

Paradise Pickles & Preserves

May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dustgreen trees. Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst. Dissolute bluebottles hum vacuously in the fruity air. Then they stun themselves against clear windowpanes and die, fatly baffled in the sun.

The nights are clear but suffused with sloth and sullen expectation.

But by early June the south-west monsoon breaks and there are three months of wind and water with short spells of sharp, glittering sunshine that thrilled children snatch to play with. The countryside turns an immodest green. Boundaries blur as tapioca fences take root and bloom. Brick walls turn mossgreen. Pepper vines snake up electric poles. Wild creepers burst through laterite banks and spill across the flooded roads. Boats ply in the bazaars. And small fish appear in the puddles that fill the PWD potholes on the highways.

It was raining when Rahel came back to Ayemenem. Slanting silver ropes slammed into loose earth, ploughing it up like gunfire. The old house on the hill wore its steep, gabled roof pulled over its ears like a low hat. The walls, streaked with moss, had grown soft, and bulged a little with dampness that seeped up from the ground. The wild, overgrown garden was full of the whisper and scurry of small lives. In the undergrowth a rat

snake rubbed itself against a glistening stone. Hopeful yellow bullfrogs cruised the scummy pond for mates. A drenched mongoose flashed across the leaf-strewn driveway.

The house itself looked empty. The doors and windows were locked. The front verandah bare. Unfurnished. But the skyblue Plymouth with chrome tailfins was still parked outside, and inside, Baby Kochamma was still alive.

She was Rahel's baby grand aunt, her grandfather's younger sister. Her name was really Navomi, Navomi Ipe, but everybody called her Baby. She became Baby Kochamma when she was old enough to be an aunt. Rahel hadn't come to see her, though. Neither niece nor baby grand aunt laboured under any illusions on that account. Rahel had come to see her brother, Estha. They were two-egg twins. 'Dizygotic' doctors called them. Born from separate but simultaneously fertilized eggs. Estha Esthappen – was the older by eighteen minutes.

They never did look much like each other, Estha and Rahel, and even when they were thin-armed children, flat-chested, worm-ridden and Elvis Presley-puffed, there was none of the usual 'Who is who?' and 'Which is which?' from oversmiling relatives or the Syrian Orthodox Bishops who frequently visited the Ayemenem house for donations.

The confusion lay in a deeper, more secret place.

In those early amorphous years when memory had only just begun, when life was full of Beginnings and no Ends, and Everything was For Ever, Esthappen and Rahel thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually, as We or Us. As though they were a rare breed of Siamese twins, physically separate, but with joint identities.

Now, these years later, Rahel has a memory of waking up one night giggling at Estha's funny dream.

She has other memories too that she has no right to have.

She remembers, for instance (though she hadn't been there), what the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man did to Estha in

Abhilash Talkies. She remembers the taste of the tomato sandwiches – *Estha's* sandwiches, that *Estha* ate – on the Madras Mail to Madras.

And these are only the small things.

Anyway, now she thinks of *Estha* and *Rahel* as *Them*, because separately, the two of them are no longer what *They* were or ever thought *They'd* be.

Ever.

Their lives have a size and a shape now. *Estha* has his and *Rahel* hers.

Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks and Limits have appeared like a team of trolls on their separate horizons. Short creatures with long shadows, patrolling the Blurry End. Gentle half-moons have gathered under their eyes and they are as old as *Ammu* was when she died. Thirty-one.

Not old.

Not young.

But a viable die-able age.

They were nearly born on a bus, *Estha* and *Rahel*. The car in which *Baba*, their father, was taking *Ammu*, their mother, to hospital in Shillong to have them, broke down on the winding tea estate road in Assam. They abandoned the car and flagged down a crowded State Transport bus. With the queer compassion of the very poor for the comparatively well off, or perhaps only because they saw how hugely pregnant *Ammu* was, seated passengers made room for the couple and for the rest of the journey *Estha* and *Rahel's* father had to hold their mother's stomach (with them in it) to prevent it from wobbling. That was before they were divorced and *Ammu* came back to live in Kerala.

According to *Estha*, if they'd been born on the bus, they'd have got free bus rides for the rest of their lives. It wasn't clear

where he'd got this information from, or how he knew these things, but for years the twins harboured a faint resentment against their parents for having diddled them out of a lifetime of free bus rides.

They also believed that if they were killed on a zebra crossing, the Government would pay for their funerals. They had the definite impression that that was what zebra crossings were meant for. Free funerals. Of course there were no zebra crossings to get killed on in Ayemenem, or, for that matter, even in Kottayam, which was the nearest town, but they'd seen some from the car window when they went to Cochin, which was a two hour drive away.

The Government never paid for *Sophie Mol's* funeral because she wasn't killed on a zebra crossing. She had hers in Ayemenem in the old church with the new paint. She was *Estha* and *Rahel's* cousin, their uncle *Chacko's* daughter. She was visiting from England. *Estha* and *Rahel* were seven years old when she died. *Sophie Mol* was almost nine. She had a special child-sized coffin.

Satin-lined.

Brass handle shined.

She lay in it in her yellow Crimplene bellbottoms with her hair in a ribbon and her Made-in-England go-go bag that she loved. Her face was pale and as wrinkled as a dhobi's thumb from being in water for too long. The congregation gathered around the coffin, and the yellow church swelled like a throat with the sound of sad singing. The priests with curly beards swung pots of frankincense on chains and never smiled at babies the way they did on usual Sundays.

The long candles on the altar were bent. The short ones weren't.

An old lady masquerading as a distant relative (whom nobody recognized), but who often surfaced next to bodies at funerals

(a funeral junkie? a latent necrophiliac?) put cologne on a wad of cotton wool and with a devout and gently challenging air, dabbed it on Sophie Mol's forehead. Sophie Mol smelled of cologne and coffinwood.

Margaret Kochamma, Sophie Mol's English mother, wouldn't let Chacko, Sophie Mol's biological father, put his arm around her to comfort her.

The family stood huddled together. Margaret Kochamma, Chacko, Baby Kochamma, and next to her, her sister-in-law, Mammachi – Estha and Rahel's (and Sophie Mol's) grandmother. Mammachi was almost blind and always wore dark glasses when she went out of the house. Her tears trickled down from behind them and trembled along her jaw like raindrops on the edge of a roof. She looked small and ill in her crisp off-white sari. Chacko was Mammachi's only son. Her own grief grieved her. His devastated her.

