

# Guantanamo Boy

Anna Perera

Published by Puffin Books

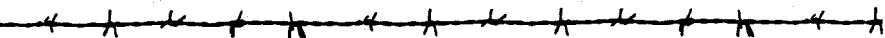
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ANNA PERERA



PUFFIN

## PUFFIN BOOKS

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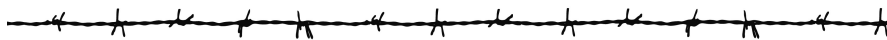
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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Although *Guantanamo Boy* is a work of fiction, it is inspired by real events. It remains a fact that children have been abducted and abused and held without charge in the name of justice in Guantanamo Bay and many secret prisons around the world.

An eye for an eye and the whole world will soon be blind

– Mahatma Gandhi



## GAME

*Sometimes*, Khalid thinks as he drags himself home after another boring day at school, *I'd rather be anywhere but here*. The thought of having to explain to his dad what happened yesterday is making his guts turn over and he hopes and prays the letter from school complaining about his behaviour in the science lab won't be there waiting for him. But as soon as he unlocks the door to 9 Oswestry Road, the envelope catches the corner of the mat.

*Great*. Khalid shakes his head at the sight of the school crest of Rochdale High on the back of the white envelope. Picking it up, he dumps his bag at his feet, throws his school blazer at the hook on the wall and, breathing in the smell of last night's curry, hurries to the kitchen, where there's more light.

For a moment, Khalid spaces out looking round the open-plan kitchen-cum-diner. At the knives in the correct slots of the wooden knife holder. At the blue striped dishcloth, folded neatly on the metal drainer, and bar of pink soap in the see-through plastic dish between the shiny taps. Everything's clean and bright, nice and neat, and nothing like the mess and

terrible panic he feels at the thought of his dad reading this letter from his science teacher. He slumps down on a chair and listens to the hum of distant traffic. Checks the clock, ticking steadily on the wall, counting down the seconds until the front door clicks open. For the last three days Dad hasn't left the Vegetarian First restaurant in Manchester, where he's been working for ten years as a lunch chef, until around six o'clock and it's only three forty-five now. It could be hours before he gets home.

The sweet smell of polish is coming from the small wooden table pushed up against the yellow wall beside Khalid. He lifts his feet up to rest them on the table. With the letter from school in his hand, he waits patiently for his sisters, six-year-old Aadab and four-year-old Gul, to charge down the hall, followed by Mum rustling bags of shopping.

'Sadly, Khalid, you cannot be trusted to behave sensibly in the science lab,' Mr Hanwood had said. 'I'm going to write to your parents about this.'

Thanks a lot.

'I never liked him,' Khalid says out loud. Yesterday wasn't even his fault. His mate Nico was angry with Devy, who owed him money, and when he asked for it Devy told him where to go and Nico reached for his collar and Devy went crazy and tried attacking Nico with his science book. But Nico ducked and he hit Khalid in the face instead. Naturally Khalid threw his school bag at him, which knocked most of the lab equipment off the bench, sending everything flying. And the only thing Mr Hanwood saw as he came through the door was Khalid flinging his bag.

Oh well, it's too late now. Unless he gets rid of the letter . . . Things get lost in the post all the time, don't they? But a moment later the front door bashes open and he hears Aadab and Gul squealing.

'Ouch! Mum, Gul's pinching me,' Aadab complains loudly.

'Khalid, how many times have I told you not to leave your bag on the mat and your jacket on the floor?' Mum shouts, ignoring the girls' bickering.

'I didn't!' Khalid shouts back, taking his feet off the table and stuffing the letter quickly into his trouser pocket. 'I put my jacket on the hook. It must have fallen off.'

'Yes, because you didn't hang it up properly,' Mum says, suddenly there beside him with a white plastic shopping bag cutting into each arm. Behind her Aadab and Gul thunder up the stairs to change out of their school clothes.

