



Learn English Through Stories

I Series

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Chapter Eight: A Soldier's Story

12 years of age, Mumbai.

About a year before what happened at the cinema, I was living at the flats with Salim and working for Neelima Kumari, and India was at war with Pakistan. It was a frightening time. We used to hear the sound of warning sirens almost every evening. We had to go straight to the underground bunker beneath a school building near where we lived. The whole of the flat people would sit or lie in the big underground hall and wait for the danger to pass.

One night, we were in the bunker when an old man called Balwant Singh started to tell stories. He had been a soldier, and he had only one leg. He told us about another terrible war with Pakistan that had happened in 1971. Everyone sat and listened as he explained what he had experienced.

“We were protecting Mandiala Bridge when the Pakistanis attacked us. It was bad — many of our bunkers were destroyed, and a lot of people died. I was leading three other soldiers when the attack began. We were asked to move forward to try to stop some soldiers using a big machine gun. But, as we did that, all of my men were shot dead. There were dead bodies everywhere, and many of our soldiers had run away, leaving most of our tanks empty and useless.”

The room went quiet as we tried to imagine this awful situation. Then Balwant went on. “The Pakistanis saw their chance and decided to come across the bridge. Without thinking, I just ran towards one of the empty tanks and climbed inside. I managed to start it and began to move towards the bridge. I could hear loud guns all the time, but I kept going. I used the gun that was on the tank and killed several soldiers. Then, I saw the Pakistani flag flying on the bridge. I knew I had to pull it down. My tank was damaged, so I got out and went forward on foot. I got close to the Pakistani bunker, and I threw a grenade into it and finished the enemy off. By this time, I had already been shot by a machine gun in the leg. But I went on and got myself to where the flag was. I pulled it down, and in its place I put up the Indian flag. Seeing our flag there was the happiest day of my life, even though I knew I had lost one leg.”

Balwant Singh stopped speaking, and we saw that his eyes were wet with tears.

“Did you get an award for being brave?” asked Salim.

“I should have the PVC, but they never gave it to me,” said Balwant with anger in his voice.

“What’s a PVC?” Salim said.

“It’s short for the Param Vir Chakra — the highest award in the Indian army for being brave. But anyway, it doesn’t matter. I know what I did that day.”

We all told Balwant that he was our hero. We crowded round him and clapped and thanked him for what he had done.

Someone said, “Tomorrow we're being visited by the Soldiers' Care Group. They want to raise money for old soldiers. Let's tell them about Balwant and get them to recognize what he did back in 1971!”

The next day, three men from the Soldiers’ Care Group came to the flats. Each of them used to be in the army. One of them said he had fought in the war against Pakistan in 1971, and even in the fight at Mandiala Bridge.

“We have an old soldier here who deserves a Param Vir Chakra for fighting there, but he wasn’t given one,” said someone. “Can you help us to get him one?”

We took the three men to see Balwant in his room. But, when they went inside, we heard loud voices. Then, just a few minutes later, the men came out, and the one who fought at Mandiala Bridge was very angry. “That man does not deserve a PVC!” he said. “He lies more than anyone I’ve ever known. I was there, and I saw what he did. He ran away at the first chance he had! If so much time had not passed since then, I would tell the police, and they would send him to prison!”

We were all very shocked. Balwant Singh did not come with us to the bunker that night. The next morning, he was found in his room at the flats. He had hanged himself.

Smita shook her head and breathed deeply. “Let’s see the question now.”

Prem Kumar turns and talks to me. “Mr Thomas, are you ready for question eight?” “Yes” I tell him. “I am.”

“OK. Which is the highest award given to a soldier in the Indian army? Is it: a) Maha Vir Chakra, b) Param Vir Chakra, c) Shaurya Chakra, or d) Ashok Chakra?”

The music starts. I think back to the bunker.

“It’s B. Param Vir Chakra,” I reply. Prem Kumar looks surprised. He thinks I am guessing.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” The drumming starts. The audience is silent. Moments later, the answer appears on the screen.

“That’s correct!” shouts Prem Kumar. The audience is clapping and shouting, too.

I smile. Prem Kumar does not.

Chapter Nine: Killing to Order

18 years of age, Mumbai.

When I first arrived in Mumbai from Agra, I decided not to contact Salim. It had been five years since I had last seen him, and I missed him. However, I had plans that might put him in danger. But, then, three months later, I was walking down the street when I suddenly saw him. “Mohammad!” he cried and put his arms around me. “Where have you been all these years?”

Soon, we were sitting in a park and talking. Salim looked good — he was taller and even more handsome than before. He was excited to tell me that he was now having acting classes.

“Guess who is paying for my classes!” he said.

“I don't know. Who?”

“Abbas Rizvi, the famous producer. He's offered me the role of a hero when he makes his next film, which will be in two years' time, when I am eighteen. But he's training me now.”

“That's great, Salim! Tell me how this all came to happen.”

So, this is Salim's story, in his own words:

“After you went away so suddenly, I went on with my life, carrying lunches to people every day. But I also still dreamt of becoming an actor. One day, I met a man called Mukesh Rawal. He had photographs of himself with famous film stars on his wall. He told me he worked part time as a film extra.

“I asked him if he could help me get work as an extra, too, and he said maybe he could. He told me to pay for several really good photos of myself in different clothes and places. He would then give these photos to the film extra company he worked for.

“I was so excited. I couldn't afford to pay a photographer, so I bought a cheap camera and asked people to take photos of me around the city. One photo was of me standing on the beach, in another I was sitting on someone's motorbike, and there were several of me in different clothes. As I walked around, I also took photos of interesting buildings and people. The last photo I took was of a middle-aged man, who was sitting on a wall and smoking. His fingers were covered with lots of gold rings, and he had a moustache. It was only afterwards that I realized whose picture I had taken. I stood still in shock. It was Mr Pillai, the man who had almost blinded us. He recognized me and tried to run after me, but I jumped on a bus and escaped.

