

SHORT STORIES

MASHI

Rabindranath Tagore



MASHI I

‘Mashi!’¹³

¹³. The maternal aunt is addressed as Mashi.

‘Try to sleep, Jotin, it is getting late.’

‘Never mind if it is. I have not many days left. I was thinking that Mani should go to her father’s house.—I forget where he is now.’

‘Sitarampur.’

‘Oh yes! Sitarampur. Send her there. She should not remain any longer near a sick man. She herself is not strong.’

‘Just listen to him! How can she bear to leave you in this state?’

‘Does she know what the doctors——?’

‘But she can see for herself! The other day she cried her eyes out at the merest hint of having to go to her father’s house.’

We must explain that in this statement there was a slight distortion of truth, to say the least of it. The actual talk with Mani was as follows:—

‘I suppose, my child, you have got some news from your father? I thought I saw your cousin Anath here.’

‘Yes! Next Friday will be my little sister’s *annaprashan*¹⁴ ceremony. So I’m thinking——’

¹⁴. The annaprashan ceremony takes place when a child is first given rice. Usually it receives its name on that day.

‘All right, my dear. Send her a gold necklace. It will please your mother.’

‘I’m thinking of going myself. I’ve never seen my little sister, and I want to ever so much.’

‘Whatever do you mean? You surely don’t think of leaving Jotin alone? Haven’t you heard what the doctor says about him?’

‘But he said that just now there’s no special cause for——’

‘Even if he did, you can see his state.’

‘This is the first girl after three brothers, and she’s a great favourite.—I have heard that it’s going to be a grand affair. If I don’t go, mother will be very——’

‘Yes, yes! I don’t understand your mother. But I know very well that your father will be angry enough if you leave Jotin just now.’

‘You’ll have to write a line to him saying that there is no special cause for anxiety, and that even if I go, there will be no——’

‘You’re right there; it will certainly be no great loss if you do go. But remember, if I write to your father, I’ll tell him plainly what is in my mind.’

‘Then you needn’t write. I shall ask my husband, and he will surely——’

‘Look here, child, I’ve borne a good deal from you, but if you do that, I won’t stand it for a moment. Your father knows you too well for you to deceive him.’

When Mashī had left her, Mani lay down on her bed in a bad temper.

Her neighbour and friend came and asked what was the matter.

‘Look here! What a shame it is! Here’s my only sister’s *annaprashan* coming, and they don’t want to let me go to it!’

‘Why! Surely you’re never thinking of going, are you, with your husband so ill?’

‘I don’t do anything for him, and I couldn’t if I tried. It’s so deadly dull in this house, that I tell you frankly I can’t bear it.’

‘You are a strange woman!’

‘But I can’t pretend, as you people do, and look glum lest anyone should think ill of me.’

‘Well, tell me your plan.’

‘I must go. Nobody can prevent me.’

‘Isss! What an imperious young woman you are!’

MASHI II

Hearing that Mani had wept at the mere thought of going to her father’s house, Jotin was so excited that he sat up in bed. Pulling his pillow towards him, he leaned back, and said: ‘Mashi, open this window a little, and take that lamp away.’

The still night stood silently at the window like a pilgrim of eternity; and the stars gazed in, witnesses through untold ages of countless death-scenes.

Jotin saw his Mani's face traced on the background of the dark night, and saw those two big dark eyes brimming over with tears, as it were for all eternity.

Mashi felt relieved when she saw him so quiet, thinking he was asleep.

Suddenly he started up, and said: 'Mashi, you all thought that Mani was too frivolous ever to be happy in our house. But you see now——'

'Yes, I see now, my Baba,¹⁵ I was mistaken—but trial tests a person.'

¹⁵. Baba literally means Father, but is often used by elders as a term of endearment. In the same way 'Ma' is used.

'Mashi!'

'Do try to sleep, dear!'

'Let me think a little, let me talk. Don't be vexed, Mashi!'

'Very well.'

'Once, when I used to think I could not win Mani's heart, I bore it silently. But you——'

'No, dear, I won't allow you to say that; I also bore it.'

'Our minds, you know, are not clods of earth which you can possess by merely picking up. I felt that Mani did not know her own mind, and that one day at some great shock——'

'Yes, Jotin, you are right.'

'Therefore I never took much notice of her waywardness.'

