

The Covenant of Water by Abraham Verghese

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A river went out of Eden to water the garden
– Genesis 2:10

Not hammer-strokes, but dance of the water,
sings pebbles into perfection.
– Rabindranath Tagore



Part One



Chapter 1

Always

1900, Travancore, South India

She is twelve years old, and she will be married in the morning. Mother and daughter lie on the mat, their wet cheeks glued together.

"The saddest day of a girl's life is the day of her wedding," her mother says. "After that, God willing, it gets better." Soon she hears her mother's sniffles change to steady breathing, then to the softest of snores, which in the girl's mind seem to

impose order on the scattered sounds of the night, from the wooden walls exhaling the day's heat to the scuffing sound of the dog in the sandy courtyard outside.

A brainfever bird calls out: *Kezhekketha? Kezhekketha? Which way is east? Which way is east?* She imagines the bird looking down at the clearing where the rectangular thatched roof squats over their house. It sees the lagoon in front and the creek and the paddy field behind. The bird's cry can go on for hours, depriving them of sleep ... but just then it is cut off abruptly, as though a cobra has snuck up on it. In the silence that follows, the creek sings no lullaby, only grumbling over the polished pebbles.

She awakes before dawn while her mother still sleeps. Through the window, the water of the paddy field shimmers like beaten silver. On the front verandah, her father's ornate *charu kasera*, or lounging chair, sits forlorn and empty. She lifts the writing pallet that straddles the long wooden arms and seats herself. She feels her father's ghostly impression preserved in the cane weave.

On the banks of the lagoon four coconut trees grow sideways, skimming the water as if to preen at their reflections before straightening to the heavens. *Goodbye, lagoon. Goodbye, creek.*

"*Molay?*" her father's only brother had said the previous day, to her surprise. Of late he wasn't in the habit of using the endearment *molay*—daughter—with her. "We've found a good match for you!" His tone was oily, as though she were four, not twelve. "Your groom values the fact that you're from a good family, a priest's daughter." She knew her uncle had been looking to get her married off for a while, but she still felt he was rushing to arrange this match. What could she say? Such matters were decided by adults. The helplessness on her mother's face embarrassed her. She felt pity for her mother, when she wanted to feel respect. Later, when they were alone, her mother said,

"*Molay*, this is no longer our house. Your uncle..." She was pleading, as if her daughter *had* protested. Her words had trailed off, her eyes darting around nervously. The lizards on the walls carried tales. "How different from here can life be there? You'll feast at Christmas, fast for Lent . . . church on Sundays. The same Eucharist, the same coconut palms and coffee bushes. It's a fine match . . . He's of good means."

Why would a man of good means marry a girl of little means, a girl without a dowry? What are they keeping from her? What does *he* lack? Youth, for one - he's forty. He already has a child. A few days before, after the marriage broker had come and gone, she overheard her uncle chastise her mother, saying, "So what if his aunt drowned? Is that the same as a family history of lunacy? Whoever heard of a family with a history of drownings? Others are always jealous of a good match and they'll find one thing to exaggerate."

Seated in his chair, she strokes the polished arms, and thinks for a moment of her father's forearms; like most Malayali men he'd been a loveable bear, hair on arms, chest, and even his back, so one never touched skin except through soft fur. On his lap, in this chair, she learned her letters. When she did well in the church school, he said, "You have a good head. But being curious is even more important. High school for you. College, too! Why not? I won't let you marry young like your mother."

The bishop had posted her father to a troubled church near Mundakayam that had no steady *achen* because the Mohammedan traders had caused mischief. It wasn't a place for family, with morning mist still nibbling at the knees at midday and rising to the chin by evening, and where dampness brought in wheezing, rheumatism and fevers.. Less than a year into his posting he returned with teeth-chattering chills, his skin hot to the touch, his urine running black. Before they could get help, his chest stopped moving. When her mother held a mirror to his lips, it didn't mist. Her father's breath was now just air.

That was the saddest day of her life. How could marriage be worse?

She rises from the cane seat for the last time. Her father's chair and his teak platform bed inside are like a saint's relics for her; they retain the essence of him. If only she might take them to her new home.

The household stirs.

She wipes her eyes, squares her shoulders, lifts her chin, lifts it to whatever this day will bring, to the unloveliness of parting, to leaving her home that is home no longer. The chaos and hurt in God's world are unfathomable mysteries, yet the Bible shows her that there is order beneath. As her father would say, "Faith is to know the pattern is there, even though none is visible."

