



# Learn English Through Stories

I Series

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## 1. Chapter Four: From Delhi to Mumbai

8 years of age, Delhi:

When Father Timothy died, I was put in the back of a van and taken to the Delhi Home for Boys. There were over one hundred and fifty children at the crowded, noisy and dirty home. It had only two toilets for all those boys, and the men who ran the home did not care about us. We were not well looked after, and they often hit us.

I quickly realized that my life with Father Timothy had been very different to that of many of the boys there. Some came from the slums of Delhi. Some had awful scars where their parents or other relations had hurt them. Others had been so hungry that they had had to live on stolen food. It was here that I first heard the word “slumdog”, and it was not long before it was used to describe me.

One day, a new boy arrived at the home. His clothes were damaged and dirty, and he looked terrified. His name was Salim Ilyasi. He was seven years old, and he was from a small village in Bihar. The people there were mostly Hindu, he told me, but his family were Muslim. A week earlier, someone had damaged a statue of the Hindu god Hanuman in the village. An angry crowd said that Muslims had done it. The group came to Salim’s small family hut while Salim was outside playing. While he watched, he saw the Hindu group burn down the hut, with his mother, father and young brother still inside it. He heard their screams as they burned to death. Salim ran to the station and jumped on the first train he saw, which brought him to Delhi. He spent several days wandering the streets of the city, hungry and in shock. Then, he was found and brought to the Home for Boys. He hated and feared all Hindus, he said, because of what had happened. So, when he asked my name, I told him it was Mohammad.

Salim and I both really loved watching films. In fact, Salim had already decided that he was going to be a famous actor when he grew up. I liked him, and we soon became very good friends. He even gave me the lucky one-rupee coin that someone had given him when he was on the streets of Delhi.

One day, a strange man came to visit from Mumbai. People said that he was very rich and had no children of his own. Some said he sometimes came to adopt one or two children to take them to his wonderful home in Mumbai. Others said that he owned a school in Mumbai, and that he used to take children there to educate them. Salim was more excited than I had ever seen before. He saw this as his chance to get to Mumbai, the place where many Indian films were made, and where actors became stars.

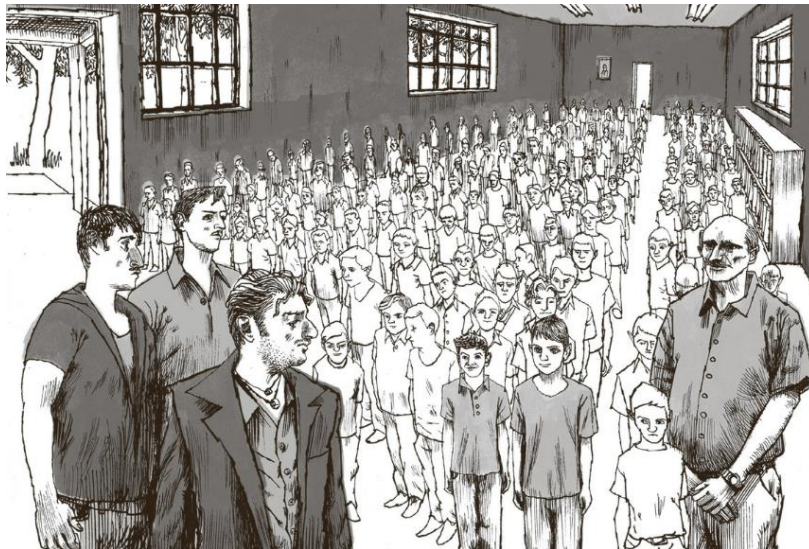
We were all standing in rows when Mr Pillai arrived. He was not what I expected. He had a thick black moustache and looked a bit unfriendly. There was a long, thick gold chain around his neck, and his fingers were covered in big gold rings. Next to him were two big, rough-looking men, who I later learned were called Mustafa and Punnoose.

Mr Pillai walked slowly around the room, carefully looking at each boy. When he came to Salim, who was quite good-looking, he stopped.

"Who is this boy? When did he arrive?" he asked Mr Gupta, one of the managers of the boys' home.

