

STUDY MATERIAL FOR ENGLISH MAJOR SEMESTER 2

Topic: A TEMPORARY MATTER

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SUMMARY	ANALYSIS
<p>Married couple Shoba and Shukumar receive a notice from their electric company that their power will be disconnected for five days from 8:00-9:00 P.M. in order to repair a power line damaged in a snow storm. Shoba remarks, "It's good of them to warn us. [...] But they should do this sort of thing during the day." Shukumar responds, "When I'm here, you mean." Shoba has just come from the gym, and Shukumar observes that she looks like "the type of woman she'd once claimed she would never resemble."</p>	<p>Lahiri introduces the temporary blackout immediately, alerting the reader to its symbolic importance. Lahiri also hints at the tension that exists in Shoba and Shukumar's marriage. When Shoba comments that the electric company should really "do this sort of thing during the day," she reveals how little Shoba thinks about Shukumar's life—she only cares if the blackout will affect her own schedule. Shukumar's observation that Shoba looks like "the type of woman she'd once claimed she would never resemble" denotes that Shoba has undergone a change that is reflected in her physical appearance, though the reader has yet to find out about Shoba and Shukumar's past or the exact state of their marriage.</p>
<p>As Shukumar tends to the dinner he's making, he reflects on the state of his marriage: "The more Shoba stayed out, the more she began putting in extra hours at work and taking on additional projects, the more he wanted to stay in, not even leaving to get the mail, or to buy fruit or wine at the stores by the trolley shop." The couple has grown increasingly distant over the past several months.</p>	<p>Shoba's inner conflict is hinted at through her disheveled appearance, while Shukumar's is suggested through his inability to leave the house, even for simple tasks like getting the mail or running to the corner store. The reader will come to understand that Shukumar's isolation is a symptom of his grief, but for now Lahiri only hints at this. In addition to the couple's individual changes, Lahiri also reveals that Shoba and Shukumar have begun to avoid one another at all costs, insinuating again that not all is well in their marriage. In light of this implied marital strife, the detail that Shukumar can't even bring himself "to buy fruit or wine," and the fact that he reflects on this while preparing dinner, establishes food as a symbolic parallel to the couple's lack of intimacy.</p>
<p>Shukumar recalls the event that caused the (previously happy) couple's alienation: six months prior, Shukumar attended an academic conference in Baltimore. Shoba was pregnant with their child, but her due date was three weeks away, so she insisted that Shukumar go and make connections. While Shukumar was away, Shoba went into early labor and had to</p>	<p>The reader learns about the root of the couple's grief and discontent: their baby was stillborn, and Shukumar was away from Shoba when it happened. Lahiri illustrates how a physical, literal separation (Shukumar's absence from the child's birth) has caused a metaphorical distance to develop between Shoba and Shukumar. This first initial separation causes the couple to become communicatively distant with one another.</p>

