



# Learn English Through Stories

F Series

F21

**Adapted and modified by  
Kulwant Singh Sandhu**

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# 1. ISWARAN

By R K Narayan

When the whole of the student world in Malgudi was convulsed with excitement, on a certain evening in June when the Intermediate Examination results were expected, Iswaran went about his business, looking very unconcerned and detached.

He had earned the reputation of having aged in the Intermediate Class. He entered the Intermediate Class in Albert Mission College as a youngster, with faint down on his upper lip. Now he was still there; his figure had grown brawny and athletic, and his chin had become tanned and leathery. Some people even said that you could see grey hairs on his head. The first time he failed, his parents sympathized with him, the second time also he managed to get their sympathies, but subsequently they grew more critical and unsparing, and after repeated failures they lost all interest in his examination. He was often told by his parents, 'Why don't you discontinue your studies and try to do something useful?' He always pleaded, 'Let me have this one last chance.' He clung to university education with a ferocious devotion. And now the whole town was excited with the expectation of the results in the evening. Boys moved about the street in groups; and on the sands of Sarayu they sat in clusters, nervously smiling and biting their fingernails. Others hung about the gates of the Senate House staring anxiously at the walls behind which a meeting was going on.

As much as the boys, if not more, the parents were agitated, except Iswaran's, who, when they heard their neighbours discussing their son's possible future results, remarked with a sigh, 'No such worry for Iswaran. His results are famous and known to everyone in advance.' Iswaran said facetiously, 'I have perhaps passed this time, Father, who knows? I did study quite hard.'

'You are the greatest optimist in India at the moment; but for this obstinate hope you would never have appeared for the same examination every year.'

'I failed only in Logic, very narrowly, last year,' he defended himself. At which the whole family laughed. 'In any case, why don't you go and wait along with the other boys, and look up your results?' his mother asked. 'Not at all necessary,' Iswaran replied. 'If I pass they will bring home the news. Do you think I saw my results last year? I spent my time in a cinema. I sat through two shows consecutively.'

He hummed as he went in for a wash before dressing to go out. He combed his hair with deliberate care, the more so because he knew everybody looked on him as a sort of an outcast for failing so often. He knew that behind him

the whole family and the town were laughing. He felt that they remarked among themselves that washing, combing his hair and putting on a well-ironed coat were luxuries too far above his state. He was a failure and had no right to such luxuries. He was treated as a sort of thick-skinned idiot. But he did not care. He answered their attitude by behaving like a desperado. He swung his arms, strode up and down, bragged and shouted, and went to a cinema. But all this was only a mask. Under it was a creature hopelessly seared by failure, desperately longing and praying for success. On the day of the results he was, inwardly, in a trembling suspense. 'Mother,' he said as he went out, 'don't expect me for dinner tonight. I will eat something in a hotel and sit through both the shows at the Palace Talkies.'

Emerging from Vinayak Street, he saw a group of boys moving up the Market Road towards the college. Someone asked: 'Iswaran, coming up to see the results?'

'Yes, yes, presently. But now I have to be going on an urgent business.'

'Where?'

'Palace Talkies.' At this all the boys laughed. 'You seem to know your results already. Do you?'

'I do. Otherwise do you think I would be celebrating it with a picture?'

'What is your number?'

'Seven-eight-five,' he said, giving the first set of numbers that came to his head. The group passed on, joking, 'We know you are going to get a first-class this time.'

He sat in a far-off corner in the four-anna class. He looked about: not a single student in the whole theatre. All the students of the town were near the Senate House, waiting for their results. Iswaran felt very unhappy to be the only student in the whole theatre. Somehow fate seemed to have isolated him from his fellow-beings in every respect. He felt very depressed and unhappy. He felt an utter distaste for himself.

