



# Learn English Through Stories

F Series

F23

**Adapted and modified by  
Kulwant Singh Sandhu**

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# 1. Snake Trouble

By Ruskin Bond

## 1

After retiring from the Indian Railways and settling in Dehra, Grandfather often made his days (and ours) more exciting by keeping unusual pets. He paid a snake-charmer in the bazaar twenty rupees for a young python. Then, to the delight of a curious group of boys and girls, he slung the python over his shoulder and brought it home.

I was with him at the time, and felt very proud walking beside Grandfather. He was popular in Dehra, especially among the poorer people, and everyone greeted him politely without seeming to notice the python. They were, in fact, quite used to seeing him in the company of strange creatures.

The first to see us arrive was Tutu the monkey, who was swinging from a branch of the jackfruit tree. One look at the python, ancient enemy of his race, and he fled into the house squealing with fright. Then our parrot, Popeye, who had his perch on the veranda, set up the most awful shrieking and whistling. His whistle was like that of a steam-engine. He had learnt to do this in earlier days, when we had lived near railway stations.

The noise brought Grandmother to the veranda, where she nearly fainted at the sight of the python curled round Grandfather's neck.

Grandmother put up with most of his pets, but she drew the line at reptiles. Even a sweet-tempered lizard made her blood run cold. There was little chance that she would allow a python in the house.

'It will strangle you to death!' she cried.

'Nonsense,' said Grandfather. 'He's only a young fellow.'

'He'll soon get used to us,' I added, by way of support.

'He might, indeed,' said Grandmother, 'but I have no intention of getting used to him. And your Aunt Ruby is coming to stay with us tomorrow. She'll leave the minute she knows there's a snake in the house.'

'Well, perhaps we should show it to her first thing,' said Grandfather, who found Aunt Ruby rather tiresome.

'Get rid of it right away,' said Grandmother.

'I can't let it loose in the garden. It might find its way into the chicken shed, and then where will we be?'

'Minus a few chickens,' I said reasonably, but this only made Grandmother more determined to get rid of the python.

'Lock that awful thing in the bathroom,' she said. 'Go and find the man you bought it from, and get him to come here and collect it! He can keep the money you gave him.'

Grandfather and I took the snake into the bathroom and placed it in an empty tub. Looking a bit crestfallen, he said, 'Perhaps your grandmother is right. I'm not worried about Aunt Ruby, but we don't want the python to get hold of Tutu or Popeye.'

We hurried off to the bazaar in search of the snake-charmer but hadn't gone far when we found several snake-charmers looking for us. They had heard that Grandfather was buying snakes, and they had brought with them snakes of various sizes and descriptions. 'No, no!' protested Grandfather. 'We don't want more snakes. We want to return the one we bought.'

But the man who had sold it to us had, apparently, returned to his village in the jungle, looking for another python for Grandfather; and the other snake-charmers were not interested in buying, only in selling. In order to shake them off, we had to return home by a roundabout route, climbing a wall and cutting through an orchard. We found Grandmother pacing up and down the veranda. One look at our faces and she knew we had failed to get rid of the snake.

'All right,' said Grandmother. 'Just take it away yourselves and see that it doesn't come back.'

'We'll get rid of it, Grandmother,' I said confidently. 'Don't you worry.'

Grandfather opened the bathroom door and stepped into the room. I was close behind him. We couldn't see the python anywhere.

'He's gone,' announced Grandfather.

'We left the window open,' I said.

'Deliberately, no doubt,' said Grandmother. 'But it couldn't have gone far. You'll have to search the grounds.'

A careful search was made of the house, the roof, the kitchen, the garden and the chicken shed, but there was no sign of the python.

'He must have gone over the garden wall,' Grandfather said cheerfully. 'He'll be well away by now!'

The python did not reappear, and when Aunt Ruby arrived with enough luggage to show that she had come for a long visit, there was only the parrot to greet her with a series of long, ear-splitting whistles.

## 2

For a couple of days Grandfather and I were a little worried that the python might make a sudden reappearance, but when he didn't show up again we felt he had gone for good. Aunt Ruby had to put up with Tutu the monkey making faces at her, something I did only when she wasn't looking; and she complained that Popeye shrieked loudest when she was in the room; but she was used to them, and knew she would have to bear with them if she was going to stay with us.

And then, one evening, we were startled by a scream from the garden.

Seconds later Aunt Ruby came flying up the veranda steps, gasping, 'In the guava tree! I was reaching for a guava when I saw it staring at me. The look in its eyes! As though it would eat me alive...'

