



**Learn English Through  
Stories  
I Series**

I1

**Adapted and modified by  
Kulwant Singh Sandhu**

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## 1. Chapter 0: Introduction

18 years of age, Mumbai:

My name is Ram Mohammad Thomas, and I have been arrested for winning a quiz show. They came for me late last night, broke open my door and took me away. Not one of my neighbours came out to stare. That is because I live in Dharavi, a slum where arrests happen every day. The people around me there are so poor they often have nothing to eat. Life is hard there, and that sometimes means doing things that we should not do. So I did not ask the police why they were taking me. We are all used to the police thinking that we must be guilty of some crime or other. Now, I am in a small, dirty police cell. It is very hot, and I am hungry. Inspector Godbole comes and takes me to be questioned for the second time. He is in his mid-forties and has no hair, and yet he has a large moustache.

“Ram Mohammad Thomas – what kind of a name is that, mixing up all the religions?” he says. I say nothing. I am used to people treating me badly and laughing at my name. Godbole pushes me into a small room, where two men are waiting for me. I recognize one of them – he is one of the men from the quiz show. I do not know the other man, who is white and is wearing a suit and tie. He is the first to speak.

“So, this is our famous winner!” I can tell that this man is American by the way he speaks. He sounds the same as the rich tourists from the United States of America that I have met in Agra.

“My name is Neil Johnson. I work for New-Age Telemedia, the company that runs the quiz. This is Billy Nanda, the producer.”

I understand everything they are saying. But boys from Dharavi – or “slumdogs” as people often call us – do not speak to important men. And they cannot usually speak English. So I say nothing.

“Nanda,” he says to the other man, “this boy understands English, doesn’t he?”

“Are you crazy?” replies Nanda. “He lives in a slum and is just a stupid waiter in a restaurant!”

Godbole had left the room, but now he opens the door and lets a fat man in. “I came as soon as I got the message from Mr Mikhailov,” says the newly arrived man.

Neil Johnson stands up and greets him. “Mr Commissioner. Thank you for coming. I know that you and Mr Mikhailov are old friends. We need your help

on - Who Will Win a Billion? Do you know it? It's the new TV quiz show that we're producing."

"I've heard of it," says the Commissioner. "Why do you need me?"

"This boy was a contestant on the show last week, and he answered all twelve questions correctly. So he won a billion rupees," says Johnson.

"What? You must be joking!"

"It's no joke. But we haven't shown it on TV yet, so not many people know about it."

"OK. So, what's the problem?" says the Commissioner.

Johnson now speaks more quietly. "Mr Mikhailov doesn't have the money to pay the prize at the moment. We didn't expect the top prize to be won yet. In eight months, we will make enough money from the paid advertisements. But we don't have that amount of money now."

"I see. So, what do you want me to do?" asks the Commissioner.

"I want your help to prove that Thomas cheated. Think about it – he's a poor waiter who has never been to school. He probably can't even read. He said he was just lucky, but it's impossible that he could know all twelve answers, or guess and get them right."

"But there are people who didn't go to school but are clever – take Albert Einstein, for example ..." replies the Commissioner.

"Listen, he's definitely no Einstein," says Johnson, and he nods to Nanda.

Nanda speaks to me in Hindi. "If you are clever enough to win the top prize on our show, prove it. We want you to answer some much easier questions now." He sits down on a chair next to me.

"OK," he asks me. "What type of money is used in France? Is it: a) the dollar, b) the pound, c) the euro, or d) the franc?"

I say nothing. Suddenly, the Commissioner walks towards me and hits me hard across the face. "Answer or I'll break your nose!" he shouts. Nanda looks shocked.

"The franc," I say.

"Wrong. Question two. Who was the first man to walk on the moon? Was it: a) Edwin Aldrin, b) Neil Armstrong, c) Yuri Gagarin, or d) Jimmy Carter?"

"I don't know." They ask me two more questions, and I get them wrong, too.

Nanda turns to the Commissioner and speaks in English again. "See? I told you – he doesn't have a clue. He must be a cheat! We just haven't worked out how he did it yet."

The Commissioner looks Johnson directly in the eyes and says, "So ... you want me to make sure he goes to jail. But why would I do that?"

"Don't worry," says Johnson, quietly, "Mr Mikhailov would ... let's say ... be sure to thank you afterwards."

The Commissioner nods and calls Inspector Godbole back into the room.

"Godbole," he says, "can you get this boy to speak?"

"Yes, sir, if you allow me to hurt him."

"No way!" says Nanda. "If the newspapers find out he's been badly treated, we'll be finished."

"Don't worry," the Commissioner says, calmly, and turns to Godbole. "There won't be any signs of it afterwards, will there, Inspector?"

"No, sir. I'll be careful. There won't be a mark on him."

Nanda and Johnson say nothing. I stare at the floor. I feel sick.

What happens next is awful. I am taken away, and I am shouted at and hurt in terrible ways. My head is held under water. Electricity is passed through my body.