"I'll be alright, Appa," she says, picturing his distress. If he were alive she wouldn't be getting married today.

She imagines his reply. *A father's worries end with a good husband. I pray he's that. But this I know: the same God who watched over you here will be with you there, molay. He promises us this in the Gospels. "I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."*

Chapter 2

To Have and to Hold

1900, Travancore, South India

The journey to the groom's church takes almost half a day. The boatman steers them down a maze of unfamiliar canals overhung by flaming red hibiscus, the houses so close to the edge she could touch a squatting old woman winnowing rice with flicks of

a flat basket. She can hear a boy reading the *Manorama* newspaper to a sightless ancient who rubs his head as if the news hurts. House after house, each a little universe, some with children her age watching them pass. "Where are you going?" asks a heavy-chested busybody through black teeth, his black index finger—his toothbrush—covered in powdered charcoal, frozen in midair. The boatman glares at him.

Out from the canals now, onto a carpet of lotus and lilies so thick she could walk across it. The flowers are opened like well-wishers. Impulsively she picks one blossom, grabbing the stem anchored deep down. It comes free with a splash, a pink jewel, a miracle that something so beautiful can emerge from water so murky. Her uncle looks pointedly at her mother, who says nothing though she worries that her daughter will dirty her white blouse and *munda*, or the *kavani* with faint gold trim. A fruity scent fills the boat. She counts twenty-four petals. Pushing through the lotus carpet they emerge onto a lake so wide that the far shore is invisible, the water still and smooth. She wonders if the ocean looks like this. She has almost forgotten that she's about to marry. At a busy jetty they transfer to a giant canoe poled by lean, muscled men, its ends curled up like dried bean pods. Two dozen passengers stand in the middle, umbrellas countering the sun. She realises that she's going so far away it won't be easy for her to visit home again.

The lake imperceptibly narrows to a broad river. The boat picks up speed as the current seizes it. At last, in the distance, up on a rise, a massive stone crucifix stands watch over a small church, its arms casting a shadow over the river. This is one of the seven and a half churches founded by Saint Thomas after his arrival. Like every Sunday school child she can rattle off their names: Kodungallur, Paruvar, Niranam, Palayoor, Nilackal, Kokkamangalam, Kollam, and the tiny half-church in Thiruvithamcode; but seeing one for the first time leaves her breathless.

The marriage broker from Ranni paces up and down in the courtyard. Damp spots at the armpits of his *juba* connect over his chest. "The groom should have been here long before," he says. The strands of hair he stretches over his dome have collapsed back over his ear like a parrot's plume. He swallows nervously and a rock moves up and down in his neck. The soil in his village famously grows both the best paddy and these goiters.

The groom's party consists of just the groom's sister, Thankamma. This sturdy, smiling woman grabs her future sister-in-law's tiny hands in both of hers and squeezes them with affection. "He's coming," she says. The *achen* slips the ceremonial stole over his robes and ties the embroidered girdle. He holds out his hand, palm up, to wordlessly ask, *Well?* No one responds.

The bride shivers, even though it is sultry. She isn't used to wearing a *chatta* and *munda*. From this day on, no more long skirt and colored blouse. She'll dress like her mother and aunt in this uniform of every married woman in the Saint Thomas Christian world, white its only color. The *munda* is like a man's but tied more elaborately, the free edge pleated and folded over itself three times, then tucked into a fantail to conceal the shape of the wearer's bottom. Concealment is also the goal of the shapeless, short-sleeved V-neck blouse, the white *chatta*.

Light from the high windows slices down, casting oblique shadows. The incense tickles her throat. As in her church, there are no pews, just rough coir carpet on red oxide floors, but only in the front. Her uncle coughs. The sound echoes in the empty space.

She'd hoped her first cousin—also her best friend—would come for the wedding. She had married the year before when she was also twelve to a twelve-year-old groom from a good family. At the wedding the boy-groom had looked as dull as a

bucket, more interested in picking his nose than in the proceedings; the *achen* had interrupted the *kurbana* to hiss, "Stop digging! There's no gold in there!" Her cousin wrote that in her new home she slept and played with the other girls in the joint family, and that she was pleased to have nothing to do with her annoying husband. Her mother, reading the letter, had said, knowingly, "Well, one day all that will change." The bride wonders if it now has, and what that means.

There's a disturbance in the air. Her mother pushes her forward then steps away.

The groom looms beside her and at once the *achen* begins the service—*does he have a cow ready to calve back in the barn?* She gazes straight ahead.

