



Learn English Through Stories

D Series

D45

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1. A Special Friend

By Cheryl Rao

Neha noticed the girl on her first day at her new school.

The school was small, and Neha hated it after the big three- storeyed building and spacious grounds of her school back in Bhopal. Besides, here she was alone, whereas in Bhopal, she and Sheetal had been together right from Class 1. She closed her eyes for a moment and had an imaginary conversation with Sheetal in her head. 'I hate everything about this small little town – this village, actually – and I want to come back to Bhopal. I miss you. Do you miss me? Or have you already made new friends to play with at break time?'

Neha stopped the monologue in her mind and pursed her lips. Sheetal would have no patience with her if she complained about everything. She'd better start looking on the bright side so that at least when she spoke to Sheetal next, she could sound upbeat.

'The classes are small,' Neha reminded herself. 'Imagine, there's only one section for each grade. That is nice. Very soon, I'll get to know everyone in my grade ...'

But right now, Neha knew no one, and it seemed that everyone in her class already belonged in pairs or little groups. Whom could she join?

The children were not unfriendly, but they already seemed very comfortable with each other, so Neha was reluctant to go approach anyone and join in their conversation. Instead, she wandered on her own around the small playground, watching the younger children playing on the swings and the slide and wondering if she should join the queues awaiting their turn.

In the end, she didn't. She finished her snack and then sat on the steps of the veranda, waiting for the bell to ring.

It was then that Neha noticed the girl. She was making her way to the back of the last building, climbing over a small mound of broken bricks and sand and then running down on her own. She looked back to see if anyone had noticed what she was doing – and saw Neha watching her.

The girl glanced around again, then looked directly at Neha and beckoned to her.

Neha was surprised. 'Does she mean me?' she wondered. 'There are so many children running around.' She was about to point questioningly at herself when the bell rang and everyone rushed towards the classrooms. Neha stood up and climbed onto the veranda to get a better view of the corner where the girl was – but it was deserted. Obviously, the bell had had the same effect on her as everyone else.

Neha forgot all about the girl and dragged herself through the rest of the day. That morning, Ma and Pa had dropped her at the school gate on their way to work.

'Vimal will pick you up after school,' Ma had said.

'Why?' Neha had protested. 'I'm almost ten! I'm old enough to walk back on my own. You can practically see the house from the school gate.'

Now she frowned as she looked at everyone running down the kachcha road towards their homes in the village nearby. Vimal stood outside the school gate, waiting for her.

'I'll bet I'm the only one who has an adult coming to get her ...' Neha thought glumly.

Feeling foolish, Neha walked up to Vimal, who mussed her hair a bit and cracked a joke as the two of them made their way to the house. In reality it was more than half a kilometre away; theirs was the last house in the lane, slightly farther from the others. Beyond their house the forest stretched, with trees and bushes and grass growing wild. As they approached the house now, Neha could see the beginning of a narrow path that disappeared into the woods.

'What's in there?' she asked Vimal.

'Just the forest. Sometimes there are wild animals there.'

'What do you mean? Like tigers and leopards? Or rabbits and peacocks?'

Vimal laughed. 'Both. All. You can never say what you will meet in that forest.'

Neha flung her bag across the room when they entered the house. 'Why did Ma and Pa have to move here?' she complained aloud. 'How could they imagine that this would be a great adventure for me?'

'Isn't it?' asked Vimal as she whipped up a glass of lassi and handed it to her. 'A forest nearby, birds and animals, a school that you can surely reach in five or ten minutes if you run, children of your own age all around

... What more could anyone want?'

Neha grimaced. 'Children of my own age ... children of my own age ... Huh! I need a proper friend, not just children of my own age!'

'You'll make friends,' said Vimal. 'My nephew goes to your school too and he's a lot younger than you. He has plenty of friends.'

Neha retired to her room to do her homework. When her parents returned in the evening, she had nothing much to report about her first day at school – or, in due course, the second or the third.

At the end of the first week, Neha spotted the girl again. It was break time and Neha was on her own. So was the girl. But she wasn't playing next to the corner building. She disappeared behind it and, a moment later, peeped out and gestured to Neha, before ducking back.

Neha didn't waste any time. She swallowed the last of her roti and vegetable and ran in the direction the girl had taken. She climbed over the rough ramp of broken bricks and sand and, in moments, turned around the corner – and realized that she was outside the school grounds. She had left behind a small gate half hidden by the rubble.

'Uh oh!' she said. 'Are we allowed to go out like this?'

