

A Temporary Matter



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JHUMPA LAHIRI

Jhumpa Lahiri, born Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri, was born in London on July 11, 1967 to Bengali Indian emigrants. When she was two years old, her family moved to the United States. She grew up in Kingston, Rhode Island, where her father worked for the University of Rhode Island as a librarian. Lahiri earned a degree in English literature from Barnard College in 1989, and would go on to receive an M.A. in English, an M.F.A. in Creative Writing, an M.A. in Comparative Literature, and a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies, all from Boston University. Lahiri's short fiction was rejected for years until the publication of [Interpreter of Maladies](#) in 1999. She went on to win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for [Interpreter of Maladies](#) in 2000. In addition to her short fiction, Lahiri has published several longer works, including [The Namesake](#) in 2003 and [The Lowland](#) in 2013. She published a second collection of short stories, [Unaccustomed Earth](#), in 2008. Her works appear frequently in the *The New Yorker*, and she has taught creative writing at Boston University and the Rhode Island School of Design. As of 2019, Lahiri is the Director of Creative Writing at Princeton University.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"A Temporary Matter" is about a couple whose marriage has been destroyed by the grief they incur after the recent loss of their child. The story's main conflict, then, is whether or not Shoba and Shukumar are ready to move through their grief together. The presence of death and grief in the story makes it useful to have a basic understanding of grief as it figured into American culture in the mid-to-late-20th century. Swiss-American psychologist Elizabeth Kübler-Ross introduced the Kübler-Ross Model in 1969 in her book *On Death and Dying*. The model presents grief as a process consisting of five stages: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. The basic idea of Kübler-Ross's "stages" is that the journey from grief to acceptance is a multi-step process. If one gets stuck in a certain stage of grief (if one is overcome by depression, say) the grieving process is prolonged. Kübler-Ross's model was originally based on her work with terminally ill patients, but she would eventually modify it to extend to anybody coping with loss (not just one's own death, but the loss of a loved one, or the end of a relationship). Although Kübler-Ross's model was later criticized for its lack of empirical evidence, the idea that grief consists of stages that must be completed in order for one to feel better after a loss gained cultural traction at this point in history, and it's useful to consider Shoba and Shukumar's

internal and marital conflicts within this context. Shukumar, for example, remains stagnant and alienated because he hasn't managed to get over the guilt he feels at not being at the hospital when the baby was stillborn. Because he remains in denial of his guilt, he cannot move forward in the grieving process.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Although it is only peripherally apparent in "A Temporary Matter," much of Lahiri's work deals with the experiences of immigrants. In this particular story, for example, the symbolic weight of food is enhanced by the cultural currency that food carries for Shoba and Shukumar as the children of Indian immigrants. Thus, knowing that Lahiri's writing speaks to the experience of immigrants provides the reader with a more nuanced understanding of the story. Other contemporary works about immigrant experiences are Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's [Americanah](#), Amy Tan's [The Joy Luck Club](#), and Min Jin Lee's [Pachinko](#). "A Temporary Matter" also deals with death, grief, and the psychological effects of mourning. Some notable examples of contemporary American literature that tackles death and grief are [Sing, Unburied, Sing](#) by Jesmyn Ward and [Lincoln in the Bardo](#) by George Saunders. Lahiri's style of writing—characterized by her ability to craft rich, psychologically compelling characters with deceptively plain, frank language—is comparable to the short fiction of Canadian author Alice Munro, whom Lahiri has cited as an influence on her writing. Other authors whom Lahiri has cited as influences (and whom are known for their short fiction) include William Trevor, Anton Chekhov, and Mavis Gallant.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Temporary Matter
- **When Written:** 1998
- **Where Written:** United States
- **When Published:** First published in *The New Yorker*, 1998. Later published in [Interpreter of Maladies](#), 1999.
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** Boston, Massachusetts
- **Climax:** Shoba tells Shukumar that she plans to move out, so Shukumar reveals the sex of their dead child.
- **Point of View:** Third Person



PLOT SUMMARY

Shukumar and Shoba, a married couple, receive a notice from their electric company informing them that for five days, their power will be cut off for one hour from 8:00 to 9:00 P.M. in order to repair a power line damaged in a snowstorm. The couple has grown increasingly distant from one another since their baby's stillbirth six months ago, and they are now accustomed to eating their **meals** in separate rooms.

The couple is still overcome with grief from the loss of their child. Shoba suffers from the unexpectedness of the death, and Shukumar from the guilt of being absent from the birth—he'd been at a conference when Shoba went into labor, and hadn't been there to comfort his wife when their baby was born dead. In the wake of the stillbirth, Shukumar reflects on how Shoba has changed. Whereas his wife was once a careful planner and loved to entertain, she has now apathetically given up on preparing for the future, and the couple has isolated themselves from others.

The temporary power outage forces Shukumar and Shoba to have dinner together, or else eat separately in **darkness**. The couple chooses to dine together, and at Shoba's suggestion, they begin to trade secrets back and forth as a way of passing the time until their electricity is restored—a game she recalls from her childhood trips to India when the generator would go out regularly. The game turns into "an exchange of confessions," with Shukumar and Shoba revealing, in turn, the small ways they've deceived and disappointed one another throughout their marriage. Revealing these truths allows Shukumar and Shoba to open up to one another for the first time since their baby's death, and their relationship appears to be on the mend.

When the electric company sends a second notice the morning of the final day of the blackout informing the couple that the repairs have been completed ahead of schedule and the blackout is over, Shukumar suggests that the couple eats together in darkness one last time. As they finish eating, Shoba reveals that she has a final secret she'd like to confide in Shukumar, but it needs to be told with the lights on. Shoba tells Shukumar that she has found an apartment and intends to leave him. Shukumar realizes that the game of trading secrets was not Shoba's attempt to repair their marriage, but a means of preparing Shukumar for this final, difficult confession.

Angrily, Shukumar responds with a brutal secret of his own: he reveals the sex of their dead baby, something Shoba wished to never know, and something she'd believed was a mystery to Shukumar, as well. Unbeknownst to Shoba, Shukumar had arrived at the hospital before the baby's body could be cremated, and he had held their dead child in his arms. Shukumar describes the scene to Shoba in vivid detail. After Shukumar confesses, Shoba turns the lights back off. The story ends as the couple weeps in darkness, "for the things they now

knew."



CHARACTERS

Shukumar – Shukumar is a 35-year-old doctoral student. Until somewhat recently, he'd been researching the agrarian revolts in India. Six months before the story takes place, Shukumar and his wife, Shoba, had been expecting their first child. While Shukumar was away at a conference, Shoba went into early labor and the baby was born as a stillbirth. Shukumar feels guilty for being away from Shoba during the tragedy, and he questions whether he even *deserves* to mourn their dead child. Shukumar's inability to reckon with his grief causes his relationship with Shoba to become increasingly strained. Shukumar spends his days home alone, essentially abandoning his dissertation. His guilt and grief leave him unable to work, socialize, or leave the house. Since the death, Shukumar has taken on the task of **cooking** for the couple, which he likes for the sole reason that it makes him feel productive. Shukumar frequently reflects back on happier times with Shoba. During a **blackout** that occurs for one hour each night while the electric company repairs a damaged power line, Shoba suggests that they share secrets in the dark. Shukumar jumps at the chance to reconnect with his wife. Confiding in one other seems to bring them closer together, and Shukumar responds to this new habit with a cautious optimism. In the very least, Shukumar hopes that their renewed communication might allow them finally to move on their lives—regardless of whether or not they choose to do so as a couple. When Shoba reveals that she's found an apartment and will be leaving Shukumar, he feels relief, for he admits to no longer loving his wife. But the shock of the news hurts him, and he retaliates with a secret of his own: unbeknownst to Shoba, he held their baby before it was time to cremate the body. Holding the baby and finding out details about the child was something Shoba didn't want to do. Because he no longer loves her, Shukumar describes the baby in vivid detail. Though cruel, getting this secret off his chest seems to provide Shukumar with some sense of closure.

