Learn English Through Stories

F Series

F72

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Contents:

1. In the Middle of the Night

By Rabindranath Tagore

‘Doctor! Doctor!’

Someone pestering me! In the middle of the night! I opened my eyes to see our local zamindar, Dakshinacharan Babu. I scrambled to my feet, dragged out my broken-backed armchair for him, sat him down, and looked anxiously into his face. It was half past two by my watch.

His face was pale and his eyes were staring as he spoke: ‘The same trouble again tonight – your medicine hasn’t worked.’

‘Perhaps you’ve been drinking again,’ I said, hesitantly.

He flared up. ‘You’re quite wrong there – it isn’t drink. Unless I tell you the whole story from beginning to end, you’ll never know the reason.’

The small tin kerosene lamp on the shelf was guttering, and I raised the wick. It shone a little more brightly and made lots of smoke. I tucked up my dhoti and sat cross-legged on a packing-case covered with newspaper. Dakshinacharan Babu began.

‘You don’t find many housewives like my first wife. But I was young then, and susceptible, and always immersed in poetry, so undiluted housewifery didn’t appeal to me much. Those lines of Kalidasa kept coming to me:

A wife is a counsellor, friend and lover; In the fine arts, it’s a joy to teach her.

But I didn’t get much joy in my efforts to teach my wife, and if I tried to address her in terms of a lover she would burst out laughing. Like Indra’s elephant floundering in the Ganges, the finest gems of poetry and fondest endearments were swept away instantly by her laughter. She was marvellously good at laughing.

‘Four years went by, and then I fell terribly ill. I had boils on my lips; I was delirious with fever; I was fighting for my life. No one thought I would survive. Things got so far, that the doctor gave me up for lost. But then a relative of mine brought a monk from somewhere: he gave me a root mixed with ghee – and, whether through the power of this medicine or through Fate, I recovered.

‘While I was ill my wife didn’t rest for a minute. Death’s envoys gathered at the door for those few days, and a feeble woman fought them continuously with mere human strength and the utmost power of feeling. She seemed to clutch and press my unworthy life to her breast as if it were her child, giving all her love and care. She didn’t eat, or sleep; she had no thought for anything

else in the world.

‘Like a vanquished tiger, Death dropped me from its jaws and went away; but as he went, he dealt my wife a heavy blow with his paw. She was pregnant at the time, and after a short time gave birth to a dead baby. Various complicated illnesses began after that. I had to look after her. This used to embarrass her. “What are you doing?” she would say. “What will people think? Don’t keep coming in and out of my room like this all the time!”

‘At night, when she was feverish, if I tried to fan her by pretending I was fanning myself, a tug-of-war for the fan would ensue. If sometimes my nursing took me ten minutes past my meal-time, I had to beg and coax her to accept it. The slightest attention seemed to do more harm than good. She would say, “It’s not right for a man to do all this.”

‘I dare say you’ve seen our house at Baranagar. There’s a garden in front, between the house and the Ganges. On the south side of the house, just beneath our bedroom, my wife enclosed a small plot with a henna hedge and made a garden of her own. Out of all the garden, that plot was the most unostentatious and natural. That is to say, colour did not take precedence over scent, or botanical variety over blooms; and there were no tags with Latin names next to nondescript plants in tubs.

Instead, there were roses, jasmine, gardenia, oleander and tuberose in wild abundance. A seat of white marble had been made round the base of a huge *bakul* tree. Before her illness, my wife herself stood at it twice a day, scrubbing it clean. On summer evenings, when her housework was finished, she sat there. She could watch the Ganges, but Babus, in company-yachts, could not see her.

‘After many days of being confined to bed, she suddenly said one moonlit Caitra evening, “I’m sick of being shut up indoors; today I shall go and sit in my garden for a while.”

‘I slowly and gingerly guided her to the stone seat under the *bakul* tree, and laid her down there. I would have been quite happy to have her head resting on my knee, but I knew she would find this odd; so I brought a pillow for her instead.

