



MAL PEET & ELSPETH GRAHAM

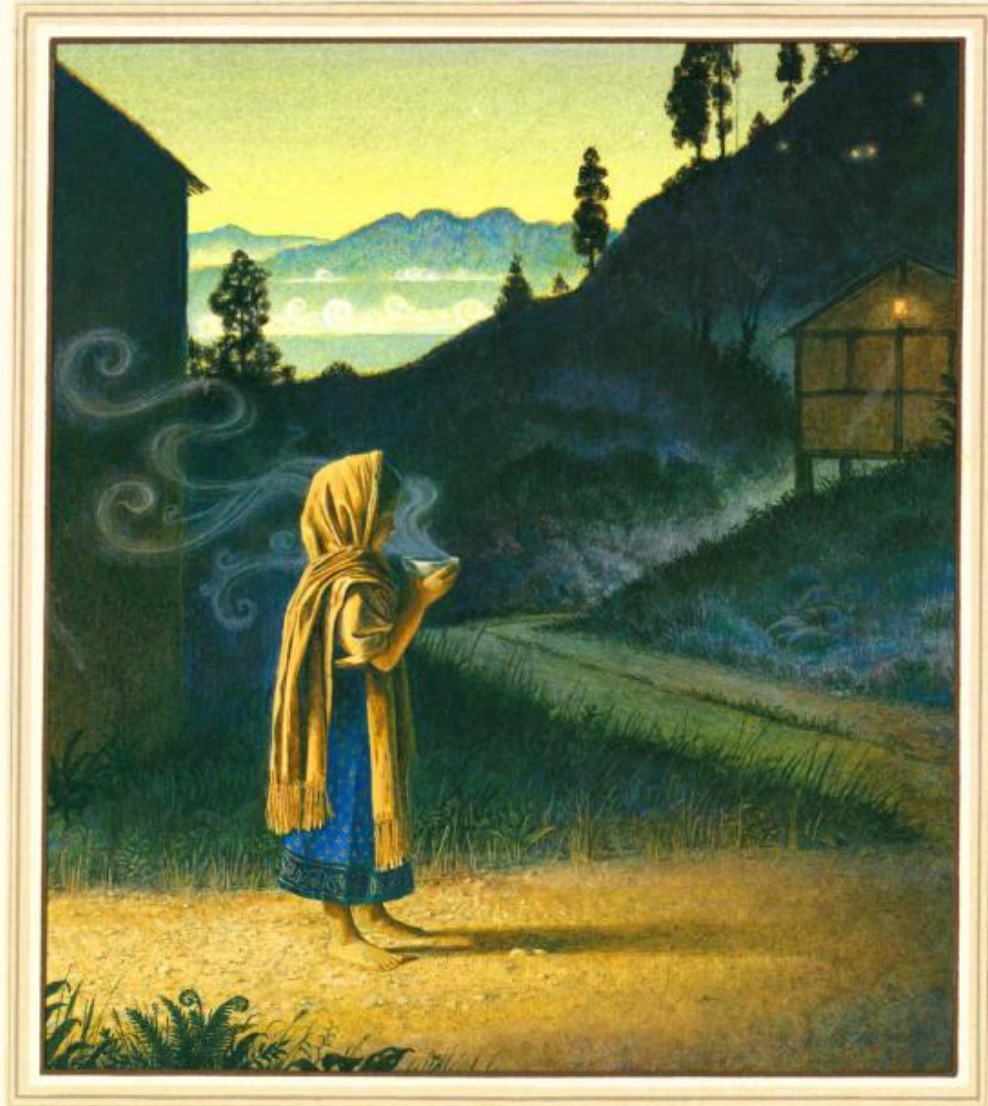


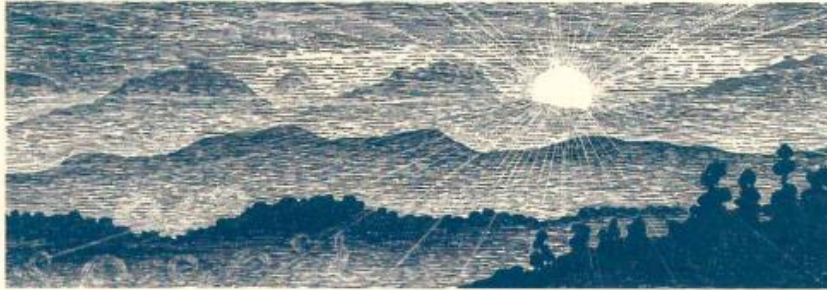
CLOUD TEA MONKEYS

ILLUSTRATED BY
JUAN WIJNGAARD

ONE BY ONE, the familiar sounds of morning drew Tashi from her sleep. Her mother breathing life into the fire; the hiss and crackle of the twigs as the flames caught; the whispering of the soot-blackened kettle as the water came to the boil.