Shoba – Shoba, 33 years old, is married to Shukumar and works as a proofreader. Since the loss of her baby, she has taken on more work projects in an effort to fill the time and take her mind off of her incessant grief. Before the baby's death, Shoba took great pride in her ability to plan for everything—good or bad. She loved to keep the kitchen stocked, cook elaborate **meals**, and entertain friends. In her cookbooks, she would record the first time she and Shukumar ate a meal together in a note next to each recipe. But the shock of the baby's death causes Shoba to lose faith in the predictability of life, and she stops cooking, shopping, cleaning, and thinking ahead. She avoids her husband, and she no longer cares about her own appearance, or that of the house. Shoba has plans to leave Shukumar, though this information is initially concealed from

Shukumar and the reader. When Shoba suggests that she and Shukumar trade secrets back and forth, her real motivation is not to make an attempt at intimacy (as Shukumar and the reader first believe) but to prepare him (and herself) for the news that she's found an apartment and plans to move out. When Shukumar learns the truth, he retaliates by revealing the sex of their baby—the one thing that Shoba had wanted to remain a mystery. The news horrifies Shoba. Though the story's ending is ambiguous (Shoba and Shukumar weep together in the dark at their final two confessions), Lahiri seems to suggest that, freed of these two remaining, heavy secrets, Shoba and Shukumar will be able to move forward with their lives—even if they choose to do so separately. The fact that Shoba and Shukumar have finally communicated with one another seems to outweigh the importance of whether or not they remain a couple.

Shoba's Mother – Shoba's mother appears only in a memory of Shukumar's. He describes her as a serious, religious woman. Shukumar thinks back to when Shoba's mother came from Arizona to live with the couple after the baby's death. Shukumar had mentioned the baby in conversation. Shoba's mother looked up from her knitting only to respond, "But you weren't even there." Shoba's mother reinforces Shukumar's fear that his physical absence from the tragedy denies him the right to mourn the baby's death.

Shukumar's Mother – Shukumar compares Shoba to his mother, stating that after the death of his father, his mother had "fallen to pieces [...], abandoning the house he grew up in and moving back to Calcutta, leaving Shukumar to settle it all." Shukumar admires Shoba's careful planning and preparation, especially compared to his mother's lack thereof—it's perhaps for this reason that Shukumar takes Shoba's grief-induced indifference especially hard.

that never was, but they come to their grief from different places and with very different inhibitions that prevent them from moving forward with their lives. For Shukumar, the guilt of not being present for the birth renders him unable to grieve and ultimately costs him his marriage. Lahiri uses Shukumar's inner conflict to comment on the role guilt plays in the grieving process, suggesting that dwelling too heavily on one's role in a tragedy can ultimately prevent people from coming to terms with their grief in a healthy way.

Shukumar feels unresolved guilt for not being present during the baby's birth. Before the couple was expecting their baby, Shukumar had made plans to attend an academic conference in Baltimore. Because the baby's due date was still three weeks away, Shoba encouraged him to attend; Shukumar would be in the job market the following year, Shoba reasoned, so it would be good for him to make contacts. But the baby came early, and Shoba was forced to undergo an emergency C-section while Shukumar was away. Although Shoba gave Shukumar her blessing to attend the conference, Shukumar insists that he "hadn't wanted to go." Lahiri emphasizes Shukumar's hesitancy to leave Shoba through his vivid recollection of the last time he saw Shoba pregnant: "Each time he thought of that moment [...] it was the cab he remembered most, a station wagon, painted red with blue lettering." Lahiri's choice to preface Shukumar's memory with "Each time" reveals that Shukumar constantly replays this moment in his mind—he sees it as the instant he made the wrong decision. It's also significant that Shukumar recalls the *cab* most clearly in his memory. Shukumar chose to climb into the cab, and the cab was the vessel that carried him far away from Shoba and their child, and the danger they faced without him.

After the baby's death, Shukumar's guilt causes him to retreat inward. He has no desire to leave the house or to socialize—especially not with Shoba. He loses interest in everything. Shukumar's newfound apathy causes him to stagnate, preventing him from moving forward in his life. Shukumar is no longer engrossed in his doctoral work. He admits that "nothing [is] pushing" him anymore, and he's been relieved of his teaching duties for the spring semester. He has no desire to leave the house, "not even [...] to get the mail, or to buy fruit or wine at the stores by the trolley stop." At the beginning of the story, the reader learns that he hasn't even managed to brush his teeth that morning. When Shoba is home, her presence makes him feel so uncomfortable "that he fear[s] that putting on a record in his own house might be rude." Overcome with guilt and unable to face Shoba, Shukumar holes up in the one room he knows Shoba won't dare enter, for fear of summoning forth painful memories: the would-be nursery he's since converted into an office.

Shukumar constantly thinks about the baby and the effect its death has had on his marriage, yet he never voices his thoughts out loud. He is ashamed to admit that he is thinking about a



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



GUILT AND GRIEF

In "A Temporary Matter," Shukumar and his wife, Shoba, suffer from unresolved grief. Six months before the story takes place, the couple was about to have their first baby. They'd been married for only a few years and were very much in love. However, three weeks before the baby's due date, while Shukumar was away at an academic conference, Shoba went into early labor and suffered a stillbirth. Now, both husband and wife grieve for the baby

tragedy for which he wasn't around (and therefore isn't entitled to mourn), so he keeps these thoughts to himself. At the beginning of the story, the couple is informed by their electric company that their power will be cut for one hour each night so that a damaged power line can be repaired. At **dinner** during the first night of the **blackout**, Shukumar lights candles so they don't have to eat in complete darkness. Shoba remarks that the candles remind her of a rice ceremony (a Hindu custom celebrating the first time a baby eats solid food) where the power went out. "I had to attend an entire rice ceremony in the dark," she remembers. "The baby just cried and cried." Immediately, Shukumar considers the fact that "their baby had never cried," though he does not share the connection with Shoba, choosing instead to steer the conversation toward more mindless, banal subjects. Shukumar recalls a moment when Shoba's mother had moved in with the couple immediately after the baby's death to help them cope with the tragedy. Shukumar mentioned the baby's death in conversation, to which Shoba's mother replied simply, "But you weren't even there." Lahiri ends this section of the story with Shoba's mother's response. Thus, Shukumar is offered no chance to interject with any concluding remarks of self-defense or reflection—the story simply moves forward to the next scene. Shukumar's silence confirms Shoba's mother's remark: that Shukumar wasn't there, and that his grief is shameful. Because Shukumar feels ashamed and unworthy of his sadness, his grieving process stagnates, and he remains unable to move beyond the tragedy of his child's death.

The grief Shukumar feels for his dead child is very real, yet the guilt he feels at his core prevents him from confronting this grief directly. When Shukumar denies himself the right to grieve—and when others, like Shoba's mother, deny him his right, too—he retreats inward, alienating himself from Shoba and preventing the two of them from moving forward from their tragedy together.



THE DIFFICULTY OF COMMUNICATION

When their power company shuts off the electricity for one hour each night, Shoba and Shukumar are forced to **dine** together or eat alone in **darkness**.

The couple chooses the former, and at Shoba's insistence they soon find themselves trading secrets back and forth. As one night dissolves into the next, Shoba and Shukumar open up for the first time since their baby's stillbirth, and they discover that they've kept many secrets from one another over the years. Although the couple initially trades confessions to pass the time, their final exchange forces them both to become vulnerable with one another. This newfound vulnerability allows for the genuine communication needed to move on from their tragedy.

When Shukumar and Shoba talk to one another in the beginning of the story, their words are brief and objective. On

the first night of the blackout, Shukumar cooks lamb for dinner. Shoba remarks simply, "You made *rogan josh*." She doesn't offer any follow up, relating merely what is objectively in front of her. Shukumar responds to Shoba with an equal level of objectiveness and brevity, speaking only to announce when the meal is ready. At first, most of the couple's interactions unfold like this. They exchange brief, inconsequential statements, avoiding vulnerability completely. Their conversations don't develop into genuine communication: they merely tick away the seconds until husband and wife may retreat to their respective solitudes.