<p>have an emergency C-section. The baby was stillborn before Shukumar was able to get back.</p>	<p>This memory also introduces the guilt that will feature prominently in Shukumar’s grieving process, as he believes that his absence denies him a right to grief.</p>
<p>Shukumar regrets the moment he chose to leave, replaying the moment in his mind in great detail: “Each time he thought of that moment, the last moment he saw Shoba pregnant, it was the cab he remembered most.” Shukumar remembers comparing the largeness of the cab to the station wagon he and Shoba might’ve needed to transport their children to lessons and appointments. He imagines Shoba handing juice boxes to their children in the backseat. These hypothetical visions of he and Shoba with the children in the station wagon were Shukumar’s first “welcomed” images of the joys parenthood could bring.</p>	<p>Shukumar clearly feels guilty and regretful about being away from Shoba during their tragedy; Lahiri’s choice to begin Shukumar’s memory with “Each time” shows how he fixates specifically on his moment of departure. The fact that Shukumar remembers the cab emphasizes the exact moment he chose to put physical distance between Shoba and himself, the cab figuring as both the literal and figurative vehicle through which Shukumar departed from Shoba and their unborn child. Shukumar’s nostalgic image of Shoba with the children in the station wagon represents his failed, hypothetical plans and shows how strongly he grieves for the hopes that now never will be realized.</p>
<p>Shukumar’s thoughts fast-forward to the present. He reveals that “these days, Shoba was always gone by the time [he] woke up.” The couple has begun to avoid each other since the baby’s death. They spend most of their time working—Shoba as a proofreader and Shukumar as a doctoral student writing his dissertation. Shukumar admits that he “envy[s] the specificity of [Shoba’s] task, so unlike the elusive nature of his.” Since the baby’s death, he’s lost all interest in writing and teaching. He and Shoba are no longer intimate, and he feels uncomfortable when she is home on the weekends, “when she sat for hours on the sofa with her colored pencils and her files, so that he feared that putting on a record in his own house would be rude.” Shukumar used to think that he and Shoba “would get through it all somehow.”</p>	<p>Lahiri illustrates the extent of Shoba and Shukumar’s physical and communicative distance. Whenever possible, Shoba and Shukumar avoid being in the same space. When the weekend comes and Shoba cannot use the excuse of having a project to attend to, she absorbs herself in work on the couch, placing a physical and emotional wall between her husband and herself, and making him feel that it would be “rude” to impose on her in even such an indirect way as “putting on a record.” The nature of Shoba’s proofreading work is very prescribed and exact, demonstrating the extent to which Shoba relies on planning and precision to organize and cope with her life. Shukumar’s admission that he initially thought the couple “would get through it all somehow” suggests that he might still have hope that his marriage is not damaged beyond repair, though Lahiri remains vague about Shukumar’s true hopes and thoughts on the matter.</p>
<p>Shukumar and Shoba’s power is turned off at 8 P.M. as planned. During this first night of the blackout, Shukumar cooks dinner. Shoba suggests that they light candles. While Shoba is upstairs changing, Shukumar walks downstairs to brush his teeth. He finds a spare toothbrush that Shoba had bought in case of a last minute guest and remarks, “It was typical of her. She</p>	<p>Lahiri further underscores the extent to which Shoba has used planning and predictability to give her life meaning. Shoba relied on her ability to “prepare for surprises, good and bad,” as evidenced by the spare toothbrush Shukumar stumbles upon, reserved for a hypothetical, last-minute guest. Shoba’s obsessive food shopping further demonstrates this, and it touches on the symbolic weight of food, cooking, and shared meals</p>

<p>was the type to prepare for surprises, good and bad.” Shukumar is “astonished” by Shoba’s preparedness, especially compared to his mother, who had “fallen to pieces” after the death of his father: “When [Shoba] used to do the shopping, the pantry was always stocked [...] There were endless boxes of pasta [...], zippered sacks of basmati rice, whole sides of lambs and goats [...]” None of the food went to waste because the couple was always entertaining friends. But since the baby’s death, Shoba has given up on cooking and planning ahead, and Shukumar has taken on the responsibility of cooking.</p>	<p>as a representation of the couple’s lost intimacy and hope for the future. The planning of food and meals used to be such a central part of Shoba and Shukumar’s marriage. The fact that Shoba hasn’t shopped since the baby’s death suggests that she has given up on planning, but also that she has given up on an important aspect of her marriage. On a related note, Shukumar’s decision to take on Shoba’s abandoned task of cooking suggests that he is more willing to continue working on the relationship.</p>
<p>Shukumar reveals that the couple hasn’t eaten together in months—in fact, they’ve avoided one another since the baby’s death. Shukumar has taken to working in what would have been the baby’s nursery. He describes how he rid the room of all traces of the dead child before bringing Shoba back from the hospital, “scraping off the rabbits and ducks with a spatula.” Still, the room “haunt[s] Shoba,” and Shukumar converts the room into his office, “partly because it was a place Shoba avoid[s].”</p>	<p>The couple’s choice to no longer eat with one another shows how distant they’ve become. Shukumar associates food and shared meals with happier times and intimacy; the fact that the couple no longer dines together suggests that they are no longer intimate. Shukumar’s memory of ridding the nursery of all traces of the baby before Shoba returned from the hospital demonstrates a lack of vulnerable communication between the couple. Shukumar would rather deny the baby’s existence than work through the tragedy with Shoba. Shukumar’s refusal to discuss the baby with Shoba also speaks to his worry that he isn’t “allowed” to mourn the baby, as he was not present for the baby’s death.</p>
<p>Shukumar returns to the kitchen to finish dinner and search for candles. The only candles he can find are birthday candles, left over from a surprise party Shoba had thrown for him last May. He reflects back on happier times, recalling how there had been “one hundred and twenty people crammed into the house.” Shoba, five months pregnant, sipped only ginger ale, and the couple had held hands all night.</p>	<p>Shukumar’s nostalgic memories show that he longs for what he and Shoba used to have. His sentimentality suggests that he might hold out hope that his marriage can be fixed, and it also provides context for Shukumar’s eventual enthusiasm to participate in Shoba’s game of confessions. Shukumar puts a lot of detail into dinner preparations the first night of the blackout, and the reader may connect this to his hope that a shared dinner might encourage the couple to finally open up to one another.</p>
<p>But since the baby’s death, “their only guest had been Shoba’s mother,” who came from Arizona to help the couple cope with their grief. Shukumar recalls that he’d once mentioned the</p>	<p>Lahiri provides the detail that Shoba and Shukumar have all but stopped entertaining guests as evidence of the couple’s overwhelming grief. Shoba’s mother’s comment to Shukumar, “But you weren’t even there,” puts an end to Shukumar’s attempt to discuss the dead baby. Her comment posits that Shukumar’s absence</p>

