



## Absent Without Leave: A Travel Memoir of Strange Mourning

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### BRISBANE AIRPORT

September is the month of birthdays. Tomorrow it is my mother's, and today is mine, and my eldest daughter's. I have promised not to write about her ever again even in my diary, it was at the top of her 14<sup>th</sup> birthday wish list: "please don't ever write about me again". I canvassed this concept with my Creative Non-Fiction postgraduate students this week, researching (the straw poll method) my coming conference paper on confessional ethics. "Writer first mother second", they accused me! I feel I am nothing first. Or everything: marker of essays all through the night, lover of husband in the mid-morning light, shrieker at lost socks, cutter of locks, the mummy who sleeps in lots of strange cots. Because despite the day of the double birthday, I have to catch a plane (as usual) and head off somewhere foreign for work. And while I am away I will not write home every day. And while I am away the younger children will have to go to endless after-school-care afternoons of glum, fatigued horror. And while I am away I will miss my mum's biblical birthday bash on Saturday, and my Aunt's 60<sup>th</sup> the following weekend. And and. So in between looking for socks I wrote a poem for that favorite Aunt of mine, and posted it on her Facebook page. Hardly glitzy, but I do not have time to phone or buy ink for the printer or go to the post office so it will have to do. They will read it at the party, and I will wish I was there for her, with them all. I am ignoring missing my own she-who-can-not-be-named's birthday, but I have written her a letter to open. She maybe will not read the letter properly, but she will like the money. I hate Skype. What is that? Skype?: it sounds like a 23<sup>rd</sup>-century plague. I will just phone: I have packed my mobile and it has international roaming.

I did not write my mum a poem. I bought her a pair of drop pearl earrings from my favorite jeweler, and a pair of black suede pumps to match her new party frock we had gone shopping for together months

earlier. It is not my fault I will not be celebrating her 70<sup>th</sup> birthday by her side. I simply can not. There will be family at her party who have hurt me and the pain is not going away as I age. No one warned me about this endless amplification of grief. I am going away today because I love my mother and she could not choose me over these others and I do not blame her but I cannot cut cake with them. Any of them. Ever again. That is why I said yes to the conference invitation, and that is why I am sitting here on the floor at the airport in a yoga pose, sad that it has come to this. That I am on a cold floor, a gruesome long-haul flight ahead of me, without even a scrap of poetry between me and my thin excuses to piss off. Did I say it was her birthday today, she who can not mentioned? This time 14 years ago I held her in my arms all night long, my lips pressed to her precious head. I wish someone would tell you as it was happening, “it won’t get any sweeter than this”. Instead I get loud messages like “Final Boarding Call”. And quiet ones like the soft swank of my heart, “go on, go on, go on”.

#### DOHA

Things I know now I am older: Doha is hotter than Brisbane, Qatar is hotter than Queensland. Even the pull of the place is hot, the fry-up of weather and light the only thing on the menu. It could send you to sleep for good, weather like this, or at least be responsible for permanent tiredness accompanied by decomposition of the will. But no—people are at work everywhere behaving with the proper performance that desert demands, moving with measured determination not wasting action. There is a Jimmy Pike painting explaining this, how you have to best walk around in the desert heat of the Australian Kimberleys. The man in the painting appears to have no arms, but Jimmy once explained that is because you must walk around with your arms clasped together behind your back. “Don’t move your arms if you don’t have to”—desert lore. Doha has only two colors that it shows to strangers, but the magazines shout this lie down, and dazzle with their promises of jeweled oases in hotels and shopping centers. Then suddenly there is the harbor and things begin to make sense, as much as any bowl of water without sharks or Slessor and his bells can. I like it here. People are extraordinarily kind. I want to let them know I do not deserve it, their kindness. Lucky I am only staying one night otherwise I would end up shouting.

