

# A temporary matter. essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

A Temporary Matter Husband and wife Shukumar and Shoba are notified that their electricity will be turned off at 8: 00PM for five evenings in a row in order to fix a power line. Shoba tells her husband this news. He looks at her, noticing that her makeup has run from her time at the gym. He reminisces about how she would look in the morning after a party in happier times. Shoba insists that the electric company should work on the lines during the day. Shukumar takes slight offense at this idea; since January, he has worked at home on his dissertation. The outages begin that evening.

Six months earlier, Shoba went into labor prematurely when Shukumar was attending a conference out of town. Shukumar remembers the station wagon cab that took him to the airport. For the first time, the images of parenthood that flashed through his mind - Shoba handing out juice boxes to their children in the back seat of their own station wagon - were welcome. While out of town, Shukumar was alerted of the labor complications, but by the time he arrived at the Boston hospital, their child had died. Lately, editor Shoba spends more time at work, leaving before Shukumar wakes and coming home late.

Shukumar had been granted more time to work on his dissertation, but he finds himself unable to work. He and his wife have become strangers, experts in avoiding one another. A half an hour before the lights are due to go out, Shukumar continues cooking their dinner while Shoba showers. Reminded of a dentist appointment, Shukumar brushes his teeth with a toothbrush purchased long ago in case of overnight guests. Shoba was always prepared for what might happen. Groceries were purchased in bulk,

Indian chutneys and marinades were prepared on the weekend, and dishes frozen for future use.

A lavish feast could be whipped up on a moment's notice. Now, Shukumar was working his way through their provisions, cooking dinner each evening just for the two of them to eat separately - Shukumar in the study that was to become the nursery and Shoba in front of the TV with her editing assignments spread out in front of her. Shukumar pretends to work when Shoba comes to visit each night, forcing herself to enter the room. Tonight, in the dark, would be the first time they ate together in months. Shukumar finds a half-empty box of birthday candles leftover from a surprise party Shoba had thrown for her husband last spring.

At the party, she held his hand all night as they chatted easily with friends they now avoid. The only visitor they'd had since their baby died was Shoba's mother, who somewhat blames Shukumar for his child's death. Shukumar sets the table with a potted ivy to hold the candles and glasses of wine. Just as the meat is ready, the house goes dark. When the power would go out while visiting relatives in India, Shoba's family would share jokes or poems. Shoba suggests they tell each other secrets in the dark. First, she confesses that when they began dating, she looked for her name in his phone book the first time she went to his apartment.

Shukumar tells Shoba that he forgot to tip the waiter on their first date. He was distracted by the thought he might marry her. The next night, Shoba comes home earlier so they can eat together before the lights go out. When they lose power, they decide to sit outside in the unseasonably warm winter

night. Shukumar wonders what Shoba will tell him since he feels they know everything about each other. Shoba shares first. When Shukumar's mother came for a visit, she lied about working late and went out for a martini with her friend Gillian instead.

Shukumar remembers the visit, his mother still in mourning for her husband twelve years after his death. Without Shoba there to say the right things, Shukumar felt awkward with his grief-stricken mother. Shukumar admits that, fifteen years ago, he cheated on an exam. His father had died only a few months earlier. Shoba takes his hand. They sit outside until the lights come on and then retreat to their home, still holding hands. Without speaking about it, their time in the dark turned into an exchange of confessions about how they had hurt or disappointed each other or themselves.

On the third night, Shukumar tells Shoba that he returned the sweater vest she had given him for their third anniversary. He exchanged it for cash and got drunk in the middle of the day. She tells him that she once let him speak to the chairman of his department with food on his chin. On the fourth night, he admits he kept a picture of a woman torn out of a magazine in his wallet while Shoba was pregnant. The desire for the unknown woman was the closest he ever came to infidelity. Shoba tells him she never liked the only poem he had ever published. Shukumar and Shoba are able to be intimate in the dark.

On the third night, they kiss and on the fourth night, they make love. The next day, they receive a notice that the power line has been repaired ahead

of schedule. It is the end of their game. Shoba suggests they still light candles and eat by their glow. After dinner, Shoba blows out the candles and opens a second bottle of wine. She turns the lights back on, telling Shukumar that she wants to see his face when she tells him her biggest secret. Before coming home that evening, she had signed the lease on her own new apartment. Shukumar is relieved but sickened.

Shoba had been preparing for a life without him and the game had been proposed so she could work up her nerve to break the news to him. It is Shukumar's turn to speak and he decides to confess something he swore he'd never tell. When she was pregnant, Shoba wanted the gender of their child to remain a surprise until birth. When the child died, she did not know if they had lost a son or daughter. Shoba took refuge in that mystery, spared of that knowledge. When Shukumar arrived at the hospital, Shoba was asleep. The doctor suggested he hold the child before it was cremated in order to begin the grieving process.

Shukumar recoiled, but then agreed. He tells Shoba that he held their son. He describes what the child looked like, how his fingers were curled just as hers curl in the night. Shukumar takes their plates to the sink, leaving Shoba alone in the living room. He watches their neighbors walk arm in arm and the lights suddenly go out. He turns to find Shoba at the light switch. They sit together and weep for their new knowledge. When Mr. Pirzada Came To Dine In the autumn of 1971, Mr. Pirzada comes to Lilia's house to dine each night. Mr. Pirzada is from Dacca, then a part of Pakistan.