Though Ammu, Estha and Rahel were allowed to attend the funeral, they were made to stand separately, not with the rest of the family. Nobody would look at them.

It was hot in the church, and the white edges of the arum lilies crisped and curled. A bee died in a coffin flower. Ammu's hands shook and her hymnbook with it. Her skin was cold. Estha stood close to her, barely awake, his aching eyes glittering like glass, his burning cheek against the bare skin of Ammu's trembling, hymnbook-holding arm.

Rahel, on the other hand, was wide awake, fiercely vigilant and brittle with exhaustion from her battle against Real Life.

She noticed that Sophie Mol was awake for her funeral. She showed Rahel Two Things.

Thing One was the newly painted high dome of the yellow church that Rahel hadn't ever looked at from the inside. It was painted blue like the sky, with drifting clouds and tiny whizzing jet planes with white trails that crisscrossed in the clouds. It's true (and must be said) that it would have been easier to notice

these things lying in a coffin looking up than standing in the pews, hemmed in by sad hips and hymnbooks.

Rahel thought of the someone who had taken the trouble to go up there with cans of paint, white for the clouds, blue for the sky, silver for the jets, and brushes, and thinner. She imagined him up there, someone like Velutha, bare bodied and shining, sitting on a plank, swinging from the scaffolding in the high dome of the church, painting silver jets in a blue church sky.

She thought of what would happen if the rope snapped. She imagined him dropping like a dark star out of the sky that he had made. Lying broken on the hot church floor, dark blood spilling from his skull like a secret.

By then Esthappen and Rahel had learned that the world had other ways of breaking men. They were already familiar with the smell. Sicksweet. Like old roses on a breeze.

Thing Two that Sophie Mol showed Rahel was the bat baby.

During the funeral service, Rahel watched a small black bat climb up Baby Kochamma's expensive funeral sari with gently clinging curled claws. When it reached the place between her sari and her blouse, her roll of sadness, her bare midriff, Baby Kochamma screamed and hit the air with her hymnbook. The singing stopped for a 'Whatisit? Whathappened?' and for a flurrywhirring and a sariflapping.

The sad priests dusted out their curly beards with goldringed fingers as though hidden spiders had spun sudden cobwebs in them.

The baby bat flew up into the sky and turned into a jet plane without a crisscrossed trail.

Only Rahel noticed Sophie Mol's secret cartwheel in her coffin.

The sad singing started again and they sang the same sad verse twice. And once more the yellow church swelled like a throat with voices.

When they lowered Sophie Mol's coffin into the ground in the little cemetery behind the church, Rahel knew that she still wasn't dead. She heard (on Sophie Mol's behalf), the soft sounds of the red mud and the hard sounds of the orange laterite that spoiled the shining coffin polish. She heard the dullthudding through the polished coffin wood, through the satin coffin lining. The sad priests' voices muffled by mud and wood.

*We entrust into thy hands, most merciful Father,
The soul of this our child departed,
And we commit her body to the ground,
Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.*

Inside the earth Sophie Mol screamed, and shredded satin with her teeth. But you can't hear screams through earth and stone.

Sophie Mol died because she couldn't breathe.

Her funeral killed her. *Dus to dus to dus to dus to dus.* On her tombstone it said *A Sunbeam Lent To Us Too Briefly.*

Ammu explained later that Too Briefly meant For Too Short a While.

After the funeral Ammu took the twins back to the Kottayam police station. They were familiar with the place. They had spent a good part of the previous day there. Anticipating the sharp, smoky stink of old urine that permeated the walls and furniture, they clamped their nostrils shut well before the smell began.

Ammu asked for the Station House Officer and when she was shown into his office, she told him that there had been a terrible mistake and that she wanted to make a statement. She asked to see Velutha.

Inspector Thomas Mathew's moustaches bustled like the friendly Air India Maharajah's, but his eyes were sly and greedy.

'It's a little too late for all this, don't you think?' he said. He

spoke the coarse Kottayam dialect of Malayalam. He stared at Ammu's breasts as he spoke. He said the police knew all they needed to know and that the Kottayam Police didn't take statements from *veshyas* or their illegitimate children. Ammu said she'd see about that. Inspector Thomas Mathew came around his desk and approached Ammu with his baton.

'If I were you,' he said, 'I'd go home quietly.' Then he tapped her breasts with his baton. Gently. *Tap, tap.* As though he was choosing mangoes from a basket. Pointing out the ones that he wanted packed and delivered. Inspector Thomas Mathew seemed to know whom he could pick on and whom he couldn't. Policemen have that instinct.

Behind him a red and blue board said:

Politeness
Obedience
Loyalty
Intelligence
Courtesy
Efficiency

When they left the police station Ammu was crying, so Estha and Rahel didn't ask her what *veshya* meant. Or for that matter, *illegitimate*. It was the first time they'd seen their mother cry. She wasn't sobbing. Her face was set like stone, but the tears welled up in her eyes and ran down her rigid cheeks. It made the twins sick with fear. Ammu's tears made everything that had so far seemed unreal, real. They went back to Ayemenem by bus. The conductor, a narrow man in khaki, slid towards them on the bus rails. He balanced his bony hips against the back of a seat and clicked his ticket-puncher at Ammu. *Where to?* the click was meant to mean. Rahel could smell the sheaf of bus tickets and the sourness of the steel bus-rails on the conductor's hands.

'He's dead,' Ammu whispered to him. 'I've killed him.'

'Ayemenem,' Estha said quickly, before the conductor lost his temper.

He took the money out of Ammu's purse. The conductor gave him the tickets. Estha folded them carefully and put them in his pocket. Then he put his little arms around his rigid, weeping mother.

Two weeks later, Estha was Returned. Ammu was made to send him back to their father, who had by then resigned his lonely tea estate job in Assam and moved to Calcutta to work for a company that made carbon black. He had remarried, stopped drinking (more or less), and suffered only occasional relapses.

Estha and Rahel hadn't seen each other since.

And now, twenty-three years later, their father had re-Returned Estha. He had sent him back to Ayemenem with a suitcase and a letter. The suitcase was full of smart new clothes. Baby Kochamma showed Rahel the letter. It was written in a slanting, feminine, convent school hand, but the signature underneath was their father's. Or at least the name was. Rahel wouldn't have recognized the signature. The letter said that he, their father, had retired from his carbon black job and was emigrating to Australia where he had got a job as Chief of Security at a ceramics factory, and that he couldn't take Estha with him. He wished everybody in Ayemenem the very best and said that he would look in on Estha if he ever came back to India, which, he went on to say, was a bit unlikely.

