



The Kenyon Review

Changeling

Author(s): Alice Hoffman

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Alice Hoffman



CHANGELING

It's the time of year when the snow comes down, when the Hudson turns silver as though the moon has fallen straight down to the river bottom, a cold, white stone. The heat pipes rattle until dawn, and on clear nights it's possible to see stars in the black sky above Tenth Avenue. Shelby always sleeps more at this time of year; she hibernates, especially now that she's alone, no relationship other than the one with her dogs. She gets home from work and climbs into bed, where she eats a bowl of reheated Chinese food while she watches the news. Bad news on every channel.

All Shelby knows is that the worst things happen in winter. This is not a scientific deduction, just a human observation. Shelby's car accident was in winter, her mother was diagnosed with cancer in winter, her little dog Blinky had to have his eye removed in winter. Shelby always runs out of money at this time of year, she slips on the ice, she has midterms in winter, she's late to work at Petco because the buses run slowly. This winter she's had three patients die during the hours she volunteers at St. Vincent's Hospital. She had stood in a hallway crying for people she didn't even know and couldn't have possibly helped on three of the coldest days of the year. Bad luck and winter go together like hail and snow, like gloves and boots, like Shelby and misfortune.

She's in the right place for that: the edge of the city. People in the neighborhood say there are wolves that come down from Canada; they walk along the frozen riverbanks and congregate in the alleys off Tenth Avenue. There are times when Shelby swears she can hear them. She wakes in the middle of the night and finds her four dogs silent, hair standing on end, all facing the window above the couch. They hear it too.

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This winter Shelby is fixated on one particular bit of bad luck. Her ex-boyfriend, Ben Mink, is getting married. Shelby was invited—Ben is nothing if not gracious, unless you cheat on him behind his back—and although Shelby has never bothered to RSVP she has the invitation stuck to her refrigerator with a Petco magnet. She would rather be in hell than be at Ben Mink's wedding.

It's this weekend, in a restaurant in Huntington. Shelby spent all week wishing for a storm to come and ruin things, and her wish has come true. She is weak, but powerful. She is detached, but vindictive, even when she's the guilty party, even though years have passed since they said their good-byes. Ten inches of snow dropped last night, and now the guests at Ben's wedding will have trouble on the Long Island Expressway. They'll skid and swerve and those who do manage to make it to the service will have to drag in wearing boots and heavy coats. Shelby is the one responsible for the breakup, yet she's the one who feels betrayed. Funny how that happens. You wreck your life then blame everyone else for your mistakes.

It was at this time of year when Shelby and her best friend Helene ran away. They were in eighth grade. Half a lifetime ago. They thought they were very grown up; they knew everything at that point in time. A pinprick of time. A dot on the graph of endlessness, but their dot all the same. They'd already tried cigarettes and whisky and beer. Sex was the next big thing. Before school they stopped at the Brass Button in town, where they had waffles, then went into the ladies' room to apply black eye-liner and lipstick. Their town was way too tame for them. Everyone was a big bore. Everyone cared about people's opinions. Shelby and Helene were above all that. They were ready for more.

On the night they ran away they climbed out their windows and met on the corner of Western Avenue. There was over a foot of snow; it was the squeaky, sparkly kind that stuck to their eyelashes and fell down their necks. They both had backpacks stuffed with clothes. Helene also had her favorite stuffed animal, Mr. Brady, with her. He was a pink hippo she'd had since she was born, a very unattractive creature Helene refused to be without. Mr. Brady had come to every sleepover and every basketball game and now he was coming along to New York City to start a new life.

Their plan hadn't gotten past sleeping in Penn Station overnight and having enough money to take a cab to Helene's cousin's dorm room at Columbia the following morning. They hadn't thought about the snow. The drifts were so tall, they kept falling down and laughing.

"We're soaking wet!" Shelby remembers saying. "How can we go to New York looking like this?"

Shelby had long brown hair and her complexion was glowy from the cold weather.

"We'll buy new clothes," Helene assured her. "Better ones."

Helene always had good ideas. She was the daring one. The one with courage.

"We'll go to Lord & Taylor and say we forgot our charge cards. I'll say my name is Missy Jeffries and then we'll charge everything to her account."

Missy was a girl in their class who always talked about her shopping trips to New York. She was a snob, so she deserved whatever she got. It was a brilliant plan. Shelby remembers feeling instantly comforted, even though her feet were freezing.

They had picked this particular snowy night because it was Helene's birthday. At midnight Helene would turn fourteen. It was a major life event. Helene had the rest of her life in front of her. They were trying to make the last train out of Huntington, so they had to hurry. They got serious and began walking in the road where the drifts were not as tall. Shelby remembers the feeling of snowflakes falling on her face. She remembers how bright the stars were. So bright it hurt to look at them.

They had fifteen minutes to make the train, and they might have made it if a car hadn't pulled up alongside them. There weren't any other cars on the road; the plows hadn't been through yet. But here was a car fishtailing along, nearly going into a spin when it stopped. It was Chris Wilson and his best friend Pete something or other. They'd stolen Chris's mom's Volvo.

