



**Learn English Through  
Stories  
D Series**

**D24**

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# 1. A House in the Country: Part 2

By Romesh Gunesekera

Months later Ray heard that some private land was being sold close to Siri's village.

He asked him about it.

'No, Sir, I didn't know.'

Ray took a piece of paper from this pocket and unfolded it. 'Look, this is what it says.' He described the position of the land. It was near the coast.

'Yes,' Siri nodded. He knew the area.

'That land is a good price, I'm told.'

'I don't know, Sir. But there's not much growing there.' He delicately licked this thumb and forefinger, 'You can taste the salt in the air there.'

'No, it is good land. You can grow cinnamon or cardamom. Something like that. I know Mr Wijesena has some land there.'

Siri nodded. 'He has grown some cloves I think. Are you thinking of buying some land also?'

Ray was standing by the door. He took a deep breath. Suddenly he realised he was nervous. Sweat ran down his back. Things were not very clear in his head. He had started talking about the land with the simple intention of planting a seed in Siri's mind: land was sometimes available. He had probably hoped, he now thought as he stood there, that Siri would connect the idea of this savings with the possibility of a piece of land out in the country. But as they talked he realised that it would take Siri years to get a living out of such land. That Siri's life would be, at best, only a life of subsistence. He would sink into the earth, unless something radical could be done.

'I was thinking about a piece of land,' he said, looking down, away from Siri. 'I was thinking about you.'

'Me?'

'Maybe you should take some land.'

'Impossible, Sir. Even with the savings you arranged. Good land in our area is expensive.'

'I know. But if you could, would you like some land? Is it what you want?'

'You know me, Sir. I like to build. I like to grow. With some land there I can do both. And I can do as I please.'

'But when?'

'When my luck comes. When the gods take pity.'

'I can lend you the money,' Ray said quietly. It was not exactly what he wanted to say. The words slipped out like moonlight when the clouds move. .

'But then I will be a debtor. I could never pay it back.'

Ray could see that. It could be the rut in the ground one never got out of. But he had a plan working itself out as he spoke.

'I'll buy the land. I'll give you a portion. You for your part can plant the trees for us both. Cinnamon, or cadju or whatever.'

Siri's eyes brightened. There was a slight smile playing around his lips. The smooth boyish cheeks rippled. 'Why, Sir? Why do you want to do this for me?'

Ray could say nothing except that he wanted to.

'You are good Sir, very good.'

Ray made arrangements to buy the land. He felt better for it. He had followed his instincts. But his instincts had changed. They were not the fine financial instincts that had served him in London: land prices plummeted as the troubles in the country spread. But this did not worry him. Things had to improve, he thought. Meanwhile he was happy to be serving in his turn.

In about ten minutes he reached the top of the hill on the side of the park. His route had already curved so that he was in fact now on his way home. A few minutes' walk along the road would bring him to the shop where he collected his paper.

He noticed the sky was dark and smudged. Crows were flapping about. Down the road he could see the white dome of the temple near his shop. The flowers of the temple trees, frangipani, were out. White blossom. Those were the trees he would like to have on the borders of the land he bought for Siri. But the white of both the dome and the flowers was grubby, as though settled with ash.

Ray thought the sky should have cleared by now. He walked quickly towards the temple. By the wall he stopped to look again at the frangipani. Many of the white flowers had fallen. But in the garden next to the temple a tree with the blood-red variety of the flower stood in rich bloom. Ray was sweating.

Then, around the corner, he came to the shop: the charred remains of the shop. Bits were still smoking, thin wisps disappearing into the grey sky. A small crowd had gathered.

The vague thoughts in Ray's head evaporated; every muscle in this body was tense, but he felt extraordinarily calm. He stepped forward. 'How did this happen?'

Several people started talking. One man said the police had a statement from the JVP claiming responsibility. The shopkeeper was dead. He had been asleep inside. Kerosene had been used. Ray picked this way through the shattered glass and boiled sweets strewn along the roadside. Practically the whole of the tiny shop had been burned. One or two big blackened timbers still remained at the back, and buckled bits of the corrugated tin from the roof lay like petrified sheets of magma. The old na tree that had shaded the shop-front was scorched; the trunk looked as if it had been gouged with a hot knife. Two policemen had cordoned off the place.

Ray waited for a while absorbing the babble around him, watching the smoke rise in small puffs out of the heaps of ash. The veins in his arms were swollen. A store burns like so many others up and down the country. Only this one's closer to home. Nothing else has changed. But Ray knew that proximity made a difference. The air was pungent. He wondered whether the dust on his shoes now mixed earth with the ash of the shopkeeper's burnt flesh.

When he got home Siri was at the gate. 'Did you see . . . ?'

Ray nodded and brushed past him.

Siri had heard about the fire from a neighbour. 'Is it very bad?'

'The whole shop has gone. Completely burnt out.' 'Mister Ibrahim?'

'Dead. He was inside.'

Ray went to his usual place. The tea tray wasn't there. A fine layer of dust covered the table.

'Water's boiling, Sir. I'll bring the tea now.'

In a few minutes Siri came with the tea. 'Will you have it here on the veranda?'

'Inside may be better today.'

'You know Sir, they warned him. He was very foolish.'

Ray asked him who had warned the shopkeeper. Why?

'Several times they told him to stop selling those newspapers. Mister Ibrahim didn't listen. Even two days ago he told me that he will not stop selling newspapers just like that. But they said he must stop, or it will be the end for him. I don't know why he continued.'

Who had warned him?

