

MOTHER CHANGELING

The voice on the other end of the line was shaking. She was back, she said. The woman who had tried to steal her son fourteen years ago was back. Fourteen years she had kept his number, had remembered his name.

Guilt gripped him. He couldn't remember her or her son. He'd given up having his own life to save other people's, and then forgot them. He poured some whiskey in his coffee. The sacrifice had seemed worth it, once.

She'd given him her first and last name when he answered, and he used that to find her case files, pretending all the while that he knew exactly who she was. A mother and her son had been at home. She was reading a book and he was napping in his room. Everything seemed fine. He had had a fever, so she wasn't concerned at how long he was sleeping. He needed it. When she went to check on him, he was gone. Window open. Baby monitor turned off. His blanket and stuffed dinosaur fallen guards by his crib. She had been so in shock she froze for a time, unable to move from where she stood staring at his crib. It'd been her husband who'd called it in.

It was a fingerprint in a graphite smudge on the window ledge that broke the case. It belonged to Liz, a woman who'd been arrested more than a few times for heroin possession. They tried her last known address and found her there, calm as can be. Before they said a thing, she invited them in, offered them tea. The toddler was on her hip, and she did the baby bounce as she walked. He had been expecting the usual drug den, but her home, though in a bad neighborhood and run-down, was neat as a pin. Not only that, but the entire house was baby-proofed, and wallpapering her home, were hundreds of drawings of the boy from sonogram to toddler. She asked one of them to hold the baby so that she could get the lasagna out of the oven.

That scene he remembered. When they were prepping the case against her, they'd shown the parents the drawings. All blood drained from their faces. This was his birthday, my sister made him that onesie. How does she know about that onesie? This was.... These are.... Snap shots of their son's life, a photo album in pencil. The father's jaw was clenched so tight, it was as if he was trying to keep his soul from escaping out his mouth. The case was airtight, and Liz was institutionalized.

He went to their home again. The Live. Laugh. Love. sign above the entryway table blurred together with a million other home he'd been in. He smelt the crisp blue of Windex and noted the vacuum lines on the carpet. She'd cleaned in anticipation of him coming over. She greeted him like an old friend and brought him a cup of coffee. After all this time, she remembered how he took it, black with milk, no sugar, and left a carafe next to him. She waited for him to settle in a bit, the words clearing pounding against the inside of her lips, too many to try to choose from. Her husband, never one for talking, simply slid a beat-up manila folder across the table, eyes blazing.

It was stuffed full to bursting. Reese put on gloves and inspected the package carefully before opening it. The post mark on it matched the area in upstate New York where Liz was currently hospitalized. He carefully opened the envelope and the papers inside immediately started sliding out. The drawings were immediately recognizable—drawing after drawing of the same boy, a flip-book of him growing up. The mom stood up abruptly and left the room. When she returned, she had with her two large personalized albums, the name "Ryan" printed across both. Inside was Ryan riding his bike, a Batman birthday, hugging a puppy, first day of school... all the big moments. The pencil drawings next to them may as well have been sized down and added to the albums. The clothes he wore, his haircuts, when he wore braces, every detail eerily matched.

The drawings had been addressed to Ryan and after a date night they'd come home to find their son with them spread across the floor of the living room. He was sitting on the couch with hundreds of versions of his face looking back at him. They'd never told him what had happened before. He said nothing the whole time they spoke, telling him together of how he had been taken. How their hearts had fallen down their bodies and leaked through their soles.

Reese always liked to interview the suspect last. It saved time. The family had given him no leads, they'd been obscenely careful since the incident when Ryan was young. Tom, a software engineer, had even taken the precaution of all but deleting the family from the internet. No social media, no online work information, no society listings, no pictures. Liz had no background with computers anyways, and according to hospital logs, she'd never taken advantage of the small computer time the patients had. Her doctors told him more of what he already knew. She knew almost every detail of Ryan's life. He was all she talked about. From them, Reese had gotten more artwork, journal entries, and letters that she had written to him in her therapy. Statements from the other patients were mostly unreliable. Several of them seemed to under the impression that she was a spy for the doctors. She was never once put in solitaire. She always took her meds (if they actually were meds). She never acted out. The only thing that she ever did was draw. Draw and listen for their secrets. Not really anything there that he could use.

