



**Learn English Through Stories**

**G Series**

**G79**

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# 1. A French Adventure in La Toque

By Kulwant Sandhu

My name is Kulwant Sandhu, a retired maths lecturer from Coventry, England. A few years ago, I set off on a journey that remains vivid in my mind. Tired of the familiar streets of Coventry, I decided to explore a lesser-known corner of France—not the vibrant chaos of Paris or the glamorous Riviera, but a tucked-away village called La Toque. This quaint, old-fashioned place, nestled in rural France, was unlike anywhere I'd been, with its cobblestone paths and serene charm. What unfolded during my stay was a blend of surprises, lessons, and a hint of mystery, all wrapped in the simplicity of village life.

Finding La Toque was no easy task. The winding roads through endless hills seemed to mock my sense of direction, and my GPS was useless in this remote region. More likely than not, I thought, I'd end up lost before reaching my destination. But after hours of driving, a weathered signpost for La Toque appeared, and relief washed over me. I'd arrived.

The village was just as described: curious and quiet, with only one hotel, the Auberge du Coeur. Booking ahead was vital, as there were no other options for miles. The hotel was humble, with creaky floors and plain decor, but it had a cosy appeal. The owner, Madame Dubois, greeted me with a polite nod, though her eyes held a trace of suspicion. As a man of Indian descent with accented French, I stood out in La Toque, where locals were known to be wary of tourists. Still, Madame Dubois was courteous, guiding me to my room and outlining the meal schedule in a brisk tone.

That first evening, I dined in the small, dimly lit dining room, enjoying a bowl of hearty vegetable soup and crusty bread. The food was simple but flavourful, and the prices were surprisingly reasonable. As a retired lecturer used to Coventry's curry houses, I was impressed with the quality in such an isolated place. The other guests, mostly elderly couples, murmured quietly, casting occasional glances my way. After dinner, I ventured outside for a stroll, but by 10 p.m., the streets were deserted. The silence was eerie, broken only by the distant call of an owl.

The next morning, I set out to explore. La Toque's narrow lanes were lined with stone houses, their shutters painted in faded blues and greens. I wandered to the village square, where a modest market was unfolding. Stalls displayed cheeses, fruits, and handmade trinkets, and the air carried the aroma of fresh baguettes. I chatted with a vendor named Pierre, who sold jars of golden honey. My French was rusty, but we managed with gestures and his limited English. Pierre was polite but guarded, studying me with curiosity. I bought a jar of honey, hoping to break the ice, and he offered a faint smile in return.

As I roamed further, I noticed a peculiar building at the square's edge—an old, crumbling structure draped in ivy. A faded sign read "Bibliothèque," but the windows were dark, and the door was locked. Intrigued, I asked Pierre about it. His face tightened, and he mumbled that the library was "abandoned" and "best avoided." His tone was cryptic, sparking my curiosity. As a maths lecturer, I was used to solving puzzles, and this felt like one I couldn't ignore.

That afternoon, I joined a guided walk arranged by the hotel. Our guide, Luc, a wiry man with a wealth of knowledge, led us through the stunning countryside. Lavender fields and vineyards stretched toward the horizon, reminding me how different this was from Coventry's urban sprawl. Luc shared tales of La Toque's past, mentioning that the village had once been a haven for scholars due to its library. When I asked why it closed, he deftly changed the topic, his evasiveness only fuelling my interest.

During the walk, I befriended Clara, an Englishwoman with a warm, chatty demeanour. She was a stark contrast to the reserved locals, and we bonded over our shared love of history. Clara had heard whispers about the library—a scandal involving a missing book of great value. "From what I've gathered," she said softly, "the book vanished, and the library was shuttered." Her words sent a chill through me, and I couldn't shake the sense that La Toque held secrets.

That night, I lay awake in my room, my mind racing with thoughts of the library. As a mathematician, I thrived on logic, but this mystery was irresistible. I decided to investigate. Armed with a flashlight, I slipped out after midnight, feeling like a sleuth in a novel. The streets were empty, as expected. At the library, the door was locked, but a window was slightly ajar. My pulse quickened. Chances are, I told myself, I'd find nothing but dust. Yet my curiosity, honed by years of tackling complex equations, pushed me forward.

I climbed through the window, landing in a musty room filled with ancient books. My flashlight revealed shelves sagging under the weight of tomes, alongside faded portraits and ornate furniture. It felt like a time capsule. I searched for clues, unsure what I sought. After an hour, I discovered a small, locked box hidden behind a shelf, heavy and etched with strange symbols. My hands shook as I tried to open it, but it refused to yield.

Then, a creak echoed through the room. I froze. Madame Dubois stood in the doorway, her face stern but calm. "Monsieur Sandhu," she said, "this is no place for you." I stammered an apology, bracing for trouble. Instead, she sighed and explained. The box held old village records, not treasures. The library had closed after a petty dispute among locals, and the tale of a missing book was a myth. "For all practical purposes," she said, "it's just a forgotten story." Her words were kind but firm, and I felt a mix of relief and embarrassment.

