Love knows no boundaries

Because we are scientists, my husband and I have moved 13 times over the past 8 years, not always to the same place or in the same direction. Eight of those moves covered large swaths of the United States: South Carolina to Texas, Texas to Washington, Washington to Idaho. For 3 years now, we’ve been seeking a permanent place where we can live together and have good, long-term jobs in science—both of us. Now, those 3 years of searching and our 10 years together have come down to decisions we’ll likely make in the next month: Will I follow him? Will he follow me? Will we take jobs in different places?

Things weren’t supposed to end up this way. We both attended tier-one research institutions for our graduate degrees. Both he, a spatial ecologist, and I, a cell and molecular biologist, have publications in our fields. We both have generous reference letters. Years ago, we decided that I would pursue the academic track while he looked for a job with a nongovernmental organization; we hoped that would improve our odds of finding jobs in the same city. We’ve been married for 5 years and together for 10, but we’ve lived in the same city for only three. (Yes, it’s a tough way to have a relationship, especially if starting a family is an eventual goal, as it is for us—but thank you, Google, for Google Chat.)

Now, my great opportunity is in Seattle, Washington. His is in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina. Both seem promising, but either could still fall through. The only certainties are that in the next 30 days, we’ll commit to yet another move—at least one, somewhere, because my husband’s job here in Boise is ending—and that whatever decisions we make, we’ll make together. The choices are terrifying: My career over his? His over mine? Live thousands of miles apart, long term, on opposite coasts and not have a family? Break up?

It might be less terrifying if I had a clear preference for one over the other, my career over my husband (or nascent family) or vice versa. But I don’t. I want them both. From graduate school and two postdocs to my first nontenure-track faculty position, I haven’t lost my desire to push forward, bit by bit, the frontiers of my field—to watch with increasing precision the dance of proteins, DNA replication and repair, and chromosome segregation. When I celebrated another New Year’s Eve with a trip to the core microscopy facility; when I spent my evenings last semester creating clinical problems for my students to work on during class; when, after I miscarried our first and so far only child, I returned to the lab the next day at the request of my principal investigator, I did so with the sense of cheerful self-sacrifice that comes from a deep desire to serve my institution, my students, and my science.

But my love for my husband and my hope for a family are deep and fundamental parts of who I am. We met over a plate of barbecue during my graduate training in Houston, Texas, and when he flew to Africa for a 3-year stay, we e-mailed and called frequently. He shared with me his experiences as a science teacher in Sierra Leone. I told him about my graduate work in Texas. The relationship was cemented when, after an encounter with a rabid cat forced his medical evacuation to Belgium, I flew in to be with him as he received the treatments that saved his life.

During that week and a half, I waited with him in a hotel room, looking out for signs of the disease. When none appeared, we returned to the United States and continued our interstate courtship. In time we married. He has supported me through my last year of graduate school, my first year teaching undergraduate biology, and the miscarriage of our child. Though we’ve lived apart for much of our marriage, neither my mind nor my heart can imagine a future without him.

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