"Need a ride?" Chris called. "This car's like an armored truck. It will go through anything."

"No thanks," Shelby called back.

"Unless you're going to the train station." Helene gave Shelby a look and mouthed *Chris Wilson*. Helene had a huge crush on him. Always had, always would.

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They got into the car. Helene crept into the back and before Shelby could get in, Chris got in the back alongside Helene. Shelby was stuck sitting up front with Pete.

“This is the first time I’ve ever driven,” Pete confided.

“Oh great,” Shelby had said. “Well, we have a train to catch. Can you manage to follow Route 110 to the train station?”

Shelby thinks the car spun out right across from the restaurant where Ben Mink is having his wedding. No one was hurt, but they hit a lamppost. In the back seat, Helene laughed. She got kind of hysterical. She was giddy with the possibility of Chris Wilson. The snow was coming down so hard Shelby couldn’t see out the windshield. One thing was certain: they weren’t going to New York City. They all got out of the car and started walking; they made it as far as the restaurant, where they huddled in the entranceway. Shelby hadn’t even noticed the name of the restaurant. How could she know someday an ex-boyfriend would be getting married there while she was home in bed waiting for a delivery of Chinese food?

Some things began one way, and ended up reversed. Every step is either closer or farther away, depending where a person lands. Before Helene turned fourteen she’d been kissed by Chris Wilson. It was her dream, Shelby knew, a far bigger one than running away. Helene went out with Chris until he broke up with her in their senior year. A month before the second accident on Route 110. This accident was different. No lampposts, no walking away laughing. Helene and Shelby set out to drive past Chris’s house to spy on him. It was another winter night, but there were no stars, just a white, swirly sky. There was a layer of black ice under the snow. No one could have seen it. No one would have known until it was too late.

When Helene’s neck was broken, Shelby fell to pieces as well. So that’s what winter means to her now. Pure, cold despair. She can never stay warm. If she’d gone to Ben’s wedding, she would have had to wear long underwear under her skirt; she would have worn her heavy boots that she’s lined with thick gray felt. She could have cut in during the first dance. In her long black skirt and her hiking boots, no one would have imagined her to be Ben’s old girlfriend, the one who dumped him and then regretted it, the way she’s regretted everything in her life.

Tonight Shelby watches snowflakes and waits for the delivery guy to bring her dinner. He arrives in less than twenty minutes, braving the storm on bicycle, skidding down the empty avenue. Shelby buzzes him in. She'll have to tip him well, even though she doesn't believe in tipping. She riffles through her desk drawer for an extra five. She opens the door and shouts down, "It's me. Shelby. Third floor."

The dogs get excited when they hear the deliveryman's footsteps. He's young, newly arrived in this country. He's been delivering for five months. When Shelby asked what happened to the guy before him, the new deliveryman only shrugged. Tonight Shelby notices he's not wearing gloves, that his hands are red, that he's leaving a puddle of water in the hall. He smiles graciously, dips his head when Shelby gives him the five dollars.

When he leaves, Shelby fixes a plate of food and grabs some chopsticks. She sits in bed, surrounded by her dogs who watch her eat orange-flavored chicken, broccoli with oyster sauce, spring rolls with a delicate plum sauce, General Gao's chicken. Her dogs are patient; they watch her every move. Container to mouth. They wait for little miracles: a spill, dropped grains of rice, a piece of chicken appearing from the heavens.

Shelby packs the leftovers away for tomorrow's dinner, then gives each dog a container with some chicken and rice mixed with kibble. She loves her dogs. They are so serious when they eat. So concentrated. They are not thinking about weddings and car crashes. They are thinking about chicken and rice and how they love Shelby. She knows this last part is true because every once in a while one of their tails wags.

Shelby gets dressed to take the dogs for a walk before the storm gets any worse. She gets bundled up: long underwear, jeans, sweater, two pairs of socks, a down jacket, a black scarf wrapped around her head, some old leather gloves that once belonged to Ben Mink. Shelby gets the leashes and her key, then follows the dogs down the stairs. Amazing how Blinkie can keep up with the others when he's in a familiar place. When Blinkie's cornea burst he was already blind; all the same, it was a thousand dollars to have the surgery to remove his eye. Some people would have said it would have been better just to put Blinkie down. Ben Mink had sat on the edge of the bed and cried. He told Shelby they just couldn't afford it. She borrowed the money from her mother and never repaid the loan. Looking back on it, Shelby thinks that was when she decided to

dump Ben. She went out with a veterinarian for a while, thinking things would be different, but they weren't.

There's no traffic. No people. Just snow. Tenth Avenue looks like Siberia; the wind blows from the west, the river. Shelby clips on her dogs' leashes and heads in that direction. On the way home, when she's tired, the wind will be at her back and will help push her along. For now, she hunkers down, shoulder against the wind. Her dogs are invigorated; even Buddy, the poodle she inherited from her mother, is hopping into drifts, ears flapping. He was a spoiled softy when Shelby first took him home, and he still sleeps in her bed, but he's barking at the wind and pulling on his lead, wanting to run. Shelby takes a deep gulp of cold air; she does her best to run and keep up with the dogs. She turns down Eleventh and crosses the West Side Highway. It's empty. No traffic. The plows haven't even been out yet.

