



**Learn English Through Stories**

**G Series**

**G82**

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# 1. Dead Man's Riddle

Adapted from Sudha Murty

In the sun-dappled villages of rural India, where the scent of earth and jasmine hung heavy in the air, disputes over family inheritance were as common as the monsoon rains. When brothers sought to divide their parents' property, arguments often flared, sometimes spiralling into bitter court battles. But in our village, nestled between rolling fields and ancient banyan trees, such matters were settled not by judges but by the wisdom of the panchayat—a council of elders whose word was law.

As a child, I would trail behind my grandfather to these gatherings, my small hand clasped in his calloused one. The panchayat meetings were held under the sprawling canopy of the village's oldest banyan, its roots twisting into the earth like the stories of our ancestors. Here, the elders would summon feuding brothers, their faces taut with resentment, to divide their inheritance. If there were three brothers, the property—gold, silver, vessels, and land—was split into three portions, each crafted to be of roughly equal value. The elders, with their weathered faces and sharp eyes, would assess every item: a gold bangle here, a silver pot there, a fertile plot by the river. Precision was elusive, for how could one measure the worth of a mother's heirloom against a father's plough? In such cases, the youngest brother was given first choice, a custom rooted in the belief that he had spent the fewest days basking in his parents' care—an asset as valuable as gold in our village's reckoning.

The elders were revered, their impartiality unquestioned. Their decisions were final, and the very idea of dragging family disputes to court was scoffed at. "When two parties go to court," the villagers would say, "both lose their wealth, and only the advocate grows fat." This wisdom, passed down through generations, kept harmony in our community, where trust in the panchayat was as enduring as the hills.

But not all disputes were resolved easily. I recall one sweltering afternoon when the panchayat faced a particularly stubborn case. Three brothers—Ramesh, Mahesh, and Suresh—stood before the council, their voices sharp with accusations. Their father, a prosperous farmer, had left behind a sprawling estate: fields of sugarcane, a modest hoard of gold, and a collection of brass vessels that gleamed like the sun. The panchayat, led by Sarpanch Som Gowda, a man whose silver beard and steady gaze commanded respect, proposed a division. Yet the brothers, each convinced he deserved more, rejected every suggestion. The air grew thick with tension, and the crowd of onlookers—farmers, weavers, and shopkeepers—murmured in unease.

Som Gowda, his patience wearing thin, raised a hand for silence. “Enough,” he said, his voice low but resonant. “Let me tell you a story from our village, one that may help you see clearly.” The crowd leaned in, and even the brothers paused, their anger momentarily eclipsed by curiosity. Som Gowda’s stories were legendary, woven with lessons that lingered like the evening’s cool breeze.

“Long ago,” he began, “in this very village, there lived a wealthy man named Madhav. He was known for his seventeen magnificent horses, each one a creature of grace, their coats gleaming like polished ebony. Madhav had three sons—Arjun, Vikram, and Kiran—who, despite their father’s wealth, quarrelled incessantly with him and each other. Madhav, a patient man, often sought counsel from his friend Sumanth, a scholar whose wisdom was as vast as the Ganges. ‘Time will teach them,’ Sumanth would say, his eyes twinkling. ‘Let life be their guru.’”

Madhav’s health began to fade, and one quiet evening, as the sky burned orange, he passed away. His will, discovered in a carved wooden box, was clear about the division of his land and gold: each son would receive an equal share. But the seventeen horses, his pride and joy, were addressed in a riddle that baffled everyone. The will declared: “The elder son shall receive half of the total horses. Of the remaining half, the second son shall take two-thirds. What remains out of that two-third should be given to the third son.”

The brothers puzzled over the words. Seventeen horses—how could half be given without slaughtering a horse? Half of seventeen was eight and a half, an impossible division for living creatures. And two-thirds of the remaining eight? Another horse would need to be cut. The thought was unthinkable; Madhav had cherished his horses, brushing their manes and whispering to them as if they were his own children. The brothers, their tempers flaring, argued for days, their voices echoing across the fields. Neighbours offered suggestions, but none could unravel the riddle without imagining a blade.

At last, they sought Sumanth, their father’s wise friend, who lived in a modest hut surrounded by books and flowering neem trees. Sumanth read the will, his lips curving into a knowing smile. “This is no riddle at all,” he said. “Meet me tomorrow at dawn in the village square, and I will show you.”

The next morning, as the first light kissed the dew-soaked grass, the villagers gathered. The seventeen horses stood in a proud line, their breath visible in the cool air. Sumanth arrived on his own horse, a sturdy mare with a gentle gait. He dismounted and tethered her alongside Madhav’s herd. “Now,” he declared, “we have eighteen horses. I will stand in your father’s place for this task.”

The brothers protested. “Your horse is not part of our inheritance!” Arjun, the eldest, snapped. “This defies our father’s wish!”

Sumanth raised a hand, his calm unshaken. “Trust me, and wait until the division is complete. I will take my horse back.” He turned to the crowd. “The will says the elder son gets half of the total horses. Half of eighteen is nine. Arjun, choose your nine horses.” Arjun, sceptical but intrigued, selected nine of the finest steeds.

Sumanth continued, “Now, nine horses remain. The will grants two-thirds of these to the second son. Two-thirds of nine is six. Vikram, take your six.” Vikram, his eyes wide, chose his share, leaving three horses.

“Finally,” Sumanth said, “the third son takes two-thirds of the remaining three, which is two horses. Kiran, they are yours.” Kiran, the youngest, stepped forward, his face a mixture of awe and gratitude as he claimed his two horses.

The crowd stared. One horse remained—Sumanth’s mare. “This one is mine,” he said, patting her flank. “I added her to make the division possible, and now I take her home.” With that, he mounted and rode away, leaving the brothers and villagers in stunned silence.