The only way that Shukumar and Shoba can open up to one another—that they can engage in conversation that trades politeness for communicative honesty—is within the safe boundaries of Shoba's confessional game. On the first night of the blackout, Shoba suggests that they trade secrets, a game she remembers playing during blackouts in her childhood. "We all had to say something. [...] A little poem. A joke." Shoba prefaces the game in this way to make honesty appear harmless and inconsequential. By downplaying the seriousness of their confessions—by viewing them as mere poems or games—she creates an unthreatening atmosphere for them to communicate without consequence. Shoba reveals that, early in their relationship, she'd looked through Shukumar's address book to see if he'd written in her name; Shukumar shares that he'd forgotten to tip the waiter the first time they went to dinner. The back-and-forth structure of the game allows Shoba and Shukumar to trade secrets without feeling any of the vulnerability that comes with *genuine* human communication. Because they both know that the other will offer up a similarly low-stakes secret, there is no real risk involved. The blackout's darkness adds another layer of safety to their structured communication. Unable to see one another's faces, the couple can pretend that they're whispering confessions into the void rather than to another person.

By the end of the story, Shukumar realizes that the game was never Shoba's attempt at bringing the couple closer together; rather, Shoba had structured the game to build up to the moment she would reveal her plans to leave him. On the final night, the power has been restored. Shukumar suggests that they eat with the lights off once more. But Shoba tells Shukumar that she has a final secret to tell him—and it needs to be told with the lights on. "I've been looking for an apartment and I've found one," she reveals. The repeated nights of small, safe secrets were all part of Shoba's larger plans to brace Shukumar for the impact of her final, agonizing confession. As Shukumar states, "This was what she'd been trying to tell him for the past four evenings." The game was only another means through which she could safely broach the uncomfortable subject that she intends to leave her husband. The game wasn't Shoba's attempt at communication—it was a means of *avoiding* communication. Shoba didn't initiate the game to rekindle her

relationship with her husband through vulnerable communication—she initiated it to craft a safe, structured space to tell Shukumar that she has no desire to try to rekindle the relationship.

Hurt, Shukumar offers his own final confession. Shoba had earlier decided she'd rather not know their dead baby's sex, stating, "at least they'd been spared that knowledge." Unbeknownst to Shoba, however, Shukumar arrived at the hospital before they'd cremated the baby, and held it in his arms. He'd hid this from Shoba, "because he still loved her then, and it was the one thing in her life she had wanted to be a surprise." Because Shoba's final confession has left him vulnerable, Shukumar decides to retaliate by revealing the sex of the baby. Shoba hadn't expected to be caught off guard in a game of her own design, and she breaks down. The couple's sudden vulnerability breaks down the wall that had grown between them since their baby's death. Lahiri ends the story ambiguously, with the couple crying together. Although it's unclear whether they will be able to repair their broken relationship, the fact that the couple has accepted vulnerability suggests that the removal of their respective, suppressed burdens will at least allow them to move forward with their lives—whether or not they do so as a couple is only of incidental importance.

Despite their initial avoidance of communication, Shoba and Shukumar's final confessions leave them both vulnerable. In sadness, they "[weep] together, for the things they now knew." Despite the uncertainty of their relationship, their ability to finally connect with one another in a vulnerable way offers the possibility that their renewed communication will permit them to heal and move beyond their grief. The symbolism of Shoba's choice to turn off the lights (thus returning the couple to the invulnerable safety of darkness) seems to suggest that the couple isn't quite ready to move forward together—that feeling vulnerable and exposed without darkness's comfort is too much to bear. Still, their shared moment of vulnerability (however brief) shows that they've rediscovered a tool that *could* allow them to fix their relationship, should they choose to do so.



THE LIMITS OF PLANNING

If Shukumar's grieving process is obstructed by his overwhelming guilt, Shoba's is inhibited by her reliance on planning and predictability. Shoba and Shukumar's marriage begins to unravel when the expectations they had for their life do not go as planned. Because Shoba relied so heavily on her ability to plan for the future, she finds herself unable to adapt to life after the unexpected death of their baby. This, in turn, obstructs her grieving process. Before the stillbirth, Shoba measured her success by her ability to plan and organize her life in the most efficient, effective way possible. To a certain degree, she might have even believed that

having a healthy, happy baby could guarantee her success and happiness in her marriage. But when Shoba suffers a stillbirth, she is forced to reckon with the fact that not all of life can be planned for and predicted. The stillbirth complicates Shoba's ability to plan, and she struggles to recover in the aftermath. In Shoba's struggle, Lahiri suggests that life is inherently unpredictable, and efforts to plan and control one's life are thus likely to fail.

Shoba plans out every aspect of her life. She feels best when she is able to enter into situations prepared. As the story unfolds, Lahiri shows the extent to which planning and precision dominate Shoba's personality—even her career allows her to exist in the realm of the prescribed and the predictable. The reader learns that Shoba works as a proofreader, "search[ing] for typographical errors in textbooks and mark[ing] them [...] with an assortment of colored pencils." Shukumar admits that "he envie[s] her [for] the specificity of her task, so unlike the elusive nature of his." Shoba orients her life around what she can plan for. She chooses a career that rejects the elusiveness and ambiguity she so despises, that allows her to know precisely what each day will bring, and what tasks it will require her to undertake. Shoba even prefers to plan for the smallest, most inconsequential minutia of life. Shukumar notes that Shoba "was the type to prepare for surprises, good and bad. If she found a skirt or purse she liked she bought two." Down to the smallest details, Shoba feels best when she can exercise control by planning for the expected.

But the baby's stillbirth shows Shoba that not all of life can be planned for. After the death of her baby, Shoba struggles to regain the control she once believed she could have over her own life. Despite Shoba's wide hips, which her doctor "had assured her were made for childbearing," the baby's birth fails to go according to plan. To Shoba, the stillbirth represents the unpredictability of her own body. In addition to the horrific loss of a child, the stillbirth forces Shoba to grapple with the realization that she can't even rely on *herself* to perform as expected, and even less so the volatile world around her. Shoba doesn't take well to this realization, and Lahiri illustrates this through the physical and behavioral changes Shoba undergoes in the months after her baby's death. When Shoba returns home from the gym looking disheveled, Shukumar notes that Shoba has become "the type of woman she'd once claimed she would never resemble." Shoba's thrown-together appearance reflects the new loss of control she feels on the inside. Shoba's behavioral shift further illustrates the extent to which she's given up on planning and precision. Before the baby's death, "the **pantry** was always stocked with extra bottles of olive and corn oil. [...] There were endless boxes of pasta in all shapes and colors, zippered sacks of basmati rice, whole sides of lambs and goats." But Shoba hasn't shopped since the stillbirth, and Shukumar notes that "they'd eaten it all by now." Just as Shoba's precisely-stocked food supply has diminished, so too has her

motivation to plan.

Shoba's stillbirth forces her to come to terms with the fact that life is unpredictable, and that the success of one's life cannot be measured by one's ability to plan. When the unimaginable occurs—when Shoba and Shukumar's baby is born dead—Shoba's meticulous plans are rendered useless, and her inability to reckon with her newfound powerlessness leaves her stagnant, flailing, and unable to work through her loss.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



DARKNESS

Darkness symbolizes interpersonal comfort and communication without vulnerability. When Shoba and Shukumar's electric company informs them that they will shut off their power each night from 8:00-9:00 to repair a fallen power line, the couple is forced to **dine** by candlelight with each other. On the first night of the blackout, Shoba initiates a game in which the couple trades secrets back and forth, and this quickly transforms into "an exchange of confessions—the little ways they'd hurt or disappointed each other." Darkness allows Shoba and Shukumar to be honest with one another for the first time since the death of their baby. Shukumar notices this change: "Something happened when the house was dark. They were able to talk to each other again." In darkness, the couple can open up and share secrets with one another without feeling the vulnerability that comes with looking someone in the eye. In "A Temporary Matter," darkness is a safe, alternative reality where Shoba and Shukumar's fear, grief, and insecurities don't stand in the way of opening up to one another. In contrast, when the lights are on, Shoba and Shukumar are fully exposed to one another. Without the comfort of darkness, their figurative nakedness makes them feel awkward and unprotected, and Shoba and Shukumar remain distant from one another. When Shoba and Shukumar finally exchange secrets in the light, they are forced to look one another in the eye and reckon with "the things they now [know]" honestly and without the concealing comfort of darkness. Shoba's final decision to turn the lights back off after both she and Shukumar have confessed final, hurtful truths suggests that the couple may not be ready to resume their life together—ultimately, they still rely on the false comfort of darkness to diminish the wounds inflicted in the light.



