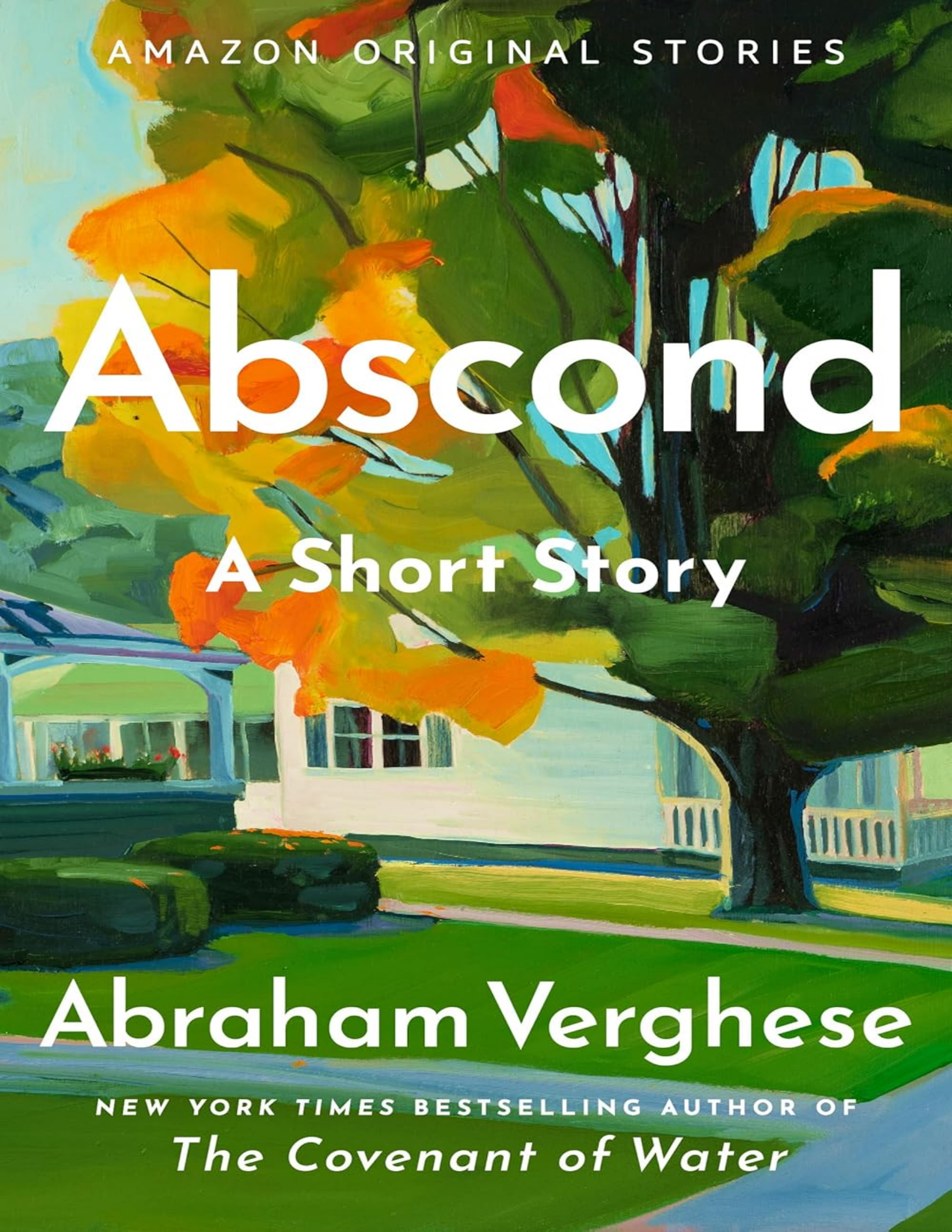




AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

Abscond

A Short Story

Abraham Verghese

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
The Covenant of Water

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The day started unremarkably, just another Tuesday, with no hint at what would unfold. Ravi had gone to bed early, slept soundly, waking at a quarter to five to muffled and distant metallic clinks from the kitchen downstairs, then a hurried tapping of a stirring spoon on the edge of a pot. He'd read somewhere that an infant could recognize its mother by her scent alone; he would know his mother from these abrupt volleys of sound. She moved twice as fast as anyone else. She was part hummingbird, his father said, which was why, no matter how much she ate, her face, arms, and neck—the only parts visible beyond her sari—were devoid of fat; she was just sinew and skin. She weighed the same as she did on the day she was married.

Outside his window the predawn darkness cloaked everything, even the giant oak that he knew stood there and had been there before he was born and would likely outlive him. From his father's study, which adjoined his bedroom on the upper level of the house, he heard the soft rustle of pages being turned. The sound brought back a memory from when he was much younger of his mother reading to him at bedtime as he cuddled against her, his fingers entwined in the ends of her braid. When she turned the page, her movement was so rapid that on one occasion, she snapped the paper clean out of its binding, reducing them both to hysterical laughter.

His father's operating days at Muhlenberg hospital were Tuesdays and Thursdays. Ravi's mother insisted on her husband eating a hot breakfast, and so, twice a week, his parents rose at an ungodly hour. His father would be gone long before the other husbands on Maple Street in Westfield emerged, briefcases in hand, to catch the express bus to Port Authority, the first step in their commutes to Midtown or Wall Street.

Ravi, you know you could join Appa for breakfast. He'd never been awake early enough to see his father leave the house on his operating days. *On second thought, why go down, Ravi? To say ta-ta-goodbye like you used to in kindergarten?* This reminded him that school would start in a few days. He was depressed to think that summer was nearly over. It was like having to leave the theater halfway through a wonderful movie.