He left behind his wife and seven daughters for a fellowship to study the foliage of New England. Since his fellowship provided for only a meager dorm room, he comes to Lilia's home to eat with her parents and to watch the news of the Indo-Pakistan War. Dacca had been invaded by the Pakistani army and torched and shelled. Thousands of people were tortured or killed. Although Mr. Pirzada writes a letter to his family each week, he had not heard from them in six months. Lilia is 10 years old, living with her parents near a university north of Boston.

Her parents, originally from India, miss their homeland and seek out names similar to their own in the university directory. This is how they found Mr. Pirzada. Lilia calls him "the Indian man," but her father explains that he is no longer Indian; though he is Bengali, he is also a Muslim. In 1947, after winning independence from England, the country was sliced in two. This partition put Hindus in India and Muslims in Pakistan. Lilia's father tells her that during Partition, violence erupted between Muslims and Pakistan. Lilia can't understand this. Mr.

Pirzada speaks the same language as her parents, they tell the same jokes and eat the same food. Lilia's father complains to her mother that their daughter is unaware of the current events of India and Pakistan. Lilia's mother is proud that their daughter was born in the United States and that she is an American. She is assured a safe life, access to education and endless opportunities. Her father is not pleased that she does not seem to learn about the world. When Mr. Pirzada arrives, Lilia takes his coat and is rewarded with a candy. Lilia savors the candy, storing the treats in a sandalwood box that belonged to a grandmother she never met.

She eats the confections with ceremony, enjoying one only after laying out her clothes for school the next day. Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's family eat in living room in front of the TV. Lilia, upon learning that Mr. Pirzada is not an Indian, watches him carefully. He takes out a silver pocket watch that is set 11 hours ahead - the time in Dacca. Lilia marvels that Mr. Pirzada's family was already waking up the next morning. Theirs was the ghost life, lagging behind where Mr. Pirzada really belonged. Lilia pays attention to the news broadcast, wondering if they would catch a glimpse of Mr.

Pirzada's daughters waving from their balcony. But only images of tanks and clamoring refugees fill the screen. That night, Lilia eats a piece of candy, letting it melt on her tongue while saying a prayer for Mr. Pirzada's family. She falls asleep with sugar in her mouth, afraid to wash away the prayer by brushing her teeth. At school, Lilia is assigned a presentation on the surrender at Yorktown with her friend Dora. While at the library to read about the American Revolution, Lilia's teacher Mrs. Kenyon catches her reading a book on Pakistan. She is chastised. The news from Pakistan dwindles as the reports are censored.

A death toll is announced along with only a recap of what is happening. More poets are executed and more villages set ablaze. In spite of this, Mr. Pirzada often stayed until midnight playing Scrabble, drinking tea and joking about the spelling of English words with Lilia's parents. On the other side of the world, a nation was being born. In October, Mr. Pirzada asks about the pumpkins he sees on the doorsteps of Lilia's neighbors. She tells him that it is used to scare people. He helps her carve a jack-o'-lantern while a TV reporter mentions Dacca. It appears as if India will go to war with Pakistan.

Mr. Pirzada's knife slips, leaving a deep gash in the pumpkin. The mouth is fixed so that it appears that the jack-o'-lantern is frozen in astonishment. Lilia dresses as a witch for Halloween with her friend Dora. It is the first year she is allowed to trick-or-treat unattended. Mr. Pirzada worries, asking her parents if there is any danger. Lilia's mother assures him that it is only an American custom. Lilia tells him not to worry. Outside, Dora asks Lilia why Mr. Pirzada wanted to come with them. She says his daughters are missing, but immediately regrets it, as if saying it will make it true.

Lilia corrects herself, saying that the girls are in another country and that their father misses them. When Lilia arrives home later, she finds their jack-o'-lantern has been smashed. Inside, Lilia's parents sit on the couch. Mr. Pirzada's head is in his hands. India and Pakistan are on the brink of war. The U. S. A. sides with West Pakistan, the Soviet Union with India and what will become Bangladesh. During the twelve days of the war, Lilia's mother only cooks boiled eggs and rice. They lay out a blanket for Mr. Pirzada to sleep on the couch. Lilia's parents call their relatives in Calcutta for updates.

The house rings with fear. In January, Mr. Pirzada flies home to what is left of Dacca. Dacca's new leader is released from prison and must lead its people through famine and unemployment and refugees returning from India. Lilia imagines Mr. Pirzada when gazing at her parents' now out-of-date map.

Months later, Lilia's family receives a letter from Mr. Pirzada. He is reunited with his family who were kept safe from harm by his wife's family. He thanks their family deeply for their hospitality. Lilia's mother makes a special supper that evening, but Lilia does not feel like celebrating.



She misses Mr. Pirzada. Since he left in January, she continued to eat a piece of candy in prayer for his family. But now there was no longer a need.

Eventually, she throws the rest of the candy away. Interpreter of Maladies Indian tour guide Mr. Kapasi takes American couple Mr. and Mrs. Das and their children to the Sun Temple at Konarak. Mr. Kapasi notes that Tina, the daughter, begins to complain within five minutes of being picked up at the hotel. Mr. and Mrs. Das are a young couple, perhaps not yet 30, but they have two boys - Ronny and Bobby - in addition to Tina.

They look Indian but are dressed like foreigners, wearing brightly colored clothing and sun visors. Mr. Kapasi is 46 and has silver hair and an unlined brow. He wears suits tailored to sitting long hours in a hot car. Ronny, who looks just like his father, inspects a goat near the tea stall where the travelers have stopped. Mr. Das tells Bobby to make sure his brother doesn't do anything stupid, but Bobby is too engrossed in a picture of the elephant god taped to Mr. Kapasi's glovebox to be bothered. Mr. Kapasi ensures the father that the animal is harmless and then inquires about Mr. and Mrs. Das.

