

follow your heart

Pulling up stakes for a partner's career is never easy. After her husband asked her to move to Madrid, **JILL JOHNSON** began talking to other couples, and to the experts, about the costs and challenges of relocation.

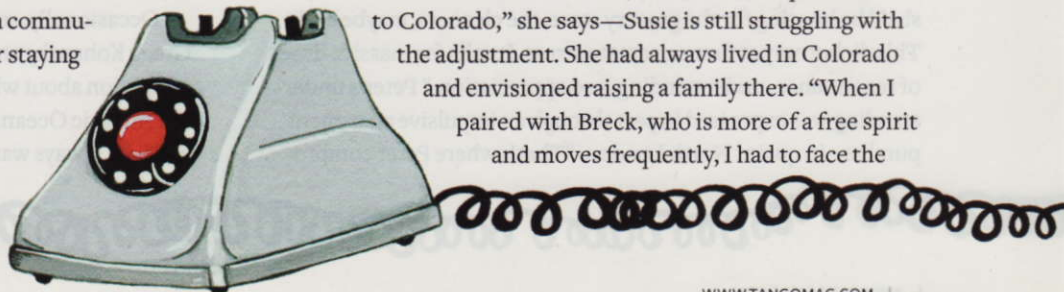
I WAS SIX MONTHS PREGNANT, AND HAD JUST FINISHED decorating the nursery in our new house in Connecticut, when my husband called me from work one day and said, "Will you do me a *really* big favor?" He sounded a tad too earnest to be referring to a trip to the dry cleaner. "Uh, sure, what is it?" I inquired. "Would you move to Madrid?" he asked.

Oh, the favors we do for our spouses. Tagging along for a job transfer—when it means leaving friends, family, a home, possibly a job—ranks up there as one of the biggies. Despite our first non-rental residence, my promising career at a new magazine, a baby on the way, and three words in my Spanish vocabulary, I couldn't say no. My husband is the main breadwinner and I grew up embracing new experiences; when my dad was transferred to London in my youth, my mom was obliging. But not everyone is so quick to pull out the packing tape for a partner. Deciding whether or not to move requires careful consideration and open communication, especially when a couple is at odds over staying or going.

The key is to come to the decision together, says marriage and relationship educator Pat Love, EdD. "If you made a choice, the experience won't be nearly as stressful as if you didn't

have a choice." She suggests brainstorming: "Make a long list of ideas, different potential scenarios, without any commentary. Anything left unsaid or unexamined is going to gnaw at you. Making a grid also helps. Look at money, jobs, moving costs, climate, friends, family, hobbies, stress on the relationship."

Susie and Breck Overall were living two hours apart in Colorado when Breck was offered a position as a hotel general manager—his career goal—in Lake Tahoe, Calif. "When we started talking about marriage, I asked my boss if I could work remotely from Tahoe," says Susie, an IT manager. Her boss agreed and Susie moved nine months after Breck. It was their first time living in the same town, let alone the same home, and they got married a month later. Despite their efforts to smooth the transition—"We found a place to live together, so I didn't move into *his* place; he scouted out friends for me; and I make frequent visits to Colorado," she says—Susie is still struggling with the adjustment. She had always lived in Colorado and envisioned raising a family there. "When I paired with Breck, who is more of a free spirit and moves frequently, I had to face the



fact that it's not all up to me anymore." They agreed to discuss where else they could live if Susie was still unhappy after one year. "I think he hopes I'll fall in love with it here, but I hope someday we'll move back," she admits. "It's definitely the biggest point of contention between us and often it goes unspoken."

Those hopes and feelings need to be voiced, says relationship expert Harville Hendrix, PhD. "In a year, they're both going to build up a lot of thoughts that won't relate to their partner's reality. It's OK to wait a year to make a decision but, still, check in with each other weekly or monthly, even for ten minutes, to listen without judging or critiquing, and to validate each other's feelings."

Couples need to look at the big picture, too. Susie realizes that Breck is now her family, and her future. She also knows there are pluses to having moved to a town where neither of them knew anyone. "We go out as a couple more and find friends together," she says. "My friends and family in Colorado still love me and will always be there. If we don't end up there, I'm not making out too bad with a wonderful, loving husband who is opening my eyes to the world." Indeed, many couples have found that a move brought them closer in some ways, as they explored uncharted territory together. "Novelty can be an energizer," notes Love. "It's one of the components of passion."

SOMETIMES A TRAUMATIC MOVE HAS AN UNEXPECTEDLY

happy ending. Peter Hess* left a job he loved in London to be with his fiancée, Sonya*, a fashion model living in New York City. But a year later the newlyweds faced another dilemma: Peter's company wanted to move him back to London, and they wanted him there in one month's time. "When he told me, I basically started crying and screaming and completely freaked out," recalls Sonya. Though she and her husband are both from Europe, "New York was the first place that felt like home for me," she says. "All my friends were there; I had just bought a horse; and I knew I wouldn't be able to work half as much in London."

