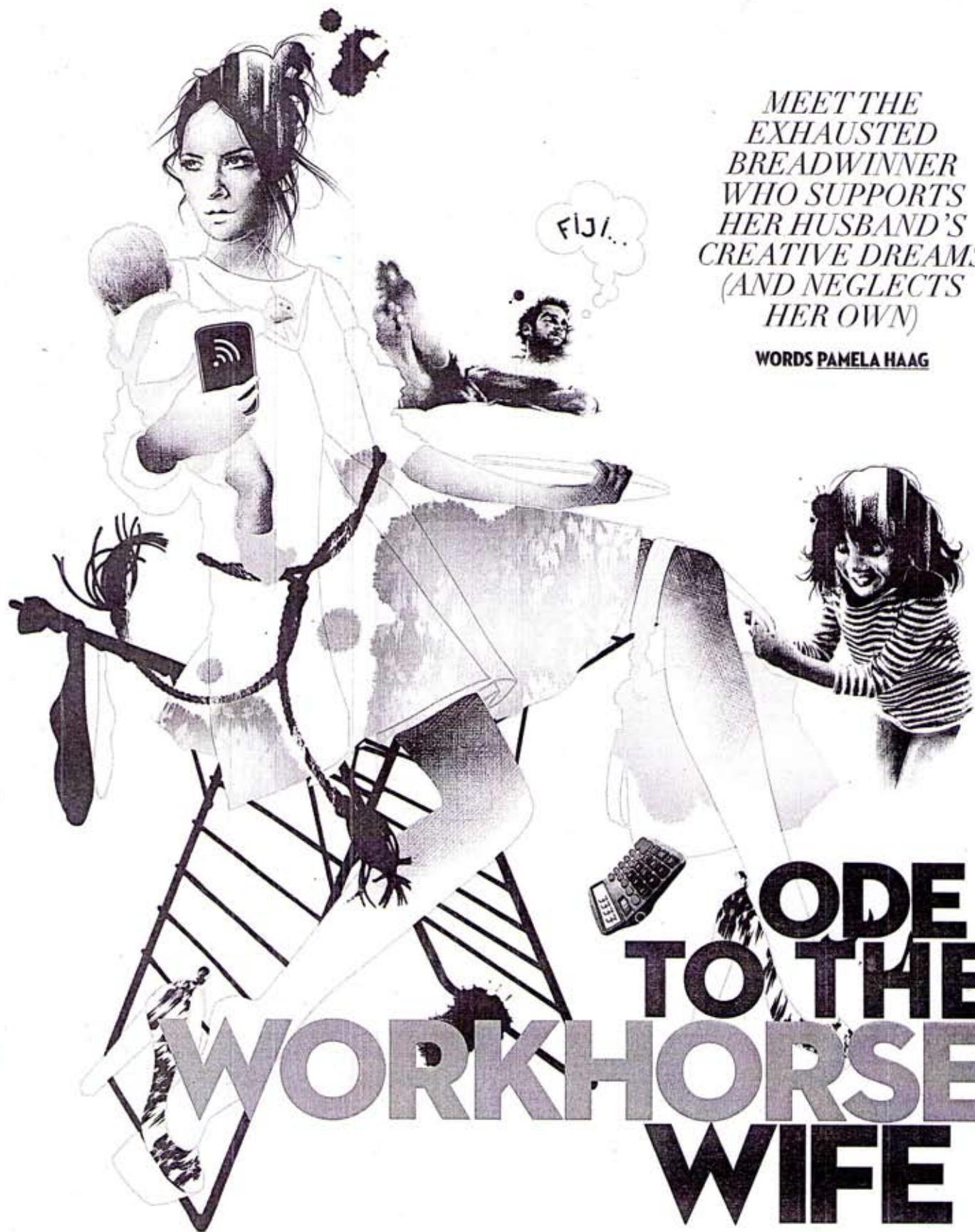


*MEET THE  
EXHAUSTED  
BREADWINNER  
WHO SUPPORTS  
HER HUSBAND'S  
CREATIVE DREAMS  
(AND NEGLECTS  
HER OWN)*

**WORDS PAMELA HAAG**



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# ODE TO THE WORKHORSE WIFE

**H**elen and Colin have a thoroughly modern marriage, of a particular sort. She works in a busy law firm. He's also a lawyer, but doesn't have a job, instead just harbours intentions to take on the occasional fascinating client. Helen returns from work late most nights, drags herself upstairs and passes out exhausted in front of the TV while Colin prepares dinner — marshmallows, popcorn and Nutella. He isn't much of a cook, and hasn't tried to learn. When they eventually had children, Helen paid for day care — never mind that Colin was at home.

