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Abstract

The Chosen Changeling is a short story set in modern day Ireland following a seven-year-old girl named Bridget. She learns that she is a changeling, meaning a pixie who was swapped with a human baby during infancy. Her non-human nature manifests itself as autism and a metal allergy. The idea for this comes from a modern understanding of autism that realizes old myths of changelings line up very closely with what we now understand to be autism. This piece is not meant to suggest autistic people are not human, but rather to use this old misunderstanding as a means to explore a viewpoint that's not often represented in literature. This piece explores a frightening and fascinating fantasy world through the lens of a young autistic girl as she faces the consequences of learning she is not her mum's original child. She must also decide what this means to her in terms of deciding right and wrong. This is a story about a parent's unconditional love and acceptance.

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It was almost over. Bridget only needed to get a little bit further to complete the level. She focused on the TV mounted high on the wall, determined to win.

“Bridget!” her mum called.

Bridget ignored the voice.

A few seconds passed and Bridget heard her mum call again. Bridget couldn’t afford to respond, though. She was so close.... just one more ledge and ... there! The game quickly celebrated her success before moving to the next level. This one looked a bit trickier. Bridget tapped the controls.

Her mum’s footsteps sounded behind her.

“Bridget McCarthy. Can you hear me?”

“Uh huh,” Bridget said, still playing.

“I’ve asked you already to put your breakfast dishes away today; can you please go do that?”

Bridget didn’t really feel like answering. She knew it wasn’t really a question. She decided to stay quiet and continued playing.

“Sweetie, I need you to go put your dishes away,” her mum said.

“No,” Bridget said.

“Excuse me, young lady,” her mum began. “I did not ask if it pleased your highness; I’ve asked you to do something.”

Bridget decided she didn’t like this talk very much. She paid even more attention to her game. That, at least, had interesting dialogue.

Her mum, however, continued speaking, “I know perfectly well you can pause that game anytime. Go take care of your dishes or I’m turning it off.”

“Just let me finish this level!” Bridget begged.

Her mum walked around the couch, scooping up the remote before standing next to the TV. “You lost that opportunity a while ago with your stubbornness. So it’s up to you, pause now and come back, or it goes away for the day,” she said.

Well, this was just mean, Bridget thought. Her blood boiled at the unfairness. She would have curled her hands into fists if they weren’t currently occupied by the game which was much more fun than dishes. She made her mad face instead, the corners of her lips turning all the way down.

“Bridget.” That was her mum’s warning voice, which made Bridget even more mad. She growled.

“All right,” her mum said. She turned off the TV.

Bridget howled. That was her game! It wasn’t saved and now she’d have to play that level all over again! And it had been hard! She stood up from the

couch and stormed up to the TV to press the power button manually. Her mum blocked the way though, standing directly in front of the TV. That wasn’t fair at all. Bridget was only seven. She wasn’t nearly as tall as her mum yet.

“You have dishes to put away,” her mum repeated.

Now Bridget didn’t want to take care of her dishes even more. How dare she? Bridget glared at her mum with her feet planted firmly and fists fixed at her sides. She wished her mum would just disappear. She tried to imagine it. She could feel her breathing grow heavier as her anger grew and her heart pounded.

Her mum stood silently for a moment, then sighed. She flattened her palms and pushed them down twice, the signal that Bridget could, and should, go away for a bit to cool down. Bridget stormed off to her room to grab her violin case before heading outside.

She sat in the backyard, glaring toward the house as she snatched handfuls of grass from the ground. She watched the door to be sure her mum wouldn’t follow her outside. She liked to come here with her violin when she got especially angry. She began to play one of her favorite songs—a lullaby her mum would sometimes sing to her. Her mum always said Bridget was very talented and encouraged her to keep playing. It was easy for Bridget to practice her music since it was one of her favorite things to do. Her mum sometimes urged her to play more than just her violin, perhaps her new flute she’d gotten for her seventh birthday. Bridget didn’t like her flute as much, it was too metallic and cold. Some metal gave her a rash, like iron. Her mum did her best not to keep any in the house. But her flute was fine, it wasn’t iron. Bridget still didn’t like it much, though.

