Learn English Through Stories

G Series

G83

Adapted and modified by

Kulwant Singh Sandhu

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Contents

1. Studies in the Park

Anita Desai

> — Turn it off, turn it off, turn it off! First he listens to the news in Hindi. Directly after, in English. Broom – brroom – brrroom – the voice of doom roars. Next, in Tamil. Then in Punjabi. In Gujarati. What next, my God, what next? Turn it off before I smash it onto his head, fling it out of the window, do nothing of the sort of course, nothing of the sort.

— And my mother. She cuts and fries, cuts and fries. All day I hear her chopping and slicing and the pan of oil hissing. What all does she find to fry and feed us on, for God's sake? Eggplants, potatoes, spinach, shoe soles, newspapers, finally she'll slice me and feed me to my brothers and sisters. Ah, now she's turned on the tap. It's roaring and pouring, pouring and roaring into a bucket without a bottom.

— The bell rings. Voices clash, clatter and break. The tin-and-bottle man? The neighbours? The police? The Help-the-Blind man? Thieves and burglars? All of them, all of them, ten or twenty or a hundred of them, marching up the stairs, hammering at the door, breaking in and climbing over me – ten, twenty or a hundred of them.

— Then, worst of all, the milk arrives. In the tallest glass in the house. 'Suno, drink your milk. Good for you, Suno. You need it. Now, before the exams. Must have it, Suno. Drink.' The voice wheedles its way into my ear like a worm. I shudder. The table tips over. The milk runs. The tumbler clangs on the floor. 'Suno, Suno, how will you do your exams?'

— That is precisely what I ask myself. All very well to give me a room – Uncle's been pushed off on a pilgrimage to Hardwar to clear a room for me – and to bring me milk and say, 'Study, Suno, study for your exams.' What about the uproar around me? These people don't know the meaning of the word Quiet. When my mother fills buckets, sloshes the kitchen floor, fries and sizzles things in the pan, she thinks she is being Quiet. The children have never even heard the word, it amazes and puzzles them. On their way back from school they fling their satchels in at my door, then tear in to snatch them back before I tear them to bits. Bawl when I pull their ears, screech when Mother whacks them. Stuff themselves with her fries and then smear the grease on my books.

So I raced out of my room, with my fingers in my ears, to scream till the roof fell down about their ears. But the radio suddenly went off, the door to my parents' room suddenly opened and my father appeared, bathed and shaven, stuffed and set up with the news of the world in six different languages—his white dhoti blazing, his white shirt crackling, his patent leather pumps

glittering.

He stopped in the doorway and I stopped on the balls of my feet and wavered. My fingers came out of my ears, my hair came down over my eyes. Then he looked away from me, took his watch out of his pocket and enquired, 'Is the food ready?' in a voice that came out of his nose like the whistle of a punctual train. He skated off towards his meal, I turned and slouched back to my room. On his way to work, he looked in to say, 'Remember, Suno, I expect good results from you. Study hard, Suno.' Just behind him, I saw all the rest of them standing, peering in, silently. All of them stared at me, at the exam I was to take. At the degree I was to get. Or not get. Horrifying thought. Oh study, study, study, they all breathed at me while my father's footsteps went down the stairs, crushing each underfoot in turn. I felt their eyes on me, goggling, and their breath on me, hot with earnestness. I looked back at them, into their open mouths and staring eyes.

'Study,' I said, and found I croaked. 'I know I ought to study. And how do you expect me to study – in this madhouse? You run wild, *wild*. I'm getting out,' I screamed, leaping up and grabbing my books, 'I'm going to study outside. Even the street is quieter,' I screeched and threw myself past them and down the stairs that my father had just cowed and subjugated so that they still lay quivering, and paid no attention to the howls that broke out behind me of 'Suno, Suno, listen. Your milk – your studies – your exams, Suno!'

