



Learn English Through Stories

E Series

E6

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1. The Thief

By Ruskin Bond

I was still a thief when I met Arun, and though I was only fifteen I was experienced and good at it.

Arun was watching the wrestlers when I approached him. He was about twenty, a tall, lean fellow, and he looked kind and simple enough for my purpose. I hadn't had much luck of late and thought I might be able to get into this young person's confidence. He seemed quite fascinated by the wrestling. Two well-oiled men slid about in the soft mud, grunting and slapping their thighs. When I drew Arun into a conversation, he didn't seem to realize I was a stranger.

"You look like a wrestler yourself," I said.

"So do you," he replied, which surprised me for a moment because at the time I was rather thin and bony and not very impressive physically.

"Yes," I said. "I wrestle sometimes."

"What's your name?" "Deepak," I lied. Deepak was about my fifth name. I had earlier called myself Ranbir, Sudhir, Trilok and Surinder.

After this preliminary exchange, Arun confined himself to comments on the match, and I didn't have much to say.

After a while, he walked away from the crowd of spectators. I followed him.

"Hello," he said. "Enjoying yourself?" I gave him my most appealing smile. "I want to work for you," I said.

He didn't stop walking. "And what makes you think I want someone to work for me?"

"Well," I said, "I've been wandering about all day looking for the best person to work for. When I saw you I knew that no one else had a chance."

"You flatter me," he said. "That's all right." "But you can't work for me."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't pay you."

I thought that over for a minute. Perhaps I had misjudged my man. "Can you feed me?" I asked.

"Can you cook?" he countered.

"I can cook," I lied.

"If you can cook," he said, "I'll feed you."

He took me to his room and told me I could sleep on the veranda. But I was nearly back on the street that night. The meal I cooked must have been pretty awful because Arun gave it to the neighbour's cat and told me to be off. But I just hung around smiling in my most appealing way, and then he couldn't help laughing. He sat down on the bed and laughed for a full five minutes and later patted me on the head and said, never mind, he'd teach me to cook in the morning.

Not only did he teach me to cook but he taught me to write my name and his, and said he would soon teach me to write whole sentences and add money on paper when you didn't have any in your pocket!

It was quite pleasant working for Arun. I made the tea in the morning and later went out shopping. I would take my time buying the day's supplies and make a profit of about twenty-five paise a day. I would tell Arun that rice was fifty-six paise a pound (it generally was), but I would get it at fifty paise a pound. I think he knew I made a little this way but he didn't mind. He wasn't giving me a regular wage.

I was really grateful to Arun for teaching me to write. I knew that once I could write like an educated man, there would be no limit to what I could achieve. It might even be an incentive, to be honest.

Arun made money by fits and starts. He would be borrowing one week, and lending the next. He would keep worrying about his next cheque, but as soon as it arrived he would go out and celebrate lavishly.

One evening he came home with a wad of notes, and at night I saw him tuck the bundles under his mattress at the head of the bed.

I had been working for Arun for nearly a fortnight and, apart from the shopping, hadn't done much to exploit him. I had every opportunity for doing so. I had a key to the front door which meant I had access to the room whenever Arun was out. He was the most trusting person I had ever met. And that was why I couldn't make up my mind to rob him.

It's easy to rob a greedy man because he deserves to be robbed. It's easy to rob a rich man because he can afford to be robbed. But it's difficult to rob a poor man, even one who really doesn't care if he's robbed. A rich man or a greedy man or a careful man wouldn't keep his money under a pillow or mattress. He'd lock it up in a safe place. Arun had put his money where it would be child's play for me to remove it without his knowledge.

It's time I did some real work, I told myself. I'm getting out of practice . . . If I don't take the money, he'll only waste it on his friends . . . He doesn't even pay me . . .

Arun was asleep. Moonlight came in from the veranda and fell across the bed. I sat up on the floor, my blanket wrapped around me, considering the situation. There was quite a lot of money in that wad and if I took it I would have to leave town—I might make the ten-thirty express to Amritsar . . .

Slipping out of the blanket, I crept on all fours through the door and up to the bed and peeped at Arun. He was sleeping peacefully with soft and easy breathing. His face was clear and unlined. Even I had more markings on my face, though mine were mostly scars.

My hand took on an identity of its own as it slid around under the mattress, the fingers searching for the notes. They found them and I drew them out without a crackle.

Arun sighed in his sleep and turned on his side, towards me. My free hand was resting on the bed and his hair touched my fingers.

I was frightened when his hair touched my fingers and crawled quickly and quietly out of the room.

When I was in the street I began to run. I ran down the bazaar road to the station. The shops were all closed but a few lights were on in the upper windows. I had the notes at my waist, held there by the string of my pyjamas. I felt I had to stop and count the notes, though I knew it might make me late for the train. It was already ten-twenty by the clock tower.

I slowed down to a walk and my fingers flicked through the notes. There were about a hundred rupees in fives. A good haul. I could live like a prince for a month or two.

When I reached the station, I did not stop at the ticket office (I had never bought a ticket in my life) but dashed straight onto the platform.

The Amritsar Express was just moving out. It was moving slowly enough for me to be able to jump on the footboard of one of the carriages, but I hesitated for some urgent, unexplainable reason.

I hesitated long enough for the train to leave without me. When it had gone and the noise and busy confusion of the platform had subsided, I found myself standing alone on the deserted platform. The knowledge that I had a hundred stolen rupees in my pyjamas only increased my feeling of isolation and loneliness. I had no idea where to spend the night. I had never kept any friends because sometimes friends can be one's undoing. I didn't want to make myself conspicuous by staying at a hotel. And the only person I knew really well in town was the person I had robbed!

