Ten weeks before he died, Mr Mohun Biswas, a journalist of Sikkim Street, St James, Port of Spain, was sacked. He had been ill for some time. In less than a year he had spent more than nine weeks at the Colonial Hospital and convalesced at home for even longer. When the doctor advised him to take a complete rest the Trinidad Sentinel had no choice. It gave Mr Biswas three months’ notice and continued, up to the time of his death, to supply him every morning with a free copy of the paper.

Mr Biswas was forty-six, and had four children. He had no money. His wife Shama had no money. On the house in Sikkim Street Mr Biswas owed, and had been owing for four years, three thousand dollars. The interest on this, at eight per cent, came to twenty dollars a month; the ground rent was ten dollars. Two children were at school. The two older children, on whom Mr Biswas might have depended, were both abroad on scholarships.

It gave Mr Biswas some satisfaction that in the circumstances Shama did not run straight off to her mother to beg for help. Ten years before that would have been her first thought. Now she tried to comfort Mr Biswas, and devised plans on her own.

‘Potatoes,’ she said. ‘We can start selling potatoes. The price around here is eight cents a pound. If we buy at five and sell at seven –’

‘Trust the Tulsi bad blood,’ Mr Biswas said. ‘I know that the pack of you Tulsis are financial geniuses. But have a good look around and count the number of people selling potatoes. Better to sell the old car.

‘No. Not the car. Don’t worry. We’ll manage.

‘Yes,’ Mr Biswas said irritably. ‘We’ll manage.’

No more was heard of the potatoes, and Mr Biswas never threatened again to sell the car. He didn’t now care to do anything against his wife’s wishes. He had grown to accept her judgement and to respect her optimism. He trusted her. Since they had moved to the house Shama had learned a new loyalty, to him and to their children; away from her mother and sisters, she was able to express this without shame, and to Mr Biswas this was a triumph almost as big as the acquiring of his own house.

He thought of the house as his own, though for years it had been irretrievably mortgaged. And during these months of illness and despair he was struck again and again by the wonder of being in his own house, the audacity of it: to walk in through his own front gate, to bar entry to whoever he wished, to close his doors and windows every night, to hear no noises except those of his family, to wander freely from room to room and about his yard, instead of being condemned, as before, to retire the moment he got home to the crowded room in one or the other of Mrs Tulsi’s houses, crowded with Shama’s Sisters, their husbands, their children. As a boy he had moved from one house of strangers to another; and since his marriage he felt he had lived nowhere but in the houses of the Tulsis, at Hanuman House in Arwacas, in the decaying wooden house at Shorthills, in the clumsy concrete house in Port of Spain. And now at the end he found himself in his own house, on his own half-lot of land, his own portion of the earth. That he should have been responsible for this seemed to him, in these last months, stupendous.

The house could be seen from two or three streets away and was known all over St James. It was like a huge and squat sentry-box: tall, square, two-storeyed, with a pyramidal roof of corrugated iron. It had been designed and built by a solicitor’s clerk who built houses in his spare time. The solicitor’s clerk had many contacts. He bought land which the City Council had announced was not for sale; he persuaded estate owners to split whole lots into half-lots; he
bought lots of barely reclaimed swamp land near Mucurapo and got permission to build on
them. On whole lots or three-quarter-lots he built one-storey houses, twenty feet by twenty-
six, which could pass unnoticed; on half-lots he built two-storey houses, twenty feet by
thirteen, which were distinctive. All his houses were assembled mainly from frames from the
dismantled American Army camps at Docksite, Pompeii Savannah and Fort Read. The frames
did not always match, but they enabled the solicitor’s clerk to pursue his hobby with little
professional help.

On the ground floor of Mr Biswas’s two-storey house the solicitor’s clerk had put a tiny
kitchen in one corner; the remaining L-shaped space, unbroken, served as drawingroom and
diningroom. Between the kitchen and the diningroom there was a doorway but no door.
Upstairs, just above the kitchen, the clerk had constructed a concrete room which contained a
toilet bowl, a wash-basin and a shower; because of the shower this room was perpetually wet.
The remaining L-shaped space was broken up into a bedroom, a verandah, a bedroom. Because
the house faced west and had no protection from the sun, in the afternoon only two rooms
were comfortably habitable: the kitchen downstairs and the wet bathroom-and-lavatory
upstairs.

In his original design the solicitor’s clerk seemed to have forgotten the need for a
staircase to link both floors, and what he had provided had the appearance of an afterthought.
Doorways had been punched in the eastern wall and a rough wooden staircase — heavy planks
on an uneven frame with one warped unpainted banister, the whole covered with a sloping roof
of corrugated iron — hung precariously at the back of the house, in striking contrast with the
white-pointed brickwork of the front, the white woodwork and the frosted glass of doors and
windows.

For this house Mr Biswas had paid five thousand five hundred dollars.