'Sorry.' Khalid jumps up to take the heavy bags from her. 'What time's Dad home tonight?'

'Any minute now,' Mum says. 'He'd better not be late again or I'll be having words with that boss of his. He works too hard, your father, and never complains.'

Khalid stares at his mum. She's frowning, always worried about something or other, which is probably why her thick, shiny hair is starting to turn grey. Her eagle eyes are all over the place, looking for anything out of order that she might need to put right. Of course he could give her the letter, but she looks tired out and is too busy unpacking shopping, and anyway, she'll just tell Khalid to wait until his dad's back.

Trying to act normal, Khalid wanders into the living room and switches on the TV. There's a news item about Guantanamo



Bay, the prison in Cuba that Mr Tagg was telling them about in history yesterday. A picture flashes up of a group of soldiers pointing guns at men in orange prison suits bent double on the ground, surrounded by high wire fences with a couple of nasty-looking dogs to one side.

‘The camp is being expanded to house more Taliban prisoners,’ the newsreader says.

*Poor guys*, Khalid thinks.

‘Six months after 9/11 and the world is getting madder by the day,’ Dad says, suddenly behind him.

‘Oh, hi, Dad. Didn’t hear you come in. How’s it going?’ Khalid’s heart is pounding faster and faster as he tries to sound calm.

‘My feet are killing me,’ Dad mutters, not noticing anything odd as he shuffles away.

Half an hour later, Dad is sitting beside Khalid at the table, telling them all about his day. How much lentil khoresha was wasted. How many half-eaten nan breads were thrown out. He goes full tilt through the contents of the restaurant bins with pain on his face. Aadam and Gul frown along with him, trying not to giggle during his long pauses, and wait patiently for him to unwrap the tin foil from the slices of nutmeg cake he keeps in his pocket for afters.

Khalid worries and fidgets, not daring to fish the letter from his pocket.

‘Things will get worse before they get better,’ Dad says. ‘A man came into the restaurant today, pointed his finger at the waiter and said, “You better watch your step round here,

mate.” Can you believe it? The boy hasn’t done anything wrong. Nothing except wear the shalwar kameez. That’s it.’

‘The table is not the place to discuss world events,’ Mum says. ‘Food goes down badly if you are concerned at all.’ She doesn’t like sitting on the floor to eat either, like her brother’s family. ‘We are living in England,’ she says. ‘Not Turkey or Pakistan, and English floors are cold, with or without cushions.’

Khalid always washes up after tea. It’s something Dad taught him to do when he was six years old. ‘Helping your mum shows her respect,’ he says, and Khalid’s glad to do it, because Mum works hard in the office at the local primary school and is always tired when she gets home.

Today, Khalid dries while Mum washes, picking up the cutlery with the tea towel in one swoop to save time. Quickly arranging the red tumblers in a line on the shelf, anxious to get it over with, because he has plans to meet his Pakistani cousin online at six o’clock. Tariq’s in Lahore, so this time works out OK for both of them.

Mum spots him checking the clock. ‘Tariq isn’t a bad boy.’ She smiles, reading Khalid’s mind. ‘But he can’t settle to anything, Uncle says.’

‘Can’t settle? He’s learning Arabic, isn’t he?’ Dad laughs, unfolding his newspaper. ‘That’s not something I ever managed to do. Tariq speaks English, Urdu, Punjabi – now Arabic. He’s going places, that young man! You’ll see.’

Khalid glances at his mother, but there’s no smile on her face.

‘Why don’t you like Tariq, Mum?’

‘He’s having too big an influence on you. All the time you are Tariq this, Tariq that, as if he’s someone very important.’ Mum folds her arms and raises her eyes to heaven. ‘Even Dad says this.’ She glances at Dad’s blank, innocent face with disbelief. ‘Yes. Yes, you do!’

Dad smiles secretively at Khalid, as if to say, *Let it go*. But Mum can’t let it go, insisting on staring at the computer in the corner as if it’s an evil monster.

