

## Changeling

by Dean Whitlock

Dean Whitlock's first published story, "The Million Dollar Wound," appeared in our Jan. 1987 issue. After that debut, he published about a dozen stories in our magazine, *Asimov's*, and elsewhere, but for most of the past decade he has been focusing his talents on community theater and most recently on books for younger readers; his fantasy novels *Sky Carver* and *Raven* have been published and more are in the works. You can find out more about him and his work at [www.deanwhitlock.co](http://www.deanwhitlock.co). "Changeling" is fantastical but it is not, strictly speaking, fantasy. We think you'll like it anyway.

She was the homeliest person he had ever met. Gavin hated to use the word ugly, because it was an ugly word, and he'd been raised to be polite. But it came to him anyway.

"It's all right," she said. "I usually work in the kitchen. We're just shorthanded tonight."

Gavin blushed and glanced down at the menu, too flustered to focus on the words. Had he been that obvious?

"Uh, what are the specials?" he asked. He put on a polite smile.

She told him, but he missed most of them. He couldn't ignore her face. It was hard to pinpoint just what about her was ugly. There was no single ghastly feature; it was just that nothing fit, as if all the pieces came from different people. The nose was a little too long and lumpy; the eyes a little too wide and a little too far apart, and the left one wandered about on its own. Her forehead was too broad, her chin too pointed, her teeth too small for the mouth, which was too wide for her face. Her hair was simply plain, her eyes unremarkably brown, her skin pale, without a single freckle or dimple to give it charm. She was neither thin nor fat, and her waitress outfit—a pink smock with a frilly white apron—hung on her like its only purpose was to fend off the occasional, undoubtedly accidental glance.

She finished the list of specials and waited for him to choose. He caught himself staring at her wandering eye and quickly looked at the menu again. All he could see now were the prices, much higher than he'd expected, almost as high as those on the elaborate menus posted outside of the fancy restaurants he'd passed over. Even the specials were more than he could really afford. He'd figured Dan and Ann's Diner would be

reasonable; hopefully even cheap.

“Do you need more time?” she asked.

“No! No. Sorry. I’m just a little spacey. I’ve been driving all day.”

“Heading where?” She didn’t sound insulted. Gavin relaxed a little.

“Here. I mean, not *here*, not Dan and Ann’s specifically. Portsmouth. I just moved here.”

“Where from?” She sounded interested, and Gavin relaxed some more. He’d been feeling lonely after unpacking in his little apartment in the big, empty house. Sitting by himself in a booth in the half empty diner hadn’t really helped. And he could never start conversations himself, with anyone, let alone a strange-looking waitress in a strange town.

“Kansas,” he replied. “Well, Pittsburgh. That’s where I drove from today. I’ve been there this past year, but I grew up in Kansas.”

“Welcome to Oz.” She must have read something in his expression then, because she quickly added. “Sorry. I’ll bet you get that all the time.”

He shrugged. “Just don’t call me Dorothy.”

“Okay, Toto, what would you like for dinner? The cook’s fresh out of kibble.”

He relaxed completely. “I guess I deserved that. My name’s Gavin. Gavin Knight.”

“Ah, a knight errant, from the Western Lands, by way of Pittsburgh. And I was supposed to say, ‘Hello, I’m Amanita. I’ll be your server this evening.’ I always forget.”

“Amanita?” He looked for a smile, but her homely face was unreadable. He decided she was pulling his leg. “As in, Extremely Poisonous Death’s Head Amanita Mushroom?”

She arched a heavy eyebrow. “You know what it means! What, you’re a mycologist?”

“No, I’m a—”

“A botanist, a doctor, a poison specialist?”

“No, I—”

“A poisoner! That’s it, you’re Mad Kansas Jack, the cat poisoner.”

He laughed. “Not hardly. I’m a grad student, at UNH.”

“Even worse. Why aren’t you living in Durham, on campus?” she asked.

“My advisor lives here. He’s got a big, old place over in what-cha-call-it, Strawberry Banke. Or is it Bankee?” He made point of pronouncing the final e.

She smiled, which mellowed her features a little, though not nearly enough. “It’s Bank without the ee, at least among us groundlings.”

“Do you live here in Portsmouth?”

“Ayuh.”

He smiled at her pronunciation. “A born and bred New Englander, huh?”

“Nope,” she said. “I’m a changeling.”

“A what?”

“A changeling. I was left in a basket on the front step of the richest man in town. Right there in Strawberry Banke.” Her smile dared him to disbelieve.

Gavin decided to take the dare. “That makes you a foundling. A changeling is switched with a human baby.”

Her eyebrows lifted slightly; now her smile said, *Do I look human?* Gavin blushed again, certain he’d insulted her, but all she really said was, “Foundlings don’t have second sight.”

Gavin couldn’t help glancing at her wandering eye, which was staring right at him at the moment. “Second sight. Okay. Like, see the future.”

“That’s right.”

Gavin wondered if she was pulling his leg again or simply crazy. It was impossible to read her face. “Okay. If you can see the future, why did you have to ask where I was from?”

She smiled. “That’s not the future, it’s the past.”

“Then why do you have to ask what I want to order?”

She snorted. “That’s the present. And it’s far too unimportant.”

Gavin surrendered. “Okay. What do you see in my future?”

She closed her right eye and let the left one wander his way. Then it wandered the other way. Gavin stared, fascinated. She reopened her right eye and regarded him curiously.

“What?” he asked.

“You’re going to meet a small, gray stranger,” she announced.

Gavin laughed. “Safe call! Everyone here is a stranger to me.”

“Small and gray?” she asked.

“Okay, that’s a new one,” he allowed. “Should I be afraid?”

