

The Captivity of Motherhood



“Wives are lonelier now than they have ever been,” Nora Johnson wrote more than half a century ago.

Those words became the first line of a searching and startling essay, a unique amalgam of first person narrative, popular ethnography, and call for social change entitled “[The Captivity of Marriage](#).” It ran in *The Atlantic* in June 1961.

Fifty-four years later, I read Johnson’s sentence on my iPhone, in the midst of the blaring chaos that I have come to think of as the psychopathology of everyday working motherhood—one kid on his iPad, another rattling around the house, my mind working over dinner and a deadline, my husband in the house somewhere, all the other details.

An *Atlantic* editor had sent the essay along, and now I was tugged powerfully by the sentence to follow Johnson through the entire piece, rapt as she wove her observations—

wry and insightful and, somehow, deeply hopeless— about the state of housewifery and mommy consciousness in Cheever times.

In writing a deceptively simple and straightforward article about her own life and the lives of other women, Johnson's mission was profound. She was searching for a language for "the problem without a name," two years before Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*. She wanted to tell us something about the way some people live, people one didn't normally think of as interesting or worthy of ink, and what it did to them. Her descriptions did something to me as I scrolled, word by word. I wept.

I hid my face as my younger son approached, needing something right that moment, in the impatient way of the youngest child. I anticipated his question: "Mommy, what's wrong?"

"I read something sad," I thought I'd say.

The next question was likely to be, "What was it about?" Then what?

"It's a story about some other people."

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Things are undeniably different for women now than they were for Nora Johnson, the daughter of the producer [Nunnally Johnson](#). The Pill was new when Johnson sat down to write her essay, and it had not yet revolutionized women's ability to delay childbearing in order to pursue personal fulfillment and career success. And so [only 38 percent of women](#) worked outside the home, most of them in rigidly gender-scripted and relatively low-paying, low-status fields—nursing, teaching, secretarial work. Those who stayed home spent [an average of 55 hours a week](#) on domestic chores. Women's ambitions and autonomy weren't just undermined by their domestic duties, but institutionally and legislatively as well: With the exception of a right to "proper support," wives had [no legal claim](#) to their husbands' income or property, while in many states, husbands could control those of their wives through "head and master laws." How easy could it be—on the days when the thoughts came at you, and the piles of laundry and the obligations like the PTA and your husband's boss's wife and the other items on Johnson's unrancorous but unsparing list piled up—to feel good in your captivity?

Johnson was groping toward feminism's second wave before it came to be, feeling for a toehold. She listed, in her catalogue not of grievances so much as unsentimental facts about the lives of herself and her conspecifics, the following: isolation, worries about illness and money, and sexual boredom. She referred to the whole schmeer as "the housewife's syndrome, the vicious circle, the feeling of emptiness in the gap between what she thought marriage was going to be like and what it really is like."