In the smudged lenses of the *achen's* spectacles, she glimpses a reflection: a large figure silhouetted by the light from the entrance, and a tiny figure at his side—herself.

What must it feel like to be forty years old? He's older than her mother. A thought occurs to her: if he's widowed, why didn't he marry her mother instead of her? But she knows why: a widow's lot is only a little better than a leper's.

Suddenly, the *achen's* chant falters because her future husband has pivoted to study her, his back turned—unthinkably—to the priest. He peers into her face, breathing like a man who has walked rapidly for a great distance. She dares not look up, but she catches his earthy scent. She can't control her trembling. She shuts her eyes.

"But this is just a child!" she hears him exclaim.

When she opens her eyes, she sees her great-uncle put out a hand to stop the departing groom, only to have it flicked away like an ant off a sleeping mat.

Thankamma runs out after the runaway groom, her apron of belly fat swinging side to side despite the pressure of her hands.

She overtakes him near a burden stone—a horizontal slab of rock at shoulder height, held up by two vertical stone pillars sunk into the ground, a place for a traveler to set down a head load and catch their breath. Thankamma presses her hands on her brother's considerable chest, trying to slow him down as she walks backward before him. "*Monay*," she says, because he's much younger, more like her son than her brother. "*Monay*," she pants. What has transpired is serious, but it is comical how her brother pushes her as if he were a plowman and she the plow, and she can't help but laugh.

"Look at me!" she commands, still grinning. How often has she seen that frowning expression on his face, even as a baby? He was just four when their mother passed away and Thankamma took over her role. Singing to him and holding him helped unfurrow his forehead. Much later, when their eldest brother cheated him of the house and property that should have been his, only Thankamma stood up for him.

He slows down. She knows him well, this hoarder of words. If God miraculously unlocked his jaw, what might he say? *Chechi*, when I stood next to that shivering waif, I thought, "This is who I'm supposed to marry?" Did you see her chin trembling? I have my own child still at home to worry about. I hardly need another.

"*Monay*, I understand," she says, as if he *had* spoken. "I know how it looks. But don't forget, your mother and your grandmother married when they were just nine. Yes, they were children, and they kept being raised as children in another household, until they were no longer children. Does this not produce the most compatible and best of marriages? But forget all that and just for a moment think about that poor girl. Stranded before the altar on her wedding day? *Ayo*, what shame! Who'll marry her after that?"

He keeps walking. "She's a good girl," Thankamma says. "Such a good family! Your little JoJo needs someone to look

after him. She will be to him as I was to you when you were little. Let her grow up in your household. She needs Parambil as much as Parambil needs her."

She stumbles. He catches her, and she laughs. "Even elephants struggle to walk backwards!" Only she would construe the faint asymmetry on his face as a smile. "I picked this girl for you, *monay*. Don't give that broker too much credit. I met the mother, and I saw the girl, even if she didn't know I saw her. Didn't I choose well the first time? Your blessed first wife, God rest her soul, approves. So now, trust your *chechi* once more."

The marriage broker confers with the *achen*, who mutters, "What kind of business is this?"

The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer. Her father taught the young bride to say that when she was scared. *My rock, and my fortress.* A mysterious energy emanating from the altar now settles on her like a surplice, bringing a profound peace. This church is consecrated by one of the twelve; he stood on the ground where she stands, the one apostle who *touch*ed Christ's wounds. She feels an understanding beyond imagination, a voice that speaks without sound or motion. It says, *I am with you always.*

Then the groom's bare feet reappear beside her. *How beautiful are the feet of messengers who preach the gospel of peace.* But these are brutish feet callused and impervious to thorns, capable of kicking down a rotting stump, and adept at finding crevices to clamber up a palm tree. His feet shift, knowing they're being judged. She can't help herself: she peeks up at him. His nose is as sharp as an axe, the lips full, and the chin thrust out. His hair is jet black, with no gray, which surprises her. He's much darker than she is, but handsome. She's astonished by the intensity of his gaze as he stares at the priest: it's that of a mongoose awaiting the snake's strike so it can dodge, pivot, and seize it by the neck.

The service must have gone by faster than she realized, because already her mother is helping the groom uncover her head. He moves behind her. He rests his hands on her shoulders as he ties the tiny gold *minnu* around her neck. His fingers brushing her skin feel as hot as coals.

The groom makes his crude mark in the church register the passes the pen to her. She enters her name and the day, month, and year, 1900. When she looks up he is walking out of the church. The priest watches his receding form and says, "What? Did he leave the rice on the fire?"

