Learn English Through Stories

G Series

G38

Adapted and modified by

Kulwant Singh Sandhu

https://learn-by-reading.co.uk

Contents

1. Hong Kong.
2. Grammar Page.

1. Hong Kong

By Janice Pariat

Joshua and I are caught in an early summer storm. Forewarned last night by great slashes of lightning that sliced through a dark, thunderous sky. The kind that, a long time ago, would keep me awake until my grandfather told me stories of a giant named Ramhah who lived on Lum Sohpetbneng, and occasionally liked to rearrange his furniture. I peer up hopefully; as far as I can see there's a dense quilt of grey.

'I told you it would rain,' says Joshua.

I maintain a defeated silence.

No matter the stories about Shillong's prettiness during the monsoon—clusters of dripping pine trees, roadside waterfalls, bright blossoming umbrellas—there is nothing as unappealing as a wet afternoon in Police Bazaar. Endlessly stamping feet turn its roads into a black, squelching mess; there's always the danger of being soaked by rushing taxis and a queer smell hangs in the air, a blend of exhaust fumes and mushroom dampness. This afternoon, out of nowhere, a faint memory stirs of the scent of pine on long walks home from school.

We take shelter under the awnings of Choudhury Pharmacy, which is doing roaring business as usual.

'We should open a medicine shop,' I jest, but Joshua is distracted.

'What?'

I gesture to the pharmacy. 'We'd never be broke.'

It's an old shop, evident from the high ceiling and spacious wooden cupboards that the dkhar attendants stand on stools to reach. Shillong has changed a great deal since I left, now plagued by a host of modern urban atrocities—giant concrete buildings, multi-storeyed shopping malls, rampant traffic—but Choudhury Pharmacy has remained the same, cheerfully doling out medicine and pidgin Khasi to its customers day after day.

'A booze shop,' adds Joshua. 'We'd be millionaires.'

He's right. Even busier, a few stores down, is Economic Wine Shop. Across its grilled counter, a congregation of men, young and old, stand in odd yet amiable silence, as though they're in church and reverently awaiting Holy Communion. They seem unperturbed by the downpour, and I presume they're

kept warm by alcohol as much as the anticipation of an impending drink. Joshua offers me a cigarette—he keeps forgetting I quit during the years we weren't together—and I refuse. He drags on it and I watch the smoke curl slowly into the air.

An eclectic group, all sans umbrellas, stands huddled around us. Two young Naga girls in skinny jeans and pointed patent leather shoes text busily on their mobile phones. 'Senti, look what he sent,' says the one wearing a manga T-shirt in heavily accented English, and she holds out her phone to her friend. I strain my neck as much as I casually can, but fail to spy the message. They snicker and continue the conversation in a dialect I cannot understand. I imagine some slick, spiky-haired guy has asked her out for coffee or sent her a declaration of love—'I Luv U 4Eva' or something equally poignant and abbreviated. 'Aru ki koribo pare?' says Senti. I think she's asking 'what will you do now?' They chatter on in their own dialect. I suppose I'll never know.

At the edge of the party stands a tall man in a bowler hat, with a violin slung over his shoulder. I wonder what kind of music he plays—maybe Indian classical at Aurobindo Hall, down Bivar Road, opposite the stretch of old pine forest—and debate whether he's Assamese or Bengali. He stares out, oblivious, seemingly mesmerized by the rain. He has a peppery stubble and a slim face dominated by a long, hooked nose. He's Bengali, I think, because something about him reminds me of Mr Duttaroy, my history teacher in school. 'History,' he was fond of saying, 'is who we are and…' here he would pause dramatically, 'why we are the way we are.' This to a gaggle of disinterested teenage girls whose minds were mostly occupied by the frustrations of studying in a convent school.

'How's that possible?' my benchmate Damaphi would hiss into my ear. 'I don't see anything similar between Mumtaz Mahal and me.'

'What do you mean?' I'd whisper back.

'She had fourteen kids and I've never even held hands with a boy.'

The musician shifts the weight of the instrument on his back. I notice that Joshua too is looking at him. 'How's the band going?' I ask. 'The usual.'

I can't decipher if that's a good thing or not. I know that he'd had trouble finding a dedicated drummer. 'What do you mean?'

He shrugs. 'That people here have small ambitions.'