"Who told you the answers? Who?" shouts Godbole. "Tell me, and I'll stop." I feel so sick, and I am in so much pain that I start to pass out. He hits me around the face, which wakes me up a little, and he pushes a pen and piece of paper with writing on it in front of me. "Sign it!" he demands.

I glance down at the sheet of paper. I know that I cannot take much more of this. Soon, I will have to sign my name.

Suddenly, I hear shouting. Then, the door opens, and a young woman enters. She is well dressed and has nice teeth and long black hair. She walks forward and then stares directly at Godbole. Godbole is so surprised that he says nothing.

"My name is Smita Shah," the woman says, confidently. "I am Mr Ram Mohammad Thomas's lawyer."



Godbole is shocked, but not as shocked as I am. I have no idea who this woman is.

“What you are doing to Mr Thomas is completely illegal,” she says. “It must stop immediately. Unless you can show me the correct papers for his arrest, I’m taking Mr Thomas away.”

“Erm ... I ... I’ll have to speak to the Commissioner. Please wait,” says Godbole, nervously, and leaves the room. I am still feeling sick, and I am still in pain. I pass out.

Much later, I am sitting on an expensive sofa holding a hot cup of tea. I am in Smita Shah’s flat. She has given me food and drink, and I have slept. I still do not know why she came to the police station. All she has told me is that she read about me in the newspaper and came as soon as she could.

“I’ve managed to get a DVD that shows you answering the quiz questions. We can watch it together,” she says. “I want you to explain to me how you were able to answer all those questions. And I want you to tell me the truth. I’m here to protect you.”

I start to worry. Who is she working for? Can I trust her? I take out my lucky one-rupee coin. Heads, I will trust her. Tails, I will not. I throw it in the air and catch it. It is heads.

“I was just lucky,” I tell her.

“So you guessed the answers, and by luck you got all twelve correct?”

“No. I didn’t guess them. I knew them,” I say. “I was lucky that they only asked questions I knew the answer to.”

I can see she does not believe me. I am sad and angry at the world, and it shows in my face.

“Look, Ram,” she says. “It’s not an easy thing to believe. I couldn’t answer most of those questions myself. But if I’m going to help you, I have to know how you won that billion. You have to explain to me how you knew the answers.”

“How can I do that? If you know something, you just know it. You learn things as you grow and live.”

Smita thinks for a moment and nods her head. “That makes sense. A quiz is really a test of your memory. So, I want to listen to your memories. Can you start at the beginning?”

“What? You mean you want me to tell you about my life, from the year I was born?”

“No,” she replies. “Start at quiz question number one, and tell me about the part of your life that gave you the answer to that question. And I want you to promise me, Ram Mohammad Thomas, that you’ll tell me the truth.”

I look her directly in the eyes. “I promise,” I tell her.

Smita picks up the DVD, puts it into the DVD player and then turns to me. “Then let’s start.”

## 2. Chapter 1: The Death of a Hero

13 years of age, Mumbai:

One day, about six years ago, my best friend, Salim, and I went to the cinema. Salim was crazy about Hindi films, and he was really excited about seeing this one again. He had already watched the film eight times and knew the name of everyone who had worked on it, from the main actors to the people who styled the actors' hair and clothes. The film was starring his favourite actor, Armaan Ali. Salim loved Armaan so much back then that he had pictures of the star all over our little room in a small flat. His life's dream was to become a famous actor, just like his hero Armaan. I thought Armaan was OK, but I did not like him as much as Salim did.

There was hardly anyone in the cinema that day, and we went straight to the front row where we always liked to sit. Salim loved to sit there because he wanted to see every part of Armaan – his green eyes, his perfect nose, his beautifully cut hair, the very small scar on his cheek – everything.

I was happy to sit in the front row, too, but I had a different reason. I wanted to see every part of my favourite female actor, Priya Kapoor. She was very beautiful, and she was starring with Armaan Ali for the first time in this film.

We both stared excitedly at the screen as the film began. Then, about an hour into the film, I noticed someone walking towards the front of the cinema. It was quite dark, but I could see that it was an older man with a long beard. He moved along the front row and then sat down in the seat next to Salim. I thought this was very strange. Why was he joining the film halfway through? And why did he come and sit next to Salim when there were two hundred other seats to choose from? Salim, however, did not seem worried. He was far too busy staring at Priya and Armaan, who he knew were soon going to start kissing.

As we watched, soft music began to play, and Armaan moved slowly towards Priya. He looked deeply into her eyes, then began to kiss her. At that moment, I noticed the man next to Salim was moving in his seat. I saw his leg touch Salim's. Salim seemed to think it was an accident and moved his own leg away, but it happened again. Then, a few seconds later, the man reached out his hand and put it on Salim's leg. Salim immediately turned to the man and pushed his hand away roughly.

