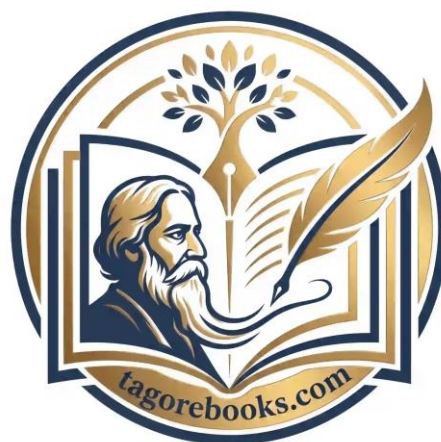


PLAY

HOUSE- WARMING

Rabindranath Tagore



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CHARACTERS

JATIN — a dying young man.

MONI — his wife .

MASHI — his aunt .

HIMI — his sister .

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN — called by some "Aunt Kayet," by Mashi "Suro" .

THE DOCTOR AKHIL — a lawyer, a nephew to Mashi .

SHAMBHU — a servant .

SHAIL — a kinswoman.

ACT ONE

A room adjoining Jatin's own.

The Neighbour Woman and Jatin's sister, Himi.

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. And how is Jatin today, Himi?

HIMI. Not well, Aunt Kayet.

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. Tell me — does his appetite still hold?

HIMI. No — he can't even keep down a spoonful of barley-water.

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. Now, listen to me, child, just this once. My own son-in-law had exactly the same thing. By the god's mercy he could still eat — his appetite held, and that was his salvation. But the moment he tried to turn on his side — Jatin has that same pain in the ribs too, doesn't he—

HIMI. No — he has no pain at all.

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. Well, never mind that then. But my son-in-law lay bedridden in just this way for months and months. So I say, child, why not send to Faridpur for that Kapileshwar Thakur — if you say the word, my own son Atul could—

HIMI. Why don't you try asking my aunt, just once, whether she might—

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. Your aunt? She won't hear a word of it. Does she believe in anything at all? If she did, would things have come to such a state? Tell me, Himi — your sister-in-law doesn't even go near Jatin's room these days, does she?

HIMI. No, no — now and then she does—

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. No use hiding it from me, child. You were all so set on bringing such a beauty into the family — well, and what good is your fairy-bride's beauty to you now, in these days of sorrow, tell me that. Better a plain, dark, homely girl than—

HIMI. Don't say such things, Aunt Kayet. Our sister-in-law is only a child still—

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. Oh, a child, is she! Do you think we have no eyes, just because her age was fudged a little for the marriage? Such a fine boy, Jatin — and this is what falls to his lot— ah, here comes Moni—

Moni enters.

Come, child, come. Were you up on the roof, then?

MONI. Yes.

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. The Shils' bridegroom's procession went by, I suppose — you went up to see it? Ah, well, a child like you, cooped up day and night in a sickroom—

MONI. I only went up to water my plants.

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. That reminds me — you must give me a cutting or two of your roses. My Atul's ever so fond of gardening — just like you.

MONI. I'll give you some.

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. And listen, child — you never touch that gramophone of yours these days — if you like, I could have it repaired at my own expense, and—

MONI. Oh, just take it, why don't you.

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. Your daughter-in-law's hand is very open indeed, isn't it. Well, why wouldn't it be — such a grand family she comes from. A regular Lakshmi. Ah, here comes your aunt — I'll be off. She sits guarding Jatin's door like a watchdog. Can't keep the illness out, so she keeps the rest of us out instead.

Exit.

HIMI. What are you looking for, sister?

MONI. That little dish I feed my puppy from.

Mashi enters.

MASHI. Bou-ma, you know Jatin lies there with his ear straining for the sound of your footstep. Go in now, in this evening hour, and light the lamp yourself in the sickroom — let it gladden his heart. Well? Answer me, won't you.

MONI. Just now, we were—

MASHI. Whoever it is, I'm not asking you to stay long. It's time for his makaradhwaja now. I saved that task for you especially. Take the little dish, stand by his pillow, and stir it slowly with honey. Once he's taken the medicine, you may come away again.

MONI. But I went to his room at midday.

MASHI. He was asleep then.

MONI. Whenever I go into that room in the evening, a kind of dread comes over me.

MASHI. Why — what is it you're afraid of?

MONI. It was in that very room that my father-in-law died — I remember it so clearly.

MASHI. No one has died. Is there a single such spot left anywhere on earth?

MONI. Don't say it, Mashi, don't — truly, I'm terribly afraid of death.

MASHI. Well then, child — in the daytime, at least, couldn't you go a little more often—

MONI. I've tried to go. But something creeps over my skin. He looks at my face in such a strange way — his eyes seem to burn.

MASHI. And what is there to be afraid of in that?

MONI. It feels as though he's gazing at my face from very far away — as though he isn't quite in this world at all.

MASHI. Well then, child — you might at least prepare these medicines and remedies from outside the room. If he hears you've done something with your own hands, that will count for something, at least—

MONI. Mashi, let me be. I can't spend my days and nights fussing over sickroom business.

MASHI. Let me ask you this once — if you yourself ever fell gravely ill, then—

MONI. I don't remember ever being ill. Once, when we were staying at the garden-house in Konnagar, I had a fever. Mother locked me in my room. I slipped out all

the same and went and bathed in a filthy pond. Everyone was sure it would turn to pneumonia. Nothing happened at all. The fever left that very day.

MASHI. Has no misfortune, no calamity, ever touched your own family?

MONI. I've never seen one. It was in this house that I saw death for the first time. I keep wishing I could get away, go somewhere, anywhere at all. The smell of liniment makes me feel as though the very air has been possessed by some hospital ghost.

MASHI. If that's truly your temperament, then how are you to manage, in this household—

MONI. I don't know. Why not make me the gardener of your garden instead — that, at least, I could truly manage.

Exits swiftly.

HIMI. You see, Mashi — my sister-in-law has such a nature that, try as I might, I can't even manage to be angry with her. It's as though Providence sent her into this world without laying any burden upon her at all. Sorrow and suffering have no meaning for her whatsoever.

MASHI. God spent such great care fashioning her outward self that He never found the time to finish the inward one. Very like your brother's own house here. He began it with such tremendous ceremony — and by the time the outer wing was finished, he'd gone bankrupt — the scaffolding of the inner wing was never taken down at all. These days we can do nothing but distract him — about the house, and about Moni too.

HIMI. I can't understand — is this doing us any good?

MASHI. What do you know, Himi? When death stands right before you, what does it matter whether the house is finished or not? And so I tell him — whatever you have resolved upon, with your whole undivided heart, that alone has been completed. That, Himi, is the only truth there is.

HIMI. The house, perhaps, has become that. But — sister-in-law?

MASHI. Himi, the One who made your sister-in-law beautiful — in His own design, she is already complete. The eternal Moni, the Moni who is God's own heart's

treasure — she is the Kaustubha jewel itself, and in her there is no flaw anywhere at all. Let Jatin, at the hour of his death, look only upon that Moni of the Divine imagination.

HIMI. Mashi, when I hear you speak like this, my whole mind fills with light.

MASHI. Himi, I only ever speak — but I don't spare myself from being angry with the girl, even so. I understand everything, and still I can't quite forgive her either. But Himi, when you said just now that you can't bring yourself to be angry with your sister-in-law — in that, I knew for certain, you are truly Jatin's own sister. Let me go to him now.

Exit.

In the sickroom.

JATIN. Mashi, has all the stonework in the third-floor room been finished?

MASHI. Yes. Finished yesterday, every bit of it.

JATIN. So — after all this time, it's done. My house-building of so many years is finished at last, my dream of so many days.

MASHI. So many people are coming to see this house of yours, Jatin.

JATIN. They see it from the outside. What I see from within is not yet finished — will never, in any age, be finished. What artist, since the world began, having set the last stone of his imagined palace in place, has ever said, "Now my work is complete"? Even the Creator of the universe could not say it — His work, too, goes on.

MASHI. But no more now, my child — you must sleep a little.

JATIN. No, Mashi — don't tell me to sleep so early today—

MASHI. But the doctor—

JATIN. Let the doctor be. Today my whole world stands finished. I won't sleep today — light every lamp in the house tonight, Mashi. Where is Moni? Just once, let her—

MASHI. I've had her seated in that new room on the third floor, dressed with flowers.

JATIN. However did that occur to you? Wonderful. Did you set the two auspicious water-jars on either side of the door?

MASHI. Yes, of course I did.

JATIN. And the lotus alpana traced on the floor?

MASHI. Need you even ask?

JATIN. Could you not, somehow, have me carried up there, just this once? Just to see it, once — my Moni, sitting there in the very centre of the room she made herself.

MASHI. No, Jatin, that cannot possibly be — the doctor would be very angry indeed.

JATIN. I can see the whole picture in my mind already. Which sari has she worn?

MASHI. The red one — her wedding sari.

JATIN. Do you know what I mean to call this house of mine, Mashi?

MASHI. Tell me.

JATIN. Moni-saudha. The Palace of the Jewel.

MASHI. A fine name.

