

from A Long Way Home

Saroo Brierley

BACKGROUND

In his memoir *A Long Way Home*, Saroo Brierley shares his memories of searching for his hometown and his birth family. He describes the detailed method he used to locate them after decades of separation. At this point in the memoir, Brierley has recently graduated from college and moved in with his friend Byron.

- 1 Alas, the new search didn't start out as an obsession.
- 2 If Byron wasn't home, I might spend a couple of hours musing over the various "B" towns¹ again. Or I might make a casual sweep down the east coast, to see what was there. I even checked out a Birampur in Uttar Pradesh, near Delhi, in the central north of India, but that was a ridiculously long way from Kolkata, and I couldn't have traveled that far in twelve or so hours. It turned out it doesn't even have a train station.
- 3 These occasional forays showed the folly of searching by town, particularly when I wasn't sure about the names. If I was going to do this, I needed to be strategic and methodical about it.

1. **"B" Towns** Brierley remembers that the name of the train station near his hometown begins with a "B." This is the station at which he boarded a train and became lost.



AUDIO



ANNOTATE

BUILD YOUR VOCABULARY

Concept and other higher-level words aren't the only ones that matter. As you read, actively build your understanding of sight and basic words. Listen to the audio and note words you've mastered and those you are still acquiring.

4 I went over what I knew. I came from a place where Muslims and Hindus lived in close proximity and where Hindi was spoken. Those things were true of most of India. I recalled all those warm nights outside, under the stars, which at least suggested it wouldn't be in the colder regions of the far north. I hadn't lived by the sea, although I couldn't rule out that I'd lived near it. And I hadn't lived in the mountains. My hometown had a railway station—India was riddled with train lines, but they didn't run through every single village and town.

5 Then there was the opinion of the Indians at college that I looked like someone from the east, perhaps around West Bengal. I had my doubts: in the eastern part of the country, the region took in some of the Himalayas,² which wasn't right, and part of the Ganges Delta, which looked much too lush and fertile to be my home. But as these were people who had firsthand experience of India, it seemed silly to dismiss their hunch.

6 I also thought I could remember enough landmark features to recognize my hometown if I came across it, or to at least narrow the field. I clearly recalled the bridge over the river where we played as kids and the nearby dam wall that restricted the river's flow below it. I knew how to get from the train station to our house, and I knew the layout of the station.

7 The other station I thought I remembered quite well was the "B" one, where I'd boarded the train. Although I'd been there quite a few times with my brothers, they'd never let me leave it, so I knew nothing of the town outside the station—all I'd ever seen beyond the exit was a sort of small ring road for horse carts and cars, and a road beyond it that led into the town. But still, there were a couple of distinguishing features. I remembered the station building and that it only had a couple of tracks, over the other side of which was a big water tank on a tower. There was also a pedestrian overpass across the tracks. And just before the train pulled into town from the direction of my home, it crossed a small gorge.

8 So I had some vague thoughts on likely regions, and some ways of identifying "Ginestlay"³ and the "B" place if I found them. Now I needed a better search method. I realized that the names of places had been a distraction, or were at least not the right place to start. Instead, I thought about the end of the journey. I knew that train lines linked the "B" place with Kolkata. Logic dictated, then, that if I followed all the train lines out of Kolkata, I would eventually find my starting point. And from there, my hometown was itself up the line, not far away. I might even come upon my

2. **Himalayas** (hīhm uh LAY uhz) tallest mountain range in the world.

3. **"Ginestlay"** Brierley remembered this as the name of his hometown, but no one he asked had heard of it and he could not find it on a map.

home first, depending on how the lines linked up. This was an intimidating prospect—there were many, many train lines from the national hub of Kolkata’s Howrah Station, and my train might have zigzagged across any of the lines of the spider’s web. It was unlikely to be a simple, straight route.

9 Still, even with the possibility of some winding, irregular paths out of Howrah, there was also a limit to how far I could have been transported in the time frame. I’d spent, I thought, a long time on the train—somewhere between twelve and fifteen hours. If I made some calculations, I could narrow the search field, ruling out places too far away.

