



Learn English Through Stories

C Series

C41

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1. The Best Christmas Present in the World

By Michael Morpurgo

I spotted it in a junk shop in Bridport, a roll-top desk. The man said it was early nineteenth century, and oak. I had wanted one, but they were far too expensive. This one was in a bad condition, the roll-top in several pieces, one leg clumsily mended, and scorch marks all down one side. It was going for very little money. I thought I could restore it. It would be a risk, a challenge, but I had to have it. I paid the man and brought it back to my workroom at the back of the garage. I began work on it on Christmas Eve.

I removed the roll-top completely and pulled out the drawers. The veneer had lifted almost everywhere — it looked like water damage to me. Both fire and water had clearly taken their toll on this desk. The last drawer was stuck fast. I tried all I could to ease it out gently. In the end I used brute force. I struck it sharply with the side of my fist and the drawer flew open to reveal a shallow space underneath, a secret drawer. There was something in there. I reached in and took out a small black tin box. Sellotaped to the top of it was a piece of lined notepaper, and written on it in shaky handwriting: “Jim’s last letter, received January 25, 1915. To be buried with me when the time comes.” I knew as I did it that it was wrong of me to open the box, but curiosity got the better of my scruples. It usually does.

Inside the box there was an envelope. The address read: “Mrs Jim Macpherson, 12 Copper Beeches, Bridport, Dorset.” I took out the letter and unfolded it. It was written in pencil and dated at the top — “December 26, 1914”

Dearest Connie,

I write to you in a much happier frame of mind because something wonderful has just happened that I must tell you about at once. We were all standing to in our trenches yesterday morning, Christmas morning. It was crisp and quiet all about, as beautiful a morning as I’ve ever seen, as cold and frosty as a Christmas morning should be.

I should like to be able to tell you that we began it. But the truth, I’m ashamed to say, is that Fritz began it.

First someone saw a white flag waving from the trenches opposite. Then they were calling out to us from across no man's land, "Happy Christmas, Tommy! Happy Christmas!" When we had got over the surprise, some of us shouted back, "Same to you, Fritz! Same to you!" I thought that would be that. We all did. But then suddenly one of them was up there in his grey greatcoat and waving a white flag. "Don't shoot, lads!" someone shouted. And no one did. Then there was another Fritz up on the parapet, and another. "Keep your heads down," I told the men, "it's a trick." But it wasn't.

One of the Germans was waving a bottle above his head. "It is Christmas Day, Tommy. We have schnapps. We have sausage. We meet you? Yes?" By this time there were dozens of them walking towards us across no man's land and not a rifle between them. Little Private Morris was the first up. "Come on, boys. What are we waiting for?" And then there was no stopping them. I was the officer. I should have stopped them there and then, I suppose, but the truth is that it never even occurred to me I should. All along their line and ours I could see men walking slowly towards one another, grey coats, khaki coats meeting in the middle. And I was one of them. I was part of this. In the middle of the war we were making peace.

You cannot imagine, dearest Connie, my feelings as I looked into the eyes of the Fritz officer, who approached me, hand outstretched. "Hans Wolf," he said, gripping my hand warmly and holding it. "I am from Dusseldorf. I play the cello in the orchestra. Happy Christmas."

"Captain Jim Macpherson," I replied. "And a Happy Christmas to you too. I'm a school teacher from Dorset, in the west of England."

"Ah, Dorset," he smiled. "I know this place. I know it very well." We shared my rum ration and his excellent sausage. And we talked, Connie, how we talked. He spoke almost perfect English. But it turned out that he had never set foot in Dorset, never even been to England. He had learned all he knew of England from school, and from reading books in English. His favourite writer was Thomas Hardy, his favourite book *Far from the Madding Crowd*. So out there in no man's land we talked of Bathsheba and Gabriel Oak and Sergeant Troy and Dorset. He had a wife and one son, born just six months ago. As I looked about me there were huddles of khaki and grey everywhere, all over no man's land, smoking, laughing, talking, drinking, eating. Hans Wolf and I shared what was left of your wonderful Christmas cake, Connie. He thought the marzipan was

the best he had ever tasted. I agreed. We agreed about everything, and he was my enemy. There never was a Christmas party like it, Connie.