"Get off me, you dirty old man! Don't touch me again, or I'll kill you!" shouted Salim, and then he hit the man across the face. The old man tried to stand up, and Salim reached out and tried to catch him. But, as Salim pulled at him, the



beard came away from the man's face. At that moment, the lights came on in the cinema. The man turned and ran away through a door with the word 'EXIT' above it.

But, in those few seconds, Salim and I had seen the green eyes. The perfect nose. The small scar on his cheek.

Salim was sitting down now, holding a large ball of false grey hair in his hands. He was silently crying. Armaan Ali, his hero, had died.

Smita is staring at me. I am not sure that she believes me. "So how old were you when this happened?" she asks.

"I think I was about thirteen. It was when Salim and I lived in small flats together."

"You do realize that, if this story was made public, it could destroy Armaan Ali," Smita says. "It would end his life as an actor. But, of course, that would only happen if what you just told me is true."

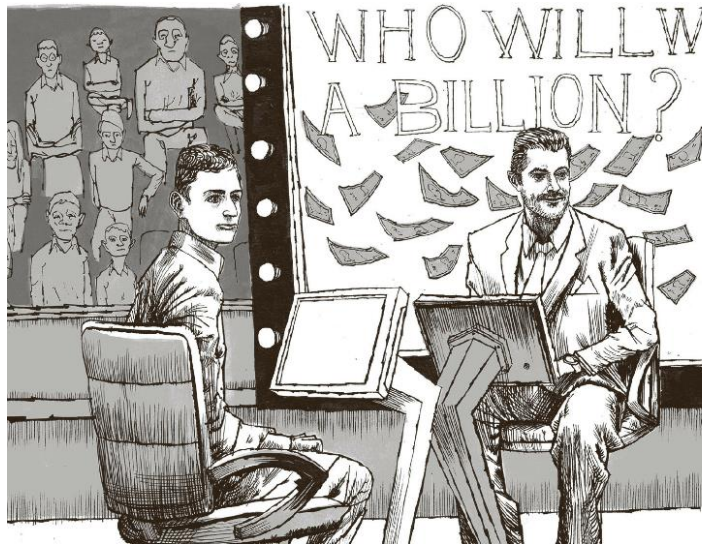
"You still don't believe me," I said. "I didn't say that," she told me. "Let's start the DVD now. I want to know what the first quiz question was." I nod my head, and Smita pushes the button on the DVD player.

The TV studio lights are low now. I can hardly see the audience sitting around me in a circle. There is just one big, bright light, and it is shining on me. I am sitting in a comfortable black leather chair in the middle of the stage, and opposite me is the presenter of the quiz show, Prem Kumar. A studio sign lights up with the word SILENCE, and then I hear someone speak.

"Cameras ready ... and three, two, one ... recording!"

Loud music starts playing, and then Prem Kumar's voice fills the studio.

"Good evening, everyone! And here we are again, ready to see who will make history today by winning the biggest prize ever offered on earth. Yes, we are ready to find out Who Will Win a Billion!"



The studio sign changes to CLAP NOW, and the audience begins clapping. Then, as the clapping comes to an end, Prem Kumar says, "So, our first contestant today is eighteen-year-old Ram Mohammad Thomas. Everyone, please give him a warm welcome!"

Everyone claps. Then, Prem Kumar turns to me. "So, Mr Thomas, what do you do?"

"I'm a waiter in Jimmy's Bar and Restaurant in Mumbai."

"A waiter! Now isn't that interesting! Tell me, how much money do you make every month?"

"About nine hundred rupees," I tell him.

"That's all?" he says. "And what will you do if you win today?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"No."

Prem Kumar stares at me. I am not saying what they want me to say. I am supposed to smile and say that I will buy a restaurant, or a plane, or a country. Or that I will throw a huge party. Or travel around the world.

"OK," says Prem Kumar, going on. "Let me explain the rules to you. You'll be asked twelve questions. If you answer each question correctly, you could win an amazing prize: one billion rupees! You can stop at any time from question one to nine and keep the money you have won up until that question. But after question nine you cannot stop. After that, it's either Play or Pay. Remember that, if you don't know the answer to a question, you have two special chances. The first is 'Call a Friend', and the second is 'Half and Half'. So, are you ready for the first question, which is worth one thousand rupees?"

"Yes, I am," I reply.

"OK, here is question one. Now, we all know that Armaan Ali and Priya Kapoor have been seen on the big screen together in many films. But can you name the popular film in which Armaan Ali starred with Priya Kapoor for the very first time?

Was it: a) Fire, b) Hero, c) Hunger, or d) Disappointments"

The music changes, and I hear a clock ticking loudly.

"D. Disappointment," I reply.

"And did you see Disappointment at the cinema?"

"Yes."

"And you are sure about your answer?"

"Yes."

The music plays excitedly, and then a moment later the correct answer appears on a big screen behind me.

"That's one hundred per cent correct! You've just won a thousand rupees! Well done!" says Prem Kumar. "And we will now take a quick break."

The studio sign changes to CLAP NOW, and the audience claps. Prem Kumar smiles. I do not.