<p>baby during her visit, to which she replied only “But you weren’t even there.”</p>	<p>from the birth negates his right to talk about the baby, and Shukumar’s responsive silence affirms that he agrees with this position.</p>
<p>Shukumar’s thoughts return to the present. He finds it “odd” that the only candles he can find are birthday candles, since Shoba would typically be prepared for “such an ordinary emergency” like a blackout. As Shukumar sets the table he sentimentally recalls that the couple used to “just reach for each other foolishly, more eager to make love than to eat.” Shukumar places “two embroidered place mats, a wedding gift from an uncle in Lucknow,” as well as “the wineglasses they usually saved for guests.” He places the birthday candles in the middle of the table, and switches the radio to a jazz station.</p>	<p>Again, Shukumar emphasizes how prepared Shoba was before the death of the child, adding additional depth and significance to her comparative lack of preparedness after the baby’s death. His memory of the couple’s former intimacy reinforces how shockingly distant the couple has become since the baby’s death. Shukumar’s elaborate table setting shows that he is putting tremendous effort into his meal with Shoba, suggesting either that he is uncomfortable at the prospect of having to face Shoba, or that he is optimistic about the possibilities for renewed intimacy that the meal presents.</p>
<p>Shoba, freshly showered, joins Shukumar at the table. “What’s all this?” She asks. The lights go off and the couple sits down to dine. Shoba remarks that the blackout reminds her of India, when “Sometimes the current disappears for hours at a stretch.” She recalls a rice ceremony she once attended that was held completely in the dark. “The baby just cried and cried,” says Shoba. Shukumar thinks, “Their baby had never cried,” but does not share this connection with Shoba.</p>	<p>The beginning of the blackout corresponds with the moment the couple sits down to eat. The electric company specified in the beginning of the story that the blackout would be “temporary,” thus the blackout’s correspondence with dinner hints that Shoba and Shukumar’s renewed dinners might, too, be temporary. Throughout the story, darkness serves as an alternate reality that allows the couple to be honest with each other in a way they couldn’t with the lights on. The blackout denotes the couple’s entrance into this safe, comfortable realm. Shoba’s anecdote causes Shukumar to think about their stillborn baby, but he doesn’t voice these thoughts aloud. Shukumar’s silence reinforces his guilt, and also highlights the couple’s inability to communicate vulnerably with each other.</p>
<p>Shoba says that the food is delicious. She recalls that during power failures at her grandmother’s house in India, they played a game where they “all had to say something [...] A little poem. A joke. A fact about the world.” Shoba suggests that the couple plays that game now. Shukumar agrees.</p>	<p>In light of food’s symbolic weight for the couple, Shoba’s compliment suggests an attempt at rekindling intimacy. Shoba introduces her “game,” purposely trivializing it in order to make Shukumar more willing to participate. By downplaying the seriousness of the bits of information they will trade back and forth, Shoba lowers the stakes and makes Shukumar feel at ease.</p>
<p>The couple begins to trade secrets back and forth. Shoba admits that when the couple first started dating she had looked through Shukumar’s address book to see if he’d written</p>	<p>Shoba and Shukumar open up to each other, but only within the constraints of Shoba’s game, and in the safe, comforting anonymity of darkness. Lahiri leaves the reader uncertain as to whether the game will lead to</p>