‘My brother tells me Tariq spends too much time on the computer and he doesn’t listen,’ she continues. ‘What kind of young man lives like this? A very bad way to behave, and don’t argue.’

‘I wasn’t going to!’ Khalid protests, while remembering it was Mum who encouraged their friendship in the first place. For a long time, because of her, he’s hero-worshipped his older cousin. Sending his first email to him almost two years ago, when he heard the news from Mum that Radhwa, the two-year-old sister Tariq adored, had died. Died slowly after a long illness. Mum explained that Tariq went totally crazy, refusing to believe she was gone, and had nightmares for weeks on end. At the time Tariq was fifteen, Khalid only thirteen, and though the whole family was broken-hearted, no one took Radhwa’s death harder than Tariq.

‘Write to him, your cousin,’ Mum had ordered. ‘Say something to help him get better.’ So he did, emailing him the hottest web links for his home town, Rochdale, and their football club. It was strange at first, emailing someone he didn’t really know, but bit by bit they became friends who chatted mostly about the stuff they had in common. Computers,

video games, football, movies, the usual things that everyone likes whether they live in Rochdale or Lahore.

If Mum ever found out that Khalid sneaked downstairs to talk to Tariq for hours on end, in the middle of the night when everyone was asleep, she'd have a fit. But if she knew how much he was learning from his cousin, not that he was ever going to tell her, then perhaps she wouldn't worry so much. He could talk to Tariq about stuff that his friends wouldn't care about. They were probably all going to stay in Rochdale their whole lives, but Khalid wanted to see the world. He didn't want to end up like his dad, working hard for someone else all his life. Khalid was always telling his dad to set up a restaurant of his own, but he wouldn't listen.

'There's nothing I haven't seen,' Tariq writes in his emails to Khalid. 'I've been to Turkey, to Medina, seen the first mosque at al-Quba. You wouldn't believe how green the dome is.'

Khalid tries to imagine a green that's brighter and greener than any other green, but he can't. Green is just another colour to him.

Tariq tells him about the sacred places of Islam, especially Medina, where the Prophet Muhammad is buried. But they are places Khalid finds it hard to care about. His curiosity sometimes closes down when he reaches these bits of Tariq's emails. The places that interest Khalid are cold and isolated, like remote parts of Iceland and the Arctic. Countries with few people and loads of floating icebergs would suit him. He hates being hot. Greenland, for example, he'd love to go there.

Plus he hates being preached to. It annoys him because it makes him feel he's back in school, not at home chatting to his

cousin. Tariq's only two years older than him, yet sometimes he treats him like a little kid. For a start, Khalid doesn't know where any of these places are. He's only been to Pakistan once, and that was eleven years ago, to see Uncle, his mother's brother, who moved there from Turkey. He hadn't met Tariq, who was staying with his grandmother at the time. All Khalid could remember was the heat and the dusty roads, plus the curved gold sword on the wall in Uncle's living room. It's not much of a memory.

He's never been to Karachi to visit Dad's sisters. But he imagines it to be just as boring as the small town near Lahore where Tariq and his family still live.

The bits of Tariq's emails that really interest Khalid are about computer games, and now Tariq has invented a game of his own, Khalid can't get enough of their online sessions.

'Khalid's actually touch-typing now. You should see him,' Dad boasts to anyone who'll listen. Mostly, that person is Mac, their Scottish neighbour from number 11, with daughters the same age as Khalid's sisters. 'He types faster than the wind.' Mac pats Khalid on the head whenever he pops round which makes everyone laugh. Then Dad and Mac wander outside to talk about petrol gauges, drive shafts, tuning, or something else that the rest of them don't care about.

Mum hurries Aadab and Gul to get in the bath and the kitchen falls silent. Always the best time of day for Khalid.

