Learn English Through Stories

G Series

G28

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Contents

A Single Night

By Rabindranath Tagore

I went to school with Surabala, and we played ‘getting married’ games together. Surabala’s mother was very affectionate towards me whenever I went to their house. Seeing us as a pair, she would murmur to herself, ‘They’re meant for each other!’ I was young, but I understood her drift fairly well. The feeling that I had a greater than normal claim to Surabala fixed itself in my mind. I became so puffed up with this feeling that I tended to boss her about. She meekly obeyed all my orders and endured my punishments. She was praised in the neighbourhood for her beauty, but beauty meant nothing to my barbarous young eyes: I merely knew that Surabala had been born to acknowledge my lordship over her — hence my inconsiderate behaviour.

My father was the chief rent-collector on the Chaudhuris’ estate. His hope was that he would train me in estate-management when I was grown up, and find me a job as a land-agent somewhere. But I didn’t like that idea at all. My ambitions were as high as our neighbour’s son Nilratan’s, who ran away to Calcutta to study and had become chief clerk to a Collector. Even if I didn’t become that, I was determined to be at least Head Clerk in a magistrate’s court. I had always noticed how respectful my father was towards legal officers of that kind. I had known since childhood that it was necessary, on various occasions, to make offerings to them of fish, vegetables and money; so I gave a specially privileged position in my heart to court employees, even to the peons.

They were the most venerated of Bengal’s deities, new miniature editions of her millions of gods. In pursuing prosperity, people placed greater trust in them than in bountiful Ganesh himself – so all the tribute that Ganesh formerly received now went to them.

Inspired by Nilratan’s example, I also took my chance to run away to Calcutta. First I stayed with an acquaintance from my home village; later my father began to give me some help towards my education. My studies proceeded along conventional lines.

In addition, I attended meetings and assemblies. I had no doubt that it would soon become necessary for me to lay down my life for my country. But I had no idea how to accomplish so momentous an act, and no one to look to for an example. I was not, however, short of enthusiasm. We were village-boys, and had not learnt to ridicule everything like the smart boys of Calcutta; so our zeal was unshakeable. The leaders at our meetings gave speeches, but we used to

wander about from house to house in the heat of the day, without lunch, begging for subscriptions; or we stood by the roadside giving out handbills; or we arranged benches and chairs before meetings. We were ready to roll up our sleeves and fight at the slightest word against our leaders. But to the smart boys of Calcutta, all this merely demonstrated our rural naivety.

I had come to qualify myself to be a Head Clerk or Superintendent; but I was actually preparing to become Mazzini or Garibaldi. Meanwhile my father and Surabala's father agreed that I should be married to her. I had run away to Calcutta at the age of fifteen, when Surabala was eight; now I was eighteen. In my father's opinion my marriageable age was elapsing. But I vowed I would never marry: I would die for my country instead. I told my father I would not marry until my studies were completely finished.

Two or three months later I heard that Surabala had been married to the lawyer Ramlochan Babu. I was busy collecting subscriptions for down-trodden India, so I attached no importance to the news.

I passed into college, and was about to take my second-year exams when news came of my father's death. I was not the only one in the family – I had my mother and two sisters. So I had to leave college and search for work. With great difficulty I managed to get a post as assistant master in a secondary school in a small town in Naukhali District. I told myself I had found the right sort of work. My guidance and encouragement would raise each pupil to be a leader of the new India.

I started work. I found that the coming exam was much more demanding than the new India. The headmaster objected if I breathed a single word to the pupils outside Grammar and Algebra. In a couple of months my enthusiasm had faded away. I became one of those dull individuals who sits and broods when he is at home; who, when working, shoulders his plough with his head bowed, whipped from behind, meekly breaking up earth; content at night to stuff his belly with cattle-fodder; no energy or enterprise in him at all.

For fear of fire, one of the teachers had to live on the school premises. I was unmarried, so this duty fell upon me. I lived in a hut adjoining the large, thatched school-building. The school was rather isolated; it stood next to a big pond. There were betel-nut, coconut and coral trees all around; a pair of huge old nim trees – adjacent to each other and to the schoolhouse itself – gave shade.

There is something which I haven't mentioned so far and which for a long time I didn't think worthy of mention. The government lawyer here, Ramlochan Ray,

lived quite near our schoolhouse, and I knew that his wife – my childhood companion Surabala – was there with him.

