

Seser Ratri (Last Nights)

- Rabindranath Tagore

The story "Last Nights" is translated by **Arun Pramanik** from the collection of Rabindranath Tagore's *Golpaguchha*, published from Viswavarati Granthan Bivag, Kolkata, 1333 (Bangla). Last reprinted in 1415 (Bangla). The original title was "Seser Ratri".

"Masi!"

"Try to sleep Jatin. It's late at night."

"Let it pass. I don't have days more to live. I say, Moni should be sent to his father's house... oh I forget, where is her father now... ?

"In Sitarampur."

"Oh yes, Sitarampur. Send Moni there. How many days more she will serve a patient! Besides she is weak in health."

"Listen me once! Why she will want to go to her father's house leaving you in such condition!"

"Does she know what the doctors have . . .?"

"She may not know that . . . But she gets to see everything in her own eyes. Only that day as I indirectly told her to go to her father's house, she at once cried."

Here it needs to say that in Masi' words, there is huge suppression of the real truth. Here follows the conversation that took place with Moni in this matter:

"Is there any news from your father's house Bou¹? I see your uncle's son Anath to go."

"Yes. My mother has told that my younger sister's annyaparasan² will be held on coming Friday. So, I thing to . . ."

"Well. Then send a necklace. Your mother will be pleased."

"I have decided to go. I've not yet seen my little sister. I wish to see her."

"What are you saying? Leaving Jatin alone, will you go! Do you know what the doctor has said?"

"Doctor told that now there is not much . . ."

"Then will you go leaving him in such state?"

"She is the only sister after the birth of my three brothers . . . very affectionate to all . . . the annyaparasan will be arranged with pomp and grandeur. If I don't go my mother will be very . . ."

"I can't understand your mother's real intention. But I say that your father will be surely angry if you go leaving Jatin in such critical condition."

"I know that. So, I need you to write just a line that there is not much danger . . . If I go, no harm will . . ."

"Do I not know that there will not be anything wrong if you go? But if I have to write to your father, I'll write everything whatever there is in my mind."

"Well, You may write. But if I go and tell him now . . ."

"See Bou. I have tolerated much . . . But I will not tolerate if you go to Jatin with this intention. Your father knows you well. You'll not be able to make him understand with these lies."

Saying this, Masi goes away. Being enraged, Moni remains on bed for some time. A woman from the nearby house comes and asks, "Why do you look like this my friend?"

"See friend. It's my only sister's annyaprasana . . . yet they don't allow me to go."

"Oh, my God! Where will you go? Isn't that your husband is almost dying in deadly disease!"

"I don't do anything. Even can't do also. Everybody is silent in the house. I feel my heart choked here. I can't stay like this."

"You're really a woman to thank!"

But you see, I can't pretend like you. Lest someone says something, so sitting in the corner of the house with suppliant face – I do not like that."

"Then let me listen, what'll you do now?"

"I'll surely go. Nobody will be able to keep me here."

"How strange! I'm really scared in your bad temper . . . let me go. I've to do my work."

Moni has cried as she was just told to go to her father's house . . . Jatin feels perturbed in this news. He takes the pillow near to his back, rises himself a little, and sits leaning on the pillow. He says, "Masi open the window a little more. There is no need of this light in the house." The silent night stands quietly besides the patient's door like a traveller of an unending pilgrimage. Jatin gets to see his Moni's face on this large canvas in absolute darkness. The two full-grown eyes of that face are filled with big drops of water – the tears don't stop. Remain fulfilled forever.

Masi becomes sure as he remains silent for a long time. She thinks perhaps Jatin has slept. Just then he suddenly says "Masi, you always thought that Moni is fickle-minded, she can't feel easy in our house. But now see . . ."

"Yes, my son. We misunderstood her. A person is known proper when the time comes."

"Masi."

"Sleep, Jatin."

"Let me think. Let me speak a little more. Don't be discontented."

"Well, tell my son."