“But, then, the bus stopped at some traffic lights, and a group of angry young men with knives got on. These men were looking for Muslims. What had happened to my family came back to me, and I felt sick with fear. ‘Tell us your names,’ one of the men said. ‘If you’re Hindu, you can leave the bus.’ One by one, each passenger said their name, and the group questioned them and then let them leave the bus. Finally, only two passengers were left — me and one older man sitting behind me.

“When I was asked my name, I was so terrified that I said nothing. ‘He's definitely a Muslim,’ one young man said. ‘Let’s burn the bus with him on it!’

“The man sitting behind me stood up and spoke. ‘My name is Ahmed Khan. I am a Muslim, and you will not touch this boy.’ As the group turned and stared at him, the man took out a handgun and raised it. You should have seen them! They all dropped their knives and ran. My life was saved.

“I got talking to Ahmed, and he asked me if I wanted a job. He told me that he needed a servant to live at his house and cook and clean. He offered me good money, so I said yes, and I started immediately.

“Later that week, I gave the photos of me to Mukesh Rawal, who managed to get me a few small film-extra jobs. And that's how I met Abbas Rizvi. He liked my looks and promised me a bigger part in his next film.

“I learned many things about Ahmed in the first six months I worked for him. When he wasn’t out, all he did was eat and watch TV. He was crazy about cricket. He watched every game, and kept a small notebook in which he wrote all the scores and key things about the games. He did that for a very good reason — he used the information to bet on the games. One day, I saw him win 80,000 rupees from one game.

“And, when he wasn’t watching cricket, he was watching Mumbai Crime Watch. It's a bit like the news, but they show you who has been murdered, who has robbed a bank - that sort of thing.

“One strange thing was that big yellow envelopes sometimes used to come in the post for him. He told me that I must never touch these. But, one day, when he was out, one arrived and I accidentally spilt my tea on it. I was worried that any papers inside would be damaged, so I carefully opened it and pulled out the documents. Inside was one photo of a man’s face, and a sheet of information which said:

Name: Vithalbhai Ghorpade, Age: 56

Address: 73 Marve Road, Malad.

“These sheets were dry, so I quickly put them back in the envelope. In the evening, I gave Ahmed the envelope.

“Two weeks later, Ahmed was sitting watching Mumbai Crime Watch as usual while I was cooking. I could hear the presenter talking. ‘In yet another terrible event in Malad, police are looking for clues to the murder of Vithalbhai Ghorpade. He was found shot dead in his house on Marve Road last night.’ I heard the name, and I heard Ahmed laugh, so I turned to look. There on the screen was the face of the man from the photo in the envelope!

“Another yellow envelope arrived a month later. I carefully opened it and saw another photograph, this time of a young man, with a different name and address. I read the information carefully and remembered it.

“A week or so later, the murder of that person was announced on the Crime Watch programme. Again, Ahmed laughed.

“I understood immediately: Ahmed was being paid to kill people. I was worried about it because it was dangerous, for him and for me. And then, one day, everything went wrong.

“It was about four months ago — the 20th of February. I remember it well because India was playing Australia, and it was a really big game. Ahmed had just placed a huge bet on Sachin Malvankar getting his thirty-seventh century that day. It was a very exciting game, and Malvankar was doing well, but at the last minute things went wrong. He did not get his thirty-seventh century. Ahmed was very angry and left the house.

“Soon after he had left, another yellow envelope came. I carefully opened it, and I was really shocked at what I saw inside. It was a photograph of Abbas Rizvi, the producer who had promised me a part in his film! I could not let Ahmed murder him. But what could I do? I immediately went to Rizvi and told him about it. I showed him the photo and the information. He said he would go to Dubai and hide for a year. In return for what I had done, he promised to make me a hero when he came back. And that is why he offered to pay to train me.

“When Ahmed returned to the flat, the envelope was there waiting for him, but it contained a new photo and new information. I had put them inside myself. Ahmed opened the envelope, and later that night he went out. I guessed he was going to kill the person in the photograph. After he had gone, I left the flat and went to Bihar to hide for a few weeks. Then, I saw on Crime

Watch that the police had shot a murderer called Ahmed Khan. That was a week ago, so I only stopped hiding a few days ago, and who do I see the first time I walk down the street? My long-lost friend, Mohammad!”

“What a story!” I say. “But tell me. Whose picture and address did you put in the envelope for Ahmed to kill?”

“Who do you think?” said Salim and smiled. “I gave him a photo of Mr Pillai and his address!”

Smita claps her hands. “Brilliant! What a clever thing to do! He found the perfect way to kill someone bad, without doing it himself. So, what happened after that? Did you tell Salim that you were going to be a contestant on the quiz?”

“No. I was going to tell him afterwards, but then the police arrested me,” I told her.

“I see. Anyway, let’s see how meeting up with Salim again helped you on the show.”

The lights are low in the studio. Prem Kumar speaks to the camera again. “Now, it's time for question nine, for one million rupees. OK. This is from the world of cricket. How many centuries has Sachin Malvankar scored for India? Your choices are: a) 34, b) 35, c) 36, or d)37.”

The music starts.

“I think I know the answer. 36,” I say.

“Is that your final answer?”

“Yes.”

The drums play loudly, and then the correct answer appears on the screen.

“That is correct! You have just won a million rupees! Ladies and gentlemen, we will now take a short break.” The cameras stop recording, and Prem Kumar looks across at me without smiling.