

THE ELIZA DOLL

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ELLIE PRICKS HER finger on the needle. The bead of blood mesmerises her, but she shakes herself free of the spell.

“Look at that, Jack. Silly me.”

Jack cocks his head.

She tears a square of tissue off the roll by the sink and wraps it around her finger. *Don't get blood on the skirt.*

Her phone's been going off all morning. Lots of texts: *'Happy birthday!'*

The big 5-0. Birthdays used to mean homemade cards and inedible breakfasts.

But today she's glad to be alone.

It's Rosie's birthday, too. Ellie posted a card to her from Cley in Norfolk, a few days ago. Inside, with a shaking hand, she wrote *'to the best birthday present I ever had'*, as she always does. Rosie needs to know her mother still feels the same.

She threads the needle back into the fabric and turns the miniature garment over in her hands, trying not to let tears

drop onto it. Jack whines, he pushes his nose against her knee. When she can speak again she says, "Yes, yes," absently.

The sun moves around the sky, warmth pours onto her through the window at her side and the glare hurts her eyes.

"Time to put this away," she tells Jack after another half hour. "I expect you're ready for a walk." He gives her an eager dog-grin, panting, anxious she might change her mind. There's often a long gap between saying it and the actual event.

Ellie opens the cupboard above her head, slips the fabric, needle, reel of thread and scissors into a wooden box. She runs her finger lovingly over the carved surface. Eliza brought the box back from, where was it? India. When she was only seventeen. Ellie had to send her some money to carry it on the plane. *You'll be pleased you did, Mum.* Her lovely, young daughter so proud of herself. It was the first thing Eliza brought home from her travels.

Ellie thinks of the other box, the silver one from Iceland, a decorated chest representing the legend of Skogafoss Falls.

She's been standing too long, staring at nothing. It would matter if there was anyone but Jack to notice. She snaps back into action, moving robotically. Bends to push the slide-out table away over the end of the bed, fastens the wooden cover onto the old-fashioned sewing machine and replaces it in the nook beneath the bed.

"We'll look for some wood while we're out, getting a bit low on supplies."

Keep on keeping on.

She rifles through the pile of kindling, the finely-chopped logs that slot into a metal frame beside the stove, decides the wood should last another evening.

"Yes, yes, I won't keep you waiting any longer." Jack makes the van rock with his capering. "Go on then."

She pulls open the heavy door and steps carefully down from the van, moving aside for Jack to jump onto the rough grass verge. Beyond it, cultivated fields stretch to the horizon

but there's a patch of scrubland off to one side where she can exercise Jack. There is nobody, no house or vehicle for miles around. Jack's eyes burn telepathically into hers.

"Find a stick then," Ellie sniffs. Her eyes have been crying again and seem quite independent of her.

She makes her arm lift and throw the stick Jack brings, his body rippling with excitement. He's off before the stick leaves her hand and it nearly hits him, but he doesn't care, just grabs it as it bounces off the ground. He comes hurtling back to Ellie, his paws flicking up mud. Ellie's phone buzzes in her shirt pocket but she ignores it.

Just give me a minute's peace. Funny she should think that when she has so much of it these days. Her thoughts need an uninterrupted trajectory: how many months has it been now? Seven.

The vibrating phone stills, and with it the beat of her erratic heart. She can't cope with conversation right now. Jack's leaping figure bounds in and out of view in the long grass, spelling *dog-joy* in a frenzied blur of black letters. Layers of sky overlap each other to the horizon. Somewhere, not far away, is the sea.

The stretch of Suffolk coast has a pebble beach. There's a strong smell of seaweed. She can see Felixstowe across a channel of water on her right, and straight ahead, nothing but sea. A thin mist, either light rain or spray from the sea, wets her skin and clothes, obscuring the view through her glasses. Having to wear varifocals is such a nuisance. She grabs a scrap of cloth from her pocket and wipes them repeatedly, but they only smear. She pulls the hood of her parka up over her head.

Jack doesn't feel the cold. He hurls himself into the waves, dips his head into the foam and comes out with a glistening pebble in his mouth. Back up the slope he races, the stone in his jaws. He drops it at her feet, shaking water all over her.

Ellie takes her sandals off and pushes her bare toes down between the pebbles, sending tingles through her body. Strands

of hair like damp rope whip her cheeks. A sudden savage breeze slashes her long skirt against her legs. The van is parked in a layby just above the beach and she wonders if she'll get away with staying the night there. The spot is deserted; it'll be pitch-dark later.

"Take a risk, Mum," says a voice on the wind. "Do it. Nothing bad'll happen."

