

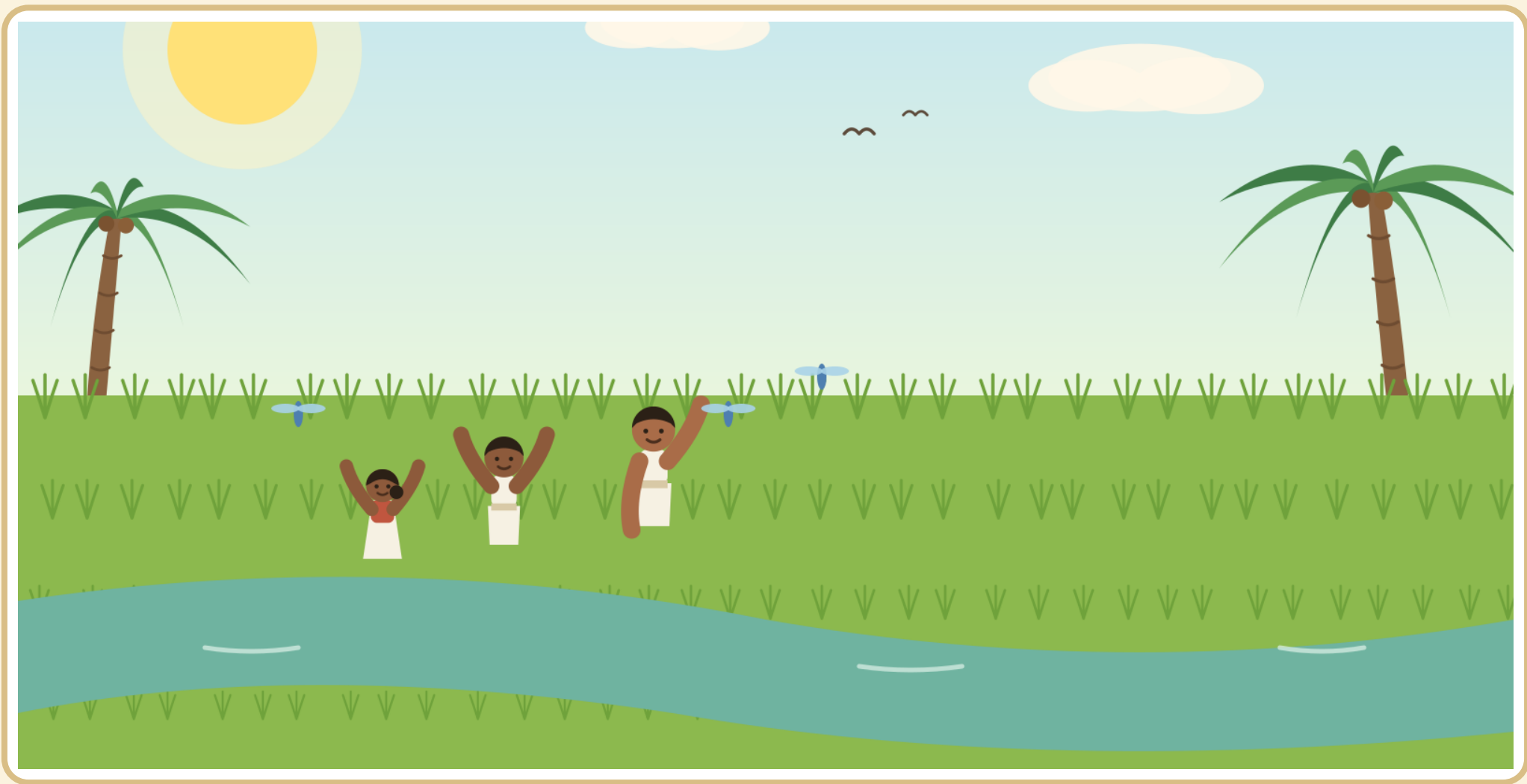
A Kuttanadan Saga

The Story of the Chirayil Family of Edathua

From Appachan C. T. Varkey to Kunjomachen & Amminikutty:
a true family story from the backwaters of Kerala, retold for children

Drawn from the chronicle by Teresa Rani Paul and the Chirayil family book





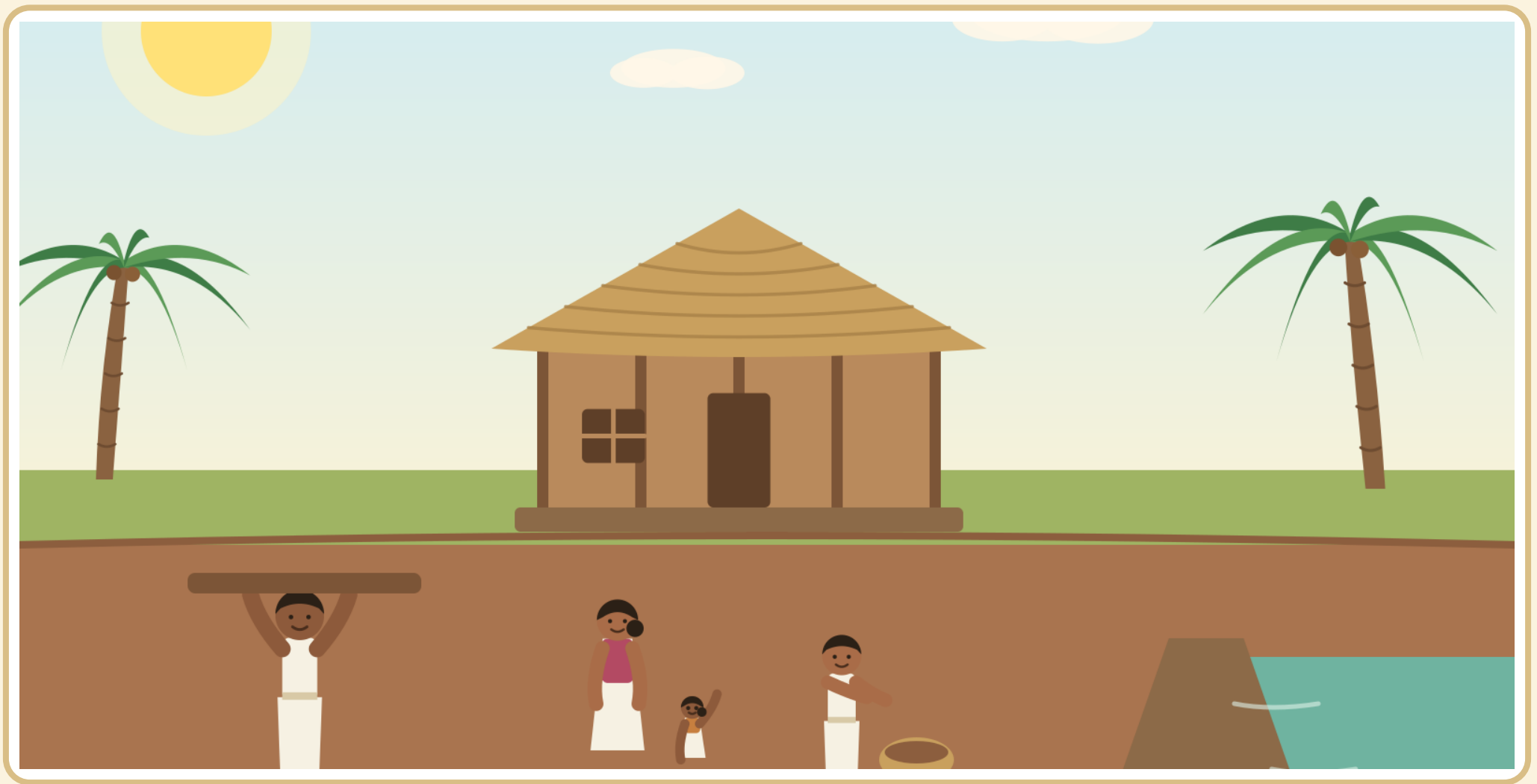
Hello, Little One!

