



JASBINDER BILAN

AARTI
& THE
BLUE
GODS

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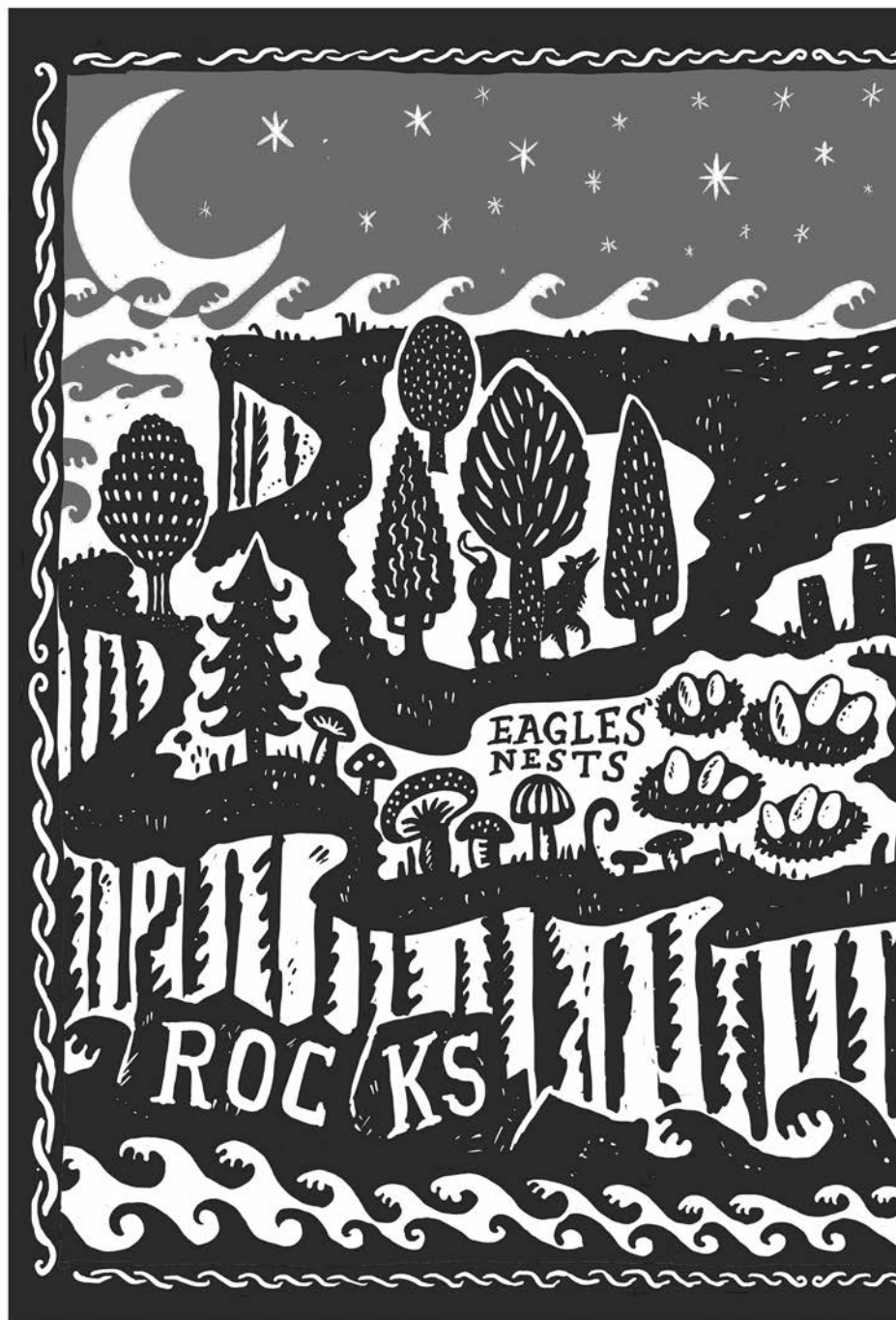


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*For Ian, Gem and Satchen –
with love always X*





*The clearest way into the Universe
is through a forest wilderness.*

JOHN MUIR, *JOHN OF THE MOUNTAINS:*
THE UNPUBLISHED JOURNALS OF JOHN MUIR



Winter



If Aarti could fly, she wouldn't hang around here, she'd spread her wings and keep going until she landed somewhere else. Somewhere she felt she belonged and where she could find someone who loved her. She huffed cold breath on her numb fingers to warm them and watched the ladybirds as they gathered at the corners of the window.