JATIN. You don't quite grasp the whole meaning of it, Mashi.

MASHI. No — perhaps not the whole of it.

JATIN. A *saudha* isn't merely a house — there is *sudha* within it too — nectar—

MASHI. There is, Jatin — this was never built with money alone — you have poured the very nectar of your own heart into it.

JATIN. You'll laugh, perhaps, to hear this—

MASHI. No — why would I laugh, Jatin? Go on — what were you saying?

JATIN. I understand today what consolation Shah Jahan found in building the Taj Mahal. A consolation that outlasted even his own death, and endures to this—

MASHI. Don't talk any more, Jatin — if you won't sleep, then sleep not, but be quiet a while and just think.

JATIN. Moni has put on that red Benarasi, her wedding sari! Just once today let her—

MASHI. The doctor forbids it, Jatin—

JATIN. The doctor thinks — for fear that I—

MASHI. Not for your sake — for Moni's own. You can't tell it from outside, but within her—

JATIN. There's some weakness, the doctor says, I suppose—

MASHI. We've all of us noticed it—

JATIN. Ah, poor thing — then be careful with her — there's no need, it's best she keep well away from the sickroom.

MASHI. She'd be only too glad to come, but it's we who—

JATIN. No, no, there's no need, no need. Mashi, there's an album on that shelf — could you hand it to me?—

[The album is brought.]

I was telling you about the Taj Mahal. It strikes me now that I've become very like that same Shah Jahan — I on this shore of a failing life, she on the far shore of a full one — so far away, beyond all reach. Just as the Emperor's own Mumtaz was! To her alone I have dedicated this house of mine — my own Taj Mahal. Within it she dwells, and will dwell forever, and yet she is nowhere near my own eyes.

MASHI. Oh, Jatin, why do you go on talking so? Rest a moment — let me bring your sleeping draught.

JATIN. No, Mashi, no. Not sleep, not today. Waking, I gain something still; in sleep, everything else is lost besides. — Mashi, I speak to you of nothing but Moni, always — you don't mind, do you?

MASHI. Not at all, Jatin. I can't tell you how much I love hearing it. Do you know whose memory it brings back to me?

JATIN. Whose?

MASHI. Your mother's. Just so, once, I had to listen to the secrets of her own heart. Your father was living in our house then, studying at the Medical College. No one in that house but I knew what was in your mother's heart in those days. When your grandfather brought forward another match for her, it was I who—

JATIN. I've heard that from you before. Grandfather could do nothing with Mother in the end, and had to marry her to Father after all. It gives me such joy to imagine that time.

MASHI. Your mother's love — that was a penance, truly. For five long years the fire of her devotion burned, and only then did she win her boon. Jatin, I see that very same fire in you, and I marvel at it.

JATIN. Mother poured that sacrificial fire of hers into my own blood — my own penance, too, will win its boon. Somehow, Mashi, it feels to me as though the time for that boon has drawn very near.— Where is that flute playing?

MASHI. A wedding shehnai. This is a wedding hour tonight.

JATIN. How strange. This very day Moni has put on her red Benarasi. In one lifetime, the wedding hour may come again and again. Tell them to light every lamp in the house tonight, Mashi. Beginning at the gate—

MASHI. So much light will hurt your eyes — you won't be able to sleep, Jatin—

JATIN. No harm will come of it. Waking, I'll find more peace than sleep could give me. Do you know, Mashi? The temple is finished — now comes the consecration of the goddess's own image. I never thought, while I lived, that it would come this far.

MASHI. If I stay in the room, you won't stop talking. I'll go now. If you won't sleep, at least be quiet.

JATIN. Very well — bring me the plan I drew for the house — and that box of my old playthings too. Speaking of playthings, that song comes back to me — Himi, Himi—

MASHI. Don't fret, Jatin, I'll call her.

Exit.

Himi enters.

HIMI. Yes, brother?

JATIN. Sing me that song, sister — the one about the little playhouse—

HIMI SINGS

I have set myself to building a little house of play, deep within my heart — how many nights I have lain awake for it, what words can tell you?

The wayfarer calls out along the road, but I find no leisure, alas, to answer; though the games outside call to me still — how am I to go?

With what all others cast aside, what lies scattered and unwanted, with broken clods of long-gone days, I build my house.

He who is my one eternal plaything, his alone is this small throne of play — by what spell shall he ever join what has once been broken?

The Doctor enters.

THE DOCTOR. Singing, is it — good, good, very good — better than any medicine. Keep your spirits up, Jatin, everything will come right. To die before ninety-five is a crime, you know — a hanging offence.

JATIN. My spirits are very high indeed. Do you know, Doctor — after all this time, my house-building is finished. Every bit of it my own design.

THE DOCTOR. That's the thing. A man only truly fits a house he's built himself. A father's house, when you come down to it, is only rented lodging — never truly one's own. Your father was my own classmate; he hadn't a scrap of that ancestral-property nonsense about him, apart from the life in him. Whatever he had, he built up himself, watching it grow before his own eyes. And what joy is there greater than that? His own father-in-law had opposed the marriage, and so out of pure spite he refused to take a paisa of his father-in-law's property. And you too have built your own nest with your own hands — that, too, is cause for joy, I should think.

JATIN. I'm in the highest of spirits.

THE DOCTOR. Good, good. Now let there be a proper house-warming. Feed us all — you can't just lie about like that, you know.

JATIN. It does feel to me today as though the house-warming will happen. Let me look at the almanac once more. On whichever day the first auspicious hour comes—

THE DOCTOR. Good, good. Never mind the almanac, my boy — it all depends on the mind. Whenever the mind decides the auspicious day has come, that auspicious day arrives.

JATIN. My mind tells me the auspicious day has come. That's why I called Himi to sing for me. It's as though the house-warming shehnai has already begun playing in the autumn sky today.

THE DOCTOR. Let it play. In the meantime let me feel your pulse, examine your chest. Before we order the sweets and confections, let's get this tiresome nuisance out of the way. What do you say, my boy?

JATIN. Whatever the pulse says, what difference does it make?

THE DOCTOR. None at all, none at all. We do these things only to distract the mind. We put on the mask of Dhanvantari and lay hands on the patient's chest and back and belly and pocket, while Death himself sits by, laughing. No one but the doctor himself can ever shake Death's own gravity. Himi, my dear, go into the next room and sing — sing like a bird. I'm writing a book, you know, in which I mean to prove that when a wave of song comes, it washes the very sickness clean out of the air. All illnesses are out of tune, don't you know — a whole tuneless, rhythmless rabble, throwing the body's own rhythm out of step. Go on now, my dear, raise your voice a little and sing.

HIMI. Which one shall I sing, brother?

JATIN. That new wedding song.

THE DOCTOR. Yes, yes, that'll do nicely. There's an auspicious hour tonight, in fact. I had to pass three separate wedding processions on my way here — that's what made me late.

Himi sings, entering the next room.

HIMI'S SONG

Play, O flute, play. Fair one, in sandal garland, dress yourself for the blessed evening.

In this sweet month of spring, does the restless traveller come? Has the champak, trembling under the bee's light foot, not yet bloomed in the courtyard?

A crimson cloth about your head, a palash-bloom bracelet on your wrist — anklets ringing at your feet, on air steeped in fragrance — amid the murmured songs of blessing, dwell in the garden of paradise.

In the next room, the Doctor and Mashi.

THE DOCTOR. It's better to know the truth plainly. Whatever grief must be borne, it's best to accept it as it is — trying to soften a grief by deceit only makes it heavier in the end.

MASHI. Doctor, why do you say all this?

THE DOCTOR. I'm telling you that you must be prepared.

MASHI. Doctor, do you imagine you can prepare me with just those two words? Since I was eighteen years old, God Himself has been preparing me — the way bricks are baked, stacked and fired in the kiln. My own ruin was laid down long, long ago; only the very last of it remains now. Providence has told me plainly enough, in His own way, whatever He meant to tell me — why must you tell it to me so roundabout?

THE DOCTOR. There's no hope left for Jatin. Only a few days more, at most.

MASHI. I have taken note of it. Let me finish what household duties remain in these last few days — and then, if the Lord is merciful, on His day of rest, He may take me up into His own work as well.

THE DOCTOR. I've changed his medicine a little. What he needs above all now is to be kept cheerful. There's no better doctor than the mind itself.

MASHI. The mind! Ah, well. I'll do what I can.

THE DOCTOR. You ought to let your daughter-in-law come to him rather more often. It seems to me you keep her rather too much at bay.

MASHI. After all, she's only a child — how could she possibly bear the strain of nursing?

THE DOCTOR. That won't do as an excuse. You do her something of a wrong yourself, if I may say so. I've observed that the girl has real strength of spirit. Such a weight hangs over her head, and yet she hasn't broken under it.

MASHI. And yet, underneath, surely there's some—

THE DOCTOR. We doctors know only the sufferings of the sick — the sufferings of the well aren't ours to consider. Send your daughter-in-law to me instead — I'll tell her myself, plainly.

