



Learn English Through Stories

I Series

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10 years of age, Mumbai.

The night Salim and I escaped from Mr Pillai, we took the train and went straight to Neelima Kumari's flat in another part of Mumbai. It was late at night, but she opened the door to us. Radhey, the boy with only one leg, was right. She was tall and beautiful and did look like a film star, only older.

"Our friend Radhey told us that you needed a servant, and that you are very kind," I said. "We badly need food and somewhere to sleep."

"Yes, I do need someone to cook and clean, but I only need one person," she replied.

In the end, I persuaded her to give one of us the job. She chose me, because she didn't want a Muslim working in the house, and Salim of course was Muslim. She told me that she would pay for me to live in a flat in Ghatkopar while I worked for her. I managed to get a room with two beds, so that meant that Salim had somewhere to stay, too, which was great.

Neelima's flat was big and modern; it had five bedrooms, and it was full of expensive things. Her bedroom was huge, and was full of magazines with pictures of Neelima on them, DVDs of her many films, and shelves full of awards. I felt so excited to be working for her.

However, it did not take long for me to realize that a film star's life is often not as wonderful as it seems. Neelima was a deeply unhappy person, and she spent most of her time worrying about her looks, and how she was ageing. She did not seem to have any friends or any relatives, and I think she felt very alone.

Sometimes, she used to tell me about her films and how she had become famous. "I am known as the Tragedy Queen of India," she said, proudly. "I have won many awards for playing characters that have very sad lives and die tragic deaths. It's not an easy thing to do, you know. I even received the National Award, which was given to me by the President of India."

After several months, she said she wanted me to work more hours, and she asked me to live at the flat. I agreed. She continued to pay for the other flat, so Salim was able to still stay there.

Not long after I moved into the flat, I noticed that Neelima went out in the evening sometimes. I did not know where she went, but she always came back looking tired and worse than she did when she had gone out.

Then, one day, she asked me to stay at the other flat for a day so she could be on her own in the flat. She asked me to stay at the other flat three times in the following three months. I believed that her lover was coming to the flat, and she did not want me to know about it. So, the next time she told me to stay at the other flat — I came back very early the next morning — at 5 a.m. — and I hid outside and waited. I was right at 6 a.m., the door opened and out stepped a man. He was tall and was wearing a white shirt and blue jeans. He looked a bit untidy and was holding a lot of bank notes in his hand, and a lighted cigarette in the other. For a moment, I thought I might know him, but I could not think where I had seen him before.

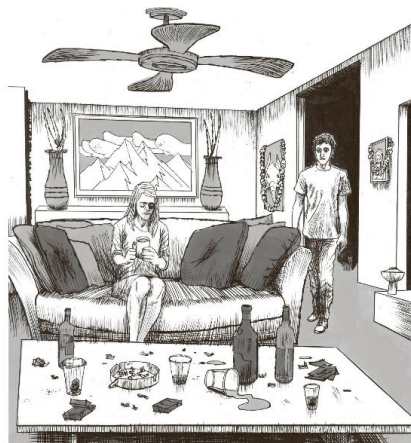
I was shocked when I went into the flat. It was a mess, with empty cigarette packets and whisky bottles, and Neelima looked terrible. She had marks all over her face, and she had a black eye. "What happened to you?" I cried.

"Oh, I just fell over and hurt myself. It's nothing to worry about."

I knew she was lying. That man I saw leaving the flat had done this to her. And in return she had given him whisky, cigarettes and money. I felt angry and unable to protect her.

Neelima had not been offered a leading part for years, because she was thought of as too old. She was angry and sad about this. One day, she told me that the best part of her life was finished, and that she wished to die young. "I want everyone to remember me as beautiful," she said. "I don't want them to think of me as someone old and ugly."

Her lover visited again. This time he treated her even worse. The next day, I saw a long, deep cut down her cheek, and again she was covered in marks. It upset me to see her like that. I wanted to call the police, but she would not let me. She cried and told me that she would never see the man again. I will never forget the cigarette burns that she showed me on her stomach. I cried, too, and we held each other for quite some time.