They were both born in America, Mr. Das says proudly. He refers to his wife by her first name, Mina, to their daughter. Mr. Kapasi stops to observe Mrs. Das, who is serenaded with a Hindi love song by the tea seller. She doesn't understand and so doesn't react. Mr. Kapasi notices her slightly plump figure under her shirt featuring a large strawberry on her chest. The family does not act like a unit, each member lost in their own activities. A sudden rush of monkeys excites the children and Mr. Das takes pictures. Mrs. Das paints her fingernails and dismisses Tina when she insists on having her nails done too.

She then complains to her husband for not getting an air-conditioned car. When asked, Mr. Kapasi says that being a tour guide is not boring, as he works in a doctor's office the rest of the week. He works as an interpreter, translating the Gujarati spoken by patients. Mrs. Das declares the work romantic, and offers Mr. Kapasi a piece of gum. Their eyes meet in the rear-view mirror. Mrs. Das urges Mr. Kapasi to give an example of his work, and he tells them that a man came in with a specific pain in his throat - like straw - and the doctor was able to cure him based on the description.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Das insist that he holds a lot of responsibility, but Mr. Kapasi had never thought of his job as anything other than thankless, a mark of failure. Before his marriage, he dreamed of being an interpreter for diplomats as he was so skilled with languages. When his son contracted typhoid at the age of 7, he met the doctor and bartered his services as payment for the boy's treatment. The boy died, but Mr. Kapasi kept translating in order to cover the cost of the funeral, school fees, and luxuries to keep his wife from crying in her sleep.

His wife resented the job - a reminder of their loss - and denigrated his work to their friends. Mrs. Das's interest is gratifying to him. Mr. Kapasi wonders if Mr. and Mrs. Das were a bad match, as he and his wife were. Mr. Kapasi is now intoxicated by Mrs. Das. He studies her body, the strawberry patch on her shirt and the way she parts her hair. When they stop for lunch, Mr. Kapasi joins the family though he usually takes this time to have a moment for himself. Mr. Das takes a picture of his wife with Mr. Kapasi, imploring her to get closer to him. She asks for his address to send copies of the picture.

He writes it on a slip of paper torn from a magazine. He indulges in a fantasy of correspondence, each revealing their dissatisfaction with their respective spouses after trading tales of their lives. Mrs. Das drops the slip of paper into her bag. They arrive at the sun temple, a pyramid-like structure carved in the shape of a chariot sitting within a dry river. The wheels are 9 feet high and represent life. Friezes of men and women in erotic poses appear along with symbols of daily life like trading and hunting. The entire family appreciates the site, to Mr. Kapasi's delight. He watches Mrs.

Das, the first person to take an interest in him. He admires the three statues of Surya, the sun god, representing dawn, afternoon, and sunset. Mrs. Das appears next to him and asks him about the statue. He hopes she understands the beauty and the power. He asks when she will return to America, and he calculates the time it will take for her first letter to arrive. In an effort to prolong the day with the Das family and put off the silence he will face with his wife, Mr. Kapasi suggests a detour to monastic dwellings. He fantasizes about taking Mrs. Das's hand while her husband is occupied with his camera.

She decides to stay in the car while the children explore with her husband. Again, the children are delighted by the monkeys that line the path. Bobby picks up a stick and plays with one of the more aggressive monkeys. Mr. Kapasi compliments the boy and Mrs. Das reveals that Mr. Das is not the boy's father. He gets his bravery from another man. Mrs. Das has kept the secret for eight years - Bobby's age. She tells Mr. Kapasi that she and her husband were engaged in high school and married in college. They never

wanted to spend a moment apart. But the reality of being married and having a child so young took its toll.

She rarely saw friends from college and ended up staying at home all day, isolated with baby Ronny. A visiting friend of Mr. Das's made advances towards Mrs. Das and she did not resist. The man is now married and the couples trade photos at Christmas time. Telling Mr. Kapasi, insisting that his talents caused her to open up, unburdens Mrs. Das. Mr. Kapasi doesn't understand, as there is no language barrier between them. She insists he offer a remedy for the pain she has carried for eight years. But the truth of a woman not yet thirty who is in love with neither her husband nor children simply depresses Mr. Kapasi.

He asks if it is pain she feels, or guilt. Insulted, she gets out of the car, spilling her snack of puffed rice in a trail behind her. The monkeys gather for the treat, unbeknownst to Mrs. Das. When she joins the family, she realizes that Bobby is missing. He is surrounded by aggressive monkeys. Mr. Kapasi rescues the stunned boy and delivers him to his family. When Mrs. Das reaches into her bag for a brush to smooth Bobby's hair, Mr. Kapasi's address flutters away in the breeze. A Real Durwan Boori Ma, an increasingly frail 64-year-old woman, is the durwan (live-in doorkeeper) to an apartment building of Calcutta.

Each day, she trudges up the stairs, lugging her reed broom and flimsy mattress behind her. As she sweeps, her raspy voice details the losses she has suffered because of Partition. She was separated from her husband, two daughters, and home. Tied to the end of her sari is a set of skeleton keys

belonging to coffer boxes that housed her valuables. She chronicles the easier times in her life, the feasts and servants and marble floor of her home. Each litany ends with the same phrase, " Believe me, don't believe me. " The details of her journey across the border shift in each retelling.

