



HOME GAME

From international jet-setting to casing the IGA, from 'coptering into Monte Carlo to cleaning Mum's house: having a foot in two countries makes for a bizarre balancing act.

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THREE MONTHS ago I was in Paris, interviewing the designer Christian Louboutin. His crew sent a limo to meet me at the Eurostar train, on which they'd brought me business class from London, the city in which I've lived for more than half my life.

I was put up in a hotel opposite the Louvre, and between appointments caught up with old friends I'd met at music festivals in Mali, Morocco and Scandinavia. I'd last seen them en route to France's Champagne region, armed with an editorial brief to swan about a chalet, quaffing quality fizz.

Mostly, I'm an arts and music journalist. Freelance, forever spinning loads of plates. Living in London, on the doorstep of Europe, gives me access to people and places I'd probably never encounter were I living in Melbourne. I'd left there - after studying anthropology at Monash University, and waitressing at Collingwood's notorious comedy venue, the Last Laugh Theatre Restaurant - at the start of the 1990s.

The occasional luxury travel assignment lets me role-play: I've driven a Jaguar sideways on the ice in Swedish Lapland. Peered through

opera glasses inside Vienna's Staatsoper. Been 'coptered into Monte Carlo to attend the polo. "My husband's a brain surgeon," I told a hedge fund manager between chukkas. And who knows, if I had one maybe he would be.

More recently, I've been in lockdown at my mother's place in Montrose, on Melbourne's eastern outskirts. I'm going nowhere except to the IGA (casing the joint first to ensure that customers are practising social distancing) and along the pipeline toward Mount Dandenong with Max and Emma, the kelpies owned by my younger brother, who lives in the

house next door. But mostly I'm roaming through Mum's unassuming red brick home brandishing a duster, vacuum cleaner and disinfectant spray.

Mum's in her 80s. My father (who died in 2003) was the domestic one. Mum has always hated cleaning, "even as a girl", she says, as if that means she can get away with gardening, reading poetry and playing piano while dust gathers, dishes pile up and daddy-long-legs party in the cornices.

Normally I return to Melbourne once or twice a year for a few weeks each time. I walk the dogs, spring-clean Mum's house and buy packs of undies at Kmart in Chirnside Park Shopping Centre, where the lack of pretension and penchant for highlights – you can get 20 for free when you get your roots done – is reassuring.

But after about five days, it always gets too much. I feel like I'm regressing. Mum feels bossed about and picked on. "You might think you're a woman of the world," she says over her shoulder, walking off with a cup of tea and leaving the milk out. "But I remember when you were so miserable at grade 5 school camp, your father and I had to come to collect you."

At this point she drives me (or I drive her, she drives herself back) to the station at Mooroolbark, the nearby 'burb in which I grew up, and I take the train into town to spend time with some old mates. We drink at the same bars, get each other's jokes and bicker, sometimes, like family.

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My accent relaxes. "You sound so Australian," a British friend on a WhatsApp call will say, sounding freakishly British.

I've got two passports, and an identity to go with each. I'm an Australian in London. A Londoner in Australia. It's the lot of the immigrant, feeling like you're always outside, looking in. It's a useful position for a writer. A few

years ago it helped me write a memoir ("Behold, the author!" shouted Mum, pointing at me, when we found my book in a bookstore).

With the world shut down, I feel lucky to be in Melbourne. If I wasn't, I'd be fretting. I'm getting used to the new slow living. No plates to spin – just Mum's to wash – and time to think. Of the gigging musicians who've lost their livelihoods. Of those who don't have space, the luxury of distance, or a home in which to self-isolate. Of the mega-rich, who for the most part will be just dandy.

I'm noticing minutiae. A wasp backstroking in the birdbath. The wet nose of a labrador poking under a wooden gate. Unseen kookaburras that think I'm hilarious. The dirt in Mum's house, where biweekly visits from the local cleaner seem to make zero difference. Under Mum's bed I find the husks of slaters, little curly worms and a cockroach that may or may not be playing dead. I sweep it into a dustpan and take it to show her, quivering with exasperation.

"Ah, those things come miles for a crumb," says Mum, leaving the top off the margarine and heading outside to smell the roses. ■
