



Learn English Through Stories

G Series

G69

**Adapted and modified by
Kulwant Singh Sandhu**

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1. The Woman on Platform Number 8

By Ruskin Bond

It was my second year at boarding school, and I was sitting on platform no. 8 at Ambala station, waiting for the northern bound train. I think I was about twelve at the time. My parents considered me old enough to travel alone, and I had arrived by bus at Ambala early in the evening; now there was a wait till midnight before my train arrived. Most of the time I had been pacing up and down the platform, browsing through the bookstall, or feeding broken biscuits to stray dogs; trains came and went, and the platform would be quiet for a while, only to come alive again when a train pulled in. As the carriage doors opened, a tide of people would step down and walk hurriedly towards the gate where the ticket collector stood. Every time this happened, I'd find myself caught in the hustle and bustle, swept along like a leaf in a storm.

Now, tired of this game and of wandering about the platform, I sat down on my suitcase and stared sadly across the railway tracks, feeling like a fish out of water.

Trolleys rolled past me, and I was aware of the shouts of the various sellers—the men who sold bhujia, monkey nuts, and sweets; newspaper boys—but I had lost interest in all that was going on along the busy platform. I continued to stare across the railway tracks, feeling bored and a little lonely, like a lost soul in the middle of nowhere.

"Are you all alone, my son?" asked a soft voice close behind me. I looked up and saw a woman standing near me. She was leaning over, and I saw a pale face and dark kind eyes. She wore no jewels, and was dressed very simply in a white sari.

"Yes, I am going to school," I said, and stood up respectfully. She seemed poor, but there was a certain grace about her, as if she carried herself with her heart on her sleeve.

"I have been watching you for some time," she said. "Didn't your parents come to see you off?"

"I don't live here," I said. "I had to change trains. Anyway, I can travel alone."

"I am sure you can," she said, and I liked her for saying that. Her words were like a pat on the back, and I also liked her for the simplicity of her dress, for her deep, soft voice, and the peacefulness of her face.

"Tell me, what is your name?" she asked.

"Arun," I said.

"And how long do you have to wait for your train?"

"About an hour, I think. It comes at twelve o'clock."

"Then come with me and have something to eat."

I was going to refuse, out of shyness and doubt, but she took me by the hand, and then I felt it would be silly to pull my hand away. She told a coolie to look after my suitcase, and then she led me down the platform. Her hand was gentle, and she held mine neither too firmly nor too lightly. I looked up at her again. She was not young. And she was not old. She must have been over thirty, but had she been fifty, I think she would have looked much the same, as if time had stood still for her.

She took me into the station dining room, ordered tea and samosas and jalebis, and at once I began to warm up to this kind woman. The strange meeting didn't put a dent in my hunger. I was a hungry schoolboy, and I ate as much as I could, but slowly, with good manners. She was happy to see me eat, her eyes lighting up like stars. I think it was the food that strengthened the bond between us and cemented our friendship, making us thick as thieves in no time.

I began to talk quite freely, telling her about my school, my friends, my likes and dislikes. She questioned me quietly from time to time, but preferred listening; she made me feel relaxed, and I had soon forgotten that we were strangers. But she did not ask me about my family or where I lived, and I did not ask her where she lived. I accepted her for what she had been to me—a quiet, kind, and gentle woman who gave sweets to a lonely boy on a railway platform, someone who seemed to have a heart of gold.

After about half an hour, we left the dining room and began walking back along the platform. An engine was moving up and down beside platform no. 8, and as it approached, a boy leapt off the platform and ran across the rails, taking a short cut to the next platform. He was at a safe distance from the engine, but as he leapt across the rails, the woman clutched my arm. Her fingers dug into

my flesh, and I winced with pain, feeling like I'd been caught off guard. I caught her fingers and looked up at her, and I saw a wave of pain and fear and sadness pass across her face. She watched the boy as he climbed the platform, and it was not until he had disappeared in the crowd that she relaxed her hold on my arm. She smiled at me reassuringly and took my hand again, but her fingers trembled against mine, as if she'd just dodged a bullet.

"He was all right," I said, feeling that it was she who needed reassurance.

