

A Long Way Home



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SAROO BRIERLEY

As Saroo's memoir explains, he was born in the small central Indian town of Khandwa to a Muslim father and a Hindu mother. He was their third child and was actually born with the name Sheru. His father effectively left the family when Saroo was very young, so Saroo, his brothers, and their mother had to do whatever they could to support the family. They were extremely poor, and Saroo and his siblings were often left home alone for days at a time. When he was five, he mistakenly boarded a train for the city of Calcutta, one of the most dangerous cities in India. He survived for weeks on the streets until he came to the attention of the authorities. The birthday he celebrates is one given to him by the Calcutta authorities; they estimated the year, and the month and day are the date that he arrived at the orphanage. Within seven months, he was adopted by a family in Tasmania, Australia and became Saroo Brierley. He completed a degree in hospitality as a young man, but began working with his father in the family hosepipe business after graduating. While he was in college, he began using Google Earth to look for his hometown, and he finally succeeded after five years of searching. He returned to Khandwa for the first time in 2011 and was able to reconnect with his mother, younger sister, and older brother. He's been back several times since, and is doing what he can to help his nieces and nephews, buy his mother a house, and support the orphanage in Calcutta that facilitated his adoption. He lives in Hobart, Tasmania.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The subject of international adoption can be a tricky one. Some people, such as Sue Brierley (Saroo's adoptive mother), believe that international adoption should be made easier and be less regulated so that more people will feel able to do it, while others take a child's-rights standpoint and insist that there need to be more regulations guiding international adoption. Legally, the second view has more traction. The first international law governing international adoption was passed months after Saroo's adoption went through in 1987, and two more have followed in the years since. Each country sets its own rules and guidelines for adoption, which can make navigating those rules especially challenging for prospective parents. In much of the world, the U.S. and Australia included, infants and babies under a year old are in extremely high demand for adoption, while older children such as Saroo and Mantosh are overwhelmingly not adopted—though children in their age group make up the majority of adoptable children in

many countries. This can, in some cases, lead to a practice known as baby stealing, where people actually kidnap infants to feed the international adoption market. Practices like these are what child's-rights advocates overwhelmingly wish to stop.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

There are a number of memoirs like Saroo's that follow adopted children as they reconnect with their birth families. These include books like *Lucky Girl: A Memoir* by Mei-Ling Hopgood, who is contacted by her Chinese birth family when she's in her twenties, and *Red Dust Road: An Autobiographical Journey* by Jackie Kay. Books about adoption from parents' perspectives include *The Russian Word for Snow: A True Story of Adoption*, which details two American parents' struggle to adopt a toddler from Russia on the eve of the election of an anti-American leader, as well as *No Biking In the House Without a Helmet* by Melissa Fay Green, which takes a humorous look at her life as a parent to four biological children and five adopted children from both Ethiopia and Bulgaria.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Long Way Home: A Boy's Incredible Journey from India to Australia and Back Again
- **When Written:** 2012-13
- **Where Written:** Hobart, Tasmania
- **When Published:** 2013
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Nonfiction
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** India and Australia, 1985-2012
- **Climax:** Saroo reunites with his birth mother, Kamla
- **Antagonist:** Poverty, the inconsistencies of memory
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Nicole Kidman. Sue Brierley has said in interviews that when the subject of adapting *A Long Way Home* for the screen first came up, the family had a number of conversations about which actors they'd like to see portray them. Sue's wish came true when Nicole Kidman was cast to play her in *Lion*, and Kidman was even nominated for the Best Supporting Actress Oscar for her performance.

Doing Good. Mrs. Saroj Sood, as well as several other Indian social workers, hope that the release of both Saroo's memoir and *Lion* will push Indian authorities to do better for lost and orphaned children. The children's home Liluah in particular has

come under fire: while individuals involved with the home have been overwhelmingly unwilling to speak about its dark past, social workers who visited around the time Saroo was there insist that Saroo and *Lion's* depictions aren't far off at all.



PLOT SUMMARY

As an adult, Saroo stands in front of his childhood home in India. He's in shock: the tiny house is clearly abandoned. A young woman appears out of the next house to help, and Saroo begins to list the people who lived in the house. The woman says they don't live there anymore. Two other men arrive, and Saroo recites the names of his family members again. One man takes Saroo's page of childhood photos, disappears for a few minutes, and then returns. He tells Saroo to follow him; he'll take Saroo to his mother.

Saroo is adopted when he's six and grows up in Hobart, Tasmania. His Mum pins a **map** of India to his wall to make Saroo feel at home. Though Saroo has a relatively easy time adjusting to his new life, he does anxiously run through his memories of his Indian family every night. After a while, Saroo begins to talk about his life in India. Mum is flabbergasted when he explains how he became lost and ended up in Calcutta. Together, they draw a map of Saroo's hometown and the train journey to Calcutta.

Saroo returns his story to his childhood in India. His parents separate when he's very young, and his only clear memory of his birth father is going to visit his birth father's new baby when he's four years old. His mother, Kamla, takes Saroo, baby Shekila, and their brothers Guddu and Kallu on a day-long journey to visit. The children go alone to their father's house, and the next day, a riot breaks out in the street when Kamla and Saroo's father begin fighting. Luckily, the riot dissolves when Saroo's father throws a rock at Kamla.

Saroo's family lives in a poor town he knows as "**Ginestlay**" in a Muslim neighborhood, even though Kamla is Hindu. Kamla works on building sites and is often gone for days at a time. Guddu and Kallu work hawking small items at train stations and sweeping train cars, while Saroo goes door-to-door begging for food from neighbors. Saroo also steals food whenever he can. As Guddu and Kallu get older, they begin spending more time at "Berampur," a train station down the line where they have better luck finding food and money. Saroo spends his time with Shekila and Baba, the local holy man. One evening when Saroo is five, Saroo insists that Guddu take him back to "Berampur" with him. Guddu agrees. Saroo quickly begins to feel tired, however, and when they reach the station, Guddu instructs Saroo to stay where he is and nap. He promises to return. Saroo does as he's told but wakes with a start some time later. There's a stopped train in front of him. Believing that Guddu is on the train, Saroo boards it. The doors close, trapping Saroo, and he

spends about fifteen hours crying, sleeping, and panicking as the train races away from his home and family.

The train finally reaches the end of the line at a massive and busy station. None of the adults will help Saroo. Saroo reasons that he should be able to take a train home again, so he begins hopping on trains and riding them out. None of them take him home. After a week or so, Saroo sees a group of men attempting to wrestle a screaming group of children out of the station. Saroo races away and out into the bustling city of Calcutta. He walks near the river and is terrified to see decomposing and mutilated bodies, but finds a group of children playing in the water and joins them. Later, he jumps in the same spot, unaware that the water level rose. A homeless man saves him from drowning, and then does the same the next day.

As Saroo searches the city for food, he comes across a gang of boys who chase him, and he does his best to sleep near holy men, as he feels safer near them. One afternoon, Saroo almost falls asleep on the train tracks. A railway worker offers Saroo a place to sleep and a meal, and Saroo accepts. The next day, when the railway worker brings a friend to help Saroo, Saroo understands immediately that the friend means to do him harm. Saroo very narrowly escapes later the next afternoon. Saroo crosses the massive bridge and meets a little boy and his mother on the other side. They house him for a night, but the mother has no time for Saroo when he won't listen to her. Several days later, Saroo meets a teenager who speaks very patiently and kindly to him. Saroo stays with the teenager for a few days until the teenager takes Saroo to the police.

Though Saroo is terrified of the police, they feed him and ask him questions about where he's from. They take him to a place that looks like a prison, where Saroo tries to avoid bullies. After a month, Saroo goes to the children's court and is turned over to Mrs. Sood and ISSA, an adoption agency. She takes him to an orphanage called Nava Jeevan and spends several weeks trying to find his family. Finally, she asks Saroo if he'd like them to find him another family. Saroo recognizes that he has no other choice, so he agrees to be adopted by a couple called the Brierleys in Australia. Saroo's friend Asra is also going to be adopted by a couple in Australia, and they travel together on the plane. They arrive in Melbourne in September of 1987.

Saroo recognizes Mum and Dad immediately, though they cannot speak to each other. Some parts of Saroo's new life take getting used to, but he adjusts quickly and enjoys his new life. He remains blissfully unaware of some of the racist comments he attracts, and he loves attending school. Two years later, Mum and Dad adopt a boy named Mantosh. The process takes two years, during which Mum becomes ill and Mantosh experiences physical and sexual abuse. Mantosh struggles to adjust to life in Australia when he does arrive.

Saroo explains how his parents came to their decision to adopt. Mum's parents, Julie and Josef, immigrated to Australia after

WWII ended. Josef's experiences in the war disturbed him, and though he was initially kind and trustworthy, he soon became delusional and violent. Mum grew up terrified of him and left school at age 16 to escape. She met Dad a few years later, and they married and moved to Hobart. Because of Mum's experiences with Josef and because of a vision of herself with a brown-skinned child she had when she was twelve, she was firm in her desire to adopt. Mum and Dad had to wait sixteen years before the law allowed them to do so, and then the process of adopting Saroo took a mere seven months.

Saroo feels like a normal teen by the time he starts high school. He has girlfriends and goofs around with his friends, though he renews his commitment to academics after Mum and Dad give him an ultimatum. He begins a degree in accounting, but enjoys his hospitality job so much he later pursues a degree in hospitality management. For this, he goes to a school in Canberra. There, he meets a number of students from India who are very interested in his story. They overwhelmingly believe that it's possible for Saroo to find his family, and so Saroo begins searching for "Ginestlay" and "Berampur" on Google Earth.

Saroo finishes his degree in 2009 and moves back to Hobart. Rather than find a hospitality job, he goes to work with Dad at the family business. After a difficult breakup, Saroo moves in with a friend named Byron. Byron has fast internet, and Saroo soon becomes obsessive about his search for his family. He devises a plan to follow all train lines out of Howrah Station in Kolkata to a 1000 Km radius, which is how far he believes he traveled as a child. He begins dating a woman named Lisa soon after, and they move in together. Finally, in 2010, Saroo finds his hometown totally by accident: it's well outside of his initial search zone, and it's mysteriously called Khandwa, a name he's never heard. Regardless, the landmarks all match up, and he finds the Burhanpur station that must be the "Berampur" he remembers. He excitedly tells Lisa, and struggles to tell Dad and Mum over the next few days. He finds a Facebook group to try to confirm whether Khandwa is indeed his hometown. It takes a while, but Saroo finally discovers that he grew up in the Khandwa suburb of Ganesh Talai—"Ginestlay."

Saroo decides he needs to go to Khandwa by himself to find his Indian family. His parents want to come, but he insists on going alone. In 2012, he travels to Khandwa and anxiously walks the streets, feeling as though they're both familiar and very different. He soon realizes that they look different mostly because the town now has electricity. When Saroo reaches the house he remembers, he finds it empty. The scene he opens the memoir with unfolds, and the man takes Saroo to his mother. After a moment, Saroo and Kamla recognize each other, and soon a celebration erupts. Kamla phones for Kallu and Shekila, who both arrive hours later. They all cry and hold each other, and manage to talk some with the help of translators. Kamla insists that she's grateful to Mum and Dad for raising him, as

she just wants what's best for him. Sadly, Saroo learns that Guddu died at the same time he disappeared.

Local and national media start arriving on Saroo's second day, and he speaks to his family with the help of a woman named Cheryl. After he returns to Hobart, Australian and international media begin contacting him. He feels compelled to tell his story in case it helps someone else. Saroo video chats regularly with his family in India, and returns to India in early winter. He learns that after his and Guddu's disappearance, Shekila and Kallu were able to attend school. Kamla never moved from Ganesh Talai in the hope that Saroo would return, and inexplicably, she experienced a vision of him the day before he returned. Saroo also meets Rochak, the administrator of the Facebook group that helped him solve the "Ginestlay" mystery. Finally, Saroo decides that he'd like to retrace his journey from Burhanpur to Kolkata. Arranging this calls many of Saroo's childhood memories into question, as it's impossible to make the journey in less than 24 hours and Indian train carriages are never empty, as he remembers his being. When his train pulls into Howrah Station after 30 hours of travel, he observes the station, the Hooghly River, and the Howrah Bridge. He visits Mrs. Sood at ISSA and gets to look through his adoption file. Finally, he visits Liluah, the prison-like home where he went before going to ISSA. It's still a terrifying place. After this, he crosses the Howrah Bridge on foot and gives silent thanks to the teenager for saving him.

A year later, Kamla and Mum meet thanks to the news program *60 Minutes*. It's an emotional experience, and the joy doesn't need translation. Saroo explains that he's in the process of buying Kamla a house, and he's also helping fund repairs to the Nava Jeevan orphanage. He's grateful for everything that happened, and has no regrets.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Saroo Brierley – The author and narrator of the book, Saroo was born "Sheru" in the central Indian town of Khandwa. He admires his mother Kamla, and his older brothers Guddu and Kallu. When he's about four, he becomes responsible for his baby sister, Shekila. Though his family lives in extreme poverty and Saroo is often hungry, he learns to thrive: he develops street smarts and steals often. When Saroo is five, he mistakenly boards a train and finds himself transported to the bustling and dangerous city of Calcutta. Saroo lives on the street for several weeks, but eventually a teenager takes him to the police. The authorities try to help, but they cannot figure out where Saroo is from, and he's eventually put up for adoption. Mum and Dad adopt him, and he arrives in Tasmania when he's five years old. Saroo adjusts to life in Australia relatively quickly, though he runs through his memories of India

nightly. He completes a degree in hospitality, but his time at college is most effective in reconnecting him with his Indian roots. With the help of exchange students, Saroo begins using **Google Earth** to follow Indian train lines and search for his hometown. This search continues for five years, during which time Saroo returns to live in Hobart and starts dating a woman named Lisa. Finally, in 2011, he finds his hometown. He worries about telling his parents, as he wants them to understand that he absolutely thinks of them as his real parents. Saroo returns to Khandwa and finds Kamla, Shekila, and Kallu relatively quickly. He learns that Guddu died when he disappeared, and struggles deeply with his loss. After finding his family, Saroo feels as though he is able to fit together pieces of his identity and better understand both his roots and how he became lost in the first place. After this, Saroo begins supporting ISSA, the agency that facilitated his adoption, and begins the process of buying Kamla a new home. He feels as though he has a responsibility to tell his story in case it inspires others.

Mum / Sue Brierley – Mum (Sue Brierley) is Saroo's adoptive mother. She grew up in a home with a volatile father, and her early experiences helped her form the opinion that there's nothing particularly special about families formed by biological parents and their biological children. This belief was also influenced by a vision she had at age twelve in which she saw a brown-skinned child standing next to her. Later, when she met and married Dad, she insisted that adoption was the only path she was willing to pursue to create a family. She and Dad decide to adopt from India because of the exorbitantly high rates of child mortality and illness in the country. She believes deeply in helping others, particularly those less fortunate and from developing countries. She and Dad also make a habit of sponsoring children. Mum and Dad wait sixteen years to adopt, and they shower Saroo with love and affection upon his arrival. Mum is one of the first people with whom Saroo shares his story of becoming lost, and she records some of Saroo's observations about his hometown and journey to Calcutta on a hand-drawn **map**. Two years later, she and Dad adopt Mantosh. It takes two years to complete the process, and the stress of it makes Mum very ill. This experience convinces Mum that adoption should be much easier, especially since Mantosh experienced neglect and abuse during that two-year time. When Saroo begins to search seriously for his hometown and his Indian family, he worries about telling Mum because he doesn't want to threaten her deep belief in the "realness" of their family. Later, thanks to *60 Minutes*, Mum and Kamla finally meet.

Kamla – Kamla is Saroo's birth mother. She married Saroo's birth father when she was nineteen, and it was an unconventional marriage: Kamla was Hindu, while her husband was Muslim. They had four children, Guddu, Kallu, Saroo, and Shekila, over twelve years. When Kamla was pregnant with Shekila, her husband took a second wife and effectively

abandoned the family. Kamla is then forced to perform hard labor for little money. Saroo loves and admires her when he's a child; he thinks she's beautiful and strong. She has customary face tattoos and always wears a red sari, so she's easy to spot when she returns from work. When both Saroo and Guddu disappear, Kamla is devastated and even considers killing herself and her remaining children, but she manages to make the best of her situation. With only two children she can afford to send Kallu and Shekila to school, and she eventually moves to a nicer house in Ganesh Talai. She never gives up on her hope that Saroo is alive and well. Sometime between Saroo's disappearance and his return, she converts to Islam and changes her name to Fatima. Though she has the right to file for divorce under Islamic law, she remains married to Saroo's birth father. The day before Saroo returns, she experiences a vision of him, which reinforces her belief in destiny. Kamla insists that Mum and Dad are Saroo's parents, as they're the ones who raised him to be the man he is when she meets him as an adult. With this, she effectively gives Saroo permission to feel that he made the right choice by consenting to his adoption. By the end of the memoir, Saroo is in the process of buying Kamla a home so that she can be comfortable in her old age. She asks that Saroo marry and have children before she dies—she values family and wants to make sure Saroo will have a family of his own to care for him upon her death.

Dad / John Brierley – Dad (John Brierley) is Saroo's adoptive father. He runs an industrial hose business in Hobart, Tasmania, where both Mantosh and Saroo work as adults. Dad was born in England and moved to Australia as a teenager. He enjoyed the climate so much that he never returns to England. He fully supports Mum's desire to adopt internationally and not have biological children, though he doesn't feel as strongly about it as she does. As a parent, Dad is loving and kind, but firm. Saroo very much enjoys having fatherly attention. Dad in particular is the one tasked with standing up to racism within their community, as he experiences several incidents while signing Saroo and Mantosh up for sports teams. Like Mum, Dad is very active, and the Brierleys as a unit are an outdoorsy family. He's especially interested in sailing and water sports, and in the year after adopting Saroo, he often takes Saroo out on his catamaran.

Mantosh – Mantosh is Saroo's little brother; the Brierleys also adopt him from India. Unlike Saroo, Mantosh's birth parents are still in the picture when he arrives at ISSA, which proves problematic: due to the fact that his mother is absent and his father is around but doesn't want him, it takes two years for the Brierleys' adoption application to go through. During those two years, Mantosh is abused physically and sexually, and also suffered sexual abuse at the hands of a family member prior to arriving at ISSA. Once in Hobart, Mantosh is loud and often acts out. He requires much more care and attention from Mum and Dad than Saroo did, which does create some sibling rivalry.

As an adult, Mantosh joins Saroo and Dad at the family business. He and Saroo are both thankful that their parents raised them the way they did and provided them so many opportunities.

Saroo's Birth Father – Saroo's birth father is a Muslim man, and unnamed in the book. He's mostly absent for Saroo's childhood because when Kamla was pregnant with Shekila, he decided to take a second wife. He was always very violent towards Kamla. Despite being physically separated, Kamla remains married legally to Saroo's birth father throughout her life. When Saroo reconnects with his birth family, Saroo learns that his father lives several hours away from Khandwa, and his family has not forgiven him for abandoning them. Despite this, Saroo does express interest in meeting his father, and his father is apparently angry when he discovers that Saroo has reconnected with his mother and siblings but not him. As of the end of the memoir, Saroo and his father haven't yet met.

Guddu – Guddu is Kamla's oldest son. As a child, Saroo looks up to him and desperately wants to be like him. At a very young age, Guddu begins trying to find work, though he's arrested at one point for violating child labor laws. He and Kallu often spend days at a time away from Khandwa. Saroo accompanies Guddu to "**Berampur**" on the day they both disappear. While Saroo unwittingly boards the train to Calcutta, it's unclear what exactly happened to Guddu—he may have been pushed or simply been distracted, but a train runs him over. Several weeks later, authorities discover his mutilated body on the train tracks. Though he is buried in a cemetery, developers eventually build right over the graves and Saroo struggles with not being able to visit his brother's grave.

Kallu – Kallu is one of Saroo's brothers; he's a few years older than Saroo. He and Guddu often ride trains to neighboring towns to work, and Kallu takes on the role of caretaker for Guddu, making sure that they have something to eat and a place to sleep when Guddu is done working. Though Saroo and Guddu's disappearance is devastating for Kallu, it also affords him the opportunity to attend school, as Kamla is able to pay for two children to attend (whereas she couldn't afford to send four). When Saroo reconnects with Kallu, Kallu is married with two sons and works two jobs. He has done much better than Kamla economically speaking, though he did move away from Khandwa to escape the negative emotional effects of suddenly being responsible for caring for his birth family after Guddu's death.

Shekila – Shekila is Saroo's baby sister. Kamla is pregnant with her when Saroo's birth father effectively leaves the family, and when Saroo is around four years old, he's put in charge of caring for her. Because of the family's extreme poverty, Shekila often tries to eat charcoal out of the fire and receives medical attention for the adverse effects of this. She's about two years old when Saroo disappears. After Saroo is adopted, he asks often for Shekila and feels guilty for leaving Kamla to care for

her alone. This is one of the reasons that Mum and Dad decide to adopt Mantosh. When Saroo returns to Khandwa as an adult and meets Shekila again, Shekila is married with two sons.