Then someone, I don't know who, brought out a football. Greatcoats were dumped in piles to make goalposts, and the next thing we knew it was Tommy against Fritz out in the middle of no man's land. Hans Wolf and I looked on and cheered, clapping our hands and stamping our feet, to keep out the cold as much as anything. There was a moment when I noticed our breaths mingling in the air between us. He saw it too and smiled. "Jim Macpherson," he said after a while, "I think this is how we should resolve this war. A football match. No one dies in a football match. No children are orphaned. No wives become widows."

"I'd prefer cricket," I told him. "Then we Tommies could be sure of winning, probably." We laughed at that, and together we watched the game. Sad to say, Connie, Fritz won, two goals to one. But as Hans Wolf generously said, our goal was wider than theirs, so it wasn't quite fair.

The time came, and all too soon, when the game was finished, the schnapps and the rum and the sausage had long since run out, and we knew it was all over. I wished Hans well and told him I hoped he would see his family again soon, that the fighting would end and we could all go home.

"I think that is what every soldier wants, on both sides," Hans Wolf said. "Take care, Jim Macpherson. I shall never forget this moment, nor you." He saluted and walked away from me slowly, unwillingly, I felt. He turned to wave just once and then became one of the hundreds of grey-coated men drifting back towards their trenches.

That night, back in our dugouts, we heard them singing a carol, and singing it quite beautifully. It was Stille Nacht, Silent Night. Our boys gave them a rousing chorus of While Shepherds Watched. We exchanged carols for a while and then we all fell silent. We had had our time of peace and goodwill, a time I will treasure as long as I live. Dearest Connie, By Christmas time next year, this war will be nothing but a distant and terrible memory. I know from all that happened today how much both armies long for peace. We shall be together again soon, I'm sure of it.

Your loving, Jim.

I folded the letter again and slipped it carefully back into its envelope. I kept awake all night. By morning I knew what I had to do. I drove into Bridport, just a few miles away. I asked a boy walking his dog where Copper Beeches was. House number 12 turned out to be nothing but a burned-out shell, the roof gaping, the windows boarded-up. I knocked at the house next door and asked if anyone knew the whereabouts of a Mrs Macpherson. Oh yes, said the old man in his slippers, he knew her well. A lovely old lady, he told me, a bit muddle-headed, but at her age she was entitled to be, wasn't she? A hundred and one years old. She had been in the house when it caught fire. No one really knew how the fire had started, but it could well have been candles. She used candles rather than electricity, because she always thought electricity was too expensive. The fireman had got her out just in time. She was in a nursing home now, he told me, Burlington House, on the Dorchester road, on the other side of town.

I found Burlington House Nursing Home easily enough. There were paper chains up in the hallway and a lighted Christmas tree stood in the corner with a lopsided angel on top. I said I was a friend come to visit Mrs Macpherson to bring her a Christmas present. I could see through into the dining room where everyone was wearing a paper hat and singing. The matron had a hat on too and seemed happy enough to see me. She even offered me a mince pie. She walked me along the corridor. "Mrs Macpherson is not in with the others," she told me. "She's rather confused today so we thought it best if she had a good rest. She has no family you know, no one visits. So I'm sure she'll be only too pleased to see you." She took me into a conservatory with wicker chairs and potted plants all around and left me.

The old lady was sitting in a wheelchair, her hands folded in her lap. She had silver white hair pinned into a wispy bun. She was gazing out at the garden. "Hello," I said. She turned and looked up at me vacantly. "Happy Christmas, Connie," I went on. "I found this. I think it's yours." As I was speaking her eyes never left my face. I opened the tin box and gave it to her. That was the moment her eyes lit up with recognition and her face became suffused with a sudden glow of happiness. I explained about the desk, about how I had found it, but I don't think she was listening. For a while she said nothing, but stroked the letter tenderly with her fingertips.

