A Temporary Matter

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The notice informed them that it was a temporary matter: for five days their electricity would be cut off for one hour, beginning at eight P.M. A line had gone down in the last snowstorm, and the repairmen were going to take advantage of the milder evenings to set it right. The work would affect only the houses on the quiet tree-lined street, within walking distance of a row of brick-faced stores and a trolley stop, where Shoba and Shukumar had lived for three years.

"It's good of them to warn us," Shoba conceded after reading the notice aloud, more for her own benefit than Shukumar's. She let the strap of her leather satchel, plump with files, slip from her shoulders, and left it in the hallway as she walked into the kitchen. 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.

She'd come from the gym. Her cranberry lipstick was visible only on the outer reaches of her mouth, and her eyeliner had left charcoal patches beneath her lower lashes. She used to look this way sometimes, Shukumar thought, on mornings after a party or a night at a bar, when she'd been too lazy to wash her face, too eager to collapse into his arms. She dropped a sheaf of mail on the table without a glance. Her eyes were still fixed on the notice in her other hand. "But they should do this sort of thing during the day."

"When I'm here, you mean," Shukumar said. He put a glass lid on a pot of lamb, adjusting it so only the slightest bit of steam could escape. Since January he'd been working at home, trying to complete the final chapters of his dissertation on agrarian revolts in India. "When do the repairs start?"

"It says March nineteenth. Is today the nineteenth?" Shoba walked over to the framed corkboard that hung on the wall by the fridge, bare except for a calendar of William Morris wallpaper patterns. She looked at it as if for the first time, studying the wallpaper pattern carefully on the top half before allowing her eyes to fall to the numbered grid on the bottom. A friend had sent the calendar in the mail as a Christmas gift, even though Shoba and Shukumar hadn't celebrated Christmas that year.

"Today then," Shoba announced. "You have a dentist appointment next Friday, by the way."

He ran his tongue over the tops of his teeth; he'd forgotten to brush them that morning. It wasn't the first time. 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.

Six months ago, in September, Shukumar was at an academic conference in Baltimore when Shoba went into labor, three weeks before her due date. He hadn't wanted to go to the conference, but she had insisted; it was important to make contacts, and he would be entering the job market next year. She told him that she had his number at the hotel, and a copy of his schedule and flight numbers, and she had arranged with her friend Gillian for a ride to the hospital in the event of an emergency. When the cab pulled away that morning for the airport, Shoba stood waving good-bye in her robe, with one arm resting on the mound of her belly as if it were a perfectly natural part of her body.

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. It was cavernous compared to their own car. Although Shukumar was six feet tall, with hands too big ever to rest comfortably in the pockets of his jeans, he felt dwarfed in the back seat. 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, adding to his anxiety that he was still a student at thirty-five. But that early autumn morning, the trees still heavy with bronze leaves, he welcomed the image for the first time.

A member of the staff had found him somehow among the identical convention rooms and handed him a stiff square of stationery. It was only a telephone number, but Shukumar knew it was the hospital. When he returned to Boston it was over. The baby had been born dead. Shoba was lying on a bed, asleep, in a private room so small there was barely enough space to stand beside her, in a wing of the hospital they hadn't been to on the tour for expectant parents. Her placenta had weakened and she'd had a cesarean, though not quickly enough. The doctor explained that these things happen. He smiled in the kindest way it was possible to smile at people known only professionally. Shoba would be back on her feet in a few weeks. There was nothing to indicate that she would not be able to have children in the future.

These days Shoba was always gone by the time Shukumar woke up. He would open his eyes and see the long black hairs she shed on her pillow and think of her, dressed, sipping her third cup of coffee already, in her office downtown, where she searched for typographical errors in textbooks and marked them, in a code she had once explained to him, with an assortment of colored pencils. She would do the same for his dissertation, she promised, when it was ready. He envied her the specificity of her task, so unlike the elusive nature of his. He was a mediocre student who had a facility for absorbing details without curiosity. Until September he had been diligent if not dedicated, summarizing chapters, outlining arguments on pads of yellow lined paper. But now he would lie in their bed until he grew bored, gazing at his side of the closet which Shoba always left partly open, at the row of the tweed jackets and corduroy trousers he would not have to choose from to teach his classes that semester. After the baby died it was too late to withdraw from his teaching duties. But his adviser had arranged things so that he had the spring semester to himself. Shukumar was in his sixth year of graduate school. "That and the summer should give you a good push," his adviser had said. "You should be able to wrap things up by next September."

But nothing was pushing Shukumar. Instead he thought of how he and Shoba had become experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible. He thought of how he no longer looked forward to 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 might be rude. He thought of how long it had been since she looked into his eyes and smiled, or whispered his name on those rare occasions they still reached for each other's bodies before sleeping.

In the beginning he had believed that it would pass, that he and Shoba would get through it all somehow. She was only thirty-three. She was strong, on her feet again. But it wasn't a consolation. It was often nearly lunchtime when Shukumar would finally pull himself out of bed and head downstairs to the coffeepot, pouring out the extra bit Shoba left for him, along with an empty mug, on the countertop.

Shukumar gathered onion skins in his hands and let them drop into the garbage pail, on top of the ribbons of fat he'd trimmed from the lamb. He ran the water in the sink, soaking the knife and the cutting board, and rubbed a lemon half along his fingertips to get rid of the garlic smell, a trick he'd learned from Shoba. It was seven-thirty. Through the window he saw the sky, like soft black pitch. Uneven banks of snow still lined the sidewalks, though it was warm enough for people to walk about without hats or gloves. Nearly three feet had fallen in the last storm, so that for a week people had to walk single file, in narrow trenches. For a week that was Shukumar's excuse for not leaving the house. But now the trenches were widening, and water drained steadily into grates in the pavement.

"The lamb won't be done by eight," Shukumar said. "We may have to eat in the dark."

“We can light candles,” Shoba suggested. She unclipped her hair, coiled neatly at her nape during the days, and pried the sneakers from her feet without untying them. “I’m going to shower before the lights go,” she said, heading for the staircase. “I’ll be down.”

Shukumar moved her satchel and her sneakers to the side of the fridge. She wasn’t this way before. She used to put her coat on a hanger, her sneakers in the closet, and she paid bills as soon as they came. But now she treated the house as if it were a hotel. The fact that the yellow chintz armchair in the living room clashed with the blue-and-maroon Turkish carpet no longer bothered her. On the enclosed porch at the back of the house, a crisp white bag still sat on the wicker chaise, filled with lace she had once planned to turn into curtains.