Later, the brothers sought Sumanth at his hut. “Uncle,” Vikram asked, “how did you solve the riddle without harming a single horse?”

Sumanth’s eyes crinkled with warmth. “Your father crafted this riddle to teach you humility. Life’s puzzles often seem impossible, but a small shift in perspective—sometimes as simple as borrowing a horse—can reveal the solution. He wanted you to seek guidance, to recognize that no one knows everything. Life is a teacher, but only if your heart is open to learning.”

Som Gowda’s voice softened as he addressed the three brothers before him. “This is the wisdom of our elders. They have walked paths you have yet to tread, faced storms you cannot imagine. Their knowledge, earned through years of joy and struggle, is a treasure no school can offer. You may fight over gold or land, but true wealth lies in listening—to each other, to the panchayat, to life itself.”

The brothers—Ramesh, Mahesh, and Suresh—stood in silence, their earlier anger dissolving like mist in the morning sun. The crowd held its breath as Ramesh, the eldest, stepped forward. “We accept the panchayat’s division,” he said, his voice steady. Mahesh and Suresh nodded, their eyes meeting in a rare moment of unity.

The villagers exhaled, and a ripple of approval spread through the gathering.

As the brothers shook hands under the banyan tree, I saw my grandfather smile, his weathered face glowing with pride. The panchayat had once again woven peace from discord, and I, a wide-eyed child, learned a lesson that would linger long after the horses had galloped into legend: wisdom, not wealth, holds the key to harmony.

## **2. Comprehension Questions**

Question 1: Where were family disputes over property typically settled in the village?

Question 2: Who was given the first choice in property division when the portions were not exactly equal?

Question 3: What was the saying in the village about going to court?

Question 4: Who was the leader of the panchayat in the story?

Question 5: How many horses did Madhav leave for his sons in his will?

Question 6: What was the problem with dividing the horses according to the will?

Question 7: Who solved the riddle of the horses, and what did he add to the division process?

Question 8: How many horses did the eldest son, Arjun, receive after the division?

Question 9: What lesson did Sumanth say the father wanted his sons to learn from the riddle?

Question 10: What did the three brothers—Ramesh, Mahesh, and Suresh—decide to do after hearing Som Gowda's story?

## Answers

Answer 1: Family disputes over property were settled by the panchayat, under the village's oldest banyan tree.

Answer 2: The youngest brother was given the first choice in property division when portions were not exactly equal.

Answer 3: The saying was, "When two parties go to court, both lose their wealth, and only the advocate grows fat."

Answer 4: The leader of the panchayat was Sarpanch Som Gowda.

Answer 5: Madhav left seventeen horses for his sons.

Answer 6: The problem was that dividing seventeen horses into half, two-thirds of the remainder, and two-thirds of what remained resulted in fractions, suggesting a horse would need to be killed.

Answer 7: Sumanth solved the riddle by adding his own horse, making a total of eighteen horses for the division.

Answer 8: Arjun, the eldest son, received nine horses.

Answer 9: Sumanth said the father wanted his sons to learn humility and to seek guidance, recognizing that no one knows everything.

Answer 10: The three brothers—Ramesh, Mahesh, and Suresh—agreed to accept the panchayat's division of their property.

## 3. Grammar Page

Unit  
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### myself/yourself/themselves etc.

**A** Study this example:



Steve **introduced himself** to the other guests.

We use **myself/yourself/himself** etc. (*reflexive pronouns*) when the *subject* and *object* are the same:

Steve introduced himself  
subject                      object

The reflexive pronouns are:

<i>singular (-self)</i>	<b>myself</b>	<i>yourself (one person)</i>	<b>himself/herself/itself</b>
<i>plural (-selves)</i>	<b>ourselves</b>	<i>yourselves (more than one)</i>	<b>themselves</b>

- I don't want you to pay for me. I'll pay for **myself**. (*not I'll pay for me*)
- Amy had a great holiday. **She** really enjoyed **herself**.
- Do **you** talk to **yourself** sometimes? (*said to one person*)
- If you want more to eat, help **yourselves**. (*said to more than one person*)

Compare:

- Lisa** introduced **me** to the other guests.
- I** introduced **myself** to the other guests.

**B** We do not use **myself** etc. after **feel/relax/concentrate/meet**:

- I **feel** nervous. I can't **relax**.
- You need to **concentrate**. (*not concentrate yourself*)
- What time shall we **meet** tomorrow?

Normally we do not use **myself** etc. after **wash/shave/dress**:

- He got up, **washed, shaved and dressed**. (*not washed himself etc.*)

You can also say **get dressed** (He **got dressed**).

**C** Compare **-selves** and **each other**:

- Kate and Joe stood in front of the mirror and looked at **themselves**.  
(= *Kate and Joe together looked at Kate and Joe*)
- Kate looked at Joe, and Joe looked at Kate. They looked at **each other**.



themselves



each other

You can use **one another** instead of **each other**:

- How long have you and Ben known **each other**? or ... known **one another**?
- Sue and Alice don't like **each other**. or ... don't like **one another**.
- Do they live near **each other**? or ... near **one another**?

**D** We also use **myself/yourself** etc. in another way. For example:

- 'Who repaired your bike?' 'I repaired it **myself**.'

**I repaired it myself** = I repaired it, not another person. Here, **myself** is used to emphasise 'I' (= it makes it stronger). Some more examples:

- I'm not going to do your work for you. **You** can do it **yourself**. (= you, not me)
- Let's** paint the house **ourselves**. It will be much cheaper.
- The film itself** wasn't very good, but I loved the music.
- I don't think Lisa will get the job she applied for. **Lisa** doesn't think so **herself**. or **Lisa herself** doesn't think so.