"This is Salim Ilyasi, and he's been here for about eleven months. He's eight years old, and he doesn't have any family." Mr Pillai nodded. "He's just the type of boy I'm looking for."

"What about him, too?" said Gupta, pointing at me. "Those two boys are always together." "No. I only need one boy. And he's too old," said Mr Pillai.



"But he's only ten. His name is Thomas, and he speaks perfect English. It's both of them, or neither of them. Buy one, get one free!"

Mr Pillai looked angry but stayed silent. Finally, he said, "All right. I'll take them."

Two days later, we arrived at Pillai's house in Mumbai. It was not the beautiful, expensive home we were expecting. It was big, but it was old and looked rough. We were taken to a small room with two beds in it. Later that evening, Mr Pillai came to see us. Salim immediately said how excited he was to be in Mumbai, and how he wanted to become a famous film star.

Pillai smiled and said, "Well, I'd better find a top music teacher who can give you lessons."

I had never seen Salim look happier.

That night, we went to a building behind the house for dinner. We were told to sit at a table with Mustafa and Punnoose, and then all the children started to come into the room and sit at other tables. I was shocked. They were all disabled. I saw boys with no eyes, feeling their way forward with the help of sticks. Others had only one leg, while some had no hands, and a few had damaged faces.

Mustafa and Punnoose tried to keep us away from the other children, but despite this we got to know a few of them. We were shocked at what the disabled boys told us.

"This isn't a school," said thirteen-year-old Ashok, who only had one arm. "We go out all day on the streets and the trains, begging for money. Some of us steal money from people, too. We have to give it all to Pillai so we can stay here and get food."

Another boy told us that the children were often punished for not earning enough money. But I noticed that Radhey, an eleven-year-old with a leg missing, was never punished.

"It's a secret," said Radhey, quietly, when we asked him about it. "There's a woman who is an actor living in Juhu Vile Parle. If I don't get enough money, I go to her and she gives me some."

"What's her name?" Salim asked.

"Neelima Kumari. I think she used to be really famous. But she's getting a bit old now. She's looking for a servant. If I didn't have a leg missing, I would definitely run away and work for her."

As promised, Pillai got us music and singing lessons. Salim was very good, and the teacher was pleased with him, but when I sang the teacher put his fingers in his ears. He taught us many different songs, and many of them were by the famous singer Surdas.

In our last lesson, Salim asked about the words in one of the songs.

"I don't understand. Why does Surdas say 'my eyes are hungry'?" he asked.

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" said the music teacher. "Surdas was completely blind."

At that moment, Punnoose came in to pay the teacher for all the classes. He counted out lots of notes and gave them to the teacher, and then the two men left the room. After they had gone, I noticed a one-hundred-rupee note lying on the floor. My first thought was to keep it, but Salim said we had better return it.

As we approached the room where Mustafa and Punnoose usually sat, we heard Pillai's voice coming from inside. "... so he says the younger one is a good singer. How much do you think he'll make in a day — three hundred?"

"More than that. Maybe as much as four or five hundred," replied Punnoose.

"Perfect. And what about the other one, the tall one?"

"He's useless. But who cares? Either he gets us at least a hundred a day, or he just stays hungry."

"OK," said Pillai. "Do them late tonight, after the other children are asleep. Then, send them out on the trains from next week."

I felt sick when I heard those words. I took Salim's hand and pulled him back to our room. In that moment, I had understood everything, but Salim had not.

"Salim, we have to escape from here. Now. Something very bad is going to happen to us tonight." Salim looked confused, so I went on.

"Do you know why they have been teaching us the songs of Surdas? It's because he was blind. And that is what we're going to become tonight. Then, next week, they're going to make us go out to sing and beg on the trains. Don't you see? All the boys here have been hurt by Mustafa and Punnoose, to make them disabled, so people will give them money when they beg."

Salim stared at me in shock.

"I have the address of that actor, Neelima Kumari, who wanted a servant," I told him. "Let's go there."

That evening, before dinner, Salim and I climbed through the bathroom window and ran as fast as we could into the night.

"How could they do that to those poor children?" says Smita, sadly. "So, what happened with Neelima Kumari?"