Mashi remained silent, suppressing a sigh. Not once, but often she had seen Jotin spending the night on the verandah wet with the splashing rain, yet not caring to go into his bedroom. Many a day he lay with a throbbing head, longing, she knew, that Mani would come and soothe his brow, while Mani was getting ready to go to the theatre. Yet when Mashi went to fan him, he sent her away petulantly. She alone knew what pain lay hidden in that distress. Again and again she had wanted to say to Jotin: 'Don't pay so much attention to that silly child, my dear; let her learn to want,—to cry for things.' But these things cannot be said, and are apt to be misunderstood. Jotin had in his heart a shrine set up to the goddess Woman, and there Mani had her throne. It was hard for him to imagine that his own fate was to be denied his share of the wine of love poured out by that divinity. Therefore the worship went on, the sacrifice was offered, and the hope of a boon never ceased.

Mashi imagined once more that Jotin was sleeping, when he cried out suddenly:

‘I know you thought that I was not happy with Mani, and therefore you were angry with her. But, Mashi, happiness is like those stars. They don’t cover all the darkness; there are gaps between. We make mistakes in life and we misunderstand, and yet there remain gaps through which truth shines. I do not know whence comes this gladness that fills my heart tonight.’

Mashi began gently to soothe Jotin’s brow, her tears unseen in the dark.

‘I was thinking, Mashi, she’s so young! What will she do when I am——?’

‘Young, Jotin? She’s old enough. I too was young when I lost the idol of my life, only to find him in my heart forever. Was that any loss, do you think? Besides, is happiness absolutely necessary?’

‘Mashi, it seems as if just when Mani’s heart shows signs of awakening I have to——’

‘Don’t you worry about that, Jotin. Isn’t it enough if her heart awakes?’

Suddenly Jotin recollected the words of a village minstrel’s song which he had heard long before:

O my heart! You woke not when the man of my heart came to my door.

At the sound of his departing steps you woke up.

Oh, you woke up in the dark!

‘Mashi, what is the time now?’

‘About nine.’

‘So early as that! Why, I thought it must be at least two or three o’clock. My midnight, you know, begins at sundown. But why did you want me to sleep, then?’

‘Why, you know how late last night you kept awake talking; so today you must get to sleep early.’

‘Is Mani asleep?’

‘Oh no, she’s busy making some soup for you.’

‘You don’t mean to say so, Mashi? Does she——?’

‘Certainly! Why, she prepares all your food, the busy little woman.’

‘I thought perhaps Mani could not——’

‘It doesn’t take long for a woman to learn such things. With the need it comes of itself.’

‘The fish soup, that I had in the morning, had such a delicate flavour, I thought you had made it.’

‘Dear me, no! Surely you don’t think Mani would let me do anything for you? Why, she does all your washing herself. She knows you can’t bear anything dirty about you. If only you could see your sitting-room, how spick and span she keeps it! If I were to let her haunt your sick-room, she would wear herself out. But that’s what she really wants to do.’

‘Is Mani’s health, then——?’

‘The doctors think she should not be allowed to visit the sick-room too often. She’s too tender-hearted.’

‘But, Mashi, how do you prevent her from coming?’

‘Because she obeys me implicitly. But still I have constantly to be giving her news of you.’

The stars glistened in the sky like tear-drops. Jotin bowed his head in gratitude to his life that was about to depart, and when Death stretched out his right hand towards him through the darkness, he took it in perfect trust.

Jotin sighed, and, with a slight gesture of impatience, said:

‘Mashi, if Mani is still awake, then, could I—if only for a——?’

‘Very well! I’ll go and call her.’

‘I won’t keep her long, only for five minutes. I have something particular to tell her.’

Mashi, sighing, went out to call Mani. Meanwhile Jotin’s pulse began to beat fast. He knew too well that he had never been able to have an intimate talk with Mani. The two instruments were tuned differently and it was not easy to play them in unison. Again and again, Jotin had felt pangs of jealousy on hearing Mani chattering and laughing merrily with her girl companions. Jotin blamed only himself,—why couldn’t he talk irrelevant trifles as they did? Not that he could not, for with his men friends he often chatted on all sorts of trivialities. But the small talk that suits men is not suitable for women. You can hold a philosophical discourse in monologue, ignoring your inattentive audience altogether, but small talk requires the co-operation of at least two. The bagpipes can be played singly, but there must be a pair of cymbals. How often in the evenings had Jotin, when sitting on the open verandah with Mani, made some strained attempts at conversation, only to feel the thread snap. And the very silence of the evening felt ashamed. Jotin was certain that Mani longed to get away. He had even wished earnestly that a third person would come. For talking is easy with three, when it is hard for two.

He began to think what he should say when Mani came. But such manufactured talk would not satisfy him. Jotin felt afraid that this five minutes of tonight would be wasted. Yet, for him, there were but few moments left for intimate talk.

