



Learn English Through Stories

F Series

F50

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1. The Lament (Misery)

By Anton Checkov

It is twilight. A thick wet snow is slowly twirling around the newly lighted street lamps and lying in soft thin layers on roofs, on horses' backs, on people's shoulders and hats. The cabdriver, Iona Potapov, is quite white and looks like a phantom: he is bent double as far as a human body can bend double; he is seated on his box; he never makes a move. If a whole snowdrift fell on him, it seems as if he would not find it necessary to shake it off. His little horse is also quite white, and remains motionless; its immobility, its angularity and its straight wooden-looking legs, even close by, give it the appearance of a gingerbread horse worth a kopek. It is, no doubt, plunged in deep thought. If you were snatched from the plough, from your usual grey surroundings, and were thrown into this slough full of monstrous lights, unceasing noise and hurrying people, you too would find it difficult not to think.

Iona and his little horse have not moved from their place for a long while. They left their yard before dinner and, up to now, not a fare. The evening mist is descending over the town, the white lights of the lamps are replacing brighter rays, and the hubbub of the street is getting louder. 'Cabby for Viborg Way!' suddenly hears Iona. 'Cabby!'

Iona jumps and, through his snow-covered eyelashes, sees an officer in a greatcoat, with his hood over his head.

'Viborg way!' the officer repeats. 'Are you asleep, eh? Viborg way!'

With a nod of assent Iona picks up the reins, in consequence of which layers of snow slip off the horse's back and neck. The officer seats himself in the sleigh, the cabdriver smacks his lips to encourage his horse, stretches out his neck like a swan, sits up and, more from habit than necessity, brandishes his whip. The little horse also stretches its neck, bends its wooden-looking legs, and makes a move undecidedly.

'What are you doing, werewolf!' is the exclamation Iona hears from the dark mass moving to and fro, as soon as they have started.

'Where the devil are you going? To the r-r-right!'

'You do not know how to drive. Keep to the right!' calls the officer angrily.

A coachman from a private carriage swears at him; a passer-by, who has run across the road and rubbed his shoulder against the horse's nose, looks at him furiously as he sweeps the snow from his sleeve. Iona shifts about on his seat as if he were on needles, moves his elbows as if he were trying to keep

his equilibrium, and gasps about like someone suffocating, who does not understand why and wherefore he is there.

‘What scoundrels they all are!’ jokes the officer; ‘one would think they had all entered into an agreement to jostle you or fall under your horse.’

Iona looks around at the officer and moves his lips. He evidently wants to say something but the only sound that issues is a snuffle.

‘What?’ asks the officer.

Iona twists his mouth into a smile and, with an effort, says hoarsely:

‘My son, Barin, died this week.’

‘Hm! What did he die of?’

Iona turns with his whole body towards his fare and says: ‘And who knows! They say high fever. He was three days in the hospital and then died... God’s will be done.’

“Turn round! The devil!” sounds from the darkness. ‘Have you popped off, old doggie, eh? Use your eyes!’

‘Go on, go on,’ says the officer, ‘otherwise we shall not get there by tomorrow. Hurry up a bit!’

The cabdriver again stretches his neck, sits up and, with a bad grace, brandishes his whip. Several times again he turns to look at his fare, but the latter has closed his eyes and, apparently, is not disposed to listen. Having deposited the officer in the Viborg, he stops by the tavern, doubles himself up on his seat, and again remains motionless, while the snow once more begins to cover him and his horse. An hour, and another... Then, along the footpath, with a squeak of galoshes, and quarrelling, come three young men, two of them tall and lanky, the third one short and humpbacked.

‘Cabby, to the Police Bridge!’ in a cracked voice calls the humpback. ‘The three of us for two griveniks.’

Iona picks up his reins and smacks his lips. Two griveniks is not a fair price, but he does not mind whether it is a rouble or five kopeks—to him it is all the same now, so long as they are fares. The young men, jostling each other and using bad language, approach the sleigh and all three at once try to get onto the seat; then begins a discussion as to which two shall sit and who shall be the one to stand. After wrangling, abusing each other and much petulance, it is at last decided that the humpback shall stand as he is the smallest.

‘Now then, hurry up!’ says the humpback in a twanging voice, as he takes his place and breathes in Iona’s neck. ‘Old furry! Here, mate, what a cap you have! There is not a worse one to be found in all Petersburg! ...’

