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I WANT A WIFE by JUDY SYFERS

1971, *New York Magazine*

I belong to that classification of people known as wives. I am A Wife.

And, not altogether incidentally, I am a mother.

Not too long ago a male friend of mine appeared on the scene fresh from a recent divorce. He had one child, who is, of course, with his ex-wife. He is looking for another wife. As I thought about him while I was ironing one evening, it suddenly occurred to me that I too, would like to have a wife. Why do I want a wife?

I would like to go back to school so that I can become economically independent, support myself, and if need be, support those dependent upon me. I want a wife who will work and send me to school. And while I am going to school I want a wife to take care of my children. I want a wife a wife to keep track of the children's doctor and dentist appointments. And to keep track of mine, too. I want a wife to make sure my children eat properly and are kept clean. I want a wife who will wash the children's clothes and keep them mended. I want a wife who is a good nurturing attendant to my children, who arranges for their schooling, makes sure that they have an adequate social life with their peers, takes them to the park, the zoo, etc. I want a wife who takes care of the children when they are sick, a wife who arranges to be around when the children need special care, because, of course, I cannot miss classes at school. My wife must arrange to lose time at work and not lose the job. It may mean a small cut in my wife's income from time to time, but I guess I can tolerate that. Needless to say, my wife will arrange and pay for the care of the children while my wife is working.

I want a wife who will take care of my physical needs. I want a wife who will keep my house clean. A wife who will pick up after my children, a wife who will pick up after me. I want a wife who will keep my clothes clean, ironed, mended, replaced when need be, and who will see to it that my personal things are kept in their proper place so that I can find what I need the minute I need it. I want a wife who cooks the meals, a wife who is a good cook. I want a wife who will plan the menus, do the necessary grocery shopping, prepare the meals, serve them pleasantly, and then do the cleaning up while I do my studying. I want a wife who will care for me when I am sick and sympathize with my pain and loss of time from school. I want a wife to go along when our family takes a vacation so that someone can continue care for me and my when I need a rest and change of scene.

I want a wife who will not bother me with rambling complaints about a wife's duties. But I want a wife who will listen to me when I feel the need to explain a rather difficult point I have come across in my course of studies. And I want a wife who will type my papers for me when I have written them.

I want a wife who will take care of the details of my social life. When my wife and I are invited out by my friends, I want a wife who will take care of the baby-sitting arrangements. When I meet people at school that I like and want to entertain, I want a wife who will have the house clean, will prepare a special meal, serve it to me and my friends, and not interrupt when I talk about things that interest me and my friends. I want a wife who will have arranged that the children are fed and ready for bed before my guests arrive so that the children do not bother us. I want a wife who takes care of the needs of my guests so that they feel comfortable, who makes sure that they have an ashtray, that they are passed the hors d'oeuvres, that they are offered a second helping of the food, that their wine glasses are replenished when necessary, that their coffee is served to them as they like it. And I want a wife who knows that sometimes I need a night out by myself.

I want a wife who is sensitive to my sexual needs, a wife who makes love passionately and eagerly when I feel like it, a wife who makes sure that I am satisfied. And, of course, I want a wife who will not demand sexual attention when I am not in the mood for it. I want a wife who assumes the complete responsibility for birth control, because I do not want more children. I want a wife who will remain sexually faithful to me so that I do not have to clutter up my intellectual life with jealousies. And I want a wife who understands that my sexual needs may entail more than strict adherence to monogamy. I must, after all, be able to relate to people as fully as possible.

If, by chance, I find another person more suitable as a wife than the wife I already have, I want the liberty to replace my present wife with another one. Naturally, I will expect a fresh, new life; my wife will take the children and be solely responsible for them so that I am left free.

When I am through with school and have a job, I want my wife to quit working and remain at home so that my wife can more fully and completely take care of a wife's duties.

My God, who wouldn't want a wife?

Judy Syfers, “I Want a Wife” - Lesson Plan – for advanced students

1. Tell students about the article:

It is a classic text of American feminism of the second wave. It appeared in New York Magazine year-end issue of 1971. Feminism was all the rage that year and the magazine included a 30-page preview of a new magazine: Ms, with Gloria Steinem as founding editor. The Ms. table of contents read “Ms. is devoted to today’s women considered as full human beings.” One of the shortest pieces in the package — just one page long, was “I Want a Wife,” by Judy Syfers. She’d written it as a speech for a rally in San Francisco the previous year.

2. Read the text together. It is a great text to read out-loud, taking turns. If you prefer, listen to this reading: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EwQX5_i8Mrc

3. Discuss the article:

- Do students find it amusing? Why?
- What aspect of GENDER relations is it about? (imbalance of duties in marriage, women’s frustration, men’s sense of entitlement, housework, ‘the second shift’)
- Ask them to name 3 most outrageous demands, expectations that a wife has to face.
- Have things changed since 1971? Is marriage different today?
- Would YOU like to have a “wife”? What is your idea of a successful marriage?
- The author retook her unmarried name soon after publishing this piece. Can you guess why?
- Discuss the text as a piece of literature. Who is the speaker? What is the tone? Talk about the use of irony and the technique of defamiliarization – she speaks in first person as a woman, but explains she would like a wife. Notice that the word “wife” is repeated many times – to the point where it sounds strange. Another trick is the detailed description of housework – which is usually ignored and taken for granted.

4. Language study: Ask students to work in pairs, looking for phrasal verbs, idiomatic phrases or stylistically rich, interesting moments in the text. There are plenty to choose from. There are no wrong answers here – let them enjoy the beauty of style. Here are a few examples.

- appeared on the scene
- to pick up after someone
- to keep track of ... appointments.
- to need a rest and change of scene.
- to come across
- an adequate social life with their peers
- I can find what I need the minute I need it.
- rambling complaints
- I need a night out by myself
- to assume complete responsibility for birth control

Have fun! I have taught this piece several times. Students love it!

Let me know how it went abgraff@uw.edu.pl

Regards, Agnieszka Graff