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Questions of Travel

Written by Michelle de Kretser

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Questions *of* Travel

MICHELLE DE KRETSER

ALLEN&UNWIN

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IN MEMORY OF LEAH AKIE





Under cosmopolitanism, if it comes, we shall receive no help from the earth. Trees and meadows and mountains will only be a spectacle . . .

E.M. FORSTER,
Howards End

But surely it would have been a pity
not to have seen the trees along this road,
really exaggerated in their beauty

ELIZABETH BISHOP,
'Questions of Travel'



I

Anywhere! Anywhere!

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE,
'Anywhere Out of the World'

Laura, 1960s

WHEN LAURA WAS TWO, THE twins decided to kill her.

They were eight when she was born. Twenty-three months later, their mother died. Their father's aunt Hester, spry and recently back in Sydney after half a lifetime in London, came to look after the children until a suitable arrangement could be made. She stayed until Laura left school.

Look at it from the boys' point of view: their sister arrived, they stood by their mother's chair and watched an alien, encircled by her arms, fasten itself to her nipple. Their mother didn't die at once but she was never well again. *Breast cancer*. They were clever children, they made the connection. In their tent under the jacaranda, they put together a plan.

Once or twice a year, as long as she lived, Laura Fraser had the water dream. There was silky blue all around her, pale blue overhead; she glided through silence blotched with gold. Separate things ran together and were one thing. She was held and set free. It was the most wonderful dream. But on waking, Laura was always a little sad, too, prey to the sense of something ending before its time.

She had no recollection of how it had gone on that Saturday morning in 1966, her brothers out in the street with bat and ball, and Hester, who had switched off her radio just in time, summoned by a splash. No one could say how the safety catch on the swimming-pool gate had come undone; the twins, questioned, had blank, golden faces. Next door's retriever was finally deemed responsible, since a culprit, however improbable, had to be found.

To the unfolding of these events, the boys brought the quizzical detachment of a general outmanoeuvred in a skirmish. It was always instructive to see how things went. They were only children, ingenious and limited. They had no real appreciation of consequences or the relative weight of decisions. If Laura had owned a kitten, they might have drowned that instead.

The pool was filled in. For that, too, the twins blamed their sister. Their mother had taught them to swim in that pool. They could remember water beaded on her arms, the scuttle of light over turquoise tiles.

Laura, 1970s

LONG-FACED AND AMBER-EYED, what Hester brought to mind was a benevolent goat. She had spent the first seven years of her life in India, from which misfortune her complexion, lightly polished beech, never recovered.

Every night, Laura listened while Hester read about a magic land called Narnia. By day, the child visited bedrooms. They contained only built-in robes—a profound unfairness. Still she slid open each door. Still she dreamed and hoped.

Glamour, on the other hand, was easily located. It emanated from the sky-blue travel case in which Hester kept her souvenirs of the Continent. There was a tiny Spanish doll with a lace mantilla and a gilded fan. There was a programme from *Le lac des cygnes* at the Paris Opéra, and a ticket from the train that had carried Hester over the Alps. Dijon was a *menu gastronomique*, Venice a sea-green, gold-flecked bead. An envelope held postcards of the Nativity and the Fall as depicted by Old Masters, and tucked between these arrivals and expulsions, a snapshot of Hester overexposed in white-framed dark glasses against the Greek trinity of sea, sunlight and symmetrical stone.

Laura would beg for the stories attached to these marvels. Because otherwise they merely thrilled—they were only crystals of Aeroplane Jelly: ruby red, licked from the palm, briefly sweet. Hester saw a small, plain face that pleaded and couldn't be refused. But the tales she offered it disturbed her.

As a young woman, she had settled in London. There, stenographically efficient in dove-hued blouses, she survived a firm of solicitors, a theatrical agency and two wartime ministries. Then she turned forty and went to work for a man named Nunn. On the occasion of the Coronation, Nunn smoothed his moustache, offered Hester a glass of sherry and promised her *tremendous times*. Hester expended three pages on this in her diary but not a word on the practical arrangement at which she had arrived with the mathematician from Madras who rented the flat below hers. Novelties to which he introduced her included cheating at bridge and a sour fish soup.

