



Learn English Through Stories

I Series

12

**Adapted and modified by
Kulwant Singh Sandhu**

<https://learn-by-reading.co.uk>

Contents

Slumdog Millionaire:

- 1. Chapter Two: Saved by the Church.**
- 2. Chapter Three: A Brother's Promise.**

1. Chapter Two: Saved by the Church

From birth to 8 years of age, Delhi:

In a busy and noisy part of Delhi called Paharganj, there is a red building with a large white cross on it. It is the Church of St Mary. And that is where the story of my life started, eighteen years ago, on a cold winter night in December. I was found outside the church in a bin that the nuns had put out for old clothes. I do not know who left me there, or why.

The nuns of St Mary's ran an orphanage, so I stayed at the church together with a number of other orphan babies. All the other babies were adopted and taken away one by one to new homes, but no one ever wanted to adopt me. I do not know why. Perhaps I was too ugly, or perhaps my skin was too dark, so I stayed at the orphanage for two years. During that time, I never had a name. The nuns just called me 'Baby' — the baby that no one wanted.

I was finally given a home by Mrs Philomena Thomas and her husband, Dominic Thomas. They were from Nagercoil in Tamil Nadu, but they now lived in Delhi. Mrs Thomas worked as a cleaner at St Joseph's Church, and her husband worked as the gardener. They were in their forties and did not have any children of their own. Their priest, Father Timothy Francis, suggested adopting a child. He said that a child might fill the hole in their lives. When she came to the orphanage, Mrs Philomena Thomas was the first person to show interest in me. In fact, she chose me that day because my skin was dark, just like hers!

It took two months for the Thomases to complete the papers to adopt me. But then, within just three days of arriving in their home, my time with them was finished. Mr Thomas discovered that the hole in his wife's life had already been filled. Not by me but by another man, Mrs Philomena Thomas immediately left her husband and newly adopted baby and ran away with her new lover. She was never seen again.

Mr Thomas was very angry. He took me to Father Timothy's house and said, "Father, you made me adopt this boy, so you can decide what to do with him." And, before Father Timothy could say a word in reply, Dominic Thomas set off to chase his wife.

Father Timothy was a good man, and I respected him. He gave me food, a place to sleep and a name: Joseph Michael Thomas.

But, seven days later, two men came to meet Father Timothy. "We are from the All Religions Together Group," said the first man. "I am Mr Jagdish Sharma,

and I am Hindu. And this is Mr Inayat Hidayatullah. He is Muslim. We have heard that you have given a home to an orphan boy.”

“Yes, his new parents disappeared,” said Father Timothy.

“What name have you given him?” asked the man.

“Joseph Michael Thomas.”

“That's a Christian name, isn't it? How do you know that he was born to Christian parents?” asked Mr Sharma. “Um, I don't. But what's wrong with Joseph Michael Thomas?”

“People in this part of India get very angry when anyone tries to make a person change their religion,” replied Mr Sharma. “Churches have been burned down, and priests have been attacked.”

“But I haven't tried to change anyone’s religion,” said Father Timothy.

“We believe you. But they are saying in the streets that you are making a Hindu boy become Christian.”

“But how do you know he is Hindu?”

“Listen, whether he is or not won't matter to the angry people who are planning to attack your church tomorrow. We want to stop that happening. Why don't you give him a Hindu name? You could name him Ram, after one of the Hindu gods,” said Mr Sharma.

Mr Hidayatullah then spoke for the first time. “Excuse me, but how do we know the boy wasn't born to Muslim parents? Why can't he be called Mohammad?”

Mr Sharma and Mr Hidayatullah discussed the names “Ram” and “Mohammad” for more than thirty minutes, without coming to a decision. Finally, Father Timothy gave up. “If I have to change his name to stop people being angry, then I'll do it. Shall I call him Ram Mohammad Thomas? Then everyone will be happy.”

And that's how I got my name.

For the next six years, Father Timothy became my father, mother, teacher and priest. If there has been anything near happiness in my life, it was in the time I spent with him.

Father Timothy looked after me well. I learned about Christianity of course, but Father Timothy taught me about other religions, too. He came from York, in

the north of England, and so it was from him that I learned to read and speak English.

The church itself was an old building, built in 1878, with beautiful coloured-glass windows and a very high wooden roof. At the far end of the church was a huge cross with a statue of Jesus Christ and the letters INRI written above it. I used to love to sit and stare at that statue and watch the coloured light shining on it through the windows.

