



Learn English Through Stories

F Series

F52

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1. The Portrait of a Lady

By Khushwant Singh

My grandmother, like everybody's grandmother, was an old woman. She had been old and wrinkled for the twenty years that I had known her. People said that she had once been young and pretty and even had a husband, but that was hard to believe. My grandfather's portrait hung above the mantelpiece in the drawing-room. He wore a big turban and loose-fitting clothes. His long white beard covered the best part of his chest and he looked at least a hundred years old. He did not look the sort of person who would have a wife or children. He looked as if he could only have lots and lots of grandchildren. As for my grandmother being young and pretty, the thought was almost revolting. She often told us of the games she used to play as a child. That seemed quite absurd and undignified on her part and we treated it like the fables of the Prophets she used to tell us.

She had always been short and fat and slightly bent. Her face was a crisscross of wrinkles running from everywhere to everywhere. No, we were certain she had always been as we had known her. Old, so terribly old that she could not have grown older, and had stayed at the same age for twenty years. She could never have been pretty; but she was always beautiful. She hobbled about the house in spotless white with one hand resting on her waist to balance her stoop and the other telling the beads of her rosary. Her silver locks were scattered untidily over her pale, puckered face, and her lips constantly moved in inaudible prayer. Yes, she was beautiful. She was like the winter landscape in the mountains, an expanse of pure white serenity breathing peace and contentment.

My grandmother and I were good friends. My parents left me with her when they went to live in the city and we were constantly together. She used to wake me up in the morning and get me ready for school. She said her morning prayer in a monotonous sing-song while she bathed and dressed me in the hope that I would listen and get to know it by heart. I listened because I loved her voice but never bothered to learn it. Then she would fetch my wooden slate which she had already washed and plastered with yellow chalk, a tiny earthen ink pot and a reed pen, tie them all in a bundle and hand it to me. After a breakfast of a thick, stale *chapatti* with a little butter and sugar spread on it, we went to school. She carried several stale *chapatties* with her for the village dogs.

My grandmother always went to school with me because the school was attached to the temple. The priest taught us the alphabet and the Morning Prayer. While the children sat in rows on either side of the verandah singing the alphabet or the prayer in a chorus, my grandmother sat inside reading the scriptures. When we had both finished, we would walk back together. This time the village dogs would meet us at the temple door. They followed us to our home growling and fighting each other for the *chapatties* we threw to them.

When my parents were comfortably settled in the city, they sent for us. That was a turning point in our friendship. Although we shared the same room, my grandmother no longer came to school with me. I used to go to an English school in a motor bus. There were no dogs in the streets and she took to feeding sparrows in the courtyard of our city house.

As the years rolled by we saw less of each other. For some time she continued to wake me up and get me ready for school.

When I came back she would ask me what the teacher had taught me. I would tell her English words and little things of western science and learning, the law of gravity, Archimedes' principle, the world being round, etc. This made her unhappy. She could not help me with my lessons. She did not believe in the things they taught at the English school and was distressed that there was no teaching about God and the scriptures. One day I announced that we were being given music lessons. She was very disturbed. To her music had lewd associations. It was the monopoly of harlots and beggars and not meant for gentlefolk. She said nothing but her silence meant disapproval. She rarely talked to me after that.

When I went up to University, I was given a room of my own. The common link of friendship was snapped. My grandmother accepted her seclusion with resignation. She rarely left her spinning wheel to talk to anyone. From sunrise to sunset she sat by her wheel spinning and reciting prayers. Only in the afternoon she relaxed for a while to feed the sparrows. While she sat in the verandah breaking the bread into little bits, hundreds of little birds collected round her creating a veritable bedlam of chirrupings. Some came and perched on her legs, others on her shoulders. Some even sat on her head. She smiled but never shooed them away. It used to be the happiest half-hour of the day for her.

When I decided to go abroad for further studies, I was sure my grandmother would be upset. I would be away for five years, and at her age one could never tell. But my grandmother could. She was not even sentimental. She came to leave me at the railway station but did not talk or show any emotion. Her lips moved in prayer, her mind was lost in prayer. Her fingers were busy telling the beads of her rosary. Silently she kissed my forehead, and when I left I cherished the moist imprint as perhaps the last sign of physical contact between us.

But that was not so. After five years I came back home and was met by her at the station. She did not look a day older. She still had no time for words, and while she clasped me in her arms I could hear her reciting her prayer. Even on the first day of my arrival, her happiest moments were with her sparrows whom she fed longer and with frivolous rebukes.

