



Learn English Through Stories

C Series

C47

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1. The Best Christmas Present in the World

Adapted from Michael Morpurgo

One cold winter day, I walked through the small town of Bridport. I loved old things, so I often visited a little shop that sold old furniture and objects. In the corner of the shop, I saw it: an old roll-top desk. The shopkeeper told me it was from the early 1800s and made of oak wood. I had always dreamed of owning a desk like this, but they were very expensive. This one was different. It was broken—the roll-top was in pieces, one leg was badly fixed, and there were black burn marks down one side. It looked sad, like it had a story to tell. The price was low because of the damage. I thought, “I can fix this desk. It will be hard, but I want to try.” It felt like a challenge I couldn’t refuse. I paid the shopkeeper, and with help, I carried the heavy desk to my workroom behind the garage. It was Christmas Eve, and I decided to start working on it that evening.

The workroom was small, with tools hanging on the walls and a warm light from a single lamp. I put the desk in the middle of the room and looked at it closely. The wood was scratched, and the roll-top was broken into three parts. I took a deep breath and started. First, I removed the roll-top completely. It was heavy, and I had to be careful. Then I pulled out the drawers one by one. The wood was damaged, probably by water, because it looked wavy and soft in some places. Fire and water had hurt this desk badly. I felt sorry for it, but I was excited to make it beautiful again.

Most of the drawers came out easily, but the last one was stuck. I pushed and pulled gently, not wanting to break it. Nothing worked. I tried for a long time, but it wouldn’t move. Finally, I got frustrated and hit the drawer hard with my hand. Bang! It flew open, and I saw something surprising—a secret space under the drawer. Inside was a small black tin box, no bigger than a book. My heart beat faster. I picked it up and saw a piece of paper taped to the lid. The handwriting was shaky, like an old person’s. It said, “Jim’s last letter, received January 25, 1915. To be buried with me.” I stared at the words. Who was Jim? Why was this letter so important? I knew I shouldn’t open the box—it felt private, almost wrong. But I was too curious. I had to know what was inside.

I opened the box slowly. Inside was an old envelope, yellow with age. On it was written, “Mrs. Jim Macpherson, 12 Copper Beeches, Bridport, Dorset.” I took out the letter carefully. It was written in pencil, and at the top, it said, “December 26, 1914.” My hands shook as I unfolded it. I started to read.

Dear Connie,

I'm writing to you with a happy heart because something wonderful happened yesterday, on Christmas Day. I want to tell you everything. We were in our trenches, cold and muddy, as usual. But the morning was different. It was quiet, with no guns or shouting. The air was cold and frosty, and the sky was clear. It felt like a perfect Christmas morning, the kind you see in pictures.

I wish I could say we started it, but we didn't. The Germans did. One of our soldiers saw a white flag waving from their trenches across no man's land. Then we heard them shouting, "Happy Christmas, Tommy!" That's what they called us British soldiers—Tommy. We were shocked. War is about fighting, not talking. But some of our men shouted back, "Happy Christmas, Fritz!" Fritz was our name for the Germans. I thought that would be the end, just a quick holiday greeting. But I was wrong.

Suddenly, a German soldier stood up in his grey coat, holding a white flag. "Don't shoot!" one of our men yelled. Nobody shot. Then another German stood up, and another. I told my men, "Stay down! It might be a trick!" But it wasn't. One German held up a bottle and shouted, "It's Christmas, Tommy! We have drinks and sausages. Want to meet?" I couldn't believe it. Soon, dozens of Germans were walking across no man's land, with no guns. They looked nervous but friendly.

One of our soldiers, Private Morris, jumped up. "Come on, boys! Let's go!" he said. I was the officer. I should have stopped them. Officers are supposed to follow rules. But I didn't. It felt right. I wanted to see what would happen. So I climbed out of the trench too. All along the line, British and German soldiers walked toward each other—grey coats and khaki coats meeting in the middle of no man's land. In the middle of a war, we were making peace.

A German officer came to me and held out his hand. "Hans Wolf," he said, shaking my hand warmly. "I'm from Dusseldorf. I play the cello in an orchestra. Happy Christmas."

"Captain Jim Macpherson," I said. "Happy Christmas to you. I'm a teacher from Dorset, in England."

"Dorset!" he said with a big smile. "I know Dorset from books!" His English was very good, almost perfect. He had never been to England, but he learned about it in school and from reading. His favourite writer was Thomas Hardy, and his favourite book was *Far from the Madding Crowd*. I love Hardy too, so we talked about his stories, about Bathsheba and Gabriel Oak. Hans told me about his family—his wife and a new baby son, born six months ago. We shared my rum and his sausages. They were delicious. All around us, soldiers were talking,

laughing, and sharing food. I saw British and German soldiers smoking together, smiling like friends.

