

LITERARY FICTION

Escape

By Emily Welch

Barry opens his left eye first, then his right, and scans his bedroom while listening for the familiar sounds in the apartment and around the neighbourhood close by. Bus brakes squealing, cars horns pressed by impatient palms, all of the sounds that were annoying, yet comfortable. He listens as his mother goes about her usual Saturday routine, and he feels the snakes squirming in his stomach: they excite and terrify him.

Barry's mother leaves for work promptly at 9 AM. With her coffee in hand, she leans into her son's bedroom doorway. She stands there for a few seconds, watching his chest rise and fall under his striped flannel pajamas, then quickly heads out the front door of their three-floor walk-up. As soon as Barry hears her shoes clicking on the stairs, he climbs carefully out of his lower bunk, and swings his legs over the edge of the bed gently, afraid of being heard – even though the apartment is empty.

With soft steps, Barry pads down the hallway to the bathroom he and his mother share. He always waits to hear the ticking of the old iron radiator, and when he hears the first ping, he begins. These rituals keep his mind from moving too fast.

Barry stares curiously into the mirror, while brushing his teeth, at the freckles sprinkled across his cheeks. The wide blue eyes looking back at him feel like they belong, but he frowns at the widening shoulders. Barry believes when he looks at the mirror that someone in charge has made a mistake. They must have. But no matter how much he questions and despairs, nothing ever changes. He stays zipped up in a stranger's body.

The old pine door of her bedroom closet opens soundlessly. His mother's garments are arranged in complete symmetry; diaphanous dresses worn long ago before life became reality. Barry reaches his hand up and brushes his fingers over the dresses that are hung with great care, each two inches apart. He is aware of how his mother takes pleasure in keeping them neat and carefully pressed. Barry runs one of the filmy evening dresses through his hands. He has never known anything else to feel like this. The ivory fabric slides over his skin, and he imagines this is what air would feel like. Ever so carefully he thumbs through the gowns, and he ducks his head down, so he can slide right under them. With the door closed behind him, everything is dark; everything feels safe. As he sits on the floor, he can just slightly hear the traffic outside. A siren wails somewhere close by, but there are no voices to be heard. He reaches up and tugs on several of the dresses, closing his eyes as they slide off their hangers and fall over his head and around him. As they fall, they flutter, like windblown leaves off autumn trees. He feels the softness of the cloth, the richness of satin, and he can't see which garment

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is running across his face. All he can smell is a powder scent; all he can breathe is the silky fabric, over his nose, his ears, his chin. Time pauses. In this space, he doesn't have to pretend, he can just be. He breathes and lets his mind stop.

A year ago, when he had just turned nine, he had been thumbing through the Sears catalogue. There had been a beautiful teenage girl that he kept coming back to. She was blond, like him, and was wearing a satin graduation gown. Barry could not stop running his hand over that picture. The dress was mauve, and not frilly or busy like some of the clothes of his female classmates. It was that same, satiny, slippery fabric as his mother's dresses; with simple folds that rippled and flowed around the young girl's legs. Everything about it was right. He tore the page out of the book and hid it in his dresser drawer. It was just him and the dress. He would take it out before school started and study the way the cloth flowed around the girl, how you could see the outline of her leg underneath it.

Back in his mother's closet, time has stopped. When Barry finally stands up, he takes a moment to lift the drifts of sliding garments off the floor where they had fluttered around him. Gently running the silky folds through his fingers, he holds the dresses to his face, and then to his chest one last time. He believes that they can feel his heart beating. When he finally stands up, and stretches, he sighs. He has been able to dream without interruption. Barry makes sure that he sets each dress back on its hanger, and divides them evenly, two inches apart. He gives a quick glance back, and closes the door.

PHOTOGRAPHY

The Hidden Self

By Rebecca Wheeler