Mrs. Saroj Sood – Mrs. Sood founded the ISSA adoption agency in Calcutta in 1975 after facilitating one adoption within India and one adoption by a Swedish woman. She received a law degree in New Delhi and was trained in social work by the order founded by Mother Teresa. As the head of ISSA, Mrs. Sood has facilitated the adoptions of around 2,000 Indian children by the time Saroo reconnects with her at age 30. She initially tries to reconnect Saroo with his birth family when he comes into her care in 1987. When they prove impossible to find, she arranges for Saroo to be adopted by the Brierleys in Tasmania. After Saroo reconnects with Mrs. Sood, he begins assisting monetarily with repairs on the Nava Jeevan orphanage she founded.

Lisa – Lisa and Saroo begin dating right as he picks up his search his hometown on [Google Earth](#). They live together in Hobart, and she overwhelmingly supports him in his desire to find his family. Saroo also explains that she very kindly didn't take it personally that he spent all his free time during their first few months of dating scouring the internet for his family, and she is understanding of Saroo's desire to return to India alone.

Asra – Asra is Saroo's closest friend in the Nava Jeevan orphanage in Calcutta. They're about the same age, and Asra is adopted by a couple in Victoria at the same time the Brierleys adopt Saroo. They keep in touch into adulthood through their parents' involvement with ASIAC, though Saroo is very careful of what he shares with Asa about his search for his birth family—Asra's Indian parents are dead, and she has no birth family to find.

The Railway Worker – The railway worker is a Howrah Station employee who lives in a shack with other railway workers in the trainyard of Howrah Station. Though he initially seems kind when he "rescues" Saroo, gives him food and shelter, and promises to introduce him to a friend who will help, Saroo understands quickly that the railway worker and his friend mean to do him harm.

The Friend – The mysterious friend of the railway worker. Though the railway worker insists that his friend is going to help Saroo, Saroo understands immediately that the men aren't to be trusted: the friend asks Saroo to lie down next to him during their first meeting. Though nothing untoward happens, Saroo comes to believe later that the friend intended to traffic Saroo into slavery of some sort.

The Teenager – The teenager is a young man who takes Saroo in for several days in Calcutta. He allows Saroo to work with him and finally takes Saroo to the police station and turns him over to the authorities. Though Saroo is distraught at the time (he doesn't trust adults in general, and especially not adults in uniform), he later credits the teenager with saving his life. One

of Saroo's biggest regrets is never learning the teenager's name so he could properly thank him.

The Homeless Man – The homeless man twice saves Saroo from drowning in the Hooghly River. Saroo learns absolutely nothing about this man, why he was watching Saroo, and why he chose to save him. He does wonder if the man is Hindu and therefore will be rewarded karmically for helping Saroo. Saroo “thanks” the homeless man from the Howrah Bridge when he returns to Kolkata as an adult.

The Mother – The mother is a young woman in Calcutta who houses and feeds Saroo for a night. Despite her kindness, she's also physically violent towards Saroo and her son, the little boy: she throws a rock at Saroo when he won't return to her from the river where she did laundry.

Josef – Josef is Mum's father. He was Polish and a part of the Resistance during World War Two. The experience disturbed him and eventually led him to extreme alcoholism. He married Julie in Germany and the two moved to Australia. Though Josef was initially trustworthy and kind, the trauma he experienced in the war soon made him violent and delusional. Though he became quite wealthy, he never was able to accept state authority and was jailed several times for refusing to pay taxes. He soon lost all the family's money and property to loan sharks.

Julie – Julie is Mum's mother; she and her family were Hungarian and fled the Nazis during World War Two. She married Josef at age nineteen, and they moved to Australia not long after. She had three children and was terrified of her husband, who was violent and at one point threatened to kill her.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Rochak – Rochak is a lawyer in Khandwa and the administrator of the Facebook group “Khandwa: My Home Town.” He's instrumental in helping Saroo figure out the “**Ginestlay**” mystery and later, helps arrange Saroo's trips to both Khandwa and Burhanpur.

Amreen – One of Saroo's friends at the Australian International Hotel School. Her father worked for Indian Railways, so she relays Saroo's questions about railway lines to him.

Saleen and Jacob – Saleen and Jacob are an Indian couple in Hobart. The Brierleys have dinner with them often after they adopt Saroo, as they speak Hindi and can help relay information before Saroo has a firm grasp of English.

Byron – A friend in Hobart who invites Saroo to move in after Saroo breaks up with his girlfriend. Byron is often out and has extremely fast **internet** that Saroo uses.

Cheryl – Cheryl helps Saroo and Kamla translate when Saroo returns to Khandwa. Her father was British, so she speaks fluent English.

Swarnima – Swarnima is a young Indian woman who helps Saroo translate when he returns to Khandwa. She helps him buy his train ticket to Kolkata.

Mrs. Medhora – Mrs. Medhora is a social worker at ISSA. Saroo meets her when he returns to visit Mrs. Sood.

Baba – Baba is the local holy man in Khandwa. When Saroo is a child, Baba talks to him about the future and occasionally gives him food.

Aunty Ula – Aunty Ula is a Swedish woman in Calcutta who teaches Saroo and other boys from the Nava Jeevan orphanage how to eat at a table with silverware.

Abdul and Musa – Abdul and Musa are two Indian children that ISSA places in adoptions in Australia several months before Saroo's adoption.

The Little Boy – The little boy is about Saroo's age and introduces Saroo to his mother. They care for Saroo for a night in Calcutta.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



FAMILY

A Long Way Home tells the story of Saroo Brierley, an Australian man who was adopted from India when he was a child. At five years old, Saroo boarded a train from his hometown in rural India with his older brother, Guddu. Due to a misunderstanding, Saroo ended up taking a solo 24-hour journey all the way to Calcutta, where he spent weeks begging and living on the streets before being taken into custody and eventually adopted. As an adult, Saroo spends years using the internet to find his birth family and hometown, and finally returns to India to meet his birth mother when he's 30. Saroo is extremely clear that being adopted doesn't make his ties to his adoptive parents any weaker or any different than those between biological children and their parents. Similarly, he insists that being raised by his adoptive parents doesn't diminish his love for his birth mother. In this way, Saroo's memoir proposes first and foremost that there's no one “correct” way for families to look and instead, suggests that how families behave with each other and care for each other is far more meaningful than simply sharing blood.

Saroo begins by describing the way he grew up in India with his birth mother, Kamla, his older brothers Guddu and Kallu, and his baby sister, Shekila. While Kamla is Hindu, Saroo's birth father is Muslim, and after taking a second wife, he distances

himself from Kamla and her children, and is at times violent and abusive towards her. Saroo and his siblings have little contact with their father throughout their childhoods because of this. This then stands as an early influence on Saroo's later belief that blood and marriage are inadequate or incomplete signifiers of family, since his father seldom does anything to support his children with Kamla. Later, as Saroo explains his adoptive parents' reason for choosing to adopt rather than have biological children, he cites a similarly abusive relationship as a major influence on his parents' decision. Mum's father, Josef, was a World War Two veteran who suffered from shellshock and alcoholism and was a terrifying person to be around—so much so that Mum never even introduces Saroo and his brother, Mantosh, to their grandfather. Growing up with a father who was so frightening impressed upon Mum that simply sharing blood with Josef didn't make him family, given that he never acted in a way that made her feel safe, loved, or even capable of trusting men as a whole. Because of this, when Mum did marry Dad, she'd already decided that there was "nothing sacrosanct about families formed only by birth parents."

When Saroo describes his childhood in Australia, he explains that he bonded quickly with his parents, and for the most part led what he considers to be a normal childhood. However, this doesn't dull his curiosity about his birth family and the bond he still feels with Kamla and his siblings, and it's this bond that inspires him to spend his twenties searching off and on for his hometown and Kamla. However, Saroo is very clear that his quest for his birth family isn't an attempt to delegitimize, discredit, or replace the sense of family he feels with Mum, Dad, and Mantosh. Instead, finding them was a way for him to better understand himself and where he came from, including the circumstances surrounding his adoption. Indeed, he states that reconnecting didn't change his identity—he still thinks of himself as Saroo Brierley and an Australian. He writes that finding his birth family simply gave him a second set of people to call family and treat kindly, generously, and respectfully, just as Mum and Dad treated him when they adopted him.

Taken together, the way that Saroo manages to feel at home in both of his families, as well as the fact that Mum, Dad, and Kamla are all endlessly thankful for the ways that their connections to Saroo afford them a much larger familial support network, shows clearly that family absolutely does not need to consist of just two parents and biological children. All of the members of Saroo's family, both Indian and Australian, manage to create families that are strong and loving, despite and even because of the terrible circumstances that have torn them apart and brought them closer together. Ultimately, Saroo insists that a sense of care and the unbreakable bonds that he experiences with both of his mothers are what creates a family, not blood.



MEMORY, TECHNOLOGY, AND FRIENDSHIP

After Mum and Dad adopt five-year-old Saroo, he is secretly meticulous about regularly running through his memories of his family in India, his terrifying experience on the train to Calcutta, and the weeks he spent begging there, all in case it ever becomes possible for him to use his memories to reconnect with his birth family. However, even before his adoption, while he's at the orphanage in Calcutta, Saroo discovers that his memory isn't as fail-proof as he'd thought: for one, nobody has heard of his hometown, "**Ginestlay**." Then, when Saroo begins his search for his birth family as a young adult, he discovers that the fledgling internet can help him fill in the gaps created by his faulty childhood memory. In this way, Saroo's memoir interrogates the limits of memory—especially when memories are colored by fear, anxiety, or extreme youth—as well as the ways that technology and friendship can add nuance, depth, and clarity to incomplete or inaccurate memories.

Saroo's account begins by describing his memories and perceptions of his hometown "Ginestlay," his train journey to Calcutta, and the few harrowing weeks he managed to survive on the streets of Calcutta. During these accounts, Saroo's narration uses the names and landmarks he believed were true and correct as a child. It soon becomes clear that Saroo's memory is faulty at best, however; he believes he was only on the train to Calcutta overnight, and no towns with names remotely similar to "Ginestlay" exist within a twelve- to fifteen-hour radius. To complicate matters further, Saroo boarded from a station he believes Guddu referred to as "**Berampur**," a name that exists in various spellings all over the Indian subcontinent. All of this casts a veil of uncertainty over Saroo's memories, as none of what he remembers is at all verifiable by the authorities that try to help him.

When Saroo attends college and meets foreign exchange students from India for the first time, he discovers that his story takes on greater meaning for both him and them because the students from Calcutta put names with the landmarks he describes: they finally name the massive Calcutta train station as the Howrah station, the largest station in India, and can name the river and bridge where he spent time as the Hooghly River and Howrah Bridge. Though Saroo could've certainly found out the names of these Calcutta landmarks on his own, what rekindles Saroo's interest in his own memories is the fact that *other* people are interested—in part because they're familiar with these places. For them, the thought of a five-year-old lost in Howrah Station is especially compelling and heart-wrenching because, unlike Mum, Dad, and other Australian friends, they understand how massive the station truly is. This in turn shows how Saroo uses the experiences and memories of others to add more depth and meaning to his own memories, as well as assign them more real-world meaning.

Finally, Saroo takes his memories to the internet and specifically, to **Google Earth**. Google Earth allows Saroo to use the information he'd gleaned from his memories and the additional information provided by the Indian exchange students to develop a method for searching the maps for "Ginestlay" and "Berampur" stations with familiar landmarks along the railway lines snaking out from Howrah Station. When Saroo finally discovers what he believes is his hometown and the Burhanpur station where he boarded, he ends up turning to Facebook for help in solving the final mystery: according to Google Earth, his hometown is called Khandwa, but he can still find no mention of "Ginestlay" anywhere. Saroo connects on Facebook with a kind man from the area who suggests that "Ginestlay" is actually Ganesh Talai, a neighborhood in Khandwa, thus solving the mystery and helping Saroo develop a more complete understanding of how he saw the world as a child.

These final revelations illustrate that as tightly as Saroo held onto his memories and as important as they were, they were unable to tell the whole story due to the fact that they were incomplete, compromised, and, most importantly, were made when Saroo was a small child with an incomplete grasp of his own world. The fact that Saroo is able to ultimately reconstruct his memories, however, and to do so from a great distance, shows that the errors of memory can be helped by outside sources of friendship, technology, and the friendships that technology can facilitate via social media.



SURVIVAL, POVERTY, AND CHILDHOOD

As Saroo describes his early childhood in India, he poignantly asserts that growing up hungry and in poverty fundamentally shapes people's lives and

can have a brutal effect on their childhoods. He recalls in horrific detail how little his family had to eat, as well as the risks he took to steal scraps of food whenever he could. However awful growing up in poverty was, however, Saroo also links the skills he developed during his early childhood to the reason he later survived for weeks in Calcutta. Essentially, Saroo suggests that his survival was a result of having been, in many ways, very much *not* a child thanks to his experiences of poverty.

Saroo and his siblings are extremely isolated as children, in part because of Saroo's birth family's poverty, and in part because of their unconventional religious makeup (Kamla is Hindu, while Saroo's birth father is Muslim, though Kamla raises her children in a Muslim neighborhood and has them undergo Muslim traditions such as circumcision). This combination of isolation and poverty means that all of Kamla's children develop a strong sense of independence at a very young age. Saroo, for example, is put in charge of watching his baby sister Shekila when he's around three years old while Kamla spends days at a time away, working on construction sites. Because Saroo is allowed this responsibility and because it's also culturally acceptable for him

to leave Shekila unattended for hours at a time, he spends a great deal of time wandering the streets alone, begging for food and stealing when he can. This teaches him the skills he later uses to feed himself as a lone child in Calcutta, as he's already an adept thief, used to being constantly hungry, and used to functioning without adult guidance or supervision. The amount of time Saroo spends alone on the streets also affords him finely tuned street smarts—essentially, he understands how to both gauge which vendor stalls or individuals will be the best targets to steal from, as well as identify individuals that may seem kindly at first glance, but actually mean to hurt him. This later proves to be one of the most important skills that Saroo develops. When a kindly railway worker takes Saroo in, promising to introduce him to a friend who will help, Saroo instinctively understands upon meeting the "friend" that there's something amiss—and his instincts are proven correct when several railway workers angrily pursue him when he escapes.

As street smart and as used to poverty as Saroo is, his experiences in Calcutta impress upon both him and the reader how tenuous the "positive" aspects of poverty that help Saroo survive truly are. The two nights that Saroo spends in the railway workers' shack begin immediately to break down his willingness to sleep on the streets, which in turn leaves him far more willing to trust the actually kind mother who takes him in for a night, as well as the teenager who later turns him in to the police. This breaking down of his survival skills reinforces for the reader that as smart and adult as Saroo may seem as he traverses Calcutta's streets, he is indeed still a child—and that care and food are enough to, in some ways, return him to a state of being truly a child once more, no matter his experiences.

Though Saroo credits his survival to his experiences with poverty, he's also very careful to remind the reader on multiple occasions that he was one of the lucky ones. His street smarts certainly helped him, but his survival was much more the work of chance and dumb luck, and his story isn't intended to be taken as a sweeping representation of childhood poverty in India. Saroo explains that in 1987, the year he was adopted, 14 million Indian children died of starvation or illness. He also notes that even today, a horrific number of lone children from Indian streets are trafficked into slavery, both sexual and otherwise, or even sold for their organs by people like the railway workers' friend. With this, Saroo suggests that his experiences of childhood poverty were certainly a contributing factor in his survival, but the same absolutely cannot be said for all children. For him, adulthood is a privileged state that means he survived his childhood—a privilege that is denied to many Indian children.



HUMAN KINDNESS

At its heart, Saroo's memoir is a story of kindness—his narration lingers on people who were kind to him as a child in Khandwa, while roaming the streets of Calcutta, and then his adoptive parents in Australia. Because of these kind people who made his survival and later successes possible, Saroo positions his memoir as a meditation on the positive effects of small and large kindnesses. He overwhelmingly asserts that he and other fortunate people have a responsibility to help others who are less fortunate, just as other people once helped him.

Amidst the horrors of the dangerous Calcutta streets, Saroo comes across several people who help him for seemingly no reason other than simply being kind. The first of these is the mysterious older homeless man who saves Saroo twice from drowning in the Hooghly River. Later, a teenager takes Saroo in and after a few days, he turns Saroo over to the police—an act that Saroo credits with saving his life, as it led him eventually to the ISSA adoption agency and his life in Australia. In his adult narration, Saroo's greatest regret is that he never thanked either the old man or the teenager. He also never learned the names of either person, or of any of the people who consciously or unconsciously helped him survive, such as the religious men Saroo slept near or the kind mother who fed and housed Saroo for a night. For a variety of reasons, including his youth and his general distrust of adults, Saroo also never learned why these people helped him in the first place (though he does wonder if the old man was Hindu and therefore, would later be rewarded via the laws of Karma). Because of this, Saroo is forced to accept that sometimes people act kindly for no apparent reason, something that's difficult for him to understand as a child whose experiences overwhelmingly taught him that people other than close family weren't to be trusted.

Saroo not only focuses on the kindness of strangers, but also the kind acts of people he became close to, such as Mrs. Sood of the ISSA adoption agency and his adoptive parents, Mum and Dad. In the case of these people, Saroo partly attributes their ability to act kindly to their association with agencies and larger systems that promote such kindness, while also exploring the ways in which those agencies can actually *hinder* people's ability to act kindly. Though Mrs. Sood is described as though she was always inclined toward helping others, she wasn't truly able to channel her desire to do so until she founded ISSA, the humanitarian-focused adoption agency that facilitated Saroo's adoption as well as that of his brother Mantosh and thousands of other children. Similarly, Mum and Dad's desire to build a family through adoption—a desire that Saroo characterizes as a way for his parents to help others less fortunate than them—is something that must necessarily be done through official channels. However, Saroo also describes how these organizations often struggle to enable people to act kindly in individual cases due to hard-to-navigate international and local

laws. After the two-year process to adopt Mantosh, during which he suffered physical and sexual abuse as a result of the delay, Mum becomes an advocate for changing adoption laws to make international adoption easier. She reasons that if the process weren't so difficult, more people would choose to do it. Mum's assertion gets at two important ideas: first, that she believes that acting kindly is something that comes naturally to people, and second, that not all laws intended to help people (i.e. strict international adoption laws) are actually successful in carrying out their intended mission—in fact, they sometimes actively discourage kindness and harm the intended recipients by making it impossibly difficult. At the same time, this is a somewhat idealistic view that disregards the ways that lax adoption laws can be brutally and immorally abused, as Saroo also acknowledges.

By considering both the small acts of kindness paid to him in Calcutta, as well as the larger, more legally sanctioned kindnesses of Mrs. Sood and his adoptive parents, Saroo paints a broad picture of what kindness can be, what forms it can take, and what barriers exist to people acting kindly more often. With the money earned through publicity for his story, Saroo chose to reinvest it in the people and organizations that helped him succeed; namely, ISSA and his birth mother Kamla, though he also uses the book as a vehicle through which to thank those strangers who helped him. With this, Saroo ends by insisting that human kindness can very literally save lives, just as it saved his.



DESTINY, CHANCE, AND LUCK

Though Saroo asserts that being raised outside of the Hindu religion he was born into means that he grew up believing that fate and destiny aren't actually real, he does take great pains to acknowledge moments when destiny appears to have been at work throughout his life. Personally, Saroo is much more invested in a belief in chance and luck rather than divine destiny, believing essentially that events in his life are the result of random coincidences rather than something preordained by a higher power. By considering both of these seemingly opposed ideas as equally valid, Saroo suggests ultimately that the differences between the two are little more than a matter of perspective.

Saroo, who is ostensibly the one most affected by his experiences of being separated from his birth family and then reunited with them as an adult, sees everything that happens to him as either chance, luck, or a conscious choice on his part that led him unknowingly to fortuitous circumstances. Saroo conceptualizes his meetings with all the people he meets during his time in Calcutta—those who are kind and helpful, as well as those who mean him harm—as being chance encounters that just so happen to lead him towards a better life. He supports this idea by stating again and again that his story is the exception, not the rule: thousands of children who roam the

streets of India die or are sold into slavery, and one wrong move could have sent him to a similar fate. Though he never says it outright, he essentially suggests that though his story is special, *he* isn't special—the fact that so many children's lives end tragically early or are otherwise corrupted is reasonable proof that the benevolent conception of destiny as espoused by others at best doesn't exist for everyone, and at worst doesn't exist at all.

Opposite Saroo's belief in chance and dumb luck are the visions that both Mum and Kamla experience that, as far as they're concerned, guide and dictate how they live their lives, and ultimately how and when Saroo enters their lives. Mum initially decides to adopt after experiencing, at twelve years old, a vision of herself with a dark-skinned child. The vision was so vivid that she could feel the warmth of the child next to her. More than twenty years later, when she receives word that her and Dad's adoption application has been accepted and Saroo is on the way, this vision helps her remain calm despite her excitement: she knows, thanks to the vision, that this moment was always going to come. Similarly, Kamla spends the 25 years that Saroo is missing praying for him, and on the day before he returns, she experiences a vision of him returning to her. She believes that his appearance the next day is very clearly the work of a higher power and exhilarating proof that destiny absolutely exists. For both women, their visions and belief in destiny provide them a sense of comfort and a lens through which to view their respective situations. Essentially, their visions allow them to ascribe more weight and meaning to situations that might otherwise be read as simple happenstance.