"I say, one needs a long time to understand even own mind. Once when we thought that we none are able to get Moni's grace, I withstood it silently. But you then . . ."

"No, my son. Don't say like this . . . I too accepted her."

"Mind is not a lump of soil. It can't be easily conquered. I knew Moni has not yet realized even her own mind. Perhaps she will realize one day in some terrible shocks, and that day . . ."

"You're right Jatin."

"That's why I never mind her frivolities."

Masi does not reply anything in Jatin's words. Only sighs in her own mind. How many days she has noticed Jatin standing on the verandah to spend nights after nights! The raindrops soaked him, yet he did not go inside the house. How many days he remained in bed with strong headache! His earnest wish that Moni would come and put her hands gently on his head. But Moni then remained busy to go to the theatre with her friends. She herself came to him, but being enraged he sent her back. How many days she told Jatin, "My son, don't think much of that girl... Let her suffer a little. She needs a little bit bad treatment." But these do not work for Jatin. There is a temple for women in Jatin's heart. He has placed Moni in that temple. It is not easy for him to think that getting his lady's favor from that temple will remain vacant in his lot. So, he continues to worship. The offerings are gradually filled. And not getting her blessings seemed almost unbelievable.

When Masi again thinks that perhaps Jatin has slept, at that time Jatin suddenly says "I know you always thought that I wouldn't be happy with Moni. That's why you were angry upon her. But Masi happiness is like these stars... can't cover the whole darkness. Only visible in the intervening spaces from time to time. We commit mistakes after mistakes in life, even misunderstand people, yet happiness comes occasionally. Today I feel my mind filled with joys in some unknown reasons. Masi gently passes her hands on Jatin's forehead. Tears roll down from her eyes in darkness. None could see.

"I think Masi. She is tender in age. How will she live?"

"Why Jatin? She is proper in her age. We too had to marry and take our husbands at an early age . . . did not happen anything wrong. Besides I say, there is no need of such excessive pleasures."

"Masi as soon as Moni's mind begins to flower, I am going to . . ."

"Why are you so worried Jatin? It is really fortunate if the mind really awakes at last."

A very old folk song now comes in Jatin's mind . . .

Oh mind, did not awake
When your man to the door came
Now as you hear the departing footsteps
You have awoken from sleep,
Oh you have awoken from sleep in darkness.

"Masi what's the time now?"

"Almost nine."

"Only nine! I think it to be one or two o'clock. Really my midnight starts from the very evening. Then why are you so busy to send me to sleep."

"Yesterday too you couldn't sleep as you continued to talk. So, today I say you to sleep as early as possible."

"Has Moni slept?"

"No, at first she prepares soup from lentil for you, and then she goes to sleep."

"What are you saying Masi! Then Moni has learnt to . . ."

"Yes. She prepares all the meals for you. She has no rest . . ."

"I thought that Moni perhaps is not at all . . ."

"The women do not need to learn these things. They do themselves when the proper time comes."

"Today in the noonday meal the jhol of Mourla³ fish was beautifully prepared. I thought you made it."

"Oh my lot! Moni does not allow me to do anything. She herself cleanses your napkins and towels in her own hands. She knows well that you don't like the dirty clothes. If you see the reading room outside, you must be surprised to see that Moni has made it so clean sweeping twice in her own hands. If I could allow her to come in your house then . . . And she really wants to come . . .

"Moni's health is perhaps not . . ."

"Doctors say that she shouldn't be allowed always in the patient's room. She is so tender-hearted that, she will surely lose her health in seeing your sufferings.

"Masi how do you prevent her from coming here."

"I can as she obeys me very much. Yet I have to report her time and again . . . oh my sad lot, this has become another duty for me!"

The stars above look bright like the tears of the sympathetic eyes. The life which is going to depart for ever comes in front of Jatin. He thanks from his heart. And Death from the absolute darkness has come and stood beside him extending its right hand. Jatin keeps his ailing hand faithfully on it. He sighs once, and hesitatingly says "Masi, if Moni is still awake, will you . . ."

