

Literally the worst

'Stress leave!!' I regretted the screech as soon as it left my mouth, aware that the high pitched, verbal exclamation marks didn't help to convey composure.

Seriously? Danielle from HR glanced away. I was *her* boss. Could they not see that giving me less time to do everything on my mammoth list would only *increase* stress?

One mistake. Two. A handful at most. They couldn't possibly fathom the pressure I was under. Running operations for the Asia Pacific division while dealing with teenagers, private school fees, couples therapy. I should get a *parade* for all the balls I had in the air and the dexterity with which I flipped them between my octopus like arms. They expected me to be across every single detail? One letter. Yes, *pubic* instead of *public* was a typo. One that wasn't caught by spell check, that I should have picked up upon careful review. Yes, it was unfortunate that it was printed in thousands of brochures. But it could have happened to anyone.

I suggested, clearly and demonstrably *in compis mentis*, that perhaps the solution was to stop giving me so much work, rather than wheeling me to the loony bin for failing to do a million and one things with absolute precision.

I scratched my neck. 'I suppose I could pencil in some leave in, say, September?'

Danielle's smile was no longer apologetic. 'Let me be clear. This isn't a request. The leave is effective immediately,' she said through clenched teeth. 'We take the wellbeing of our employees seriously.'

As I marched out, it occurred to me that only last week I'd been waiting at the lights and had considered stepping into traffic. Not kamikaze style. More like, 'wouldn't it be nice to be injured so badly that I could shirk all responsibilities, but which wasn't so incapacitating that I couldn't binge on Netflix — or drink wine through a straw.'

A full body cast would be a perfectly acceptable time out. Stress leave, on the other hand, was for *losers*. I was not a loser. I had a successful career that kept me chained to a desk, an obscene mortgage, never ending renovations, mother to two over scheduled, privately schooled teenage daughters, and wife to a husband who had a crush on our therapist. By Sydney standards, I ticked every box of success. Kicking goals. Nailing it.

I drove along the Hume Highway. No Spotify. No podcasts. I had to resort to the radio. Like a *pleb*.

The easy listening combo of hits and old school wasn't enough to drown out my thoughts. My family's reaction to stress leave had been — excessive. How very *dare* they.

'It's like, for your own good, Mum,' Sophie had said, head tilted, fringe hanging over one eye. 'You're like, legit cray. It's literally the *worst*.'

I rolled my shoulders back. She was equating my occasional moods to genocide or a tsunami? The non-literal use of "literally" grated on my nerves. My number one pet peeve. Even more irritating than my hatred of "like". What was I paying those school fees for?

'You literally wanted to get hit by a bus. That's like, mental?' my younger daughter Tasha added.

Unnecessary upward intonation. A close number two.

My daughters didn't appreciate the nuances of my fantasy (which I'd shared in a heated moment of picking up a uniform from the floor for the one billionth time), the luxury that a "not my fault" non—fatal injury offered.

'What a ridiculous idea.' I'd scoffed.

They ganged up on me. Oliver rubbed his temples. 'Humour us,' he'd pleaded. Then — one of his favourites — appropriated from Julie, our therapist, 'Would you rather be right or happy?'

'Both — being right *makes* me happy.' Check mate.

Was this an intervention? No! They hastened to calm me down — speaking in soothing voices like they were handling a dangerous animal. It's a holiday. You-time.

'Where's this retreat anyway?'

At which point Oliver bit his lip. 'It's not *exactly* a retreat. You know, the renovations, mortgage ...' he trailed off. And then explained the DIY element to their "gift". A friend of a friend's cabin in whoop whoop.

Being banished to the bush was one thing. Confiscating my devices was completely over the top.

The nerve of them — taking my phone, ipad, laptop, smart watch. Hiding the sim cards.

'You're always on your phone, you're not *present*,' said the pot Sophie (whose phone was — figuratively — surgically attached to her palm) to the kettle (me), whose diligent attention to my phone, paid for Sophie's phone bills.

This mindfulness mumbo jumbo had a lot to answer for. Multitasking copped a bad rap. The way I saw it, the only possible way to fit 40 hours of tasks into 24 hours, was to do more than one thing, often several things, often with technological assistance, at the same time. It was simple physics.

‘How will I tell the time?’ I’d really started to panic at that point. They were sending me out in the wilderness to fend for myself, without even the basic essentials for survival. I’d tried a different angle.

‘How will you manage? I hold this household together.’

‘It’ll be good for us,’ Oliver reasoned, in an annoyingly calm tone — another Julie plagiarism. ‘It’s our chance to step up. Lighten your load. You’re always complaining about how much you have to do.’

‘I do *have* to do it. It’s not optional! If I stop running on the hamster wheel, the wheel will grind to a halt. And everything the wheel is powering will stop ... having power. This won’t work. Everything will fall apart.’

‘Give us *some* credit. It’s only a few weeks. Remember what Julie told us about needless worrying. What’s the worst that could happen?’

