

A “TRAILING” SPOUSE?

A millennial commentator shares her reaction to joining the ranks of the Foreign Service community.

BY JESSIE BRYSON

am a trailing spouse.

This isn't a diagnosis for my own mid-life crisis or some existential metaphor for my relationship status. No, this is what I'm called, thanks to my dear husband's Foreign Service position.

To be more specific and, I suppose, far less incriminating, it's a term assigned to me by way of my husband's job, if I really had to blame somebody. (But who's blaming anybody in this career?) Thus, as I haul my worldly belongings from one continent to another, updating my Facebook location status as often as some do their relationships, I find myself thrown into the unexpected role of “trailing spouse.”

This lifestyle certainly does have its perks. The government goes to great lengths to ensure the stability of our family (and our future family's) life. Housing is provided, cost-of-living adjustments are accounted for, and luxuries like dishwashers and lawn mowers are supplied to provide some semblance

Jessie Bryson has accompanied her husband, Barrett Bryson, who joined the Foreign Service in 2010, to Dar es Salaam by way of Guangzhou and Washington, D.C. As a writer and photographer, she is active both online and in her local community. She keeps a diary of her observations about overseas life at www.jessbopeep.com.

of American normalcy. Living on a single-income salary in East Africa is far more manageable than it is in any American metropolis.

I envy friends' kids who already have more life experience under their tweeny belts than I have accrued during my 30 years of existence. These kids have grown up in places like Italy, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Kenya, Switzerland and Costa Rica. But it's okay, because I take my immature self off to exotic locations on "holiday" to cope—places like Bali, Phuket, Taipei, Mumbai, Mexico City and Bozeman, Mont. (After living abroad for two years in Asia, Bozeman was as exotic as Penang.)

Plus, it's straight-up impressive that my husband is qualified enough, and has been selected, for his position abroad. I'm one of those "brains are attractive" kinds of girls, you know?

I do occasionally whine about mosquitoes, lament that I only find myself residing in hot and humid locales, and dread the fact that many of my clothes will forever have a slightly dusty, storage-like smell because they sat in a shipping container for eight months last year. But eventually, mosquito bites heal, and I'll live in a city located at 45° North. And if I weren't so cheap, I would take my entire wardrobe in for dry cleaning.

I really only have one major issue with this lifestyle I've stumbled into, and that's that I'm often labeled a "trailing spouse" (whether vocalized or not) on first introduction. It's a label that I'm finding difficult to accept, simply due to its eponymous implication of attaching oneself to another.

It's Not the Good Old Days

Decades ago, the outward appearance of a trailing spouse directly affected her husband's work. The performance review of a member of the military or Foreign Service, especially those at high ranks, used to include an assessment of his spouse's ability to entertain. I can't imagine making a pot roast, let alone being judged for one.

In those good old days, as they're misleadingly known, a Foreign Service was almost always a man whose wife followed him overseas. His spouse was expected to host dinners and cocktail gatherings while maintaining the home and her appearance with finesse. The spouse featured in the role of supporting character was a big deal, and "trailing spouse" was (and I do say this with a bit of hesitation) something of an esteemed title.

Luckily we've moved on, away from an obsession with pot roast and misogynistic tendencies. Both men and women play the role of trailing spouse now, though it's still more common among the latter; and many of these spouses pursue profes-

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sional opportunities abroad. But like the term "stay-at-home mom," "trailing spouse" still has a negative connotation.

This has a lot to do with the feminist movement, but it also reflects a strong desire among millennials for innovation and individualism. Members of the "Me, Me, Me" Generation emblazoned on the cover of *Time* magazine months ago have not been taught how to put themselves behind others. As a result, most young adults today, myself included, are not comfortable playing a supporting role.

Our Generation

Back at home, many of my friends are DINKs, which is an unfortunate acronym for what I see as a fortunate situation: Dual Income, No Kids. As products of the Me Generation, we grew up with walls adorned with soccer and softball trophies, and adults cooing that we jump the highest and sing the loudest and smile the prettiest. We post these facts all over our walls—on Facebook, that is, not in suburban homes. We've all gone on to earn college degrees, many of them postgraduate; and some of us have helped start a business or two.