MASHI III

‘What’s this, child, you’re not going anywhere, are you?’

‘Of course, I’m going to Sitarampur.’

‘What do you mean? Who is going to take you?’

‘Anath.’

‘Not today, my child, some other day.’

‘But the compartment has already been reserved.’

‘What does that matter? That loss can easily be borne. Go tomorrow, early in the morning.’

‘Mashi, I don’t hold by your inauspicious days. What harm if I do go today?’

‘Jotin wants to have a talk with you.’

‘All right! There’s still some time. I’ll just go and see him.’

‘But you mustn’t say that you are going.’

‘Very well, I won’t tell him, but I shan’t be able to stay long. Tomorrow is my sister’s *annaprashan*, and I must go today.’

‘Oh, my child! I beg you to listen to me this once. Quiet your mind for a while and sit by him. Don’t let him see your hurry.’

‘What can I do? The train won’t wait for me. Anath will be back in ten minutes. I can sit by him till then.’

‘No, that won’t do. I shall never let you go to him in that frame of mind... Oh, you wretch! The man you are torturing is soon to leave this world; but I warn you, you will remember this day till the end of your days! That there is a God! That there is a God! You will someday understand!’

‘Mashi, you mustn’t curse me like that.’

‘Oh, my darling boy! My darling! Why do you go on living longer? There is no end to this sin, yet I cannot check it!’

Mashi after delaying a little returned to the sick-room, hoping by that time Jotin would be asleep. But Jotin moved in his bed when she entered. Mashi exclaimed:

‘Just look what she has done!’

‘What’s happened? Hasn’t Mani come? Why have you been so long, Mashi?’

‘I found her weeping bitterly because she had allowed the milk for your soup to get burnt! I tried to console her, saying, “Why, there’s more milk to be had!” But that she could be so careless about the preparation of *your* soup made her wild. With great trouble I managed to pacify her and put her to bed. So I haven’t brought her today. Let her sleep it off.’

Though Jotin was pained when Mani didn’t come, yet he felt a certain amount of relief. He had half feared that Mani’s bodily presence would do violence to his heart’s image of her. Such things had happened before in his life. And the gladness of the idea that Mani was miserable at burning *his* milk filled his heart to overflowing.

‘Mashi!’

‘What is it, Baba?’

‘I feel quite certain that my days are drawing to a close. But I have no regrets. Don’t grieve for me.’

‘No, dear, I won’t grieve. I don’t believe that only life is good and not death.’

‘Mashi, I tell you truly that death seems sweet.’

Jotin, gazing at the dark sky, felt that it was Mani herself who was coming to him in Death’s guise. She had immortal youth and the stars were flowers of blessing, showered upon her dark tresses by the hand of the World-Mother. It seemed as if once more he had his first sight of his bride under the veil of darkness.¹⁶ The immense night became filled with the loving gaze of Mani’s dark eyes. Mani, the bride of this house, the little girl, became transformed into a world-image,—her throne on the altar of the stars at the confluence of life and death. Jotin said to himself with clasped hands: ‘At last the veil is raised, the covering is rent in this deep darkness. Ah, beautiful one! How often have you wrung my heart, but no longer shall you forsake me!’

¹⁶. The bride and the bridegroom see each other’s face for the first time at the marriage ceremony under a veil thrown over their heads.

MASHI IV

‘I’m suffering, Mashi, but nothing like you imagine. It seems to me as if my pain were gradually separating itself from my life. Like a laden boat, it was so long being towed behind, but the rope has snapped, and now it floats away with all my burdens. Still I can see it, but it is no longer mine... But, Mashi, I’ve not seen Mani even once for the last two days!’

‘Jotin, let me give you another pillow.’

‘It almost seems to me, Mashi, that Mani also has left me like that laden boat of sorrow which drifts away.’

‘Just sip some pomegranate juice, dear! Your throat must be getting dry.’

‘I wrote my will yesterday; did I show it to you? I can’t recollect.’

‘There’s no need to show it to me, Jotin.’

‘When mother died, I had nothing of my own. You fed me and brought me up. Therefore I was saying——’

‘Nonsense, child! I had only this house and a little property. You earned the rest.’

‘But this house——?’

‘That’s nothing. Why, you’ve added to it so much that it’s difficult to find out where my house was!’

‘I’m sure Mani’s love for you is really——’

‘Yes, yes! I know that, Jotin. Now you try to sleep.’

‘Though I have bequeathed all my property to Mani, it is practically yours, Mashi. She will never disobey you.’

‘Why are you worrying so much about that, dear?’

