



# Learn English Through Stories

F Series

F14

**Adapted and modified by  
Kulwant Singh Sandhu**

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# 1. The Living and the Dead

By Rabindranath Tagore

## 1

The widow living with the zamindar Sharadashankar's family, in the big house at Ranihat, had no blood-relatives left. One by one they had died. In her husband's family, too, there was no one she could call her own, having no husband or son. But there was a little boy - her brother-in-law's son - who was the apple of her eye. His mother had been very ill for a long time after his birth, so his Aunt Kadambini had brought him up. Anyone who brings up someone else's son becomes especially devoted: there are no rights, no social claims - nothing but ties of affection. Affection cannot prove itself with a legal document; nor does it wish to. All it can do is love with doubled intensity, because it owns so uncertainly.

Kadambini poured her frustrated widow's love on to this boy, till one night in Sraban she suddenly died. For some strange reason her heartbeat stopped. Everywhere else, time continued; yet in this one, small, tender, loving heart its clock's tick ceased. Keeping the matter quiet, in case the police took notice, four Brahmin employees of the zamindar quickly carried off the body to be burnt.

The cremation-ground at Ranihat was a long way from human habitation. There was a hut on the edge of a tank there, and next to it an immense banyan tree: nothing else at all on the wide open plain.

Formerly a river had flowed here - the tank had been made by digging out part of the dried-up course of the river. The local people now regarded this tank as a sacred spring. The four men placed the corpse inside the hut and sat down to wait for the wood for the pyre to arrive. The wait seemed so long that they grew restless: Nitai and Gurucharan went off to see why the firewood was so long coming, while Bidhu and Banamali sat guarding the corpse.

It was a dark monsoon night. The clouds were swollen; not a star could be seen in the sky. The two men sat silently in the dark hut. One of them had matches and a candle, wrapped up in his chadar. They could not get the matches to light in the damp air, and the lantern they had brought with them had gone out as well. After sitting in silence for a long time, one of them said, "I could do with a puff of tobacco, *bhai*. We forgot everything in the rush."

"I'll run and get some," said the other. "I won't be a minute."

"That's nice!" said Bidhu, perceiving his motive. "I suppose I'm to stay here on my own?"

They fell silent again. Five minutes seemed like an hour. They began inwardly to curse the two who had gone to trace the firewood - no doubt they were sitting comfortably somewhere having a smoke and chatting. They were soon convinced that this must be so. There was no sound anywhere - just the steady murmur of crickets and frogs round the tank. Suddenly the bed seemed to stir a little, as if the dead body had turned on to its side. Bidhu and Banamali began to shudder and mutter prayers. Next moment a long sigh was heard: the two immediately fled outside and ran off towards the village.

A couple of miles along the path they met their two companions returning with lanterns in their hands. They had actually just been for a smoke, and had found out nothing about the firewood. They claimed it was being chopped up now and would not be long coming. Bidhu and Banamali then described what had happened in the hut. Nitai and Gurucharan dismissed this as nonsense, and rebuked the other two angrily for deserting their post.

The four of them swiftly returned to the hut at the cremation-ground.

When they went in, they found that the corpse had gone: the bed was empty. They stared at one another. Could jackals have made off with it? But even the garment that covered it had gone. Searching about outside the hut they noticed in a patch of mud by the door some recent, small, woman's footprints.

The zamindar, Sharadashankar, was not a fool: to try to tell him a ghost-story would get them nowhere. After long discussion, the four decided they had best say simply that the cremation had taken place.

When, towards dawn, the wood arrived at last, those who brought it were told that in view of the delay the job had already been done, using firewood stored in the hut. They had no reason to doubt this. A dead body was not a valuable object: why should anyone wish to steal it?

## 2

It is well known that an apparently lifeless body can harbour dormant life which in time may bring the body back to life. Kadambini had not died: for some reason, her life-function had been suspended - that was all.

When she regained consciousness, she saw dense darkness all around her. She realized that the place where she was lying was not her usual bedroom. She called out "*Didi*" once, but no one in the dark room replied. She sat up in alarm, recalling her death-bed - that sudden pain in her chest, the choking for breath. Her eldest sister-in-law had been squatting in a corner of the room

warming her little son's milk on a stove - Kadambini had collapsed on to the bed, no longer able to stand.

Gasping, she had called, "*Didi*, bring the little boy to me - I think I'm dying." Then everything had gone black, as if an inkpot had been poured over a page of writing. Kadambini's entire memory and consciousness, all the letters in her book of life, became at that moment indistinguishable. She had no recollection of whether her nephew had called out "*Kakima*" for the last time, in his sweet loving voice; whether she had been given that final viaticum of love, to sustain her as she travelled from the world she knew, along Death's strange and endless path.

