



Learn English Through Stories

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A Journey Through Desert

Adapted from Sudha Murty

In the bustling city of Bangalore, where languages like Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, and Hindi blend in a vibrant cultural mosaic, Sudha Murty, a college professor and storyteller, discovered an unexpected connection with two young boys. This is the story of how her kindness, amplified by an old cassette player, transformed their lives in profoundly different ways.

The Service Station Encounter

A decade ago, Sudha drove her own car, navigating Bangalore's crowded streets without a driver. She often stopped at a petrol bunk with a service station nearby, where her car received maintenance every few months. The servicing took two hours, so she would sit under a sprawling tree, reading books in the shade. At the station, two identical twins, Ram and Gopal, both around fourteen, worked as errand boys. Despite their tattered clothes and greasy hands, their smiles were radiant, and their cheerful chatter won over everyone.

Bangalore, the capital of Karnataka, is a cosmopolitan hub, attracting people from across India. The twins, whose mother tongue was Kannada, had learned Tamil, Telugu, and Hindi by interacting with diverse customers. This linguistic dexterity—ability to use language skillfully—impressed Sudha, who noticed their curiosity despite their lack of formal education.

Ram and Gopal's lives were far from easy. Orphaned by their father, they lived in a nearby slum with their mother, a construction labourer, and their uncle. They had studied only until class four before dropping out to support their family. From 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., they ran errands, cleaned tools, and assisted mechanics, with Sundays as their only day off. Their meager salary came with free breakfast and lunch, plus occasional tips from car owners. Yet, their enthusiasm never waned, a stark contrast to the discontent Sudha observed in some wealthier children.

Building a Bond

Over months, Sudha grew fond of the twins. She brought them snacks, like crispy samosas, and old shirts from her home. The boys accepted these gifts with joy, as if they were treasures, though they never wore the clothes, explaining, "Madam, our work dirties everything with grease." Their gratitude touched Sudha, who marvelled at their ability to find happiness despite adversity—hardship or misfortune.

One day, thinking they might enjoy reading, Sudha brought storybooks. To her surprise, the boys' faces fell. "Madam," Ram said hesitantly, "we struggle to read. It takes too long." Gopal added, "Could you tell us the stories instead?" Their earnest eyes pleaded, and Sudha couldn't refuse. She recalled how her own children loved bedtime stories, and these boys, deprived of school and play, deserved the same joy.

However, Sudha's teaching schedule was demanding, and visiting the station every Saturday was challenging. Then, she had an idea. In her attic, she found an old cassette player, a device popular in the 1980s for recording and playing audio tapes. She recorded a series of stories onto a cassette, her voice weaving tales of courage and wisdom. The next Saturday, she handed the player and tape to the boys, showing them how to press "play" and "rewind." "Listen during your breaks," she said. "I'll take it back to record more stories later."

The twins were thrilled. Around 4 p.m., when work slowed, they huddled near the player, its tinny speaker filling the air with Sudha's voice. Customers smiled at the sight of two boys, greasy hands paused, lost in stories. Each week, Sudha collected the player, recorded new tales, and returned it, creating a ritual that brought light to their grueling days.

The Power of Stories

The cassette player became a bridge between Sudha's world and theirs. Unlike books, which required literacy they lacked, the recorded stories were accessible, allowing them to listen repeatedly. One story, in particular, captivated them: The Journey Through Desert. Sudha's voice described two boys in a poor village, eager to reach a prosperous town across a vast desert. Elders advised, "Collect stones from the desert; they're valuable in the town."

The boys set out with food and water, walking under a cool morning sun. As the day grew scorching, the sand burned their feet, and their supplies dwindled. They collected stones, but their bags grew heavy. One boy, discouraged, threw his stones away and turned back, saying, "This is too hard." The other persevered, driven by hope. Alone, thirsty, and exhausted, he reached the town, only to find it ordinary. Disheartened, he opened his bag to discard the stones—only to discover they had transformed into dazzling diamonds. Overnight, he became wealthy.