Baby Kochamma told Rahel that she could keep the letter if she wanted to. Rahel put it back into its envelope. The paper had grown soft, and folded like cloth.

She had forgotten just how damp the monsoon air in Ayemenem could be. Swollen cupboards creaked. Locked windows burst open. Books got soft and wavy between their covers. Strange insects appeared like ideas in the evenings and burned

themselves on Baby Kochamma's dim 40-watt bulbs. In the daytime their crisp, incinerated corpses littered the floor and windowsills, and until Kochu Maria swept them away in her plastic dustpan, the air smelled of Something Burning.

It hadn't changed, the June Rain.

Heaven opened and the water hammered down, reviving the reluctant old well, greenmossing the pigless pigsty, carpet bombing still, tea-coloured puddles the way memory bombs still, tea-coloured minds. The grass looked wetgreen and pleased. Happy earthworms frolicked purple in the slush. Green nettles nodded. Trees bent.

Further away, in the wind and rain, on the banks of the river, in the sudden thunderdarkness of the day, Estha was walking. He was wearing a crushed-strawberry-pink T-shirt, drenched darker now, and he knew that Rahel had come.

Estha had always been a quiet child, so no one could pinpoint with any degree of accuracy exactly when (the year, if not the month or day) he had stopped talking. Stopped talking altogether, that is. The fact is that there wasn't an 'exactly when'. It had been a gradual winding down and closing shop. A barely noticeable quietening. As though he had simply run out of conversation and had nothing left to say. Yet Estha's silence was never awkward. Never intrusive. Never noisy. It wasn't an accusing, protesting silence as much as a sort of aestivation, a dormancy, the psychological equivalent of what lungfish do to get themselves through the dry season, except that in Estha's case the dry season looked as though it would last for ever.

Over time he had acquired the ability to blend into the background of wherever he was – into bookshelves, gardens, curtains, doorways, streets – to appear inanimate, almost invisible to the untrained eye. It usually took strangers a while to notice him even when they were in the same room with him.

It took them even longer to notice that he never spoke. Some never noticed at all.

Estha occupied very little space in the world.

After Sophie Mol's funeral, when Estha was Returned, their father sent him to a boys' school in Calcutta. He was not an exceptional student, but neither was he backward, nor particularly bad at anything. *An average student*, or *Satisfactory work* were the usual comments that his teachers wrote in his Annual Progress Reports. *Does not participate in Group Activities* was another recurring complaint. Though what exactly they meant by 'Group Activities' they never said.

Estha finished school with mediocre results, but refused to go to college. Instead, much to the initial embarrassment of his father and stepmother, he began to do the housework. As though in his own way he was trying to earn his keep. He did the sweeping, swabbing and all the laundry. He learned to cook and shop for vegetables. Vendors in the bazaar, sitting behind pyramids of oiled, shining vegetables, grew to recognize him and would attend to him amidst the clamouring of their other customers. They gave him rusted film cans in which to put the vegetables he picked. He never bargained. They never cheated him. When the vegetables had been weighed and paid for, they would transfer them to his red plastic shopping basket (onions at the bottom, brinjal and tomatoes on the top) and always a sprig of coriander and a fistful of green chillies for free. Estha carried them home in the crowded tram. A quiet bubble floating on a sea of noise.

At meal times when he wanted something, he got up and helped himself.

Once the quietness arrived, it stayed and spread in Estha. It reached out of his head and enfolded him in its swampy arms. It rocked him to the rhythm of an ancient, foetal heartbeat. It sent its stealthy, suckered tentacles inching along the insides of

his skull, hoovering the knolls and dells of his memory, dislodging old sentences, whisking them off the tip of his tongue. It stripped his thoughts of the words that described them and left them pared and naked. Unspeakable. Numb. And to an observer therefore, perhaps barely there. Slowly, over the years, Estha withdrew from the world. He grew accustomed to the uneasy octopus that lived inside him and squirted its inky tranquillizer on his past. Gradually the reason for his silence was hidden away, entombed somewhere deep in the soothing folds of the fact of it.

When Khubchand, his beloved, blind, bald, incontinent seventeen-year-old mongrel, decided to stage a miserable, long-drawn-out death, Estha nursed him through his final ordeal as though his own life somehow depended on it. In the last months of his life, Khubchand, who had the best of intentions but the most unreliable of bladders, would drag himself to the top-hinged dog-flap built into the bottom of the door that led out into the back garden, push his head through it and urinate unsteadily, bright yellowly, *inside*. Then with bladder empty and conscience clear he would look up at Estha with opaque green eyes that stood in his grizzled skull like scummy pools and weave his way back to his damp cushion, leaving wet footprints on the floor. As Khubchand lay dying on his cushion, Estha could see the bedroom window reflected in his smooth, purple balls. And the sky beyond. And once a bird that flew across. To Estha – steeped in the smell of old roses, blooded on memories of a broken man – the fact that something so fragile, so unbearably tender had survived, had been *allowed* to exist, was a miracle. A bird in flight reflected in an old dog's balls. It made him smile out loud.

After Khubchand died Estha started his walking. He walked for hours on end. Initially he patrolled only the neighbourhood, but gradually went further and further afield.

People got used to seeing him on the road. A well-dressed

man with a quiet walk. His face grew dark and outdoorsy. Rugged. Wrinkled by the sun. He began to look wiser than he really was. Like a fisherman in a city. With sea-secrets in him.

Now that he'd been re-Returned, Estha walked all over Ayemenem.

Some days he walked along the banks of the river that smelled of shit, and pesticides bought with World Bank loans. Most of the fish had died. The ones that survived suffered from fin-rot and had broken out in boils.

Other days he walked down the road. Past the new, freshly baked, iced, Gulf-money houses built by nurses, masons, wire-benders and bank clerks who worked hard and unhappily in faraway places. Past the resentful older houses tinged green with envy, cowering in their private driveways among their private rubber trees. Each a tottering fiefdom with an epic of its own.

He walked past the village school that his great-grandfather built for Untouchable children.

Past Sophie Mol's yellow church. Past the Ayemenem Youth Kung Fu Club. Past the Tender Buds Nursery School (for Touchables), past the ration shop that sold rice, sugar, and bananas that hung in yellow bunches from the roof. Cheap soft-porn magazines about fictitious South Indian sex fiends were clipped with clothes pegs to ropes that hung from the ceiling. They spun lazily in the warm breeze, tempting honest ration buyers with glimpses of ripe, naked women lying in pools of fake blood.