'Aaaarti!' Aunt's voice tinkled up the stairs. 'It's nearly supper time – come down!'

Aarti scooped the red-and-black speckled ladybirds into her little tin, inched the mildewed window open a fraction and tipped the insects out into the deep winter evening.

The ladybirds flipped open their tiny wings and whizzed away. But Aarti knew that it didn't make any difference. However many times she did this, they always flew right back in. And, when she noticed

them, Aunt Amalie would pop each one and crack its little shell. It made tears prick at Aarti's eyes every time.

'I'm making potato cakes,' came Aunt's voice again. 'Your favourites.'

Whenever Aunt called her name, Aarti heard another name flitting in the back of her mind – but it would never come to the front where she might catch it.

'Coming, Aunt!' she called.

She turned from the window, breathed down the butterflies that fluttered around her stomach and padded across the wooden floor of her bedroom. On the landing, she skirted round the metal bucket catching cold splashes of rainwater from the ceiling.

She walked past the dark door that Aunt always kept locked and that Aarti had never seen inside, along the corridor, past Aunt's room with its thick rug unfurled across the floorboards, and paused at the top of the stairs.

Peering down the curling bannister she saw her aunt standing at the very bottom, her bouncy blond curls tamed back into a bun, her cheeks rosy red from the fire. Aunt wore a grey tunic that came past her knees, over thick woollen trousers.

'There you are,' Aunt said, smiling. She was in a

good mood this evening. When Aunt was in a good mood it made Aarti nervous. She wasn't sure what she might do next. 'Come along, there's time for some reading before supper.'

Aarti tried to smile back. She owed Aunt so much and wanted to make her proud – it was just that sometimes she didn't know how to do it.

She made her way down the smooth wooden steps. The familiar homely smell wafted towards her from the range: fish guts from their morning catch mingled with the tang of woodsmoke. There was a darkened arched window at one end of the large hall and threadbare rugs scattered across the stone floor. Shelves lined the walls, heaving with books of all sizes.

Aunt was now sitting at a rustic table with a thick book spread open before her. The warmth from the crackling fire pumped blood to Aarti's cheeks and to the tip of her frozen nose. She felt herself relax a little.

Using a thick cloth to protect her hands, Aarti swung open the small metal door on the wood-burning range and checked the fire would last until morning. The logs smouldered orange and hissed when she added an extra piece of wood.

'Good girl, Aarti – we must never let the fire go out.'

‘Yes, Aunt.’ She smiled and felt her heart skip, allowed herself a beat of satisfaction. She shuffled on to the bench beside Aunt.

Aunt pointed to the words in the book with her pale finger, one by one, and as usual Aarti read out the words as clearly and as loudly as a hymn, just as Aunt had taught her.

*‘Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?’*

When Aarti had finished the verse, Aunt Amalie moved across to the griddle hanging above the fire and flipped the potato cakes. ‘These will help you to have a good night’s sleep, my dear,’ she said, as she dabbed on some sheep’s butter that made the cakes sizzle and sing. ‘Isn’t Aunt Amalie good? Making these for you? Your favourites.’

Aarti studied Aunt’s face carefully, checking for the signs as she had learnt to do. ‘Thank you, Aunt.’

‘Fetch the honey from the store, would you, dear?’

Aarti heaved open the door beside the range and entered the dark storeroom with its earthy, sweet scent and shelves crammed with jars of preserves, honey from the beehives, dried herbs and

mushrooms gathered through the year. The sheep gave them milk and butter, and meat that they dried for winter, packages of it carefully preserved and wrapped. On the floor, slumped like sleeping old men, were huge sacks of salt, oats to sow once spring came, and fresh oats from last autumn's harvest. Aunt was clever and a good planner and she worked hard to organize the store so they had everything they ever needed.

She had explained it all to Aarti, how they had to look after everything carefully so they could survive here – and how just as Aunt's parents had taught *her* to live on the island, so she was teaching Aarti. It was hard work, yes, but also a place where *they* were in control and where Aarti would be safe from a world full of bad, cruel things.

And anyway, Aunt knew everything and Aarti only knew the island.

