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The Woman Upstairs

by Claire Messud

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.

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