Her first feeling was that the land of death must be one of total darkness and desolation. There was nothing to see there, nothing to hear, nothing to do except sit and wait, forever awake. Then she suddenly felt a chilly, rainy wind through an open door, and heard the croaking of monsoon frogs; and all her memories of the monsoon, from childhood right through her short life, rose in her mind. She felt the touch of the world again. There was a flash of lightning: for an instant the tank, the banyan tree, the vast plain and a distant row of trees showed themselves before her eyes. She remembered how she had sometimes bathed in the tank on sacred occasions; how seeing dead bodies in the cremation-ground there had made her aware of the awesomeness of death.

Her immediate idea was that she should return home. But then she thought, "I'm not alive - they won't take me back. It would be a curse on them. I am exiled from the land of the living - I am my own ghost." If that were not so, how had she come at dead of night from the safe inner quarters of Sharadashankar's house to this remote cremation-ground?

But if her funeral rites had not yet been completed, then what had become of the people who should have burned her? She recalled her last moments before dying, in the well-lit Sharadashankar residence; then, finding herself alone in this distant, deserted, dark cremation-ground, she again said to herself, "I no longer belong to the world of living people. I am fearsome, a bringer of evil; I am my own ghost."

As this realization struck, all ties and conventions seemed to snap. It was as if she had weird power, boundless liberty - to go where she liked, do what she liked; and with the onset of this feeling she dashed out of the hut like a madwoman, like a gust of wind - ran out into the dark burning-ground with not the slightest shame, fear or worry in her mind.

But her legs were tired as she walked, and her body began to weaken. The

plain stretched on endlessly, with paddy-fields here and there and knee-deep pools of water. As dawn broke slowly, village bamboo-groves could be seen, and one or two birds called. She now felt very afraid. She had no idea where she stood in the world, what her relation to living people would be. So long as she was in the wide open plain, in the burning-ground, in the darkness of the Srabaṇ night, she remained fearless, as if in her own realm. Daylight and human habitation were what terrified her. Men fear ghosts, but ghosts fear men: they are two separate races, living on opposite sides of the river of death.

### 3

Wandering around at night like a madwoman, with her mud-smearred clothes and weird demeanour, Kadambini would have terrified anyone, and boys would probably have run away and thrown pebbles at her from a distance. Fortunately the first passer-by to see her in this condition was a gentleman.

“*Ma*,” he said, approaching her, “you look as though you come from a good family: where are you going to, alone on the road like this?”

At first Kadambini did not reply, and merely stared blankly at him. She felt totally at a loss. That she was out in the world that she looked well-born, that a passer-by was asking her questions - all this was beyond her grasp.

The gentleman spoke again. “Come along, *Ma*, I’ll take you home. Tell me where you live.”

Kadambini began to think. She could not imagine returning to her in-laws’ house, and she had no parental home; but then she remembered her childhood friend Yogmaya. Although she had not seen her since childhood, they had sometimes exchanged letters. At times there had been an affectionate rivalry between them, with Kadambini asserting that nothing was greater than her love for Yogmaya, while Yogmaya suggested that Kadambini was not responding sufficiently to her own affection. But neither doubted that if opportunity to meet arose again, neither would wish to lose sight of the other. “I’m going to Shripaticharan’s house at Nishindapur,” said Kadambini to the gentleman.

The man was going to Calcutta. Nishindapur was not nearby, but it was not out of his way. He personally saw Kadambini to Shripaticharan Babu’s house.

The two friends were a little slow to recognize each other, but soon their eyes lit up as each saw a childhood resemblance in the other. “Well I never,” said Yogmaya. “I never thought that I would see you again. But what brings you here? Did your in-laws kick you out?”

Kadambini was silent at first, then said, "*Bhai*, don't ask me about my in-laws. Give me a corner in your house, as a servant. I'll work for you."

"What an idea!" said Yogmaya. "How can you be a servant? You're my friend, you're like..." and so on. Then Shripati came into the room. Kadambini gazed at him for a moment, then slowly walked out, without covering her head or showing any other sign of modesty or respect. Afraid that Shripati would take offence at her friend's behaviour, Yogmaya made apologies for her. But so little explanation was necessary - indeed, Shripati accepted her excuses so easily - that she felt uneasy.