“No, no dangers looming. But you will fall in love.”

“With a small, gray stranger?” he asked.

“No,” she replied. “Well, yes, but that will be completely platonic. You’ve already met the true love of your life. Now, my turn to ask a question: What’ll you have, Gavin?”

I guess the seance is over, he thought. “A grilled cheese sandwich. And a glass of milk.”

“Fries? Salad? Batter-dipped mushrooms?” She flashed an evil grin. Her small teeth looked sharp.

“No, thanks. I’m on a budget.”

“Ah, the poor, wandering student; the mendicant friar. Not a knight errant at all.”

She took the menu and walked around the counter and into the kitchen. Dan and Ann’s was done up in a retro style that went with the waitress outfits: red vinyl upholstery, chrome edging, Formica tabletops, and long windows between the counter and the kitchen, where a cook was hustling in front of the grill. Apart from a greatly sagging pot belly, he looked normal. Amanita—that couldn’t really be her name, could it? Whatever, she seemed to be making his sandwich herself. She glanced up, and Gavin quickly turned to the miniature jukebox fastened to the wall at the end of his booth. He studied the list of titles, but the only one he recognized was “Love Me Tender,” by Elvis. He guessed they all must be from the ancient days of rock-and-roll.

Not that he could afford to waste a quarter on music. He had arrived with very little left in his pocket, and he wouldn’t be paid for another two weeks. Gavin sighed. He was supposed to be in Scotland right now, researching medieval folklore with his new advisor, Professor Jury, but the funding had fallen through. Gavin’s had at least; Dr. Jury had left without him, and wouldn’t be back until halfway through the fall term. Gavin, meanwhile, was supposed to do his half of the research on the Web and at the UNH library, as well as take care of the good professor’s big old drafty block of a house up in Strawberry Banke without the ee. Not the best of ways to get to know his new department and new town. He was not good at making his own introductions.

Amanita brought his sandwich, and he was going to ask her if that was really her name, but business had picked up and he didn’t want to get in the way. The meal went down quickly, with no one for him to talk with, but just as he was finishing, she hurried past and set down a plate with a big slice of apple pie on it.

“On the house, Friar Gavin,” she said. “Pay at the counter when you’re done.”

Then she was off to another table. She was busy in the kitchen when he left, so he couldn’t tell her how delicious the pie had been. He paid the other waitress (who had a very pretty face) and left feeling only half full.

Gavin walked around Portsmouth for a while. It was nothing like Kansas City or Pittsburgh, the only two cities he knew. The buildings were mostly brick, with shops or restaurants along the streets and apartments above. They were built low, too; the high steeple of a white church was

taller than most. It was quiet by his city standards, but then it was a chilly Tuesday evening in May. It was after eight p.m., and the shops were closed. Following his nose, he came to a river. The water was low, exposing muddy walls and pilings that gave off a pungent odor. He wondered what caused it; it wasn't unpleasant but was definitely unfamiliar. He looked downstream; the river swept out of sight around a broad curve lined with buildings and wharves. He knew from the map that Portsmouth was right by the Atlantic Ocean. He'd never seen an ocean before. He wondered if the odor came from the sea.

He decided to walk that way, just in case the sea was near. The city streets didn't border the river or follow any regular plan, so he wound this way and that, catching glimpses of water between the buildings. He wasn't worried about finding his way back to the professor's house—Gavin never got lost.

Soon he came to a park that bordered the river. Boats of various sizes, some with masts even, were tied up in neat rows along the docks. Children were playing on climbers, and couples strolled on the pathways or sat under the trees. Gavin started to feel lonely again. He turned onto a path that cut across the park toward the street, ready to find his way back to Strawberry Banke. As he passed between two tall oak trees, a voice called out.

"Hello!"

Gavin looked around. He couldn't see anyone close by, but the voice called again.

"Hello!"

Gavin looked down. A small, gray parrot was standing at the base of the left-hand oak tree. It cocked its head and peered up at him. Its eyes were bright and round and rimmed with white feathers. Its tail was bright red.

For a moment, Gavin could only stare. The hairs at the back of his neck prickled. A small, gray stranger? Then he laughed; he couldn't help it. Of all the impossible and ridiculous coincidences, this had to take the prize. He knelt and spoke to the parrot.

"Hello, yourself," Gavin said.

"Here's a pretty boy!" the parrot squawked.

“You are a pretty one,” Gavin agreed. “Polly want a cracker?”

The parrot blinked. “Bite me!” he replied.

“Okay,” Gavin murmured. “Either you’re not Polly or you don’t like crackers.”

He looked around to see if there was anyone near, and the parrot flew right to his shoulder. “Whoa!” Gavin exclaimed, almost toppling against the oak.

“Whoa Nelly!” the parrot agreed. It turned, batting his cheek with its red tail, leaned out, and looked him right in the eye. “Hello!” it said. “Let’s go!”

Gavin asked everyone nearby, even overcoming his shyness to interrupt a couple snuggling on a bench, but no one recognized the parrot. The bird, meanwhile, sat on his shoulder, ignoring the other people and occasionally rubbing its evil-looking beak against Gavin’s ear. Gavin finally stopped in the deepening twilight at a crossing of the paths.

“Now what?” he murmured.

“Go with the flow!” the parrot squawked.

It seemed like the only course. “I don’t have any food for you in the house,” Gavin told the bird. But he thought he knew where he might be able to get some.

He retraced his steps to Dan and Ann’s Diner. The parrot muttered on his shoulder, occasionally letting out a shrill whistle or a hoarse “Hello” at a passerby. As Gavin rounded the corner, he saw that the lights in the diner were off. His excitement dimmed a moment, until he realized that Amanita was at the front door, talking with two young men in suits. He hesitated, suddenly feeling foolish. He really wanted to hear what she’d say when she saw that her joking prediction had come so oddly true. But he also didn’t want to break into her real life.