But her tales were so impassioned that no one could dismiss her outright. Each resident of the building had a different interpretation of her tales. Mr. Dalal of the third floor can't fathom how a landowner ends up sweeping stairs, wives think she is the victim of changing times, Mr. Chatterjee believes she simply mourns her family and wraps herself in illusion. Nevertheless, her tales harmed no one and she was entertaining. Best of all, she kept the stairs spotlessly clean and the outside world at bay. She routed away any suspicious person with a few slaps of her broom.

Though there was nothing to steal from the apartments, the residents were comforted by her presence. Boori Ma suffers from sleepless nights. Mrs. Dalal, who has a soft spot for Boori Ma, comes to the roof to dry lemon peels. Boori Ma asks her to inspect her back for the mites she assumes torment her in her sleep. Mrs. Dalal finds nothing. Boori Ma talks again about her lost comforts - such comforts Mrs. Dalal can't dream of. The women commiserate and Mrs. Dalal offers to buy the woman new bedding. Later rains turn Boori Ma's mattress into yogurt, so she focuses on the offer of new bedding.

Boori Ma is allowed to wander in and out of the apartments, offered tea and crackers for help with cleaning of children's activities. She knows better than to sit on the furniture, so she crouches in doorways and takes in life from a distance. She visits The Dalals. Mr. Dalal asks her to help tote basins to his

apartment. Mrs. Dalal is not pleased. A basin does not make up for not having a phone or a fridge, or other amenities promised but not delivered. The argument rings through the building and Boori Ma does not ask about bedding. She sleeps on newspaper that night. Mr.

Dalal installs one basin - the first of the building - in his home and another in the foyer for all of his neighbors to use. Instead of being moved by the gesture, the residents of the building are awash in resentment. Why did they have to share, why were the Dalals the only ones who could improve the building, why couldn't they buy their own basins? To appease his wife after their argument, it is rumored that Mr. Dalal purchased lavish shawls and soaps. He takes her away for ten days and Mrs. Dalal assures Boori Ma that she has not forgotten her promise of renewed bedding.

While the Dalals are away, the other wives plan renovations and the stairs become choked by workmen. Unable to sweep, Boori Ma keeps to her roof, keeping an eye on her dwindling set of newspapers and wondering when she had her last glass of tea. When she grows restless of the roof, she wanders around the town spending her life's savings on treats. She feels a tug at the end of her sari and finds her purse and skeleton keys gone. When she returns to the building, she finds the basin has been torn out of the wall. The residents carry her up to the roof and accuse her of telling robbers about the new basin.

She tries to convince them, but after all of her lies, they say, how can they believe her now? The residents seek the advice of Mr. Chatterjee. He comes to the conclusion that the building needs a real durwan to keep their

valuables safe. They toss Boori Ma out of on the street muttering, as her figure recedes, “ believe me, believe me. ” Sexy Miranda is a young, somewhat aimless, woman who works in fundraising for a public radio station in Boston. Her coworker Laxmi, already married and settled despite being only a few years older than Miranda, alerts Miranda to a personal disaster.

Her cousin’s husband had a life-changing conversation on an airplane and has left his family. Laxmi doesn’t blame her cousin for taking to bed, but her grief has made her unable to care for her son. Usually, Laxmi doesn’t need to tell Miranda family gossip, as Miranda can hear Laxmi’s phone calls through her cubicle. Today, however, Miranda is engrossed in her own phone call. She talks with her married lover Dev. Laxmi’s nephew is a genius and part Bengali, like Dev. At first Miranda thought it was a religion, but Dev pointed out the West Bengal state on a map of India.

He brought the map, printed in an issue of the Economist, to show where his father had been born. When she asks about the article it appears in, he taps her playfully on the head with the magazine. He says it’s nothing she’ll ever need to worry about. But later, when he leaves, she pulls the article from the trash and looks for photos of where Dev was born. They met a week before at a makeup counter in a department store in Boston. As she paused to smell a fragrance card, her eyes found Dev, an elegant man, purchasing toiletries for a woman.

Miranda engages a saleswoman so she can stay near to Dev. He watches her as the woman applies cream to her face. She tries to place his accent, guessing he is Lebanese or Spanish. They meet at the exit and Miranda

inquires about the creams. They are for his wife - who will be leaving for India for a few weeks. Those few weeks, Miranda and Dev spend nearly every night together at her apartment. Dev races back to his home in the suburbs in the early mornings for a pre-arranged daily phone call with his traveling wife. He calls frequently, leaving his voice on her answering machine.

He is charmed by her tiny apartment, and her bravery in moving to a city where she knows no one, and also by her long legs. Miranda and Dev both admit to their loneliness and Miranda thinks he understands her. Dev is the first man she has dated who is thoughtful, romantic, and chivalrous. Miranda keeps Dev a secret, only occasionally wanting to tell Laxmi. Dev shows Miranda his favorite parts of Boston, including the Mapparium - a domed building with a room that looks like you are standing inside a globe, with glowing stained glass panels that look like the outside of a globe.

Dev's voice echoes alluringly as he shows her details of the world. The acoustics make each sound feel as if a whisper in her ear. He stands across the room from her and whispers into the corner of a wall. She feels his voice under her skin. She says "Hi," and he responds, "You're sexy." It was the first time she'd been told she was sexy. Hearing his voice in her head, Miranda goes back to the department store and buys clothes she thinks a mistress should have - seamed stockings, black heels, a black slip, and a silver cocktail dress. She imagines wearing the ensemble at dinner with Dev.