In Hester's girlhood it had been hinted that France was a depraved sort of place, so naturally it was to Paris that her thoughts turned when she realised, as her third Christmas in his office approached, that she was in love with Nunn. Hester imagined him making her his mistress in a room with a view of the Eiffel Tower—she imagined it at length. An accordionist played 'Under the Bridges of Paris' beneath their window; Nunn threw a pillow at him. Food was still rationed in England, so Nunn gave orders for tender steaks and velvety puddings to be placed under silver covers and left at their door. Their bed was draped in mauve silk—no, a deep, rich red. When Hester learned that her employer intended to spend the holidays with his wife's parents in Hull, she crossed the Channel anyway. Nunn might detect traces of French wickedness about her when she returned and be moved to act.

Paris, in those years still trying to crawl out from under the war, was morose and inadequately heated—scarcely different,

in fact, from London. But a precedent had been set. Every year, Hester penny-pinched and went without so that she might go on spending her holidays abroad. Partly it was the enduring hope that she might yet return with something—an anecdote, a daring way with a scarf—that would draw her to Nunn's attention *in that way* at last. Partly, and increasingly as time passed, it was the dismay that pierced her at the prospect of solitary days spent in London with neither companion nor occupation (for her arrangement with the mathematician was confined to alternate Wednesdays).

When Nunn's wife finally came to her senses and died, he promptly married her nurse. Hester realised that she was fed up with England. On the voyage home to Sydney, she stood at the ship's rail late one night. The eleven volumes of her diary splashed one by one into Colombo Harbour.

Because all this had to be excluded from the stories laid before Laura, they suggested journeys undertaken in order to seek out delightful new places. Whereas really, thought Hester, her travels had been a kind of flight.

The way to crowd out her misgivings was to talk and talk. So it wasn't enough to describe the dishes on the handwritten menu from Dijon: a pear tart as wide as a wheel, snails who had carried their coffins on their backs. Hester found herself including the lilies etched on the pink glass shades of the lamp on her table, and the stag's head mounted on the wall. She described the husband and wife who, having had nothing to say to each other for forty years, inspected her throughout her meal. Where recollection had worn thin, she patched and embroidered. Laura shivered to hear of the tight little square in front of the restaurant where once the guillotine had stood: a detail Hester concocted on the spot, feeling that her narrative lacked drama and an educational aim.

So the story that made its way to Laura was always vivid, informative, and incidental to what mattered. Conjuring the glories of Athens, Hester passed over the unspeakable filth of Greek public lavatories that obscured her memory of the Acropolis, greed and incaution having led her to consume a dish of oily beans in Syntagma Square. Calling up the treasures of the Uffizi, she didn't say that she had moved blindly from one coloured rectangle to the next, picturing ways in which Nunn might compromise himself irrevocably in the filing room. Rose windows and Last Judgments dominated her description of Chartres, but when Hester had been making the rounds of that cold wonder, all her attention was concentrated on the selection of a promising effigy. Tour guides harangued, Frasers howled in their Presbyterian graves. Hester lit candles in a side chapel, knelt, offered brief, fervent prayers.

After talking about her travels, Hester was often restless. Turning the dial on her transistor late one night, she heard a woman say gravely, *Away is hard to go, but no one / Asked me to stay.*

Ravi, 1970s

THE SEA TUGGED PATIENTLY AT the land, a child plucking at a sluggish parent. That was the sound behind all other sounds. Ravi's life ran to its murmur of change.

The town, a pretty backwater, lay on the west coast of Sri Lanka, twenty-three miles from Colombo. The baroque flourish of its colonial churches threw tourists into confusion. They had come prepared for Eastern outlandishness, not third-rate copies of home.

The new airport wasn't far away. At night, the tilted lights of planes were mobile constellations, multiplying from year to year.