She focused all her attention now on the song she played. She could feel her breathing and heart rate slow down. Nothing mattered but this song that made everything all right. She played so intently, she didn’t hear quiet footsteps creeping up behind her. She didn’t notice someone sit down right in front of her. She didn’t realize she was surrounded until the song ended and she opened her eyes.

Bridget gasped and fell backwards on the grass. Three creatures sat around her with green tinted skin and pointed ears, covered lightly from head to toe in a shimmering dust. The creatures were tall, but still shorter than Bridget’s mum. Their clothes combined old clothing and plants. One wore a leaf skirt and an old hoodie. Another had leaves sticking out of messy green hair while wearing a flower-print dress. One wore tat-

tered jeans and a tube top made of large leaves sewn together. The creatures sat around her on the grass all leaning in and staring right into her with their abnormally wide eyes. It made Bridget very uncomfortable. She began plucking up grass again to ground herself.

No one spoke for a few seconds until Bridget finally spluttered, "Who ... what are you?"

The creature sitting directly in front of her with the flower dress smiled. "We're pixies, Bridget. Surely you knew that. I'm Sidhea."

Bridget had heard about pixies. They weren't supposed to be real, Bridget was pretty sure, but sometimes things would go missing and her mum blamed pixies. Once, she'd heard someone saying that everyone thought this one girl's uncle was drunk when really, he'd been enchanted by pixies.

"Has she forgotten?" the pixie with the hoodie asked.

"Of course she has, they don't usually remember this long," Sidhea replied.

"Come on," the pixie with the leaf top said. "Let's take her with us. She can help."

The two others nodded in agreement and the one with the jeans and leaf top grabbed Bridget's wrist and started pulling.

Bridget hated people grabbing her; her wrist felt suffocated and her heart pounded. She screeched and twisted to free herself.

"All right, just follow us," the pixie said. He and the other two skipped towards the fence at the edge of her backyard. Sidhea leaped over and stood before the forest that lay on the other side.

Bridget froze. She had heard stories about that forest. She thought they were just spooky stories big kids told to scare little kids, but she wasn't eager to find out. "I'm not supposed to go in there. It's dangerous. And I'm not going anywhere with you guys, I don't even know your names."

The hooded pixie bowed. "Coilaan, at your service."

"I'm Jaervin," the other pixie said. "And the forest isn't dangerous, it's our home. Pixies live in there, that's why they tell you it's dangerous." He chuckled.

"Come on, it'll be fun," Sidhea urged.

"No thanks, I wanna stay here," Bridget said. She liked her backyard; it was familiar and safe. The forest was not.

"Please?" Coilaan begged. "We really want your help."

Bridget looked back at the house. Still no sign of her mum coming out. Besides, how often did she meet pixies? They said it was safe and she'd be with them. Maybe they would all become friends. She put her violin back in its case and picked it up, following the pixies into the forest.

The forest was dark even though it was the middle of the day. The trees grew close together and blocked most of the sunlight. As they traveled further and further, it grew more difficult for Bridget to see. She was beginning to regret her decision.

"Where are we going?" Bridget asked. "Why are you taking me with you?"

Excited murmuring broke out among the pixies. Finally, they stopped and faced her.

"You really don't remember us, do you? We're the ones who left you," Sidhea said.

"Left me?"

"With the hyumun woman, with the long red hair in the house by the forest edge," Jaervin said. He said "human" very strangely, like the word was thick and syrupy in his mouth, emphasizing the "yew."

"You mean my mum?" Bridget asked. "What do you mean you left me with her?"

"Tell her, go on," Sidhea cackled.

Coilaan grinned. "You're not one of them, you know. You're a changeling child."

"What's a changeling?"

"A pixie child swapped with a hyumun child. Oh it's such great fun. So much fuss."

Bridget's eyes grew wide, then she squinted at him. "No, I'm not. How come I don't look like you then?"

