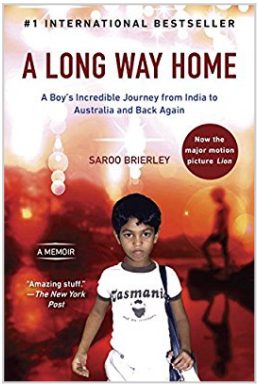

A Long Way Home: A Memoir

By Saroo Brierley

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First it was a media sensation. Then it became the #1 international bestseller *A Long Way Home*. Now it's *Lion*, the major motion picture starring Dev Patel, Nicole Kidman, and Rooney Mara—nominated for six Academy Awards!

This is the miraculous and triumphant story of Saroo Brierley, a young man who used Google Earth to rediscover his childhood life and home in an incredible journey from India to Australia and back again...

At only five years old, Saroo Brierley got lost on a train in India. Unable to read or write or recall the name of his hometown or even his own last name, he survived alone for weeks on the rough streets of Calcutta before ultimately being transferred to an agency and adopted by a couple in Australia.

Despite his gratitude, Brierley always wondered about his origins. Eventually, with the advent of Google Earth, he had the opportunity to look for the needle in a haystack he once called home, and pore over satellite images for landmarks he might recognize or mathematical equations that might further narrow down the labyrinthine map of India. One day, after years of searching, he miraculously found what he was looking for and set off to find his family.

A Long Way Home is a moving, poignant, and inspirational true story of survival and triumph against incredible odds. It celebrates the importance of never letting go of what drives the human spirit: hope.

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A Long Way Home: A Memoir By Saroo Brierley Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Review
“Amazing stuff.”—*The New York Post*

“So incredible that sometimes it reads like a work of fiction.”—*Winnipeg Free Press* (Canada)

“A remarkable story.”—*Sydney Morning Herald Review*

“I literally could not put this book down...[Saroo's] return journey will leave you weeping with joy and the strength of the human spirit.”—*Manly Daily* (Australia)

“We urge you to step behind the headlines and have a read of this absorbing account...With clear recollections and good old-fashioned storytelling, Saroo...recalls the fear of being lost and the anguish of separation.”—*Weekly Review* (Australia)

About the Author
Born in Khandwa, Madhya Pradesh, India, **Saroo Brierley** lives in Hobart, Tasmania, where he manages a family business, Brierley Marine, with his father. Saroo’s story has been published in several languages and is now a major motion picture from The Weinstein Company.

1.

Remembering

When I was growing up in Hobart, I had a map of India on my bedroom wall. My mum—my adoptive mother—had put it there to help me feel at home when I arrived from that country at the age of six to live with them in 1987. She had to teach me what the map represented—I was completely uneducated. I didn’t even know what a map was, let alone the shape of India.

Mum had decorated the house with Indian objects—there were some Hindu statues, brass ornaments and bells, and lots of little elephant figurines. I didn’t know then that these weren’t normal objects to have in an Australian house. She had also put some Indian printed fabric in my room, across the dresser, and a carved wooden puppet in a brightly colored outfit. All these things seemed sort of familiar, even if I hadn’t seen anything exactly like them before. Another adoptive parent might have made the decision that I was young enough to start my life in Australia with a clean slate and could be brought up without much reference to where I’d come from. But my skin color would always have given away my origins, and anyway, she and my father chose to adopt a child from India for a reason, as I will go into later.

The map’s hundreds of place-names swam before me throughout my childhood. Long before I could read them, I knew that the immense V of the Indian subcontinent was a place teeming with cities and towns, with deserts and mountains, rivers and forests—the Ganges, the Himalayas, tigers, gods!—and it came to fascinate me. I would stare up at the map, lost in the thought that somewhere among all those names was the place I had come from, the place of my birth. I knew it was called “Ginestlay,” but whether that was the name of a city, or a town, or a village, or maybe even a street—and where to start looking for it on that map—I had no idea.

I didn't know for certain how old I was, either. Although official documents showed my birthday as May 22, 1981, the year had been estimated by Indian authorities, and the date in May was the day I had arrived at the orphanage from which I had been offered up for adoption. An uneducated, confused boy, I hadn't been able to explain much about who I was or where I'd come from.