Sometimes Estha walked past Lucky Press – old Comrade K. N. M. Pillai's printing press, once the Ayemenem office of the Communist Party, where midnight study meetings were held, and pamphlets with rousing lyrics of Marxist Party songs were printed and distributed. The flag that fluttered on the roof had grown limp and old. The red had bled away.

Comrade Pillai himself came out in the mornings in a greying

Aertex vest, his balls silhouetted against his soft white mundu. He oiled himself with warm, peppered coconut oil, kneading his old, loose flesh that stretched willingly off his bones, like chewing gum. He lived alone now. His wife, Kalyani, had died of ovarian cancer. His son, Lenin, had moved to Delhi, where he worked as a services contractor for foreign embassies.

If Comrade Pillai was outside his house oiling himself when Estha walked past, he made it a point to greet him.

'Estha Mon!' he would call out, in his high, piping voice, frayed and fibrous now, like sugarcane stripped of its bark. 'Good morning! Your daily constitutional?'

Estha would walk past, not rude, not polite. Just quiet.

Comrade Pillai would slap himself all over to get his circulation going. He couldn't tell whether Estha recognized him after all those years or not. Not that he particularly cared. Though his part in the whole thing had by no means been a small one, Comrade Pillai didn't hold himself in any way personally responsible for what had happened. He dismissed the whole business as the Inevitable Consequence of Necessary Politics. The old omelette and eggs thing. But then, Comrade K. N. M. Pillai was essentially a political man. A professional omeletteer. He walked through the world like a chameleon. Never revealing himself, never appearing not to. Emerging through chaos unscathed.

He was the first person in Ayemenem to hear of Rahel's return. The news didn't perturb him as much as excite his curiosity. Estha was almost a complete stranger to Comrade Pillai. His expulsion from Ayemenem had been so sudden and unceremonious, and so very long ago. But Rahel Comrade Pillai knew well. He had watched her grow up. He wondered what had brought her back. After all these years.

It had been quiet in Estha's head until Rahel came. But with her she had brought the sound of passing trains, and the light

and shade that falls on you if you have a window seat. The world, locked out for years, suddenly flooded in, and now Estha couldn't hear himself for the noise. Trains. Traffic. Music. The Stock Market. A dam had burst and savage waters swept everything up in a swirling. Comets, violins, parades, loneliness, clouds, beards, bigots, lists, flags, earthquakes, despair were all swept up in a scrambled swirling.

And Estha, walking on the riverbank, couldn't feel the wetness of the rain, or the suddenshudder of the cold puppy that had temporarily adopted him and squelched at his side. He walked past the old mangosteen tree and up to the edge of a laterite spur that jutted out into the river. He squatted on his haunches and rocked himself in the rain. The wet mud under his shoes made rude, sucking sounds. The cold puppy shivered – and watched.

Baby Kochamma and Kochu Maria, the vinegar-hearted, short-tempered, midget cook, were the only people left in the Ayemenem house when Estha was re-Returned. Mammachi, their grandmother, was dead. Chacko lived in Canada now, and ran an unsuccessful antiques business.

As for Rahel.

After Ammu died (after the last time she came back to Ayemenem, swollen with cortisone and a rattle in her chest that sounded like a faraway man shouting), Rahel drifted. From school to school. She spent her holidays in Ayemenem, largely ignored by Chacko and Mammachi (grown soft with sorrow, slumped in their bereavement like a pair of drunks in a toddy bar) and largely ignoring Baby Kochamma. In matters related to the raising of Rahel, Chacko and Mammachi tried, but couldn't. They provided the care (food, clothes, fees), but withdrew the concern.

The Loss of Sophie Mol stepped softly around the Ayemenem House like a quiet thing in socks. It hid in books and food. In

Mammachi's violin case. In the scabs of the sores on Chacko's shins that he constantly worried. In his slack, womanish legs.

It is curious how sometimes the memory of death lives on for so much longer than the memory of the life that it purloined. Over the years, as the memory of Sophie Mol (the seeker of small wisdoms: *Where do old birds go to die? Why don't dead ones fall like stones from the sky?*) The harbinger of harsh reality: *You're both whole wogs and I'm a half one.* The guru of gore: *I've seen a man in an accident with his eyeball swinging on the end of a nerve, like a yo-yo*) slowly faded, the Loss of Sophie Mol grew robust and alive. It was always there. Like a fruit in season. Every season. As permanent as a Government job. It ushered Rahel through childhood (from school to school) into womanhood.

Rahel was first blacklisted in Nazareth Convent at the age of eleven, when she was caught outside her Housemistress's garden gate decorating a knob of fresh cowdung with small flowers. At Assembly the next morning she was made to look up *depravity* in the Oxford Dictionary and read aloud its meaning. '*The quality or condition of being depraved or corrupt,*' Rahel read, with a row of stern-mouthed nuns seated behind her and a sea of sniggering schoolgirl faces in front. '*Perverted quality: Moral perversion; The innate corruption of human nature due to original sin; Both the elect and the non-elect come into the world in a state of total d. and alienation from God, and can, of themselves do nothing but sin.* J. H. Blunt.'

Six months later she was expelled after repeated complaints from senior girls. She was accused (quite rightly) of hiding behind doors and deliberately colliding with her seniors. When she was questioned by the Principal about her behaviour (cajoled, caned, starved), she eventually admitted that she had done it to find out whether breasts hurt. In that Christian institution, breasts were not acknowledged. They weren't supposed to exist, and if they didn't could they hurt?

That was the first of three expulsions. The second for

smoking. The third for setting fire to her Housemistress's false hair bun which, under duress, Rahel confessed to having stolen.

In each of the schools she went to, the teachers noted that she:

- (a) Was an extremely polite child.
- (b) Had no friends.

It appeared to be a civil, solitary form of corruption. And for this very reason, they all agreed (savouring their teacherly disapproval, touching it with their tongues, sucking it like a sweet) – all the more serious.

It was, they whispered to each other, *as though she didn't know how to be a girl.*

They weren't far off the mark.

Oddly, neglect seemed to have resulted in an accidental release of the spirit.

Rahel grew up without a brief. Without anybody to arrange a marriage for her. Without anybody who would pay her a dowry and therefore without an obligatory husband looming on her horizon.