In the evening a change came over her. She did not pray. She collected the women of the neighbourhood, got an old drum and started to sing. For several hours she thumped the sagging skins of the dilapidated drum and sang of the homecoming of warriors. We had to persuade her to stop to avoid overstraining. That was the first time since I had known her that she did not pray.

The next morning she was taken ill. It was a mild fever and the doctor told us that it would go. But my grandmother thought differently. She told us that her end was near. She said that, since only a few hours before the close of the last chapter of her life she had omitted to pray, she was not going to waste any more time talking to us.

We protested. But she ignored our protests. She lay peacefully in bed praying and telling her beads. Even before we could suspect, her lips stopped moving and the rosary fell from her lifeless fingers. A peaceful pallor spread on her face and we knew that she was dead.

We lifted her off the bed and, as is customary, laid her on the ground and covered her with a red shroud. After a few hours of mourning we left her alone to make arrangements for her funeral.

In the evening we went to her room with a crude stretcher to take her to be cremated. The sun was setting and had lit her room and verandah with a blaze of golden light. We stopped half-way in the courtyard. All over the verandah and in her room right up to where she lay dead and stiff wrapped in the red shroud, thousands of sparrows sat scattered on the floor. There was no chirping. We felt sorry for the birds and my mother fetched some bread for them. She broke it into little crumbs, the way my grandmother used to, and threw it to them. The sparrows took no notice of the bread. When we carried my grandmother's corpse off, they flew away quietly. Next morning the sweeper swept the bread crumbs into the dust bin.

2. Summary

The writer recalls his Grandmother as short, healthy and slightly bent. Her hairs were silver in colour and were scattered messily on her wrinkled face. She used to walk around the whole house in white clothes. She kept her one hand resting on her waist and the other hand was telling the beads of her rosary.

The writer thinks of her as not very pretty but constantly beautiful all the time. He compares her calm face with the winter landscape. During their lengthy stay in the village, Grandmother woke him up from the bed in the early morning, plastered his wooden slate, organized his breakfast, and sent him to the school. The temple was connected to the school. She sat inside and studied the sacred texts while the children learned the alphabet.

On their way back to the home she used to give the stale chapattis to the street dogs. A turning point in their beautiful relationship arrived when they went to live in a city. Despite the fact that they shared a room, their relationship started to grow apart. Now, the writer used to go to the city school on a school bus and studied subjects like English, Physics, mathematics and many more subjects that his grandmother could not understand at all.

His grandmother could no longer go to school with him to send him. She felt upset that there was no teaching about God and scriptures at the city school. Instead, he was given music lessons, but she said nothing. She thought music was dreadful. It was just good for prostitutes and beggars, according to her. It was not intended for gentlemen.

When the writer went to a university, he got a separate room in his house. The common link of the relationship between the grandson and the grandmother was broken now. Grandmother rarely talked to anyone in the house now. The writer's grandmother quietly accepted her loneliness. She was constantly occupied with her spinning wheel and reciting prayers and she hardly ever spoke to anyone. She took a break in the afternoon. Her daily routine consisted of breaking bread into pieces and giving it to the birds. The birds would perch on her legs, head, and even her shoulders.

When the writer was leaving on a trip abroad for his further studies, his grandmother did not get disturbed at all. Rather she went to the train station to say goodbye, but she didn't say anything and merely kissed his forehead. Her lips were moving in prayer, her thoughts were consumed by prayer and her fingers were busy reciting the storey of the beads on her rosary. Seeing her grandmother at this old age, the writer was thinking that it might be his last

meeting with his grandmother. But when he came back home after a duration of 5 years, his grandmother was there to welcome him back and he saw her celebrate his return.

The next morning after the return of his grandson she got ill. Although the doctor told them that it was a slight fever and would go away very soon, still she could foresee that her time to leave this world was near. She did not want to waste her time talking to someone. Her fingers were busy reciting the storey of the beads on her rosary.

She went to her bed praying and telling the beads till her lips stopped moving and the rosary fell down from her lifeless hand. Her body was discovered on the floor, wrapped in a red shawl after she died. To grieve her death, thousands of sparrows flew in and sat dispersed around her body. All the sparrows flew away without making any noise or pecking any bits of food scattered for them when the dead body of the old lady was carried away for the last rites.

3. Questions and Answers

Question 1: Mention three reasons why the author's grandma was upset when he began attending a city school.

Answer: The grandmother was bothered by the following:

1. She was no longer able to assist him in his studies. He began attending an English medium school, where he was taught topics such as English, Physics, and Maths. She couldn't understand these. This all upset her.
2. There were no lessons on God or religion.
3. She didn't like the fact that he was taking music lessons. Music, she said, was just for beggars or other low level activities.

