

Penguin



Readers

LION



Based on:

A LONG WAY HOME

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CHAPTER ONE

Getting lost

I live in Australia now, but I was born in India, in a place called Ganesh Talai. When I was a child, I did not know how to read or write, so I only remembered the name “Ginestlay”. I lived with my mother, Kamla, who was very beautiful, with long, thick hair. I had two older brothers called Guddu and Kallu, and a baby sister, Shekila. My father had another family now, so we did not see him. We lived in a poor part of town near the **railway station**, in a single room with a **mud** floor. It was small and **simple**, with no TV, radio, books or toys. We were poor, but I remember being very happy and having fun with my brothers and sister.

The Indian streets were full of animals, like cows, pigs and dogs. I did not like dogs because once one tried to bite me. While I was running away, I fell down and cut my head. A **holy man** gave me some advice, “Dogs don’t bite you if you aren’t afraid of them.” After that I tried not to be afraid but it was hard. I still do not like dogs, and I still have the **scar** on my head today.

My mother worked hard for the family, carrying heavy rocks on her head in the hot sun every day. Guddu was the oldest brother, so he helped the family by working in a restaurant. But we were still poor. We **begged** from neighbours or people on the streets and I often felt hungry,

but it was a normal feeling. There are hungry children everywhere in India. We ate very simple food like bread, rice and **daal**. If we were lucky, we had vegetables, but fruit was too expensive.

My brothers and I found different ways to get food. Sometimes we took fruit from trees or we stole tomatoes from a field. One night, we found a chicken farm and we made a plan to steal some eggs. We waited until the men on the farm left to have a rest. Then we quickly climbed inside and took as many eggs as we could carry. But the chickens woke up and we had to run away quickly. While we were running home, many of the eggs were dropped or broken. We only had ten eggs left, but we had a good dinner that evening.

We did not have enough money to pay for school, so most days I stayed at home with Shekila. Shekila was very special to me and she loved being with me. I was very young, but our father was gone and our mother worked all day, so I had to look after my sister. I washed, fed and played with her.

When Guddu was fourteen and Kallu was twelve, they often left to look for work in another town called something like “Berampur”. They slept in the station and found different jobs to get money. Sometimes I went out with them, waiting in the station while they worked. One night, when I was five years old, we were having dinner. Our mother went outside for something and Guddu decided to go back to Berampur. I wanted to go, too, so I jumped



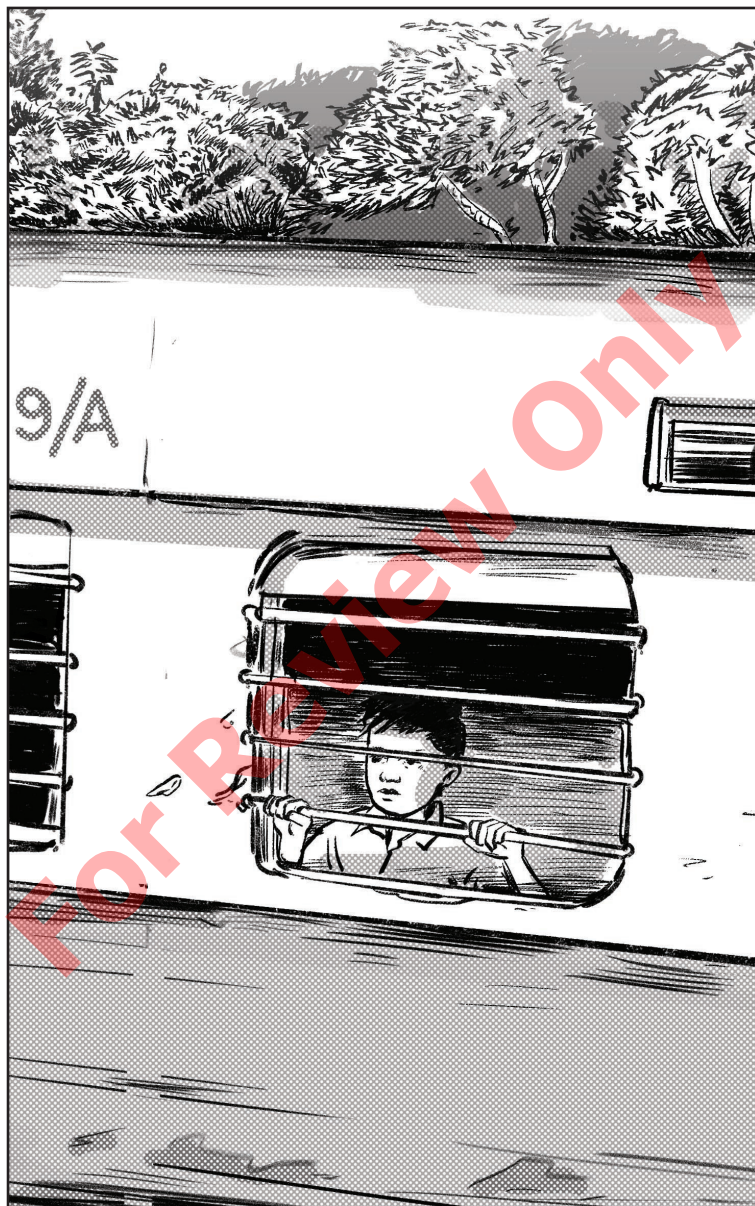
up and said, "I'm coming with you!" He thought about it and said yes. I knew that my mother would not be cross, because I was with my older brother.