She smiled gratefully at me and pressed my hand. We walked together in silence until we reached the place where I had left my suitcase. One of my schoolfellows, Satish, a boy of about my age, had turned up with his mother.

"Hello, Arun!" he called. "The train's coming in late, as usual. Did you know we have a new headmaster this year?"

We shook hands, and then he turned to his mother and said: "This is Arun, Mother. He is one of my friends, and the best bowler in the class."

"I am glad to know that," said his mother, a large imposing woman who wore spectacles. She looked at the woman who held my hand and said: "And I suppose you're Arun's mother?"

I opened my mouth to make some explanation, but before I could say anything, the woman replied:

"Yes, I am Arun's mother."

I was unable to speak a word, my tongue tied in knots. I looked quickly up at the woman, but she did not appear to be at all embarrassed, and was smiling at Satish's mother.

Satish's mother said: "It's such a nuisance having to wait for the train right in the middle of the night. But one can't let the child wait here alone. Anything can happen to a boy at a big station like this—there are so many suspicious characters hanging about. These days one has to keep their wits about them when dealing with strangers."

"Arun can travel alone though," said the woman beside me, and somehow I felt grateful to her for saying that. I had already forgiven her for bending the truth; and besides, I had taken an instinctive dislike to Satish's mother.

“Well, be very careful, Arun,” said Satish’s mother, looking sternly at me through her spectacles. “Be very careful when your mother is not with you. And never talk to strangers!”

I looked from Satish’s mother to the woman who had given me tea and sweets, and back at Satish’s mother.

“I like strangers,” I said.

Satish’s mother was definitely taken aback, as if I’d thrown her for a loop. She clearly wasn’t used to being contradicted by small boys. “There you are, you see! If you don’t watch over them all the time, they’ll walk straight into trouble. Always listen to what your mother tells you,” she said, wagging a fat little finger at me. “And never, never talk to strangers.”

I glared resentfully at her, and moved closer to the woman who had befriended me. Satish was standing behind his mother, grinning at me, and delighting in my clash with his mother. Apparently, he was on my side, ready to back me up come hell or high water.

The station bell clanged, and the people who had till now been sitting quietly on the platform began moving about, as if someone had stirred the pot.

“Here it comes,” shouted Satish, as the engine whistle shrieked and the front lights played over the rails.

The train moved slowly into the station, the engine hissing and sending out waves of steam. As it came to a stop, Satish jumped on the footboard of a lighted compartment and shouted, “Come on, Arun, this one’s empty!” and I picked up my suitcase and made a dash for the open door.

We placed ourselves at the open windows, and the two women stood outside on the platform, talking up to us. Satish’s mother did most of the talking.

“Now don’t jump on and off, as you did just now,” she said. “And don’t stick your heads out of the windows, and don’t eat any rubbish on the way.” She allowed me to share the benefit of her advice, as she probably didn’t think my ‘mother’ was a very capable person. She handed Satish a bag of fruit, a cricket bat, and a big box of chocolates, and told him to share the food with me. Then she stood back from the window to watch how my ‘mother’ behaved, as if she were keeping score.

I was stinging from the patronizing tone of Satish's mother, who obviously thought my family was down on its luck; and I did not intend to give the other woman away. I let her take my hand in hers, but I could think of nothing to say. I was conscious of Satish's mother staring at us with hard, beady eyes, and I found myself hating her with a firm, unreasoning hate. The guard walked up the platform, blowing his whistle for the train to leave. I looked straight into the eyes of the woman who held my hand, and she smiled in a gentle, understanding way. I leaned out of the window then, and put my lips to her cheek and kissed her.

The carriage jolted forward, and she drew her hand away.

"Goodbye, Mother!" said Satish, as the train began to move slowly out of the station. Satish and his mother waved to each other.

"Goodbye," I said to the other woman, "goodbye—Mother . . ."

I didn't wave or shout, but sat still in front of the window, gazing at the woman on the platform. Satish's mother was talking to her, but she didn't appear to be listening; she was looking at me, as the train took me away. She stood there on the busy platform, a pale sweet woman in white, and I watched her until she was lost in the crowd, like a needle in a haystack.