"I got the job working for her. But don't worry. You'll hear all about that soon and about what happened to Salim."

Smita nods and pushes "Play" on the DVD machine.

Prem Kumar looks into the camera. "Now, we move on to question number four, which is worth ten thousand rupees. This is a question about music. Here you are. Which one of these famous singers was blind? Was it: a) Paramanand Das, b) Surdas, c) Nand Das, or d) Kishori Amonkar?"

The music starts. "B. Surdas,"

I say. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

The music has gone, and now the drums begin. The correct answer appears.

"That's correct! You have just won ten thousand rupees!" says Prem Kumar.

The audience claps. Prem Kumar smiles. I do not.

## 2. Chapter Five: How to Speak Australian

14 years of age, Delhi:

After what happened with Neelima Kumari, I left Mumbai as quickly as I could and went back to Delhi. I got a job working for Mr Taylor, who was an Australian diplomat. I lived with several other servants in a building at the back of the family house. I was paid to clean the house and do other jobs for Mr Taylor, his wife, Rebecca, and their two teenaged children, Roy and Maggie.

It was a good job, and the Taylors were kind to me. Each month, they used to pay me 1,500 rupees. Fifty rupees went in my pocket, and the rest they saved for me because I was still a child. But I had to be careful. During the three years I was with them, six or seven other servants lost their jobs because they did something wrong, and Mr Taylor found out about it. He was The Man Who Knows Everything. Jagdish, the gardener, stole something from the garden, and Mr Taylor knew. Result: Jagdish lost his job the next day. Raju, the cook, opened the drinks cabinet and drank some whisky. Result: he lost his job the next day. Basanti, a new servant, tried on one of Maggie's dresses. Result: yes, gone the next day.

I had no clue how Mr Taylor knew all these things, so I decided to be as careful as I could possibly be. Result: I was the only servant to keep my job, and the family trusted me. I was allowed to go into all the rooms in the house, and sometimes I was invited to play video games with Roy in the living room. But no one was allowed into Mr Taylor's office, which was protected by three different locks.

The time I spent with the Taylors helped me to forget the terrible things that had happened in Mumbai. For the first few months in Delhi I lived in fear, expecting the police to come for me at any moment. But in time I relaxed and thought less and less about Mr Shantaram and Neelima Kumari.

I learned a lot while I was living with the Taylors: how to measure whisky and mix drinks, how to cook on an open grill, and how to understand Australian English. I practised speaking like Roy, making all the "a" sounds in each word as long as I could: "G'day mate, see you at eight at India Gate!"

However, my new life did not carry on like that forever. One day, Jai, the new cook, said, "I'm not going to stay here and cook forever. I want to open up a business — a garage — but it will cost money. How much money do you think this stupid family have in the house? It's probably all in that locked office." I said nothing. I hoped he was not planning to rob the Taylors.



At around that time, Mr Taylor started going out for a walk early every morning. I thought that was strange because Mr Taylor did not like exercising. One day, I followed him. He walked to a park a little distance from the house, and then he disappeared into some bushes. I moved closer and heard him talking to an Indian man.

"I've told you," Mr Taylor said, "be very careful. Always 'confuse them to lose them'. What it means is that you must never go straight to where you want to go. Instead, change roads, change cars, go into one shop then come out of another... do every — thing you can to confuse anyone who is following you."

"OK. I'm sorry. I'll remember that," said the man. "But I have some good news. I can now get the information you wanted. Meet me on Friday evening at eight, in the car park behind Balsons." Mr Taylor agreed, and then the meeting ended. I was starting to see another side to Mr Taylor.

A few months later, the news came that Mr Taylor's mother had died in Adelaide. The family got ready to travel to Australia for the funeral. Before they left, Mr Taylor locked the house up and told the servants not to enter it. It did not take Jai long to act. On the very first night the family was away, he broke into the house. I was woken up by him screaming and shouting, and I found him inside Mr Taylor's office."

"Six months I've been waiting to get in here, and there's nothing! They live like kings, and yet there's only a big TV and two or three necklaces!" he shouted, angrily. He then said he was leaving and told me not to tell the police or he would break every bone in my body.

