

***Moon Child*** Alison Jones

I tilt the barrel and adjust the screw, ever so slightly. There. Perfect. I stare, as I often have, at the papery image: the shadowy craters, the crepey skin pocked by celestial assaults over the course of four-and-a-half billion years.

I feel a special connection with that pewter disc up there, when it's full and round, as it is tonight. It was drifting across the sky the night I was born, as my mother tells it. Full-moon night, the brightness of it washing in through her bedroom window, and her clutching the bed rails, scared stiff.

They were still youngsters, she and my father. Early twenties, ardent, idealistic, wanting to fix the world, wanting to help. And so they were living in a village in Southern India, working under a tropical sun to build a well nearby. The women there had always walked long distances for water, so this would be a great gift. My mother was nuggetty and strong, perfectly capable of the digging and lifting required for the job. They would finish their day's work and sit, sweat-soaked, on the little verandah of their hut, enjoying the cooling temperatures until the mosquitoes came.

As her pregnancy progressed my mother could do less of the hard, physical work. My father shooed her away when she tried to dig. *Go and rest, beautiful*, he scolded. *You must look after yourself and our baby*. She wanted to wander, to explore, but it was not seen as right for her to wander alone, so she would tag along with groups of local women as they went about their tasks. She would pick up words here and there, deciphering tiny pieces of language as she could, but it was mathematics and sciences that were her forté, not languages, so by the time she entered her labour with me she was still unable, really, to utter a sentence in the local tongue. She was sorry that she had not managed to build a bridge to the women there. She felt herself in a bubble, watching lives that went on, with all their vivid colour and noise, outside of where she was.

My father arrived at the hut that day, as the sun was going down. Her labour had just begun, the contractions mild and intermittent. She met him at the door with eyes bright with excitement, and alarm. *Tonight, then*, he said, excited and alarmed in the same measure. He washed, they ate dinner. She hardly touched hers, listening all the while to an internal language that spoke to her much more powerfully than food. My father filled a heavy iron vessel with water and placed it on the range, building a small fire under it so that when the time came there would be plenty of hot water. He knew that he would need that, as well as cloths, basins, coverings for the bed, water for his wife to drink as she laboured. The nearest hospital was many miles distant, and with no reliable transport to get there my parents understood that this baby would be born here in the village.

It is no small thing for a man to say to himself, I will deliver our child. He had read some books on the subject, and understood how things generally went. He trusted himself to be doctor, nurse and midwife. Others had done it, he reasoned. He would work it out as he went along.

First labours are often long, they say. The body is learning unfamiliar movements. So the contractions came and went, with no sense of urgency, for a long time.

At about nine in the evening, a huge round moon lifted itself over the mountains in the east. My parents watched, entranced, as it swam slowly upwards.

*We can tell our daughter* – my father said -

*Or our son* – said my mother,

*That the moon was full the night she came*, my father finished. They smiled into each other's faces, and felt full to overflowing with moon, and baby, and reckless adventure.

So the moon swam up the sky and my parents rested, waiting.

Some time later my mother reached out to stroke the carpet of light falling across the bed – and then yelped, clutching my father's arm. He saw beads of sweat on her brow, dampened the washer and passed it gently over her face.

*Easy now*, he murmured. Her eyes had grown wide. Some powerful engine had moved into her body and taken it over, pumping, gripping, squeezing, pinching. She groaned, trying to position her body to ease the pain. He watched her distress, and began to worry. Could he do this, after all? Witnessing her pain and not being able to lessen it was the hardest part.

The contractions were coming more closely now, stronger. My mother rode them with gasping breaths, clutching the rails of the bedhead. Each powerful grip made her shriek. Her screams and groans pushed out through the open window and scattered amongst the trees. How strange that the moon was so calm, the light so still and hymn-like, amongst this chaos.

Suddenly the door flew open, and three local women strode in, one quite old, the other two middle-aged. They shooed my father from the house, pushing him outside and closing the door in his face. The older woman checked unceremoniously under my mother's coverings to see how soon the baby could be expected, and with constant murmurings the three women set about all those birthing tasks with which they were so familiar. My father paced the moonlit ground outside, still hearing my mother's cries. Once he peered through the uncovered window, unable to prevent himself – but the old woman flapped her apron at him and covered the window with a shawl. He finally accepted that he was unwelcome. He sat on the concrete tankstand near the front door, to wait.

I arrived as the moon, smaller now, was coasting into the western sky. My father, was still sitting on the tankstand. His legs and back were beginning to cramp. Then the front door was thrown open.

He looked up, all of his questions visible on his face. The three women smiled broadly. He noticed that the old woman had no teeth, but her smile was warm and generous. There was jubilant chattering he did not understand.

He stood. The women, clustering on the front step, motioned with their arms. They stood aside respectfully to let him pass.