Leaving the station, I walked slowly through the bazaar keeping to dark, deserted alleys. I kept thinking of Arun. He would still be asleep, blissfully unaware of his loss.

I have made a study of men's faces when they have lost something of material value. The greedy man shows panic, the rich man shows anger, and the poor man shows fear. But I knew that neither panic nor anger nor fear would show on Aron's face when he discovered the theft; only a terrible sadness, not for the loss of the money but for my having betrayed his trust.

I found myself on the maidan and sat down on a bench with my feet tucked up under my haunches. The night was a little cold and I regretted not having brought Aron's blanket along. A light drizzle added to my discomfort. Soon it was raining heavily. My shirt and pyjamas stuck to my skin, and a cold wind brought the rain whipping across my face. I told myself that sleeping on a bench was something I should have been used to by now, but the veranda had softened me.

I walked back to the bazaar and sat down on the steps of a closed shop. A few vagrants lay beside me, rolled up tight in thin blankets. The clock showed midnight. I felt for the notes. They were still with me but had lost their crispness and were damp with rainwater.

Arun's money. In the morning he would probably have given me a rupee to go to the pictures, but now I had it all. No more cooking his meals, running to the bazaar, or learning to write whole sentences. Whole sentences . . .

They were something I had forgotten in the excitement of a really big man, a wise and successful man that was something. I should go back to Arun, I told myself, if only to learn how to write.

Perhaps it was also a concern for Arun that drew me back. A sense of sympathy is one of my weaknesses, and through hesitation over a theft, I had often been caught. A successful thief must be pitiless. I was fond of Arun. My affection for him, my sense of sympathy, but most of all my desire to write whole sentences, drew me back to the room.

I hurried back to the room extremely nervous, for it is easier to steal something than to return it undetected. If I was caught beside the bed now, with the money in my hand, or with my hand hundred rupees. Whole sentences, I knew, could one day bring me more than a hundred rupees. It was a simple matter to steal (and sometimes just as simple to be caught) but to be under the mattress, there could be only one explanation: that I was actually stealing. If Arun woke up I would be lost.

I opened the door clumsily and stood in the doorway in clouded moonlight. Gradually my eyes became accustomed to the darkness of the room. Arun was still asleep. I went on all fours again and crept noiselessly to the head of the bed. My hand came up with the notes. I felt his breath on my fingers. I was fascinated by his tranquil features and easy breathing and remained motionless for a minute. Then my hand explored the mattress, found the edge, and slipped under it with the notes.

I awoke late the next morning to find that Arun had already made the tea. I found it difficult to face him in the harsh light of day. His hand was stretched out towards me. There was a five-rupee note between his fingers. My heart sank.

“I made some money yesterday,” he said. “Now you’ll get paid regularly.” My spirit rose as rapidly as it had fallen. I congratulated myself on having returned the money.

But when I took the note, I realized that he knew everything. The note was still wet from last night’s rain.

“Today I’ll teach you to write a little more than your name,” he said.

He knew but neither his lips nor his eyes said anything about their knowledge.

I smiled at Arun in my most appealing way. And the smile came by itself, without my knowing it.

2. Education in India



Education has always been a respectable profession. Even in the recent past schools were associated with places of worship and teachers were revered like priests. Emphasis used to be on moral education - the purpose of education used to be turning out physically, mentally and morally balanced young men. But it is a matter of regret that today education is fast becoming commercialized.

There is a mushroom growth of academies and tuition centres. Their purpose is only to make money. Students have a feeling that they are not well prepared to sit in competitive examinations unless they take coaching from one or the other coaching centres. When they go to those centres, a very heavy fee is charged to them. No common family can afford fees of that kind.

Education is in a very bad state. The policymakers and the chairpersons of universities and boards too are not very serious about the purpose of education. The universities turn out thousands of young persons every year who are unskilled degree holders, unable to get employment. It is the duty of the government to take an active interest in the improvement of the education system.

The present education system must be changed. Education should make people employable and good human beings.

3. Grammar Page

The Possessive Form of Nouns

Use the possessive form of a noun to show ownership.

- ▶ To make the possessive form, put an **apostrophe** and an **s** after a **singular noun**.

This is my bed and that is **Peter's** bed.

We all like **Dad's** cooking.

It is my job to collect **everybody's** plate after the meal.

The flies are buzzing around the **horse's** tail.

This is **Susan and Jenny's** room.

This is **Tom's** hat and that is **Tom's father's** hat.

Notes

- How do you make the possessive form when two names linked by **and** are the owners? Put an 's after the second name only. For example:
Katy and Mike's house is very big. (= *the house that belongs to both Katy and Mike*)
Joe and Sarah's dad works at the shoe factory. (= *He is Joe's dad and he is also Sarah's dad.*)
- Sometimes two possessive forms with 's appear together, one after the other:
This is **John's brother's** ball. (= *The ball belongs to John's brother.*)
Paul's teacher's house has a swimming pool. (= *the house that belongs to Paul's teacher*)

- ▶ After **plural nouns** that don't end in **s**, use an **apostrophe** and an **s** to make the possessive form.

The **children's** room is always messy.

Some **people's** houses are bigger than ours.

Rats' tails are longer than **mice's** tails.

Men's voices are deeper than **women's** voices.

After **plural nouns** that end in s, just add an apostrophe **s'**.

The **pupils'** desks are arranged in rows.

The **boys'** bedroom is bigger than the **girls'** bedroom.

The strong winds destroyed all the **farmers'** crops.

Mice's tails are shorter than **rats'** tails.

Notes

When a name ends in s, you can make the possessive form in either of two ways: add an apostrophe and an s **'s'**, or add just an apostrophe **'**. For example:

This is **James's** house.

or

This is **James'** house.

Which is **Charles's** bike?

or

Which is **Charles'** bike?