

THE ESCAPE ARTIST

With work, endless demands from the family, footballs flying around the house and a million and one things to do, sometimes it pays to have your own parallel universe. When life gets too much, you can always reach for the escape hatch and chill out in your private villa in Capri.

WORDS BY MARY HOWLEY

SHORT
STORY OF
THE MONTH

It's the first day of the school holidays. The Spouse and I are juggling our employment in between driving the offspring to their social pursuits. Needless to say, our kids have a far more active social life than we currently have.

After a longer than normal day at work, my old friend Mademoiselle Guilt worms her way into my chest, because I've bought takeaway for dinner yet again. I'm running out of cuisines. In the last couple of weeks, our dinners have been a global odyssey.

In the kitchen, the floorboards cling to my shoes, begging to be mopped. When I look down I see a trail of dried orange juice leading from the fridge to the kitchen table. There are piles of tomato sauce-smear plates, and dirty bowls on the kitchen bench – evidence of the constant snacking and raiding of the fridge and pantry by the offspring. The sink contains the remnants of breakfast. Traces of solidified Coco Pops and Corn Flakes are caked on the breakfast bowls, the culprits of the sour, milky odour that caused me to put my hand over my nose as soon as I opened the front door.

The dishwasher is open like a big gaping mouth, empty and waiting to be fed. The TV is blaring and no-one's watching. I grab the remote, switch it off, walk around the room flicking off light switches, turning off the heating and muttering about our massive electricity bills. As usual, no-one's listening.

Adolescent Son and Youngest Son are kicking the footy in the living room. At least they aren't wrestling on the floor. Then I realise that my crockery shelves are in the

direct path of the flying footy. These shelves display the Noritake dinner set that I inherited from my grandmother. I managed to wrangle it from my sister-in-law who had been eyeing it well before Granny died. Right now, a missile in the form of a Sherrin football is hurtling towards it. I reach out and grab the ball – one-handed like a seasoned footballer. Adolescent Son and Younger Son applaud my catching skills. I ignore their slow claps and spend the next five minutes screaming like a Mumzilla about showing respect for our house.

"Chill, Mum," says Adolescent Son, as he slumps onto the sofa. "We haven't broken anything yet."

Pain smoulders behind my eyes like a smoke signal, warning me of an imminent migraine. I stoke the wood heater with old newspapers and bits of kindling wood and strike a match. My daughter, Sassy Girl, is lounging in an armchair with her legs flapping over the armrest as she scrolls on her phone and talks to her screen. "Mum, that's bad for the environment. You're damaging the ozone layer."

I stare at the roaring flames and pout. I feel like a naughty child who has been caught out.

Sassy Girl glances up at me with her questioning eyes. "Mum, did you ...? You did remember, didn't you?"

A feeling of dread washes over me. Now it hits me: the thing that was bugging me all the way home. I had to do something ... go somewhere ... it was swirling in my head, but I couldn't for the life of me remember what it was. I was supposed to pick up her dress from the drycleaner. I shake my head and shrug my shoulders.

Her face crumbles. "But I was going to wear that dress to Sasha's party tonight."

Oh God! I had 100 trivial things floating in the stratosphere of my mind all day, but then I forgot the one vital thing that had been hammering in my head, all morning. "Pick up dress from cleaners" had somehow vaporised from my ailing memory bank by the afternoon.

"Sorry," I mumble and slink away like a Leunig character, inwardly berating myself. I have a brain like a colander where thoughts slide out of it.

Down the hallway comes the sound of profanities. I walk towards the voice. The swearing is so severe I imagine the words to be engulfed by a blue swirling cloud.

I stand at the door, aghast. The washing machine sits in the middle of the laundry. The tiled floor is a patchwork of wet towels. Spouse has his sleeves rolled up as he surveys the back of the machine and wrestles with a coiled pipe that's dribbling a fountain of grey water onto the floor.

"F...n' machine's sprung a f...n' leak," he says.

He's talking into the machine and his words bounce into the stainless-steel drum before ping-ponging back out into the air.

"Why didn't you organise someone to repair it?" I ask, hinting that maybe it needs someone who knows what they're doing.

He twists the upper half of his body towards me, his face displaying his irritation at my suggestion. "I rang the manufacturer already. There's a two-week wait."

I stare at the dirty washing toppling out of the wicker laundry basket. The lid is

skewed sideways, as if Oscar the Grouch is about to pop his furry head out at any minute. It'll only take one more week of dirty laundry for the pile to reach the ceiling.

My forehead is throbbing like a drum and all I can do is cup my hands around the sides of my face.

The pressure in my head is like a volcano about to erupt from the top of my skull.

"I've got to get out of here," I say, staggering towards the bedroom.

"Where are you off to?" Spouse calls out.

"The island," I mutter under my breath.

"Island? What island?" Spouse asks.

Sassy Girl joins in. "Are you booking a holiday? Can we go to Hawaii?"

"Where are we going?" Adolescent Son pipes up. "Shall I look for my passport?"

"Shall I start packing? Can we go during school time?" quips Younger Son.

"Hey, don't blow the budget," Spouse calls out. "We might have to buy a new washing machine."