The barrage of words from Tariq begins the moment the kitchen door closes and Khalid is at last alone in front of the computer, which takes up all the space on the smaller corner table.

‘Hi, cuz,’ the email starts. ‘I haven’t had time to look at Rochdale Football Club’s results for Saturday. How did they do?’

‘It was a draw – a bit of a tough game,’ Khalid fills him in.

‘Which means they have to win the next match or they’ll be in danger of being relegated, yeah?’ Tariq types.

‘Looks that way.’ Khalid sighs as he waits for Tariq’s response.

‘What a shame for Rochdale. The only real lesson I learned today is that no matter how much you learn there is always more to find out. Reading many books has shown me how little I know about anything! And I thought that match was going to be a sure-fire thing. For something happy I will tell you what I have been doing today . . .’

Khalid rushes through the news about Tariq’s Arabic lessons. Scrolling quickly down the page to the bit he wants. Leaning forward, elbows on the table, to grab every detail.

From the very first sentence, ‘Latest game news’, Khalid hangs on every word of his cousin’s ideas and plans, whether he understands them or not.

‘I haven’t decided what to call it yet,’ Tariq begins, ‘but I think six characters placed in different countries would be the best. Then we can have multiple players online at the same time dissing each other. What do you think?’

‘Yeah, six would be brill,’ Khalid types quickly. ‘It’s gotta have a real cool name, though!!!!’

Khalid doesn’t notice time passing as he reads about the complexity required to implement the programming language. Plus the goals, rules, mathematical framework Tariq’s

been working on to put the game together make it sound as if his invention is going to be even better than *Counter Strike*. Khalid loves *Counter Strike*, a war-based shooting game that he plays at Nico's place on his console. One team are the terrorists and the other are the Special Forces who have to sneak in and defuse the bomb. Tariq and Khalid both love playing *Grand Theft Auto* too, getting an adrenalin rush from blowing stuff up and stealing cars. *Starcraft*, the online strategy game set in space, is their favourite at the moment, but they chat about loads of other games while Tariq finishes off his own invention, which doesn't have a name yet. It's going to be basic, but it's much more fun knowing that it's their own private game.

These emails make Khalid feel so much better that he forgets about giving Dad the letter from school. Then the door opens and Mum silently crosses the kitchen to pluck something from the fruit bowl.

'It's half past seven. Get off the computer, Khalid!'

It's always the same. There's never enough time to talk to Tariq. Reluctantly, Khalid quickly types, 'Later, cuz!' and then closes the computer down.

'Nations around the world are strengthening their anti-terrorism laws. Pakistan is providing America with more military bases and airports to use for its attack on the Taliban,' the newsreader states from the TV in the living room.

'Haven't you got any homework to do?' Mum sighs.

'I can't work with the TV on in there,' Khalid says.

'Oh, that's a good one.' Mum refuses to be taken in by his excuse for a moment, then gives him an only-kidding smile

before heading back to the living room and shutting the door behind her.

Dragging his school bag to the table, Khalid is soon absorbed in Galileo.

Galileo, the genius who knew everything about astronomy and mathematics. He even managed to improve the telescope. Khalid sits back and folds his arms. How did Galileo know the telescope needed improving? Thinking about this makes his mind go fuzzy. There's so much to take in and most of it Khalid has to read twice before it makes any sense at all. One thing Khalid's sure of, though, is that Galileo is way cool. Everyone throughout history knew that. He even took on the Catholic Church.

'We're all part of this misery.' Dad pops his head round the door to get a glass of water. Khalid doesn't know what he means or what he's talking about. Nor does he ask. But he thinks about it for a moment. That's Dad all over. He says things you can't pin down, which is a major part of the problem between them. How exactly is Dad going to react when he hands him the letter? He just doesn't know.