Meet the workhorse wife — or WW — the exhausted breadwinner to her

dream-chasing husband, treated as the creative talent in the marriage, who goes through life chasing financially precarious dreams.

Take Tom, whom I met at a coffee shop, where he sat with large unfurled maps of Fiji. Was he planning a trip? No, he said. He was an (unpublished) novelist, who wanted to travel to Fiji to write about radical whale-savers. He had no children, no responsibilities, no paid employment, and the wife who supported him was a full-time hospital doctor. Nice work if you can get it.

And guess what? The WW is on the rise, and starring in various Hollywood films. The recent thriller *Limitless* opens with unpublished writer Eddie Morra being dumped by his girlfriend for exploiting her handouts, while I »»

Don't Know How She Does It sees Sarah Jessica Parker as a hotshot banker to her distinctly beta-male husband, who is trying to make it as an architect. In a sense, the WW has become the 1950s husband, except that she does chores and childcare as well. In the 1950s, women notoriously went to college to snag their "Mrs Degree". New research finds that the Mr Degree is the next wave: men now gain more than women financially from marrying a college-educated spouse. Even before the 2008 recession, economists had noted male attrition from the workforce, with personal choice one of several reasons. Now, in almost one in four American marriages, women out-earn or support their husbands. That 25% includes a variety of marriages — dual-career couples, contented career women, stay-at-home dads — and the discontented ranks of the WWs.

The WWs' husbands are not greeting their wives with dinner and a perfect martini at the end of the day. A study in 2003 found that when a wife contributes more than half the family income, the husband's contribution to the housework drops; when she's the sole provider, it drops even more.

Participants in an online survey that I conducted for my book on marriage wouldn't be surprised. I asked them if they agreed with the statement: "It's never equal in terms of housework and chores — wives usually end up doing more." Of all the questions asked, this garnered the highest number of "I agree entirely" responses. Had the survey been restricted to women, the percentages would likely have been higher.

"Assortative mating" — where people choose mates similar to themselves — is the big trend fuelling the rise of the WW. For the first time in history, men and women are marrying people almost identical to themselves in earning power, education, career and credentials. The idea of "marrying up" has dwindled since the 1950s. Now, either could be the main breadwinner. So, while women's lib freed women from having to see husbands as meal tickets, it also freed men to start seeing wives as meal tickets, if they wanted to. And, apparently, some do.

As women are urged to be less picky — relinquishing the Having It All dream and settling for "Mr Good Enough" (as writer Lori Gottlieb urged us) — single men seem to get pickier. This is what sociologists Michael Kimmel and Kay Hymowitz identify as a quest for protracted bachelorhood. Ironically, the WW's husband actually does have it all: family, marriage, leisure and satisfying work.

In the pre-feminist era, wives worked to support their husbands' ambitions. A 1963 New York Times article used a familiar nickname for the wife who was supporting a graduate student husband, that she was going for her "PhT" (Putting Hubby Through) by "doing some sort of clerical work". The WW feels like a new kind of PhT. Supporting the husband's professional dreams used to involve soufflés, cocktail parties and vacuuming. Today it might mean making big money, but still doing the vacuuming. She has the shell of the feminist dream, in her career and pay cheque, but he has the soul of it — the fulfilling work and a marriage that supports a big dream.

My friend Gretchen has made a tedious commute to a lucrative job for more than 20 years. During this time, she has contemplated opening a stationery store, becoming a journalist and teaching. These dreams are stacked in a corner of the marriage, as her husband, Adam, moves fitfully through an obscure PhD. Needless to say, Gretchen supports both of them. She once commented that his inability to repay student loans or to "market himself" for better jobs had stymied her life. Gretchen conceded an injustice — she wanted mission-driven work as well. "But if I ask him to earn more

money, and he doesn't get to finish his degree," she said, "he won't have had a chance at his dream." In these marriages, there is an overvaluing of his dreams and an undervaluing of the wife's, or perhaps just a habituated deference to male ambition.

