



**Learn English Through
Stories
D Series**

D38

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George Kershaw

Nothing but the Truth



Nothing but the Truth part 2

By George Kershaw

CHAPTER FIVE

Money worries

Hu was sitting on the balcony of her apartment. It was evening. She had Lao Mao, the cat, sitting on her knee, but otherwise she was alone. The balcony was full of plants in pots. Her mother loved plants, and filled the apartment and the balcony with growing things. The balcony was so full of plants it was difficult to move. In the family, they called the balcony 'Mother's little jungle'. Hu's father liked to water the plants in the early morning before he went to work. He said it helped him relax.

'Stupid!' said Hu to the cat. Lao Mao said nothing. Hu thought the cat smiled.

Hu was worrying about money.

'Lao Mao, you are lazy, and you don't listen to me. Sit on your own chair!' Hu put the cat on another plastic chair and stood up.

She went to the edge of the balcony and looked across at Bangkok. Bangkok was coming home from work. Bangkok was trying to come home. Hu could see the traffic standing still on the highway. There was the smell of the traffic, a smell of cooking, a smell of dirt, and a smell of plants from the balcony and from the gardens in the Soi below.

'Stupid!' said Hu again, returning to her chair. How could she pay for her extra English lessons? She didn't get a lot of pocket money. Her father was generous but he had said:

'Hu, we have been saving for when you to go to medical school for a long time...'

'When?' Hu had thought. 'If not when I go.' But she had said nothing.

'There will be other expenses,' her father had continued. 'You must save too.'

Mr Stanyer had said he would want the money after each lesson, twice a week. Without good results in English, she could not enter the IB programme. Without the IB, medical school was a dream.

It was very quiet in the apartment. Hu's mother was baby-sitting. Hu's mother did small jobs for people, for neighbours in the apartment block and for friends.

Hu's father was a good man, but he didn't understand. He didn't want his wife to work, but he didn't understand how expensive life was in central Bangkok. The oil company gave them a big apartment because he often had to entertain important people from work. But he wasn't a rich man.

Once Hu had offered to do work for money. The answer was no. Her mother was shocked.

'Your education is more important,' she had said. 'One day you will be a doctor. Then you will have money. Concentrate on your studies and your father will be proud of you. Your father cannot let you work...'

The doorbell rang, waking Hu from her thoughts. Hu answered it. Marwa stood at the door with a pile of English books in one hand, a plastic box in the other, and a big smile.

'Can I come in?' said Marwa.

'Of course,' said Hu. 'My father's still at work and my mother's baby-sitting.'

It was getting dark in the big empty apartment, so Hu switched the lights on and cleared the dining table. Marwa put the books and the box on the table.

'We've got sweets and we've got English homework!' she said. 'Which do you want first?'

'Sweets!' said Hu. Mrs Marlati, Marwa's mother, was famous for her homemade Iranian sweets. The two friends sat eating sweets and began the homework. Hu thought the homework was easy, but explaining the answers to Marwa made it more interesting.

'Your father always works late,' said Marwa through a mouth full of sweets, 'like my father.'

Hu sighed. 'Yes, he works late. Tonight he must meet an important businessman from the airport. He won't be home before midnight.' She took another sweet and turned the page of the textbook. 'He works too hard, smokes too much and worries too much.'

'My father's the same,' said Marwa.

'I only see him in the morning before school. Even at the weekends, he must play golf with important customers. In the morning, he wakes me up coughing. He's always tired.'

But he's an oil engineer. Very important. Very rich!' said Marwa.

Hu thought of her mother's little jobs. 'He's an engineer and he manages the Bangkok office. It's a good job but... But I wish he didn't work so hard... Mr Stanyer wants us to do up to exercise 3, modal verbs.'

Hu tried to explain modal verbs to Marwa. They talked about their families and ate too many sweets.

Just before half past nine, the doorbell and the telephone rang at the same time. Marwa's driver was at the door. He had come to take her home. Hu waved goodbye to Marwa and went to the telephone.

'Hu, sorry. Is it too late? John Truman here.'

'Oh,' said Hu.

'Yeah, good news. They will tell you at school tomorrow. We're going on a field trip to Khao Yai National Park.'

'Khao Yai? We? You mean all of year eleven?' asked Hu.

'Sure. Well, if you want to. It's a geography and biology field trip. Listen: "The oldest and largest of Thailand's national parks...", sorry I'm reading, "... two hundred and fifty wild elephants, twenty-five to thirty tigers, eight hundred species of orchids..."'

'That sounds wonderful. But when? How many days? Will it be expensive?' Hu was excited, but she was thinking of money and all the little jobs her mother had to do. She loved animals, flowers and trees. And it would be good to get away from Bangkok. Away from the dirt and the traffic noise, the smells and the hurrying crowds. They never went away at the weekend, her father was always too busy or resting.