‘Full-blown *bakul*-flowers floated down in ones and twos, and shadowy moonlight shone through gaps in the branches on to her wasted face. It was still and peaceful all around; and as I sat beside her in the fragrant shadows and looked at her face, tears came to my eyes.

‘I slowly edged towards her and took her hot, emaciated hand in mine. She made no objection. After sitting in silence like this for a while, my heart

swelled and I burst out, “I shall never forget your love!” At once I realized I should not have said that. My wife laughed. In that laugh there was modesty, pleasure, and some disbelief; but also a considerable dose of the keenest mockery. She offered not a word of argument, but her laughter said, “You’ll *never* forget? That’s impossible and I don’t expect it either.”

‘For fear of this sweet piercing laugh, I never dared use amorous words with my wife. Whatever came to my mind when I was alone seemed utterly stupid if I tried to come out with it to her face. To this day, I cannot understand why words which, when I saw them in print, made my eyes stream with tears, seemed so ludicrous when spoken.

‘Arguments deal in words, but you cannot argue with a laugh; so all I could do was stay silent. The moonlight grew brighter; a *koel*-bird was calling more and more impatiently. I sat and wondered if, even on a moonlit night like this, the female *koel*-bird was deaf.

‘Despite every medical effort my wife’s illnesses showed no sign of recovery. The doctor said, “Why not try a change of air?” I took her to Allahabad.’

Dakshinacharan Babu suddenly stopped at this point. He eyed me suspiciously, and then sat thinking with his head in his hands. I also kept silent. The kerosene lamp on the shelf was dim now, and the whining of the mosquitoes could be heard clearly in the still room. Suddenly he broke his silence and began again: ‘At Allahabad my wife was treated by Dr Haran. He spent a long time treating her, but finally he too said what I and my wife already knew: that her condition could not be cured. She would be ill for the rest of her life.

‘One day she said to me, “I shan’t get better and neither can I hope for a speedy death. Why should you spend your life with a living corpse?

You should marry again.”

‘She saw this as a logical and rational solution: she had not the slightest sense of anything great or heroic or peculiar in it. Now it was my turn to laugh – had I had any of her talent for laughter. Like the hero of a novel, I gravely and pompously started: “For as long as there is life in my body –”

‘ “Come, come,” she interrupted. “Don’t go on! Hearing you talk like that is enough to kill me!”

‘ “I shall not be able to love anyone else –” I continued, refusing to give in. My wife laughed loudly at this, so I had to stop.

‘I don’t know if I ever admitted it to myself at the time, but I can now see I was wearying of all this nursing with no hope of recovery. I never imagined I would back out of it; but I was dismayed by the prospect of spending my whole life

with an incurable patient. When as a young man I had looked ahead, my whole future seemed packed with the magic of love, the lure of pleasure, the charm of beauty. But that was all a mirage now, and a hopeless, barren desert stretched out in front of me.

'My wife must have perceived this inner tiredness in my nursing of her. I did not know it at the time, but I am sure she could read me as easily as the unjoined letters of a child's first reader. So when I cast myself in the role of a romantic hero, and solemnly mouthed my poeticisms, she laughed with affection, but also with helpless merriment. I still want to die with shame when I think of her godlike insight into my innermost thoughts.

'Dr Haran was of the same caste as ourselves. I was often invited to his house. After a few days of going there, he introduced me to his daughter. The girl was unmarried; she was about fifteen. The doctor told me she was not yet married because he had not found a groom to his liking. But from others I heard a rumour of some kind of scandal in the family. She could not, though, be faulted in any other respect. She was as accomplished as she was beautiful. We talked of many things, and sometimes I returned home late – past the time for my wife's dose of medicine. She knew I had gone to Dr Haran's house, but never asked the reason for my lateness.

'I began to see a new mirage in the desert. Bursting with thirst, I saw clear, overflowing water lapping and purling before me. However hard I tried, I could not turn my mind from it, and my wife's sick-room became doubly unattractive to me. My nursing and doses of medicine began to fail in their regularity.