MASHI. No, no, there's no need for that — I'll tell her myself—

THE DOCTOR. You see, in our profession we have every opportunity to come to understand human nature rather well. I've learned this much: that the natural jealousy a mother-in-law bears her daughter-in-law doesn't die away even in the gravest hour of danger. That the wife might win her husband's heart through nursing him — this, somehow, is never quite—

MASHI. It isn't a lie — such jealousy may well exist. So much sin hides itself away in the heart — who but the One who dwells within can ever truly know?

THE DOCTOR. And why only toward your nephew's wife? Isn't there a duty owed toward her as well? Think it over with your own heart — what must her state of mind be like. The poor thing must surely be restless, longing to come to him.

MASHI. My powers of judgment aren't very great — I hadn't thought that far.

THE DOCTOR. I'm a blunt-spoken man, you see — I can't help but say what's right. Don't take offence.

MASHI. Why should I take offence, Doctor? If there's some wrong somewhere, how is it ever to be corrected without someone pointing it out? I'll bear your words in mind — there'll be no fault on my side—

Exit the Doctor.

Himi, what are you doing?

HIMI. Warming milk for brother.

MASHI. Never mind, I'll warm the milk. You go and sing Jatin a little something. Listening to your singing seems to bring some sleep to his eyes.

The Neighbour Woman enters.

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. Sister, how is Jatin today?

MASHI. Not well, Suro.

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. Listen to me, sister. Do let our Jagu Doctor have a look at him, just once. My granddaughter's nose had swollen up terribly — in the end Jagu Doctor came and drew out a great glass bead from right inside her right nostril. Marvellous hand he has. My son knows his address.

MASHI. Very well — tell him to send the address along.

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. I saw your daughter-in-law at the zoo in Alipore the other day.

MASHI. She's very fond of animals — she goes there often.

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. And just because she loves animals, does that mean she can't love her husband too?

MASHI. Who said she doesn't love him? She's only a child — how could she survive, staying by a sickbed day and night? It's we who force her out—

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. Well, say what you like, but the whole neighbourhood's women are all talking about her—

MASHI. The neighbourhood's women haven't married her, Suro. My Jatin understands her — he's never once—

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. Well, sister, just because he says nothing doesn't mean—

MASHI. Only says nothing? She takes such joy going off, now to the museum, now to see the tigers and bears—

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. What are you saying, sister. Surely nursing is worth more than—

MASHI. He says himself that this, for Moni, is nursing. Jatin lies confined to his bed — but when Moni goes out roaming, Jatin feels, somehow, that he too has been let out for a little while. Is that so small a thing, for a sick man?

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. Who's to say, sister — we're old-fashioned people, we can't make sense of such things. Well, never mind — I'll send my son round, sister. He knows Jagu Doctor's address. No harm in having him take a look, once.

Exit.

In the sickroom.

JATIN. Ah, Himi, you've come. Thank goodness. I can't find that photograph anywhere — do have a look for it, sister.

HIMI. Which photograph, brother?

JATIN. The one taken under the tree with Moni, at the Botanical Gardens.

HIMI. That was in your album, wasn't it?

JATIN. I took it out of the album just a little while ago. It must be somewhere in the bed — or it may have fallen to the floor.

HIMI. Here it is, brother — under the pillow.

JATIN. It feels like something from another lifetime. That spot beneath the neem tree. Moni was wearing a saffron-coloured sari. Her hair was tied low, at the back of her neck. Do you remember, Himi, some bou-kotha-kau bird was calling and calling somewhere, restlessly. The tide was in on the river — what a wind there was, and what a rustling, whispering sound in the branches of the jhau trees. Moni was gathering the jhau berries, peeling their skins and smelling them — she said, I love this scent so much. I never knew what all she loved — but through her loving it, I have tasted this whole world so richly. Sing me that song you sang that day, Himi. There's a good girl. You remember it, don't you?

HIMI. Yes, I remember.

SONG

*Upon the lake-waters of youth, a hundred-petalled lotus of meeting trembles in
some restless flood.*

*In the crimson blush of shyness a secret dream awakens; and there, among its
fragrant stamens, one single drop of tears.*

*Blow gently, gently, O breeze, touch it with such tenderness. My fearful heart
trembles lest the stem's own thread should break — and so, for no reason at all,
my eyes brim with a needless pity.*

JATIN. That day, beneath the tree, the whole world seemed to speak. Today, within these walls, the whole world has fallen utterly silent. Those walls are like her own pale lips. Himi, dim the light a little more. On that side, so many shades of green were spilling from the trees into the sky, and on the other, the smoke curling up from the factory chimneys — how lovely its colour was too, and what a lovely shape. Everything pleased me that day. And that dog of yours — Moni kept throwing a ball into the water, over and over, and it would swim out after—

HIMI. Brother, you mustn't talk any more now.

JATIN. Very well, I won't. I'll close my eyes and listen — that rustling of the jhau trees. But Himi, the way you sang it today — was it just as it was then? Who can say. Let it grow a little darker still, and I'll hear it of its own accord — *blow gently, gently, O breeze.* Go on now. Where did I leave that photograph?

HIMI. Here it is!

Exit.

In the next room, Mashi and Akhil.

AKHIL. Why did you send for me, Kaki?

MASHI. My boy, you're a lawyer — there's something you simply must do for me.

AKHIL. They can't wait any longer, it seems — they've got their decree, and now they mean to have it executed—

MASHI. They won't have to wait much longer. They're your own clients, after all. Explain it to them a little — tell them the doctor has said—

AKHIL. The doctor's already said it once before, hasn't he — this time they don't seem inclined to believe it. Mortgaging a house in order to build a house — whatever possessed Jatin to think of such a scheme?

MASHI. It's no fault of his, none at all — where his good sense ought to have sat, Moni has sat instead, like some baleful star. He thought he could hold his Moni, that will-o'-the-wisp light of his, fast within a wall of brick.

AKHIL. But he did have some ready cash, surely?

MASHI. All of it thrown into the jute trade.

AKHIL. Jatin, in the jute trade! A pen trying to plough a field. Should I laugh or weep?

MASHI. He set about spending far beyond what anyone could manage, thinking he'd make a quick profit buying and selling jute. However it is that flies smell out a wound from the sky, the moment there's the faintest whiff of ruin about, every manner of ill-advising scoundrel comes flocking from who knows where.

AKHIL. Disaster! The market's such now that farmers can't even cover the cost of cutting their own standing jute.

MASHI. Enough, enough, say no more. No use even thinking of it any longer — the days are running out.

AKHIL. Kaki, the creditors have probably got wind of his jute business by now — realised there'll be a whole flock of vultures gathering soon, and so they're hurrying to collect what's owed them first.

MASHI. Akhil, tell them to wait just these few days more — don't let the court's own bailiff race Death's own messenger to the door. Or else take me to your client myself. I'm a brahmin's daughter — I'll go and beat my head at his very feet.

AKHIL. Very well, let me have a word with them first — if it comes to it, perhaps you will have to go. Let me look in on Jatin before I leave.

MASHI. No — the sight of you will only bring his business troubles back to his mind.

AKHIL. Very well — and that life insurance he took out in Moni's name, some good while back — what's become of that?

MASHI. That I've somehow managed to keep afloat, whatever it's cost me. Whatever little I had went into it, along with all this money for the doctor besides. I can't save Jatin — but if I can save this one gift of his, that will be some comfort to me. Do you remember what a fuss he'd make, now and then, whenever the premium fell due? For pity's sake, Akhil, tell your client—

AKHIL. Look here, Kaki, I'll be honest with you — I haven't the smallest scrap of pity for him. Such grand, kingly folly—

MASHI. But look, too, how much mercy God has shown him. He set himself to building this house with his whole heart and soul — it isn't finished, true enough, but his old playmate has come now to gather up the broken toy and take him along with it. Who knows to what other game he's been invited now.

AKHIL. Kaki, it's a pity our law-books nowhere set down this business of yours about games and playmates. If they did, we'd starve outright, instead of scraping a living as we do — otherwise we'd all go under, whim by whim, straight to the bankrupt's own landing-ghat.

Exit.

Moni enters.

MASHI. Bou, has any word come from your father's house? I saw your cousin Anath about.

MONI. Yes — Mother's sent word that my little sister's rice-feeding ceremony is next Friday. So I was thinking—

MASHI. Very good, child — send a gold necklace along, your mother will be pleased.

MONI. I was thinking I would go myself. I've never seen my little sister — I do want to see her.

MASHI. Oh, my dear, what are you saying — leave Jatin alone and go?

MONI. I won't be gone very long.

MASHI. Who's to say how long is "not very long," child? Is time truly in our own hands? A single blink of the eye, and it's too late.

MONI. After three sons, such a dearly loved daughter — there'll be a grand ceremony. If I don't go, Mother will be terribly—

MASHI. I can't quite understand your mother's way of thinking, child — her own heart, surrounded on all sides by the seven seas of a mother's own weeping, and still she doesn't understand another's grief, calling you away, again and again—

MONI. Listen, Mashi, I won't have you speaking against my mother, I tell you plainly. If you were my own mother-in-law by blood, I might still bear it — but—

MASHI. Very well, Moni, I've done wrong, forgive me. I'm not speaking to you now as a mother-in-law — I'm pleading with you, plainly, as one poor woman to another — don't go, not at this time, with Jatin as he is. If you go, your father will be angry — that much I know for certain.

