

Vermin

The closest I'd ever been to the Himalayan mountains was a National Geographic TV special. So when I looked out the plane's window, past the lake of clouds, down to the mountains, it was truly astonishing! Though the view was breathtaking, I have to admit, I felt uneasy about this flight.

Up to this point, the trip had been without incident, a textbook case of modern commercial air travel. I told myself I should stop worrying before I jinx things. That's when the pilot spoke over the intercom: "We're having a problem with the aircraft," he said, trying to calm the passengers with his reassuring Forth Worth accent, "it's in our best interest to put the plane down in a mountain valley."

We landed—quite gracefully, after all—in a frozen canyon deep within the mountains. Way off, through the whipping snow, I could barely see a few pastel-colored buildings. At this altitude I was expecting to see yurts, maybe galvanized steel quonset huts occupied by Chinese or American climatologists.

When we reached the pastel structures I saw that they were simply spit-level houses, the kind you see in any suburban subdivision: the "robin's egg blue" and "morning meadow yellow" homes of Eagle Ridge Estates, or Chatham Woods.

Their only striking characteristic was the fact that they were half-buried beneath snow in this Himalayan canyon.

Our captain escorted the passengers into one of the houses, a bland affair with pale

yellow vinyl siding. An ordinary looking family gave us a lukewarm greeting. They looked like any suburban family you might see in a mall in say, Columbus, Ohio. Except for one thing: if they were so typical, what were they doing living in one of the most hostile and remote places on the planet?

The mother, a pale, unattractive woman in a gray smock, looked anemic. In fact, the entire family shuffled about so listlessly, they looked like they were suffering from radiation poisoning.

Hardly anyone said a word. The family sat us down to dinner, which consisted of a tepid gruel that tasted like caulking compound. Naturally, I had many questions, but the family members merely stared at me with dazed expressions. Occasionally, one of them would mumble something in a feeble monotone.

Then one of the children, an unwholesome looking youngster around twelve years old, shuffled into the room and said, "The dogs brought home those other strange dogs again Mom."

The mother looked at the father. The father gazed at the floor, then closed his eyes.

The mother turned to the boy. "I told you those aren't dogs. You know they're worms now don't you?"

"Yes Ma'am."

How anyone could mistake worms for dogs was intolerable. I got up from the table to see what the kid was talking about. Looking out the picture window onto the garbage-strewn front yard, I didn't see any dogs. But several yaks stood huddled together against the wind, moaning and staring into the window with big, sad eyes.

Intermingling among the yaks were some other kind of creature, the likes of which I'd never seen. There were roughly the size of pigs, though they didn't resemble pigs in another way. Rather, they were stout, cylindrical-shaped creatures, built like small barrels tipped on their sides. They didn't appear to have any arms or legs, just long, curving necks with distinct heads and faces.

That was the strangest thing, their faces! They had perfectly human-looking faces, albeit singularly unbecoming humans. They had the unhealthy look of lice-infested beggars, the bloated faces of besotted drunks. Their fat faces were covered with grimy stubble, weeks' growth of graying beard. Long, filthy strands of greasy hair hung across their cheeks. Their bloodshot eyes conveyed a hangdog look of hopelessness and self-loathing. They gazed at us longingly, as if begging for table scraps.

I couldn't fathom what I was staring at. Some of the "worms," as they were called, had pocked and blistered faces. They twisted and contorted their mouths as if in a primitive, plaintive speech. Stretching out from their "shoulders" were tiny, clutching hands, barely the size of a newborn infant's. Three wrinkled fingers reached out in a delicate grasping gesture. I thought I saw suction cups on the tips of their yearning fingers.

I turned around, eager for some kind of explanation from the family, the captain of our flight, the other passengers, anyone. But most of them had left. Only the odd, anemic family remained, and they seemed more embarrassed than anything else.

Perhaps a bit ashamed as well.