



Learn English Through Stories

G Series

G76

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An Indian Dream

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The Urdu-speaking Muslim youth is easily recognized. You will find him in a cheap café, with or without a cup of tea in front of him, seated facing a mirror in which he can occasionally steal a glance at his handsome self as he lights his cigarette. He has wavy hair. Before leaving the restaurant he will make sure that the waves are in place. He carries a red comb in his pocket. On his way out he will smile benignly at the urchin who cleans the table (himself growing up to be a handsome Muslim youth), and will exchange an intimate word with the proprietor, who is seated at the cash register. Often during conversation he will screw up his eyes thoughtfully, particularly if he suspects someone is looking. His tragedy is that he rarely finds a girl watching him. Indian girls never make eyes at anyone, except at the marriages of their elder sisters.

Ashfaq Hussain had spent a good part of his recent years at Diamond Restaurant. He had his favourite table in the corner. He was seldom alone. Kader, Salim and Ajoy were usually with him. They had graduated a year ago from the Maulana Azad College which was only a quarter of a cigarette away from the Diamond. The three years spent in getting a degree had been divided equally between the college canteen and the Diamond.

Ashfaq had suddenly begun to pay more attention to his wavy hair. The reason was not very mysterious. One of those Muslim girls. Place: a wedding. That is where the story really begins.

An Indian marriage spreads its tentacles into undiscovered corners of the Circle of Family, Friends and Acquaintances. Good care is taken to ensure that no one is left out. A wedding night becomes a battlefield for old and new feuds and a fertile ground for sowing seeds of fresh alliances. Observant elders note the pluses and minuses of prospective spouses and then make reconnaissance at the parental level. True-life romance is sparked off occasionally in the encounters of young bodies brushing against each other while hurrying on some hectic errand. The scene is classic, and its regular appearance on the Hindi film screen does not in any way make it less real. A kameez, silken-smooth against the curves of the waist, patterned flowers encasing adolescent breasts, the tight-fitting chooridar enclosing the firmness of virginity in its folds. Kameez rubbing against shervani, the friction of silk and brocade, arm and breast, youth and sex, eye and heart.

And Ashfaq could not be happier if he was being married, and married to Ayesha herself. When palms have lingered a little longer in a clasp than is necessary, it is not difficult to find out the lady's name. Ayesha. Whisper: Aayeshaa.

'Look, why don't you take a collection and visit Lily? Maybe losing your virginity would solve your problems.' Salim was getting a little tired of the eulogies. Fun was fun, and they had had a good time manufacturing jokes on Mr Ashfaq Hussain's recent excursion into the exciting world of adolescent women, but enough was enough, and three days was more than enough.

'I don't have forty-five rupees to waste,' replied Ashfaq, a little lamely. 'Shut up, Salim!' interjected Ajoy. 'Ashfaq's love is pure. It costs much more than forty-five bucks.'

'Brutes,' muttered Ashfaq. And in reply Salim and Ajoy and Kader began discussing Lily, of Free School Street fame, and, boy, did she know how to go about it, and no danger of clap either. After that, conversation at the Diamond returned to normal: sex, revolution, football, revolution, money, revolution. At long last it occurred to Ashfaq that he had made an ass of himself.

However, Ashfaq's ardour was in no way diminished. His inability to meet Ayesha only made things worse. He found out that she had a rich father, she was in the first-year class at Loreto College, Park Street. The father owned a kabab restaurant. Ashfaq began eating there. And he tried to manoeuvre his daily programme in such a way that at 3.30 every afternoon he would be walking down Park Street. Ashfaq discovered to his dismay that it didn't help. At precisely 3.20 a dark blue Ambassador joined the queue of cars in the college compound; at 3.30, a smiling, giggling, whispering, serious, jovial, perturbed Ayesha sank into those foam seats and soon disappeared from view. Ayesha seemed oblivious of his passion.

After two months of such devotion Ashfaq realized that worshipping from afar was a rather boring business. But there was no way by which he could bridge the communication gap. There were numerous schemes, of course. He could bump into her accidentally. He could, if his nerve did not repeatedly fail him. If, IF she rebuffed him? Perish the thought! But. When you have studied in an Urdu-medium school and done your B.A. in Urdu and you are twenty-one years old and you are in love with an eighteen-year-old queen who has studied in a convent and is now in Loreto College and has that beautiful English accent, then the little but becomes a very big BUT. So big that it disturbs your sleep and obsesses your waking thoughts.

