

THE ESKIMO KEEPS HER PROMISE

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Jeremy says that one day I will wake up and there will be something different about my room. He says I will feel sick and not know why. My mother will be putting dishes away in the kitchen and the truck will be gone and the cat will be sleeping on the TV as usual, her flicking tail making a soft, static sound against the screen. But I will get out of bed, and I will look and look, shaking out my clothes, holding my books upside down by their spines to see if something falls. I'll tear the covers off my bed. I'll dump the sand out of the little perfume bottles on my shelf and sift through it and find nothing. Then I will pick up the Eskimo doll on my desk, and I will feel something hard in her tiny pocket and it will be a silver tooth—*his* silver tooth—and when I find it there, I will know that he has killed himself.

He makes me a map of where to find his body. It is four pieces of paper taped together. He draws the two dogs in the yard and a football, the fence around the house with the moldy scarf on the weather vane, the trail past the horse's grave, and then blue arrows pointing down a gulch. He folds up the corner of the map and writes "Lift here" and I do. A wolf stands in the water eating a boy. The wolf is looking up at me with a piece of blue cloth in his mouth like I've startled him with how fast I opened the flap. The boy's eyes are red Xs but his mouth is smiling; the blood is a fountain on his stomach and there are frogs. Jeremy paints a corn-haired girl crying in her hands. He draws cattails and crows.

But he is eleven and lies.

The first thing I do every morning is press my finger on the pocket. I turn over on my bed and reach out, sometimes with my eyes still closed. The pocket is big enough to fit a penny. The clasp is the tip of a sea urchin's quill and it pricks me. I know that there is nothing to find, but still I feel a terrifying thrill in checking. It is my first thought, and my last thought. Sometimes I believe I can make things happen by forgetting to wish for them *not* to happen. So I always make my intentions

clear: *I don't want Jeremy to kill himself.* I bargain. This time, with the doll. *If there's no tooth in your pocket tomorrow, I promise to build you a sled. I promise to make you a dog out of cotton and rocks.*

I don't play with dolls anymore. They used to talk amongst themselves like I didn't exist at all. They carried on in another world equal to mine. But now they are aware that they are dolls, which keeps them in their place. I do all the talking now. When I am alone and have something to say, I say it to them only because it's better than talking to the wall. It's the only attention I give them.

Except now, the Eskimo.

She stands on my desk with two sharp wires coming together at her temples to hold up her wooden head, and her seal-skin boots hang an inch in mid-air. She is mouthless. Inside her muff, she is handless, just stubs of stuffed material. Inside her boots, the same stubs. She is not a doll in the old sense—she never was, just an antique on a stand—but she is not a doll in the new sense either. She is godlike and hateful. She has some new power over me that transcends the usual power struggle of girls and dolls. It gives me a purpose that no one else could know, a fear of death and chaos, the thrill of grave responsibility. I know it's all false and in the day it's a game to talk with Jeremy about his suicide. But at night....

The Eskimo gets lots of things she never uses—a fishing pole and a baby—but I do it because it's the only thing keeping Jeremy alive. I am nine but understand the word is “sacrifice.” I whisper it in my dark room. The word falls from my mouth like a red silk scarf.

Jeremy finally twists his tooth out. He's at his own house when it happens; I see only the gap it leaves behind.

He gives the silver tooth to his aunt to send in an envelope to his mother. He does not come into my room some night and open the urchin clasp. He does not look over at me sleeping in my bed. He does not kill himself and so I am not the one to find him, to chase off the wolf and hold him in my lap, crying in his coarse, sweet hair, *I love you.*

He goes on living and eats scorched brownies from a pan on my porch. The rest of his life is out of my control. The world is reckless and angry. He teases the dog with an old sock. He lives and goes on living. Because that is what I wished.

There is no one to blame, nothing to blame on anyone. Still, I hold it

against him. And I think of what is gone, of those moments when our lives hung in the same balance and the whole of his world depended on me. The secret bargains in the dark room. Insects thumped on my window. I saw his death in the stream, then undid it, as if the river and its secrets was an open zipper simply to be closed. The doll's wooden head glared in the moon. The dog barked at the stars.

All of this is lost on him. A red scarf fallen in a black room.