

Another Party  
by Eric Cecil

She'd always felt sewn up like rags. Now she felt undone. All the guests had gone home, and she was left there staring at tables shelled with spent cans, at ashtrays blooming with crumpled butts, all twisted and tendrilled like anemones. She thought of a fire. She imagined feeding the rags of herself to it, then running, the hiss and snap of combustion at her heels. Barefoot. She'd lost her shoes somewhere. Her soles were blackened with the filth of the hall. And the mess of the kitchen, where someone had upended a small fryer, where they'd attempted to clean it with an old mop, its threads cowlicked and stuck and useless against the limpid grease. The grease, she laughed to herself. That would do. But it was so bright outside, probably close to noon, and a fire in the daylight seemed like such a terrible waste to her.

She padded back to her room and saw that someone had dumped the trashcan on her small bed. Wads of discarded tissue, balled to look like flowers, dwelled next to the dried sheaths of old condoms, deflated bags of chips, still more cans, more cigarettes. Her books were strewn about the room, too, like so many fallen birds. Unopened bills, fallow pens, hairties gaping like open mouths along the floorboards. Her clothes. Someone had ventured deep inside her closet, removing old striped blouses and flowered dresses she hadn't worn in years. She hadn't been able to. They were too small now, or she was too big, and anyway, they'd been worn too many times. Nearly to rags.

She laughed and stumbled into the wall, leaning against it for support. Slowly she reached for the power button on her TV, pushing it off. A band of static flipped onscreen and then collapsed, hissed, disappeared. There was something like a sizzling. Then nothing. Have to save electricity, she said aloud. Her voice sounded unlike her in the empty apartment. It was the voice of a carefree stranger. It scared her. She let it. She let the carefree stranger's voice hector her toward the phantom of a dress that hung off the corner of her closet door. She staggered, paused, stared, removed the dress from its point, gingerly holding each strap between thumb and forefinger, attempting to imagine a younger her, a thinner her inhabiting its slim shape. She couldn't. She could only picture the party from the night before. She could only envision young men bellying laughter, hoisting drinks, pawing her belongings, or scowling, silent women rifling through the shallows of her jewelry boxes as if panning for flecks of gold.

She turned to the surface of her vanity and saw the boxes there, undisturbed. But the backdrop of the round mirror, she noticed, was broken, and in the webbed and haloed glass, she saw herself by the dozen: reflections gathered like guests of a second party, yet another to which she hadn't been invited.