Madame Dubois escorted me back to the hotel, advising me to stay out of mischief. The next day, I kept a low profile, visiting the market and enjoying the countryside. I even made amends with Pierre, who gifted me another jar of honey. By the time I left La Toque, I felt a quiet affection for the village. Its guarded locals and simple life were a far cry from Coventry, yet they had a charm of their own.

Driving away, I reflected on my adventure. La Toque, with its deserted streets and enigmatic past, was a puzzle I'd never fully solve. But as a retired lecturer, I'd learned to appreciate the beauty of unanswered questions. Glancing at the honey jars on the passenger seat, I smiled. Sometimes, the sweetest moments come from the most unexpected places.

## **2. Comprehension Questions and Answers**

Question 1: Where does Kulwant Sandhu live, and what is his former profession?

Question 2: Why was it important to book the hotel in La Toque in advance?

Question 3: How does Kulwant describe the food and prices at the Auberge du Coeur?

Question 4: What idiom does Kulwant use when he thinks he might get lost on the way to La Toque?

Question 5: Why were the streets of La Toque deserted by 10 p.m.?

Question 6: What was the name of the vendor Kulwant met at the market, and what did he sell?

Question 7: What did Kulwant find unusual about the old library in the village square?

Question 8: What did Clara tell Kulwant about the library's past?

Question 9: What did Kulwant find inside the library, and why couldn't he open it?

Question 10: What explanation did Madame Dubois give about the library and the box?

## Answers

Answer 1: Kulwant Sandhu lives in Coventry, England, and he is a retired maths lecturer.

Answer 2: It was important because there is only one hotel in La Toque, with no other options nearby.

Answer 3: He describes the food as simple but delicious and the prices as reasonable.

Answer 4: He uses the idiom "More likely than not."

Answer 5: The streets were deserted because the village is quiet, and locals go inside early.

Answer 6: The vendor's name was Pierre, and he sold jars of honey.

Answer 7: It was crumbling, covered in ivy, and locked, with a dark and mysterious appearance.

Answer 8: Clara said there was a rumour about a scandal involving a missing valuable book, which led to the library's closure.

Answer 9: He found a small, locked box with strange symbols, but he couldn't open it because it was locked.

Answer 10: She explained that the box contained old village records, not treasures, and the library closed due to a dispute, with the missing book story being a myth.

## 3. Grammar Page

Unit  
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### Singular and plural

**A** Sometimes we use a *plural* noun for one thing that has two parts. For example:



These words are plural, so they take a plural verb:

- My trousers **are** too long. (*not* My trousers *is*)

You can also use **a pair of** + these words:

- Those are** nice **jeans**. *or* That's **a nice pair of** jeans. (*not* a nice jeans)
- I need **some** new **glasses**. *or* I need **a new pair of** glasses.

**B** Some nouns end in **-ics**, but are not usually plural. For example:

**athletics**   **gymnastics**   **economics**   **politics**  
**physics**   **electronics**   **maths** (= mathematics)

- Gymnastics is** my favourite sport. (*not* Gymnastics *are*)

**News** is not plural (see Unit 70B):

- I have **some news** for you. **It's** good news!

Some words that end in **-s** can be singular or plural. For example:

**means**   **a means** of transport   **many means** of transport  
**series**   **a TV series**   **two TV series**  
**species**   **a species** of fish   **200 species** of fish

**C** Some singular nouns are often used with a plural verb. For example:

**audience**   **committee**   **company**   **family**   **firm**   **government**   **staff**   **team**

These nouns are all groups of people. We often think of them as a number of people (= they), not as one thing (= it). So we often use a plural verb:

- The government** (= they) **have decided** to increase taxes.
- The staff** at the company (= they) **are** not happy with **their** working conditions.

In the same way, we often use a plural verb after the name of a company or a sports team:

- Shell have** increased the price of petrol.
- Italy are** playing Brazil next Sunday (in a football match).

You can also use a singular verb (The government **wants** ... / Shell **has** ... etc.).

We use a plural verb with **police**:

- The police are** investigating the crime, but **haven't** arrested anyone yet.  
(*not* The police *is* ... *hasn't*)

Note that we say **a police officer** / **a policeman** / **a policewoman** (*not* a police).

**D** We do not often use the plural of **person** ('persons'). We normally use **people** (a *plural* word):

- He's **a nice person**. *but* They are nice **people**. (*not* nice persons)
- Many people don't** have enough to eat. (*not* Many people *doesn't*)

**E** We think of a sum of money, a period of time, a distance etc. as *one* thing. So we use a singular verb:

- Fifty thousand pounds** (= it) **was** stolen in the robbery. (*not* were stolen)
- Three years** (= it) **is** a long time to be without a job. (*not* Three years *are*)
- Two miles isn't** very far to walk.