Her husband is not at the jetty where a boat bobs and strains impatiently against its mooring.

"From the time your husband was a little boy," says her new sister-in-law, "he's preferred his feet to carry him. Not me! Why walk when I can float?" Thankamma's laughter coaxes them to join in. But now, at the water's edge, mother and daughter must part. They cling to each other—who knows when they will see each other again? She has a new house-name, a new home, unseen, to which she now belongs. She must renounce the old one.

Thankamma's eyes are also moist. "You don't worry," she says to the distraught mother. "I'll care for her as if she were my own. I'm going to stay at Parambil two or three weeks. By then, she'll know her household better than her Psalms. Don't thank me. My children are all grown. I'll stay long enough for my husband to miss me!"

The young bride's legs wobble when she peels away from her mother. She might fall if not for Thankamma swinging her onto her hip like a baby, then stepping into the waiting boat. She instinctively wraps her legs around Thankamma's sturdy waist and presses her cheeks to that meaty shoulder. From that perch she gazes back at the forlorn figure waving from the jetty, a figure dwarfed by the giant stone crucifix rising behind her.

The home of the young bride and her widower groom lies in Travancore, at the southern tip of India, sandwiched between the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats—that long mountain range that runs parallel to the western coast. The land is shaped by water and its people united by a common language: Malayalam. Where the sea meets white beach, it thrusts fingers inland to intertwine with the rivers snaking down the green canopied slopes of the Ghats. It is a child's fantasy world of rivulets and canals, a latticework of lakes and lagoons, a maze of backwaters and bottle-green lotus ponds; a vast circulatory system because, as her father used to say, all water is connected. It spawned a people—Malayalis—as mobile as the liquid medium around them, their gestures fluid, their hair flowing, ready to pour out laughter as the float from this relative's house to that one's, pulsing and roaming like blood corpuscles in a vasculature, propelled by the great beating heart of the monsoon.

In this land, coconut and palmyra palms are so abundant that at night their frilled silhouettes still sway and shimmer on the interiors of closed eyelids. Dreams that augur well must have green fronds and water; their absence defines a nightmare. When Malayalis say "land" they include water, because it makes no more sense to separate the two than it does to detach the nose from the mouth. On skiffs, canoes, barges, and ferries, Malayalis and their goods flow all over Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar with a swiftness the landlocked cannot imagine. In the absence of decent roads and regular bus transport and bridges, water is the highway.

In our young bride's time, the royal families of Travancore and Cochin, whose dynasties extend back to the Middle Ages, are under British rule as "princely states." There are over five hundred princely states under the British yoke—half of India's land mass—most of them minor and inconsequential. The maharajahs of the larger princely states, or "salute

states"—Hyderabad, Mysore, and Travancore—are entitled to anywhere from a nine- to a twenty-one-gun salute, the number reflecting a maharajah's importance in the eyes of the British (and often equalling the count of Rolls-Royces in the royal's garage). In exchange for keeping palaces, cars, and status, and for being allowed to govern semiautonomously, the maharajahs pay a tithe to the British out of the taxes they collect from their subjects.

Our bride in her village in the princely state of Travancore has never seen a British soldier or civil servant, a situation quite unlike that in the "presidencies" of Madras or Bombay—territories administered directly by the British and teeming with them. In time, the Malayalam-speaking regions of Travancore, Cochin and Malabar will come together to form the state of Kerala, a fish-shaped coastal territory at India's tip, its head pointing to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and its tail to Goa, while the eyes gaze wistfully across the ocean to Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Kuwait, and Riyadh.

Push a spade into the soil anywhere in Kerala and rust-tinged water wells up like blood under a scalpel, a rich laterite elixir that nourishes any living thing. One can dismiss the claims that aborted-but-viable fetuses cast away in that soil grow into feral humans, but there's no arguing that spices flourish here with an abundance unmatched anywhere else in the world. For centuries before Christ, sailors from the Middle East caught the southwesterlies in the lateen sails of their dhows, to land on the "Spice Coast" and buy pepper, clove, and cinnamon. When the trade winds reversed, they returned to Palestine, selling the spices to buyers from Genoa and Venice for small fortunes.

The spice craze swept over Europe like syphilis or the plague and by the same means: sailors and ships. But this infection was salutary; spices extended the life of food and whomsoever consumed it.