The thought flashes through Khalid's mind that his friends, if they were here, might think Dad was a bit weird saying something like that out of the blue. But then his family aren't what people suppose they are. Mum has never worn the veil and neither did her mother in Turkey, where she was brought up. Maybe Dad was referring to the fact there has been more hostility in the neighbourhood lately towards Muslims. Though Khalid hasn't been called any names, or been punched or anything, a couple of the Muslim guys at school said they



felt totally unsafe being out at night now, while before 9/11 they had felt fine.

OK, they sometimes say Friday prayers and usually eat halal food, but that's as far as the Muslim religion goes in Khalid's family. Dad was brought up in Karachi, Pakistan. His father, who is now dead, owned a furniture shop there and Dad was the last child born to his mother, when she was thirty-nine years old. His three sisters are much older than him and only the oldest is married, so the others live with her and her husband.

'Those whispering ninnies!' Dad calls them. He doesn't like them much and hardly ever mentions them.

'Your dad's just like my grandpa,' Nico says. 'Always telling you to straighten your shirt and comb your hair before you leave the house. As if anyone cares about that stuff any more!'

Whenever Khalid sees Nico on the street, he's wearing a black T-shirt and blue low-riders, eating a bag of chips. Always grinning like a lunatic, as if he's just seen something mad. Nico's a mate but he's also the main supplier of alcohol to kids in the area. Being lucky enough to have an eighteen-year-old brother, Pete, who looks just like him, Nico only has to flag up his brother's ID at the local offy to buy crates of beer, which he then sells at inflated prices. Why he spends so much on chips, Khalid can't understand. But then Nico always has an answer.

'Eating chips, drinking beer and nailing those steroid heads in the park, how's that for a brill life, eh, mate?' His deep laugh sounds more like a barking dog than a fifteen-year-old boy, which makes Khalid laugh too. Nico's never mentioned

nailing Muslims and Khalid doubts he ever will. He's not that kind of kid. None of his mates are. They don't see colour, race or religion, any stuff like that. And the kids they call the steroid heads are a bunch of eleven- and twelve-year-olds with shaved heads who live on the estate behind the school and get their kicks from acting hard and bullying old ladies.

'You finished your homework?' Mum's back in the kitchen and watching Khalid out of the corner of her eye as she makes a cup of mint tea.

'Yeah. Think I'll go round Nico's for a bit to talk about the match tomorrow.'

Mum's mouth twitches as she sits down at the table with a magazine. 'Ask Dad first, Khalid. I don't like that cocky boy!'

'Mum! Nico's top of the class in maths and his brother's at Manchester Uni doing electrical engineering. Dad says you don't get much cleverer than that.'

'All the same, there's something strange about him. I don't care what you say.'

'Yeah, yeah, whatever!' Khalid kisses her on the cheek, pretending to be interested for a moment in her *World of Cross-Stitching* magazine. The sudden smell of her jasmine perfume catches him before, quick as a flash, he grabs his cool blue cap and dashes out.

'Wait a minute, son!' Dad lifts his head from under the bonnet of Mac's old Ford Fiesta as Khalid scoots past. 'You can't go out in your school clothes. You'll wreck them.'

Khalid puts on his innocent face. 'I'm only going to Nico's to check some maths – a few equations and that.'

For some reason this makes Mac laugh.

‘When I was your age we didn’t go round bothering our heads about maths and footie when the streets were packed with girls.’

Dad sighs. He hates Mac passing on advice like this to Khalid. But at fifty-four Mac is always that bit out of touch, so Dad doesn’t need to worry that Khalid is listening to him properly. Khalid tries to imagine what it would be like for Mac to hang round with his mates in the park, see what life is really like now.

‘Aye, you couldn’t move for hotties round our way!’ Mac laughs to himself.

‘Yeah? Cool!’ Khalid grins, wandering off. ‘See you later.’

At the end of the road, Khalid rolls back his shirt cuffs, pulls his school trousers low until they sag, turns right, then second left and cuts through the cul-de-sac to the park. Once there, he runs past the swings. Straight to the spot by the oak trees where everyone hangs out on the broken benches.