For everyone involved in Saroo's story, including Saroo himself, the way that they engage with either a belief in destiny or a belief in chance and luck shows clearly that it's not necessarily a question of which belief system is right or wrong. Rather, the important thing is whether or not a person can find meaning and comfort in their chosen belief system. This suggests, ultimately, that the power of either worldview lies in individuals' abilities to use them to effectively add meaning to their lives, and in turn to tell stories that make the most sense and provide the most comfort to themselves and others.

name in India that occurs in numerous different spellings, and authorities cannot find a “Ginestlay” anywhere. These two names in particular then come to represent the frustrating limits of Saroo's childhood memory. It's not until 25 years later that he finally unravels the mystery of these names—“Ginestlay” is the suburb Ganesh Talai in the town of Khandwa, and “Berampur” is the Burhanpur train station—and is able to add adult perspective and understanding to his childhood memories.



MAPS AND GOOGLE EARTH

Maps very quickly become extremely important documents for Saroo: Mum pins up a map of India in his bedroom, and together, the two draw a map of Saroo's hometown and the town where he boarded the train for Calcutta. Saroo fixates on the map in his room, and later on the maps made available to him via the program Google Earth. For Saroo, maps hold the key to piecing together his past—assuming he can reconcile “Ginestlay” and “Berampur” with the actual places recorded on maps. Maps then come to represent Saroo's hope and idealism in attempting to find his home, and particularly in terms of Google Earth, they illustrate how technology and social networking can help illuminate incomplete or childish memories.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Random House edition of *A Long Way Home: A Memoir* published in 2013.

1. Remembering Quotes

“Me begot!” Later she found out I was upset that I had forgotten the way to the school near my Indian home, where I used to watch the students. We agreed that it probably didn't matter anymore. But deep down, it mattered to me. My memories were all I had of my past, and privately I thought about them over and over, trying to ensure that I didn't “beget.”

Related Characters: Saroo Brierley (speaker), Mum / Sue Brierley

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Saroo describes how not long after the Brierleys adopted him, he forgot something that was extremely important to



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



“GINESTLAY” AND “BERAMPUR”

When Saroo is first picked up by Calcutta authorities, all he can tell them about where he came from are these two place names, which he believes are his hometown and the train station where he boarded the train for Calcutta respectively. However, “Berampur” is a common place

him, and doing so disturbed him greatly. This makes it very clear that at this point, Saroo spends a lot of time living in his memories of his time in India—whether or not those memories are actually real or not, or applicable to his life at the time or not. Later, Saroo will struggle to reconcile the things he does remember in his obsessive attempt to find his birth family. This then shows that even though he and Mum ultimately agree that the factual truth of these memories doesn't matter, they can be used to create real change in his life later on. In fact, it's because he focuses so much on not forgetting these memories that he's able to find his hometown and his mother at all.

☝ Mum and Dad were very affectionate, right from the start, always giving me lots of cuddles and making me feel safe, secure, loved, and, above all, wanted. That meant a lot to a child who'd been lost and had experienced what it was like for no one to care about him.

Related Characters: Saroo Brierley (speaker), Dad / John Brierley, Mum / Sue Brierley

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

Saroo describes how Mum and Dad immediately did whatever they could to show Saroo that he could trust them to care for him. This is an early indicator that Saroo overwhelmingly believes that the most important signifier of a family is how the members of a family treat each other. It means the world to him that his parents show him that he's loved, wanted, and safe, and that means far more to him than whether or not they're related by blood. Later, Saroo will relay Mum's story of growing up. During her childhood, she didn't receive much or any of the kind of care that she's now showing Saroo, and that negative experience taught her that blood doesn't make a family. Rather, this kind of kindness does.

2. Getting Lost Quotes

☝ This episode stayed with me as an example of my mother's courage in turning to face down her pursuers, and also of the vulnerability of the poor in India. Really, it was just luck that the crowds backed off.

Related Characters: Saroo Brierley (speaker), Saroo's Birth Father, Kamla

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Saroo explains how he remembers and thinks of the domestic dispute between his parents that he witnessed as a child, which almost turned into a riot. He recognizes that Kamla took a major risk in deciding to stand and fight to protect her children; in doing so, they all could've died. When Saroo mentions specifically that this shows how vulnerable the poor are in India, he gets at the idea that because Kamla was living in dire poverty, her life wasn't seen as being as valuable by the mob—there would've been few or no consequences to escalating the riot. Then, by recognizing that the positive (or at least net neutral) results of this riot are fully the result of luck and chance, Saroo shows that at this point, he believes that everything that happened to him was a matter of dumb luck. Believing this allows him to make more sense of what happened to him and recognize just how lucky he was in a way that he wouldn't be able to do if he believed in destiny.

☝ Hunger limits you because you are constantly thinking about getting food, keeping the food if you do get your hands on some, and not knowing when you are going to eat next. It's a vicious cycle...Not having enough to eat paralyzes you and keeps you living hour by hour instead of thinking about what you would like to accomplish...Hunger and poverty steal your childhood and take away your innocence and sense of security.

Related Characters: Saroo Brierley (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

As he discusses how he grew up in India, Saroo very bluntly details how growing up hungry and in poverty literally keep him from doing anything but trying to find his next meal. As he'll discover later, all of these consequences hit Saroo when he becomes lost. Saroo's family's poverty means that he cannot afford to go to school; in turn, this means that he communicates poorly and can't read, two skills that

would've made his search for home much easier. However, it's important to recognize that in Saroo's situation at this point, he doesn't necessarily need either of those things. His most important skill at this point is his ability to find food, as well as his street smarts. Those are the things that keep him alive, but possessing only those skills in turn means that he'll likely never be able to rise above this poverty.

☝ Once, a porter appeared to understand that I was lost, but when I couldn't immediately make myself understood, he made it clear I wasn't to bother him anymore. The world of adults was closed to me, so I continued to try to solve my problem by myself.

Related Characters: Saroo Brierley (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

When Saroo tries to ask for help in Howrah Station, adults are generally unable and unwilling to help. In the case of this porter, Saroo ties the man's unwillingness to help to Saroo's inability to effectively communicate, which is a product of Saroo's life of poverty and lack of education. Notably, Saroo also conflates these symbols of poverty with childhood—essentially, he's hit twice here, as he not only can't communicate, but he's also one lost child among many.

However, this passage shows that Saroo's experiences of poverty aren't necessarily all bad. His experiences living in poverty have taught him how to think rationally and look out for himself, which is why he can decide to keep trying to solve his problem himself. Poverty taught him to be self-sufficient, even though he doesn't understand yet that being self-sufficient isn't actually going to help him in the long run.

4. Salvation Quotes

☝ Of course, I can't be sure what the railway worker's friend had planned or what happened to the children who were grabbed from the station that night I slept nearby, but I feel pretty certain that they faced greater horrors than I ever did.

Related Characters: Saroo Brierley (speaker), The Friend, The Railway Worker

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

After Saroo ends up in police custody, he steps back from his narrative and recognizes that though being at the station was terrifying at the time, it was probably the best thing that could've happened to him. He goes on later to describe some of the horrors that befall many children on Indian streets, such as being trafficked into slavery or sold for their organs, and he recognizes that the railway worker's friend likely intended to do something of that sort with Saroo. Essentially, this is one of those moments that allows Saroo to recognize that his experience was absolutely not the norm and cannot be expected under normal circumstances. He was lucky, and so many Indian children simply aren't.

☝ I told them what I could. They recorded my answers on their many forms and documents. "Ginestlay" meant nothing to them. I struggled to remember the name of the place where I'd boarded the train, but could only say that my brothers called it something like "Burampourr..."

Related Characters: Saroo Brierley (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

As the police question Saroo about how he became lost, he grows immediately aware of the fact that his memory of what happened is faulty or compromised for a variety of reasons. This also sets up that "Ginestlay" in particular is going to be an issue in his search, as not even these police officers can tell him anything about such a place. Given the fact that Saroo is at this point sitting in a station talking to officers, it shows that he's finally realized that he can trust some adults to help him, something that took him weeks to realize. This represents a major shift in Saroo's outlook on life and has mostly to do with his few brief experiences sleeping indoors (with the railway worker, the woman, and the teenager). Those experiences impressed upon Saroo that he did indeed need help, and he was going to need to accept help from adults he once thought terrifying and

untrustworthy.

☛ The types of people who had tried to capture me when I was on the streets clearly didn't let walls and gates stop them...I know now that few are taken off the streets, and many of those who are have a lot of suffering ahead of them.

Related Characters: Saroo Brierley (speaker), The Friend, The Railway Worker

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

Saroo is specifically describing the people who snuck into Liluah at night to either abuse children there or take them away. This demonstrates a major failing on the part of Calcutta authorities to protect the children they're supposed to, showing another way that bureaucracy can sometimes get in the way of actually behaving kindly. Though Liluah is described to Saroo as a place where he'll be safer than out on the streets, he sees firsthand that this is simply not the case, and those adults who are charged with protecting him cannot be counted on to do so.

As Saroo thinks about it later in life, his adult understanding helps him realize just how lucky he was to make it out of Liluah alive and without having suffered abuse. Again, it reminds both him and the reader that Saroo's story is miraculous, and plenty of children who find themselves in similar situations cannot expect to experience such good fortune as he did.

5. A New Life Quotes

☛ Apparently, in the end, the delight I took in having abundant food close at hand overcame most matters of taste or culture.

Related Characters: Saroo Brierley (speaker), Mum / Sue Brierley

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

Saroo details how simply not being in poverty anymore

meant that he quickly gave up on some of his previous beliefs about the world, including the Hindu religion in which he was raised (the instance in question has to do with encountering beef in the fridge, which was a shock since cows are considered sacred by Hindus and aren't eaten). The fact that Saroo is so willing to make these leaps speaks to the power of simply not being in poverty. In Tasmania, Saroo certainly could've insisted on maintaining his Hindu beliefs or at least Hindu food laws. All of this suggests that the cultural differences are simply so great that when combined with sudden prosperity, it was easier for Saroo to go along with his new parents and try harder to integrate than it was to fight for things that possibly didn't seem as important anymore, especially when he's no longer surrounded by other Hindus that would be aghast to find him eating beef.

☛ I was keen on the idea of having a sibling. In fact, it seemed that the person I missed most from India was my sister. "What do you want for Christmas?" my mum would ask me every year. "I want Shekila back," I often said.

Related Characters: Mum / Sue Brierley, Saroo Brierley (speaker), Mantosh, Shekila

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

Saroo describes the lead-up to Mantosh's adoption when Saroo is ten years old. Saroo's fixation on Shekila in particular shows that even though Saroo is now a Brierley and very much a part of his adoptive family, that doesn't change the fact that he still feels a connection with his birth family. They always factor into his thoughts, and he'd still like to someday be a part of that family again in a more tangible way. His excitement to get any sibling (he doesn't yet know anything about Mantosh) also shows that Saroo isn't particular about wanting Shekila back in this instance, even though he does want her back specifically. What he wants is also any kind of sibling relationship.

☛ What happened to Mantosh exposed the harm that the bureaucratic adoption system can inflict. When I learned about his past, later on, I couldn't stop thinking about the nights I'd spent in the Liluah juvenile home, and how easily I could've experienced trauma similar to what Mantosh had experienced.

Related Characters: Saroo Brierley (speaker), Mantosh

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

Years after Mantosh's adoption, Saroo learns that during the two years Mantosh was in Liluah, he was physically and sexually abused. Learning that someone so close to him suffered this kind of abuse impresses upon Saroo just how lucky he was to make it out of Liluah with as few scars as he did. This also impresses upon Saroo that though he was lucky, plenty of other children in situations similar to his own are not. This again reinforces the idea that Saroo's good fortune has to do primarily (in his understanding) with chance and luck, especially since there was nothing about him that necessarily kept any of the abuse from happening—except for dumb luck.

6. My Mum's Journey Quotes

☝ Because of all she'd been through growing up, Mum had decided that there was nothing sacrosanct about families formed only by birth parents.

Related Characters: Saroo Brierley (speaker), Julie, Josef, Mum / Sue Brierley

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

After Saroo offers a brief account of Mum's tumultuous and sometimes scary upbringing, he shows how these experiences taught Mum that blood is sometimes a poor signifier of family. After suffering abuse and neglect from her father, Josef, Mum comes to believe that what truly makes a family is the one's desire to help other members of their family—essentially prioritizing actions over a simple relation. She chooses to use this belief in her own life by deciding to adopt rather than have biological children with Dad. Doing so also allows her to give back and act kindly towards others, something that didn't happen much to her in her childhood. By adopting, she can possibly make another child's life much brighter than hers was.

☝ Mum was delighted when the word came through but also calm: somewhere inside her, she'd always felt that the vision she'd had at the age of twelve had meant it was her destiny to have an adopted child by her side.

Related Characters: Saroo Brierley (speaker), Dad / John Brierley, Mum / Sue Brierley

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

When Mum received word that she and Dad were going to be able to adopt Saroo, she was calm because of a vision she had. That vision of her with a brown-skinned child is what led her through the sixteen years of trying to adopt after getting married to Dad. Essentially, the vision and Mum's belief in destiny allowed her to make sense of her situation and believe for sixteen years that she would absolutely be able to adopt one day; she just needed to be patient. This again shows that which belief system (destiny vs. chance) one chooses is ultimately less important than whether or not a person can use their chosen system to make sense of the twists and turns of their life. For Mum, a belief in destiny allows her to do just that.

☝ She is an advocate of replacing Australia's various state laws on intercountry adoption with a simplified federal law. She's critical of governments making it too difficult to adopt and feels that if it was a little easier, maybe more families would do it.

Related Characters: Saroo Brierley (speaker), Dad / John Brierley, Mum / Sue Brierley

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

Saroo explains his mum's beliefs about adoption, which mainly focus on the fact that governments generally don't make it easy to adopt children from other countries. Mum's beliefs rest on the assumption that people are overwhelmingly kind and want to help others—what stops them from doing that is bureaucracy that makes performing kindnesses for others difficult. She very clearly sees intercountry adoption as a way to give back to the world at large and help children in need, and she sees these laws in direct opposition to people's ability to act kindly. At the

same time, these laws exist in the first place to prevent people who *aren't* kind, have ulterior motives, or wouldn't be good parents from adopting a child and causing them further harm or trauma. Mum's optimistic worldview resists this, however, and there is no easy answer to the issue.

7. Growing Up Quotes

☝ It was completely different describing my time in the train station to people who knew it as Kolkata's massive Howrah Station, and the river next to it as the Hooghly River.

Related Characters: Saroo Brierley (speaker), Amreen

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

When Saroo begins college in Canberra, he meets a number of students from India and starts telling them his story of being lost in Kolkata (Calcutta). He finds that telling them is very different than telling Australians; while for people like Mum and Dad, Saroo's story sounds entirely fantastical, the Indian students are at the very least able to picture where exactly Saroo spent time, and wonder more appropriately how he was even able to survive. This in turn begins to rekindle Saroo's interest in his own story, which shows that these kinds of connections are invaluable as one tries to piece together their history. By talking to people who care about his story on a very different level than his other peers, Saroo is able to find the courage and the wherewithal to finally begin a real search for his hometown and for his family.

9. Finding Home Quotes

☝ ...Khandwa Railway Station.

The name meant nothing to me.

My stomach knotted. How could this be?

Things had looked so right all the way from Burhanpur, which had to be the "B" town I had tried to remember. But if the bridge and the river were correct, where was "Ginestlay"?

Related Characters: Saroo Brierley (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

Saroo explains the search process he went through on the night he found his hometown of Khandwa on Google Earth. His inability to find "Ginestlay" begins to show the cracks in Saroo's childhood memories, as well as the limits of their usefulness. For Saroo, he finds his hometown based entirely on visual clues rather than on names specifically. This is in part because he never attended school and therefore, was certainly never able to read the names of the train stations. Further, he never needed to—he had the visual clues he needed to make his way around his stomping grounds. However, this does illustrate one of the major ways that poverty trapped Saroo and even continues to do so, long after he last spent a hungry night. These memories were shaped by poverty and the lack of information that poverty left him with, and that in turn makes it much harder to unravel the "Ginestlay" mystery, since solving that mystery relies on verbal communication, not visual cues.

☝ Mum had such a dedicated belief in adoption and the authentic family that adoption created. I was worried about how my news would affect her, and I wanted to reassure her that of course they would always be my parents.

Related Characters: Saroo Brierley (speaker), Dad / John Brierley, Mum / Sue Brierley

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

After Saroo locates Khandwa, he worries about telling Mum about his discovery, as he fears she'll feel threatened by the news. The fact that Saroo is afraid and wants to protect Mum from anxiety or heartache shows, first, how much he cares for her. Trying to protect her is a concrete action that he can take to care for her, regardless of their biological ties to each other. Then, it also shows that Saroo fully believes in the authenticity of his family with Mum, Dad, and Mantosh. In his eyes, finding his birth family is a way for him to understand himself better and to expand his family, not replace his adopted family or prioritize birth families over adopted ones.

10. Meeting My Mother Quotes

☝️ Even at this first meeting, she told me she was grateful to my parents who had raised me in Australia, and that they had the right to call me their son because they had raised me from a child and made me the man I was today. Her only concern for me, she said, was that I should have the very best life I could.

Related Characters: Kamla, Saroo Brierley (speaker), Dad / John Brierley, Mum / Sue Brierley

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 204

Explanation and Analysis

When Saroo and Kamla finally find someone to translate for them during their first meeting, Kamla is very clear in her respect for Saroo's parents and her acceptance of them as part of the family. This shows that Kamla, like Mum, believes that a more important signifier of family is action, not blood. She believes that Mum and Dad are worthy of being family because of all the things they did for Saroo over the years, irrespective of the fact that they're not his biological parents. This in turn continues to expand the book's definition of family, as now Saroo truly is able to feel comfortable with the fact that he has two sets of parents, each of them equally important to him.

12. Reaching Out Quotes

☝️ And even though it was exhausting to go over my story again and again with the media, I thought I had a kind of duty to do it, because it might help people—what had happened to me was remarkable, and might offer hope to others who wanted to find their lost family but thought it impossible.

Related Characters: Saroo Brierley (speaker), Kamla, Mum / Sue Brierley

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 225

Explanation and Analysis

After Saroo returns from his first trip to India to find his family, media outlets begin contacting him to talk about his miraculous story. Saroo's reasoning behind why he agrees to talk to them shows how he conceptualizes telling his story as an act of kindness he can easily do for others. For him, he very much wants his story to give others hope that

something similar might be able to happen to them, as far-fetched as that may be realistically. Essentially, he sees this as a way for him to pay forward the kindness of other people who helped him, like the teenager and the homeless man. Neither knew that their actions were somehow responsible for saving Saroo's life, and likewise, unless someone contacts Saroo and thanks him explicitly, there's also no way for him to know if telling his story may change someone else's life for the better.

☝️ I began to realize that just as my search for my mother had in some ways shaped my life, her faith that I was alive had shaped hers. She couldn't search, but she did the next best thing: she stayed still.

Related Characters: Saroo Brierley (speaker), Kamla

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 231

Explanation and Analysis

Saroo explains that while he spent much of his life thinking about Kamla, and later searching for her, she spent the 25 years between his disappearance and his return waiting for him to come back and doing what she could to make it as easy for him as possible. Though he doesn't make the explicit connection until later in the novel, part of Kamla's decision to do this has to do with her belief in fate and destiny. She's told by several religious leaders over the years that Saroo is safe and well, which tells her that there's a possibility that her family isn't as fractured as it may seem. By staying (generally) in one spot, she makes it possible for Saroo to do the work of finding her and reuniting their family. This is also a testament to the inexplicable and extremely strong bonds Saroo feels with both of his mothers, as part of the reason Kamla stays is because she feels that connection with him even after he's gone.

13. Returning Quotes

☝️ "Who are your family?" he asked next, and I found myself hesitating. "My family lives in Tasmania, but I also have family here, in Khandwa, in Madhya Pradesh," I said at last. That seemed to satisfy him, and I realized that it had also begun to satisfy me.

Related Characters: Saroo Brierley (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 253

Explanation and Analysis

While on the train from Burhanpur to Khandwa as an adult, Saroo helps a little boy practice his English and talks to him about his family. It's first important to note that this boy doesn't think twice about the fact that Saroo has family in multiple places. This suggests that this boy already has a more developed and nuanced view of what family can look like, and understands that it doesn't always have to look particularly conventional in order to be real. Then, Saroo's own acceptance of his multiple families shows that he's coming to the end of the major parts of his journey to piece together his identity, his past, and his family into one cohesive whole. Essentially, he's finally coming to the same place that this boy is—he understands that his family may look different, but that difference isn't something that negatively affects how he feels about his family in any way.