'Why? Are you afraid?' asked the girl. She was standing on top of another pile of rubble, but this one was higher and seemed to have been glued together with the rain – and time – so it was like a very broad slide. What Neha didn't know was that the 'slide' ended in a deep ditch that ran along the school buildings and the road.

'Wheeeee!' cried the girl as she slid off.

Neha took off behind her. Suddenly, the girl disappeared, and Neha found herself at the edge of the ditch, unable to stop herself. She catapulted into the ditch and landed on the girl. The two of them rolled over and over

... and started laughing.

‘Wasn’t that fun?’ chortled the girl.

Neha nodded as she picked herself up and dusted off her uniform. ‘Why is no one else here?’

The girl shrugged and climbed up the ramp again. ‘Who knows? Who cares? It’s fun and I do it, and that’s it. My name is Mila, by the way.’

Neha followed her, singing softly, ‘Koi mil-a gaya, koi mil-a gaya ...’ Mila laughed.

The two of them were enjoying themselves so much that they didn’t hear the bell signalling the end of the break. It was only when they heard the clatter of benches and desks in the classroom behind them that they knew that their time was up.

‘Gotta go!’ cried Neha and dashed around the corner, with Mila close on her heels. But Neha was so intent on reaching her classroom that she didn’t look to see which room Mila ran into.

‘Wonder which class she’s in,’ thought Neha idly as she slipped onto her bench, thankfully not the last student to enter the classroom.

After school, she looked around for Mila, but didn’t see her in the crowd of children milling around and pushing through the gate.

‘You’re looking happy,’ remarked Vimal when Neha joined her. ‘Did you enjoy your day?’

Neha nodded. ‘I made a new friend.’ ‘In your class?’

Neha shook her head. ‘No. I don’t know which class she is in. But we had fun together.’

Vimal didn’t ask her anything more. She just nodded and kept walking.

And Neha walked beside her, skipping every few feet.

Soon it became a regular routine at break time to run behind the school building with Mila. When the ramp was no longer fun, the two of them found other things to do. They climbed trees and Mila showed her a way to climb up onto the roof of the building and peer over at the children playing. ‘We can swing down from here onto the branches of that tree,’ said

Mila.

‘How? What will we swing on? We’ll need ropes or vines or something ...’

‘I’ll think of a way,’ said Mila. Leaving Neha lying on her stomach, she ran over the edge of the roof quickly and disappeared through one of the windows.

‘Hey, I don’t know how to get down ...’ protested Neha, but Mila was already out of earshot.

‘That’s mean of her,’ said Neha as she slid along the roof to the back of the building. She looked down and the ground seemed a long way below, even with the raised ramp going up the wall. ‘I guess I’ll have to jump,’ she said.

Neha lay there, dithering, and then she heard the bell. She didn’t need anything more to make up her mind. She swung her legs over the edge and jumped.

She landed on rubble that, luckily, was loose, and she didn’t hurt herself.

Standing up shakily, she muttered, ‘Wait till I see that Mila next!’

But she didn’t meet her for the next few days because a long weekend came up and Ma and Pa took her camping to a lake nearby with two other families they had got to know through their work. Their children were either much older or much younger than Neha, but they still enjoyed themselves paddling in the water, catching fish and cooking over a campfire.

‘I can’t wait to tell Mila about this ...’ sighed Neha dreamily as they sat around the campfire.

‘Who’s Mila?’ asked Naveen, one of the older children. ‘Is she in our school?’

‘Yes, but I don’t know in which class she studies. I keep forgetting to ask her because we have so much fun together. She’s about as tall as me, so she must be one year junior or senior.’

‘Mila ... Mila ... I can’t place anyone named Mila,’ said Naveen.

Neha waited eagerly to meet Mila when she went to school after the long weekend, but she didn’t see her anywhere that day. Disappointed, she walked home with her head down. Now that she had made friends with Naveen and his younger sister Rekha – who lived just a couple of houses away – Ma and Pa had agreed that Vimal didn’t need to pick her up from school. She could walk with her new friends.

Naveen and Rekha veered off into their lane and Neha plodded on. She had barely walked a few metres when she heard a sound and looked up to see Mila standing at the side of the road with her arms crossed, grinning at her.

‘Where were you today?’ cried Neha, perking up immediately and running over to Mila. ‘School was so boring without you!’

‘I know,’ replied Mila confidently. Then her expression changed and became a bit sad. ‘But you have new friends now. You don’t need my company ...’

‘No – no – no!’ said Neha, stomping her feet to emphasize each ‘No’. ‘I’m only walking back with them, and that’s because I have to walk back with someone, my father says.’ She looked at Mila hopefully. ‘Do you live in this lane? I can walk back with you ... or we can all walk back in a group. Naveen and Rekha and you and me ...’