He started to turn away when the parrot let out another whistle and squawked, “Go with the flow!”

Amanita saw them. Immediately, she waved and called, “Hi, Gavin!” She said something to the two men and hurried up the street.

“Well, look who you picked up,” she said.

“She’s a pretty girl!” the parrot squawked.

Gavin blinked. If anything, Amanita was homelier than he remembered. “Look,” he said, “I don’t want to interrupt you and your friends.”

She laughed. “Hardly. They’re Jehovah’s Witnesses. You have saved me from a cruel fate, oh knight in shining armor.”

He smiled. “You’re lucky they didn’t follow you over. I never know how to escape from them myself.”

“No problem. I just told them you were a practicing wiccan. Who’s your new friend?”

“I don’t know, but don’t call it Polly. I just found it in the park by the river.”

She pursed her lips and made chirping noises at the parrot. “Hey, pretty boy,” she said. “Have you got a name?” It chirped back. “Hmm. All right. How about Sancho?”

“Hello!” the parrot replied.

“I guess that’s a yes,” Gavin said. “Why Sancho?”

She smiled at him. “Every knight needs a squire. Come on, let’s get him some food.”

She let them back into Dan and Ann’s, sat them at the counter, and rummaged in the big cooler. Sancho nibbled gashes in the corner of a menu, nipping at Gavin’s finger when he tried to stop him. When Amanita came out of the kitchen with some fruit and lettuce cut up in a bowl, Sancho whistled his thanks and began tearing apart an orange slice.

“You’ve made a friend,” Gavin remarked.

“How about you?” she asked. “More pie and milk?”

“Hey, that was great,” Gavin said. “I really appreciate it, but I can’t keep—”



“Sure, you can,” she said.

So he ate the pie and drank the milk while Sancho ripped into his fruit and Amanita watched with her wandering eye. When he was done, she gave him a bag of fruit and veggies for Sancho and offered him a lift home. Gavin was about to refuse, but Sancho said, “Let’s go!” So he wound up climbing into the passenger seat of her car, which turned out to be a sky-blue vintage Volkswagen Beetle in nearly perfect repair.

“Nice wheels,” Gavin said.

“It suits me,” she replied, and Gavin wondered if she meant its odd looks.

She headed in the right direction, but missed the turn that would have taken them into the narrow, windy streets of Strawberry Banke.

“Hey,” Gavin began, “that’s—”

“Yes, I know. I’m kidnapping you,” she said. “You’ve never seen the ocean, right? I didn’t think so. I know a good spot. Don’t worry, it’s very public.”

“Go with the flow!” Sancho squawked, nipping at Gavin’s ear. Gavin took his hand off the door handle and tried to relax. He really was interested in seeing the ocean. But he wasn’t sure he could handle any more of her surprises.

It only took ten minutes or so along quiet, winding roads. They drove out of the city glare and into the pewter gleam of moonlight. The pungent smell from Portsmouth’s river receded, then resurged. They came out of the trees and houses and crossed a stretch of dark meadow land. Amanita stopped at a tee junction, and Gavin could hear a soft grumbling sound. She turned right, skirting a row of houses, then made a final turn and pulled the Beetle up to a bank of sand at the end of a narrow dead-end street. They got out. Gavin was shivering with anticipation. She led him through soft sand, up a low bank.

And there was a great sweep of darkness that stretched as far as he could see under the moonlight. The beach was a long, gentle slope of lighter gray that ended at a snaking line of silver, where waves thumped and growled at the lip of the sea. Stars dotted the horizon, and Gavin couldn’t tell where the sky ended and the sea began. He felt a moment of vertigo,

almost fear, at the unbroken immensity. The waves muttered a warning.

“Thar she blows!” Sancho cried, and Gavin jumped.

“Oh, yeah,” he said.

He tore his eyes from the grip of the sea’s expanse. To right and left, the beach reached out in a broad, flat crescent. Houses looked down on it, lighting patches of sand with their glowing windows. The sky above and behind was bright with city glow and moonlight. A sea gull laughed from the roof of a nearby house. Gavin let his eyes wander back to the dark reach of the sea. He had stood at night on the wide plains of Kansas, where the sky and land were just as lost in distance and darkness, but he had never seen the world’s end like this. He shivered again.

He noticed a light flash out to sea. In a minute, it flashed again. A lighthouse? he wondered. He noticed other lights to its left that were too large to be stars.

“Those are the Isles of Shoals,” Amanita said.

“People live out there?” It seemed crazy.

She didn’t answer immediately. He glanced at her face, but it was blurred by shadow. Only her eyes showed: each a faint gleam fixed on the lights of the islands.

“The aides used to bring us here from the orphanage once or twice a year.” Her voice was soft, with none of the edge it held when she was joking. “I was sure the islands were my birthplace, that my mother’s people still lived there. That I would have lived there, if she hadn’t died.” She chuckled. “Childhood fancies. I didn’t realize you can’t see those islands, not in daylight or under the moon.”

Gavin thought he understood. “Only in dreams?”

She turned her face toward him, half lit now by moonlight and window shine, half still smoothed by darkness, with her humped nose a stark edge between. “Not only in dreams. The darkness just has to be deep enough, and you have to have the courage to believe. Come on, I’ll take you home now.”

Gavin was happy to follow her up the beach, away from the dark sea, but he had the odd feeling that he had just done very poorly on an exam.

