

# Changelings



by Leah Suslovich

June 1

She doesn't like to walk on the sidewalk. I've seen her mincing delicately on the pavement, trying not to touch it until she reaches the next stretch of grass. Then the ground beneath her feet is familiar, even if she can sense the concrete below the thin veneer of green.

Nobody else knows what's wrong with her. My neighbour, Mrs. Kerenson, said that she's probably autistic, which means (she explained condescendingly) that she doesn't respond to the real world. Mr. Kerenson agreed, and said that Laura is living in a different world.

They're wrong. She *was* living in a different world. But she's here now, and she'll have to get used to it. The same way I did.



June 8

I've been trying to avoid her. After all, you never know what kind of people get sent out here; murderers, thieves, heretics. But today we came face to face. I was walking on the grass, indulging myself, and she was on the grass as usual. It was a narrow strip of grass, so we stood there and stared at each other.

Each of us knew what the other was. We can always tell, when we meet.

"I *thought* you might be one of us," Laura breathed finally. "I heard my 'mother' say that you were a little strange."

"They say that you are very strange," I countered.

"That's because you've been here longer than I have."

I met her bleak gaze and said, "I've been here ten days."

"Ten..." Her mouth opened in horror. "But then – you've been here less time than I have!"

"How long have you been here?" I asked.

"I don't know. But longer than ten days. How can you bear it?"

"I have to." I looked away from her and added, "I never had magic."

"Oh!" Her little gasp of pity told me what I hadn't dared ask directly; she *had* possessed magic, worlds away. So she hadn't been banished for lack of it, like me. She committed a crime, and this exile is her punishment.

The pavement, that she hates, is her punishment.

I don't know what came over me then. What spurred me might have been her pity, or her criminality, or just my own frustration. I stepped forward and pushed her, hard; hard enough to make her step back off the grass. Her foot came down on the sidewalk. I pushed her again, and she fell, lying in a heap on the concrete squares, her mouth open in a little 'o' of shock and bewilderment.

I walked away. When I looked back, she had pulled herself onto the grass and was crying.



June 9

I can't believe I did that. I'm not a cruel person. I *know* I'm not. Not even in human form. So why...?

I went over to her and apologised. She listened, expressionless. When I was finished, she said, "You think I'm a criminal, don't you?"

"You mean you aren't?"

"Oh, I guess I am. The – the Justices said that I am. But I didn't hurt anyone!"

"What did you do?" I asked, morbidly curious.

"Does it matter?" she demanded, staring at me.

"No," I said, ashamed. "I guess it doesn't."

We were sitting on the boardwalk, and a bunch of other kids were playing tag on the beach. We watched them for a few minutes, for lack of anything to say to each other. I found myself wanting to join them, something that never would have occurred to me two days ago.

"I'm afraid," Laura said suddenly. "I heard that we forget. That soon we'll be children like any other children, and eventually we won't even remember the truth."

She looked at me pleadingly, sure that I would give her reassurance. But while a part of me *was* afraid, a part of me wanted to be in the game, to be like all the others.

"Being a child like any other wouldn't be so bad," I said finally, slowly. "It's growing up that worries me."



June 16

I've become very close to Laura. I should have known that I would; we're both going through the same thing, even if I am guilt-free and she's a criminal. We discuss Faerie often. My memories of it are fading, but hers seem as distinct as ever. Sometimes I don't even remember the things she describes.

It's a mercy, this forgetting. And when I'm with other children – sometimes even when I'm alone – I am content to let it be that way, to let my old life fade and disappear. But when I'm with Laura, I feel that I've lost something wonderful, and that I have to keep the memory no matter how much pain it causes me.

Laura thinks about the human children whose bodies we stole. I never thought about anything like that before, but now we discuss it often. Did they disappear? Did they go to Faerie? Or are they still here, in our minds, subjugated by our stronger possession?

I thought that they might take over *our* bodies in Faerie. But Laura says that's not possible. She claims that she's seen the bodies of the changelings, the banished ones, and they are quite dead. That means that my body is dead, too, but it doesn't bother me. I don't even remember what my body looked like. *This* body felt thick and heavy at first, but now I'm used to it.

Anyhow, the adults are happy that we talk so much. They think that it will do Laura good. My mother – my body's mother, anyhow – makes sure to drop a few encouraging words

every night.

June 20

Laura finally told me what her crime was. Her brother killed another boy and was sentenced to Earth. She tried to rescue him, so she was sentenced too.