Then, one day, Neelima Kumari asked me to tidy her flat and bedroom and organize all the DVDs of her films and all her awards. While I did this, she put on her best clothes and jewellery, and spent a long time doing her make-up. She looked beautiful. Then, she opened a new bottle of pills and took them all, every one of them.

Finally, she went into her room and put on the DVD of her most famous film, Mumtaz Mahal. She then sent me out to buy vegetables at the market.

When I returned, I did not have to touch her to know that she was dead. In her hand, she was holding one of her awards. It said, "National Award for Best Actor. It was awarded to Ms Neelima Kumari for her role in Mumtaz Mahal, 1985."

She had planned her death to be the most perfect tragedy.

What should I do? I did not want to go to the police, because they might think I had murdered her. I did the only thing I could — I ran away back to the other flat. I told Salim that I had lost my job, which was true in a way. Luckily, Neelima had already paid our rent of the flat for the next two months.

Every day, I was terrified that the police would come for me, but they did not. I did not see anything in the newspapers about Neelima's death either. After a few weeks, I managed to get a job working in a factory, so Salim and I had enough money to live.

A month after I had left Neelima's flat, the police broke in and found her. A neighbour had complained about the smell. They carried away the body, which by then no one could recognize, and they threw the best actor award in the bin. It was only when they checked records for her teeth that they found out who she was. Then, the newspapers printed the photograph of her month-old dead body. "Neelima Kumari," they wrote, "the famous Tragedy Queen of the past, has killed herself. She was forty-four. Her body was found in her flat a month after her death."

Even Neelima could not have expected her death to be as big a tragedy as that.

"Poor woman. What a sad story," Smita says.

I nod, and then I push "Play" to show Smita the next question.

We are still in the break, and the producer of the show, a tall man with long hair, is talking to Prem Kumar in a corner. After he leaves, Prem Kumar calls me over.

"Look, Mr Thomas," he says, "I want to remind you that it's 'Play or Pay' from this question forward. That means if you go on, and you don't get one of the questions right, then you lose all the money. You have a million rupees waiting for you — you can decide to take that money now, or you can play for the billion-rupee prize. Which do you plan to do?"

"I'm going to walk away," I say. "I've been lucky up till now, but that might change."

"Well, the producer, Billy Nanda, thinks that to have a young waiter win the show would make a great news story. So, we have decided to make it easier for you. Do you remember how I helped you with the second question? I want to do the same with the next three questions. If you go into Play or Pay, we will secretly tell you the answers. What do you say?"

"I can't really say no," I tell him.

Prem Kumar claps his hands. "Excellent. So, for the next question, I am going to ask you, 'What is the length of the Palk Strait between India and Sri Lanka?' And the correct answer will be c) 137 km. OK?"

"Yes," I say, although I do not know whether to trust him.

I return to my seat, and the studio sign changes to **Clap Now**. As the clapping then grows quieter, Prem Kumar begins to speak. "Ladies and gentlemen, we have a contestant who has reached the magic amount of one million rupees. Now, he must decide whether to leave now with that money, or go on to compete for the top prize. Mr Thomas, will you play or will you run?"

"I will play," I say.

The audience seems shocked. "Oh, my God!" says one person, and another says, "That's so stupid!" "Is this your final decision?" asks Prem Kumar.

"Yes."

"So, question number ten, for ten million rupees. Neelima Kumari, the Tragedy Queen, won the National Award "But this is not the question" I say.

"Please, Mr Thomas, you must stay quiet when I am reading a question," he says, in a very serious voice. "So, as I was saying, Neelima Kumari, the Tragedy Queen, won the National Award for best actor in which year? Was it: a) 1984, b) 1988, c) 1986, or d) 1985?"

I stare at Prem Kumar. He smiles back at me. I understand now. What he told me in the break was a trick to make me go on playing. But he does not know how lucky I am.

"I know the answer," I say, calmly. "It is D. 1985."

"What?" Prem Kumar is shocked and can hardly speak. "Yes... it is D. Mr Thomas... has just won... um ... ten million rupees!" he says.

The audience goes wild. Everyone stands up and claps and shouts.

Prem Kumar looks as though he has just seen a ghost. What he expected to be a tragedy has just become something else.