There were other benefits. In Birmingham, a priest who chewed cinnamon to mask his wine breath found himself irresistible to female parishioners and pseudonymously penned the popular pamphlet *Newe Sauces Swete and Sharp: A Merrie Gallimaufry of Couplings Uncouthe and Pleasant for Man and his Wyf*. Apothecaries celebrated the miraculous cure of dropsy, gout and lumbago by potions of turmeric, kokum, and pepper. A Marseilles physician discovered that rubbing ginger on a small, flaccid penis reversed both states, and for the partner procured “such pleasure that she objects to him getting off her again.” Strangely, it never occurred to Western cooks to dry roast and grind together peppercorn, fennel seed, cardamom, cloves, and cinnamon, then throw that spice mix into oil along with mustard seed, garlic, and onions to make a masala, the foundation of any curry.

Naturally, when spices fetched the price of precious jewels in Europe, the Arab sailors who brought them from India kept their source a secret for centuries. By the 1400s, the Portuguese (and later the Dutch, the French, and the English) made expeditions to find the land where these priceless spices grew; these seekers were like randy youths who’d caught the scent of a loose woman. Where was she? East, always somewhere east.

But Vasco da Gama went west from Portugal, not east. He sailed along the West African coast, rounded the tip of Africa, and came back up the other side. Somewhere in the Indian Ocean, da Gama captured and tortured an Arab pilot who led him to the Spice Coast—present day Kerala—landing near the city of Calicut; his was the longest ocean voyage yet undertaken.

The Zamorin of Calicut was quite unimpressed by da Gama, and by his monarch who sent sea corals and brass as tributes, when the zamorin’s presents were rubies, emeralds and silk. He found it laughable that da Gama’s stated ambition was to bring Christ’s love to the heathens. Did the idiot not know that

fourteen hundred years before his arrival in India, even before Saint Peter got to Rome, another of the twelve disciples—Saint Thomas—had landed just down the coast on an Arab trading dhow?

Legend has it that Saint Thomas arrived in 52 AD, disembarked close to present-day Cochin. He met a boy returning from the temple. “Does your God hear your prayers?” he asked. The boy said his God surely did. Saint Thomas tossed water into the air and the droplets remained suspended. “Can your God do that?” By such displays, whether magic or miracles, he converted a few Brahmin families to Christianity; later he was martyred in Madras. Those first converts—Saint Thomas Christians—stayed true to the faith and did not marry outside their community. Over time they grew, knitted together by their customs and their churches.

Almost two thousand years later, two descendants of those first Indian converts, a twelve-year-old bride and a middle-aged widower, have married.

“Happened is happened,” our young brie will say when she becomes a grandmother, and when her granddaughter—her namesake—egs for a story about their ancestors. The little girls has heard rumors that theirs is a genealogy chock-full of secrets and that her ancestors include slavers, murderers, and a defrocked bishop. “Child, the past is the past, and furthermore it’s different every time I remember it. I’ll tell you about the future, the one *you* will make.” But the child insists.

Where should the story begin? With “Doubting” Thomas, who insisted on seeing Christ’s wounds before he’d believe? With other martyrs of the faith? What the child clamors for is the story of their own family, of the widower’s house into which her grandmother married, a landlocked dwelling in a land of water, a house full of mysteries. But such memories are woven from

gossamer threads; time eats holes in the fabric, and these she must darn with myth and fable.

The grandmother is certain of a few things. A tale that leaves its imprint on a listener tells the truth about how the world lives, and so, unavoidably, it is about families, their victories and wounds, and their departed, including ghosts who linger; it must offer instructions for living in God's realm, where joy never spares one from sorrow. A good story goes beyond what a forgiving God cares to do: it reconciles families and unburdens them of secrets whose bond is stronger than blood. But in their revealing, as in their keeping, secrets can tear a family apart.

Chapter 3

Things Not Mentioned

1900, Parambil

The new bride dreams that she's splashing in the lagoon with her cousins, piling onto their narrow skiff, deliberately capsizing it, and clambering on again, their laughter echoing off the banks.

She awakes confused.

A snoring mound beside her swells and subsides.

Thankamma. Yes. Her first night at Parambil. That name rubs awkwardly over her tongue like the edge of a chipped tooth.

From next door, her husband's room, she hears nothing.

Thankamma's body hides a small boy—she sees only the shiny tousled hair on his head, and a hand, palm up, resting just beyond it.

She listens. Something is missing. The absence is disquieting. It comes to her: she cannot hear water. She's missing

its murmuring, soothing voice, and so she manufactured it in her dream.