Learn English Through Stories

G Series

G37

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1. Skeleton

By Rabindranath Tagore

There was a whole skeleton hanging on the wall of the room next to the one where the three of us slept when we were young. At night the bones used to clatter as the breeze stirred them. During the day we ourselves had to stir them: we were, at that time, studying meghnād-badh kābya (poems) with a pundit, and anatomy with a student from the Campbell Medical School. Our guardian wanted us to become instant experts in all fields of learning. To reveal how far his wishes were fulfilled would be superfluous to those who know us and unwise to those who do not.

This was all a long time ago. Meanwhile the skeleton disappeared from the room, and anatomical knowledge from our heads – heaven knows where.

A few days ago there was, for some reason, a shortage of space in the house and I had to spend the night in the room. Unused to being there, I couldn't sleep. I tossed and turned, and heard the big bell of the church clock nearly every time it struck. The oil-lamp in the corner of the room guttered, and five minutes later went out completely. Recently there had been a couple of deaths in our household – so the extinction of the lamp easily aroused morbid thoughts. The flame of a lamp could fade into eternal darkness at one in the morning; the little flame of a man's life could also go out one day or night and be forgotten. Gradually the memory of the skeleton came to me. As I imagined the life of the person whose skeleton it was, I suddenly felt a kind of live presence groping along the wall and circling round my mosquito-net, breathing audibly. It seemed to be looking for something, pacing rapidly round the room as it failed to find it. I knew perfectly well that this was all fabricated by my sleepless overheated brain: it was the blood throbbing in my head that sounded like rapid footsteps. Nevertheless, I felt very odd. Trying to break out of my senseless fear, I called, 'Who's there?' The footsteps stopped right next to my mosquito-net and I heard an answer: 'Me. I've come to see where my skeleton might have gone.'

I decided I really could not show such fear to a creature of my imagination; so, clutching my pillow grimly, I said in a cheery voice as if speaking to an old friend, 'The right sort of task for the middle of the night! You still need that skeleton?'

From the darkness right against the mosquito-net the reply came, 'How could I not? My breast-bone was part of it – my twenty-six-year-old youth flowered around it. How could I not wish to see it again?'

‘I understand what you mean,’ I replied hastily. ‘Finish searching and then go. I’m trying to get some sleep.’

‘You’re alone, I see,’ said the voice. ‘Then let me sit down a little. Let me talk to you. Thirty-five years ago I too sat next to men and chatted with them. For thirty-five years I have wandered about, moaning with the wind of cremation-grounds. Today I want to sit next to you and talk like a human being again.’

I sensed that someone had sat down next to my mosquito-net. Seeing no way out, I said brightly, ‘Fine. Talk about whatever would make you feel better.’

‘The most amusing story I have,’ she said, ‘is the story of my life.’ The church clock struck two.

‘When I was alive and young there was someone I feared like death. My husband. I felt like a fish caught on a hook. That is, a completely unknown animal had hauled me up on a hook, snatched me out of the cool, deep, protective waters of my home, with no chance of escape.

Two months after my marriage, my husband died. The grief that was expected of me was supplied in full by my in-laws. My father-in-law, pointing to numerous signs, told my mother-in-law that I was what the Shastras called a “poison-bride”. I remember that distinctly. Are you listening? Are you enjoying the story?’

‘Very much,’ I said. ‘It’s very amusing so far.’

‘Then listen. I returned joyfully to my father’s house. I grew up. People tried to disguise it from me, but I well knew that women as beautiful as I was are rare. Do you agree?’

‘Quite possibly. But I have never seen you.’

‘Never seen me? Why? You saw my skeleton! But I mustn’t tease you. How can I prove to you that in those empty eye-sockets there were big, wide, black eyes; that the skeleton’s hideous toothy grin bore no comparison with the sweet smile that played on my red lips? It would be both amusing and annoying to describe to you the grace, the youth, and the firm unblemished fullness that ripened day by day on those long dry pieces of bone! The anatomy of that body of mine was beyond even the greatest doctors! Indeed a doctor once said to his best friend that I was a “golden lotus”; meaning that anatomy and physiology could be learnt from any other human body, but I was unique – a miraculous flower. Does a golden lotus have a skeleton inside? When I moved, I knew that I was like a diamond sparkling in all directions when you turn it – such waves of natural beauty broke forth on all sides with my

every gesture. I would sometimes gaze at my arms – arms that could have sweetly subdued the world's most passionate men like a horse's bridle. Do you remember Subhadra when she scooped up Arjuna and proudly drove him in her chariot astonishing heaven, earth and the nether world? Equal to hers were those delicate, shapely arms of mine, those pink palms, and those beautifully tapered fingers. But that shameless, naked, unadorned skeleton bore false witness to me. I was speechless and helpless then, and angrier with you than anyone else in the world. I longed to stand before you as I was at sixteen, in the living, youthful flush of my beauty; to rob you of sleep; to disrupt your anatomy-learning and drive it away.'