'Let's see. Five days, Monday to Friday, first week in March, before the heat gets too bad. Listen...?'

'Sorry, John. Sounds great, but I must go!' said Hu and she quickly put the phone down.

Her mother was home. 'Who was that?' she asked quickly.

'John, John Truman,' Hu replied. 'A student from school. An American boy.'
Hu's face was going red.

'And what was it about?' her mother asked.

'Oh, nothing. Homework. He wanted to know about, er, geography homework.' Hu didn't like to lie.

'At half past nine in the evening? Do you have time to talk to "American boys" all night? You must study in the evenings if you want to be a doctor. Have you done the washing up?'

Hu quietly went to the kitchen. She did not want to tell her mother about the field trip to Khao Yai National Park. She was thinking about how much money the field trip would cost.

CHAPTER SIX

Lessons in disappointment

All the year eleven students met in the video room at lunchtime the next day. It was hard to get a seat and some of the taller students had to stand at the back. Mr Rodriguez gave out some information explaining the field trip and the kinds of activities the students would have to do.

Hu looked through the information until she found the part on cost: including everything, it was six thousand Baht. Hu laughed sadly, shaking her head. In a low voice she said, 'Stupid!'

Mr Rodriguez suddenly stopped speaking. With all the students in the video room, it was getting very hot.

'I'm sorry, Miss Hu, did you have something to tell us?' he asked, drying his big black moustache with a handkerchief.

'No... I... sorry, Mr Rodriguez.' Hu felt embarrassed. Sean Payne laughed at the back.

'May I continue then?' Hu nodded, her face red with embarrassment. 'Thank you, Miss Hu. Where was I? Yes...'

Hu was adding up the cost in her head. It was almost Chinese New Year, an expensive time for Chinese families. All the presents, all the food. Hu knew her family couldn't afford to go home to China for the holiday this year even if Hu's father was not too busy. She had heard her parents arguing about it late one night the week before. There was no way her father could pay for her to go on the field trip.

Then Mr Rodriguez put the lights out and switched on the video. Hu thought it was wonderful. The jungle and the mountains, the cool waterfalls, the many colours of the birds. Hu forgot she was at school.

'Hrrmmph!' Sean Payne was being an elephant.

Mr Rodriguez stopped the video and switched all the lights on. Sean was standing using his arm as the elephant's trunk, while the boys next to him were laughing.

'Get out, Sean!' shouted Mr Rodriguez. 'You can come and see me at half past three.' Mr Rodriguez touched his moustache with his handkerchief and said

something quietly in Spanish. Some of the students at the back of the classroom clapped their hands as Sean left the room.

Hu found Mr Stanyer's classroom empty when she went there at half past three that afternoon. She waited outside for nearly fifteen minutes until Mr Stanyer came and opened the door. His body touched hers as he pushed past her. He smelled of sweat and tobacco smoke.

'Sorry Hu, I'm a bit late. Had to go to the teachers' room...' He sat down heavily and opened his desk, taking out a can of cola and some textbooks. He pushed his desk back and put his feet on the desk. He yawned and turned the pages of the textbook.

'So you spoke to your father, Hu?'

'Mr Stanyer, I don't want my father to know about these lessons. He worries about my results. I don't want him to worry. If my results improve, there won't be a problem.'

Mr Stanyer smiled slowly, his hands on his bald head. He laughed quietly and smiled.

'That's fine, Hu. This can be our little secret. Our little secret.' Then he laughed again.

'OK,' he said. 'Let's do something on tenses. Things you usually do in the past. Page 14, exercise 3a.' Mr Stanyer handed Hu an old copy of the students' workbook that went with their textbook.

Then he settled down with a magazine. Hu couldn't see the magazine, but Mr Stanyer gave it all his attention, smiling and laughing as he turned the pages. He seemed not to know Hu was in the classroom.

Hu worked through the exercises. At first they seemed easy. But then she wanted to ask a question.

'Mr Stanyer?'

'Mmm.' His eyes didn't leave the magazine.

'Is "used to" a tense?'

'Is "used to" a tense?' Mr Stanyer mocked Hu's voice. 'The answers are at the back of the book, Hu.'

'Yes, and I've got the answers right. All right. But it doesn't seem like a tense. It doesn't change and...'

'So you want to be the expert now?' Mr Stanyer looked in the drawer in his desk. He pulled out a grammar book and threw it on the desk in front of Hu.

'Yeah, it's a kind of tense, er, in the past. Look it up.' He pushed his chair back and slowly stood up. 'Listen, I've got to make a phone call... I'm going to the teachers' room. I'll be back in five minutes, maybe ten.' He carefully put the magazine back in the drawer, locked the desk and left the room.

He didn't go to the teachers' room. Hu saw him walking through the school gate and across the road to the Chinese shop.

