



# Learn English Through Stories

F Series

F15

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# 1. Gateman's Gift

R.K. Narayan

When a dozen of people questions openly or slyly a man's sanity, he begins to entertain serious doubts himself. That was what happened to ex-gateman - Govind Singh. And you could not blame the public either. What could you do with a man who carried about in his hand a registered postal envelope and asked, "Please tell me what there is inside?" The obvious answer was, "Open it and see ..." He seemed horrified at this suggestion. "Oh, no, no, can't do that," he declared and moved off to another friend or a friend of a friend. Every time the suggestion was the same, and then he thought everyone had turned mad. And then somebody said, "If you don't like to open it and yet want to know what is inside, you must take it to the X-ray place." It was suggested by an ex-compounder who lived in the next street.

"What is it?" asked Govind Singh. It was explained to him. "Where is it?" He was directed to the City X-ray unit of hospital.

But before saying anything further about his progress, it would be useful to go back to an earlier chapter in his history. After war service in 1914-18, he came to be recommended for a gatekeeper's post at Engladia's. He liked the job very much. He was given a khaki uniform, a resplendent band across his shoulder and a short stick. He gripped the stick and sat down on a stool at the entrance to the office. And when his chief's car pulled up at the gate, he stood at attention and gave a military salute. The office consisted of a staff numbering over a hundred, and as they trooped in and out every day, he kept an eye on them. At the end of the day, he awaited the footsteps of the General Manager coming down the stairs, and rose stiffly and stood at attention, and after he left, the hundreds of staff poured out. The doors were shut; Singh carried his stool in, placed it under the staircase and placed his stick across it. Then he came out and the main door was locked and sealed. In this way, he had spent twenty-five years of service, and then he begged to be pensioned off. He would not have thought of retirement yet, but for the fact that he found his sight and hearing playing tricks on him; he could not catch the Manager's footsteps on the stairs, and it was hard to recognize him even at ten yards. He was ushered into the presence of the chief, who looked up for a moment from his papers and muttered, "We are very pleased with your work for us, and the company will give you a pension of twelve rupees for life..." Singh clicked his heels, saluted, turned on his heel and went out of the room, his heart brimming with gratitude and pride. This was the second occasion when the great man had spoken to him, the first being on the first day of his service. As

he had stood at his post, the chief, entering the office just then, looked up for a moment and asked, "Who are you?"

"I'm the new gatekeeper, master," he had answered. And he spoke again only on this day. Though so little was said, Singh felt electrified on both occasions by the words of his master. In Singh's eyes the chief had acquired a sort of godhood, and it would be quite adequate if a god spoke to one only once or twice in a lifetime. In moments of contemplation Singh's mind dwelt on the words of his master, and on his personality.

His life moved on smoothly. The pension together with what his wife earned by washing and sweeping in a couple of houses was quite sufficient for him. He ate his food, went out and met a few friends, slept and spent some evenings sitting at a cigarette shop which his cousin owned. This tenor of life was disturbed on the first of every month when he put on his old khaki suit, walked to his old office and salaamed the accountant at the counter and received his pension. Sometimes if it was closing, he waited on the roadside for the General Manager to come down, and saluted him as he got into his car.

There was a lot of time all around him, an immense sea of leisure. In this state he made a new discovery about himself, that he could make fascinating models out of clay and wood dust. The discovery came suddenly, when one day a child in the neighbourhood brought to him its little doll for repair. He not only repaired it but made a new thing of it. This discovery pleased him so much that he very soon became absorbed in it. His back yard gave him a plentiful supply of pliant clay, and the carpenter's shop next to his cousin's cigarette shop sawdust. He purchased paint for a few annas. And lo and behold! He found his hours gliding. He sat there in the front part of his home, bent over his clay, and brought into existence a miniature universe; all the colours of life were there, all the forms and creatures, but of the size of his middle finger; whole villages and towns were there, all the persons he had seen passing before his office when he was sentry there - that beggar woman coming at midday, and that cucumber-vendor; he had the eye of a cartoonist for human faces. Everything went down into clay. It was a wonderful miniature reflection of the world; and he mounted them neatly on thin wooden slices, which enhanced their attractiveness. He kept these in his cousin's shop and they attracted huge crowds every day and sold very briskly. More than from the sales Singh felt an ecstasy when he saw admiring crowds clustering around his handiwork.

On his next pension day, he carried to his office a street scene (which he ranked as his best), and handed it over the counter to the accountant with the request, "Give this to the Sahib, please!"

“All right,” said the accountant with a smile. It created a sensation in the office and disturbed the routine of office working for nearly half an hour. On the next pension day he carried another model (children at play) and handed it over the counter.

“Did the Sahib like the last one?”