'Dr Haran said to me sometimes that death was best for those whose illnesses could not be cured, because they could take no pleasure in being alive and were a misery to others. General statements like this are permissible: he should not, however, have said such a thing with reference to my wife. But doctors become so indifferent to human mortality that they don't always understand people's feelings.

'Suddenly one day I heard my wife saying in the next room, "Doctor, why are you swelling your earnings by making me swallow all these useless medicines? Since my life has become so wretched, give me something to carry me off!"

' "Come, come," said the doctor. "You mustn't talk like that."

'It cut me to the quick to hear such a thing. As soon as the doctor had gone, I went to my wife's room and sat on the edge of her bed, slowly stroking her forehead. "It's very hot in this room," she said. "You go out. It's time for your walk. If you don't go, you won't feel hungry in the evening."

‘Going for a walk meant going to the doctor’s house. I had told my wife that I needed to be out for some of the day in order to work up an appetite. I’m certain now that she saw through this deception. I was stupid, so I thought she was stupid too.’

Dakshinacharan was silent again after this, with his head in his hands. At last he said, ‘Give me a glass of water.’ He drank the water and went on:

‘One day the doctor’s daughter Manorama expressed a desire to meet my wife. I wasn’t exactly pleased with this proposal, but I had no reason to refuse it. So one evening she came along to where we were staying.

‘My wife was in even greater pain than usual. On days when the pain was bad, she would lie totally still and silent: only when she clenched her fist or looked blue in the face could one tell what agony she was in. There was no movement at all in the room that evening; I sat quietly on the edge of the bed. Maybe she had no strength to tell me to go for my walk, or maybe she wanted me to stay with her at a time of such suffering. The kerosene light was by the door, in case it hurt her eyes.

All that could be heard in the hushed darkness was a heavy sigh from my wife whenever the pain abated.

‘Manorama appeared at the door, and the light from the kerosene lamp fell on to her face. She lingered in the doorway, making out nothing at first in the mixture of light and dark. My wife started and clutched my hand. “Who’s she?” she said. Frightened in her weakened state by the sight of an unknown person, she muttered two or three times, “Who’s she? Who’s she? Who’s she?”

‘Like a fool, I first replied, “I don’t know.” But something seemed to lash me like a whip as I spoke, and I quickly said, “Oh – she’s Dr Haran’s daughter.”

‘My wife looked up at me; I couldn’t bring myself to look at her. Then she murmured to the visitor, “Come in”, and to me, “Hold up the light.” Manorama came in and sat down. She talked with my wife for a bit.

‘Then the doctor appeared. He had brought two bottles with him from his dispensary. He showed them to my wife and said, “You should rub on the lotion in the blue bottle and take the other by mouth. Make sure you don’t mix them up, for the massage-lotion is very poisonous.”

‘Warning me too to be very careful, he put the bottles on the bedside table; and as he said goodbye he called his daughter to come with him. “Why can’t I stay, Father?” she said. “There’s no other woman to help with the nursing.”

‘ “No, no, please don’t trouble yourself,” said my wife in alarm. “We have an

old servant – she looks after me like a mother."

' "How good your wife is!" said the doctor with a laugh. "She's nursed others for so long that she can't stand anyone nursing *her*!"

'As the doctor turned to leave with his daughter, my wife said, "Dr Haran, my husband has been sitting in this closed room for too long. Take him out with you."

' "Come," said the doctor to me, "come with us for a walk by the river."

'I did not demur for long. As we left, the doctor once again warned my wife about the two bottles.

'I ate at the doctor's house that night. It was late when I returned, and my wife was tossing and turning. Stabbed with remorse, I asked, "Is the pain worse?"

'She stared at me, speechlessly, too choked to reply. I ran to fetch the doctor again. For a long time, the doctor could not make out what was wrong. Eventually he asked, "Is the pain worse? Why not rub on the lotion?" He picked up the bottle from the table and, finding it empty, asked, "Did you drink this medicine by mistake?" By a silent nod, my wife answered that she had. The doctor immediately rushed back to his house in a tonga to fetch a stomach-pump. I fell half-senseless on to my wife's bed.