"Surely, my son. I go to call her soon."

"I don't want to keep her long in my room. . . . Only five minutes . . . I have a word or two to say her . . ."

Masi sighs and goes to call Moni. And here Jatin's pulses flow rapidly. Jatin knows that he has not yet been able to talk her well. It seems that they are the two different harps set in different tunes. Very difficult to play together. Moni all the times cajoles and rejoices with his friends. Listening from the distance, how many times Jatin's heart is tormented in envy. Jatin has blamed himself - why can he not speak like her on such ordinary things! It's not that he can't speak well even on the trifling matters. However, things which are common to men are different from women. One can continue a long grave speech without caring much about the other partner. But in case of the homely and commonest things, there is the need of constant interaction. A flute can be played alone. But it sounds well when the other musical instrument is accompanied with it. So, in how many evenings when Jatin sat with Moni on mattress in the open verandah, he couldn't continue well only just after few words. The strings seemed to wide apart. After that the whole silence seemed to vanish in shame. Jatin felt well that Moni likes to go. He wished the arrival of someone at once there. Because it is difficult to continue with the two, rather easy with the three persons.

Jatin begins to think how he'll begin today when she comes to him. He feels that if he tries to speak after some thinking, the speeches become long, the words don't fit proper. Jatin now fears that perhaps tonight's five minutes will also fail. Yet he knows well that there are only a few five

minutes still left in his life.

"What is this Bou? Are you going somewhere?"

"I'll go to Sitarampur."

"How strange! With whom?"

"Anath will take me there."

"My little daughter! My sweet girl. You'll surely go. I'll not stop you . . . but don't go today."

"Tickets have been reserved already."

"There will be no such monetary loss if you do not go now . . . you'll surely go in the morning . . . but not today."

"Masi I don't like your all these rituals to go in father's house. What loss will be there, if I go now."

"Jatin has called you. He has some words to speak to you."

"Well. Still there is enough time . . . I'll go to tell him."

"No, you should not tell him that you're going to your father's house."

"Well then. I'll say nothing. But I'll not delay anymore. The Annyaprasana will be held tomorrow. I'll surely go today."

"I beg to you Bou with my folded hands. Please keep my words only for tonight. Just be quiet. Go to Jatin with calm mind, and seat beside him. . . .Don't make hurry."

"But what can I do Masi. The vehicle will not wait for me. Anath has already gone. He'll come to take me there within ten minutes. I now just go to meet him."

"No, you need not go to Jatin. You may go to your father's house. I'll not allow you to go in such perturbed state. Oh what an unfortunate woman you're!

You who've caused such deep sorrow in him, the man will go tomorrow for ever leaving everything. . . . But as many days as you leave in this earth, you have to remember this day. God knows and sees everything, you'll come to know one day."

"Masi don't curse me like this."

"Oh my son! Why are you still alive my son! Sins have no end . . . I can't stop her."

Masi comes to the patient's house in late. She hopes that perhaps he has slept. But as she enters, Jatin rises from the bed. Masi says, "Oh my god, she has made another nuisance."

"What happened Masi? Why Moni does not come? Why are you so late Masi?"

"As I went, I saw her to cry aloud. She has burnt milk as she tried to boil for you on the fire." She felt much guilty for this. I consoled her saying that there are still more milk. But she was very ashamed as she burnt milk prepared for you. I consoled and sent her to bed. Today I couldn't bring her. Let her sleep a little."

Jatin's heart is much hurt as he hears that Moni is not coming. Yet he gets some relief. He fears that she may felt perhaps some trouble in his presence. Because such things happened many times in his life. Jatin's heart is filled in gratitude as he thinks that Moni's soft heart is so hurt as

she burnt milk prepared for him.

"Masi."

"Yes, my son."

"I know well that my days are coming to an end. But I've no regret. Don't you lament for me?"

"No my son. I'll not lament. Because I believe in both life and death. Both are inevitable."

"Masi, I say you truly that death now seem to me very pleasant."

