



Learn English Through Stories

E Series

E29

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Fire on the Beard

By Sudha Murty

What a grand picnic everyone had! They played and ate and splashed in the water till late evening. Grandpa and Grandma had to drag them back home. That night the children tumbled into bed and were fast asleep even before Grandma switched off the lights. Quietly she tucked them in. The next morning there was no sign of anyone waking up. Grandpa and Grandma went about their work, not waking the children. But when it was ten o'clock, Grandma decided they had to wake up now. So she came into the room and found all four were up and chatting in bed. She looked at them for a while with her hands on the hips. Then she said, 'So, I think you've had enough rest. Now up all of you. Wash up and get ready. I'll give you your lunch by noon.'

All the others jumped up except Anand. He grinned at Grandma and said, 'You know, I can live without food if I get to lie in bed all day.'

'Really?' Grandma said. 'So be it. Everyone else, lunch will be ready at twelve, so be there on time. Oh, and those who lie around in bed will also miss the afternoon story.' Then she walked off trying to hide a smile. Anand and miss a meal! He was the one who loved his food the most!

Anand was quiet. The rest sprang out of their beds and went to brush their teeth and have a bath. Soon the aroma of onion dosa wafted through the house. It was too delicious to resist. Everyone gathered in the kitchen to help grind the dosa batter.

By now Anand was bored and hungry, lying alone in bed. He quietly went and took his bath. He was worried—what if Grandma had taken him seriously and not kept a share of the dosa for him? And what if he had to miss that day's story?

When Grandma saw him appear at the kitchen and join in, she laughed and said, 'You have become like Brij.'

'Who is Brij, Grandma?'

So Grandma started the story while the children ate the dosas.

Brij

Yaaawwnnn! Brij stretched out in the sun, yawned loud and long, and went back to sleep. Is Brij a rich man on a holiday; or has he worked hard all day and just resting for a while? Neither! Brij was the laziest, most good-for-nothing fellow you'll ever meet. He would spend entire days just lying around on his bed doing nothing. He was too lazy to even trim his beard and it had grown right down to his knees. All day he sat around combing it and admiring it, doing nothing else. His mother would call him, his wife would scold him, but Brij was not one to mend his ways.

This is how most conversations with his wife, Shanti, would go:

'Can you get some water from the well? There is no water in the house.'

'The well is dry. There's no water there.'

'Can you fetch water from the pond, at least?'

'The pond is too far. I can't walk so much for a pot of water.'

'Then pluck those coconuts from the tree.'

'Oh, those coconuts are still tender. Let's pluck them next month.'

'What about getting some areca (betel) nuts from the tree then?'

'Don't you know, areca nuts are not good for health?'

'Help me plough the field then.'

'It is too hot. The sun will burn my skin. It's better if you too did not go there.'

'Can you at least look after the house when I am in the field?'

'There is nothing to look after in the house.'

And so on and on Brij would make excuses for not doing any work that was asked of him. Of course he was never too tired to eat! As soon as his wife would lay out the meal, he would jump out of bed saying, 'Oh you have prepared food for me with such love, it is my duty to eat it.' And then he would gobble down all that was given.

When evening fell, Brij would roll out of bed, comb his hair and beard and set off to meet his gang of friends. Seeing how he managed to get out of doing any work, many others in the village had decided to do the same. All these people had formed a club, The Idlers' Club. They would meet every evening and sit around and talk about all kinds of things. They claimed this way they were improving their general knowledge, but all they were really doing was gossip and boast.

Brij, as the leader of the club, would get to boast the loudest and longest. One day, the topic was who was the laziest of all.

'Bathing every day is such a waste of time and precious water. I take a bath once in two days. That way I even save water!' said Manoj, the environmentalist.

'I never make my bed,' boasted Suresh, the innkeeper. 'Why bother when you have to lie down in it once again at the end of the day?'

'I eat my food out of the vessel in which it is cooked,' claimed Raju, the cook. 'Putting the food in the plate only increases the work for you will need to wash it too.'

Now Brij thought he should say something that would beat all these other tall tales. So he said, 'I am always cool and calm. Why, even if my beard were to catch fire I would start digging a well at that time, and never store water close at hand!'

As these discussions were happening, a real fire broke out in the village! It burned down buildings and roofs and sheds, crackling and throwing up sparks, making villagers run helter-skelter looking for water to douse the flames.

The Idlers' Club heard all the commotion but no one bothered to step out to see what was happening. 'What is going on?' they only asked each other.

'Oh nothing,' Brij dismissed the topic. 'Must be some circus or the other. So, what were we talking about?'

By now the fire had spread to their road. It was fast making its way to the house where the idlers were sitting. It got hotter and hotter. Brij's friends started sweating and getting nervous now. Soon the roof of the house caught fire. Still Brij kept saying, 'Don't worry, don't worry. It will rain now and put this out.' Then 'The wind is blowing in the opposite direction and will blow it down. We are really cool people, we should not be afraid of a fire!'

Finally his friends could stand it no longer and rushed screaming out of the house. But Brij was too stubborn, and refused to move. Finally the fire caught up with him and his beard started getting singed (slightly burnt). Now even Brij was scared. 'Heellp!' he shouted.

'Now you can start digging the well,' his friends suggested.

'Oh, get me some water from the pond,' Brij begged.

'That's too far away,' the others shouted from outside. 'Maybe it will rain,' they added.

By now the beard was burning away merrily, and all Brij could do was leap and dance away from the flames. Till suddenly there were splashes and splashes of water! Someone was emptying cool, cool water on the fire and putting it out!

Guess what?

Brij could not believe his luck. Who had saved him? Why, it was Shanti and many other women of the village who had worked hard and drawn water from wells and ponds to save their homes.

Finally Brij learnt his lesson. Being lazy and pretending to be cool had certainly not helped him in his hour of need. So he shaved off his half-burnt beard, woke up early each morning and did all that Shanti told him to do, and more!

Laziness leads to poverty; hard work makes you rich.

2. Grammar Page

The Past Progressive Tense

Use the past progressive tense to talk about **things that were happening** in the past and had not stopped happening. They were continuing.

To make the past progressive tense, use **was** or **were** and a verb that ends in **ing**.

I **was watching** television.

Ben **was finishing** his homework.

She **was putting** her books into her schoolbag.

Jenny and I **were tidying** the classroom.

We **were all dancing** at the party.

You **weren't listening** to the teacher.

Some boys **were looking** out of the window.

Notes

The **ing** form of a verb is called the **present participle**. You use the present participles with **was** or **were** to make the past progressive tense:

was + **cleaning**
(*present participle*)

were + **listening**
(*present participle*)

You can also use the past progressive tense to say **what was happening when something else happened**.

Sam **was doing** his math homework when the phone rang.

Dad **was cooking** our dinner when I got home.

When I saw Joe, he **was looking** for his dog.

We **were all enjoying** the movie when the power went out.

What **were** they **doing** when the bell rang?