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The next day, he put an ad in the *Portsmouth Herald* announcing a lost parrot. He knew it was the right thing to do, but he also stocked up on fresh fruit and hoped Sancho would be around to share it. He bought a copy of the newspaper, too, to put under Sancho's perch. Sancho had chosen the back of a spindly chair for his regular roost, and he occupied it like a prince on a throne. It was by a window that overlooked the narrow street, and he commented shrilly on every passerby: *There's a pretty girl! Let's go! Hello!* And a wide repertoire of whistles, including the opening measure of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

Gavin set up his laptop on a small, old table beside Sancho's chair. The house itself was more than 250 years old, if you could believe the date painted over the front door, and everything in it seemed to be an antique, except for a modern kitchen and the wireless Internet hub. Gavin's email was already filled with messages from Dr. Jury, asking him to research this old manuscript or to find the source of some equally obscure reference to a bit of lost saga. Gavin logged into the UNH library and got to work.

By evening, his brain was fogged. He nuked a frozen pizza, gobbled it down (Sancho stuck to his fruit), and went for a walk, with Sancho perched happily on his shoulder. He came back, found a book titled *Legends of Faery* in Dr. Jury's crammed library, and fell asleep after half a chapter. Sancho woke him at daybreak with his discordant rendition of the Fifth's first four notes. After the twelfth repetition, Gavin crawled out of bed to feed them both.

It became a comfortable routine: a quick morning walk to get a paper, followed by email, Dr. Jury's questions (most without answers), lunch, a trip to the store for groceries, more research, dinner, a walk, reading, bed. Gavin learned the layout of the town on foot, without really having to fit in. He let Sancho say hello for the both of them. Sancho was his companion, the computer his outlet, the research his only care. Apart from money, and that problem was eased at the end of the second week when his first paycheck arrived from UNH. That evening, he drove Sancho back to the beach.

It was June now, the days were getting long, and the sea was brightly lit. People walked along the crescent of sand or lay on towels. A few waded in the wash of the gentle waves. Gavin watched from the top of the beach.

“Thar she blows!” Sancho squawked.

“Yeah.” Gavin steeled himself and walked down the long slope to the edge of the dark, wet sand that marked the highest reach of the waves. Proximity didn’t help any more than daylight; the unending expanse of water made his stomach knot. He could see the Isles of Shoals clearly in the daylight, rising in a cluster this side of the horizon. There were fields and buildings; one looked like a big, white hotel from the last century, but nothing really out of the ordinary. And they were only six miles away—he’d checked Wikipedia. But they might as well have been on the far side of the moon. He didn’t linger. He drove back to the house, ate a dull dinner, then took Sancho for a late walk.

Without even thinking about it, he followed the path he had taken on his first evening there, and found himself turning the corner by Dan and Ann’s Diner. Still without thinking, he walked in. A waitress spotted Sancho immediately.

“I’m sorry, we can’t allow pets,” she said.

Gavin began to stammer an apology, but Amanita appeared in the window to the kitchen and called out, “It’s okay, Hazel; I know this guy. That’s his service animal. He’s allergic to dogs.”

Hazel looked suspicious, but she let Gavin in. He ordered the apple pie and a glass of milk, and watched as she and Amanita held a whispered consultation behind the counter. Hazel gave him a curious look, but she was smiling when she brought the pie, along with half a banana. Sancho charmed her with a long wolf whistle and called her a pretty girl, which, Gavin admitted, she was. She wasn’t going to charge for the pie, but Gavin insisted. Amanita was busy washing up and only had time to wave. He waved back. He couldn’t help contrasting her face with Hazel’s and felt an uncomfortable mix of pity and guilt. He ate quickly and left.

Amanita was waiting on the sidewalk. “I’m off early tonight,” she said. “Your timing’s perfect.”

Gavin shrugged, feeling even more guilty. “Thanks for getting me in,” he said. “That was quick thinking. I’m surprised Hazel bought it; I’m obviously not blind.”

“No problem. I told her you were bipolar and the parrot kept you from losing it.”

Gavin laughed. "Did you tell her I was a wiccan, too?"

Amanita gave him her evil grin. "She'd assume that. If you know me, you must be. Where're you headed?"

He shrugged again. "Just walking. The river park, I guess."

"Let's go!" Sancho squawked.

So they wound their way down river. Amanita made wry comments about the various restaurants and stores, most of which she said catered to tourists and the town's cadre of young professionals on the make. When they reached the park, she led him down onto the wharf. Even more boats were tied there now, some lit, some dark. Light glimmered on the water from both sides, and the half moon's reflection danced in the current. They walked all the way to the end of the park, where a concrete ramp led down into the river's fragrant waters. Amanita had grown quiet, her mismatched face oddly still. She frowned at the ramp and the water.

"This is where I'll start from," she said.

"What?" Gavin wondered if he'd missed some earlier comment.

"I can launch the Beetle right from here," she replied. "It's watertight, you know. That's why I bought it."

"Your car?"

"That's right. It's watertight; I can drive it right down the ramp and let the ebb tide carry me out to sea. It'll save gas."

"Okay, I guess it would," he said. Once again, he had no idea if she was joking.

"Seriously," she said. "Two guys drove a VW Beetle across the English Channel back in the sixties."

"Across the English Channel?"

"Most of the way. The engine stopped, so they opened the sunroof and paddled until the tide turned against them and the waves came up."

"Whoa Nelly!" Sancho squawked.

“Yeah,” Gavin said. “That’s crazy.”

“Well, sure. They should have kept better track of the tides. We won’t have that problem. If we can get the light right, I think we’ll only have to go a few miles.”

“The light right?” Gavin felt like he kept missing something.

“To see the isles.”