It had been his greatest summer ever. He should carve those words into the handle of his tennis racket, or better still, on the trunk of the oak tree outside: 1967 GREATEST SUMMER EVER. He'd turned thirteen, but his growth spurt had begun a year earlier. He was stronger, faster, and taller now, the changes happening quicker than he could grow accustomed to them. It would have meant little if he wasn't also playing tennis at a level that astonished him and shocked everyone else. He was ranked number one in New Jersey in his age bracket.

He heard the squeak of a leather chair, then the floorboards creaking as his father, in socks, headed downstairs. *You should join him, Ravi.* But he didn't move. The debate in his head was unresolved. Just then, his right hand floated up and across his body to stroke an imaginary backhand, a shorthand of the real stroke, with the backs of his fingers standing in for the racket face. He caught himself doing this unconsciously several times a day—always the backhand; it was as though the sweetness of the strings meeting the ball in the very center of his racket face lingered within him for many hours after he was off the court. The movement decided it for him; he swung his long legs off the bed and sat up. *Why do you always second-guess yourself, Ravi?* Well, not always . . . but a lot, and over little things. He stared down at his feet, which seemed to belong to someone else. His shoes were already four sizes bigger than his father's.

Walking past the study, he saw the desk lamp was still on, illuminating the oversize *Zollinger's Atlas of Surgical Operations* splayed open on the table. As he descended the stairs, he ducked; the low ceiling had left scars on his scalp before the movement became instinctive.

In the kitchen, his parents looked up from where they sat in the breakfast nook, too surprised to say anything. His mother sped into action, putting a clean plate before him, then ladling hot *sambar* from the stove into a ramekin she set atop his plate, all before he had a chance to say he wasn't hungry. She poured him a glass of milk, her free hand resting on his shoulder. She liked him seated because it brought him to her level. "Hot *idli* just now coming," she said.

Over the rim of his coffee cup, his father's eyes were alive with pleasure, though he remained silent. Ravi was glad he'd come downstairs.

"You had your atlas out, *Appa*?" Ravi said, feeling the need to say something. His father just nodded; *he* never felt pressured to speak.

After a while his father said, "On paper, every operation looks simple. But paper doesn't bleed."

"Why bother, then?"

His father wagged his head, his chin swinging like a pendulum, a gesture that could mean any number of things. He sipped his coffee before responding. "Why indeed. Good question. You see, no matter how many times I've done the operation, I review. It's habit. A ritual. I can't stop now." Steaming, fresh *idlis*, like tiny flying saucers, popped onto their plates. His father leaned forward, dropping his voice. "Truth be told, all I need before surgery is coffee. But your *amma* insists. So now, without *idli*, my game is off!"

"Don't think I didn't hear you," his mother said in Tamil.

"I *saaaid*"—he winked at Ravi—"your loving breakfast, dear Rekha, is the key to my success!" He'd replied in English. His mother spooned chutney onto Ravi's plate with one hand and refilled his father's coffee cup with the other. He went on: "Your mother has more limbs than Durga. Whereas your humble father"—he held his hands up to face level, a gesture he might use after scrubbing and when waiting for the circulating nurse to gown him—"has to manage in the theater with just two." Saying "theater" and not "operating room" was a legacy of his father's medical school training in Madras.

At last, Ravi's mother sat down. Her face managed to express both pleasure at being compared to a deity and disapproval at a God's name being used in vain. She had no plate before her because she ate only after her bath and then her puja. The latter she performed standing in front of the repurposed hall closet, whose door had been removed; in place of overcoats, it had shelving densely populated with idols. A large, multitiered oil lamp rose from the floor like the Christmas tree in FAO Schwarz's Santa's

workshop display every winter. In place of elves, reindeer, and the bearded man himself, his mother's shrine held icons of Muruga, Venkatesha, Lakshmi, Shiva, Ganesh, Hanuman, and Sai Baba, to name a few. Rituals were so central to his parents' lives, Ravi thought. His only rituals were confined to tennis: preparing to serve and waiting to return serve.

His mother thrust a napkin at him, pulled his milk glass back from the table's edge, and, when Ravi didn't take the napkin cue, she wiped away his milk mustache.

His father observed their moves as he savored his coffee. He looked superficially relaxed, but Ravi felt there was an underlying intensity in him, a quiet gathering of forces, like a sprinter approaching the blocks.

"*Kanna*," his mother said, pushing his hair back with her fingers before he had time to retract his head. "Don't you fret," she said in Tamil. "When you become a doctor, I'll make *idlis* for you before surgery!" She smiled, delighted by the thought.

"No way, *Amma*! I'm not going to be a doctor. I'll make my living playing professional tennis." Of course, he didn't say that. Just to think it felt dangerous. He fiddled with his *idlis*.

"You know something, *kanna*?" She'd switched to English. The endearment "*kanna*" took the place of Ravi's name, even when his friends were around. It embarrassed him. He was the sole Indian in his school and stood out like a sore thumb. To be Indian was to be weighed down by the expectations of students and even a few teachers who thought he should know about magic carpets and harems, or cannibalism and shrunken heads, even if none of these things were Indian. Billy, who was his neighbor and had been his classmate since kindergarten, had picked up on "*kanna*" and repeated it at school. On Billy's tongue, it came out as "Connor," which, all considered, wasn't too terrible. So "Connor," Ravi was to most of his friends.

"*Kanna!*" his mother repeated, pinching his cheek because he hadn't responded. "You know it's your destiny to be a surgeon like your *appa*, don't you?"