I mutter something about starting small, and aiming high. I'm aware that I sound like I'm quoting a self-help book, but sometimes, Joshua makes me nervous. I'm not as comfortable with him as I used to be. It was guilt, perhaps.

‘It’s not that,’ says Joshua. ‘I’ve played with lots of people here. They’re not looking to make something of their music… it’s a hobby, a fad…a way to make some cash at a wedding reception, playing covers of Michael Learns to Rock.’

‘That’s a terrible band.’

He concurs.

Next to Joshua is a short-haired, middle-aged lady wearing a rose printed jaiñsem. Its red flowers are impossibly large and elaborate, and stand out against the greyness of the day. She wears her jaiñsem the old-fashioned way—down to her ankles—and is carrying a beige leather bag. A similarly coloured sweater lies draped neatly over her shoulders. For a moment I imagine her life: her name is Mabel, and she’s a government employee in faithful service for about twenty-five years, in an innocuous department, like agriculture. She has two children who are now in college at St Anthony’s or St Edmund’s, studying sturdy subjects like commerce and science. Her doctor husband works in a government hospital and also has his own clinic somewhere in town. Like so many others, he too is judiciously reliant on antibiotics. They live in Malki, in one of those new concrete houses with a cement patch for a lawn, and go for family holidays to Puri and Manali. Their photographs are enlarged and framed at Highland Photo Studio, the largest, most popular one in town, and hang on their living room walls as important testaments to the goodness of God and existence. Suddenly, she looks at me. Perhaps she felt my inspection; I hurriedly look down, feeling guilty for having reduced a life to a string of clichés.

My eyes fall on the mud-splattered boots of the boy next to me. I can tell they’d been carefully polished and have now fallen prey to mud and wet weather. Somehow, that makes me sad. He’s in his late teens or early twenties. It’s hard to tell. His face is mostly smooth but marked by patches of old pimple scars. Under his fusty black leather jacket, he’s wearing an Iron Maiden T-shirt, one of the many sold at the crowded Tibetan Market down the road.

‘I’m sure he plays the guitar,’ I say nudging Joshua.

‘Don’t we all.’

I ignore his sarcasm. Perhaps the boy didn’t play very well, I thought, but, like so many others, was good enough to keep alive a small, musical dream. He’s brushing back his greasy hair and stealing glances at the Naga girls, who pay him no attention. Soon, he gives up, and stares at his boots instead. The usually bustling street in front of us is nearly empty except for a few resilient pedestrians, and an elderly man wrapped in a tapmohkhlieh, holding a black

umbrella. I glance at Joshua; he's looking out into the distance; I like the slope of his jawline, the three-day stubble, his tousled hair that curls at the edges. His skin is darker than mine, and he's at least a head taller. I try and imagine how we appear—to someone passing by. Him in his faded jeans and blue sweater, me in my loose cotton trousers and sleeveless pink top. In a moment of affection, I slip my arm through his.

'Do you remember on our way back from Sohra, when we got caught in the rain?' I ask. Three years ago, a dull Sunday afternoon, Joshua's old motorbike, an impulsive plan. We'd made it safely to the Mawkdok bridge, but decided to go no further. Even though I'd visited Sohra many times before, I'd never seen it like this—enveloped in clouds that seemed to begin and end nowhere. We stood at the viewpoint, the only ones there on that mid-monsoon afternoon, and watched the fog glide through the treetops. The world had ceased to exist. Driving back, we were caught in a thunderstorm near Mylliem. I remember the small jadoh stall we stopped at, the coal fire we huddled around. It rained like it would never stop, and we spent the evening dipping butter biscuits into our cups of plain red tea and talking. We did that a lot, those days. Our conversations bound us close because we thought we couldn't speak that way with anyone else. They were, like us, unique. Somehow, it was important to have an opinion on the right books and movies—Camus' devotion to the freedom of the individual and Salinger's pristine, impeccable craft, Truffaut's wonderful, minuscule focus on the everyday and Tarkovsky's sublime, spiritual cinematography.

'I think we finished all the biscuits,' says Joshua.

I agree. I think about how we don't talk like we used to.

We recount all the details of that afternoon, except one—that it was the day he told me he loved me.

I say, 'It was fun.'

'Yes,' he replies. 'And then you decided to leave.' Raindrops hammer the awning like tiny ammunition. To study further, to work, I want to say. Things you couldn't easily do in Shillong at the time. Perhaps even now.