I'm amazed at her gall. Going against the Justices for the sake of a murderer – even if he *was* her brother! And she should have realised that nobody can escape justice.

I told her that, and she pressed her lips together and said, "Don't be so sure. I still haven't given up."

June 21

I asked Laura what she meant by what she said yesterday. She looked at me for a long time, as though deciding whether or not to trust me. Then she said, "I want to escape."

She's crazy. Nobody escapes from Earth. I told her that.

"I will," she said.

"Nobody even knows how the Justices work the Change!" I said.

"I do," she said, and she meant it.

I thought she was lying. But I've been thinking... she *did* see the bodies of the changelings. Nobody's allowed to see that. So maybe she found some things out when she was trying to rescue her brother. Maybe escape *is* a possibility for her.

June 23

"What do you think about Laura?" my mother asked me tonight, as she was giving me supper.

I stared at her. She never asks me what I think, not seriously; adults never do, I've noticed. This system of everyone having a different age is a stupid one. It leads to a lot of inequality.

"What do you mean, what do I think?" I asked cautiously as she sat across from me. My father wasn't home. He rarely is.

"Well, I was talking to her father. He thinks it's a wonderful thing that the two of you are friends. I was just curious to know how she – er – responds to you."

So Laura is the patient, and I am her therapy. I find that very amusing. It's possible that she's making me crazy, but I am definitely not making her sane.

"I don't know," I said noncommittally, starting to eat. Their food is completely tasteless. "She's fine."

"Is she normal?"

I almost choked on my food. If only she knew how ridiculous that question was. If only she knew that she should be asking about *my* normality... and suddenly I wanted to tell her everything, about Faerie and the Justices and how they had come for me while I was dancing in the fields. I wanted to tell her how strange the house, the world, is to me, and how much I hated it at first. How much I still sometimes hate it. I wanted to tell her all this, and I almost did. The only thing that stopped me was the knowledge that she'd find me silly – until she saw how serious I was, and then she'd be scared..

"She's okay," I said, still noncommittal. My mother dropped the subject.

And now I'm really scared. Because I've never wanted to tell anyone anything before. It's not in my character. This sudden desire to spill out my guts didn't come from me.

So who *did* it come from?

Laura and I were wondering what happened to the human souls that occupied these bodies. We assumed that they died or ceased to exist, or maybe remained as helpless, bodiless ghosts.

Illustration: Les Prince



But now I wonder. The tie that a soul has to its body is a strong one. The Justices' powerful magic can separate them, obviously – but for how long? What if, eventually, the human spirits reassert themselves? What if my uncharacteristic feelings were the human's first victory?

Spirits, I'm scared. They never told me about this. I don't want to die. I don't want to forget myself. How could they do this to me?

June 24

I told Laura my theory this morning. I was half-hysterical, almost sobbing. She listened calmly until I was finished, and then she said, "I've been around for longer than you have, and I'm still here, aren't I?"

I felt like a fool.

We spent the rest of the day just walking by the seashore, not speaking. I like the ocean. It's so peaceful and wild, calm and treacherous. We passed a bunch of kids laughing and playing in the sand, and for once I was just as eager to avoid them as Laura was.

It's later at night. I've been lying awake in bed, thinking, and finally I just had to get up and write my thoughts down. I'm afraid I'll forget them in the morning.

What made me start thinking is something that Laura said this afternoon. She was talking about Faerie, about how much she missed it, and she said, "The sea reminds me. Sometimes that's good, but sometimes it's bad."

"I don't remember any seas," I said. There are a lot of things I don't remember, more every day.

"That's because there weren't any," Laura said. "But the sea is a – a connection between Faerie and Earth. That's a secret, closely guarded by the Justices."

Talking about the Justices makes me nervous, even here,

Laura seems to know a lot about the Justices, things that I never heard of. I thought it might be because I've forgotten what I once knew – but today she *admitted* that what she knew about the ocean was a secret. I don't think she discovered it while she was searching for her brother. I think the Justices *told* her... the way they tell every one of their members.

I think that Laura was a Justice.

It makes sense. Who else would dare try to save someone whom the Justices had condemned? Who else would have the strength and understanding to keep her memories, herself, once banished to Earth? Who else would even dream of being able to go back – and would know how the Justices work the Change?

I don't think it's ever happened before – a Justice being exiled. But that's what happened to Laura. I'm sure of it.



June 25

I asked Laura today how she plans to escape.

She didn't answer me for a long time. I thought she wasn't going to answer me at all, until she said, "Why do you want to know?"