You have never seen my face, and you have never heard my voice. But long, long ago, I was a child just like you! My name is Varkey of the Chirayil family, and I grew up in a green watery land called Kuttanad. Our people came from Kudamaloor, on the banks of the River Meenachil, in the old kingdom of Chembakassery. There were no cars, no roads, and no glowing screens. Our world was made of water, mud and green as far as the eye could see. My brother Jacob, my sister Annamma and I ran barefoot through the paddy fields, chasing dragonflies with our mundus tucked up to our knees, like little marsh cranes!



A Boat Ride to a New Home

My father Thomas Varkey was very wise. He could smell rain three days before the sky turned grey! “We will plant our roots in new soil,” he said. So the family packed pots, farming tools and seeds into a big wooden boat called a kettuvallam, and rowed up the winding rivers. Splash, glide! Splash, glide! They came to a wild, marshy village on the Pamba river called Edathua, where father built the first and finest house in the growing village. It would be our family's home for generations and generations.



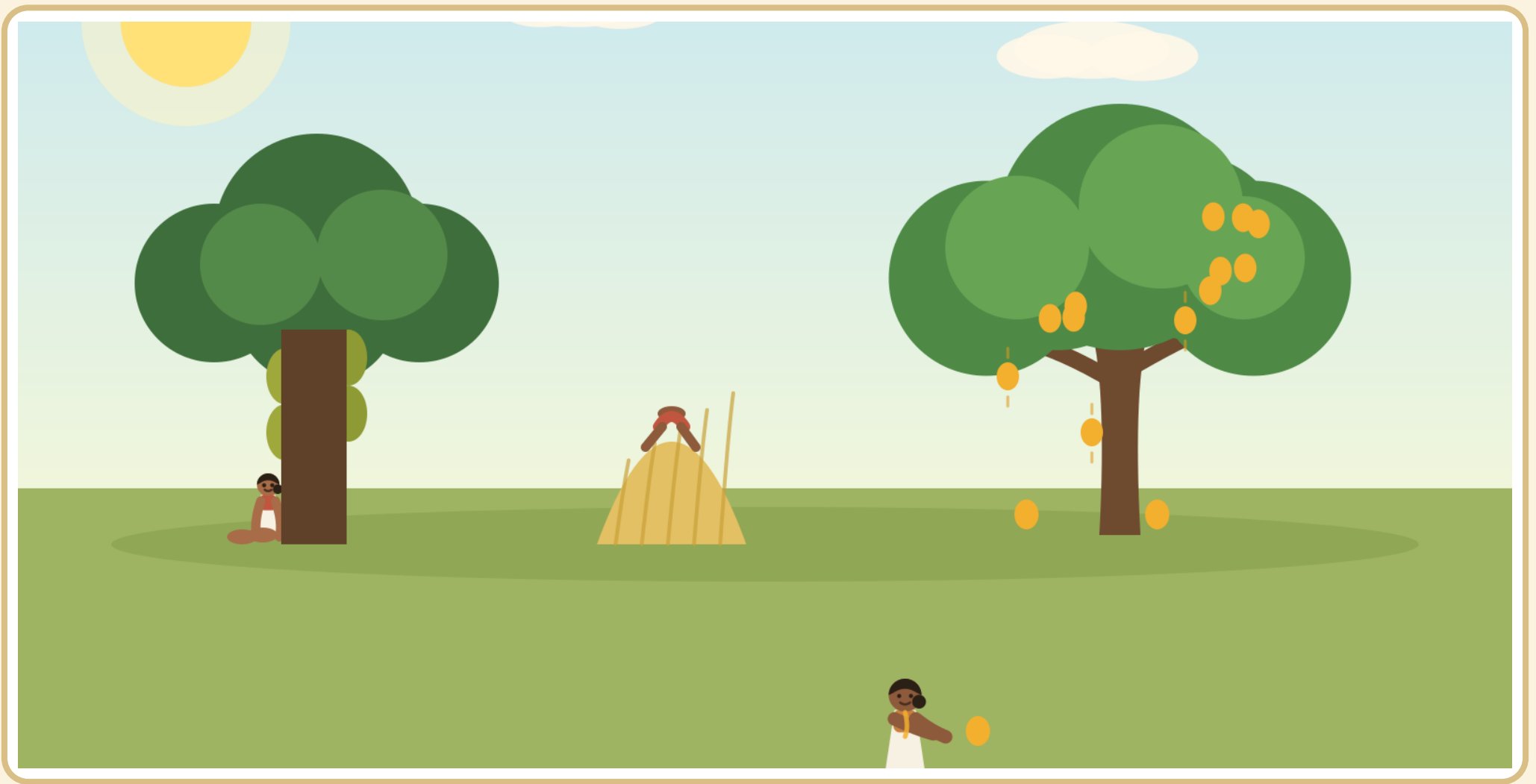
Building with Mud and Love

Everyone helped build our new home. Father and big brother Jacob carried heavy timber and piled up mud walls called varambus to keep the river water out of our fields. The house stood high on a platform of earth so the floods could never reach us. Deep inside the house we built an arra, a strong wooden granary raised off the ground, where all the golden rice from our fields was kept safe until the next harvest. Jacob grew up to become a teacher and then a headmaster, and the whole village respected him. Slowly, the wild marsh turned into paddy fields and coconut groves. We had planted our roots!



Rosamma, Queen of Our Home