10 Why hadn’t I thought of the search with this clarity before? Maybe I had been too overwhelmed by the scale of the problem to think straight, too consumed by what I didn’t know to focus on what I did. But as it dawned on me that I could turn this into a painstaking, **deliberate** task that simply required dedication, something clicked inside. If all it took were time and patience to find home, with the aid of Google Earth’s⁴ god’s-eye view, then I would do it. Seeing it almost as much an intellectual challenge as an emotional **quest**, I threw myself into solving it.

11 First, I worked on the search zone. How fast could India’s diesel trains travel, and would that have changed much since the eighties? I thought my Indian friends from college might be able to help, especially Amreen, whose father would likely have a more educated guess, so I got in touch with them. The general consensus was around seventy or eighty kilometers an hour. That seemed like a good start. Figuring I had been trapped on the train for around twelve to fifteen hours, overnight, I calculated how many kilometers I might have traveled in that time, which I put at around a thousand, or approximately 620 miles.

12 So the place I was looking for was a thousand kilometers along a train line out of Howrah Station. On Google Earth you can draw lines on the map at precise distances, so I made a circular boundary line of a thousand kilometers around Kolkata and saved it for my searches. That meant that as well as West Bengal, my search field included the states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and nearly half of the central state of Madhya Pradesh to the west, Orissa to the south, Bihar and a third of Uttar Pradesh to the north, and most of the northeastern spur of India, which encircles Bangladesh. (I knew I wasn’t from Bangladesh, as I’d have spoken Bengali, not Hindi. This was confirmed when I discovered

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: In paragraph 8, mark details that describe the challenges Brierley faces in finding his hometown.

QUESTION: Why does Brierley provide so much detail about his thought process?

CONCLUDE: What can you conclude about Brierley and his mission from these details?

deliberate (dih LIHB uhr iht)
adj. carefully thought over in advance; planned

quest (kwehst) *n.* long search undertaken in order to find or realize something

4. **Google Earth** computer program that displays satellite images of the world.

that a rail connection between the two countries had only been established a few years ago.)

- 13 It was a staggering amount of territory, covering some 962,300 square kilometers, over a quarter of India’s huge landmass. Within its bounds lived 345 million people. I tried to keep my emotions out of the exercise, but I couldn’t help but wonder: Is it possible to find my four family members among these 345 million? Even though my calculations were reliant on guesswork and were therefore very rough, and even though that still presented me with a huge field within which to search, it felt like I was narrowing things down. Rather than randomly throwing the haystack around to find the needle,⁵ I could concentrate on picking through a manageable portion and set it aside if it proved empty.

Reading Environmental Print

This image is an aerial view of Earth with map information added, including the location of Kolkata, a major Indian city. Consider how details of the land, sea, and human-made borders convey meaning.



- 14 The train lines within the search zone wouldn’t all simply stretch out to the edge in a straight radius, of course—there would be a lot of twists, turns, and junctions, as they wound around and traveled much more than a thousand kilometers before they

5. **haystack . . . needle** the saying “finding a needle in a haystack” means looking for something almost impossible to find.

reached the boundary edge. So I planned to work outward from Kolkata, the only point of the journey I was certain about.

15 The first time I zoomed in on Howrah Station, looking at the rows of ridged gray platform roofs and all the tracks spilling out of it like the fraying end of a rope, I was amazed and shocked that I'd once trod barefoot along these walkways. I had to open my eyes wide to make sure what I was looking at was real. I was about to embark on a high-tech version of what I'd done in my first week there, twenty years ago, randomly taking trains out to see if they went back home.

16 I took a deep breath, chose a train line, and started scrolling along it.

17 Immediately, it became clear that progress would be slow. Even with broadband, my laptop had to render the image, which took time. It started a little pixelated, then resolved into an aerial photograph. I was looking for landmarks I recognized and paid particular attention to the stations, as they were the places I remembered most vividly.

