



Learn English Through Stories

F Series

F60

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1. The Elder Sister

1

One evening in Village Shivganj some women were talking beneath a neem tree. Mentioning a husband who had beaten his wife with a stick simply for bathing in the Ganga without his permission, Tara said angrily, 'May fire burn the faces of such men!'

The women were shocked by this statement. One put her hand to her bosom, another pressed the tip of her tongue between her teeth—it was improper for Tara to say such a thing.

Kundan frowned and said, 'Tara Behen, you don't think before you speak. He was her husband, so what if he beat her?'

Kundan was the wife of Jai Gopal Chaudhuri. Babu Jai Gopal was one of those few fortunate people in the world who ate good food twice a day without having to lift a finger. He would step out of the house once a year to collect rent. The rest of the year he would sit in the room that opened on to his courtyard, and gossip. But this village was not his ancestral property. That had been lost in the days of the late Madan Gopal. Jai Gopal's father-in-law had given him this village when he saw him fall upon difficult times. On top of this, he would send his son-in-law some assistance every month. Jai Gopal lived very comfortably and had no worries for the future. His old father-in-law was without a male issue. The moment he breathed his last, the property with an annual profit of twenty thousand rupees would fall into his hands. How many such fortunate men can there be in the world? It can't be said that Jai Gopal longed for the blessed demise of his father-in-law but two or three times a year he had the story of Satya Narayan recited in anticipation of that auspicious day.

Anyway, Jai Gopal passed ten very comfortable years. He had three children.

His stomach took on the rotundity of a dome. He began to lose the hair on his crown, a sign of the way being cleared for the coming of good fortune. But then events took an unexpected turn. Something happened which shouldn't have and it blighted Jai Gopal's future. At the age of sixty his father-in-law had a son. Jai Gopal heard and could do nothing more than beat his head. Kundan cursed her father with all her might and expressed a wish to see the corpse of this newborn child.

She said, 'The old man is over sixty and still isn't finished with sex. Now he's got this millstone round his neck. Here was I, a dutiful daughter! And he was so selfish! So selfish!'

This child put a stop to Jai Gopal's carefree days and his pursuit of pleasure.

With his tiny little fist he crushed all of Jai Gopal's hopes and desires, his confidence and aspirations. His in-laws invited him for a family occasion but he couldn't join them. He was too beset by the worry of earning a living. He left for Assam and found a job in a tea factory. This was the first time in his life that he was compelled to make a journey to such a far off place. Until then he had never lived alone. His wife and children had been the centre of his life. For several months he could not adjust. But as the days passed, the thoughts of home abated. Hardly a year had gone by when a new passion arose in his breast for a better standard of living. Ambition took the place of love. At first he would send letters every week, then he began to send them every fortnight. And by the time the second year passed he had come to a stage where he didn't find the time to write a letter even once a month.

But Kundan's position was entirely the opposite. She loved Jai Gopal in the way that wives generally love their husbands—she served him with heart and soul. She never felt the kind of love which is disturbing, which makes you tearful and torments the heart, that powerful emotion that overwhelms all other feelings. She had never been apart from her husband and so she was unacquainted with those feelings and yearnings which reveal their power only in separation. A knot of love bound them but it was loosely tied. This sudden separation strengthened it.

The smouldering fire of love flared in this wind of separation. A new and intense emotion arose in Kundan's heart. She became quiet and withdrawn most of the time. Being alone began to depress her. Sometimes she would weep in solitude. Her letters became more ardent.

She would think, *What does it matter if I have to wear coarse cloth? I shall wear it. It doesn't matter that I have to bear hardship. I shall bear it.*

Although she was a mother of three, she was beginning to feel the passionate romantic love of a beautiful girl drunk on the wine of youth. She remembered so many things that she had said to hurt Jai Gopal. She had been annoyed with him and fought with him so many times. She would recall all this and weep. In her innocent ardour she vowed never to hurt him

in future. She would live exactly as he cared to keep her.

2

The child of old age is much loved. This newborn child, who was named Nauni Chandra, awoke the good fortune of his elderly parents. All their love was concentrated on him. He was not just their son but all the prayers and desires of their lives in human shape.