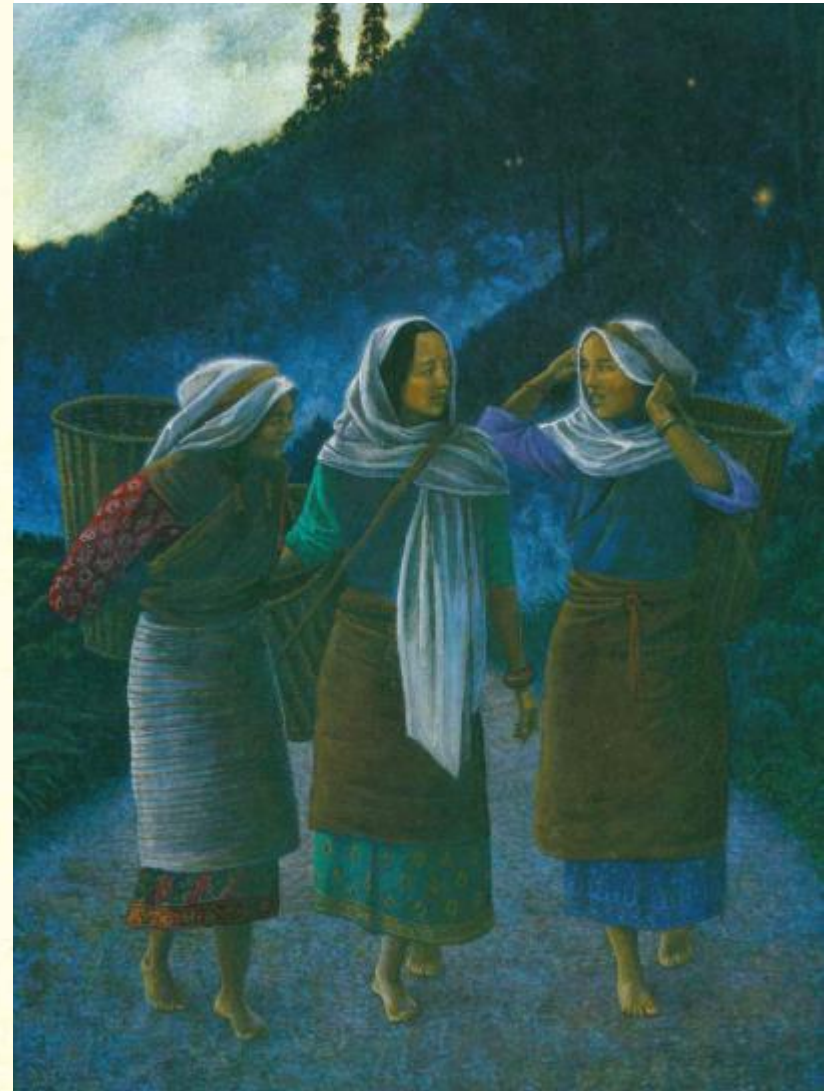
Tashi took her bowl of sweet tea outside and stood beside the rough road in the blue morning. The sun had not yet found a way through the mountains, but it was coming; a light the colour of lemons was soaking into the sky and painting out the stars. The air was very cold. Tashi shivered and pulled her shawl more tightly around herself. As the stars went out, small squares of light appeared on the dark hillside above her: lamps were being lit in the village. A cockerel crowed and another answered. Inside the house her mother coughed, twice.





It was not long before they heard voices and laughter from where the road curved down from the hill. Then the women came, their white headscarves glowing in the half-dark, their clothes bright patches of scarlet, green, indigo. Each woman carried a great wicker basket, bigger than Tashi. They called her name, their voices wobbly in the cold air. Her mother came out of the house, her back bent under the burden of her tea-basket.

The walk to the tea plantation was long, but for Tashi this was a happy part of the day. The women gossiped and made jokes about their husbands. The sun was kind too, laying warm patches in the road that were good to walk into out of the cold shadows. Later the sun would turn cruel, burning down from a hazy sky.