While Shoba showered, Shukumar went into the downstairs bathroom and found a new toothbrush in its box beneath the sink. The cheap, stiff bristles hurt his gums, and he spit some blood into the basin. The spare brush was one of many stored in a metal basket. Shoba had bought them once when they were on sale, in the event that a visitor decided, at the last minute, to spend the night.

It was typical of her. She was the type to prepare for surprises, good and bad. If she found a skirt or a purse she liked she bought two. She kept the bonuses from her job in a separate bank account in her name. It hadn’t bothered him. His own mother had fallen to pieces when his father died, abandoning the house he grew up in and moving back to Calcutta, leaving Shukumar to settle it all. He liked that Shoba was different. 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, depending on whether they were cooking Italian or Indian. There were endless boxes of pasta in all shapes and colors, zippered sacks of basmati rice, whole sides of lambs and goats from the Muslim butchers at Haymarket, chopped up and frozen in endless plastic bags. Every other Saturday they wound through the maze of stalls Shukumar eventually knew by heart. He watched in disbelief as she bought more food, trailing behind her with canvas bags as she pushed through the crowd, arguing under the morning sun with boys too young to shave but already missing teeth, who twisted up brown paper bags of artichokes, plums, gingerroot, and yams, and dropped them on their scales, and tossed them to Shoba one by one. She didn’t mind being jostled, even when she was pregnant. She was tall, and broad-shouldered, with hips that her obstetrician assured her were made for childbearing. During the drive back home, as the car curved along the Charles, they invariably marveled at how much food they’d bought.

It never went to waste. When friends dropped by, Shoba would throw together meals that appeared to have taken half a day to prepare, from things she had frozen and bottled, not cheap things in tins but peppers she had marinated herself with rosemary, and chutneys that she cooked on Sundays, stirring boiling pots of tomatoes and prunes. 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. Shukumar had been going through their supplies steadily, preparing meals for the two of them, measuring out cupfuls of rice, defrosting bags of meat day after day. He combed through her cookbooks every afternoon, following her penciled instructions to use two teaspoons of ground coriander seeds instead of one, or red lentils instead of yellow. Each of the recipes was dated, telling the first time they had eaten the dish together. April 2, cauliflower with fennel. January 14, chicken with almonds and sultanas. He had no memory of eating those meals, and yet there they were, recorded in her neat proofreader’s hand. Shukumar enjoyed cooking now. It was the one thing that made him feel productive. If it weren’t for him, he knew, Shoba would eat a bowl of cereal for her dinner.

Tonight, with no lights, they would have to eat together. For months now they’d served themselves from the stove, and he’d taken his plate into his study, letting the meal grow cold on his desk before shoving it into his mouth without pause, while Shoba took her plate to the living room and watched game shows, or proofread files with her arsenal of colored pencils at hand.

At some point in the evening she visited him. When he heard her approach he would put away his novel and begin typing sentences. She would rest her hands on his shoulders and stare with him into the blue glow of the computer screen. “Don’t work too hard,” she would say after a minute or two, and head off to bed. It was the

one time in the day she sought him out, and yet he'd come to dread it. 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 trumpets and drums. By the end of August there was a cherry crib under the window, a white changing table with mint-green knobs, and a rocking chair with checkered cushions. Shukumar had disassembled it all before bringing Shoba back from the hospital, scraping off the rabbits and ducks with a spatula. For some reason the room did not haunt him the way it haunted Shoba. In January, when he stopped working at his carrel in the library, he set up his desk there deliberately, partly because the room soothed him, and partly because it was a place Shoba avoided.

Shukumar returned to the kitchen and began to open drawers. He tried to locate a candle among the scissors, the eggbeaters and whisks, the mortar and pestle she'd bought in a bazaar in Calcutta, and used to pound garlic cloves and cardamom pods, back when she used to cook. He found a flashlight, but no batteries, and a half-empty box of birthday candles. Shoba had thrown him a surprise birthday party last May. One hundred and twenty people had crammed into the house — all the friends and the friends of friends they now systematically avoided. Bottles of vinho verde had nested in a bed of ice in the bathtub. Shoba was in her fifth month, drinking ginger ale from a martini glass. She had made a vanilla cream cake with custard and spun sugar. All night she kept Shukumar's long fingers linked with hers as they walked among the guests at the party.

Since September their only guest had been Shoba's mother. She came from Arizona and stayed with them for two months after Shoba returned from the hospital. She cooked dinner every night, drove herself to the supermarket, washed their clothes, put them away. She was a religious woman. She set up a small shrine, a framed picture of a lavender-faced goddess and a plate of marigold petals, on the bedside table in the guest room, and prayed twice a day for healthy grandchildren in the future. She was polite to Shukumar without being friendly. She folded his sweaters with an expertise she had learned from her job in a department store. She replaced a missing button on his winter coat and knit him a beige and brown scarf, presenting it to him without the least bit of ceremony, as if he had only dropped it and hadn't noticed. 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."

It struck him as odd that there were no real candles in the house. That Shoba hadn't prepared for such an ordinary emergency. He looked now for something to put the birthday candles in and settled on the soil of a potted ivy that normally sat on the windowsill over the sink. Even though the plant was inches from the tap, the soil was so dry that he had to water it first before the candles would stand straight. He pushed aside the things on the kitchen table, the piles of mail, the unread library books. He remembered their first meals there, when they were so thrilled to be married, to be living together in the same house at last, that they would just reach for each other foolishly, more eager to make love than to eat. He put down two embroidered place mats, a wedding gift from an uncle in Lucknow, and set out the plates and wineglasses they usually saved for guests. He put the ivy in the middle, the white-edged, star-shaped leaves girded by ten little candles. He switched on the digital clock radio and tuned it to a jazz station.

"What's all this?" Shoba said when she came downstairs. Her hair was wrapped in a thick white towel. She undid the towel and draped it over a chair, allowing her hair, damp and dark, to fall across her back. As she walked absently toward the stove she took out a few tangles with her fingers. She wore a clean pair of sweatpants, a T-shirt, an old flannel robe. Her stomach was flat again, her waist narrow before the flare of her hips, the belt of the robe tied in a floppy knot.

It was nearly eight. Shukumar put the rice on the table and the lentils from the night before into the microwave oven, punching the numbers on the timer.

"You made *rogan josh*," Shoba observed, looking through the glass lid at the bright paprika stew.

Shukumar took out a piece of lamb, pinching it quickly between his fingers so as not to scald himself. He prodded a larger piece with a serving spoon to make sure the meat slipped easily from the bone. “It’s ready,” he announced.

The microwave had just beeped when the lights went out, and the music disappeared.