But when his wife returns, he appears at Miranda's in gym clothes, having told his wife he was out running. The lingerie remains unworn at the back of



her drawer, and the silver dress often slips off its hanger and falls to the floor of her closet. But the affair continues. Dev shares more about his life and asks Miranda about her own. He takes naps during their trysts, accustomed to taking them during hot summers as a boy. Miranda doesn't sleep, but studies his body during, what Dev calls, " the best twelve minutes of the week. " After waking up, he goes home to his wife.

Miranda recalls the Dixits, an Indian family who moved into her neighborhood when she was a child. Her peers would make fun of their name and frown upon their differences. Miranda went over to their house once for the daughter's birthday and was so frightened by a painting of the fierce goddess Kali, that she never returned. Now, Miranda is ashamed of her behavior. When not with Dev, she walks to an Indian restaurant and tries to remember Hindi phrases from the bottom of the menu. She even tries to learn how to write her name in Bengali. Miranda's boredom wanes during the week, but her guilt rears its head when Laxmi talks about her cousin.

On Sundays, Dev would come. She asks him what his wife looks like and he responds that she looks like an actress, Madhuri Dixit. For a moment, Miranda's heart stops. She knows she could not be the girl from her childhood, but it still spooks her. Miranda finds her way to an Indian grocery that rents videos, on the hunt to find out what Madhuri Dixit looks like. A Bollywood video plays in the deli, and she knows she must look like one of those women. Beautiful. Miranda notices a snack that Laxmi eats and the grocer tells her it's too spicy for her. Laxmi's cousin comes to Boston to get away from her drama.

Laxmi treats her to a spa day, asking Miranda to babysit the cousin's son for the day. Rohin comes to Miranda's apartment with a backpack full of books and a sketchpad. For a boy of 7, he looks haggard and weary. Rohin demands Miranda quiz him on world capitals, as he is having a competition with another student to memorize them all. He announces he will win. He is precocious and makes more demands of Miranda throughout the afternoon. For coffee, to watch cartoons, to look through her toiletries and to draw a picture of their day together. He says, with a precision that startles Miranda, that they will never see each other again.

Rohin drags himself to her room and starts going through her closet, finding the silver dress on the floor. Rohin asks that she put it on. Miranda knows she will never wear it on a date with Dev. Now that his wife is back in town, she is nothing but a mistress. She makes Rohin wait outside, latching the door to make sure, while she changes. His eyes open wide when he sees her. Rohin tells her she's sexy. After her heart skips a beat, Miranda asks him what it means. The boy blushes and finally admits that it means loving someone you don't know. His father had sat down next to someone sexy on a plane and now loves her instead of his mother.

Miranda goes numb. Rohin curls up for a nap and Miranda takes the dress off. Back in her jeans, she lies down next to the boy and imagines the arguments his parents must have had. Thinking about her own situation, she begins to cry. When she wakes up, Rohin is holding the issue of the Economist. He asks who Devjit Mitra is. Miranda doesn't know what to say. The next time Dev calls, she tells him not to come. She asks him what he said to her in the Mapparium, but he answers incorrectly. The following

Sunday, it snows. The Sunday after that, Miranda makes plans with Laxmi and he doesn't ask her to cancel.

The third Sunday, she walks alone to the Mapparium and studies the city. Mrs. Sen's Since the beginning of his school year, Eliot has been going to Mrs. Sen's house after school. Though he is 11 and can take care of himself, Eliot's mother wants an adult around to supervise. However, Mrs. Sen doesn't know how to drive. At their first meeting, Eliot is taken aback by the pile of shoes by the door and the carefully covered furniture. His mother is the one who looks odd, Eliot thinks. Mr. Sen, a mathematics professor, assures Eliot's mother that she will be able to drive by December. Mrs.

Sen responds that she is a slow learner and that she had a chauffeur at home. Eliot's mother asks if she means India and the word alone releases emotions in Mrs. Sen. She says, " Everything is there. Eliot would often watch Mrs. Sen prepare meals. He is taken with a curved blade brought from India that Mrs. Sen would use to expertly carve vegetables in seconds. She doesn't allow Eliot to go near her in the kitchen, afraid for his safety. She tells Eliot that there is a knife in every household and a retinue of women would gather to prepare feasts for weddings. No one could sleep over the din.

Here, Mrs. Sen says, is too quiet. Eliot also dislikes his home. He and his mother live alone in a beach house. Now that the weather has turned cold, the beach is desolate and forbidding. Mrs. Sen asks Eliot whether, if she started screaming, anyone would come. At home, people would come running at the slightest commotion to share joy or grief. Eliot remembers a party that was thrown by a neighbor; he and his mother were not invited.

Eliot decides that someone might call to complain. He understands that “home” to Mrs. Sen means India and not the house they’re presently in. He asks Mrs.

Sen about the vermillion powder used to create a red part in her hair. She says it is like a wedding ring, but one that won’t get lost in the dishwasher. When Eliot’s mother arrives, Mrs. Sen offers her a snack. Eliot’s mother knows she doesn’t like the tastes and also that she has not taken a late lunch – her excuse for taking only one or two bites. At home, Eliot’s mother pours glasses of wine and eats bread and cheese, sometimes so much that she is not hungry for the pizza they order for dinner most nights. Mrs. Sen waits for Eliot at the bus stop each day and each day they go directly to her car so she may practice her driving.