He remembered her childhood fantasy. “Oh, right. And if you get it wrong?”

“Then we’ll paddle.”

He noticed she kept saying *we*, but he wasn’t quite ready to play along. “Well, you’d better take a life jacket, too, and plenty of food.”

“Men,” she scoffed. “It’s all about appetites, isn’t it. Come on, I’ll walk you home.”

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“This is where they found my basket,” she said, as they reached the granite steps leading up to the paneled, date-capped door.

Gavin’s mouth dropped open. “Your mother left you with Dr. Jury?”

She laughed. “Not your boss: his father, G. Sumner the First. Your boss is G. Sumner, Junior. Some people think he’s my brother.” He stared. “Yeah, I know; the family resemblance is hard to see under the moonlight. Good night, Gavin.”

“Would you like to come in for some tea or something?” It came out on its own, an embarrassed attempt to cover up for staring.

“Thanks, but it’s late. I’m on early shift tomorrow.”

“Okay, then, I guess—” Gavin groped in his pocket, then the other. “Oh, dang!”

“Dang?” she echoed, smiling.

“I’ve lost my keys!” Gavin said. He searched his pockets again, then

peered at the ground, hoping they might have just dropped out. “Do you see them anywhere?”

“No. When did you have them last?”

“I can’t remember.”

“Do you know where they are, Sancho?” she asked.

“Bite me!” Sancho replied.

“Dang!” Gavin hit the door post. “We’re locked out!” Amanita was chuckling. “It’s not funny. Dr. Jury will kill me.”

“Sorry,” she said. “I just can’t believe you say *dang*. Such a gentleman.”

Gavin blushed. “I don’t feel like one right now.”

“Look, you can get a locksmith in the morning. UNH will vouch for you.”

“What about tonight?”

“You can stay at my place,” she said. “I’ve got a pullout couch.”

“Oh, I can’t do that,” Gavin said.

“Afraid I’ll seduce you?” she asked. “Or just too much of a gentleman?” She flashed that sharp-toothed smile again.

Gavin shrugged, totally flustered. “I just....”

“Who else do you know?”

That was it, of course: He didn’t know anyone here but her.

“Go with the flow!” Sancho advised.

“Yeah,” Gavin muttered.

Amanita’s apartment was two floors up, across from Dan and Ann’s Diner, and it was a studio: one room, plus bath and kitchen nook, distressingly small. Yes, she had a pullout couch, but it was the only bed.

Before Gavin could say anything, she threw the seat-back cushions on the floor in the far corner and produced some extra blankets from the closet to construct a small nest. He insisted on sleeping there. She shrugged and told him to take the first turn in the bathroom. He came out and waited, awkward and embarrassed, until she went in, then took off his shirt and slipped under the blanket, still in his pants and undershirt. Amanita came out a few minutes later, discreetly clothed in a T-shirt and sweatpants, got into the bed, wished him good night, and turned out the light.

Gavin relaxed slowly, but finally fell asleep to the sound of her soft breathing. When he woke to Sancho's serenade the next morning, sunlight was leaking in around the shades, and she was already gone. Gavin lay still for a moment, groping at a vague memory of a dream: He was lying on the cushions. Amanita stood by the window, holding something; a mirror, perhaps? It seemed to glow, as though moonlight shone from behind its glass. Seagulls called faintly. She turned toward him, and her face was different. Rearranged. All of a piece. She set down the mirror and came toward him. Her left eye glowed.

That was all he could remember, but it seemed uncomfortably real. He shivered and threw off the covers, then sat up, scrubbing his face with the heels of his hands. It had been a long time since he'd had a girlfriend, but Amanita? He liked her, yes. She was interesting. Kind to him. Clever. Funny, too. But funny in both ways. Odd. It wasn't just her face, he told himself firmly. Besides, she wasn't the dream woman, not really. That was just some figment of his unconscious. That's all.

"She's a pretty girl!" Sancho squawked.

"Yeah, right," Gavin muttered. "But not my type."

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He kept reminding himself that for the next two weeks. The dream didn't come back, not as a dream. But during the evenings, he argued with the memory. When his next paycheck arrived, he decided he had laid the issue to rest. She was his friend, and that was fine. He'd head over to Dan and Ann's to get some pie and say hello. Maybe they could go to a movie or something.

When Gavin went into Dan and Ann's, Amanita wasn't in the kitchen. He hesitated by the register. Without her striking face, the diner felt hollow, its chrome and vinyl a sham.



“Where’s our pretty girl?” Sancho called.

All the diners looked up, and Gavin felt his face go red.

Waitress Hazel came over and flashed a pretty, blue-eyed smile at Sancho. “Table for two?” she asked, pulling a menu from the rack by the register.

“Is Amanita working tonight?” Gavin asked.

“Who?” Hazel asked.

“Where’s our pretty girl?” Sancho repeated.

“Oh, her.” Hazel frowned; in an instant her face soured. “She’s supposed to be. She didn’t show up today or yesterday.”

“Is she sick?” Gavin asked.

Hazel shrugged. “Beats me.”

“Didn’t anyone call her?”

“Hey, she’s the one who’s supposed to call. Do you want to sit down or not?”

“Bite me!” Sancho squawked.

“Yeah,” Gavin muttered. “I mean, no. No, thank you. I’m not hungry.”

He stumbled out onto the sidewalk. The sun was setting and the air had grown cool. Couples brushed past. Music thumped from a passing car. Gavin looked up at the window to Amanita’s tiny apartment. A faint light showed behind the half-closed shade. Gavin stared, watching for some sign of movement, of presence. She’s all right, he told himself. It’s just a cold or something. But he didn’t believe it.

“Let’s go!” Sancho squawked, nipping his ear. “Let’s go!”