“Yes, he liked it.”

“Please give this one to him...” and he passed it over the counter. He made it a convention to carry on every pension day an offering for his master, and each time his greatest reward was the accountant’s stock reply to his question,

“What did the Sahib say?”

“He said it was very good.”

At last, he made his masterpiece. A model of his office frontage with himself at his post, a car at the entrance and the chief getting down: this composite model was so realistic that while he sat looking at it, he seemed to be carried back to his office days. He passed it over the counter on his pension day, and it created a very great sensation in the office. “Fellow, you have not left yourself out, either!” people cried, and looked admiringly at Singh. A sudden fear seized Singh and he asked, “The master won’t be angry, I hope?”

“No, no, why should he be?” said the accountant, and Singh received his pension and went home.

A week later when he was sitting on the stool kneading clay, the postman came and said, “A registered letter for you...”

“For me!” Any letter would have upset Singh; he had received less than three letters in his lifetime, and each time it was a torture for him till the contents were read out. Now a registered letter! This was his first registered letter.

“Only lawyers send registered letters, isn’t it so?”

“Usually,” said the postman.

“Please take it back. I don’t want it,” said Singh.

“Shall I say “Refused”?” asked the postman. “No, no,” said Singh. “Just take it back and say you have not found me...”

“That I can’t do...” said the postman, looking serious.

Singh seemed to have no option but to scrawl his signature and receive the packet. He sat gloomily - gazing at the floor. His wife who had gone out and just returned saw him in this condition and asked, “What is it?” His voice choked as he replied, “It has come.” He flung at her the registered letter.

“What is it?” she asked. He said, “How should I know. Perhaps our ruin...” He

broke down. His wife watched him for a moment, went in to attend to some domestic duty and returned, still found him in the same condition and asked, "Why not open it and see, ask someone to read it?" He threw up his arms in horror. "Woman, you don't know what you are saying. It cannot be opened. They have perhaps written that my pension is stopped, and God knows what else the Sahib has said..."

"Why not go to the office and find out from them?"

"Not I! I will never show my face there again," replied Singh. "I have lived without a single remark being made against me, all my life. Now!" He shuddered at the thought of it. "I knew I was getting into trouble when I made that office model..." After deeper reflection he said, "Every time I took something there, people crowded round, stopped all work for nearly an hour... That must also have reached the Sahib's ears."

He wandered about saying the same thing, with the letter in his pocket. He lost his taste for food, wandered about unkempt, with his hair standing up like a halo - an unaccustomed sight, his years in military service having given him a habitual tidiness. His wife lost all peace of mind and became miserable about him. He stood at crossroads, clutching the letter in his hand. He kept asking everyone he came across, "Tell me, what is there in this?" but he would not brook the suggestion to open it and see its contents.

So forthwith, Singh found his way to the City X-ray Institute at Race Course Road. As he entered the gate he observed dozens of cars parked along the drive, and a Gurkha watchman at the gate. Some people were sitting on sofas reading books and journals. They turned and threw a brief look at him and resumed their studies. As Singh stood uncertainly at the doorway, an assistant came up and asked, "What do you want?" Singh gave a salute, held up the letter uncertainly and muttered, "Can I know what is inside this?" The assistant made the obvious suggestion. But Singh replied, "They said you could tell me what's inside without opening it..." The assistant asked, "Where do you come from?" Singh explained his life, work and outlook, and concluded, "I've lived without remark all my life. I knew trouble was coming..." There were tears on his cheeks. The assistant looked at him curiously as scores of others had done before, smiled and said, "Go home and rest. You are not all right... Go, go home."

"Can't you say what is in this?" Singh asked pathetically. The assistant took it in his hand, examined it and said, "Shall I open it?" "No, no, no," Singh cried, and snatched it back. There was a look of terror in his eyes. The assembly looked up from their pages and watched him with mild amusement in their eyes. The

assistant kindly put his arms on his shoulder and led him out. "You get well first, and then come back. I tell you - you are not all right."

Walking back home, he pondered over it. "Why are they all behaving like this, as if I were a madman?" When this word came to his mind, he stopped abruptly in the middle of the road and cried, "Oh! That's it, is that it? Mad! Mad!" He shook his head gleefully as if the full truth had just dawned upon him. He now understood the looks that people threw at him. "Oh! Oh!" he cried aloud. He laughed. He felt a curious relief at this realization. "I have been mad and didn't know it..." He cast his mind back. Every little action of his for the last so many days seemed mad; particularly the doll-making. "What sane man would make clay dolls after twenty-five years of respectable service in an office?" He felt a tremendous freedom of limbs, and didn't feel it possible to walk at an ordinary pace. He wanted to fly. He swung his arms up and down and ran on with a whoop. He ran through the Market Road. When people stood about and watched he cried, "Hey, don't laugh at a madman, for who knows, you will also be mad when you come to make clay dolls," and charged into their midst with a war cry. When he saw children coming out of a school, he felt it would be nice to amuse their young hearts by behaving like a tiger. So he fell on his hands and knees and crawled up to them with a growl.