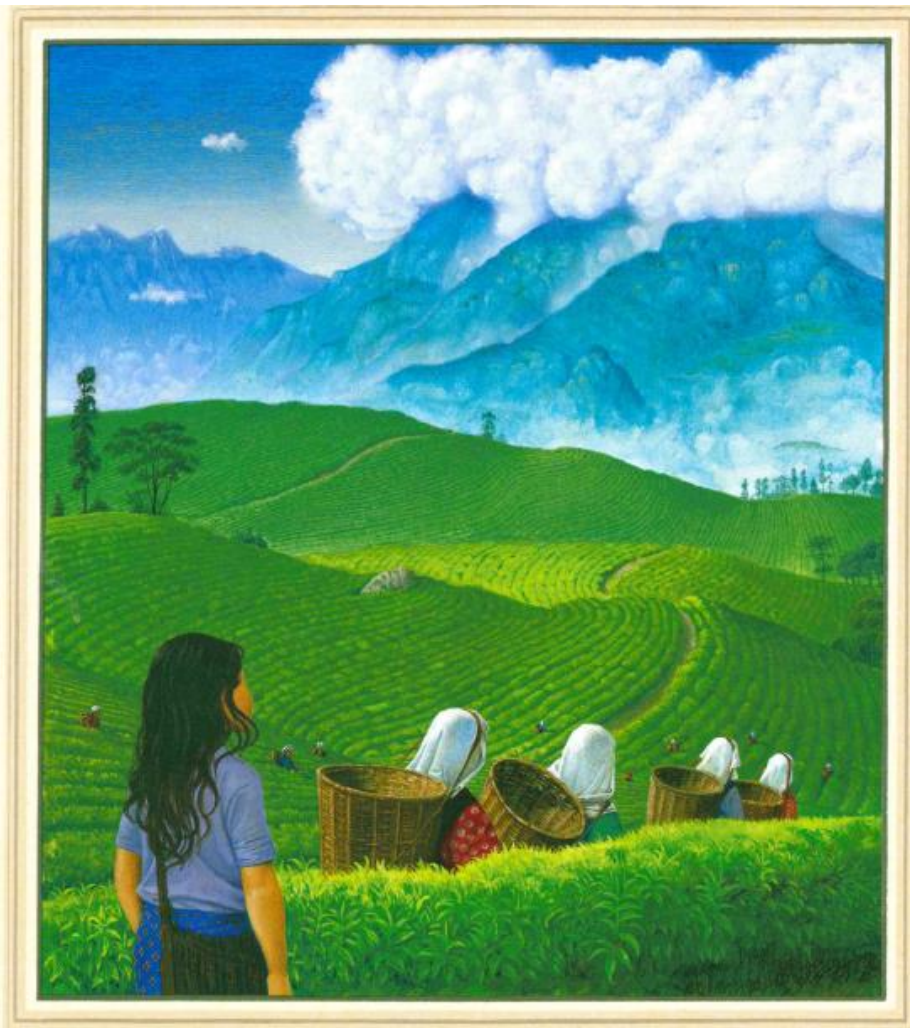


When Tashi and her mother and the women arrived at the plantation the Overseer came out of his hut, yawning and stretching his belly. He was a bad-tempered man with a beaky nose and eyes like sharp little stones.

