



OPPOSITE 'Love is supposed to know no bounds, but I wonder if it can also know no boundaries,' muses Ceridwen, who knows that one day she'll have to consider a partner's feelings about location. **THIS PAGE** With 15 989 kilometres separating New York from Sydney, Ceridwen's family is faced with the challenge of not allowing distance to untie their emotional bonds. 'Can a country be both a millstone and a lodestone?' she asks.



roots or wings?

With her family spread over three continents, author Ceridwen Dovey begins to deliberate the relative importance of family ties, proximity and reciprocity

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AN OLD HIGH-SCHOOL FRIEND told me recently about the fate of his brother's two-year-old marriage. The brother in question is Australian, the wife American, and they're both in their early 30s. They met while banking in New York, fell in love and married, with the understanding that they would move to Sydney when they were ready to start a family. Then her sister had a baby, and as she watched the parenting process second-hand, and saw how crucial her own parents were as a support system, she realised she didn't want to raise their children so far from them and the culture she was familiar with. She laid down her ultimatum: either we stay in the US when we have children, or we end this marriage now. He chose to do the latter.

The most disturbing – but interesting – part of the story is that at the time of the divorce, neither of them wanted kids for another five years at least. This was a prophylactic divorce, pain undergone to prevent potentially greater future hurt.

This story bothered me deeply. Despite being only 27, I feel increasingly that I have a small window, say five years, within which to make some monumental decisions which will irreversibly alter the course of my life. The tale of this train-wrecked marriage seemed like an omen, a vision of the disaster that could be lurking in my near future if I don't start taking some preventative measures. This may sound dramatic, but it'll make more sense if you bear with me for a brief family history.



William Butler Yeats wrote in *A Prayer for my Daughter*: 'O may she live like some green laurel, Rooted in one dear perpetual place.' While her parents may not have rooted her in one dear perpetual geographical place, Ceridwen says they grounded her with their constant affirmation.

My parents are both academics, and early in the 1980s they decided to leave South Africa and move to Australia for political reasons, only to be drawn back (and away to Australia again) repeatedly throughout the decade. Eventually my sister and I ended up living on our own to finish high school in Sydney while my parents remained in South Africa, and it was only once my sister and I were studying in the US that my parents returned to Sydney themselves. Emotionally, we're an incredibly close family, but geographically we couldn't be further apart: I haven't lived in the same country as my parents since I was 15.

I currently call New York home, my sister is in London, and my parents are still in Sydney. I have no concrete plans to move to Australia any time soon, but I feel increasingly as if I should be making some. My parents, when I hint at my dilemma about a permanent homecoming, are horrified and urge me to think of myself and my needs only at this stage of my life.

But try as I might, I can't relegate the concern to a back burner – I have tandem fears that are key to understanding my growing sense of urgency. The first is that I will wake up one day and find myself living in, say, San Francisco, with an American husband, American children, an American-based career, and American friends. The consequence of this, is that my parents will have an annual relationship with their American grandchildren instead

of a weekly one. My future children will drag themselves reluctantly to the phone to speak to Ouma and Oupa, strangers whom they will have forgotten in the long absences between visits.

The second fear is that I will be woken in the middle of the night, 20 years from now in, say, San Francisco by a phone call from Sydney telling me something has happened to one of my parents – and that one or both of them needs my constant care. What do I do then? Do I uproot my family and move to Sydney? What about my husband's parents? What about my job? Or do I try to bring my parents to the US and force them to adapt at their age, with no friends and no support system except for me?

Most of my friends think I'm crazy to be thinking so far ahead and tell me it's dangerous to try to predict life's course and impossible to anticipate my future needs. My sister's view is far healthier and more level-headed. She feels I'm shutting out the essential element of spontaneity in life's decisions by trying to tie up all my loose ends earlier than necessary. Even my parents think it's premature for me to try and force a decision now, and they remind me that the freedom to move around the world and live in different countries is one of the privileges they have always encouraged me to work hard to achieve. Usually I agree with them. But there are times when I am tempted to make a bold move, to relocate to Australia now, when the stakes are not so high, when I'm still young and resilient enough to build an entirely new life with the least trauma, when there's no husband to take into consideration, no children to blur the clarity of the decision, no second set of grandparents to abandon. Then there's the added complication that my parents themselves can't guarantee they'll remain in Australia forever. And since Australia isn't really home for any of us, is that the appropriate place for a homecoming?

