

THE BYSTANDER —★—

Sounding the Alarm

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I wake up every morning knowing that today I will need to prove that I am not stupid just because I'm a woman. Being female in America, no matter what your qualifications are, any respect you get has to be re-affirmed every single day, sometimes with the same people you had to prove it to yesterday and the day before.

Rather than demanding, *at the least*, to be revered for incubating and birthing our "products of conception," I see women of all ages reverse-mortgage their value by using billions of dollars' worth of "products of perfection" to make them look better. These items never go on sale and never diminish in demand. They also never enhance our leverage. In fact, they contribute to the subliminal assumption that women are artful delicate creatures who just want to dress up like Mommy while only pretending to be smart, capable, and strong like Daddy.

But it's a dead giveaway. Rather than creating beauty, the image that gets transmitted is that of a person who stared herself down in a bathroom mirror, didn't like what she saw, and tried to change her contours, colors, and complexion with paints, wands, glue and brushes. She has become a mirage, a façade with no real voice, muscle, or backbone. Any potential power goes uncaptured, much like an array of solar panels amid a dense forest of tall trees. The irony is that, in the entire history of human relationships, not one woman has ever been rejected because her cuticles were untrimmed, her stilettos were not high enough, or her eyelashes were too short to successfully bat out a proper come-hither-look.

The last time I wore makeup, it was to get a professional head-shot. I relented "because otherwise the lighting will make you look washed-out." The wax, the fragrance, the dusty but oily layers, all combined, made the photo shoot feel more like a circus clown audition. Afterward, I went to my neighborhood coffee shop, wondering if any of the familiar staff would comment on my improved face. No one noticed. I made a quick stop into

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their unisex restroom before I left. The flush was not successful, evidently from a previous more substantial user. With the water quickly rising, I grabbed the plunger and began to give the bowl enough CPR to keep the floor dry. As I felt the now-murky liquid splashing onto my feet, I glimpsed my painstakingly-painted face in the mirror, grimacing while vigorously unclogging someone else's business from a grungy public toilet.

My reflection told our story; looking great, but then being rudely surprised by plumbing problems that we may not even be responsible for, but have to fix just to save our own shoes. The real story is that when it's a plumbing system of another kind that we *should* be able to fix—our own bodies—we are first ordered to obey the laws of men. Those are the same people we have to convince, every day, that we're smart enough to make our own decisions. To accomplish that, looking great will get you nowhere.

So it might be better to replace those glue-on plastic fingernails with some talons sharpened into claws. That's the kind of power tool you'll need if you want to climb the ladder that leads to respect and equality, or just hang on to what you've already got. Those false eyelashes will only cloud the laser-sharp vision you'll need to escape the long arm of the law, once the government takes away your Pills.

As mothers, aunts, sisters or simply your friends, we can only sound the alarm. It won't make us popular with you, but here's the reality you need to see: don't waste your time perfecting yourselves in the mirror. What you should be doing is figuring out how to save yourselves from a flood of legislation you can't outrun, especially when you're wearing those cute high-heeled shoes.