



Learn English Through Stories

F Series

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Contents:

- 1. An Indian Dream**
- 2. Grammar Page**

An Indian Dream - Modified

You can spot the Urdu-speaking Muslim guy from a mile away. He's chilling in a budget café, maybe sipping tea, maybe not, parked in front of a mirror where he sneaks a glance at his sharp look while lighting a cigarette. His hair's got that perfect wave. Before he bounces, he'll check it's still on point, red comb tucked in his pocket. He flashes a warm smile at the kid wiping tables (who's probably dreaming of being just like him one day) and swaps a quick word with the owner behind the counter. When he's deep in conversation, he'll squint like he's unravelling the meaning of life, especially if he thinks someone's watching. Problem is, he rarely catches a girl's eye. Indian girls don't flirt in public—except maybe at their sister's wedding, when sparks might fly.

Ashfaq Hussain was a regular at Diamond Café, always holding court at his favourite corner table. He was rarely alone—Kader, Salim, and Ajoy were usually there too. They'd graduated from Maulana Azad College a year ago, just a short walk from the café. Their three years at college were split evenly between the campus canteen and Diamond's tables, burning the midnight oil over chai and debates.

Lately, Ashfaq had been obsessing over his hair more than usual. The reason? Not hard to guess: a girl. A Muslim girl, to be precise. It all started at a wedding.

Indian weddings are a chaotic web of family, friends, and distant acquaintances—no one gets left out. They're a battleground for old grudges and new connections. Elders size up potential matches, scoping out prospects for their kids. Sometimes, amidst the chaos, a spark ignites—bodies brushing past each other on some rushed errand, silk kameez grazing a shervani, the electric friction of youth and attraction. Ayesha's kameez hugged her curves, its floral pattern framing her youth, her chooridar accentuating her grace. When their hands lingered a moment too long, Ashfaq felt like he was on cloud nine, as if he was the one getting married. Finding out her name was easy: Ayesha. Aayeshaa, he whispered to himself.

"Dude, why don't you just pool some cash and hit up Lily? Maybe that'll snap you out of it," Salim said, rolling his eyes. The guys had been riffing on Ashfaq's newfound crush for days, but three days of jokes was pushing it.

"I'm not blowing forty-five bucks on that," Ashfaq shot back, a bit deflated.

"Chill, Salim," Ajoy cut in. "Ashfaq's in love. That's worth way more than forty-five bucks."

“Idiots,” Ashfaq muttered. The conversation veered back to the usual: girls, politics, soccer, money, and more politics. Ashfaq realized he’d made a fool of himself, but his feelings for Ayesha didn’t fade. If anything, not seeing her made it worse. He learned she was a first-year at Loreto College on Park Street, daughter of a wealthy kebab restaurant owner. So, Ashfaq started eating there. He timed his walks to pass Park Street at 3:30 p.m. daily, hoping to catch a glimpse. But every day, at 3:20, a sleek blue Ambassador rolled into the college compound. By 3:30, Ayesha—smiling, chatting, or lost in thought—slid into the car and vanished. She didn’t even notice him.

Two months of this, and Ashfaq was bored of pining from a distance. He couldn’t figure out how to talk to her. Sure, he could “accidentally” bump into her, but what if she shut him down? The thought was unbearable. He’d studied in an Urdu-medium school, got his B.A. in Urdu, and was now a 21-year-old chasing an 18-year-old convent-educated girl with a polished English accent. The gap felt like a mountain to climb. It started to eat at him—his cramped Tantibagan home, the cockroach-filled bathroom, the faded green walls with a cheap Nehru portrait next to his photo, his three synthetic shirts, those flimsy curtains, his sister mopping the floor with muddy water, his mom chopping veggies in a smoky kitchen. He wanted out. He wanted a corporate job, a tie, a fancy apartment with a sofa set.

Ashfaq had been sending out job applications since graduation, but now he was desperate. He checked the post office daily for replies, dreaming of a job, a flat, Ayesha, and a happily-ever-after.

One Friday, a thin envelope brought good news: a big firm invited him for a test and interview for a Management Trainee position on Brabourne Road. He prayed that afternoon—something he hadn’t done in years—begging for the job. He showed up early, rocking a new blue tie with black streaks, bought just for this. The day dragged on, and he couldn’t help noticing Salim’s subtle jealousy or Ajoy’s smug grin. Ajoy, the wannabe revolutionary, always got snarky about jobs. Was it a crime to want a decent paycheck?

“We got over 20,000 applications from across India,” Mr. Mirchandani, the interviewer, said casually. Someone asked, “How many spots are there?” He smiled. “As many as we need.”

Ashfaq took the test quietly. He couldn’t match the polished English of the other candidates, but he banked on his smarts. When Mr. Mirchandani read out the names for the next round—publicly, with apologies to those cut—the three who made it all had perfect accents. The rest shuffled out, humiliated, forcing weak smiles as they said goodnight.

After four rejections, Ashfaq got it. Ajoy was right: being lower-middle-class and average didn't cut it. You needed connections, a degree in something like economics, or a posh accent and a fancy home. So, he lowered his sights—clerk jobs, sales gigs, anything with a shot at promotion.

His sisters' teasing got so bad he stayed out late to avoid them. He snapped at his mom, only softening when she served him dinner. Bits of gossip about Ayesha fueled his obsession: she was witty, once shutting down a creepy old guy with ease. One rainy afternoon, over tea and cigarettes, Ajoy asked, "What does Ayesha even look like?"