Ellie takes off her glasses. She wipes them again, this time with the hem of her skirt. Hair blows across her face and she pushes it away, replacing the glasses on the bridge of her nose.

She's here.

Eliza stands next to her, oddly luminescent.

A shimmer of raindrops or sea-spray coats the downy skin of her face. Her straw-coloured hair, which she has never cut, straggles and blows about in the wind. Eliza is wearing a long, striped coat.

"Where did you get that?" asks Ellie, fingering the coarse fabric, damp and heavy. She estimates the strength of needle she'd have to use to sew through such material.

"Oh, I think it was Éire," Eliza says breezily. She's been to so many places; Iceland the most recent. "So, I managed to find you on your birthday. What've you been doing?"

"Waiting for you, mainly."

Ellie tries to slow her breathing.

Cold spray from the sea makes her shiver and for a moment she's transported back to the icy ground by a waterfall, snow and crashing water soaking her then as she's soaked now.

"Are you all right, Mum?"

I should be the one looking after her. She nods and makes her mouth smile. "Are you warm enough?"

"Of course. Are you?"

"I am now you're here." The weight of the morning lifts. "It's been ages. I've missed you, where have you been?"

"In and out," says Eliza vaguely. "I'm here now. Have you got anything to eat?"

Inside the van, Ellie's afraid to take her eyes off Eliza. She stirs a saucepan with her body half-turned away. Eliza's prone to changing her mind at the last minute. She might decide to stay, or she might go. If she wants to stay there's plenty of room in the bed for both of them.

Eliza used to creep into her bed as a child. It was the only physical contact she'd allow. Ellie wonders what she can do to make staying more tempting.

"Shall we light the stove?"

Outside is dim already; a storm brewing. Ellie switches the light on but still shivers again with foreboding. Jack curls himself by the warming stove, steam coming off his black coat. Eliza laughs. She crumples herself next to him on the floor, laying her face on his neck. Eliza always got on best with animals.

If Jack was a cat he'd purr. Instead he lets out a long, contented sigh. Eliza shifts, moving her head so she is looking up into Ellie's eyes.

"It's a brilliant thing you did, taking to the road. My renegade Mum. I'm proud of you, you know."

Ellie's chest hurts. She slides a hand under her cardigan and feels her heartbeat. *Keep on keeping on.*

"I wish all my daughters were."

"Mum," says Eliza, as sternly as she's able with the high, girlish voice Rosie used to tease. ("You sound like Kate Bush." She'd enrage Eliza by playing their mother's old records, waving her arms about.) "Rosie will come round. She couldn't expect you not to follow your dream, just because she thought you should give her some money from the house. You're the one who struggled to maintain it all those years," Eliza giggles. "Dad was such an itinerant."

Her fingers make trails on Jack's sleek coat.

"I let Rosie down." Ellie closes her lips. She places the lid on the pot she's been stirring, turns the gas down and fits herself into the space behind Eliza. She sits on the bed, legs wedged against Eliza's spine. She keeps her own back straight and holds her breath, counting seconds.

Heat rises from the stove. Steam escapes from under the lid of the saucepan. Jack sighs deeply. Ellie's forced to release air from her lungs.

"She's still not talking to me properly, you know," she admits.

There doesn't seem enough oxygen in the van to replace what she's lost.

"Rosie's married," Eliza is saying. "Her and Rick are OK. Don't beat yourself up about it. Move on."

A log shifts within the stove. The sky at the windows becomes darker. Ellie fights panic.

Jack struggles up from the floor and shakes himself as best he can in the confined space, making the van rock. Hard rain is suddenly pattering against the window; it might even be hail. Despite this Ellie knows what Eliza's about to say. Like Jack, her daughter has pushed herself up from the floor. She's buttoning her coat.

No.

The past tumbles forward and crashes at Ellie's feet. Don't go. Events from a jumbled timeline converge. Why isn't it possible to take a huge step back and rearrange things?

"I'd better get off, it's getting late."

Icy feelings suffuse Ellie as Eliza makes preparations to leave. They stand close together as the young woman tucks her long, long hair inside the coat and pulls the hood up. Eliza gives her mother a smile.

"Sorry, Mum. Got places to go, y'know?"

The rain outside sounds like a waterfall, nothing will stop its relentless precipitation.

"You haven't even eaten," Ellie's voice is hardly there. "There's a storm outside. Eliza, please don't go."

But it's pointless to ask.