<p>in her name already (and he had not). Shukumar shares that the first time they went out to dinner, he'd forgotten to tip the waiter. He defends his folly: "By the end of the meal I had a funny feeling that I might marry you," he tells Shoba. "It must have distracted me."</p>	<p>the couple's reconciliation. On one hand, the couple's openness seems to suggest an attempt at renewed communication; on the other hand, it's clear that they aren't comfortable speaking to each other candidly outside the context of Shoba's game.</p>
<p>Shoba comes home early the next night and the couple is able to eat with the lights on. After dinner, when the power shuts off, they sit outside together, as it is unusually warm out. They bring candles and a flashlight with them and resume their game. Shoba tells Shukumar that on a night when his mother was visiting and Shoba said she had to stay late at work, she'd actually gone out for drinks with her friend Gillian. Shukumar responds that he cheated on his Oriental Civilization exam in college. They sit outside until the lights turn back on.</p>	<p>Because Shoba and Shukumar's secrets become more detailed and damning, and the reader may be inclined to believe that the couple's relationship is improving, and that the distance between them growing gradually smaller. Still, though, Lahiri reinforces that the couple only opens up when the lights are off. When the hour of the blackout ends, the return to their respective uncommunicative solitudes. The couple needs the safety and anonymity of darkness in order to feel confident enough to confide. It's true that they are opening up to each other in ways they haven't since the baby's death, but the fact that they need darkness to do so shows the limitations of their communication.</p>
<p>After the second night of secrets, Shukumar thinks about the significance of their game: "Somehow, without saying anything, it had turned into [...] an exchange of confessions—the little ways they'd hurt or disappointed each other, and themselves." While Shoba is at work, Shukumar eagerly mulls over what he will tell her that night.</p>	<p>Shukumar realizes that the game is more than the mere exchange of jokes and stories Shoba first presented it to be. The couple uses the game not simply to pass the time, but to confess to the ways they'd "hurt or disappointed each other, and themselves." The couple uses the game to communicate with one another, offering the possibility that their relationship can be saved. Still, Shukumar's excitement to confess to Shoba that night shows that this renewed communication is limited to the constraints of the game; that is, Shoba and Shukumar aren't suddenly willing to interact with one another in all facets of life, only during the hour of temporary darkness.</p>
<p>On the third night, Shukumar tells Shoba that he actually returned a sweater vest she'd bought him for their third wedding anniversary—he hadn't lost it, as he had originally told Shoba. On the fourth night, he tells her about a photo of a woman in a magazine he'd clipped out and carried with him and lusted after for a week. Shoba tells Shukumar that she'd once allowed him to talk to the chairman of his college department with "a dab of pâté on his chin" because she had been mad at him. On the next night, she tells</p>	<p>The first of this next set of confessions seem somewhat shallow. They are petty but not terribly inconsequential. In the shallowness of these confessions, Lahiri reminds the reader that Shoba and Shukumar aren't exactly bearing their souls to each other—they're only spilling secrets on a very superficial level, akin to a game of truth-or-dare one would play at a slumber party. Still, Shoba's final confession—that she never liked Shukumar's only published poem—is brutal and more meaningful. The couple's confessions oscillate between the shallow (Shoba's petty decision not to tell Shukumar about the dab of pâté) and the deeply hurtful</p>

