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The Retro Wife

Feminists who say they're having it all—by choosing to stay home.

By **Lisa Miller** Published Mar 17, 2013

The Makino family.
(Photo: Julie Blackmon)

When Kelly Makino was a little girl, she loved to go orienteering—to explore the wilderness near her rural Pennsylvania home, finding her way back with a compass and a map—and the future she imagined for herself was equally adventuresome. Until she was about 16, she wanted to be a CIA operative, a spy, she says, "like La Femme Nikita." She put herself through college at Georgia State working in bars and slinging burgers, planning that with her degree in social work, she would move abroad, to India or Africa, to do humanitarian work for a couple of years. Her husband would be nerdy-hip, and they'd settle down someplace like Williamsburg; when she eventually had children, she would continue working full time, like her mother did, moving up the nonprofit ladder to finally "run a United Way chapter or be the CEO." Kelly graduated from college magna cum laude and got an M.S.W. from Penn, again with honors, receiving an award for her negotiating skills.

Now Kelly is 33, and if dreams were winds, you might say that hers have shifted. She believes that every household needs one primary caretaker, that women are, broadly speaking, better at that job than men, and that no amount of professional success could possibly console her if she felt her two young children—Connor, 5, and Lillie, 4—were not being looked after the right way. The maternal instinct is a real thing, Kelly argues: Girls play with dolls from childhood, so "women are raised from the get-go to raise children successfully. When we are moms, we have a better toolbox." Women, she believes, are conditioned to be more patient with children, to be better multitaskers, to be more tolerant of the quotidian grind of playdates and temper tantrums; "women," she says, "keep it together better than guys do." So last summer, when her husband, Alvin, a management consultant, took a new position requiring more travel, she made a decision. They would live off his low-six-figure income, and she would quit her job running a program for at-risk kids in a public school to stay home full time.

Kelly is not a Martha Stewart spawn in pursuit of the perfectly engineered domestic stage set. On the day I met her, she was wearing an orange hoodie, plum-colored Converse low-tops, and a tiny silver stud in her nose. In the family's

modest New Jersey home, the bedroom looked like a laundry explosion, and the morning's breakfast dishes were piled in the sink. But Kelly's priorities are nothing if not retrograde. She has given herself over entirely to the care and feeding of her family. Undistracted by office politics and unfettered by meetings or a nerve-fraying commute, she spends hours upon hours doing things that would make another kind of woman scream with boredom, chanting nursery rhymes and eating pretend cake beneath a giant *Transformers* poster. Her sacrifice of a salary tightened the Makinos' upper-middle-class budget, but the subversion of her personal drive pays them back in ways Kelly believes are priceless; she is now able to be there for her kids no matter what, cooking healthy meals, taking them hiking and to museums, helping patiently with homework, and devoting herself to teaching the life lessons—on littering, on manners, on good habits—that she believes every child should know. She introduces me as "Miss Lisa," and that's what the kids call me all day long.

Alvin benefits no less from his wife's domestic reign. Kelly keeps a list of his clothing sizes in her iPhone and, devoted to his cuteness, surprises him regularly with new items, like the dark-washed jeans he was wearing on the day I visited. She tracks down his favorite recipes online, recently discovering one for pineapple fried rice that he remembered from his childhood in Hawaii. A couple of times a month, Kelly suggests that they go to bed early and she soothes his work-stiffened muscles with a therapeutic massage. "I love him so much, I just want to spoil him," she says.

Kelly calls herself "a flaming liberal" and a feminist, too. "I want my daughter to be able to do anything she wants," she says. "But I also want to say, 'Have a career that you can walk away from at the drop of a hat.' " And she is not alone. Far from the Bible Belt's conservative territories, in blue-state cities and suburbs, young, educated, married mothers find themselves not uninterested in the metaconversation about "having it all" but untouched by it. They are too busy mining their grandmothers' old-fashioned lives for values they can appropriate like heirlooms, then wear proudly as their own.