He went home in a terrifying condition. His wife, who was grinding chilli in the back yard, looked up and asked, "What is this?" His hair was covered with street dust; his body was splashed with mud. He could not answer because he choked with mirth as he said, "Fancy what has happened!"

"What is it?"

"I'm mad, mad." He looked at his work-basket in a corner, scooped out the clay and made a helmet of it and put it on his head. Ranged on the floor was his latest handiwork. After his last visit to the office he had been engaged in making a model village. It was a resplendent group: a dun road, red tiles, green coconut trees swaying, and the colour of the saris of the village women carrying water pots. He derived the inspiration for it from a memory of his own village days. It was the most enjoyable piece of work that he had so far undertaken. He lived in a kind of ecstasy while doing it. "I am going to keep this for myself. A memento of my father's village," he declared. "I will show it at an exhibition, where they will give me a medal." He guarded it like a treasure: when it was wet he never allowed his wife to walk within ten yards of it. "Keep off, we don't want your foot dust for this village..."

Now, in his madness, he looked down on it. He raised his foot and stamped everything down into a multi-coloured jam. They were still half-wet. He saw a donkey grazing in the street. He gathered up the jam and flung it at the donkey

with the remark: "Eat this if you like. It is a nice village..." And he went out on a second round. This was a quieter outing. He strode on at an even pace, breathing deeply, with the clay helmet on, out of which peeped his grey hair, his arms locked behind, his fingers clutching the fateful letter, his face tilted towards the sky. He walked down the Market Road, with a feeling that he was the sole occupant of this globe: his madness had given him a sense of limitless freedom, strength and buoyancy. The remarks and jeers of the crowds gaping at him did not in the least touch him.

While he walked thus, his eye fell on the bulb of a tall street lamp. "Bulb of the size of a papaya fruit!" he muttered and chuckled. It had been a long cherished desire in him to fling a stone at it; now he felt, in his joyous and free condition, that he was free from the trammels of convention and need not push back any inclination. He picked up a pebble and threw it with good aim. The shattering noise of glass was as music to his ears. A policeman put his hand on his shoulder. "Why did you do it?" Singh looked indignant. "I like to crack glass papaya fruit, that is all," was the reply. The constable said, "Come to the station."

"Oh, yes, when I was in Mesopotamia they put me on half-ration once," he said, and walked on to the station. He paused, tilted his head to the side and remarked, "This road is not straight..."

A few carriages and cycles were coming up to him. He found that everything was wrong about them. They seemed to need some advice in the matter. He stopped in the middle of the road, stretched out his arms and shouted, "Halt!" The carriages stopped, the cyclists jumped off and Singh began a lecture: "When I was in Mesopotamia—I will tell you fellows who don't know anything about anything." The policeman dragged him away to the side and waved to the traffic to resume. One of the cyclists who resumed jumped off the saddle again and came towards him with, "Why! It is Singh, Singh, what fancy dress is this? What is the matter?" Even through the haze of his insane vision Singh could recognize the voice and the person—the accountant at the office. Singh clicked his heels and gave a salute. "Excuse me, sir, didn't intend to stop you. You may pass . . ." He pointed the way generously, and the accountant saw the letter in his hand. He recognized it although it was mud-stained and crumpled.

"Singh, you got our letter?"

"Yes, sir—Pass. Do not speak of it..."

"What is the matter?" He snatched it from his hand. "Why haven't you opened it!" He tore open the envelope and took out of it a letter and read aloud: "The General Manager greatly appreciates the very artistic models you have sent,



and he is pleased to sanction a reward of one hundred rupees and hopes it will be an encouragement for you to keep up this interesting hobby.”

It was translated to him word for word, and the enclosure, a cheque for one hundred rupees, was handed to him. A big crowd gathered to watch this scene. Singh pressed the letter to his eyes. He beat his brow and wailed, “Tell me, sir, am I mad or not?”

“You look quite well, you aren’t mad,” said the accountant. Singh fell at his feet and said with tears choking his voice, “You are a god, sir, to say that I am not mad. I am so happy to hear it.”

On the next pension day he turned up spruce as ever at the office counter. As they handed him the envelope they asked, “What toys are you making now?”

“Nothing, sir. Never again. It is no occupation for a sane man...” he said, received his pension and walked stiffly out of the office.