'Calm down, dear,' urged Grandmother, sprinkling rose water over my aunt. 'Tell us, what *did* you see?'

'A snake!' sobbed Aunt Ruby. 'A great boa constrictor in the guava tree. Its eyes were terrible, and it looked at me in such a queer way.'

'Trying to tempt you with a guava, no doubt,' said Grandfather, turning away to hide his smile. He gave me a look full of meaning, and I hurried out into the garden. But when I got to the guava tree, the python (if it had been the python) had gone.

'Aunt Ruby must have frightened it off,' I told Grandfather.

'I'm not surprised,' he said. 'But it will be back, Ranji. I think it has taken a fancy to your aunt.'

Sure enough, the python began to make brief but frequent appearances, usually up in the most unexpected places.

One morning I found him curled up on a dressing-table, gazing at his own reflection in the mirror. I went for Grandfather, but by the time we returned the python had moved on.

He was seen again in the garden, and one day I spotted him climbing the iron ladder to the roof. I set off after him, and was soon up the ladder, which I had climbed up many times. I arrived on the flat roof just in time to see the snake disappearing down a drainpipe. The end of his tail was visible for a few moments and then that too disappeared.

'I think he lives in the drainpipe,' I told Grandfather.

'Where does it get its food?' asked Grandmother.

‘Probably lives on those field rats that used to be such a nuisance. Remember, they lived in the drainpipes, too.’

‘Hmm...’ Grandmother looked thoughtful. ‘A snake has its uses. Well, as long as it keeps to the roof and prefers rats to chickens...’

But the python did not confine itself to the roof. Piercing shrieks from Aunt Ruby had us all rushing to her room. There was the python on *her* dressing-table, apparently admiring himself in the mirror.

‘All the attention he’s been getting has probably made him conceited,’ said Grandfather, picking up the python to the accompaniment of further shrieks from Aunt Ruby. ‘Would you like to hold him for a minute, Ruby? He seems to have taken a fancy to you.’

Aunt Ruby ran from the room and onto the veranda, where she was greeted with whistles of derision from Popeye the parrot. Poor Aunt Ruby! She cut short her stay by a week and returned to Lucknow, where she was a schoolteacher. She said she felt safer in her school than she did in our house.

### 3

Having seen Grandfather handle the python with such ease and confidence, I decided I would do likewise. So the next time I saw the snake climbing the ladder to the roof, I climbed up alongside him. He stopped, and I stopped too. I put out my hand, and he slid over my arm and up to my shoulder. As I did not want him coiling round my neck, I gripped him with both hands and carried him down to the garden. He didn’t seem to mind.

The snake felt rather cold and slippery and at first he gave me goose pimples. But I soon got used to him, and he must have liked the way I handled him, because when I set him down he wanted to climb up my leg. As I had other things to do, I dropped him in a large empty basket that had been left out in the garden. He stared out at me with unblinking, expressionless eyes. There

was no way of knowing what he was thinking, if indeed he thought at all.

I went off for a bicycle ride, and when I returned, I found Grandmother picking guavas and dropping them into the basket. The python must have gone elsewhere.

When the basket was full, Grandmother said, 'Will you take these over to Major Malik?' It's his birthday and I want to give him a nice surprise.'

I fixed the basket on the carrier of my cycle and pedalled off to Major Malik's house at the end of the road. The major met me on the steps of his house.

'And what has your kind granny sent me today, Ranji?' he asked.

'A surprise for your birthday, sir,' I said, and put the basket down in front of him.

The python, who had been buried beneath all the guavas, chose this moment to wake up and stand straight up to a height of several feet. Guavas tumbled all over the place. The major uttered a swear word and dashed indoors.

I pushed the python back into the basket, picked it up, mounted the bicycle, and rode out of the gate in record time. And it was as well that I did so, because Major Malik came charging out of the house armed with a double-barrelled shotgun, which he was waving all over the place.

'Did you deliver the guavas?' asked Grandmother when I got back. 'I delivered them,' I said truthfully.

'And was he pleased?'

'He's going to write and thank you,' I said.

And he did.

*'Thank you for the lovely surprise,' he wrote, 'Obviously you could not have known that my doctor had advised me against any undue excitement. My blood-pressure has been rather high. The sight of your grandson does not improve it. All the same, it's the thought that matters and I take it all in good humour...'*



'What a strange letter,' said Grandmother. 'He must be ill, poor man. Are guavas bad for blood pressure?'

'Not by themselves, they aren't,' said Grandfather, who had an inkling of what had happened. 'But together with other things they can be a bit upsetting.'