Feminism has fizzled, its promise only half-fulfilled. This is the revelation of the moment, hashed and rehashed on blogs and talk shows, a cause of grief for some, fury for others. American women are better educated than they've ever been, better educated now than men, but they get distracted during their prime earning years by the urge to procreate. As they mature, they earn less than men and are granted fewer responsibilities at work. Fifty years after the publication of *The Feminine Mystique,* women represent only a tiny fraction of corporate and government leaders, and they still earn only 77 cents on the male dollar.

What to do? One solution is to deny the need for broader solutions or for any kind of sisterly help. It's every


(Photo: Julie Blackmon)

woman for herself, and may the best one win. "I don't, I think, have, sort of, the militant drive and, sort of, the chip on the shoulder that sometimes comes with that," said Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer in an interview with PBS, in which she declined to label herself a "feminist." "I think it's too bad, but I do think that *feminism* has become in many ways a more negative word." (*I went to Stanford, worked at Google, got pregnant, and still became the chief executive of a Fortune 500 company*, she seemed to say. *If you're smart enough, so can you.*) But others, as you may have read, believe it's time for women to resume the good fight. In her much-discussed *Atlantic* piece, Anne-Marie Slaughter, by profession a policy wonk (now at Princeton, formerly at the State Department), calls for better workplace programs: more parental leave, more part-time and flextime options. Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg, in her new book, *Lean In,* acknowledges the need for better policies, but argues that the new revolution needs to start with women themselves, that what's needed to equalize U.S. workplaces is a generation of women tougher, stronger, wilier, more honest about their ambition, more strategic, and more determined to win than American women currently are.

But what if all the fighting is just too much? That is, what if a woman isn't earning Facebook money but the salary of a social worker? Or what if her husband works 80 hours a week, and her kid is acting out at school, and she's sick of the perpetual disarray in the closets and the endless battles over who's going to buy the milk and oversee the homework? Maybe most important, what if a woman doesn't have Sandberg-Slaughter-Mayer-level ambition but a more modest amount that neither drives nor defines her?

Reading *The Feminine Mystique* now, one is struck by the white-hot flame of Betty Friedan's professional hunger, which made her into a prophet and a pioneer. But it blinded her as well: She presumed that all her suburban-housewife sisters felt as imprisoned as she did and that the gratification she found in her work was attainable for all. That was never true, of course; the revolution that Friedan helped to spark both liberated women and allowed countless numbers of them to experience financial pressure and the profound dissatisfactions of the workaday grind. More women than ever earn some or all of the money their family lives on. But today, in the tumultuous 21st-century economy, depending on a career as a path to self-actualization can seem like a sucker's bet.

Meanwhile, what was once feminist blasphemy is now conventional wisdom: Generally speaking, mothers instinctively want to devote themselves to home more than fathers do. (Even Sandberg admits it. "Are there characteristics

inherent in sex differences that make women more nurturing and men more assertive?" she asks. "Quite possibly.") If feminism is not only about creating an equitable society but also a means to fulfillment for individual women, and if the rewards of working are insufficient and uncertain, while the tug of motherhood is inexorable, then a new calculus can take hold: For some women, the solution to resolving the long-running tensions between work and life is not more parent-friendly offices or savvier career moves but the full embrace of domesticity. "The feminist revolution started in the workplace, and now it's happening at home," says Makino. "I feel like in today's society, women who don't work are bucking the convention we were raised with … Why can't we just be girls? Why do we have to be boys and girls at the same time?" She and the legions like her offer a silent rejoinder to Sandberg's manifesto, raising the possibility that the best way for some mothers (and their loved ones) to have a happy life is to make home their highest achievement.