FOOD

Food represents the former intimacy of Shukumar and Shoba's marriage, and the nostalgia Shukumar

feels for who Shoba used to be and the relationship they once had. Shukumar connects food to Shoba's former preparedness. Before the stillbirth, Shoba would stock the pantry full of everything imaginable. She would cook elaborate meals for Shukumar and their friends, noting the date she first made each dish in her recipe book. At present, though, Shoba's grief in the wake of their child's stillbirth causes her to lose faith in planning ahead. Shoba no longer cooks or plans for the future, and the task of preparing their meals falls to Shukumar. Shukumar enjoys cooking, as he sees it as "the one thing that ma[kes] him feel productive." Symbolically, Shukumar's decision to take on the responsibility of cooking represents his determination to hold on to some semblance of the marriage he once had. Along these lines, Shoba's decision to abandon food implies that she is more prepared than Shukumar to give up on the marriage. When the **blackout** forces the couple to dine together for the first time since the stillbirth, this is a symbolic act that signifies the couple's relationship may be on the mend. When Lahiri reveals this growth to be false—when Shoba and Shukumar's rekindled relationship leads only to them revealing hurtful, alienating truths to one another—Shukumar leaves the table, and "carrie[s] the plates to the sink." By removing the dinner plates from the table, Shukumar symbolically removes the possibility of renewed intimacy in his marriage.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Houghton Mifflin edition of *Interpreter of Maladies* published in 1999.

A Temporary Matter Quotes

●● She wore a navy blue poplin raincoat over gray sweatpants and white sneakers, looking, at thirty-three, like the type of woman she'd once claimed she would never resemble.

Related Characters: Shukumar, Shoba

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

Shoba returns home from the gym as Shukumar receives the electric company's notice of the temporary blackout. Shukumar observes his wife's physical appearance. This serves as the reader's first impression of Shoba. Dressed in her clashing "navy blue poplin raincoat over gray sweatpants and white sneakers," Shoba appears haphazardly thrown together. Lahiri reveals that Shoba's

disheveled state is new and unlike her usual appearance, noting that Shoba looks “like the type of woman she’d once claimed she would never resemble.” Lahiri introduces Shoba in this way in order to hint at the problems Shoba and Shukumar face individually and in their marriage.

The fact that Shoba’s outer appearance is what communicates her inner turmoil speaks to the couple’s inability to communicate with one another. Shukumar knows that his wife is upset, but not because she tells him so: he can only deduce that she is grieving by how she is dressed. Shoba’s messy appearance also hints at her abandonment of planning. To Shoba, “the type of woman she’d once claimed she would never resemble” is a woman who can’t be bothered to plan out her outfit. Shoba’s haphazard physical appearance reflects the overall haphazard temperament she has adopted as a result of her grief.

●● He hadn’t left the house at all that day, or the day before. The more Shoba stayed out, the more she began putting in extra hours at work and taking on additional projects, the more he wanted to stay in, not even leaving to get the mail, or to buy fruit or wine at the stores by the trolley stop.

Related Characters: Shoba, Shukumar

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

When Shoba reminds Shukumar of his dentist appointment on Friday, he runs his tongue across his teeth and realizes he’s forgotten to brush that day; in fact, he hasn’t even bothered to leave the house. This quote emphasizes the toll Shukumar’s guilt and grief have taken on his daily life (though the reader has yet to learn the source of these emotions), as he finds it difficult to function outside the safe comforts of his home.

If Shukumar’s grief keeps him from leaving the house, Shoba’s forces her out—and away from her husband. In this passage, Lahiri demonstrates the opposite ways in which the couple’s grief has impacted them, and the distancing results these opposite coping mechanisms have had on the couple’s relationship. At this point in the story, Lahiri is ambiguous as to whether Shukumar is motivated to stay

inside by the unmanageability of the outside world, or by Shoba’s guaranteed absence from the home. Lahiri has yet to reveal Shoba and Shukumar’s reasons for avoiding one another, and this is one of the first hints she gives the reader that their marriage is on the rocks.

●● Each time he thought of that moment, the last moment he saw Shoba pregnant, it was the cab he remembered most, a station wagon, painted red with blue lettering. [...] As the cab sped down Beacon Street, he imagined a day when he and Shoba might need to buy a station wagon of their own, to cart their children back and forth from music lessons and dentist appointments. He imagined himself gripping the wheel, as Shoba turned around to hand the children juice boxes. Once, these images of parenthood had troubled Shukumar [...] But that early autumn morning, the trees still heavy with bronze leaves, he welcomed the image for the first time.

Related Characters: Shoba, Shukumar

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

The night that the couple receives news of the temporary blackout, Shukumar recalls the last time he saw Shoba pregnant. The reader has just learned the origins of Shoba and Shukumar’s marital troubles: six months prior, Shoba suffered a stillbirth while Shukumar was away at a conference. Although they are both reeling with grief, Shukumar bears the added guilt of being absent from Shoba during the tragedy.

Shukumar fixates on the cab for two reasons: because it is the literal vehicle by which he distanced himself from Shoba and their unborn child, and because it reminds him of a vision he had for his and Shoba’s future that is no longer possible. As Shukumar travels farther away from Shoba, he imagines that she is in the cab with him, their children nestled in the backseat. It’s the first time “he welcome[s] the image” of parenthood, and, in this moment, he begins to invest as much stock in planning as Shoba is known to do.

Shukumar’s investment in this joyous image of parenthood is shattered when the child is born dead and the vision—the plan—is no longer possible. The image of the cab thus demonstrates the limitations of planning, a concept that is thematically significant to the larger story. In most cases, Lahiri associates planning with Shoba, but in this instance

she illustrates the impossibility of planning ahead in Shukumar's character. Shukumar fixates on the cab because it represents his plan for parenthood that will never become a reality.

☛ It was typical of her. She was the type to prepare for surprises, good and bad. If she found a skirt or purse she liked she bought two. [...] It astonished him, her capacity to think ahead. When she used to do the shopping, the pantry was always stocked with extra bottles of olive and corn oil [...] It never went to waste. When friends dropped by, Shoba would throw together meals that appeared to have taken half a day to prepare [...] Her labeled mason jars lined the shelves of the kitchen, in endless sealed pyramids, enough, they'd agreed, to last for their grandchildren to taste. They'd eaten it all by now.

Related Characters: Shukumar, Shoba

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 6-7

Explanation and Analysis

Shukumar wanders downstairs to brush his teeth before dinner on the first night of the blackout. He finds a new toothbrush in a box under the sink and realizes Shoba must have purchased it in the event of a surprise guest. He reflects how this is "typical" of Shoba, as she used to be obsessed with planning and preparing for the future.

Before the baby's death, Shoba preferred to have no surprises in her life. To emphasize this, Shukumar lists all of the foods with which Shoba would stock the pantry. Shukumar's choice to explain Shoba's former preparedness in terms of the food she'd buy also emphasizes the symbolic value of food in "A Temporary Matter." When Shukumar remembers food or meals, he usually associates them with the couple's former happiness and intimacy. Shukumar's invocation of food here suggests, then, that the couple hasn't been intimate or happy since Shoba's loss of hope in the future and subsequent abandonment of planning.

The couple's remark that there would be enough food "to last for their grandchildren to taste" was meant as a joke, but it also speaks to how far ahead the couple had planned out their lives, and makes Shoba's unexpected stillbirth (which put at least a temporary end to the possibility of grandchildren) all the more tragic and consequential. The

fact that the couple has "eaten it all by now" suggests that their love has run out.

☛ At some point in the evening she visited him. When he heard her approach he would put away his novel and begin typing sentences. [...] He knew it was something she forced herself to do. She would look around the walls of the room, which they had decorated together last summer with a border of marching ducks and rabbits playing trumpet and drums. [...] Shukumar had disassembled it all before bringing Shoba back from the hospital, scraping off the rabbits and ducks with a spatula.

Related Characters: Shoba, Shukumar

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

As Shukumar prepares for his and Shoba's meal together on the first night of the blackout, he elaborates on one of the ways the couple avoids each other in order to explain why he is so uncomfortable at the prospect of facing his wife at the dinner table. Since the baby's death, he and Shoba engage in some elements intimacy—saying goodnight, and checking up on each other, for example—but they are only going through the motions. Shukumar observes that visiting him in his study is something that Shoba "force[s] herself to do." She will not visit Shukumar voluntarily, as the office was once the baby's nursery and brings forth too many painful memories for Shoba.