Jaervin rolled his eyes. "We put a permanent illusion on you of course, can't just go swapping hyumun babies with little green pixies. They'd notice right away. It's not as fun then. Better to let you grow up and cause them grief as they try to figure out what happened to their baby. They never do quite know what to do with them. They bite people, or they go quiet a lot, don't get along with the other kids, just act strange, they do. Drives the hyumuns mad. They can't understand their children's behavior, can they? Don't understand why the iron hurts their child neither. No, pixies don't like iron. That's how you can tell."

Bridget stopped walking. "Wait, you mean I was swapped with a human baby? My mum's actual daughter?"

Sidhea giggled, "Yep, it was great fun. Oh! We

should show her!” She looked around excitedly at the other pixies, “Please, Jaervin?”

“Show me what?” Bridget asked.

“The hyumun you replaced, of course! Oh it’d be so funny!” Sidhea howled. She motioned further into the forest. “She’s over there, we all bring her food sometimes. She’s very fun to play with, you’ll love her.”

They stopped at a tree with a door built into it.

“She’s in there,” Sidhea whispered.

Bridget walked over and put her hand on the knob. She hesitated. Would this other girl be mean to her? Maybe she’d yell at Bridget for stealing her life. Bridget considered not going in. She could just stay out here and not go in at all and never see this girl. There would never be another her, just Bridget and her mum. Her mum would never have to know that Bridget wasn’t actually hers. Bridget wanted to know what the other her was like though. Her curiosity clawed at her chest and Bridget opened the door.

The door led to a tunnel with a ladder leading down. A soft light shone from the bottom and Bridget climbed down the trunk to find a small candlelit room. She paused and set her violin case at her feet. The floor was covered in dirt and leaves and filled with old junk: some toys, an old couch, a broken computer. But at the center of the room sat a little girl just Bridget’s size. This girl was much thinner than Bridget, with bony wrists. Her stomach stuck out more than Bridget’s. Her hair was red like Bridget’s but yellower and messier, with hair ties and clips randomly scattered throughout. Her eyes were brown like Bridget’s mum’s and not green like Bridget’s. In fact, the little girl looked quite a bit like Bridget’s—no—like the little girl’s mum. The girl stared into Bridget with wide eyes, the same overwhelming stare the pixies had given her.

“Who are you?” The girl asked without a trace of fear. She came very close to Bridget and grabbed her hand and sucked on one of her fingers. Bridget jerked her hand back with a yell and wiped the saliva on her jumper.

“I’m ...” Bridget gulped. “I’m Bridget.” She paused for a moment, looking the girl over with suspicion. “What’s your name?”

The girl cackled. Bridget didn’t think she liked the girl’s laugh very much.

“The pixies call me Breejen, they also call me hyumun. That’s what they say I am, their precious little hyumun Breejen. They come down here and bring me food. Do you have some for me? Are you here to give

me more food?” She began clawing at Bridget’s pants pockets.

Bridget shoved Breejen away. “No, I haven’t got any food for you. Get off me!”

Breejen flopped down and started playing with a doll whose hair had been ripped out. Bridget looked around the room. The dim candles seemed too bright now. The room felt too small. The sound of Breejen hitting the doll on the leaves grated like a screeching violin in Bridget’s ears. She needed to leave now. She grabbed her violin and scrambled for the ladder, climbing back up.

A pair of pixies hovered by the door when she came out.

“Met the other you, did you?” They cackled hysterically. “Took her place, you did. Yep.” More cackling. “Sneaky little changeling swapped with the hyumun!” The pair rolled around clutching their sides as they howled with laughter.

Their laughter sounded even more aggressive than Breejen’s noisy leaves. It scraped against her ears like a nail file. Bridget despised the texture of nail files; they made her want to rip her nails out. Her eyes burned with tears.

She ran off through the trees for a minute before plopping down on the forest floor to sob. She wanted to go home, but she had no idea where she was. Her mum would probably be super mad when she got back. It had been so long since she’d gone out to cool down. She wanted to be safe in her house with her mum, who wasn’t really her mum. She was Breejen’s mum and Bridget had stolen her. She’d stolen her name and her room and her life. Her mum would never want her back now. She wouldn’t want a pixie, she’d want her real human child who wasn’t a thief and who probably wouldn’t have incidents either and get stubborn and silent. Bridget slammed her fists onto the forest floor as if she could punch a hole and fall right back into her house. She curled up and muffled her wails with her legs. She wished now that she had just put the dishes away; then she would never be lost in the woods.