"What do you mean, why?"

She turned and faced me. "Do you want to go back to Faerie?"

"Of course I do!"

Even if there's a risk?"

"What risk?"

She took a deep breath. "The Justices have a potion that they make you drink, in order to free your spirit. I... stole some of it."

And who but a Justice could do that? I smiled and said, "That's unbelievable!"

Laura looked away from me. "When the time is right, I'll drink the potion and walk into the sea. And... I'll just hope that it works in reverse."

"You mean you don't *know*?"

"Of course not! It's never been done before. I'm just guessing and hoping."

"Will you return to your old body?"

"I don't know!"

"Won't it be... decomposed?"

Laura looked at me oddly. "Our bodies don't work that way."

"Oh." I hesitated. "I forget so much. I don't remember what it was like... I don't even remember how they Changed me!"

"Nobody remembers that," Laura said softly.

But did she? I wondered. Is it different for a Justice? I didn't ask her. For some reason, I don't want her to know that I know who she is.

"When will the time be right?" I asked.

Laura glanced at me quickly, out of the corner of her eye. "Tonight."

Somehow, I wasn't surprised. "I can sneak out of my house."

An even longer silence. Then Laura said, almost coldly, "If you want to."

Doesn't she *want* me to escape? Or is she just trying to test me, to see if I'll do it?

I'm going to be there tonight.



She was dressed in black shorts and a black T-shirt – very dramatic – and was standing right by the shoreline. The ocean looked very dark and cold.

I ran over the sand toward her. She turned and smiled. Without a word, she handed me a small bottle.

I drank it quickly. The taste was vaguely familiar... but the memory vanished as soon as I reached for it. It made a wild, fey feeling run through my veins. Laura must have already drunk hers. She was even stranger than usual. She did a little dance right there on the beach, the weirdest dance I have ever seen, and then she laughed.

"Come on!" she shouted gleefully, and ran straight out into the ocean. Her feet were bare.

I followed her. The water was ice-cold, and it sank through my socks and sneakers instantly, then through my jeans. Laura was way in front of me, laughing in sheer joy.

I ignored the coldness of the water and the pull of the tide, and ran after her. The waters were tugging at my waist when fear suddenly hit me and I stopped again. My mother had warned me not to go out this far, or the current would pull me in.

What was I thinking? I *wanted* the current to pull me in! I took a few more steps forward, and then I stopped. I was too scared.

Laura said that she didn't know for sure that this would work. What if it didn't? What if we just drowned? I thought of cold water filling my mouth, my lungs, and I froze.

"Come on!" Laura shouted. "Faerie is on the other side!"

I wanted it – I *did*. But my human body didn't want to die. I couldn't move.

"Come on!" Laura said, and suddenly she was beside me, her hands on my arms, pulling me forward.

I fought her. I couldn't help it. It was like I wasn't in control of my own body – except that it's not *really* my own body, is it? I'm taller and stronger than Laura is. She couldn't stop me from turning in a sudden panic and running back to shore.

I crouched on the damp sand, weeping. Laura knelt beside me, and she didn't cry, but her eyes were so sad that I couldn't look at her.

"You could have gone," I sobbed. "You should have."

Laura just shook her head. After a while, she helped me to my feet. I snuck back into my house, put my wet clothes into the laundry, and fell asleep crying.

I've never felt so hopeless. So... lost. I'll never go back to Faerie – I know that now. And soon I won't even live on Earth. The human influence that kept me from going into the sea will eventually regain its own, no matter how hard I try to fight it.

Laura will share my fate. She could have gone on... but she came back with me. I'll never forget that.



June 30

Laura has been avoiding me for several days now.

I don't understand it. Is she angry at me? Does she blame *me* because she didn't make it to Faerie? She returned on her own. I didn't force her.

Today I went up to her house and knocked on the door. Her mother said that she isn't feeling well, and that I shouldn't come visit again today. So instead of moping around and feeling lonely, like I've been doing for the past few days, I went

up to some kids and asked them if I could play freeze-tag with them. It wasn't so hard.

They said yes, and I had fun.  
Who needs Faerie, anyhow?



June 31

I can't believe I wrote that.

I finally spoke to Laura. She told me that the time to go to Faerie is going to be right again – tonight. And that she wants me to come with her.

I *want* to. I really want to! But I know that I can't.

"Maybe it would be better if you go yourself," I said slowly.

I half-expected her to be relieved. Instead, she got angrier than I've ever seen her.