Asking me to catastrophise, even rhetorically, was not going to lower my blood pressure. I started to list exactly what I did every day. How vital I was to the family’s operations. Everything that could go wrong without my supervision and orchestration. Yes, I had briefly contemplated reducing my workload by a well-timed breaking of multiple bones, but I was *not* completely expendable. They couldn’t possibly cope without me.

‘And stop bringing bloody Julie into everything!’ By that stage I was hyperventilating.

‘Uh, *language*. See? Literally cray.’ Sophie twirled a finger around her temple.

‘Yeh — you’ve got to like, reach for your own oxygen mask first?’ added Tasha.

They were so cheerful, waving me off. Like they were the ones going on holiday. They took my devices and seized the work folder I’d tried to smuggle. They literally (correct use) pushed me out the door, and bundled me into the car with food, an ample supply of toiletries, and an alarm clock. Plus, gallons of wine. A digital detox for four weeks was torture enough. Dry July, or whatever the March equivalent was (March parch?), could go get stuffed.

So, here I was on a dirt road in country NSW. I twiddled the radio dial. Crackle. White noise. Not even AM talk back crazies out here.

I'd passed signs for Orange, Cowra, Grenfell. I kept an eye out for the sign to the arse end of nowhere. I only had a paper map to guide me.

I hummed a song I couldn't shake. '*It's like ray—ee—ayne.*' Why of all ear worms, was Alanis Morissette stuck on repeat in my brain?

I looked at the passing gum trees, canola fields and endless abyss of nature, trying to remember the words to *Rip Rip Wood Chip*. Maybe one annoying song would cancel out another.

Throw it in the bin, no news today.

That was more accurate. After a silent drive that had lasted all eternity, I pulled into 'Kulahea'. I wondered if the name had some meaning. Peace. Solitude. Hell hole.

It was rustic, I'd give it that. Also, rusty. There was a note on the table.

Welcome to Kulahea — as in, in the middle of summer, you bloody wish it was cooler here. And in the middle of winter, you'll freeze your bum off coz it's definitely cooler here! Watch out for snakes.

It was sparse, but clean. A double bed. I hoped Oliver had included sheets in the supplies he'd hurriedly thrown together in his haste to get rid of me. A bookshelf. In a few strides I walked from the back clothesline to the front porch. The grand tour took less than two minutes, and with that, I exhausted every possible form of entertainment.

Nothing but trees and dust as far as the eye could see. Couldn't Oliver at least have sent me somewhere instagrammable? I didn't have a phone. No camera. How was I meant to make memories — in my head, like a Neanderthal?

I curled up in the foetal position on the bed and wondered if death by boredom was possible.

The next day, I woke with a shocking headache. I reached for my phone, and my hand slapped the air. I remembered where I was. Up shit creek. Without an electronic device to feed me my first thoughts of the day.

I figured it was morning by virtue of the sunlight piercing my pounding skull. I'd made quite a dent in my wine rations already.

I sat up with a start. Wednesday. Sophie's English assessment was due. Tasha's swimming carnival. There's no way Oliver would remember she needed a new swimming cap. The figures for the half-year report needed to go to finance— who was dealing with that? I could drive back to Grenfell and see if there was an internet café. Did they still exist? Maybe there was a pay phone. I didn't even know how to use one.

Sigh. I'd stay put. Give them what they wished for. Let them figure it out. Let it dawn on them how much I did, now they had to do it themselves.

With nothing better to do, I went back to bed and slept off my hangover. This felt like a scientific discovery of epic significance. Rest = recovery. Who knew?

The next few days were not worth writing home about. Hot, dry and *boring*. I paced, kicked things, threw rocks at other rocks. It was the suckiest holiday ever. Literally, the worst.

By the second week I'd taken to screaming really loudly. No one could hear me and it felt bloody terrific. I'd also found a bush track that circled the property, and an unlikely companion. Imaginary Julie and I had lengthy and heated arguments, as I muttered like a lunatic wandering in gum boots. I got everything off my chest.

For months, she'd been throwing the M-word at me in our sessions, always taking Oliver's side. I didn't have a martyr complex. Oliver had occasional input into decisions. I did delegate — sometimes — to my team. It's just that none of them were very good at whatever I outsourced. I needed to check everything or re-do it. If you wanted a job done well, do it yourself. You can see my dilemma, can't you Julie?

One day Julie stopped in her tracks, held her hands to her ears and screamed 'Enough! I'm so sick of your moaning and whinging, and this woe is me crap! You're a smart woman. If you hate everything so much, figure out how to change it!'

Fair point Jules. I asked her to wait while I did a lap by myself. Biting off more than I could chew was my MO. I thought about my usual routine. Do too much. Complain. Repeat. I'd been living the same week over and over. Same habits. Same criticisms. If nothing changes, nothing changes. Maybe *I* had to change. When I got back, Julie was lying in a hammock with a pina colada. She lifted her sunnies, 'Well, was I right, or was I right?'

'You were right,' I mumbled. 'See? That wasn't so hard.' She poured me a wine and we clinked glasses. She wasn't all bad, this imaginary Jules.