"What these women feel is that the trade-offs now between working and not working are becoming more and more unsustainable," says Stacy Morrison, editor-in-chief of BlogHer, a network of 3,000 blogs for and by women. "The conversation we hear over and over again is this: 'The sense of calm and control that we feel over our lives is so much better than what is currently on offer in our culture.' And they're not wrong." The number of stay-at-home mothers rose incrementally between 2010 and 2011, for the first time since the downturn of 2008. While staying home with children remains largely a privilege of the affluent (the greatest number of America's SAHMs live in families with incomes of $100,000 a year or more), some of the biggest increases have been among younger mothers, ages 25 to 35, and those whose family incomes range from $75,000 to $100,000 a year.


(Photo: Julie Blackmon)

This is not the retreat from high-pressure workplaces of a previous generation but rather a more active awakening to the virtues of the way things used to be. Patricia Ireland, who lives on the Upper West Side, left her job as a wealth adviser in 2010 after her third child was born. Now, even though her husband, also in finance, has seen his income drop since the recession, she has no plans to go back to work. She feels it's a privilege to manage her children's lives—"not just what they do, but what they believe, how they talk to other children, what kind of story we read together. That's all dictated by me. Not by my nanny or my babysitter." Her husband's part of the arrangement is to go to work and deposit his paycheck in the joint account. "I'm really grateful that my husband and I have fallen into traditional gender roles

without conflict," says Ireland. "I'm not bitter that I'm the one home and he goes to work. And he's very happy that he goes to work."

A lot of the new neo-traditionalists watched their own mothers strain under the second shift, and they regard Sandberg's lower-wattage mini-mes, rushing off to Big Jobs and back home with a wad of cash for the nanny, with something like pity. They don't want a return to the confines of the fifties; they treasure their freedoms, but see a third way. When Slaughter tours the lecture circuit, she is often approached, she says, by women younger than 30 who say, "I don't see a senior person in my world whose life I want." In researching her 2010 book *The Unfinished Revolution: Coming of Age in a New Era of Gender, Work and Family,* New York University sociologist Kathleen Gerson found that, in spite of all the gains young women have made, about a quarter say they would choose a traditional domestic arrangement over the independence that comes with a career, believing not just "that only a parent can provide an acceptable level of care" but also that "they are the only parent available for the job."

The harried, stressed, multiarmed Kali goddess, with a laptop in one hand and homemade organic baby food in the other, has been replaced with a domestic Madonna, content with her choices and placid in her sphere. "I was … blessed," wrote one woman on the UrbanBaby message boards recently, "with the patience to truly enjoy being home with my kids and know that in the end family is what is important in life—not pushing papers at some crap job." When the UB community fired back with a fusillade of snark, the poster remained serene. "It's sacred work but not for everyone," she wrote. "I will never have regrets." In season three of *The Good Wife,* Caitlin D'arcy, the law firm's ambitious and strategically minded female associate, unexpectedly quits her job when she becomes pregnant, saying she wants to be a full-time wife and mother. Her mentor, Alicia Florrick—separated from her husband and a mother of two—tries to dissuade her. "You're smart and clever," she says. "If you give this up for someone, even someone important to you, you'll regret it."

"I'm not giving it up for my fiancé," says Caitlin. "I'm giving it up for myself. I like the law, but I love my fiancé."

"But you don't need to choose," protests Alicia. "There's no reason why you can't work, be a wife and a mother."

"But I want to choose," says Caitlin. "Maybe it's different for my generation, but I don't have to prove anything. Or if I have to, I don't want to. I'm in love."

In Friedan's day, housewives used novel technologies such as the automatic washing machine to ease the burden of their domestic work; today, technology helps them to avoid the isolation of their grandmothers and to show off the fruits of their labor. Across the Internet, on a million mommy blogs and Pinterest pages, these women—conceptual cousins of the bearded and suspendered artisanal bakers and brewers who reside in gentrified neighborhoods—are

elevating homemaking to an art, crocheting baby hats, slow-roasting strawberries for after-school snacks ("taste like Twizzlers!"), and making their own laundry soap from scratch. Young mothers fill the daytime upholstery and pattern-making courses at Third Ward, a craftspace in Williamsburg, and take knitting classes at the Brooklyn Yarn Café in Bushwick while their kids are in school.