#### BUDAPEST

I was not certain about this stopover. It was unscheduled and at my own expense, an impromptu decision, instantly made whilst sitting with the

“academic advisor” travel agent, long sufferer of dithering idiotic academics. It is such a small university she has to be nice to us I suppose, but still, I am grateful. She suggested it as a birthday treat to myself and I agreed. I like Rosalie. I am always cancelling planned trips on her when research funds evaporate and she never fails to smile and roll her eyes and make me feel OK. Often she is the nicest person I speak to all day on campus. So here I am in the middle of her good idea and how fabulous it is. The hotel is unbelievable, an art deco fantasy with seven thermal baths larger than Olympic swimming pools in tiered gardens. I swam for hours, I had a massage, I sat naked in saunas and I did not miss anyone or anything or think about my neglected duties at home. But the guilt eventually came biting back. Even sitting on my balcony sipping wine looking at the Danube did not assuage my sadness. It was at this point I discovered I had left my sleeping tablets on the plane: now I was stuffed. I go insane without sleep. Who does not? Most people bitch and suffer when deprived. Me, I do things I know I should not. I tried to phone home, but it was completely the wrong time. Happy birthday to me.

Determined to tire myself out, I dressed for a night on the town. In the lift on my way down to “Activity #1: Pretend to be a prostitute who picks up clients in expensive hotel lobbies”, I met a woman who changed my life. We did not speak. She was old, she had the hands you have when you must have lived close to a century. She was wearing silver tapestried court shoes, matching fishnet stockings, with paisley silk culottes flirting at her ankles. Her blouse was aristocratic in cut, buttoned with what looked like gifts from Atlantis. The cuffs were theatrical and witty. Her ancient neck sparkled with a crystal choker. Red lips. Startling blue eye shadow and false lashes. Her hair was as silver as her shoes, falling below her waist in determined curls. Oh to age with such a caress for life! *This is the way you live*, pulsed the oxygen we shared. *This is the way, this is the way*. She smiled directly at me then disembarked. Everyone in that spacious art-deco lift had been affected by her presence.

I consequently embarked on the following program, in an effort to both defeat jetlag and honor the shifting in my gut following the “lift spectacular”.

I sat in the hotel foyer and took notes about rude guests trying to match degrees of rudeness with nationality.

I went out walking and bought and ate an ice cream shaped like a rose.

I accepted the invitation of a stranger and accompanied him to a bar by the river and shared a bottle of wine, and laughed. I felt free, and safe.

After he walked me back to the hotel I decided on impulse to attend, alone, the “Exclusive Truffle Evening”. I was seated with strangers and felt awkward. I saw the lady with the silver shoes across the room, radiance itself, but I left during the fourth course: truffle overdose.

I went swimming again. Good god. I could live here forever beneath these tinsel stars.

I dressed up somewhat and ordered a taxi to the “Atlantida Club” (a venue advertised in my bedside brochure) because I wanted to dance and I did, but I still felt lonely.

So I participated in the “Love fun meet people” speed-dating event. It was amusing. I told my “dates” I was a dentist, because writers are boring. And then I did something so bad I will never talk about it.

### MALEV HUNGARIAN AIRLINES (WHICH IS REALLY A BUS) TO SLOVAKIA

Next day. Steeply sloped roofs spied from the Autobahn—this is definitely not Australia. All you see as you speed along the new plastic bitumen bypass at home in Lennox Head is a subtropical landscape looking a little sad, as though it has been sent to stand in the corner. The post-surgery rawness of the landscape is upsetting everyone in the village, who really have no desire to live “within driving spit of Brisbane”. Here, there are villages every ten seconds blinking up at you. Architecture and people own the landscape, whereas the landscape owns us at home. Turn your back on your lawn and it grows spears that can kill you within a week. Waves as human mincemeaters. Sky as tent top, suspended by its own good intentions. Pandanus trees as emotionally volatile decoration. Here I am “on”, home I am “in”. What’s Hungarian for highway? The bus driver speaks German but not English. I am translating for the Brits behind me who are negotiating air-conditioning temperatures which does not match their prostitudinal attire. Is speaking German insulting to a Hungarian? Is it like, I do not know, the tongue of the enemy? Everywhere I go I am the colonizer’s slut, singing their song. But these roofs are beautiful, their lines are so sharp they cut your eyes. Other things I see are Tescos and other recognizably British chain stores but I am not fooled about where I truly am because it is still a cleaner place than England last time I looked. Like that time when we came back to London when we lived there from three weeks in Greece and thought the garbos were on strike. But no, that was just your daily north London streetscape.