'Well… I'm back.'

The rain continues relentlessly, lulling us all into self-absorbed silence. I remember how we'd sat and searched for scholarships. We had a plan, that, given the certainty of youth, couldn't possibly go wrong. We were to study in London, he'd do film and I'd attend classes that would teach me to craft my words. Shillong, even Delhi wasn't good enough for us. It had to be elsewhere, swifter, more exuberant and exciting, one of the great centres of the world,

the city around which every other merely circled like satellites. We applied for everything we could find—the Chevening and Charles Wallace, the Jawaharlal Nehru scholarship, Inlaks, and (even though we debated the colonial implications of the title) the Commonwealth.

For months we waited. Then the rejections started trickling in. 'Thank you for your application. We are sorry to inform you…'

'It's fine,' we told each other. We were sure one of them would work out. They didn't.

I guess the friction started after I told him my parents would pay for my studies in London anyway.

'They said they'd manage it, since I've been accepted by the university,' I added. 'What about you?'

I had no idea it would turn quite so ugly. Something reared in Joshua that I'd never seen before—envy perhaps, or jealousy, a sudden, billowing anger. We argued about it for hours, and days, words flung around like sharp, jagged stones.

'Don't you get it?' he shouted finally.

By this time, I was almost in tears. 'Get what?' I shouted back. 'I won't go if…'

'We're not the same class.'

I remember that word silenced me. Like he'd spat in my face.

Class was something we discussed as a grand theme in films and novels — Austenian characters who struggled to fit in and move up in the world, Renoir's comédie de manières and Buñuel's witty yet ruthless denouncement of the bourgeoisie. I hadn't considered, and didn't imagine it affecting my life in any way. Only after this did I begin to see the differences—between his address and mine, his house and the one I lived in, the jumble of bric-a-brac in their living room and what my mother carefully placed in ours, the way his parents spoke and the way mine articulated their sentences. It disgusted me, the fact that now I noticed.

As soon as it lets up a little, people break away from the group like loosed birds and disappear into the crowd. Joshua has long finished his cigarette. I watch a boy of about eight jump into a puddle. His mother scolds him. 'Ale, Jason… don't be naughty. Ale sha ne.'

'Want some Chinese food?' asks Joshua.

I take it I've been forgiven for dragging him out shopping on an afternoon such as this. About the other things, I could only hope.

‘My treat,’ I offer, just to be sure.

We walk towards the main road past a row of women selling baskets of soh phi, and stop to cross just before Babla’s Clothes Shoppe, where my birthday and school fête dresses were bought. My shiny custom-made patent leather shoes came from Three-In-One in Laitumkhrah, which closed a while ago; the Chinese family who owned it packed up and left when the ‘trouble’ began and extortion notes were handed out as generously as kwai.

‘Come on.’ Joshua grabs my elbow and shepherds me across the road. The rain has mellowed to a drizzle and the sky lightened to a pale evening blue. Suddenly, the air is crisp with an after-shower coolness. The streets are damp yet clean.

We descend a narrow flight of stairs lodged awkwardly between two shops, one selling stationery and the other a riot of children’s toys. To our left is Kimsang, a dimly lit bar we think is straight out of a gritty noir flick, like something by Melville. Its smoke-filled interiors are dotted with hunched, solitary figures. Faded rock stars, failed businessmen, ex-HNLC and KSU members. Since I’ve been back in Shillong, almost two months now, Joshua and I have come here a few times for a drink; we proudly place ourselves under those tags of struggling writer and disenchanted youth. Today, however, we turn right into Hong Kong, a lacklustre Chinese joint with thin walls painted a peculiar shade of blue. Unlike other restaurants, Hong Kong has little plywood cubicles to sit in, giving it a private yet slightly dubious air. Joshua heads towards a seat in a cubicle in a corner. I follow. There’s barely enough room for me to hang my bag on the chair, yet it’s warm, a welcome change from the chill outside.

‘What will you have?’ asks Joshua.

‘Let’s see…’

I run my eye down the menu, a laminated sheet of yellow paper framed by twirling red dragons, and choose pork soup chow. He settles for a plate of chicken momos, large.

We place our orders with a shy waiter hovering nearby. His brand new uniform—a silky aubergine-coloured shirt and smart black trousers—seems incongruous in these grubby surroundings.