Gavin hurried across the street and up the narrow staircase to her landing. He knocked gently. There was no reply. He knocked a little louder and called, “Amanita? It’s me, Gavin.”

Dead silence. He tried the knob. It turned, and the door eased open.

He peered inside. The lamp on the table was lit. The couch was open, empty, the covers a mess.

“Amanita?” he called.

Sancho whistled shrilly, then burst from his shoulder in a gray flurry and flew to the table. Feeling like an intruder, Gavin went after him.

“Come on, Sancho,” he said. “We shouldn’t be in....”

There was a letter on the table, stark under the lamplight. An official logo proclaimed it was from the Reynolds Orphanage, New Hampshire Department of Human Services.

“Dear Mary,” it began.

Gavin blinked and read it again. *Mary*. So plain. He could understand why she would change it to something like Amanita. He wondered what other names she had given herself. He couldn’t help reading the rest.

“Last week, we received a correspondence from your birth mother. This is not an unusual occurrence, and we follow a strict policy regarding our clients’ privacy. You can rest assured we have not shared your current name and address with her. Instead, we have questioned her closely and contacted several references to confirm that she is who she claims to be and, most important, is in a stable situation in her life. If you wish, I would be happy to meet with you to discuss your own feelings about the possibility of a meeting between the two of you. It would be completely up to you, of course.”

There was more, about the process, the availability of counseling services, a polite signature. But Gavin’s eyes returned to two words: *birth mother*.

Two words that shredded the fable she had woven to adorn her homeliness, to make her plainness special. She could change her name but, Amanita or Mary, she couldn’t change the facts of her birth. And what would she do now, faced with those ugly facts?

Heart racing, Gavin checked the bathroom. It was empty. So was the closet. No one floating in the bathtub, hanging from the clothes pole. He looked out the kitchen window, down into the twilit parking lot. Her VW Beetle was gone.

“Damn!” He punched the window sill. “Where would she go?”

“Thar she blows!” Sancho cried. “Thar she blows!”

“No,” Gavin said. “She wouldn’t. Would she?”

“Thar she blows!” Sancho replied.

He hurried back to Strawberry Banke for his car and sped to the beach.

The blue VW was hub-deep in the soft sand at the end of the beach access road. She’d gotten it a good eight feet off the pavement before it bottomed out. Gavin felt a momentary pulse of relief, until he realized the Beetle was empty. He clambered out, Sancho clinging to his shoulder, and hurried over the mound of sand to the beach.

The water was much higher than he’d seen it before, and smooth as a mirror, lapping calmly just a few dozen yards in front of him. It was dark, lit only by stars and the patterns reflected from the islands. There was no moon. The lighthouse winked once, twice, then swung into darkness. Before it returned he spotted her, a forlorn hump of shadow sitting at the water’s edge. Gavin exhaled, almost stunned by relief. Sancho shook himself but held his tongue.

Gavin walked slowly down the soft slope and across the hard sand below the high tide line. He stopped beside her, suddenly as awkward as he’d been that night in her apartment. Something glimmered faintly in her lap. She was cradling a small hand mirror, white as an old shell. The glass seemed pearly, as though fogged by moonlight. A gull called in the distance.

“You came,” she said, unsurprised. She didn’t turn her gaze from the sea.

“Yeah.” He knelt beside her. “Is that okay?”

She shrugged. “It’s your nature.”

That hurt a little. “I was worried about you,” he said.

“You read the letter.”

He blushed. “Uh, yeah. I ... Sancho was on the table and....”

“You thought I might do something desperate. Slit my wrists, hang myself. Throw myself into the crashing sea.”

“Well, yeah,” he admitted. “I’m glad I was wrong.”

She shrugged again. “Why bother? Nothing has changed really.” For the first time, she sounded bitter. She looked directly at him. “See?”

Even in the moonless night, he could. Now *he* shrugged.

She studied his face with both eyes, but when he stayed silent, she turned back toward the sea.

“I was going to drive right out there,” she said. “It’s dark enough. I’ve planned it long enough.”

He followed her gaze over the dark water and shivered. “All your life,” he said.

“All my life,” she agreed.

“But now?”

“I got stuck.” She was silent then. Finally, she turned to him again and asked, “What do you think, Sir Gavin, my poor, goodhearted knight? Am I mad?”

“Yeah. But no more than most.”

“Really?” She arched a heavy brow. “Should I do it then?”

“That’s your choice to make, not mine.”

“Would you come with me?”

He turned to the sea again. The lights seemed very small, as distant as the stars. He swallowed.

“Go with the flow!” Sancho squawked suddenly, and they both jumped.

Gavin laughed. “It’s what, six miles?” he said, voice high. “I guess I could.”

“Right.” Amanita rose and took two steps up the beach. Then she paused, turned back, and threw the mirror over the water. It turned once, flashed, and dropped lightly into the sea.

“What—?”

“It was in the basket with me,” she said. “I can see my way well enough without it. Let’s go.” She strode away.

Gavin hesitated, looked back at the black, starlit sheet, marred only by the spreading ripples where the mirror had struck and sunk.

“Let’s go!” Sancho squawked, and he flew to Amanita’s shoulder.

“Traitor,” Gavin muttered, hurrying after them.

He caught up with her at the peak of the sand, and they walked the rest of the way together.

“It’s in pretty deep,” Gavin remarked, studying the VW’s half buried rims.

“We’ll get it loose,” she said, kneeling by the right front wheel. She twisted off the valve cap and began to let air out of the tire. “Have you got a tire gauge?”

“Yeah. What—?”

“We want to let out at least half. It’s like a dune buggy: Soft, wide tires get better traction in soft sand. Get your gauge.”