Question 2: What would the author's grandmother do after he grew up and started studying at the university?

Answer: His grandmother has changed dramatically since he was a child. She grew increasingly private. She'd spend her days at the spinning wheel, praying and feeding sparrows.

Question 3: The three phases of the author's relationship with his grandmother before he left the country to study abroad.

Answer: The three phases of the author's relationship with his grandmother before he left the country to study abroad are:

1. Childhood – when he went to the village school and the grandmother helped him to get ready and went to school with him.
2. Boyhood – when he went to the city school in a bus. He shared a room with grandmother but she could no longer help him in his studies.
3. Early youth – when he went to the university and was given a room of his own. The common link of friendship was broken.

Question 4: Three ways in which the author's grandmother spent her days after he grew up.

Answer:

The three ways in which the author's grandmother spent her days after he grew up are:

1. She lived alone in her room as she had accepted her loneliness quietly.
2. She sat at her spinning wheel reciting prayers.
3. In the afternoon, she would feed the sparrows.

Question 5: The odd ways in which the author's grandmother behaved just before she died.

Answer: Just before her death, the author's grandmother refused to talk to them. Since she had omitted to pray the previous night while she was singing songs of homecoming and beating the drum, she was not going to waste any more time. She ignored their protests. She lay peacefully in bed praying and telling beads.

Question 6: The way in which the sparrows expressed their sorrow when the author's grandmother died.

Answer: Thousands of sparrows sat silently surrounding the dead body of the author's grandmother. There was no chirruping. The author's mother threw some crumbs of bread to them. They took no notice of them. As soon as the grandmother's corpse was carried off, they flew away quietly. Thus the sparrows expressed their sorrow.

4. Grammar Page



GRAMMAR STUDY: Some More Prepositions

about	<i>on the subject of:</i> This poem is about tigers in the zoo. Is it about poverty? <i>approximately:</i> There are about ten students in the hall. He is about 60.
above	<i>higher than:</i> The clock hangs above my bed. The plane flew above the clouds. <i>earlier on a page:</i> There is a heading above each diagram.
below	<i>lower than:</i> This lake is 50 metres below sea level. <i>later on a page:</i> Footnotes are provided below the text.
over	<i>above; higher than:</i> There is a bulb over that table. <i>covering:</i> We spread an extra blanket over the bed. <i>more than:</i> It costs over five thousand rupees.
under	<i>beneath:</i> There is a ball under the table. Who is that girl under the tree? <i>less than:</i> Under 15 students failed the final exam.
across	<i>from one side to the other side:</i> We walked across the road. <i>on the other side of:</i> There is a health post across the street.
along	<i>in a line; from one point to another:</i> They're walking along the road.
after	<i>one follows the other:</i> The cat ran after the dog. Is she always after you? <i>later in time:</i> Did he come after lunch? They met me after 10. <i>later in a series:</i> D comes after C in the alphabet. <i>in pursuit of:</i> He always runs after money. Several people are after this job.
before	<i>earlier in time:</i> He came here before lunch. Do you come here before 4 pm? <i>earlier in a series:</i> D comes before E in the alphabet.
between	<i>within a group of two:</i> The books were divided between the two students. <i>in-between location:</i> Our school is between the hospital and the park. <i>in-between time:</i> He came here between June and September. <i>in-between in a series:</i> M comes between L and N in the alphabet.
among	<i>in a group:</i> The money was shared among five people.
behind	<i>at the back of:</i> Our school is behind the hospital. Is a dog behind the gate?
in front of	<i>ahead of:</i> He stood in front of the class. There is a dog in front of the gate.
around	<i>in a circular way:</i> They were sitting around the campfire. <i>surrounding:</i> There is a wire fence around the park. <i>in different parts of:</i> I looked around the room for the letters. <i>in the other direction:</i> We turned around and went back home. <i>approximately:</i> He is around six feet tall.
beside	<i>next to:</i> Our house is beside the supermarket.
against	<i>touching; supported by:</i> He leaned the ladder against the wall. <i>in opposition to:</i> Dowry is against the law.
outside	<i>opposite of inside:</i> Can you wait outside?
inside	<i>opposite of outside:</i> You shouldn't stay inside the castle.
close to	<i>near:</i> Our house is close to the supermarket.
near	<i>close to:</i> Our house is near the supermarket.
next to	<i>beside:</i> Our house is next to the supermarket.
off	<i>away from something:</i> The cat jumped off the roof.
onto	<i>moving to a place:</i> The cat jumped onto the roof.
into	<i>entering something:</i> You shouldn't go into the castle.
opposite	<i>on the other side:</i> Our house is opposite the supermarket.