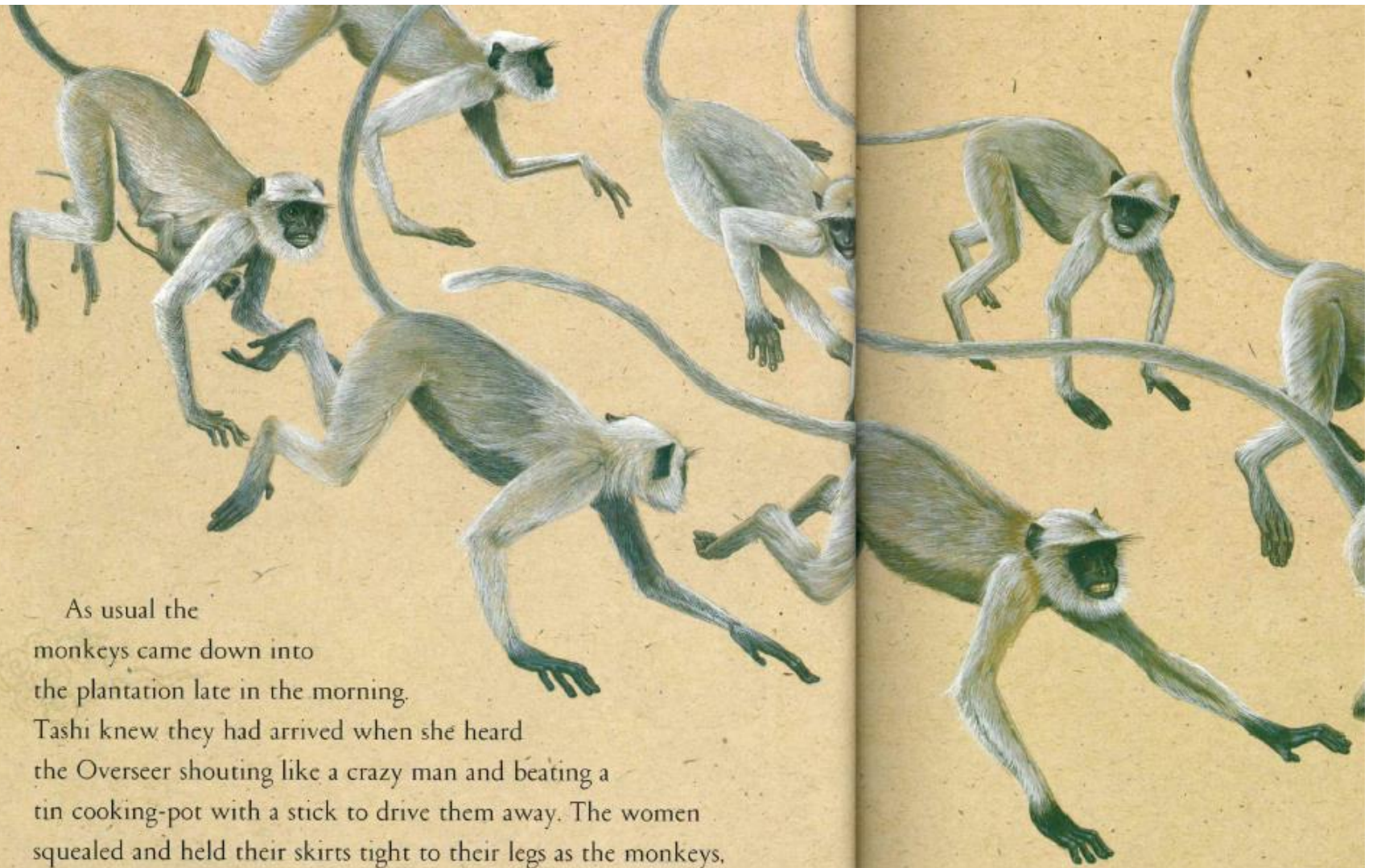
The women stood silently while he told them what they already knew, what they had always known: to pick only the young leaves and the buds from the tops of each bush. Then they found their places and began, plucking the tender leaves and buds and tossing them over their shoulders into their great wicker baskets.

The rows of glossy green tea bushes curved into the distance like waves. Tashi had never seen the end of the plantation. Perhaps it had no end. Perhaps it went right around the world.

Within an hour the sun had sucked the mist up out of the valleys and hung it like a great grey curtain over the tops of the mountains. Up there, on those wild mountain-tops above the cloud, were things Tashi was afraid of: big cats with jade-green eyes and snakes like yellow whips.



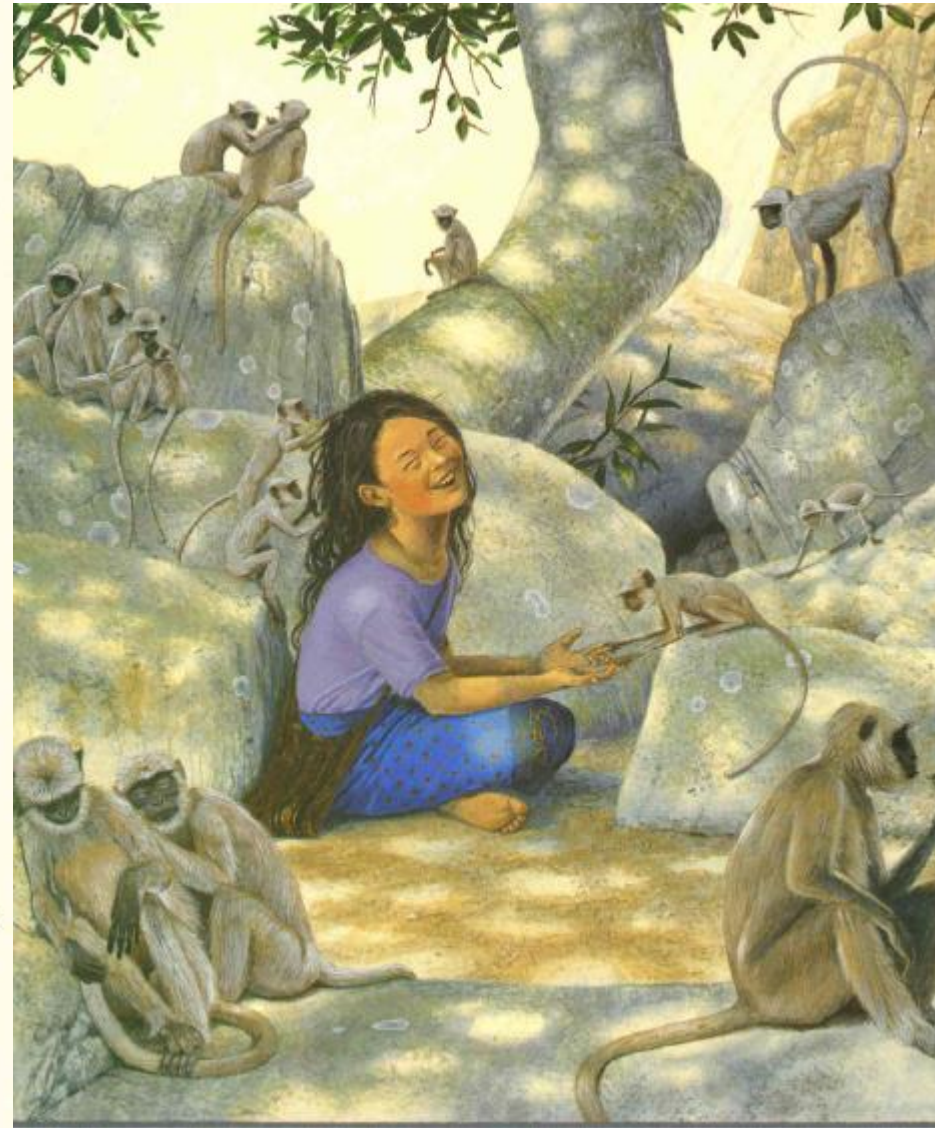
As usual the monkeys came down into the plantation late in the morning. Tashi knew they had arrived when she heard the Overseer shouting like a crazy man and beating a tin cooking-pot with a stick to drive them away. The women squealed and held their skirts tight to their legs as the monkeys, showing their teeth in grins of fear, fled down the rows of bushes. The big male monkey that Tashi called Rajah came first, then after him the younger males, and after them the mothers with their babies hanging beneath them or riding on their backs like jockeys in a horse race. Tashi grabbed her lunch-bag and followed them.