‘Eya, Kal! Whassup?’ Tony Banda grins. ‘Nothing’s like going on here, mate.’

They were all there: Nico, Mikael, Holgy, Tony, a few other random kids from school, all making their own entertainment. Rough-readying each other with fake punches, dirty jokes, fags and the odd can of lager. Fighting each other for the last of the Pringles.

‘Idiot face! Give it back!’ Holgy tries grabbing the green tube from Tony.

‘Nah, you ate all mine last week!’ Tony whacks him over the head with it. Then Holgy, thick brown hair in his eyes, elbows Tony until he drops the Pringles. Nose-diving the tube as he

runs backwards, pouring crumbling crisps down his throat. Everyone laughing because, let's face it, Holgy's a nutter.

'Goal. Goal, yay!' Mikael shouts out the picture flashing at the front of his mind, which makes Khalid smile. The main thing they have in common apart from school is the fact they're on the same five-a-side football team on Thursday evenings. How their little team is doing is never far from anyone's mind, especially Mikael's.

'We need a game plan for tomorrow's match.' Tony Banda looks at Nico.

'Let's just try and win for once.' Nico drags on a fag. 'How about that for a change?'

'Yeah, we were a bit sluggish last week,' Khalid adds.

'A bit sluggish?' Holgy roars with laughter. 'We haven't scored a goal in ages and, Tony, try not to get another card from the referee for spitting tomorrow, eh?' A nifty goalie with big calf muscles, Holgy croaks like a sea lion with every spectacular save he makes. He's the best player of the lot.

'Leave it out,' Tony says. 'That wasn't my fault.'

Tony's a great attacker, Khalid thinks. He pushes forward like no one else. But no matter how long Tony's played football, he still can't keep to the rules. It's a shame his mind is usually somewhere else.

'Where's Lexy tonight, Tony?' Mikael asks. The mention of Lexy makes Tony go all gooey. In fact, with her blonde hair, big blue eyes and a great figure, she makes them all go gooey. Standing there on the sidelines at every match, dressed in a pink duffel coat whatever the weather, she runs up to Tony in her high-heel black boots when he's sent off (which happens

every other game) and throws her arms round him as if he's just scored a goal.

'Dunno,' Tony says. 'She'll turn up, I expect.' And, just like that, there she is, tripping towards them in her high heels.

'What does she see in you, Tony?' Nico shakes his head in disbelief as she comes across the park.

'Lexy needs her eyes testing,' Mikael states, and they all laugh.

'Too right she does,' agrees Khalid. Lexy is fit, but he really fancies this Irish girl from school, Niamh. *Why am I too shy to do anything about it, though?* he asks himself, falling back in the damp grass to stretch out. There's a sudden chill in the darkening clouds which adds to his nervousness as he finally rips the envelope from his pocket.

'Whoa!' says Nico, whooping with laughter as he spies the school's crest.

'Go on, Hanwood, do your worst,' Khalid announces. Holding the envelope to the sky, he tears it open and begins reading in a teacher-like voice for everyone to enjoy:

'Dear Mr Ahmed,

Your name was mentioned at the committee meeting today for the school fête, which is being held next term on 2 July. We wondered if it would be at all possible for you to set up another curry stall as you did so successfully last year? *Blah, blah, blah.*

Khalid kills himself laughing at the wasted hours he's spent worrying over nothing. 'Hanwood said he was going to write a letter about my behaviour in the lab.'

'He's said that to me a million times. School fête? It's still only March,' Nico says.

'So you've learned the months of the year, have ya, Nico?' Holgy grins.

'Januwaree,' Mikael joins in. 'Febooraree.'

'Shut up!' Nico kicks him.

Then, beyond the dissing, a spiralling warmth breaks out between them. These lads of the same age who share the same streets and school. The same teachers. Same gelled spiky hair. The same stupid jokes and sometimes the same dreams that just might, one day, come true.