So as long as she wasn't noisy about it, she remained free to make her own enquiries: into breasts and how much they hurt. Into false hair buns and how well they burned. Into life and how it ought to be lived.

When she finished school, she won admission into a mediocre college of Architecture in Delhi. It wasn't the outcome of any serious interest in Architecture. Nor even, in fact, of a superficial one. She just happened to take the entrance exam, and happened to get through. The staff were impressed by the size (enormous), rather than the skill, of her charcoal still-life sketches. The careless, reckless lines were mistaken for artistic confidence, though in truth, their creator was no artist.

She spent eight years in college without finishing the five-year undergraduate course and taking her degree. The fees were low

and it wasn't hard to scratch out a living, staying in the hostel, eating in the subsidized student mess, rarely going to class, working instead as a draughtsman in gloomy architectural firms that exploited cheap student labour to render their presentation drawings and to blame when things went wrong. The other students, particularly the boys, were intimidated by Rahel's waywardness and almost fierce lack of ambition. They left her alone. She was never invited to their nice homes or noisy parties. Even her professors were a little wary of her – her bizarre, impractical building plans, presented on cheap brown paper, her indifference to their passionate critiques.

She occasionally wrote to Chacko and Mammachi, but never returned to Ayemenem. Not when Mammachi died. Not when Chacko emigrated to Canada.

It was while she was at the School of Architecture that she met Larry McCaslin who was in Delhi collecting material for his doctoral thesis on *Energy Efficiency in Vernacular Architecture*. He first noticed Rahel in the School library and then again, a few days later, in Khan Market. She was in jeans and a white T-shirt. Part of an old patchwork bedspread was buttoned around her neck and trailed behind her like a cape. Her wild hair was tied back to look straight though it wasn't. A tiny diamond gleamed in one nostril. She had absurdly beautiful collarbones and a nice athletic run.

There goes a jazz tune, Larry McCaslin thought to himself, and followed her into a bookshop where neither of them looked at books.

Rahel drifted into marriage like a passenger drifts towards an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge. With a Sitting Down sense. She returned with him to Boston.

When Larry held his wife in his arms, her cheek against his heart, he was tall enough to see the top of her head, the dark tumble of her hair. When he put his finger near the corner of her mouth he could feel a tiny pulse. He loved its location. And

that faint, uncertain jumping, just under her skin. He would touch it, listening with his eyes, like an expectant father feeling his unborn baby kick inside its mother's womb.

He held her as though she was a gift. Given to him in love. Something still and small. Unbearably precious.

But when they made love he was offended by her eyes. They behaved as though they belonged to someone else. Someone watching. Looking out of the window at the sea. At a boat in the river. Or a passer-by in the mist in a hat.

He was exasperated because he didn't know what that look meant. He put it somewhere between indifference and despair. He didn't know that in some places, like the country that Rahel came from, various kinds of despair competed for primacy. And that *personal* despair could never be desperate enough. That something happened when personal turmoil dropped by at the wayside shrine of the vast, violent, circling, driving, ridiculous, insane, unfeasible, public turmoil of a nation. That Big God howled like a hot wind, and demanded obeisance. Then Small God (cosy and contained, private and limited) came away cauterized, laughing numbly at his own temerity. Inured by the confirmation of his own inconsequence, he became resilient and truly indifferent. Nothing mattered much. Nothing much mattered. And the less it mattered, the less it mattered. It was never important enough. Because Worse Things had happened. In the country that she came from, poised forever between the terror of war and the horror of peace, Worse Things kept happening.

So Small God laughed a hollow laugh, and skipped away cheerfully. Like a rich boy in shorts. He whistled, kicked stones. The source of his brittle elation was the relative smallness of his misfortune. He climbed into people's eyes and became an exasperating expression.

What Larry McCaslin saw in Rahel's eyes was not despair at all, but a sort of enforced optimism. And a hollow where

Estha's words had been. He couldn't be expected to understand that. That the emptiness in one twin was only a version of the quietness in the other. That the two things fitted together. Like stacked spoons. Like familiar lovers' bodies.

After they were divorced, Rahel worked for a few months as a waitress in an Indian restaurant in New York. And then for several years as a night clerk in a bullet-proof cabin at a gas station outside Washington, where drunks occasionally vomited into the money tray, and pimps propositioned her with more lucrative job offers. Twice she saw men being shot through their car windows. And once a man who had been stabbed, ejected from a moving car with a knife in his back.

Then Baby Kochamma wrote to say that Estha had been re-Returned. Rahel gave up her job at the gas station and left America gladly. To return to Ayemenem. To Estha in the rain.

In the old house on the hill, Baby Kochamma sat at the dining table rubbing the thick, frothy bitterness out of an elderly cucumber. She was wearing a limp, checked, seersucker nightgown with puffed sleeves and yellow turmeric stains. Under the table she swung her tiny, manicured feet, like a small child on a high chair. They were puffy with oedema, like little foot-shaped air cushions. In the old days whenever anybody visited Ayemenem, Baby Kochamma made it a point to call attention to their large feet. She would ask to try on their slippers and say, 'Look how big for me they are!' Then she would walk around the house in them, lifting her sari a little so that everybody could marvel at her tiny feet.

She worked on the cucumber with an air of barely concealed triumph. She was delighted that Estha had not spoken to Rahel. That he had looked at her and walked straight past. Into the rain. As he did with everyone else.

She was eighty-three. Her eyes spread like butter behind her thick glasses.

'I told you, didn't I?' she said to Rahel. 'What did you expect? Special treatment? He's lost his mind, I'm telling you! He doesn't recognize people any more! What did you think?'

Rahel said nothing.

She could feel the rhythm of Estha's rocking, and the wetness of rain on his skin. She could hear the raucous, scrambled world inside his head.

Baby Kochamma looked up at Rahel uneasily. Already she regretted having written to her about Estha's return. But then, what else could she have done? Had him on her hands for the rest of her life? Why *should* she? He wasn't her responsibility.

Or was he?

The silence sat between grand-niece and baby grand aunt like a third person. A stranger. Swollen. Noxious. Baby Kochamma reminded herself to lock her bedroom door at night. She tried to think of something to say.

'How d'you like my bob?'

With her cucumber hand she touched her new haircut. She left a riveting bitter blob of cucumber froth behind.

