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MOONLIGHT

by Karen Ball

My name is Chandrika. I was born during the night in the single room my parents shared. Mother and Father gave me the name Chandrika after the silver light that blessed my birth – it means ‘moonlight’. My parents no longer live on the plantation; they died when I was young. I remember my mother’s eyes and the gold bracelets that jangled on her wrists. That is all. I take care of my family now; I am all my younger brothers have.

That morning I woke at dawn, just as I had for as many dawns as I could remember. The mists hung low over the emerald hills and I wrapped my cotton shawl tightly around my shoulders. The earth felt fresh beneath my toes and my heart squeezed tight with happiness as I gazed down on the slopes. I live in a very beautiful place; I don’t need a teacher to tell me that. I had to leave school to work in the tea plantation when I was fourteen. I don’t mind. While I have two hands to dance over the tea plants and fill my basket with green leaves, what use do I have for a pen and paper? The alphabet won’t fill my brothers’ stomachs.

I went to the shared water tap with my kettle. It is one of the few items my brothers and I own and every morning I give thanks for its battered

sides. Without its cheerful whistle, how would I get my brothers out of their beds? I filled the kettle and then I plunged my hands under the cool water, bringing them up to wash my face. The water felt good against my skin. I could already sense the heat of the day creeping up behind me. I gazed back down at the hills and saw that the dawn mist was burning off. The ghostly swirls seemed to disappear earlier and earlier each day – it had been a hot summer.

I walked back to our line room. It is only small, but so are all the rooms on the estate. No one complains; we know we are lucky to be working and to have a shelter over our heads. I could feel my heavy plait swinging behind my back as I walked past all the other families.

“Good morning!” Amanthi called out, grinning. She is our neighbour. She wears a beautiful gold stud in her nose and her coffee-coloured skin always glows golden in the morning sunshine. I cannot help but smile every time I see her.

“Good morning, Amanthi,” I called back. “Did you have good dreams last night?” She burst out laughing and shook her head at me. Everyone knows Amanthi always dreams of fudge made from palm treacle.

I heaved the kettle onto its stand above the fire, stoked to light again from last night’s few coals. As I waited for it to boil, I sat on my haunches

and made breakfast for the boys, patting out rice-flour pancakes that I grilled over the fire. The aroma of the pancakes drifted under Babiya and Nimal's nostrils and I watched to see whose eyelashes would flutter open first. I would never tell the boys this, but they both have beautiful eyelashes. Long and thick – the type my girlfriends would love to have. I know, because they tell me.

Nimal was the first to stretch his arms above his head.

"Is that breakfast I can smell?" he asked. I watched him climb out of bed and wander over, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He reached out and picked a pancake off the toasting fork, batting it from hand to hand as he waited for it to cool down. He didn't wait long enough. "Chandrika," he protested, as he burnt his tongue. "Do you have to make the pancakes so hot?"

I thrust the toasting fork into his hand and pretended to bat him round the head as I jumped to my feet.

"Don't be so cheeky," I said, walking to the door. "And make sure Babiya is up and ready for school. I'll see you this evening." Nimal grunted in answer; I knew that was all the conversation he was capable of this early in the morning.

Amanthi was waiting for me outside our room. Together, we walked down to the plantation. The green, sloping hills fell below us. At their base was a smooth lake, its waters reflecting the cloud-covered sky.

We picked up our baskets and tied them to each other's backs. They were big – big enough to hold a whole day's pickings. When the sun descended at the end of the day, my back would be aching from the weight of it.

Along with the other girls and women, we walked out onto the terraced slopes. The women's brightly-coloured sashes and their hands, plucking and snipping, made the fields look as though they were being teased by giant butterflies. I reached out to the nearest tea plant, and snapped off two leaves, throwing them over my shoulder into the basket on my back. The first of many.

I know it is wrong to be proud, but I cannot deny the truth: I am a good tea picker. I am always careful to only nip off the two bright green leaves and the berry at the top of each tea plant. You could never make a bitter cup of tea from the leaves that I pluck. I sometimes think about all the people around the world, drinking my tea. It makes me feel very small and humble.

“Are you still saving for university?” Amanthi asked, as we worked side-by-side. I could see that the bottom of her basket was already hidden beneath emerald leaves. I made a silent promise to myself to work faster.

“A few rupees a month,” I admitted. “I would love for my brothers to graduate one day. Do you think that can be possible, Amanthi?” In my heart, I knew this was an impossible dream. But it was a dream that kept me going as I strode down the endless rows of tea. It was better than dreaming of fudge!

“All things are possible,” Amanthi said. “You are a determined young woman. You could make anything happen.” I felt my face blush at this compliment and put up a hand to wipe away the sheen of sweat that was already covering my cheeks. I batted my hands in front of my face.