Sudha explained the story's meaning: "A student's life is like the desert. Examinations are the hot sun, difficulties are the burning sand, and studying is like hunger and thirst. Knowledge is the stones you collect, heavy but precious. Persevere, and your efforts will shine like diamonds."

Ram and Gopal replayed this story often, its message sinking deep. Another tale, The Jackal's Ambition, also lingered. It told of a jackal who, seeing his large morning shadow, boasted he'd hunt a camel. Ignoring smaller prey, he searched all day, only to find no camel. By evening, his shadow shrank, and he settled for a mouse. The moral: overambition without practicality leads to failure.

A Decade Passes

As time flowed like a river, Sudha hired a driver and stopped visiting the station. The cassette player, returned after the last recording, gathered dust in her home, and she lost touch with the twins. Her old car, though aging, remained reliable, a reminder of those Saturdays under the tree.

One day in 2025, her driver reported a car issue and mentioned the mechanic at Good Luck Garage had asked about her. "He knew you teach at a college," he said. Intrigued, Sudha visited the modern garage, its glass cabin gleaming. A young man in blue overalls, holding a spanner, greeted her warmly. "Madam, please sit in the cabin. I'll wash my hands and join you."

In the functional office, Sudha sipped coffee, studying the man. His dimpled smile sparked recognition. "Are you Ram or Gopal?" she asked. "I'm Ram, Madam," he replied, his voice warm with gratitude. He owned the garage, a testament to his success. Sudha was astonished, eager to hear his story.

Ram's Transformation

Ram sat opposite her, his eyes reflecting the past. "Madam, your stories changed my life, especially the one about the desert, recorded on that cassette player. Gopal and I listened to it countless times." He recounted their struggles: long hours, a domineering uncle who took their earnings, and dreams of education stifled by poverty. The cassette player, however, offered escape and inspiration.

"The desert story gave me hope," Ram said. "I saw my life as that desert—hard, endless, but with a destination. I decided to study, no matter the odds." Night schools were far, and money was scarce, but Ram's determination grew with each replay of the tape. The service station owner, impressed by his resolve, paid his fees for an Automobile Diploma. Ram worked by day, studied by night, and later secured a bank loan to start Good Luck Garage. "I had nothing to lose," he said, "unlike rich people who fear failure. Your story taught me to keep collecting stones."

Sudha, moved, asked about Gopal. Ram's face clouded. "He followed the jackal story, Madam. Gopal always aimed too high, chasing big dreams without a plan. He refused to work with me and now works as a peon in an office."

Sudha was stunned. The same cassette player, the same stories, had led to such different paths.

The Legacy of Early Technology

The cassette player, a relic of the 1980s, was pivotal in this tale. Its simplicity—portable, battery-powered, and easy to use—made it ideal for the twins' circumstances. In a slum with unreliable electricity, it brought stories to life, offering education where schools couldn't. Its ability to repeat stories reinforced their lessons, embedding wisdom in Ram's mind. For Gopal, however, the same device amplified a misinterpretation, highlighting how technology's impact depends on the user's choices.

Sudha reflected on the cassette player's role. In an era before smartphones, it was a revolutionary tool, democratizing knowledge for those excluded from formal systems. Her act of recording stories was small, yet its ripple effect was profound, proving that early technology, paired with human connection, could spark transformation.

Lessons Learned

Ram's success and Gopal's struggles underscored universal truths. Happiness, Sudha realized, doesn't stem from wealth but from purpose and resilience. Ram's journey mirrored the desert boy's, collecting knowledge despite obstacles, while Gopal's overambition echoed the jackal's folly. The cassette player amplified these lessons, making them accessible and enduring.

Sudha left the garage with a full heart, silently saluting the unknown authors of those stories and the inventors of the cassette player. She hadn't written the tales or built the device, but by sharing them, she'd ignited a spark. Ram's garage stood as proof that small acts—storytelling, kindness, and technology—could change lives in ways unimaginable.