'If you had a body,' I said, 'I would touch it and swear that not a trace of that learning remains in my mind. Your world-enchanting youthful beauty is all I am aware of now, radiantly etched against the night's dark background – nothing but that!'

'I had no female friend to keep me company. My elder brother had resolved not to get married. There were no other women in the house. I used to sit under a tree in the garden and imagine that the whole of Nature was in love with me, that all the stars were eyeing me, that the wind was sidling past me sighing deeply, that the grass on which my legs were stretched out would, were it conscious, quickly swoon to unconsciousness again. I supposed that all the world's young men were silently assembled round my feet like a clump of grass. What senseless anguish I felt!

'When my brother's friend Shashishekhar passed out of medical college, he became our family doctor. I had previously often observed him secretly. My brother was a very peculiar person – he seemed never to look at the world with his eyes open: as if there were never enough space in the world for him, and he therefore had to retreat to the outermost edge of it. Shashishekhar was his only friend, so of all the young men outside he was the one I watched most often. And when in the evening I sat like an empress at the foot of my flowering tree, all the world's young men sat at my feet in Shashishekhar's image. Are you listening? What are you thinking?'

'I'm thinking,' I said with a sigh, 'that I should have liked to have been born as Shashishekhar.'

'Listen to the whole story first. One day in the rainy season I caught a fever. The doctor came to see me. It was our first meeting. I turned my face towards

the window, so that the red light of evening might mask my pallor. When the doctor came into the room and looked at my face, I imagined that I myself was the doctor looking at my face. In the evening light it was as delicate as a slightly wilted flower laid on a soft pillow; unkempt strands of hair had fallen on to my forehead, and my shyly lowered eyelashes cast shadows on to my cheeks. The doctor, speaking in a low, gentle voice, told my brother he would need to feel my pulse. I slid my rounded, listless arm out from underneath the coverings.

Glancing at it, I reflected that it would have looked better with blue glass-bangles on it. As the doctor felt my sickly pulse, he was more unsettled than any doctor I had known. His fingers trembled most incompetently. He could feel the heat of my fever; I also had a sense of how his own pulse was racing. Don't you believe me?'

'I don't see any reason for disbelieving you,' I said. 'A man's pulse varies according to circumstances.'

'Gradually, after three or four more periods of illness and recovery, I found that at my imaginary evening court the millions of men in the world had reduced themselves to one. My world was almost deserted – a single doctor and a single patient were all that were left. I would surreptitiously put on a light-orange-coloured sari, plait a string of bell- flowers into my hair, and sit in the garden with a mirror in my hand.

Why? For the pleasure one gets from looking at oneself? But in fact I was not looking at myself, for it was not I who did so. I had become two people, as I sat alone. I saw myself as the doctor saw me; I loved and worshipped and was enraptured; yet within me deep sighs heaved like the moaning evening wind.

From that time on I was no longer alone. When I walked, casting my eyes down to look at the way my toes pressed the ground, I wondered how our newly qualified doctor would like my footsteps; in the afternoon, when the heat shimmered outside the window, and there was no sound except the cry of a kite flying high in the sky or toy-sellers outside our garden-fence calling, "Toys for sale, bangles for sale", I would spread out a clean sheet and lie down. I would stretch a naked arm casually across my soft bed and pretend that a certain someone had seen my arm and the way I stretched it out, had lifted it up in both hands, had planted a kiss on my pink palm and had crept out again. What would you think of the story if it ended here?'

'Not bad,' I replied. 'Still a bit incomplete – but I would happily spend the rest of the night finishing it off in my mind.'

‘But it would be a very serious story then! What about the ironic twist at the end? What about the skeleton within, with all its teeth showing? Listen to what happened next. The doctor’s practice built up, and he was able to open a small surgery on the ground floor of our house. I would sometimes jokingly ask him about medicines, poisons, what would make a man die quickly, and so on. The doctor spoke freely about his profession. As I listened, Death became as familiar as a relative. Love and Death were the only things that were real to me.

My story is almost finished – there is not much more of it.’

‘And the night is almost over too,’ I murmured.

‘After a while I noticed that the doctor had become distracted, seemingly embarrassed in my company. Then one day I saw him all dressed up, asking if he could borrow my brother’s carriage – he was going somewhere that night. I could not bear to remain in ignorance. I went to my brother and eventually managed to ask, “Tell me, Dādā, where is the doctor going to tonight in the carriage?”

“To die,” said my brother laconically.

“No, tell me truly,” I said.

“To get married,” he said, more openly than before.

“You don’t say!” I said, laughing loudly.

Bit by bit I discovered that the doctor would get 12,000 rupees from the marriage. But what was his purpose in shaming me by keeping his plans secret? Had I fallen at his feet and told him I would die of heart- break if he married? Men can never be trusted. I learnt this in one fell swoop, from the only man I cared about in the world.