By the third week, we were great pals. She held my hand on walks in the day, and topped up my Merlot in the evenings, as I slowly figured things out. Ping — maybe I did have a pathological need to be right. Ping — maybe it wouldn't be so bad to release my stranglehold, my control, on everything. I started to see myself how they must see me — pedantic, micro manager, fun police. How did they put up with me? After one cathartic sob fest, Jules patted my hand, 'My work here is done,' she half whispered in that tranquil, cheesy tone that used to make me want to vomit, 'Stop beating yourself up, enjoy the peace and quiet.' And with that, she vanished. I hoped there wouldn't be an invoice for her three week consultation waiting at home.

The last week was bliss — drinking wine, sleeping in. Sometimes singing out loud. That damn song was still plaguing me.

... life has a funny way, of helping you out when you think everything's gone wrong and everything blows up in your fay—yace

I took time to smell the proverbial roses, which, at Kulahea involved sniffing the gum trees and getting dust up my nose. I was a total *Eat Pray Love* cliché. But I owed it to my family, no — I owed it to myself, to continue this journey in the real world. Oh cringe, I'd used the word *journey*. And I'd run out of wine. It was time to go.

I took the scenic route home, down the Bilpin Road. The apple pie shop was closed — bummer. I filled up in Windsor, tapping my card at the bowser. I wasn't ready to make small talk with the cashier and burst my monk like calm. I kept the radio off, content now with my own thoughts for company.

The M7 was empty. So, this is what it was like to drive in Sydney outside peak hour. No traffic, even on the Harbour Bridge. It was glorious.

Two blocks from home, flashing lights beckoned me to pull over.

I rolled down my window as the policeman approached and the new, zen me greeted him with slightly manic grin.

'Have you been drinking?' he asked.

'No,' I said indignantly, remembering slurping cask dregs the night before. 'I'm high on life.' This dude was not going to kill my buzz, the second I re-entered civilisation.

'Where've you been?'

'By myself,' I mumbled, not wishing to explain my exile.

'Self-isolating?'

'Um, I guess that's one way to describe it.'

'Are you an essential worker?' He must have clocked my confusion. 'Do you work in a grocery store, delivery driver?'

'I'll have you know I'm very important — *actually*. I'm chief of operations for a luxury travel company.'

'My condolences.'

WTF? I handed over my licence. He stepped back. 'No contact, mam.'

'Ah, ok.' Was he afraid of girl's germs?

He glanced in the back. 'Is that toilet paper?'

I don't know how much pooing my family thought I'd do, but they'd loaded me up with enough loo roll to last an apocalypse. I hadn't even taken it out of the car. Kulahea's bathroom had been adequately stocked.

'Is that a crime, officer?' I batted my eyelids, hoping to flirt my way out of his bizarre questioning.

'C'mon. Everyone knows the rules. I'll ask you once more. Where've you been?'

'I needed time out. I took a road trip.'

He frowned and muttered something about eastern suburbs and privilege. 'The rules apply to everyone.'

I smiled nervously. This must be some sort of joke. What rules?

He passed me a form. A \$2,000 fine? 'Straight home.' He ordered. 'No stopping.'

The old me would have protested. Ranted. Demanded to see his supervisor. The new me, breathed in silently. Breathed out, accepting my fate. Que bloody sera.

I smiled, folded the piece of paper and drove away slowly, looking at the clearly deranged cop in the rearview mirror. Obviously, this was an egregious error, but I could empathise with mistakes in the workplace. Perhaps that fella needed some stress leave. Poor chap. He'd made no sense whatsoever. I couldn't let it upset me, this close to home. I would calmly and rationally, sue his arse off, at some later point. Serenity now.

I pulled into my street and braced for the laundry and dishes that awaited. I doubted there would be anything for dinner. My family needed me. I liked being needed. I could admit that. Cheers Jules.

Oliver's car was in the driveway. Was there a public holiday I'd forgotten? Through the window I saw them all doing strange, jerky actions — a bit River Dance, a bit Vogue.

I let myself in and stood in the kitchen. Boxes of food in piles. The house smelt like disinfectant.

'Mum! You're back! Isn't this, like, insane?' Sophie turned. 'Stop recording! Join in, we'll do it again. The whole family ones get more hits.'

‘Why aren’t you at school — or work? Oliver, why are you wearing trackies?’

‘Der, Rona? Tik tok?’ Tasha was speaking gibberish.

Oliver enveloped me in a hug. ‘I wanted to get you. I was so worried. But I figured you were safer —’ his voice muffled.

‘Hey, 1.5 metres!’ said Sophie, pulling us apart.

Oh, I’d missed them. ‘It’s not netball, Soph. C’mere you guys.’ I held my arms out. They stepped back.

‘Haven’t you seen the papers? Listened to the radio. Anything?’

I shook my head. ‘Give me my sim card.’ I charged my phone and scrolled. And scrolled.

Borders shut. No travel. Stood down indefinitely. Schools closed. Isolation. Thousands sick. Hundreds dead.

A familiar sensation flooded through me. The warm and satisfying glow of self-righteousness. I gave the finger to imaginary Julia. Isn’t it ironic? Don’t ya think?

‘I bloody well *told* you,’ I smirked. ‘The world *literally* went to shit without me.’