It's a frozen moment in time. The only moving pieces are Shelby and the dogs and the snowflakes. They walk north. Shelby's white dogs all but disappear into the whiteness all around them. Shelby stops and looks down into the river. Ice and waves. Standing on the pilings of a pier is a man in a black coat. A young man who waves at her. A puzzle piece Shelby didn't expect.

"Looking for my dog," the man calls up to her. He has long dark hair covered with snow.

"Did he run off?" Shelby calls back.

"He always does in the snow." The stranger climbs back up, over the rocks, over the railing. "Nice dogs," he says to Shelby.

"Oh, yeah," Shelby says. "Looks like they can't say the same about you."

The General, Shelby's smartest dog, is growling at the stranger, and the other three, who are usually so friendly, aren't in the least bit waggly. The Great Pyrenees, Pablo, stands perfectly still. He's like a dog made out of ice. No response. Thinking things over.

"Dogs like me," the man in the black coat says.

"These ones don't."

Shelby laughs, a little embarrassed. She tugs on the General's leash. The General goes right on growling, and Shelby feels something up her backbone. She feels the way things can change and become inverted.

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She remembers the moment before she and Helene hit the black ice in a way that it is far more real to her than any here and now will ever be. They were laughing. They were plotting. They were both alive, full of blood and spirit and breath.

“What kind of dog do you have?” Shelby asks the stranger from the pier.

If this were a story, it could go in a thousand directions. Shelby could fall in love with this man or be murdered by him; she might recognize him as a neighbor, an outlaw, a doctor, a thief.

“A mutt,” the man in the black coat says.

A liar, a beautiful soul, a pickpocket.

“He’s half wolf. Maybe that’s what your dogs pick up. His scent. It scares the hell out of some dogs.”

“Not mine,” Shelby says.

“I rescued him from a pound in Minnesota,” the young man says. “I was working there and they were going to put him down. So I stole him.”

Shelby laughs. She has stolen three of her four dogs. Rescued them from abuse and neglect. She wonders if any of this guy’s story is true. If he ever was in Minnesota or had a dog.

“I let him run when there’s no one around. He always comes back to me,” the young man tells Shelby.

Maybe Shelby was supposed to be here, at this exact place, this exact time. The man in the black coat brushes snow out of his hair and takes a wool cap from his pocket. Shelby would rather be on this snowy street than be the bride in a restaurant in Huntington. She will probably never have a wedding dress. She will never go to Aruba on a honeymoon.

Shelby’s big dog, Pablo, lets out a deep woof. Pablo is usually the strong silent type, but now he’s barking furiously and he pulls hard, hard enough to pull his leash out of Shelby’s grasp. He takes off across the highway, leash trailing.

“Shit,” Shelby mutters. She picks up Blinky and starts running, dragging the General and Buddy with her. Maybe it’s the wolf dog, maybe it’s the wind, but something has spooked Pablo. His breed comes from a land of snow, and he has disappeared into the distance, white against

white. "Shit," Shelby shouts. "Pablo."

She hears the man in the black coat calling something, but she can't really hear him. The wind is so loud. The beat of her pulse in her head is throbbing. Other than that there is total silence. White and wind and pulse. For a moment Shelby feels lost; the snow is blowing sideways so she can't even read the street signs. Is there asphalt beneath her feet? The orbs of the traffic lights cast green and red shadows. Shelby thinks she sees Pablo half a block up. He looks like a mountain, a pile of snow. Shelby runs faster; she's breathing so hard her lungs feel burning hot, about to explode. It is Pablo.

"Stay," Shelby calls to him.

But in fact he's not moving. When she gets to him, Shelby sees why. There is a little girl in a doorway and Pablo is lying down beside her. No shoes. Little feet. Pajamas and a robe. A little girl with black hair, nearly frozen. Shelby lets Blinkie down, then crouches on the sidewalk. She puts her arms around the child and pulls her inside her heavy old coat.

Somewhere there is a beautiful man looking for a wolf; somewhere the ice is freezing.

"What's your name?" Shelby says.

She is taking the little girl's pulse as she questions her, fingers fitted around the small cold wrist. Steady and strong. They still have time. Shelby reaches into her pocket for her cell phone. She dials 911. She is facing the river. She can't see a thing, but together she and the operator figure out where they are.

"Do you know your name?" Shelby asks.

"Elsa," the little girl says.

Elsa is warming up inside Shelby's coat. Shelby can feel little feet against her waist. Tiny blocks of ice.

"Brrrr," Shelby says in a shivery voice.

Elsa almost manages a smile. She has perfect teeth. Inside Shelby's coat, she wiggles her toes.

Pablo and the other dogs are circled around them. They're on a corner facing the West Side Highway. They aren't lost, only misplaced. When the snow stops falling, Shelby will see the ambulance; she'll see clear to the river, the silver water, the veins of ice, the clouds above, farther and farther away.