

JASBINDER BILAN

ASHA
& THE
SPIRIT
BIRD

Chicken
House

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*This book is dedicated to my
family and especially to my wonderful
Majee, Chint Kaur Bilan, who held
my hand throughout my childhood
and still stays close.*

*Faith is the bird that feels the light
when the dawn is still dark*

RABINDRANATH TAGORE



I crouch close to the bittersweet straw in the cowshed, last night's strange dream racing through my heart. The cows shuffle to make room as I steady myself and duck low along the floor. I prise my fingers under the heavy stone, pulling out the small wooden box.

My hands tremble as I lift the lid, carefully unfold Papa's last letter and trace his address across the fragile yellow paper.

102 Connaught Place Zandapur

He's been working away for eight long months and I don't know why he hasn't written since the half-moon in May, *four* months ago. I brush away my salty tears with the back of my hand and, even though I know his letter off by heart, read each word

as if he were right here with me.

Dearest Asha,

The city is so different to Maermanali. It's busy and full of people. Working in the factory isn't too bad but I'd much rather be home with you all. I know you'll be studying hard at school and helping Ma. I miss you every day and promise I'll come back for your special birthday on Divali.

Always remember that I love you,

Papa

I begin to refold the letter but the clang of the spare cowbell startles me. It's swinging from a hook in the far corner, where not a breath of air can reach it.

And suddenly I'm back in the frozen landscape of my dream, lost in the ice wilderness of the Himalayas. I press my back against Tulsī's steamy body and struggle to calm her; the cows are spooked too.

I put the letter in my pocket and follow the bell as it moves from side to side through the whisper-still air. Goosebumps spike my arms and beads of cold sweat prickle my forehead, even though the shed is blazing with heat.

I keep my eyes fixed on the bell, grab Papa's scarf from the shelf and wind it round my neck. I breathe in his comforting scent to stop the panic rising . . . then the bell sounds again, this time even more loudly, echoing into the air like a death toll.

I'm about to run and tell Ma but stumble when I hear Jeevan outside shouting my name, his urgent footsteps pounding closer and closer. He bursts in, sending straw and dust flying everywhere.

'Asha!' His face is red-hot and fear sparks in his brown eyes. 'Asha, come quick, your ma needs you.'

'What is it?' I clutch the scarf. 'You're scaring me.'

'Just c-come.' He's panting so hard that his words burst out in snatches. 'Something terrible is . . . I'll tell you on the way.'

'Is Ma all right? Is she hurt? Tell me.'

'We've got to get down there.' He grabs hold of my hand, pulling me out of the shed, and we hurtle downhill to the village, but the path is steep and the loose stones are making me slip as air shoots into my lungs in painful gulps.

I squint towards the clutch of houses, shielding my eyes against the glare of the shiny solar panels and just make out a group of people gathered around our gates. They look like little dots from here and I can't work out who they are.

When we get closer, I see Ma, her green chuni flying through the air like it does when she uses it to swat flies.

Jeevan grips my hand so tightly I can feel his fingernails, sharp on my palms.

‘There’s a woman and some men,’ says Jeevan, between breaths. ‘Not from round here. They’re asking for money from your ma.’

I feel sick, press my side to stop the stitch and keep on going past the mango tree. We’re only a few steps from my house now, where everyone is spilling out of the garden and I see the people Jeevan told me about.

Two hulking men tower over Ma, and one of them is pointing a blunt metal pipe right in her face. A red car is parked outside too, a slim woman dressed in Western clothes standing beside it. My blood turns cold.

‘Jeevan, what’s happening?’

‘I don’t know!’

We force our way through the crowd. The twins are clinging to Ma’s legs and crying.

‘Ma!’ I shout, over the noise. ‘Ma!’

She ignores me. She’s trying to grasp the slim woman’s hand. ‘One more month, Meena, please!’ she cries.

The woman flicks Ma away. 'I'm a business-woman, not a charity,' she says coldly. 'Now . . . where's the money?' She nods to one of her men, the one with the pipe, who shoves Ma and sends her tumbling to the ground.

