



**Learn English Through
Stories**
E Series

E27

**Adapted and modified by
Kulwant Singh Sandhu**

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1. Nine Questions for a Princess

Princess Suryaprabha, who was very beautiful and intelligent, wanted to marry a man who was even more intelligent and learned than her. She was not too concerned about wealth or looks. So she said to her father, 'I have decided. Let any man ask me nine questions. If I am unable to answer even one of them, I will marry him.'

The king knew well how bright she was and was worried. 'And what if you answer all the questions?' he asked. 'Then he will be rejected and will not get a second chance.' The king had no choice but to agree to her condition and made the announcement in the kingdom. Many people arrived to try their luck. But the princess was too clever for them, and she answered each one's questions in no time. The king became more and more worried. He decided to talk to his most trusted friend, Ganapati Maharaj, who was a teacher, about this. Ganapati heard him out, then said he would send his brightest student Shashishekhar to question the princess.

The next day, a handsome young man appeared in court. He was dressed simply but his eyes shone bright with the light of knowledge. He announced that he had nine questions for the princess and, in no time, was sitting before her.

'How many stars are there in the sky?' was his first question.

Suryaprabha replied, 'There are as many stars as there are hair on a goat.'

'Which is the most beautiful child on earth?'

'For every mother, her child is the most beautiful.'

'What is the difference between truth and lies?'

'It is the difference between our eyes and ears. Our eyes will always see the truth but our ears can hear both truth and lies.'

'Which person has hands, yet is considered handless?'

'A rich man who does not share his wealth.'

'Who has eyes but is still blind?'

'A man without compassion, who does not see the suffering that exists in this world.'

Then Shashishekhar showed her a picture of a crumbling palace and asked what it meant. By now the princess was sure this was no ordinary man. But it did not take her long to give her answer.

‘A house without a proper foundation, be it a palace, will collapse.’

He showed another picture — of an old lady collecting firewood, while carrying a heavy load on her back.

The princess smiled and replied, ‘This picture depicts human greed. The woman has collected so much wood, yet she does not want to give up and go home.’

Now, the princess had answered seven questions accurately. There were only two left. Shashishekhar then asked a very clever question: ‘Princess, which is the question you can’t answer?’

Suryaprabha was stumped. If she told him, Shashishekhar would ask that question as the last one, and if she did not, she would lose anyway. She smiled and bowed her head. ‘I accept defeat.’

Thus it came to be that the two wisest people in the kingdom got married and lived happily.

2. The Story of Paan

By Sudha Murty

Vishnu Kaka had invited the entire family for dinner. It was a lavish meal with many courses. Everyone ate their fill, enjoying each dish. After it was over, the children gathered around Kaka as he brought out his big box of paan. They loved watching Kaka choose and mix his ingredients to make delicious paans which the grown-ups then ate with blissful looks on their faces.

He explained to the children, 'A paan contains betel leaf, betel nut and lime. But we should use only so much of each ingredient. Only then will it taste good.' All seven children wanted to try this experiment on their own. Some of them chewed on only the leaf, some on the nut, and others on the nut and leaf, or the leaf and only lime. It was true, when the three were not put together, the paan tasted horrible! In fact, Sharan vomited when he added more lime than necessary! Everyone made a beeline for the mirror to check if their tongues were red or not.

Grandma was sitting and chatting with Sharan's mom and watching their antics. Then she called out to them and said, 'Children, by this time you must all know that the leaf, nut or lime on their own taste very bad. Even if you put just two together it is no good. Only when you add the three in a perfect combination can a paan be eaten. And that's when you get that red colour in the mouth!'

'Why is that, Grandma? Is there any special meaning?'

'Yes there is a special meaning and I'll tell you the story, which I first heard from my grandmother.'

Once upon a time, there were two brothers, Bhanu and Veer. Their parents died when they were young and Bhanu brought up his younger brother with a lot of love and care. When Bhanu was old enough, he married Bharati. She was a gentle, loving person and looked after Veer with as much love as her husband.

When Veer was about twenty years of age, he heard that their king was looking for soldiers to join his army, as there was going to be a war.

Veer decided to join the army. Oh, how much his brother and sister-in-law cried and pleaded, telling him to remain at home with them. They could not bear the thought of the boy they had brought up with so much affection going so far away from them. But Veer insisted on becoming a soldier, so they let him go away, with a heavy heart and tears in their eyes.

For many days there was no news of Veer. The king went to war, vanquished his enemy and returned. The soldiers who went with him also came back home. But of Veer there was no sign. Day after day his brother and sister-in-law watched out for him, hoping to see him come walking down the road, back home. But there was no one. Then, one day, a group of soldiers passed through their village, returning home from the war. Bhanu called out to them and asked about his brother.

‘Veeru, oh yes, so sad, he died, you know, in the battlefield,’ said one, shaking his head.

‘No. He was injured, and he recovered. Did he not come home?’ said another.

‘He was on his way home when he fell ill,’ informed a third.



On hearing these awful tidings, Bhanu was deeply saddened. He decided he could not live at home waiting for his dear little brother to return. He would go and look for him. When he told his wife, Bharati too decided to go with him.

Together, they set off one day to look for the missing Veer and bring him home.

