



## Kytna Went After her Daughter

*Koryak People - Russia*

Kytna was already old when it all happened. She lived with her old husband and her adult daughter in Kichiga, a small fishing village on the isthmus of the Kamchatka Peninsula.

One day Kytna's daughter, Ralinavut, went out for a walk and did not return. They searched for her everywhere, and went to ask people in nearby villages and settlements, but no one had seen her, so they thought she must have lost her way and died of cold in some remote place.

However, there was an old woman, from a nearby settlement, who, taking Kytna aside, said:

'Do you remember the wolf pack that has been prowling around the area in recent months?' And when Kytna nodded, she continued, 'Well, they left the same day your daughter disappeared. A few days before I counted them and there were 28 wolves. But when I saw them pass that day of your daughter's disappearance there were 29.'

Kytna immediately understood what the other old woman had meant, so that even though everyone in the area thought that Ralinavut was dead, she still believed that her daughter would one day return.

Three years passed, and Ralinavut did not return.

Then Kytna took her shamaness drum and played and sang all night, and at daybreak she said to her husband:

‘Ralinavut isn’t dead. She’s with a pack of wolves in the far north, in a place called Talkap’. Then she added, ‘You’ll remember that, when she was missing, there was a pack of wolves around here. Well, they were the ones who took her.’

‘But have you gone crazy?’ said her husband, deeply worried. ‘How are you going to go so far? You’ll disappear into the tundra!’

‘Don’t worry’, Kytina replied. ‘I won’t get lost, and I know how I’m going to get to Talkap.’

The next day, Kytina left home before her husband had woken up, and started on her way. But, as soon as she had walked a hundred paces, she changed into a wolf, and trotted nimbly on the snow.

At dusk she came across a nomadic reindeer-herding camp. Kytina then reverted to her human appearance and headed to the camp where she was greeted with the usual hospitality of the arctic regions. They were surprised to see her arrive walking, and they asked her where she was going ... on foot!

‘I’m going to Talkap, in the north’, Kytina answered. ‘I’m going in search of my daughter, who was taken by the wolves.’

The nomads looked at her with amazement.

‘That’s a long way off’, one of them said. ‘You won’t be able to get there on foot, grandmother. I’ll give you one of my reindeer to help you make the trip.’

‘It’s easier for me to go on foot, so I’ll keep walking’, she replied, generating even greater amazement among her hosts.

The next day, at dawn, Kytina continued on her way and, as when she left Kichiga, as soon as she had taken a hundred paces she turned herself into a wolf. The man who had offered her the reindeer had risen early and watched her leave, so he saw her transformation.

‘That’s why she didn’t want the reindeer!’ he exclaimed.

As she was making her way, Kytina encountered a lone wolf.

‘Hello, brother’, Kytina addressed him. ‘Have you met a strange she-wolf in a pack further north?’

‘Do you mean a she-wolf who is both a wolf and a woman?’ the wolf responded with another question. ‘Yes, I saw her beyond Talkap, in a large pack of 29 wolves. They took me among them one day and I saw that there was a rather strange she-wolf in the pack. I guess you mean her.’

‘Yes’, said Kytna, ‘it must be my daughter, Ralinavut’.

‘Yes’, the wolf exclaimed suddenly, ‘that’s the name of that strange she-wolf in the pack which I’m telling you about!’

After thanking him and saying goodbye, Kytna continued her long journey.

For several days she traveled through large areas of tundra, crossing swamps and stony moors, fording half-frozen rivers and sleeping under rocky outcrops or, in their absence, among the thickest bushes. She was very cold, and she ended up exhausted after many days, but Kytna kept walking, on all fours, but walking.

Eventually she came across a camp of Chukchi nomads, who were herding their reindeer in the area. They were glad to meet someone after so many days without seeing anyone new from outside their herding group. They offered her their food and drink, and, as they were surprised, they asked her how an old woman like her was walking through such inhospitable places.

‘I come from far away, in the south’, she replied. She did not want to explain further, so she went straight to the point. ‘Do you know if there’s a pack of wolves in this area?’

‘Of course!’ said the one who seemed to be the leader. ‘There’s a large pack of 29 wolves, and we are very fed up with them because, as soon as we are careless, they attack one of our reindeer!’

‘Those wolves took my daughter three years ago, and now she lives with them’, Kytna explained as if it were the most natural thing in the world. ‘I’ve come to see if I can take her home.’

The Chukchis seemed to understand what she was saying.

The next morning, Kytna did not wait for breakfast, but left as soon as she was ready.

Not long after, she came to a place where a pack of wolves was satiating their hunger on a reindeer which they had hunted just that night. Kytina, who had transformed back into a wolf as soon as she had lost sight of the Chukchi camp, began to walk in a circle around the pack, singing like wolves do:

There are many wolves here eating reindeer,  
among them must be Ralnavut.

At that point, the fur on Ralnavut's back bristled and she stopped eating. 'Who's asking for me here on the tundra?' she thought.