If Shoba "force[s] herself" to visit the nursery and her husband, Shukumar forces himself to work in order to avoid spending time with his wife. He admits that on hearing her footsteps near the office, "he would put away his novel and begin typing sentences." Shukumar's grief has inhibited his investment in his doctoral studies, but he forces himself to appear productive in order to justify holing himself up in a room he knows his wife dreads.

This passage also explains how the room came to be Shukumar's office: before bring Shoba back from the hospital, Shukumar rid the room of all evidence of the baby's existence, "scraping off the ducks and rabbits with a spatula." Shukumar's choice to silently destroy all evidence of the baby rather than work through the death with Shoba demonstrates another instance of the couple's inability to communicate.

☛ [Shoba's mother] was polite to Shukumar without being friendly. She never talked to him about Shoba; once, when he mentioned the baby's death, she looked up from her knitting, and said, "But you weren't even there."

Related Characters: Shoba's Mother (speaker), Shoba, Shukumar

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

As Shukumar prepares dinner the first night of the blackout, he remembers when Shoba's mother has come to live with the couple to help them after the death of their child. She would complete tasks around the house, mending his clothes and straightening up around the house. But when Shukumar tried to talk about the baby's death, she denied him the right to bring up the subject. Shoba's mother's response of "But you weren't even there," confirms and strengthens Shukumar's fear that he is unworthy of grieving the baby's death because he wasn't there with Shoba when it happened.

This section ends with Shoba's mother's remark—Shukumar doesn't refute the condemnation, nor does the story's narration offer any lines of defense or explanation on Shukumar's behalf. Lahiri's decision to end the passage with Shukumar's silence shows that he agrees with Shoba's mother's assertion: because he was absent from the death, he has no right to bring up the hard subject in conversation, nor, by extension, to perform any display of grief over the dead child.

☛ "It's like India," Shoba sad, watching him tend his makeshift candelabra. "Sometimes the current disappears for hours at a stretch. I once had to attend an entire rice ceremony in the dark. The baby just cried and cried. It must have been so hot."

Their baby never cried, Shukumar considered. Their baby would never have a rice ceremony, even though Shoba had already made the guest list [...].

"Are you hot?" he asked her.

Related Characters: Shukumar, Shoba (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

Shoba and Shukumar have just sat down for dinner as the lights go out on the first night of the blackout. Shoba compares the situation to her childhood visits to India, when the generator would go out regularly. Shukumar contrasts Shoba's memory of the baby in India to the memories they will never be able to have: "Their baby would never have a rice ceremony," he observes. Shukumar only thinks this response, though—he does not convey this comparison to Shoba. Shukumar's silence shows how reluctant he is to bring up the baby to Shoba, underscoring the extent to which his guilt inhibits him from grieving openly. It also shows how compromised the couple's ability to communicate has become since the baby's death—Shukumar can only think these things silently, to himself, and cannot voice them aloud to Shoba.

☛ "I remember during power failures at my grandmother's house, we all had to say something," Shoba continued. [...] "A little poem. A joke. A fact about the world. For some reason my relatives always wanted me to tell them the names of my friends in America. I don't know why the information was so interesting to them."

Related Characters: Shoba (speaker), Shukumar

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

Shoba and Shukumar sit at the dinner table during the first night of the blackout, and Shoba mentions a game she used to play with her family during blackouts in India. Her description of the game emphasizes its casual and inconsequential quality. Shoba explains that participants need offer only "a little poem. A joke. A fact about the world," in order to make Shukumar more enthusiastic and willing to participate. Shoba continues to emphasize the triviality of the game, noting that she couldn't fathom "why the information" she would offer when she played the game as a child "was so interesting" to her relatives.

By the end of the story, the reader will see that the game is part of Shoba's plan to reveal her decision to leave

Shukumar. Not wanting to communicate the news to Shukumar's face (for fear of the vulnerability and awkwardness this would entail), Shoba orchestrates a game of confessions that will lead up to the final, difficult admission that she plans to move out. If Shoba can make the game seem unthreatening and trivial, it's more likely that Shukumar will agree to play along, and Shoba's agenda will go according to plan.

☝ Something happened when the house was dark. They were able to talk to each other again. The third night after supper they'd sat together on the sofa, and once it was dark he began kissing her awkwardly on her forehead and her face, and though it was dark he closed his eyes, and knew that she did, too. The fourth night they walked carefully upstairs, to bed, [...] making love with a desperation they had forgotten. [...] As he made love to her he wondered what he would say to her the next night, and what she would say, the thought of it exciting him.

Related Characters: Shoba, Shukumar

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

Shukumar reflects on the blackout nights he and Shoba have spent playing Shoba's confessional game. He emphasizes the importance of the dark as a necessary feature of the game's success. When Shukumar suggests that "something happen[s] when the house [is] dark," he reveals that he and Shoba wouldn't be able to open up to each other were the lights to be turned on. In darkness, they don't feel as vulnerable. The darkness of the blackout supplies an artificial air of safety that allows Shoba and Shukumar to take communicative risks they wouldn't be willing to take were the lights to be on.

Shukumar emphasizes the transformative power of darkness when he goes into detail about the acts of intimacy the couple has engaged in that week, noting that on the third night "he began kissing her awkwardly on her forehead and face, and thought it was dark he closed his eyes, and knew that she did too." Shukumar and Shoba's decision to close their eyes further demonstrates the limitations of the couple's renewed intimacy. Talking in the safety of darkness is one thing; but to engage in acts of

physical intimacy, the couple needs yet another layer of safe darkness, so they both close their eyes.

On the fourth night, they take intimacy a step further, "making love with a desperation they had forgotten." Still, even as he makes love to her, Shukumar's mind is absorbed in thoughts of the game. Shukumar's preoccupation with the game demonstrates the highly structured nature of the couple's renewed intimacy. They cannot vulnerably engage in acts of intimacy or communication of their own free will—they can only do so within the safe constraints of Shoba's game.

☝ She wouldn't look at him, but he stared at her. It was obvious that she'd rehearsed the lines. All this time she'd been looking for an apartment, testing the water pressure, asking a Realtor if heat and hot water were included in the rent. It sickened Shukumar, knowing that she had spent these past evenings preparing for a life without him. He was relieved and yet he was sickened. This was what she'd been trying to tell him for the past four evenings. This was the point of her game.

Related Characters: Shoba, Shukumar

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

On the fifth morning of the blackout, Shukumar receives a second letter from the electric company notifying them that the power line has been repaired ahead of schedule and there will be no more outages. The couple still dines together with the lights out, but at the end of the meal Shoba tells Shukumar she has something to say, and she needs for him to see her face when she tells him.

Shoba reveals that she's found an apartment and will be moving out. Shukumar realizes that preparing him for this difficult information "was the point of her game" all along. Just as she'd been "testing the water pressure" at apartments, she was "testing" how vulnerable Shukumar could become in her presence, in order to assure his readiness to receive her unfortunate news.

Shoba's grand reveal—and Shukumar's shocked response—is an ironic reversal of the story's development. Before Shoba tells Shukumar of her plans to read him, Shukumar—and the reader, too—might have thought that

Shoba's game was an attempt to pick up the pieces of her broken marriage and altered personality. Until this point, it had seemed as though Shoba had lost all desire to plan and prepare for her life. Her ultimate reveal shows that this is not the case—Shoba regained her ability to plan well before the story takes place, as evident in her decision to find an apartment, and her method of priming Shukumar for the news with a strategic game.

Shukumar's conflicted response—"relieved and yet sickened"—is significant, as well. Shukumar feels "relieved" on learning that Shoba isn't pregnant (she'd also said she needed to see his face when she told him this more joyous news so many months before), but he feels "sickened" knowing that he's been duped. As conflicted as Shukumar might feel towards the prospect of repairing his marriage with Shoba, he is upset that she orchestrated the confessional game instead of simply telling him her plans to his face.