They decided to go to the site of the king's big battle, where Veer was last seen by his companions. This place was far away and they had to travel through forests and valleys and mountains and deserts. The two walked and walked, over many miles, but poor Bharati was not strong enough. One day, after travelling through a thick forest, they reached a little hamlet. Bharati sat down, exhausted. Then to Bhanu's great horror she died out of sheer exhaustion. Unable to bear his grief, Bhanu too died immediately.

Over many years at the place where the couple had died, two trees grew. One was a tall tree and the other a creeper that hugged the tree. It was as if Bharati and Bhanu were together even in death.

Meanwhile, Veer, the brother they had loved so deeply, was not really dead. He had got terribly wounded in the war and spent many years recovering from his injuries in a little village far away from home. When he finally recovered, he came back as fast as he could to his old house, knowing how anxious his family would be for him.

But imagine his surprise when he found the house locked and bolted, abandoned for many years. Slowly the neighbours gathered around and told him how Bhanu had decided to go looking for his lost brother.

That night Veer cried many bitter tears. How would he find his beloved brother and sister-in-law now? Where were they? By the time morning dawned he had made up his mind. He would try and go the way they had travelled and find them. Immediately he set off.

Veer was a soldier, but he had only lately recovered from many wounds and was not too strong. It took him many days to walk across the difficult land Bhanu and his wife had crossed. Then one day, near a forest, he came across a little shrine. The villagers told him the sad story of how the shrine came to be. Years ago a couple had arrived at the spot, tired from days of walking. Legend had it that they were on the way looking for a long-lost brother. When the two died without fulfilling this wish, two wonderful plants, unknown to anyone

earlier, had grown at the spot. The leaves and nuts from the trees were so sweet and refreshing that the villagers decided to build a small temple for the man and the woman at the place.

Veer listened to the story with growing sorrow. He realized the couple they talked about was none other than his brother and his wife. Unable to bear the news, he turned into a statue of limestone.

Do you know how they have all been remembered ever since? The tall tree grew nuts called areca nuts, the creeper's leaves were paan or betel leaves and from the statue came the lime paste that is added to preparations of paan. And this is how this loving family came together even after death. Together they taught people the values of love, unity and loyalty, and when people chew paan they remember this story.

Sharan's mom was surprised to hear this story. 'Really, Grandma,' she said, 'even I was not aware why these three ingredients are always used to make a paan. I too will come to listen to your stories from now on!'

Grandma nodded, then she added with that glint in her eyes, 'Chewing paan is not good for your teeth. Everyone, off you go to brush your teeth!'

3. A Tornado

A tornado is a very violent wind, in which the air whirls rapidly upwards in a greyish funnel-shaped cloud, with its tip near the ground. It twists and sways² in the sky like a diving thing and moves in a straight line over the countryside at about 6 to 30 mph. No one knows exactly what starts a tornado, but it certainly happens when extremely hot moist air meets cold dry air. When the two kinds of air have to pass each other they get locked together and the hot air spirals upwards more and more quickly until it may be whirling round at between 400 to 500 mph. Usually tornadoes are over small areas. They are not as extensive as hurricanes.

Tornadoes do a vast amount of damage, even though they seldom last for more than an hour or two. The speed of the whirling air makes quite small things such as grains of sand into dangerous weapons. Once, in America, a corn cob, picked up by a tornado was shot through a horse's skull and killed the horse. The hot air spiralling upwards suck-up⁶ everything in its path, rather as a vacuum cleaner does. Tornadoes have been known to tear steel bridges from their foundations, uproot large trees and lift trains off their tracks. People and animals have been lifted and carried away some distance by tornadoes. Once, a horse, for example, was picked up, carried 2 miles and put down again unhurt. Queer things happen such as corks flying out of bottles and closed boxes and houses exploding as the air within them rushes out with.

Vocabulary

1. **Whirls:** Spins or moves around quickly in a circle;
2. **Sways:** Moves from side to side;
3. **Extensive:** Covering a large area;
4. **Hurricane:** Violent storm;
5. **Spiralling:** Moving in continuous circle;
6. **Queer:** Unusual.

2. Grammar Page

was and were

The words **was** and **were** are the simple past forms of the verb **be**.

- **Was** is the simple past form of **am** and **is**. Use **was** with **singular nouns** like 'my dad' and 'the teacher', and with the pronouns **he, she** and **it**.
- **Were** is the simple past form of **are**. Use **were** with **plural nouns** like 'my parents' and 'Jenny and Mary', and with the pronouns **we, you** and **they**.

Ten years ago, **I was** only a baby.

When **I was** younger, I played with teddy bears.

My friend was ill yesterday.

Mom was angry when she saw the broken vase.

It was very wet on Monday.

It was six o'clock when we got home.

We were away on vacation last month.

John and I were in the garden.

You were nasty to me!

You and Sally were not at school yesterday.

Dinosaurs were prehistoric animals.

Those were my best jeans.

Here is a table to help you remember how to use **was** and **were**.

	singular	plural
first person	I was	we were
second person	you were	you were
third person	he was she was it was	they were they were they were

Notes

You may use these contractions when you are combining **was** and **were** with **not**.

full form	short form
I was not	I wasn't
he was not	he wasn't
she was not	she wasn't
it was not	it wasn't
we were not	we weren't
you were not	you weren't
they were not	they weren't