However, his parents were not destined to see their son's happiness. In his third year his mother fell ill. She realized that she wouldn't survive and so she sent for Kundan. She would certainly have refused as Kundan now hated her parents. But in those days, a plague had spread in Shivganj and she didn't have the courage to turn them down.

Kundan's mother was overjoyed to see her and wept copiously. Her father recited a thousand prayers for her but the servants and young girls in the house were jealous of this new guest and regarded her scornfully. They were disrespectful to her most of the time.

The maid would say, 'How long can one go on fetching water from the well? Carrying water pots all day makes your back ache.' The cook said, 'Those boys of hers are half starved! They lay siege to the kitchen even before the stove's lit.'

Kundan heard all this and swallowed her pride. Her heart had begun to melt at the sight of her mother's pain. Finally, one day the old woman's health became very fragile. She held Nauni Chandra's hand, placed it in Kundan's and in tears passed away from this world.

The moment her mother died Kundan's nature underwent a change for the better. The hatred she had felt for Nauni Chandra disappeared. She felt compassion when she looked at the wasted, motherless child. When her own sons beat him and he came with tearful eyes and complained to his *jiji*, holding on to the edge of her sari, she was moved to the depths of her being and lifted him into her lap with all the love of a mother, pressing him tightly to her heart and kissing him. This change in her could have taken place because her mother had entrusted him to her. Or it was possible the thought of his helplessness had defeated her hatred. In any case, Kundan began to feel more affection for her brother than for her own children.

Nauni's complaints were no longer in vain. If he ever ventured to throw a childish tantrum, Kundan didn't punish him. Seeing him in tears broke her heart and the child too became so attached to her that he forgot his own mother.

Three months later, Kundan's father also died. In his will he named Jai Gopal as Nauni's guardian and also bequeathed a village to him as his means of living. Kundan was now the mistress of the house and Nauni the master of her heart.

The instant he received the news, Jai Gopal returned from Assam and began to take up the duties of a zamindar.

3

Jai Gopal was no longer the carefree, independent-minded man he once had been. Now he had become a cunning man of the world. He had developed a taste for money and it constantly dominated his thoughts. In that alien land he had earned well and spent well. There were countless opportunities for illicit pleasures in the tea gardens. He had taken wholehearted advantage of them. In short, his character had been corrupted and a simple, innocent woman like Kundan, who had never learnt to raise her eyes, could no longer master his heart. She had been reunited with her husband after a long time and comforted and cared for him even more assiduously than before. But the more she attempted to come close to him the more Jai Gopal ran from her.

From the first day Jai Gopal treated Nauni Chandra like an outsider. If he looked in his direction it was with hatred, if he spoke to him, it was in a harsh tone. Kundan wanted Jai Gopal to share her love for her brother but, if she ever took the boy in her arms and approached him, he turned his face away in repugnance. For some time Kundan did all she could to cleanse Jai Gopal's heart. But finally she realized that he had never forgiven Nauni, and for what? For being born.

Earlier, whenever there was a fight between Nauni and his nephews, Kundan would always side with her brother. So the boys never had the courage to be cruel to him. But now the court had changed its approach. A new judge had come and laid down a new law. Now if they complained they were considered to be completely in the right.

Whenever Jai Gopal beat Nauni and he slowly crept up to Kundan with big, tearful eyes she would pick him up, carry him to some corner of the house and cry her heart out until Nauni managed to console her. As Jai Gopal treated Kundan more and more pitilessly, Kundan's love for her brother grew progressively deeper.

Jai Gopal seemed to develop a fever whenever he heard Nauni crying or talking and if Nauni ever opened his mouth when Jai Gopal was asleep, all hell broke loose. After her husband had gone to bed, Kundan would take her brother into her arms, carry him to the highest wall on the flat roof, sing him lullabies and pat him to sleep. This sometimes led to Jai Gopal speaking severely to Kundan.