For the first few years, I believed that Father Timothy was my real father. But, as I grew older, I realized that all the people at church called him Father, too. I was also confused because he was white and I was not. So one day I asked him, and he told me the truth as gently as he could. He explained that I was an orphan child and had been left by my mother in a bin full of clothes at St Mary's Orphanage. It was then, for the first time, that I understood the difference between father and Father. That night I cried, and I felt a new kind of pain.

Then, one morning, I woke up and Father Timothy was not in the house, so I went across to the church to look for him. As soon as I entered, I knew something was wrong. I walked to the front of the church, and there on the floor, just below the statue of Jesus Christ, was Father Timothy. Perhaps he had come to pray, to speak quietly to God. But now he was lying on his side on the cold, hard floor. His eyes were fixed open, and his skin was grey.

I do not know how long I sat next to the body, staring up at the statue of Jesus on the cross and crying. I cried for hours, even after they came and took the body away under a white sheet. That was the day I truly became an orphan. Father Timothy had been my father, just as he had been Father to all the people who came to his church.

Smita looks sad when I finish telling her about Father Timothy.

"So... what happened to you, after Father Timothy died?" she asks me. "I was sent to a special Home for Boys in Delhi."

Smita breathes deeply and says, "Now, tell me about question two." And she moves forward in her seat to play the recording of the quiz show.

We are still having a break from recording in the studio. Prem Kumar moves closer to me and whispers, "Let me tell you what the next question is going to be. I'll ask you what FBI stands for. You've heard of the FBI, haven't you?"

"No, I haven't," I say.

He shakes his head. "Oh. Look, we want you to win a bit more money. I can change the question. Tell me quickly, are there any other letters like that, that you know the meaning of?"

I think for a while before replying. "I know what INRI means. It's what's written on the top of a Christian cross," I tell him.

"Oh! OK, I'll see what I can do."

A few minutes later, the loud music starts up again, and the studio sign changes to 'SILENCE'.

"So, Mr Thomas, here comes question two, for two thousand rupees. What are the letters that are normally written on the top of a Christian cross? Is it: a) IRNI, b) INRI, c) RIN1, or d) NIRI?"

Music plays for a short time, and then I say, "The answer is B. INRI." "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

The studio is filled with the sound of drums. The right answer appears on the screen.

"That's correct! You have just won two thousand rupees."

"Thank you," I say.

2. Chapter Three: A Brother's Promise

13 years of age, Mumbai:

So, on that day when Salim and I saw Armaan Ali at the cinema, we came back to the flats afterwards. I remember it well because Salim was so angry. He began pulling down the pictures of Armaan that had been all over the walls of our small room for almost three years. When Armaan Ali was finally in hundreds of pieces on the floor, Salim fell quiet.

It was then that I heard voices outside our door, and someone called my name. It was Mr Ramakrishna, the man who looked after the whole building. I went out into the corridor and saw Mr Ramakrishna standing with a short, middle-aged man. "Thomas, this is Mr Shantaram. He will be staying in the flat next to you. You are a very responsible boy, so please help him and his wife and daughter if they need anything. OK?" And he turned and walked away.

I tried to look past Mr Shantaram and into the flat to see his wife and daughter, but I only saw inside for a very short moment. There seemed to be a girl sitting on a bed. She had long, dark hair, and I guessed that she was older than me. Mr Shantaram saw me trying to look in, and he immediately closed the door.

"What do you do?" I asked him.

"I'm a scientist, an astronomer. But I'm taking a break from that at the moment, and I'm managing a clothes shop for a while. This room here is only for a short time, of course, while we wait until we can move into our big apartment in Nariman Point."

I knew Mr Shantaram was lying. People who can afford to live in Nariman Point never stay in these flats, not even for a short time.

The walls of the rooms inside the flat were very thin. If you put your ear against the wall and listened very carefully, you could hear almost everything that was going on in the next room. I picked up a glass, turned it over, and put it carefully against the wall. When I put my ear to it, I could hear Mr Shantaram speaking.

"What an awful place this is. Listen, I don't want any street boys coming in here. There are two right next door to us, and they look rough. And, Gudiya, don't speak to any boy in these flats. If you do, I will take my belt and make you sorry that you did!" he shouts. I drop the glass in shock.

At that time, I was working in a factory, so I was away from the flats for most of the day. Salim worked long hours, too, taking lunches to people around the

city. I hardly saw Shantaram, and I never saw his wife or daughter. But, one night, I heard Mr Shantaram teaching his daughter something.