At first, Mum and Dad didn't know how I'd become lost. All they knew—all anyone knew—was that I'd been picked off the streets of Calcutta, as it was still known then, and after attempts to find my family had failed, I had been put in the orphanage. Happily for all of us, I was adopted by the Brierleys. So to start with, Mum and Dad would point to Calcutta on my map and tell me that's where I came from—but in fact the first time I ever heard the name of that city was when they said it. It wasn't until about a year after I arrived, once I'd made some headway with English, that I was able to explain that I didn't come from Calcutta at all—a train had taken me there from a train station near "Ginestlay." That station might have been called something like "Bramapour," "Berampur" . . . I wasn't sure. All I knew was that it was a long way from Calcutta, and no one had been able to help me find it.

Of course, when I first arrived in Australia, the emphasis was on the future, not the past. I was being introduced to a new life in a very different world from the one I'd been born into, and my new mum and dad were putting a lot of effort into facing the challenges that experience brought. Mum didn't worry too much about my learning English immediately, since she knew it would come through day-to-day use. Rather than trying to rush me into it, she thought it was far more important at the outset to comfort and care for me, and gain my trust. You don't need words for that. She also knew an Indian couple in the neighborhood, Saleen and Jacob, and we would visit them regularly to eat Indian food together. They would speak with me in my own language, Hindi, asking simple questions and translating instructions and things Mum and Dad wanted me to know about how we'd live our life together. Being so young when I got lost and coming from a very basic background, I didn't speak much Hindi, either, but being understood by someone was a huge help in becoming comfortable about my new surroundings. Anything my new parents weren't able to communicate through gestures and smiles, we knew Saleen and Jacob could help us with, so we were never stuck.

I picked up my new language quite quickly, as children often do. But at first I spoke very little about my past in India. My parents didn't want to push me to talk about it until I was ready, and apparently I didn't show many signs that I gave it much thought. Mum remembers a time when I was seven, when out of the blue I got very distressed and cried out, "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."

In fact, the past was never far from my mind. At night memories would flash by and I'd have trouble calming myself so I could sleep. Daytime was generally better, with lots of activity to distract me, but my mind was always busy. As a consequence of this and my determination not to forget, I have always recalled my childhood experiences in India clearly, as an almost complete picture—my family, my home, and the traumatic events surrounding my separation from them have remained fresh in my mind, sometimes in great detail. Some of these memories were good, and some of them bad—but I couldn't have one without the other, and I couldn't let them go.

My transition to life in another country and culture wasn't as difficult as one might expect, most likely because, compared to what I'd gone through in India, it was obvious that I was better off in Australia. Of course, more than anything I wanted to find my mother again, but once I'd realized that was impossible, I knew I had to take whatever opportunity came my way to survive. 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. I bonded with them readily, and very soon trusted them completely. Even at the age of six (I would always accept 1981 as the year of my birth), I understood that I had been awarded a rare second chance. I quickly became Saroo Brierley.

Once I was safe and secure in my new home in Hobart, I thought perhaps it was somehow wrong to dwell on the past—that part of the new life was to keep the old locked away—so I kept my nighttime thoughts to myself. I didn't have the language to explain them at first anyway. And to some degree, I also wasn't aware of how unusual my story was—it was upsetting to me, but I thought it was just the kind of thing that happened to people. It was only later, when I began to open up to people about my experiences, that I knew from their reactions it was out of the ordinary.

Occasionally the night thoughts would spill over into the day. I remember Mum and Dad taking me to see the Hindi film Salaam Bombay! Its images of the little boy trying to survive alone in a sprawling city, in the hope of returning to his mother, brought back disturbing memories so sharply that I wept in the dark cinema. After that, my parents only took me to fun Bollywood-style movies.

Even sad music of any kind (though particularly classical) could set off emotional memories, since in India I had often heard music emanating from other people's radios. Seeing or hearing babies cry also affected me strongly, probably because of memories of my little sister, Shekila. The most emotional thing was seeing other families with lots of children. I suppose that, even in my good fortune, they reminded me of what I'd lost.