‘No, you can’t smoke here,’ he says in reply to Joshua’s question, and points to a poster on a neighbouring cubicle wall which asks, acerbically, ‘Tobacco OR Family? Make your choice.’

The rest of the décor consists of faux Chinese fans and tasselled wall hangings, all garish in their cherry red and gold brightness. At the opposite end of the room, a row of plastic ferns hang, suspended from the ceiling. Heavily dusty, they look as though they've been there for years, untrimmed and inorganic. Above the strains of Roxette's 'Spending my Time', I hear distant kitchen sounds: the sizzle of stir-fry, the clatter of cutlery, quickly barked out meal orders—'Segwan chicken' and 'Singapur rice'. The smell of onions hangs in the air like stale, cheap perfume. A cubicle away sit a young couple in awkward silence. She's in a blue salwar kameez and hasn't noticed her chunni sweeping the floor. He picks it up for her and they smile at each other. Dimly, I remember Joshua and I on one of our first few outings together (we never called them 'dates', how uncool and juvenile): he took me to a tea shop in Bara Bazaar, a tiny place in a crowded alleyway I couldn't hope to find on my own. That was what I liked about being with Joshua. He'd take me to joints that I'd never have visited with my other friends and family; it was new, exciting. I realized later that, in my straitlaced bourgeoisie bubble, they were considered unclean and grimy, or just plain dubious. Yet it was in those places—the roadside tea shops and liquor stores, the rumbling market streets and parking lots—where I grew to know my town and pick up its stories. We'd sit for hours and people-watch and he'd tell me, most earnestly, that he wanted to do something for Shillong, but he wasn't quite sure what. On one of those evenings, when he dropped me home, I turned back from the gate, and kissed him, and said whatever he decided to do, I would be there to help him.

I play with the plastic flowers in the vase in front of me. Someone has considerately filled it with water.

In the cubicle behind us two men are discussing Meghalaya politics. I eavesdrop shamelessly.

'You think KSU is against uranium mining? Nonsense. They make a fuss now so the government will pay them off. A few lakhs in their pockets, you see nobody will be protesting.' I can't hear his companion's reply, but the speaker continues emphatically. 'People? What people? Everyone only wants to make more money. Look at that Tasiang woman… made some nine or ten crore.'

I glance at Joshua, who is spinning the salt shaker on the table. The last public protest he'd tried to stage, along with a small group of vaguely interested youngsters, was against the recent Tasiang embezzlement scam: substandard CGI sheets given to the poor for housing that couldn't survive the mad March winds.

'Nothing to be done now,' the voice floats out again, 'this government has gone to the dogs.'

‘What did I tell you? This is all people do,’ Joshua mutters, as the salt shaker slithers across the table and crashes into the cubicle wall. ‘Sit and talk. Nobody gets off their asses to do anything.’

The conversation in the cubicle comes to an end, along with, I presume, their meal. One last apocalyptic proclamation—‘What has happened to the world?’ followed by a loud burp.

Soon, our food arrives. I’m thankful for the distraction. The chicken momos sit squat and plump on the orange melamine plate like fat, contented priests—while the soup chow is fresh and steaming, topped generously with spring onions. A plate of green chillies and a plastic bottle of virulent hot sauce accompanies the meal. We eat in silence. Joshua’s mood improves when I ask him to help me with my rather large helping of soup chow. I fork the vegetables, he picks at the pork. The soup is clear and deliciously wholesome.

‘Good, no?’ he asks.

I nod as an errant noodle slithers down my chin.

‘We can organize another protest,’ I offer, ‘gather more people. Maybe make a short video…’

‘Maybe,’ he mutters, non-committal. Yet I know he will. Behind the disenchantment, there was a streak of stubbornness that ran through him like a fault line. He would stick to his job as reporter for the small Khasi daily he worked for, and try and change, not the world, but a small portion of it that meant most to him. I’d help him, perhaps. If he wanted me to.

‘How’s your article going?’ he asks. ‘The one on traditional Khasi music.’

‘Not bad…but I might need your help with the interviews. My Khasi is a bit thlun…rusty now.’

He nods. ‘You should meet this guy who lives in my locality in Rynjah… he works as a banker but he also plays ksing and duitara.’

‘Where exactly is Rynjah?’ The sprawl of Shillong has blurred my geography of the town.