When I grew up, I married Rosamma. Oh, she was a queen! She watched over the noisy chickens, the milking cows, the drying rice and every single coconut. Nothing escaped her eagle eye! I worked hard in the fields, and Rosamma quietly sent milk, eggs and rice to hungry neighbours who had nothing to eat. She never asked for a thank-you. That was her secret kindness, and it became our family's way for ever after.



Wild Games under the Mango Tree

Our daughters played hide-and-seek all afternoon! One would hide behind the jackfruit tree, quite sure she was invisible, while her muddy feet stuck out for all to see. Another dove headfirst into the haystack like a field mouse! And when the evening breeze shook the mango tree, thud! thud! thud! down rained the golden mangoes. The girls pounced on them like hungry little tigers and slurped the sweet juice till it dripped from their elbows.



Stories by the Evening Flame

When the stars came out, we lit our brass lamp, the nilavilakku, and sat close on the polished floor. After prayers, I told the children about Joachim and Anna, an old couple far across the sea who had no child. They prayed and prayed, and God sent them a baby girl called Mary, who grew up to become the mother of Jesus! That night, Rosamma whispered to me, “Let us pray for a little boy. Let us sail to the shrine of Mother Mary at Vallarpadam.”



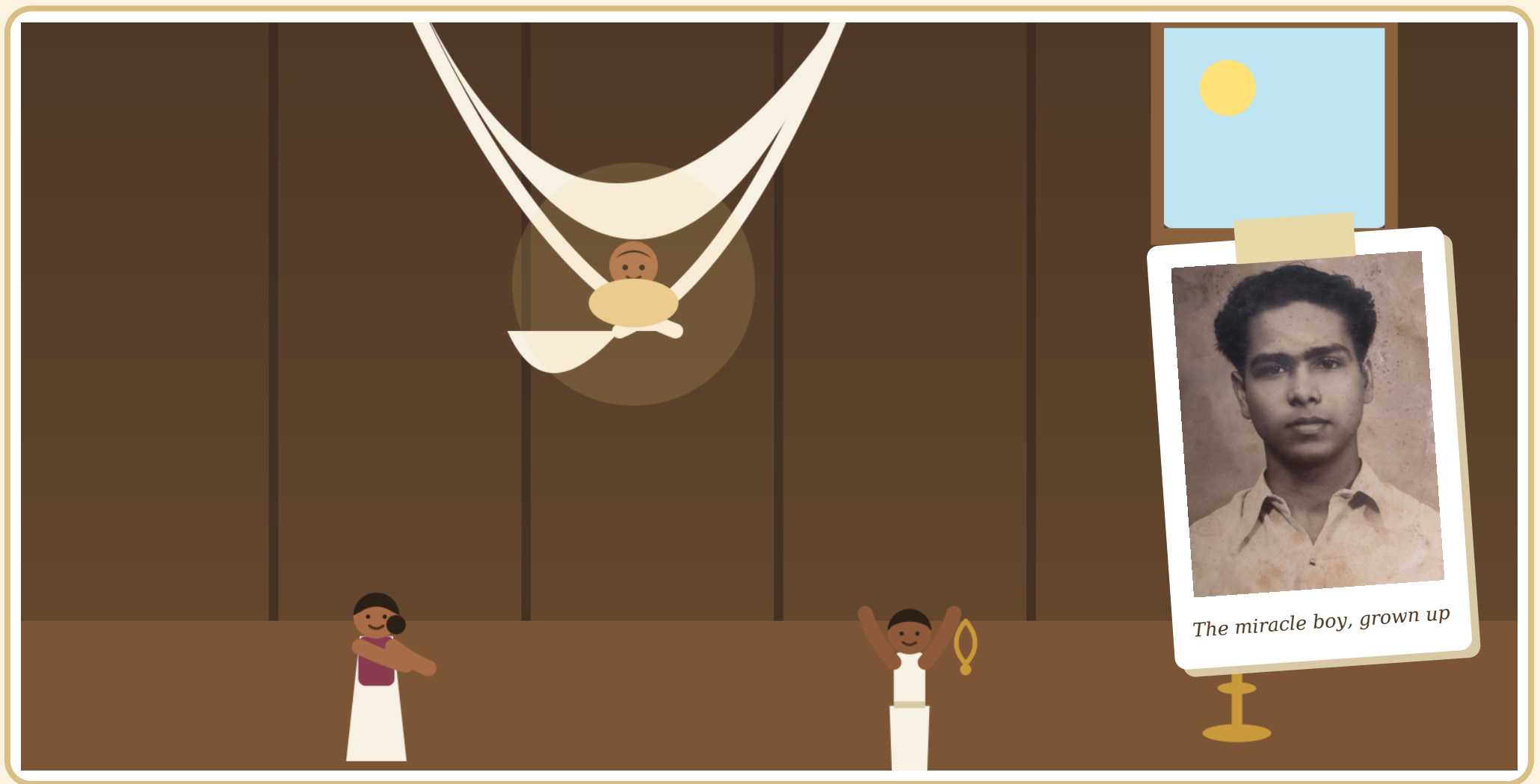
The Long Journey over the Waters

So we set off in a kettuvallam with two strong boatmen. For days and days, our whole world was splash, glide, splash, glide. Rosamma had packed rice, salted fish, banana chips and jars of clean water. At night we tied our boat to the tree roots and slept under a little oil lamp, while the crickets sang all around us. Do you know, little one, that island was famous for miracles? Long ago, in 1752, a mother and her baby fell into the stormy sea there, and Our Lady of Vallarpadam sent a priest dreams until they were found, safe and alive!