Comprehension

Question 1: Where did Sudha Murty often stop to get her car serviced in Bangalore?

Question 2: Who were Ram and Gopal, and what was their role at the service station?

Question 3: What languages had Ram and Gopal learned by interacting with customers?

Question 4: Why did Ram and Gopal drop out of school?

Question 5: What gift did Sudha give the twins that they couldn't fully use, and why?

Question 6: What device did Sudha use to share stories with the twins, and how did they use it?

Question 7: What was the main lesson of the story The Journey Through Desert that Sudha shared?

Question 8: What was the moral of The Jackal's Ambition story?

Question 9: What happened to Ram after Sudha stopped visiting the service station?

Question 10: How did Gopal's life differ from Ram's, and which story influenced his choices?

Answers

Answer 1: At a petrol bunk with a service station nearby.

Answer 2: They were identical twin brothers, around fourteen, working as errand boys at the service station.

Answer 3: Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, and Hindi.

Answer 4: To support their family after their father's death, as they lived in a slum with their mother and uncle.

Answer 5: Storybooks, because they struggled to read due to limited literacy.

Answer 6: An old cassette player; they listened to recorded stories during breaks.

Answer 7: Perseverance through difficulties, like collecting stones, leads to valuable rewards, like knowledge turning into diamonds.

Answer 8: Overambition without practicality leads to failure.

Answer 9: He studied at night school, earned an Automobile Diploma, and opened Good Luck Garage.

Answer 10: Gopal became a peon, chasing big dreams without a plan, influenced by The Jackal's Ambition.

3. Grammar Page

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Names with and without **the** 1

A We do *not* use **the** with names of people ('Helen', 'Helen Taylor' etc.). In the same way, we do *not* use **the** with most names of places. For example:

continents
countries, states etc.
islands
cities, towns etc.
mountains

Africa (*not the Africa*), **South America**
France (*not the France*), **Japan, Texas**
Sicily, Tasmania
Cairo, Bangkok
Everest, Kilimanjaro



But we normally use **the** in names with **Republic, Kingdom, States** etc.:

the Czech Republic **the United Kingdom** (**the** UK)
the Dominican Republic **the United States** of America (**the** USA)

Compare:

Have you been to **Canada** or **the United States**?

B When we use **Mr/Ms/Captain/Doctor** etc. + a name, we do not use **the**. So we say:

Mr Johnson / Doctor Johnson / Captain Johnson / President Johnson etc. (*not the ...*)
Uncle Robert / Saint Catherine / Queen Catherine etc. (*not the ...*)

Compare:

We called **the doctor**.
We called **Doctor Johnson**. (*not the Doctor Johnson*)

We use **Mount** (= mountain) and **Lake** before a name in the same way (without **the**):

Mount Everest (*not the ...*) **Mount Etna** **Lake Superior** **Lake Victoria**

They live near **the lake**.

They live near **Lake Superior**. (*not the Lake Superior*)

C We use **the** with the names of oceans, seas, rivers and canals:

the Atlantic (Ocean) **the Red Sea** **the Amazon**
the Indian Ocean **the Channel** (between
the Mediterranean (Sea) France and Britain) **the Nile**
the Suez Canal

We use **the** with the names of deserts:

the Sahara (Desert) **the Gobi Desert**

D We use **the** with *plural* names of people and places:

people
countries
groups of islands
mountain ranges

the Taylors (= the Taylor family), **the Johnsons**
the Netherlands, the Philippines, the United States
the Canaries (*or the Canary Islands*), **the Bahamas**
the Andes, the Alps, the Urals

The highest mountain in **the Andes** is (**Mount**) **Aconcagua**.

E We say:

the north (of Brazil) *but* **northern** Brazil (*without the*)
the southeast (of Spain) *but* **southeastern** Spain

Compare:

Sweden is in **northern Europe**; Spain is in **the south**.

We also use **north/south** etc. (*without the*) in the names of some regions and countries:

North America **South Africa** **southeast Asia**

Note that on maps, **the** is not usually included in the name.