Rahel could think of nothing to say. She watched Baby Kochamma peel her cucumber. Yellow slivers of cucumber skin flecked her bosom. Her hair, dyed jetblack, was arranged across her scalp like unspooled thread. The dye had stained the skin of her forehead a pale grey, giving her a shadowy second hairline. Rahel noticed that she had started wearing make-up. Lipstick. Kohl. A sly touch of rouge. And because the house was locked and dark, and because she only believed in 40-watt bulbs, her lipstick mouth had shifted slightly off her real mouth.

She had lost weight on her face and shoulders, which had turned her from being a round person into a conical person. But sitting at the dining table with her enormous hips concealed, she managed to look almost fragile. The dim, dining-room light had rubbed the wrinkles off her face leaving it looking – in a

strange, sunken way – younger. She was wearing a lot of jewellery. Rahel's dead grandmother's jewellery. All of it. Winking rings. Diamond earrings. Gold bangles and a beautifully crafted flat gold chain that she touched from time to time reassuring herself that it was there and that it was hers. Like a young bride who couldn't believe her good fortune.

She's living her life backwards, Rahel thought.

It was a curiously apt observation. Baby Kochamma *had* lived her life backwards. As a young woman she had renounced the material world, and now, as an old one, she seemed to embrace it. She hugged it and it hugged her back.

When she was eighteen, Baby Kochamma fell in love with a handsome young Irish monk, Father Mulligan, who was in Kerala for a year on deputation from his seminary in Madras. He was studying Hindu scriptures, in order to be able to denounce them intelligently.

Every Thursday morning Father Mulligan came to Ayemenem to visit Baby Kochamma's father, Reverend E. John Ipe, who was a priest of the Mar Thoma church. Reverend Ipe was well known in the Christian community as the man who had been blessed personally by the Patriarch of Antioch, the sovereign head of the Syrian Christian Church – an episode which had become part of Ayemenem's folklore.

In 1876, when Baby Kochamma's father was seven years old, his father had taken him to see the Patriarch who was visiting the Syrian Christians of Kerala. They found themselves right in front of a group of people whom the Patriarch was addressing in the westernmost verandah of the Kalleny house, in Cochin. Seizing his opportunity, his father whispered in his young son's ear and propelled the little fellow forward. The future Reverend, skidding on his heels, rigid with fear, applied his terrified lips to the ring on the Patriarch's middle finger, leaving it wet with spit. The patriarch wiped his ring on his sleeve, and blessed the little boy. Long after he grew up and became a priest, Reverend

Ipe continued to be known as *Punnyan Kunju* – Little Blessed One – and people came down the river in boats all the way from Alleppey and Ernakulam, with children to be blessed by him.

Though there was a considerable age difference between Father Mulligan and Reverend Ipe, and though they belonged to different denominations of the Church (whose only common sentiment was their mutual disaffection), both men enjoyed each other's company, and more often than not, Father Mulligan would be invited to stay for lunch. Of the two men, only one recognized the sexual excitement that rose like a tide in the slender girl who hovered around the table long after lunch had been cleared away.

At first Baby Kochamma tried to seduce Father Mulligan with weekly exhibitions of staged charity. Every Thursday morning, just when Father Mulligan was due to arrive, Baby Kochamma force-bathed a poor village child at the well with hard red soap that hurt its protruding ribs.

'Morning, Father!' Baby Kochamma would call out when she saw him, with a smile on her lips that completely belied the vice-like grip that she had on the thin child's soapslippery arm.

'Morning to you, Baby!' Father Mulligan would say, stopping and folding his umbrella.

'There's something I wanted to ask you, Father,' Baby Kochamma would say. 'In First Corinthians, chapter ten, verse twenty-three, it says . . . "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient". Father, how can *all* things be lawful unto Him? I mean I can understand if *some* things are lawful for Him, but –'

Father Mulligan was more than merely flattered by the emotion he aroused in the attractive young girl who stood before him with a trembling, kissable mouth and blazing, coal-black eyes. For he was young too, and perhaps not wholly unaware that the solemn explanations with which he dispelled her bogus

biblical doubts were completely at odds with the thrilling promise he held out in his effulgent emerald eyes.

Every Thursday, undaunted by the merciless midday sun, they would stand there by the well. The young girl and the intrepid Jesuit, both quaking with unchristian passion. Using the Bible as a ruse to be with each other.

Invariably, in the middle of their conversation, the unfortunate soapy child that was being force-bathed would manage to slip away, and Father Mulligan would snap back to his senses and say, 'Oops! We'd better catch him before a cold does.'

Then he would reopen his umbrella and walk away in chocolate robes and comfortable sandals, like a high-stepping camel with an appointment to keep. He had young Baby Kochamma's aching heart on a leash, bumping behind him, lurching over leaves and small stones. Bruised and almost broken.

A whole year of Thursdays went by. Eventually the time came for Father Mulligan to return to Madras. Since charity had not produced any tangible results, the distraught young Baby Kochamma invested all her hope in faith.

Displaying a stubborn single-mindedness (which in a young girl in those days was considered as bad as a physical deformity – a harelip perhaps, or a club foot), Baby Kochamma defied her father's wishes and became a Roman Catholic. With special dispensation from the Vatican, she took her vows and entered a convent in Madras as a trainee novice. She hoped somehow that this would provide her with legitimate occasion to be with Father Mulligan. She pictured them together, in dark sepulchral rooms with heavy velvet drapes, discussing Theology. That was all she wanted. All she ever dared to hope for. Just to be near him. Close enough to smell his beard. To see the coarse weave of his cassock. To love him just by looking at him.

Very quickly she realized the futility of this endeavour. She found that the Senior Sisters monopolized the priests and bishops with biblical doubts more sophisticated than hers would

ever be, and that it might be years before she got anywhere near Father Mulligan. She grew restless and unhappy in the convent. She developed a stubborn allergic rash on her scalp from the constant chafing of her wimple. She felt she spoke much better English than everybody else. This made her lonelier than ever.

Within a year of her joining the convent, her father began to receive puzzling letters from her in the mail. *My dearest Papa, I am well and happy in the service of Our Lady. But Koh-i-noor appears to be unhappy and homesick. My dearest Papa, Today Koh-i-noor vomited after lunch and is running a temperature. My dearest Papa, Convent food does not seem to suit Koh-i-noor, though I like it well enough. My dearest Papa, Koh-i-noor is upset because her family seems to neither understand nor care about her wellbeing . . .*

Other than the fact that it was (at the time) the name of the world's biggest diamond, Reverend E. John Ipe knew of no other Koh-i-noor. He wondered how a girl with a Muslim name had ended up in a Catholic Convent.