During Durga puja he had silken clothes made for his own sons but didn't even have clothes of common cloth made for Nauni. Kundan witnessed this cruelty towards her helpless brother, suffered torments but could do nothing. Nauni was so attached to her that they now existed as one being; there was no difference between them. Kundan felt less respect for Jai Gopal with every passing day and looked at him with suspicion. She had become so distrustful that she never left Nauni alone with him. Despite trying her best, she could not be loyal to Jai Gopal in this matter.

Jai Gopal had begun to regard Kundan as a woman of evil intent. Before he had considered Nauni the one who had disturbed his life's dream but now he blamed Kundan. She alone was the obstacle on the path that would lead him to wealth and greatness. He no longer had a shred of sympathy for his wife. His attitude was the one conundrum in Kundan's heart that she could not comprehend.

4

It was the festival of Bhaiya Dooj. Kundan fasted for her brother's well-being. She had already prepared for this day. She had arranged for a pink silk coat, a blue-bordered dhoti and a gold silk scarf for him. In the morning she massaged him with herbal paste, bathed him, dressed him and, according to the custom, marked his brow with a tika of curd and rice. Nauni played around the village in his colourful clothes. Plain-speaking Tara had come to the village.

All kinds of gossip was floating around. She listened to it and in a fit of fury, made her way to Kundan. '*Behen!* What are you playing at? You're pretending all this love and affection for Nauni but the whole household is after his life. You are giving him poison mixed in a golden bowl.'

Kundan replied angrily, 'Tara, don't utter such things on this of all days!'

Tara replied, 'This is not something I've made up. I have come and told you what I've heard in the village. You are sowing thorns for the boy to whom you owe every bit of happiness you have. Your nephew Khurud Gopal has registered the land in Sheikhpura in his own name for just eight annas and there are similar schemes being planned in other places too. But remember, wealth gained by such means can never be digested. God sees everything.'

Kundan began to weep. When Jai Gopal came home she raised the subject.

Jai Gopal said, 'I didn't want this to reach your ears. I was badly deceived myself. The fact is that I had entrusted the handling of Sheikhpura to Khurud. But Khurud didn't pay the land revenue that was due to the government and when the village came up for auction he bought it in his own name. I only found out about it myself yesterday.'

'So why don't you challenge this in court?'

'There's no point in going to court now. Apart from that it's a matter of disgrace to file a case against your own nephew. People would laugh at me.'

Kundan was not satisfied. She realized that these were all plots to ruin Nauni. Her mind could not cope with this. How could a woman understand such matters? How could she save Nauni? Was there no one to help the helpless? Was there no one to give her justice? If only someone could take her to the collector, she would tell him everything. She should go herself. She would take her complaint to the Viceroy himself. But she would not allow this cruelty towards Nauni.

Some days after this Nauni fell ill. It was the monsoon and malaria was everywhere. Nauni fell victim to it too. His fever didn't recede for three days and neither did he open his eyes. There was a vaidya in the village. He would come twice a day and give medicine but it had absolutely no effect. On the fourth day, Kundan said to Jai Gopal, 'It would be a good idea if you could go to the town and bring Sarda Babu here. Nauni's temperature still hasn't come down.'

Jai Gopal replied in an uncaring tone, 'Who knows if Sarda Babu is in town or not. Give him the vaidyaji's medicine for a few more days.'

'Vaidyaji's medicines haven't helped him and he's getting worse.'

'But he's just had fever for three days.'

'Why don't you just take a look at him; he's turned yellow.' 'Very well. I'll go to the doctor babu tomorrow.'

Jai Gopal rose early and, after being absent the whole day, returned at night with the news that the doctor sahib was not at home; he'd gone into the villages somewhere. Kundan didn't believe her husband. That night when everybody was asleep she picked Nauni up. The river Sarad flowed next to the village. She walked down to its banks, hired a boat and arrived at the doctor sahib's house at midnight. Sarda Babu was her family doctor. He recognized her at once. He was most upset to see Kundan in this state. He understood the situation and cleared two rooms in his house for her. He arranged for a maid and busied himself with Nauni's treatment.

The night passed. At the crack of dawn Jai Gopal arrived, beside himself with rage. He addressed Kundan. 'If you know what's good for you, you'll come home with me at once.' Kundan replied, 'I am not going now even if you cut my throat.'