Suddenly she reached out and took my hand. Her eyes were filled with tears. "You told me you'd come home by Christmas, dearest," she said. "And here

you are, the best Christmas present in the world. Come closer, Jim dear, sit down.”

I sat down beside her, and she kissed my cheek. “I read your letter so often Jim, every day. I wanted to hear your voice in my head. It always made me feel you were with me. And now you are. Now you’re back you can read it to me yourself. Would you do that for me, Jim dear? I just want to hear your voice again. I’d love that so much. And then perhaps we’ll have some tea. I’ve made you a nice Christmas cake, marzipan all around. I know how much you love marzipan.”

2. Summary

This story has been written by Michael Morpurgo. It is an emotional story related to history. The author went to a junk shop. He saw a desk with a roll-top. It was made of oak and was very old. It wasn't in good shape. One side of it was burned. The author bought it and started mending it. It was Christmas Eve.

He removed the roll top and pulled out the drawers. The last drawer was shut tightly. He pulled it out with full force and found a secret drawer inside. It contained a black tin box in which there was a letter. He read the letter and found that it was Jim's last letter, received on 25th January 1915. It was addressed to Mrs. Jim Macpherson, 12 Copper Beeches, Bridport, Dorset; dated 26th December 1914. The letter contained the story of British and German soldiers during First World War, how the soldiers of two enemies forgot all fighting on the day of Christmas, they enjoyed the drinks and sang with each other. They became friends before going to their own trenches. They even played games with each other. This showed how two armies longed for peace. The narrator folded the letter again and put it carefully into its envelope. He went to the address mentioned on the envelope and discovered that the house was damaged, but the man there told him that Mrs. Macpherson was about one hundred and one years old and admitted in a hospital. He drove to the hospital, he found the old lady on a wheelchair, gazing at the garden. He wished her a very happy Christmas. He handed her the letter. When she saw the letter, she was very happy. She considered the narrator as Jim. Suddenly her eyes filled with tears, she kissed him and requested him to read the letter as she wanted to listen to her husband.

3. Questions and Answers

Q1. What did the author find in a junk shop?

A1. The author found a roll-top desk for sale in a junk shop. It was made of oak wood in the early nineteenth century, but it was in a very bad condition

Q2. What did he find in a secret drawer? Who do you think had put it in there?

A2. He found a small tin box in the secret drawer. It had a letter in it. I think the owner of the roll-top desk might have put it there.

Q3. Who had written the letter, to whom, and when?

A3. John Macpherson, a captain in the British army, had written that letter, dated Dec. 26, 1914, to his wife Connie.

Q4. Why was the letter written — what was the wonderful thing that had happened?

A4. The letter described a wonderful event. The two armies: the British and the German — fighting against each other celebrated Christmas together.

Q5. What jobs did Hans Wolf and Jim Macpherson have when they were not soldiers?

A5. Before joining the army, Hans played the cello in the orchestra and Jim was a teacher.

Q6. Had Hans Wolf ever been to Dorset? Why did he say he knew it?

A6. No, Hans had never been to Dorset. He had learned all he knew of England from school, and reading books in English.

Q7. 5. Do you think Jim Macpherson came back from the war? How do you know this?

A7. No, Jim Macpherson never came back home from the war. He probably died in the war. His wife Connie kept his last letter and was still waiting for his arrival.

Q8. Why did the author go to Bridport?

A8. The author went to Bridport to meet Mrs Jim Macpherson and hand over Jim's letter to her.

Q9. How old was Mrs Macpherson now? Where was she?

A9. Macpherson was 101 years old. She was in a nursing home.

Q10. Who did Connie Macpherson think her visitor was?

A10. Connie thought that the visitor was her own husband, Jim Macpherson.

Q11. Which sentence in the text shows that the visitor did not try to hide his identity?

A11. That sentence is, "I found this. I think it's yours."