Tashi and the monkeys met in their usual place, where the endless rows of tea bushes were broken by a jumble of rocks and a tree spread its shadow on the ground. Here she sat and crossed her legs. The monkeys watched her with their deep, serious eyes.

After a while the youngest ones left their mothers and came over to her. There was fruit in her lunch-bag and she shared it. The young monkeys inspected Tashi's fingers one by one. With their own long delicate fingers they groomed her thick dark hair. The mothers relaxed, trusting her. They snoozed in small groups or flirted with the young males. Rajah stalked around the edge of the tree-shadow, watching everything.

The women stopped work when the sun was a blurred red globe, hanging just above the rows of tea bushes. There was less talk on the way home. The women's tiredness was like a cloud around them. Tashi's mother had bruised-looking eyes. Her cough was worse. Once or twice she stopped walking and pressed her hand to her chest.



Comprehension Questions

1. What is the name of the big male monkey?
2. What is growing on the plantation?
3. Name one thing that Tashi is afraid of in the mountains?
4. What do you think The Overseer does?
5. ***“Later, the Sun would turn cruel.”*** What does this mean?

The next morning there was no crackle from the fire, no whisper from the kettle, no perfume of sweet tea.

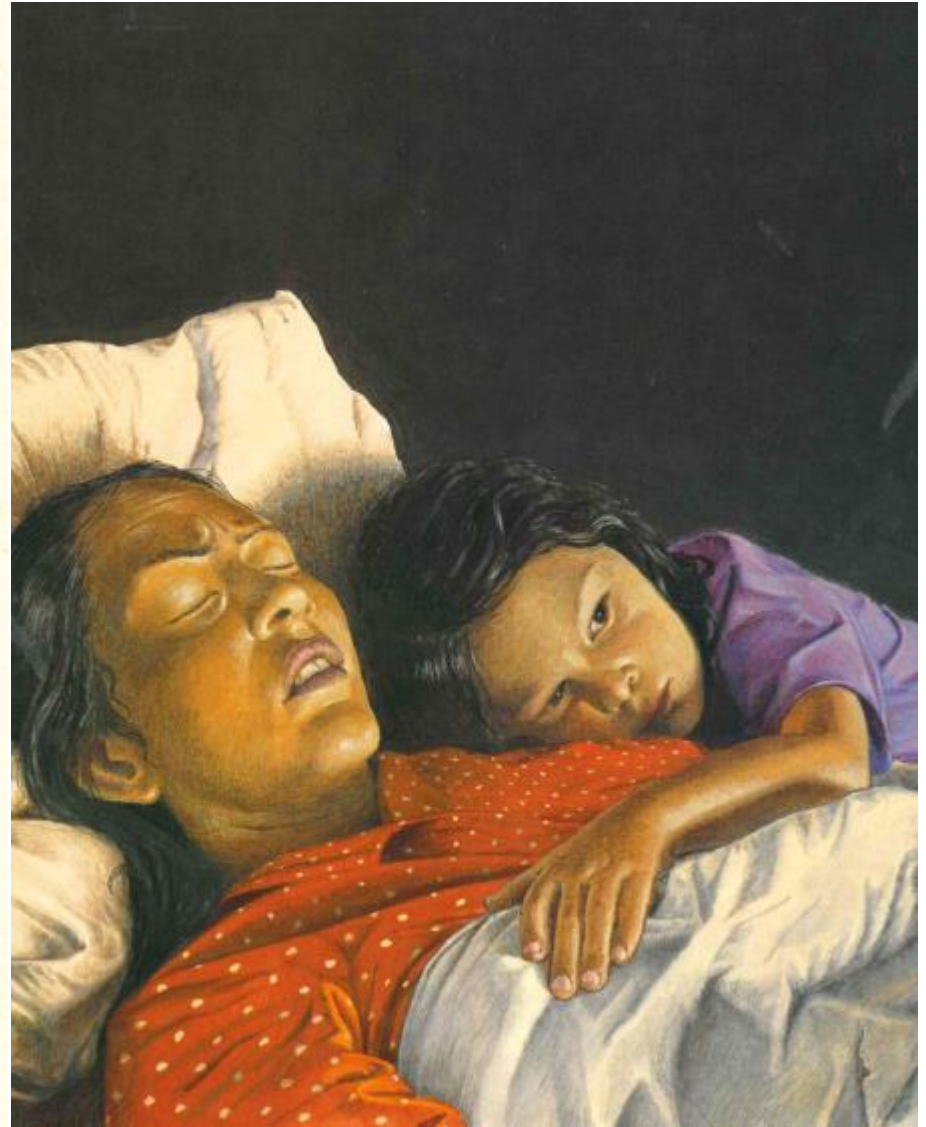
“Tashi! Come here, child.” Tashi crossed the dim room to her mother’s bed. The cough was hard and sharp like a stick breaking. Her mother’s face was cold but also wet with sweat.

“I am sick, child. I do not think I can work today.”

Tashi ran to the dawn-lit road when she heard the women coming. Two came into the house: her Aunt Sonam and one other. They felt her mother’s forehead and spoke to each other in low voices. Sonam brought water and told Tashi to make sure her mother drank. Then they hurried away to their work.

The next morning was the same. Tashi knew that if her mother could not work there would be no money. With no money to pay the doctor, her mother would not get well. If her mother did not get well, she could not work and there would be no money. The problem went round and round. It was like a snake with its tail in its mouth and Tashi was frightened by it.

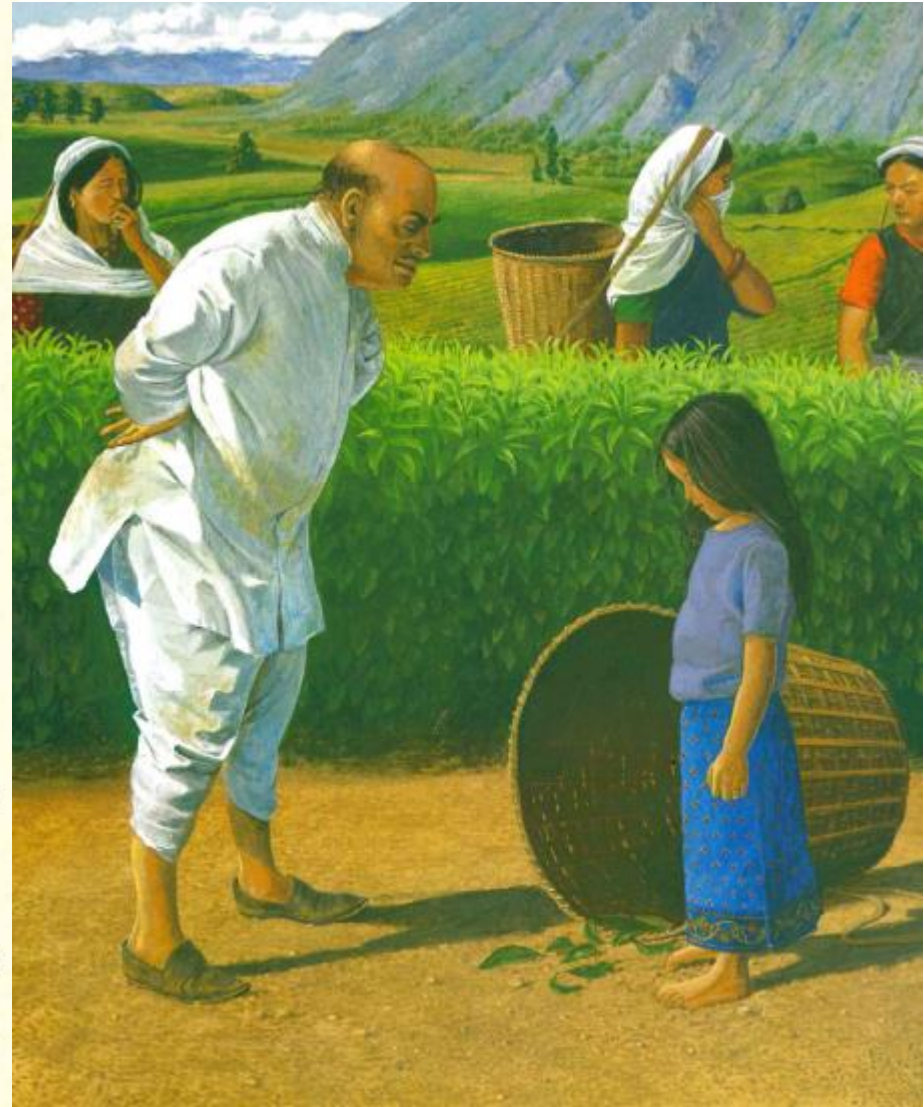
When her mother was asleep again, Tashi dragged the heavy tea-basket to the door. She found that if she leant her body forward she could lift the bottom of the basket off the ground. Bent like this she began the long walk to the plantation.