"Why," she sneered, "do you want to stay on Earth?"

"I can't go to Faerie. You know that."

"Can't or won't?"

"What's the difference?" I demanded. There's a big difference, and I know it, but I was annoyed at her tone.

"There isn't much of one, obviously. After all that I—" She broke off and turned away.

"After all that you what?" I asked. Laura started walking away from me, treading only on the grass; I raced after her and grabbed her shoulder. "After all that you *what*?"

Laura whirled and pushed me so hard that I almost fell over. "Leave me alone!"

"After all that you went through? After all that you did for me? Is that what you were going to say?"

"Shut up!"

"Don't lie to me! You didn't come here for me, you were banished! Banished because —" And I stopped short.

Because she tried to save her brother.

Except that there are no gender differences in Faerie. I hadn't remembered that until now.

Why would she say *brother* – unless it was to keep me from guessing who I was?

Laura just looked at me.

"I'm not your brother!" I said.

Her lip curled. "And why do you think I wanted you to escape with me? Why do you think I waited for you to be ready? There's no such thing as the 'right time' – I just waited for *you*! Why do you think I came back for you?"

"You're lying!" I said. "You said that you were here longer than I was...."

"I really was. Your trial took longer." She glared at me. "I tried to rescue you from their prison – then I tried to rescue you from Exile – but nothing works, does it? Nothing!"

A tight hand was gripping my chest. "I am not a murderer! I was banished because I had no magic —"

"You were always good at lying to yourself," Laura hissed. "Nobody gets exiled for not having magic! Only the Justices have magic. You were punished for *murdering* —"

I pushed her, harder than she had pushed me. And suddenly my memory flew back to the first time I met her, when I pushed her for no reason. I shuddered and tried to forget that. "Liar!"

"And you think that you don't have it in you to do violence?" Laura practically snarled at me.

Her words hit a little too close to home – and I had to stop myself from pushing her again. Laura took a look at my face, and her eyes became a little calmer. "If it helps, Miasi, the faerie that you killed deserved it...."

*Miasi* My faerie name; we forget them when we come to Earth. And with it came a whole flood of memories, and I turned and raced away from Laura so that she shouldn't see me crying.

He *did* deserve it. Nobody ever deserved killing as much as he did. But I remember how easy it was for me to kill... and how I thought no one would know, how I'd gone dancing in the golden fields of Faerie afterward, delirious with joy. And then the Justices came for me, and it all turned to fear, justly deserved....

I remember my horror at my exile. I remember how I'd longed to stay in Faerie, the Faerie that I'd loved, how the very thought of Earth had filled me with disgust. That disgust lived in me again, and I ranted and raved and tore at my human body. People gave me a wide berth, thinking that I was mad, which suited me well. I'm a murderer, am I not? They'd better stay far away from me. If they don't, they might be sorry.



July 2

My mother is very concerned at the change in me, and is thinking of a psychologist.

Laura came to my house and told me to be at the beach tonight, if I want to come. Then she left. Not another word passed between us.

I remember Faerie. I can't bear Earth... but I've become weaker. I've given into the human soul these past days, thinking that it would be better if I was fully human. Maybe my murderous spirit can be suppressed. And even as I think this, I'm wondering... I didn't feel guilt in Faerie. Is this guilt mine, or *hers*?

The real human spirit will soon live again, and the exiled criminal will be gone. By the time I feel that I want to fight again, it will be too late.



July 3

Panic in the neighborhood: Laura has disappeared.

I know where she is, of course. But I'm not telling.

My mother thinks that she drowned. She may be right. Laura's body is definitely under the sea – and the human spirit that inhabited *that* body is dead forever. It seems cruel. I just hope that Laura has returned to Faerie. Her mission was a failure, but I hope she didn't die for it.

I guess I'll never know whether she really escaped or not. It seems strange to think that she did it all for me.



August 30

Summer vacation is almost over. I've been packing up for school and I found this. It's in my handwriting, but I don't remember writing it at all! Strange, isn't it? I remember Laura, of course, and she *did* drown. My mother says I probably wrote this to get rid of the grief. It's a good story anyhow.

I showed it to my mother and she said it's really good. She says she'll send it into a magazine and maybe it will win and maybe I'll even get paid for it! I think that's awesome!

I want to rewrite it and make them both go back to Faerie. I think that would be a much better ending. My mother says it isn't, though. She'll send it in the way it is. But I don't like for anyone to be sad in my stories. I think I'll write another one where it all turns out better. ❖