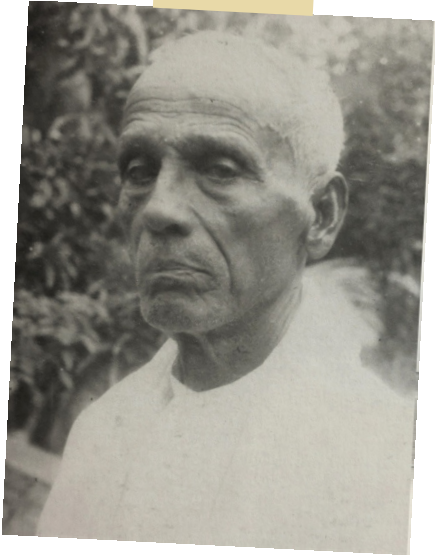
The White Church by the Sea

At last we saw it: the white church of Vallarpadam, shining beside the blue-green water. We walked barefoot through the hot sand, and for seven whole days we fasted, knelt and prayed with pilgrims from many faraway lands. Rosamma folded her hands tight and asked Mother Mary for a baby boy. Then we lit our candles, climbed into our boat, and carried our hope all the way home to Edathua.



The Miracle of September

And Heaven heard us! On the eighth of September 1925, the very feast day of Mother Mary's birthday, a mighty cry rang through our house. It was not a soft little cry. It was a great, booming ROAR that shook the roof! "A boy, Varkey!" called the midwife. "A healthy, strong boy!" I fell to my knees and wept happy tears. We named him Thomas, and everyone lovingly called him Kunjomachen. We rocked him in a soft cloth cradle called a thookku thottil.



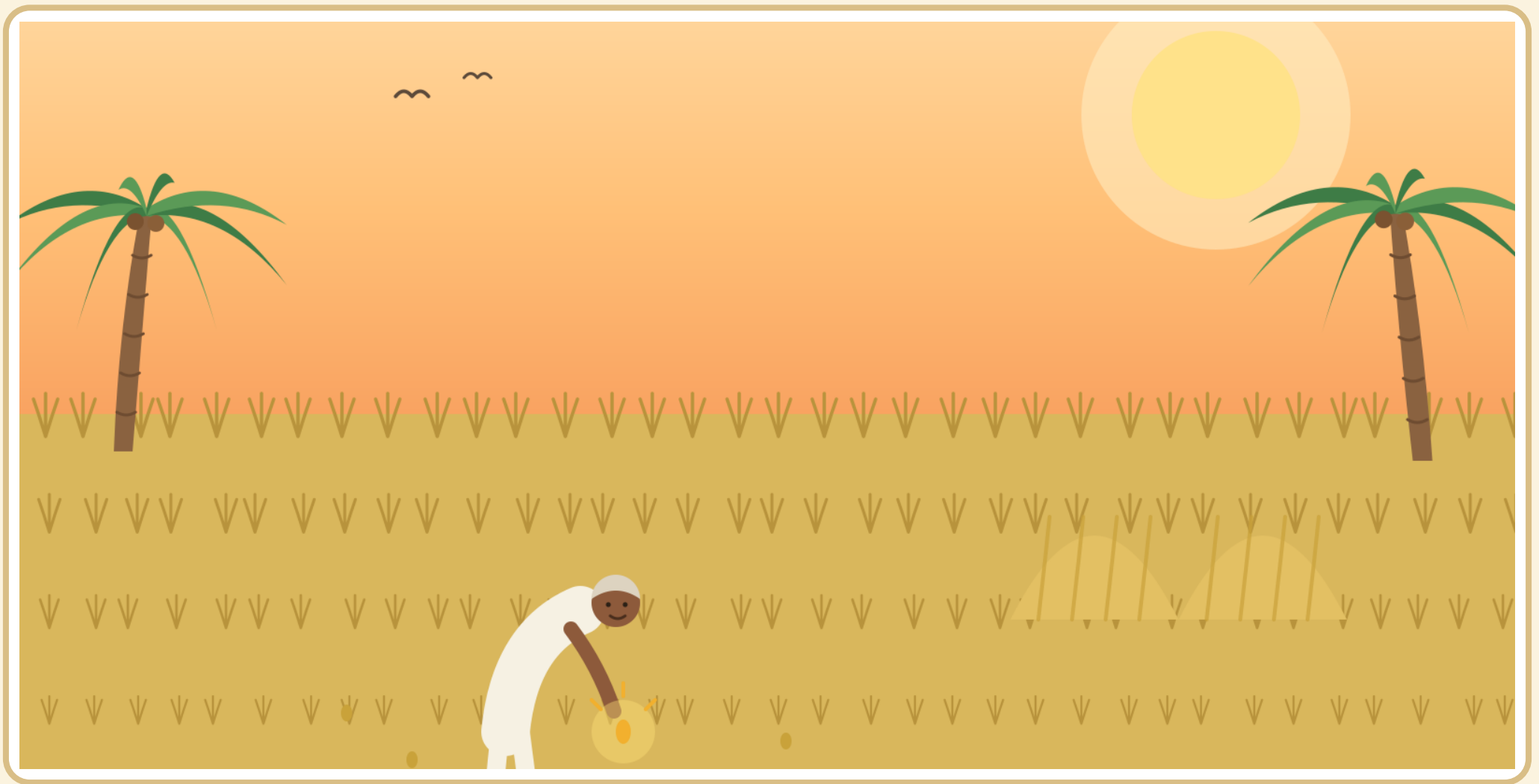
Appachan C. T. Varkey, always in crisp white



Varkey (left) with his brother Jacob, the teacher

The Real Appachan Varkey

Here I am, little one, in real photographs! I was born on December 26, 1891, in Edathua. My grandchildren say I always wore a clean, crisp white mundu, and that all my clothes fit in one small wooden box, because I believed in keeping only what we truly need. In the evenings after my bath, I smelled of ayurvedic oil, and the children would squeeze in next to me at prayer time just to get a deep whiff of that magical aroma!