MONI. I know that too — you'll have to write him a line, Mashi. Tell him that my going makes no particular—

MASHI. That your going does no harm at all — do you think I don't know that? But if I must write to your father, I'll write exactly what's in my heart, and nothing less.

MONI. Very well then — never mind your letter. What's all this fuss over my simply going to my father's house? When he wanted to go and study in Germany, that was when a passport was needed. Is my own father's house Germany, then?

MASHI. All right, all right, don't raise your voice so. There — I think he's calling me. I'm coming, Jatin. I wonder if he heard any of that.

Exit.

In Jatin's room.

MASHI. Were you calling me, Jatin?

JATIN. Yes, Mashi. I was lying here thinking — there's no help for it, I'm a prisoner, wound about in the net of my illness, walled in on every side — and yet why do I go on binding Moni in just the same way?

MASHI. What are you saying now, Jatin, there's no telling. Her whole life is bound up with yours — do you think her bonds will simply fall away, just because you wish to release her?

JATIN. There was a time when a wife would go to the funeral pyre with her husband — that wrong, at least, has since been stopped. But this — this is Moni's own suttee, moment by moment, a living suttee. The very thought of it leaves me breathless — set her free from it, Mashi, set her free.

MASHI. Why do you say such a thing all of a sudden, Jatin? Did some word reach your ear in a half-waking dream, perhaps?

JATIN. No, no — I've been thinking of it a long while now, the rustling of the jhau trees, the tide on the river, that distant bou-kotha-kau bird calling. I kept remembering Moni's saffron sari, and how she played with the dog, and her laughter for no reason at all. Why should her restless, living spirit be shut up within these dead walls? Give her leave. How long it's been since I've heard her laughter in this house. Shall her own fresh current, her own new tide, be dammed up and held back by these medicine bottles and this sickroom diet? It feels wrong to me — deeply wrong.

MASHI. Not wrong at all, not the least bit wrong. Only one who has life to give can ever give it. It's only the full cloud, after all, that can rain. Don't sit up, Jatin — lie back, don't fret so. Where is it you mean to send Moni, tell me — I don't quite follow.

JATIN. Suppose Moni went to her father's house — I keep forgetting where her father is just now—

MASHI. Sitarampur.

JATIN. Yes, Sitarampur. It's open country there — send her there.

MASHI. Just listen to yourself. Why would she want to go off to her father's house, leaving you in this condition?

JATIN. What has the doctor said — does she—

MASHI. Let her not know that. But she has eyes to see with. The other day, the moment there was the faintest hint of her going to her father's, the poor girl wept without end.

JATIN. Truly, Mashi? Moni wept? Truly? You saw it yourself?

MASHI. Jatin, don't sit up, don't — lie back. Oh dear, I've forgotten to shut the storeroom — the dog will get in this very minute. I must go — you sleep a little, Jatin.

JATIN. I'll sleep properly this time, don't worry. Just one thing more — fix the auspicious day for the house-warming.

MASHI. What are you saying, Jatin, in your condition—

JATIN. You may none of you believe it — but my heart tells me the day of the house-warming has come. I shall be able to go, I'm certain I shall be able to go. Have everything made ready from this very hour. Let there be no delay again, when the time comes.

MASHI. It shall be done, it shall be done, don't fret over it.

JATIN. Tell Moni too, this very hour. She has her own part to play in it, hasn't she?

MASHI. She has indeed, Jatin, she has.

JATIN. You shall welcome the two of us together.— Ah, Mashi, one question keeps coming to my mind, and I've been too afraid to ask anyone. Can you tell me? Has the jute market gone up at all, of late?

MASHI. I don't quite know. Akhil was saying something about it.

JATIN. What, what was he saying? I don't want to frighten you, but this much is certain — if the market hasn't gone up, then—

MASHI. What then?

JATIN. Then this house of mine — it will turn to mere mirage, in an instant. There — there, that's our jute-office manager. Narahari, Narahari—

MASHI. Jatin, don't shout so, for pity's sake, lie still. I'll go, I'll speak with him myself.

JATIN. I'm afraid, somehow — Mashi, if the market truly has turned bad, speak to Akhil, see if he can somehow—

MASHI. Very well, I'll speak with Akhil. You just now—

JATIN. Do you know, Mashi? The money I borrowed — it was Akhil's own money, lent under another man's name—

MASHI. I'd guessed as much myself.

JATIN. But listen — don't let Narahari come near me. I'm afraid of what he might say. I can't bear it — take him to Akhil instead.

MASHI. I'm going to do just that—

JATIN. If you have the almanac with you, do send it in to me.

MASHI. Never mind the almanac now, sleep.

JATIN. Moni wept, at the thought of going to her father's house? I find that very strange indeed.

MASHI. What's so strange in that?

JATIN. She's that very Urvashi of Amaravati, where no shadow of death ever falls — and you would all turn her into some private hospital's nurse?

MASHI. Jatin, would you look at her only as some picture, then — something to hang upon a wall?

JATIN. What's the harm in that? A true picture is a very rare thing in this world. Is it so small a fortune, to be granted the chance to look upon the very thing that was made to be looked at? Never mind — you said Moni wept? Even the lotus, Lakshmi's own seat, sighs and sets the fragrant air to weeping sometimes?

MASHI. If a woman can't be allowed to nurse, then—

JATIN. Shah Jahan had no want of women to keep his household running — and yet, among them all, there was only the one whom he saw as having nothing at all that needed doing. Otherwise the Taj Mahal would never have come into his mind. The Taj Mahal, too, has no need of anything. Mashi, the moment I'm well again, I'll take up this house once more. As long as I live, this alone shall be my one task — bringing this house, my Moni-saudha, to completion. I saw the Divine dream with

my own eyes, and I wish only to leave behind the news that I dressed my own dream in its finery. Perhaps you don't quite follow what I mean, Mashi.

MASHI. I tell you truly, child, I don't quite understand you men and your talk.

JATIN. Open that window a little wider.— *[Mashi opens the window.]* — Look, look there, every tear-drop of the ancient darkness has turned to a star.— Where's Himi, Mashi. Has she gone to sleep?

MASHI. No, it isn't very late yet. Himi, come here, listen.

Himi enters.

JATIN. They've forbidden me to sing, so I must keep calling for you instead — don't mind it, sister.

HIMI. No, brother, you know how much I love to sing. Tell me which song you'd like.

JATIN. That one — *my heart gazes on, gazes on...*

HIMI'S SONG

*My heart gazes on, gazes on, beholding within itself some sweetness. My eyes
wander, beggared, restless, never at peace.*

*Gazing, gazing, within my breast a single-stringed instrument hums low; along
every path of my heart's own longing a flute has begun to play. Cradled in beauty,
see there, swaying — a formless sweetness.*

*Upon some shoreless lake of feeling, a rootless flower floats on the water.
Whenever I reach to seize it in my hand, a wave comes and pushes it away — I sit
still, within my own mind, and steal nothing.*

It is not a thing to be seized and held, this formless sweetness.

JATIN. Mashi, you've always believed, all this while, that Moni's heart was restless — that it never truly settled in our home — but look now—

MASHI. No, my child, I misjudged her — one only truly knows a person when the time comes.

JATIN. You thought I could never be happy with Moni, and so you were angry with her. But happiness is like those stars — it shows itself only in the gaps between darkneses. Hasn't the light of heaven shone through the gaps of my own life too? I have received what was mine to receive — I have nothing left to say. But Mashi, she's still so young — what will she have left, to live by?

MASHI. What do you mean, so young? We too, child, at just that age, set our own gods afloat toward the world and drew them back again, inward, toward our hearts. What harm came of it? And truly — what such great need is there for happiness, after all?

JATIN. From the moment I heard that Moni wept, I understood — her heart has awakened. Call her to me once, Mashi. She came at midday, once — that was the first light of day, and I thought, suddenly, there wasn't a single shadow anywhere in her. Let me see her once now, in this evening dark — perhaps I'll catch a glimpse of that same hidden tear within her.

MASHI. Her love for you is still too shy to lift its veil before you — and so all her weeping stays hidden, out of sight.

JATIN. Very well, let it stay hidden then. But you must bring me word of what lies behind that veil, Mashi. For when the veil finally lifts — perhaps then— but tonight, this evening, I want especially to speak with her a little.

MASHI. What is this special thing you have to say, tell me.

JATIN. My Moni-saudha is finished at last — I want to give her that news with my own lips. The house-warming isn't mine to have — it's hers alone to make. It was for her that I made all this — this song of mine, sung on strings of brick and mortar.

MASHI. Doesn't she know that already?

JATIN. Even so, it must be properly offered to her. I'll tell Himi to stand outside her door and sing that song—

My life's own offering, accept it — accept it, at its highest, its utmost worth. —

Go now, Mashi, call her in. — Ah, look, Mashi, isn't that Narahari coming to see me — my jute-office manager — don't let him come in here today. No, no, no, I don't want to hear anything at all. Whatever news he has, I'll face it later.