<p>him that “she’d never liked the one poem he’d ever published in his life [...] that she’d found the poem sentimental.”</p>	<p>(Shoba’s dismissing Shukumar’s poem as “sentimental). In this oscillation, Lahiri seems to toy with the reader, leaving them to wonder whether the couple’s secrets will grow into something meaningful (the restoration of the marriage, for example) or whether they will remain shallow and consequential only within the confines of the game.</p>
<p>Shukumar reflects on the significance of the dark: “Something happened when the house was dark. They were able to talk to each other again.” What’s more, the darkness encourages the couple to engage in acts of physical intimacy. After the third night, Shukumar recalls how they’d kissed on the couch. On the fourth night, they’d “[made] love with a desperation they had forgotten.”</p>	<p>Shukumar sees that the darkness allows the couple to talk freely. Without the safety of darkness, they remain distant and aloof with one another. Lahiri balances moments of closeness (the couple’s acts of renewed physical intimacy) with their sustained inability to engage in these acts with the lights on. Through this contrast, she seems to caution the reader against feeling too optimistic that the couple will move beyond their grief and alienation to repair their broken marriage.</p>
<p>On the fifth night, Shukumar finds a second note from the electric company informing them that the line has been repaired ahead of schedule: there will be no more blackouts. He is disappointed, and everything seems a little duller: “He didn’t feel like cooking anymore. It wasn’t the same, he thought, knowing the lights wouldn’t go out.” When Shoba comes home that night, Shukumar remarks, “I suppose this is the end of our game,” as he watches her read the electric company’s updated notice. She says they can still light candles, if he wants.</p>	<p>“A Temporary Matter” is framed by notes from the power company. Lahiri does this in order to formally illustrate the very temporary aspect of Shoba and Shukumar’s renewed communication. Like the blackout, their dinners together will last only through the week. Shukumar seems to sense this: when he reads the updated notice, he becomes depressed and loses interest in cooking, knowing that their meals won’t be the same when the lights no longer go out. Shoba detects Shukumar’s disappointment, and humours him by suggesting that they’ll still light candles.</p>
<p>Shukumar pours wine and puts on a Thelonious Monk album that Shoba likes. They eat in darkness, though Shoba “[doesn’t] thank him or compliment him” After they finish eating, Shoba blows out the candles and stands up to turn on the lights. She sits back down at the table. “Shouldn’t we keep the lights off?” asks Shukumar. Shoba responds, “I want you to see my face when I tell you this.” With a jolt of panic, Shukumar recalls that these are the exact words Shoba had used when she told him she was pregnant. Shukumar had been happy then, but now, “he didn’t want her to be pregnant</p>	<p>Shukumar’s decision to pour wine and put on music that Shoba enjoys suggests that he hasn’t entirely given up on repairing his relationship. Shukumar’s desire to eat in darkness (despite the end of the blackout) shows that he wants to continue to communicate with Shoba, but also that he realizes they likely will not continue to communicate when they have to face the other person in the vulnerable environment of a well-lit room. Shukumar’s panic when Shoba says that she has something to say with the lights on (as he remembers that Shoba used these exact words to announce her earlier pregnancy) reveals how guarded and fragile he remains about their relationship. Shukumar’s comment</p>

<p>again. He didn't want to have to pretend to be happy."</p>	<p>that "he didn't want to have to pretend to be happy," he reveals either that he doesn't want their marriage to take this next step, or that their marriage is still so broken that it could not survive the added stress and weight of a baby.</p>
<p>But Shoba is not pregnant this time. Instead, she tells Shukumar that she plans to leave him: "I've been looking for an apartment and I've found one," she says. She explains that she "need[s] some time alone." Shoba cannot look at Shukumar, "but he stare[s] at her" as he realizes that "she'd rehearsed the lines." He finally sees Shoba's intentions behind her confessional game: "He was relieved and yet he was sickened. This was what she'd been trying to tell him for the past four evenings. This was the point of her game."</p>	<p>Shukumar's discovery allows the reader to see the shallowness and falseness of the confessional game. Shoba's ironic reveal aligns the reader with Shukumar: like Shukumar, up until this point the reader might have been cautiously optimistic that the game was Shoba's attempt at reconciliation.</p>
<p>Shocked and sickened, Shukumar responds to Shoba's announcement with one last secret: the sex of their baby. After the baby's death, Shoba had remarked, "at least they'd been spared that knowledge." Not knowing the baby's sex had "enabled her to seek refuge in a mystery." She assumed that it was a mystery to Shukumar, too, but it was not: he'd arrived at the hospital in time to hold their baby. "Our baby was a boy," he tells Shoba. "His skin was more red than brown. He had black hair on his head. He weighed almost five pounds. His fingers were curled shut, just like yours in the night." Shoba's face becomes "contorted with sorrow." Shukumar had "promised himself that day that he would never tell Shoba, because he still loved her then, and it was the one thing in her life that she had wanted to be a secret."</p>	<p>Shukumar's cruel admission betrays how hurt he is by Shoba's desire to move out. Shukumar's use of precise, evocative details to describe the dead baby emphasize this cruelty. When Shukumar states that he withheld the baby's sex from Shoba "because he still loved her then," he insinuates that he no longer loves Shoba. Shukumar's statement adds to the artificiality of the couple's confessional game. Shukumar seemed enthusiastic to grow closer to Shoba, but only within the false confines of the game—he doesn't love her once the lights go on. Besides this, Shukumar's retaliating confession shows that his hurt (or, his vulnerability) counteracts his guilt. When, caught off guard by Shoba's news, he tells her the baby's sex, he's finally able to address the tragedy out loud. The shock of Shoba's confession pulls them both out of their structured game, and they appear vulnerably before each other.</p>