But eventually I began talking about the past. Only a month or so after my arrival, I described to Saleen my Indian family in outline—mother, sister, two brothers—and that I'd been separated from my brother and become lost. I didn't have the resources to explain too much, and Saleen gently let me lead the story to where I wanted it to go rather than pressing me. Gradually, my English improved; we were speaking Hinglish, but we were all learning. I told Mum and Dad a few more things, like the fact that my father had left the family when I was very little. Most of the time, though, I concentrated on the present: I had started going to school, and I was making new friends and discovering a love of sport.

Then one wet weekend just over a year after I'd arrived in Hobart, I surprised Mum—and myself—by opening up about my life in India. I'd probably come to feel more settled in my new life and now had some words to put to my experiences. I found myself telling her more than ever before about my Indian family: about how we were so poor that we often went hungry, or how my mother would have me go around to people's houses in the neighborhood with a pot to beg for any leftover food. It was an emotional conversation, and Mum held me close during our talk. She suggested that together we draw a map of the place I was from, and as she drew, I pointed out where my family's home was on our street, the way to the river where all the kids played, and the bridge under which you walked to get to the train station. We traced the route with our fingers and then drew the home's layout in detail. We put in where each member of my family slept—even the order in which we lay down at night. We returned to the map and refined it as my English improved. But in the whirl of memories brought on by first making that map, I was soon telling Mum about the circumstances of my becoming lost, as she looked at me, amazed, and took notes. She drew a wavy line on the map, pointing to Calcutta, and wrote, "A very long journey."

A couple of months later, we took a trip to Melbourne to visit some other kids who had been adopted from the same Calcutta orphanage as me. Talking enthusiastically in Hindi to my fellow adoptees inevitably brought back the past very vividly. For the first time, I told Mum that the place I was from was called "Ginestlay," and when she asked me where I was talking about, I confidently, if a little illogically, replied, "You take me there and I'll show you. I know the way."

Saying aloud the name of my home for the first time since arriving in Australia was like opening a release valve. Soon after that, I told an even more complete version of events to a teacher I liked at school. For over an hour and a half, she wrote notes, too, with that same amazed expression. Strange as I found Australia, for Mum and my teacher, hearing me talk about India must have been like trying to understand things that had occurred on another planet.

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The story I told them was about people and places I'd turned over in my mind again and again since I arrived in Australia, and which I would continue to think about often as I grew up. Not surprisingly, there are gaps here and there. Sometimes I'm unsure of details, such as the order in which incidents occurred, or how many days passed between them. And it can be difficult for me to separate what I thought and felt then, as a child, from what I've come to think and feel over the course of the twenty-seven years that followed. Although repeated revisiting and searching the past for clues might have disturbed some of the evidence, much of my childhood experience remains vivid in my memory.

Back then, it was a relief to tell my story, as far as I understood it. Now, since the life-changing events that sparked after my thirtieth birthday, I am excited by the prospect that sharing my experiences might inspire hope in others.

2.

Getting Lost

Some of my most vivid memories are the days I spent watching over my baby sister, Shekila, her grubby face smiling up at me as we played peekaboo. She always looked at me with adoring eyes, and it made me feel good to be her protector and hero. In the cooler seasons, Shekila and I spent many nights waiting alone in the chilly house like newly hatched chicks in a nest, wondering if our mother would come home with some food. When no one came, I'd get the bedding out—just a few ragged sheets—and cuddle with her for warmth.

During the hot months of the year, my family would join the others with whom we shared the house and gather together outside in the courtyard, where someone played the harmonium and others sang. I had a real sense of belonging and well-being on those long, warm nights. If there was any milk, the women would bring it out and we children got to share it. The babies were fed first, and if any was left over, the older ones got a taste. I loved the lingering sensation of its sticky sweetness on my tongue.

On those evenings I used to gaze upward, amazed at how spectacular the night sky was. Some stars shone brightly in the darkness, while others merely blinked. I wondered why flashes of light would suddenly streak across the sky for no reason at all, making us "ooh" and "aah." Afterward we would all huddle together, bundled up in our bedding on the hard ground, before closing our eyes in sleep.

