



"A writer of uncommon
elegance and poise."

— NEW YORK TIMES

Interpreter of Maladies

Jhumpa Lahiri



stories

by the author of
THE NAMESAKE

"Jhumpa Lahiri is the kind of writer who makes you
want to grab the next person you see and say,
'Read this!'" — Amy Tan

International Bestseller

NEW YORKER "Debut of the Year"
PEN/Hemingway Award Winner

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, this stunning debut collection unerringly charts the emotional journeys of characters seeking love beyond the barriers of nations and generations. In stories that travel from India to America and back again, Lahiri speaks with universal eloquence to everyone who has ever felt like a foreigner.

"A writer of uncommon sensitivity and restraint."

— WALL STREET JOURNAL

"Lahiri breathes unpredictable life into the page, and the
reader finishes each story reseduced, wishing he could
spend a whole novel with its characters."

— NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW



JHUMPA LAHIRI's debut collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, was an international bestseller and winner of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, among many other awards. She is also the author of the *New York Times* bestsellers *The Namesake* and *Unaccustomed Earth*. She lives in New York.

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*Interpreter
of
Maladies*

S T O R I E S

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Jhumpa Lahiri



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Review*, "Interpreter of Maladies" in the *Agni Review*, "A Real
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"Mrs. Sen's" in *Salamander*, "This Blessed House" in *Epoch*, and
"The Treatment of Bibi Halдар" in *Story Quarterly*.

PRAISE FOR

Interpreter of Maladies

"A wonderfully distinctive new voice . . . Ms. Lahiri's prose is so eloquent and assured that the reader easily forgets that *Interpreter of Maladies* is a young writer's first book . . . Ms. Lahiri chronicles her characters' lives with both objectivity and compassion while charting the emotional temperature of their lives with tactile precision. She is a writer of uncommon elegance and poise, and with *Interpreter of Maladies* she has made a precocious debut."

— Michiko Kakutani, *New York Times*

"Jhumpa Lahiri writes such direct, translucent prose you almost forget you're reading . . . This remarkable first collection gains much of its power from the gentle narrative voice. Lahiri's language is uncluttered; she's sparing with metaphor, and the riches accumulate unobtrusively." — *Newsweek*

"Lahiri has a gift for illuminating the full meaning of brief relationships — with lovers, family friends, those met in travel." — *Time*

"Lahiri breathes unpredictable life into the page, and the reader finishes each story reseduced, wishing he could spend a whole novel with its characters. There is nothing accidental about her success: her plots are as elegantly constructed as a fine proof in mathematics." — *New York Times Book Review*

"Ms. Lahiri expertly captures the out-of-context lives of immigrants, expatriates and first-generation Americans of Indian descent. And she astutely shows the leaps of faith that are required to keep their marriages glued together . . . She is a writer of uncommon sensitivity and restraint." — *Wall Street Journal*

"A stunning literary debut." — *Newsday*

"Humane, attentive." — *San Francisco Chronicle*

"An elegantly written, deeply felt debut collection . . . Each story unfolds at a leisurely pace — in a style reminiscent of Alice Munro and Bharati Mukherjee — allowing readers to enter into skillfully portrayed imaginary lives." — *Minneapolis Star Tribune*

"Brimming with promise, Lahiri has a knack for exposing the silent sacrifices and small moments of ridiculousness of people navigating between two worlds." — *Time Out*

"Delicate, deceptively simple . . . Lahiri's fiction charts the depths of alienation, regeneration, and cross-cultural fertilization in America's Indian immigrant community." — *Boston* magazine

"Subtle, scenic tales about people trying to reconcile the traditions they've inherited with baffling new cultures. Their disorientation resonates in the evocative and often ominous details Lahiri employs . . . Superb." — *Village Voice*

"The loss of the familiar has become common not just to the immigrant experience, but to the experience of all of us as our society rushes head over heels toward the future. In *Interpreter of Maladies*, Jhumpa Lahiri captures the poignancy of this loss with clarity and understated beauty." — *Portland Oregonian*

"A blend of lush detail, precise characterization and gently ironic tone. [The stories are] full of rich colors, tastes, smells and textures . . . It's rare to find a collection in which every story is a winner. Here is one." — *San Diego Union-Tribune*

"Each story in *Interpreter of Maladies* is delicate and sharp, like a needle drawn through silk." — *Seattle Times*

"Stunning . . . Lahiri's touch is delicate yet assured, leaving no room for flubbed notes or forced epiphanies."

