

Bridging the Distance

When we're old enough to decide where to set down our roots, some of us choose to cross countries and seas whereas others elect not to fall far from the family tree. We ask three writers to consider the benefits and drawbacks of living close to your relatives, far away from them and how to form your own version of family no matter where you are.





WORDS
DAISY HILDYARD

NEAR

With every home-cooked meal comes a barrage of unsolicited opinions: Sharing a house with your family or even just living around the corner from them has its ups and downs.

Family can be more like a force of nature than something we choose. After all, even the closest connection is no guarantee that your relatives are relatively like you at all. As we grow older, many people make up for this preordained allocation by opting to put an ocean between themselves and their childhood bedrooms, but some of us retain an instinctive desire to endure living near our kin. For those who do, there are many benefits that these relationships foster.

Plenty of reasons exist for why we might choose to return to our family homes in our later years: We may face financial adversity (thanks, student loans), come back to look after an older relative or simply have a deep-seated affinity for our hometown's deep-dish pizza. Whether we've recently returned from an adventure abroad or never actually left the nest, there is a calm yet chaotic nostalgia that comes with sharing oxygen with your parents once more.

Whether you cohabit in a house, a neighborhood or a city, many of us hope that living near our family will return us to a simpler life. And in some ways, it does: It can help us edit unnecessary baggage from our lives and devote that newfound time to personal projects. There are also practical benefits: There's no need to worry about holiday traffic. You can eat your dad's cooking twice a week. Small luxuries such as child care, free rides to the airport and extra hands when moving house are available on request.

But sharing a physical space may also encroach on your mental space. Being in close proximity to your family means that your loved ones are inherently implicated in your daily life. Whether you cross paths with them at your local supermarket or in the hallway, someone will always have something to say about the choices you're making, be it about the granola you're buying or the shoes you're wearing. They'll share their opinions on anything you care to discuss, along with a few things you don't care to discuss at all. They'll offer sentiments on posture, gender, the international panel on climate change, how to chop an onion and the local public transportation system. And as frustrating as it may be, you have to remember that your grandmother has lived through wars and revolutions, careers and husbands, so she's earned the right to make impolite noises about your impractical clothing or your weirdly named kids.

Living near family can be supportive and grounding, but it also forces you to confront your origins. The only way to prevent your kin's ever-present opinions from overwhelming you is to speak your mind when you really need to, and to let it go when you don't. Avoiding conflict and enjoying a fight are both skills, but they require paying attention to your relatives' changing moods and minds. Sometimes, every relative needs their own room—both mentally and literally.



WORDS
KELSEY SNELL

FAR

Although putting space between ourselves and our families can teach us independence, it's perfectly normal to admit that you sometimes still need them.

Leaving home and loving home don't have to be at odds with one another. Despite what our grandmothers' rib-cracking hugs lead us to believe, our families never intended to keep us—only to make and teach us, and to love us enough to let us go.

Enter distance; she complicates everything and yet sweetens the pot. It's not in spite of home but because of it that we're miles, time zones and oceans away—hungry for adventure and out to find our own. Psychologist John Bowlby's attachment theory suggests it's key in a child's development to have a "secure base," such as a parent they trust who will be there when they return from exploring. Because of this reliable base, independence begins to take shape. We eventually fling ourselves from the coop, swerving solo and headlong into chaotic midtown streets, standoffish living situations, cultures of every strata and overpriced, under-lit bars in the name of "finding ourselves."

But some days you just need a back-scratch more than a happy hour. Far from home, we miss its ease and unsolicited affections, the little tender moments and the Wednesday minutiae. We miss being known. And when one thing triggers the homesickness, it all falls down. Add a little heartbreak to your miserable morning commute and that unspoken plea of "come home" on the end of the line can suddenly begin to sound like the best solution—even when it's not.

This is because our secure base is our people, not a location. Those relationships can stand firm among the zigzagging, sling-shotting trajectory of our nomadic lives. But if we miss a call, the next and another, we can't let remorse prevent us from picking up the phone to return it, or let guilt make us lazy. And as unnatural and awkward as a video chat feels, there are few better options to make someone feel immediately connected. While we yearn for an all-elusive handwritten note, letters lack the spontaneity of tech—sometimes a surprise FaceTime high five is what your sister needs right before her last college exam.

That said, our inability to deliver that perfect grandiose gesture shouldn't prevent us from letting our families into our everyday lives. Jotting an inside joke on a postcard, leaving an "I love you" message as your train makes an overground appearance or emailing a photo and the menu from last night's dinner with girlfriends can make them feel just as—if not more than—connected.

But sometimes, going home really is the answer. There's no place like home to bring a weary soul, a victory or a no-frills persona needing little more than a bowl of cereal and a hug. When we hop in the car or buy that plane ticket, we're not admitting defeat—only that we're tired. After putting up with the bitter exhaustion of the unknown, we can now taste the sweetness of coming home.

WORDS
LIZ CLAYTON

WHEREVER YOU ARE

Your current family situation doesn't have to dictate your future one: Finding your own meaning of family can reinforce your relationships with all parties involved.



It happens. By chance or by choice, you've suddenly found yourself a grown-up, either far from home, far from family or without a family to be far from. Whether we're building or rebuilding one, the families we choose are part of the places where we put down roots—the building blocks aiming into the skies of our future selves.

The idea of choosing our own families may first come out of necessity: They spring from that need for comfort, support and Thanksgiving tablemates that appear when you're a fish out of kindred water. But what starts as a provisional measure reveals itself to be a deeper statement. That community of friends that becomes your local family—from the accidental buddies at the gym

and laundromat to romantic partners that you've sought out with more intention—is a radiating circle of who you truly are today. They reflect your realized (or realizing) adult self, a person whose goals and interests are informed—but not defined—by who you were in college, who you are among your siblings or who you'll become in later chapters of your life.

Of course, there's a nuance lost in these new families: They aren't able to post embarrassing throwback photos of you online or remind you of the time your sweet station wagon with the eight-track player blew up downtown while you were ditching high school. But what they do bring is an optimism, a clean slate and the

welcoming arms of those who also seek a sense of closeness that, in many ways, is harder to build from the ground up.

You can learn a lot about yourself through the families you fall into in a new environment. Whether it's the married couple who always has a place at the table for you, the neighbor who brings you freshly cut flowers or the school crossing guard you always buy a candy bar for, how you nurture and let yourself be nurtured—and by who—can reveal what you want from intimacy. While our birth families, bless them, are preselected for us (warts and all), our friend families allow us to choose different warts that may be more compatible with our own—or that will teach us more about them.

For those lucky enough to have both kinds of kin, there's a sweet space between the comfort of those who've always known you and understand precisely how you work and the tabula rasa of those you've newly drawn near. We're all products of both our past and present selves and all the little stages in between. We're able to find our true selves in that harmony, gathering what and who we choose to make us strong and loving and making this new world our own.

And if we should fear that we're cheating on the families we came from? Without a doubt, they want this world for you, a place where you'll thrive and where the kitchen table is never empty.