At first I tried the tea shop at the corner. In my reading I had often come across men who wrote at café tables – letters, verse, whole novels – over a cup of coffee or a glass of absinthe. I thought it would be simple to read a chapter of history over a cup of tea. There was no crowd in the mornings, none of my friends would be there. But the proprietor would not leave me alone. Bored, picking his nose, he wandered down from behind the counter to my table by the weighing machine and tried to pass the time of day by complaining about his piles, the new waiter and the high prices. 'And sugar,' he whined. 'How can I give you anything to put in your tea with sugar at four rupees a kilo? There's rationed sugar, I know, at two rupees, but that's not enough to feed even an ant. And the way you all sugar your tea – *hai, hai*,' he sighed, worse than my mother. I didn't answer. I frowned at my book and looked stubborn. But when I got rid of him, the waiter arrived. 'Have a biscuit?' he murmured, flicking at my table and chair with his filthy duster. 'A bun? Fritters? Make you some hot fritters?' I snarled at him but he only smiled, determined to be friendly. Just a boy, really, in a pink shirt with purple circles stamped all over it – he thought he looked so smart. He was growing sideburns, he kept fingering them. 'I'm a student, too,' he said, 'sixth class, fail. My mother wanted me to go back and

try again, but I didn't like the teacher – he beat me. So I came here to look for a job. Lalaji had just thrown out a boy called Hari for selling lottery tickets to the clients so he took me on. I can make out a bill …' He would have babbled on if Lalaji had not come and shoved him into the kitchen with an oath. So it went on. I didn't read more than half a chapter that whole morning. I didn't want to go home either. I walked along the street, staring at my shoes, with my shoulders slumped in the way that makes my father scream, 'What's the matter? Haven't you bones? A spine?' I kicked some rubble along the pavement, down the drain, then stopped at the iron gates of King Edward's Park.

'Exam troubles?' asked a gram vendor who sat outside it, in a friendly voice. Not insinuating, but low, pleasant. 'The park's full of boys like you,' he continued in that sympathetic voice. 'I see them walk up and down, up and down with their books, like mad poets. Then I'm glad I was never sent to school,' and he began to whistle, not impertinently but so cheerfully that I stopped and stared at him. He had a crippled arm that hung out of his shirt sleeve like a leg of mutton dangling on a hook. His face was scarred as though he had been dragged out of some terrible accident. But he was shuffling hot gram into paper cones with his one hand and whistling like a bird, whistling the tune of, 'We are the bulbuls of our land, our land is Paradise.' Nodding at the greenery beyond the gates, he said, 'The park's a good place to study in,' and, taking his hint, I went in.

I wonder how it is I never thought of the park before. It isn't far from our house and I sometimes went there as a boy, if I managed to run away from school, to lie on a bench, eat peanuts, shy stones at the chipmunks that came for the shells, and drink from the fountain. But then it was not as exciting as playing marbles in the street or stoning rats with my school friends in the vacant lot behind the cinema. It had straight paths, beds of flapping red flowers – cannas, I think – rows of palm trees like limp flags, a dry fountain and some green benches. Old men sat on them with their legs far apart, heads drooping over the tops of sticks, mumbling through their dentures or cackling with that mad, ripping laughter that makes children think of old men as wizards and bogey-men. Bag-like women in grey and fawn saris or black burkhas screamed, just as grey and fawn and black birds do, at children falling into the fountain or racing on rickety legs after the chipmunks and pigeons. A madman or two, prancing around in paper caps and bits of rags, munching banana peels and scratching like monkeys. Corners behind hibiscus bushes stinking of piss. Iron rails with rows of beggars contentedly dozing, scratching, gambling, with their sackcloth backs to the rails. A city park.

What I hadn't noticed, or thought of, were all the students who escaped from their city flats and families like mine to come and study here. Now, walking down a path with my history book tucked under my arm, I felt like a gatecrasher at a party or a visitor to a public library trying to control a sneeze. They all seemed to belong here, to be at home here. Dressed in loose pyjamas, they strolled up and down under the palms, books open in their hands, heads lowered into them. Or they sat in twos and threes on the grass, reading aloud in turns. Or lay full length under the trees, books spread out across their faces sleeping, or else imbibing information through the subconscious. Opening out my book, I too strolled up and down, reading to myself in a low murmur.