‘He-he—he-he’, giggles Iona. ‘Such a ...’

‘Now you, ‘such a’, hurry up, are you going the whole way at this pace? Are you...Do you want it in the neck?’

‘My head feels like bursting,’ says one of the lanky ones. ‘Last night at the Donkmasoves, Vaska and I drank the whole of four bottles of cognac.’

‘I don’t understand what you lie for,’ says the other lanky one angrily; ‘you lie like a brute.’

‘God strike me, it’s the truth!’

‘It’s as much the truth as that a louse coughs!’

‘He-he,’ grins Iona, ‘what gay young gentlemen!’

‘Pshaw, go to the devil!’ says the humpback indignantly.

‘Are you going to get on or not, you old pest? Is that the way to drive? Use the whip a bit! Go on, devil, go on, give it to him well!’

Iona feels at his back the little man wriggling, and the tremble in his voice. He listens to the insults hurled at him, sees the people, and little by little the feeling of loneliness leaves him. The humpback goes on swearing until he gets mixed up in some elaborate six-foot oath, or chokes with coughing. The lankies begin to talk about a certain Nadejda Petrovna. Iona looks round at them several times; he waits for a temporary silence, then, turning round again, he murmurs:

‘My son... died this week.’

‘We must all die,’ sighs the humpback, wiping his lips after an attack of coughing. ‘Now, hurry up, hurry up! Gentlemen, I really cannot go any farther like this! When will he get us there?’

‘Well, just you stimulate him a little in the neck!’

‘You old pest, do you hear, I’ll bone your neck for you! If one treated the like of you with ceremony, one would have to go on foot! Do you hear, old serpent Gorinytch! Or do you not care a spit!’

Iona hears rather than feels the blow they deal him.

‘He-he’ he laughs. ‘They are gay young gentlemen, God bless’em!’

‘Cabby, are you married?’ asks a lanky one. ‘I?’

He-he, gay young gentlemen! Now I have only a wife and the moist ground...He, ho, ho, ...that is to say, the grave. My son has died, and I am alive...A wonderful thing, death mistook the door...instead of coming to me, it went to my son...'

Iona turns round to tell them how his son died but, at this moment, the humpback, giving a little sigh, announces, 'Thank God, we have at last reached our destination,' and Iona watches them disappear through the dark entrance. Once more he is alone, and again surrounded by silence... His grief, which has abated for a short while, returns and rends his heart with greater force. With an anxious and hurried look, he searches among the crowds passing on either side of the street to find whether there may be just one person who will listen to him. But the crowds hurry by without noticing him or his trouble. Yet it is such an immense, illimitable, grief. Should his heart break and the grief pour out, it would flow over the whole earth, so it seems, and yet no one sees it. It has managed to conceal itself in such an insignificant shell that no one can see it even by day and with a light.

Iona sees a hall porter with some sacking and decides to talk to him.

'Friend, what sort of time is it?' he asks.

'Past nine. What are you standing here for? Move on.'

Iona moves on a few steps, doubles himself up, and abandons himself to his grief. He sees it is useless to turn to people for help. In less than five minutes he straightens himself, holds up his head as if he felt some sharp pain, and gives a tug at the reins; he can bear it no longer. 'The stables,' he thinks, and the little horse, as if it understood, starts off at a trot.

About an hour and a half later, Iona is seated by a large dirty stove. Around the stove, on the floor, on the benches, people are snoring; the air is thick and suffocatingly hot. Iona looks at the sleepers, scratches himself, and regrets having returned so early.

'I have not even earned my fodder,' he thinks. 'That's what's my trouble. A man who knows his job, who has had enough to eat and his horse too, can always sleep peacefully.'

A young cabdriver, in one of the corners, half gets up, grunts sleepily, and stretches towards a bucket of water.

'Do you want a drink?' Iona asks him.

'Don't I want a drink!'

‘That’s so? Your good health. But listen, mate—you know, my son is dead...Did you hear? This week, in the hospital...It’s a long story.’