“Perfect timing,” Shoba said.

“All I could find were birthday candles.” He lit up the ivy, keeping the rest of the candles and a book of matches by his plate.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said, running a finger along the stem of her wineglass. “It looks lovely.”

In the dimness, he knew how she sat, a bit forward in her chair, ankles crossed against the lowest rung, left elbow on the table. During his search for the candles, Shukumar had found a bottle of wine in a crate he had thought was empty. He clamped the bottle between his knees while he turned in the corkscrew. He worried about spilling, and so he picked up the glasses and held them close to his lap while he filled them. They served themselves, stirring the rice with their forks, squinting as they extracted bay leaves and cloves from the stew. Every few minutes Shukumar lit a few more birthday candles and drove them into the soil of the pot.

“It’s like India,” Shoba said, 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 had never cried, Shukumar considered. Their baby would never have a rice ceremony, even though Shoba had already made the guest list, and decided on which of her three brothers she was going to ask to feed the child its first taste of solid food, at six months if it was a boy, seven if it was a girl.

“Are you hot?” he asked her. He pushed the blazing ivy pot to the other end of the table, closer to the piles of books and mail, making it even more difficult for them to see each other. He was suddenly irritated that he couldn’t go upstairs and sit in front of the computer.

“No. It’s delicious,” she said, tapping her plate with her fork. “It really is.”

He refilled the wine in her glass. She thanked him.

They weren’t like this before. Now he had to struggle to say something that interested her, something that made her look up from her plate, or from her proofreading files. Eventually he gave up trying to amuse her. He learned not to mind the silences.

“I remember during power failures at my grandmother’s house, we all had to say something,” Shoba continued. He could barely see her face, but from her tone he knew her eyes were narrowed, as if trying to focus on a distant object. It was a habit of hers.

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. 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. The last time I saw my aunt she asked after four girls I went to elementary school with in Tucson. I barely remember them now.”

Shukumar hadn't spent as much time in India as Shoba had. His parents, who settled in New Hampshire, used to go back without him. The first time he'd gone as an infant he'd nearly died of amoebic dysentery. His father, a nervous type, was afraid to take him again, in case something were to happen, and left him with his aunt and uncle in Concord. As a teenager he preferred sailing camp or scooping ice cream during the summers to going to Calcutta. It wasn't until after his father died, in his last year of college, that the country began to interest him, and he studied its history from course books as if it were any other subject. He wished now that he had his own childhood story of India.

"Let's do that," she said suddenly.

"Do what?"

"Say something to each other in the dark."

"Like what? I don't know any jokes."

"No, no jokes." She thought for a minute. "How about telling each other something we've never told before."

"I used to play this game in high school," Shukumar recalled. "When I got drunk."

"You're thinking of truth or dare. This is different. Okay, I'll start." She took a sip of wine. "The first time I was alone in your apartment, I looked in your address book to see if you'd written me in. I think we'd known each other two weeks."

"Where was I?"

"You went to answer the telephone in the other room. It was your mother, and I figured it would be a long call. I wanted to know if you'd promoted me from the margins of your newspaper."

"Had I?"

"No. But I didn't give up on you. Now it's your turn."

He couldn't think of anything, but Shoba was waiting for him to speak. She hadn't appeared so determined in months. What was there left to say to her? He thought back to their first meeting, four years earlier at a lecture hall in Cambridge, where a group of Bengali poets were giving a recital. They'd ended up side by side, on folding wooden chairs. Shukumar was soon bored; he was unable to decipher the literary diction, and couldn't join the rest of the audience as they sighed and nodded solemnly after certain phrases. Peering at the newspaper folded in his lap, he studied the temperatures of cities around the world. Ninety-one degrees in Singapore yesterday, fifty-one in Stockholm. When he turned his head to the left, he saw a woman next to him making a grocery list on the back of a folder, and was startled to find that she was beautiful.

"Okay" he said, remembering. "The first time we went out to dinner, to the Portuguese place, I forgot to tip the waiter. I went back the next morning, found out his name, left money with the manager."

"You went all the way back to Somerville just to tip a waiter?"

"I took a cab."

"Why did you forget to tip the waiter?"

The birthday candles had burned out, but he pictured her face clearly in the dark, the wide tilting eyes, the full grape-toned lips, the fall at age two from her high chair still visible as a comma on her chin. Each day, Shukumar noticed, her beauty, which had once overwhelmed him, seemed to fade. The cosmetics that had seemed superfluous were necessary now, not to improve her but to define her somehow.

"By the end of the meal I had a funny feeling that I might marry you," he said, admitting it to himself as well as to her for the first time. "It must have distracted me."

The next night Shoba came home earlier than usual. There was lamb left over from the evening before, and Shukumar heated it up so that they were able to eat by seven. He'd gone out that day, through the melting snow, and bought a packet of taper candles from the corner store, and batteries to fit the flashlight. He had the candles ready on the countertop, standing in brass holders shaped like lotuses, but they ate under the glow of the copper-shaded ceiling lamp that hung over the table.

When they had finished eating, Shukumar was surprised to see that Shoba was stacking her plate on top of his, and then carrying them over to the sink. He had assumed she would retreat to the living room, behind her barricade of files.

"Don't worry about the dishes," he said, taking them from her hands.

"It seems silly not to," she replied, pouring a drop of detergent onto a sponge. "It's nearly eight o'clock."

His heart quickened. All day Shukumar had looked forward to the lights going out. He thought about what Shoba had said the night before, about looking in his address book. It felt good to remember her as she was then, how bold yet nervous she'd been when they first met, how hopeful. They stood side by side at the sink, their reflections fitting together in the frame of the window. It made him shy, the way he felt the first time they stood together in a mirror. He couldn't recall the last time they'd been photographed. They had stopped attending parties, went nowhere together. The film in his camera still contained pictures of Shoba, in the yard, when she was pregnant.

After finishing the dishes, they leaned against the counter, drying their hands on either end of a towel. At eight o'clock the house went black. Shukumar lit the wicks of the candles, impressed by their long, steady flames.

"Let's sit outside," Shoba said. "I think it's warm still."

They each took a candle and sat down on the steps. It seemed strange to be sitting outside with patches of snow still on the ground. But everyone was out of their houses tonight, the air fresh enough to make people restless. Screen doors opened and closed. A small parade of neighbors passed by with flashlights.

"We're going to the bookstore to browse," a silver-haired man called out. He was walking with his wife, a thin woman in a windbreaker, and holding a dog on a leash. They were the Bradfords, and they had tucked a sympathy card into Shoba and Shukumar's mailbox back in September. "I hear they've got their power."