Home, to these women, is more than a place to watch TV at the end of the day and motherhood more than a partial identity. It is a demanding, full-time endeavor, requiring all of their creativity, energy, and ingenuity. Kelly Makino set up a giant mothers' group in northern Jersey, using her M.S.W. to help other parents pool time and resources. (Such "side projects," she says, have the added benefit of "keeping us sane.") Homeschooling, once the province of Christian conservatives, is now increasingly chosen by lefty families; in New York City, the number of children being taught in their apartments rose by nearly 10 percent over the past year.

For Rebecca Woolf, maternal ambition led to the creation of her website, Girl's Gone Child, in 2005, when she was 23 and had just given birth to her son Archer. She has since had three more children (a girl, Fable, and twins named Reverie and Boheme), and every day she posts staged photos of her kids that make her family life look like one big, wholesome-but-funky romp. Here are the twins wearing adorable handmade animal hats with ears! Here is a lesson in at-home bang trimming! Woolf, who lives in Los Angeles and whose husband is a television producer, points out that as the founder of a thriving blog, she does have a job. But the image of home life she presents for popular consumption is as glossy and idealized as the mythical feminine perfection Friedan rebelled against. It is perhaps no wonder that in the world of mommy blogs, tattooed Fort Greeners and Mormons unknowingly collide, trafficking the same sites and trading recipes on the same message boards. They may vote different tickets, but on the centrality of home and family to a satisfying life, their interests are aligned.

Before they marry, college students of both genders almost universally tell social scientists that they want marriages in which housework, child care, professional ambition, and moneymaking will be respectfully negotiated and fully shared. According to a 2008 report by the Families and Work Institute, two thirds of people younger than 29 imagine for themselves partnerships not defined by traditional gender roles. Maybe she'll change the lightbulbs; maybe he'll go part time for a while after the birth of the baby. Seventy-four percent of American employees say they believe that women who work outside the home can be as good at mothering as those who don't. The institute's data also indicates that "men today view the 'ideal' man as someone who is not only successful … but also involved as a father, husband/partner, and son." Once married, the research shows, men are more contented over the long term, and women are happiest in an egalitarian union—so long as both parties agree about what egalitarian means.

That, of course, is where things get tricky. Despite their stated position, men still do far less housework than their spouses. In 2011, only 19 percent spent any time during the average day cleaning or doing laundry; among couples with kids younger than 6, men spent just 26 minutes a day doing what the Bureau of Labor Statistics calls "physical care," which is to say bathing, feeding, or dressing children. (Women did more than twice as much.) In her research, Gerson found that in times of stress men overwhelmingly revert to the traditional provider role, allowing them to justify punting on the dishes. "All [men]," she says, "agree that no matter what the gender revolution prescribes, it is still paramount for men to earn a living and support their families, which also implies taking a backseat as caregiver." As a romantic college student, a man may imagine he will request an extended paternity leave, but it's very likely that he won't. The average amount of time a man takes off after the birth of a child is five days. "That's exactly what happened to me!" exclaimed Kelly Makino when I relayed that stat to her. Alvin had planned on taking a two-week leave after Lillie was born but was back at the office after half that time.

All those bachelors' vows of future bathroom cleanings, it turns out, may be no more than a contemporary mating call. "People espouse equality because they conform to the current normative values of our culture," says University of Texas evolutionary psychologist David Buss. "Any man who did not do so would alienate many women—yes, espousing values is partly a mating tactic, and this is just one example." At least in one area, there's scant penalty for this bait and switch. Last year, sociologists at the University of Washington found that the less cooking, cleaning, and laundry a married man does, the more frequently he gets laid.