Gavin did as she asked and started letting air out of the rear tires. Amanita decided twelve pounds was about right.

“You’re going to ruin these tires,” he said.

“I suspect that’s the least of your worries,” she replied, and he blushed again, because she was right. “Okay, I’ll drive, you push.”

She got in with Sancho, and Gavin set his feet firmly in the sand. He bent over, grabbed the rear bumper, and tensed. Amanita started the engine; it pattered into life.

Oh, Lord, what am I getting myself into? Gavin thought, but then Amanita revved the engine, eased out the clutch, and he was heaving against the funny round bumper with all his strength, digging his feet into the soft sand, slipping and slithering, half on his knees while the Beetle's rear end bucked and slewed and the tires threw rooster tails of sand three feet high on either side of him. Suddenly the car lurched, rose, and surged forward. Gavin almost fell flat on his face. Sancho whistled Beethoven gleefully from a perch on the passenger side window frame.

Gavin scrambled after the car, hopped onto the rear bumper, and clung desperately to the handle on the engine compartment door. Behind its louvered hood, the engine gnashed and sputtered like a drowning cat. Amanita shifted up, the car lurched again, and they climbed the last few yards to the top of the mound. The Beetle's nose dropped into the down slope, but Gavin's stomach kept rising.

The Beetle crossed the high tide line, and Amanita slowed. "Get in!" she yelled.

Gavin obeyed, stumbling from the still-moving bumper to the uneven sand. He managed to grab the door handle and yank it open, throwing himself into the seat just as the beach began to level out. The Beetle rolled onto the hard, damp sand and shot forward. The door swung shut, with Sancho flapping wildly to keep his perch.

"Make sure it's shut tight," Amanita said.

Gavin was staring through the flat windshield at the rapidly approaching sea. His stomach was still rising and he tried to swallow it back into place, without much success. He groped blindly for the door handle, swung the door wide, and slammed it shut as hard as he could. Sancho shrieked in outrage, tottering on the window ledge.

"Bite me! Bite me!" he screeched.

"Sorry," Gavin muttered.

He scooped Sancho into his lap and cranked up the window just as they reached the water. Spray arched from the front wheels, splashing onto the windshield and across the side windows. The front bumper submerged for a moment, and Gavin gripped the dashboard with white knuckles. Sancho spread his wings and whistled. The Beetle pushed up a bulge of bow wave. The front end bobbed. The rear wheels bumped, skipped, raced, and suddenly the car was afloat. Amanita shifted into fourth and

throttled back. The engine settled. The Beetle slowed. Burbling gently from the submerged muffler, they eased away from shore toward the distant lights of the islands.

Amanita laughed sharply. "Well, this is a bit of an anticlimax, isn't it?"

The old Beetle had a handhold at the top of the dash above the glove compartment. Sancho climbed onto it and peered out the front window, head cocked.

"Whoa Nelly!" he squawked.

Gavin tried to laugh, but gulped instead as the Beetle lifted on the first small swell. He forced a smile. "Shouldn't you turn on the lights?" he said. "In case there are boats or floating logs or something?"

"It'd ruin our night vision," Amanita replied, but she turned on the parking lights at least. Amber light fanned from the Beetle's four quarters onto the coal-black sea. The dim green glow from the dashboard reversed the shadows on her face.

"Thanks," Gavin said. He spoke in a half whisper, but his voice still sounded loud to him. He fell silent.

Slowly but steadily, the Beetle pattered farther from land, rising and falling as the slight ocean swell rolled beneath them. Somewhere in the distance and half a beat off, a bell buoy rang. The lighthouse winked in its own slow rhythm. Gavin's heart beat double-time to them all. As far he could tell, the lights of the islands weren't getting any closer. His eyes began to ache from the strain. He glanced at Amanita. She was looking through the windshield, both hands on the wheel, shifting it slightly right and left, as though she was driving on a highway, with white lines and medians and guard rails and road signs to mark their path. Not an ocean, with nothing but starlight, bells, and a course plotted on the chart of her childhood dreams.

He looked back out the windshield, and the lights had changed somehow. The alignment was wrong. And it was still shifting, as though the islands were drifting to the left.

"They're moving," he said.

"We are," she replied. "There's a strong current here."

Of course, he thought. Islands can't move. But as he watched the lights shift against the apparently fixed stars, he couldn't shake the feeling that the islands were sliding aside, dodging, leaving the Beetle on a clear path to the open sea.

"Don't worry," Amanita said, "it'll slow as the tide turns." She gave him a smile that he supposed was meant to be comforting, but the low, green light from the dash only made her seem fey.

Still they crept onward, Amanita steering always toward the islands, though they seemed to slide farther and farther askew. Gavin leaned his head against the side pillar and stroked Sancho's head. Sancho murmured and fluffed his feathers. Gavin opened the window a bit, and a breeze blew in, cooling his cheek. The air was moist, salty, and stung his nose. The noise of the bell wavered oddly. The motion of the Beetle freshened. Wavelets began to lap against the fenders, and the lift of the swells increased. Gavin took a firm grip on the handhold. Sancho perched on his knuckles.

Now the lights ahead seemed to waver. The breeze grew more damp, and smoky tendrils wafted through the amber glow of the parking lights. Beads of condensation appeared on the windshield, lensing the starlight.

"Fog," Amanita said quietly. "The final barrier." Her smile grew.

The tendrils thickened. The beads swelled and began to roll down the windshield, leaving oily tracks that scattered the lights of the islands into splinters of rainbow. Then even that disappeared, and all they could see were the fans of amber streaming from the Beetle's quarters into a dense, billowing fog. Amanita turned on the wipers. They didn't help.