She lifted a jar of honey and closed the door behind her, setting the jar on the side. She sat down at the table, watching Aunt as she left the potato cakes for a minute longer and then scooped three on to a wooden plate and placed it in front of Aarti.

Aarti gripped the edge of the plate when Aunt turned her back. The last time Aunt had been nice to her, it had ended with Aarti having to sleep in the

woodstore because Aunt said she didn't seem very grateful and maybe needed time to think. It had been one of the coldest nights of deep winter and Aarti would surely have frozen, but Chand snuggled in beside her and then it wasn't too bad. She knew Aunt couldn't help it, and she did rub her feet with comfrey balm after.

Aarti was jolted back to the present as Aunt sat down opposite her at the long table. 'Beautiful reading, Aarti.'

'Thank you, Aunt.' She nibbled on a potato cake.

'Isn't this cosy?' Aunt continued. 'Let it rain, but here we are warm and we are fed.' Her voice softened. 'There's a big bad world out there, Aarti – you're lucky to be safe here on our island. Nobody to bother us or tell us what to do.' Aunt reached out, touched Aarti's chin and turned her face towards her. 'There is so much heartache out there.' Her eyes glistened. 'People who say they love you but don't really mean it. It's a cruel world.' She released Aarti, who instantly bowed her head, staring at her plate. Aunt's intensity was a bad sign. 'Lucky for you I shelter you from it . . . but remember, don't ever trust a man or a boy, Aarti. *I* know their ways.'

Aarti glanced up and nodded like she always did during Aunt's frequent talks about people's cruelty.

Although she knew Aunt had lived in a world with other people once, it also confused her – because how could every single person in the whole world be bad?

‘And one day, Aarti,’ continued Aunt, ‘this whole island will be yours.’ Aunt moved closer and put an arm round Aarti’s shoulder. ‘You were once a poor orphan that nobody wanted, and now look at you. Heir to the most beautiful place in the world.’

Aarti had heard this story a hundred times – but Aunt always left out the things Aarti burnt to know. Her heart pattered. ‘And what happened to my parents?’ she blurted.

Aunt’s voice turned cold. ‘They died, Aarti. I’ve told you. Don’t be ungrateful now.’ Aunt’s grey eyes began to spark and she tugged at the loose strands of hair that had escaped from her bun.

Aarti swallowed and watched Aunt as she pulled rhythmically at the loose hair, the muscle in her jaw rippling as lightly as a feather.

‘I . . . I’m not ungrateful,’ she started, keeping her voice gentle. ‘You told me how most people only want to adopt babies, but how you wanted *me* – your niece – over any bawling babies because you wanted a little girl of your own. I . . . it’s just . . .’ But she didn’t dare continue.

Aunt's jaw relaxed slightly. 'Now then,' she said, composing her face and securing the hair back into her bun. 'Did you have a good day, my petal?'

'Yes, Aunt,' said Aarti, swallowing a mouthful of sweet, soft potato cake.

'Here, have some more honey.' Aunt Amalie dipped a spoon into the jar and drizzled deep-amber liquid over the potato cakes on Aarti's plate. 'What a treat – and it's not even your birthday! This year you will be twelve, Aarti. Can you believe it? We'll plan a special day for you. A picnic on the beach and a present. You will have a present. Something I have saved for you for a long time.'

'Thank you, Aunt.' Aarti stared into the fire. She wanted to be excited but she knew how it worked. How one day Aunt would entice her with the most wonderful treats and the next day she would pick fault with every tiny thing that Aarti did. Sometimes she would rage at her, throwing pans and plates on the floor, or make her do her ballet pliés for hours and hours on end.

Sometimes she would send her out in the deep snow and not allow her into the house until she'd performed some task. That was when she wandered the island with Chand. They would go to the safe place that Chand had shown her, the dry cave behind

the waterfall in a hidden glade in the woods where she would make a bed of leaves for them both.

‘What are you thinking, little one?’ asked Aunt, tipping Aarti’s chin and forcing her to look into her eyes again. Aunt’s were a cold grey.

‘N . . . nothing,’ replied Aarti, her stomach clenching as she thought of what might happen if Aunt discovered her secrets.

Aunt held her chin. ‘Such a beauty,’ she whispered. ‘An Indian princess living in the Scottish wilds.’ She let go.

Aarti never understood what Aunt meant by this. It was one of the many things she said that didn’t make any sense.