As for the husband, his masculine identity doesn't now come from being the breadwinner as much as a creative entity. They're dreamy, but not idle. They labour diligently, but theirs is a labour of love, supported by their wives' labour of labour. On this point, some of my girlfriends disagree. "They're not following any 'muses' except those leading to potato crisps and football," says one. But most of them strike me as ambitious in ways that don't pay the bills.

Most marriages are their own delicate ecology, and the problem here is discreetly elided. Joe is a lawyer but has no clients; Jack is a novelist but has no publications — the husband pretends to work; the wife pretends to believe him. The elephant in the room — why doesn't this man pull his weight? — is sidestepped. And thus these husbands are becoming more liberated by women's liberation than their wives.

Marriages end up this way for complicated reasons. The couple tends to see themselves as progressive and feminist. Ironically, it's that very sensibility that can paralyse the wife to the point that she cannot make reasonable demands on the husband. What feminist woman would "impose" the breadwinning role on her husband? Sometimes the wife is particular about how things are run, so she doesn't want her husband to do more housework. Two separate WWs I know have lamented that they cannot tolerate bacteria growing in their toilet bowls, implying that the husband is beyond learning this task. And sometimes the wife feels so guilty for having a time-ravaging career — even if it supports the family — that she overcompensates by tolerating the marital slacker.

So what's a WW to do? The solution is not to reinstate the husband as workhorse. Nor to abandon the Having It All dream, either. No, to get fairness, the WW has to trade perfection for equity, even if it means the occasional piece of burnt toast or unsightly toilet bowl.

Others work to simplify their standard of living. Kiera had just landed a job as a professor. As an equally well-educated freelance writer, her fiancé George had almost always been un- or underemployed. It sounds like a WW marriage in the making. But instead, Kiera and George

chose to simplify their standard of living dramatically. George realised that he neither wanted to be "selfish" in his marriage by scrounging off his wife, nor a full-time worker; Kiera realised that she didn't want to be a stressed-out sole breadwinner saddled with an outsized lifestyle.

Fairness is a final frontier for marriage. We can arrange career and marriage any way we want, but while there isn't an ideally fair type of marriage, there is an ideally fair state of marriage. Both spouses need to feel that each is doing enough of that unglamorous, dreary "life maintenance" work, whether it's breadwinning or bread-baking, so that things feel fairly allocated.

Fairness is a psychological struggle, not a legal one. WWs don't feel comfortable asking a quixotic husband to take a day job. Conversely, frustrated workhorse husbands might not feel comfortable confessing they didn't really want to end up the sole breadwinner. But perhaps that's what he and she need to say. Before the WW bolts the stable. ●

*Marriage Confidential: The Post-Romantic Age of Workhorse Wives, Royal Children, Undersexed Spouses and Rebel Couples Who Are Rewriting the Rules* by Pamela Haag (HarperCollins £16.99). To buy it for £15.29 (inc p&p), visit [thesundaytimes.co.uk/bookshop](http://thesundaytimes.co.uk/bookshop) or call 0845 271 2134

## THE WW HAS BECOME THE 1950S HUSBAND, EXCEPT SHE DOES CHILDCARE AND CHORES AS WELL

## YOU ARE A WORKHORSE WIFE IF...

- You tiptoe around at 10am, pulling on yesterday's clothes in the curtained darkness so as not to disturb the sleeping genius.
- You have a ready spiel for friends and family on his "projects in the pipeline" — the sitcom, the film script, the novel, the poems, the animation. Yet any questions to him regarding his professional progress are off limits.
- He constantly interrupts your working day with telephone calls asking, "Do you think I

- should call my new band Flaneurs or The Flaneurs?", "Do you know where I left my keys?" or "How do I get onto Twitter?"
- You resort to positive "nudge" techniques to encourage any kind of domestic proactivity: "Darling, it's too wonderful that you remembered to turn on the dishwasher."
- He proudly tells you that he "fired off a few emails" as if this is a day's achievement.
- The nanny starts to complain about having to

- look after an extra child. Other kidult traits include refusal to come to bed, gawking at the TV and unbridled fridge-raiding (You: "Is there any dinner?" Him: "Nah, not hungry right now").
- He now works in a shed, as he found the house wasn't conducive to creativity. You built the shed.
- You're considering your own project — a self-help book called *Galvanising the Genius In Your Life*.