☞ But like the teenager who later took me to the police station, he had given me another chance to live. He hadn't profited from his act in any way...and I had never thanked him.

Related Characters: Saroo Brierley (speaker), The Homeless Man, The Teenager

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 266

Explanation and Analysis

As Saroo stands on the Howrah bridge during his return trip to Kolkata as an adult, he thinks about the people who helped him when he was a child and credits them with the fact that he's alive. By then using his book to thank these people, Saroo attempts to show them gratitude in much the same way he tried to let Kamla know that he was alive and well by thinking those thoughts to her when he was a child. For him, doing this is all he can do to thank them specifically. In a larger sense, writing the book thanks these individuals as well as others like them by magnifying these small acts of kindness and crediting them in ways that they might not be otherwise. In this way, Saroo also encourages the reader to think more critically about acts of kindness in their own lives, both in terms of people who have been kind to them and in terms of what they themselves can do. He insists that these acts of kindness may seem small, but his own experience is proof that they can literally save lives.

Epilogue Quotes

☞ But my experiences have undoubtedly shaped who I am today, providing me with an unshakable faith in the importance of family—however it is formed—and a belief in the goodness of people and the importance of grasping opportunities as they are presented.

Related Characters: Saroo Brierley (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 271

Explanation and Analysis

As Saroo begins to wrap up his memoir and discuss the things he's learned over the course of his journey, he focuses primarily on how his experiences have changed how he thinks about family. Saroo's descriptions of his birth family in India show that when he was young, poverty aside, his family was the most important thing in his life. He found them overwhelmingly helpful, supportive, and safe. As his journey began and he was forced to expand his circle outwards and trust more people, it did two things. First, it began to show him that other people can indeed be good and helpful, just like his birth family was. Then, simply by virtue of the fact that he was adopted, Saroo learns that family doesn't necessarily have to look like his birth family did. Families can be made up of adopted children, different types of parents, and different types of children, and the family itself is still an amazing and supportive force in his life.

☞ I am astonished at the miraculous turns in my story—my mum's vision that led her to intercountry adoption, My Indian mother praying and seeing an image of me the day before we were reunited...It is sometimes difficult not to imagine some forces at work that are beyond my understanding.

Related Characters: Saroo Brierley (speaker), Kamla, Mum / Sue Brierley

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 273

Explanation and Analysis

In closing the memoir, Saroo lists some of the lucky and miraculous turns of fate that led him to where he is today. When he suggests that he simply has to accept that there

may be something going on beyond his understanding, it shows that by the end of his journey, he's accepted that there may be something to the idea of destiny in a divine sense. By accepting this, Saroo begins to use other belief systems to make sense of his own situation. Notably, he sees

that this might make more sense than his earlier belief that much of what happened to him was simple coincidence. This again makes it very clear that the true power of both destiny and a belief in chance is those systems' ability to allow people to tell stories that make sense about their lives.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

Saroo is in shock—he's standing in front of the house where he grew up in a small town in central India. The house is clearly abandoned, and it seems much smaller than Saroo remembers. It being empty was Saroo's worst fear, he says, and one that he's lived with for 25 years. He doesn't know what to do. Even though he has money and a ticket home, he feels just like he did on the railway platform when he was five.

Though Saroo doesn't offer his age at this point until much later, it's clear that a great deal of time has passed since he last saw this house—and that a lot has changed since then. In particular, the fact that he feels like he did as a child suggests that he experienced some kind of trauma or abandonment then.



The door of the next house down opens, and a young woman comes out. Saroo notes that he looks Indian, but his Western clothes are too new for him to pass as actually Indian. He also can't speak Hindi, and he tells her so. The woman responds that she speaks a little English, and Saroo points to the abandoned house and lists the people who lived there: Kamla, Guddu, Kallu, Shekila. He points to himself and says his name. The woman is silent until Saroo pulls out the page of childhood photographs and shows it to the woman, who manages to say in English that they no longer live here. Again, Saroo feels dizzy.

Again, opening with this scene creates the sense that there's been lots of change in the last 25 years, but that Saroo has continued to remember Kamla, Guddu, Kallu, and Shekila for all that time. This shows just how intently Saroo hangs onto his memories of the people who, he'll soon reveal, are his birth family. The fact that Saroo doesn't speak Hindi shows that even as he kept some memories, he was unable to remember his first language.



Saroo understood that it was very likely that this would happen, as poor people often don't get much of a choice where they live. He chooses not to consider whether his mother might be dead. A man approaches, and Saroo again recites the names of his family members: his birth mother, Kamla; his brothers, Guddu and Kallu, and his sister, Shekila. In English, the man asks how he can help, and Saroo quickly tells the man his story: he grew up here, got lost as a child, and grew up abroad. The man walks away for a moment and then returns—he's going to take Saroo to his mother.

This passage makes it clear that Saroo's family was extremely poor, which makes the fact that he's coming off as a well-off Westerner more surprising—something happened to fundamentally change Saroo's circumstances. When the man is able to take Saroo to his mother, it seems miraculous and sets up early on that there are surprising elements of destiny at work in Saroo's story.



1. REMEMBERING

Saroo grows up in Hobart, Tasmania (an island state of Australia). His Mum puts a **map** of India on Saroo's wall to make him feel at home when he arrives in 1987 at age six. She also decorates the house with Indian objects, though they look only vaguely familiar to Saroo. Throughout his childhood he spends hours sitting in front of the map. He knows that somewhere in that huge place is where he came from, "**Ginestlay**," though he doesn't know if "Ginestlay" is a city, village, or a street. He also doesn't know how old he is for sure—the Indian authorities guessed at his birth year, and the month and day of his birthday are when he arrived at the orphanage.

These early recollections of the move to Tasmania, Australia show that Saroo's childhood memories, though important to him, aren't necessarily reliable in terms of facts. The fact that Saroo writes "Ginestlay" in quotations every time signals to the reader that while it's technically a memory, it's absolutely not correct—it's a childish mispronunciation of his home, but it's all he has to go off of at this point.



Mum and Dad aren't sure how Saroo got lost. All anyone knows at first is that Saroo was picked up off the streets of Calcutta and soon after, adopted by the Brierleys. It isn't until Saroo has been in Australia for a year that he's able to explain that he's not actually from Calcutta; rather, he boarded a train from "**Berampur**," a station near "Ginestlay." When Saroo arrives in Australia, however, everyone focuses on the future, not the past. Mum concentrates on caring for Saroo and earning his trust rather than immediately teaching him English.

Often, Saroo, Mum, and Dad visit an Indian couple, Saleen and Jacob. They speak Hindi with Saroo and translate as needed. Saroo picks up English quickly, but it takes him a while to be ready to talk about India. As far as Mum knows, Saroo doesn't even think much about it, though this is far from the truth: once he cries out, "Me begot!" and only later does Mum discover that Saroo forgot the way to the school near his home in India. He explains that those memories are precious to him, as they're all he has of his past and he thinks of it often. Because Saroo is determined to not forget, he clearly remembers his past in India, both the good memories and the bad ones.

Saroo has a relatively easy time adjusting. Though he misses Kamla, he knows he has to take any opportunities that allow him to survive and thrive. Mum and Dad make Saroo feel loved, safe, and wanted. He keeps his thoughts and memories to himself, in part because he doesn't realize how extraordinary his story is. However, the memories still affect him: he's unable to watch a Hindi movie about a lost boy, and sad music triggers emotional flashbacks.

Eventually, Saroo begins to speak. He tells Saleen about his family, and a year after his arrival, tells Mum about how poor his family was. They talk about his neighborhood and together, and draw a **map** of it with Saroo's instructions. Not long after, Saroo tells Mum about how he became lost. With an incredulous look on her face, she takes notes and marks Calcutta on their map. A few months later, Saroo tells her he's from "**Ginestlay**," and not long after that, he tells a teacher a more complete version of his story.

Saroo explains that he told Mum and his teacher about the memories he'd held onto since his arrival. There are some gaps, questionable details, and murky divisions between what he thought as a child and what he knows now, as an adult. It was a relief to tell his story as a child and now, as an adult, he hopes that his story will inspire hope in others.

Mum's focus following Saroo's arrival shows that she places a great deal of importance on building family through actions, not through blood. She's able to make Saroo feel at home by encouraging him to trust her; it matters little that he's not her biological child. She also recognizes that trust and family can transcend language barriers, something that will become important to Saroo later as well.



Again, by allowing Saroo to dictate how and when these conversations about India take place, Mum and Dad show Saroo that they're trustworthy individuals, and make him feel safe. However, the fact that Mum believes that Saroo likely doesn't think much about India shows that she may underestimate how important Saroo's memories are to him—and by extension, might not understand how traumatic it could be that he thinks he "begot" (forgot) them.



Later, Saroo notes that he wants to show people how important it is to take opportunities whenever they arise; this is one way he attempts to give back to his readership. In this way, he shows early on that kindness and care for others can take many forms.



This map becomes an early symbol of Saroo's childhood memories—though in the case of this particular map, some of the landmarks he asks Mum to draw turn out later to be surprisingly accurate. It will come to light that his memories of "Ginestlay" are relatively happy.



By making it abundantly clear that parts of his story are questionable, Saroo shows that he understands that memory isn't something infallible. Most notably, it can be compromised by youth (the memories he relays are from his very early childhood) and by fear.



2. GETTING LOST

Saroo vividly remembers caring for his baby sister, Shekila. He's her sole caregiver when Kamla is away, working for days at a time. During the hot months, Saroo's family sits in the courtyard with the other family that lives in their house to sing and drink milk. These are happy times in Saroo's memories. Kamla is a Hindu, while his birth father is a Muslim. His father is often absent, and when he is around, he's very violent. After he moves in with his new wife he attempts to make Kamla move away, but Kamla is too poor to move. Finally, he has to move himself.

Saroo is too young to understand his parents' separation. His only vivid memory of his birth father is visiting when he is four years old to see his father's new baby. Kamla gets Shekila, Saroo, Kallu, and Guddu up and dressed early to take a day-long journey by bus and on foot. The next morning, Kamla doesn't accompany her children to her husband's home. Saroo is happy to see his father and thinks his father's wife is nice. The children spend the night there, although Guddu and Kallu run away that night. Saroo learns later that they were unhappy with their family's situation and wanted to escape. They're found later that morning, safe and sound.

Later that same morning, Saroo watches his birth father approach and realizes he's chasing Kamla. She finally spins around to confront him. As they shout at each other, Hindus line up with Kamla, while Muslims line up with Saroo's father. Saroo and his siblings move towards Kamla when suddenly, Saroo's father throws a rock at Kamla's head. She falls, bleeding, and this manages to shock the crowds and dissolve the tension. Saroo later fixates on this moment as being indicative of Kamla's courage, as well as how vulnerable poor people in India are—his mother, as well as he and his siblings, could've easily been killed.

After Saroo's birth father leaves, Kamla moves her children to the Muslim side of town. Saroo remembers no religious instruction, and remembers thinking that the only difference between Muslims and Hindus was that they dressed differently. Though Saroo is excited by the new home, he's afraid of the spiders. He believes he lives in a town called "Ginestlay," which is hot and dry except during monsoon season.

Noting that Kamla's poverty is what kept her from being able to move is an early example of the ways that poverty shapes people's lives in fundamental ways. Her poverty means that she has little ability to dictate the terms of her life. However, it's also important to recognize that Saroo remembers this as a happy time, in spite of the poverty his family experienced. Essentially, poverty and joy aren't mutually exclusive.



This journey—and the fact that Kamla doesn't accompany her children for the actual visit—illustrates again how little power she has to dictate the terms of her life because of her economic standing. Though Saroo doesn't mention it, this is also the product of her gender: she has little power to stand up to her husband because she's female, which shows too that family can help people thrive as well as trap them in dangerous circumstances.



This event shows some of the religious animosity at play throughout India, and it reinforces how unusual Kamla and Saroo's birth father's marriage was. It is, in fact, something that can make life very dangerous for all involved, as evidenced by Saroo's assertion that they all could've died. When the children move towards Kamla, it alludes to Saroo's later assertion that he feels stronger bonds to both of his mothers than he does to his fathers.



Saroo's belief about what delineates Muslims and Hindus again reminds the reader that most of this part of his narration needs to be considered in terms of the fact that he is a child with an incomplete grasp of the world around him.



Saroo's neighborhood is very poor. People either live in communal housing or tiny and dilapidated single-family houses like Saroo's family. Cows, other livestock, and dogs wander the street. Saroo is afraid of the dogs, especially after one chases him and causes him to fall, and he suffers a nasty gash along an eyebrow. Baba, the local holy man, tells Saroo afterwards to not be afraid of dogs, but this doesn't help Saroo much.

After Shekila's birth, Kamla goes to work on building sites. She works six days per week for a tiny amount of money, and is often away for days at a time. Guddu begins working at age ten, and the family survives by begging from neighbors. Saroo occasionally finds crockery left out to be cleaned and picks what food he can off of the bottom. He explains to the reader that when a person is starving, they don't much care where their next meal comes from. Hunger means that a person thinks only of how to obtain food, and they're never able to think further in the future than the next meal. He declares that hunger and poverty steal childhoods, innocence, and security—though he was lucky, as he learned to thrive.

Because they live in a Muslim neighborhood, Kamla has Saroo circumcised at age three. He never learns exactly why she has this happen, as Kamla raises her children Hindu. Regardless, Saroo arrives home to find Baba there, along with a number of others. Baba explains that something important is going to happen. Several men take Saroo upstairs to sit in a large clay pot. He remains calm until a man appears with a razor blade. Fortunately, the procedure is over in seconds. Kallu is circumcised next, but not Guddu. The neighborhood feasts that evening, but Kallu and Saroo sit on the roof in just their shirts, listening.

Saroo and his siblings enjoy a more varied diet in the Muslim neighborhood, and they actually get to eat full meals during celebrations. They also find food at the Saturday market. Guddu, being the oldest, feels responsible for his siblings' survival, so he begins selling toothbrush kits on train platforms at age ten. Though all of Kamla's children are known by local police as petty thieves, they often get away with their discrepancies—until they arrest Guddu, using a law meant to protect him as justification. When Kamla figures out what happened, she bullies the guards into letting Guddu go.

Baba's advice here stands as an early example of Saroo's community extending outside his immediate family. This begins to show Saroo that there are other kind people in the world besides his relatives (save his birth father).



The picture Saroo paints for the reader shows that overwhelmingly, poverty and hunger mean that Saroo and his siblings aren't ever given the space to be carefree children. At young ages, they're forced to fight for their lives instead of being allowed to play or dream of the future. However, Saroo's assertion that he thrived shows that as horrible as this situation was for him, it also afforded him some important and useful skills, as evidenced by the fact that he made it to adulthood.



Again, Saroo's very clear lack of understanding reinforces how young he is at the time; he's simply too young to be privy to his mother's decision-making process. It's worth considering that Kamla may have chosen to circumcise her sons so that they fit in better and could have a chance of thriving in the Muslim neighborhood, something that might not be as easy without this marker of being Muslim.



Guddu's decision to begin working at age ten again illustrates how poverty stole Guddu's childhood; it was far more important for him to support his family than think of himself and his personal desires or dreams. However, his arrest shows that this kind of independence and tenuous adulthood can also be dangerous. Essentially, the family's poverty means that they have to walk a very fine line in order to survive.



Everyone in Saroo's family goes out during the day to obtain food or money, and they pool their resources at night. Kamla cooks what she can with the ingredients her children bring home, and Saroo loves her cooking. He feels hungry most of the time. He, Kallu, and Guddu become increasingly more creative about obtaining food as time goes on, knocking fruit out of trees and once stealing eggs from a henhouse watched by armed guards. Though they steal a number of eggs, only ten make it home unbroken. Kamla fries the eggs, and Saroo is jealous when Shekila receives the first one. Saroo steals it and races outside with it. Kamla never punishes him.

One morning, Saroo wakes up hungry and takes his sleeping blanket with him to a tomato field. He picks tomatoes and runs away when he sees boys racing after him, but his blanket gets caught on the barbed wire fence. Kamla is furious that Saroo lost his blanket, though she doesn't beat him like other parents would. Saroo also steals sometimes from Kamla's landlady. Another time, he lands a job carrying watermelons across the town's main street. He struggles with the heavy melons in traffic and suddenly finds himself knocked to the ground. Though Saroo's leg is injured, the melon suffers a worse fate: it's crushed to pulp. He has no idea how Kamla pays the doctor who treats his leg.

Saroo only sees food being given away once, and he frantically finds a plastic bag in which to carry the hot curry home. The only other thing Saroo wants aside from food is to attend school, which he cannot do due to finances. He speaks poorly as a result. As Saroo and his brothers get older, Guddu and Kallu begin spending more time away from "Ginestlay." Saroo spends time with Baba, who he thinks of as more of a father than his birth father. They fish together, and Baba sometimes feeds Saroo and talks to him about the future. Saroo also forms a bond with a supervisor at a military school camp. The supervisor feeds Saroo porridge in the morning and teaches him to whistle.

With Guddu and Kallu spending more time away, Saroo becomes very close to Shekila. Saroo becomes her primary caregiver when he's around four, and they play and eat together. Saroo spends most of his time around the house with her, though he occasionally stacks wood for a local shopkeeper. Shekila begins eating charcoal when she's two to appease her hunger, and sees a woman several times to get some relief from the digestive effects of this. Saroo plays cricket with other kids in the evenings and envies the richer kids' kites, though he doesn't have any close friends.

It's important to notice that though Saroo's family is very clearly in dire poverty, this doesn't necessarily affect how their closeness as a family in a negative way. Rather, it almost seems to force the members of the family to cling together even more tightly. Saroo will later note that this is something he believes was relatively unique to his family, which reinforces that there's something special about Saroo and the bonds he shares with his family.



The fate of the melon here illustrates just how tenuous life is on the streets, especially for a small child: it is truly a matter of life and death, and one wrong move has the potential to end a person's life. Again, it's also noteworthy that Kamla is somehow able to pay a doctor to treat Saroo. This shows that she cares deeply for the health and wellbeing of her family, while Saroo's confusion as to how she paid for it shows again how young and naïve he is at this point.



Saroo's poor language skills are another example of the ways that poverty fundamentally shapes people's lives—he literally cannot afford to learn to speak better. This passage also sets the precedent that while kindness certainly exists in Saroo's world, it's not necessarily something that's easy to come by, or something that Saroo should expect from people who aren't his family.



Eating charcoal can cause major and dangerous constipation, hence the need for immediate medical care when Shekila does this. Again, the fact that Kamla seeks care for Shekila even though her payment methods are unknown or questionable suggests that she puts the welfare of her family above other things. Poverty can reorganize a person's priorities.



At fourteen and twelve, Guddu and Kallu spend most of their time away, often at a town a few stops down the train line called “**Berampur**.” They occasionally take Saroo with them when he’s four or five, and Saroo begs for money in the station. One evening when Saroo is five, everyone but Kallu is home for dinner. Kamla goes out afterwards, and Guddu announces that he’s going back to “Berampur.” Saroo, not wanting to be left behind, insists he’s going with. Guddu agrees, and they leave Shekila alone.

Saroo is thrilled as he heads off with Guddu on a bike. He’s tired by the time they board a train, and the adventure doesn’t seem as fun anymore. Finally, when they reach “**Berampur**,” Saroo insists he needs to sleep. Guddu tells Saroo to stay put and promises to return. Saroo wakes up some time later and sees a train at the same platform where he and Guddu got off. He has no idea how long he’s been asleep, but he decides to look for Guddu on the train. Afraid of being left alone again, Saroo searches several carriages. One is entirely empty, so Saroo settles in and falls asleep, believing that Guddu is surely in another carriage.

When Saroo wakes, there’s bright sunlight outside. The train is moving, and he can’t see Guddu anywhere. He finds the doors to the carriage locked, and he begins to panic. He runs through the carriage, looking for Guddu and yelling his name, and eventually, curls up and cries. Saroo shuts down to a degree, and he cries, sleeps, and looks out the window in turn. Once, he wakes up when the train is stopped, but can’t see anyone on the platform and the doors won’t open. Eventually, the panic recedes a bit and Saroo decides he needs to behave like his brothers: he can beg, and he can eventually find his way back home.

After another six hours, the landscape becomes green and watery. The train goes through small towns, and then the landscape outside becomes entirely urban. The train slows and finally stops at a station where hundreds of people swarm on the platform. Someone opens the carriage, and Saroo darts out. He learns only later that he jumped off in Calcutta, one of the most dangerous cities in the world. He’s frightened by the crowds, and nobody seems to even notice him as he calls out “**Ginestlay, Berampur?**” Several people stop to see if they can help, but nobody understands “Ginestlay.” It never occurs to Saroo that the policemen, people he’d learned to avoid, might be able to help.

As with “Ginestlay,” the use of quotations around “Berampur” tells the reader that this isn’t the real name of the station; rather, it’s how five-year-old Saroo thinks of and understands his world. It’s also clear that Saroo greatly admires Guddu, and being allowed to go with him feels like proof that Guddu recognizes how grown-up Saroo is getting.