"They'd better," Shukumar said. "Or you'll be browsing in the dark."

The woman laughed, slipping her arm through the crook of her husband's elbow. "Want to join us?"

"No thanks," Shoba and Shukumar called out together. It surprised Shukumar that his words matched hers.

He wondered what Shoba would tell him in the dark. The worst possibilities had already run through his head. That she'd had an affair. That she didn't respect him for being thirty-five and still a student. That she blamed him for being in Baltimore the way her mother did. But he knew those things weren't true. She'd been faithful, as had he. She believed in him. It was she who had insisted he go to Baltimore. What didn't they know about each other? He knew she curled her fingers tightly when she slept, that her body twitched during bad dreams. He knew it was honeydew she favored over cantaloupe. He knew that when they returned from the hospital the first thing she did when she walked into the house was pick out objects of theirs and toss them into a pile in the hallway: books from the shelves, plants from the windowsills, paintings from walls, photos from tables, pots and pans that hung from the hooks over the stove. Shukumar had stepped out of her way, watching as she moved methodically from room to room. When she was satisfied, she stood there staring at the pile she'd made, her lips drawn back in such distaste that Shukumar had thought she would spit. Then she'd started to cry.

He began to feel cold as he sat there on the steps. He felt that he needed her to talk first, in order to reciprocate.

"That time when your mother came to visit us," she said finally. "When I said one night that I had to stay late at work, I went out with Gillian and had a martini."

He looked at her profile, the slender nose, the slightly masculine set of her jaw. He remembered that night well; eating with his mother, tired from teaching two classes back to back, wishing Shoba were there to say more of the right things because he came up with only the wrong ones. It had been twelve years since his father had died, and his mother had come to spend two weeks with him and Shoba, so they could honor his father's memory together. Each night his mother cooked something his father had liked, but she was too upset to eat the dishes herself, and her eyes would well up as Shoba stroked her hand. "It's so touching," Shoba had said to him at the time. Now he pictured Shoba with Gillian, in a bar with striped velvet sofas, the one they used to go to after the movies, making sure she got her extra olive, asking Gillian for a cigarette. He imagined her complaining, and Gillian sympathizing about visits from in-laws. It was Gillian who had driven Shoba to the hospital.

"Your turn," she said, stopping his thoughts.

At the end of their street Shukumar heard sounds of a drill and the electricians shouting over it. He looked at the darkened facades of the houses lining the street. Candles glowed in the windows of one. In spite of the warmth, smoke rose from the chimney.

"I cheated on my Oriental Civilization exam in college," he said. "It was my last semester, my last set of exams. My father had died a few months before. I could see the blue book of the guy next to me. He was an American guy, a maniac. He knew Urdu and Sanskrit. I couldn't remember if the verse we had to identify was an example of a *ghazal* or not. I looked at his answer and copied it down."

It had happened over fifteen years ago. He felt relief now, having told her.

She turned to him, looking not at his face, but at his shoes — old moccasins he wore as if they were slippers, the leather at the back permanently flattened. He wondered if it bothered her, what he'd said. She took his hand and pressed it. "You didn't have to tell me why you did it," she said, moving closer to him.

They sat together until nine o'clock, when the lights came on. They heard some people across the street clapping from their porch, and televisions being turned on. The Bradfords walked back down the street, eating ice-cream cones and waving. Shoba and Shukumar waved back. Then they stood up, his hand still in hers, and went inside.

Somehow, without saying anything, it had turned into this. Into an exchange of confessions — the little ways they'd hurt or disappointed each other, and themselves. The following day Shukumar thought for hours about what to say to her. He was torn between admitting that he once ripped out a photo of a woman in one of the fashion magazines she used to subscribe to and carried it in his books for a week, or saying that he really hadn't lost the sweater-vest she bought him for their third wedding anniversary but had exchanged it for cash at Filene's, and that he had gotten drunk alone in the middle of the day at a hotel bar. For their first anniversary, Shoba had cooked a ten-course dinner just for him. The vest depressed him. "My wife gave me a sweater-vest for our anniversary," he complained to the bartender, his head heavy with cognac. "What do you expect?" the bartender had replied. "You're married."

As for the picture of the woman, he didn't know why he'd ripped it out. She wasn't as pretty as Shoba. She wore a white sequined dress, and had a sullen face and lean, mannish legs. Her bare arms were raised, her fists around her head, as if she were about to punch herself in the ears. It was an advertisement for stockings. Shoba had been pregnant at the time, her stomach suddenly immense, to the point where Shukumar no longer wanted to touch her. The first time he saw the picture he was lying in bed next to her, watching her as she read. When he noticed the magazine in the recycling pile he found the woman and tore out the page as carefully as he could. For about a week he allowed himself a glimpse each day. He felt an intense desire for the woman, but it was a desire that turned to disgust after a minute or two. It was the closest he'd come to infidelity.

He told Shoba about the sweater on the third night, the picture on the fourth. She said nothing as he spoke, expressed no protest or reproach. She simply listened, and then she took his hand, pressing it as she had before. On the third night, she told him that once after a lecture they'd attended, she let him speak to the chairman of his department without telling him that he had a dab of pâté on his chin. She'd been irritated with him for some reason, and so she'd let him go on and on, about securing his fellowship for the following semester, without putting a finger to her own chin as a signal. The fourth night, she said that she never liked the one poem he'd ever published in his life, in a literary magazine in Utah. He'd written the poem after meeting Shoba. She added that she found the poem sentimental.

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, feeling together for the final step with their feet before the landing, and making love with a desperation they had forgotten. She wept without sound, and whispered his name, and traced his eyebrows with her finger in the dark. 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. "Hold me," he said, "hold me in your arms," By the time the lights came back on downstairs, they'd fallen asleep.

The morning of the fifth night Shukumar found another notice from the electric company in the mailbox. The line had been repaired ahead of schedule, it said. He was disappointed. He had planned on making shrimp *malai* for Shoba, but when he arrived at the store he didn't feel like cooking anymore. It wasn't the same, he thought, knowing that the lights wouldn't go out. In the store the shrimp looked gray and thin. The coconut milk tin was dusty and overpriced. Still, he bought them, along with a beeswax candle and two bottles of wine.

She came home at seven-thirty. "I suppose this is the end of our game," he said when he saw her reading the notice.

She looked at him. "You can still light candles if you want." She hadn't been to the gym tonight. She wore a suit beneath the raincoat. Her makeup had been retouched recently.

When she went upstairs to change, Shukumar poured himself some wine and put on a record, a Thelonius Monk album he knew she liked.