In the beginning, when I first started studying in the park, I couldn't concentrate on my studies. I'd keep looking up at the boy strolling in front of me, reciting poetry in a kind of thundering whisper, waving his arms about and running his bony fingers through his hair till it stood up like a thorn bush. Or at the chipmunks that fought and played and chased each other all over the park, now and then joining forces against the sparrows over a nest or a paper cone of gram. Or at the madman going through the rubble at the bottom of the dry fountain and coming up with a rubber shoe, a banana peel or a piece of glittering tin that he appreciated so much that he put it in his mouth and chewed it till blood ran in strings from his mouth.

It took me time to get accustomed to the ways of the park. I went there daily, for the whole day, and soon I got to know it as well as my own room at home and found I could study there, or sleep, or daydream, as I chose. Then I fell into its routine, its rhythm, and my time moved in accordance with its time. We were like a house-owner and his house, or a turtle and its shell, or a river and its bank – so close. I resented everyone else who came to the park – I thought they couldn't possibly share my feeling for it. Except, perhaps, the students.

The park was like an hotel, or an hospital, belonging to the city but with its own order and routine, enclosed by iron rails, laid out according to prescription in rows of palms, benches and paths. If I went there very early in the morning, I'd come upon a yoga class. It consisted of young bodybuilders rippling their muscles like snakes as well as old crack-pots determined to keep up with the youngest and fittest, all sitting cross-legged on the grass and displaying hus-mukh to the sun just rising over the palms: the Laughing Face pose it was called, but they looked like gargoyles with their mouths torn open and their thick, discoloured tongues sticking out. If I were the sun, I'd feel so disgusted by such a reception I'd just turn around and go back. And that was the simplest of their poses – after that they'd go into contortions that would embarrass an ape. Once their leader, a black and hirsute man like an

aborigine, saw me watching and called me to join them. I shook my head and ducked behind an oleander. You won't catch me making an ass of myself in public. And I despise all that body-beautiful worship anyway. What's the body compared to the soul, the mind?

I'd stroll under the palms, breathing in the cool of the early morning, feeling it drive out, or wash clean, the stifling dark of the night, and try to avoid bumping into all the other early morning visitors to the park – mostly aged men sent by their wives to fetch the milk from the government dairy booth just outside the gates. Their bottles clinking in green cloth bags and newspapers rolled up and tucked under their arms, they strutted along like stiff puppets and mostly they would be discussing philosophy. 'Ah but in Vedanta it is a different matter,' one would say, his eyes gleaming fanatically, and another would announce, 'The sage Shanakaracharya showed the way,' and some would refer to the Upanishads or the Bhagavad Puranas, but in such argumentative, hacking tones that you could see they were quite capable of coming to blows over some theological argument. Certainly it was the mind above the body for these old coots but I found nothing to admire in them either. I particularly resented it when one of them disengaged himself from the discussion long enough to notice me and throw me a gentle look of commiseration. As if he'd been through exams, too, long ago, and knew all about them. So what?

Worst of all were the athletes, wrestlers, Mr Indias and others who lay on their backs and were massaged with oil till every muscle shone and glittered. The men who massaged them huffed and puffed and cursed as they climbed up and down the supine bodies, pounding and pummelling the men who lay there wearing nothing but little greasy clouts, groaning and panting in a way I found obscene and disgusting. They never looked up at me or at anyone. They lived in a meaty, sweating world of their own – massages, oils, the body, a match to be fought and won – I kicked up dust in their direction but never went too close.

The afternoons would be quiet, almost empty. I would sit under a tree and read, stroll and study, doze too. Then, in the evening, as the sky softened from its blank white glare and took on shades of pink and orange and the palm trees rustled a little in an invisible breeze, the crowds would begin to pour out of Darya Ganj, Mori Gate, Chandni Chowk and the Jama Masjid bazaars and slums. Large families would come to sit about on the grass, eating peanuts and listening to a transistor radio placed in the centre of the circle. Mothers would sit together in flocks like screeching birds while children jumped into the dry fountains, broke flowers and terrorized each other. There would be a few

young men moaning at the corners, waiting for a girl to roll her hips and dart her fish eyes in their direction, and then start the exciting adventure of pursuit. The children's cries would grow more piercing with the dark; frightened, shrill and exalted with mystery and farewell. I would wander back to the flat.