Jatin looks at the sky in darkness. He sees that his Moni stands in front of him in the image of death. She is now in her imperishable youth . . . she looks like the wife, the mother, the beauty, the benevolent. On her unkempt hair, the stars above look like the blessed garland in the hand of the goddess Lakshmi. On their head the darkness spreads as the wedding garment. They look at each other again as in the wedding look. The whole darkness of the night is filled in Moni's steadfast lovelorn eyes. Moni, the woman of this house; Moni, my little Moni appears as the goddess of the universe. She now takes her seat on the star goddess in the midst of the union of life and death. The silent night is filled in holy tide like the consecrated pitcher. Jatin silently utters in his folded hands, "Now she unveils herself at the end. The cover is dispelled in the darkness. I pined for you . . . oh goddess; you'll not leave me alone anymore."

"Masi, I feel pain, but not as much as you think. Gradually, I'm now becoming separated from my pain. So long, it remained tied with my life-ship like a loaded boat. Today it has untied the knot. Taking my belongings, it now floats away. I can still see it now, but it does not seem mine anymore . . . Masi, I can't see Moni for the last two days.

"Should I give another pillow near your back Jatin?"

"It seems to me that Moni too has left me. Like my untied boat filled with sorrow."

"My son, Take a little pomegranate juice. Your throat becomes dried."

"I've completed the Will... have I shown you that? ... I can't remember."

"I don't need to see Jatin."

"When my mother died, I had nothing. You nourished me. I've been brought up in your hands. So I say..."

"What are you saying Jatin! I had only this house and a little property. But you have earned and made everything what is now.

"But the house . . ."

"Now this is not my house at all. You have made it large. My part is very difficult to find it now."

"Moni inwardly very much . . ."

"I know that well Jatin. Now you sleep."

"I've willed everything for Moni in papers. But all these things will remain for you Masi. I believe she will never disobey you."

"Why are you thinking so my son?"

"Your blessings are my only belongings. But seeing me to will, never think anything wrong about me."

"What're you saying Jatin? You've willed your own thing to Moni. And I'll mind for that! O my son! The bliss that you feel after giving everything to

Moni, is my only happiness.”

“But I too you . . .”

“See Jatin. Now I'll be very angry. You're now to leave me forever, and you want me to forget my grief with money.”

“Masi, if I could give you anything more valuable than mere money . . .”

“You've given me my son. You've given me a lot. You made my lonely house fulfilled. This is the only reward of my lives. So long I received everything from you, and today if you don't give me anything should I not object! . . . Give everything Jatin . . . will them . . . these houses, belongings, horses, all the estates . . . whatever is here, Will everything to Moni. . . These things will be burden for me.”

“You're old . But Moni is now growing . . .”

“Don't say like this. You want to give everything to Moni, you are free to give. But I know she will not be able to keep all these.”

“Why Masi?”

“I know. She will not be able to take and sustain from these property. She'll die rather, yet won't be able to arrange a mere glass of water from these huge estates and properties.”

Jatin remains silent. In his absence the house will be totally vacant for Moni. Whether these words are true or false, or it will be good or bad to Moni, he cannot estimate properly. All the stars seem to enter in his heart and whisper in his ears “This happens. We see the same thing from the very beginning that all these toiling are of no avail in family.”

“Jatin gives a deep sigh and says “we can't give anything valuable more.”

“Is this not enough my son? These houses, money, wealth whatever you're giving to her, she will never try to realize its true value. I pray to God to give her strength to accept your offerings.”

“Give me a little more pomegranate juice. My throat dries quickly. Did Moni come to me yesterday? I can't remember properly.”

“She came. But you fell asleep by then. She sat by the side of your head, began to air you for long. Then she went to give your clothes to the washer man.”

“Strange! Perhaps I dreamt at that time. I saw that Moni tried to come to my room... the door slightly opened ... she pushed more ... but couldn't open any more. But Masi you're doing everything beyond the limit... Let her see that I'm dying. . . . Otherwise, she will not be able to bear my death.”

