

Autumn Stover
First place

The Changeling

*“Hush awhile, hush awhile, sleep now for me.
Lay yourself softly if my babe you be,
Or did some fay creeping from your crib steal you sleeping
And leave me a creature that's nothing of me?”*

-Changeling Lullaby

No one believed me – not a single soul. The child I had brought into this world was not the one that lay in her crib. My baby was gone.

My hands gripped the side of her crib as I peered down at her sleeping body. Her hair was soft, blonde fuzz on the top of her little head, her nose was small and upturned – much like her father’s – and her face was pudgy and sweet, but it was all a clever guise. Whatever it was that lay, sleeping, in front of me was not my child.

Her entire temperament had changed in the past few weeks, and it had not escaped my notice. My well-behaved child had turned into a spiteful, fussy baby. In anger, she would throw things to the floor and scream in frustration. It was this that had first alerted me to the change – her horrifying screams.

As I gave her a bottle, she grabbed it from my hands with unnatural force and violently threw it to the floor. My beautiful Josephine looked straight into my eyes, and she started screaming. It was the most unearthly noise I had ever heard in my life. Akin to nails on a chalkboard, her screams sent vicious shivers down my spine. The screams that sounded through our lonely little home sounded like the cries of a thousand tortured souls. I tried everything I could to calm her – to get her to stop her terrible screaming. But despite my greatest efforts, nothing would halt the noise that grated at my very soul. Long after she had finished, the echoes of her cries lingered in the air and haunted my sleep.

Once I had put her to bed, the screams would start as quiet whispers and grow with unnatural ability. They bounced off every wall and slammed into my head with great force. There was no end to them.

After hearing the torturous noises that emanated from my child for weeks on end, I knew something was wrong. I began watching Josephine more carefully, examining her every move: every blink, every yawn, every small smile. I spotted the difference in her immediately.

Josie was twisted. The baby in my care was no longer the sweet child I took home from the hospital. When I approached a family friend in law-enforcement, my worries were pushed aside and, instead, he referred me to a psychiatrist.

The doctor's name was George C. Newman; he was a psychiatrist that helped the police department with cases on many occasions. I called him, thinking maybe he would listen, and his receptionist scheduled an appointment for me the following Monday. With Josie stowed away at the neighbor's, I made my way to his office. Sitting in the bright blue waiting room, the smell of flowery air freshener permeated from the seats and walls and the constant shuffle of papers from the receptionist's desk was a nuisance.

After thirty minutes of waiting, a young man in disheveled clothes emerged from the wooden door that led to Dr. Newman's office. His eyes were lifeless and blank as he stared off into the distance.

I shouldn't be here, I thought.

"Dr. Newman will see you now, Mrs. Harris," the receptionist stopped shuffling her papers to let me know. With hesitation weighing down my feet, I walked to the door and turned the knob with a sweaty hand.

Once inside the bookcase-lined walls, Dr. Newman took his dark square glasses off his nose and smiled at me. "Please take a seat, Mrs. Harris," he offered as he extended a wrinkled hand towards a large cushioned chair with a massively tall back.

"Please, call me Meg, Dr. Newman."

"Meg, then," he smiled. I sank into the red chair and stared at the aging man in front of me. It seemed to me that Dr. Newman was the stereotypical psychiatrist with his graying hair that showed signs of once being jet black and his well-tailored suit. He had the look of a kind and old scholar. Everything in me wanted to trust him, but eventually he began his psychological accusations.

"Tell me about yourself, Meg," he began. "Your friend, Officer Emery, tells me you recently lost your husband in a car accident." His question caught me off guard and at the

mention of Daniel's passing, my eyes filled with tears. The wound was too fresh – too deep to be exposed.

"It was," – my voice broke, and I paused to take a labored breath – "Two months before Josie was born." I wiped at my eyes with the back of my shaking hand. "If he were here... If he were here," I sighed.

"What do you mean by that, Meg?"

The words were bubbling up inside of me, the thought of my daughter being stolen right under my nose. "If Daniel would've been here, they wouldn't have taken Josie." My sorrow quickly turned to disgust as I thought of my once-beautiful baby girl.

At my sudden silence, Dr. Newman prodded further. "Who took your daughter?"

Despite the doctor's kind eyes, I knew what he was actually thinking. I was some whack-job that he would diagnose and admit to the hospital. "It's... complicated."

"Then explain it to me. I am here to listen." He flipped the page of his notebook that sat securely in his lap and he pushed his shiny, black pen to its surface as he scribbled something on the page.

I dropped my voice to a whisper, trying my best to hide my swirling emotions. "They came in the night, and they took her from her crib." My voice was smooth and even as I continued. "They thought they were sneaky, coming in like that, and they thought their decoy could fool me, but it didn't. It never did. That – that thing– they left in Josie's place isn't even human, you know?"

Leaning forward, he rested his chin on his hand. "What is this thing you believe that has replaced your daughter?"

"I know what you're thinking. Please, before you jump to any conclusions: hear me out."

I proceeded to open up to Dr. Newman and tell him how I had found stories of changeling children – children stolen from their cribs and replaced with exact copies by fairy creatures. "That's it. That's what happened, you see?" I asked, begging him to believe me. "They came in, and they took her – they took Josie." Through the entire account, he nodded gently and continued his note taking. By the end, I could tell by the look in his eyes that he didn't believe me.

No one believed me.

“Mrs. Harris – Meg – in my professional opinion, I feel as though you need to be admitted to a residency psyche ward for further evaluation.”

“Like what?” I demanded, in shock from his hasty conclusion. “A nut house?”

“No, just a place where you can reside for some time and get some rest, Meg.”

“What do you think is wrong with me, Dr. Newman?” I asked through clenched teeth.

Dr. Newman sighed, rubbing his temples. “Listen, Mrs. Harris. What is happening to you is a rather rare condition known as Capgras delusion. It occurs from intense trauma – the passing of your husband, childbirth – those things are hard for your brain to cope with separately, let alone together. People often suffer from delusions that their loved ones are switched with exact replicas of themselves. Are you following?”

I shook my head defiantly, the screams of my baby echoing in my mind. They grew louder and louder until I could no longer shut them out. They drowned out the words tumbling from Dr. Newman’s mouth and I began to scream with them. “Stop!” I pleaded, my voice barely rising above the horrifying sound. “Please, stop!”

I could see Dr. Newman’s lips moving, but I did not hear his words over the screams.

With my hands over my ears and tears sliding down my flushed face, I looked into Dr. Newman’s terrified eyes as he clutched his notebook in his lap. “I have to make it stop...” I whispered.

I laid the Josie replacement in her crib after retrieving her from the neighbor’s house. As I watched her sleeping, soundly, I wondered what kind of monster could take a baby from its mother – its poor, loving mother. The thing in Josie’s crib was not human, and it was not good. It was an evil, terrible monster that paraded around, only pretending to be my beautiful baby.

Calmly, serenely, I lifted the pillow off the floor where I had left it, and I pushed it against the monster baby’s face. There wasn’t much force behind her squirming as she lost air and, finally, went still.

I couldn’t get my Josie back – I knew that – she was gone, but at least I could rest in peace knowing that the thing that took her place was gone forever, too.

The sirens began to approach my home as I put the gun to my head and pulled the cool, metal trigger, finally ending the terrible screams.