Feminism has never fully relieved women from feeling that the domestic domain is theirs to manage, no matter what else they're juggling. There is a story, possibly apocryphal yet also believable, of an observer looking over Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's shoulder during a Cabinet meeting in the late nineties. On the pad before her, the secretary had written not "paths to peace in the Middle East" but "buy cottage cheese." (Albright declined to comment for this story, but while promoting a book in 2009, she told an audience that all her life she made it a point always to answer phone calls from her children, no matter what else she was doing. "Every woman's middle name is guilt," she said.) Those choices have a different tenor now, one that upholds the special importance of the maternal role. "My sense," says Buss, "is that younger women are more open to the idea that there might exist evolved psychological gender differences." Among my friends, many women behave as though the evolutionary imperative extends not just to birthing and breast-feeding but to administrative household tasks as well, as if only they can properly plan birthday parties, make doctors' appointments, wrap presents, communicate with the teacher, buy the new school shoes. A number of those I spoke to for this article reminded me of a 2010 British study showing that men lack the same mental bandwidth for multitasking as women. Male and female subjects were asked how they'd find a lost key, while also being

given a number of unrelated chores to do—talk on the phone, read a map, complete a math problem. The women universally approached the hunt more efficiently. Joanna Goddard, who runs the women's lifestyle blog A Cup of Jo, says she hears this refrain among her friends. "I'll just do it. It'll be easier. I'll just do it. It'll be faster. I'll do the dishes. I know where everything goes."

Psychologists suggest that perhaps American women are heirs and slaves to some atavistic need to prove their worth through domestic perfectionism: "So many women want to control their husbands' parenting," says Barbara Kass, a therapist with a private practice in Brooklyn. " 'Oh, do you have the this? Did you do the that? Don't forget that she needs this. And make sure she naps.' Sexism is internalized." Perhaps this mentality explains the baffling result of a survey that the Families and Work Institute conducted last spring for *Real Simple* magazine. Women said they yearned for more free time and that they hated doing most housework. But when they got free time, they used it to do housework—convinced that no one else could do it as well.

If women and men are at odds with themselves over what they value most, if a woman says she wants a big job but also needs to be home by 5:30 to oversee homework, and her husband promises to pick up the kids from chess club but goes instead to the meeting with the boss, how can marriages with two working parents not wind up conflict-ridden? From Kelly Makino's perspective, it was a no-brainer. "Some days I just have to pinch myself," she says. "It's so easy, it's so rewarding to live this way."

Kelly and Alvin decided to change their lives one night last spring during a mini-vacation to Washington, D.C. They were there to see the cherry blossoms, and Kelly was aware, all weekend long, of the ebbing of her anxiety. "I didn't have to worry about 500 people's lives. I had to worry about four people's lives."

Connor had been in a fight at school. Lillie had been having nightmares. After the kids were in bed, the Makinos retired to the bathroom of their hotel room. "We realized that neither one of us were happy. We were sleep deprived and stressed out all the time," says Kelly. If they scaled back, they reasoned, they could live on Alvin's salary. But first Kelly had to come to terms with her unfulfilled ambition —"I knew I had it in me to be the best"—and the disapproval of her parents. Her father worried that she'd be bored out of her mind. Her mother accused her of "mooching." It took Kelly three months to quit her job.

Sitting at their kitchen table, littered with the detritus from a birthday-party goody bag, the Makinos retrace how their relationship turned out the way it has. They met at a biker bar where Kelly was waitressing, and at first, when Alvin envisioned their collective future, he thought, "*Oh, it's totally not going to be like my parents. We're going to do things equally. Both of us are working, and we'll*

take care of the kids together. It just seemed so simple in my mind."

"I remember you said you wanted us to be a power couple," says Kelly.

But there was tension. Alvin earned a lot more money. Kelly felt that her job contributed more good to the world, that its emergencies were more urgent. One time, she remembers, she was just leaving work when she found herself face-to-face with an anguished child. "It's 4:30, this 12-year-old girl tells me she has been raped." Kelly attended to the girl and contacted the school authorities; after she got home, she put her own kids to bed and then was on the phone making a report to protective services until midnight. It was exhausting work but gratifying. "Honestly, before I had kids," she says, "I kind of looked down on stay-at-home moms a little. I thought, *You can't hack it*. It was a prejudice that was wrong. I thought, *Why can't you do it? You must've sucked at your job if you stay home*."