The exams drew nearer. Not three, not two, but only one month to go. I had to stop daydreaming and set myself tasks for every day and remind myself constantly to complete them. It grew so hot I had to give up strolling on the paths and staked out a private place for myself under a tree. I noticed the tension tightening the eyes and mouths of other students – they applied themselves more diligently to their books, talked less, slept less. Everyone looked a little demented from lack of sleep. Our books seemed attached to our hands as though by roots, they were a part of us, they lived because we fed them. They were parasites and, like parasites, were sucking us dry. We mumbled to ourselves, not always consciously. Chipmunks jumped over our feet, mocking us. The gram seller down at the gate whistled softly 'I'm glad I never went to school, I am a bulbul, I live in Paradise …'

My brains began to jam up. I could feel it happening, slowly. As if the oil were all used up. As if everything was getting locked together, rusted. The white cells, the grey matter, the springs and nuts and bolts. I yelled at my mother – I think it was my mother – 'What do you think I am? What do you want of me?' and crushed a glass of milk between my hands. It was sticky. She had put sugar in my milk. As if I were a baby. I wanted to cry. They wouldn't let me sleep, they wanted to see my light on all night, they made sure I never stopped studying. Then they brought me milk and sugar and made clicking sounds with their tongues. I raced out to the park. I think I sobbed as I paced up and down, up and down, in the corner that stank of piss. My head ached worse than ever. I slept all day under the tree and had to work all night.

My father laid his hand on my shoulder. I knew I was not to fling it off. So I sat still, slouching, ready to spring aside if he lifted it only slightly. 'You must get a first, Suno,' he said through his nose, 'must get a first, or else you won't get a job. Must get a job, Suno,' he sighed and wiped his nose and went off, his patent leather pumps squealing like mice. I flung myself back in my chair and howled. Get a first, get a first, get a first – like a railway engine, it went charging over me, grinding me down, and left me dead and mangled on the tracks.

Everything hung still and yellow in the park. I lay sluggishly on a heap of waste paper under my tree and read without seeing, slept without sleeping. Sometimes I went to the water tap that leaked and drank the leak. It tasted of brass. I spat out a mouthful. It nearly went over the feet of the student

waiting for his turn at that dripping tap. I stepped aside for him. He swilled the water around his mouth and spat, too, carefully missing my feet. Wiping his mouth, he asked, 'BA?'

'No, Inter.'

'Hu,' he burped. 'Wait till you do your BA. Then you'll get to know.' His face was like a grey bone. It was not unkind, it simply had no expression. 'Another two weeks,' he sighed and slouched off to his own lair.

I touched my face. I thought it would be all bone, like his. I was surprised to find a bit of skin still covering it. I felt as if we were all dying in the park, that when we entered the examination hall it would be to be declared officially dead. That's what the degree was about. What else was it all about? Why were we creeping around here, hiding from the city, from teachers and parents, pretending to study and prepare? Prepare for what? We hadn't been told. Inter, they said, or BA, or MA. These were like official stamps – they would declare us dead. Ready for a dead world. A world in which ghosts went about, squeaking or whining, rattling or rustling. Slowly, slowly we were killing ourselves in order to join them. The ball-point pen in my pocket was the only thing that still lived, that still worked. I didn't work myself any more — I mean physically, my body no longer functioned. I was constipated, I was dying. I was lying under a yellow tree, feeling the dust sift through the leaves to cover me. It was filling my eyes, my throat. I could barely walk. I never strolled. Only on the way out of the park, late in the evening, I crept down the path under the palms, past the benches.

Then I saw the scene that stopped it all, stopped me just before I died. Hidden behind an oleander was a bench. A woman lay on it, stretched out.

She was a Muslim, wrapped in a black burkha. I hesitated when I saw this straight, still figure in black on the bench. Just then she lifted a pale, thin hand and lifted her veil. I saw her face. It lay bared, in the black folds of her burkha, like a flower, wax-white and composed, like a Persian lily or a tobacco flower at night. She was young. Very young, very pale, beautiful with a beauty I had never come across even in a dream. It caught me and held me tight, tight till I couldn't breathe and couldn't move. She was so white, so still, I saw she was very ill – with anaemia, perhaps, or TB. Too pale, too white – I could see she was dying. Her head – so still and white it might have been carved if it weren't for this softness, this softness of a flower at night – lay in the lap of a very old man. Very much older than her. With spectacles and a long grey beard like a goat's, or a scholar's. He was looking down at her and caressing her face – so tenderly, so tenderly, I had never seen a hand move so gently and tenderly. Beside them, on the ground, two little girls were playing. Round little girls,

