



**Learn English Through
Stories
D Series**

D23

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Contents

- 1. House in the Country: Part 1**
- 2. Grammar Page.**

1. A House in the Country: Part 1

By Romesh Gunesekera

The night had always been noisy: frogs, drums, bottles, dogs barking at the moon. Then one evening there was silence. Ray stepped out on to the veranda. There was no wind. He pulled up a cane chair and sat down. The fireflies had disappeared. The trees and bushes in the small garden were still. Only the stars above moved, pulsing in the sky.

These were troubled times in Sri Lanka, people said, but nothing had happened in this neighbourhood. Nothing until this surprising silence. Even that, he thought, may not be new. He was becoming slow at noticing things.

Then a shadow moved. A young man appeared, his white sarong glowing in the moonlight.

He was much younger than Ray. Not as tall, but stronger, smoother skinned. His eyes were bright and hard like marbles. He came and stood by a pillar. A moth flew above him towards a wall light.

‘What has happened?’ Ray asked, looking around.

Siri scratched his head, gently rocking it. ‘Don’t know.’ ‘There’s not a sound.’ They spoke in slow Sinhala.

Ray liked this extraordinary silence. He liked the way their few words burst out, and then hung in the air before melting. It was the silence of this winter England transplanted. The silence of windows and doors closed against the cold. Lately Colombo had become too noisy. He had never expected such peace would come so close to war.

‘The radio?’ Ray asked. Siri always had a radio on somewhere in the house droning public service. ‘Radio is not on?’

Siri shook his head. ‘No batteries.’ He bit the edge of his lower lip. ‘I forgot to buy new ones. Shall I go now?’

It was late: nearly eleven at night. The little shop at the top of the road would have closed. Ray felt uneasy about Siri going too far. ‘No. Go tomorrow. Better than now.’

Siri nodded. ‘Too quiet. Maybe another curfew?’

But it was not simply the silence of curfew. There seemed to be no sound at all. In the two years Ray had been back in the country there had been many curfews. They had lost their significance. Only the occasional twenty-four-hour curfew had any impact. Even those rarely inconvenienced him; he was often content to stay in this house.

But in recent months there had been a new wall to build, shutters to fix. Each day had been shattered by hammer blows aimed at protecting this future privacy. Ray had taken to escaping to a bar off Galle Road; it made him more than usually melancholic.

‘Didn’t you go out at all today?’ Ray asked.

‘These shutters,’ Siri pointed inside. ‘I wanted to finish the staining . . .’

‘Good. They are very good.’ The wood had the perfume of a boudoir.

‘I was working on that, the last coat. Finished about seven-thirty. And then, when I was listening after my bath, the radio stopped.’ He twisted his fingers to show a collapse into chaos. ‘I didn’t go out then because I thought you would be coming home soon.’ His face widened in an eager smile.

Ray looked away. His long shadow danced down the steps. A gecko twitched. Ray had come home late.

Siri shifted this weight and moved away from the wall. He sat on the edge of a step. ‘What do you think they’ll do, Sir?’

‘Who?’

‘Government.’

Ray leaned back in his chair with both hands clasped behind his head and stared up at the night sky. He saw only a waning red moon. ‘I don’t know. What do you think?’

Siri rubbed his thighs. He’d heard people say they should hold elections – the government might even win; but people also said that there probably wouldn’t be any elections. They’d try another ‘military solution’ against the JVP - the People’s Liberation Front - like against the Tigers, and get stuck with war.

‘Trouble is no one knows.’ Siri’s mouth turned down at both ends, but this was not a face that could show much distress. ‘Nobody really cares, do they? Except for themselves.’

Ray put his hands together, matching fingertips, and half nodded. 'Not many people do.'

Ray had not planned on having any help or company when he first returned to Colombo from England. He'd had a secure job with a building society, a flat in London, a car, and a happy circle of acquaintances. There had also been a woman he'd spend a night or two with from time to time. But they never had much to talk about and quite often he simply thought about going back to Sri Lanka. One summer she went back home to Ulster; she got married.

That year he too decided he would go back home. He resigned from his job, sold his flat and left. The business of moving absorbed his energies, and he had no time to think. He had a house left to him in Colombo and money saved over the years. He hoped he would find out what he wanted once he had freed himself from the constraints of his London life, and once he had retrieved his past.

The first time he saw the house this uncle had left him, this blood turned to sand. It looked like a concrete box shoved into a hole. Nothing of the elegance of his converted London flat, nor the sensuality of the open tropical houses of his Sri Lankan childhood. But then he found Siri.

It was the luck of a moment. Ray was with a friend at a bar. They were drinking beer. His friend asked about the house, and Ray said he had too much to do. He needed builders, renovators. His friend mentioned Sirisena, Siri, who had done their house.

A few days later Siri turned up. Ray liked this quiet competence; the strange innocence in his eyes. He didn't quite know how to develop their working relationship. To him it should have been simply a relationship of employment. The old conventions of Colombo serfdom died years ago, but Siri kept saying 'Sir' and circumscribing their roles. He developed his job feel the pull of revolution being preached across the country.

Siri did the carpentry, found the plumbers, the electricians. He moved in and slowly rebuilt the old house around Ray. Walls were re-plastered, doors rehung, floors tiled. And he kept the house in order.

Although in England Ray had done many of these things himself, here he found he needed Siri. Much of the renovation was straightforward, but from time to

time he would see the need for change. He would talk it over with Siri, his fingers designing in the air. The next day Siri would start on the work.