Soon the lights went out and the show started—a Tamil film with all the known gods in it. He soon lost himself in the politics and struggles of gods and goddesses; he sat rapt in the vision of a heavenly world which some film director had chosen to present. This felicity of forgetfulness lasted but half an hour. Soon the heroine of the story sat on a low branch of a tree in paradise and wouldn't move out of the place. She sat there singing a song for over half an hour. This portion tired Iswaran, and now there returned all the old pains and gloom. 'Oh, lady,' Iswaran appealed, 'don't add to my troubles, please

move on.’ As if she heard this appeal the lady moved off, and brighter things followed. A battle, a deluge, somebody dropping headlong from cloud-land, and somebody coming up from the bed of an ocean, a rain of fire, a rain of flowers, people dying, people rising from graves and so on. All kinds of thrills occurred on that white screen beyond the pall of tobacco smoke. The continuous babble on and off the screen, music and shouting, the cry of pedlars selling soda, the unrestrained comments of the spectators—all this din and commotion helped Iswaran to forget the Senate House and student life for a few hours.

The show ended at ten o’clock in the night. A crowd was waiting at the gate for the night show. Iswaran walked across to Ananda Bhavan—a restaurant opposite the Palace Talkies. The proprietor, a genial Bombay man, was a friend of his and cried, ‘Ishwar Sab, the results were announced today. What about yours?’

‘I did not write any examination this year,’ Iswaran said. ‘Why, why, I thought you paid your examination fees!’

Iswaran laughed. ‘You are right. I have passed my Intermediate just this evening.’

‘Ah, how very good. How clever you must be! If you pray to Hanuman he will always bring you success. What are you going to do next?’

‘I will go to a higher class, that is all,’ Iswaran said. He ordered a few tidbits and coffee and rose to go. As he paid his bill and walked out, the hotel proprietor said, ‘Don’t leave me out when you are giving a dinner to celebrate your success.’

Iswaran again purchased a ticket and went back to the picture. Once more all strifes and struggles and intrigues of gods were repeated before him. He was once again lost in it. When he saw on the screen some young men of his age singing as they sported in the waters of some distant heaven, he said, ‘Well might you do it, boys. I suppose you have no examination where you are...’ And he was seized with a longing to belong to that world.

Now the leading lady sat on the low branch of a tree and started singing, and Iswaran lost interest in the picture. He looked about for the first time. He noticed, in the semi-darkness, several groups of boys in the hall—happy groups. He knew that they must all have seen their results, and come now to celebrate their success. There were at least fifty. He knew that they must be a happy and gay lot, with their lips red from chewing betel leaves. He knew that all of them would focus their attention on him the moment the lights went

up. They would all rag him about his results—all the old tedious joking over again, and all the tiresome pose of a desperado. He felt thoroughly sick of the whole business. He would not stand any more of it—the mirthful faces of these men of success and their leers. He was certain they would all look on him with the feeling that he had no business to seek the pleasure of a picture on that day.

He moved on to a more obscure corner of the hall. He looked at the screen, nothing there to cheer him: the leading lady was still there, and he knew she would certainly stay there for the next twenty minutes singing her masterpiece... He was overcome with dejection. He rose, silently edged towards the exit and was out of the theatre in a moment. He felt a loathing for himself after seeing those successful boys. 'I am not fit to live. A fellow who cannot pass an examination...' This idea developed in his mind—a glorious solution to all difficulties. Die and go to a world where there were young men free from examination who sported in lotus pools in paradise. No bothers, no disgusting Senate House wall to gaze on hopelessly, year after year. This solution suddenly brought him a feeling of relief. He felt lighter. He walked across to the hotel. The hotel man was about to rise and go to bed. 'Saitji,' Iswaran said, 'please forgive my troubling you now. Give me a piece of paper and pencil. I have to note down something urgently.' 'So late as this,' said the hotel man, and gave him a slip of paper and a pencil stub. Iswaran wrote down a message for his father, folded the slip and placed it carefully in the inner pocket of his coat.

He returned the pencil and stepped out of the hotel. He had only the stretch of the Race Course Road, and, turning to his right, half the Market Road to traverse, and then Ellaman Street, and then Sarayu... Its dark swirling waters would close on him and end all his miseries. 'I must leave this letter in my coat pocket and remember to leave my coat on the river step,' he told himself.

