



# Lost Ele Fountain

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The first couple of pages are set in italics. The speaker is a scared child. She, or maybe he, is being chased by a guard wielding a baton, dodging passengers, hurdling luggage on the platforms of a railway station. The rolling stock is cream and blue. People yell at the child: 'Little rat?' or 'Watch out, rat?'. Then, 'Monsoon clouds burst,' we read, 'spilling soft rain on the city.'

Ele Fountain never tells us which city, but everything coincides with a reader's image of India - the crowded station, its street children, the weather. The fear of the child in those opening paragraphs is a nightmare which readers might well recognise; and the anonymity of place and child may give us a sense that this story is not limited to the sub-continent.

Lola is 13. She has had a privileged childhood, though one cruelly marred by the death of her mother in giving birth to her young brother, Amit. She has a loving Dad. She mostly likes life at her private school, where her friends have affluent homes, staffed by numerous servants. Those friends enjoy their music, films, travel and luxury holidays. Overnight stays featuring makeovers are a favourite weekend pastime. Admittedly, Lola's family is less wealthy than those of her friends, and her more modest home is some distance from the school and its neighbourhood.

One Saturday, her Dad goes off on a business trip to another city to buy material for his clothing factory. Lola and Amit spend the day together. Amit is entertaining company; he's only eight, but he already goes to a school for the performing arts; his voice is so good he has his first film audition lined up. Dad fails to return that evening. And the next. The days go by with no word. The ready cash is running out. The landlord sends his agent round, demanding the rent. They have no contact with relatives - we learn later that Dad's family didn't approve of Mum, and he'd had to make a choice. Over several short chapters, piece by piece, the fabric of Lola's life tears apart. Just before the bailiffs arrive, she has no choice but to take Amit onto the streets. Before long, she loses Amit in a crowd.

So here's that nightmare. Imagine. No family, no friends, no food, no money. No home. No safety net. Sounds like the Victorian Underclass to a British reader, you might think. Though maybe not, if you know about food-banks or sleeping on the streets. Children living through the blitz in World War II sometimes dreamed an air raid took all their family, leaving them utterly alone. And, each night on TV, the orphans of Idlib? Maybe it's the worst of youthful fears.

Ele Fountain's prose is the more powerful for its simplicity as Lola's fall continues until all she has left is herself and

the stained clothes she stands up in. She doesn't know where she'll spend the next night, find the next stale crust. It is only then, helped by the cunning and friendship of the likeable Rafi, who's been on the streets for a year already, that she begins the long climb back.

Pushkin Children's Books' declared aim is 'to share tales from different languages and cultures with younger readers, and to open the door to the wide, colourful worlds these stories offer.' Their unusual list is worth checking online. Many of their titles are in translation, but Ele Fountain is a UK author, already much praised for **Boy 87**. **Lost** opens a door into a tale, told without cliché or sentimentality, of what matters and what doesn't as you're growing up ? and beyond. Wherever you might live.

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