The fact that Saroo loses interest in the adventure so quickly again illustrates just how young he is—though he’d like to think otherwise, he is a child who needs a place to sleep at night, just like any other five-year-old. It soon becomes clear that Guddu isn’t on the train, which shows that Saroo’s belief that he is there is something that Saroo creates in order to make this event easier to deal with.



The fact that Saroo is so quickly able to conquer his panic and vow to be like his brothers shows that in some ways, his poverty has the potential to save him—Guddu and Kallu taught him how to beg and sleep on the streets, which will prove necessary skills when Saroo finally makes it off the train. However, this is also indicative of how poverty can steal a person’s life. Saroo very literally cannot afford to dwell on his lost family; he must concentrate on survival.



Though Saroo overwhelmingly credits his survival in Calcutta to his experiences with poverty, the fact that he was labeled a petty thief in his hometown means that he doesn’t understand that policemen can help at all—to him, they’re just people who get him in trouble when he gets caught. His lack of language, a result of his poverty, also keeps him from getting help here, as evidenced by the people who give up when they cannot understand what he’s saying.



Saroo decides to take the next train from his platform, reasoning that it should head back to “Berampur.” It turns around in a smaller town and heads back to the massive station after an hour. For days, Saroo takes trains out in hopes that they’ll take him home. None of them do. He eats dropped peanuts and corncobs and learns to get by. Nobody ever asks him for a ticket, though he avoids trains with conductors. None of the adults he does speak with are able or willing to help him.

As time goes on, Saroo becomes familiar with the huge station. He watches a group of children who also sleep in the station, and he sleeps near them to feel safer. One night, however, Saroo wakes to screams. One child screams for the others to run, and Saroo sees children being carried off by adults. He darts onto the tracks and into a tunnel to escape. Around a corner, he comes face to face with an oncoming train, and he presses himself against the wall to avoid being crushed. After it passes, he continues to follow the tracks and leaves them when he reaches a road. He reaches a massive river and stares at it and the busy bridge spanning it, feeling lost and alone.

Finally, Saroo walks down to the riverbank. Vendors shoo him away, and he eventually comes upon some holy men sleeping. They wear saffron robes and look scary, but he reasons he’ll be safer around holy people. Saroo falls asleep and wakes in the morning, alone.

3. SURVIVAL

Saroo walks along the river, which is foul and lined with dead animals and human excrement. He’s shocked to come across two mutilated human bodies, and horrified to realize that the bodies are proof that existing in this city is a matter of life and death. Saroo feels terrified and wonders what happened to Guddu. He cries for a while and then vows to do his best to survive, as that’s the best chance he has of finding his way home. He finds people on the river bathing and doing laundry, and he joins children playing in the shallows. Later in the afternoon, Saroo jumps back into the river—but he doesn’t notice that the water level has risen. The current begins to pull him downstream, and water fills his lungs. Suddenly, someone pulls Saroo out. Saroo sees that it was an old homeless man.

Saroo again finds himself surprised by the river the next day, and the same homeless man saves him. A crowd gathers, insisting that the gods spared Saroo. Embarrassed, Saroo runs away and decides he needs to find a place to sleep. He finds a piece of cardboard next to a disused factory. That night, nasty-looking dogs bark nearby, and Saroo wakes in the morning with a rock clutched firmly in his hand.

For a five-year-old, the ability to clearly reason that the train should head back from whence it came illustrates one of the positive aspects of Saroo’s upbringing: it’s taught him to be logical and levelheaded in situations like this, regardless of the fact that he never manages to get on the right train.



By not providing context or explanation from an adult’s perspective on what happened, Saroo asks the reader to experience this with him as though the reader is also a child. This allows the reader to share more of Saroo’s emotional experiences of his time on the streets.



For Saroo, religion is something that he equates with safety and kindness, regardless of what the religious people in question look like. These holy men essentially allow Saroo to make more sense of his surroundings.



For Saroo, the bodies are proof that there’s no real sense of community in Calcutta (or at least the part he’s in). Instead, it’s a place where someone might kill him for seemingly no reason, and where his body won’t be properly cared for. However, this idea immediately comes into question when Saroo is both embraced by the children in the river, and then saved by the homeless man. These events begin to show Saroo that there is kindness to be found, even in a gritty and dangerous city like Calcutta.



The crowd’s insistence that Saroo has been spared by the gods shows that many people believe in a divine conception of fate and destiny. When Saroo runs here, his action seems more connected to his later beliefs in chance and luck more than preordained fate.



The vendors in the area don't take pity on any of the orphan children, so Saroo watches people eating and learns which leftovers are safe and best to eat. He soon begins wandering further from the station and the river in search of food. One day, he finds himself in a dense and smelly block and comes across a group of older boys smoking cigarettes. One boy approaches, speaking a different language, and slaps Saroo in the face. Saroo gets up and walks away. When the boys begin to follow, Saroo runs through the enclosed yards. He makes it up onto a garden wall and then runs along it as the boys throw bottles at him. When the boys finally leave him alone, Saroo darts through a house to the street and returns to the bridge.

Saroo struggles to find a place to sleep each night, and once finds himself under the bridge where he sees some wooden platforms holding statues of a goddess and covered in offerings. For the first time, Saroo feels safe. He collects some of the coins and eats some of the offerings of fruit, and then clambers onto some planks and curls up to sleep. He thinks of his family, but the thoughts aren't as painful. When Saroo wakes up the next morning, he slips past the holy men in saffron robes and feels secure in their presence.

Some days, Saroo returns to the railyard. One afternoon, he nearly falls asleep on the track in the heat, and a railway worker approaches him. Saroo explains that he's lost, and the man explains that the tracks are very dangerous. Saroo is heartened that this man seems interested and tells him the story of how he arrived in Calcutta. When the man invites him to come home with him, Saroo doesn't hesitate to accept.

The railway worker lives with other workers in a metal shack near the station. Dinner that night seems decadent, and Saroo feels as though these men are saving his life. They allow him to sleep in a bed of straw and arrange for a friend who can help to visit. The next day, the friend shows up, sits on Saroo's bed, and asks Saroo to lie down beside him and tell his story. Saroo tells the reader that it's possible any five-year-old would've felt uncomfortable, but he knew instinctively that this man was bad—but also that he needed to play along. The man promises to return the next day. Saroo agrees, but knows he's not going anywhere with him.

Saroo is unable to decide whether these boys are chasing him for sport or whether they have better reasons to chase him away, which reinforces his belief that this city is a matter of life and death. The fact that Saroo so willingly wanders into such a dangerous part of town shows that though he does have well-developed survival skills, he hasn't yet perfected his instincts regarding which people and areas are safe to trust. He is, essentially, still a child, and isn't always aware of what's safe and what isn't.



Again, Saroo conflates religion of any kind with safety, a belief that's supported here when the holy men seem to allow Saroo to sleep near their shrine without waking him. This also continues to show that Saroo can indeed find small moments of kindness and belonging in unexpected places, and it's not wrong to look for those places and take them when they come.



Saroo may be a hardened street child by now, but kindness and warmth have the power to draw him off the streets in an instant. Essentially, though poverty has given Saroo a boost in some cases, it also makes him susceptible to manipulation as he looks for any kind of relief.



In particular, Saroo's immediate ability to understand that he needs to play along in order to make it out of this alive shows just how developed his street smarts have become in the last few weeks, especially since it wasn't that long ago that he walked right into a dangerous neighborhood. However, this experience also shows Saroo that what seems to be kindness is not always so; some people are trying to manipulate him and possibly hurt him.



Saroo washes dishes that night after dinner and as the men smoke, he bolts as though his life depends on it. He slows once he reaches the streets, but when he hears his name, he runs to the most crowded part of the street. He looks back to see the railway worker and several others looking for him, angry looks on their faces. Finally, Saroo hides in a sewage pipe between two houses. He listens to the railway workers talking to a fruit vendor and sees the men move on. Saroo feels betrayed, and says he has never felt more terrified. He remains hidden for a while and then winds through the darkest parts of the streets.

It becomes clear that the men weren't just being kind; they certainly want something from Saroo and it's sure to not be good. The fact that they kept Saroo in their shack the way they did (they made him feel like a guest, not a prisoner) suggests that Saroo is probably unlike their other victims in his ability to recognize them as dangerous. They clearly expected him to go along with their wishes—they seem to usually consider children to be gullible and easy targets.



4. SALVATION

After the experience with the railway worker, Saroo decides to cross the river to avoid running into him. The bridge is crowded with people of all sorts, and the traffic in the middle is overwhelming. Saroo leaves the main road as soon as he's across. To the reader, Saroo wonders whether the railway worker had unwittingly shown him that he couldn't survive alone for long, and as such Saroo works up the courage to approach people for help.

In his adult narration, Saroo recognizes that as useful as his street skills were, what he truly needed to survive and thrive was adult assistance and kindness. His brief stint at the railway worker's shack reminded Saroo of what it feels like to sleep inside and be fed, reinforcing that those are things he absolutely does need.



First, Saroo approaches a little boy about his own age. They play in the street for a while and then the boy invites Saroo to come home with him. The boy's mother seems kind, and Saroo tells her some of his story. She allows him to stay and eat with them, promising to help him find someone to get him home. The next day, she invites Saroo to come with her to the pond to do laundry. Saroo washes himself in the pond and loves being in the water. Eventually, the boy joins his mother, but Saroo doesn't listen when she calls for him. She loses her temper, throws a rock at Saroo, and leaves with her son. Saroo begins crying.

The very existence of a woman who is fully willing to help Saroo (at least at first) helps Saroo learn that it is possible and sometimes a good thing to trust people. However, her violence again shows that Saroo's early experiences with family were possibly an outlier, given that Kamla wasn't violent at all with her children. This also begins to get at the idea that families are built as much or more by the way that individuals interact with each other, not by blood.



Saroo is perplexed, as Kamla never would've thrown a rock. He wonders if this is how people are in the big city. Not long after, Saroo meets a teenager about Guddu's age. The teenager approaches Saroo and patiently asks him his name. They talk for a bit and when Saroo admits he's lost, the teenager invites him to come back to his family's home. Saroo stays with the teenager's family for several days, and they're very kind to him.

The teenager's resemblance to Guddu no doubt plays a role in Saroo's desire to trust him, which shows again that Saroo values his family and understands that he can trust family to help him. Essentially, it makes the teenager seem like less of a stranger along the lines of the railway worker, and more like an actual kind person.



The teenager finally tells Saroo that he's going to take him someplace to get help. When Saroo sees that they're headed for a police station, he begins to resist. The teenager promises Saroo that the police officers will help, and eventually Saroo agrees to stay with the police. The police put Saroo in a locked cell, and he has no idea if things are getting better or worse.

Remember that Saroo has never been given a reason to believe that the police exist to help people; his experiences with poverty taught him instead that they stand in direct opposition to the ways in which he must obtain food to survive.



Saroo addresses the reader and explains that he wonders what might've happened had he not trusted the teenager. It's likely he would've died, as most homeless kids in Kolkata die. The railway worker's friend may have intended to traffic Saroo into sexual slavery or sell him for his organs. Only a few months after Saroo was taken off the street, a person began murdering homeless people at night. He says he wishes he remembered the name of the teenager.

The police feed Saroo in the morning and then take him with other children to another building. The adults there feed the children and then ask Saroo questions about who he is and where he's from. They have no idea where "Ginestlay" is. Finally, they declare that Saroo is lost. After this, they take him to a building that they explain is for lost children. It looks like a prison. There are hundreds of children in long halls filled with bunk beds, and only one bathroom. Children sleep three or four to a bed, and the place is scary at night.

Saroo wonders now if the place felt so horrible because most of the children had been abandoned or were otherwise sick, injured, or disabled. He also learned later that the place was a juvenile detention center called Liluah, and it housed criminal children alongside lost children like him.

Saroo tries to avoid the bigger boys who hit him, and it's just by luck that he's never taken by the men who climb over the walls and come inside. He reasons now that they were probably people like the railway worker and his friend, and walls don't stop them—though neither do the adults who work there. About a month after Saroo arrives there, the authorities decide to turn him over to an orphanage. He feels lucky to be leaving Liluah.

Saroo is taken to the children's court in Calcutta, where he's released into the care of Mrs. Saroj Sood and the Indian Society for Sponsorship and Adoption (ISSA). Saroo feels safe with Mrs. Sood immediately. She explains to him that he'll live in her orphanage, called Nava Jeevan, while she tries to find "Berampur." She buys him a banana when he asks, and Nava Jeevan turns out to be very nice. The windows have bars, but Saroo understands that they're to keep children safe. The environment is generally friendly, though it's still overcrowded.

Now, by going back and adding an adult's perspective to these childhood events, Saroo does for the reader what others later are able to do for him: he makes the memories make more sense by providing extra context to a simple and childish narrative and memory.



Again it's suggested that Saroo's ideas about where he comes from are convoluted, if not false, since still no one has heard of "Ginestlay." The way he describes the place for lost children suggests that while the government ostensibly tries to right by these children, it's not easy or even possible in practice.



The fact that Liluah also houses criminal children suggests that resources in Calcutta are stretched thin, and even people trying to do the right thing often simply can't.



Even though Saroo is technically in the care of the state at Liluah, his experience (and the experiences of others he describes) show clearly that not all care is created equal. Saroo may be safe from the murderers on the street, but he's still absolutely at risk for all sorts of other horrible fates.



By buying Saroo a banana, Mrs. Sood shows him that she's truly willing to listen to him and attend to his needs. The safety that Saroo feels at Nava Jeevan and with Mrs. Sood illustrates clearly his desire to trust people and form close bonds with them. Essentially, this indicates that he's ready and willing to seek family and friendships now that he's seen that he cannot live without those relationships.



While other children go to school, Saroo sits at home on the enclosed front porch. He eventually makes friends with a teenage girl who sometimes passes him snacks. One day she gives him a pendant of the god Ganesh, who is often called the Remover of Obstacles and the Lord of Beginnings. Saroo treasures it into adulthood, and he sees it as proof that people will help him. He manages to avoid the few bullies at Nava Jeevan, and is never hit or punished.

After a few weeks, Mrs. Sood tells Saroo that since they cannot find Kamla, they're going to try to find him another family. Part of him had already accepted that he wasn't going home, and he's not particularly devastated. He simply doesn't understand how the adults can't just find the right train to send him home. Four weeks later, Mrs. Sood tells Saroo that a mother and father in Australia would like him to come live with them. Two other boys from Nava Jeevan, Abdul and Musa, already went to Australia, and Saroo's friend at the orphanage, Asra, will also be going.

Asra and Saroo are given photo albums made by their prospective parents. Saroo is bewitched by the fact that the Brierleys are white, have a car, and a large house. He's especially fascinated when they say in the album that he'll ride on a jet to come to them. Saroo is generally overwhelmed by the thought of living with a new family, but Asra is very excited. Eventually, her enthusiasm proves contagious and Saroo agrees to go to Australia.

Once Saroo makes his decision, his reservations disappear. One day, Asra, Saroo, and the other children going to Australia are separated by gender, and the boys are taken to the house of a woman called Aunty Ula. She teaches them how to eat at the table with a knife and fork and ask for more food. Saroo is thrilled to learn that he'll be able to ask for more food. Days later, Saroo, the five others from Nava Jeevan, and two other children from a different orphanage board a plane bound for Australia. Saroo is sad to say goodbye to Mrs. Sood, but his excitement at flying on a plane soon takes the place of any anxiety.

The Australian volunteers accompanying the children give them chocolate bars, and Saroo makes his last for the entire journey. He's fascinated by getting to watch TV and eats everything the flight attendants bring. They stay a night in Bombay, which feels extremely luxurious to Saroo. The next day, he puts on a "Tasmania" tee shirt sent by his new parents and is allowed to choose a toy at a toyshop. He chooses a model car.

The Ganesh pendant and the fact that Saroo keeps it foreshadows Saroo's good fortune to come. Though Saroo ultimately doesn't believe in a divine sense of destiny, it's possible to read the relationship between Ganesh and the good things that happen to Saroo in his life as possible proof that divine destiny is indeed real.



Saroo now understands that he must take any chance he gets at a better life, no matter what form that chance might take. It's also worth noting that part of what keeps the adults from being able to find Saroo's home is his lack of language—again, the effects of growing up in poverty keep him from moving more easily through the world.



Saroo's feeling of being overwhelmed likely has to do with the fact that he still has a family that is alive and surely misses him; it'll later come to light that Asra's birth parents are dead. This shows that though Saroo will later state that he absolutely believes that his adoptive family is his "real" family, he struggled to get to that point.



Remember that for Saroo at this point, being in a situation where he can ask for food and expect to receive it is entirely outside his realm of experience. This begins to create an experience gap between him and the rest of his birth family, as the fact that they remain in Saroo's hometown mostly ensures that they're going to struggle to lift themselves out of poverty, if they'll be able to do so at all.



Getting to choose a toy in particular is a way for ISSA to show the children that they're cared for and that this is a start of a better life, as it's likely the first time in these children's lives that they've been able to choose anything frivolous like a toy.



Saroo explains that he knows now that on the flight from Calcutta to Bombay, he passed very close to his hometown. The plane likely left a vapor trail, just like the ones he watched with fascination as a child. He wonders if Kamla saw his vapor trail.

This coincidence feeds Saroo's belief in chance and fate, as well as a growing sense that everything that happened to him was somehow connected via destiny.



5. A NEW LIFE

Saroo lands in Melbourne on the night of September 25, 1987. The volunteers lead the children to a VIP area to meet their new families. Though Saroo feels very shy, he immediately recognizes the Brierleys. He still has his chocolate. He hugs Mum and Dad, and Mum cleans the chocolate off of his hand. They can't talk to each other, so they sit and point at pictures in the photo album. Saroo is withdrawn, but he immediately feels safe with his parents. Eventually, Saroo and the Brierleys head to a hotel before their flight to Tasmania.

When Mum cleans Saroo's hands, it's an action that communicates through the language barrier that she's here to care for Saroo over anything else. This continues to develop the idea that families are created when people care for each other, not necessarily just by being blood relations.



Mum scrubs Saroo in the bathtub. Later, they find that he has a heart murmur and an intestinal tapeworm. He sleeps soundly that night and wakes up in the morning to see Mum and Dad watching him from their bed. He peers out at them, and feels as though none of them could believe that they were going to be a family. After breakfast, they take a short flight to Hobart. Saroo is shocked that the streets of Hobart are clean, and nobody there is as dark as him. The house is very impressive, and Saroo loves the cold fridge especially.

Again, bathing Saroo is another way for Mum to demonstrate how she'll care for her new son, which in turn shows Saroo that he can trust her to care for him kindly and gently. The disbelief Saroo mentions alludes to the fact that this all happened very quickly compared to other adoptions; it's only been seven months since the police took custody of Saroo.



The best part of the new house is Saroo's bedroom, as he's never had a room to himself. Mum has pinned a **map** of India in it and laid out warm clothes appropriate for Tasmania's cooler weather. It takes him time to understand that all the books and toys are for him to play with at will. The other difficult thing to get used to is the abundance of food. Saroo and Mum name food items for each other in Hindi and English. Mum cooks Indian food often, but Saroo's diet slowly becomes more Australian. He's shocked the first time he sees Mum with beef—as a Hindu, it's taboo to slaughter cows, which are considered holy animals. Eventually, the abundance of food overcomes Saroo's cultural preferences.

The difficulties Saroo has in adjusting to life in Tasmania are illustrative of the effects of poverty—per his narration, the only thing he ever truly owned was his sleeping blanket, which makes it far easier to understand his struggle to realize all the things in his room are his. Then, the fact that he does eventually move past his Hindu upbringing in favor of accepting what's given to him shows that the abundance the Brierleys offer is more compelling than religious beliefs for someone who grew up hungry.



Mum teaches Saroo to swim very quickly, and Saroo loves being able to enjoy the outdoors. Mum and Dad are active and take Saroo to play golf, hike, and sail. Saroo finds the natural world peaceful, as he'd never experienced anything like it in India. The year after his adoption, Saroo starts school in a suburb called Howrah. He explains that years later, he discovered that the area of Calcutta where he lived on the streets was also called Howrah, named after the city's massive Howrah Station.

The "Howrah" coincidence also adds more weight to Saroo's growing sense that there's possibly more at play than chance. He starts to take a more balanced view between chance and destiny, as he sees that it's significant that these coincidences exist in the first place.



Saroo loves school, though he struggles with the fact that he can't answer his classmates' questions about where he's from. Mum finally attends a parent-student day and explains Saroo's adoption to his classmates. Saroo says he doesn't remember experiencing racism at school, though Mum and Dad can recall several instances that went over Saroo's head at the time. They eventually stop attending events put on by the local Indian Cultural Society, as Mum and Dad notice that people believe that Saroo shouldn't have been taken from India to live with white parents. They do continue to be involved with ASIAC, an organization that helps people adopt internationally. Saroo is surprised at the first meeting to discover that he's not the only internationally adopted child in Hobart.