Q12. For how long do you think Connie had kept Jim's letter? Give reasons for your answer.

A12. Connie kept Jim's letter till old age because she was waiting for him to come read the letter.

Q13. Why do you think the desk had been sold, and when?

A13. The desk must have been sold when Connie's house had burnt. The table had been damaged by fire as well as water.

Q14. Why do Jim and Hans think that games or sports are good ways of resolving conflicts? Do you agree?

A14. They favoured a peaceful solution to settle disputes. Games or sports, they said, were good ways of resolving conflicts because no one dies in a game: no children will be orphaned and no wives become widows. I totally agree with their thinking – the amount of money that is spent on weapons and arms could easily be used on education and health.

Q15. Do you think the soldiers of the two armies are like each other, or different from each other? Find evidence from the story to support your answer.

A15. I think the soldiers of the two armies are like each other and had many similarities. They shared similar values and customs: they drank and ate sausages; played a football match; and sang Christmas songs

Q16. Mention the various ways in which the British and the German soldiers become friends and find things in common at Christmas.

A16. They shared the Christmas greetings by saying, "Happy Christmas – same

to you.” They drank, ate and smoke together. Both sides knew how to play football.

Q17. What is Connie’s Christmas present? Why is it the best Christmas present in the world?

A17. Jim’s letter was Connie’s Christmas present. She thought that Jim had come back home from war. She mistook the author for Jim. She had been waiting for her husband Jim. So the coming home of Jim was the best Christmas present in the world for her.

Q18. Do you think the title of the story is suitable for it? Can you think of any other title(s)?

A18. I think the title of this story is appropriate and suitable. For the old Connie, no other present could have given her such joy as the coming home of Jim, her husband. Her presumption might be wrong, but she got the greatest happiness of her life. Since the story revolves around Christmas, the alternate title of the story could be ‘War and Peace’ or ‘Christmas Gift’. But neither can be a match to the present title.

4. English in India

English was first introduced in India by the British in the nineteenth century. The British needed cheap employees who could communicate in English. Many Indians started learning English and became successful. One such person was Amar, who became a doctor. English education also opened the eyes of many others. They started getting ideas to free India from the British. So, the struggle for Indian independence started.

Amar got married and started his new life. At the same time, he was heavily involved in the movement to free India. One day he was caught and sentenced to prison. He was sent to Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal. There, he met many other prisoners who were fighting for the same cause. In the prison they were treated very badly. Amar was a brave man who did not bend before the authorities.

One fine day, he was hanged. But his wife kept waiting for his return until she grew old. However, she never lost hope and faith and continued to wait for her husband to return someday.

5. Letters

1. Dilemma

Dear Friend,

I am writing to you to share my anxiety. I am in a dilemma, don't know what to do.

It all started with a roll-top desk that I bought from a second-hand shop. It has many drawers. In one of them, I found a letter. It was written by some Jim to his wife Mrs. Macpherson. Jim was an army officer and fought the war against Germany during World War I. The letter described an incident that took place on Christmas morning on the battlefield. The Germans invited the British to share their schnapps and sausages and play a football match.

When I read the letter, I was in tears. I felt I must find Mrs. Macpherson and deliver the letter to her. After inquiring about her, I reached a nursing home and found the lady who was now 101 years old. I went up and handed over the letter to her. That was Christmas morning. Her eyes lit up and she looked at me and believed that her husband, Jim, had come back. She kissed my cheek, offered me tea and cake. I was amazed to see her love for her husband. Now I am in a right pickle. I'm not sure whether to disclose my identity or pretend to be her long-lost husband. I am unable to decide on my own. I need your help in this. Please write me back soon. What should I do?

Yours lovingly.

2. A letter to Mother

Dear Mother,

I am fine here and hope that you are also fine.

Good news:

You will be glad to know that I'm having a good time here. I've made many friends. I share my room with 3 other students and they all are very friendly.