2. Comprehension Questions and Answers

Question 1: Why does Arun feel "like a fish out of water" while waiting at the station?

Question 2: How does the woman on the platform make Arun feel more comfortable?

Question 3: What causes the woman to clutch Arun's arm suddenly, and how does this show her "heart of gold"?

Question 4: Why does Arun say, "I like strangers," and how does this affect Satish's mother?

Question 5: What is the significance of Arun calling the woman "Mother" as the train leaves?

Answers

Answer 1: Arun feels "like a fish out of water" because he is alone, bored, and lonely on the busy platform, unsure of what to do while waiting for his train.

Answer 2: The woman makes Arun feel comfortable by speaking kindly, offering him tea and sweets, listening to him talk about his life, and treating him with gentle care, which helps him warm up to her.

Answer 3: The woman clutches Arun's arm when a boy dangerously crosses the railway tracks, showing her fear for his safety. This reveals her "heart of gold" as it demonstrates her deep care and concern for others, even a stranger.

Answer 4: Arun says, "I like strangers," to defend the kind woman who befriended him and to defy Satish's mother's judgmental attitude. This statement throws Satish's mother for a loop, as she is shocked by his bold contradiction of her advice.

Answer 5: Arun calling the woman "Mother" reflects the deep bond they formed, showing his gratitude and affection for her kindness. It also suggests he accepts her lie to protect him, highlighting their emotional connection as she fades like a needle in a haystack.

3. Grammar Page

Unit
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Countable and uncountable 1

A A noun can be *countable* or *uncountable*:

Countable

- ☐ I eat **a banana** every day.
- ☐ I like **bananas**.



Banana is a *countable* noun.

A countable noun can be singular (**banana**) or plural (**bananas**).

We can use numbers with countable nouns. So we can say **one banana**, **two bananas** etc.

Examples of nouns usually countable:

- ☐ Kate was singing **a song**.
- ☐ There's **a nice beach** near here.
- ☐ Do you have **a ten-pound note**?
- ☐ It wasn't your fault. It was **an accident**.
- ☐ There are no **batteries** in the radio.
- ☐ We don't have enough **cups**.

Uncountable

- ☐ I eat **rice** every day.
- ☐ I like **rice**.



Rice is an *uncountable* noun.

An uncountable noun has only one form (**rice**). There is no plural.

We cannot use numbers with uncountable nouns. We cannot say 'one rice', 'two rices' etc.

Examples of nouns usually uncountable:

- ☐ Kate was listening to **music**.
- ☐ There's **sand** in my shoes.
- ☐ Do you have any **money**?
- ☐ It wasn't your fault. It was bad **luck**.
- ☐ There is no **electricity** in this house.
- ☐ We don't have enough **water**.

B

You can use **a/an** with singular countable nouns:

a beach a student an umbrella

You cannot use singular countable nouns alone (without **a/the/my** etc.):

- ☐ Do you want **a banana**?
(not want banana)
- ☐ There's been **an accident**.
(not There's been accident)

You can use *plural* countable nouns alone:

- ☐ I like **bananas**. (= bananas in general)
- ☐ **Accidents** can be prevented.

We do not use **a/an** with uncountable nouns. We do not say 'a sand', 'a music', 'a rice'.

But you can often use **a ... of**. For example:
a bowl / a packet / a grain of rice

You can use uncountable nouns alone (without **the/my/some** etc.):

- ☐ I eat **rice** every day.
- ☐ There's **blood** on your shirt.
- ☐ Can you hear **music**?

C

You can use **some** and **any** with plural countable nouns:

- ☐ We sang **some songs**.
- ☐ Did you buy **any apples**?

We use **many** and **few** with plural countable nouns:

- ☐ We didn't take **many pictures**.
- ☐ I have a **few things** to do.

You can use **some** and **any** with uncountable nouns:

- ☐ We listened to **some music**.
- ☐ Did you buy **any apple juice**?

We use **much** and **little** with uncountable nouns:

- ☐ We didn't do **much shopping**.
- ☐ I have a **little work** to do.