He was soon out of Ellaman Street. His feet ploughed through the sands of the riverbank. He came to the river steps, removed his coat briskly and went down the steps. 'O God,' he muttered with folded hands, looking up at his stars. 'If I can't pass an examination even with a tenth attempt, what is the use of my living and disgracing the world?' His feet were in water. He looked over his shoulder at the cluster of university buildings. There was a light burning on the porch of the Senate House. It was nearing midnight. It was a quarter of an hour's walk. Why not walk across and take a last look at the results board? In any case he was going to die, and why should he shirk and tremble before the board?

He came out of the water and went up the steps, leaving his coat behind, and

he walked across the sand. Somewhere a time gong struck twelve, stars sparkled overhead, the river flowed on with a murmur and miscellaneous night sounds emanated from the bushes on the bank. A cold wind blew on his wet, sand-covered feet. He entered the Senate porch with a defiant heart. 'I am in no fear of anything here,' he muttered. The Senate House was deserted, not a sound anywhere. The whole building was in darkness, except the staircase landing, where a large bulb was burning. And notice-boards hung on the wall.

His heart palpitated as he stood tiptoe to scan the results. By the light of the bulb he scrutinized the numbers. His throat went dry. He looked through the numbers of people who had passed in third-class. His own number was 501. The successful number before him was 498, and after that 703. 'So I have a few friends on either side,' he said with a forced mirth. He had a wild hope as he approached the Senate House that somehow his number would have found a place in the list of successful candidates. He had speculated how he should feel after that... He would rush home and demand that they take back all their comments with apologies. But now after he gazed at the notice-board for quite a while, the grim reality of his failure dawned on him: his number was nowhere. 'The river...' he said. He felt desolate, like a condemned man who had a sudden but false promise of reprieve. 'The river,' Iswaran muttered. 'I am going,' he told the notice-board, and moved a few steps. 'I haven't seen how many have obtained honours.' He looked at the notice-board once again. He gazed at the top columns of the results. First-classes—curiously enough a fellow with number one secured a first-class, and six others. 'Good fellows, wonder how they managed it!' he said with admiration. His eyes travelled down to second-classes—it was in two lines starting with 98. There were about fifteen. He looked fixedly at each number before going on to the next. He came to 350, after that 400, and after that 501 and then 600.

'Five-nought-one in second-class! Can it be true?' he shrieked. He looked at the number again and again. Yes, there it was. He had obtained a second-class. 'If this is true I shall sit in the B.A. class next month,' he shouted. His voice rang through the silent building. 'I will flay alive anyone who calls me a fool hereafter...' he proclaimed. He felt slightly giddy. He leant against the wall. Years of strain and suspense were suddenly relaxed; and he could hardly bear the force of this release. Blood raced along his veins and heaved and knocked under his skull. He steadied himself with an effort. He softly hummed a tune to himself. He felt he was the sole occupant of the world and its overlord. He thumped his chest and addressed the notice-board: 'Know who I am?' He stroked an imaginary moustache arrogantly, laughed to himself and asked, 'Is the horse ready, groom?' He threw a supercilious side glance at the notice-board and strutted out like a king. He stood on the last step of the

porch and looked for his steed. He waited for a minute and commanded, 'Fool, bring the horse nearer. Do you hear?' The horse was brought nearer. He made a movement as if mounting and whipped his horse into a fury. His voice rang through the dark riverside, urging the horse on. He swung his arms and ran along the sands. He shouted at the top of his voice: 'Keep off; the king is coming; whoever comes his way will be trampled...'