That was in our first house, where I was born, which we shared with another Hindu family. Each group had their own side of a large central room, with brick walls and an unsealed floor made of cowpats and mud. It was very simple but certainly no chawl—those warrens of slums where the unfortunate families of the megacities like Mumbai and Delhi find themselves living. Despite the closeness of the quarters, we all got along. My memories of this time are some of my happiest.

My mother, Kamla, was a Hindu and my father a Muslim—an unusual marriage at the time, and one that didn't last long. My father spent very little time with us (I later discovered he had taken a second wife), and so my mother raised us by herself.

My mother was very beautiful, slender, with long, lustrous black hair—I remember her as the loveliest woman in the world. She had broad shoulders, and limbs made of iron from all her hard work. Her hands and face were tattooed, as was the custom, and most of the time she wore a red sari. I don't remember much about my father, since I only saw him a few times. I do recall that he wore white from top to bottom, his face was square and broad, and his curly dark hair was sprinkled with gray.

As well as my mother and my baby sister, Shekila, whose name was Muslim unlike ours, there were also my older brothers, Guddu and Kallu, whom I loved and looked up to. Guddu was tall and slim, with curly black hair down to his shoulders. He was light-skinned, and his face resembled my mother's. Usually he wore short shorts and a white shirt—all our clothes were hand-me-downs from the neighbors, but because of the heat we didn't need much. Kallu was heavier than Guddu, broad from top to bottom, with thin hair. On the other hand, I had short, straight, thick hair, and I was extremely skinny as a child; my face resembled my father's more than my mother's.

When my father did live with us, he could be violent, taking his frustrations out on us. Of course, we were helpless—a lone woman and four small children. Even after he moved out, he wanted to be rid of us altogether. At the insistence of his new wife, he even tried to force us to leave the area so that he could be free of the burden that our presence brought to bear. But my mother had no money to leave, nowhere to live, and no other way to survive. Her small web of support didn't extend beyond our neighborhood. Eventually, my father and his wife quit the area themselves and moved to another village, which improved things for us a bit.

I was too young to understand the separation of my parents. My father simply wasn't around. On a few occasions I found I had been given rubber flip-flops and was told he'd bought new shoes for all of us, but beyond that he didn't help out.

The only vivid memory I have of seeing my father was when I was four and we all had to go to his house to visit his new baby. It was quite an expedition. My mother got us up and dressed, and we walked in the terrible heat to catch the bus. I remember seeing my mother coming toward me from the outdoor ticket booth, her image hazy in the wavering heat emanating from the tarmac. I kept a particular eye on Shekila, who was exhausted by the sizzling temperature. The bus journey was only a couple of hours, but with the walking and waiting, the journey took all day. There was another hour's walk at the other end, and it was dark by the time we reached the village. We spent the night huddled together in the entranceway of a house owned by some people my mother knew (they had no room inside to offer, but the nights were hot and it wasn't unpleasant). At least we were off the streets.

Only the next morning, after we had shared a little bread and milk, I found out that my mother wasn't coming with us—she was not permitted. So we four children were escorted up the road by a mutual acquaintance of our parents to our father's place. My mother would wait at her friend's house.

Despite all this—or perhaps being oblivious to most of it—I was very happy to see my father when he greeted us at the door. We went inside and saw his new wife and met their baby. It seemed to me his wife was kind to us—she cooked us a nice dinner and we stayed the night there. But in the middle of the night I was shaken awake by Guddu. He said that he and Kallu were sneaking out, and asked if I wanted to come along. But all I wanted to do was sleep. When I woke again, it was to hear my father answering a loud knocking at the front door. A man had seen my brothers running from the village into the open countryside beyond. The man was worried they could be attacked by wild tigers.

I later learned that Guddu and Kallu had attempted to run away that night—they were upset by what was happening in our family and wanted to get away from our father and his other wife. Fortunately, they were

found later that morning, safe and sound.