Through ASIAC, Saroo is able to keep in contact with Asra. A year after their adoptions, their families meet up to go to the zoo in Melbourne with Abdul and Musa, and everyone seems happy to be in their new homes. Later that year, Saroo even gets to see Mrs. Sood again when she accompanies another adoptee to Hobart.

Saroo loves all his teachers at school and applies himself to academics. When he's ten, Mum and Dad adopt another child from India. Saroo is thrilled; he'd been saying for years that he wanted Shekila for Christmas. He explains that Mum was a wonderful mother to him, so the only person missing in his life was a sibling. This is heightened by the fact that he was so close to Shekila, and he occasionally tells Mum that he feels guilty for not looking after her better.

Just as they did the first time, Mum and Dad ask for any child of any age or gender, and they get a little boy named Mantosh. Mantosh proves loud and disobedient. Like Saroo, he grew up poor in India and arrives at nine years old in Australia with no records. He grew up speaking Bengali around Calcutta, his birth home was violent, and eventually, a grandmother handed him over to the state. He wound up at ISSA, but children can only remain at ISSA for two months. Because he did have known parents, Mrs. Sood struggled to make Mantosh available for adoption. He went to Liluah, where he was physically and sexually abused. The entire process took two years, and Saroo understands now that what happened to Mantosh exposed the harm that can come as a result of the bureaucratic adoption system.

Saroo's surprise at discovering he's not as special as he thought points again to his extreme youth at this time in his story, especially since he's clearly aware that other children, like Asra, have been and are being adopted into Australian families. The prejudice of people at the Cultural Society suggests that there are people in Hobart who have distinct views of what adoption should look like, and they think less of the Brierleys as a family for violating their ideas of what makes a traditional Australian family.



The fact that all four of these children are, per Saroo's understanding, happy to be in Australia with their new families is a testament to the power of adoption to form families—it helps build Saroo's belief that blood relations aren't necessary.



With the prospect of a sibling on the horizon, it appears as though all of Saroo's childhood dreams are coming true: he's finally able to go to school, and soon he'll have a sibling to care for. The fact that Saroo connects this sibling specifically to Shekila and feels bad about leaving her does show that he's still dwelling on his memories of India.



The stark differences between Mantosh and Saroo make it abundantly clear that adoption isn't a clear process for everyone, and everyone's experience is different. For Mantosh, he was caught between two families far more than Saroo was, given that ISSA spent so much time fighting with his parents. It's suggested that sometimes, birth families can stand in the way of a person finding family elsewhere, whether that be through adoption or through finding a "chosen family" of friends.



Mantosh doesn't seem to understand that the move to Australia is permanent at first, and he experiences major mixed feelings. He can become suddenly explosive, and even as an emaciated child he is as strong as an adult. This makes Saroo wary of Mantosh, and he's generally unsettled by the sibling rivalry that grows between them. Mantosh also struggles in school and seems to attract more racist comments. He fights back and struggles to rely on his teachers, especially the female ones—women in positions of authority aren't common in India. Saroo struggles with this too, but Mum quickly puts Saroo in his place.

Though Mum feels guilty for not being able to give Saroo as much attention now, Saroo is used to being independent. Eventually, Mum and Dad begin planning a family trip to India. Both Saroo and Mantosh are initially excited, but soon begin to feel anxious. They begin experiencing anxiety about things they thought they'd put behind them already, and the idea becomes more and more upsetting. Finally, Mum and Dad cancel the trip.

6. MY MUM'S JOURNEY

Saroo tells the reader that it's important he explain how his parents came to the choice to adopt two children internationally, with no preference for gender, age, or circumstance. Mum was born in Tasmania to central European immigrants, both of whom emigrated after World War II. Mum's mother, Julie, was born in Hungary to a very large family. Julie's father left for Canada and effectively abandoned his family, and most of her older brothers served in the war. The remaining members of Julie's family fled to Germany once Russians invaded Hungary to pursue retreating Nazis. Julie was 19 at the end of the war.

Mum's father, Josef, was born in Poland. His mother died when he was little, and his stepmother hated him. His grandmother raised him, and because of his stepmother, he grew up hating women. Josef was a member of the Resistance in WWII, but the experience disturbed him. He eventually fled to Germany, where he met Julie. They married and had a baby by the end of the war. When they decided to leave Europe, they boarded a ship they thought was headed for Canada but ended up in Australia instead. Julie remained in Victoria for a year while Josef built houses in Tasmania, and then she joined him when he bought a farm. Mum was born in 1954, and a little sister was born a year and a half later.

Remember that Saroo was three years younger than Mantosh was when he arrived; essentially, this means that Mantosh had three more years to learn Indian customs and belief systems before being uprooted. Though Saroo's extreme youth at the time of his adoption clearly has negative effects on his memory, it also possibly gave him a leg up in adjusting to life in Australia.



It's worth noting that having the ability to plan a family trip to India is indicative of the Brierleys' wealth, especially in comparison to Saroo and Mantosh's birth parents. Planning this trip also suggests that for Mum and Dad, India is a place to visit and enjoy, while for their sons, it's so much more—it's where they came from, and they suffered there.



Already in Mum's history, it's clear that she comes from a long line of neglect and possibly poverty, given the time period. By going back and giving this history, Saroo shows how these past experiences very distinctly shape how Mum and Dad behave in the present. In turn, this sets the reader up to look for instances in which Saroo behaves in ways that he learned early on in life.



On Josef's side as well, there's clear abuse and neglect at play, which the reader can expect to fundamentally color how Josef goes on to move through the world. This in turn makes it clear that an unhappy or unsafe family life can, in some ways, be just as detrimental as growing up in poverty, as both leave a child with major scars. Relocating to Tasmania, where Mum (and later, Saroo) is able to make a better life for herself, positions Tasmania itself as a place of possibility and of hope.



Mum described Josef as being huge, powerful, and scary, as his moods could shift instantly from melancholia to blind rage. He drank vodka daily and insisted on traditional Polish meals, which Mum hated and often refused to eat. Though Josef became quite rich in the building business, he soon grew delusional, deranged, and refused to pay taxes on his properties. He lost all the family's money this way.

Mum left school at 16 per Josef's insistence, and she got a job as a pharmacy assistant in Burnie. She loved her independence and paid Julie for her board, while the rest of her paycheck went towards assembling a hope chest. On a lunch break one day, Mum noticed a young man from Hobart named John Brierley (Dad). He soon asked her out. He was from England, and though he'd been skeptical of Australia at first, he loved surfing and the sun so much he never went back to England. Mum's experience with her own father soured her towards men, and it wasn't until her older sister married that she realized that men could be kind and respectful.

A year later, Dad got a job on the mainland, but he stayed in Burnie long enough to propose and get married. They moved to Hobart, and Mum celebrated her 21st birthday in her own house several years after.

Mum was very affected by Josef's ensuing downfall. He went bankrupt twice and was eventually sent to the lockup. An accountant cheated Josef and left him with more debt, and when Mum was 30, Josef was taken to prison, became very violent, and was transferred to a psychiatric prison. He borrowed money from a loan shark, who promptly took everything from Josef. Julie left Josef a year later, even though he threatened to kill her. Eventually, she came to live with Mum and Dad when Saroo and Mantosh were young. Josef died when Saroo was twelve, and he never met him.

In part because of the political shifts happening in Australia after the sixties, Mum and Dad were very interested in "alternative" ideas. They, like others, were worried about overpopulation and war, and these worries helped them decide to adopt children from developing countries. Mum's upbringing taught her that there was nothing particularly special about families formed by birth parents alone. At twelve years old, Mum also experienced a vivid vision of a brown-skinned child next to her, which turned into a guiding force in her decision to adopt. Mum felt so strongly about adopting that she even admitted she may have ended her marriage had Dad not agreed.

In many ways, Josef mimics Saroo's birth father in how their children describe them. This illustrates how detrimental it can be when a child's parent is so unreliable and downright dangerous, as Mum grows up undernourished as a result of refusing to eat the Polish meals on which her father insists.



A hope chest is traditionally filled with household items such as linen and dishes that a woman will need to furnish her married home. The fact that Mum spends her hard-earned money putting this together shows that even though she hasn't necessarily had firsthand experience that family can be loving and positive, she still recognizes that building one of her own is something that she aspires to—though in a very different way than her parents did.



In only a few years, Mum is able to turn her life around by accepting help and companionship from Dad.



Mum never introduces her children to her father, showing just how strongly she believes that blood is a poor indicator of family. Though Josef is undeniably her children's grandfather, keeping her children from him means that she doesn't believe that this relationship should guarantee him contact, when in every other way he hasn't earned it.



Mum believes in some form of destiny, though it's unclear whether it's religiously motivated or not. Regardless, this places Saroo's adoption in the realm of destiny, as it's clear from her vision that his adoption was always going to happen. It's also worth noting that Mum conceptualizes adoption as a way to help others less fortunate than she is, which is a way for her to give back to a world that has, in her adult life at least, been very kind to her.



In Tasmania at that time, state law prohibited couples who were able to conceive from adopting. Mum and Dad settled for sponsoring children overseas and otherwise enjoying their good fortune. Sixteen years later, Mum met a couple who had adopted a child and also had a biological son. She resumed her inquiry into adoption and discovered the rules had changed. Mum and Dad applied to adopt through ISSA, in part because in 1987, the childhood death toll in India was not much less than the total population of Australia.

Because Mum and Dad didn't have a preference on age or sex, they received word that Saroo was available within weeks of turning in their application. As soon as Mum saw Saroo's photo, he felt like hers. Three months later, he arrived in Melbourne. Mum believes that more Australians should consider adopting, and she's very critical of the way that governments make adoption very difficult. The struggle to adopt Mantosh made her very ill, and she believes that if it weren't so difficult, more people would do it. Saroo explains that he's very thankful for the life his parents gave him.

The early state law attempts to dictate how families work, and effectively says that the family that Mum and Dad eventually create somehow isn't appropriate. By doing this, the law implies that relationships like Mum's with Josef are somehow more legitimate than Mum's relationship to Saroo, based only on whether or not people share blood and not on their actual relationship.



Mum's assertion that more people would adopt if it were easier presumes that people are kind at heart, and are willing to help others when doing so isn't difficult. This suggests that a main reason more people aren't kind in other ways is because kindness often must be filtered through official channels (such as adoption agencies) that are, in some cases, restrained by misguided laws. At the same time, adoption can go horribly wrong for children, and the strict laws are in place to prevent situations like this—not everyone's view of human nature is as optimistic as Mum's.



7. GROWING UP

By the time Saroo begins high school, he feels like any other normal Australian teenager. He still runs through his memories of India, but they're very much in the background of his life. The ethnic makeup at school is more diverse, which helps both Saroo and Mantosh feel at home, and both boys participate in sports. By fourteen, Saroo is running off to drink with friends and his girlfriend, which he insists has nothing to do with being adopted and everything to do with being a teen. Eventually, Mum and Dad give Saroo an ultimatum: leave school before Year 12 to work, go to university, or join the military. The possibility of the military reminds Saroo of the horrific children's homes in India, and he applies himself to academics.

Saroo can now engage with his childhood memories on his own terms, as he's very much adjusted to life in Australia. Essentially, his childhood of poverty and fear hasn't necessarily had lasting negative effects that he is still dealing with as a young adult. Mum and Dad's ultimatum reminds Saroo that it's important to take opportunities when they arise, something he's upfront about wanting to impart to the reader as well.



After finishing school, Saroo begins a three-year accounting program and gets a job in hospitality. He enjoys his job so much that he soon leaves accounting behind. He works in bars and clubs around Hobart but after a few years, decides he wants more. He decides to pursue a degree in hospitality management, and receives a scholarship to the Australian International Hotel School in Canberra. His work experience means that the course will only be a year and a half. The move turns Saroo back towards thinking about India.

Saroo moving to Canberra is notably a move away from his adoptive family, but because it also turns his thoughts toward India again it is also a move towards his birth family, showing again how family can take many forms and is always present.



In Canberra, Saroo soon discovers that there are a number of Indian students at school, many from Kolkata (formerly Calcutta). This is the first time he's heard Hindi spoken in years, and it's the first time that he feels as though he's the Australian in the group. The students welcome Saroo, and he soon becomes comfortable being Indian and enjoying Indian culture. Saroo tells them his story, which proves very different than telling Australians about it: the Indian students are familiar with Kolkata's Howrah Station, the Hooghly River, and the Howrah Bridge. Because of this, they understand his story differently; while it'd been a fairy tale for Australians, it's real for them.

Because of this, Saroo feels as though his past is more present than it'd been in years, though he doesn't find that it makes people think differently of him. The exchange students also become detectives when they hear about it, and they all want to find his hometown. He reminds them that even the authorities couldn't find "Ginestlay" or "Berampur," but this doesn't deter them. Saroo believes he was on the train for twelve to fifteen hours, but he recognizes as an adult that his memory of being on the train is fragmented, likely because of the overwhelming trauma.

Saroo becomes friends with a girl named Amreen. Her father works for Indian Railways, so he asks if she'd ask her father for help locating "Berampur" or "Ginestlay" stations. A week later, her father suggests a Kolkata suburb called Brahmapur, a remote city in West Bengal called Baharampur, and a coastal city called Brahmapur. Saroo rules out the first suggestion outright, but he wonders why none of the authorities tried to look for Kamla in any of those places. The other two cities also seem unlikely, as neither seem far enough away from Howrah and Saroo hadn't seen the ocean until he flew over it to Australia. His friends suggest that Saroo looks as though he might be from West Bengal, and he begins to wonder if his memories are incorrect.

Saroo also begins to use the internet to search for clues, though the internet of 2007 is much more difficult to find things on than it is today. Saroo searches for many different spellings of "Ginestlay" and "Berampur" with little success. His memories of the layout of his town, however, remain vivid, and he feels like if he could see the town, he'd recognize it. None of the available maps are detailed enough to show small villages, but finally Saroo hears that **Google Earth** might be helpful. He begins searching for "Berampur" and finds many all over India, but he starts with the two that Amreen's father suggested. The landmarks around those towns look very different than what Saroo remembers, and neither have the distinctive water tower.

Through the Indian students, Saroo is able to rekindle interest in his own story because of their interest. Essentially, he uses the fact that for these people, his story is far more real and compelling than it was for people in Hobart to renew his own belief in the value of his memory. Their information also gives him more of an adult perspective on his childhood memories, as they begin to make more sense with these mature insights.



Saroo's recognition that his childhood memories are likely compromised by trauma illustrates how much he's grown up and come to view his memories as possibly more of a story than as hard fact. Now, as an adult, he also can better understand that he certainly had some facts wrong if the authorities weren't able to help him then.



West Bengal is relatively close to Kolkata, which would then mean that Saroo definitely misremembered how long he was on the train (it would be much less than fifteen hours). The suggestions that Amreen's father offers show that it's not just Saroo's childhood memories that are confusing; he's fighting a system that makes validating any of his memories difficult because of how many "Berampur" variations exist all over India, and how huge and sprawling the country is in general.



The fact that Saroo's visual memory is clearly superior to his verbal memory could be a product of his learning style, but it could also be a symptom of growing up in poverty and not learning language skills. He relied on visual cues to locate himself and get by, and verbal cues simply weren't as useful for him as knowing that the train station looks a specific way and is near a water tower. This kind of memory isn't as compatible with the tools available to someone with internet access, as the internet overwhelmingly relies on verbal knowledge.



This is somewhat disheartening; Saroo wonders how much may have changed in the last 20 years since he was there. He fears he won't be able to recognize the station if it's been remodeled, and he understands too that his inability to come up with a correct place name means that the search function won't help much. Internet speeds are also still very slow, and eventually, he decides to limit the amount of time he searches. He finally gives it up completely, and he wonders if he needs to just move on.

Saroo finishes his degree in 2009 and soon moves back to Hobart. He realizes almost immediately that he's no longer interested in hospitality, and decides to work for the family business selling industrial hoses. Mantosh joins the business as well. Coincidentally, Dad began the business the day that Saroo arrived from India. Saroo also begins a new relationship and soon moves in with his girlfriend. He realizes that tracing his roots isn't the most important thing, and he doesn't feel incomplete. He focuses instead on all that his parents have given him.

8. RESUMING THE SEARCH

Though Saroo loves working with Dad, his relationship with his girlfriend sours and they soon break up. Saroo moves back in with Mum and Dad and is very depressed until an old friend, Byron, invites Saroo to move in with him. Byron often goes out, while Saroo prefers to stay in and begins thinking again about India. Luckily, Byron has broadband internet and Saroo has a new, fast laptop. Saroo reasons that he feels happy enough to resume his search in a low-key way. On nights when Byron is out, Saroo searches for towns or uses **Google Earth** to check out coastal cities.

Saroo thinks about the information he has about his hometown: Muslims and Hindus lived together, the climate is warm and dry, and there was a railway station, a bridge, and a water tower at the "**Berampur**" station where he boarded the train. Finally, Saroo decides to trace the train tracks from Howrah Station until he discovers where he began. He consults Amreen about how fast the trains went in the eighties, and with that information, sets himself a thousand-kilometer radius in which to search. The circle is huge.

At this point, Saroo recognizes that the internet is just as capable of proving that his task is impossible as it is of helping him find his hometown. Saroo's success will come down to whether or not he can extract anything more useful out of his childhood memories to then match up with what the internet can provide.



Saroo can relatively easily turn his attention back to his adopted family and recognize that his relationships with them are fulfilling regardless of whether or not he finds his hometown, making it very clear just how strong Saroo's relationships with his adoptive family are. This adds more weight to his assertion that families formed by adoption can be just as strong as birth families.



Mum and Dad believe that family means a responsibility to continue caring for each other, even when a family member is no longer a child. When Saroo says that he's happy enough to begin his search, this is in part because his family is around to support him and help him regain solid emotional ground.



By devising this very logical system for searching for his hometown, Saroo attempts to divorce his search from chance at all. Remember, his previous experiences in life have taught him that so many events are the product of coincidences or dumb luck, which means he understands that he cannot necessarily trust those coincidences to get him anywhere.



The first time that Saroo zooms in on Howrah Station, he's shocked that he once walked barefoot there. He chooses a train line and begins scrolling outwards. It soon becomes clear that progress will be slow: the internet struggles to render the image quickly. However, Saroo feels confident that if he's thorough, he'll find what he's looking for. He begins searching every night before bed. He soon finds a dammed river that looks familiar and a station that looks promising, but the town is surrounded by lakes. Saroo wonders how many stations might look promising but ultimately be wrong.

In the first few months, Saroo rules out his international friends' suggestion that he's from West Bengal. A few months later, in 2010, he begins a relationship with a woman named Lisa. They break up several times before settling into a solid relationship and moving in together. Lisa seems to understand how important the search is for Saroo, though she also recognizes that he's obsessed. Saroo doesn't tell many people about his search, especially Mum and Dad. He doesn't want them to think he's unhappy with his life they gave him.

More than a year after the search began, Saroo has worked through most of his circle. He begins looking further out and eventually, searches by state rather than his initial boundary. He searches nightly and Lisa graciously puts up with it, even though Saroo is somewhat distant. Sometimes, she admits that her greatest fear is that Saroo will find what he's looking for on **Google Earth**, but not be able to find his family once he gets to India. Saroo can't respond, as he doesn't feel that he can consider failure.

By the end of 2010, Saroo and Lisa get faster internet, and not long after, he begins concentrating on the central Indian states of Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. He questions his sanity, but continues to search. Finally, one night in March, he finds it.

9. FINDING HOME

On March 31, 2011, Saroo comes home from work and settles in with his laptop. He continues along in the central west of India, studying the stations he passes. After a few hours, he takes a break and then returns, flicking the map ahead quickly to get a sense of what the land is like ahead. He finds a river and a large blue lake, and he imagines he's hiking as he peruses the lush country. Saroo notices that there are no train lines, so he begins to search for them. Suddenly, he notices a station symbol and zooms in.

The simple truth that it's possible for many stations in India to contain the right elements but not be the correct station means that in some ways, Saroo will still have to rely on chance and luck to find his hometown. This description in particular makes it seem as though it would be relatively easy to pass right over his target if things have changed just a little too much to make them readily recognizable.



Saroo tries to protect Mum and Dad from this search because of how much he cares for them—he desperately wants them to believe that the life he has with them is one that he wants. This fear of telling them also shows that Saroo is well aware that there are still people who would like to think that his family is somehow not "correct" because he's adopted, and he doesn't want his parents to think he's one of them.



Lisa is becoming part of Saroo's family, especially given that she's supporting him in a very familial way by providing him a safe space in which to conduct his search. When Saroo must begin looking outside his boundary, it implies that his personal memories and the information from his friends was likely wrong.



It's important to recognize that Saroo's success is entirely contingent on having access to the technology available at the time. It allows him to revisit his memories in a way that no other analog technology could.



Saroo previously noted that hiking and outdoor physical activity wasn't part of his life in India; here, his daydreaming about hiking reinforces how fundamentally his adoption has changed his life from what it was as a child.