Iona looks to see what effect his words have, but sees none—the young man has hidden his face and is fast asleep again. The old man sighs and scratches his head. Just as much as the young one wants to drink, the old man wants to talk. It will soon be a week since his son died, and he has not been able to speak about it properly to anyone. One must tell it slowly and carefully; how his son fell ill, how he suffered, what he said before he died, how he died. One must describe every detail of the funeral, and the journey to the hospital to fetch the dead son’s clothes. His daughter, Anissia, has remained in the village—one must talk about her too. It is nothing he has to tell? Surely the listener would gasp and sigh, and sympathise with him? It is better, too, to talk to women; two words are enough to make them sob.

‘I’ll go and look after my horse,’ thinks Iona; ‘there’s always time to sleep. No fear of that!’

He puts on his coat and goes to the stable to his horse; he thinks of the corn, the hay, the weather. When he is alone, he dare not think of his son; he can speak about him to anyone, but to think of him, and picture him to himself, is unbearably painful.

‘Are you tucking in?’ Iona asks his horse, looking at its bright eyes: ‘go on, tuck in, though we’ve not earned our corn, we can eat hay. Yes I am too old to drive—my son could have, not I. He was a first-rate cabdriver. If only he had lived!’

Iona is silent for a moment, then continues:

‘That’s how it is, my old horse. There’s no more Kuzma Ionitch. He has left us to live, and he went off pop. Now let’s say you had a foal, you were the foal’s mother and, suddenly, let’s say, that foal went and left you to live after him. It would be sad, wouldn’t it?’

The little horse munches, listens and breathes over its master’s hand...

Iona’s feelings are too much for him and he tells the little horse the whole story.

2. Summary

The story tells about a father and his great despair for his dead son. Iona, the father, is a Russian sleigh driver who desperately tried to share his grief with strangers. Iona wanted someone to listen to him, somehow feel his grief, in order for him to feel better. This reading shows the unkindness of human nature. It takes a powerful look at the lack of human involvement and compassion toward one man's grief. Iona tries unsuccessfully, four times, to find an outlet to his pain. Only resorting to the faithful ear of his horse does Iona reach towards the acceptance for the death of his son.

Iona's first fare was a military officer. At first, this man seemed interested in Iona's story, but when Iona turned around to talk to him in more detail, the officer started shouting at him about his driving. This resulted in the military officer tuning Iona out.

Iona's next fare was three obnoxious young men. They were unruly and offensive towards Iona but he gave them a ride anyway hoping they would just listen to him. Unfortunately, one of the men replied, "we shall all die," and Iona received no sympathy from them.

Then he tried to have a small chat with a porter by asking him what sort of time it was. The porter told him the time then asked him to move on.

Finally, when he could no longer hold his thoughts in any longer, he took his horse back to the stable. He came upon another cabman and Iona told him about his grief only to find the cabman was fast asleep. Iona wanted to tell someone the details of his son's death yet no one showed an interest. This only drove him deeper into grief and only intensified his emotions. He watches crowds of people go by and the narrator adds: "Can he not find among these thousands someone who will listen to him?" In the end, Iona found refuge speaking to his horse. He poured his heart out to her ... and she listened.

3. Questions and answers

Question 1:

Comment on the indifference that meets Iona's attempts to share his grief with his fellow human beings.

Answer:

Iona Potapov lost his son, who died a week before. He wished to share his suffering and his emotions: how his son fell ill; how he suffered; his death and his funeral; fetching his clothes from the hospital; and his daughter was living in the village. However, the people he came across, whether passengers or others, were not interested in listening to his story. Either the people were in hurry or were tired or busy. Thus, none of them paid heed to his words as he began every time. Finally, he told it all to his horse and she listened while she was breathing over his hand.

Question 2:

What impression of the character of Iona do you get from this story?

Answer:

Iona was an old cab driver; he lost his young son. No other member of his family was living with him. His wife had already passed away and his daughter was living in the village. Being lonely, he was reduced to a ghost figure. He desperately wished to talk and share his sentiments with someone. Iona was so shattered that he tried to talk to any or everybody.

He was plunged into the thoughts of his son so much that he was totally unaware of his surroundings, even the snow. He drove his sledge rashly and brandished his horse more than necessary. He lost control over his emotions and went on blabbing about his loss in front of even the ones who would be least interested to know. He tried talking to his passengers, the policemen and the three drunkards. He was afraid for his withered age and that his son was gone. He knew it would be difficult for him to earn his livelihood. He even made a remark to the horse that had his young son been alive, they would not have suffered and would have had plenty of food to live on. His state was of a typical old man who loses his young son and feels helpless and only grieves. He felt sorry for his horse because he could not provide her with corn and she had to do away with grass only. He also thought that the death knocked at the wrong door: it should have been his, not his son's.