Exit Mashi.

JATIN. Himi, listen, listen—

Himi enters.

Let me sing you a song. You must learn this one.

HIMI. No, brother, don't sing — the doctor's forbidden it.

JATIN. I'll just hum it low. That old song of Kinu the Baul's has come back to me, after so long.

SONG

*Ah, when your heart did not wake, then the beloved of your heart came knocking
at your door.*

*And at the sound of his going away your sleep, oh, was broken — broken there, in
the dark.*

*The very wind of his turning back struck deep into your breast; that same wind,
within your own soul, shall raise a storm of lamentation yet.—*

I understood from what your aunt said, Himi — Moni's heart has woken. Perhaps you don't quite follow what I mean. Never mind. Have you seen the whole of the house?

HIMI. It's turned out beautifully.

JATIN. The upstairs room, where I had the stonework laid — where's the plan? Here, this room — has the wooden canopy been fitted over the beams there?

HIMI. Yes, it has.

JATIN. And what sort of work is on it, tell me.

HIMI. A broad blue border all around, and in the centre a field of red lotuses with white geese — just as you described it.

JATIN. And the walls?

HIMI. A row of herons, worked in inlaid shell.

JATIN. And the floor?

HIMI. A conch-shell border on the floor, and in the middle a great lotus-seat.

JATIN. Have they set the two white marble jars on either side of the door outside?

HIMI. Yes, they have — with two little electric bulbs set inside them — so lovely.

JATIN. Do you know what that room is called?

HIMI. I know — Moni-mandir. The Jewel's Own Shrine.

JATIN. Akhil came to see your aunt the other day. Did you hear anything of what he said? About this house?

HIMI. He was saying there's no house in all Calcutta so beautiful.

JATIN. No, no, not that. Was Akhil talking about this house's — never mind, let it be. Mashī was saying that fish curry made at midday today, with the tiny morala fish — that Moni had made it herself — such a lovely flavour. Did you—

HIMI. I couldn't say.

JATIN. Oh, shame on you, sister, that even to this day you and your sister-in-law haven't quite got on — this troubles me—

HIMI. I'm her sister-in-law, after all — perhaps that's why—

JATIN. Do you nurse your grudges by following the scriptures too, then?

HIMI. Yes, brother — you know that Hindi song — *nanadiya rahi jaagi* — "the husband's sister lay wakeful"—

JATIN. I suppose you've changed it a little for yourself — *nanadiya rahi raagi* — "the husband's sister lay resentful."

HIMI. Yes, brother, it doesn't sound half bad set to the tune — (*singing*) *nanadiya rahi raagi*—

JATIN. But don't sing it out of tune, sister.

HIMI. How could I? It was you who taught me my music.

JATIN. Ah, there — I see a whole crowd of business men about the place today. Naren Khan's people are lurking about near the gate. Himi, do one thing for me —

could you, somehow, quietly find out what the market's doing just now— no, no, never mind, let it be. Shut that door, would you.

In the next room.

MASHI. What's this, Bou? Are you going somewhere?

MONI. I'm going to Sitarampur.

MASHI. What are you saying? Who's going with you?

MONI. Anath is taking me.

MASHI. My dear child, go, go — I won't stop you. But not today.

MONI. The ticket's bought, the compartment's reserved. Mother's sent the money for it.

MASHI. Never mind, let the money go to waste. Take tomorrow's early train instead. Just tonight—

MONI. Mashi, I don't hold to your dates and days. What harm is there in going today?

MASHI. Jatin's called for you — he has something particular to say to you.

MONI. Very well then, there's still ten minutes — I'll go and tell him myself.

MASHI. No — you mustn't tell him you're going.

MONI. I won't say it, then — but I can't delay any longer either. The rice-feeding is tomorrow, I simply must go today.

MASHI. I beg you, Bou, with folded hands — grant me this, just this once. Go to Jatin with a quiet heart, and sit with him a while. Don't hurry.

MONI. What can I do, tell me. The train won't wait for me. Anath's already gone ahead — he'll be here any moment now to fetch me. Let me go see him once, quickly, before I leave.

MASHI. No — never mind, then, go on. I won't let you go to him like this. Oh, you wretched, wretched girl — as long as you live, you will have to remember this day.

MONI. Mashi, don't curse me so, I tell you.

MASHI. Oh, child — why do you go on living at all, then? There's no end to sorrow — I can hold it back no longer.

Exit Moni.

Shail enters.

SHAIL. Mashi, what do you make of your daughter-in-law's conduct, tell me. What a business. In such a state as her husband's, what possesses her to go off to her father's house?

MASHI. Such a slip of a girl — you'd think she was made of soft butter, and yet what stone her heart is carved from.

SHAIL. I've known her a long time, but I never knew she was capable of this. And look — she keeps dogs, cats, monkeys, peacocks, no end of creatures — the moment anything happens to one of them, she's beside herself — and yet toward her own husband — I simply can't make her out.

MASHI. Jatin understood her, through and through. I remember once, Jatin lay in bed with a splitting headache, and Moni went off in a whole party to the theatre. I couldn't bear it, and went to fan him myself. He snatched the fan from my hand and flung it away. Oh, what pain that was. My heart still breaks to remember those days.

SHAIL. And yet I say, Mashi, even if she weren't quite so stony a girl, a man's own wandering heart can never truly be held down. The softer she is, the more surely they slip away.

MASHI. Who's to say, Shail — perhaps that's simply human nature. Unless there's something hard within a bond, it's no bond at all — whether man or woman. The garland of love has flowers of paradise strung upon it, but the thread that holds them together is made of thunderbolt.

SHAIL. If she hasn't yet got into the carriage, let me go and try to make her see reason.

Exit.

The Neighbour Woman enters.

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. Grandmother! Oh my, what's this business. Your daughter-in-law's off to her father's house, is she?

MASHI. What of it? Why should you all trouble yourselves so over it?

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. Well, quite so, what's it to us. It's only that everyone in the neighbourhood is so fond of Jatin Babu, that's the only reason—

MASHI. Yes, quite — and it's for that very reason, I suppose, that all of you together must go and—

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. Now, now, Grandmother, Moni's done a very fine thing indeed. Very few girls could do such a good deed.

MASHI. A wife who follows her husband's own wish — that's what you all call a good wife! Our Moni is just such a wife.

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. Yes, well, I can see that plainly enough.

MASHI. Moni's only a child, cooped up with a sick man — Jatin couldn't bear to see her so unsettled. In the end, on the doctor's own advice, she— well, never mind. Go on, gossip about it up and down the neighbourhood, as much as you please. Only don't come shouting it into Jatin's ear.

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. Well I never. Now I understand well enough what sorrow sends Moni running to her father's house so often.

Exit.

The Doctor enters.

THE DOCTOR. What's all this business? I come to the door and find boxes and trunks being loaded onto a carriage roof, and your daughter-in-law setting off somewhere with her brother. She didn't even pause at the sight of me. Didn't so much as ask after the patient's condition. Have you quarrelled with her, perhaps?—

Mashi says nothing.

Look here — at least during these last days, given the patient's condition, couldn't you have set aside your mother-in-law's authority for once?

MASHI. How could I, Doctor. One's own nature doesn't die so easily. Living together under one roof, a sharp word or two is bound to pass between us.

THE DOCTOR. Well, your daughter-in-law called for a carriage and simply left — you might at least have tried to stop her—

Mashi says nothing.

I don't know — I suspect you're rather relieved she's gone. But let me tell you plainly — by exiling your daughter-in-law like this, you dash Jatin's hopes with every passing moment, and it's costing him his very life. Our duty to the patient comes before everything else — that's why I must speak so plainly. Otherwise, I've no business meddling in your mother-in-law-and-daughter-in-law quarrels.

MASHI. If I've done wrong, there's no use arguing over it now. I simply cannot bring myself to lower my own pride and write begging her to come back — you may curse me for it, or do as you please. Now, could you do one thing for me, Doctor?

THE DOCTOR. What is it, tell me.

MASHI. Write a letter to her father in Sitarampur. Tell him plainly how things stand with Jatin. I know her father well enough to feel certain that the moment he gets that letter, he'll bring her back here himself.

THE DOCTOR. Very well, I'll write it. But Jatin must never, under any circumstances, learn that his wife has gone to her father's house. I'm telling you this plainly. No medicine of mine will hold against that news. Himi, my dear, you're sitting right there — do one thing: sing that song he loves, just outside his door. Let him have no chance at all to ask after his wife. Do you hear, my dear? This isn't the time for weeping. Weeping can come later. Singing, now. Have I told you? I'm writing a book, you know, in which I'll show that the vibration of song and the growth-pattern of disease run in exactly opposite directions. I'm practically angling for the Nobel Prize, you understand?

Exit.

HIMI'S SONG

Beyond the sea of death, softly, softly, you came — in a dream-form to enchant the world.

My weeping, hour upon hour, calling you, wandered round and round, striking against every obstacle on every side; I was shut fast in this dark well of life — today you have come, in a dream-form to enchant the world.