When she came downstairs they ate together. She didn't thank him or compliment him. They simply ate in a darkened room, in the glow of a beeswax candle. They had survived a difficult time. They finished off the shrimp. They finished off the first bottle of wine and moved on to the second. They sat together until the candle had nearly burned away. She shifted in her chair, and Shukumar thought that she was about to say something. But instead she blew out the candle, stood up, turned on the light switch, and sat down again.

"Shouldn't we keep the lights off?" Shukumar asked. She set her plate aside and clasped her hands on the table. "I want you to see my face when I tell you this," she said gently.

His heart began to pound. The day she told him she was pregnant, she had used the very same words, saying them in the same gentle way, turning off the basketball game he'd been watching on television. He hadn't been prepared then. Now he was.

Only he didn't want her to be pregnant again. He didn't want to have to pretend to be happy.

"I've been looking for an apartment and I've found one," she said, narrowing her eyes on something, it seemed, behind his left shoulder. It was nobody's fault, she continued. They'd been through enough. She needed some time alone. She had money saved up for a security deposit. The apartment was on Beacon Hill, so she could walk to work. She had signed the lease that night before coming home.

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.

Now it was his turn to speak. There was something he'd sworn he would never tell her, and for six months he had done his best to block it from his mind. Before the ultrasound she had asked the doctor not to tell her the sex of their child, and Shukumar had agreed. She had wanted it to be a surprise.

Later, those few times they talked about what had happened, she said at least they'd been spared that knowledge. In a way she almost took pride in her decision, for it enabled her to seek refuge in a mystery. He knew that she assumed it was a mystery for him, too. He'd arrived too late from Baltimore — when it was all over and she was lying on the hospital bed. But he hadn't. He'd arrived early enough to see their baby, and to hold him before they cremated him. At first he had recoiled at the suggestion, but the doctor said holding the baby might help him with the process of grieving. Shoba was asleep. The baby had been cleaned off, his bulbous lids shut tight to the world.

"Our baby was a boy," he said. "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 looked at him now, her face contorted with sorrow. He had cheated on a college exam, ripped a picture of a woman out of a magazine. He had returned a sweater and got drunk in the middle of the day instead. 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.

Shukumar stood up and stacked his plate on top of hers. He carried the plates to the sink, but instead of running the tap he looked out the window. Outside the evening was still warm, and the Bradfords were walking arm in arm. As he watched the couple the room went dark, and he spun around. 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.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. “A Temporary Matter.” *Interpreter of Maladies*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1991. 1-21.

Introduction to Jhumpa Lahiri

YOB - 1967, London - to Bengali parents - raised in the United States

Acclaimed contemporary author known for her exploration of the immigrant experience, particularly focusing on the Indian-American community.

As an author, she often delves into themes of identity, displacement, emotional depth, keen observation of the human condition, and cultural assimilation.

Her debut collection of short stories, Interpreter of Maladies (1999), won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

She grappled with familial bonds, generational conflicts, the nuances of the immigrant experience, questions of identity, belonging to a certain geocultural space, and the complexities of cultural inheritance.

About the book collection:

[Interpreter of Maladies is Jhumpa Lahiri's debut collection of short stories, published in 1999. The book quickly gained critical acclaim, winning the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2000. This collection consists of nine stories, each exploring the lives of Indian and Indian-American characters who are caught between two worlds: their inherited cultural traditions and the realities of life in a new country.

The stories in Interpreter of Maladies are marked by their emotional depth, subtlety, and precise prose. Lahiri delves into themes of displacement, loneliness, identity, and the complex dynamics of family relationships. The characters often struggle with feelings of alienation and the challenges of bridging cultural divides, whether between generations or between the immigrant and native-born experiences.

Overall, Interpreter of Maladies is celebrated for its insightful portrayal of the immigrant experience and its ability to convey universal human emotions with grace and precision. It remains a significant work in contemporary literature, offering readers a nuanced view of the lives of those navigating the complexities of cultural identity.]

Themes in Lahiri's works:

Jhumpa Lahiri's work is renowned for its exploration of themes related to identity, displacement, and the immigrant experience. Central to her writing is the tension between cultural heritage and the realities of life in a new environment. Her characters often grapple with feelings of alienation, caught between the traditions of their homeland and the expectations of their adopted country.

One of Lahiri's recurring themes is the concept of belonging. Her stories frequently portray characters who feel a sense of rootlessness, whether they are first-generation immigrants trying to establish a new life or their children, who struggle to reconcile the cultural values of their parents with their own identities. This often leads to a deep exploration of family dynamics and generational conflict, where the older and younger generations have differing views on tradition, identity, and assimilation.

Another significant theme in Lahiri's work is communication and isolation. Her characters often face

difficulties in expressing their emotions or bridging cultural and generational gaps, leading to misunderstandings and emotional distance. This theme is closely tied to her exploration of loneliness and yearning—for connection, for a sense of home, or for a lost or unattainable past.

Lahiri also delves into the idea of cultural dislocation, where characters feel estranged in both their homeland and their adopted country, never fully belonging to either. This dislocation often extends to a sense of loss—of language, culture, or identity—that permeates her narratives.

Through these themes, Lahiri captures the complexities of the human experience, particularly within the context of migration and the search for identity. Her writing is marked by its emotional depth, nuanced character development, and the subtlety with which she portrays the inner lives of her characters.

Lahiri's Writing Style:

Jhumpa Lahiri's writing style is characterized by its elegance, clarity, and emotional subtlety. Her prose is often described as spare and unadorned, yet it is rich in detail and evocative in its simplicity. Lahiri has a remarkable ability to convey deep emotions and complex inner lives through straightforward language, making her work accessible yet profoundly moving.

One of the hallmarks of her style is her economy of words. Lahiri avoids elaborate descriptions and flowery language, instead opting for concise, precise sentences that carry significant emotional weight. This minimalist approach allows her to focus on the internal experiences of her characters, often revealing their emotions and conflicts through small, everyday moments.

Lahiri also has a keen eye for cultural and sensory details, which she uses to create vivid settings and atmospheres. Whether describing the bustling streets of Calcutta or the quiet suburbs of New England, she captures the essence of a place with just a few carefully chosen details. These settings often reflect the inner states of her characters, adding layers of meaning to her narratives.

Another notable aspect of Lahiri's style is her use of subtlety and restraint. She often leaves much unsaid, allowing the silence or the spaces between words to carry as much meaning as the dialogue itself. This creates a sense of intimacy and introspection, drawing readers into the quiet struggles and emotional complexities of her characters.