As we reach adulthood, we millennials have specific ideals for life. Work hard and play hard. Learn another language. Book exotic and adventurous travel excursions. Know how to address a proper cover letter. Put off having a family in favor of career stability. Learn to write a witty Match.com profile. Do what inspires, but also think about whether these actions look good to others.

Many of my friends are able to balance successful relationships with their successful careers, and in their free time have successful social lives. When they casually ask me what I am up to these days, I scramble to find an answer that will impress.



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Already, I feel I am failing my generation. “Oh, what am I doing, you ask? Ummm, I followed my husband to Africa.” In my mind, I might as well have made a pot roast.

What We Do

Living overseas, I attend gatherings where fellow trailing spouses introduce one another as “Wife of X” or “Husband of Y,” and then immediately talk about what we did in a past life. Former lawyers, media planners, environmentalists, teachers, Peace Corps Volunteers and scientists (though, for what it’s worth, I notice that very few are former doctors). Armed with impressive CVs, we begin new lives abroad as housewives, parents, volunteers, hobbyists.

More often than not, there are great barriers to overcome in seeking employment overseas, if spouses and partners are even allowed to work in a particular country. Often the job market is not what we expected, whether because of regulations in the country, heightened expectations and inflated U.S. pay scales, the lack of jobs in the local economy, or more obvious barriers such as language, visas, time commitments and the like.

Last August, as I read the heavily circulated *New York Times* article, “The Opt-Out Generation Wants Back In,” I could not help making constant connections between my struggles in the fairly recent role as trailing spouse and those of modern-day stay-at-home mothers. In either situation, when a woman (or man) chooses family over career, feelings of responsibility, guilt, envy, resentment and regret surface, no matter how confident the choice. Whether one is a trailing spouse or a stay-at-home mother, the issue of defining one’s personal identity is under microscopic scrutiny.

But the challenges for the “trailing spouse” have an added

twist. Even if we find ways to pack days to the brim, and score an amazing role of a lifetime at our new home, we live with the constant, nagging awareness that when our spouse's job is done, we will be required to pick up and pack out and move on and start all over again.

Leading, Not Trailing

But recently, I've been inspired. I have met many a trailing spouse with enormous credentials who is doing magnificent things alongside their partner. No matter where they live, they find meaningful work, are graceful parents and become the backbone of their families' lives. Plenty of spouses like me are assuming the role of freelancer, consultant or telecommuter, because the same online presence that feeds the Me Generation's self-absorption also facilitates working from home, and much more.

Most of these Foreign Service spouses are in their element, on both a personal and professional level, and are the precise opposite of "trailing." In the end, it's not the process of finding work overseas that's hard—because frankly, that's hard everywhere. It's also more than finding a good OB-GYN, driving to four neighborhoods to find the right (safe) dog food or avoiding a pesky gluten allergy that would be a breeze to work around back in the States.

If anything, as I suspect most trailing spouses will profess, we thrive under pressure. We may shed a few tears every now and then, but handling overseas life is easy, compared with answering what seems like a simple question, "What do you do?" Coming to terms with that has replaced cooking a perfect pot roast as the million-dollar dilemma.

I wrote earlier that I'm a trailing spouse, thanks to my husband. But, of course, my husband isn't tying me to the seat of every plane he boards. And I wouldn't trade in my marriage, our travels or my job, however undefined, as a writer, for anything. My husband and I make some decisions independent of one another, but most are made together, including spending his career overseas.

At the end of each assignment, when our worldly goods are being carried out the door in a crate that will spend eight months in storage, I can always bow out of this difficult role. But I ask myself: Would living in a shoebox apartment in a fifth-floor walkup in New York really be more glamorous? More fulfilling?

I don't think so.

Trailing spouse? To me it looks more like *prevailing* spouse! ■



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