“My son, should I cover that woolen shawl on your legs. The soles of your feet have become chilled.”

“No Masi, I don't need to cover anything now.”

“Do you know Jatin that Moni herself has made this shawl. She has made it for you, remaining awake nights after nights. She finished it yesterday.”

Jatin took the shawl in his own hand. Begins to feel. The softness of the shawl seems to him as the softness of Moni's mind. She has woven it for Jatin. Her love for Jatin has been woven in it. It is made not only of wools, but only by the touch of her soft fingers. When Masi covers his feet with the shawl, it seems to Jatin that Moni is now sitting near his feet and serving him nights after nights.

"But Masi I knew that Moni doesn't know sewing... She doesn't like sewing at all."

"It's true. But I've trained her. Though there are some wrong sewings."

"Let it be. It'll not be sent in the Paris exhibition... My feet will be rightly covered with these wrong sewing."

Jatin is more delighted as he thinks that there are some wrong sewing. Poor Moni can't weave proper, even she doesn't know well, she makes mistakes again and again. Yet she continues nights after nights with patience... this thought makes Jatin much happy. He feels blessed. He takes the shawl more close to him.

"Masi, is the doctor in the room below?"

"Yes Jatin, he'll stay here tonight."

"But don't give me sleeping pills anymore. I can't sleep. Rather it increases my pain. Let me awake proper. Do you know Masi? Our marriage was held in the twelfth day of the lunar fortnight in Baisakh⁴ month... it's coming tomorrow... All the stars will be lighted tomorrow. Perhaps Moni has forgotten that. I want to remind her tonight. Call her only for two minutes... Why are you silent Masi? Perhaps the doctor has told you that I'm weak now. So, nothing should be... But I say you certainly that my mind will be free enough if I can talk to her a few words tonight... perhaps I'll not be needed sleeping pills anymore. My heart wants to speak her something, that's why I can't sleep for the last two nights... Masi don't cry like this. I'm well. My mind is filled in such joys that it never happened earlier. That's why I say you to call my Moni. It seems that I'll leave my burdened heart in her hands. I wanted to tell her many things in many times but I could not. But Masi don't delay anymore; call her at once... now... No, Masi I can't endure your crying anymore. So long you remained silent. Why today you can't control your cryings!"

"Oh my Jatin, my poor son. I thought that all my cryings have been ended... But now I see, still there are some left... Today I can't resist any more."

"Please call Moni... I'll tell her that for tomorrow's night she should ..."

"I go. My son Shambhoo is near the door. Call him as you need."

Masi goes to Moni's vacant bed room. She sits on the floor and cries aloud "Oh, please come, come once ... come, you the monstrous woman. One who has given you everything, please keep his last words ... he is going to die ... don't kill him anymore."

Hearing the footsteps Jatin startles and asks, "Moni?"

"No, I'm Shambhoo."

"Please call once your Bouthakuran.⁵"

"Whom?"

"Your Bouthakuran."

"She hasn't yet returned."

"Where did she go?"

"In Sitarampur."

"Has she gone today?"

"No, she has gone three days before."

Jatin's whole body seems to faint at once. Everything seems dark before his eyes. Till now he sits leaning on the pillow. But now he lies on the bed. He throws the covered woolen shawl from his feet.

Masi comes after a long time. Jatin says nothing. She thinks that perhaps Jatin has forgotten that.

Suddenly Jatin says, "Did I tell you about that dream?"

"Which dream?"

"As though Moni pushed the door to come in my room... but the door opened a little. She remained in the outside and saw me, but couldn't enter. Moni remains outside in my room forever. I called her so earnestly, but she did not get a place here."

"Masi remains silent, without speaking anything. And thinks that the imaginary world that she wanted to create for Jatin does not last long. When sorrows come, it's better to accept ...it's really foolish to resist the onslaught of fate through deception.

"Masi, the affection that I received from you is the blessings of my life and the lives to follow. Filling the boat of my life, I'm going. In the coming life, you must be born as my daughter. I'll bring up you from my heart."