### KOSICE

Slovakia at last. The “airport terminal” for the bus-plane happens to be the car park of McDonald’s. Not a taxi or rank or bus or train or tram in sight—our driver had taken off already with a shrug and a smile when I asked him where a taxi might be found. He must have left his German

tongue at the border crossing. A large Irish woman takes charge of us bewildered beasts, ordering five taxis in impressive Slovakian. Turns out she is a medical student here on an overseas semester, and so are the bunch of other stray prostitutes that I had been listening to her lecturing about the 1916 Easter uprising and the vital difference between insurrection and riot, while my British darlings flicked through their *Hello's*. You have got to love the Irish education system: I can not imagine any other 20-year old in the Western world so well-informed about their own country's history. I wished them well saving lives and determined to make my forthcoming keynote speech as vital. Words must matter. After all, this very morning I had visited Budapest's own Literature Museum. I will remember that experience, knee deep in the blood of my presentation. My taxi driver was old enough to be able to tell me some stories but he did not because after the false start of him thinking I had asked to be taken to the Hilton (classy looking chick that I am) he worried for our hour's drive about locating my obscure Pension. Kosice looked cracked and weary on the way out and then I saw a muscled young man shining up an antique piece of farm machinery in an abandoned, empty, weed-strewn car yard and he was smiling in the sunshine and even dancing a little to his ear-phoned music while he worked. Happy happy happy.

## PRESOV

Here at last. Wine costs 1.5 euro a glass. I am staying here. Forever. My hotel room has ancient wooden beams at dangerous angles. History goes bang bang bloody bang on my head whenever I try to stand up straight. There is no telephone. No internet connection. How can I let them know I am safe? I am overexcited so I go out.

I queued for a gelato.

I went to an excellent wine bar in a cellar, on my own, and the waitress took pity on me which was irritating so I left.

I wanted to go into the Italian restaurant for dinner just to be served by the waiters standing outside the entrance, wearing long white gloves.

I ate a kebab in the park, the fountain was beautiful but I was self-conscious.

Tomorrow I will find the university and some friends so I do not have to find out the worst button on my cardigan has popped open by the fact that strangers are staring at my bare chest.

Tonight I will go to sleep and dream of the Bavarian church where we used to drive my mother-in-law for her holy retreats. Such Baroque worlds, such baroque times, such a baroque kind of ache, to be missing

everything you once knew. Tonight, deep in Europe, I am missing my ex-husband more than my husband. Travel is travel. Trouble is trouble.

## DAY 2

There is nothing innocent about waking up in a pension loft room that has medieval beams running at dangerous diagonals across the space. Were they really meant to be wooden colored? I thought once upon a time, when they were built, the fashion was lime washing? I once walked around the Antiquities Museum in Munich on a private tour with my archaeologist sister-in-law and I have never fully recovered from learning that day that the Greeks used to paint their statues in vivid hues. She showed me the evidence. She knew her stuff. I was convinced. How could one have zealously studied Ancient History and Art History at High School and never learnt this? And what lies might they be telling about Slovakia in the guidebooks and the textbooks of today? Lies simply because the story is in black and white thereby withholding the most kaleidoscopic of facts? There are only skylight windows in my room. All night long I could see the stars, and now in the early dawn I can only see weak blue sky quivering with the bright day ahead. Colors everywhere. I know when I go outside I will see and be soothed by the variegated pastel facades of the medieval buildings along the street, determinedly not white.

I am walking, having abandoned jogging as it never pays to be the only person doing something odd in a strange country. I walk past gaggles of teenagers waiting outside their schools, I had forgotten how early they start in Europe. They are smoking and flirting and all the girls look like they are auditioning for a movie about some bourgeois bitch exploiting a stream of eastern European nannies, all tight jeans and inappropriate footwear and sparkly tops. They look nothing like the same aged kids I see each morning outside unmentionable daughter's free dress hippie high school, not because of their clothes though. On the north coast, the dress code extends to shorts that mandatorily reveal bum cheeks as soon as the weather edges higher than 16 and the age stretches past 12. No, it's not the clothes, it is the sense of themselves. They carry themselves differently. The difference is the same kind of difference that I felt the first time I went to a ritzy disco club in Berlin immediately after the wall came down (where are all these memories coming from? Is being in Europe rewiring my brain? But it is true: I was living in Berlin when the wall came down and now I live in seaside suburbia where I know much of the population would volunteer to build gated communities if it were allowed). The "Osties" were distinctive. They danced different. They had