## 2. Never Say Die

The sun shone through the branches of the huge banyan tree in the front yard of the hold ushering in another wonderful day. Time had not been very kind to Buta and Hariyali. They were only in their teens when they lost their parents to starvation.

The village headman Shastriji said, “What will happen to these orphans? How will they live? God knows!”

The listeners sighed in response. No one cared to offer any help.

Buta the elder child was a fighter. He refused to fall prey to any problems. Along with 10-year-old Hariyali, he began cultivating vegetables in the back yard of their small house.

“Where there is a will there is away.” The Yadav siblings, blessed with green fingers, gradually began to taste the fruits of success. They moved into a bigger house that had a huge terrace. They revolutionised the process of vegetable and fruit farming, developed simple indigenous farming machinery, set up vermin-compost pits, propagated using discarded plastic to grow plants, and extended support to anyone who sought their experience and expertise.

They became trendsetters.

A few years later they were in for a huge surprise. The village headman came visiting along with some local elders. “Come here dear children”, he said. With folded hands, Buta and Hariyali stood at a distance. “No, no, not so far away. Come close to me.” He said loudly, “these two Yadav children have made our village famous”. Everyone was surprised. “They have been selected by the municipality as ‘green warriors’, said the headman. They continued their efforts and gradually began crossing the seas.

## 2. Grammar Page - Concord



Test Yourself



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

1. The number of big rivers in this country.....ninety. (is, are)
2. A red and a yellow bird.....sitting in that tree. (is, are)
3. Either the driver or the passengers.....responsible for paying the parking ticket. (is, are)
4. There.....a lot of poetry books in the library. (is, are)
5. Either your coat or my shoes.....always on the floor. (is, are)
6. Neither the boys nor the girls in the park.....eating ice-creams. (was, were)
7. There.....twice as many pigs in Denmark as people. (is, are)
8. Neither you nor I.....there. (was, were)
9. A series of books.....been published on oil. (has, have)
10. A small percentage of the grain.....ruined by the prolonged rain. (was, were)
11. After class, Tina always.....for a computer class. (run, runs)
12. Either of those books.....adequate. (is, are)
13. All of the clocks in the city.....at about the same time. (strike, strikes)
14. One-third of the people.....unemployed. (is, are)
15. Politics.....what he enjoys the most. (is, are)
16. The number of students taking the exam.....eighty. (is, are)
17. Everyone in this school.....very friendly towards my brother. (was, were)
18. Precisely thirty years.....his tenure of office. (was, were)
19. Quite a few people.....to think that Karan is innocent. (seem, seems)
20. These materials.....been synthesized from a variety of sources. (has, have)
21. Neither Mary nor her brothers.....what happened. (know, knows)
22. Two hours.....not enough to complete the task. (is, are)
23. Either my father or my brothers.....decided to buy this house. (has, have, is)
24. A lot of people.....Alok to be too quiet. (consider, considers)
25. Neither of us.....able to predict the outcome of today's game. (was, were)
26. Eight minus two.....six. (is, are)
27. One family in ten.....a dishwasher in that country. (own, owns)
28. Everyone.....inner doubts. (has, have)
29. The power cuts in Nepal.....likely to last for five or six years. (is, are)
30. Every man and woman.....the right to good medical care. (has, have)
31. These scissors.....designed for left-handed people. (is, are)
32. Those trousers.....made of wool. (is, are)
33. Neither of the statements.....true. (is, are)
34. Three hours.....the maximum length of time allowed for the exam. (is, are)
35. My father says there.....never anything worth watching on TV. (is, are)
36. My friends who are in the band.....me to play a musical instrument. (wants, want)
37. Sabnam and her brothers.....at school. (is, are)
38. Several of the students.....decided to join the course. (has, have)
39. Two-thirds of the work.....left undone. (was, were)
40. Watching violence on TV.....some children more aggressive. (make, makes)
41. No dresses of that colour.....available with us. (is, are)
42. Ali and Imran often.....with each other. (argue, argues)
43. Some of the books on the shelf.....dusty. (is, are)
44. Two multiplied by six.....twelve. (equal, equals)

## Answers

1. Is 2. Are 3. Are 4. Are 5. Are 6. Were 7. Are 8. Was 9. Has  
10. was 11. Runs 12. Is 13. Strike 14. Are 15. Is 16. Is 17. Was  
18. was 19. Seem 20. Have 21. Know 22. Is 23. have 24. Consider  
25. were 26. Is 27. Owns 28. Has 29. Are 30 has 31. Are 32. Are  
33. is 34. Is 35. Is 36. Want 37. Are 38. Have 39. Was 40. Makes  
41. are 42. Argue 43. Are 44. equals