The One Golden Grain

Every evening after the harvest, I walked around my paddy fields all dressed in white, picking up every single dropped grain. My father had taught me a secret: “In the vastness of every field, among the billions of grains, there is one golden grain. It brings good times, so make sure it reaches home!” That is why we never waste even one tiny blessing. I taught this to my son Kunjomachen, and he taught it to his children, and now, little one, I am teaching it to you.



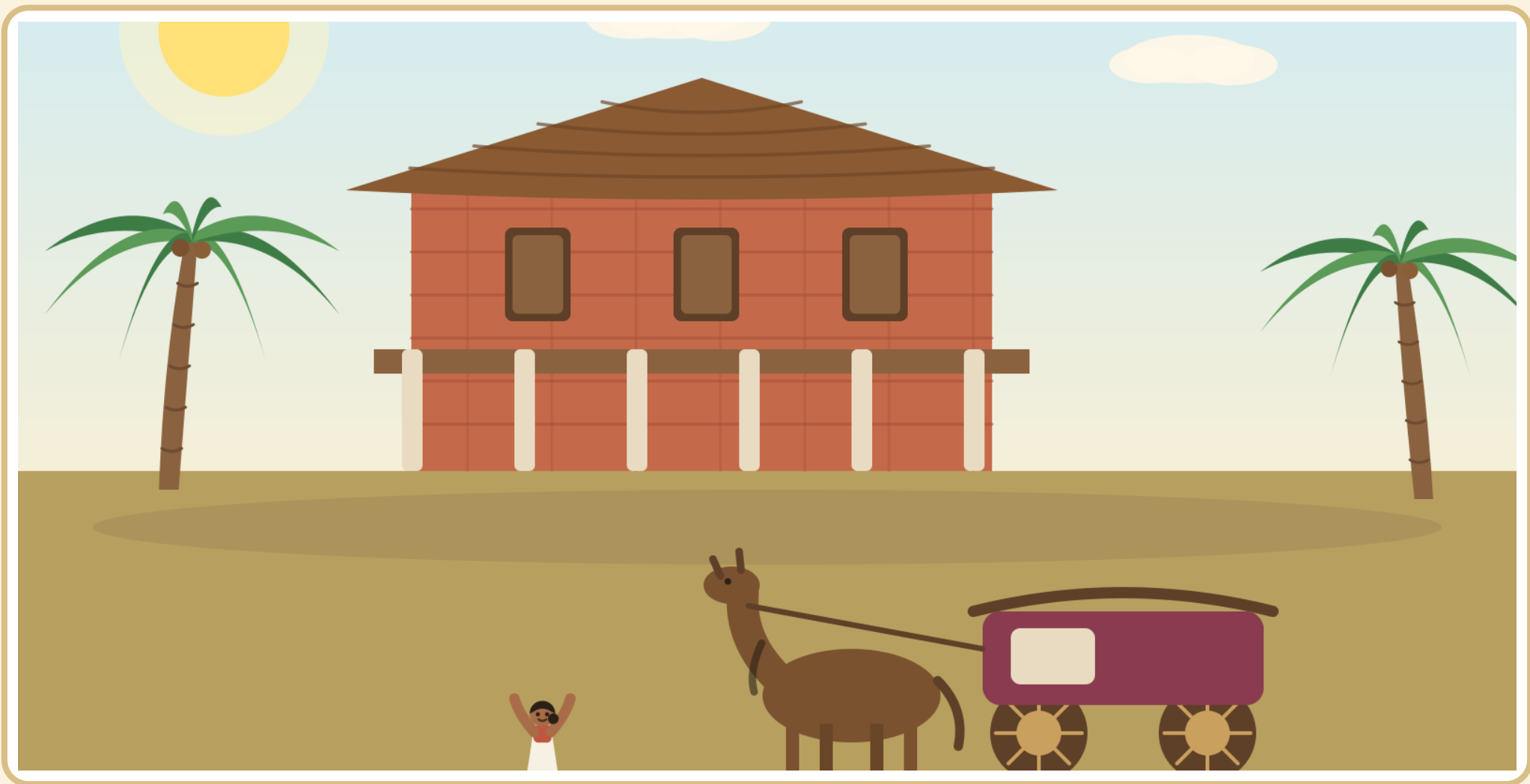
The Boy Who Sailed to College

Kunjomachen grew up clever and strong, and went to study literature at the great Sacred Heart College in faraway Thevara. But how do you get to college with no roads? By boat, of course! The journey was seventy kilometres of winding water. The boat left Edathua at seven in the evening and arrived at seven the next morning, gliding all night under the stars. And in his lap he carried the most precious cargo of all: a warm dinner, lovingly packed by his mother Rosamma.



LECO Appachen and the Midnight Stranger

Kunjomachen became a great businessman. He brought LECO, shiny coal bricks from the mines of Neyveli, to Edathua, and trucks came rumbling in, full of fuel for homes and hospitals. The whole village called him LECO Appachen! One night, driving home very late, he saw a stranger standing beside a broken-down car. Kunjomachen stopped and gave him a ride to the next town. And guess what? The stranger was the head of a great cement company! He was so touched that he gave Kunjomachen a big new business. You see, little one, kindness always finds its way back.



A Little Girl Called Amminikutty

Far away in Mavelikara, a little girl was growing up. Ammini, lovingly called Amminikutty, was born on December 10, 1933, the youngest of six children of Mathai Panicker. Her family's grand house was built of red laterite stone, and they rode in horse carriages! In the outhouse there was even a wooden boat filled with warm medicinal oils for royal massages, called an enna thonni. Her uncle was the great Archbishop Mar Ivanios, a holy man loved by all of Kerala.