But one problem morphed into another: the same morning, standing in the street, I saw my father approaching and realized that he was chasing after my mother, with a couple of people following behind him. Not far from me, she suddenly stopped and spun on her heel to face him, and they argued and shouted angrily. Quickly they were joined by other people on both sides. Perhaps their personal argument tapped into the tension between Hindus and Muslims, and it quickly turned into a confrontation. The Hindus lined up with my mother, facing the Muslims, who were aligned with my father. Tempers rose very high, and many insults were exchanged. We children gravitated toward our mother, wondering what would happen with all the shouting and jostling. Then, shockingly, my father hurled a small rock that hit my mother on the head. I was right next to her when it struck her and she fell to her knees, her head bleeding. Luckily, this act of violence seemed to shock the crowds, too, cooling tempers rather than exciting them. As we tended to my mother, the crowd on both sides started to drift away.

A Hindu family found the room to take us in for a few days while my mother rested. They told us later that a police officer had taken my father away and locked him up in the cells at the village police station for a day or two.

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. My mother—and perhaps all of us—could easily have been killed.

Although we weren't brought up as Muslims, after my father left, my mother moved us to the Muslim side of town, where I spent most of my childhood. She may have felt that we would fare better there, since the neighborhood was a little less destitute. Even after we moved, I don't remember having any religious instruction as a child, other than the occasional visit to the local shrine. But I do remember simply being told one day that I wasn't to play with my old friends anymore because they were Hindus. I had to find new—Muslim—friends. Back then the religions didn't mix, and neither did the people.

When we moved to our new house, we all carried everything we owned, which was only some crockery and bedding. I cradled in my arms small items such as a rolling pin and light pots and pans. I was excited about being in a new place, although I didn't really know what was happening. At that point I didn't understand what religion was. I just saw Muslims as people who wore different garments than Hindus; the men dressed all in white and some had long beards, with white hats on their heads.

In our second home, we were by ourselves but in more cramped quarters. Our flat was one of three on the ground level of a red-brick building and so had the same cowpat-and-mud floor we'd had before. Just a single room, it had a little fireplace in one corner and a clay tank in another for water to drink and sometimes wash with. There was one shelf where we kept our sleeping blankets. Only rich people could afford electricity, so we made do with candlelight. I was afraid of the spiders that would crawl along the wall. There were mice, too, but they didn't bother me the way the insects did. The structure was always falling apart a little—my brothers and I would sometimes pull out a brick and peer outside for fun before putting it back in place.

Our town, which I knew as "Ginestlay," was generally hot and dry, except during the heavy rains of the monsoon. A range of large hills in the distance was the source of the river that ran past the old town walls, and in the monsoon, the river would break its banks and flood the surrounding fields. We used to wait for the river to recede after the rains stopped so we could get back to trying to catch small fish in more manageable waters. In town, the monsoon also meant that the low railway underpass filled with water from the stream it crossed and became unusable. The underpass was a favorite place for the local kids to play, despite the dust

and gravel that rained down on us when a train crossed.

Our neighborhood in particular, with its broken and unpaved streets, was very poor. It housed the town's many railway workers, and to the more wealthy and highborn citizenry, it was literally on the wrong side of the tracks. There wasn't much that was new, and some of the buildings were tumbling down. Those who didn't live in communal buildings lived in tiny houses like we had: one or two rooms down narrow, twisting alleyways, furnished in the most basic way—a shelf here and there, a low wooden bed and a tap over a drain, perhaps.

The streets were full of cows wandering around, even in the town center, where they might sleep in the middle of the busiest roads. Pigs slept in families, huddled together on a street corner at night, and in the day they would be gone, foraging for whatever they could find. It was almost as if they worked nine to five and clocked off to go home and sleep. Who knew if they belonged to anyone—they were just there. Most people didn't eat pork, as it was considered unclean. There were goats, too, kept by the Muslim families, and chickens pecking in the dust.