'Very well. Never darken my door, do you understand?'

Now Kundan gave a sharp reply, 'Your door? That house belongs to my brother.'

Jai Gopal just clenched his fists. He at once returned and changed the deeds of their house and orchard into his son's name. The next day, he had the papers registered as well.

Kundan stayed at the doctor's house for an entire week. Nauni was recovering. She had intended to remain there another week but the news of the sale of the house and orchard made it impossible to stay. A property worth some fifteen hundred to two thousand rupees was slipping away from their hands. At that moment Kundan considered her own child a stranger. Her brother had become dearer to her than her son.

6

The collector sahib was on his autumn tour. He had camped in Sheikhpura and that morning was sitting in front of his tent. The zamindars and nobility of the surrounding villages had assembled to pay their respects. Babu Jai Gopal too, in a long, tight-fitting black alpaca coat and white turban was present for the same purpose. The sahib bahadur had shown him an unusual degree of respect and called for a chair for him. Jai Gopal felt as if he had been given the treasure of the whole world. Could anyone else be so fortunate? The ruler of Gyanpur and the chaudhuri of Shahganj had left for the heavens with this wish unfulfilled. Jai Gopal looked around with pride. The village banias and labourers were staggered by the honour he'd received. What a shame! Mitra Babu of Samganj wasn't there or he would have been able to see how he was respected.

Suddenly a woman arrived, wrapped from head to foot in a shawl and clutching the figure of a five-year-old child.

The sahib asked, 'Who are you?'

Kundan replied, '*Huzoor*, I am an unhappy woman of this village. I have come to you with a complaint.'

'Very well, come to the courtroom. I will be there shortly.'

'No, *huzoor*. My complaint should be heard here.'

The colour began to drain from Jai Gopal's face. He stared at Kundan like an angry monkey. If he hadn't been in fear of the sahib he would certainly have attacked her.

Kundan began, 'Huzoor, this boy is my brother. I am the daughter of Babu Madhusudan who died two years ago. The babu sahib who is sitting in front of you is my husband. When my father died he made this babu sahib the guardian of his minor son and in his will allotted him two annas of his estate to live on. But the intentions of this babu sahib have changed. He is putting all my poor brother's property in his own name and the name of his sons. There is no one to prevent him. I am his wife. I am under his power and cannot speak. The result of this will be that under your rule disaster will befall an orphan and his property will fall into the hands of others. This is why I have come humbly before you; I entrust this boy to your care. Now it is your duty to see that he receives justice. Please do whatever you think is fit.'

With this, Kundan fell silent. Enraged, Jai Gopal had summoned the courage to interrupt several times but held back when he saw the expression on the sahib's face.

Finally, the sahib asked him, 'Is all this true?'

Jai Gopal replied, 'Huzoor, what can I say to you? Babu Madhusudan left debts behind him. So huzoor, some land has been mortgaged to pay the debts.'

'Very well, very well, bring me all the papers.'

'Certainly, huzoor.'

Then the sahib addressed Kundan, 'Well, you can leave now. I will do all I can in this matter. No one will be able to take your brother's property. I am very pleased by your honesty and steadfastness.'

Kundan bent down, kissed the ground and taking Nauni, placed him before the sahib. Nauni began to cry but the sahib consoled him with the gift of a tennis ball. When Kundan turned away he said, 'Take this boy with you. Are you in fear of something?'

Kundan replied, 'Huzoor, I have entrusted him to you now. He can no longer live with me.'

'And where will you go?'

'I will go with my husband.'

Kundan embraced Nauri and kissed him and took his leave with tears in her eyes.

After a week the estate was brought under the jurisdiction of the Court of Wards and a master was appointed to teach Nauri. Jai Gopal went to Assam but no one saw Kundan again. The day she returned from the sahib's camp she contracted cholera. But the villagers don't accept this story to this day and plain-speaking Tara still maintains that Kundan never had cholera at all.

2. Comprehension

Question 1: Where does the story The Elder Sister take place?