18 When I first zoomed out to see how far I'd gone along the track, I was amazed at how little progress the hours of scrolling and studying had brought me. But rather than being frustrated and impatient, I found I had enormous confidence that I would find what I was looking for as long as I was **thorough**. That gave me a great sense of calm as I resumed my search. In fact, it quickly became compelling, and I returned to it several nights a week. Before I turned in each night, I'd mark how far I'd gone on a track and save the search, then resume from that point at the next opportunity.

19 I would come across goods yards, overpasses and underpasses, bridges over rivers and junctions. Sometimes I skipped along a bit but then nervously went back to repeat a section, reminding myself that if I wasn't methodical, I could never be sure I'd looked everywhere. I didn't jump ahead to look for stations in case I missed a small one—I followed the tracks so I could check out anything that came along. And if I found myself reaching the edge of the boundary I'd devised, I'd go back along the train line to a previous junction and then head off in another direction.

20 I remember one night early on, following a line north, I came to a river crossing not far outside a town. I caught my breath as I zoomed in closer. The dam wall was decaying, but maybe the area had since been reconstructed? I quickly dragged the cursor to roll the image along. Did the countryside look right? It was quite green, but there were a lot of farms on the outskirts of my town. I watched as the town unpixelated before my eyes. It was quite small. Too small, surely. But with a child's perspective . . .

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: A **simile** compares two unlike things using the word *like* or *as*. Mark the simile in paragraph 15.

QUESTION: Why might the author have used a simile to describe what he was viewing on his computer screen?

CONCLUDE: How does the simile help the reader to better understand the challenges the author is facing?

thorough (THUR oh) *adj.*
including everything possible; careful and complete

And there was a high pedestrian overpass across the tracks near the station! But what were the large blank areas dotted around the town? Three lakes, four or five even, within the tiny village's bounds—and it was suddenly obvious that this wasn't the place. You didn't clear whole neighborhoods to put in lakes. And of course, many, many stations were likely to have overpasses, and many towns would be situated near life-giving rivers, which the tracks would have to cross. How many times would I wonder if all the landmarks aligned, only to be left with tired, sore eyes and the realization that I was mistaken again?

21 Weeks and then months passed with my spending hours at a time every couple of nights on the laptop. Byron made sure I spent other nights out in the real world so I didn't become an Internet recluse. I covered the countryside of West Bengal and Jharkhand in these early stages without finding anything familiar, but at least it meant that much of the immediate vicinity of Kolkata could be ruled out. Despite the hunch of my Indian friends, I'd come from farther away.

22 Several months later, I was lucky enough to meet someone with whom I started a new relationship, which made the search less of a priority for a while. Lisa and I met in 2010 through a friend of Byron's and mine. We became friends on Facebook, and then I asked her for her phone number. We hit it off immediately; Lisa's background is in business management and she is smart, pretty, and can hold a great conversation. However, we had an unsettled start together, with a couple of breakups and reunions, which meant there was a similar inconsistency in the periods I spent looking on the Internet, before we finally settled into the lasting relationship we have today.

23 I didn't know how a girlfriend would take to the time-consuming quest of her partner staring at maps on a laptop. But Lisa understood the personal and growing importance of the search, and was patient and supportive. She was as amazed as anyone about my past, and wanted me to find the answers I was looking for. We moved into a small flat⁶ together in 2010. I thought of the nights I spent there on the laptop as being a pastime, like playing computer games. But Lisa says that even then, with our relationship in full swing, I was **obsessive**. Looking back, I can see that this was true.

24 After all the years of my story being in my thoughts and dreams, I felt I was closing in on the reality. I decided this time I wasn't going to listen to anybody who said, "It might be time to move on," or "It's just not possible to find your hometown in

obsessive (uhb SEHS ihv) *adj.*
tending to think or worry so much about something that you cannot think about anything else

6. **flat** *n.* apartment.

all of India like this.” Lisa never said those things, and with her support, I became even more determined to succeed.