You begin to hate the environment in which you have grown up: dim rooms in Tantibagan, the cockroach-infested bathroom, the cheap portrait of Pandit Nehru beside your framed photograph on the fading green of the walls, your three synthetic shirts, those horribly thin curtains hanging loosely across barred windows, your sister with a pail of muddy water and rag mopping the floor every morning, while your mother sits and slices vegetables in the small gloomy kitchen with its smoky mud chulha.

You want to be an executive, wear a tie, go to office and have a sofa-set in your living room.

Ashfaq began looking for a job. He had been sending applications ever since his results had been published, but the anxiety with which he now waited for replies! He went to the local post office every day to see if there were any letters for him. He had it all figured out. He would get a job, get a flat, get Ayesha and live happily ever after.

One Friday morning a thin envelope brought good news. A prominent firm had called him for the preliminary test and interview for the post of Management Trainee. Would Mr Ashfaq Hussain kindly come to their office on Brabourne Road on Tuesday at 4 p.m.? He was so happy that he went to say his prayers that afternoon, something he had not done for years. And he asked Allah to get him the job.

Wearing a new tie (blue, patterned with a maze of black streaks) bought for the occasion, he reached his destination at 3.15 that humid afternoon. It had been a long and impatient day. He recalled the faint flush of jealousy Salim had not been able to restrain. It would be stupid to blame him. He wanted a sofa-set too. And yet that jealousy was more reassuring than Ajoy's superior smile. What the hell was that pseudo-revolutionary bastard thinking? All his goddam revolution came to the fore when anyone mentioned jobs. Was it a crime to seek good, honest employment?

'We've received over 20,000 applications from all over the country,' said Mr Mirchandani casually while conducting the test. Someone worked up the courage to ask, 'How many of us will you take?' Mr Mirchandani smiled. 'As many as we need.'

Ashfaq answered the test quietly. He couldn't compete with these English accents. But surely his IQ would see him through. Mr Mirchandani read out the names of those who would be required for the next round of eliminations; read them out in public, with profuse apologies and best wishes for those who would not be needed. The three who survived the first round spoke English with a good accent.

Couldn't they have been told privately? They trooped out sheepishly, humiliation their bond, weak grins on their faces as they wished each other good night.

After the fourth time Ashfaq learnt the truth which Ajoy knew. You can't afford to be lower-middle-class and mediocre. If you know a secretary in Writers' Building, fine. If you don't, you should study economics or physics and know your theories better than the rude Personnel Manager interviewing you knows them. If you have an English accent and a carpet in your living room, you don't need much else. That was the golden rule in India. So Ashfaq started looking for a clerk's desk, a medical representative's post, a door-to-door salesman's job, anything. One can get promotions, there is a future, he bluffed himself.

His sisters had begun teasing Ashfaq so much that he avoided coming home till he was sure they were all asleep. Towards his mother he adopted a surly attitude showing disdain for everything other than the food she served him each night.

Stray scraps of information fed his imagination. Ayesha was witty: he had heard how she had choked the ardour of an elderly wolf reeking of attar and poetry. One wet afternoon (tea sipped through cigarette smoke, the nose a little cold in the damp air) Ajoy asked, 'What does Ayesha look like?'

The dream was six months old, but it had not staled. The outline of her face had been lost; only vague adjectives remained – beautiful, exquisite.

He kept awake that night trying to answer the question. Ajoy's was too easily answered; it was much more difficult to satisfy himself.

The situation is delicate: Ashfaq is asking himself: what is one in love with? When he has smoked six Charminar cigarettes he vaguely senses that one is always, inevitably, in love with images, but his mind cannot clearly comprehend that answer; it is a mind unused to wandering too far away from traditional patterns. There is only one solution to the confusion. Ashfaq creates a surreal photograph; convinced that emotion is far more important than life, he wakes up in the morning refreshed and deeply and irrevocably in love once more with Ayesha.

Passion surges into action; Ashfaq meets people the whole day, follows every hint, explores opportunities he would not have imagined existed before. Getting a job has become of crucial importance. The desire of the moth for the flame has disturbing effects on the moth's health; Ashfaq's cheeks become hollow; frustration weighs upon his eyes.