Kadambini joined her friend's household, but she could not be intimate with her - Death stood between them. If one doubts or is conscious of oneself, one cannot unite with another. Kadambini looked at Yogmaya as if she and her house and husband were in a different, distant world. "They are people of the world," she felt, "with their loves and feelings and duties, and I am an empty shadow. They are in the land of the living, whereas I belong to Eternity."

Yogmaya was also puzzled, could not understand anything. Women cannot bear mystery, for this reason: that poetry, heroism or learning can thrive on uncertainty but household arts cannot. Therefore women thrust aside what they don't understand, maintaining no connection with it, or else they replace it with something they themselves have made - something more useful. If they cannot do either of these, they get angry. The more impenetrable Kadambini became, the more resentful Yogmaya became towards her, wondering why she had been burdened with such trouble.

There was a further problem. Kadambini was terrified of herself. Yet she could not run away from herself. Those who are frightened of ghosts look backwards in terror - they are frightened of what they cannot see. But Kadambini was terrified of her inner self - nothing outside frightened her. Thus, in the silence of midday, she would sit alone in her room and sometimes shout out loud; and in the evening, the sight of her shadow in the lamplight made her quiver all over. Everyone in the house was alarmed by her fear. The maids and servants and Yogmaya herself began to see ghosts all over the place. Eventually, in the middle of the night, Kadambini came out of her bedroom, wailing; she came right up to the door of Yogmaya's room and cried, "*Didi, Didi*, I beg you! Do not leave me alone!"

Yogmaya was as angry as she was frightened. She would have driven Kadambini out of the house, there and then. The kindly Shripati, with great effort, managed to calm Kadambini down and settle her in an adjoining room.

The next day Shripati received an unexpected summons from the inner part of

the house. Yogmaya burst into a torrent of accusation: "So! A fine man you are. A woman leaves her own husband's home and takes up residence in your house - months have gone by but she shows no sign of leaving - and I've heard not the slightest objection from you. What are you thinking of? You men are a fine lot."

In fact, of course, men are unthinkingly weak about women, and women can accuse them all the more because of this. Even if he had been willing to swear on his life that his concern for the pathetic yet beautiful Kadambini was no more than was proper, his behaviour suggested otherwise. He had said to himself, "The people in her husband's house must have treated this childless widow with great injustice and cruelty, so that she was forced to flee and take refuge with me. She has no father or mother - so how can I desert her?" He had refrained from inquiring about her background, not wishing to upset her by questioning her on this unwelcome subject. But his wife was now objecting strongly to his passive, charitable attitude; and he realized he would have to inform Kadambini's in-laws of her whereabouts, if he was to keep the peace in his household. In the end he decided it would not be fruitful to write a letter; it would be better to go to Ranihat personally to find out what he could.

Shripati set off, and Yogmaya went to Kadambini and said, "My dear, it doesn't seem advisable for you to stay here anymore. What will people say?"

"I have no connection with people," said Kadambini, looking solemnly at Yogmaya.

Yogmaya was nonplussed. "*You* may not have," she said irritably, "but *we* have. How can we go on putting up someone else's widow?"

"Where is my husband's house?" said Kadambini.

"Hell!" thought Yogmaya. "What is the woman on about?"

"Who am I to you?" said Kadambini slowly. "Am I of this world? All of you here smile, weep, love, possess things; I merely look on. You are human beings; I am a shadow. I do not understand why God has put me in your midst. You're worried that I'll damage your happiness - I in turn cannot understand what my relation is to you. But since the Almighty has kept no other place for the likes of me, I shall wander round you and haunt you even if you cut me off."

Her stare and the tone of her words were such that Yogmaya understood their import, even if she did not understand them literally and was unable to reply. She could not manage any more questions. Gloomy and oppressed, she left the room.



Shripati did not return from Ranihat until nearly ten at night. The whole world seemed awash with torrential rain. With its thudding sound, it gave the impression that it would never end, that the night would never end.

“What happened?” asked Yogmaya.

“It’s a long story,” said Shripati. “I’ll tell you later.” He took off his wet clothes, had something to eat and after smoking for a bit went to bed. He seemed very preoccupied. Yogmaya suppressed her curiosity all this while, but when she got into bed she asked, “What did you find out? Tell me.”

“You are certainly mistaken,” said Shripati.

Yogmaya was rather annoyed at this. Women do not make mistakes, or if they do men are wiser not to mention them; it is safest to let them pass without complaining. “In what way?” asked Yogmaya heatedly.

“The woman you have accepted into your house,” said Shripati, “is not your friend Kadambini.”