It was Baby Kochamma's mother who eventually realized that Koh-i-noor was none other than Baby Kochamma herself. She remembered that long ago she had shown Baby Kochamma a copy of her father's (Baby Kochamma's grandfather's) will in which, describing his grandchildren he had written: *I have seven jewels one of which is my Koh-i-noor*. He went on to bequeath little bits of money and jewellery to each of them, never clarifying which one he considered his Koh-i-noor. Baby Kochamma's mother realized that Baby Kochamma, for no reason that she could think of, had assumed that he had meant *her* – and all those years later at the convent, knowing that all her letters were read by the Mother Superior before they were posted, had resurrected Koh-i-noor to communicate her troubles to her family.

Reverend Ipe went to Madras and withdrew his daughter from the convent. She was glad to leave, but insisted that she

would not reconvert, and for the rest of her days remained a Roman Catholic. Reverend Ipe realized that his daughter had by now developed a 'reputation' and was unlikely to find a husband. He decided that since she couldn't have a husband there was no harm in her having an education. So he made arrangements for her to attend a course of study at the University of Rochester in America.

Two years later, Baby Kochamma returned from Rochester with a diploma in Ornamental Gardening, but more in love with Father Mulligan than ever. There was no trace of the slim, attractive girl that she had been. In her years at Rochester, Baby Kochamma had grown extremely large. In fact, let it be said, obese. Even timid little Chellappen Tailor at Chungam Bridge insisted on charging bush-shirt rates for her sari blouses.

To keep her from brooding, her father gave Baby Kochamma charge of the front garden of the Ayemenem House, where she raised a fierce, bitter garden that people came all the way from Kottayam to see.

It was a circular, sloping patch of ground, with a steep gravel driveway looping around it. Baby Kochamma turned it into a lush maze of dwarf hedges, rocks and gargoyles. The flower she loved the most was the anthurium. *Anthurium andraeanum*. She had a collection of them, the 'Rubrum', the 'Honeymoon' and a host of Japanese varieties. Their single succulent spathes ranged from shades of mottled black to blood red and glistening orange. Their prominent, stippled spadices always yellow. In the centre of Baby Kochamma's garden, surrounded by beds of canna and phlox, a marble cherub peered an endless silver arc into a shallow pool in which a single blue lotus bloomed. At each corner of the pool lolled a pink plaster-of-Paris gnome with rosy cheeks and a peaked red cap.

Baby Kochamma spent her afternoons in her garden. In sari and gumboots. She wielded an enormous pair of hedge shears in her bright orange gardening gloves. Like a lion-tamer she

tamed twisting vines and nurtured bristling cacti. She limited bonsai plants and pampered rare orchids. She waged war on the weather. She tried to grow edelweiss and chinese guava.

Every night she creamed her feet with real cream and pushed back the cuticles on her toe-nails.

Recently, after enduring more than half a century of relentless, pernickety attention, the ornamental garden had been abandoned. Left to its own devices, it had grown knotted and wild, like a circus whose animals had forgotten their tricks. The weed that people call communist patcha (because it flourished in Kerala like communism) smothered the more exotic plants. Only the vines kept growing, like toe-nails on a corpse. They reached through the nostrils of the pink plaster gnomes and blossomed in their hollow heads, giving them an expression half surprised, half sneeze-coming.

The reason for this sudden, unceremonious dumping was a new love. Baby Kochamma had installed a dish antenna on the roof of the Ayemenem house. She presided over the World in her drawing room on satellite TV. The impossible excitement that this engendered in Baby Kochamma wasn't hard to understand. It wasn't something that happened gradually. It happened overnight. Blondes, wars, famines, football, sex, music, coups d'état – they all arrived on the same train. They unpacked together. They stayed at the same hotel. And in Ayemenem, where once the loudest sound had been a musical bus horn, now whole wars, famines, picturesque massacres and Bill Clinton could be summoned up like servants. And so, while her ornamental garden wilted and died, Baby Kochamma followed American NBA league games, one-day cricket and all the Grand Slam tennis tournaments. On weekdays she watched *The Bold and The Beautiful* and *Santa Barbara*, where brittle blondes with lipstick and hairstyles rigid with spray seduced androids and defended their sexual empires. Baby Kochamma loved their shiny clothes and the smart, bitchy repartee. During the day

disconnected snatches of it came back to her and made her chuckle.

Kochu Maria, the cook, still wore the thick gold earrings that had disfigured her earlobes for ever. She enjoyed the *WWF Wrestling Mania* shows, where Hulk Hogan and Mr Perfect, whose necks were wider than their heads, wore spangled Lycra leggings and beat each other up brutally. Kochu Maria's laugh had that slightly cruel ring to it that young children's sometimes have.

All day they sat in the drawing room, Baby Kochamma on the long-armed planter's chair or the chaise longue (depending on the condition of her feet), Kochu Maria next to her on the floor (channel surfing when she could), locked together in a noisy Television silence. One's hair snow white, the other's dyed coal black. They entered all the contests, availed themselves of all the discounts that were advertised and had, on two occasions, won a T-shirt and a Thermos flask that Baby Kochamma kept locked away in her cupboard.

Baby Kochamma loved the Ayemenem house and cherished the furniture that she had inherited by outliving everybody else. Mammachi's violin and violin stand, the Ooty cupboards, the plastic basket chairs, the Delhi beds, the dressing table from Vienna with cracked ivory knobs. The rosewood dining table that Velutha made.

She was frightened by the BBC famines and Television wars that she encountered while she channel surfed. Her old fears of the Revolution and the Marxist-Leninist menace had been rekindled by new television worries about the growing numbers of desperate and dispossessed people. She viewed ethnic cleansing, famine and genocide as direct threats to her furniture.

She kept her doors and windows locked, unless she was using them. She used her windows for specific purposes. For a Breath of Fresh Air. To Pay for the Milk. To Let Out a Trapped Wasp (which Kochu Maria was made to chase around the house with a towel).

She even locked her sad, paint-flaking fridge where she kept her week's supply of cream buns that Kochu Maria brought her from Bestbakery in Kottayam. And the two bottles of rice-water that she drank instead of ordinary water. In the shelf below the baffle tray, she kept what was left of Mammachi's willow-pattern dinner service.