different manners at the bar (they would line up). They were having more fun. They seemed impressed by what life had to offer. They were more open to the fizz of the future. They were more—naïve? Naivety is a safe place, a cool place, a confident and happy place. That is how they looked. Like things had not yet begun. Sometimes when I watch the kids at home about to begin their day I feel like they are dead with the weight of their own good fortune. Slovakia is in the middle of a national Quit Smoking campaign. The kids hanging outside the three Gymnasiums I passed seemed unaware of this. They seemed so happy. Maybe we should all start smoking again. It was fun. Those were the days.

I am walking. Not running. I am in a very dangerous looking neighborhood now. All the buildings are cracking open with concrete cancer. I am alert and looking as nonchalant and bored as possible as I turn back for the town center. I definitely want a cigarette and a coffee. I know if I have to I can run away from trouble, I have the right clothes on and can be fast. One day I will not be able to do that. Be fast. Run. Then what will I do about me and all that trouble?

### DAY 3

Yesterday I met a writer, an Australian living in Hamburg. They printed his name wrong on the conference brochure, so now he will always be “last name first, first name last” to me. Maybe this will be a joke between us for the rest of my life—you never can tell what gifts come from travel. On the other hand, some things are predictable: this morning I was breaking the fast of a long sleepless jetlagged night with some food I never normally allow myself to eat (typical travel thing #1) all alone (#2) having to listen to the endless bullshit of others at the next table in the hotel restaurant (#3, the worst perhaps). Of course, they were fellow conference attendees, dissecting yesterday’s ideas, but really the scene was your typical “two middle-aged men nearing retirement on a spree away from home showing off to each other”—gently bragging about their careers and their minds and their contacts and their worldliness. I wonder what kind of men they might have been had they instead pursued a career in carpentry.

And then we just die. This morning I walked around the cemetery. When I stopped worrying about being raped (I should have written crime, that is the true residence of my imagination) and started looking properly you could note the cultural difference of sadness and death. In this cemetery, it is easy to see the average life span is not that of Australia. In this cemetery, there are anonymous graves. In this cemetery, the cross commemorating those who fell during World War Two looks as

though it was sculpted from two giant black crowbars. Leaving, I develop a deep fondness for some young men who died too soon in the 1970s, their youthful pictures etched on the marble. One of them is smiling and wearing what has to be a velour suit and bow tie. I hope they all did the right thing, what they wanted to do, and that their lives were free from the competition of words. I would like to die knowing more about wood. I vow to work on this. I vow to phone the family today. I break my vow. Later that morning before breakfast I bribe the desk clerk to let me use his hotel computer to read my emails.

### ETHER WORLD

Darling,

I don't know when you will read this, or if you will get it, or even what the telecommunications situation is like with Presov, but I will try the hotel at some sensible time. Really hoped you travelled well. The kids are thinking about you and missing you, as am I. Very much indeed. I am sorry I didn't catch your call on Friday. I sat with the phone by me, just in case, but it didn't ring. When I got back, I noticed we'd forgotten to pack your charger. In terms of news, your Mum finally ended up calling you to say Happy Birthday on Friday, a few minutes after we got back from dropping you at the airport. Ho hum. Wonder what you were doing? Anyway the kids enjoyed seeing them, and there was no pressure exerted to do anything else, or none that I noticed. Daughter #1 got absolutely flogged at netball—they were playing a team they hadn't played before. It looked like all the girls had been on one sleepover or another. Her party was horrid, sorry to tell you, but I am really worried. Those friends of hers, the little madams, made her cry at her own party. I was able to comfort her and make her feel happy. She said her only real friend is Lisette, so I think it will be interesting to see just how soon it is until that unholy friendship circle from primary school finally falls apart. Our poor baby. Not nice for her, particularly with all the effort that we put in (her and me) to making it lovely. Kat's cake turned out amazing, a massive chocolate Oreo reproduction. It was beautiful. And tasted good too. But I think by the time we cut it Maisie had effectively bitch-slapped the party to death. Bitch. Anyway, that's the news except to say that I am thinking about you all the time, wondering what Hungarian and Slovakia summers are like...our winter? Good luck with all your stuff, you're great, you really are. I love you. Don't kiss strange men!