Question 3:

How does the horse serve as a true friend and companion to Iona?

Answer:

When Iona realised that nobody was listening to him and that he had no one to go to grieve at his loss, he turned to his horse. He tried to talk to his passengers, the officers, the drunkards and the young cabdriver, about his son; how he fell ill, what did he say before he died. It was about to be a week since the mishap and the Cabby had had no body to talk to so far. Finally, he decided to go to look after his horse. It was unbearably painful to him to picture his son when he was alone. So he tried to keep himself occupied. He offered hay to the little horse as that was all he could as he had no corn as he did not earn much for he had lost his young son, he explained it to the horse. Iona's feelings were too much for him. The driver goes on explaining the whole story of his son to the horse, while the horse listened patiently and breathed over its master's hand like a true mate.

Question 4:

Empathy and understanding are going out of modern society. The individual experiences intense alienation from the society around him or her.

Answer:

We have entered an era that feeds on globalisation. A world that is driven by fast technology. The age old emotions and sentiments are all bygone. There is little time for empathy and understanding. An ordinary human's lifestyle has evolved, changing the ethics of our society. People are busy and work is immense and the pressure that a human undergoes leaves no time for them to ponder or wonder. A state that makes a human mechanical and lacking in sensibility, which is overtaken by practicality. The concept of society has altered. The individual is alienated from the society. Human does contribute to the society but not with cultural values but only by technological advancement. The sharing and dependence have evaporated from our culture and we have restricted our zone by not giving way to feelings of joy, sorrow, fear or love any way. Humans have resigned from such emotions and are resolute not to give in to them.

Question 5:

Behind the public face of the people in various occupations is a whole saga of personal suffering and joy which they wish to share with others.

Answer:

Human beings always have two sides, a professional one and a personal one. It is usually observed that the professional side of the individual's personality is kept firm no matter how weak or drained the individual is on the personal front. It is also called 'Emotional Intelligence' (or EQ). One hand every individual holds back a story they don't share with others yet they long for it to be conversed.

In this world of today, where we all are much wiser and practical and much busier, we get little time to spend and share our inner selves with others or vice versa. Iona went to work to keep himself busy and earn his living. He tried to share his grief and emotions with strangers, but it did not work. Nobody had time, patience or a heart to listen.

In most cultures, mourning is observed for some time when families, friends and relations share the loss of their loved ones. However, Iona was living away from his village and his daughter was with him, and his wife had already passed away.

Question 6:

The story begins with a description of the setting. How does this serve as a fitting prelude to the events described in the story?

Answer:

The story of Iona Potapov is one of suffering. The setting described in the beginning sets the mood of the reader, the atmosphere is full of gloom and darkness as it is a day covered with snow. The author has tried to evoke melancholy in the reader's heart through the environment he describes so that the reader is set in tune with the mood of the protagonist. The author describes the positions and appearance of Iona. He appears like a ghost who is lost as if he is not interested in the world any more, unaware of his surroundings and the snow that covered his eyelashes and even on his horse's back. This all sets the mood perfectly for a story that is to uncover the protagonist's loss at which he laments.

Question 7:

Comment on the graphic detail with which the various passengers who took Iona's cab are described.

Answer:

The author described the passengers that took Iona's cab defining their character sketch. The first one was the officer. It gives an image of the impatience that the police personnel have. These characters portray the society we live in. How a drunkard might react to someone's grief and how a police officer would be unconcerned about someone's loss. Even the boy in the stable did not pay any heed to Iona's story. Nobody in the busy world had the time to stop and hear to what the poor old cab driver had to say.

Question 8:

This short story revolves around a single important event. Discuss how the narrative is woven around this central fact.