What do I see today — the darkness of black hair pouring down, layer on layer, lit with the jewel-glow of the evening star. The sky today is filled with the ache of song, the cricket's cry trembles at your feet. My worship is the incense of a flowering grove — today you have come, in a dream-form to enchant the world.

HIMI. *(looking off, offstage)* Coming, brother, I'm coming, right inside.

Exit.

Akhil enters.

AKHIL. Why did you call for me, Kaki?

MASHI. Jatin's been asking after you, again and again, since yesterday. I couldn't put it off any longer.

AKHIL. About that mortgage business of his?

MASHI. That worry sits very heavily on his mind, but he won't ask about it directly. Every time the thought comes knocking, he pushes it away again. Whatever you do, don't bring it up with him yourself — he won't bring it up either.

AKHIL. Then what do you need me for?

MASHI. To draw up a will.

AKHIL. A will? You astonish me.

MASHI. I know, there's no real need for it. But I beg you, by all that's holy, you must grant me this one thing. Whatever he asks to leave to whomever, possible or not, you must write it down exactly as he says. Don't laugh, don't object. Whatever becomes of that will afterward, that I already know well enough.

AKHIL. Of course I know. I could have Jatin will me the whole of King George the Fifth's own empire, and sign it over in my name. I'm quite certain His Imperial Majesty won't be filing suit against him for undue influence. But look here, Kaki, let me speak to you about this house while I'm here. My client—

MASHI. Akhil, let's speak two true words for once. I'm suffocating from all the lies I have to tell, in the house and out of it both. Now listen — your client is yourself. I've known that from the very start.

AKHIL. What are you saying, Kaki!

MASHI. Never mind, there's no need to pretend otherwise. You've done well enough by it. I know you've always had your eye on my property, believing it rightfully yours—

AKHIL. Shame, shame, such a thing to say—

MASHI. And what harm would there be in that, tell me. You're as good as my own son, after all. I would have given it all to you. But we were two sisters. Father, angry with my elder sister, left the whole of his property to me alone. He died before that anger could ever cool. He's in heaven now — he has no such anger left in him today. And so I poured my father's property into the enjoyment of her own grandson instead. By Lakshmi's grace, you people want for nothing anyway.

AKHIL. Have I ever said a single word to you about it?

MASHI. If you had any sense, there'd be no need to say anything. Jatin got it into his head to build this house. You clever lawyer folk will never understand what unbearable suffering lay hidden within that obsession. I'm only a woman, his own aunt — my heart was breaking. Where was I to find the money? I had to come to you. You set up some sham client and—

Himi enters.

HIMI. Mashi, the priest's wife has come.

MASHI. There's a good girl — ask her to sit a moment, I'll come directly.

Exit Himi.

AKHIL. Kaki, how old is this niece of yours now?

MASHI. Just past seventeen. She'll sit for her I.A. examination this very year.

AKHIL. What a sweet voice she has — I heard her singing from outside.

MASHI. The two of them, brother and sister, are cut from the very same cloth. He builds a house, she sings a song — the same music playing in both of them.

AKHIL. As for a marriage match—

MASHI. No — ever since her brother fell ill, she won't let anyone so much as mention the subject. She's given up her studies entirely, and stays here.

AKHIL. But I could find her a good match, Kaki, if ever—

MASHI. Just as you found me a client, I suppose?

AKHIL. No, Kaki, I'm not joking now — I've been thinking, if I sent her a harmonium, would you have any—

MASHI. No objection at all — but she doesn't care for the harmonium.

AKHIL. For her singing?

MASHI. She plays the esraj with her songs.

AKHIL. Well then, an esraj, why not—

MASHI. She already has an esraj.

AKHIL. Then let there be one more. Increasing one's holdings is what they call prosperity, after all.

MASHI. Very well, send the esraj. Now listen to me. All this while I've been paying interest to that client of yours by selling off my own ancestral jewellery, piece by piece. Every time your client wrote demanding repayment within three days, the interest climbed higher still, until today I have nothing left at all. And so your aunt's whole property has poured straight into her nephew's own coffers. My father-in-law's soul must be well satisfied in the world beyond — but my own father, and Jatin's mother — if, in that other world, their eyes still weep—

Himi enters.

HIMI. Mashi, brother's calling for you, again and again. He's terribly restless, and keeps asking after sister-in-law. I can't bring myself to answer — the words won't come, my throat closes up.

[She covers her face with both hands and weeps.]

MASHI. Don't cry, my child, don't cry. I'm going to Jatin now.

AKHIL. Kaki, if there's anything I can do — tell me — shall I go in to Jatin and—

MASHI. Yes — you must go to Jatin. About that will of his.

Exit.

In the sickroom.

JATIN. Moni didn't come? What kept her so long?

MASHI. Quite a business — I found her weeping because she'd scorched the milk while heating it for you. A girl from such a grand family — she only ever knew how to drink milk, never how to heat it herself. It's only because she's so eager to do something for you that she tries at all. I had a great deal of trouble calming her down, and left her lying in bed. Let her sleep a little.

JATIN. Mashi!

MASHI. Yes, my child?

JATIN. I understand — my days are drawing to a close. But I have no regret. Don't grieve for me.

MASHI. No, my child, my turn for grieving is over. God has made me understand this much at least — that living is not, in itself, always good, nor dying always evil.

JATIN. Death seems sweet to me now. I can hear the shehnai even now, from the far shore. Himi — where's Himi?

MASHI. There, standing by the window.

HIMI. Yes, brother, what is it?

JATIN. My dear sister, don't weep off in hiding like that — I feel I can hear the very sound of your tears within my own chest. Let me see your hand. I'm very well indeed. Sing me that song, won't you — *if the hour has come to go*.

HIMI'S SONG

If the hour has come to go, then go — but leave, before you go, one final touch.

Where, again and again, in my own song, I set my dreams afloat toward some far shore — look sometimes upon that empty window there — my own empty window.

At the edge of my mind, that jasmine vine speaks some secret word in its own sorrowful scent. Will the bird of another Shravan, on that same branch, not bring back some remembrance still — in this Shravan's own rain-soaked shade, parting and meeting, meeting and parting — our own parting, our own meeting.

MASHI. Himi, fill a bottle with hot water — for his feet.

Exit Himi.

JATIN. It hurts, Mashi, but nothing like what you must imagine. It's as though my own pain and I are gradually parting ways. It was bound fast to the ship of my life, like cargo in its hold — today the binding rope is cut; I can still see it there, but it no longer clings to me at all.— These three days I haven't seen Moni once, day or night.

MASHI. Here, child, drink a little pomegranate juice — your throat's growing dry.

JATIN. My will was drawn up yesterday, wasn't it — did I show it to you? I can't quite remember.

MASHI. No need for me to see it, Jatin.

JATIN. When Mother died, I had nothing at all. I was raised on your own bread, by your own hand. That's why I was saying—

MASHI. What sort of talk is that? All I ever had was this one house, and a little property besides. Everything else is entirely your own earning.

JATIN. But this house—

MASHI. What house of mine? How many wings you've added on since — my own little share of it can hardly even be found any more.

JATIN. Deep down, Moni loves you very—

MASHI. How would I know that. Sleep now, Jatin.

JATIN. I've willed everything to Moni, it's true — but it remains yours all the same. She would never disobey you.

MASHI. Why trouble yourself over that, child?

JATIN. Your blessing is everything to me. Don't ever think, seeing my will, that—

MASHI. What sort of talk is that, Jatin. Do you imagine I'd resent your leaving your own things to Moni? What a wretched thought.

JATIN. But I meant to leave you, too—

MASHI. Now listen, Jatin, I'll truly be angry. Are you going to leave us, and try to buy me off with money on your way out?

JATIN. Mashi, if there were something greater than money that I could—

MASHI. You have given, Jatin, you have given a great deal already. You filled my empty house — that is the fortune of many lifetimes for me. I've had my heart's fill all this while — if my portion has run out today, I won't complain. Go on — leave the house, the property, the carriage and horses, the estate — whatever there is — leave it all in Moni's name. This weight is more than I could bear.

JATIN. You have no taste for such enjoyment, but Moni's still so young, and so—

MASHI. Don't say that— give her the wealth if you must, but as for enjoying it—

JATIN. Why shouldn't she enjoy it, Mashi?

MASHI. No, no, she never will, she never could, I tell you — none of it will please her at all; her throat will run dry as wood — she'll find no savour in any of it, whatever it is.

JATIN. (*falling silent, then sighing*) There's really nothing worth giving at all, then—

MASHI. What little you're leaving behind! Do you think she'll never come to understand the worth of what you've given her, disguised as mere house and money?

JATIN. Did Moni come yesterday? I can't quite recall.

MASHI. She came. You were asleep. She sat a long while by your pillow—

JATIN. How strange! At that very moment I was dreaming that Moni wanted to come into my room — the door had opened just a crack — she was pushing at it, but it wouldn't open any further than that. But Mashi, you're all making rather too much of this. Let her see me — as easily, as gently, as the evening light comes—

MASHI. Child, let me draw this woollen shawl over your feet — your soles have gone quite cold.