Such a remark - especially from one’s husband - might reasonably cause offence. “So I don’t know my own friend?” said Yogmaya. “I have to wait for you to identify her? What an absurd thing to say!”

Shripati replied that its absurdity or otherwise was not the point: proof was what counted. There was no doubt whatsoever that Kadambini had died.

“Listen,” said Yogmaya. “You’ve got into a complete muddle. Whatever you heard in whatever place you went to can’t be right. Who asked you to go anyway? If you had written a letter, everything would have been made clear.”

Distressed by his wife’s lack of confidence in his efficiency, Shripati started to explain all the proofs in detail - but to no avail. They went on arguing into the small hours. Shripati believed their guest had been deceiving his wife all this time, and Yogmaya believed she had deserted her family; so both were agreed that Kadambini should be evicted from the house immediately. But neither was willing to admit defeat in the argument. Their voices rose higher and higher, and they forgot that Kadambini was lying in the next room.

“It’s a terrible thing,” said one voice. “I heard what happened with my own ears.”

“How can I accept that?” shouted the other. “I can see her with my own eyes.” Eventually Yogmaya said, “All right, tell me when Kadambini died.” She hoped,

by finding a discrepancy with the date of one of Kadambini's letters, to prove that Shripati was wrong. But they worked out that the date given to Shripati was exactly one day before Kadambini had come to their house. Yogmaya felt a racing in her heart at this, and Shripati too began to feel unnerved. Suddenly the door of their room blew open, and a damp wind put out their lamp. The darkness outside instantly filled their whole room from floor to ceiling. Kadambini came and stood right inside their room. It was half past two in the morning: the rain outside was relentless.

"Friend," said Kadambini, "I am your Kadambini, but I am no longer alive. I am dead."

Yogmaya yelled out in terror; Shripati was speechless.

"But other than being dead, what harm have I done to you? If I have no place in this world, or in the next world, then where shall I go?" And again, in the rain and the night, as if to wake God from his sleep, she screamed, "Oh, tell me, where shall I go?" Then, leaving the dumbfounded husband and wife in the dark house, Kadambini fled in search of her place in or beyond the world.

## 5

It is hard to say how Kadambini returned to Ranihat. She did not show herself to anyone at first: she spent the whole day, without food, in a ruined deserted temple. When evening came - early, as it does in the monsoon, and oppressively dark - and the villagers, fearing a storm, had retreated into their houses, Kadambini emerged on to the road again. As she approached her in-laws' house, her heart started to pound; but she pulled her heavy veil round her head like a servant, and the gate-keepers did not prevent her from entering. Meanwhile the rain had come on even harder, and the wind blew more fiercely.

The mistress of the house - Sharadashankar's wife - was playing cards with her widowed sister-in-law. The maid was in the kitchen, and the little boy was lying in the bedroom, sleeping after a bout of fever.

Kadambini entered the bedroom, without anyone noticing. It was impossible to say why she had returned to her in-laws' house - she herself did not know why - but she knew that she wanted to see the little boy again. She gave no thought to where she would go after that, or what would happen to her.

She saw, in the lamplight, the thin, frail little boy lying asleep with his fists clenched. Her racing heart thirsted when she saw him: how she longed to clasp him to her breast one last time, to protect him from all misfortune! But then

she thought, "Now that I am not here, who will look after him? His mother loves company, gossiping, playing cards; for a long time she was happy to leave him in my care; she never had to bother with his upbringing. Who will take care of him, as I did?" The little boy suddenly turned over and, half-asleep, said, "*Kakima*, give me some water." "O my darling," she inwardly replied, "my treasure: you haven't yet forgotten your *Kakima*." At once she poured out some water from the pitcher and, raising him up against her breast, helped him to drink.

While he remained half-asleep, the little boy showed no surprise at taking water from his aunt as he had been used to doing. But when Kadambini - fulfilling her longstanding desire - kissed him, and then laid him down again, he came out of his sleep and hugged her, asking, "*Kakima*, did you die?"

"Yes, my darling," she said.

"Have you come back to me? You won't die again?"

Before she could reply an uproar broke out: a maid had come into the room with a bowl of sago in her hand, but had then screamed and fallen down in a faint. Hearing her scream, Sharadashankar's wife dropped her cards and came running: she stiffened like wood when she was in the room, unable either to flee or utter a word. Seeing all this, the boy himself took fright. "*Kakima*, you must go," he said, wailing.

Kadambini felt for the first time now that she had not died. The ancient house, everything in it, the little boy, and his affection - they were all equally alive to her; there was no gulf intervening between her and them. When she had been in her friend's house she had felt dead, felt that the person whom her friend had known had died. But now that she was in her nephew's room, she realized that his *Kakima* had never died at all.