Answer:

The story has a simple plot and revolves around it. Iona Potapov, an ageing man, a poor Russian cab driver lost his dear son a week earlier. A load that he carries, weighing his heart, Iona wishes to speak and share his grief desperately with someone. Thus, on finding no companion or friend to mourn over his grief he tries to share it with every one he comes across. Iona tries to share it with the passengers that board his sledge only to find how disinterested everyone is in his story. His agony grows and he is thrown into despair. All the while there is one thing that remains constant in the story, the loss Iona suffers and his attempt to overcome it. So, overwhelmed is the old father that he finally decides to go on and talk his heart out to his horse. The horse proves to be a true companion and listens to Iona's story patiently while munching hay.

Question 9:

The story begins and ends with Iona and his horse. Comment on the significance of this to the plot of the story.

Answer:

The story is an irony on how disengaged humans are that one has to find a true companion in an animal. Iona from the beginning of the story is portrayed with his horse. In the beginning, while Iona is struck with his loss and is melancholic, he and his horse stood unmoved. It appeared that they both shared similar grief and sentiment. Both seemed unaware of their surroundings and of the heavy snow, the horse for being a slave animal and Iona due to his grief. The story narrates how Iona lashes his frustration by brandishing the horse unnecessarily, yet the horse is faithful to his master. Even by the end of the story, Iona is left unheard and his heavy heart knows

no one to release his burden to. He finds solace in the company of his horse again. He goes up to him and gives him hay to munch. While he goes on speaking to the silent animal explaining how he lost his young son. He grieved, now that he is old and poor, to make things worse, he will be having trouble earning. The animal, not sure if understood what his master said, remained silent and heard it all peacefully proving its faithfulness to his master.

2. Grammar Page



GRAMMAR STUDY: OF, TO, WITH, BY, FOR, FROM

OF

<i>possession or belonging</i>	a friend of mine, the people of this village, the water of this river, the colour of this wall, the car of my father
<i>something made from</i>	a shirt of cotton, a sari of silk, a house made of brick
<i>containing</i>	a bag of potatoes, a box of chocolates, a bundle of sticks
<i>quantity</i>	two kilos of rice, five litres of milk, four kilos of apples
<i>measurement of uncountable nouns</i>	a cup of tea, a log of wood, a blade of grass
<i>location</i>	east of here, the middle of the road
<i>part of a group</i>	one of us, a member of the team, a student of this school
<i>in the sense of 'by'</i>	I like to watch the recent films of David Dhawan.
<i>cause</i>	A lot of people per year die of this disease on average.

TO

<i>destination</i>	I am going to Dharan. She has gone to Delhi.
<i>in the direction of</i>	Turn to the right. Turn to the left.
<i>until</i>	from Monday to Friday, five minutes to ten
<i>compared with</i>	They prefer tea to coffee.
<i>with indirect object</i>	Please give it to me. He sent a letter to them.
<i>as part of infinitive</i>	I like to play basketball. They wanted to meet me.
<i>in order to</i>	We went to the chemist to buy some aspirin.
<i>add</i>	Add ten to fifteen.
<i>purpose</i>	I invited all my friends to dinner.

WITH

<i>accompanying</i>	He stayed with me. He came here with his aunt.
<i>having; containing</i>	Here is a book with a map of the island. Who is that boy with a black cat?
<i>by means of; using</i>	I repaired the shoes with glue. She cut it with a knife. He killed it with an arrow.
<i>manner</i>	He did it with pleasure/ease/ difficulty.
<i>because of</i>	We were paralyzed with fear.
<i>physical features and diseases</i>	The girl with brown hair is my friend. There is a man with a limp.
<i>the opposite of 'against'</i>	If he is with me, I can easily solve this problem. Are you with us or against us?
<i>giving assistance</i>	Can you help me with the washing up? She helped us with Science problems.
<i>doing things competitively</i>	They always argue with me. She is fighting with her elder brother.

BY

<i>near</i>	There is a house by the river. He sat by his father.
<i>past</i>	He waved as he drove by the house.
<i>not later than</i>	Try to finish the work by next week. Can you finish this project work by tomorrow?
<i>to the extent of</i>	I beat Hemant by six marks.
<i>agent (passive)</i>	The house was decorated by my father.
<i>in units of</i>	cheaper by the dozen, sold by weight, by the tons
<i>means</i>	by cheque, by credit card, travel by plane, by bus
<i>divide /multiply</i>	Divide 50 by 10. Multiply 5 by 6.
<i>manner</i>	I caught the mouse by its tail.