JATIN. No, Mashi, I don't feel like anything over me just now.

MASHI. Do you know, Jatin — this shawl is Moni's own work — she's been making it for you, night after night, all this while. She finished it only yesterday.

[Jatin takes the shawl and turns it over a little in both hands. Mashi draws it over his feet.]

JATIN. It feels to me as though it must be Himi's own sewing. Moni doesn't care for needlework — could she really manage it?

MASHI. Love teaches a woman what she needs to know. Himi must have shown her how. There are plenty of wrong stitches in it—

JATIN. Himi, put down that fan, dear. Come, sit by me. This very day I'll look at the almanac and tell you when the house-warming's auspicious hour will fall.

HIMI. Never mind that now, brother—

JATIN. You think I won't be present, don't you — that's what you're thinking. I'll be there, sister — that day, I'll be there in the very air of this house — you'll be able to feel it. I've already chosen the song you'll sing — that one, "O flame, come" — sing it for me once.

HIMI'S SONG

O flame of fire, come, come, bring light, bring light.

In this empty house, in sorrow and in joy, kindle the sacred lamp.

*Bring strength, bring radiance, bring peace, bring fulfilment, bring tender love,
bring the eternal good.*

*Come, riding the auspicious hour, come, O bringer of blessing. Bring auspicious
slumber, and bring too the waking after.*

*In the night of sorrow, in a mother's form, keep watch, unblinking, unsleeping —
across the festival sky of your own being, pour down your radiant, pure smile.*

JATIN. Do you know what festival this song speaks of, Himi?

HIMI. I don't know.

JATIN. Come now, guess.

HIMI. I can't guess it.

JATIN. I can. On the day you're married, from the very first light of that festival morning—

HIMI. Never mind, brother, never mind.

JATIN. I feel I can hear its flute already, playing in Bhairavi. I've already written down provision for your wedding expenses—

HIMI. Brother, let me go now, then.

JATIN. No, no, sit — but on the day of the house-warming, it's for you to dress everything, on my behalf — remember, as many white lotuses as can be found — and on the seat prepared in that room, spread that red Benarasi shawl from my own wedding—

Shambhu enters.

SHAMBHU. The doctor's asking whether he ought to stay tonight.

MASHI. Yes — he must stay.

Exit Shambhu.

JATIN. But no sleeping draught tonight. It muddles my sleep and it muddles my waking, both. It was on the night of Baishakh Dwadashi that we were married, Mashi. Tomorrow's that same lunar day again. I want to remind Moni of that. Call her in, just for two minutes. Why are you so quiet? My heart wants to tell her something — that's why these last two nights I haven't slept at all. No more delay now — after this there'll be no more time. No, Mashi, I can't bear that weeping of yours. You've been so calm, all this while — why now—

MASHI. Oh, Jatin — I thought all my tears had run dry — today I can't hold them back any longer.

JATIN. Why did Himi go off so quickly?

MASHI. She's gone to rest a little. She'll be back again soon.

JATIN. Call Moni to me.

MASHI. I'm going now, child. Shambhu will stay by the door. Call him if you need anything.

Exit.

In the next room, Akhil enters.

[Himi hastily wipes her eyes and rises.]

HIMI. Let me call Mashi for you.

AKHIL. No need — it's nothing so urgent.

HIMI. Will you go in to see brother?

AKHIL. No, I'll get word of him from here itself. How is Jatin?

HIMI. The doctor says his condition isn't good today.

AKHIL. You've all been working day and night for some days now. I came so you might rest a little. I daresay I too could manage some small part of the nursing—

HIMI. No, that could never be. I'm not the least bit tired.

AKHIL. Well then, perhaps I could work alongside you.

HIMI. This sort of work—

AKHIL. I know — far harder than practising law.

HIMI. No, that isn't what I meant.

AKHIL. No, but it's true all the same. If I had to make barley-water, I'd probably set the room on fire.

HIMI. What are you saying?

AKHIL. Not the least exaggeration. Setting rooms on fire is rather our trade, you know. Don't you see — here you are making barley-water for Jatin, and I've probably sat and concocted something that's fit neither as a sickroom diet nor as anything a well man could stomach either. Sit down, let me have a word or two with you.

HIMI. This is hardly the time for—

AKHIL. Heaven forbid! If I could tell a proper story, I'd give up this trade altogether and turn into a second Bankim Chatterjee. Why are you laughing? We have to invent so much, in our line, and none of it worth a thing — if I could invent a proper story, I'd leave this profession behind at once. I suppose you've begun writing stories yourself?

HIMI. No.

AKHIL. A play, perhaps—

HIMI. No, that's not in me at all.

AKHIL. How do you know that?

HIMI. The language won't come.

AKHIL. A play needs no language at all to begin with. No notebook, no pen required. Perhaps your own play has already begun — who's to say?

HIMI. Let me go and call Mashi.

AKHIL. No, there's no need. I'll stop this idle talk now, and come to business. I meant to speak with Jatin himself, but in his present state—

HIMI. He often asks me whether any rumour of his business troubles has reached my ears — you, perhaps—

AKHIL. I know his business has gone under entirely—

HIMI. I beg you, at your feet, don't let him know that. Whatever else happens, at least this house of his—

AKHIL. Does Jatin talk about the house?

HIMI. He speaks of nothing else. One day there'll be a grand house-warming, he says — he's planning it all—

AKHIL. The arrangements for the house-warming are already under way, in fact—

HIMI. How do you know that?

AKHIL. From my very own office. The bailiffs are practically dressed and ready—

HIMI. Look here, Akhil Babu, this isn't a matter for jokes—

AKHIL. As if I don't know that myself. What's the use hiding it from you. This house is mortgaged—

HIMI. No, no, no — that can't possibly be — Akhil Babu, please, have mercy—

AKHIL. But why do you fret so? You know everything already. Your brother isn't going to live much—

HIMI. I know, I know — brother won't be with us much longer — that, too, I could bear. But if this house of his should go as well, my heart will break and I'll die. This house means more to him than his very life—

AKHIL. Look here, you may top your class in literature, mathematics, and logic, but in worldly matters you'd fail even the lowest examination. In business there's no such thing as a heart — the rules are—

HIMI. I don't know anything about that. I beg you, at your feet — you must save this house. From your own office—

AKHIL. The bailiffs will need dressing up as musicians, then, with flutes put in their hands. I studied every chapter of rhythm and metre at law college, but never quite got round to practising the musical kind. Perhaps that's a lesson I might learn from you, after—

Mashi enters.

MASHI. Akhil, what's going on here? Why is Himi crying?

AKHIL. There was a small snag in the house-warming plans, and over that—

MASHI. And why bring such matters to her?

AKHIL. Her brother's put the whole charge of the house-warming into her hands, it seems — so, worried that nothing should go wrong with it, she's turned to me, of all the people she might have chosen. If you all feel the same way, then, why not — I might just roll up my sleeves myself and take charge of the house-warming business. Do you follow me, Kaki?

MASHI. I follow you well enough. Not just rolling up your sleeves — you mean to tighten the knot further still. This isn't the time for such counsel. For now, just assure Jatin that no one's hand will fall upon his house.

AKHIL. Very well — I'll simply tell him the jute market's gone up. Now tell her to wipe her eyes—

The Doctor enters.

THE DOCTOR. A lawyer, is it! That settles it, then.

AKHIL. Look here, there's no use arguing over whether Saturn or Kali-yuga does more damage. Whatever few souls in Bengal manage to survive your own hands, it's only their meagre leftovers that fall to our trade—

THE DOCTOR. There isn't much time left to run that trade in this room, I can tell you, from what I've just seen.

AKHIL. Don't try to frighten me, sir — death is where your business ends, ours only really gets going after that. No, no, never mind, let that be — Kaki, I'll say this before I go — I'm quite willing to take full charge of the house-warming ceremony. And a certain other burden besides. I'll be in the outer room — call me when you need me.

Exit.

THE DOCTOR. Bou-ma still hasn't come? And you haven't been in to see him in quite a while either.

MASHI. I can't think what answer to give if he asks after Moni. I can't invent excuses any longer — I'm sick with myself over it. Once he falls asleep a little, I'll go in.

THE DOCTOR. I'll wait outside. Send word in an hour or so, how the patient's doing. In the meantime, someone must keep the lawyer occupied — the sight of those two together, even in ordinary times, would be enough to make my own pulse falter.

Exit.

ACT TWO

In the sickroom, Shambhu stands by the door.

The Neighbour Woman enters.

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. There you are, Shambhu.

SHAMBHU. Yes, sister.

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. I want to look in on Jatin, just once. Your aunt's not about — now's my chance—

SHAMBHU. What good would that do, sister?

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. There's a post going begging at the Maharaja of Natore's estate. If I could just get Jatin to write a line for my son—

SHAMBHU. No, sister, that simply cannot be done. If Mashi finds out, there'll be no living with her.

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. How would she ever find out? I'll be in and out in five minutes flat—

SHAMBHU. Forgive me, sister, but it truly cannot be done.