Then Hans and I ate your Christmas cake, Connie. I told him you made it. He loved the marzipan and said it was the best he ever tasted. I agreed. We talked for hours, about books, families, and home. It was strange—he was my enemy, but he felt like a friend. That Christmas felt like a dream.

Suddenly, someone brought out a football. The soldiers made goalposts with their coats and started a game—Tommy against Fritz. Hans and I didn't play. We stood together, cheering and clapping. The cold air made our breath mix in clouds between us. Hans looked at it and smiled. "Jim," he said, "this is how we should end the war. A football match. No one dies. No children lose fathers. No wives lose husbands."

I laughed. "I'd choose cricket," I said. "We British would win!" He laughed too. The Germans won the football game, 2–1. Hans said our goal was bigger, so it wasn't fair. We both laughed again.

The day passed too quickly. The food and drinks were gone, and the game ended. We knew it was time to go back. I shook Hans's hand and said, "I hope you see your family soon. I hope this war ends."

He nodded. "Every soldier wants peace, Jim," he said. "I'll never forget this day, or you." He saluted and walked back to his trench. He turned once to wave, then disappeared into the crowd of grey-coated soldiers. That night, we heard the Germans singing "Silent Night." It was beautiful. Our men sang "While Shepherds Watched." Then it was quiet again. That Christmas was the best I ever had, Connie.

I know this war will end soon. By next Christmas, it will be a memory. We'll be together again, I promise.

Love, Jim

I folded the letter and put it back in the envelope. My heart was full of emotions—sadness, wonder, and respect. I couldn't sleep that night. I kept thinking about Jim and Connie, about the war, and about that Christmas. In the morning, I knew what I had to do. I drove to Bridport, just a few miles away. I stopped a boy walking his dog and asked, "Do you know Copper Beeches?" He pointed to a street nearby.

When I got to number 12, my heart sank. The house was burned, with broken windows and no roof. It looked empty and sad. I knocked on the door of the house next door. An old man in slippers answered. I asked if he knew Mrs. Macpherson. "Oh yes," he said. "Connie Macpherson. She's 101 years old, a

lovely lady, but a bit confused sometimes. Her house burned down because of candles—she didn't like electricity. Firemen saved her just in time. She's in Burlington House now, a nursing home on Dorchester Road."

I thanked him and drove to the nursing home. It was a big building with a warm, welcoming feel. In the hall, there were Christmas decorations—paper chains and a tree with a small angel on top. I heard people singing and laughing in the dining room. They wore paper hats and looked happy. The matron, a kind woman, greeted me. I said I was a friend visiting Mrs. Macpherson with a Christmas present. She smiled and gave me a mince pie. "Connie's not with the others today," she said. "She's a bit confused, so she's resting. She has no family, no visitors. She'll be happy to see you." She led me down a corridor to a quiet room with wicker chairs and green plants.

Mrs. Macpherson sat in a wheelchair, looking out at the garden. Her hair was white, tied in a small bun. She looked small and fragile, but her face was kind. "Hello," I said softly. "Happy Christmas, Connie. I found this. I think it's yours." I showed her the tin box. Her eyes looked at me, confused at first. Then she saw the box, and her face changed. Her eyes lit up, and she smiled, like she remembered something wonderful.

I told her about the desk, how I found it in the shop and discovered the letter. I don't think she heard me. She touched the letter gently, her fingers shaking. She didn't speak for a long time. Then she reached for my hand. Her eyes were wet with tears. "You said you'd come home by Christmas, Jim," she said. "And here you are, the best Christmas present in the world."

I was surprised. She thought I was Jim. I didn't correct her—I didn't want to make her sad. I sat beside her, and she kissed my cheek. "I read your letter every day, Jim," she said. "It makes me feel you're with me. Now you're here. Please, read it to me. I want to hear your voice. Then we'll have tea and Christmas cake. I made it with marzipan, just how you like it."

I held her hand and nodded. I opened the letter and read it to her, slowly and clearly. She listened with a smile, her eyes closed, like she was hearing Jim's voice, not mine. When I finished, she said, "Thank you, Jim dear." We sat quietly, holding hands, looking at the garden. I felt like I had given her something special, something more than a letter. I had brought her Jim, even for a moment.

2. Comprehension Questions

Question 1: Where did the narrator find the roll-top desk?

Question 2: Why was the desk cheap?

Question 3: What did the narrator find in the secret space of the desk?

Question 4: Who wrote the letter found in the tin box?

Question 5: What happened on Christmas morning in 1914 in the trenches?

Question 6: What did Hans Wolf and Jim Macpherson talk about?

Question 7: What game did the soldiers play in no man's land?

Question 8: Why did Connie's house burn down?

Question 9: Where was Connie Macpherson living when the narrator found her?

Question 10: Why did Connie think the narrator was Jim?

Answers

Answer 1: The narrator found the roll-top desk in a small shop in Bridport that sold old furniture and objects.

Answer 2: The desk was cheap because it was broken, with the roll-top in pieces, a badly fixed leg, and burn marks on one side.

