

# 'MY PARENTS GAVE ME THE ULTIMATE GIFT'

Some teenagers aren't allowed to go to the mall without supervision, but Ceridwen Dovey's parents left both her and her sister alone in another country

At the ripe young age of 15, while most of my contemporaries were plotting ways to creep under the radar of their overprotective parents, I was coming to terms with having nobody but my 17-year-old sister around to tell me what to do. Forget *Party of Five*; it was a Party of Two. Thankfully our parents hadn't died a tragic death, their sabbatical in Sydney had simply come to an end and, after a family conference, my sister and I chose to finish our schooling in Australia instead of returning to South Africa with them.

They set us up in a flat opposite our school, with a car my sister had just learnt to drive, a file of my mom's hastily photocopied recipes, a crash course in using household cleaning chemicals and the prospect of a visit from our 80-year-old grandmother (who had never left South Africa) to ease the transition. It was terrifying, exhilarating, and yes, Dave Eggers, staggeringly heartbreaking, to wake up the day after they'd left and find ourselves all alone, the young mistresses of our tiny domain.

At first we revelled in our new-found freedom, left our wet towels on the bedroom floor, our cereal bowls by the computer, our empty pizza boxes on the carpet, our homework resolutely unfinished. Until the day not so long after our parents' departure when we realised the fridge was empty, the toilet blocked, and all the defiant measures we had developed as weapons of parental irritation were rendered pointless in the absence of authority. Rebelling suddenly seemed a whole lot less fun when there was no possibility of getting caught.

So we cancelled the party of the decade we'd been planning to hold that weekend, and no amount of pleading

by our friends could make us change our minds: we had grocery shopping to do, bills to pay, laundry to sort. And we knew exactly who would be left sweeping up the shattered martini glasses from the kitchen floor and scooping the vomit from the bathtub come Sunday morning. We would have had to be suckers for punishment to host a party. Quiet nights in became instantly more attractive.

Our grandmother arrived for her promised visit, ostensibly to look after us for a month as we adapted to life without parents, and while we greatly appreciated her endless variations on a theme of macaroni cheese, it would be more truthful to say that we looked after her. She'd boarded the plane with blind faith, having no idea where Australia was, and when she spotted us at arrivals felt vindicated enough to say, 'See, I'm not so bloody stupid.' Within a week of her stay, she had dubbed me Minister of Finance because I was in charge of our budget

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- I refused to give her an advance on her weekly pocket money when she blew the first week's allowance on koala-inspired toilet-paper holders for her friends.

She periodically got lost and would call us from a payphone with vague descriptions of being near a highway. But she also always had a few words of wisdom for us, even if we sometimes had to unscramble her proverbs - two of her favourites were: 'There's a silver lining around every corner' and 'Where there's a woman, there's a rock.'

After our gran had left us truly alone we became as dependent on each other as an old married couple. We also fought as fiercely. We had rules that we stuck to religiously: we weren't allowed to call our parents in the middle of a fight to tell tales on each other (with the time difference they would have been asleep anyway) and we couldn't go to sleep without making up. We agreed not to spend the night at friends' houses so that we never left the other alone in the flat overnight. And though it's common sense, it seemed to us miraculous that the more responsibilities we had, the more responsible we became. The more trust our parents put in us, the less we wanted to let them down.

I'm not advocating this as a model approach to parenting - maybe one day when I have a daughter and she turns 15, I'll suddenly discover I was unknowingly hideously scarred by the experience all along. But there's a lesson in there somewhere: that perhaps freedom, when given alongside limitless love, is one of the greatest gifts a parent can give. ■

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