Gavin stared ahead, desperately trying to see through the drifting curtain. He lost all sense of direction. There was nothing beyond the amber glow of their own making.

No, wait, he thought. Is that...? The fog seemed to lighten, as though a moon had lifted above an unseen horizon. A shadow, a shape, a hint of something solid wavered beyond the arched smears on the windshield. The Beetle rocked slightly, and water purred beneath the running boards. A minor key. The hairs prickled on Gavin's scalp. He strained, listening. The water made a sound like laughter. He glimpsed ... A mound? A tree? A face?



Dazed, he turned to Amanita. Her smile was mirrored in the windshield.

Mary? he thought. No, never that. Look at her: eyes wild, shining, cold and sharp and filled with longing. Longing so deep it could drown islands itself. Look at her hands on the wheel, turning into the waves, then back on course. She knows where she's going; she's going where she believes. A belief so fierce nothing can stand before it. Surely not fog. Nor dark. Not even the tide and a million miles of open sea. And I'm going with her, willy-nilly. No turning back, no choice now. It was her choice, and it will be until we arrive ... somewhere. The Isles of Shoals, the isles of dreams, the halls of the fairy kings ... wherever she chooses to take us.

Suddenly, he laughed, past caring.

She looked surprised. She studied his face. Then she laughed with him. Her smile glowed in the fey light. Her eyes burned. Her hair seemed to stream in an invisible breeze. She was wild, yes, and wide open as the sea, transformed and beautiful in a way that terrified him. She sounded the Beetle's horn, and the tinny beep made both of them laugh harder.

Sancho whistled and shrieked, "Whoa, Nellie!"

Amanita turned the wheel away from the faint loom of light and shadow before them. She reached into the back seat, pulling forth a wooden paddle almost as long as the little car was wide. She laid it across Gavin's shoulder. He took it, rolled down his window, and thrust the paddle into the water, leaning out to add strong strokes to the Beetle's putting engine. The car pulsed forward with each one.

Sancho flew out the window. "Let's go!" he cried. "Let's go!"

"Sancho!" Gavin yelled. "Come back!" The fog swirled, wet and deafening. He leaned farther out, searching the darkness. The car rocked violently. His stomach lurched. "Sancho!"

Amanita held their course. "He'll find us," she said. "He knows the way."

Gavin hardly heard her. He stared out, back, straining to see. To hear. Was that a splash, a laugh, a ripple of movement, hanging above the water behind them, where Sancho had disappeared?

But Sancho flew back into the amber glow. He settled on the handle

at the turn of the hood. "Go with the flow!" he squawked, peering forward like a demented figurehead.

Gavin laughed again and resumed paddling. The fog soaked his face, dripped off his eyebrows, ran down his cheeks, and filled his mouth with the faint taste of iodine and brine. A bell rang faintly somewhere before them, borne on the damp breeze. Behind, the keen of faint music faded away. Maybe it was the muttering engine, the lapping sea. Slowly, steadily, the Beetle muddled onward.

\* \* \* \*

Dawn came in a slow twilight that Gavin didn't even notice until the fog had turned pearly and the amber parking lights dim. His arms were sodden with fatigue and the weight of water in his shirt. He kept paddling. A strange shape loomed suddenly in the darkness: a buoy, swaying and clanging with a bell muted by fog. It swept past and was lost again. The sea swirled, slewing the Beetle right and left. A swell slapped the side, splashing a little water through the window. Gavin heard the wet grumble of waves washing on a shore. He was about to call a warning to Amanita when the sun topped the horizon. The fog turned to spun gold. Warmth played on their faces. Sancho whistled Beethoven.

The fog eddied, thinned, and disappeared as if vanished by a spell. They were motoring along a channel between two rock-bound islands barely a hundred yards to either side. Straight ahead lay the low, dark silhouette of a third island. Boats rode at anchor in a small harbor sheltered by the three rocky mounds. And beyond the harbor and the islands, the sun laid a bright pathway across the ripples of the broad sea.

Gavin turned to Amanita, his face split by an uncontrollable grin. She had her own face back, her normal, human face, and the sunlight painted her features gold.

"It's beautiful," he said. "Even if it's not..." Where? he wondered. Where had she thought she was taking them? Where had they gone? "It's the Isles of Shoals. Is that okay?"

She looked uncertain for just a moment, but it passed. "It's fine," she replied. "It was the going that mattered." She returned his smile twofold, and he glimpsed the fey beauty at play in her eyes.

Beaming like an idiot, Gavin stared at every rock, house, and stunted tree on the three islands, as Amanita piloted their uncommon craft into the

still water of the harbor and around the end of a long pier jutting from the right-hand shore. She brought them alongside a small, floating dock lined with dinghies, and reached behind her seat again to draw forth two coiled lengths of rope.

“Tie us up,” she said. “And Gavin? Don’t open the door.”

He stopped, hand poised on the door handle. “Oh, right,” he said.

So he heaved himself out through his window, and greeted Sancho, who flew to his shoulder as he bent to tie the Beetle at front and back. Then he returned to the passenger window and helped Amanita climb out. Somehow, in reaching for her hand and trying to support her elbow and catching her as she almost tumbled into the water, he wound up holding her close in an awkward sideways hug, with his right arm tight around her breast. She winked. He blushed and stepped back, but kept hold of her hand.

“What do you think?” she said. “They must serve breakfast somewhere on this island.”

“Let’s hope so,” he replied. “Come on, we’ll find someone to ask.”

“Hello!” Sancho cried. “Hello! Go with the flow!”

Squeezing her hand, Gavin led the way off the dock and up the path toward the heart of the island.