Answer 3: The narrator found a small black tin box with a letter inside in the secret space of the desk.

Answer 4: The letter was written by Jim Macpherson.

Answer 5: On Christmas morning in 1914, the German soldiers waved a white flag and shouted "Happy Christmas" to the British soldiers. They met in no man's land to talk and share food.

Answer 6: Hans Wolf and Jim Macpherson talked about Dorset, Thomas Hardy's books, their families, and shared rum, sausages, and Christmas cake.

Answer 7: The soldiers played a football game, Tommy against Fritz, in no man's land.

Answer 8: Connie's house burned down because she used candles instead of electricity, and they likely caused the fire.

Answer 9: Connie Macpherson was living in Burlington House, a nursing home on Dorchester Road.

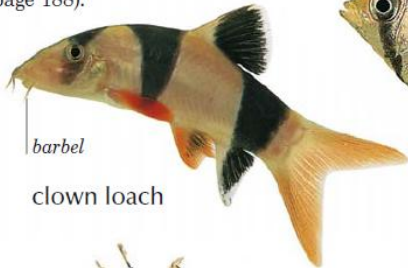
Answer 10: Connie thought the narrator was Jim because she was confused, very old, and thought the narrator was her husband Jim when he gave her the letter.

3. Picture Dictionary Page

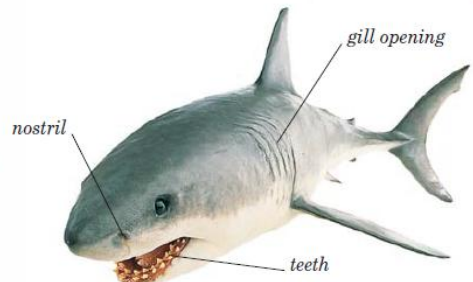
fish

fish or fishes *noun*

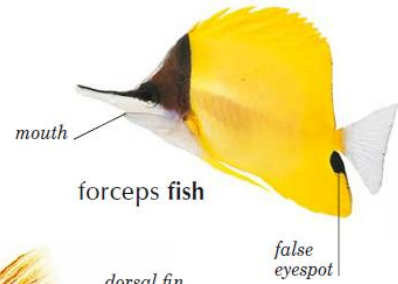
a cold-blooded animal that lives in the water, breathes through gills, and is usually covered in scales. Most fish have streamlined shapes. Fish eat other water animals and plants (see **skeleton** on page 188).



clown loach



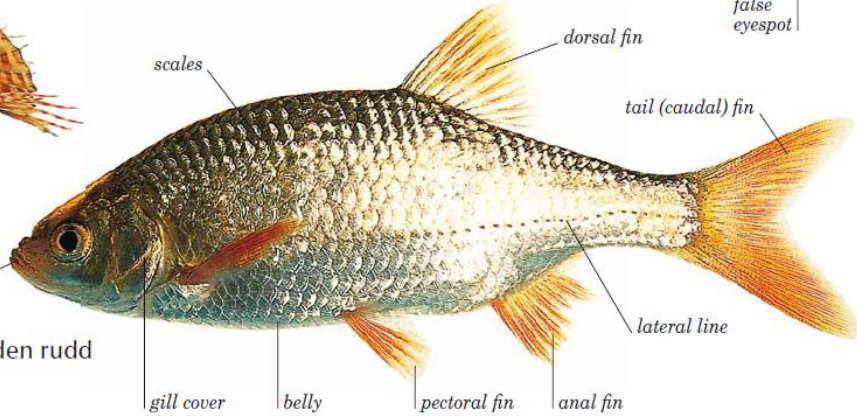
great white shark



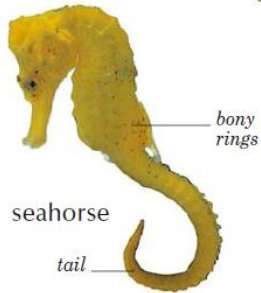
forceps fish



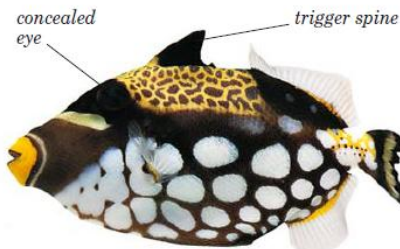
lionfish



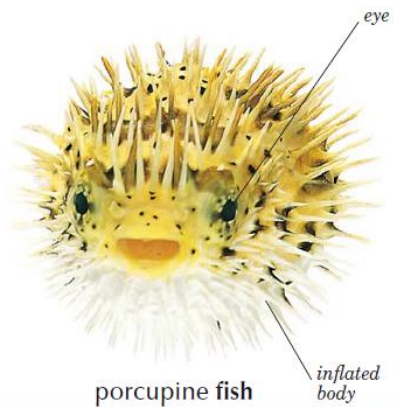
golden rudd



seahorse



clown triggerfish



porcupine fish