But, unbeknownst to Shoba, Shukumar had arrived at the hospital early and held his dead son. He had been keeping this knowledge from Shoba "because he still loved her then," and he knew it would devastate Shoba. But Shukumar is sickened by Shoba's premeditated game, and he is hurt that she tricked him into going along with it. He retaliates by proving to Shoba that there are limits to planning. Shoba thought she could control exactly how she would tell Shukumar her plans to leave him, but there was no way she could prepare for Shukumar's response to the news.

Shukumar responds in the cruelest way imaginable—revealing the one secret Shoba wished never to know—in order to dismantle Shoba's well-wrought confessional game, and on the larger scale, her perceived ability to plan for all of life's surprises. This passage also marks the first time he's been able to talk about the baby out loud. Though cruel, Shukumar's confession allows him to confront his guilt and opens the possibility of working through his grief with Shoba.

☛ These were the things he had told her. He had held his son, who had known life only within her, against his chest in a darkened room in an unknown wing of the hospital. He had held him until a nurse knocked and took him away, and he promised himself that day that he would never tell Shoba, because he still loved her then, and it was the one thing in her life that she had wanted to be a surprise.

☛ Shoba had turned the lights off. She came back to the table and sat down, and after a moment Shukumar joined her. They wept together, for the things they now knew.

Related Characters: Shoba, Shukumar

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

Shukumar feels betrayed that Shoba planned to leave him from the beginning of their confessional game, —and that the game was all part of her plan to tell him the news—so he retaliates by sharing a cruel secret of his own. Until this point, Shoba had believed that the baby's sex was a mystery to them both, and that they might seek solace in not knowing what they would never have. As Shukumar explains, the baby's sex "was the one thing in her life that she had wanted to be a surprise." Shoba struggles to cope with her baby's death, and with her inability to anticipate the tragedy. Planning has let her down in a horribly devastating way, so she decides to accept her baby's sex as a mystery in attempt to come to terms with the unpredictability of life.

Related Characters: Shukumar, Shoba

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

These are the story's final lines. Shoba and Shukumar have delivered their final confessions to one another—Shoba, that she is moving out, and Shukumar, that he held their dead son. They've finally allowed themselves to be vulnerable with one another, and they sit at the dinner table, weeping "for the things they now kn[o]w." Lahiri ends the story on an ambiguous note. The couple has finally managed to tell the truth to one another—they have communicated what grieves them most, outside the safe confines of the confessional. Shukumar has finally worked past his guilt and spoken of the baby out loud.

One of Lahiri's primary themes in "A Temporary Matter" is the difficulty of communication, and it seems promising that the couple has finally managed to communicate openly and vulnerably with each other—perhaps their final actions will allow them to begin to rebuild their relationship. Still,

Shoba's decision to turn off the lights seems like a regressive action: it pushes the couple back from their vulnerable state and into the safe, invulnerability of darkness. Throughout the story, Shoba's and Shukumar's seemingly open communication has been counteracted by the fact that they can only get through to one another in the safety of darkness. Darkness acts as a security blanket for the couple, ridding them of the vulnerability and awkwardness of confronting another person directly.

Although it seems like a communicative improvement that the couple has finally confessed to each other's face, Shoba's decision to turn off the lights suggests that the couple remains unable to face each other's truths. Because they remain unable or unwilling to communicate outside of the relative safety of darkness, the future of their marriage remains uncertain.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

A TEMPORARY MATTER

Married couple Shoba and Shukumar receive a notice from their electric company that their power will be disconnected for five days from 8:00-9:00 P.M. in order to repair a power line damaged in a snow storm. Shoba remarks, "It's good of them to warn us. [...] But they should do this sort of thing during the day." Shukumar responds, "When I'm here, you mean." Shoba has just come from the gym, and Shukumar observes that she looks like "the type of woman she'd once claimed she would never resemble."

As Shukumar tends to the **dinner** he's making, he reflects on the state of his marriage: "The more Shoba stayed out, the more she began putting in extra hours at work and taking on additional projects, the more he wanted to stay in, not even leaving to get the mail, or to buy fruit or wine at the stores by the trolley shop." The couple has grown increasingly distant over the past several months.

Shukumar recalls the event that caused the (previously happy) couple's alienation: six months prior, Shukumar attended an academic conference in Baltimore. Shoba was pregnant with their child, but her due date was three weeks away, so she insisted that Shukumar go and make connections. While Shukumar was away, Shoba went into early labor and had to have an emergency C-section. The baby was stillborn before Shukumar was able to get back.

Lahiri introduces the temporary blackout immediately, alerting the reader to its symbolic importance. Lahiri also hints at the tension that exists in Shoba and Shukumar's marriage. When Shoba comments that the electric company should really "do this sort of thing during the day," she reveals how little Shoba thinks about Shukumar's life—she only cares if the blackout will affect her own schedule. Shukumar's observation that Shoba looks like "the type of woman she'd once claimed she would never resemble" denotes that Shoba has undergone a change that is reflected in her physical appearance, though the reader has yet to find out about Shoba and Shukumar's past or the exact state of their marriage.



Shoba's inner conflict is hinted at through her disheveled appearance, while Shukumar's is suggested through his inability to leave the house, even for tedious tasks like getting the mail or running to the corner store. The reader will come to understand that Shukumar's isolation is a symptom of his grief, but for now Lahiri only hints at this. In addition to the couple's individual changes, Lahiri also reveals that Shoba and Shukumar have begun to avoid one another at all costs, insinuating again that not all is well in their marriage. In light of this implied marital strife, the detail that Shukumar can't even bring himself "to buy fruit or wine," and the fact that he reflects on this while preparing dinner, establishes food as a symbolic parallel to the couple's lack of intimacy.



The reader learns the root of the couple's grief and discontent: their baby was stillborn, and Shukumar was away from Shoba when it happened. Lahiri illustrates how a physical, literal separation (Shukumar's absence from the child's birth) has caused a metaphorical distance to develop between Shoba and Shukumar. This first initial separation causes the couple to become communicatively distant with one another. This memory also introduces the guilt that will feature prominently in Shukumar's grieving process, as he believes that his absence denies him a right to grief.



Shukumar regrets the moment he chose to leave, replaying the moment in his mind in great detail: “Each time he thought of that moment, the last moment he saw Shoba pregnant, it was the cab he remembered most.” Shukumar remembers comparing the largeness of the cab to the station wagon he and Shoba might’ve needed to transport their children to lessons and appointments. He imagines Shoba handing juice boxes to their children in the backseat. These hypothetical visions of he and Shoba with the children in the station wagon were Shukumar’s first “welcomed” images of the joys parenthood could bring.

Shukumar’s thoughts fast-forward to the present. He reveals that “these days, Shoba was always gone by the time [he] woke up.” The couple has begun to avoid each other since the baby’s death. They spend most of their time working—Shoba as a proofreader and Shukumar as a doctoral student writing his dissertation. Shukumar admits that he “envie[s] the specificity of [Shoba’s] task, so unlike the elusive nature of his.” Since the baby’s death, he’s lost all interest in writing and teaching. He and Shoba are no longer intimate, and he feels uncomfortable when she is home on the weekends, “when she sat for hours on the sofa with her colored pencils and her files, so that he feared that putting on a record in his own house would be rude.” Shukumar used to think that he and Shoba “would get through it all somehow.”

Shukumar and Shoba’s power is turned off at 8 P.M. as planned. During this first night of the **blackout**, Shukumar cooks **dinner**. Shoba suggests that they light candles. While Shoba is upstairs changing, Shukumar walks downstairs to brush his teeth. He finds a spare toothbrush that Shoba had bought in case of a last minute guest and remarks, “It was typical of her. She was the type to prepare for surprises, good and bad.” Shukumar is “astonished” by Shoba’s preparedness, especially compared to his mother, who had “fallen to pieces” after the death of his father: “When [Shoba] used to do the shopping, the pantry was always stocked [...] There were endless boxes of pasta [...], zippered sacks of basmati rice, whole sides of lambs and goats [...]” None of the food went to waste because the couple was always entertaining friends. But since the baby’s death, Shoba has given up on cooking and planning ahead, and Shukumar has taken on the responsibility of cooking.

Shukumar clearly feels guilty and regretful about being away from Shoba during their tragedy; Lahiri’s choice to begin Shukumar’s memory with “Each time” shows how he fixates specifically on his moment of departure. The fact that Shukumar remembers the cab emphasizes the exact moment he chose to put physical distance between Shoba and himself, the cab figuring as both the literal and figurative vehicle through which Shukumar departed from Shoba and their unborn child. Shukumar’s nostalgic image of Shoba with the children in the station wagon represents his failed, hypothetical plans and shows how strongly he grieves for the hopes that now never will be realized.