'I have five hundred and one horses,' he spoke to the night. The number stuck in his mind and kept coming up again and again. He ran the whole length of the riverbank up and down. Somehow this did not satisfy him. 'Prime Minister,' he said, 'this horse is no good. Bring me the other five hundred and one horses, they are all in second-classes—' He gave a kick to the horse which he had been riding and drove it off. Very soon the Prime Minister brought him another horse. He mounted it with dignity and said, 'This is better.' Now he galloped about on his horse. It was a strange sight. In the dim starlight, alone at that hour, making a tap-tap with his tongue to imitate galloping hoofs. With one hand swinging and tugging the reins, and with the other stroking his moustache defiantly, he urged the horse on and on until it attained the speed of a storm. He felt like a conqueror as the air rushed about him. Soon he crossed the whole stretch of sand. He came to the water's edge, hesitated for a moment and whispered to his horse, 'Are you afraid of water? You must swim across, otherwise I will never pay five-nought-one rupees for you.' He felt the horse make a leap.

Next afternoon his body came up at a spot about a quarter of a mile down the course of the river. Meanwhile, some persons had already picked up the coat left on the step and discovered in the inner pocket the slip of paper with the inscription:

'My dear father: By the time you see this letter I shall be at the bottom of Sarayu. I don't want to live. Don't worry about me. You have other sons who are not such dunces as I am—'



## 2. Grammar Page - Concord



### Test Yourself

1

Fill in the blanks with suitable verbs choosing from the brackets:

1. In my view the police.....arrested the wrong man. (has, have)
2. Anu and her friends.....at the fair. (was, were)
3. Every boy and girl.....to participate. (has, have)
4. A number of students.....late. (was, were)
5. Everyone's fingerprints.....unique. (is, are)
6. Mother, with her daughters and sons, .....gone to Pokhara. (has, have)
7. Either Riya or her sister often.....heels. (wear, wears)
8. A pair of plaid trousers.....in the closet. (is, are)
9. Here.....the coaches and the players for both teams. (comes, come)
10. One of my friends never.....make-up. (wear, wears)
11. Billiards.....his favourite game. (is, are)
12. NEA.....for Nepal Electricity Authority. (stand, stands)
13. News.....what editors and news directors say it is. (is, are)
14. One in every three marriages.....in divorce. (end, ends)
15. Half of the mangoes.....ripe. (was, were)
16. Suman is one of those people who.....too hard. (work, works)
17. Pukar must tell me what..... (happen, happens)
18. His driver's license.....expired. (has, have)
19. I'm of the view that neither of my friends.....guilty. (was, were)
20. Cookies and cream.....my favourite flavour. (is, are)
21. Each of the boys.....taking his own lunch. (is, are)
22. All the books on that shelf.....to me. (belong, belongs)
23. Incidents of alcohol abuse.....for many traffic fatalities each year. (account, accounts)
24. ....either my father or my brothers responsible? (Is, Are)
25. It is one the best books that.....been written ever. (has, have)
26. Not only the students but also their instructor.....been called to the Principal's office. (has, have)
27. Nothing ever.....here. (happen, happens)
28. The boy or his friends.....every day. (run, runs)
29. ....Anita's sons visited this place? (Has, Have)
30. One.....to do it oneself. (like, likes)
31. The team captain, as well as his players, .....anxious. (is, are)
32. The value of these antiques.....not been determined. (has, have)
33. Someone.....carelessly left the door open. (has, have)
34. The West Indies.....thousands of tiny islands. (has, have)
35. Every man, woman, and child.....love and understanding. (need, needs)
36. The young sometimes.....to change society. (want, wants)
37. One of my friends.....to come with us tonight. (wants, want)
38. Neither the manager nor his staff.....anything about this. (know, knows)
39. There.....time to watch the movie. (is, are)
40. Everyone.....to find their own path in life. (has, have)

## Answers

1. have 2. Were 3. Has 4. Were 5. Are 6. Has 7. Wears 8 is  
9. come 10. Wears 11. Is 12. Stands 13. Is 14. Ends 15. Were  
16. work 17. Happens 18. Has 19. Was 20. Is 21. Is 22. Belong  
23. account 24. Is 25. Have 26. Has 27. Happens 28. Run  
29. have 30. Likes 31. Is 32. Has 33. Has 34. Has 35. Needs  
36. want 37. Wants 38. Know 39. Is 40 has