— *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

"Lahiri displays a remarkable maturity and ability to imagine other lives . . . Each story offers something special. Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* will reward readers." — *USA Today*

INTERPRETER
OF MALADIES

For my parents and for my sister

WITH THANKS TO
the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown,
Janet Silver, and Cindy Klein Roche

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A Temporary Matter

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

"It's good of them to warn us," Shoba conceded after reading the notice aloud, more for her own benefit than Shukumar's. She let the strap of her leather satchel, plump with files, slip from her shoulders, and left it in the hallway as she walked into the kitchen. She wore a navy blue poplin raincoat over gray sweatpants and white sneakers, looking, at thirty-three, like the type of woman she'd once claimed she would never resemble.

She'd come from the gym. Her cranberry lipstick was visible only on the outer reaches of her mouth, and her eyeliner had left charcoal patches beneath her lower lashes. She used to

look this way sometimes, Shukumar thought, on mornings after a party or a night at a bar, when she'd been too lazy to wash her face, too eager to collapse into his arms. She dropped a sheaf of mail on the table without a glance. Her eyes were still fixed on the notice in her other hand. "But they should do this sort of thing during the day."

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

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

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

He ran his tongue over the tops of his teeth; he'd forgotten to brush them that morning. It wasn't the first time. He hadn't left the house at all that day, or the day before. The more Shoba stayed out, the more she began putting in extra hours at work and taking on additional projects, the more he wanted to stay in, not even leaving to get the mail, or to buy fruit or wine at the stores by the trolley stop.

Six months ago, in September, Shukumar was at an academic conference in Baltimore when Shoba went into labor, three weeks before her due date. He hadn't wanted to go to

the conference, but she had insisted; it was important to make contacts, and he would be entering the job market next year. She told him that she had his number at the hotel, and a copy of his schedule and flight numbers, and she had arranged with her friend Gillian for a ride to the hospital in the event of an emergency. When the cab pulled away that morning for the airport, Shoba stood waving good-bye in her robe, with one arm resting on the mound of her belly as if it were a perfectly natural part of her body.

Each time he thought of that moment, the last moment he saw Shoba pregnant, it was the cab he remembered most, a station wagon, painted red with blue lettering. It was cavernous compared to their own car. Although Shukumar was six feet tall, with hands too big ever to rest comfortably in the pockets of his jeans, he felt dwarfed in the back seat. As the cab sped down Beacon Street, he imagined a day when he and Shoba might need to buy a station wagon of their own, to cart their children back and forth from music lessons and dentist appointments. He imagined himself gripping the wheel, as Shoba turned around to hand the children juice boxes. Once, these images of parenthood had troubled Shukumar, adding to his anxiety that he was still a student at thirty-five. But that early autumn morning, the trees still heavy with bronze leaves, he welcomed the image for the first time.

A member of the staff had found him somehow among the identical convention rooms and handed him a stiff square of stationery. It was only a telephone number, but Shukumar knew it was the hospital. When he returned to Boston it was over. The baby had been born dead. Shoba was lying on a bed, asleep, in a private room so small there was barely enough space to stand beside her, in a wing of the hospital they hadn't been to on the tour for expectant parents. Her placenta

had weakened and she'd had a cesarean, though not quickly enough. The doctor explained that these things happen. He smiled in the kindest way it was possible to smile at people known only professionally. Shoba would be back on her feet in a few weeks. There was nothing to indicate that she would not be able to have children in the future.

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

But nothing was pushing Shukumar. Instead he thought of how he and Shoba had become experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible. He thought of how he no longer looked