‘I’ll take you.’

‘Thanks,’ I say quietly, trying to catch his eye, but he’s intent on swiping the last bit of hot sauce off his plate with half a momo.

Finally, he asks the question I’ve been hoping he wouldn’t.

‘How long are you in Shillong?’

I tell him. I have a month left of my sabbatical; I hadn't decided yet whether I wanted to go back to my job in a magazine in Delhi, or stay on. I can hear my parents' voices: *Stay on and do what?*

When we finish, we ask our well-dressed waiter for the bill. It comes on a saucer of stale supari and sugar that looks like miniature cubes of ice. No one collects it for a long while, so we decide to pay at the counter near the entrance instead. There's a middle-aged gentleman in a mustard brown shirt manning the place. His head of thick black hair, done up in a stylish 80s pouf, is oddly mismatched with his tired, wrinkle-lined face. He also has a lazy eye, which adds to his weariness. Behind him, in stark cheerful contrast, are glass shelves lined with pink-rimmed prawn wafers and custard yellow crisps.

'140,' he says, taking the money from me.

I notice he has long, slim fingers. Maybe he, too, is a musician.

'Are you the owner?' asks Joshua.

'Yes,' he replies, counting out the change.

'Do you also own Kimsang?' Joshua points outside.

He shakes his head. 'No, some Marwari man owns it now.'

'And you? Where are you from?'

He seems amused and stops what he's doing. 'China.'

'Which part?'

'Hong Kong.'

'How did you land up all the way here?'

I frown, unsure how Joshua's candidness will be received.

Yet the man laughs as though no one has asked in a long time. 'My family fled during the communist revolution, to Calcutta. My grandparents moved to Shillong in the late '60s.'

'Do you keep in touch with them? Your relatives in China?'

'There's no one left now…everyone's gone. To Singapore, Philippines, Canada.'

There's an awkward pause.

He looks as though he'd like to see us leave.

I pick up my change. 'Thank you… bye.'

Outside, the day has creased into evening, clear but darkened. The sky is a deep, dying blue. A pale sun has set and left behind streaks of silver clouds. We

emerge into a busy main road and are jostled by the crowd. Joshua offers me a cigarette. I refuse. He lights one for himself. Puddles of water reflect lights that quiver with every passing step. I feel the weight of everyone’s history press down on me like relentless rain.

- THE END -

2. Grammar Page

Unit 38 if I do … and if I did …

A Compare these examples:

(1) LISA: Shall we take the bus or the train?
JESS: **If we take** the bus, it **will** be cheaper.

For Jess, it is possible that they will take the bus, so she says:
If we **take** the bus, it **will** be …

(2) Lisa and Jess decide to take the train. Later, Jess talks to Joe.

JOE: How are you going to travel?
JESS: We're going to take the train. **If we took** the bus, it **would** be cheaper, but the train is quicker.

Now Jess knows they are *not* going to take the bus, so she says:
If we **took** the bus, it **would** be …

B When we talk about something that will not happen, or we don't expect that it will happen, we use **if** + *past* (**if** we **went** / **if** there **was** etc.).
But the meaning is *not* past:

- What would you do **if** you **won** a lot of money?
  (I don't really expect this to happen)
- **If** there **was** an election tomorrow, who would you vote for?
  (there will not be an election tomorrow)
- I'd be surprised **if** they **didn't come** to the party.
  (I expect them to come)

Compare **if I find** and **if I found**:

- I think I left my watch at your house. **If you find** it, can you call me?

but

- **If you found** a wallet in the street, what would you do with it?

C We do not normally use **would** in the **if**-part of the sentence:

- I'd be very scared **if** somebody **pointed** a gun at me. (*not* if somebody would point)
- **If** we **went** by bus, it would be cheaper. (*not* If we would go)

In the other part of the sentence (not the **if**-part) we use **would** (**'d**) / **wouldn't**:

- **I'd be** (= I **would** be) scared if somebody pointed a gun at me.
- I'm not going to bed yet. I'm not tired. If I went to bed now, I **wouldn't sleep**.
- What **would** you **do** if you were bitten by a snake?

Could and **might** are also possible:

- If I won a lot of money, I **might** buy a house.
  (= it is possible that I would buy a house)
- If it stopped raining, we **could go** out.
  (= we would be able to go out)