



Learn English Through Stories

I Series

18

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1. Chapter Twelve: The Thirteenth Question

18 years of age, Mumbai.

We have just finished the break. Prem Kumar glances at me and then smiles to the camera. “Ladies and gentlemen. Ram Mohammad Thomas, an eighteen-year-old waiter from Mumbai, has gone further than any other contestant on this show. But can he win one billion rupees ?”

Everyone is standing up and clapping now.

“OK, here is the last question. We all know that Mumtaz Mahal was the wife of Emperor Shahjahan and that he built the Taj Mahal in her memory, but what was the name of Mumtaz Mahal’s father? Your choices are: a) Mirza Ali Kuli Beg, b) Sirajud- daulah, c) Asaf Jah, or d) Abdur Rahim Khan Khanan.

“This last question is very important, so we’ll have one last break so that you have time to think before you answer, Mr

Thomas.

The studio sign changes to **Clap Now**, and Prem Kumar smiles at me. “I got you, didn’t I? You won’t know this one. Say goodbye to the money!” He laughs.

I laugh back. “Actually, I do know the answer to this question.” “What?”

“The answer is Asaf Jah. I worked as a guide for two years at the Taj Mahal.”

Prem Kumar is not laughing now. He is silent and looks very worried. He goes to the producer, and they talk in the corner. They look at a large book. They talk some more. Finally, Prem Kumar returns and recording begins again.

“Ladies and gentlemen, sorry about that, that last question wasn’t the real question. We were just recording a practice question for a tea advertisement. We’ll start again now.” I am shocked. The audience seems confused, too.

The music begins, and then Prem Kumar says again, “Ladies and gentlemen, Ram Mohammad Thomas, an eighteen-year-old waiter from Mumbai, has gone further than any other contestant on this show. If he answers this last question correctly, he will win one billion rupees! Here is question twelve. What is the popular name of Beethoven’s Piano Sonata Number 14? Is it: a) Moonlight, b) Starlight, c) Sunlight, or d) Midnight?”

Prem Kumar then announces the break as he did before. Then, after the cameras have stopped recording, he begins to walk off the stage.

I stand up as well. "I need to go to the toilet." "Then you'd better come with me," he says.

We are in the toilets now, and Prem Kumar is washing his hands and talking to me. He is laughing and telling me I have no chance of winning now. When he turns around, he finds me staring at him.

"I didn't come here to win money," I tell him. "I came to take revenge."
"Revenge? Revenge on whom?" he asks.

"On you I say. I pull out a small revolver from my trouser pocket. It fits comfortably in my hand. I hold it tightly and point it at him.

Prem Kumar looks terrified. "But we've never met before!"

"I saw you outside Neelima Kumari's flat about five years ago. It was early one morning, and you had just beaten her up and persuaded her to give you lots of money. But that wasn't enough for you. Then you attacked my lovely Nita."

"Nita? I don't know anyone called Nita," he replied.

"She's the girl who you treated badly and almost killed in Agra." "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Let me remind you," I say, angrily. "Four months ago, you stayed at the Palace Hotel in Agra. You tried to have sex with a girl there, but she refused you. You beat her up, broke bones and cut her, and you burned her with a cigarette, just as you did to Neelima Kumari."

"That wasn't me," he says, trying to stay calm.

"Yes, it was," I say, quietly. I raise my gun a little higher. "I promised to take revenge on the person who had hurt Nita so badly. But I didn't know how to find you. Then, I saw an advertisement in a newspaper for this quiz, and it showed your face. That is why I'm here."

"Listen, maybe I did hurt Neelima and that girl, but that is done now," Prem Kumar says. "How will shooting me change that? If you shoot me, you won't get your money. Drop the gun, and I promise I'll help you to win."

"I'm not interested in the money," I tell him.

"But, if you shoot me, you'll be arrested and hanged. You'll die, too."

"I don't care about that." I hold the gun tightly and take a step closer. His eyes are wide with fear. This is it — I have been waiting for this for the last four months. But I cannot do it. I cannot make myself shoot him.

“Please ... no ... don’t!” he begs. “I promise I’ll tell you the answer to the last question. You’ll be our biggest winner.”

I try to feel anger. I remember all the things that have happened that have brought me to this point. I see the black cigarette burn marks on Neelima’s body, the long cut on Nita’s cheek, her black eye. But, instead of anger, I feel a terrible sadness, and instead of a hot, deadly piece of metal coming out of my gun, tears come out of my eyes. I lower the gun.

“Thank you! Thank you so much,” says Prem Kumar. “In return, I’ll tell you the answer to the last question. Anyway, you’ve already won fairly — you knew that Asaf Jah was the correct answer to that question.”

For the first time, I think about the money. With a billion rupees I could achieve many things. I could buy Nita’s freedom. I could make Salim’s dream of becoming a film star come true. I could change the lives of orphans and street children like me. I could even buy myself an expensive sports car. I make my decision.

“OK, so what’s the answer?” I ask.