rather dirty, drawing lines in the gravel. They stared at me but the man and the woman did not notice me. They never looked at anyone else, only at each other, with an expression that halted me. It was tender, loving, yes, but in an inhuman way, so intense. Divine, I felt, or insane. I stood, half-hidden by the bush, holding my book, and wondered at them. She was ill, I could see, dying. Perhaps she had only a short time to live. Why didn't he take her to the Victoria Zenana Hospital, so close to the park? Who was this man – her husband, her father, a lover? I couldn't make out although I watched them without moving, without breathing. I felt not as if I were staring rudely at strangers, but as if I were gazing at a painting or a sculpture, some work of art. Or seeing a vision. They were still and I stood still and the children stared. Then she lifted her arms above her head and laughed. Very quietly.

I broke away and hurried down the path, in order to leave them alone, in privacy. They weren't a work of art, or a vision, but real, human and alive as no one else in my life had been real and alive. I had only that glimpse of them. But I felt I could never open my books and study or take degrees after that. They belonged to the dead, and now I had seen what being alive meant. The vision burnt the surfaces of my eyes so that they watered as I groped my way up the stairs to the flat. I could hardly find my way to the bed.

It was not just the examination but everything else had suddenly withered and died, gone lifeless and purposeless when compared with this vision. My studies, my family, my life – they all belonged to the dead and only what I had seen in the park had any meaning.

Since I did not know how to span the distance between that beautiful ideal and my stupid, dull existence, I simply lay still and shut my eyes. I kept them shut so as not to see all the puzzled, pleading, indignant faces of my family around me, but I could not shut out their voices.

'Suno, Suno,' I heard them croon and coax and mourn. 'Suno, drink milk.'
'Suno, study.'

'Suno, take the exam.'

And when they tired of being so patient with me and I still would not get up, they began to crackle and spit and storm.

'Get up, Suno.'

'Study, Suno.' 'At once, Suno.'

Only my mother became resigned and gentle. She must have seen something quite out of the ordinary on my face to make her so. I felt her hand on my forehead and heard her say, 'Leave him alone. Let him sleep tonight. He is tired

out, that is what it is – he has driven himself too much and now he must sleep.'

Then I heard all of them leave the room. Her hand stayed on my forehead, wet and smelling of onions, and after a bit my tears began to flow from under my lids.

'Poor Suno, sleep,' she murmured.

I went back to the park of course. But now I was changed. I had stopped being a student – I was a 'professional'. My life was dictated by the rules and routine of the park. I still had my book open on the palms of my hands as I strolled but now my eyes strayed without guilt, darting at the young girls walking in pairs, their arms linked, giggling and bumping into each other. Sometimes I stopped to rest on a bench and conversed with one of the old men, told him who my father was and what examination I was preparing for, and allowing him to tell me about his youth, his politics, his philosophy, his youth and again his youth. Or I joked with the other students, sitting on the grass and throwing peanut shells at the chipmunks, and shocking them, I could see, with my irreverence and cynicism about the school, the exam, the system. Once I even nodded at the yoga teacher and exchanged a few words with him. He suggested I join his class and I nodded vaguely and said I would think it over. It might help. My father says I need help. He says I am hopeless but that I need help. I just laugh but I know that he knows I will never appear for the examination, I will never come up to that hurdle or cross it – life has taken a different path for me, in the form of a search, not a race as it is for him, for them.

Yes, it is a search, a kind of perpetual search for me and now that I have accepted it and don't struggle, I find it satisfies me entirely, and I wander about the park as freely as a prince in his palace garden. I look over the benches, I glance behind the bushes, and wonder if I shall ever get another glimpse of that strange vision that set me free. I never have but I keep hoping, wishing.

2. Comprehension Questions

Question 1: Why does Suno find it hard to study at home?

Question 2: What makes Suno decide to study outside his house?

Question 3: Where does Suno first try to study outside, and why doesn't it work?

Question 4: How does Suno describe King Edward's Park when he first enters it?