Lahiri illustrates the extent of Shoba and Shukumar’s physical and communicative distance. Whenever possible, Shoba and Shukumar avoid being in the same space. When the weekend comes and Shoba cannot use the excuse of having a project to attend to, she absorbs herself in work on the couch, placing a physical and emotional wall between her husband and herself, and making him feel that it would be “rude” to impose on her in even such an indirect way as “putting on a record.” The nature of Shoba’s proofreading work is very prescribed and exact, demonstrating the extent to which Shoba relies on planning and precision to organize and cope with her life. Shukumar’s admission that he initially thought the couple “would get through it all somehow” suggests that he might still have hope that his marriage is not damaged beyond repair, though Lahiri remains vague about Shukumar’s true hopes and thoughts on the matter.



Lahiri further underscores the extent to which Shoba has used planning and predictability to give her life meaning. Shoba relied on her ability to “prepare for surprises, good and bad,” as evidenced by the spare toothbrush Shukumar stumbles upon, reserved for a hypothetical, last-minute guest. Shoba’s obsessive food shopping further demonstrates this, and it touches on the symbolic weight of food, cooking, and shared meals as a representation of the couple’s lost intimacy and hope for the future. The planning of food and meals used to be such a central part of Shoba and Shukumar’s marriage. The fact that Shoba hasn’t shopped since the baby’s death suggests that she has given up on planning, but also that she has given up on an important aspect of her marriage. On a related note, Shukumar’s decision to take on Shoba’s abandoned task of cooking suggests that he is more willing to continue working on the relationship.



Shukumar reveals that the couple hasn't **eaten** together in months—in fact, they've avoided one another since the baby's death. Shukumar has taken to working in what would have been the baby's nursery. He describes how he rid the room of all traces of the dead child before bringing Shoba back from the hospital, "scraping off the rabbits and ducks with a spatula." Still, the room "haunt[s] Shoba," and Shukumar converts the room into his office, "partly because it was a place Shoba avoid[s]."

The couple's choice to no longer eat with one another shows how distant they've become. Shukumar associates food and shared meals with happier times and intimacy; the fact that the couple no longer dines together suggests that they are no longer intimate. Shukumar's memory of ridding the nursery of all traces of the baby before Shoba returned from the hospital demonstrates a lack of vulnerable communication between the couple. Shukumar would rather deny the baby's existence than work through the tragedy with Shoba. Shukumar's refusal to discuss the baby with Shoba also speaks to his worry that he isn't "allowed" to mourn the baby, as he was not present for the baby's death.



Shukumar returns to the kitchen to finish **dinner** and search for candles. The only candles he can find are birthday candles, left over from a surprise party Shoba had thrown for him last May. He reflects back on happier times, recalling how there had been "one hundred and twenty people crammed into the house." Shoba, five months pregnant, sipped only ginger ale, and the couple had held hands all night.

Shukumar's nostalgic memories show that he longs for what he and Shoba used to have. His sentimentality suggests that he might hold out hope that his marriage can be fixed, and it also provides context for Shukumar's eventual enthusiasm to participate in Shoba's game of confessions. Shukumar puts a lot of detail into dinner preparations the first night of the blackout, and the reader may connect this to his hope that a shared dinner might encourage the couple to finally open up to one another.



But since the baby's death, "their only guest had been Shoba's mother," who came from Arizona to help the couple cope with their grief. Shukumar recalls that he'd once mentioned the baby during her visit, to which she replied only "But you weren't even there."

Lahiri provides the detail that Shoba and Shukumar have all but stopped entertaining guests as evidence of the couple's overwhelming grief. Shoba's mother's comment to Shukumar, "But you weren't even there," puts an end to Shukumar's attempt to discuss the dead baby. Her comment posits that Shukumar's absence from the birth negates his right to talk about the baby, and Shukumar's responsive silence affirms that he agrees with this position.



Shukumar's thoughts return to the present. He finds it "odd" that the only candles he can find are birthday candles, since Shoba would typically be prepared for "such an ordinary emergency" like a **blackout**. As Shukumar sets the table he sentimentally recalls that the couple used to "just reach for each other foolishly, more eager to make love than to eat." Shukumar places "two embroidered place mats, a wedding gift from an uncle in Lucknow," as well as "the wineglasses they usually saved for guests." He places the birthday candles in the middle of the table, and switches the radio to a jazz station.

Again, Shukumar emphasizes how prepared Shoba was before the death of the child, adding additional depth and significance to her comparative lack of preparedness after the baby's death. His memory of the couple's former intimacy reinforces how shockingly distant the couple has become since the baby's death. Shukumar's elaborate table setting shows that he is putting tremendous effort into his meal with Shoba, suggesting either that he is uncomfortable at the prospect of having to face Shoba, or that he is optimistic about the possibilities for renewed intimacy that the meal presents.



Shoba, freshly showered, joins Shukumar at the table. “What’s all this?” She asks. The lights go off and the couple sits down to **dine**. Shoba remarks that the **blackout** reminds her of India, when “Sometimes the current disappears for hours at a stretch.” She recalls a rice ceremony she once attended that was held completely in the dark. “The baby just cried and cried,” says Shoba. Shukumar thinks, “Their baby had never cried,” but does not share this connection with Shoba.

The beginning of the blackout corresponds with the moment the couple sits down to eat. The electric company specified in the beginning of the story that the blackout would be “temporary,” thus the blackout’s correspondence with dinner hints that Shoba and Shukumar’s renewed dinners might, too, be temporary. Throughout the story, darkness serves as an alternate reality that allows the couple to be honest with each other in a way they couldn’t with the lights on. The blackout denotes the couple’s entrance into this safe, comfortable realm. Shoba’s anecdote causes Shukumar to think about their stillborn baby, but he doesn’t voice these thoughts aloud. Shukumar’s silence reinforces his guilt, and also highlights the couple’s inability to communicate vulnerably with each other.



Shoba says that the **food** is delicious. She recalls that during **power failures** at her grandmother’s house in India, they played a game where they “all had to say something [...] A little poem. A joke. A fact about the world.” Shoba suggests that the couple plays that game now. Shukumar agrees.

In light of food’s symbolic weight for the couple, Shoba’s compliment suggests an attempt at rekindling intimacy. Shoba introduces her “game,” purposely trivializing it in order to make Shukumar more willing to participate. By downplaying the seriousness of the bits of information they will trade back and forth, Shoba lowers the stakes and makes Shukumar feel at ease.



The couple begins to trade secrets back and forth. Shoba admits that when the couple first started dating she had looked through Shukumar’s address book to see if he’d written in her name already (and he had not). Shukumar shares that the first time they went out to **dinner**, he’d forgotten to tip the waiter. He defends his folly: “By the end of the meal I had a funny feeling that I might marry you,” he tells Shoba. “It must have distracted me.”

Shoba and Shukumar open up to each other, but only within the constraints of Shoba’s game, and in the safe, comforting anonymity of darkness. Lahiri leaves the reader uncertain as to whether the game will lead to the couple’s reconciliation. On one hand, the couple’s openness seems to suggest an attempt at renewed communication; on the other hand, it’s clear that they aren’t comfortable speaking to each other candidly outside the context of Shoba’s game.



Shoba comes home early the next night and the couple is able to **eat** with the lights on. After dinner, when the **power shuts off**, they sit outside together, as it is unusually warm out. They bring candles and a flashlight with them and resume their game. Shoba tells Shukumar that on a night when his mother was visiting and Shoba said she had to stay late at work, she’d actually gone out for drinks with her friend Gillian. Shukumar responds that he cheated on his Oriental Civilization exam in college. They sit outside until the lights turn back on.

Because Shoba and Shukumar’s secrets become more detailed and damning, and the reader may be inclined to believe that the couple’s relationship is improving, and that the distance between them growing gradually smaller. Still, though, Lahiri reinforces that the couple only opens up when the lights are off. When the hour of the blackout ends, the return to their respective uncommunicative solitudes. The couple needs the safety and anonymity of darkness in order to feel confident enough to confide. It’s true that they are opening up to each other in ways they haven’t since the baby’s death, but the fact that they need darkness to do so shows the limitations of their communication.