‘All I have I owe to you. When you see my will don’t think for a moment that——’

‘What do you mean, Jotin? Do you think I shall mind for a moment because you give to Mani what belongs to you? Surely I’m not so mean as that?’

‘But you also will have——’

‘Look here, Jotin, I shall get angry with you. You want to console me with money!’

‘Oh, Mashi, how I wish I could give you something better than money!’

‘That you have done, Jotin!—more than enough. Haven’t I had you to fill my lonely house? I must have won that great good-fortune in many previous births! You

have given me so much that now, if my destiny's due is exhausted, I shall not complain. Yes, yes! Give away everything in Mani's name,—your house, your money, your carriage, and your land—such burdens are too heavy for me!’

‘Of course I know you have lost your taste for the enjoyments of life, but Mani is so young that——’

‘No! You mustn't say that. If you want to leave her your property, it is all right, but as for enjoyment——’

‘What harm if she does enjoy herself, Mashi?’

‘No, no, it will be impossible. Her throat will become parched, and it will be dust and ashes to her.’

Jotin remained silent. He could not decide whether it was true or not, and whether it was a matter of regret or otherwise, that the world would become distasteful to Mani for want of him. The stars seemed to whisper in his heart:

‘Indeed it is true. We have been watching for thousands of years, and know that all these great preparations for enjoyment are but vanity.’

Jotin sighed and said: ‘We cannot leave behind us what is really worth giving.’

‘It's no trifle you are giving, dearest. I only pray she may have the power to know the value of what is given her.’

‘Give me a little more of that pomegranate juice, Mashi, I'm thirsty. Did Mani come to me yesterday, I wonder?’

‘Yes, she came, but you were asleep. She sat by your head, fanning you for a long time, and then went away to get your clothes washed.’

‘How wonderful! I believe I was dreaming that very moment that Mani was trying to enter my room. The door was slightly open, and she was pushing against it, but it wouldn't open. But, Mashi, you're going too far,—you ought to let her see that I am dying; otherwise my death will be a terrible shock to her.’

‘*Baba*, let me put this shawl over your feet; they are getting cold.’

‘No, Mashi, I can't bear anything over me like that.’

‘Do you know, Jotin, Mani made this shawl for you? When she ought to have been asleep, she was busy at it. It was finished only yesterday.’

Jotin took the shawl, and touched it tenderly with his hands. It seemed to him that the softness of the wool was Mani's own. Her loving thoughts had been woven night after night with its threads. It was not made merely of wool, but also of her touch.

Therefore, when Mashi drew that shawl over his feet, it seemed as if, night after night, Mani had been caressing his tired limbs.

‘But, Mashi, I thought Mani didn’t know how to knit,—at any rate she never liked it.’

‘It doesn’t take long to learn a thing. Of course I had to teach her. Then there are a good many mistakes in it.’

‘Let there be mistakes; we’re not going to send it to the Paris Exhibition. It will keep my feet warm in spite of its mistakes.’

Jotin’s mind began to picture Mani at her task, blundering and struggling, and yet patiently going on night after night. How sweetly pathetic it was! And again he went over the shawl with his caressing fingers.

‘Mashi, is the doctor downstairs?’

‘Yes, he will stay here tonight.’

‘But tell him it is useless for him to give me a sleeping draught. It doesn’t bring me real rest and only adds to my pain. Let me remain properly awake. Do you know, Mashi, that my wedding took place on the night of the full moon in the month of *Baisakh*? Tomorrow will be that day, and the stars of that very night will be shining in the sky. Mani perhaps has forgotten. I want to remind her of it today; just call her to me for a minute or two... Why do you keep silent? I suppose the doctor has told you I am so weak that any excitement will—but I tell you truly, Mashi, tonight, if I can have only a few minutes’ talk with her, there will be no need for any sleeping draughts. Mashi, don’t cry like that! I am quite well. Today my heart is full as it has never been in my life before. That’s why I want to see Mani. No, no, Mashi, I can’t bear to see you crying! You have been so quiet all these last days. Why are you so troubled tonight?’

‘Oh, Jotin, I thought that I had exhausted all my tears, but I find there are plenty left. I can’t bear it any longer.’

‘Call Mani. I’ll remind her of our wedding night, so that tomorrow she may——’

‘I’m going, dear. Shombhu will wait at the door. If you want anything, call him.’

Mashi went to Mani’s bedroom and sat down on the floor crying,—‘Oh come, come once, you heartless wretch! Keep his last request who has given you his all! Don’t kill him who is already dying!’

Jotin hearing the sound of footsteps started up, saying, ‘Mani!’

‘I am Shombhu. Did you call me?’