In this way a new veranda was created; rooms divided. The curfews allowed him to examine progress. They provided the snapshots when activity was suspended. The workmen didn't come; it was only Ray and Siri.

It was the first time since childhood that Ray had had a constant companion. He encouraged Siri to talk and wished, in a way, that Siri could turn into this confidant. He wanted to ask, 'Why do you treat me like a...' but could never bring himself even to suggest he saw himself as a master. Siri simply showed respect in his antiquated fashion.

Ray's only response was to care. He didn't know how to respect in turn, but he felt a need to protect in a way he had never felt before. He tried to be generous with the pay and reasonable in his demands, but Siri seemed to want to do everything that needed doing and to spend all his time in the house. He hardly ever went back home to his village.

When Ray bought furniture for Siri's room, Siri looked dismayed.

'What's wrong?'

'I don't need all this.' Siri pointed at the cupboard and the new bed, the new pillow and mats.

'Some comfort won't harm.'

'I have nothing to put in the cupboard. The old bed was fine, just as it was.'

Ray said now that Siri had a steady job he might accumulate some possessions.

'What for? My family need things, my mother, and my brother. I only need something to do. Some place . . . Sir, this house I am making for you. It will be beautiful. To me that is enough.'

Ray didn't know what to do. He was embarrassed and puzzled. He pulled down his chin and snorted, like a bull backing out of a shed. The early days were confusing. Siri seemed exhilarated by the freedom he had to use any material he desired to turn ideas into reality, even his own ideas. He had never been given such complete responsibility before. Ray didn't understand this. It took time for him to see Siri as himself.

That night, that silent night, back in his room Ray kept thinking about Siri. He felt uncomfortable. He would have liked to have talked some more. To have said something to Siri that would have helped them both understand what was happening. Instead they had sat there swallowing silence.

The next morning Ray woke to the scream of parrots circling the mango tree in the garden. He dressed quietly and stepped into the soft rubber of his shoes. In fifteen minutes he was out of the house.

The road was deserted. He walked to the end and crossed over into the park. He had a route he could follow with his eyes closed, carefully planned and timed to avoid other people.

He liked walking alone, in control of the sound around him: the thud of his feet, the blood in his ears.

The sky that morning was grey. Large, heavy clouds rippled overhead. Crows crowded the flame tree by the main road. Bats hung on the telephone lines.

Usually Ray walked for about twenty minutes. On his way back he would collect a newspaper from the small general store near the temple. Then at home he would savour a pot of tea and read the news. This morning he was looking forward to returning to an almost completed veranda.

Siri would have prepared the tea and disappeared: a tray with a white cloth, a small blue Chinese tea pot filled to the brim and protected by an embroidered tea-cosy, one plain white cup and saucer, a silver jug of boiled milk. A silver spoon. Ray would normally find the tray on a glass table. He had learned to accept this service as a part of life. He no longer resisted it and he never did the same for Siri. He never went that far.

But sometimes, in the evening, he'd offer Siri a drink. He would find Siri sitting on the steps or strolling about the garden.

'Have a beer?' he'd say.

Siri would nod hesitantly and approach Ray smoothing his sarong. He would take the glass and sip slowly. He never sat down when he had a beer. He would stand while Ray sat. Whether, they shared a beer or not, Siri was usually quite happy to talk. He'd tell Ray about life in the village: river bathing, family feuds, someone running amok. In the middle of such a story, Siri would sometimes stop and peer at Ray. 'Why do you look so sad?' he'd ask, and surprise Ray with this directness.

One evening Ray asked, 'Have you built your own house?'

Siri's mouth wrinkled; he slowly shook this head. 'No. Not my own. I have no land.'

'What about the family farm?'

'It's very small. We have one field.'

His father had tried milch cows, but couldn't compete with the local MP's people. They had commanded everything until the JVP moved in. By then the cows had dried up and Siri's father died. His brother stayed to work the one field, but Siri left.

'Could you ever go back to live in the country again? Now, after a city life. After what you've learned.' Ray wanted to know how genuine this own feeling of returning to roots was. He knew it was never possible to go back to exactly the same things, but at the same time he felt the old world never quite passes away. Suddenly the frame shifts and you find yourself back where you started.

'Go back to the country? Village life?' Siri smiled like a little boy thinking about the ripeness of mangoes. 'Yes. Yes, I could go back to a life in the country. Like my brother's. If there was a house like this in the country.'

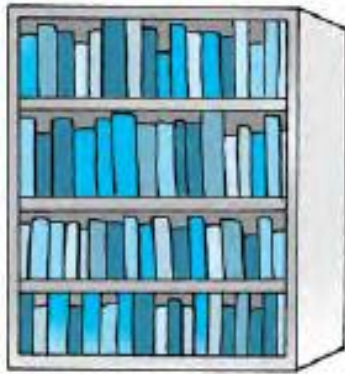
'Maybe you should start saving some money?'

Siri found this suggestion amusing. 'There's never been the chance.' He clicked his tongue and added, 'Until now.'

The next day Ray went with Siri to the National Savings Bank and got him a savings book. He arranged for a part of Siri's salary to go straight into savings. But even after that Ray felt Siri was still not thinking far enough ahead. He was going to lose out. It troubled him at the time, although this own concern about Siri puzzled him more.

2. Grammar page

Other adjectives tell you something about quantity without giving you the exact number.



a lot of books



some soldiers



a few cups



a few puppies

a little ice cream
a little rice
not **many** people
too **much** salt
lots of insects
plenty of money
some food
Is there **any** milk?



Adjectives that tell you about **quantity** are also called **quantifying determiners**.