After the second night of secrets, Shukumar thinks about the significance of their game: “Somehow, without saying anything, it had turned into [...] an exchange of confessions—the little ways they’d hurt or disappointed each other, and themselves.” While Shoba is at work, Shukumar eagerly mulls over what he will tell her that night.

Shukumar realizes that the game is more than the mere exchange of jokes and stories Shoba first presented it to be. The couple uses the game not simply to pass the time, but to confess to the ways they’d “hurt or disappointed each other, and themselves.” The couple uses the game to communicate with one another, offering the possibility that their relationship can be saved. Still, Shukumar’s excitement to confess to Shoba that night shows that this renewed communication is limited to the constraints of the game; that is, Shoba and Shukumar aren’t suddenly willing to interact with one another in all facets of life, only during the hour of temporary darkness.



On the third night, Shukumar tells Shoba that he actually returned a sweater vest she’d bought him for their third wedding anniversary—he hadn’t lost it, as he had originally told Shoba. On the fourth night, he tells her about a photo of a woman in a magazine he’d clipped out and carried with him and lusted after for a week. Shoba tells Shukumar that she’d once allowed him to talk to the chairman of his college department with “a dab of **pâté** on his chin” because she had been mad at him. On the next night, she tells him that “she’d never liked the one poem he’d ever published in his life [...] that she’d found the poem sentimental.”

The first of this next set of confessions seem somewhat shallow. They are petty but not terribly inconsequential. In the shallowness of these confessions, Lahiri reminds the reader that Shoba and Shukumar aren’t exactly bearing their souls to each other—they’re only spilling secrets on a very superficial level, akin to a game of truth-or-dare one would play at a slumber party. Still, Shoba’s final confession—that she never liked Shukumar’s only published poem—is brutal and more meaningful. The couple’s confessions oscillate between the shallow (Shoba’s petty decision not to tell Shukumar about the dab of pâté) and the deeply hurtful (Shoba’s dismissing Shukumar’s poem as “sentimental”). In this oscillation, Lahiri seems to toy with the reader, leaving them to wonder whether the couple’s secrets will grow into something meaningful (the restoration of the marriage, for example) or whether they will remain shallow and consequential only within the confines of the game.



Shukumar reflects on the significance of the **dark**: “Something happened when the house was dark. They were able to talk to each other again.” What’s more, the darkness encourages the couple to engage in acts of physical intimacy. After the third night, Shukumar recalls how they’d kissed on the couch. On the fourth night, they’d “[made] love with a desperation they had forgotten.”

Shukumar sees that the darkness allows the couple to talk freely. Without the safety of darkness, they remain distant and aloof with one another. Lahiri balances moments of closeness (the couple’s acts of renewed physical intimacy) with their sustained inability to engage in these acts with the lights on. Through this contrast, she seems to caution the reader against feeling too optimistic that the couple will move beyond their grief and alienation to repair their broken marriage.



On the fifth night, Shukumar finds a second note from the electric company informing them that the line has been repaired ahead of schedule: there will be no more **blackouts**. He is disappointed, and everything seems a little duller: “He didn’t feel like **cooking** anymore. It wasn’t the same, he thought, knowing the lights wouldn’t go out.” When Shoba comes home that night, Shukumar remarks, “I suppose this is the end of our game,” as he watches her read the electric company’s updated notice. She says they can still light candles, if he wants.

Shukumar pours wine and puts on a Thelonious Monk album that Shoba likes. They **eat** in **darkness**, though Shoba “[doesn’t] thank him or compliment him” After they finish eating, Shoba blows out the candles and stands up to turn on the lights. She sits back down at the table. “Shouldn’t we keep the lights off?” asks Shukumar. Shoba responds, “I want you to see my face when I tell you this.” With a jolt of panic, Shukumar recalls that these are the exact words Shoba had used when she told him she was pregnant. Shukumar had been happy then, but now, “he didn’t want her to be pregnant again. He didn’t want to have to pretend to be happy.”

But Shoba is not pregnant this time. Instead, she tells Shukumar that she plans to leave him: “I’ve been looking for an apartment and I’ve found one,” she says. She explains that she “need[s] some time alone.” Shoba cannot look at Shukumar, “but he stare[s] at her” as he realizes that “she’d rehearsed the lines.” He finally sees Shoba’s intentions behind her confessional game: “He was relieved and yet he was sickened. This was what she’d been trying to tell him for the past four evenings. This was the point of her game.”

“A Temporary Matter” is framed by notes from the power company. Lahiri does this in order to formally illustrate the very temporary aspect of Shoba and Shukumar’s renewed communication. Like the blackout, their dinners together will last only through the week. Shukumar seems to sense this: when he reads the updated notice, he becomes depressed and loses interest in cooking, knowing that their meals won’t be the same when the lights no longer go out. Shoba detects Shukumar’s disappointment, and humors him by suggesting that they still light candles.



Shukumar’s decision to pour wine and put on music that Shoba enjoys suggests that he hasn’t entirely given up on repairing his relationship. Shukumar’s desire to eat in darkness (despite the end of the blackout) shows that he wants to continue to communicate with Shoba, but also that he realizes they likely will not continue to communicate when they have to face the other person in the vulnerable environment of a well-lit room. Shukumar’s panic when Shoba says that she has something to say with the lights on (as he remembers that Shoba used these exact words to announce her earlier pregnancy) reveals how guarded and fragile he remains about their relationship. Shukumar’s comment that “he didn’t want to have to pretend to be happy,” he reveals either that he doesn’t want their marriage to take this next step, or that their marriage is still so broken that it could not survive the added stress and weight of a baby.



Shukumar’s discovery allows the reader to see the shallowness and falseness of the confessional game. Shoba’s ironic reveal aligns the reader with Shukumar: like Shukumar, up until this point the reader might have been cautiously optimistic that the game was Shoba’s attempt at reconciliation.



Shocked and sickened, Shukumar responds to Shoba's announcement with one last secret: the sex of their baby. After the baby's death, Shoba had remarked, "at least they'd been spared that knowledge." Not knowing the baby's sex had "enabled her to seek refuge in a mystery." She assumed that it was a mystery to Shukumar, too, but it was not: he'd arrived at the hospital in time to hold their baby. "Our baby was a boy," he tells Shoba. "His skin was more red than brown. He had black hair on his head. He weighed almost five pounds. His fingers were curled shut, just like yours in the night." Shoba's face becomes "contorted with sorrow." Shukumar had "promised himself that day that he would never tell Shoba, because he still loved her then, and it was the one thing in her life that she had wanted to be a secret."

As Shukumar clears the table, Shoba stands up and turns the **lights back off**. They both sit back down at the table, "[weeping] together, for the things they now knew."

Shukumar's cruel admission betrays how hurt he is by Shoba's desire to move out. Shukumar's use of precise, evocative details to describe the dead baby emphasize this cruelty. When Shukumar states that he withheld the baby's sex from Shoba "because he still loved her then," he insinuates that he no longer loves Shoba. Shukumar's statement adds to the artificiality of the couple's confessional game. Shukumar seemed enthusiastic to grow closer to Shoba, but only within the false confines of the game—he doesn't love her once the lights go on. Besides this, Shukumar's retaliating confession shows that his hurt (or, his vulnerability) counteracts his guilt. When, caught off guard by Shoba's news, he tells her the baby's sex, he's finally able to address the tragedy out loud. The shock of Shoba's confession pulls them both out of their structured game, and they appear vulnerably before each other.



The reader realizes that, like the blackout, the couple's renewed communication was only "a temporary matter." Shoba's decision to turn the lights off reveals that, even after their confessional game, the couple is not ready to face one another directly. They cannot continue to confront their grief honestly and vulnerably with one another, evidenced by the fact that they can only weep "together" when the lights are off. The fact that Shoba and Shukumar have finally revealed their deepest, most vulnerable secrets to one another points in an optimistic direction, but their ultimate decision to turn away from one another and weep in darkness shows that they remain uncomfortable with vulnerability. Lahiri's ending leaves the reader uncertain as to whether Shoba and Shukumar have improved their communication enough to move beyond their grief, together, with the lights on.





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