Ravi lived in a lane crammed with life and food. Foreigners sometimes strayed there by mistake. If they noticed the Mendises' house, they saw a box devoid of charm. But the house was built of bricks plastered over and colourwashed blue. It contained an electric table fan, a head of Nefertiti stamped on black velvet, a three-piece cane lounge suite. The roof held through ravaging rain. In the compound

lived a merry brown dog called Marmite, who could sing the chorus from 'Cold, Cold Heart'. There was also a tree with mulberries as fat as caterpillars, and a row of violently orange ixoras. The lavatory was indoors and flushed.

He hated girls and sisters. How had Priya come by a copy of the *Jacaranda School Atlas*? She made a great show of studying its pages. When Ravi came to stand at her elbow, she spread her hands and leaned forward, calling, 'Mummy, Mummy! *Aiyya* is breathing on my book.'

On the veranda, their mother was singing to the baby: *John, John, the grey goose is gone*. In a classroom that resembled a stable, with a half wall and a wooden gate, Anglican nuns had taught Carmel to sing. Her husband could play the guitar, and there was the radio, of course, but music in that house meant singing. The older children sang *Why can't my goose* and *Christmas is coming, The goose is getting fat*. Geese, like God, were taken on trust and for the same reason: they must exist somewhere, there were so many songs about them. Carmel broke off to nibble Varunika's tiny nose. Then it was *Five golden rings, Four calling birds* . . . She had sung it to each of her children, standing them up on her knee.

The baby was beneath Ravi's attention. But he was only ten months older than Priya. The two fought or played with ferocious concentration. In cramped rooms, they exercised childhood's talent for finding secret places.

There were games with the neighbours' children. Brandishing a stick to signify authority, *Kang kang buuru!* chanted the leader. *Chin chin noru!* came the chorus. 'Will you do what I say?' 'Yes!' 'Run, run, run and bring me . . .' When it was Ravi's turn, he would request objects that struck him as magical: a square white stone, a green

feather. But Priya set daring tasks, ordering her subjects to pluck a mango from a tall tree, or to pull the tail of the chained monkey who performed for tourists, his face savage and full of sorrow.

Long after a shower was installed in the house, the children went on making a game of well baths, each icy bucketful eliciting screams of joyful fear. The bathroom and lavatory, the last rooms in the house to be built, were not completed until Ravi was almost four. Perhaps a memory of this work, an odour of damp cement, a sense of walls rising, his parents' preoccupation with the shaping of domestic space, ran under a game the boy devised when he was older. Accompanied by Priya, he would roam the town looking at houses. When he hissed, 'Here!', the children would stand and stare. Priya liked to speculate about the people who lived in the house: she assigned names and ages to the children, she sought Ravi's opinion on whether their mother was stern or smiling, she dithered over the dishes they preferred. Ravi bore her babyish chatter in silence and contempt. He cared nothing for the lives enclosed within a set of walls and was excited only by the character of *the house itself*. A circular porch lent this one a jovial air, a double row of openwork bricks rendered another spiteful, while a third, *an upstairs house* situated deep in a treed garden, exuded a sinister charm. Ravi's imagination worked to penetrate the enigma of each dwelling: the brilliance and dark within, the disposition of rooms, the dusty places where dead flies collected.

This game, at once deeply satisfying to both children and the source of bitter quarrels, continued throughout the long Christmas holidays one year.

Laura, 1970s

A SUMMER CAME WHEN, HAVING twirled up the seat to adjust its height, Laura would photograph herself in the booth at Central Station. There were weeks when all her pocket money, changed into twenty-cent coins, disappeared that way. The result was always the same: a gloomy adolescent skulking under a bush of hair.

One day she pulled back the pleated curtain and emerged from the booth to see Cameron. Her brother had his back to her and was using one of the payphones, listening with one palm on the tiled wall. His head drew all the light in that dim place. The receiver, pressed to it, had the black potential of a gun.

Laura dodged back into the booth. Why had Cameron left his office to use a public phone? When she heard the whirr that signalled the delivery of her photos, she peered out. He had vanished.