Mila shook her head. ‘I live on the other side of that.’ She indicated the forest.

Beaming in excitement, Neha said, ‘Oh, you can take the path from our house!’ And then her face fell. ‘No, no, you can’t. Vimal says that there are wild animals there sometimes ...’

‘Don’t be silly. I’ve lived here all my life and no wild animals have ever come to that area. Your Vimal is just trying to frighten you.’

‘Then you’ll walk with me?’ asked Neha.

Mila shook her head again. ‘No, not when you have company already.’ ‘Why?’ asked Neha, confused.

‘You have friends now. You don’t need me.’

‘They’re company,’ said Neha. ‘They’re not friends. Yet.’ ‘But they will be ...’ muttered Mila under her breath.

They had been strolling along as they talked and now were in sight of Neha’s front door. The door opened, and Vimal came out as if she knew that Neha had reached. Mila heard the door too. She put her finger on her lips, ducked behind the hedge and in a moment was out of sight.

‘You scared her away!’ Neha accused Vimal as she entered through the gate.

Vimal looked confused. ‘Who? What do you mean?’

‘My friend. She was walking with me and then you came out and she ran off.’

Vimal looked over the hedge and along the road, this side and that, and then turned to face Neha. 'There's no one in sight. Are you sure you're not imagining this friend?'

Neha stomped into the house, threw down her bag and glared at Vimal. 'I'm not four years old! I don't have imaginary friends!'

'Okay, okay,' said Vimal soothingly. 'Maybe she has superpowers and she can become invisible – like in those movies you make me watch ...'

'Aaargggh!' screamed Neha and charged at Vimal with her arms raised as if she was a monster. Soon, the two of them were laughing once again.

That evening, when Neha was swinging on the tyre her father had hung for her on one of the trees, she caught a glimpse of blue over the hedge.

'Pssst! It's me!'

Neha jumped down from the swing and ran to the gap in the hedge. Mila stood on the other side, still in her blue uniform. 'What happened? Didn't you go home? Are you hungry? Do you want something to eat?'

Mila shook her head. 'I don't want anything. I thought you probably needed me ... just look at you, swinging all alone like that ...'

'I like this swing. Why don't you come and swing too. Come, I'll push you! And I'll ask Pa to hang another tyre for you if you visit regularly. Then I won't be alone, and you won't be either. We'll have each other.'

'Swinging is boring,' declared Mila. 'I'll show you something better.' She turned. 'Come!'

Neha looked towards the house. 'I can't go without telling Vimal. Just hang on.' And without waiting for a reaction from Mila, she raced into the house, shouting, 'Vimal Didi, Vimal Didi, my friend has come and I'm going out with her!'

'Where are you going?' asked Vimal. 'And is this your superhero friend you're talking about, the invisible one?'

'Didi!' protested Neha. 'Don't say that! You'll hurt her feelings. She's here and you can meet her – come on.' She grabbed Vimal's hand and dragged her towards the gap in the hedge.

She slipped through the hedge and looked around on the other side, but she couldn't see her friend. Vimal too peered over the hedge.

‘Oh no! She’s run off again!’ cried Neha.

Vimal didn’t say anything. She just gazed at Neha.

‘Don’t look at me like that! She was here a moment ago!’ insisted Neha. ‘I should have gone to play with her. I shouldn’t have come and asked you!’

‘And where was she planning to take you?’ asked Vimal. ‘The forest ...’

‘The forest?’ repeated Vimal, her voice raised in disbelief.

‘So what if we go there?’ cried Neha. ‘She’s lived here all her life, and she says she’s never even heard of any wild animals there. It’s perfectly safe

...’

‘What’s perfectly safe? What are you doing?’ said a voice, and both of them whirled around. Ma and Pa had returned, spotted them beyond the hedge and come to see what they were up to.

They slipped back into the garden and Vimal began to explain. Neha interrupted and protested. But in the end, Ma and Pa believed Vimal. ‘You’re not to go into that forest alone or with a friend or even with several friends, get it?’ said Pa sternly.

Neha stuck her lower lip out and flounced back into her room. ‘First they uproot me and bring me here, then they won’t let me play where I want and with whom I want ... It’s so unfair!’

‘I know,’ someone whispered, and Neha jumped. She looked all around her room, but there was no one. Had she imagined it? Then out of the corner of her eye, she saw a movement near the open window – and suddenly Mila hopped onto the windowsill. ‘It’s also unfair that you believe them.’

