



A Long Way Home

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Extract

They've gone.

I've been thinking about this day for twenty-five years. Growing up half a world away, with a new name and a new family, wondering whether I would ever see my mother and brothers and sister again. And now here I am, standing at a door near the corner of a run-down building in a poor district of a small, dusty town in central India – the place I grew up – and no-one lives there.

It's empty.

The last time I stood here I was five years old.

The door, its hinges broken, is so much smaller than I remember it as a child – now I would have to bend over to fit through it. There's no point in knocking. Through the window, as well as some gaps in the familiar crumbling brick wall, I can see into the tiny room my family shared, the ceiling only a little higher than my head.

This was my worst fear, so paralysing that I suppressed it almost completely – that once I finally found my home, after years of searching, my family wouldn't be in it.

Not for the first time in my life, I'm lost and I don't know what to do. This time I'm thirty, I've got money in my pocket and a ticket home, but I feel just like I did on that railway platform all those years ago – it's hard to breathe, my mind is racing and I wish I could change the past.

Then the neighbour's door opens. A young woman in red robes comes out of the better maintained flat next door, holding a baby in her arms. She's curious, understandably. I look Indian, but my Western clothes are probably a little too new, my hair carefully styled – I'm obviously an outsider, a foreigner. To make matters worse, I can't speak her language, so when she speaks to me, I can only guess that she's asking me what I want here. I remember barely any Hindi and I'm not confident about how to pronounce the little I do know. I say, 'I don't speak Hindi, I speak English,' and I'm astonished when she responds, 'I speak English, a little.' I point at

the abandoned room and recite the names of the people who used to live there - 'Kamla, Guddu, Kallu, Shekila' - and then I point to myself and say, 'Saroo.'

This time the woman remains silent. Then I remember something Mum gave me back in Australia, for just this situation. I scabble around in my daypack and pull out an A4 page with colour photographs of me as a child. Again I point to myself, and then say 'little' as I point to the boy in the photographs. 'Saroo.'

I try to remember who lived next door to us when this was my home. Was there a little girl who could now be this woman?

She stares at the page, then at me. I'm not sure if she understands, but this time she speaks, in hesitant English.

'People . . . not live here . . . today,' she says.

Although she is only confirming what I know, to hear her say it aloud hits me hard. I feel dizzy. I'm left standing there in front of her, unable to move.

I've always known that even if I managed to find my way back here, my family might have moved. Even in my short time with them, they had moved here from another place - poor people often don't have much say in where they live, and my mother used to have to take whatever work she could get.

These are the thoughts that start coming out of the box I've put them in. The other possibility - that my mother is dead - I jam back inside.

A man who has noticed us approaches, so I start my mantra over again, reciting the names of my mother, Kamla, my brothers, Guddu and Kallu, my sister, Shekila, and me, Saroo. He is about to say something when another man wanders up and takes over. 'Yes? How can I help?' he says in clear English.

This is the first person I've been able to talk to properly since I arrived in India, and my story comes tumbling out quickly: I used to live here when I was a little boy, I went off with my brother and got lost, I grew up in another country, I couldn't even remember the name of this place, but now I've found my way back here, to Ganesh Talai, to try to find my mother, my brothers and my sister. Kamla, Guddu, Kallu, Shekila.

He looks surprised at the story and I recite the family names yet again.

After a moment, he says, 'Please wait here. I'll be back in two minutes.'

My mind races with possibilities - what's he gone to get? Someone who might know what happened to them? An address, even? But has he understood who I am? I don't have to wait long before he's back. And he says the words I'll never forget: 'Come with me. I'm going to take you to your mother.'