Kytina approached, drawing another circle, and again sang to the wind:

These wolves are thieves,  
but my daughter Ralnavut lives, and is here.

And the wolf Ralnavut thought: 'She's my mother, and she's looking for me!'

Trying not to attract attention, Ralnavut went to the area where the she-wolf could be heard singing, and sang in turn:

Mother, how did you find me?  
I'd rather you hadn't come.  
I've been a wolf for a long time  
and they've welcomed me into their pack.

Kytina drew a third circle and sang again:

Ralnavut, you are a human being, not a wolf.  
And, like us, you have a human name.

And Ralnavut could no longer contain herself. She ran in the direction of her mother, shouting:

Mother, why have you come here?'

‘Because I missed you and my heart was freezing without you’, Kytna replied, ‘and I won’t leave here if you don’t come with me, because I’m your mother.’

‘Come on, let’s run while they’re not looking at us’, she said in a whisper. ‘Not far from here there’s a Chukchi camp. They’ll welcome us and we can rest for a few days. I’m exhausted, as I’ve been walking from Kichiga.’

And Ralnavut accepted Kytna’s invitation.

Not far from the Chukchi camp, they both assumed human form, and, when they arrived, the group leader said:

‘Oh, what a brave old woman! Not only has she returned, but she has brought her daughter from the wolf pack!’

Kytna looked at him as if sharing a secret.

They rested for several days, after which Kytna decided it was time to leave and return to Kichiga. The Chukchi offered to take them with a reindeer, but Kytna declined.

‘We’ll walk’, she said. ‘We’ll leave tomorrow very early.’

The next day, shortly before dawn, they left the camp under the watchful eye of the Chukchis, who breathed a sigh of astonishment when, at a hundred paces, Kytna and Ralnavut suddenly turned themselves into two wolves, trotting rapidly across the snowy landscape.

‘That’s why they didn’t want to go on a reindeer’, said the leader of the Chukchis. ‘Wolves are much faster.’

Days later, Kytna’s husband was startled to hear voices of alarm in Kichiga. When he left the hut, he saw two wolves approaching the village, and he thought, ‘It must be Kytna and Ralnavut’. But the people in the village were scared:

‘Quick, hide the children!’ they shouted. ‘Wolves are coming! There are wolves entering the village!’

‘Stop fussing! They’re not wolves!’ Kytna’s husband shouted. ‘They’re my wife and daughter.’

And, to the surprise of the people, he added:

‘Think a bit. Would a wolf be mad enough to enter the village in broad daylight?’

And, when they looked back in the direction of the wolves, they saw Kytna and her daughter, smiling as they entered the village. □

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## Comments

In this adaptation we have followed the journey of Kira Van Deusen's version, the only version that we know of a story belonging to a people as remote as the Koriaks. As is obvious, this is a story related to the Siberian shamanic tradition, where its highest practitioners, mostly women, claim to be capable of transforming themselves into different animals.

From the context of western mentality we may, or may not, accept such spectacular statements as these. Anyway, we would do well to put aside our ingrained ethnocentrism and accept, at least, that the culture and traditions of these Siberian peoples have allowed them to survive in an extraordinarily hostile environment. They have also allowed them to connect deeply with their environment and the beings that populate it. In this sense, and as requested by the Earth Charter in its Principle 8b, the Koryaks have preserved their ancestral knowledge and it has allowed them to survive in harmony with their environment, something that we have been unable to do in the West.

As Van Deusen (2017) points out:

Both women and men are selected by the spirits of nature and the ancestors to be shamans like Kytna –healers, diviners and ceremonial leaders. (...) They celebrate rituals which keep people in harmony with nature, communicating with the spirits of their ancestors and of places in nature –trees, sky, rocks, mountains, sacred springs, lakes and rivers.

However, Siberian shamanism was harshly persecuted by the Soviet regime, so its practitioners had to keep their knowledge secret. Only after the fall of the Soviet Union, did public celebrations begin again. And, during this time, many shamans received education in Western universities and have thus had the opportunity to spread their legacy (Van Deusen, 2017).

## Sources

Van Deusen, K. (2003). How Old Woman Kytina Brought Her Daughter Home. In Cox, A. & Albert, D. (eds.), *The Healing Heart: Communities Storytelling to Build Strong and Healthy Communities* (pp. 35-37). Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers.

Van Deusen, K. (2017). How Old Woman Kytina Brought Her Daughter Home. *Healing Story Alliance*. Retrieved from <https://healingstory.org/how-old-woman-kytina-brought-her-daughter-home/>

## *Associated text of the Earth Charter*

Principle 8b: Recognize and preserve the traditional knowledge and spiritual wisdom in all cultures that contribute to environmental protection and human well-being.

## *Other passages that this story illustrates*

Preamble: Universal Responsibility.- The spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life is strengthened when we live with reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature.

Principle 12b: Affirm the right of indigenous peoples to their spirituality, knowledge, lands and resources and to their related practice of sustainable livelihoods.