

## FEATURES

# The Retro Wife

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

By Lisa Miller Published Mar 17, 2013 ShareThis

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The Makino family.

(Photo: Julie Blackmon)

**W** 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