Bridget heard footsteps approaching and quickly wiped her eyes. When she looked up, she saw Coilaan grinning mischievously.

“Hey, Bridget. We still want your help. Come on.” He motioned for her to follow.

Still wiping tears from her eyes, Bridget sniffed, grabbed her violin case, and stood to follow him. At least someone wanted her. Coilaan skipped through the

trees. Bridget trailed behind him until they reached the edge of the woods where Sidhea and Jaervin were waiting. Bridget looked out, squinting in the low sunlight, and saw a collection of people gathered for an outdoor concert several yards away. They sat with their backs to the woods and the band members busily prepared their instruments, oblivious to the the pixies' presence.

"So," Jaervin began, turning to Bridget. "What we need from you is for you to play your instrument."

"My violin?" Bridget asked.

"Oh yes," Sidhea said, nodding eagerly. "We needed another musician and while we were by your house, we heard you playing and just knew we needed to use you! You're very good and you're a pixie."

"So you'll play that," Jaervin continued. "And Sidhea will play her pipe. She's got much more experience in inducing trances than you, but your music will help a lot. So you two will play and once they're entranced, Coilaan and I will be able to take control."

"We can make them tear out their hair!" Coilaan laughed. "Or dance around in just their underwear!" Jaervin and Sidhea chuckled along.

"You two will have to keep playing the whole time. Otherwise the trance will break," Jaervin said.

"No," Bridget interjected. "I won't do it."

Jaervin blinked. "What do you mean you won't do it?"

"I mean no. I won't play." Bridget did not want to be a part of this. These people hadn't done anything to hurt her. It didn't feel right and didn't sound fun. The idea scared her.

"What, being raised by a hyumun make you soft or something?" Jaervin demanded.

But Bridget just stood with her feet planted firmly and glared at him with her fists at her sides. She wished Jaervin would disappear. She tried to imagine it. She could feel her breathing grow heavier as her anger grew and her heart pounded.

"You're one of us, you know. You're a pixie! If you're going to be a pixie you've got to help us out. Sidhea can't get control of all of them, there's too many."

Bridget had never asked to be a pixie in the first place. She stayed silent.

Jaervin's voice got louder, "Well you're sure stubborn like a pixie, aren't you? Well I can play that game too. I can make you hurt. You need more reminder you're one of us? I'll make it so you have no other choice."

He grabbed her wrist with a surprisingly strong grasp and dragged her back through the trees. Bridget screamed and held her violin to her chest with her other hand. She tried to wriggle free, but it was useless.

They stopped in front of a pit in the ground and Jaervin shoved her in. Bridget screamed as she fell, clutching her violin. She hit the ground with a thud and an ache immediately spread through her legs. Despite the pain, Bridget dashed to the side of the pit, trying to climb up. The walls curved in though, making the entrance smaller than the pit; there was no way for Bridget to get any grip in the firm dirt. She screeched and clawed at her prison, yelling for Jaervin to let her out, but he had disappeared. Bridget could do nothing but sob.

She didn't know how much time had passed, but eventually she heard footsteps nearby. She looked up to see Coilaan peering over the edge.

"Come with me," he said with a grin. He tossed a rope ladder over the edge for her.

Bridget considered not going for a minute. Why should she listen to him? He let Jaervin throw her in. She really wanted out though. Bridget grabbed her violin and climbed out. She didn't realize Jaervin was there until he clutched her wrist again and pulled her along. Bridget screamed and tried to kick him.

Jaervin dragged Bridget to a small clearing of trees. Bridget gasped. Her mum stood right there in the clearing.

"Mum!"

"Bridget!" Her mum cried and moved toward her, but a couple of pixies held her back. "Give me my daughter!" she yelled, straining against their grasp.