25 I didn’t tell many people what I was doing anyway. And I decided not to tell my parents. I was worried they might misunderstand my intentions. I didn’t want them to think that the **intensity** of my search revealed an unhappiness with the life they’d given me or the way they’d raised me. I also didn’t want them to think that I was wasting time. So even as it took up more and more of my life, I kept it mostly to myself. I finished work with Dad at five p.m., and by five-thirty I would be back at the laptop, slowly advancing along train tracks and studying the towns they led to. This went on for months—it had been over a year since I started. But I reasoned that even if it took years . . . or decades . . . it was possible to eventually sift completely through a haystack. The needle would have to show up if I persisted.

26 Slowly, over several more months, I eliminated whole areas of India. I traced all the connections within the northeastern states without finding anything familiar, and I was confident that I could rule out Orissa, too. Determined to be thorough, no matter how long it took, I started following lines farther out than my original thousand-kilometer zone. South beyond Orissa, I eliminated Andhra Pradesh, five hundred kilometers farther down the east coast. Jharkhand and Bihar didn’t offer up anything promising, either, and as I wound up in Uttar Pradesh, I thought I’d keep going to cover most of the state. In fact, the states eventually replaced my zone boundary as a way of marking my progress. Ruling out areas state by state provided a series of goals that spurred me on.

27 Unless I had something pressing to do for work, or some other unbreakable commitment, I was on the laptop seven nights a week. I went out with Lisa sometimes, of course, but the moment we got home I was back on the computer. Sometimes I caught her looking at me strangely, as though she thought I might have gone a bit crazy. She’d say, “You’re at it again!” but I would reply, “I have to . . . I’m really sorry!” I think Lisa knew she simply had to let me exhaust myself of the interest. I became distant during that time, and although Lisa would have been within her rights to feel alone in this still-new relationship, we worked through it. Perhaps to some extent sharing something so fundamental to me strengthened our connection—and that came through when we sometimes talked about what it all meant. It wasn’t always easy for me to articulate,⁷ especially as I was trying to keep a lid on my expectations, trying to convince myself it was a fascinating exercise, not a deeply meaningful personal quest. Talking to Lisa

intensity (ihn TEHN suh tee)
n. great focus or concentration; strong commitment

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: In paragraph 27, mark details that show how often Brierley is searching for his hometown at this point.

QUESTION: What do these details reveal about how his search is progressing?

CONCLUDE: How do these details help the reader to better understand Brierley’s state of mind?

7. **articulate** (ahr TIHK yuh layt) *v.* express clearly using words.

sometimes revealed the underlying importance of the search to me: that I was looking for my home to provide closure and to understand my past and perhaps myself better as a result, in the hope that I might somehow reconnect with my Indian family so they would know what had happened to me. Lisa understood all this and didn't resent it, even if there were times when she wanted to ban me from staring at the screen for my own sake. Once in a while she would simply come over and shut my laptop and place it on the floor because I was becoming so obsessive about my search.

28 At times Lisa admitted her own greatest fear: that I would find what I thought I was looking for, go back to India, and somehow be wrong or fail to find my family there. Would I return to Hobart⁸ and simply start again, obsessively searching online? I couldn't answer her questions any more than I could allay her fears. I couldn't allow myself to think about failure.

29 If anything, I became more intense about my search as 2010 drew to a close, and the speed of our newly acquired broadband connection made it quicker to refresh the images and zoom in and out. But I still had to take it slowly—if I rushed, I'd leave myself open to wondering later if I'd missed anything and then going back in an endless cycle. And I had to try not to bend my memories to fit what I was looking at.

30 By early 2011, I was concentrating more on areas within India's center, in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. I spent months poring over them, **relentlessly**, methodically.

31 Of course, there were times when I doubted the wisdom, and even the sanity, of what I was doing. Night after night, with the day's last reserves of energy and willpower, I sat staring at railway lines, searching for places my five-year-old mind might recognize. It was a repetitive, forensic⁹ exercise, and sometimes it started to feel claustrophobic, as if I were trapped and looking out at the world through a small window, unable to break free of my course in a mind-twisting echo of my childhood ordeal.