"We had numerous discussions and arguments about it, and two weeks passed before I realized there was no way out of it. He had been in his position in New York for a year and he wasn't happy. It would have been way too selfish of me to tell him to stay in a job he didn't like, especially when he had given up the job in London for me." She did have a couple of demands, though: the company had to move her horse, and if she was still miserable a year after the move, the couple would have to come up with a solution.

Sonya was unhappy for the first six months, as are many spouses who move for their partner's job. "The person moving due to a new opportunity isn't going to feel the same stress," Love warns. "He'll have a built-in support group at work and the elation of a new job; she'll be hunting for the grocery store, the cleaners, maybe a job. This dichotomy at first can create stress. It calls for massive doses of reassurance, understanding, and appreciation." Peter's understanding was expressed in part through an impulsive apartment purchase in quaint North London. "That's where Peter compro-

LOVE AND THE BATTLEFIELD

SEPARATION IS STRESSFUL

for any couple, but its emotional toll can be significantly higher for military couples, mainly because wondering what your partner is doing in a cubicle in Cleveland is less stressful than wondering if he or she is surviving combat halfway around the world.

"That issue of 'my partner's in harm's way' is so powerful that military long-distance relationships suffer from an entirely different amount of depression, anxiety, and stress," says Greg Guldner, PhD, director of the Center for the Study of Long Distance Relationships. "Daily worry, coupled with a very small amount of contact in many situations—not being able to pick up a phone and say, 'Are you OK?'—is extremely anxiety-provoking."

Surprisingly, the greatest time of risk for a military couple is their reunion, Guldner says, in part because of the stress a returning soldier experiences making the transition to daily civilian life. But the other factor that contributes to serious problems is that of disillusionment. Though it's healthy for long-distance partners—civilian or military—to idealize one another while apart, the less

contact a couple has, the rosier their perception of one another becomes. When the partner returns, and the reality is vastly different, couples experience stress that, in some situations, can lead to power struggles and domestic violence.

And, Guldner says, though it's taboo to leave a partner who's deployed overseas, when the person returns, that "barrier force" is gone.

Fortunately, military couples have access to formal support systems that provide everything from financial help to diapers. Also, enlisted personnel are required to take a four-hour course on reunions. Jason Cassano, a Navy officer who didn't see his wife during the seven months he served in the Persian Gulf after 9/11, says a counselor visited his ship. "One of the things I recall from the lectures is that you have to remember your partner was taking care of everything for you while you were away—and he cautioned against returning and assuming your old roles," Cassano says. "More significantly, emotional connections have to be rekindled. You might have missed each other, but the time away will come between you. You have to build the love again."

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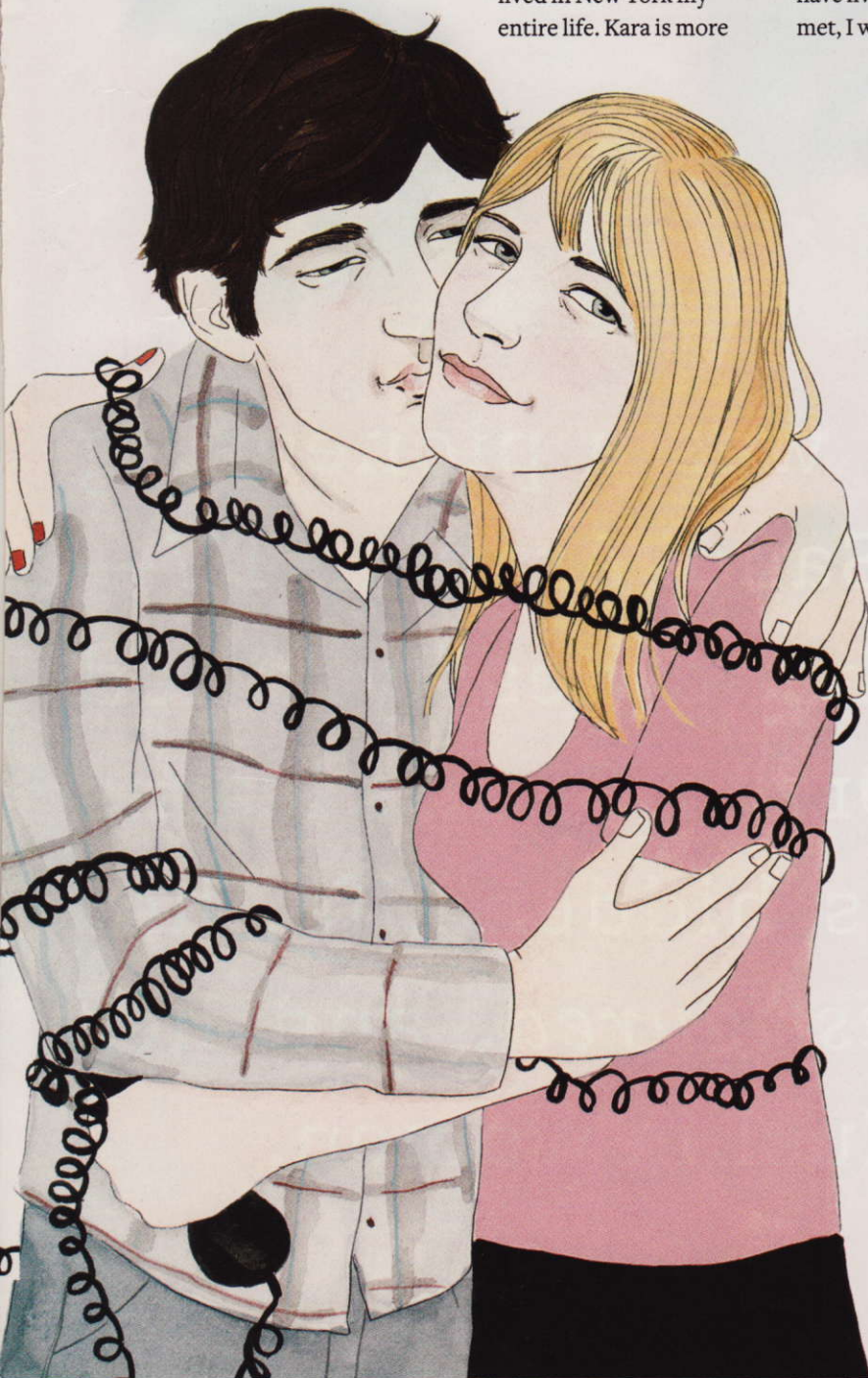
mised," says Sonya. "When the agent told us the apartment was for sale, not for rent, he said, 'It's crazy to buy when we don't know how long we'll be here.' I really wanted it, though, and he caved." Once removed from their "all-beige" corporate apartment, Sonya began to settle in. Several years later, they sold the apartment for a hefty profit, and they are now happily settled in a house in Kent.