I became acquainted with Ramlochan Babu. I'm not sure if he was aware that as a child I had known Surabala, and when we met I did not think it appropriate to mention this. I did not particularly think about the fact that Surabala had at one time been involved with my life.

One day, during a school holiday, I went along to Ramlochan's house for a chat. I can't remember what we talked about – probably India's present plight. Not that he was very well-informed or concerned about the subject, but it was a way of passing an hour-and-a-half or so, smoking, and indulging in pleasurable gloom. As we talked I heard in the next room the soft tinkling of bangles, the rustle of garments, the sound of footsteps; it wasn't hard to deduce that inquisitive eyes were observing me through the half-open window. Suddenly I remembered those eyes – large eyes full of trust, simplicity and childish devotion: black pupils, dark eyelashes, and an ever-calm gaze. Something seemed to clench my heart, and an anguish throbbed within me.

I returned to my hut, but the pain remained. Writing and reading were no distraction from it; it oppressed me like a huge weight in my chest, thudding in my veins. In the evening I calmed down a little and asked myself why I should be in such a state. The inner answer came, 'You are wondering why you lost your Surabala.'

I replied, 'But I gave her up willingly. I couldn't let her wait for me forever.'

Someone within me said, 'You could have got her if you had wanted then, but now nothing whatever you can do will give you the right even to see her. However close the Surabala of your childhood lives to you now, however often you hear the tinkle of her bangles or feel the scent of her hair brushing past you, there will always be a wall keeping you apart.'

'No matter,' I said, 'who is Surabala to me?'

The reply came: 'Surabala is not yours today, but think what she could have been to you!'

That was true. Surabala could have been mine. She could have been my closest, most intimate companion; she could have shared all my sorrows and joys; but now she was so far away, so much someone else's, seeing her now was forbidden, it was a fault to speak to her, a sin to think about her. And a certain Ramlochan Babu, who was nobody before, was suddenly in the way. By mouthing a few mantras, he had whisked Surabala away from everyone else in the world.

I am not about to propose a new social morality; I do not wish to break convention or tear away restrictions. I am merely expressing my real feelings. Are all the feelings that arise in one's mind reasonable? I could not drive from my mind the conviction that the Surabala who reigned behind Ramlochan's portals was more mine than his. I admit this feeling was highly illogical and improper, but it was not unnatural.

I was now unable to concentrate on my work. At midday, as pupils burbled over their books, and everything outside shimmered, and a soft warm breeze brought the scent of the flowers of the nim trees, I yearned what I yearned for I don't know – but this much I can say: I did not want to spend the rest of my life correcting the grammar of India's future hopefuls. I hated sitting alone in my large room after school hours, yet I couldn't bear anyone coming to see me. At dusk I listened to the meaningless rustle of the betel-nut and coconut trees by the pond, and reflected on life. What a baffling tangle! No one thinks of doing the right thing at the right time; instead, wrong and unsettling desires come at the wrong time. You, worthless though you are, could have been Surabala's husband and lived out your days in contentment. You wanted to be Garibaldi, but look what you became – an assistant master in a village school! And the lawyer Ramlochan Ray, why did he need to be Surabala's husband? She was nothing to him, right up to the wedding: he married her without giving her a thought, became a government lawyer and was earning nicely, thank you! He ticked her off if the milk smelled of smoke, and when he was in a good mood he ordered some jewellery for her. He was plump, wore a long coat, was perfectly pleased with life, never spent his evenings sitting by the pond staring at the stars and regretting the past.

Ramlochan had to go away for a few days on a big court-case. Surabala must have been as lonely in her house as I was in mine.

It was Monday, I remember. The sky had been cloudy since dawn. At ten, rain began to patter down gently. Seeing the look of the sky, the headmaster closed the school early. Large chunks of black cloud rolled across the sky all day, as if grandly preparing for something. The next day torrential rain started in the afternoon, and a storm blew up. It rained harder and harder through the night and the wind blew more and more fiercely. At first it had blown from the east, but it gradually swung round to the north and north-east.

It was pointless trying to sleep that night. I remembered that Surabala was alone in her house. The schoolhouse was much sturdier than hers. I several times thought of fetching her over to the school – I could spend the night on the raised bank of the pond. But I could not bring myself to do this.