I'm doing Okay with my studies: most teachers are caring and supportive apart from my English teacher — he's very old fashioned and I don't get him; all he says, 'grammar, grammar... how important.'

The Hostel warden is very good and caring. She loves and helps every student and takes care of each of them. The food we get is also good and hygienic.

News not so good:

I feel very lonely. I pass my day okay but sometimes I wake up in the night. I don't know what it is — I get scared, I don't like it. I want to grow up with my sister and younger brother. I don't want to live away from them. I can study well in our local school. Nowadays, there is so much help on YouTube.

You take care of yourself and pass on my regards to Father, Sister and Baby Brother.

Yours affectionately.

3. Thank You Letter

Dear Aunt,

We all are well here and hope this letter finds you in the best of health and high spirits.

First, I'm very upset and disappointed that you didn't come to my birthday. But Mum told me that you were very busy and had a lot of business to attend.

I received so many gifts this year: a watch, a mini camera, a Parker fountain pen, etc.

But the present you sent me made my day. A set of Roald Dahl books: The Witches, The Twits, The Magic Finger, Fantastic Mr Fox...

I've already read Fantastic Mr Fox.

Fantastic Mr Fox starts like this:

Down in the valley, there were three farms. The owner of the farms had done well. They were rich men. They were also nasty men. All three of them were about as nasty as any men you could be. Their names were Farmer Boggis, Farmer Bunce and Farmer Bean...

Thank you for the present.

Yours affectionately.

4. Experience of Trekking

Dear Friend,

I'm in good health and happy and hope you are also in the best of health and high spirits.

I am writing this letter to share my trekking experience with you. Recently, I went to Mussoorie for trekking with a group of students from my school. We went by coach, which took almost 3 hours. A tent was set up and we stayed there for three days. Everyday day we went on different tracks. The first two involved climbing the mountains and the rocks. Some of the rocks were very steep and dangerous. Somehow we managed and came back safely. On the third day we were tired and exhausted. So we went only to shops and eateries.

Yours affectionately.

6. Picture Dictionary Page

exhibition

exhibitions *noun*

an event where things are displayed for people to look at.



A sculpture exhibition.

■ say ek-suh-bish-un

exist

exists existing existed *verb*

to be or to live.
Dinosaurs existed long before humans.

existence *noun*

exit

exits *noun*

a way out of a building.



We left by the nearest fire exit.

expand

expands expanding expanded *verb*

to become larger.

Water expands as it freezes.

■ opposite **contract**

expansion *noun*

expect

expects expecting expected *verb*
to think that something is likely to happen.



He was expecting rain.

expedition

expeditions *noun*

an adventurous journey that is made for a special reason, such as exploring.



They set off on an expedition to cross the Antarctic.

expensive

adjective

costing a lot of money.

■ opposite **cheap**

an expensive watch



a cheap watch

experience

experiences *noun*

1 an important event that you remember for a long time.

Traveling around the world was a fantastic experience.

experience *verb*

2 knowledge or skill gained from doing something for a long time.

She has years of experience.

■ say ik-speer-ree-ens

experienced *adjective*

experiment

experiments *noun*

a test that you do in order to find out something.



expert

experts *noun*

a person who knows a lot about a subject.

The space shuttle was designed by experts.

expert *adjective*

explain

explains explaining explained *verb*

to help someone to understand something.
Our teacher explained how rainbows occur.

explanation *noun*

explode

explodes exploding exploded *verb*

to burst apart suddenly, often into many pieces.



explosion *noun*

explore

explores exploring explored *verb*
to look around somewhere carefully for the first time.

After we arrived on the island, we set off to explore.

exploration *noun*

extinct

adjective

no longer existing.



The dodo is an extinct bird.

extra

adjective

more than is usual.



An extra scoop of ice cream.

extra *adverb*

extraordinary

adjective

very unusual.

What an extraordinary car. It must be 30 feet long!

extreme

adjective

very great, or much more than usual.

He was in extreme danger.

eye

eyes *noun*

the part of the body that you see with.