I slam the bedroom door shut. My heart thumps in my chest while the migraine is doing a hip-hop dance in my head. I'm sinking, yet again, in the quicksand of domesticity.

I unbutton my black corporate blazer, wrangle myself out of it and toss it to a corner of the room. Aaahhh, the freedom. It feels like I've just gotten out of a straitjacket. I slip off my stiletto heels and fall on the king-size bed, arms out like a starfish, ready to surrender.

Closing my eyes, I imagine walking through the passages of my mind, wondering which parallel universe I will be transported to, today.

I take a few deep breaths in and out. My heart stops thumping and relaxes into a rhythmic beat. I feel serene, ready for take-off.

And off I go, out of reality and into my own fantasy.

I'm in my private jet staring out of the window as we fly over oceans and islands. I'm sinking into one of the reclining baby-blue, plush leather chairs, next to a table laden with French Champagne and canapés encrusted with jewels of caviar that resemble balls of round rubies. This is premium first class, and the flight staff are fussing over me like I'm some pouting Hollywood star with a humungous ego and a massive bank balance.

Moments later, the jet lands on the air strip, which is conveniently located just metres away from my mansion. The driver of my black limousine, who looks uncannily like my favourite actor, Bradley Cooper, takes off his sunglasses and smiles at me with his piercing blue eyes.

He drives me to the front door of my sumptuous, secluded, sun-kissed, sandstone villa, which is perched on a cliff overlooking my very own piece of ocean.

Today I'm in ... Positano on the Amalfi Coast, or the Isle of Capri. Yes, I'm in Capri.

I stand on one of the many stone balconies of my villa. My long, white, flowing caftan billows in the breeze, as I admire the stretch of serene, sapphire-blue coastline.

It's tranquil on my island. Spouse and the offspring are off-limits in my paradise.

Forget meditation – this is my therapy. For 10 minutes, I'm on vacation within the confines of my mind.

Now I must confess, there are times when I don't need to mind travel to my island, such as when I see the rapture on Sassy Girl's face as she makes a wish and blows out her birthday candles. Or when Younger Son gives me a thumbs-up after winning a tennis match. Or when I'm at the football with

Adolescent Son and we cheer after our team kicks a goal. During those moments, I'm there 100 per cent, soaking it all in. It's only when the chaos takes over, when life becomes too much – that's when I reach for my escape hatch.

A few weeks after the washing machine incident, I'm cooking dinner for the offspring. I'm rushing because Spouse and I have a dinner date with our friends Tam and Dan.

They've recently become empty nesters and are keen to show us the hundreds of photos of their river cruise along the Nile River. I'm stirring the risotto and ladling vegetable stock into the saucepan.

My mind wanders to my villa in Capri where my personal chef is making me a lavish banquet, with each dish served on a saucer-sized plate.

Spouse rests a hand on my shoulder. "Hey hon, better add more stock," he says, peering into the saucepan.

I snap back to the real world of do-it-yourself. The risotto is caked dry on the bottom of the pan.

An hour later, I'm searching in my closet for my trusty black dress, the one that hugs my curves like a Formula 1 car hugs a racetrack.

I have a niggling suspicion that I've worn it to dinner with Tam and Dan before, and unfortunately Tam has a memory like a homing pigeon.

Annoyingly, the dress is in the ironing basket and when I find it the creases give it the look of origami. I laugh to myself because right now, everything that can go wrong is going wrong.

As I'm pulling clothes off hangers and tossing them on the floor, I'm back to my parallel universe and I imagine the vast walk-in robe in my villa.

My stylist has organised a rack of clothes for me to choose from. Everything will fit me perfectly. There's no frumpiness allowed in my little kingdom.


In my real life, I'm still sifting through my wardrobe. It's slim pickings when it comes

to finding something that fits. Oh, what's this? I've found a tomato-red dress that I'd forgotten about. Moments later I'm dragging it over my oh-too-tight slimming undergarments. The dress feels like I've re-acquainted with an old friend who's hugging the life out of me.

Forty-five minutes later, Spouse and I are searching for a car park close to the restaurant. I'm slightly panicked because Tam and Dan are always impeccably early and we're always predictably late.

Unable to find a park nearby, we have to walk a few blocks. My stilettos make me feel like a tightrope walker as I navigate the cracks in the footpath. My undergarments feel like a python that's strangling me. What was I thinking putting on a dress two sizes too small? I must look like a chorizo sausage that's disguised as a Roma tomato. The image of that makes me laugh out loud and Spouse smiles at me and links his hand with mine, the way he used to when we were carefree with no responsibilities.

We walk under the streetlights, swinging our arms, laughing at nothing, just having fun. Do I need my parallel universe right now? Nope!

I'm soaking in this moment, because it's the real deal, better than anything my weird and furtive imagination can ever cook up. 



**AUTHOR
MARY
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As a child, Mary's parents did not speak English when they first migrated to Australia. They believed that books hold the power to open windows into other worlds. This inspired Mary to start writing her own stories, and she's never stopped. Mary currently lives on an acre with her partner and their three teenage children in the northeast of Victoria. She mostly writes fiction, but snippets of her own life occasionally slip into her stories.

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