Soon I was laughing while we rode on Guddu's bike to the station. I was so excited. The children playing on the road shouted "Hey, Guddu!" and I thought that he was famous. At the station we got on the train, but it was getting late and I was starting to feel tired. The journey took about an hour. When we arrived at Berampur, I was really tired and I sat down on a seat on the **platform**. Guddu said, "Sit down and don't move. I'll come back soon." I lay on the seat, shut my eyes, and fell asleep.

When I woke up, everything was silent and the station was empty. I could not see Guddu anywhere. I looked around and saw the **overpass** over the train **tracks** and the big **water tower** next to the station. There was a train at the platform, but I did not know if it was the Ginestlay train. How long was I asleep? Guddu told me not to move, but maybe he was already on the train? I did not want to stay here on this dark platform alone, so I got on the train. The seats were comfortable and, in a few moments, I was sleeping again.

When I woke up, there was bright sun in my eyes and the train was moving!

I jumped up. The **carriage** was empty, and I could not enter the next one because there were no doors between them. I ran to the doors and tried to open them, but they were shut. A cold feeling like ice started growing in my



chest and I could feel my heart getting faster as I started to **panic**. I cannot really remember what I did at that moment, but I think that I started screaming and hitting the windows hard. I was so afraid. The train was moving fast and when I looked outside, I did not know the land that I saw, but I knew that I was **far** from home. I continued running up and down, shouting Guddu's name and crying for my mother and Kallu. But no one answered and the train did not stop.

I was **lost**.

For the next few hours, I just cried, sat silently, or slept. Once, I woke up and noticed that the train was stopping at a station, and my heart filled with hope. There was no one on the platform, but I still ran to the door. I hit it hard and screamed loudly, but the train just started moving again.

After a while, I was too tired to cry any more. The next few hours were like a bad dream. I sat on a seat in the empty carriage while the train continued moving and no one opened the doors. But after some time, I began to think. I just needed to wait for someone to open the door. This train was taking me away from home, so maybe it could also take me back there? I thought about my brothers, who often stayed away from home. They knew how to find food for themselves and a place to sleep, and I knew that I could look after myself, too. There was nothing to eat, but I could get water from the carriage's toilet. So I sat and waited, trying not to think about anything.

When I looked outside again, I saw trees, fields and

monkeys. Then, there were small towns, children playing and mothers washing clothes. And after that, the towns became bigger, with cars, big buildings and crowds of people. The train was moving more slowly, so I knew that it was coming to another station, and, suddenly, it stopped. Outside the window, I saw hundreds of people, maybe thousands! Someone opened the train door and I quickly ran on to the platform.

I did not know where I was. Today, I know that I was in Kolkata, one of the biggest and most dangerous cities in the world.

I had no shoes, no money and no **identification**. I was happy to be off the train, but I was frightened, too. I looked for Guddu, still hoping he was on the same train, but there was nobody that I knew here. The station was full of busy people, hurrying to their trains, talking and shouting, and I could not understand anyone. I shouted “Ginestlay? Berampur?” to people, but there were lots of other children begging and looking for food, so nobody listened to me.

There were policemen in the station, but I did not ask them for help. I was afraid that they would put me in prison. When Guddu was younger, he was put in prison for selling toothbrushes at the station. We did not know where he was for three days.

The next day, I became tired of asking people for help. Adults did not want to listen to me, so I decided to try and find my own way home. “A train brought me here, so a

train can take me back,” I thought. So I chose one and got on it. As it left the platform, I looked at the station from the outside. It was a huge red building. After an hour, the train stopped just outside the city, but then it went back to the same station. I tried another train, and the same thing happened. Maybe I needed to use a different platform? But there were many platforms in this station, so every day, for many days, I caught a different train out of the city. Nobody ever asked me for a ticket.

At home, I was good at finding food, so I learned to feed myself in the station quite easily. I ate food that I found on the ground, it was easy to find water, and I slept under the seats on the platforms.

But after a while, I started to lose hope. There were so many trains and I could not find the right one. My home was out there somewhere but no train from here seemed to go to it. Maybe someone in the world outside could help me, but part of me was actually happy each time the train returned to the station. The station was the only place that I knew outside of home, and I could only get home from there, so I was afraid to leave it.

I noticed a group of children who slept at the end of a platform. I thought that they were like me, **homeless**. I was afraid of them for a while, but they did not seem bad, so one day I sat down near them. I felt safer there and I soon fell asleep. I woke up a short time later to hear a young voice scream, “Go away! Don’t touch me!” I thought that it was a bad dream, but I heard a man’s voice shout, “You’re

coming with me!” Then a child shouted, “RUUUNN!” and I jumped up, knowing that this was not a dream.

I saw some adults picking up the children at the end of the platform, and a small girl trying to escape. I ran away as fast as I could and I jumped from the platform on to the tracks. I did not know why the men were taking the children, but I could not allow them to get me. It was completely dark but I kept running until a train suddenly appeared and was coming towards me! I quickly moved to the side before it could hit me.

I continued walking carefully along the tracks until they came to a road. Then I left the tracks and I walked outside of the station for the first time. The road took me to a wide river with a huge bridge that had crowds of people, cars and bicycles moving across it. There were small shops near the river and a lot of boats on the water. This place was so big to my young eyes. How many people were here? Was this the biggest city in the world? I could not believe that anywhere could be so crowded and noisy. I felt more afraid and lost than ever.

The river was busy. People were washing in the water, or cooking, or carrying things from the boats. I tried to get some free food from the shops, but nobody would give me anything, so I kept walking. I finally found a group of sleeping holy men who had orange clothes and long, dirty hair. I felt safe near them, so I lay down and fell asleep, too.

When I woke up, it was morning. The holy men were gone and the sun was up. That was my first night on the streets of Kolkata.