She put the dozen or so bottles of insulin that Rahel brought her in the cheese and butter compartment. She suspected that these days, even the innocent and the round-eyed could be crockery crooks, or cream-bun cravers, or thieving diabetics cruising Ayemenem for imported insulin.

She didn't even trust the twins. She deemed them Capable of Anything. Anything at all. *They might even steal their present back.* she thought, and realized with a pang how quickly she had reverted to thinking of them as though they were a single unit once again. After all those years. Determined not to let the past creep up on her she altered her thought at once. *She. She might steal her present back.*

She looked at Rahel standing at the dining table and noticed the same eerie stealth, the ability to keep very still and very quiet that Estha seemed to have mastered. Baby Kochamma was a little intimidated by Rahel's quietness.

'So!' she said. Her voice shrill, faltering. 'What are your plans? How long will you be staying? Have you decided?'

Rahel tried to say something. It came out jagged. Like a piece of tin. She walked to the window and opened it. For a Breath of Fresh Air.

'Shut it when you've finished with it,' Baby Kochamma said, and closed her face like a cupboard.

You couldn't see the river from the window any more.

You could, until Mammachi had had the back verandah closed in with Ayemenem's first sliding-folding door. The oil

portraits of Reverend E. John Ipe and Aleyooty Ammachi (Estha and Rahel's great-grandparents), were taken down from the back verandah and put up in the front one.

They hung there now, the Little Blessed One and his wife, on either side of the stuffed, mounted bison head.

Reverend Ipe smiled his confident-ancestor smile out across the road instead of the river.

Aleyooty Ammachi looked more hesitant. As though she would have liked to turn around but couldn't. Perhaps it wasn't as easy for her to abandon the river. With her eyes she looked in the direction that her husband looked. With her heart she looked away. Her heavy, dull gold kunukku earrings (tokens of the Little Blessed One's Goodness) had stretched her earlobes and hung all the way down to her shoulders. Through the holes in her ears you could see the hot river and the dark trees that bent into it. And the fishermen in their boats. And the fish.

Though you couldn't see the river from the house any more, like a seashell always has a sea-sense, the Ayemenem house still had a river-sense.

A rushing, rolling, fishswimming sense.

From the dining-room window where she stood, with the wind in her hair, Rahel could see the rain drum down on the rusted tin roof of what used to be their grandmother's pickle factory.

Paradise Pickles & Preserves.

It lay between the house and the river.

They used to make pickles, squashes, jams, curry powders and canned pineapples. And banana jam (illegally) after the FPO (Food Products Organization) banned it because according to their specifications it was neither jam nor jelly. Too thin for jelly and too thick for jam. An ambiguous, unclassifiable consistency, they said.

As per their books.

Looking back now, to Rahel it seemed as though this difficulty

that their family had with classification ran much deeper than the jam-jelly question.

Perhaps, Ammu, Estha and she were the worst transgressors. But it wasn't just them. It was the others too. They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much. The laws that make grandmothers grandmothers, uncles uncles, mothers mothers, cousins cousins, jam jam, and jelly jelly.

It was a time when uncles became fathers, mothers lovers, and cousins died and had funerals.

It was a time when the unthinkable became thinkable and the impossible really happened.

Even before Sophie Mol's funeral, the police found Velutha.

His arms had goosebumps where the handcuffs touched his skin. Cold handcuffs with a sourmetal smell. Like steel bus rails and the smell of the bus conductor's hands from holding them.

After it was all over, Baby Kochamma said, 'As ye sow, so shall ye reap.' As though *she* had had nothing to do with the Sowing and the Reaping. She returned on her small feet to her cross-stitch embroidery. Her little toes never touched the floor. It was her idea that Estha be Returned.

Margaret Kochamma's grief and bitterness at her daughter's death coiled inside her like an angry spring. She said nothing, but slapped Estha whenever she could in the days she was there before she returned to England.

Rahel watched Ammu pack Estha's little trunk.

'Maybe they're right,' Ammu's whisper said. 'Maybe a boy does need a Baba.'

Rahel saw that her eyes were a redly dead.

They consulted a Twin Expert in Hyderabad. She wrote back to say that it was not advisable to separate monozygotic twins,

but that two-egg twins were no different from ordinary siblings and that while they would certainly suffer the natural distress that children from broken homes underwent, it would be nothing more than that. Nothing out of the ordinary.

And so Estha was Returned in a train with his tin trunk and his beige and pointy shoes rolled into his khaki holdall. First class, overnight on the Madras Mail to Madras and then with a friend of their father's from Madras to Calcutta.

He had a tiffin carrier with tomato sandwiches. And an Eagle flask with an eagle. He had terrible pictures in his head.

Rain. Rushing, inky water. And a smell. Sicksweet. Like old roses on a breeze.

But worst of all, he carried inside him the memory of a young man with an old man's mouth. The memory of a swollen face and a smashed, upside-down smile. Of a spreading pool of clear liquid with a bare bulb reflected in it. Of a bloodshot eye that had opened, wandered and then fixed its gaze on him. Estha. And what had Estha done? He had looked into that beloved face and said: Yes.

Yes, it was him.

The word Estha's octopus couldn't get at: *Yes*. Hoovering didn't seem to help. It was lodged there, deep inside some fold or furrow, like a mango hair between molars. That couldn't be worried loose.

In a purely practical sense it would probably be correct to say that it all began when Sophie Mol came to Ayemenem. Perhaps it's true that things can change in a day. That a few dozen hours can affect the outcome of whole lifetimes. And that when they do, those few dozen hours, like the salvaged remains of a burned house – the charred clock, the singed photograph, the scorched furniture – must be resurrected from the ruins and examined. Preserved. Accounted for.

Little events, ordinary things, smashed and reconstituted.

PARADISE PICKLES & PRESERVES

Imbued with new meaning. Suddenly they become the bleached bones of a story.

Still, to say that it all began when Sophie Mol came to Aye-menem is only one way of looking at it.

Equally, it could be argued that it actually began thousands of years ago. Long before the Marxists came. Before the British took Malabar, before the Dutch Ascendency, before Vasco da Gama arrived, before the Zamorin's conquest of Calicut. Before three purple-robed Syrian Bishops murdered by the Portuguese were found floating in the sea, with coiled sea serpents riding on their chests and oysters knotted in their tangled beards. It could be argued that it began long before Christianity arrived in a boat and seeped into Kerala like tea from a teabag.

That it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how.

And how much.

Arundhati Roy *The God of Small Things*, Harper Collins 1998