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. It cannot be done, indeed! Your aunt seems to think her nephew will die of the mere touch of the likes of us. And never once does she stop to think of her own case. She's devoured her own husband, her one and only daughter's gone too, she's kept neither father nor mother by her — only Jatin's left now. She won't rest till she's finished him off too. Otherwise, it seems, she simply cannot die herself. Mark my words, Shambhu — now that your aunt has got her claws into him, there's no hope left for Jatin at all.

SHAMBHU. There, she's calling for me. You'd best go now.

THE NEIGHBOUR WOMAN. No fear, I'm off.

Exit.

Shambhu enters the room.

JATIN. *(startled by the footstep)* Moni!

SHAMBHU. It's Shambhu, sir. You were calling me?

JATIN. Call your Bou-Thakrun for me, once.

SHAMBHU. Whom?

JATIN. Bou-Thakrun.

SHAMBHU. She hasn't come back yet, sir.

JATIN. Where has she gone?

SHAMBHU. To Sitarampur.

JATIN. Did she go today?

SHAMBHU. No, sir, it's been three days now.

JATIN. Who are you? Am I seeing clearly?

SHAMBHU. I'm Shambhu, sir.

JATIN. Tell me plainly — am I mistaken about something?

SHAMBHU. No, sir.

JATIN. Which room am I in? Is this Sitarampur?

SHAMBHU. No, sir — this is your own bedroom, in Calcutta.

JATIN. Not a lie? None of this is a lie?

SHAMBHU. Let me call Mashi for you.

Exit.

Mashi enters.

JATIN. How am I to know I haven't died already, Mashi? Perhaps everything's turned upside down.

MASHI. What are you saying, Jatin?

JATIN. You are my aunt, aren't you?

MASHI. Of course I am, Jatin.

JATIN. Call Himi for me — let her sit by me. Let her stay close by. Don't let her go anywhere now.

MASHI. Come, Himi, sit here.

JATIN. Make that flute stop, would you. Was that brought in for the house-warming? There's no more need of it.

MASHI. There's a wedding next door — that's where the flute's playing.

JATIN. A wedding flute? Then why does it carry so much weeping in it? Bhairavi, is it? Have I told you my dream, Mashi?

MASHI. What dream?

JATIN. Moni was pushing at the door, to come into my room. It wouldn't open even the smallest bit further than that. She stood outside, watching. She simply couldn't get in. I called her, again and again, but her house-warming never came. It didn't come, didn't come, didn't come. —

[Mashi has no answer.]

I understand now, Mashi, I understand — I am ruined. Utterly ruined. In every direction. This house doesn't even exist any more — it's all been sold — I was only fooling myself.

MASHI. No, Jatin, no, I swear to you your house stands exactly as it is — Akhil's here, if you like I'll call him in.

JATIN. The house still stands, then? It can wait, surely — it isn't a shadow, like me. Let it stand, year after year, its door open. What do you say, Mashi?

MASHI. It shall stand, Jatin, filled full with your own love.

JATIN. Himi, my dear — you'll stay in this room of mine. One day, perhaps, the time will come — the house-warming will happen. On that day, whoever I may have become by then, I'll know it. Himi, Himi!

HIMI. Yes, brother.

JATIN. I leave it to you, sister. Do you remember which song you're to sing?

HIMI. I remember — "O flame, come, come."

JATIN. My good sister, don't be angry with anyone. Forgive everyone. And whenever you remember me, remember this — "My brother loved me always, and

loves me still, even today." Do you know, Mashi, that Himi's own wedding will be held in this very house? In that old hall of ours, where my own mother was married. I never touched a stone of that hall.

MASHI. So it shall be, my child.

JATIN. Mashi, in your next life, be born as my daughter. I'll raise you myself, hold you to my own breast.

MASHI. What are you saying, Jatin. Be born again as a girl? Better still, be born as a son in your own lap. Wish for that instead.

JATIN. No, not a son — for shame! Come to my house instead, just as beautiful as you were in your own girlhood. I'll dress you myself, in all your finery.

MASHI. Don't talk on so — sleep a little.

JATIN. I'll name you Lakshmirani.

MASHI. That's hardly a modern name.

JATIN. No, not modern. You've always been my old-fashioned one, forever. Come to my house bringing that same nectar-filled old-fashioned self of yours.

MASHI. I've no wish to come bringing the sorrow of a daughter to be married off, into your house.

JATIN. Do you think me weak, Mashi? Do you want to spare me from sorrow?

MASHI. Child, mine is only a woman's heart — I am the weak one. That's why I've always wanted, in such fear, to save you from every sorrow, forever. But what power have I ever truly had? I've managed nothing at all.

JATIN. Mashi, there's one thing I can say with some pride. Whatever I never received, I never once fought to seize. All my life I waited, with folded hands. I wanted no falsehood — that's why it took so long, this patience. Perhaps the truth will show me mercy now.— Who's that, Mashi, who is that?

MASHI. There's no one there, Jatin.

JATIN. Go and look in that room once, would you — I feel as though—

MASHI. No, my child, I see no one.

JATIN. But I could have sworn—

MASHI. Nothing at all, Jatin.

The Doctor enters.

JATIN. Who's that? Where are you coming from? Is there any news?

MASHI. It's the doctor.

THE DOCTOR. You mustn't stay by him — he talks far too much with you around—

JATIN. No, Mashi, you're not to go.

MASHI. Very well, child, I'll go sit in that corner there.

JATIN. No, no — sit by me, hold my hand. It's from your hand that God will take me into His own.

THE DOCTOR. Very well. But no talking now. And it's time for that medicine.

JATIN. Time, is it? Come to distract me again? The time has already passed. I have no need of false comfort. Send them all away, send everyone away. Mashi, I have you now — I want nothing false any longer. Come, sister Himi, sit by me.

THE DOCTOR. This much excitement isn't good for him.

JATIN. Then don't excite me any further.—

[Exit the Doctor.]

The doctor's gone — now climb up onto my bed and sit, let me lay my head in your lap.

MASHI. Lie down, child, sleep a little.

JATIN. Don't tell me to sleep — I still need to stay awake a little longer. Can you hear it? It's coming. It will come any moment now. Everything's growing dim before my eyes. Twilight — my own twilight hour. The door of the bridal chamber will open. Himi, meanwhile, that song — *beyond the boundary of life and death*.

HIMI'S SONG

Beyond the boundary of life and death, O my friend, you stand and wait.

House-Warming

In the lonely sky of my own heart, your great throne is wrapped in light; with what deep hope, what unbroken rapture, I reach toward it with both arms outstretched.

The silent night has strewn beneath your feet the dark weight of her own unbound hair. What song is this that floods the world today, descending from your own vina's strings?

The whole world melts into the ringing of that music — in the ache of the song, I too am lost.

Moni enters.

MASHI. Child, Jatin — look, just once. There, she's come.

JATIN. Who? A dream?

MASHI. Not a dream, child. Moni. There — your own jewel.

JATIN. *(looking toward Moni)* Who are you?

MASHI. Don't you know her? There she is — your own Moni.

JATIN. Has the door opened, then — all the way?

MASHI. All the way open.

JATIN. But that shawl over her feet — that isn't the one, that isn't the one. Take it away, take it away.

MASHI. It isn't a shawl, Jatin. It's your wife, fallen at your feet. Lay your hand upon her head — give her your blessing.

Curtain.

NOTES

few notes on how I've handled it:

- **Format:** I've kept it as a play script (character names in small caps, stage directions in italics/brackets) rather than converting the dialogue into

narrative prose, since that's the form the original takes and changing it would lose the immediacy of a text meant for performance.

- **Songs:** Himi's five interpolated songs are rendered as free verse rather than forced into rhyme, since Bengali's rhyme scheme doesn't map naturally onto English and a forced rhyme would distort the imagery. I prioritized the songs' emotional arc (from playhouse-nostalgia, to wedding anticipation, to the final threshold-of-death lyric) over strict form.
- **Central pun:** Jatin's name for the house, *Moni-saudha* ("Moni's Palace"), turns on *saudha* containing *sudha* (nectar/ambrosia) — a wordplay he explains explicitly in the dialogue ("A *saudha* isn't merely a house — there is *sudha* within it too"). I kept the Bengali terms untranslated at that moment so his explanation still makes sense, rather than translating the name and losing the pun he's pointing at.
- **Shah Jahan / Taj Mahal:** kept as direct historical reference, since Jatin's whole self-understanding in the play is built on that explicit parallel (a dying man building a monument to a living, unreachable, beloved wife).
- **Ambiguity preserved:** The ending is deliberately unclear about whether Moni's final entrance is real or another hallucination layered onto his earlier feverish visions (Narahari, the imagined figure in the next room) — I left that exactly as ambiguous as the original, with Mashi's insistence "not a dream" being the only anchor, itself delivered by a character whose reliability the play has already complicated (her own guilt over turning Moni away, her improvised comfort throughout).
- I did not attempt to smooth over the play's difficult, unresolved cruelty toward Moni — Mashi's curse upon her, the neighbours' gossip, Jatin's own late, guilty reversal about having "imprisoned" her — since that tension between everyone's love for Jatin and their treatment of his wife is the play's real engine.