The wind buffets the van, it creaks alarmingly. Ellie wakes with a sob. Then panic overtakes her, a fear that the van will overturn. How far away is the sea? Will she be swept away? She can't help imagining choking on great gulps of wa-

ter, so cold it would freeze her lungs before it drowned her. Her hands grip the quilt so tightly she has difficulty straightening her fingers. The van rocks. Jack whines in his sleep and stretches along the bottom of the bed. Her body is rigid but she forces herself to let the tension go, inch by inch.

She couldn't drive in this anyway.

Down will come Baby, cradle and all.

She tightens the layers of coverings more securely around her; draws her knees up and wedges her feet either side of the hot water bottle. *Give in to whatever happens. Nothing can be worse than. . .*

She's never been afraid of sleeping alone before now, in fact she's longed for solitude.

A few glowing embers survive behind the glass door of the stove, it can't be that late. Every now and then a particularly strong gust of wind screams down the chimney and lights the embers into fitful flames. Jack sighs and snores, his sleep unbothered by the storm. Ellie thinks of Eliza saying she's proud of her. *I can do this.*

She doesn't think she's slept at all but she must have done because sun streams through the gap in the curtains at the end of the bed, hitting her in the face. Turning her head to the side she meets Jack's eager eyes. He's on the floor, chin propped by her pillow. His tail wags fiercely as he gives her his most engaging grin. His breath gusts over her.

Ellie groans and pushes herself into a sitting position. The absence of last night's roaring gale means she can hear the swell and suck of the waves, a hundred metres away. She swings her feet to the floor and stands, reaching up to snap the roof window open. The scent of the sea floods in and she breathes deeply. Everything's blurry without her glasses so she puts them on, then pulls her dressing gown around her and shoves her feet into her slippers. Jack lets out a pleading whine.

"Go on then," she says, hauling the van door open. She ought to follow him with a bag. *Hmm.* While he races off she puts the kettle on. Bending to watch him through the

small window over the sink, she sees him head unerringly for the sea. She'll have to have a towel ready for when he comes back.

Using the toilet, she tries to remember when she last emptied it. There's a hint of smell. She'll need a night on a campsite to stock up on water, empty the waste and make use of laundry facilities. *It will cost money.* But not having to worry about the amount of water she uses in a shower will be a luxury her body's ready for. *Call it a birthday present.*

In hooking up to electricity, she'll be able to plug in the sewing machine and get more work done, so maybe it will pay for itself.

Later, she'll get the map and work out where to go next. She has a stall booked at a craft fair in Leigh-on-Sea but it isn't for another week or so. She has time to complete a couple more dolls before that.

Her phone buzzes. After a search, she finds it in the pocket of her shirt, on the end of the bed where she threw it after her walk with Jack yesterday. Five missed calls show up on the screen.

"Hi," she says. "Jonah. Sorry I didn't get to talk to you yesterday." She keeps her voice guarded.

"No worries. How are you doing? Did you have a nice birthday?" He sounds far away.

"I'm OK. How are you?"

"I'm fine. Got back twelve days ago." (From America). "Made some money, you know, so if you need any help?" He's smoking; she hears the long suck in and the outlet of breath afterwards.

"Thank you."

There's a bump on the side of the van. Looking out she sees a seagull flying erratically away. Down the beach, Jack spots it and tears off like a greyhound.

She could do with money but doesn't want to admit it. This is supposed to be about independence. Maybe she'll be fine after the next craft fair – it's the run-up to Christmas, after all; people should buy.

The thought of the festive season sickens her.

“Are you crying?” asks Jonah.

There’s a scratching at the door, Jack’s polite way of knocking.

“Shit!”

The toast under the grill has burst into flames.

“Hang on a minute.” Ellie bends and retrieves it then throws the charcoaled bread into the sink, runs the tap. What a waste. Jack’s whining but she won’t let him in until she’s dried him.

The van smells of burning.

“I’m just. . . exhausted,” she admits.

She thinks of the tasks still to be done: cleaning out the woodstove, making the bed; stacking the wood more securely and fastening it in. She needs to make sure everything is packed away so it won’t crash about in the back while she’s driving.

When all I really want to do is sleep.

But cars are starting to park on the verges on either side of the narrow road and she can see people throwing interested glances at her bright yellow LDV. She curses whoever painted it that colour.

“Ellie.”

She presses the phone closer to her ear. *Pull yourself together, Ellie.*

“Tell me where you are,” he says. “I’m coming to meet you. I’m taking you to a hotel for the night. Just one night,” he persists, ignoring her protests. “Don’t worry,” he adds. “I’ll get us separate rooms. But I’m going take you away from all this, just for one night. Tomorrow you can get back to your gypsy life.”