

“CHANGELING”

by
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2011
FOURTH DRAFT APRIL 2013

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My nose is short, squat and bulbous. My teeth are fanged and stick out at angles behind my lips. My ears are too big and my obsidian coloured hair falls around my face like a matted curtain of braids, washed or not. Even my dress is dirty, a tea-coloured hand-me-down, shapeless and threadbare.

Am I ugly? I am told I am. By the children in the town square, by Father when he drinks and by my Mother's eyes.

My parents never stopped hoping they'd find the Goblins who brought me here. The one's who took their child and left me in its place. Changeling child.

Father looks for their little girl daily, takes his long walks many hours through the forests that surround our dairy farm. Mother knits and pretends not to notice me, as I watch her from nearby, my wordless lips imploring her for a hug, a kind word or a tender kiss. I yearn for those affections that will never find me, on my rough stool in that corner of the house that is mine, the corner they gifted me, the corner that no light ever touches.

I am told I am ugly but I am not without attention. The curves of my body follow a lush hourglass. My breasts are high and firm, too big for a girl of twelve. The eyes of the townsmen are on me always. My eyes, without whites, are said to tempt them, drawing them closer, leading them to wicked thoughts. This I am told by Mother, by the women of the town and their fists, by the Priest who beats me on a Sunday.

A French woman teaches us English and Math in the town square, she likes to be called Miss Friday. No one knows her real name, or why she came to a small German town for the pittance she gets for taking us. She is beautiful the way fields stretching towards the horizon are in the late afternoon. She has hair that falls like coal coloured milk, skin the hue of snow, bee-stung burgundy lips and wet silver eyes. Eyes that sparkle like the shallows of a stone filled river when the sun hits them, sieved through the clouds. She is the only person in the town who shows me any kindness.

Often after class, the other children will play in the forests. When stones aren't thrown to scare me off, sometimes they will let me join them. I remember one day we found a wounded bird, just sport for a bored fox.

"Wechselbalg," the children cried. "Go eat the bird!"

"Yeah, *häslich*, there's your dinner."

I approached it. It's chest puffed like a beating heart and its eyes were full of fear. I felt pity and hate. Something knotted within me. I didn't eat the bird. I bent down, picked it up and wrung its little neck. The children ran from me screaming. I held it's limp body in my cupped hands, it's last shocked expression fixed in place, staring up at me. My hot tears fell on its feathers, bouncing off its body like raindrops through a net of leaves. I buried it, marking it so I could return to the grave when I needed to.

There is a boy who joins us with Miss Friday in the square. He's older but stupid, so he has to stay back with the young folk. At least everyone says he's stupid. He is proud and vain but I don't think he's unintelligent, just impatient. If he doesn't get a question right straight away he gets frustrated.

He pulls at my bra strap constantly. He acts like he's bullying me, calls me the hurtful names they all do and grins eagerly when my snapped bra gets their laughs. But his face is always flushed when he does this. He plays it cool and his face is a hard, snickering mask, but the colour in his cheeks, the snatches of tongue between his teeth; they all give him away. I know what he really wants from me. I take secret delight in his torture, his frustrated gaze across my neck and chest; it sends heat to that part of my body the Priest would rather I not think on.

Every Sunday Father Traugott Engel launches into another fiery lecture from the pulpit, followed by a private roasting for myself. Mother and Father know; he has their endorsement. In his quarters Father Engel berates my tangled hair, my devil's eyes, my general ugliness and seeming inability to change my appearance. Then with trembling hands, part arthritis, part sadism, Traugott reaches for the worn leather belt strap woven into his hat rack. With clenched breath, like a fetish savoured in secret, Traugott orders me to strip. The threadbare dress, my bra and moth-loved underwear; I shed them all and stand before him. He tells me there must be nothing between my punishment and my full sensation of it; he asks me to embrace it, as the lust comes in wheezes between his teeth. At his order I sink to the floor on all fours. The lash of the looped belt against my buttocks and thighs follows soon after; just enough time for Traugott to drink in the view. He strikes indiscriminately and without mercy, hitting my kidneys and spine, even my sex. My tough Goblin hide protects me from the welts and marks but not the pain. My sex is the worst, no leathery Goblin skin to shield me there. Afterwards I put river stones down my underwear to cool the burning flesh.

Mother and Father seem more tender after Traugott's beatings; as though they resent me less, the devil having been thoroughly whipped from me for another week. They smile as though receiving a freshly released inmate; purged after a lengthy and satisfactorily harrowing sentence. Hours later when the fantasy clears they realise they're still stuck with me and that Traugott's treatments have not brought me closer to loving that 'good book' and its talking snakes.