Just before dusk, when the doctor came into the room after seeing his patients, I laughed raucously and said, “Well, Doctor – so today you’re getting married?”

The doctor was not only embarrassed at my frankness, he became extremely glum.

“Isn’t there going to be any band or music?” I asked.

“Is marrying a matter for such rejoicing?” he said with a slight sigh.

I became quite overcome with laughter. I had never heard such a thing. “That won’t do,” I said. “There must be a band, there must be lights.”

I got my brother so worked up that he immediately set about organizing festivities on a grand scale. I chatted on about what would happen when the bride came into the house, what I would do. I asked, “Well, Doctor – will you go around feeling lady-patients’ pulses now?” Although human thoughts, especially a man’s thoughts, cannot be directly perceived, I can nevertheless swear that my words struck the doctor like a spear in the chest.

The ceremony was fixed for the middle of the night. That evening the doctor sat out on the roof with my brother drinking a glass or two of liquor. It was their habit to do this. The moon rose slowly in the sky. I went to them and said, still laughing, “Has the Doctor Babu forgotten?

The show is about to start!”

A minor detail here: I had, beforehand, gone secretly into the doctor’s surgery to collect some powder, and had taken my chance to mix a small part of it into the doctor’s glass, unseen by anyone. I had learnt from the doctor which powders were fatal. The doctor swallowed the drink in one gulp, and looking at me piteously said in a slightly choked and husky voice, “I must be off now.”

Flute-music began to play. I put on a Benares sari, and all the ornaments from my jewellery-chest; and I smeared vermilion liberally into my parting. Then I spread out my bedding under my favourite bakul tree. It was a beautiful night. Full, pure moonlight. A south wind blew away the tiredness of a sleeping world. The whole garden was fragrant with bel-blossoms and jasmine. When the sound of the flute had faded into the distance; when the moonlight had begun to fade, and the whole world around me – trees, sky, my life-long home – seemed unreal, I closed my eyes and smiled.

My wish was that when people came and found me, that slight smile would still be intoxicatingly present on my red lips. My wish was that when I slowly entered my bridal-chamber of Eternal Night, I would take that smile with me. But where was the bridal-chamber? Where was my bridal attire? Woken by a clattering sound within me, I found three boys learning anatomy from me. In a breast that had throbbed with joy and sorrow, where, daily, the petals of youth had unfolded one by one, a teacher was pointing out with his cane which bone was which. And what trace was there now of the final smile I had formed with my lips?’

‘How did you find my story?’

‘Hilarious,’ I replied.

The first crow cawed. ‘Are you still there?’ I asked.

There was no reply. Dawn-light was entering the room.

- THE END -

2. Grammar Page

Unit 37 — can/could/would you … ? etc. (Requests, offers, permission and invitations)

A — Asking people to do things (requests)

We use **can** or **could** to ask people to do things:

- **Can you** wait a moment, please?

or

- **Could you** wait a moment, please?
- Helen, **can you** do me a favour?
- Excuse me, **could you** tell me how to get to the bus station?

You can say **Do you think** you **could** … ? :

- **Do you think you could** take me to the airport?
  (*not* Do you think you can)

B — Asking for things

To ask for something, we use **Can** (I) **have** … ? / **Could** (I) **have** … ? or **Can** (I) **get** …?:

- *(in a shop)*
  Can I **have** these postcards, please? *or* **Can** I **get** these postcards, please?
- *(in a restaurant)*
  Could we **have** the menu, please? *or* **Can** we **have** the menu, please?

May I **have** … ? is also possible:

- **May** I **have** these postcards, please?

C — Asking to do things

We use **can I** or **could I** to ask to do something:

- *(on the phone)* Hello, **can I** speak to Steve, please?
- '**Could I** use your phone charger?' 'Sure.'
- **Do you think I could** borrow your bike?

May is also possible:

- **May** I **ask you a question**?

May is more formal than **can** or **could**.

You can also say:

Do you mind if I … ?
Is it all right if I …? / **Is it OK if I** … ?

- **Do you mind if I** use your phone charger?
- '**Is it all right if I** sit here?' 'Yes, of course.'

D — Offering and inviting

You can use **Can I** … ? to offer to do something:

- '**Can I** help you?' 'No, it's OK. I can manage, thanks.'
- '**Can I** get you some coffee?' 'That would be nice.'

To offer or to invite, we use **Would you like** … ? (*not* Do you like):

- '**Would you like** some coffee?' 'No, thanks.'
- '**Would you like** to eat with us tonight?' 'That would be great.'

I'd like … (= I **would** like) is a polite way to say what you want:

- *(at a tourist information office)* **I'd like** some information about hotels, please.
- *(in a shop)* **I'd like** to try on this jacket, please.