'Then, like a mother soothing a child, she pulled my head on to her breast and by the touch of her hands tried to convey what she felt. By the sad touch of her hands, she assured me again and again: "Don't grieve, it's for the best – you'll be happy, and that makes me die happily."

'When the doctor returned, my wife's torments were over.'

Complaining of the heat, Dakshinacharan took another drink of water. Then he stepped outside and walked up and down the verandah a few times before coming in and sitting down again. He did not seem to want to go on talking: it was as though I myself was extracting the words from him by a kind of sorcery. He began again:

'I married Manorama and returned to Bengal. She had married me with her father's permission; but whenever I spoke affectionately to her, whenever I tried to win her with loving words, she remained solemn and unsmiling. There were misgivings, perhaps, at the back of her mind that I didn't quite fathom. It was at this time that my drinking got out of hand.

'One evening early in autumn I was walking with Manorama in our garden at Baranagar. It was eerily dark. There was no sound even of birds fluttering their wings in their nest – just the rustling of shadowy *jhāu* bushes on either side as

we walked.

‘Feeling tired, Manorama reached the white stone seat at the base of the *bakul* tree, and lay down with her head on her arms. I sat down next to her. The darkness was even denser there, though the bits of sky that were visible were covered with stars. The crickets under the trees were stitching, as it were, a narrow border of sound along the edge of the robe of silence that had slipped down from the sky. I had been drinking that afternoon, and my mind was in a fluid, maudlin state. As the darkness pressed my eyes, the shadowy shape of my wife’s languid body, the dim pallor of her loose sari, stirred me with inexorable passion. But she seemed like a shadow herself – impossible to hold in my arms.

‘Suddenly the darkness over the *jhāu* bushes seemed to catch fire: a thin, yellow crescent moon climbed slowly into the sky above the trees, lighting the face of the woman slumped in her white sari on the white stone seat. I could hold back no longer. I moved and clasped her hand and said, “Manorama, you don’t believe me, but I do love you. I shall never be able to forget you.”

‘I winced in alarm at my own words, remembering I had once spoken in the very same way to someone else. And that very moment, above the *bakul* tree, over the tops of the *jhāu* bushes, under the yellow slice of the moon, right from the eastern to the far western bank of the Ganges, a laugh sped swiftly, a rolling laugh. I cannot describe that heart-rending laugh, the way it seemed to split the sky. I lost consciousness, and fell from the stone seat.

‘When I came round, I found I was lying on my bed indoors. My wife was saying, “Why did you pass out like that?”

‘ “Didn’t you hear?” I replied, trembling. “Didn’t you hear that laughter, the way it filled the sky!”

‘ “Laughter, you call it?” said my wife, laughing herself. “A huge flock of birds flew past, I heard the noise of their wings. Do you get frightened by so little?”

‘In the light of day I could understand that it was indeed a flock of birds in flight – ducks from the north coming to feed on the river sandbanks. But by the evening, I could not believe that any more: I felt that loud laughter was lying in wait to fill the darkness: at the slightest opportunity it would burst out, splitting the dark and enveloping the sky. Things reached such a pitch that after dusk each day I was frightened even to speak to Manorama.

‘I decided to take her on a boat-trip, away from the Baranagar house.

My fears faded in the river’s late autumn breezes. For a few days we were happy. Lured by the beauty around her, Manorama at last opened slowly the

locked door of her heart.

‘We sailed beyond the Ganges and Kharia and reached the Padma. The awesome river had started her long winter sleep, lifeless and inert as a hibernating snake. To the north, barren banks of sand stretched bleakly towards the horizon; and in the villages on the steep southern banks, mango-groves quaked and pleaded in the face of the river’s demonic power. From time to time the Padma rolled over sleepily, and pieces of the crumbling shore slapped and splashed as they broke away. We found a good mooring and tied up the boat.