A contact, a relative whom Ashfaq had been pestering without having any right to (he was neither a close nor a friendly relative), finally gave him the news that the post of a clerk was vacant in a suburban municipality. Name, degree, president of local youth club, recommended by one Muslim official of Writers' Building and two professors of Maulana Azad College. Good credentials for a job in a municipality with a Muslim chairman.

The room had the soggy, dark, damp smell of a government office being used for signing papers, filing, and indulging in small-scale corruption. At the head of the long, brown table sat the chairman, the horn-rimmed spectacles (reminiscent of a zamindar's munim) peering owlishly into Ashfaq's nervous eyes, the chairman's face pompous and gloated with petty power. On his right, a bald head, straight wire meshing of hair from the bulging forehead to the bend of the skull at the back. On his left, a young commissioner, with a thin faded black tie worn specially for the occasion on a white cotton shirt with a small-town tailor's collars.

The job went to Shyam Babu's candidate. Shyam Babu, with his control over two thousand industrial workers' votes, had played an important and never-to-be-forgotten part in the election of the chairman.

That day he did not see her. She had probably left college early. He sauntered down Park Street, spent some time at the newsstands with the big-bosomed *Playboy* covers (the magazine cost thirty rupees, second hand, imagine how much the girls would cost, even second hand!) and wandered over to the crossing of Park Street and Chowringhee. In black stone, and three times life size, Mahatma Gandhi presided over this junction of affluent streets. Appropriate, quite appropriate that the Mahatma should, piously semi-nude, stand guard over the cabarets in the restaurants on Park Street. This was his Indian Dream. For the poor, religion and hunger. For the rich, black money.

At what point does a person become desperate? It is an awful moment, that sudden streak of lightning, that noiseless thunder reverberating inside the skull when suddenly you become certain. I am going to die; nothing means anything anymore. Mother, Gandhi, Money, Respect, Law, Love, this street, that memorial, monument, passion, faith. The face lights up as the myths of childhood, the pillars of civilization collapse, and in the broad distance of the horizon, above the green unrolling endless carpet, there is the glow of happiness as you discover: nothing has crumbled since nothing existed, the nightmare was an illusion.

But wait, there is a chance still. Within the two thousand yards separating the clean elegance of Park Street and the dirty turbulence of Dharmatalla (now renamed Lenin Sarani – West Bengal's homage to pseudo-Marxism), there is sufficient hope that Ashfaq will become a revolutionary. And if he does, he will shame Ajoy, who is a revolutionary merely in intent. Ashfaq will not only go to the villages and die a hero of the people but also understand what he is dying for. What happens to the knowledge then? That noiseless thunder, etc.?

Three cups of tea later everything is utterly confused. Ashfaq is finally defeated by his background, by that sofa-set.

Lily was surprised and delighted. She had initiated virgins before, but this chap was overdoing it a little. He was a bit of an unusual case. He was trying to impress her, of course, but more than her he was trying to impress himself. What the hell! It was his money, wherever he had stolen it from (his father, probably) – all she could do was give him a good time and she would do it and she was unused to thinking so much anyway.

Ashfaq breathed in the comfort of the atmosphere, and what difference did it make that the room cost eighty rupees a day? He luxuriated in the air-conditioning, the silence. He threw off his aged shoes and sank his feet into the three-inch luxury of the carpet. The room was warm and heavily curtained against the evening sunlight. He had heard of how these things were done. Speaking loudly and crudely to hide his nervousness at using the telephone for room service, he ordered Scotch, and ignored the smirk on the waiter's face as he left the bottle and two glistening glasses on the table. His head pressed against the foam of the armchair, he watched Lily undress, then the tingle became a storm as she, with a smile, unbuttoned his shirt.

He had never felt so clean before. Soaking in the bathtub in warm water, Lily scrubbing his back, her nipples against his eyes and lips.

He wore a thin tie (he had bought it recently from the New Market, for seven rupees, when the prospects of the interview for the municipality job were bright) when he went to have dinner. It was a fantastic world, and even though Ashfaq knew about these things and knew what to expect he was still a little surprised. Certain words which had been fantasies took on life. Dance. Loud foreign music, couples gyrating, swaying like snakes, luxuriating in comfort, money.

This was the Life. How miserable to exist without knowing the softness of a carpet, or the sharp taste of this chicken.