Kelly's commitment to her career "put a lot more pressure on me to make sure I could pick up the kids and I could feed the kids," says Alvin. "As much as I tried to be really supportive, there were conflicts with schedule, with availability, with resource time. We would get home at 6:30 or seven, then we'd have to think about dinner. It's a rush to get the kids to bed. The time either of us had with the kids was short, hectic, stressful. Day to day, managing our schedules—sometimes my meeting would last two hours instead of twenty minutes—it put a lot of strain on our relationship." They got fat on takeout. At bedtime, they talked about "bills, plans, schedules, the next day, everything but spending time together," says Alvin. They never had sex, remembers Kelly. They rarely had any fun at all.

In 2006, British researchers studied work-life conflict in five European countries. They found a lot of strife in France, despite a high percentage of women in the workforce and widespread government policies aimed at helping women remain employed when their children are young: subsidized nursery schools, day-care collectives, and the like. What's more, the French expressed progressive, optimistic ideals about gender roles. Seventy-four percent of full-time employees in France disagreed with the following statement: "A man's job is to earn money, a woman's job is to look after the home and family."

The explanation for the disconnect, the researchers surmised, was that French people, like Americans, lie to themselves about what they want. French women (like their American counterparts) do the bulk of the domestic work, and the majority also work full time. Quoting from colleagues' earlier work, the sociologists showed that sexism in France is as much a part of the culture as great bread, wine, and a long lunch hour. In France, "there were numerous men who were available to look after children during the week when their partner was employed … but nevertheless did not take responsibility for child care even when they were free." They were saying one thing and doing another, which in marriage, says the historian Stephanie Coontz, is "a recipe for instability and

unhappiness."

That same year, an American sociologist published a paper describing similar results. Predictors of marital unhappiness, found Bradford Wilcox at the University of Virginia, included wives who earned a large share of household income and wives who perceived the division of labor at home as unfair. Predictors of marital happiness were couples who shared a commitment to the institutional idea of marriage and couples who went to religious services together. "Our findings suggest," he wrote, "that increased departures from a male-breadwinning-female-homemaking model may also account for declines in marital quality, insofar as men and women continue to tacitly value gendered patterns of behavior in marriage." It's an idea that thrives especially in conservative religious circles: The things that specific men and women may selfishly want for themselves (sex, money, status, notoriety) must for the good of the family be put aside. Feminists widely critiqued Wilcox's findings, saying it puts the onus on women to suck it up in marriage, when men should be under more pressure to change. But these days you'll find echoes of Wilcox's thesis in unlikely places. "We look at straight people," a gay friend said to me recently as we were comparing anecdotes about husbands, "and we think marriage must be so much easier for them."

When I look at Kelly and Alvin Makino, I feel the same way. I have worked full time for almost all my daughter's nine years, and only very rarely have I ever felt that nature required anything else of me. I love my job and have found work to be gratifying and even calming during periods when other parts of my life are far less so. Like 65 percent of American couples, my husband and I both work to pay our bills, but my commitment to my career extends way beyond financial necessity. My self-sufficiency sets a good example for my daughter (or so we tell ourselves), which is one reason why even if we were to win the lotto, staying at home would not likely be a course I'd choose.

And yet. I am not immune to the notion that I have powers and responsibilities as a mother that my husband does not have. I prepare our daughter's lunch box every morning with ritualistic care, as if sending her off to school with a bologna sandwich made by me can work as an amulet against all the pain of my irregular, inevitable absences. I believe that I have a special gift for arranging playdates, pediatrician appointments, and piano lessons, and I yearn sometimes for the vast swaths of time Kelly Makino has given herself to keep her family's affairs in order. In an egalitarian marriage, every aspect of home life is open to renegotiation. When two people need to leave the house at 6 a.m., who gets the children ready for school? When two people have to work late, who will meet that inflexible day-care pickup time? And who, finally, has the energy for those constant transactions?