At its core, my dilemma is about my desire to reciprocate the attention my parents gave me. They have nurtured and adored me, gone way beyond the normal call of parental duty. Is it my ethical duty to respond by committing to live in the same country as them and to eventually care for them? For guidance, I turned to the people who've thought deeply about this through the ages: the moral philosophers. I was hoping for a moral prescription, for somebody to tell me, with certainty, the right thing to do.

Turns out most agree that filial obligation is a special and difficult moral case, and that there is no clear-cut understanding of children's ethical responsibilities to parents. The problem seems to be one of a fundamental imbalance: parents choose to have children; children don't choose to have parents. Depending on your philosophical persuasion, there are different lines of thought: Aristotle sees a child's obligation as a debt to be repaid; Locke believed a parent should be entitled to respect from a child; Hume was passionate about the crime of filial ingratitude. Unfortunately, none had chosen to tackle the issue of whether an adult child who has a close relationship with her parents is ethically obliged to actively discourage suitors of a certain nationality to avoid being trapped in a far-away country by marriage. Neither do they expand on whether she is morally required to live in the same city as them, or whether she should put parental closeness above career success.

It's probably impossible to find someone to tell me in concrete terms what I should do; the moral guidelines are faint and flexible. And there are emotions involved, which draw the matter out of an objective light. Perhaps I am not listening hard enough to what the two people I am supposedly taking into account are saying; that above all else, they want me to be happy and fulfilled wherever I live, whether that is close to or far from them.

I'm also coming to realise that it's not fair on them to base this decision solely on my sense of filial responsibility and reciprocity. Were I to end up miserable after the move, I cannot guarantee that at the lowest moments I would be able to prevent resentment from creeping in. For such a move to work, I'd need to be moving where they live for myriad reasons – it would have to make sense for me professionally, romantically, economically, emotionally – otherwise the pressure I would put on us all could be unbearable. I also need to leave them some room for their own manoeuvres, whether a post-retirement return to South Africa or buying a camper van and joining the ranks of the Grey Nomads. As my sister gently keeps reminding me, I need to have faith in the deep emotional bond that has sustained us as a family thus far, spread across three continents, and trust that we'll continue to make the sacrifices we need to make to spend every bit of time we can find together to strengthen that bond.

I wouldn't presume to tell anybody what honouring and respecting one's parents amounts to in practical terms. It's up to each of us to exercise our agency and figure out our own realm of responsibility. Spanish novelist Javier Marias describes writing fiction as navigating with a compass, but without a detailed map – and perhaps part of the human condition entails living life in a similar fashion: we only ever know the general direction we're headed in, but never the details of the wrong or right routes we're taking to get there. As for predicting my future needs, there's of course a chance that my friends are right; that I'll try to plot out my life too perfectly, spend many glorious years with my parents in Australia, only to watch my own adult children head for New York. If there's a life lesson in here somewhere, I haven't yet found it, but I hope that in 20 years I'll feel that having asked these questions now helped me find that elusive balance between putting down roots and exercising my wings. ■

about the author

Raised by somewhat nomadic academics, it seemed only natural that Ceridwen Dovey would develop a passion for literature and for changes of environment. Upon completion of high school in Australia, Ceridwen was awarded an undergrad scholarship to Harvard, where she completed a BA Honours in Anthropology and Film in 2003. As part of her thesis, she made a documentary film, *Aftertaste*, about labour relations on wine farms in SA, which has been screened at ethnographic film festivals around the world. A Masters in Creative Writing from UCT followed in 2006, and she's currently in her second year of a PhD in anthropology at New York University. Confident that she would write a novel much later in life, the inspiration for and execution of her debut novel, *Blood Kin* (Penguin, R128) at the age of only 26 took her by surprise. She agrees with Don DeLillo, who says he 'grew into novelhood. In this vein, she is working on her second novel.

