

The Betty Draper Effect.

BY MELISSA RAYWORTH | POSTED 5 YEARS AGO

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It was just before midnight on a Sunday last fall. I stood rinsing dishes, surrounded by cabinets hung when Lady Bird Johnson lived in the White House. Inside them, melamine dishes in a distinctly mid-century shade of powder blue sat stacked in perfect rows. Behind me, tucked in a conversation were the Beatles appearing on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. I caught my reflection in the kitchen window, my face clearly outlined against the blackness of a suburban night. It wasn't 1964. But here in this house, for a moment, it was hard to tell.

I had spent the past hour watching *Mad Men*, the AMC show praised for bringing the early Sixties, in all their sleek but stifled glory, palpably to life. But most viewers, when they clicked off their televisions, returned seamlessly to their twenty-first-century lives. Not me.

I'm living in a suburban split-level that has hardly changed since my in-laws built it in 1964. Now unable to manage alone, they moved to a retirement home and left most everything behind. My husband and I have become stewards of a home that is, in many ways, frozen in the *Mad Men* era.

I fell in love with the show immediately, drawn to the way it explores the lives of women on the precipice of '60s feminism. Each week last summer and fall, I'd spend an hour bathed in the strange glow of Kennedy-era motherhood – an environment almost unrecognizable today. Wives asking their husbands' permission to go shopping. Pregnant women puffing on cigarettes. Housewives shuddering in fear at the presence of a pretty "divorc'e" on their block.



photo: AMC/Carin Baer

It's been surreal and illuminating to be surrounded by the show's mid-century furniture and vintage Tupperware while trying to figure out where motherhood ends and the rest of me begins. I see these items after two seasons of *Mad Men* and realize that the fragments of my day – the needles and thread I use to replace buttons, the Mary Proctor Hi-Lo Adjustable ironing board in my laundry room ("End Ironing Drudgery Forever!") – are the very items women bought while grappling

with the stifling restrictions and numbing domesticity that shaped motherhood in that era.

Seeing my physical space mirrored in the fictional world of Don and Betty Draper of Ossining, N.Y., has me wondering what lessons are still to be learned from the women who did their mothering in that unique window just before the '60s reached suburbia. And I've wondered which remnants of their lives remain with us, silent and unnoticed.

Stumbling across boxes of Ivory Snow that my mother-in-law squirreled away back when women were judged on the cleanliness of their children's clothing, I've found answers. And some of them are unsettling.

* * *

"Why are you alone here?" the boy who lives down the block asks Betty Draper, played with frosty perfection by January Jones. She is sitting at her kitchen table, motionless, surrounded by the best appliances and accessories of the time. Everything is neatly in its place, including Betty, the perfectly coiffed wife of an ad executive. The boy watches her at the table as she pauses to consider his question. The answer, it is clear, could fill volumes. "It's the middle of the day," she finally answers.

"It's lousy," the kid replies.

On August 16, as the show's third season begins, many of its female characters are so crippled by their circumstances – married moms, husband-hunting secretaries or the sole female trying to fight her way into the executive ranks – that they have no choice but to move boldly if they want to change things.

Most women I know today can't imagine being trapped that way. Only our budgets restrict us. Society doesn't tell us what we can accomplish. This is thanks to mold-breaking women like my mother-in-law, who worked in academia while raising kids and shared responsibilities with her husband even in the early 1950s.

But having options isn't quite the same as exercising them.

During the six years I have been a mother, too often I have put off the work that will really propel me forward in favor of shorter assignments that fit better with my kids and my husband. I shape my life around what my family needs. A decade ago, as a single, childless actress in New York, I would have told you that would never happen. But it has – not because society or my spouse expects it, but through a combination of old habits, love for my family and, honestly, a dash of fear.



photo: AMC/Carin Baer

My big goals – my dreams – are still on the to-do list. I'm planning to get to them as soon as the laundry is done, the kids are fed, the bills are paid and I've wrapped up the next few assignments. Women living in the *Mad Men* era began to realize that the little tasks would never really get done. There would always be more dirty dishes, more dust, more chores. So, encircled by domesticity, they began questioning everything. They thought

outside the box because they were trapped in it. I've challenged myself to approach life with the same sense of urgency and determination that propelled the women of that era. They earned for us the opportunity to accomplish anything. We owe them. We owe us.

* * *

For an American woman, ours is not a perfect world. Not yet. Discrimination is still everywhere. Beauty, or the lack of it, is still used to marginalize and classify us. And those of us employed outside the home often have minimal support in our workplaces. I do not marginalize any of that.

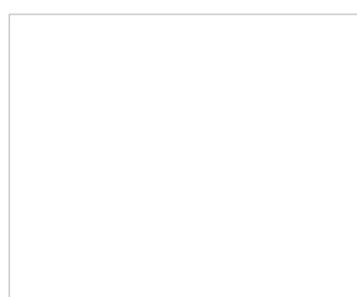
But sometimes, the box that traps us can be of our own making.

Sometimes, the box that traps us can be of our own making. I could coast through the next decade, here among the Melmac and Fiestaware, pleasantly working and raising kids while the opportunity for a truly groundbreaking career lies just beyond the horizon. Years could slide by. Or I could harness the explosive energy that I see depicted on *Mad Men* – and that I feel in this house, so many years later – and I can make the next few years of my life extraordinary. Like Don Draper's former secretary Peggy, who went after her own office and then pushed herself to shine in the job nobody thought she could do, I can use the opportunities I've been given to help shape the future.

Decades from now, another woman will stand at this sink. Maybe she'll be married to one of my sons and some of these mid-century talismans will still line the kitchen cabinets. Maybe some relics from today, from me, will be there as well. When she thinks of the women of my generation, I hope she can say that we tackled problems and moved forward with all the strength and fire that so many women did in the '60s. And I hope we give her the inspiration to go even further. An American woman's explosive energy, after all, should never be permitted to become a relic.


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