Hu looked up 'used to' in the grammar book. The explanation didn't help her. She started the next exercise.

It was nearly half past four when Mr Stanyer came back. His face was red and he smelled more strongly of cigarettes, and, she guessed, rice whisky.

'Any problems?'

'No, I got all the answers right. But I still don't understand if "used to" is a tense or...'

'Let's just call it an expression. Listen, honey, sometimes we just say things a certain way in English.' Mr Stanyer yawned. Hu said nothing.

'OK, we've done enough for today,' said Mr Stanyer.

'We?' thought Hu.

'So... er, that's five hundred Baht. That's what we agreed?'

Hu didn't argue. That's what Mr Stanyer had agreed, with himself. With all the pocket money she had saved and her lunch money for the last two days, Hu had exactly five hundred Baht.

'See you on Wednesday,' said Mr Stanyer, counting the hundred Baht notes and smiling to himself.

But how would she find the money for Wednesday? How would she stand six more weeks with Mr Declan Stanyer?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Of rings and lies

The two policemen entered the classroom during her English lesson. One was fat, his stomach tight in his brown uniform, the other was small and thin. They had guns.

'We have come for Hu Jian Ming. She must come now. She stole a gold ring.'

Before Hu could say anything, the small policeman roughly took her by the arm and pulled her towards the classroom door. Marwa started crying.

'Huuuu...'

Hu started to try and speak. 'You must tell my father...' But the words wouldn't come out. She couldn't breathe. What was happening? Mr Stanyer started laughing. The other children started laughing. The thin policeman was pulling her through the classroom door. Marwa was screaming. Hu couldn't breathe. 'You must tell my father...'

She was awake, breathing heavily, her heart beating fast. It was quite dark. Bangkok was very strange at four o'clock in the morning because it was so quiet. From time to time, there was the noise of a motorbike, but even the building work had stopped until first light. Where was she?

'I am in my own bed. I am at home. There are no policemen. I did not steal the ring.' Hu tried to calm herself. Slowly her breathing and her heart returned to normal. It was a dream.

Of course! The ring! Auntie Wang's ring. Auntie Wang was Hu's mother's cousin. The ring had belonged to Auntie Wang's mother before she died. When Auntie Wang went to live in America with her new husband, she had given the ring to Hu.

'My husband is a rich man. I will have all the rings and all the gold I want,' she had told Hu.

The ring was very old and very valuable. Hu kept it in a jewellery box her mother had given her on her sixteenth birthday.

'I can sell it,' Hu told herself. 'Later I can work and buy another one just like it. It will just be like borrowing the money.'

Hu decided she would carefully write down the dates and the amounts she paid to Mr Stanyer after each 'lesson'. She would only spend what she needed to. She felt very bad about the idea, but she couldn't see any other way out of her situation. It was a long time before she slept again.

It was Saturday. Hu had told her mother she was going to the Dusit zoo with Marwa and Yoshiko. Hu's father was playing golf with his important visitor that day. Her mother was finishing a dress for the English woman in the apartment above theirs. Hu was alone in the apartment. She made herself a snack to eat and then started across Bangkok.

It is always easy to find a jewellery shop in Bangkok, but Hu didn't want to be recognised, so she travelled to the other side of the city. The bus journey was long and hot and uncomfortable - even on a Saturday, the traffic was very bad. But she had a seat, and she sat holding tight to the gold ring in its box, with a mixture of fear and guilt.

She tried three jewellery shops before she could get a good price. In the third shop, there was an old Chinese man with two gold teeth. Hu could argue better in her own language. The man didn't seem to believe that the ring belonged to Hu, but she managed to raise the price. Finally, the man said that she was robbing a poor old man and disappeared into the back of the dark shop. He came back with lots of five hundred Baht notes. He counted out the sum they had agreed and gave the notes to Hu. Now she felt like a thief.

Hu buried the notes right at the bottom of her shoulder bag and walked out into the sunshine.

Hu couldn't go home so soon. She sat at a tiny table on the pavement and ordered a bowl of noodles. They were hot and delicious. But she couldn't eat them. She thought of the money in the bag at her feet and felt sick with fear. Bangkok is a safe enough city if you are careful, but Hu had never had so much money before. And it didn't feel like her own money.

After a while, it was time to go home. She would tell her mother she didn't feel well and had to come back from the zoo early.

Another lie, but now she had the money for her lessons.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A proud father

The next few weeks were a little easier. Hu couldn't stop feeling guilty about selling her gold ring, and worried about the money hidden in her jewellery box. She still slept badly. She spent as little of the money as she could and wrote down each amount she 'borrowed'. Hu tried to keep the lessons secret, but her friends soon learnt about her situation. They were very good to her.