When she got there Tashi could see no one; the bushes loomed above her. She could hear the shouts of the Overseer and the calls of the women. She hauled the basket along the rows until she saw Aunt Sonam plucking the bushes and dropping the leaves over her shoulder into her basket, over and over again, like a clockwork machine.

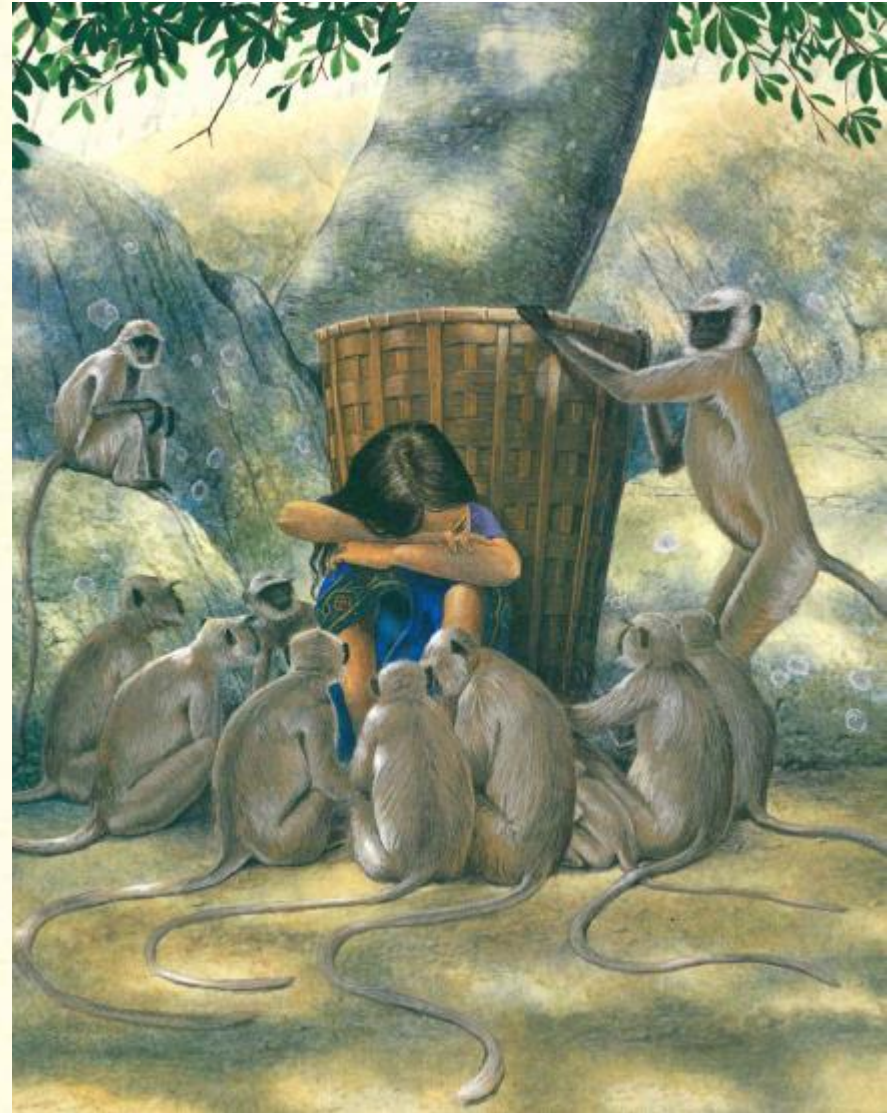
Before Tashi could reach Sonam, a shadow fell upon her. She looked up. The Overseer stood there, his hands on his hips. Desperately Tashi began to pick leaves, any leaves that she could reach.