“The heat!” I complained. This year was like no other. We had started to call it Agni’s Year, after the Hindu god of fire. “It isn’t good for the tea.” The plants enjoyed the humidity, it was true. But this much heat – with the morning mists disappearing so quickly – made the plants dry and brittle. It was getting more and more difficult to find fresh, juicy tea leaves. And that meant fewer rupees at the end of each day.

As I turned back to my work, a mosquito came to hover in front of my face. Most of the time they only bothered us at sunset, but this summer there

were so many that they even hovered in the air on cloudy days. Fortunately, I know what the trick is with mosquitoes – you ignore them. They get so annoyed that they have to fly away and bother someone else. *Go away!* I willed my unwelcome companion. *Leave me alone*.

It was not to be. As I reached up to the cloudy sky to stretch my back, I felt a bite on the tender skin of my inside arm. I snatched my hands back down and rubbed the skin where the mosquito had bitten me. I should have been used to this by now. Sri Lanka is home to many more mosquitoes than it is to girls who work the fields. Especially this summer. But I still hated the cruel bite of these insects.

"Another bite!" I said to Amanthi.

She laughed. "They love you. You must have juicy meat on those young bones."

I couldn't help joining in with her laughter.

It was too beautiful a day.

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As I walked back to our line room, tired and hungry, the Golden Shower trees on the boundary of the plantation were heavy with bunches of yellow flowers. The heat had made them blossom in crowds of gold colour, and

now their petals lit up the fading sky. They were like candles lighting my way home.

Nimal and Babiya were already home from school and sat, cross-legged, on the dirt floor, playing Pachisi. Babiya threw his cowrie shells on the board to see how many moves he would have next.

“Chandrika!” he cried, as I stepped into the room. “Come and play!” I went to sit down next to them, but as I did so I felt my head become light. I closed my eyes and white dots danced behind my eyelids.

“What is it?” Nimal asked, concerned.

I waved a hand through the air. “It’s nothing. I’m tired, that’s all,” I told him. But Nimal caught hold of my arm and twisted it round so that he could see the pale underside. A large red blush spread out from where the mosquito had bitten me that morning.

“What’s this?” he asked. I shrugged my shoulders.

“Another mosquito bite. If I had a rupee for every one of those…” I didn’t finish the sentence. We all knew that any joke about precious rupees wasn’t funny. Not when our bellies rumbled. “I’ll make something to eat. You two, get to your studies.”

I watched from the fire as my brothers knelt to their work, spreading out their schoolbooks on the ground. Nimal’s brow furrowed in

concentration as he worked his way through his sums. He was a clever boy; everyone said so. It gave me a shiver of excitement to think about what he could achieve in life.

As I dished out the broth, the ladle trembled in my hand. I realised that my shiver of excitement had not stopped. And I no longer felt hungry for food. As the boys ate, I crept into bed and pulled the thin sheet over my legs. I prayed that my brothers would not notice how the sheet moved and shifted as my feet jerked beneath it with the racking tremors that now had hold of my body. I turned over in bed and gazed at the mosquito bite. It was angry red and swollen. I closed my eyes tight shut and prayed. *Please not malaria,* I asked. *Not now. Not yet.* I knew we couldn't afford a doctor even if I could have made the two-day journey to see one. There had been so much malaria this hot summer – more than ever before – that the doctors were overworked. One more girl in the waiting room was the last thing they needed. Besides, there was still so much tea to pick if my dreams were to come true…

I pulled the sheet up to my chin and fell into a fitful sleep.

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When I woke in the morning, a dull throbbing filled my head. My skin was covered with a sheen of sweat and my joints ached. I could not decide if I

felt too hot or too cold and kept pushing the sheets from me, only to hastily gather them around my shoulders the next moment. Light poured into the room and I realised that dawn had long since come and gone.

I had slept in!

“Nimal! Babiya! Why didn’t you wake me?” I called out. But my voice came out thin and weak. Their beds were empty. As I struggled to swing my legs out of the bed, a plump hand pushed me back against the pillow. It was Amanthi.

“You are not going to work today,” she said. “The boys are at school. The rest of us have pooled our rupees and called a doctor. He’ll be here soon.” Despair flooded through me.

“No,” I whispered, my mouth dry. I could not afford to stay in bed and my friends could not afford to waste their money on me. I had to get back out to the fields.

I pushed the sheet off me and tried to twist my body out of the bed. But the effort made me wince with pain and I felt nausea rise up through my body. As Amanthi put her arm around my shoulders, I retched. But my stomach was empty.

I looked back up at my friend.

“What is happening to me?” I asked. She could not meet my gaze.

At that moment I knew.

“All will be well. Remember, you are a strong young woman.” Amanthi’s words fell like heavy stones down a well. They disappeared into the darkness of my soul.