‘One day we wandered far from the boat. As the golden shadows of the sunset faded, a clear full moon rose up before our eyes; and as a great, unchecked flood of moonlight spread right up to the horizon, over vast white sandbanks, I felt as if we alone were wandering in a boundless dream-world, empty as the moon. Manorama was swathed in a red shawl, flowing down from her head, wound round her face, covering her whole body. As the silence thickened, and nothing showed but an infinite, directionless whiteness and emptiness, Manorama slowly brought out her hand and gripped mine; she edged close and seemed to rest the whole of her mind and body, youth and existence on me. My heart raced, and I wondered if love could ever be fulfilled indoors.

Where is there room for lovers except where the sky is open and naked and endless like this? We seemed without home, without doors, without anywhere to return to, free to wander without constraint through this moonlit emptiness, hand in hand, heading nowhere.

‘Walking like this, we came to a pool of water in the middle of the sand: the Padma had changed her course and the water had been left trapped. A long bar of moonlight lay as if in a swoon across that waveless, sleeping, desert-pool. We stood on the edge together: as Manorama gazed at me pensively, her shawl slipped from her head. I lifted her face – gleaming in the moonlight – and kissed her.

‘At once a voice resounded through the empty waste, saying three times, “Who’s she? Who’s she? Who’s she?” I started in alarm, and my wife shuddered too. But the next moment we realized it was not a human voice, not a supernatural one either – just the call of the water- birds scouring the sandbanks. They had been startled by the sight of people approaching their safe retreat.

‘Shaken by our fear, we hurried back to the boat. We lay on our beds: Manorama was exhausted and quickly fell asleep. But someone came and stood by my mosquito-net in the dark, and pointing once at Manorama with a

long, thin, bony finger whispered ever so softly and indistinctly into my ear, “Who’s she? Who’s she? Who’s she?”

‘I sat up and struck a match for the lamp. Instantly a gale of laughter swept the shadowy figure away, shaking my mosquito-net, rocking the boat, turning the blood of my sweat-soaked body to ice as it sped through the dark night. Over the Padma it went, over the sandbanks, over the sleeping fields and villages and towns, travelling on and on across countries and peoples, gradually becoming fainter as it shrank into the distance; leaving even the realm of life and death; becoming thinner than the point of a needle, till it was too faint to hear, too faint to imagine; yet there seemed to be endless sky inside my head whose borders the sound could never cross however far it travelled. It went on till I could bear it no more: I decided I’d have to turn out the light or I’d never sleep – but as soon as I did so and lay down again, immediately that strangulated voice returned to the darkness next to my mosquito- net, close to my ear: “Who’s she? Who’s she? Who’s she?” To the same rhythm as the blood in my heart it continued: “Who’s she? Who’s she?

Who’s she?… Who’s she? Who’s she? Who’s she?” In the depth of the night, on that silent boat, my round clock seemed to come to life too, its hands pointing from the shelf at Manorama, and saying with its tick- tock, “Who’s she? Who’s she? Who’s she?… Who’s she? Who’s she? Who’s she?” ’

Dakshinacharan Babu had turned yellow as he spoke, and his voice was hoarse. ‘Drink some more water,’ I said, touching him. My kerosene lamp guttered and went out. I noticed that it was getting light outside. The crows were cawing. Magpie-robins were whistling. An ox-cart creaked past on the road in front of my house. Dakshinacharan’s expression changed: there was no sign of fear any more. He seemed ashamed that the sorcery of the night and the frenzy of his imaginary fears had made him tell me so much. I felt that he blamed it on me.

Without a single civil word, he abruptly rose and left the house.

The next night, half-way through, there was a knocking at my door again, and the sound of ‘Doctor! Doctor!’

2. Comprehension Questions

Question 1: Why does Dakshinacharan Babu visit the doctor in the middle of the night?

Question 2: How does Dakshinacharan describe his first wife's reaction to his romantic or poetic expressions?

Question 3: What significant act does Dakshinacharan's first wife perform during his severe illness?

Question 4: What does Dakshinacharan's first wife suggest when she realizes her illness is incurable?

Question 5: Who is Manorama, and how does Dakshinacharan meet her?

Question 6: What mistake does Dakshinacharan's first wife make that leads to her death?