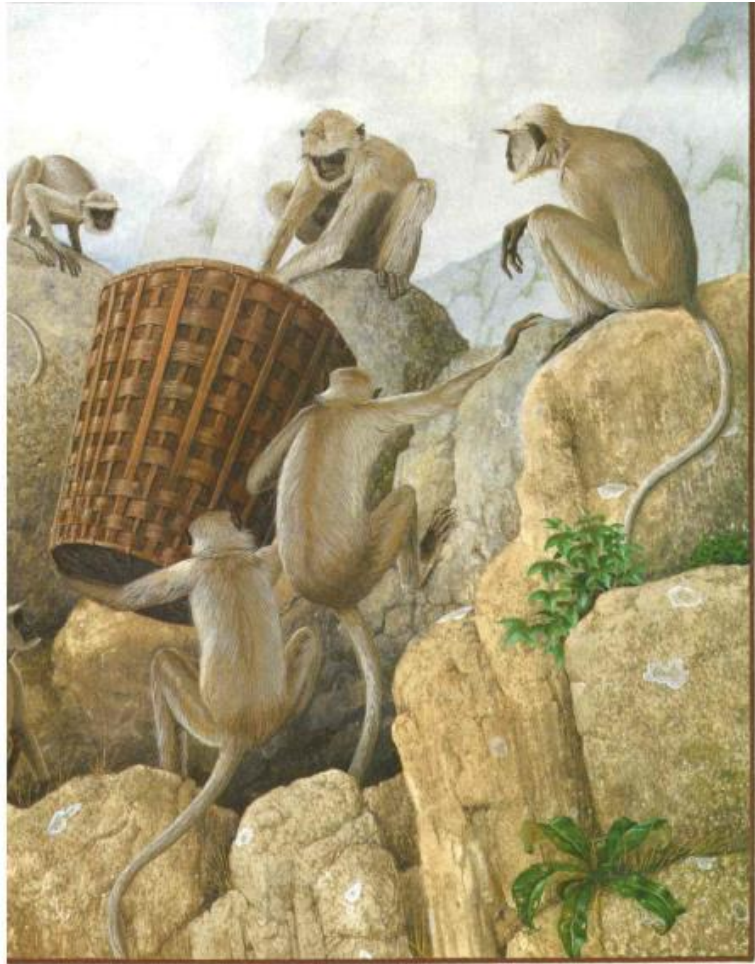
The Overseer laughed an ugly laugh full of brown teeth. He called the other women to come and look at this stupid child who thought she could pick tea from bushes that were taller than herself. And then he kicked the basket over, spilling the sad and dusty leaves onto the ground. Tashi looked up into the face of her Aunt Sonam, but there was no help there. Sonam did not dare make an enemy of the Overseer, and she pulled an end of her headscarf over her face and turned away.



Tashi dragged the empty basket down to the shade of the tree that grew out of the rocks, and when she got there she sat and wept with her head in her hands. She wept for her mother and for Aunt Sonam and for herself. She cried for a long time. Then she wiped her wet eyes with the backs of her hands and looked up. The monkeys were sitting in the circle of shade, watching her. They were all watching her – the babies hanging from their mothers, the older ones quiet for once, Rajah himself sitting looking at her with his old head tilted curiously to one side. So she told them everything. She told them everything because there was no one else to tell.

When she had finished there was stillness and silence for a few moments. Then Rajah walked through the tree-shadow towards her, coming closer than he had ever come before. He stood and was suddenly taller than Tashi. He put his long fingers on the rim of the basket and felt along it carefully. Then, without moving his head, he gave a harsh cry: "*Chack! Chack-chack-chack!*"





Instantly several of the adult monkeys leapt across the clearing, grabbed the basket, lifted it and then, with amazing strength and speed, carried it up and over the jumbled rocks towards the slopes of the mountains. Higher and higher they went, Rajah leading. In a very short time they and the basket had vanished into the clouds far above the plantation.

Tashi was too dismayed by the theft of her mother's basket to cry out. She stood watching the monkeys go, and then sat, feeling terribly tired. The young ones came to her. She took the three small bananas that were her lunch and shared them. Feeding the young ones calmed her. After a while she fell asleep.

To be continued...

Comprehension Question

- Predict what you think will happen next in the story.