“Gudiya, come and look through the telescope. Can you see the bright red thing in the middle? That's the planet Mars.”

For the next thirty minutes, Salim and I used our glasses to listen to Shantaram. We heard about the planets - their names, sizes and whether they had rings around them. We learned about the stars and their place in the sky.

A week later, I heard a new sound: “Meow!” I quickly went to the wall with my glass.

“He's such a sweet little cat,” Gudiya was saying. “Thank you for letting me keep him! What shall I call him?”

“It needs to be something that sounds important,” I heard her father say.

“Maybe we should name him after one of the planets.”

“Mars!” said Gudiya.

“But he's the smallest in the family, so he should be called Pluto, after the smallest planet,” said her father. “Yes! Pluto!” cried Gudiya, happily.

During the next few weeks, Mr Shantaram started to come home drunk. I did not need my glass to hear the terrible things he used to shout or the things he threw. I hated hearing these things, but what could I do?

Then, one night, Mr Shantaram threw a very hot cup of tea, and it went all over Gudiya's face. I could hear everything. I quickly ran outside to get a taxi for Mrs Shantaram to take her daughter to the hospital. Two days later, Mrs Shantaram came to me and asked me whether I would go with her to visit Gudiya. “She gets very lonely. Perhaps you can talk to her.” So I went on my first-ever visit to a hospital.

When we arrived, Gudiya was lying alone on a bed. Her burned face was completely covered; I could only see her black eyes.

I was shy to begin with, but we soon began to talk. I learned about her life, and I told her about some of mine. When the time came for me to leave, Gudiya asked me if I would do something important for her. “Will you look after my cat Pluto until I come home?”

“Yes, of course,” I promised.

Suddenly, she reached out and held my hand. "You are the brother I never had." I could see from her eyes that she was smiling. I did not know what to say, so I just sat there, feeling very happy and important.

Later that night, I was woken up by a strange noise. It was the sound of a cat crying, but not like I had ever heard before. And then it suddenly stopped. The next morning, I found Pluto's dead body by the bin outside the flats. The cat's neck had been broken. Later, I heard Shantaram tell his wife that Pluto had run away. I did not say anything. What difference would it have made?

Things were quiet for a while, but a week after Gudiya came home I heard Mr Shantaram shouting again. I heard Gudiya say, "Please don't hit me, Papa, please don't hit me!" and then she cried out in pain several times.

I wanted to protect Gudiya, to save her. Her father was so drunk that, minutes later, he had quickly fallen asleep. There was a small hole near the floor in the corner of our room. I went to it and whispered, "Sister, don't cry." Then I reached my arm through the hole. I felt fingers touching my arm, my elbow, my wrist, and then she held my hand tightly. In that moment, I experienced something amazing: love, energy and understanding. We had become one person. I do not know how long I held her hand, but I woke up hours later lying on the floor.

The next night, things were worse. Gudiya's father shouted louder and hit her harder than before. Again, he fell asleep, and again, I held Gudiya's hand as she cried. I felt her pain as if it were my own. I made a decision that night.

"Gudiya," I told her, "I will never allow this to happen again. And that is a brother's promise."

The next evening, I waited near the stairs for Mr Shantaram to come home. I watched as he walked slowly up the stairs. I could see that he was very drunk. When he reached the top of the stairs, I ran at him and pushed him as hard as I could. He fell straight down to the ground and landed face down. He did not move.

It was only then that I thought about what might happen next. Surely, someone would call the police. I would be arrested and taken to prison. I did not wait another moment. I ran down the stairs as fast as I could and went straight to the train station. I found the train I wanted and jumped inside as it was pulling away.

I left Mumbai, I left Gudiya, I left Salim, and I ran away to the other city I knew: Delhi.

I can see that Smita has been upset by what she has heard. There are tears in her eyes. Perhaps because she is a woman, too, she feels deeply for Gudiya.

I move forward in my seat to push the “Play” button. “Let's see question number three,” I say.

Prem Kumar turns to me and says, “Mr Thomas, let's see whether you can answer the third question for five thousand rupees. Are you ready?”

“Ready,” I reply.

“OK. Our next question is from the world of astronomy. Which is the smallest planet in our solar system? Is it: a) Pluto, b) Mars, c) Neptune, or d) Mercury?”

“The answer is A. Pluto,” I say. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

I hear loud drums. The correct answer appears on the screen.

“That's correct! Mr Thomas, you have just won five thousand rupees!”

The audience is clapping loudly, and some people have stood up from their seats.