Lahiri's narrative voice is often empathetic and observant, offering a deep understanding of her characters' experiences without judgment. This allows readers to engage with her characters on a personal level, even when their cultural background or life circumstances are different from their own.

Overall, Jhumpa Lahiri's writing style is distinguished by its grace, subtlety, and the powerful way it captures the nuances of human emotion and experience.

What is "A Temporary Matter" about?

"A Temporary Matter" revolves around a married couple, Shoba and Shukumar, who are grappling with the emotional aftermath of a stillbirth that has created a rift between them.

The narrative unfolds over five days when the electricity in their neighborhood is scheduled to be turned off for an hour each evening. During these power outages, the couple begins to have dinner together by candlelight, something they haven't done in a long time. They start a game where they reveal secrets to each other—secrets they had never shared before.

As the days pass, the secrets become more significant, and the reader learns about the depth of their grief and the ways they've drifted apart. Shoba confesses to small betrayals and hidden thoughts, while Shukumar reveals something much more significant: he tells Shoba that he held their stillborn son and saw what the baby looked like, something he never shared with her before. This revelation brings the story to a poignant conclusion.

The story poignantly captures themes of communication, grief, and the fragility of relationships, highlighting how the couple's inability to connect has led to their emotional estrangement. The temporary darkness during the power outage serves as a metaphor for their temporary attempts to reconnect and the eventual unraveling of their marriage.

Themes:

"A Temporary Matter" by Jhumpa Lahiri explores several profound themes centered around relationships, communication, and grief. Here are the key themes:

Communication and Miscommunication: The story highlights the breakdown of communication between the married couple, Shoba and Shukumar. Their inability to express their feelings and communicate openly leads to a growing emotional distance between them. The temporary power outages serve as a catalyst for them to reconnect, but also expose the depth of their disconnection.

Grief and Loss: Grief is a central theme in the story, as Shoba and Shukumar struggle to cope with the loss of their stillborn child. Their different ways of dealing with grief create a chasm between them, and the story delves into the impact of this shared tragedy on their marriage.

Intimacy and Distance: The couple's physical and emotional intimacy has eroded over time, and the story examines how distance can grow in a relationship despite living together. The temporary power outages provide a rare opportunity for them to be physically close and share personal secrets, but this newfound intimacy is fleeting.

Secrets and Revelations: Both Shoba and Shukumar harbor secrets that they reveal to each other during the nightly blackouts. These confessions, which initially seem to bring them closer, ultimately lead to a devastating revelation that further drives them apart. The theme of secrets emphasizes the idea that truth can both heal and harm relationships.

The Temporary Nature of Life and Relationships: The title itself, "A Temporary Matter," suggests the impermanence of situations, emotions, and even relationships. The story reflects on how temporary circumstances, like the power outage, can lead to significant changes in people’s lives. It also underscores the idea that some aspects of life, including love and happiness, may be fleeting.

Overall, the story is a poignant exploration of the complexities of marriage, the ways in which people cope with loss, and the fragile nature of human connections.

Symbols:

The Power Outages: The recurring power outages are a central symbol in the story. They represent both a literal and metaphorical darkness that has settled over Shoba and Shukumar's relationship. The darkness allows them to hide their true feelings, but it also becomes a space where they can confront their pain and secrets. The temporary nature of the outages mirrors the temporary reprieve they experience in their troubled marriage.

The Candlelight: During the power outages, Shoba and Shukumar use candles to light their home. The soft, flickering light of the candles symbolizes the fragile and fleeting moments of connection between them. It also contrasts with the harshness of their reality, creating an atmosphere of intimacy that is only temporary.

The Stillborn Child: Although not a physical symbol in the story, the memory of their stillborn child serves as a symbolic presence that haunts Shoba and Shukumar. The loss of the child represents the end of their hopes and dreams for their future together. It also symbolizes the emotional distance and unresolved grief that pervades their marriage.

Food and Cooking: Food plays a significant symbolic role in the story. Shoba's cooking, which once represented care and love, becomes a ritual of avoidance after the tragedy. The meals they share during the power outages symbolize their attempts to reconnect and find comfort in each other, but also highlight the emotional distance that remains.

The Confessions: The nightly confessions that Shoba and Shukumar make to each other symbolize their last attempts at honesty and vulnerability. These confessions reveal the secrets and hidden emotions that have been festering in their relationship. However, the final revelation ultimately symbolizes the irrevocable breach in their marriage.

The House: The house itself, once a place of warmth and life, becomes a symbol of isolation and emptiness. The unkempt state of the house reflects the deterioration of their relationship and the neglect of their emotional well-being. It serves as a physical reminder of the life they once envisioned but can no longer have.

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.

Recurring Themes in Jhumpa Lahiri's Work:

Immigrant Experience & Cultural Dislocation: Explores the challenges of adapting to a new culture while maintaining ties to the homeland; Focuses on identity conflicts, generational differences, and the sense of being "in-between."

Communication Barriers & Emotional Distance: Characters often struggle to express their true feelings, leading to misunderstandings and isolation; Silence and unspoken words are as significant as dialogue.

Marital Strife & Familial Relationships: Examines the complexities, disappointments, and quiet tragedies within marriages and families; Focuses on intimacy lost, unmet expectations, and the gradual erosion of connection.

Loss, Grief, and Loneliness: Characters frequently grapple with profound loss (death of loved ones, loss of homeland, loss of connection); Explores the isolating nature of grief and the difficulty of moving forward.

Assimilation vs. Preservation of Heritage: Depicts the tension between adopting new customs and preserving cultural traditions; Highlights the sacrifices and compromises involved in cultural integration.

The Weight of Secrets & The Past: Unspoken truths, hidden emotions, and unresolved past events significantly shape characters' present lives and relationships

Everyday Life & Mundane Details: Uses precise, realistic details of daily routines and domestic settings to reveal deeper emotional currents and character states.

Isolation & Alienation: Characters often feel isolated, even within relationships or communities, due to cultural differences, personal grief, or emotional barriers.

Themes in "A Temporary Matter" (Illustrating the Above):

Profound Grief and Unprocessed Loss: The central trauma is the stillbirth of Shoba and Shukumar's child, a loss they have not healthily mourned together; This loss hangs over every aspect of their lives and relationship, creating a chasm.

Communication Breakdown & Emotional Distance: Before the outages: Shoba and Shukumar live parallel lives in the same house, barely speaking, avoiding each other and their pain.

Mechanism: The power outages ("a temporary matter") physically force proximity and darkness, creating an artificial space for communication they couldn't achieve in the light of day.