Two of the fastest-growing religious movements in America are Mormonism and Orthodox Judaism, which clearly define gender roles along traditional lines. It's

difficult not to see the appeal—if only as a fleeting fantasy. How delicious might our weeknight dinners be, how straight the part in our daughter's hair, how much more carefree my marriage, if only I spent a fraction of the time cultivating our domestic landscape that I do at work.

This veneration of motherhood is fed by popular culture. On critically praised TV shows, ambitious women are nutty and single (Claire Danes in *Homeland,* Tina Fey on *30 Rock)*, while good mothers are chopping veggies with a big glass of Chardonnay at their elbow. Beyoncé and Marissa Mayer never explain how they do it all, I suspect, because they have teams of nannies and housekeepers on the payroll—and realize that outing themselves as women who rely on servants will taint them, somehow, as bad parents. (Sandberg places this feeling within "the holy trinity of fear: the fear of being a bad mother/wife/daughter.") In my Facebook feed, Michelle Obama is an object of obsession not for the causes she's pursued as First Lady but for her child-rearing tactics: two mandatory sports (one chosen by them and one chosen by her) and no screen time on weeknights. When her husband first ran for president, he delivered speeches proclaiming the heroism of the working mother: "I don't accept an America that makes women choose between their kids and their careers." Four years later, against an opponent whose home life looked like a Disney production, Obama took a sanctity-of-motherhood tack: There is "no tougher job than being a mom."

Even Anne-Marie Slaughter would say that her maternal drive ultimately superseded her professional one, which is why she was unable to achieve more in her huge State Department job. She had a troubled kid at home. Thus the policy solutions she proposes do not dispel the mind-sets that continue to haunt American couples: In a world where men still run things and women still feel drawn to the kitchen and the nursery, an army of flextime females might lock in a second-class tier of workers who will never be able to compete with men for the top jobs. "That's the criticism of my piece that I worry most about," Slaughter says. "If that turns out to be true, I'll have to live with it forever."

Even as she enjoys her new life, Kelly Makino misses certain things about her old one. She misses getting dressed for work in clothes that have buttons and hems and sexy shoes to match. She misses "eating lunch with chopsticks," a euphemism for a universe of cuisine beyond chopped fruit and yogurt cups. She acknowledges the little luxuries of an office: a desk, a quiet cup of coffee, sick days. She misses her work friends—it is vexing trying to find the same hours free—and the validation that bosses and colleagues offer for a job well done. "There is no way my wonderful, loving family can fill that need," she says. In February, a few months after I met the Makinos at their home in New Jersey, they moved to the suburbs of Washington, D.C., for Alvin's job. Out of her element and detached from her old network, she is, for the first time since quitting work, bored.

Kelly loved her old profession and does not want to be painted as betraying the

goals of feminism. She prefers to see herself as reaching beyond conventional ideas about what women should do. “I feel like we are evolving into something that is not defined by those who came before us,” she says. By making domesticity her career, she and the other stay-at-home mothers she knows are standing up for values, such as patience, and kindness, and respectful attention to the needs of others, that have little currency in the world of work. Professional status is not the only sign of importance, she says, and financial independence is not the only measure of success.

I press her on this point. What if Alvin dies or leaves her? What if, as her children grow up, she finds herself resenting the fact that all the public accolades accrue to her husband? Kelly wrestles with these questions all the time, but for now she’s convinced she’s chosen the right path. “I know this investment in my family will be paid back when the time is right.” When her kids don’t need her anymore, she’ll figure out what she wants to pursue next. Someday, she’s sure, she’ll have the chance to “play leapfrog” with Alvin; she’ll wind up with a brilliant career, or be a writer, or go back to school. “You have to live in the now. I will deal with later when later comes. I’ll find a way,” she says. “Who knows? Maybe I will be home for ever and ever. Maybe I will have the best-kept lawn on the block for the rest of my life.”