He knows that Mrs Sen takes Eliot driving because she is afraid. She asks if everything will improve when she gets her license, as Mr. Sen says. Eliot responds that she can go places. Mrs. Sen then asks how long it would take to get to Calcutta – 10, 000 miles at 50 miles per hour. Mrs. Sen is easily distracted behind the wheel, getting nervous by the main road. Everything is too much for her. Two things make Mrs. Sen happy – a letter from her family and fish from the seaside. When a letter arrives, Mrs. Sen calls her husband and reads the contents word for word.

The letters make her restless, and she takes Eliot for a walk around the campus. She laments the birth of her sister’s child as the girl will not know her aunt for at least three years. Mrs. Sen asks if Eliot misses his mother these afternoons. The thought hadn’t occurred to him. She says he is wise –

he already tastes the way things must be. Mrs. Sen calls the local fishmarket each day to request a whole, fresh fish that her husband will pick up. She is a regular, known by the market. Again, she compares the fish available here to those in Calcutta and declares them inferior.

One day the market puts a fish on hold but Mr. Sen refuses to pick it up. Mrs. Sen begins to weep and then takes Eliot into her room. She flings her beautiful saris on the bed. She has nowhere to wear them, no pictures of her life she wants to send to her family back home. Mr. Sen begrudgingly arrives to take her to the fish market. Mrs. Sen refuses to drive. At the market, Eliot watches her chat with the workers. Mrs. Sen becomes despondent. She refuses again to drive, she doesn't prepare any lavish meals, she switches on the television but doesn't watch, and she lets tea grow cold on the counter.

She plays a sad raga for Eliot and then a tape of her family cataloguing the events of the day she left India. She identifies each family member and then translates the mundane events. The next day, she repeats the tape but stops when her grandfather speaks. Eliot learns the man has just died. A week later, Mr. Sen takes Eliot and his wife back to the fish market where they purchase a large quantity of fish. It is getting cold and the blustering winds make Mrs. Sen shiver with delight. This is a good day. She laughs at everything Mr. Sen says and even allows for a photograph to be taken. Mr. Sen tells her to drive home and it is a disaster.

She goes too slowly, becomes distracted by the radio, and finally pulls over to the side of the road. She hates driving and refuses to drive again. Mrs. Sen learns the bus route and begins to take Eliot to the shore herself. But the

passengers complain about the smell of the fish, and Mrs. Sen is confronted and embarrassed by the bus driver. A few days later, when the next fish arrives, Mrs. Sen tells Eliot to put on his shoes. They pile into the car and Mrs. Sen attempts to merge onto the main road. The accident happens quickly. Startled by another driver, Mrs. Sen drives the car into a telephone pole.

Both she and Eliot have minor scrapes and pains. Mr. Sen is called and he reasons with the police officer, explaining that she doesn't have a license. He takes them back to the Sens. Mrs. Sen prepares a snack for Eliot and then retreats to her bedroom. Eliot can hear her crying. When his mother arrives, Mr. Sen explains what happened and offers to reimburse her for the month. From that day on, Eliot wears a string around his neck with his house key. He was no longer to be watched by a babysitter. When his mother calls and asks if he is okay, he stares out at the choppy grey waves and declares he is fine.

This Blessed House When moving into a new house, newlyweds Twinkle and Sanjeev find Christian icons everywhere. The first is a porcelain effigy of Jesus found next to a bottle of malt vinegar left in the kitchen by the previous owners. Sanjeev tells his wife to throw both away, reminding her that they are not Christian. He feels that he has had to remind Twinkle of the obvious several times when moving in. But Twinkle is attached to the figurine and places it on the mantle - which Sanjeev notices needs dusting. Over the course of the week, Twinkle finds more items and places each on the mantle.

Sanjeev doesn't understand why his wife is so charmed by the snow globes, statuettes and 3D postcards. By the end of the week, Twinkle grows dismayed that no other objects are hiding about. Then she finds a tacky poster of a crying Jesus and, with delight, announces she will hang it up. Sanjeev, unpacking while listening to Mahler, puts his foot down. Twinkle pushes back and decides to hang the poster in her study behind the door so it will remain hidden during their housewarming party. Sanjeev sighs and thinks about the piece he is listening to - a testament to love.

From the bathroom, Twinkle tells him she finds the music boring. They bicker about the mantle on their way to Manhattan for a night, Twinkle in high heels and now taller than Sanjeev. He doesn't understand why she is content and curious about everything. He doesn't understand why she doesn't unpack or clean or dust as she is home all day working on a dissertation. Three days later, he comes home to a delicious fish stew concocted out of thin air and with the vinegar Sanjeev implored Twinkle to throw away. The bread basket is covered with a cloth bearing Christ's image. Twinkle calms him by saying that the house is blessed.

Sanjeev marvels at her behavior. Nicknamed after a nursery rhyme, she has yet to lose her childlike endearment. They had only known each other for four months. Their parents, old friends, arranged a meeting at the birthday party of one of the daughters in their circle. Sanjeev, in California on business, began an intense long-distance relationship with Twinkle after that night. They married in India shortly thereafter and Twinkle moved to Connecticut - where she knew no one. Sanjeev found the house before

leaving for the wedding and determined that he and his bride should live there forever.

A week before the housewarming party, Twinkle and Sanjeev rake the lawn of the golden leaves. Across the yard, Twinkle screams and Sanjeev runs over, thinking she has found a dead animal or snake. Instead, she has found a bust of the Virgin Mary. She screams with delight and insists on keeping it on the property. But Sanjeev is worried about what the neighbors will think, as they are Hindu and not Christian. Twinkle doesn't understand. Sanjeev, feeling as if he is getting nowhere with this woman he barely knows and yet shares his life with, wonders if they love one another.