'I don't know, Sir. These thugs who come around.' Ray raised his eyes. 'Why do you think he didn't stop selling those papers?' he asked. 'He was not a Party member.'

Siri shrugged. 'He was a mudalali - a businessman. Making money. You make money by selling what people buy. People wanted his newspapers, so he sold them. That is his work. Was his work.'

Ray wondered whether Siri was right. Was Ibrahim killed by the market? Or was he simply caught in between? He could see the flames leap at Ibrahim's straw mat; within seconds he must have been wrapped in fire. But he must have screamed. How did they not hear it? The shop was not far, and the night had been so silent. The smell of kerosene? Flesh? But then, countries have been in flames before and the world not known.

'Sir, do you think there is any danger here?' 'What do you mean?'

'Will they harm this house?'

'This house means nothing. It has nothing to do with anyone.'

'I hope no harm will come. It is becoming so beautiful.'

Ray and Siri both felt uneasy all day. They avoided each other. Ray spent the morning alone and then went out to a café for lunch. He came back early in the evening and disappeared into this room. He had a shower and lay down on this bed to rest. Clean and cool; naked on the cotton sheet. He felt this body slowly relax. The evening was warm. As day began to turn to night the birds screamed again. Through this window he could see the sun set in an inflamed sky. When he closed his eyes the grey smudges came back. His skin was dry. He looked at

the polished wood of this new windows. Siri had done a fine job. He had brought out the wood grain perfectly. Ray wanted to ask Siri to build another house. A house on their land out in the country. He thought if he provided the materials Siri could design and build a house with two wings, or even two small houses. One for each of them. If Siri were to marry it would make for a good start. Ray wondered how he'd feel if that happened. He would lose something. The intimacy that had yet to be. But he would feel some satisfaction. He would have made a difference.

Later, when he came out on to the veranda he found Siri sitting on the steps. Siri looked up; his hard black eyes gave nothing to Ray.

'Sir,' Siri said in low voice, 'I want to go.'

'Where?'

'Away, Sir.' Siri remained sitting on the steps. His face was in shadow.

'What's wrong? What is it?'

'This destruction. I want to go away.' The eyes softened slightly. 'And you, Sir, have seen the world. Tell me where. Where is a good place?'

Ray looked down at Siri. 'What do you mean? You know, shops have been burned many times before. In Matara, in Amparai, here in Colombo it has happened before.'

Siri shook his head.

'It has happened all over the world,' Ray said.

Siri kept shaking his head. 'But it can't always be like this. It can't.' The night air slowly curled around him.

'We have to learn — somehow. We are no better, but we are no worse.' Ray turned on the wall lights, pushing at the darkness. Then he saw one of the new shutters was broken: several slats were splintered; the wood was raw. Ray felt a pain in his chest. He took a deep breath. 'Never mind. It can be fixed.' He was determined.

Siri stared up at him, then shook his head again as if at a fly. 'Sir . . . ' this face slowly crumpled. 'Sir, my brother back home. They've used a lamp-post for him.' Siri shut his eyes.

Ray's throat felt thick, clogged. 'You should have told me,' he said at last tugging at this neck. The body would have been mutilated, then strung up as a beacon; the corpse would swing in the wind for days. 'Why?'

Siri's bare feet dangled over the steps. When he spoke this voice was hardly audible. 'Who can tell, Sir, in this place?'

Ray looked at their shadows cupped in a circle of yellow light on the gravel below the veranda; the light on Siri's arms. He tried to lean forward but couldn't move. He couldn't clear the space between them. Siri's skin was mottled.

'It happened last night,' Siri said.

Ray nodded, 'Maybe you should take a few days off. Find your people, he heard himself say. 'The veranda can wait . . . ' His voice faltered. They were not the words he wanted. Ray saw himself alone again in his house, picking his way through the debris at the back. There were two rooms still to be done; pots of yellow paint in the corner of the bedroom would remain unopened. He found himself thinking that without Siri he would have to make his own morning tea again. Drink alone on his incomplete veranda; wait.

But Siri said nothing. Ray could not tell whether he had heard him. Siri slowly straightened out and stepped down on to the path. He looked at Ray for a moment, then turned and started walking towards the back of the house, towards his room in the servant's quarters. Ray opened his mouth to say something about the new house, the cinnamon garden, but Siri had melted away in the darkness. Ray remained standing on the veranda. He felt he was on fire, but the palms of his hands were wet. Out in the garden fireflies made circles. Frogs croaked. The sky trembled like the skin on a drum.

The end.



## 2. Grammar page

### Comparison of Adjectives

When you compare two people or things, use the **comparative** form of the adjective.

Lots of comparative adjectives end in **-er**.



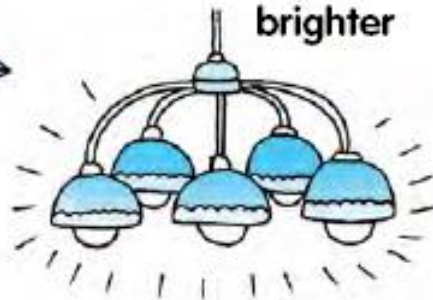
small



smaller



bright



brighter

cheap	<b>cheaper</b>
clear	<b>clearer</b>
loud	<b>louder</b>
new	<b>newer</b>
old	<b>older</b>
rich	<b>richer</b>
short	<b>shorter</b>
tall	<b>taller</b>
slow	<b>slower</b>
thick	<b>thicker</b>



The word **than** is often used with comparative adjectives. For example, you might say:

Jack is taller **than** John.

A sports car is faster **than** a motorbike.