Six months in, the dream hadn't faded, but her face had. All he had were vague words—beautiful, stunning. That night, he couldn't sleep, wrestling with Ajoy's question. His mind, stuck in traditional grooves, couldn't pin it down. Was he in love with a person or an idea? After six Charminar cigarettes, he decided it was the feeling that mattered. He woke up renewed, still head-over-heels for Ayesha.

His passion drove him to hustle harder. He chased every lead, explored every opportunity. A distant relative, annoyed by Ashfaq's persistence, finally tipped him off about a clerk job at a suburban municipality. With his degree, local youth club cred, and recommendations from a Muslim official and two professors, he had a shot.

The interview room reeked of damp government bureaucracy—paperwork, files, and petty corruption. The chairman, with his horn-rimmed glasses and smug air, sat at the head of a long table, flanked by a bald guy with wiry hair and a young commissioner in a cheap tie. Ashfaq's nerves were shot. The job went to Shyam Babu's candidate, backed by the votes of 2,000 factory workers who'd helped elect the chairman.

That day, Ayesha left college early; he didn't see her. He wandered down Park Street, lingered at newsstands with pricey Playboy magazines, and ended up at the Chowringhee crossing. A towering Gandhi statue loomed over the ritzy streets, half-naked and ironic, guarding cabarets and wealth. This was Ashfaq's India: hunger and faith for the poor, black money for the rich.

Desperation hit like a bolt from the blue. Nothing mattered anymore—family, ideals, love, the street, the statue. Everything he'd believed in crumbled. But then, a flicker of hope: between Park Street's polish and Dharmatalla's grit (now Lenin Sarani, a nod to West Bengal's faux-Marxism), maybe he could be a revolutionary. Not like Ajoy, all talk. Ashfaq could go to the villages, die a hero, and actually understand why.

Three teas later, he was lost again, defeated by his roots, by that damn sofa set.

Lily was thrilled but surprised. She'd dealt with nervous first-timers, but Ashfaq was next-level. He was trying too hard to impress—mostly himself. Whatever, it was his cash (probably pinched from his dad). She'd give him a good time and not overthink it.

Ashfaq soaked in the hotel room's luxury—eighty bucks a night, who cared? The AC, the silence, the thick carpet under his bare feet. He'd heard how these things went. Hiding his nerves, he ordered Scotch over the phone, ignoring the waiter's smirk. Sinking into a plush armchair, he watched Lily undress, her smile sparking a storm inside him as she unbuttoned his shirt.

In the bathtub, warm water and Lily's touch made him feel cleaner than ever. Later, in his new seven-rupee tie, he headed to dinner. The world felt surreal—loud music, couples dancing, money flowing. This was living. How could anyone settle for less?

He burped and laughed loudly, startling Lily and the prim waiters. She hissed, "Stop it!" He dialed it back, not wanting to ruin the night. For once, he was happy. Screw everything.

That night, on a foam mattress and crisp white sheets, he felt a pang for Ayesha. It was foolish, but it had meant something.

Ashfaq's suicide in that upscale hotel room on January 21 made the news. Lily freaked, worried she'd be blamed. The hotel took a PR hit, and the desk clerk got sacked, leaving him jobless with three kids to feed. Ashfaq's parents were devastated—a son is a son, job or no job.

At Diamond Café, the vibe shifted. Ajoy called Ashfaq a coward, but Kader and Salim told him to shove his Marxism. They didn't talk much after the funeral.

Ayesha? She married a rich, foreign-educated Muslim businessman—great dancer, killer accent, pretty smart. Life moved on.

2. Grammar Page



GRAMMAR STUDY: Punctuation and Word Order

- ⇒ We can use single inverted commas (‘ ’) or double inverted commas (“ ”) with suitable saying verbs (reporting) to quote the actual words spoken by the speaker. The first letter of the reported sentence is always capital.

She said, ‘I’m looking for my diary.’
single inverted commas

She said, “I’m looking for my diary.”
double inverted commas

- ⇒ If the ‘speaker + reporting verb’ come before the reported sentence, we generally put a comma (,) before inverted commas.

He said, “Can I use your camera?”
comma to separate the speaker and the reported sentence

- ⇒ The speaker can come before and after the reported sentence (speech) or quoted speech.

Habiba said, “During Eid we give a donation to the poor.”
comma inverted comma full stop inverted comma

“During Eid we give a donation to the poor,” Habiba said.
inverted comma comma inverted comma full stop

Dad asked, “Where’s my notebook?”
comma inverted comma question mark inverted comma

“Where’s my notebook?” asked Dad.
inverted comma question mark inverted comma full stop

“What a nice dress!” said Mina.
inverted comma exclamation inverted comma full stop

- ⇒ The speaker can come before and after the reporting verb if it is a noun. But, if the speaker is a pronoun, it normally comes before the reporting verb.

“It’s five o’clock already,” said Atul.
reporting verb + noun

“It’s five o’clock already,” Atul said.
noun + reporting verb

“What’s your name?” he asked.
pronoun + reporting verb

- ⇒ If the speaker interrupts the reported sentence, the punctuation system is as follows:

“Of course,” said Tina, “we’ll attend the meeting.”
inverted comma comma inverted comma comma inverted comma full stop inverted comma

“Why,” asked Mona angrily, “are you always late?”
inverted comma comma inverted comma comma inverted comma question mark inverted comma