Ashfaq burped and suddenly laughed out loudly. Lily became furious and embarrassed. 'Stop it, men!' The waiters – more correctly dressed than the customers – were perturbed by this obnoxiously loud laugh.

If it wasn't for her he probably wouldn't have stopped laughing so soon. He did not want the night to be ruined. Ashfaq was happy; he had found the final answer: f— everything.

For the first time in his life, Ashfaq relaxed on a foam mattress, and on a milkwhite bedsheet. He felt a tinge of nostalgia when he thought of Ayesha; however foolish it might have been, the affair had been a precious experience.

Ashfaq's suicide in a posh hotel room in the early hours of the morning on January 21 (as the newspapers said) did cause a few minor ripples. Lily was scared by the whole thing, especially at the prospect of being accused of murder. And it was bad publicity for the hotel, which disturbed the management, and the clerk at the booking counter was fired for not being choosy enough about his guests. Without being sentimental we might still state that the clerk in question was now in for a very hard time, what with three children to support and no prospects of another job.) Ashfaq's parents were, understandably, heartbroken. Job or no job, money or no money, a son will be missed and a brother remembered.

In the Diamond, a distance developed between the three remaining friends. After the funeral they talked the whole thing over. 'What a goddam coward, what a weak person!' Ajoy declaimed angrily. The other two told him to put his Marxism up his arse and shut up.

In the course of fruitful time, Ayesha married a foreign-returned wealthy Muslim businessman who danced very well, spoke English with an excellent accent, and was, after a fashion, intelligent too.

3. Grammar Page

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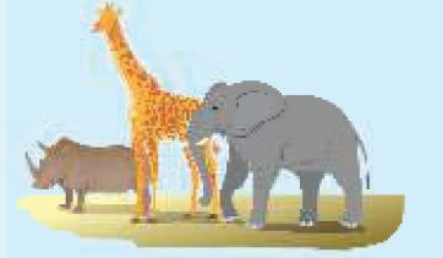
the 4 (the giraffe / the telephone / the old etc.)

A

Study these sentences:

- The giraffe** is the tallest of all animals.
- The bicycle** is an excellent means of transport.
- When was **the camera** invented?
- The dollar** is the currency of the United States.

In these examples, **the** ... does not mean one specific thing. **The giraffe** = a specific type of animal, not a specific giraffe. We use **the** ... in this way to talk about a type of animal, machine etc.



In the same way we use **the** for musical instruments:

- Can you play **the** guitar?
- The** piano is my favourite instrument.

Compare **a** and **the**:

- I'd like to have **a** piano. *but* I can't play **the** piano.
- We saw **a** giraffe at the zoo. *but* **The** giraffe is my favourite animal.

Note that **man** (without **the**) = human beings in general, the human race:

- What do you know about the origins of **man**? (*not* the man)

B

the old, the rich etc.

We use **the** + *adjective* (without a noun) to talk about groups of people. For example:

the old	the rich	the homeless	the sick
the elderly	the poor	the unemployed	the injured

the old = old people, **the rich** = rich people etc. :

- Do you think **the rich** should pay higher taxes?
- We need to do more to help **the homeless**.

Note that we say: **the old** (*not* the olds), **the poor** (*not* the poors) etc.

The rich, the homeless etc. are *plural*. For one person, we say:

a rich man (*not* a rich) **a homeless person** (*not* a homeless)

C

the French, the Chinese etc.

We use **the** + a few nationality adjectives that end in **-ch** or **-sh**. For example:

the French **the Dutch** **the British** **the English** **the Spanish**

The meaning is *plural* – the people of that country.

- The French** are famous for their food. (*not* French are ...)

We do not say 'a French' or 'an English' (*singular*). For example, we say:

- I met **a** French **woman** / **an** English **guy**.

We also use **the** + nationality words ending in **-ese** or **-ss**. For example:

the Chinese **the Portuguese** **the Swiss**

These words can also be singular (**a Chinese**, **a Swiss** etc.).

With other nationality words, the plural ends in **-s** (usually without **the**). For example:

an Italian → **Italians** a Mexican → **Mexicans** a Thai → **Thais**

- Italians** / **Mexicans** / **Thais** are very friendly.

In all cases you can use *adjective* + **people**. For example, you can say:

- French** / **Chinese** / **Mexican** people are very friendly.