After Jai had gone, I looked around inside the office. It was full of strange-looking machines, very small cameras, and pieces of paper with strange numbers and letters on them. One piece of paper had the words "Top secret" on it. There were also two books: Spying for beginners and How to be an excellent spy. On the walls were small TV screens, and they were showing images of different rooms in the house, and of places I did not recognize. On one screen, I could see my bedroom. The bed covers were thrown back, just as I had left them twenty minutes earlier.



Now, I understood. The clues were all here. Mr Taylor had watched every person in the house and probably people in other places, too. He was a spy.

I had earned over 43,000 rupees since I had been with the Taylors, but I did not yet have that money in my own hands. I knew I had to be clever. I telephoned Mr Taylor in Australia. "I am so sorry, sir, but Jai has just robbed your house. He has taken the television and some other things. And he also broke into your office."

"What?" Mr Taylor sounded very shocked. "Listen, close and lock my office immediately. You don't have to go in the room, just lock it up. It's very important that you don't call the police, or let anyone go in there. I'll be back tomorrow."

Mr Taylor returned home the next day, without having been to his mother's funeral. He went straight to check the office. "Thank God, nothing has been taken from the room. Well done, Thomas. I knew I could trust you."

Six months later, things were much the same as they had been before. Then, one day, I picked up the phone to call a taxi for Maggie, but the phone line was already in use. Mr Taylor was speaking, and then I heard another man answer him.

"Yes," said the other man. "I've got what you asked for. This is it — the big one. Meet me tomorrow, Thursday, at 8 p.m. at the Quality Ice Cream Shop near India Gate."

I put the phone down as quietly as I could. Then, I sat and thought long and hard.

Late the next night, a police car came to the house with its red lights on, and a police inspector got out with Mr Taylor. Minutes later, the Australian Ambassador arrived. I recognized him from parties that the Taylors had had at the house.

"What's going on?" asked the ambassador. "Why has Mr Taylor been told that he is *persona non grata* and asked to leave the country within forty-eight hours?"

"Well, sir, we caught Mr Taylor in the act of taking top-secret information from a man by the name of Jeevan Kumar. Kumar works high up in the offices of the government," said the police inspector.

Mr Taylor was as white as a sheet and said nothing.

"Well, I'm very shocked," said the ambassador. "I find it hard to believe Mr Taylor is a spy, but if you say he must go then he has to go." Then he took the inspector to one side and said, quietly, "How did you know they were going to meet?"

"That's the strange thing. It wasn't Jeevan Kumar who told us. It was one of your own men. He called us this morning and told us to go to India Gate at 8 p.m. to catch Mr Taylor receiving some important documents," explained the police inspector.

"I don't believe it. How do you know the person was an Australian?" asked the ambassador.

"Well, the person said something like, 'G'day mai-te, go to India Gai-te, tonight at ai-te.' Only an Australian would speak like that."

The next day, Mr Taylor paid me all the money he owed me for all the work I had done in those three years. Then, he said goodbye to his family and left Delhi. I left Delhi that day, too, with 52,000 rupees in beautiful, clean bank notes that all belonged to me. I thanked the Taylor family and set off to see Salim in Mumbai.

Smita glances at her watch. It is 1.30 a.m.

"Are you sure you want to go on?" I ask.

"Yes. I have to understand everything by tomorrow to help you." She pushes the "Play" button.

Prem Kumar is smiling. "So, question number five, for fifty thousand rupees. Remember that you could still 'Call a Friend' or do 'Half and Half'. What is the phrase a government uses to describe a foreign diplomat who has not done their job correctly and must leave the country? Is it: a) habeas corpus, b) caveat emptor, c) tabula rasa, or d) persona non grata?"

I do not wait for the drums to start. "D," I say.

"Excuse me? Is that a guess?"

"No. I know the answer." Prem Kumar looks shocked. I turn to the screen and watch as the correct answer appears and the audience starts clapping.

"That's correct! You have just won fifty thousand rupees!" says Prem Kumar.

"Well, I must say, Mr Thomas, tonight you really seem to be The Man Who Knows Everything!"