"*Didi*," she said pathetically, "why are you frightened of me? See - I am just as I was." Her sister-in-law could not keep her balance any longer; she collapsed unconscious.

Informed by his sister, Sharadashankar Babu himself came into the inner quarters. Claspng his hands he begged, "Sister-in-law, it is not right of you to do this. Shatish is the only son in the family: why are you casting your eye on him? Are we strangers to you? Ever since you went, he has wasted away day by day; he has been constantly ill, calling out "*Kakima, Kakima*" day and night. Now that you have bid farewell to the world, please stop attaching yourself to him, please go away - we'll perform your proper funerary rites."

Kadambini could bear no more. She screamed out, "I did not die, I did not die, I tell you! How can I make you understand - I did not die! Can't you see: I am

*alive.*" She seized the bell-metal bowl that had been dropped on the ground and dashed it against her brow: blood gushed out from the impact. "See here, I am alive!"

Sharadashankar stood like a statue; the little boy whimpered for his father; the two stricken women lay on the ground. Crying out, "I did not die, I did not die, I did not die," Kadambini fled from the room and down the stairs, and threw herself into the tank in the inner courtyard of the house. Sharadashankar heard, from the upper floor, a splashing sound.

It went on raining all night, and it was still raining the next morning; even in the afternoon there was no let-up. Kadambini had proved, by dying, that she had not died.

## 2. Jokes

### **Moonlike Beauty**

Banta: Beta Pappu what sort of girl are you looking for?

Pappu: Papa, chand jaisi. (Like the moon).

Banta: You want her to be so beautiful?

Pappu: No, I want her to come out at night and disappear in the morning.

### **Dating Papa**

Teacher: How old is your father?

Santa: As old as I am.

Teacher: How can that be possible?

Santa: He became a father only after I was born.

### **Perfect Canvas**

During an exhibition of his paintings, an artist was explaining his work.

“This,” he said, pointing to a blank canvas, “is a cow grazing.”

“Where is the grass?” asked a visitor.

“The cow has eaten it.”

“Well, then, where is the cow?”

“How could you expect her to stay,” the artist replied, “after she eaten all the grass?”

### **The Dog**

A man walking down the streets sees another man with a very big dog. One man says to the other, “Does your dog bite”, the man replies “No my dog doesn’t” The man pats the dog and has his hand bitten off, “I thought you said your dog didn’t bite” said the injured man. “That’s not my dog”, replied the other.

## 3. Grammar Page

### 3. Indefinite pronouns

→ The following indefinite pronouns agree with singular verbs.

|         |          |            |           |
|---------|----------|------------|-----------|
| either  | anybody  | somebody   | everybody |
| nobody  | each     | neither    | anyone    |
| someone | everyone | no one     | one       |
| other   | anything | everything | nothing   |

Either party *has* the right to sign the contract.

Anybody who *is* good at computer typing can apply for this post.

Somebody *has* broken that bench.

Everybody *is* ready to do it.

Nobody *knows* what's going on.

Each class *is* 45 minutes in length.

Neither answer *was* correct.

Anyone *has* the right to be the member of this club.

Someone *was* screaming for help.

Everyone *needs* a little downtime.

No one *believes* a word she says.

One *tries* one's best.

Something *is* jamming the machine.

Everything *was* going according to plan.

Nothing *is* going right for me today.

→ However, the following indefinite pronouns always take plural verbs.

|      |     |      |         |        |
|------|-----|------|---------|--------|
| both | few | many | several | others |
|------|-----|------|---------|--------|

Both men *were* charged of murder.

Both women *were* Indian.

Few people *live* to be 100.

A few students *are* not interested at all.

Many students *have* passed the test.

Many of these animals *are* not found here.

Several candidates *were* called for a second interview.

Several letters *have* arrived this morning.

Others *have* met similar problems.

→ Subjects with 'each, each of, every, either, either of, neither, neither of, one, one of, etc' are always singular and agree with singular verbs.

Each and every student *has* a textbook.

Each and every man *has* equal rights.

Every man and woman *has* the right to good medical care.

Every letter *was* carefully checked.

Each lesson in this book *is* very interesting.

Each of the girls *sings* well.

Neither of the boys *is* interested in this course.

Neither of them *is* available to speak right now.

Either of us *is* capable of doing the job.

Either of the girls *comes* here today.

One of my friends *wants* to meet the Principal.

One of them *was* very sick.