Jaervin shook his finger. "All in due time, Ms. McCarthy. But you come into our forest..." He grinned. "You play by our rules. Surely you know not to mess with pixies."

Bridget's mum scowled at Jaervin but stood still. Bridget, meanwhile, continued to wriggle in Jaervin's grasp.

"We found her wandering in the woods, looking for *you* I suppose," Jaervin huffed. Then he brightened. "Ah, there's our missing guest." Jaervin motioned to another side of the clearing. A moment later, Breejen waddled out, accompanied by Sidhea.

"Now that everyone's here, let us begin," Jaervin said. "Ms. McCarthy, though you may not know it, about seven years ago your child was swapped with one of our own. A changeling."

“What?” Bridget’s mum demanded.

“This girl—” Jaervin motioned to Bridget, still caught in his grasp. She wiggled her arm, but he only gripped it tighter. “--is not really your child. She is a pixie.”

Bridget couldn’t help peeking up at her mum, who wasn’t really her mum. She saw the shocked look on her face and swiftly brought her eyes back down again. This was it. It was over. Her mum would never want her back. She choked out a sob. “Mum!”

“Silence!” Jervin hissed at her.

“This girl, however,” Jaervin continued, pointing to Breejen. “This is the child you bore.”

Bridget glared at Breejen. Stupid human girl. Breejen smiled with a blank expression, seemingly unaware of the drama.

“So, Ms. McCarthy,” Jaervin said with a hint of mischief in his tone. “Will you claim your stolen child?”

Bridget didn’t want to watch but she couldn’t tear her eyes away. Not-her-mum took a shuddering breath and closed her eyes. Then she looked between Bridget and Jaervin with a scowl. Her mum knew better than to go against Jaervin’s warning about messing with pixies in their own forest. She must not have been as shocked as Bridget had been at the pixies’ presence. That explained why Bridget wasn’t supposed to play in here. *Too late now*, Bridget thought dismally. Finally, her mum approached Breejen.

Jaervin leaned down close to Bridget’s ear. “That woman will choose her real child now. You will have nowhere else to go. This is what you get for spoiling the prank,” he hissed.

Bridget stayed silent. She watched as Breejen’s mum knelt in front of the girl. Breejen stared at her mum with her lopsided smile.

“Hello,” her mum began. “I’d like to be your mum again if that’s all right with you.”

Breejen gave a single nod and giggled.

“What are you called?” Her mum asked.

“Breejen.”

“How about I call you Bree, would you like that?”

Bree smiled wider.

“Wonderful, now you may return safely home with your child,” Jaervin said, grinning wickedly at Bridget.

Bridget closed her eyes as they welled up with tears. She was never going to see her mum again; she would have to live with the mean pixies forever. Tears rolled down her cheeks when she heard her mum’s voice.

“May I?”

Bridget opened her eyes to see her mum’s extended hand. Bridget swapped her violin to the hand still in Jaervin’s grasp. She took her mum’s hand in her free one, which was knackered from carrying a violin all day.

“Thank you, sir. We’ll be going now,” her mum told Jaervin.

Jaervin looked taken aback. Still holding Bridget’s hand, he tilted his head. “But, you are returning home with your child...” he said in a tone sounding more like a question.

“Yes. Bree is my child and so is Bridget. You have given me back the one I birthed, but you never asked me to give up my other child.”

“But she isn’t your child, she was a changeling. She’s a pixie. She’s one of us!” Jaervin sputtered.

Her mum straightened, towering over Jaervin. “I have chosen her as my child, changeling or not. I have raised her and sworn to love and protect her. As long as I live, she will have a home available with me as my child.”

Jaervin opened and closed his mouth a few times.

“You did say I may return home safely with my child, so I expect we won’t be troubled by any pixies on our way back,” Bridget’s mum reminded Jaervin.

Coilaan and Sidhea howled with laughter.

“She got you!” She got you!” Coilaan taunted. “You granted them safe passage!”

Jaervin scowled and finally let go of Bridget’s wrist. Bridget flexed her free wrist and gave Jaervin her best stink-eye.

Bridget’s mum gave a quick nod. “Let’s go girls. It’s time we went home.”