32 And then one night in March around one in the morning, in just such a mood, spent with frustration, I took a wild dive into the haystack, and it changed everything.

33 As always, on March 31, 2011, I had come home from work, grabbed my laptop, opened Google Earth, and settled in for a session on the sofa, stopping only briefly for dinner when Lisa got home. I was examining the central west at this time, so I picked up there, "traveling" a train line near my former search zone

8. **Hobart** capital of Tasmania, an island state of Australia, where Brierley lives.

9. **forensic** (fuh REHN sihk) *adj.* careful and detailed, similar to the scientific methods used to solve a crime.

relentlessly (rih LEHNT lihhs lee) *adv.* without stopping; with determination

boundary. Even with quicker broadband, it was still slow going. I continued for what seemed like ages, looking at a few stations, but as usual, when I zoomed out, I found I'd only covered a tiny area. I thought that the countryside looked a bit green for my dusty old town, but I knew by now that India's landscape changed appearance regularly as you moved across it.

34 After a few hours, I had followed a line to a junction. I took a break, checking Facebook for a while before rubbing my eyes, stretching my back, and returning to my task.

35 Before zooming in, I idly flicked the map along to get a quick picture of where the westerly line out of the junction headed, and watched hills, forests, and river sweep by, a seemingly endless terrain of reasonably similar features. I was distracted by a large river that fed into what looked like a massive, deep blue lake called Nal Damayanti Sagar, which was surrounded by some lush country and had mountains to its north. For a while, I enjoyed this little exploration, indulgently unrelated to my search, like a recreational hike of grand proportions. It was getting late, after all, and I'd turn in soon.

36 There didn't seem to be any train lines in this part of the country, which might have been why it was relaxing to look at. But once I'd noticed that, I found myself almost subconsciously looking for one. There were villages and towns dotted around here and there, and I wondered how the people traveled without rail—perhaps they didn't move around much? And farther west, still no tracks! Then as the countryside flattened out into farmland, I finally came across a little blue symbol denoting a train station. I was so attuned to looking for them, I was somehow relieved to find this one, and I checked out the tiny wayside station, just a few buildings to the side of a reasonably major train line with several tracks. Out of habit, I started tracing the route as it wound southwest. I quickly came across another station, a bit bigger, again with a platform on only one side of the tracks, but some areas of the township on either side. That explained the overpass, and was that . . . was that a water tower just nearby?

37 Holding my breath, I zoomed in for a closer look. Sure enough, it was a municipal water tank just across from the platform, and not far from a large pedestrian overpass spanning the railway line. I scrolled over to the town side and saw something incredible—a horseshoe-shaped road around a square immediately outside the station. Could it be—perhaps it was the ring road I used to be able to see from the platform! Was it possible? I closed my

Could it be—perhaps it was
the ring road I used to be
able to see from the platform!
Was it possible?





CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: In paragraph 37, mark the words the author emphasizes with italics.

QUESTION: Why does the author choose to emphasize these words?

CONCLUDE: How does this emphasis help the reader understand Brierley's thoughts and emotions?

eyes and went back twenty four years in time to when I would walk to the station's exit and see the ring road with an island in the middle. I thought to myself, *This is unique; I haven't seen this before*. I zoomed out, discovering that the train line skimmed the northwestern edge of a really large town. I clicked on the blue train station symbol to reveal its name . . . Burhanpur. My heart nearly stopped. *Burhanpur!*

38 I didn't recognize the town itself, but then I'd never been in it—I'd never left the platform. I zoomed back in and re-examined the ring road, the water tower, the overpass, and they were all positioned where I remembered them. That meant that not far away, just up the line, I should find my hometown, "Ginestlay."

