Tasks

Excerpt from The Covenant of Water

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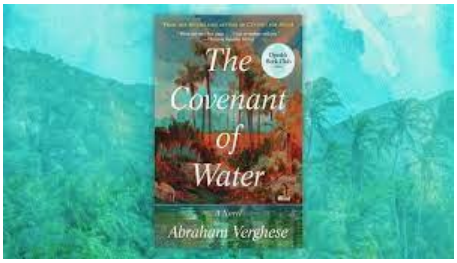

1900, Travancore, South India

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 in 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 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 so 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 secret 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 lovable 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[1] 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 on 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 all right, Appa[2]," 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 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 hurt. House after house, each a little universe, some with children her age watching them pass. "Where are you going?! Asks a bare-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 mundu, or the kavani[3] 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 realizes that she is 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 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, Paravur, 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 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 mundu. 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 mundu 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 se 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[4] to hiss, “Stop digging! There is 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.

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[1] A priest or a nobleman.
[2] Appa means ”daddy”.
[3] A mundu and a kavani are pieces of clothing.
[4] The ceremony