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## PRESOV, AFRESH

This city is a different place for me now after my keynote lecture (which was a huge flop) and after the conference dinner (which was torture) I wish I wish I wish I had not agreed to read from my memoir, how ridiculous, how un-Australian. When you are in trouble, and away from home, architecture changes shape, cities reveal secrets you are not prepared for. It is a simple story really. I did not pack my sleeping pills, and I go a bit crazier than most from lack of sleep. The big guns ignored me, did not invite me to their table. If I had silver shoes I would not care. Why do I care? My new writer friend and I left, but not before an old friend from Germany smoking outside told me before she wished she had not that *everyone thinks your paper was insane no-one can understand why you were invited to deliver the keynote you spoke too long your memoir is written like a little girl whining and you dress like a slut did you realize you're too old for tight dresses with stripes would you like a cigarette let's get some champagne it's so cheap here where are you going the party's just starting*. For some reason I was upset by this exchange. I said goodnight to the nice man who writes interesting books about redemption and does not live in Australia anymore. I wasted slabs of life crying in my room. I knew who the ringleader was. Jealous slag. It is not my fault is it that I get published more than her? Slap slap slap. We are not so good at choosing the girls we hang out with, that teenage daughter of mine and me.

## STILL ABSENT

Absent without leave. That is the only reason I am here, the only reason I can be anywhere. My grandfather went AWOL from the Army right at the beginning of the Second World War, just before he was shipped out for the duration. Cairo, Crete, the Pacific—he did the Grand Tour before he made it home. But first he jumped the train on its way from Melbourne to Brisbane taking the boys to their departing ship, and dashed home to his fresh bride and loved her one more time. Then my father was born and he never saw his Dad until he was almost five. So there you go. Absence makes life.

I live so much when I leave home but it is always war. I did not even know what decade or century I was in half the time on this trip, what with the black hole of communications (only on the last day I figured out that there was free WiFi in the Hilton lobby). I had not spoken to my family at all. I could barely remember where I lived. What I learnt: not much. That I should resign from my job. That I should stop theorizing about ethics and life writing. That I should be more dutiful. That I should kill all bitches. LOL. But in reality, I have learnt small, sure things. One

friend has strongly entered my life. He wrote me from Germany, long afterwards, saying he was sorry that I had had a bad time and that he likes my stuff regardless. It was like listening to tea-tree oil at work, he said.

There are more surprises than I imagine when I return home. It is warm and dry, Gurrung season up north, I can feel the hot pre-monsoonal winds. The stringybark is in flower. In the car on the way home from the airport I soak up the happy chatter of my mob and think about all I have to do. I need to plant beetroot and coriander and so much else, ready to harvest for the Christmas salads. Two hours south of Brisbane and I am safe. Home. Yet. I think I could move to Budapest and never leave. It is a city in love with water. Veli-Bej Bath. Saint Gellért Bath. Király Bath. Lukács Bath. Széchenyi Bath. Perhaps I should run away, perhaps I have over-invested in my job. It doesn't seem to love me back, not much. I have over 200 emails waiting: all admin. I am too tired to unpack properly, but while I am rooting around in my suitcase for gifts from afar—*where was I? was it real?*—my husband tells me all the gossip now that we have a moment alone: I am most upset about an old boyfriend who has gone AWOL to mine the fuck out of Western Australia, and a girlfriend who has left her husband and children and run off with a roadie (girls our age should really know better). Then I go snorkeling at the Bream Hole with my children, not forgetting to rub the rim of our masks with toothpaste lest our vision blurs. The smell of the ocean is better than heroin. The colour of the world beneath kills me. Tropical fish: you can not make that shit up. Later, we will shop for new shoes, and I will write a story about what happened while I was away.

## AUTHOR

Susan Bradley Smith is an award-winning Australian writer and academic who has spent much of her adult life as an expatriate. Her latest books are the shortlisted poetry collection *supermodernprayerbook* and the memoir *Friday Forever*. She is currently working on a biography of Winston Churchill's actress daughter Sarah, Lady Audley. She lives in Melbourne and teaches at La Trobe University, and is the founder director of the creative bibliotherapy practice, The Lemonade Academy [www.lemonadeacademy.com](http://www.lemonadeacademy.com)