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How angry am I? You don't want to know. Nobody wants to know about *that*.

I'm a good girl, I'm a nice girl, I'm a straight-A, strait-laced, good daughter, good career girl, and I never stole anybody's boyfriend and I never ran out on a girlfriend, and I put up with my parents' shit and my brother's shit, and I'm not a girl anyhow, I'm over forty fucking years old, and I'm good at my job and I'm great with kids and I held my mother's hand when she died, after four years of holding her hand while she was dying, and I speak to my father every day on the telephone – every day, mind you, and what kind of weather do you have on your side of the river, because here it's pretty gray and a bit muggy too? It was supposed to say 'Great Artist' on my tombstone, but if I died right now it would say 'such a good teacher/daughter/friend' instead; and what I really want to shout, and want in big letters on that grave, too, is FUCK YOU ALL.

Don't all women feel the same? The only difference is how much we know we feel it, how in touch we are with our fury. We're all furies, except the ones who are too damned foolish, and my worry now is that we're brainwashing them from the cradle,



and in the end even the ones who are smart will be too damned foolish. What do I mean? I mean the second graders at Appleton Elementary, sometimes the first graders even, and by the time they get to my classroom, to the third grade, they're well and truly gone – they're full of Lady Gaga and Katy Perry and French manicures and cute outfits and they care how their *hair* looks! In the third grade. They care more about their hair or their shoes than about galaxies or caterpillars or hieroglyphics. How did all that revolutionary talk of the seventies land us in a place where being female means playing dumb and looking good? Even worse on your tombstone than 'dutiful daughter' is 'looked good'; everyone used to know that. But we're lost in a world of appearances now.

That's why I'm so angry, really – not because of all the chores and all the making nice and all the duty of being a woman – or rather, of being *me* – because maybe these are the burdens of being human. Really I'm angry because I've tried so hard to get out of the hall of mirrors, this sham and pretend of the world, or of my world, on the East Coast of the United States of America in the first decade of the twenty-first century. And behind every mirror is another fucking mirror, and down every corridor is another corridor, and the Fun House isn't fun anymore and it isn't even funny, but there doesn't seem to be a door marked EXIT.

At the fair each summer when I was a kid, we visited the Fun House, with its creepy grinning plaster face, two stories high. You walked in through its mouth, between its giant teeth, along its hot-pink tongue. Just from that face, you should've known. It was supposed to be a lark, but it was terrifying. The floors buckled or they lurched from side to side, and the walls were crooked, and the rooms were painted to confuse perspective. Lights flashed, horns blared, in the narrow, vibrating hallways lined with fattening mirrors and





elongating mirrors and inside-out upside-down mirrors. Sometimes the ceiling fell or the floor rose, or both happened at once and I thought I'd be squashed like a bug. The Fun House was scarier by far than the Haunted House, not least because I was supposed to enjoy it. I just wanted to find the way out. But the doors marked EXIT led only to further crazy rooms, to endless moving corridors. There was one route through the Fun House, relentless to the very end.

I've finally come to understand that life itself is the Fun House. All you want is that door marked EXIT, the escape to a place where Real Life will be; and you can never find it. No: let me correct that. In recent years, there was a door, there were doors, and I took them and I believed in them, and I believed for a stretch that I'd managed to get out into Reality – and God, the bliss and terror of that, the intensity of that: it felt so *different* – until I suddenly realized I'd been stuck in the Fun House all along. I'd been tricked. The door marked EXIT hadn't been an exit at all.



I'm not crazy. Angry, yes; crazy, no. My name is Nora Marie Eldridge and I'm forty-two years old – which is a lot more like middle age than forty or even forty-one. Neither old nor young, I'm neither fat nor thin, tall nor short, blond nor brunette, neither pretty nor plain. Quite nice looking in some moments, I think is the consensus, rather like the heroines of Harlequin romances, read in quantity in my youth. I'm neither married nor divorced, but single. What they used to call a spinster, but don't anymore, because it implies that you're dried up, and none of us wants to be that. Until last summer, I taught third grade at Appleton Elementary School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and maybe I'll go back and do it again, I just





don't know. Maybe, instead, I'll set the world on fire. I just might.

Be advised that in spite of my foul mouth, I don't swear in front of the children – except once or twice when a rogue 'Shit!' has emerged, but only sotto voce, and only in extremis. If you're thinking how can such an angry person possibly teach young children, let me assure you that every one of us is capable of rage, and that some of us are prone to it, but that in order to be a good teacher, you must have a modicum of self-control, which I do. I have more than a modicum. I was brought up that way.

Second, I'm not an Underground Woman, harboring resentment for my miseries against the whole world. Or rather, it's not that I'm not *in some sense* an Underground Woman – aren't we all, who have to cede and swerve and step aside, unacknowledged and unadmired and unthanked? Numerous in our twenties and thirties, we're positively legion in our forties and fifties. But the world should understand, if the world gave a shit, that women like us are not underground. No Ralph Ellison basement full of lightbulbs for us; no Dostoyevskian metaphorical subterra. We're always upstairs. We're not the madwomen in the attic – they get lots of play, one way or another. We're the quiet woman at the end of the third-floor hallway, whose trash is always tidy, who smiles brightly in the stairwell with a cheerful greeting, and who, from behind closed doors, never makes a sound. In our lives of quiet desperation, the woman upstairs is who we are, with or without a goddamn tabby or a pesky lolloping Labrador, and not a soul registers that we are furious. We're completely invisible. I thought it wasn't true, or not true of me, but I've learned I am no different at all. The question now is how to work it, how to use that invisibility, to make it burn.





THE WOMAN UPSTAIRS

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Life is about deciding what matters. It's about the fantasy that determines the reality. Have you ever asked yourself whether you'd rather fly or be invisible? I've asked people for years, always thinking their answer revealed who they were. I'm surrounded by a world of fliers. Children are almost always fliers. And the woman upstairs, she's a flier too. Some greedy people ask if they couldn't have both; and a certain number – I always thought they were the conniving bastards, the power-hungry, the control freaks – choose the vanishing act. But most of us want to fly.

Do you remember those dreams? I don't have them anymore, but they were a joy of my youth. To confront despair – the dogs at my heels, or the angry man with a raised fist or a club – and have only to flap my arms, rising slowly, directly upward, like a helicopter or an apotheosis, and then soaring, free. I skimmed the rooftops, gulping the wind, rode the air currents like waves, over fields and fences, along the shore, out over the ruffled indigo of the sea. And the light of the sky, when you fly – do you remember that? The clouds like illuminated pillows, close and moist when you ventured into them, and ah! the revelation when you came out the other side. Flying was everything, once.

But I've come to the conclusion that it's the wrong choice. Because you think the world is yours, but really you're always flying away from something; and the dogs at your heels and the man with the club – they don't go away because you can't see them anymore. They are reality.

As for being invisible, it makes things more real. You walk into a room where you are not, and you hear what people say, unguardedly; you watch how they move when they aren't with you. You see them without their masks – or in their various masks, because suddenly you can see them anywhere. It may be painful to learn what happens when you're behind the arras; but then, please God, you know.





All these years, I was wrong, you see. Most people around me, too. And especially now that I've learned that I really am invisible, I need to stop wanting to fly. I want to stop needing to fly. I want it all to do over again; but also I don't. I want to make my nothingness count. Don't think it's impossible.