Saroo follows the tracks from that station until he gets to the next one. It has a pedestrian overpass and a familiar water tank, and most incredibly, a horseshoe-shaped road just outside the station. It looks just like the road Saroo always looked at from "**Berampur**." He zooms out; the town's name is Burhanpur. Saroo doesn't recognize the town itself, though he reasons that he never left the station. Anxiously, Saroo pulls the map north along the line until it crosses a gorge, then a river with a dam. There's farmland on either side of the tracks surrounding the city. Saroo finds the station. This town is called Khandwa.

The name means nothing to Saroo, so he checks off the landmarks he remembers that this station and the town have. He even finds the familiar park fountain, and then he traces his way "home." There's nothing marked "**Ginestlay**" on the map, but he locates a building he's sure is his childhood home. After a few minutes, he calls for Lisa—realizing only after he yells that it's the middle of the night. She hugs and congratulates him.

The next day, Saroo tells Dad that he found his hometown. Dad is skeptical, and Saroo realizes that telling him is the first step towards doing something about his discovery. A little while later, Saroo tells Mum. He worries about upsetting her, especially since she so firmly believes in their family. He assures her that she'll always be his mother as he shows his parents the **Google Earth** images. They celebrate tentatively.

After dinner, Saroo heads home and searches for Khandwa on Facebook. He discovers a group called "Khandwa: My Home Town" and messages the administrator (Rochak) asking if there's a fountain near the cinema. The fountain is the most distinct landmark Saroo can think of, and he sleeps poorly until the administrator responds. The administrator responds in the morning saying that the fountain by the cinema isn't very big, and the cinema itself has been closed for years. Saroo tries to stay calm.

The next day, Mum tells Saroo that when she looked at the **map** they'd drawn when he was a child, it didn't quite match up with what he found on Google Earth. Saroo doesn't know if that means he's wrong, or if he just had a hard time accurately describing landmarks as a six-year-old. Mum also checks the map of India in Saroo's room, and is surprised to see Burhanpur and Khandwa on it, almost all the way across the country from Kolkata. Saroo is shocked to realize that his hometown had been right in front of him his entire childhood; he just hadn't known where to look. He wonders, though, if Mum is right—it's so far away from Kolkata. He begins to doubt his memories.

This moment of success illustrates clearly how technology can make it possible for someone to use even compromised and incomplete childhood memories to make sense of the world as an adult. With new information about the towns' names, Saroo will be able to more successfully investigate these places and come to a better and more adult understanding of his childhood.



Because "Ginestlay" is clearly still a mystery and because Khandwa isn't a name Saroo recognizes, it's clear that his childhood memories were incorrect in a variety of ways. Essentially, this reinforces that he had to rely on visual cues rather than verbal ones, as the verbal ones have now been proven useless.



For Mum and Dad, Saroo's discovery could very easily challenge the strong and loving family that they've spent 25 years developing and nourishing. All families—birth and adopted—are susceptible to change, as both Saroo's birth family and adoptive family are changed by this discovery.



Rochak's message shows that as much as Saroo may remember, many things have indeed changed in the past 25 years—clearly, Saroo's memories are effective, but only to a point. It's also worth recognizing that Rochak's willingness to help here mirrors the way that others helped Saroo when he was a child.



Mum seems to be trying to protect Saroo from the possibility of disappointment, which is one way for her to show him her support and her love. However, it also shows her placing more faith in childhood memories than Saroo thinks is entirely reasonable at this point, given that he recognizes the streets of Khandwa but has no recollection of ever hearing the name itself.



Finally, Saroo thinks to ask about a suburb in Khandwa that might sound like “**Ginestlay**.” The heart-stopping answer comes from Rochak a day later: there’s a suburb called Ganesh Talai, which seems to match Saroo’s childhood mispronunciation closely enough. Saroo isn’t sure what to do. He’s excited to have found home, but he’s unsure of what this might mean for his family. He wonders if Kamla is healthy or even alive, and whether his siblings are okay. He wonders if he’d even recognize them. Saroo realizes that he must go to Khandwa in order to answer his questions, but he feels some of the same anxiety that made Mum and Dad cancel the trip to India when Saroo was a child.

Saroo researches Khandwa for a long time. He discovers that it’s a relatively small city, but is at a major rail junction. He watches YouTube videos from the city, and after a few weeks, he finally raises the subject of going to India with his parents and Lisa. They all insist he should go, and they all want to go too. Saroo insists he must go alone, as he doesn’t want to make a big scene and possibly attract people excited to be his “mother” and claim a long-lost son.

Lisa backs down immediately, but Mum and Dad argue more. Finally, Saroo convinces them that he must go alone. It takes Saroo eleven months to sort through bureaucratic details, though he also puts off the possible heartbreak that might come from being disappointed once in India. He finds support in strange places, including from the doctor’s office that administers his vaccinations. Finally, Mum and Lisa take Saroo to the airport and Mum gives Saroo a page of color photographs of him as a child. Saroo is the last to board the plane and anxiously wonders if he really should go.

10. MEETING MY MOTHER

When Saroo lands in Indore on February 11, 2012, he feels like an outsider immediately—he doesn’t speak Hindi at all, struggles to escape insistent taxi drivers, and feels as though the streets look much dirtier than he remembers. When he arrives at the hotel, he sleeps for a few hours and then hires a driver to take him to Khandwa. He wonders if there’s a reason his driver charges so little: the drive is terrifying, even by Indian standards. When they finally reach the outskirts of Khandwa, Saroo feels cold when he doesn’t recognize it at all. He asks the driver to head for the train station first.

Solving the “Ginestlay” mystery shows with finality that childhood memories can certainly be useful, but they shouldn’t necessarily be taken as definite reality. Again, this mystery exists in the first place because of the combination of Saroo’s youth and his lack of education; he never had the language skills to be able to appropriately pronounce Ganesh Talai or even Khandwa, for that matter.



Saroo recognizes that in such a poor city, there are people who will see his return as an economic opportunity rather than a chance to put a fractured family back together. He recognizes that because his childhood memories are obviously flawed in places, he might be especially susceptible to this kind of thing.



When Saroo receives support in odd corners of his world, it begins to suggest that his story is exceptional and has the power to touch people. This foreshadows his eventual realization that his story can be used to inspire hope in others, and that he can perhaps use it to pay back some of the kindness shown to him by others. Giving others hope and support, essentially, is one of the kindest things a person can do.



Saroo will say it explicitly later, but returning to India doesn’t actually change or complicate his identity—he still identifies as an Australian (just with Indian roots), as reinforced here by the immense culture shock he experiences upon landing. Khandwa is still a relatively large city (200,000 people in 2011), so it’s misguided to think that Saroo would’ve been intimately familiar with all of it.



Fortunately, Saroo is able to direct the driver to the station by memory. Though it looks a bit different, it is indeed the correct station, and Saroo has his bearings in town. Feeling suddenly exhausted, Saroo asks the driver to take him to the hotel. On the drive there, he thinks the streets look shabbier than he remembers. He inadvertently offends the driver by not tipping him, and feels horrible as he checks in and collapses on his bed. However, Saroo can't settle. Finally, he decides to go back out.

Saroo retraces the car's path back to the railway line and then navigates the streets he only half recognizes. The anxiety ebbs some when he comes across Baba's mosque, but it kicks back into overdrive when he walks into the center of Ganesh Talai. There are too many buildings and nothing looks right, but Saroo finally realizes that things look different because the town has electricity now. Saroo decides to look for the home where his family lived in the Hindu neighborhood. When he finds the street, he suddenly experiences flashes of memories of playing in the alley. A woman asks in Hindi if she can help, and Saroo simply tells her no and walks away.

Saroo walks back to the Muslim area of the neighborhood, and before he can think, he finds himself in front of his childhood house. It's clearly abandoned, and he can barely fathom that five people once lived there—it's only about nine feet square. Saroo reasons that he couldn't expect to just waltz in and find Kamla still here, but he feels crushed regardless. A woman comes out of the house next door. When Saroo realizes she speaks some English, he recites the names of his family members and shows her the sheet of photos. The woman explains that nobody lives in the house anymore.

Two men walk over to investigate, and Saroo tells one of the men who speaks English his story and again lists his family members' names. The man asks Saroo to wait and walks off as a crowd begins to gather, curious about Saroo. A minute later, the man returns and tells Saroo to follow him to Kamla. Unthinking and anxious, Saroo follows until the man stops in front of three women and announces that this is his mother. Saroo is stunned as he looks from woman to woman. The one in the middle looks vaguely familiar, so he assumes that one is his mother. They look at each other for a moment and it seems as though she recognizes him instantly. Kamla steps forward, takes Saroo's hands, and stares at him.

Again, these moments of culture shock and adjusting poorly reinforce that Saroo is absolutely Australian; discovering his hometown doesn't change that. The moments when Saroo does feel at home (as when he recognizes the station) show that Saroo's memory can indeed be trusted in some cases.



Saroo's anxiety as he walks the streets of Khandwa is a product of the tenuous relationship between the "Ginestlay" he remembers and the Ganesh Talai in front of him. Notably, "Ginestlay" exists only in his memory, and so is a place where things don't change, hence his present feeling that things look so vastly different. Ganesh Talai is a real, vibrant place in the world where things can change and evolve as time goes on, unlike childhood memories.



The willingness of this woman to help Saroo for no other reason than he looks lost and she can is testament to the inherent kindness of many people. The narrative now finally catches up to the events of the prologue, bringing things full circle but also adding suspense to the expectation of what comes next.



Again, help and kindness can be found in all sorts of unlikely places. The man's kindness also shows the sense of community at work in Ganesh Talai, as this man must know Kamla and be aware of Saroo's disappearance in order to be able to make this happen. The idea of family and caring for others can also extend to encompass an entire community.



Kamla leads Saroo to her house around the corner, muttering with emotion. Saroo can't say anything. When they get inside, Kamla pulls out a cell phone and Saroo hears her calling Kallu and Shekila. She refers to Saroo as Sheru, and Saroo realizes he may have been mispronouncing his name the entire time. He also learns that Kamla has since converted to Islam and now goes by Fatima, though he tells the reader she'll always be Kamla to him. The crowd outside the house grows as people call their friends and tell them about Saroo's miraculous return.

Several people speak English, so Kamla and Saroo can speak to each other. Saroo offers her a brief rundown of his story. She's astonished. She explains that the man had simply said that Sheru was back, and she was "surprised with thunder" that he'd returned. Saroo feels as though the phrase encapsulates his feelings exactly. Later, when Saroo realizes he'd been mere meters from Kamla and it was only because of that man that he found her, he feels haunted that he may not have been able to find her at all.

The crowd babbles happily and chaotically around Saroo. He and Kamla meet a woman named Cheryl, who is able to translate for them. Saroo tells Kamla more about his life and what happened when he got lost. She makes it very clear that she's grateful to Mum and Dad for raising Saroo to be the man he is today, and she insists she only wants for him to have the best life possible. Saroo is moved to hear this, as it allows him to feel that he made the right decision to choose adoption at Nava Jeevan.

Though Kamla's new home represents a step up by the standards of Ganesh Talai, it's also more dilapidated in some ways than the house Saroo lived in. Others tell Saroo that Kamla works as a housecleaner now, and Saroo recognizes that she has to work hard for this house. A little while later, Kallu and Shekila arrive. Shekila bursts into tears upon seeing Saroo, and Kallu is stunned. Finally, Saroo asks about Guddu. He wants Guddu to know that he doesn't blame him for what happened, and he's shocked to hear that Guddu never returned after Saroo got lost. A few weeks later, Kamla had received word that he died in a train accident. Saroo is devastated.

The possibility that Saroo has been mispronouncing his own name again shows how unreliable childhood memories can be. However, Saroo's name now, as well as his belief in the memory of "Ginestlay," shows that these incorrect recollections do actually have a great deal of power to change the course of someone's life, regardless of their truthfulness.



The haunted feeling Saroo experiences points to his belief in luck and chance; it was only by chance and because of unexplainable kindness on the man's part that Saroo found Kamla so quickly. In this way, Saroo draws a link between kindness and fate. As was the case with the teenager, someone's kindness led him to the right place.



Kamla's selfless ability to thank Mum and Dad shows that like them, she believes that family doesn't have to just consist of blood relatives. She recognizes that Mum and Dad are now somehow a part of her family, as they raised her son. This expands the definition of family even further, and shows that family can consist of an entire community.



Saroo's recognition that Kamla has to work very hard for even this minimal step up shows another instance of poverty keeping Kamla from ever being able to do much better for herself. The struggle to feed herself and her family is likely hard enough that finding better housing is far down on her list of immediate necessities, as much as she takes pride in this new home.



Saroo learns later that Kamla had been annoyed that Guddu took Saroo, but it took her a week to become worried. A month after their disappearance, a policeman arrived with a photo of Guddu's mangled body for Kamla to identify. He'd fallen off a moving train. Saroo is even more devastated when Kallu explains that though Guddu was buried in a cemetery, builders later built right over the graves. Saroo feels as though Guddu is being taken away from him, and is especially upset that there are no photographs of him—all he has are his memories. Saroo isn't sure if his family totally understands his grief; they made peace with his death years ago.

Saroo also learns about his birth father: he now lives in Bhopal, a few hundred kilometers away, and the family hates him for abandoning them. At one point, Cheryl mentions that some of the people gathered in Kamla's house wonder how Kamla knows for sure that Saroo is her son. Kamla insists she'd know Saroo anywhere, but points out the scar on Saroo's eyebrow as definitive proof.

Late in the evening, Saroo decides that he needs to go back to the hotel. Kallu takes Saroo on his motorbike and then heads to his home in Burhanpur. Saroo thinks about how much his life has changed in the last few hours, and thinks a lot about Guddu. He believes that Guddu didn't just fall; he was too confident navigating the trains. He wonders if Guddu got into a fight, or was so preoccupied with finding Saroo that he made a mistake. Saroo struggles with the thought that if he hadn't gotten on the train, Guddu might still be alive. He realizes, however, that he needs to accept that he'll never know the full truth. Before he goes to bed, he texts Mum and Dad the news, and tells them that Kamla thanks them for raising him.

11. RECONNECTION

Kallu picks Saroo up the next morning and takes him back to Kamla's house. There, Saroo gets to meet Kallu's wife, son, and daughter. Saroo is delighted to meet his niece and nephew, and they all happily and silently have tea until the crowds, Cheryl, and other translators arrive. Shekila soon arrives with her sons and husband. They're all shocked that Saroo isn't married with children. Though they seem happy that he has a girlfriend, Saroo questions whether or not Kamla understands the concept.

Guddu's death represents a situation where Saroo's memories are literally all he has; there's no real way to corroborate them with real life in the present. This exposes some of the limits of memory, especially when so much time has passed where no new memories were made of someone. Especially now that Saroo has learned that so many of his childhood memories were lacking or false, he sees that only having these memories of Guddu will deny him important information—but they can still be important and powerful.



Kamla's insistence that she'd know Saroo anywhere points to what Saroo terms an unbreakable bond he shares with both of his mothers, and that she still clearly feels even after all this time apart. This reinforces for Saroo that family is one of the most important and powerful things in his life.



Though Saroo doesn't consider the possibility, it's also possible that Guddu didn't return for Saroo because he'd already suffered the accident. The many possible outcomes and chains of events from that night illustrate clearly that one of the kindest things people can do is to forgive themselves and not dwell on what might have been, just as Saroo had to eventually choose adoption and move on in order to give himself a better life as a child.



Lisa's existence as a girlfriend rather than as a wife again illustrates that Saroo is very Australian and isn't particularly Indian in his day-to-day life. His Indian family's shock and awe about Saroo not being married shows how important these official, legal familial relationships are to this part of Indian culture.



On the second day of Saroo's visit, the local media arrive, and then the national media. Saroo tells his story over and over again, and he's genuinely surprised by the interest. Though it's exhausting, Saroo thinks it's wonderful that people are so excited that just one of India's many lost children found his way home. Eventually, the gathered people start a public celebration with music and dancing. Saroo tells the reader that miracles do happen. He and his family cry a lot, both of happiness and sadness.

Saroo picks up a piece of charcoal and shows it to Shekila, who laughs. Saroo sees this as proof of how far the rest of his family have come: with Guddu and Saroo gone, Kamla had been able to afford to send Shekila and Kallu to school. Shekila is now a schoolteacher who can speak and write both Hindi and Urdu, while Kallu is now a factory manager and a school bus driver. Saroo thinks it's bittersweet that his and Guddu's disappearance is what allowed the rest of the family to lift themselves out of poverty.

Life hasn't been easy for Kallu, however. Following Guddu's death, he was shouldered with the burden of being the only man in the family. He cut his schooling short to learn to drive, and the pain of Saroo and Guddu's losses eventually caused him to move to Burhanpur. Saroo's reappearance affects him deeply, and Shekila also struggles with what happened—though she sends her sons to school, she lives with the fear that they won't come back.

Over the next few days, Saroo learns a great deal about his family. He learns that he was born Sheru, which is Hindu for "lion." He learns that Kamla's family is of a warrior caste, while his birth father was a building contractor. Kamla explains that when she was pregnant with Shekila, Saroo's birth father took another wife (which he could do as a Muslim) and announced that he was leaving Kamla for his new wife. Though she was angry, Kamla remained married to her husband, even though she could've sought a divorce under Islamic law.

Kamla felt so disoriented and disturbed at the time, she considered killing herself and her children. She decided to move to the Muslim part of Ganesh Talai, as the Muslim community was more accepting of her and the neighborhood was slightly more prosperous. She formally converted to Islam after Saroo disappeared. Saroo begins to consider seeking out his birth father, feeling as though his father is part of his past even though he saw him so little. He recognizes that he'll need Kamla, Shekila, and Kallu's blessing to do so, but he doesn't raise the subject.

Saroo's surprise suggests that for him, his story still feels very personal and not necessarily something applicable on a larger scale. Essentially, he doesn't yet understand how he can use his story to perform a kindness for others; at this point, finding his family is still just a kindness he can give to himself.



Here, Saroo links large families to poverty. Though he certainly felt loved and cared for by his family, it wasn't until the family became much smaller that any member of it was able to experience anything beyond love and care. Kamla's decision to make the best of her situation by sending Shekila and Kallu to school shows that she, like Saroo, takes opportunities when they come.



The fears and emotional turmoil that both Kallu and Shekila experience show that their family being ripped apart negatively affected everyone, not just Saroo. It also seems as though Kallu and Shekila have overwhelmingly experienced the most struggle regarding what happened, which is likely a result of their youth, poverty, and lack of information about the situation.



Kamla remains married to Saroo's birth father even though she doesn't have to be, complicating Saroo's understanding of how "good" families work. Kamla remains married because she places a great deal of importance on honoring her commitments to her family, even when the family situation itself leaves a lot to be desired.



Kamla's explanation confirms Saroo's earlier musings that the Muslim neighborhood represented a sense of belonging and community that Kamla didn't have in her Hindu community, which likely explains why she had Kallu and Saroo circumcised (since doing so likely made her seem more entrenched in the community's culture and beliefs).



Saroo begins to wonder about the ways that he and everyone else are using the word “home.” He’s not sure where exactly his home is. His adoption meant that he grew up a very different person than who he might have been had he grown up in India, and he now thinks of himself as Australian. However, finding his Indian family and returning to Khandwa also feels like coming home. Because of this, Saroo feels very emotional about returning to Hobart. He promises his family that he’ll return, knowing that his journey to figure out who he is is far from over.

Though Saroo understands that finding his birth family means that things will necessarily need to change somewhat for him, his firm belief that he's still Australian points to the strong closeness he still feels with his adoptive family. Essentially, though it's still confusing for him, this lays the groundwork for accepting that his family is simply larger and more varied now.



12. REACHING OUT

When Saroo gets back to Hobart, he calls Asra to share the news. She’s very happy for him and asks what he’s going to do next. Saroo realizes he hadn’t thought of that all—it was so emotional finding his family in the first place. He recognizes that now, he’ll have to figure out how he fits into both families across cultures. Mum, Dad, and Lisa are thrilled to hear all about meeting his family and seem especially interested in knowing whether he wants to return. Saroo reassures them that he has no intention of moving to India.

Just as Saroo needed to learn to trust Mum and Dad upon his arrival in Australia, the same thing must happen again as Saroo's family navigates how to deal with these new members of their family. Trust is one of the most important elements that keeps a family together, as some of the anxiety here seems to stem from questions of whether or not they can trust Saroo to stay.



Saroo’s story spreads. His family receives a call first from the Hobart newspaper, then other Australian papers, and soon, other international media outlets. Saroo soon books a manager to help him deal with the attention and struggles to juggle his life for a bit. Though it’s exhausting for Saroo, he feels as though he has a responsibility to keep telling his story in case it gives someone else in a similar situation hope, as well as to encourage others to simply grasp opportunities and not give up.

When Saroo books his agent and feels a responsibility to tell his story, it shows that he's beginning to understand that his story absolutely has the power to help others. It essentially becomes a way for Saroo to give back to a world that has given him many good things and unasked for kindnesses in life.