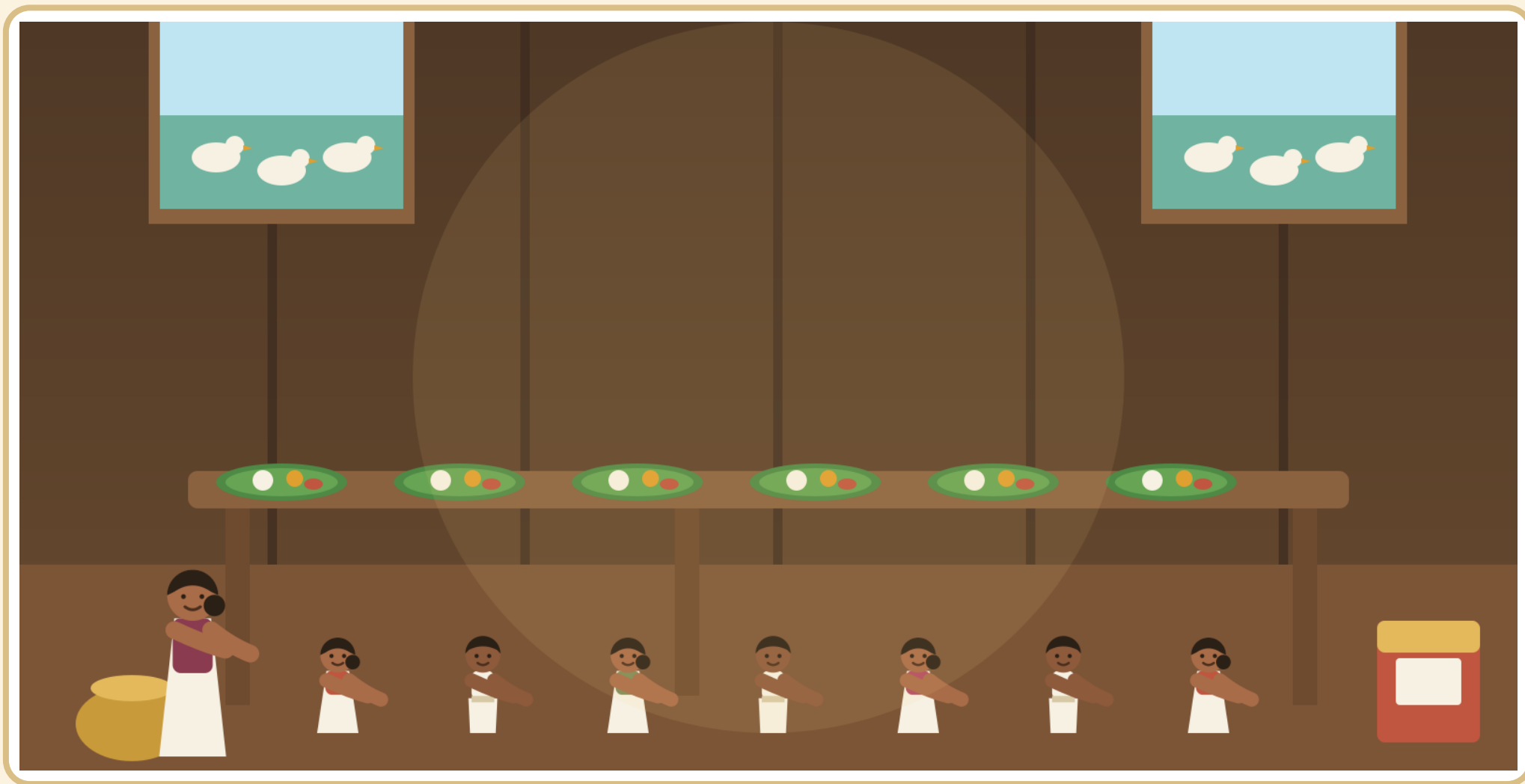
Kunjomachen and Amminikutty on their wedding day, 1950