Marital Erosion and Lost Intimacy: The story meticulously details the routines that replace intimacy (eating separately, occupying different rooms); The temporary intimacy fostered by the darkness only highlights how broken the marriage truly is in the "light" of reality.

Secrets, Confession, and Catharsis: The darkness of the power outages provides a safe space for

confessing secrets and grievances they've withheld; These confessions, while cathartic in the moment, ultimately reveal irreparable damage and lead to a final, painful separation.

The Irony of the "Temporary": The title is deeply ironic. The power outage is temporary, but the revelations and the final decision to separate are permanent; The grief and the damage to their marriage are not temporary matters at all.

The Power of Setting & Mundane Details: Lahiri uses the domestic setting (the house, the kitchen, the unused nursery) and mundane details (grocery lists, bills, cooking) to reflect the characters' emotional states and the decay of their relationship; The darkness becomes a crucial symbolic setting enabling temporary truth-telling.

Isolation Within Marriage: Despite living together, Shoba and Shukumar are profoundly isolated in their individual grief and resentment; The story poignantly depicts how two people can be utterly alone while sharing the same physical space.

Cultural Nuance (Subtler here, but present): While less explicit than in other stories, the characters' names and some subtle cultural references place them within an Indian-American context. The focus, however, is on universal marital grief and communication issues, showing how Lahiri's themes transcend specific cultural boundaries while sometimes being rooted in them. "A Temporary Matter" powerfully encapsulates Lahiri's core themes: the devastating impact of unprocessed grief and loss, the corrosive effect of silence and failed communication within intimate relationships (especially marriage), the weight of secrets, and the poignant loneliness that can exist even in shared spaces. It masterfully uses a seemingly minor, temporary event to expose permanent, life-altering fractures.

Guidelines for Shoba's character

Jhumpa Lahiri's poignant short story "A Temporary Matter" dissects the slow, agonizing death of a marriage after a profound loss. At the heart of this dissection lies Shoba, a character whose meticulously constructed facade of competence and control ultimately shatters, revealing a landscape of profound grief and irrevocable alienation. A critical analysis of Shoba reveals her as a complex figure embodying the destructive power of unprocessed grief, the fallacy of coping mechanisms, and the tragic transformation of intimacy into unbearable exposure.

1. The Facade of Competence and Control:

Pre-Loss Persona: Lahiri initially presents Shoba through Shukumar's memory as vibrant, organized, and deeply engaged with life and her marriage. She was the planner, the cook, the social catalyst – a woman radiating capability and warmth. Her meticulousness (labeling spices, organizing coupons) was a positive expression of care and order.

Post-Loss Armor: After the stillbirth, this meticulousness transforms into a suffocating armor. Shoba throws herself into work with relentless fervor, staying late, taking on extra projects. Her domestic routine becomes robotic: cooking elaborate meals only to freeze them individually, maintaining a spotless house. This hyper-competence is her primary coping mechanism – a desperate attempt to impose order on the chaotic void left by their loss and to avoid the terrifying abyss of her grief. She controls her environment precisely because she feels utterly out of control internally.

2. Emotional Withdrawal and the Geography of Grief:

Physical and Emotional Distance: Shoba's most defining characteristic post-loss is her profound withdrawal. She retreats physically (sleeping in the spare room, working late) and emotionally. Conversations with Shukumar are functional, devoid of intimacy. She avoids touch and shared vulnerability. Her grief is a solitary journey, walled off even from her partner who shares the same loss.

The Failure of Shared Suffering: Crucially, Lahiri shows that shared trauma does not necessarily foster connection. Shoba's grief isolates her further. She cannot find solace in Shukumar; perhaps his grief mirrors her own too painfully, or perhaps his different way of grieving (passivity, stagnation) feels like a betrayal or an impossible burden. Her withdrawal is a form of self-preservation, albeit one that fatally wounds the marriage.

3. The Power Outage: Illumination Through Darkness:

Cracks in the Armor: The enforced intimacy of the darkness during the power outages acts as a catalyst. Temporarily freed from the visual cues of their strained daily existence and the performative aspects of Shoba's control (cooking, busyness), a space opens. The ritual of confession begins.

A Temporary Reconnection? Initially, the confessions seem to bridge the gap. Shoba participates actively, her laughter returning, her engagement palpable. She shares seemingly minor secrets, creating a fragile sense of intimacy and shared history. This period suggests a longing within her for connection, a flicker of the woman she was. However, this reconnection is profoundly fragile and built on a foundation already eroded.

4. The Final Confession: Truth as Destruction:

The Devastating Revelation: Shoba's ultimate confession – that she has secured her own apartment and is leaving – is the culmination of her character arc and the story's tragic core. It's delivered not as a spontaneous outpouring of pain, but as a calculated, final truth in the ritual after the power has returned. The timing is crucial: she chooses the light, not the dark, for this revelation, signifying a finality and a deliberate end to pretense.

Control Reasserted, Intimacy Destroyed: This act is the ultimate assertion of the control she has sought throughout her grief. She has planned her exit meticulously, paralleling her frozen meals and organized home. However, it's control wielded as a weapon of severance. The intimacy fostered in the

darkness is revealed to be just that – temporary, a fleeting illusion shattered by the harsh light of her decision. Her confession isn't a bid for understanding or reconciliation; it's an announcement of termination. She uses the vulnerability Shukumar offered (his confession about holding their son) not to connect, but to underscore the impossibility of their continued union.

Critical Significance:

Beyond Stereotype: Shoba avoids being a simple "cold" or "heartless" woman. Lahiri crafts her with deep humanity. Her control is a response to unbearable pain, her withdrawal a defense against annihilation. We understand why she becomes who she is, even as we witness the destruction it causes.

The Tragedy of Misdirected Coping: Shoba embodies the tragic irony that coping mechanisms, while necessary for individual survival, can be lethal to relationships. Her competence and control, initially strengths, become instruments of isolation and marital death.

The Failure of Communication: Her character underscores the story's central theme: the insufficiency of words, even true ones spoken in intimacy, to heal wounds that have festered too long in silence. The confessions come too late; the distance is unbridgeable.

Grief's Asymmetry: Lahiri uses Shoba to explore how grief is experienced uniquely. Her journey diverges radically from Shukumar's, highlighting that even shared loss can lead to fundamentally incompatible paths forward. Her decision to leave is, tragically, her way forward.