"Nothing is forever," says Sonya. "You can always change something if it's terrible. I certainly did not want to leave New York at the time, but that's what a relationship is about: compromise."

Occasionally, reaching a compromise seems nearly impossible. Gregg Kohansky and his wife, Kara Irwin, had a five-year difference of opinion about where to live—and that difference was the size of the Atlantic Ocean. "After living abroad with my family when I was a child, I always wanted to again," says Kara, a Russian major and

law-school grad who had intended to work in Moscow. But since she knew there was no way Gregg would move to Russia, she revised her plan. "When my firm offered me a job in the London office, I thought it was the perfect solution—same language, similar culture, lots of Americans." The couple visited London in January 2000, two months after they got engaged. "Gregg liked it and agreed to try it for two years, and his company agreed to transfer him," says Kara. "At the time I secretly hoped and assumed that once he settled in, he'd be willing to stay longer and maybe even move to another country. Maybe it was deceptive of me not to voice those thoughts at the time."

They're still in London, but have separated: The debate over moving back to the U.S. reached an impasse. "With respect to living abroad, I'm from Earth and Kara's from Pluto," says Gregg. "I lived in New York my entire life. Kara is more



nomadic. She's fluent in several languages; I can barely talk to a three-year-old in Spanish. Given these differences, we have divergent perspectives as to the importance of living abroad."

For any couple in Gregg and Kara's shoes, the challenge is to "find a solution that honors them both," says Helen LaKelly Hunt, PhD, who developed the Imago Relationship Therapy technique with Harville Hendrix, her husband. "When two people with different realities stay in respectful dialogue, a transformation can occur—a new reality, some new option that neither one considered alone." For instance, they might have agreed to stay in Europe until they had children, and then return to the States.

MOST COUPLES END UP MOVING TOGETHER FOR ONE partner's career. Not Anil Kumar and his wife, Gloria Gangte, who have lived apart for most of their 11-year relationship. "When we met, I was in the military and she was studying. I had two months leave per year. The rest of the time we wrote long letters—we had no Internet, no phone," explains Anil. The couple got married in 2000 and moved to Spain in July 2002, when Gloria, a diplomat, got a post at the Indian Embassy in Madrid. In April 2003, Anil left for a year to do an MBA course. They were together long enough to have a baby girl. Then Gloria was assigned to a post in Argentina, so off they went—Gloria and the baby that is; Anil has stayed in Madrid for his job in finance. They connect by email daily and visit as much as they can. "We'll see each other a few months a year for the next three years," says Anil, matter-of-factly, "but it's not the quantity of time, it's the quality."

Hendrix responds to this adage with caution: "The relationship will change if you don't spend a lot of time together, because everyone changes every day." But Anil, who says he and Gloria always pick up right where they left off, has a cultural explanation for their happy union: They're Indian. "In the part of the world we come from, there's a very low rate of divorce," he says. "Once you are married, you are married for life. That gives us a lot of strength and comfort."

I contemplated whether my husband and I ought to try a transatlantic arrangement, should his job in Europe outlast my patience for language barriers and stroller-hostile airports. Nah, I think I'll stick it out. I can *almost* converse with a three-year-old in Spanish now, my son can navigate stairs, and there's something else, that Love mentioned: "Relocating for your partner, when you look at it from five to ten years out, is money in the bank for your relationship. It will increase the stability in your marriage. Gratitude may come later, but it will come; this is not a deed that goes unnoticed."

JILL JOHNSON is a freelance writer and a *Tango* contributing editor. She founded *Tear Sheet* magazine before moving to Madrid.

*Names have been changed.