"What're you saying Jatin? I'll be born again as a girl! No Jatin. I'll be born as a son in your lap ... pray for this.

"No, no, not son. You'll come in my house with your heavenly beauty as you were in your childhood. I can remember how I'll ornament you."

"Don't say more Jatin ... now sleep a little."

"I'll name you Laxhmirani."

"This isn't a modern name."

"No, I'll not give you any modern name. Masi, I like you to be of the old days. You'll surely come to my house with the grandeur of the old days."

"Will I be born to your house with the miseries of Kanyadan?⁷ I can't wish that."

"Masi do you think me so weak? ... Do you want to save me from sorrows and sufferings?"

"My son! My mind is weak as I'm a woman. ... That's why I always tried to save you from the terrible truths. But what more can I do! I've failed to do anything."

"Masi, I don't get any time to apply the lessons of my life. But all these things will remain with me. What a man can do in this short life, I'll show that in the coming life. In this life, I've rightly understood that it's really foolish to think about myself all the time!"

"But I know you've taken nothing for yourself. Rather, you've given to others."

"Masi, I feel proud that I don't force on happiness ... I did never say that I'll force to get things for me when the opportunity comes. I didn't force on the unattainable things. I tried to get that on which none has right at all ... I've only waited with folded hands throughout the life. Perhaps, I've remained such for so long because I didn't want anything lie ... Truth will pity me perhaps now. Who is there? ... Masi can you see?"

"Where? There is none Jatin."

"Masi, please go once inside the house and see. Perhaps I can see . . ."

"No, my son. I see none."

"But perhaps I've seen clearly . . ."

"Nothing Jatin . . . now look, the doctor has come."

"See, he talks much if you remain with him. He has spent thus for the last few nights. You kindly go to bed. That man will stay with him."

"No, Masi. I'll not allow you to go."

"Well, my son. Here I seat in the corner."

"No, not all. You stay here beside me. . . . I'll not leave your hands. . . . even at the end too. . . . I've been brought up in your hands Masi. God will take me from your hands."

"Well. Let it be. But Jatinbabu, you should not talk much. Now the time has come for that medicine."

"No, it's a lie. The time has already passed... Now you're trying to deceive me with the medicine. I don't need it. I don't fear to die. Masi, they are treating death. Then why have you gathered all these doctors? ...remove them all. Dismiss them. Now I need only you... I don't need anybody more . . .not anybody . . .not any lie."

"This excitement does not fit your health."

"Then you go. Don't excite me anymore...Masi, has the doctor gone? ... Then come near my bed. Seat here. I want to put my head on your lap."

"Well, my son. My heart. Lie and sleep a little."

"No, Masi, don't say me to sleep. If I sleep, I'll not awake anymore. Still I need to awake a little more. . . Can you not hear Masi anything? Look it's coming. That will come soon."

"Jatin, my son look a little . . . she has come. Look just once."

"Who? Dream?"

"No dream, my son. Moni has come. Your father-in-law has come."

"Who're you?"

"Can you not recognize my son, she is your Moni."

"Moni! Has that door opened?"

"Everything has opened, my son, everything."

"No, Masi. Don't cover that shawl on my feet. No, don't give. That shawl is made of lies. The shawl is full of deception."

"Not shawl Jatin. Bou has fallen on your feet. . . .Put your hand on her head, and bless her. . . Don't cry such Bou. That time is yet to come. Now stop a little.

Ashwin,⁸ 1321.

Footnotes :

1. The affectionate term for son's wife.
2. The Hindu rite of a child's tasting rice for the first time celebrated in the six month after birth.
3. A typical Bengali fishy soup cooked for ailing persons.
4. The first month in Bengali calendar.
5. The respectable term for elder's wife.
6. Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth.
7. The act of giving away a girl especially, a daughter in marriage.
8. The sixth month in Bengali calendar. The story was composed in this month of the Bengali year 1321.