Sanjeev only knows for certain that love is not what he had in his old life - full of takeout meals and classical CDs arriving by mail. Later, with Twinkle in the bath, Sanjeev declares he is going to throw out the statue. She rises up and marches downstairs in a towel. She tells Sanjeev she hates him, then collapses in his arms in tears. The statue ends up in an alcove out of sight from the main road but still visible to all who visit their home. The night of the housewarming party, Twinkle avoids removing the objects from the mantle and Sanjeev hopes his guests - mostly colleagues - will notice the bones of the house more.

When the guests arrive, Twinkle charms them easily. Sanjeev is asked if he is Christian, but it is not as big of an issue as it appears. His friends are impressed by Twinkle, but he still feels a bit lost. He steals a moment alone in the kitchen. Replenishing the champagne from the cellar, he hears Twinkle explain the figurines and how each day is like a treasure hunt. Soon, she



mobilizes the party to search the attic, much to Sanjeev's dismay. While everyone is in the attic, he fantasizes removing the ladder and truly having the house to himself.

He thinks of sweeping the figurines off of the mantle and into the trash in silence. Sanjeev finds Twinkle's discarded shoes and places them in the doorway of their master bedroom. For the first time since they married, the shoes create a pang of anticipation in Sanjeev. He thinks of Twinkle slipping her soles into the shoes, touching up her lipstick and rushing to hand out their guests' coats at the end of the night. It reminds him of the anticipation he would feel before one of their long talks when she was still living in California. Twinkle's voice rings out. The party has found an enormous silver bust of Jesus in the attic.

She asks if they can put it on the mantle, just for the night. Sanjeev hates it, especially because she loves it so much, and he knows it will never find a home in her study as she promises. He knows she will have to explain to their guests to come, in their many years together. She rejoins the party and he follows. The Treatment of Bibi Haldar 29-year-old Bibi Haldar is gripped by a mysterious ailment. Myriad tests and treatments have failed to cure the woman. She has been told to stand on her head, shun garlic, drink egg yolks in milk, to gain weight and to lose weight.

The fits that could strike at any moment keep her confined to the home of her dismissive elder cousin and his wife. Bibi keeps the inventory of her brother's cosmetics stall and is watched over by the women of their community. She is provided only meals and a room and a length of cotton to

replenish her wardrobe each year. Bibi sweeps the store, wondering loudly why she was cursed to this fate, to be alone and jealous of the wives and mothers around her. The women come to the conclusion that she wants a man. When they show her artifacts from their weddings, Bibi proclaims what her own wedding will look like.

Bibi is inconsolable at the prospect of never getting married. The women try to calm her by wrapping her in shawls, washing her face or buying her new blouses. After a particularly violent fit, her cousin Haldar emerges to take her to the polyclinic. A remedy is prescribed - marriage. " Relations will calm her blood. " Bibi is delighted by this news and begins to plan and plot the wedding and to prepare herself physically and mentally. But Haldar and his wife dismiss this possibility. She is nearly 30, the wife says, and unskilled in the ways of being a woman.

Her studies ceased prematurely, she is not allowed to watch TV, she has not been told how to pin a sari or how to prepare meals. The women don't understand why, then, this reluctance to marry her off if she such a burden to Haldar and his wife. The wife asks who will pay for the wedding? One morning, wearing a donated sari, Bibi demands that Haldar take her to be photographed so her image can be circulated among the bachelors, like other brides-in-waiting. Haldar refuses. He says she is a bane for business, a liability and a loss. In retaliation, Bibi stops calculating the inventory for the shop and circulates gossip about Haldar's wife.

To quiet her down, Haldar places an ad in the paper proclaiming the availability of an " unstable" bride. No family would take the risk. Still, the

women try to prepare her for her wifely duties. After two months of no suitors, Haldar and his wife feel vindicated. Things were not so bad when Bibi's father was alive. He created charts of her fits and wrote to doctors abroad to try to cure her. He also distributed information to the members of the village so they were aware of her condition. But now only the women can look after her while being thankful, in private, that she is not their responsibility.

When Haldar's wife gets pregnant, Bibi is kept away from her for fear of infecting the child. Her plates are not washed with the others, and she is given separate towels and soap. Bibi suffers another attack on the banks of the fish pond, convulsing for nearly two minutes. The husbands of the village escort her home in order to find her rest, a compress, and a sedative tablet. But Haldar and his wife do not let her in. That night, Bibi slept in the storage room. After a difficult birth, Haldar's wife delivers a girl. Bibi sleeps in the basement and is not allowed direct contact with the girl.

She suffers more, unchecked fits. The women voice their concern but it goes unheeded. They decide to take their business elsewhere and the cosmetics in the stall soon expire on their shelves. In autumn, Haldar's daughter becomes ill. Bibi is blamed. Bibi moves back into the storeroom and stops socializing - and stops searching for a husband. By the end of the year, Haldar is driven out of business and he packs his family up and moves away. He leaves Bibi behind with only a thin envelope of cash. There is no more news of them and a letter written to Bibi's only other known relative is returned by the postal service.

The women spruce up the storeroom and send their children to play on their roof in order to alert others in the event of an attack. At night, however, Bibi is left alone. Haggard, she circles the parapet but never leaves the roof. In spring, vomit is discovered by the cistern and the women find Bibi, pregnant. The women search for traces of assault, but Bibi's storeroom is tidy. She refuses to tell the women who the father is, only saying that she can't remember what happened. A ledger with men's names lay open near her cot. The women help her carry her son to term and teach her how to care for the baby.