## 2. Driverless Cars

Imagine sitting inside your car, sipping a cup of tea and reading the morning newspaper, while your car drives you to your office...all by itself without any human interference. Driverless or self-driving cars are already here being tested by companies round the world.

The car would have the capability to drive its passenger by automatic means through pre-set commands or self-instructional inputs. Technology pundits consider them as a paradigm shift in the human-automobile relationship. When fully operational, they are set to become the game-changer, revolutionising the way we drive and commute.

Within just a few years, these autonomous cars have become a reality, emerging out of the realms of science fiction. It is now predicted that the fully automatic or self-driving vehicles will hit the market between 2020 and 2025.

Driverless cars or self-driving vehicles are based on a very simple concept. The automobiles run either on their own with pre-set commands or with the partial intervention of a person sitting inside. A self-driving car, also called a driverless car or autonomous car, is a vehicle that is capable of sensing its environment and navigating without human input and hence designed to travel between destinations without a human operator or driver.

While it may seem that the technology emerged all of a sudden, the path of self-driving vehicles has taken a lot longer time than most of us think. The journey began in 1925 when Francis Houdina demonstrated the first radio-controlled car driving through the streets of Manhattan in the USA. Today, major giants round the world, including Google, Honda, General Motors and many other car manufacturers have jumped on to the bandwagon.

All self-driving cars typically involve the same basic principle of operation. The driver or passenger sets a destination. The car's software calculates the route and starts the car on its way. Although the basic principle is the same across the spectrum, different cars may differ in individual technologies incorporated into them.

### Vocabulary

- |                            |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| 1. automatic: independent; | 2. paradigm shift: important/fundamental change |
| 3. commute: travel;        | 4. autonomous : independent/self-dependent      |
| 5. predicted: foretold;    | 6. navigating: finding its position             |
| 7. emerged: developed;     | 8. incorporated: used                           |

## 3. Grammar Page

### 4. Uncountable nouns

→ *Uncountable nouns are always singular and agree with singular verbs (is, was, has, does, v<sup>s</sup>).*

Water *freezes* at 32°F.

Coffee *was* served during the intermission.

Air *is* a mixture of gases.

Hydrogen *is* highly explosive.

Rice *is* the country's biggest export.

Salt *dissolves* in water.

Sugar *is* the destroyer of healthy teeth.

Gold *is* very expensive.

Measles *is* a serious illness.

Education *is* a top priority.

Physics *is* a difficult subject.

Politics *doesn't* interest me.

Linguistics *is* my favourite subject.

All his luggage *was* lost.

Our baggage *has* been loaded into the car.

All the equipment *is* cleaned regularly.

All the furniture *was* made of wood.

The traffic here *is* very busy.

The weather *was* awful last year.

Good news *has* pleased them.

The apparatus *does* not work well for the experiment.

The scenery *is* very nice in the mountains.

All the information *is* available at the website.

The homework for the winter vacation *was* on the blackboard.

#### Grammar Review

Here is the list of uncountable nouns:

Liquids:	juice, water, coffee, milk, ....
Gases:	oxygen, air, carbon dioxide, ....
Foods:	cake, bread, meat, fruit, rice, ....
Particles:	dust, salt, sand, sugar, ....
Solid elements:	gold, iron, silver, metal, ....
Diseases:	malaria, cancer, measles, mumps, ....
Abstract ideas:	education, truth, honesty, music, ...
Subjects:	physics, mathematics, athletics, politics, statistics, linguistics, ethics, ....
Others:	luggage, baggage, furniture, equipment, scenery, traffic, weather, information, apparatus, dust, machinery, money, advice, news, homework, etc.

### 5. Verbal nouns

→ *Verbal nouns (gerunds and to-infinitives) always agree with singular verbs (is, was, has, does, v<sup>s</sup>).*

Walking *is* a healthy exercise.

Dancing *is* a good way to keep fit.

Swimming always *gives* me a good appetite.

To walk *is* healthy.

To err *is* human.

To smoke *is* injurious to our health.

### 6. Adjectives as subjects

→ *Some adjectives with 'the' occur as the subject and agree with plural verbs.*

The poor *are* given shelter.

The old *are* treated with great compassion.

The sick *were* given free treatment.

The Chinese *are* hard-working.

The rich *are* happy.

The young *have* great expectations.

The intelligent *are* selected.

### 7. Arithmetic sums

→ *Arithmetic sums normally agree with singular verbs (is, was, has, does, v<sup>s</sup>).*

Three plus three *equals* six.

Two times six *is* twelve.

Twenty divided by five *equals* four.

Four times four divided by two *is* eight.

Ten minus four *is* six.

Three subtracted from seven *is* four.

Two plus two *is* four.