Question 5: What kinds of people does Suno see in the park?

Question 6: How does Suno's experience in the park change over time?

Question 7: What important moment in the park deeply affects Suno?

Question 8: How is the woman Suno sees in the park described?

Question 9: How does seeing the woman and the man change Suno's thoughts about his studies?

Question 10: What does Suno mean by calling himself a "professional" of the park?

Answers

Answer 1: Suno finds it hard to study at home because of the constant noise from the radio playing news in multiple languages, his mother's cooking sounds, and the chaos of his siblings and visitors.

Answer 2: Suno decides to study outside because his home is too noisy and chaotic, which he calls a "madhouse," making it impossible to focus.

Answer 3: Suno first tries to study at a tea shop, but it doesn't work because the proprietor and waiter keep talking to him, distracting him from his books.

Answer 4: Suno describes King Edward's Park as a city park with straight paths, red flowers (cannas), palm trees, a dry fountain, green benches, and various people like old men, women, children, and madmen.

Answer 5: Suno sees yoga practitioners, old men discussing philosophy, wrestlers, families with children, young men and women, beggars, and other students in the park.

Answer 6: Over time, Suno adapts to the park's routine, feeling at home and able to study, sleep, or daydream there, unlike his initial struggle to focus.

Answer 7: The important moment is when Suno sees a young, ailing Muslim woman in a burkha lying on a bench with an older man tenderly caressing her face.

Answer 8: The woman is described as young, very pale, beautiful, and dying, with a face like a wax-white flower, wrapped in a black burkha.

Answer 9: Seeing the woman and man, with their tender and intense love, makes Suno view his studies and family pressures as meaningless, showing him the value of human connection.

Answer 10: By calling himself a "professional" of the park, Suno means he has embraced its lifestyle and rhythm, living freely in a search for meaning rather than chasing academic goals.

3. Grammar Page

Unit **83**

a friend **of mine** **my own** house
on my own / by myself

A **a friend of mine / a friend of yours** etc.

We say '(a friend) **of mine/yours/his/hers/ours/theirs**'.
A friend of mine = one of my friends:

- I'm going to a wedding on Saturday. **A friend of mine** is getting married. (*not* a friend of me)
- We went on holiday with **some friends of ours**. (*not* some friends of us)
- Harry had an argument with **a neighbour of his**.
- It was **a good idea of yours** to go to the cinema.

In the same way we say '(a friend) **of my sister's** / (a friend) **of Tom's**' etc.:

- That woman over there is **a friend of my sister's**. (= one of my sister's friends)
- It was **a good idea of Tom's** to go to the cinema.

B **my own ... / your own ...** etc.

We say **my own / your own / her own ...** etc.:
my own house **your own** car **her own** room
(*not* an own house, an own car etc.)

my own ... / your own ... etc. = something that is only mine/yours, not shared or borrowed:

- I don't want to share a room with anybody. I want **my own room**.
- Vicky and Gary would like to have **their own house**.
- It's a shame that the apartment hasn't got **its own parking space**.
- It's **my own fault** that I have no money. I buy too many things I don't need.
- Why do you want to borrow my car? Why don't you use **your own**? (= your own car)

You can also say 'a room **of my own**', 'a house **of your own**', 'problems **of his own**' etc.:

- I'd like to have a room **of my own**.
- He won't be able to help you with your problems. He has too many problems **of his own**.

C He cuts **his own** hair

We also use **own** to say that we do something ourselves instead of somebody else doing it for us. For example:

- Paul usually cuts **his own hair**. (= he cuts it himself)
- I'd like to have a garden so that I could grow **my own vegetables**. (= grow them myself instead of buying them from shops)

D **on my own / by myself**

On my own and **by myself** both mean 'alone'. So you can say:

on { my / your / his / her / its / our / their } **own** *or* **by** { myself / yourself *(singular)* / himself / herself / itself / ourselves / yourselves *(plural)* / themselves }

- I like living **on my own**. *or* I like living **by myself**.
- Some people prefer to live **on their own**. *or* ... live **by themselves**.
- Jack was sitting **on his own** in a corner of the cafe. *or* Jack was sitting **by himself** ...
- Did you go on holiday **on your own**? *or* Did you go on holiday **by yourself**?