39 Almost afraid to do so, I dragged the cursor to pull the image north along the train line. When I saw that the track crossed a gorge just on the edge of the built-up area, I was flooded with adrenaline—I remembered in a flash that the train I took with my brothers traveled on a small bridge over a gorge like that before pulling into the station. I pushed on more urgently, east then northeast, in just moments zooming over seventy kilometers

of green farms, forested hills, and small rivers. Then I passed across some dry, flat land, broken up by a patchwork of irrigated farmland and the occasional small village, before I hit a bridge over a substantial river. Ahead I was able to see the town's outskirts. The river's flow was significantly reduced below the bridge by dam walls on either side. If this was the right place, this was the river I used to play in, and there should be a bigger concrete dam wall to my right a little farther from the bridge . . .

40 There it was!

41 I sat staring at the screen for what seemed like an eternity. What I was looking at matched the picture in my head exactly. I couldn't think straight; I was frozen with excitement, terrified to go on.

42 Finally, after a couple of minutes, I forced myself to take the next step, slowly, nervously. I tried to calm myself so I didn't jump to any rash conclusions. If I really was looking at "Ginestlay" for the first time in twenty-four years, then I should be able to follow the path I remembered from the river back to the train station, only a short way up ahead. I began to drag the cursor again, slowly rolling the map to trace the course of the path, which wound gently alongside a tributary stream, left and right, around a field, under a street overpass and then . . . the station. I clicked on the blue symbol and the name came up on the screen: Khandwa Railway Station.

43 The name meant nothing to me.

44 My stomach knotted. How could this be?

45 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"? I tried not to despair. I had spent a lot of time in and around our local train station as a boy, so I checked off what I remembered—the three platforms, the covered pedestrian overpass that connected them, an underpass road beneath the tracks at the northern end. But it wasn't so much the existence of these reasonably common features but their position in relation to each other that would identify the specific place that I was looking for. It all checked out. I also remembered a huge fountain in a park near the underpass, and I went looking. Sure enough, it was a little indistinct, but I thought I detected its familiar circular shape in a central clearing, surrounded by trees.

46 From here, I knew the route to where my home should be. This was why I'd gone over and over it in my head since I was a little boy: so that I would never forget it.

47 Now, as a man, I followed the road up from the fountain and along the route of the underpass, and then the streets and alleys I had walked as a child—the way I used to imagine myself walking

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: In paragraph 41, mark the words that show Brierley's reaction to the image on his screen.

QUESTION: Why might Brierley react with these feelings?

CONCLUDE: How does the description of his reaction add suspense to Brierley's narrative?

when I lay in bed at night, in the safe comfort of my house in Hobart, trying to project myself back to my village home to let my mother know I was okay. Before I realized I'd gone far enough, I was looking down at the neighborhood I knew as a boy.

48 Still, nothing like "Ginestlay" came up on the map. It was the strangest feeling, and one that I became familiar with over the next year or so—part of me was certain, but still another part of me doubted. I was sure this was the right place, but for all this time I'd also been sure of the name "Ginestlay." Khandwa rang no bells whatsoever. Maybe "Ginestlay" was a part of Khandwa? A suburb? That seemed possible. I looked through the maze of alleys where my family lived, and although the image wasn't as clear as what I would get when I looked at where I lived in Hobart, I was sure I could see the little rectangular roof of my childhood home. Of course, I'd never seen the place from above, but the building was the right shape and in precisely the correct location. I hovered over the streets for a while, astonished, trying to take it all in. Finally I couldn't contain my excitement any longer.

49 I called out to Lisa, "I've found my hometown! You've gotta come and see this!" It was only then that I realized the time. I'd been at the computer for over seven hours nonstop, except for dinner.

50 Lisa poked her head around the corner, yawning, in her nightie. It took her a moment to wake up properly, but even half-asleep she could see my excitement. "Are you sure?" she asked.

51 "This is it, this is it!" I replied.

52 In that moment, I was convinced. "This is my hometown!"

53 It had taken eight months of intense searching, and it was nearly five years since I'd first downloaded Google Earth.

54 Lisa grinned and hugged me tightly. "That's so great! You did it, Saroo!" 🐼