The way home lay past gardens that were gatherings of green decay. Rain might fall, caressing and warm, hardly different from the thick, damp heat that preceded it. Now and then a cloudburst encouraged delirium. Timetables and commuters were thrown into

chaos, traffic lights blacked out, the broken bodies of umbrellas littered the streets. Sydney quite forgot that it was Western and efficient. It squinted over its brown back at Africa, at India; an old, old memory of wholeness stirred.

After the storm, pavements showed a heightened brilliance of blossom. Here and there, a stone face wore a cockroach veil.

When there was a scorcher, afternoon tightened around the streets in a blinding bandage. On the nature strips, the nerve had gone from the grass. But in the park the light was necklaces and pendants looping through trees. Laura lifted an arm from the elbow like an Ancient Egyptian; admiring her pretty hands, with their pointed fingers, her thoughts were bright and dark as leaves. Half-naked children were to be seen darting through a shimmer. Laura would have liked to join them beside the fountain, but an elf shouted, 'What's Vince gunna do for a face when the camel wants its bum back?' and Laura recognised that she was no longer a child. She walked on, badly frightened. She had just realised—which is to say, *felt*—that she was going to die. The elf, too, was doomed, along with Vince and all that shrieking crew. The broad-faced European woman stealing municipal begonias would die, and those two snooty girls flicking their flat hair at each other. All the teachers at school and everyone in Fleetwood Mac. No one on earth would be spared. The galloping gaucho, the indigo Tuareg on his dune: inside each, the skeleton smiled. The dead strolled through the suburbs, through the city, their numbers uncountable and always on the rise. How could anyone, knowing this, select the correct concourse at Central, or deal with the yellow fat on a chop while not disdaining the multitudes that starved? The gravel slurred under Laura's shoe, the planet groaned as it turned. Behind her, screams revived and fell like sirens.

•

Her brothers, paid to apply the rack and the screw, Hamish in finance, Cameron in commercial law, rented a flat in Rushcutters Bay. Donald Fraser, the medical director of a hospital, often dined out. So Laura and Hester watched TV with plates on their laps. There were evenings when they sat on and on, homework and washing-up neglected. By the time the sound of a car could be heard in the drive, it was a point of honour not to move. It was not that Donald criticised *Dallas* or fish fingers. But he stood there, jingling his keys, before retreating to his room.

Wielding his electric toothbrush in the ensuite, Donald Fraser was reliving the moment when he had looked in on his daughter and his aunt. One was a glazed wooden goat, the other . . . he rinsed and spat, traversed by pity for the female morsel he had engendered. His daughter's eyes were coins of a lowly bronze denomination. Crossing a room, she caused him to fear that she would collide with the furniture. He couldn't conceive of the absence of beauty in a woman as anything other than a misfortune and had no doubt that he was responsible for Laura's affliction. Long before her birth, mirrors had presented him with lips as coarsely suggestive as a double entendre. He pressed a hand towel to them. Yet they excited women. For context is all. It was a mouth that would constitute an invitation on an attractive girl; on his poor child, it was an obscenity from which her father flinched.

She was the repository of all that was massive and defective in Donald's lineage. He had escaped the worst of it. Even so, as he peered over the towel, he fell far short of his own ideal. Beautiful young women—*stunners*—were therefore necessary to him. His wife had been one. Her radiant fairness had passed to the boys, adulterated by the Fraser motif of thickly turned limb. But it was the girl who had suffered the full force of the paternal theme. *The runt had copped the brunt.* At her birth, Donald had thought of a

piglet he had dissected as a boy. Loving his sons, he showed them no quarter. Laura, whom he didn't like to touch, raked in money, extravagant presents, indulgence in all things except the failure in which she had played no part.

Donald put the thought of his daughter from him by recalling the image of a succulent oncologist who was driven to adjust her goldilocks if ever they met in the lift. But her smile contained a pink expanse of gum. So he had pretended not to understand when she 'accidentally' called his extension. Emboldened before the bathroom mirror by this proof of standards, he dared to let the towel fall.