Thomas V. Chirayil and Ammini Thomas

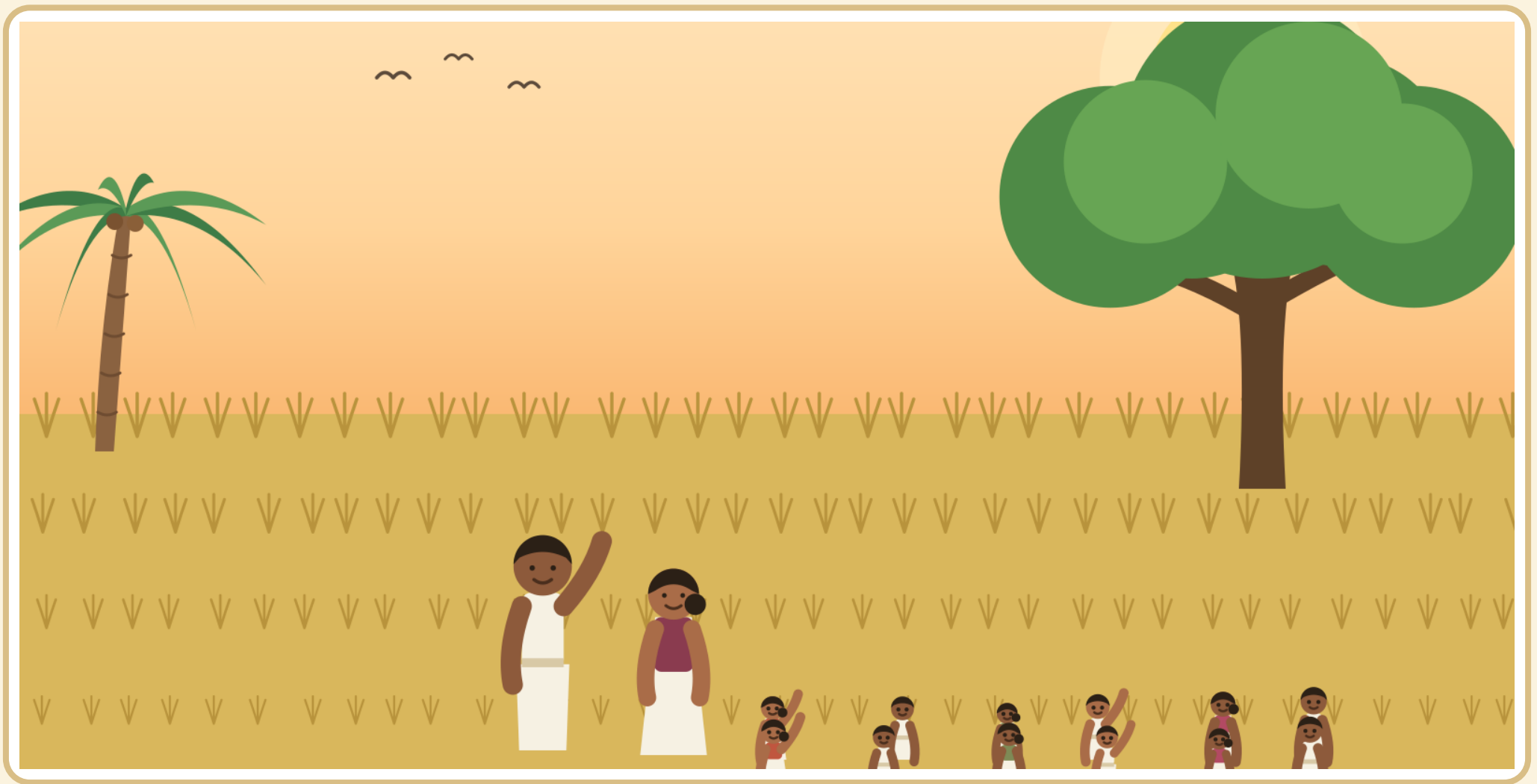
A Wedding and a Boat Ride

On September 14, 1950, Kunjomachen married Amminikutty, and because the roads were so narrow, the new bride travelled from Mavelikara to Edathua the Kuttanad way: by boat! Though she had grown up like a little princess, Amminikutty rolled up her sleeves at once. She was the first to wake in the morning and the last to sleep at night, checking every chicken, every cow and every door. And do you know what? She never, ever complained. Instead she counted her blessings, every single day.



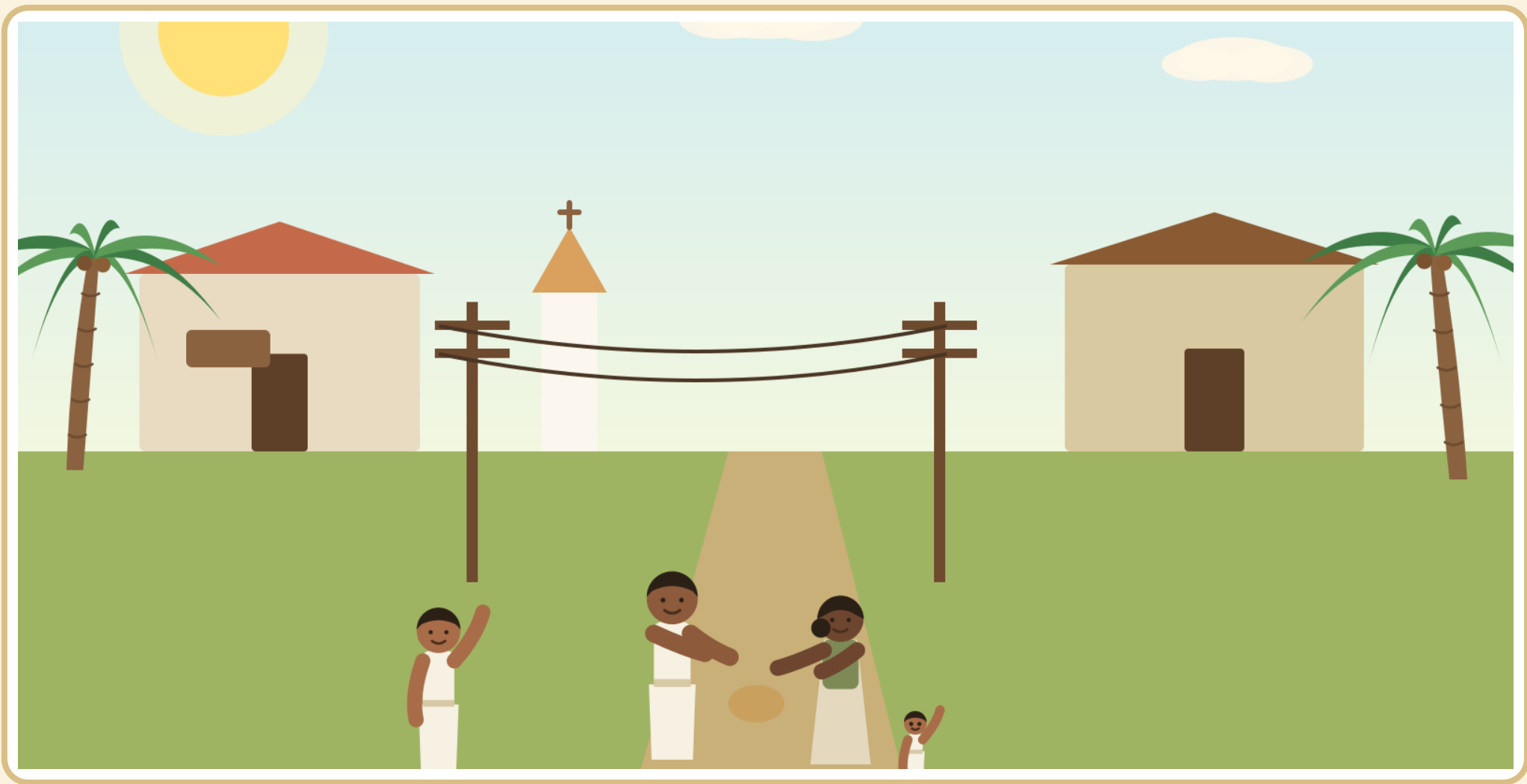
The Longest Dining Table

The dining room was the heart of the house, with a table as long as four tables put together! Before the holidays, Ammini, my son's wife, fattened two hundred ducks on the riverlet so there would be enough feasts for everyone. My son bought everything in big amounts, even Britannia biscuits in giant tins that reached up to a child's waist. The little ones had to dive in head-first to reach the last biscuits at the bottom! Fish and duck and mountains of rice from the family's own fields: nobody ever left that table hungry.



Twelve Children!