I gazed past her at the bright light of the day outside. It made my eyes hurt to look, but I could not turn away. I could see the beautiful greens of the tea plantation. So many greens! Row after row of tea plants. It was all I had ever known and the only picture I had woken up to, day after day. I wouldn’t be denied it now.

“Take me outside,” I said.

“No, Chandrika,” Amanthi protested. “You’re too weak.”

She was wrong.

“It’s all I ask of you,” I said. “It’s not too much, is it?” I watched as tears brimmed in Amanthi’s eyes. You see, I was clever too. I knew how to persuade people. Especially when it was as important as this.

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Amanthi and I walked out together. I leant heavily on Amanthi’s arm, but she didn’t complain. Other families huddled and whispered as they looked at me. I knew what they were thinking. I was thinking the same thing.

Amanthi settled me on a large rock and I gazed out over my homeland. I could see the women working in the fields. I longed to be with them – to feel the glossy wax of the tea leaves beneath my hands; to work for my family. I remembered my mother and wondered if she had ever felt the same way. My vision blurred as shooting pains ran through my limbs. I thought of the family who used to live in Amanthi's room, of the baby who had died from malaria.

A voice sounded out from behind me. When I turned round I saw a tall man carrying a slim leather case. Nimal was stood behind him.

"I heard the doctor had been called," he said. "I could not stay in school." I did not have the heart to scold him.

The doctor knelt beside me and reached out a cool palm to feel my forehead.

"You should be in bed," he said.

"I know, I tried to—" Amanthi began to say.

"Shush, now," I said. "Sunshine is good for the soul. Even one such as mine."

"There's nothing wrong with your soul," the doctor said. He pulled a syringe and a glass tube out of his bag. "I'd like to take a blood test," he

explained. Nimal crept closer and I noticed the way he peered intently at the doctor's equipment.

I held out my arm and the doctor wiped an alcohol-soaked swab of cotton over a patch of skin. Then I looked away and waited. The pain as he drove the needle home was nothing compared to my night sweats. When I turned back, Nimal was watching closely as the doctor filled the sample glass. He pushed a stopper into the glass and passed the test tube to my brother.

"Put this in my case. Carefully," he told my brother. Nimal's face glowed with pride as he carried the test tube over to the battered leather case the doctor had left on the ground. I watched as Nimal held my blood sample up to the sunshine. What clues swirled around in there? I already knew. I had tasted death; I knew its tang. After all, I had buried my mother and father.

"Is it malaria?" Nimal asked, standing back up. His face was solemn now. "We can take the truth." He straightened his shoulders and it broke my heart to watch him being brave.

The doctor turned round to scan the horizon, to gaze down on the tea pickers far below us. I saw the way his hands fisted and the knuckles turned white. He nodded, once grimly.

“Probably,” he said. “If only we could do something about this heat. It’s bringing the mosquitoes out worse than ever before.” My brother came to stand beside the doctor. The doctor continued to talk, almost to himself. “Of course, people know what is happening – but they prefer to turn their faces away from the truth.” Amanthi and I shared a startled glance. Doctors didn’t normally talk in this way. He turned round and strode over to me, lifting my face so that he could peer into my eyes. I tried to keep my gaze steady as the light hurt my eyes.

“You must sleep,” he said. His voice broke. “Rest is what you need now.” He let go of my chin and my head sank onto my chest. I was exhausted and suddenly I didn’t want to be out here anymore. I wanted my bed.

As Amanthi helped me back to my room, I heard Nimal ask the doctor questions.

“What can be done?” he asked.

“Things are changing, but slowly,” the doctor said. “People must be educated. They must learn to change their ways. If the rich countries don’t change their lifestyles we will all suffer. And if the developing countries don’t make changes too, that suffering will be even worse.”

I paused at my doorway and turned round for one last look. My eyes hungrily ate up the picture of my brother with the doctor's hand resting on his shoulder. Beyond them, the green hills of the tea plantation. My heart filled with hope as I watched the doctor approach me to say goodbye. I could see that his was a kind soul.

"Look after him," I said, gazing up into the man's face. "He has a sharp brain. Help him get to university." The doctor did not look away; he understood. He nodded once. "He has a brother, too," I added.

"They shall have good lives," the doctor said. "And so will their children. If we make the world better. And we *will* make the world better - I promise you that."

"So do I," said Nimal.

I thought of all the people around the world, drinking my tea. Then I turned into the dark of our room. Amanthi shut the door behind us and I climbed stiffly into bed.

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My name is Chandrika. I died during the night, kissed by the light of the moon, in the room my parents shared. I left behind my brothers – too young to bury a sister. But I also left behind hope. I had seen the fire that burnt in

Nimal’s heart. He is a clever boy. I know he will do much with his life. I hope he will change the world. As Amanthi said – you never can tell.

All things are possible.