In the rumpus room, they were eating Tim Tams straight from the packet. An ad break interrupted a Ewing machination—something involving a secret and a lie. It must have been the reason Hester chose that moment to confide that she hadn't always been the last after a run of boys. A sister had contracted diphtheria in India at the age of three. Pinafored Hester, lingering outside a window, heard her mother say that the child's throat seemed to be lined with grey velvet. 'That was the infected membrane,' said Hester to Laura. 'Dr Norris had ridden through a cyclone to reach us but he was too late. Ruth choked and died.'

Yuk! thought Laura. The unfairness of being saddled with *an old bag* as companion had recently begun to oppress. Thankfully, the Ewings had returned to cavort and divert. Hester went on holding half a Tim Tam. Eventually, she placed it on her saucer and drew a hanky from her sleeve. Laura thought, If you cry, I'll have to kill you. She waited, sliding her eyes sideways and holding a cushion like a shield. The whole hanky thing was disgusting, too—what was wrong with a Kleenex?

Hester was in the grip of a senseless thought: *Death runs in our family*. For a long time, the space occupied by Ruth had remained visible; the child Hester had to step off a path or choose a different

chair. A Ruth-shaped form, something like a mist but less definite, still moved now and then along a passage or across a window. Back teeth together! said Hester to Hester. It was the only salve known to her childhood: offered when a funny bone collided with a cupboard, when a sister died. Over the years that followed, the command lost its power; it survived in the present as a joke. It wasn't that Hester regretted the shift, exactly. But the saying belonged to a world that was imperfect and solid: how had it grown as light as mockery? She wiped her ringless fingers—carefully, one by one.

Ravi, 1970s

ON THAT DAY IN 1779 when Captain Cook died in Kealakekua Bay, an Italian apothecary arrived in Galle on a ship registered in Rotterdam to the Dutch East India Company. One of these men was already famous and the other would die in obscurity, but each had his part in a great global enterprise that ran on greed, curiosity and the human reluctance to stay still.

Ravi's pedigree reached back through two hundred years to the Italian adventurer; on his mother's side, which didn't count. Of his father's ancestors, however, he knew almost nothing. No tales circulated of them, for they lacked exoticism and hence the glamour from which legends are made.

Mindful of his wife's European heritage, Suresh Mendis had once brought home a sideboard inset with speckled mirrors and a portrait of Edward VII. It was solidly constructed from teak, but two of its clawed feet had been sawn off and one of its drawers was stuck. Suresh told his wife that he had acquired it from a colleague who was emigrating and had *let it go for next to nothing*. Suspicion fluttered in Carmel, but this was in the first year of their

marriage, and they hadn't yet learned to look on each other's wishes as flaws.

Propped on bricks, the sideboard was placed on the back veranda to await repair. There it stayed and became, in fact, a useful receptacle for the odds and ends that every household accumulates: a pot of glue, string, receipts, a saucepan without a handle, a cracked dish that might yet serve for the dog's rice. 'Look in the sideboard,' the Mendises would advise each other when they had searched everywhere else for an elusive object.

It was here that Ravi came to stand when his father went into hospital with pains in his stomach and failed to return. The sideboard, ever further advanced in decrepitude, one of its mirrors shattered by a cricket ball, a second monsoon-warped drawer now as unyielding as the first, had nevertheless endured. Ravi was just tall enough to lay his head on the battered board, beside a blurred whitish ring left by a glass. Marmite, believing this stance to signal a new game, trotted up and remained beside him, gently wagging her tail.

Laura, 1980s

SHE NOTICED AN ANT SCURRYING about the bathroom basin. Overcome with tenderness—for where could it go? on what could it subsist?—Laura resolved to pick it up in a tissue and deposit it outdoors. But her need to pee was urgent. Satisfying it, she grew dreamy and remained seated far longer than necessary. She turned on the tap to wash her hands and recalled the ant too late, as it was swept away.

Afterwards Laura thought, Perhaps suffering isn't a sign that God is absent or indifferent or cruel. Perhaps all the horrible things happen because he just gets distracted.

She was sixteen, a metaphysical age. The Absent-Minded Almighty: having created him in her image, she felt quite protective of him and worshipped him tenderly until the phase passed.