God blessed Kunjomachen and Amminikutty with twelve children: four girls and eight boys! Rani, Rosamma, Pushpam and Kusumam; George, Mathew, Ivan, Jacob, Paul, Anto, Rojan and Jojo. Cloth was bought in one long roll, and the tailor sewed shirts for everyone, which were handed down as the children grew. Every day, my son made them copy out the newspaper editorial in their best handwriting, so their letters grew neat and their minds grew sharp. The house rang with laughter like a tree full of noisy parrots!



A Village Like His Own Child

“The village was like his own child,” the family says of Kunjomachen. Nobody ever left the house empty-handed. He helped bring a bank to Edathua, started a training institute so young people could learn a trade, gave land for a police station, and when the village needed ten telephone orders before it could get its very first telephone exchange, he walked from door to door until he had gathered all ten! My son and Ammini cared for the poorest of the poor with mercy and love, just as my Rosamma and I had done before them.



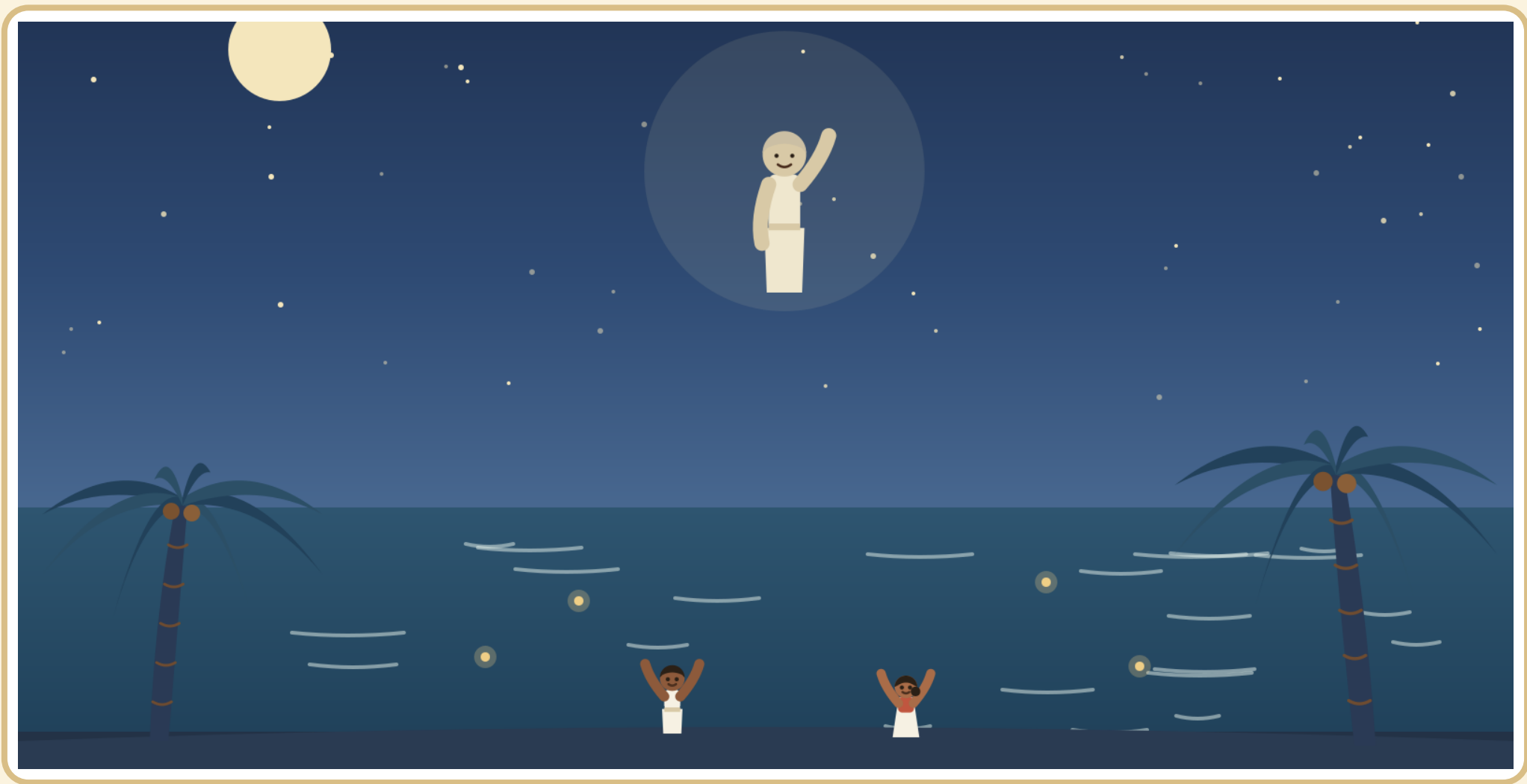
Amminikutty with one of her great-grandchildren



The grandchildren together at Onam

Grandchildren by the Dozen

The twelve children grew up and had children of their own: twenty-six grandchildren, and then great-grandchildren too! Every summer they came from far-away cities, some riding the train for two whole nights, watching the land turn greener and greener out the window. And at the station stood my son and his Ammini, whom all the little ones lovingly called Achen and Ammachy, waiting with open arms and making every single child feel like the most important person in the whole universe.



You Carry the Story Now

My child, my bones rest in the soil of Edathua, but my story flows in your very veins. From me and my Rosamma, to Kunjomachen and Amminikutty, to their twelve children, twenty-six grandchildren and all the little ones after: we are one long, unbroken river. So whenever the world feels too loud, put down your glowing screen for a moment. Feel the earth under your feet. Look for the one golden grain. And remember that you are held by the very same Grace that held us, all those years ago.

With all my love, your Appachan — C. T. Varkey

Words Our Family Lived By

“Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool... But this is the one to whom I will look: the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word.”

— Isaiah 66:1-2

“In the vastness of every field, among the billions of grains, there is one golden grain. It is the harbinger of good times, so ensure that it reaches home.”

— The Chirayil family lesson, passed from father to child

*In loving memory of Thomas Varkey & Mariamma, C. T. Varkey & Rosamma,
Kunjomachen & Amminikutty, their twelve children, twenty-six grandchildren,
and every little one who carries the story on.*