She takes Haldar's old creams and wares out of the basement and reopens his shop. The women spread the word and soon the stall is providing enough money for Bibi to raise her boy. For years, the women try to sniff out who had disgraced Bibi but to no avail. The one fact they could agree upon is that Bibi seemed to be cured. The Third and Final Continent In 1964, an Indian man leaves his native country to sail to London. He studies at the London School of Economics, sharing an apartment with a group of other expatriate Bengalis. Five years later, at age 36, the man gets a job offer from a library at MIT.

Around the same time, his marriage was arranged so he flies first to his wedding in Calcutta and then onwards to Boston. He reads a guidebook warning that America is less friendly than Britain. On the plane he learns that two men have landed on the moon. He studies the differences and expectations and finds a cheap room at the YMCA in Central Square for his first weeks in the country. The first meal he has in America is a bowl of cornflakes. He is on a budget, resolving to spend little money until his wife

arrives, but the noise of Massachusetts Avenue outside his window is too much to bear.

He spends each day drinking tea out of a newly purchased thermos, reading the Boston Globe cover to cover and then sleeping fitfully in his room. He comes across an ad for a room for rent and calls. He is told the room is only rented to boys from Harvard or Tech (MIT). He makes an appointment for the following day. He finds the house with the room for rent on a pretty, tree-lined street. It would be the first detached house he lived in, and the first home without Indians. The woman who owns the house is the quite old Mrs. Croft. She is dressed as if she lived in the turn of the century. They talk of the moon landing and Mrs.

Croft demands that the man call it " splendid. " The man is baffled, but clearly she is impressed that he is punctual, that he declares the event " splendid," and that he does indeed work for MIT. He moves in. warned against " no lady visitors. " He thinks about his wife Mala in Calcutta awaiting her green card. After their wedding, she wept every night thinking of her family only five miles away. He reflects on the death of his mother, which happened in the same bed, years before. She had gone crazy after the death of her husband and it fell to the narrator to take care of her and light her funeral pyre.

When the narrator moves in, he finds Mrs. Croft sitting on the piano bench. She slaps the seat next to her, imploring him to sit down. This becomes a routine, the pair sitting together for 10 minutes a day and declaring the moon walk splendid. He does not have the heart to tell her that there is no

longer a flag on the moon – that the astronauts took it with them when they flew back to earth. When rent is due, instead of putting it on the ledge above the piano as requested, he hands the envelope stuffed with dollar bills to Mrs. Croft. She is confused and doesn't take it at first.

That night, when he returns from work, she is still holding the envelope. They do not talk about the moon walk. She tells him that what he had done was very kind. Mrs. Croft's daughter Helen, dressed in modern clothes, comes to visit and to bring her mother food. Helen tours the narrator's room and they chat. She says he is the first boarder her mother has called a gentleman. Mrs. Croft yells for them to come downstairs and they fear the worst. But Mrs. Croft chides them for the indecency of a man and woman sharing a room without a chaperone. The narrator helps Helen carry the groceries to the kitchen.

The narrator is shocked to learn that Mrs. Croft is 103 years old. The piano, Helen explains, was the source of income when Mrs. Croft was widowed. The narrator thinks of his own mother, destroyed by her widowhood. Six weeks are spent with the narrator worrying about Mrs. Croft's health, but, ultimately, he has no obligation to her. He prepares for his wife's arrival from Calcutta, anticipating it as if simply another season. He sees an Indian woman walking in Cambridge, an overcoat fastened over a sari. A dog tugs at the free end of her sari and the narrator thinks of Mala and the protection she will need in her new home.

He moves into a furnished apartment found through the housing office at MIT and says goodbye to Mrs. Croft without ceremony. Compared to the century

she has lived, his six weeks with her are a blink of an eye. The narrator meets Mala at the airport, also without fanfare. He speaks to her in Bengali – the first time in America – and he takes her home. She presents him with two blue sweaters she has made him, but they fit poorly. It takes time for him to get used to having someone there, anticipating his needs. He and Mala are like strangers.

He reluctantly gives her a few dollars, thinking only that it is a duty and, when he returns, he finds more kitchen tools and a tablecloth. Mala is making the apartment their home. Still, they talk little. One day, the narrator suggests they go out. Mala dresses in a beautiful sari and parts her hair in an elegant fashion. The narrator regrets the suggestion immediately, as she is overdressed. But they go walking out into the balmy night. Finding himself on her street, the narrator takes Mala to Mrs. Croft's house. Helen answers the door. He is alarmed to realize that Mrs. Croft has broken her hip.

She tells the narrator that she called the police and he responds “ Splendid! ” Mala laughs. Mrs. Croft tells Mala to stand up. Mrs. Croft appraises her and the narrator wonders if she had ever seen a woman in a sari. But Mrs. Croft is pleased – Mala is a lady! The narrator laughs now, and he and Mala share a smile, the first real intimacy they've shared. From that moment on, Mala and the narrator explore Boston with each other and fellow Bengalis. The time is like a honeymoon. Month later, Mala consoles the narrator when he learns that Mrs. Croft has died. She is the first person he mourns in America.

It is a sad milestone. The narrator continues to present day, when he and Mala have been married for decades and can barely remember a time when

they didn't know each other. They have a son who attends Harvard. They haven't strayed much farther than Boston, living outside of the city and still remembering important landmarks from their lives despite the changing city. He and Mala have chosen to live their lives in this country. The narrator knows he is not the first person to seek fortune in another country, another life. But he still marvels at the distance traveled.