Unfortunately, there were also lots of dogs, which scared me—some were friendly, but many were unpredictable or vicious. I was particularly afraid of dogs after I was chased by one, snarling and barking. As I ran away, I tripped and hit my head on a broken tile sticking up from the old pathway. I was lucky not to lose an eye but got a bad gash along the line of my eyebrow, which a neighbor patched up with a bandage. When I'd finally resumed my walk home, I ran into Baba, our local holy man, who would give advice and a blessing to local people. Baba told me never to be afraid of dogs—that they would only bite you if they felt you were scared of them. I tried to keep that advice in mind but remained nervous around dogs on the street. I knew from my mother that some dogs had a deadly disease that you could catch, even if they didn't do worse than nip you. I still don't like dogs, and I've still got the scar.

Since my father wasn't around, my mother had to support us. Soon after Shekila's birth, she went off to work on building sites. Since she was a strong woman, she was able to do the hard work involved, carrying heavy rocks and stones on her head in the hot sun. She worked six days a week from morning until dusk for a handful of rupees—something like a dollar and thirty cents. This meant that I didn't see very much of her. Often she had to go to other towns for work and could be away for days at a time. It was a great feeling to see her walking up the street after several days' absence. You couldn't miss her since she always wore a red sari. Usually on Saturdays she would come home, and often she brought back some food. Yet she still couldn't earn enough money to provide for herself and four children. At age ten Guddu went to work, too, and his first long shift of about six hours washing dishes in a restaurant earned him less than half a rupee.

We lived one day at a time. There were many occasions when we begged for food from neighbors, or begged for money and food on the streets by the marketplace and around the railway station. Sometimes my mother would send me out in the evening to knock on doors and ask for leftovers. I'd set off with a metal bowl. Some scowling people angrily shouted "Go away!" while others might have something to give me—perhaps a little kichery, biryani rice (rice layered with meat), or yogurt curry. Occasionally I got a thrashing if I was too persistent.

Once I found a partially broken glass jar near my house. It had contained mango pickle, but most of it had been scraped out. I decided to use my fingers to get what remained in the jar. I tried to avoid the glass particles, but I was so hungry that I gulped down whatever I could scoop out.

Often when walking around the neighborhood, I would see crockery that had been left outside to be cleaned. I usually checked to see if anything was stuck to the bottom of the pot. Typically any leftover food was covered with flies, which I'd shoo away before devouring whatever remained. Sometimes a dog was hanging

around, and I didn’t know if it had licked the pot or not. I’d get a rock and chase it away before eating what was left. When you’re starving, you aren’t too particular about what you put into your mouth. On days when no food was available, you just wouldn’t eat.

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. You want something to fill your stomach, but you don’t know how to get it. Not having enough to eat paralyzes you and keeps you living hour by hour instead of thinking about what you would like to accomplish in a day, week, month, or year. Hunger and poverty steal your childhood and take away your innocence and sense of security. But I was one of the lucky ones because I not only survived but learned to thrive.

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One big impact that our Muslim neighborhood had on my upbringing wasn’t pleasant—circumcision at about age three. I don’t know why I had to endure it even though we weren’t converts to Islam—perhaps my mother thought it wise to go along with some of the local area’s customs to keep the peace, or maybe she was told it was a requirement of our living there. For whatever reason, it was done without anesthetic, so it’s unsurprisingly one of my clearest and earliest memories.

I was playing outside when a boy came up and told me I was needed at home. When I got there, I found a number of people gathered, including Baba. He told me that something important was going to happen, and my mother told me not to worry, that everything would be all right. Then several men from the neighborhood ushered me into the larger upstairs room of our building. There was a big clay pot in the middle of the room, and they told me to take my shorts off and sit down on it. Two of them took hold of my arms, and another stood behind me to support my head with his hand. The remaining two men held my body down where I sat on top of the clay pot. I had no idea what was going on, but I managed to stay fairly calm—until another man arrived with a razor blade in his hands. I cried out and tried to struggle, but they held me fast as the man deftly sliced. It was very painful but over in seconds. He bandaged me up, and my mother carried me out and took care of me on a bed.

A few minutes later, Kallu went into the upstairs room and the same thing happened to him, but not Guddu. Perhaps he’d already had it done.

That night the neighborhood held a party, with feasting and singing, but Kallu and I could only sit on our rooftop, listening. We weren’t allowed to go outside for several days, during which time we were forced to fast and wore only a shirt with no trousers while we recovered.

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