies at the back put down their spools and danced,” Conor added. “We formed a circle and followed as they led. Then one of them dressed Linda like a local and we all danced until dawn.”

“I have little no good head next day” Ramesh said, holding his head.

“You were very lucky though.” Yarron said. “Just to go to a party like that.”

“Yes” I agreed putting the finishing stitch on the brocade. “We’ve been lucky to meet so many good people. And such handsome horses too.”

“Horses lucky too” Ramesh said. “New blankets nearly finished and I buy bells for Lilu, Titu and Kalu too.”

He rummaged through his bag and took out a smaller sack. Inside were brass bells, hung on thick red thread. Tiku as the lead horse already had a bell. He always wore it walking but Ramesh took it off in the evenings worried that it would bring him harm in an encounter with wolves. The biggest bell was Lilu’s because she was the strongest horse and needed something of stature around her neck. Titu had a jazzy bell, scrawled with intricate lines, and Kalu had a clanger, to keep his nipping tendencies in line.

We didn’t finish the blankets until almost a week later, when we were camped by the road, nearing our journey’s end. Conor and I had walked with Ramesh and his horses for more than ninety days and for thirty of those days, Yarron walked with us too. We had become a family of the mountain kind, looking out for each other and the horses. Dressed up in their bold new blankets, the horses looked a treat and Ramesh was very proud. But in my mind, when I see them, they are still going BBRSSH in the mountains, free of all baggage and adornment, bar the little glint of wildness always in their eyes.