Question 7: What supernatural or eerie experiences does Dakshinacharan encounter after marrying Manorama?

Question 8: Where does Dakshinacharan take Manorama to escape his fears, and what happens there?

Question 9: What role does the garden under the bakul tree play in the story?

Question 10: How does Dakshinacharan's behavior at the end of the story reflect his emotional state?

Answers

Answer 1: Dakshinacharan Babu visits the doctor at half past two in the morning because he is distressed, claiming the doctor's medicine has failed to cure his recurring "trouble," which he later reveals as haunting experiences tied to his guilt.

Answer 2: Dakshinacharan describes his first wife as laughing at his romantic or poetic expressions, finding them ludicrous, with her laughter mixing modesty, pleasure, disbelief, and mockery.

Answer 3: During Dakshinacharan's severe illness, his first wife tirelessly nurses him, fighting death with her love and care, barely eating or sleeping to keep him alive.

Answer 4: When she realizes her illness is incurable, Dakshinacharan's first wife suggests that he should marry again, seeing it as a logical solution to free him from the burden of nursing her.

Answer 5: Manorama is Dr. Haran's daughter, described as beautiful and accomplished. Dakshinacharan meets her when he is invited to Dr. Haran's house while his wife is being treated in Allahabad.

Answer 6: Dakshinacharan's first wife mistakenly drinks a poisonous lotion meant for external use, which Dr. Haran had warned was dangerous, leading to her death.

Answer 7: After marrying Manorama, Dakshinacharan hears eerie laughter and the repeated question "Who's she?"—echoes of his first wife's voice—whenever he expresses affection for Manorama, particularly in the garden and on the boat.

Answer 8: Dakshinacharan takes Manorama on a boat trip along the Ganges and Padma rivers to escape his fears. There, he hears the question "Who's she?" and laughter again, which he initially mistakes for water-birds but perceives as his first wife's voice.

Answer 9: The garden under the bakul tree is a significant setting, created by Dakshinacharan's first wife as a simple, natural space where she sat. It becomes a site of haunting laughter, symbolizing her lingering presence and his guilt.

Answer 10: At the end, Dakshinacharan abruptly leaves the doctor's house without a civil word, ashamed of revealing his fears, and returns the next night, indicating his ongoing torment and inability to escape his guilt.

3. Grammar Page

Write the sentences in the indirect speech using the prompts given:

1. "I don't like classical music very much."
   Jiya told me.....
2. "Are you a teacher?"
   She asked me.....
3. "Be quiet, children."
   The librarian told.....
4. "What's your name?"
   The woman asked me.....
5. "Don't telephone me again or I'll call the police."
   He threatened.....
6. "Let's eat something and then go for a walk!"
   She suggested.....
7. Anuj said to me, "What a nice dress you have bought!"
   Anuj exclaimed with surprise.....
8. "Yes, it was me who ate all the cake."
   She admitted.....
9. "I think you'd better drink this medicine."
   The doctor advised.....
10. "When does the bus leave?"
    I asked.....
11. "May you pass the SEE exam with good marks!"
    My mother blessed me.....
12. "Will I pass my exam?"
    Deepa wondered.....
13. "Did you invite Jenny to your party?"
    He asked me.....
14. "Yes, I'll come with you."
    He agreed.....
15. "I'll help you, I promise."
    He promised.....

Answers

1. Jiya told me that she didn't like classical music very much
2. She asked me if I was a teacher.
3. The librarian told children to be quiet
4. The woman asked me what my name was.
5. He threatened me not to telephone him again or he would call the police.
6. She suggested that they should eat something and then go for a walk.
7. Anuj exclaimed with surprise that I had bought a nice dress.
8. She admitted that it was her who had eaten all the cake.
9. The doctor advised me to drink that medicine.
10. I asked when the bus left.
11. My mother blessed me that I might pass the SLC exam with good marks.
12. Deepa wondered if she would pass her exam.
13. He asked me if I had invited Jenny to my party.

14 He agreed that he would come with me.

15. He promised that he would help me.