‘No! I don’t believe them! I have to listen to them!’ cried Neha, rushing over to the window and seating herself beside her friend. ‘Why do you keep hiding? Why don’t you meet Vimal and my parents and Naveen and Rekha? You interact with all the kids in your class, so why not my family and friends?’

‘You won’t understand!’ said Mila. She hopped off the window and disappeared behind the house.

Neha was confused, but she didn’t call Mila back.

She didn't see Mila again for a full week. The children in her class sometimes called her to join in their games and she began to have fun with them. She stayed in the playground and didn't go behind the school. Then, one afternoon, when Naveen and Rekha didn't walk home with her because they had gone into town with their parents, she found herself alone on the road.

Suddenly Mila was there, walking beside her. In uniform. But looking like she was weak – and somehow faded.

'Are you okay?' asked Neha. 'Were you sick? I haven't seen you in ages

...'

Mila shrugged and kicked at the pebbles on the road. She crossed over to the other side and didn't say anything.

'I'm sorry,' said Neha.

Mila shrugged again and kept walking.

When they reached Neha's gate and she stopped to turn in, Mila kept going. Neha watched her, open-mouthed, as she entered the forest and walked through the trees. Then suddenly Mila fell, as if she had been knocked down by a stone, or fainted with weakness.

'No! No!' cried Neha and ran towards her. 'Hold on! I'm coming! I'll help you!' She took a few steps inside the forest and then froze. She remembered what Pa had said. 'But I can't just let Mila lie there!'

'Mila, I'm coming to help you!' she called desperately, forcing her limbs to start moving again. She could see Mila lying unconscious on the path, but she didn't seem to be getting any closer to her. She looked around. She could no longer see the path behind her. Or the road. Or her house.

Ahead of her, Mila moved a bit and Neha could hear her groan. 'I'm coming!' she cried. 'I'm coming!' But suddenly, she was grabbed from behind and lifted off the path. She screamed and struggled and hit out with her fists, but she couldn't move. She could hear a voice shushing her and realized it was Vimal.

'We have to help Mila!' cried Neha. 'She's so weak, she can't move ...'

But Vimal was not going towards Mila, who continued to groan and try to rise. In fact, Vimal was moving backwards and taking Neha with her, out

of the forest, out onto the road.

‘Mila! Mila!’ sobbed Neha. ‘Let me go! I have to help Mila! Look at her – she can’t even get up. We can’t leave her there!’

‘Shush ... shush,’ soothed Vimal, holding her tight even after she had put her down. ‘There’s no one there ...’

‘What are you saying?’ shrieked Neha. ‘I can see her! She’s reaching her hand out to me now! She’s trying to sit up. She needs help!’

‘Look again,’ said Vimal. ‘Look again. Where is she?’

Neha blinked. And looked. And Mila was not there. There was nobody on the path. ‘Wh-what? Wh-where did she go?’ cried Neha. ‘She always runs off when someone else comes – she doesn’t want to meet my friends and family – but this time she couldn’t have. She was so weak. H-how-how did she get up?’

Vimal didn’t answer. Instead, she said, ‘I heard you say Mila. Is that your friend’s name: Mila?’

Neha choked back a sob and nodded.

‘My cousin Devi had a friend named Premila many years ago. No one had ever met her, and we used to tease her and say Premila was her imaginary friend. Devi hated that because, according to her, they were inseparable. We were the ones who never bothered to meet her. And then one day, Devi disappeared. Just disappeared. She had last been seen near the forest so all kinds of search parties went in, but she wasn’t found. Gone.’ Vimal snapped her fingers. ‘Just like that. Vanished.’

Neha gulped and looked back at the forest. The path that she had run along – that had seemed endless as she tried to reach Mila – was just a few feet long and then there was only grass. ‘My imagination?’ she said. ‘How could it be? And now she’s gone? Mila’s gone?’

She allowed Vimal to lead her indoors. Then, as she left Vimal in the dining room and entered her room, she heard a soft voice say, ‘I’m here. Right here.’

Neha spun around, but there was no one there. Only that voice, giggling softly.

5. Grammar page



Use **has** with **he, she, it**, and with **singular nouns**. Use **have** with **I, you, we, they**, and with **plural nouns**.

Here is a table to help you remember the rules:

	Singular	Plural
First person	I have	we have
Second person	you have	you have
Third person	he has she has it has	they have they have they have

Learn these contractions:

I have	=	I've
you have	=	you've
he has	=	he's
she has	=	she's
it has	=	it's
we have	=	we've
they have	=	they've
have not	=	haven't
has not	=	hasn't