At about one or one-thirty in the morning the roar of flood-waters became audible – a tidal wave was approaching from the sea. I left my room and went outside. I made my way to Surabala's house. The bank of the pond was on my way – I managed to wade as far as that, up to my knees in water. I scrambled up on to the bank, but a second wave dashed against it. Part of the bank was about six or seven feet high. As I climbed up on to it, someone else was climbing from the other side. I knew with every fibre of my being who that person was; and I had no doubt that she knew who I was.

We stood alone on an island nine feet long, everything around us submerged in water. It was like the end of the world – no stars in the sky, all earthly lamps extinguished. There would have been no harm in saying something, but no word was spoken. I didn't even ask if she was all right, nor did she ask me. We just stood, staring into the darkness. At our feet, deep, black, deadly waters roared and surged.

Surabala had abandoned the world to be with me now. She had no one but me. The Surabala of my childhood had floated into my life from some previous existence, from some ancient mysterious darkness; she had entered the sunlight and moonlight of this crowded world to join me at my side. Now, years later, she had left the light and the crowds to be with me alone in this terrifying, deserted, apocalyptic darkness. As a young budding flower, she had been thrown near me on to the stream of life; now, as a full-bloomed flower, she had again been thrown near me, on the stream of death. If but one more wave had come, we would have been shed from our slender, separate stems of existence and become one. But better that the wave did not come. Better that Surabala should live in happiness with her husband, home and children. Enough that I stood for a single night on the shore of the apocalypse, and tasted eternal joy.

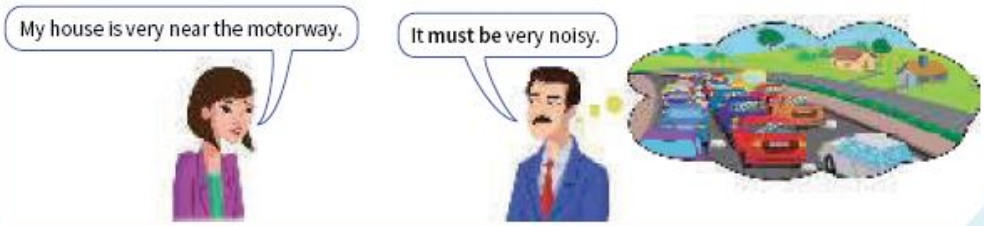
The night was nearly over. The wind died down; the waters receded. Surabala, without saying a word, returned home, and I also went silently to my room. I reflected: I did not become a Collector's chief clerk; I did not become Court Clerk; I did not become Garibaldi; I became an assistant master in a run-down school. In my entire life, only once – for a brief single night – did I touch Eternity. Only on that one night, out of all my days and nights, was my trivial existence fulfilled.

2. Grammar Page

Unit 28 — must and can't

A

Study this example:



We use **must** to say that we believe something is certain:

- You've been travelling all day. You **must be** tired.
  (travelling is tiring and you've been travelling all day, so you **must** be tired)
- 'Joe is a hard worker.' 'Joe? You **must be joking**. He doesn't do anything.'
- Louise **must get** very bored in her job. She does the same thing every day.

We use **can't** to say that we believe something is not possible:

- You've just had lunch. You **can't be** hungry already.
  (we don't expect people to be hungry immediately after a meal)
- They haven't lived here for very long. They **can't know** many people.

The structure is:

you/she/they (etc.)	**must** **can't**	**be** (tired / hungry / at work etc.) **be -ing** (doing / going / joking etc.) **get / know / have** etc.

B

Study this example:

Martin and Lucy expected their friends to be at home.
They rang the doorbell twice, but nobody has answered. Lucy says:

They **must have gone** out.
(= there is no other possibility)

For the past we use **must have** ... and **can't have** ... :

- I lost one of my gloves. I **must have dropped** it somewhere.
  (that's the only explanation I can think of)
- 'We used to live very near the motorway.' 'Did you? It **must have been** noisy.'
- Sarah hasn't contacted me. She **can't have got** my message.
- Max walked into a wall. He **can't have been looking** where he was going.

The structure is:

I/you/he (etc.)	**must** **can't**	**have**	**been** (asleep / at work etc.) **been -ing** (doing / looking etc.) **gone / got / known** etc.

You can use **couldn't have** instead of **can't have**:

- Sarah **couldn't have got** my message.
- Max **couldn't have been looking** where he was going.