Saroo regularly video chats with his family in India, though they don’t have a camera so he cannot see them. He decides he needs to set Kamla up so they can stay in touch, and decides he wants to play a real part in his Indian family. He returns to India for the second time in early winter, as the Diwali “Festival of Lights” is ending. It’s a celebration of good and a rejection of evil. Saroo arrives in the evening, drops his bags at the hotel, and gets back in the car and heads for Ganesh Talai. Though Saroo had tried to learn some Hindi, he’s lost as soon he finds himself in a conversation. Kamla greets him warmly anyway.

By returning during the Festival of Lights, Saroo observes another coincidence that makes his story seem even more special. It allows him a place and space to recognize all the good things that have happened in his life to lead him to this point. Further, his desire to "set up" his family so that he can stay in touch and presumably support them suggests that Saroo wants to pay back his mother's kindness to him now that he is able.



Shekila and Kallu join Saroo and Kamla, and Kamla makes her children sit in plastic chairs while she sits on the floor. When Cheryl arrives, the conversations begin, though they proceed slowly. Saroo also meets a woman named Swarnima, who speaks English and offers to help translate. Saroo is so overwhelmed by her kindness that he pays her, but offended, she returns the money. They eventually become good friends.

Saroo's misguided attempt to pay Swarnima illustrates how the idea of kindness doesn't always mean the same thing in different cultures. For him, paying her is a way to reciprocate her kindness, while for her, it's enough to simply offer her translation skills simply for the sake of doing it.



Kamla seems to fear that Saroo is still undernourished, so she feeds him as much as she can. Saroo remembers being a child with her in the kitchen, and is thrilled to get to taste her goat curry again. During this visit, they talk often about how the family never fully gave up on him. Priests and religious leaders often told Kamla that Saroo was healthy and happy, and they amazingly always pointed south when she asked where he was. Kamla had done everything she could to search for Saroo, but most of what she could actually do was pray.

Saroo realizes that Kamla's faith that he was alive fundamentally shaped her life. She insisted on remaining in Ganesh Talai in hopes that Saroo would return, something that blows Saroo away. He explains to the reader that there have been so many coincidences surrounding his story, he just has to accept them. For example, it turned out that Kallu and Shekila's fond memories of bathing together were the same memories that Saroo turned over as he tried to telepathically send Kamla messages that he was well. Kamla also admits that one day, she prayed to Allah for blessings and an image of Saroo appeared in her mind. The next day, Saroo arrived.

Kamla tells Saroo that many families want their daughters to marry Saroo, and he tries to explain again about Lisa. Kamla asks that Saroo marry and have children before she dies so he'll have someone to care for him. Kallu and Shekila express interest in visiting Australia to see where Saroo was raised and to meet his family.

Kamla also tells Saroo that if he wants to return to India, she'll work to build him a home and go back to work so she can support him. Saroo explains to the reader that he wants to do the exact opposite. Saroo, Shekila, Kallu, and Kamla discuss how Saroo might help support Kamla in particular, as well as the rest of their families. Saroo decides he'd like to buy Kamla a house in Ganesh Talai.

Finally, the subject of Saroo's birth father comes up. Kallu and Shekila are unforgiving of him, and they also blame him for Guddu's death. Though Saroo understands, he doesn't feel the same. He feels as though his father might have made a decision that spiraled out of control, and thinks he's willing to forgive his father if he's repentant. Towards the ends of his visit, Saroo receives word that his father learned that Saroo was back, is angry that Saroo hasn't contacted him, and wants to see him. There's not enough time, so Saroo puts it off.

Kamla's priests and religious leaders certainly cast Saroo's life in terms of destiny and a particularly divine destiny. Notably, this belief allowed Kamla to maintain her sense of hope and her belief that Saroo was alive, which suggests that the fact that Saroo doesn't believe in divine destiny really doesn't matter. Rather, what matters is that Kamla was able to make sense of her situation.



For Saroo, the only possible thing he can do with all these instances is just accept that they happened and that they make his life richer—because he believes more in chance and luck than in destiny, these are just coincidences. However, for Kamla, who believes in destiny that's divinely shaped, all of these coincidences are actually just proof that her belief system is correct, and that Saroo was always going to come back to her.



The number of available wives for Saroo suggests that there was some nugget of truth in his fear that people would try to capitalize on his miraculous return.



The discrepancies in how Saroo and Kamla want to care for each other is again indicative of the huge cultural differences that now separate them, but also show how deeply committed they both are to supporting people they consider family in any way possible.



Saroo is able to come to these possible conclusions about his father because he does just have his few childhood memories to go on, unlike his siblings who have suffered a lifetime of neglect firsthand. Saroo's father's reaction to learning about Saroo, however, suggests that Saroo's hope that family might fix all former ills may be naïve, particularly given the anger he describes.



Saroo is very happy to finally get to meet Rochak, the administrator of the “Khandwa: My Home Town” Facebook group. Rochak had helped Saroo plan his trip to Khandwa, and Saroo is thrilled to get to thank him. Rochak loves that the internet is connecting people in remote places like Khandwa with the rest of the world. Both he and Saroo believe that online friendships like theirs are just as profound and fulfilling as friendships in the real world. Rochak believes that Saroo’s journey home is one of destiny, and to complete Saroo’s “destiny,” he organizes a car to drive Saroo to Burhanpur to catch a train.

The friendship that Saroo and Rochak share continues to expand the book's definition of family to encompass relationships that don't necessarily exist in the “real” world. Instead, Saroo and Rochak's friendship is based on the kindnesses that Rochak performed for Saroo during Saroo's search. Families and friendships are built primarily through actions, not blood or even proximity.



13. RETURNING

Saroo explains that he feels as though he has to do one final thing: take the train from Burhanpur to Kolkata as an adult. He initially tries to buy his ticket in Khandwa, which is no easy task: train tickets in India must be certified in order to guarantee a passenger their seat for the entire journey, and not speaking Hindi complicates matters. Swarnima helps Saroo figure out what route he might have taken as a child. There are two possible options: one that goes south with a transfer in Bhusawal, and one that arcs nonstop all the way to Kolkata.

The struggle to match up Saroo's fragmented childhood memories of being on the train with the modern train schedule is something that's surely complicated by the years that have passed between the two journeys. This also isn't something that technology can really help with, as there's simply no way to validate what happened to him as a child.



Looking at the two routes, Saroo is forced to confront how uncertain his memories of the train are. It’s clear that his belief that he was only on the train for 15 hours was wrong; there’s no way to get from Burhanpur to Kolkata in less than 24 hours, and 29 hours is a more common travel time. Saroo also realizes that his assumption that he woke on the platform and boarded the train in front of him must be wrong as well. He would’ve boarded a southbound train from that platform, and southbound trains don’t go to Kolkata directly. He realizes he either changed platforms or changed trains at some point.

It's worth noting that part of the reason Saroo cannot ever know for sure which route he took has to do with his poverty, not just his spotty memories: his lack of education meant that he wasn't able to even make any memories of the names of stations that he passed through, since he couldn't read the signs.



Saroo explains that his memories of that night aren’t clear. Sometimes, he has a flicker of an image of jumping off a train and getting on another one, but he’s unsure if it’s real. If it’s real, it could mean that he did go to Bhusawal and boarded a train to Kolkata, though it’s also possible that in Bhusawal he got on the same train going back from whence it came, slept through the Burhanpur stop, and went to Kolkata on the other route. There’s no way to be sure. Saroo decides to honor his memory of being trapped on the train and books a ticket on the Kolkata Mail from Burhanpur.

The decision that Saroo is forced to make (which route makes most sense versus which route best fits with his memories) illustrates how there are times when what's actually most important about memory is simply choosing to honor it without questioning its truth. In this way, Saroo decides that what matters is that he felt trapped and alone, not that he takes the route that's actually the most probable.



It's unlikely this was the train Saroo took, as it would've only stopped in Burhanpur for two minutes and a conductor would've checked off new passengers. This is one of the mysteries of Saroo's journey, however: he doesn't remember seeing conductors at all, and conductors are a constant on interstate trains. However, Saroo remains firm in his decision to take the Kolkata Mail. Before he leaves, he visits Kamla one final time to take family photos. It's emotional to get to say goodbye to his mother before leaving for the train this time, as he hadn't gotten to as a child.

Saroo watches fireworks in Burhanpur that night, somewhat worried about what reliving his childhood memories might dredge up or what memories it might challenge. Saroo wakes later to a knock on his door from a rickshaw driver, showers in cold water, and heads for the Burhanpur station at 4:00 am. When they arrive, Saroo reads that the train will be an hour late. He takes the time to look around the station. While it had been dirty when he was a child, it's now very clean. Saroo studies the opposite platform, sure that it's where Guddu left him and where he boarded.

Saroo catches the eye of a chai seller across the tracks and motions that he'd like a cup. Just as the seller regains his platform after serving Saroo, a freight train rushes by at full speed—trains don't slow down at stations in India. Saroo wonders if Guddu died doing the same thing the chai man just did. He thinks that despite the confusion surrounding which platform he boarded from, he still feels sure about what happened after he boarded: he looked for Guddu, curled up to sleep, and woke to bright sunlight. He reasons that the time must have felt like eternity to a five-year-old.

Other passengers arrive on the platform in time to catch the late train. A conductor ushers Saroo into the appropriate first-class carriage. Saroo wonders about his memory of the carriage being empty, something that never happens in India. He wonders if his carriage was maybe headed for repair or was a work train. As the Kolkata Mail pulls out, Saroo shivers and reminds himself that he's setting things right by taking this journey.

Saroo explains that when he was a child, most people traveled by rail. The trains weren't fast then and still aren't fast now. After an hour of being on the train, Saroo realizes that if he indeed took this route as a child, he went right through Khandwa. He wonders if he slept through the stop. Had he woken up, he could've simply gotten off and gone home.

The absence of conductors in Saroo's memories could point to a number of things, including the possibility that he simply blocked memories of seeing them or that he was able to avoid them successfully. Then, by saying goodbye to Kamla, Saroo is in some ways able to make peace with the way things happened the first time. This is a way to symbolically atone for or ease the pain that his first journey caused everyone.



As an adult, Saroo's education and literacy means that he can conduct himself with far less anxiety than he did as a child. Rather than panicking, as he did when Guddu was late, Saroo can calmly and reasonably decide to wait and just sit with his memories in the station.



Again, simply being an adult, being able to read, and being able to recognize these unknowns sheds light on Saroo's childhood memories. Even if he cannot ever fully reconcile his memories with the information in front of him, taking the memories and this information together shows how both can at the very least create a more complete picture of his terror and lack of knowledge as a child.



Again, it's possible that in his terror and distrust of adults, Saroo may have simply avoided the adults and then not remembered them. It's impossible to know, but the lack of concrete information again adds to the sense of mystery surrounding Saroo's first journey and the good fortune he experienced because of it.



Again, it's mere coincidence that Saroo could've just gotten off the train and gone home. Realizing this adds more emotion and meaning to Saroo's memories, as it shows again that there are clearly things he didn't realize at the time.



Saroo's train comes to life with the sounds of ringtones, conversation, and vendors selling chai and food. As Saroo walks to the pantry car, he becomes more convinced that the train he was on as a child must not have been in use given the major differences and the lack of passengers. He makes a point of studying the landscape outside, which is much like he remembers it. He thinks that he's more anxious than nervous about returning to Kolkata as night falls.

Saroo feels at peace lying down in the bumpy train, listening to the Hindi around him. Earlier that day, he'd spoken with a little boy who was excited to practice his English. They talked about cricket, and the boy seemed disappointed that Saroo isn't married. The boy did seem satisfied when Saroo explained he has family in both India and Tasmania, and he realized that he's also satisfied with that answer.

Late the next morning, the train begins to slow down. Saroo looks at all the tracks snaking out from Howrah Station and realizes that he never stood a chance of finding his way home as a child. Finally, at 12:20 pm, the train reaches Howrah Station. Saroo stands on the platform, noticing that now, people surge around him—as a child, they'd ignored him. He thinks that one upset child in such a busy place wouldn't have been a strange sight. Saroo finds the station hauntingly familiar, though he doesn't notice any homeless children inside. He notices some outside, and can barely believe he survived. He takes a taxi to his hotel.

That afternoon, Saroo meets up with a translator and takes a taxi to the ISSA office to visit Mrs. Sood. The office looks exactly as it did when Saroo was a child, and Mrs. Sood is shocked to see Saroo. Though she's in her eighties, she remembers Saroo perfectly. She inquires after Mum and Kamla, and then asks a social worker, Mrs. Medhora, to find Saroo's file.

Saroo explains that Mrs. Sood has been helping children for 37 years, and has arranged about 2,000 adoptions. She was born in New Delhi, earned a law degree, and facilitated her first adoption in 1963. After she helped a Swedish woman adopt an Indian child, the woman wrote about Mrs. Sood and inspired Mrs. Sood to move to Calcutta, receive training in adoption, and finally open ISSA in 1975. Mrs. Sood explains that while Saroo's adoption had been easy, intercountry adoption is now very difficult—it often takes between one and five years.

The possibility that Saroo was on an out-of-use train would be a major coincidence, supporting even further Saroo's belief that his journey to Australia and back again is one guided by chance and luck. Theoretically, it's possible that if his train had been in use, he could've found someone able to help him and gone home.



Saroo's satisfaction with having two families suggests that he's becoming more and more comfortable with his new extended family—and further, that it's not even especially interesting or strange for a small Indian boy to hear about.



Saroo's disbelief that he survived again shows how far he's come from his early childhood of poverty—it's difficult for him now to truly and viscerally remember what it felt like to be so poor and reliant on only his street smarts, because he no longer needs them. This again shows that kindness and care can help break down some of the effects of poverty.



Mrs. Sood remembers Saroo, because for her, adoption is something that truly affects people; it's not just something theoretical. It's a way for her to truly make the world a better place, and Saroo's return is proof of that.



Though Saroo doesn't speak much about the laws that govern adoption, adoptions can take such a long time mostly because of the rules surrounding them. Though they're often intended to support and protect children, an unfortunate side effect is that the process can take longer. Some of these systems set up to help can also end up causing harm—but there is no clear solution to the issue.



Saroo thinks of Mum, who is still very frustrated with how difficult adoption can be, especially after her experience trying to adopt Mantosh. He explains that in 1987, it only took a few weeks to arrange his adoption. Mrs. Sood explains that it's very common for families to do what Saroo's parents did and adopt a second child from India. Finally, Mrs. Medhora returns with Saroo's file. Saroo reads that he was taken to the police on April 21, 1987, classified as a child in need of care, and then spent a month in Liluah. From there, he was turned over to ISSA on May 22. ISSA then had two months to either find Saroo's family or declare him adoptable by another. If they hadn't been successful, Saroo would've been returned to Liluah, as Mantosh was.

ISSA had photographed Saroo and published the picture in several newspapers, none of which were distributed anywhere near Khandwa. He was declared free for adoption on June 26, the Brierleys were approved to adopt him on August 24, and he received his passport on September 14. Ten days later, he boarded the plane for Melbourne. Mrs. Medhora also explains to Saroo that he'd been wrong about why he'd been released from Liluah; while he used to think it was because he was in good health, it was actually because he was lost. ISSA intended to reunite him with Kamla.

It also comes to light that ISSA hadn't known that Saroo spent weeks on Kolkata's streets. He hadn't offered any information and likely wouldn't have been able to tell them much had they asked specifically. They believe he was very lucky to have survived in Kolkata for several days, let alone weeks. Finally, Saroo bids Mrs. Sood goodbye. He gets back in the taxi with Mrs. Medhora and the interpreter to visit Nava Jeevan. The building Saroo remembers is now a free daycare center. Then, they visit the Juvenile Court and finally, Liluah.

The building looks like a fortress, and Saroo remembers the massive gates outside. Now, the building is a home for women and girls. Somehow it seems less brutal, though it still seems like a place one would want to escape quickly. The visit to Liluah helps ease some of the pain Saroo feels about his past. He wonders how people could've slipped over the tall fences without anyone saying anything, and he feels thankful that he survived.

By comparing Saroo's experience with Mantosh's, it becomes clear that Saroo's life could've easily gone very differently. It was undeniably wonderful that things went the way they did after he was turned over to ISSA, but it was also absolutely a matter of luck. While Saroo's story is special, so many children in India are simply not as lucky as he was.



Mrs. Medhora explains that they took Saroo in because he was lost, showing that even though ISSA is an adoption agency primarily, it also places a great deal of importance on its charges' birth families. Essentially, it recognizes all sorts of families as valuable, and does what it can to support them in any way possible.



Now that Nava Jeevan is a daycare center, it means that there are more children who won't be unattended during the day, as Saroo was as a child—and in turn, those children hopefully won't suffer the same kind of heartache Saroo did as a result of being separated. ISSA's shock at hearing that Saroo had been on the streets for so long reinforces just how lucky he was, and how unusual his story truly is.



The people who snuck into Liluah likely had some degree of power over those in charge of protecting the children there, suggesting another way that trying to do the right thing can become complicated in bureaucratic situations like this.



To end his journey, Saroo walks the streets near the Howrah Station. He marvels that he could still smell the fruit as a child over the stench of human waste. He walks to the river, but decides to not go down to the edge. He instead decides to cross the Howrah Bridge. The crush of humanity is incredible, and Saroo marvels at how small he must've felt as a child. After walking a short way across, Saroo stops and looks back to the riverbank. He looks for the holy men he slept near but doesn't see them, and also observes the place where he almost drowned. He thinks of the homeless man who saved him, as well as the teenager who took him to the police. Saroo thanks the homeless man as the sun begins to set.

Though the homeless man is certainly deceased by now, Saroo is able to use the book itself as a vehicle to thank all these people who helped him survive as a child. What matters more is the fact that Saroo is finally able to make it public that these people took it upon themselves to help him for seemingly no reason. In turn, he encourages the reader to think about people who may have helped them and how it may be possible to thank those people and pay the kindness forward in some way.



EPILOGUE

The television program *60 Minutes* proposes introducing Kamla and Mum on camera as part of a piece on Saroo's experiences. Saroo wonders if Mum might feel threatened meeting Kamla, or if Kamla might find it impossible to connect with Mum. However, Saroo feels that time stands still as his mothers embrace, tears in their eyes. The joy and love don't require much translation.

The overwhelming happiness of Mum and Kamla's meeting shows that familial ties can absolutely extend to people not thought possible at first. The kindness that both women showed Saroo means that they're a part of each other's lives now, illustrating the connecting power of love.



Saroo explains that he does what he can to help Kamla, including paying her rent and buying food. Now, he has dual citizenship and can buy property in India, so he's looking to buy her a better home in Ganesh Talai. He, Kallu, and Shekila have found a place, but the paperwork takes time. Saroo says he's also dedicating time to helping Mrs. Sood. He's providing money for repairs on the Nava Jeevan orphanage, and he wants to help other children who might be in a situation like he was.

Saroo sees it as his responsibility to do what he can to support those people and organizations that supported him and made his current life possible. By doing this, Saroo indirectly helps to make sure that other children who become lost and find their way to Nava Jeevan might have a better chance of finding their birth families than he did.



Saroo says that his desires for himself are less clear. He still thinks of himself as Australian; he just wanted to know where he came from, better understand his past, and let his family know he's okay. He insists that finding his family in India has simply given him two families, not two identities, though visiting India has certainly enriched his life. He admires the importance that Kallu and Shekila place on family, and he wonders if Westerners have lost something through the Western focus on individualism. He says that he's not religious, but he's interested in exploring some of his Indian family's beliefs and seeing if they help him at all. Saroo is also happy to help his niece and nephews have a better life.

Here, Saroo shows that the experience of reconnecting with his birth family has done nothing but positive things for him. This stands as a testament to the power of family, as Saroo is able to feel so at peace in part because he now has a much larger (and therefore, more supportive) network of family members in his life. His desire to research his childhood religious beliefs also shows that he's willing to see if a divine sense of destiny might help him make more sense of his story.



Saroo says that had he not gotten lost, his life would certainly be very different. However, he believes that his experiences have provided him with amazing faith in the importance of family, a belief in the goodness of people, and the importance of taking opportunities. He feels as though there's certainly an element of destiny in how things played out. He knows too that Mum and Dad wouldn't wish that their lives had gone any differently, and he explains that he's extremely grateful for all they've done. Saroo's success has also inspired Mantosh to search for his birth mother.

Saroo thinks back on his process of discovering Khandwa via **Google Earth**. He realizes he could've done things differently and found what he was looking for much faster, but he understands that he did the best he knew how at the time. He thinks he has no regrets about how things transpired, except for Guddu's death, and he's constantly shocked by the fortuitous twists, turns, and coincidences that led him to the Brierleys and then back to Kamla. He believes everything was meant to happen just as it did.

Saroo's insistence that destiny did play a role in how his life played out shows that he has integrated some of Kamla's beliefs into his own initial sense that his life is what it is thanks to chance and luck. Now, it makes more sense for him to believe that there was more at play. Again, this doesn't mean that one belief system is better than the other; it just means that his needs are changing in regard to how he tells his story.



Though Saroo doesn't mention other children here, his conclusion does point to the fact that what happened to him was fortuitous and out of the ordinary—many other children do not experience such positive twists of fate. This again reinforces that while his story is intended to inspire hope in others, it's not intended to be taken as a sweeping generalization about lost children in India.





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