Question 2: Who is Kundan's husband in the story?

Question 3: Why does Jai Gopal go to Assam?

Question 4: Who is Nauri Chandra?

Question 5: What changes Kundan's feelings toward Nauri Chandra?

Question 6: How does Jai Gopal treat Nauri Chandra?

Question 7: What does Kundan do to protect Nauri's property?

Question 8: What happens to Nauri's estate after Kundan's complaint?

Question 9: What does Tara suspect about Kundan's death?

Question 10: What festival is mentioned when Kundan dresses Nauri in silken clothes?

Answers

Answer: The story takes place in the village of Shivganj.

Answer 2: Kundan's husband is Jai Gopal Chaudhuri.

Answer 3: Jai Gopal goes to Assam to work in a tea factory after losing his expected inheritance.

Answer 4: Nauni Chandra is Kundan's younger brother, born to her parents in their old age.

Answer 5: Kundan's feelings change when her dying mother entrusts Nauni to her care, and she feels compassion for his helplessness.

Answer 6: Jai Gopal treats Nauni harshly, with hatred, and tries to take his property.

Answer 7: Kundan takes Nauni to the district collector and publicly complains about Jai Gopal's schemes.

Answer 8: The estate is placed under the Court of Wards, and a master is appointed to teach Nauni.

Answer 9: Tara suspects that Kundan did not die of cholera and implies foul play.

Answer 10: The festival mentioned is Bhaiya Dooj.

3. Grammar Page

By

by accident: *not deliberately*
bit by bit: *gradually*
by courtesy of: *with the help or permission of*
by hand: *without the use of machinery*
little by little: *gradually*
by mistake: *accidentally*
one by one: *one at a time*
side by side: *beside one another*

by all means: *by any possible method*
by chance: *by accident; without planning*
by degrees: *gradually*
by heart: *from memory*
by means of: *by using*
by no means: *not at all*
by oneself: *alone*
by the way: *incidentally*

by hand: *without the use of machinery*
little by little: *gradually*
by mistake: *accidentally*
one by one: *one at a time*
side by side: *beside one another*

by heart: *from memory*
by means of: *by using*
by no means: *not at all*
by oneself: *alone*
by the way: *incidentally*

For

for certain: *definitely; without doubt*
for fun: *for the sake of enjoyment*
for instance: *for example; as an illustration*
for a living: *as a profession*
for the sake of: *for the benefit of*
for a while: *for a period of time*
for sure: *definitely*

for example: *as an illustration*
for good: *permanently*
for keeps: *(colloquial) permanently*
for now: *temporarily*
for sale: *intended to be sold*
word for word: *exactly as said or written*
for the time being: *until some other arrangement is made*

Out of

out of the blue: *unexpectedly*
out of character: *unlike a person's known character*
out of control: *not able to be regulated or guided*
out of fashion: *not presently in common use*
out of order: *not functioning properly*

out of breath: *puffing and panting after running*
out of danger: *safe*
out of date: *old-fashioned*
out of hand: *not under control*
out of sight: *hidden, not able to be seen*
out of style: *not fashionable*
out of trouble: *not in trouble*

out of town: *having temporarily left town*
out of work: *no longer having employment*

Some other prepositions:

to a certain extent: *partly*
up to date: *current; modern*
to the point: *relevant*
under control: *able to be regulated or guided*
be under oath: *have sworn to tell the truth*
with regard to: *concerning; about*
from all sides: *from all directions*
from time to time: *occasionally*
within limits: *to a certain extent; not too much*
of course: *certainly*
one's point of view: *one's opinion about something*
off one's hands: *no longer one's responsibility*
off the track: *following a wrong line of thought or action*

to date: *so far; until now*
see eye to eye with: *agree entirely with*
under consideration: *being thought about*
be under the influence of: *be affected by*
under observation: *being watched carefully*
with respect to: *concerning; about*
from head to foot: *completely; all over*
inside out: *with the inner side out; thoroughly*
go without saying: *be obvious*
hard of hearing: *somewhat deaf*
off duty: *not engaged in one's regular work*
off and on: *from time to time*