‘Ask your mistress to come?’

‘Ask whom?’

‘Your mistress.’

‘She has not yet returned.’

‘Returned? From where?’

‘From Sitarampur.’

‘When did she go?’

‘Three days ago.’

For a moment Jotin felt numb all over, and his head began to swim. He slipped down from the pillows, on which he was reclining, and kicked off the woollen shawl that was over his feet.

When Mashi came back after a long time, Jotin did not mention Mani’s name, and Mashi thought he had forgotten all about her.

Suddenly Jotin cried out: ‘Mashi, did I tell you about the dream I had the other night?’

‘Which dream?’

‘That in which Mani was pushing the door, and the door wouldn’t open more than an inch. She stood outside unable to enter. Now I know that Mani has to stand outside my door till the last.’

Mashi kept silent. She realised that the heaven she had been building for Jotin out of falsehood had toppled down at last. If sorrow comes, it is best to acknowledge it.—When God strikes, we cannot avoid the blow.

‘Mashi, the love I have got from you will last through all my births. I have filled this life with it to carry it with me. In the next birth, I am sure you will be born as my daughter, and I shall tend you with all my love.’

‘What are you saying, Jotin? Do you mean to say I shall be born again as a woman? Why can’t you pray that I should come to your arms as a son?’

‘No, no, not a son! You will come to my house in that wonderful beauty which you had when you were young. I can even imagine how I shall dress you.’

‘Don’t talk so much, Jotin, but try to sleep.’

‘I shall name you “Lakshmi.”’

‘But that is an old-fashioned name, Jotin!’

‘Yes, but you are my old-fashioned Mashi. Come to my house again with those beautiful old-fashioned manners.’

‘I can’t wish that I should come and burden your home with the misfortune of a girl-child!’

‘Mashi, you think me weak, and are wanting to save me all trouble.’

‘My child, I am a woman, so I have my weakness. Therefore I have tried all my life to save you from all sorts of trouble,—only to fail.’

‘Mashi, I have not had time in this life to apply the lessons I have learnt. But they will keep for my next birth. I shall show then what a man is able to do. I have learnt how false it is always to be looking after oneself.’

‘Whatever you may say, darling, you have never grasped anything for yourself, but given everything to others.’

‘Mashi, I can boast of one thing at any rate. I have never been a tyrant in my happiness, or tried to enforce my claims by violence. Because lies could not content me, I have had to wait long. Perhaps truth will be kind to me at last.—Who is that, Mashi, who is that?’

‘Where? There’s no one there, Jotin!’

‘Mashi, just go and see in the other room. I thought I——’

‘No, dear! I don’t see anybody.’

‘But it seemed quite clear to me that——’

‘No, Jotin, it’s nothing. So keep quiet! The doctor is coming now.’

When the doctor entered, he said:

‘Look here, you mustn’t stay near the patient so much, you excite him. You go to bed, and my assistant will remain with him.’

‘No, Mashi, I can’t let you go.’

‘All right, Baba! I will sit quietly in that corner.’

‘No, no! You must sit by my side. I can’t let go your hand, not till the very end. I have been made by your hand, and only from your hand shall God take me.’

‘All right,’ said the doctor, ‘you can remain there. But, Jotin Babu, you must not talk to her. It’s time for you to take your medicine.’

‘Time for my medicine? Nonsense! The time for that is over. To give medicine now is merely to deceive; besides I am not afraid to die. Mashi, Death is busy with his physic; why do you add another nuisance in the shape of a doctor? Send him

away, send him away! It is you alone I need now! No one else, none whatever! No more falsehood!’

‘I protest, as a doctor, this excitement is doing you harm.’

‘Then go, doctor, don’t excite me anymore!—Mashi, has he gone? That’s good! Now come and take my head in your lap.’

‘All right, dear! Now, Baba, try to sleep!’

‘No, Mashi, don’t ask me to sleep. If I sleep, I shall never wake. I still need to keep awake a little longer. Don’t you hear a sound? Somebody is coming.’

MASHI V

‘Jotin dear, just open your eyes a little. She has come. Look once and see!’

‘Who has come? A dream?’

‘Not a dream, darling! Mani has come with her father.’

‘Who are you?’

‘Can’t you see? This is your Mani!’

‘Mani? Has that door opened?’

‘Yes, Baba, it is wide open.’

‘No, Mashi, not that shawl! Not *that* shawl! That shawl is a fraud!’

‘It is not a shawl, Jotin! It is our Mani, who has flung herself on your feet. Put your hand on her head and bless her. Don’t cry like that, Mani! There will be time enough for that. Keep quiet now for a little.’