Conclusion:

Shoba in "A Temporary Matter" is a masterfully rendered study in the devastating consequences of profound grief when channeled into isolation and rigid control. She is not a villain, but a deeply wounded woman whose chosen path of survival necessitates the sacrifice of her marriage. Her

meticulousness, initially a sign of care, transforms into an emotional barricade. The temporary intimacy of the darkened confessions ultimately illuminates not the path back to each other, but the irrevocable distance that has grown between them. Shoba's final act of confession – announcing her departure – is the ultimate, heartbreaking assertion of the control she craved, achieved through the final dismantling of the relationship she could no longer inhabit. She remains a haunting figure, a testament to the isolating power of grief and the tragic ways love can curdle into unbridgeable separation.

Guidelines: Shukumar’s character

Jhumpa Lahiri's "A Temporary Matter" presents Shukumar not merely as Shoba's grieving husband, but as a haunting study in passive disintegration, internalized despair, and the devastating consequences of emotional paralysis. While Shoba constructs fortresses of control, Shukumar embodies a different, yet equally destructive, response to shared tragedy: a retreat into profound inertia and observational detachment that ultimately cements the marriage's demise. A critical analysis reveals him as a complex figure defined by his passivity, his role as witness, his buried rage, and the tragic futility of his eventual, too-late vulnerability.

1. The Architecture of Passivity:

Pre-Loss Ambiguity: Unlike Shoba, whose vibrancy is recalled in detail, Shukumar's pre-loss self is sketched more vaguely. He is a graduate student, seemingly content within the structure Shoba provided (meals, social life). This initial passivity foreshadows his inability to navigate crisis. His defining characteristic becomes inaction.

Post-Loss Stagnation: After the stillbirth, Shukumar's world collapses inward. He abandons his dissertation, the symbol of his future and intellectual engagement. His days are marked by a profound lack of purpose: sleeping late, wandering the house, minimally interacting. This isn't just grief; it's a complete surrender to despair. His passivity is a form of self-erasure, a refusal to engage with a world that has inflicted unbearable pain. He becomes a ghost in his own home.

2. The Observer Trapped Within:

Narrative Lens: Crucially, Shukumar is the story's focalizing character. We experience the decaying marriage and Shoba's transformation primarily through his perception. This makes him a relentless, yet passive, observer. He notices Shoba freezing meals, working late, sleeping separately, but he interprets rather than acts. He catalogs the signs of their disintegration with a melancholic acuity but lacks the will or courage to intervene.

Internal Monologue vs. External Silence: Lahiri masterfully employs Shukumar's internal thoughts to reveal his pain, resentment, and longing. He is acutely aware of the distance, remembers their intimacy, and feels the sting of Shoba's withdrawal. However, this rich inner life starkly contrasts with his external silence. He cannot bridge the gap between thought and speech, between feeling and action. His observation becomes a prison.

3. The Slow Burn of Buried Rage and Resentment:

Not Just Sadness: Beneath Shukumar's surface passivity simmers a potent mix of anger and resentment. He resents Shoba's ability to function externally ("She was always the one to arrange things"), her withdrawal, and perhaps, implicitly, her different way of grieving which feels like abandonment. He feels judged by her competence and her distance.

Passive-Aggressive Undertones: His inaction itself becomes a form of aggression. By failing to engage, by allowing the silence to fester, by not fighting for their connection, he contributes to the marital death. His withholding of the repaired mailbox key is a small but potent act of passive aggression, symbolizing his refusal to facilitate even minor external connections for Shoba.

4. The Power Outage: Fleeting Connection and the Illusion of Catharsis:

Temporary Awakening: The darkness initially disrupts Shukumar's passivity. Freed from the visual weight of their estrangement and Shoba's performative control, he participates actively in the confession ritual. He finds a strange comfort in the anonymity of the dark, even enjoyment in the shared secrets and Shoba's laughter. This suggests a deep, buried yearning for connection and a temporary suspension of his despair.

Selective Vulnerability: However, his confessions, while revealing (the ugly sweater, the lost ring), are carefully curated. They expose past embarrassments or flaws, not the raw, present agony of their shared loss or

his current resentment. He guards his deepest wounds even in the liberating dark.

5. The Final Confession: Vulnerability as Self-Sabotage and Ultimate Isolation:

The Devastating Truth: Shukumar's final confession – that he held their son at the hospital – is his most profound act of vulnerability. It's the raw, unvarnished truth of his paternal love and grief, directly confronting the core of their trauma. He shares it after the power returns, choosing the light, perhaps hoping for a reciprocal breakthrough or absolution.

Tragic Irony and Self-Sabotage: The timing and content are devastatingly ironic. He offers his deepest pain just as Shoba reveals her planned departure. His vulnerability is met not with connection, but with confirmation of irrevocable separation. Some critics argue this confession, knowing Shoba's secret (as hinted by his earlier observation of the apartment letter), is a subconscious act of self-sabotage – forcing the final confrontation he was too passive to initiate, exposing his wound knowing it would be the last thing she heard, a final, painful imprint.

The Return to Isolation: His final act – blowing out the candles – plunges them back into darkness, symbolizing the extinguishing of their last fragile connection and his return to the isolating despair that now feels permanent. He is left utterly alone, having finally spoken his deepest truth only to have it sever the final thread.

Critical Significance:

Counterpoint to Shoba: Shukumar is the essential counter-narrative to Shoba's hyper-activity. Lahiri illustrates that grief can manifest as paralyzing stillness just as destructively as frenetic control. Their incompatible coping mechanisms doom any chance of mutual support.

The Destructive Power of Male Inaction: Shukumar embodies a specific form of tragic masculinity – one silenced by grief, unable to articulate need or

anger constructively, retreating into ineffectuality. His passivity is not benign; it actively erodes the relationship.

The Futility of Late Words: His character arc underscores the story's central theme: communication, when delayed and born of despair rather than ongoing effort, is often futile or even destructive. His most profound truth arrives too late, serving only to underscore the chasm.

The Burden of Witness: As the focalizer, Shukumar forces the reader to experience the slow, excruciating death of love and hope from the inside, making the tragedy profoundly intimate and unsettling.

Conclusion:

Shukumar in "A Temporary Matter" is a masterful portrayal of grief as an entombing force. He is not a villain, but a casualty of profound loss whose response – a retreat into observation, passivity, and buried rage – proves as fatal to his marriage as Shoba's controlling withdrawal. His eventual, searing vulnerability is not redemptive but tragically ironic, serving only to illuminate the irreparable rupture moments before it is finalized. Shukumar remains a haunting figure, emblematic of the devastating consequences when despair manifests as silence and inaction, and when the courage to speak one's deepest pain emerges only after the possibility of healing has vanished. His final isolation in the renewed darkness is the bleak culmination of a journey defined by the unbearable weight of things left unsaid and undone.