“It is A.”

“OK,” I say.

We leave the toilets and return to our seats. Prem Kumar looks nervous. I wonder whether he has told me the correct answer. Everyone claps when I sit down. The studio sign changes to **Silence**.

“Mr Ram Mohammad Thomas,” says Prem Kumar, and then he repeats the question. Then, he asks, “Do you know the answer?”

“No.”

The audience sounds shocked. The camera suddenly moves in closer on my face.

“I’d like to use the special chance,” I say.

Prem Kumar says something about “Half and Half”, and then the four answers appear on the screen. There is music and drums, and two of the incorrect answers are taken away. Only choices A and C stay on the screen. “Mr Thomas, everything depends on this last decision,” says Prem Kumar. “You will win one billion rupees ... or nothing! What is your answer?”

I take out my lucky one-rupee coin. “Heads my answer will be A, tails it will be C,” I say. The crowd cannot believe I am doing this. Prem Kumar looks surprised, but then smiles and nods his head.

I throw the coin in the air. Everyone stares as it rises, then falls. It lands on the desk in front of me, turns for a few moments and then falls flat. Prem Kumar moves forward to look at it and announces, "It is heads!"

"Then my answer is A," I say.

There are drums. The correct answer appears on the screen for the last time.

"It is A!" cries Prem Kumar. "Mr Ram Mohammad Thomas, you have made history! You have won one billion rupees, yes, one billion rupees!" The audience is going crazy. People are standing and clapping, shouting and dancing. This goes on for a few minutes, until the cameras stop recording. Then, Prem Kumar looks across at me and smiles. I do not smile back. Then, the producer, who looks very serious and worried, comes and takes Prem Kumar away with him.

"Wow. What a show, what a story, what a night! So, now I know how you won a billion rupees," says Smita. "Yes. I've told you everything. All my secrets."

"Then I think I should tell you mine now. Aren't you wondering who I am and why I suddenly appeared in the police station?" she asks.

"Well, yes, but I decided to trust you, and not to question something so good."

"I am Gudiya, the girl you helped in the flats. And don't feel bad that you pushed my father to his death. He didn't die, he only hit his head and broke his leg.

"And that one event changed him. He never hit me or my mother again. For years I tried to find you, but you had disappeared. Then, yesterday, I saw your name in the newspaper and read that you had been arrested. I knew that there could only be one person with that name, so I came quickly. So, just think of this as a very small way that I can begin to pay you back for how you helped me."

I take Smita's hands in mine, and I begin to cry. "I am so glad that you found me. I have got a lawyer, a friend and a sister all at the same time."

Smita smiles at me. "All your troubles are now mine. I'll fight for you, just as you fought for me."

2. Chapter Thirteen: The end of the show

19 years of age, Mumbai.

Six months have passed since the longest night of my life.

Smita kept her promise, and she fought for me as hard as she could. She used the DVD recordings to prove that I had not cheated. New Age Telemedia finally paid me the full one-billion-rupee prize money. The company had no more money after that, and so I became the first and last winner on the show.

Prem Kumar died two months ago. The police say that he killed himself, but I am not so sure. I think the men running the show probably took their revenge on him.

Money can buy you unexpected things. Even the police will listen to you when you show them money. So, along with a large number of policemen, I went to visit the home for disabled children that Mr Pillai had owned. The police arrested five men and freed thirty-five disabled children. The children are now all safe and being well cared for.

Salim has finally got the part of a hero in a film, and he is busy recording in Mehboob Studios. He thinks the producer is a man called Mohammad Bhatt, but it is actually me.

The love of my life has joined me in Mumbai. She is now my wife, and her name is Nita Mohammad Thomas. Smita and I are walking along the seafront in Mumbai, and I have parked my sports car not far away.

“I’ve been wanting to ask you something,” I tell her. “That evening, when you rescued me from the police station, why didn’t you tell me who you really were straight away?”

“Because I wanted to hear your stories and find out the truth. I heard you tell my own story, just as it had happened. It was then that I knew for sure that you were telling me the truth.”

I nod my head in understanding.

“Ram,” she says, “that same evening, after I brought you to my house, you threw a coin in the air. Why?”

“I wasn’t sure whether to trust you. I used the coin to make my decision. Heads and I would tell you everything, tails and I would say goodbye. It was heads.”

“So, if it had been tails, you wouldn’t have told me your story?” Smita says.

“It wouldn’t have been tails.”

“Do you believe in luck that much?” she asks.

“Here, take a look at the coin.” I pass her the one-rupee coin from my pocket.

She looks at it, then turns it over. Then turns it over again. “It’s heads on both sides!” she cries. “Yes. It’s my lucky coin. But luck has nothing to do with it.”

I take the coin from her and throw it high in the air. It goes up, up and up, shines for a moment when the sun catches it, and then it falls into the ocean and sinks.

“Why have you thrown it away?”

“I don’t need it now. Because luck comes from inside you.”

The End