I rush to Ma's side while Jeevan pulls my little brother and sister away from danger. His mother, who's watching with the other neighbours, scoops them both up. Ma stands and brushes the dust off her clothes.

The woman, Meena, signals to one of her men. 'You search the house. I'll check the outbuildings. And you –' she points to the other man – 'make sure no one interferes.'

The man with the pipe kicks at our front door with his boot.

'Ma – *do* something!' I shout. Needles stab at my stomach.

But she looks the other way.

'Get away from our house,' I yell, boiling with outrage.

The man bares his crimson teeth in a paan-stained smile, shoves aside the beaded curtain, and disappears inside.

Ma stands watching at the door, frozen to the spot. Why isn't she doing anything?

I run into the kitchen, my legs shaking, Jeevan right behind me.

‘You can’t just walk into our house!’ My voice cracks.

‘Can’t I?’ The man turns and his jaw moves mechanically, still chewing the paan. He spits a blood-red line across the floor, filling the room with his putrid breath.

Jeevan charges towards him. ‘Stop! That’s disgusting!’

A fierce admiration bubbles inside me as my friend and I exchange a look swift as a heartbeat. ‘Jeevan, be careful.’ I grab him by the arm. ‘Don’t go too close.’

The man’s mouth twists into a strange grin as he drops the pipe on the floor. ‘Where’s your papa when you need him?’ he sneers. ‘Probably in some toddy shop spending all your money . . . and I bet he’s never coming back.’

‘My papa doesn’t even drink.’ I’m filled with anger. ‘And if he was here you wouldn’t dare to come anywhere near our house.’

He knots his eyebrows together over his beetle-black eyes and goes to the latticed cupboard door where Ma keeps the crockery. ‘Is this where you hide the valuable stuff?’ He looks inside, but nothing in

there is worth much. He sweeps everything out, knocking my best blue cup off the shelf. It clatters to the ground, smashing to pieces. He storms past Jeevan, who stumbles backwards on to the floor.

‘Leave him alone!’ I cry, and without thinking throw myself at the man and kick him as hard as I can.

‘You . . . little swine!’

He grasps me by the wrist and shakes me violently. When he finally lets go, my knees buckle as fear swamps me.

Ma runs in, pulls me towards her. ‘Please . . . stop this. We have nothing to give you. There’s nothing valuable in here.’

Ma’s neck is bare and I realize they must have already forced the gold pendant from her.

Meena sweeps through the door and looks around, wrinkling her nose. She knows what she’s looking for: her eyes catch on our brass pot. She reaches into it and brings out the key to the old tractor, which she must’ve seen in the outhouse. ‘We’ll take this as interest,’ she says to Ma, dangling the key for a moment before tossing it to her thug. ‘But I’ll be back for the full repayment.’ She walks out of the house.

Interest? Repayment? The words spin around in my head but I can’t make sense of them. The only

thing I'm sure about is that she's taking the tractor.

'No! Not Papa's tractor,' I shout after Meena, sprinting into the garden. 'How will we do all the hard farm jobs?'

Meena is sliding into the driver's seat of the red car.

Her men climb on to the tractor. The engine starts with a splutter, followed by an ear-piercing screech.

'No!' I cry, unable to keep the sobs from escaping. 'No!'

Meena winds down the window of her sleek car and fixes Ma with a stare. 'We'll be back for the money by nightfall on Divali. If you don't have it, we're taking the house.'

She accelerates out on to the road before Ma can reply, followed by the tractor.

'Ma!' I scream. 'Don't let them steal it!' My words are drowned out by the engine noise and the neighbours' shouting.

Jeevan joins me and we run past Ma, past the neighbours, following the vehicles on to the road. My lungs burn and my legs ache. They're too fast: we can't stop them.

Jeevan swears at them, his face livid, his eyes full of fire.

His words shock me, even in this moment of

hopeless fury, but I let them hang in the air.

The car and tractor head along the twisting road that leads away from the village, throwing dust on to the ripening barley fields, the engine noise getting fainter and fainter.