Lessons! They were not real lessons. Hu learnt to do the simple exercises Mr Stanyer gave her from the workbook at the beginning of the lesson, and then when he went to 'make a telephone call', she would do her other homework. She didn't ask questions. 'That's just how we say things in English,' Mr Stanyer would say. How she hated that!

And how she hated him, his smell of sweat and cigarettes, his laziness. She hated the way he laughed at his magazines, how he sat with his feet on the desk. But he was too stupid to worry about. And now that she was paying for lessons, he was giving her higher marks.

One day he looked up from his magazine and found Hu yawning and stretching. She was bored, and she had not slept well.

'You uncomfortable?' he said. 'These classroom chairs are uncomfortable. And it's kind of hot in here.' As usual, there were dark marks under the arms of his shirt. Mr Stanyer pushed his hands across his baldhead. He took a deep breath, smiled, and then said:

'Hu, we don't have to be uncomfortable. We don't have to have these lessons here. You could come back to my place in Soi 35. You could relax there... be more comfortable.'

'No!' said Hu, looking Mr Stanyer directly in the eye. She said no with such strength, with so much anger, Mr Stanyer looked as if she had hit him.

Then he went to make a telephone call. He never mentioned the idea again.

Hu learnt much more English in the library with John than with Mr Stanyer. John told her about his home in America, about his friends and his family. Hu told him about China, about the many changes in her life and the lives of her friends and family. They talked about Thailand, and of their hopes for their future lives. John wanted to be an engineer; Hu was not sure if she wanted to be a doctor or a singer.

The school show was the best, the most exciting part of her life at school. She knew her father would not be happy about her taking part in the show. 'Your studies must come first. You won't become a doctor by singing in shows,' he would say. But when she told her mother, her mother was delighted and helped her learn the songs. When she was not doing one of her little jobs, baby-sitting or making clothes, Hu's mother came to watch them practising. She found the music and the style of singing very different from her own training, but it made her happy and excited. Afterwards, Hu would hear her mother singing as she prepared their supper. Sometimes Hu's mother would sing her favourite love songs from Anhui opera, and sometimes she would try the songs from 'The Wizard of Oz' in her strange Chinese English. It made Hu laugh.

As she had expected, Hu's father was not very happy about the school show, but he was glad to see Hu's mother enjoying herself. He pointed out that Hu needed all her spare time for studying, but left the decision to her. After a while, he said nothing. Perhaps he was too busy and too tired to argue.

All the talk among her friends was about the field trip to Khao Yai. They talked about which groups they would join and which activities they would do together. Hu didn't like to feel jealous. She had told Mr Rodriguez she couldn't go because she had to prepare for the Chinese New Year holiday. Mr Rodriguez was disappointed. Hu was his star pupil in biology. Hu said nothing when her friends were making their plans. She told herself it was more important to prepare for the selection tests for the IB. The tests were a week after the field trip.

One morning, a week before the field trip, Hu was woken up by the sound of her father coughing. He was on the balcony outside her room, watering mother's 'little jungle'. A few seconds later, he knocked on her bedroom door.

'Jian Ming, I want to talk to you.'

It sounded important. Hu put on her dressing gown over her pyjamas and joined her father at the breakfast table. Her mother was in the kitchen.

'Father, you're smoking! It's not even seven o'clock!' said Hu.

'Oh. Sorry.' He put out his cigarette. 'Important meeting today. Sorry.' He held up some papers.

'What's this?'

Hu could see that it was the information about the Khao Yai field trip.

'Your mother was looking in your school bag for your dirty sports shirt,' he added.

'I'm sorry, father.'

'And she found this. Why didn't you tell us about this?' Hu's father looked disappointed.

'I'm sorry. I... I forgot. It's not important. I don't want to go.' Hu couldn't look at her father.

He lit another cigarette without thinking. Hu said nothing. Her father smoked the cigarette and then asked her:

'Which is it? You forgot? You thought it wasn't important? Or you don't want to go?'

'But father, it's so expensive...'

'But Jian Ming, it's so important. It's biology. If you want to be a doctor, you must be good at biology. There is always money for your education. And I know how much you love plants and birds and animals. You need a break from Bangkok.' He sighed. 'I know I'm always too busy to give us a holiday, I'm sorry. My work is so important.'

'It's too late now. I've told them I cannot go.'

'You told them you had to prepare for the Chinese New Year holiday. You know that's not true.' Her father looked hurt.

'You've spoken to Mr Rodriguez?' asked Hu.

'I have. And it's not too late. Another student had to drop out. He has to go into hospital for a small operation.'

Hu's father stood up, checking his jacket pockets for cigarettes.

'It's all arranged. All paid for. You silly girl.' He laughed and started coughing. As he got to the door of the apartment, he shouted goodbye to Hu and her mother, and then left.

Hu didn't know if she should cry or shout for joy. Khao Yai National Park! Next week!