It'd been over a decade and she had had no visitors. No phone calls. No mail. No evidence of any contact with the outside world. It the most thorough stalking case that he had ever seen, but it was utterly impossible that she could know what she knew. And it was impossible that the stalker was anyone but Liz. He'd interviewed everybody she'd so much as looked at in the last ten years and still had no leads as to how she could have gotten the details of Ryan's entire life.

He went for a long shot and went to the parents' house, hoping to maybe build some idea of who she was. When he interviewed them after the kidnapping, he hadn't bothered to ask them much. After her first heroin overdose, they'd disowned her. Her father had referred to her as "the devil's bride" and stated that they would have nothing to do with her. Having no one in his life, that hadn't settled very well with Reese. A child, even an incredibly disturbed child, still warranted acknowledgment. Stuff like that was what ruined the "wins" of his job. Of course people came out messed up when they came from people like that.

Her mother answered the door. Her face went white and her hand flew to the cross at her throat.

"What did the witch do to that poor boy now?!"

Angry words started their journey up his throat before he stopped them.

"Why do you call her a witch?" as she closed the door behind him. He stood in a hallway lined with crosses. Bloody-headed Jesus looked down from them all.

"What else would you call it? It was hard enough just thinking that she was crazy, but we still hoped that she would grow out of that. When she started using the devils tools, we prayed every night. But when we found out that that boy was real..." His heart stopped.

"What do you mean when you found out that that boy was *real*?"

She stood up and beckoned for him to follow. They entered the garage and she guided him to load two boxes labelled "Christmas Décor" into his car.

"George doesn't know that I kept these. They're Elizabeth's childhood. Her journals, artwork, school projects, notes from teachers and counselors. It's all in there."

The boxes leered at him from the corner of his apartment. The place was bare of any personal touch. Essentials only. The couch was the same leather one that he'd bought when he had first gotten the job, excited for all the good that he would do, convinced his job would be the first step to his future— followed by meeting his soulmate, starting a family, buying a house. Would he have taken the job knowing he would have nothing after all these years?

He took a bottle of Maker's out of the freezer and poured a little into a rocks glass, one of six dishes that he had total. This was his first lead since Karen had called him. Nerves tingled through his body.

The ancient packing tape peeled back from his knife like butter, and his heart pounded at what he saw at the top of the box.

He got up, walked back to the freezer and brought the whole bottle over.

The painting was clearly done by a very young child. The corner was signed Elizabeth with the "Z" backwards and the "A" written as a circle with a line barely connected to the left side. It was of a baby. Even then, her art was beyond her peer. After that was picture after picture. In watercolor, finger paint, charcoal. From pre-school to high school. All pictures of the same boy. Different ages, but all clearly Ryan, before Ryan was even born. Some even showed images of what he would clearly look like a few years from now.

He threw back the rest of his glass and poured this time to the top. He was only through the first box.

The next one was filled with journals. He dumped them out and started with the ones with hearts and unicorns on the front and the tiny gold-painted plastic locks. They had some of the normal

things you'd expect from a child her age, things about playdates and friends and wanting a kitten, but the overwhelmingly majority of it was about "her baby." She saw him in her dreams every night. She heard him cry and laugh. Child therapists claimed it was a phase and encouraged her parents to put her into more group activities.

Journal after journal, boxes of them, all of Ryan, before Ryan existed.

Everybody tells me that he is a figment of my imagination, something I am clinging to for some deep-rooted psychological reason. They have me on medication to stop me from seeing him. I tell them that it's working. That I don't see him anymore, that I don't hear him, but the truth is, he has become the only real thing in my life. If he doesn't exist, I don't want to either. How can I love this much if he isn't real? How do I know the sound of his laugh, what each of his cries mean? How do I know the pitch his voice will reach when it's changing? How do I go each day knowing that the center of my universe might be all in my head? That I am most likely crazy?

There was a goodbye letter to Ryan tucked into that journal. A just in case farewell before she tried to take her own life. The medical records were there for that, along with a letter her mother wrote her after, tear drops spreading the ink and crinkling the pages. The next journal wasn't any happier.

We aren't really friends. We sit next to each other in art studio and once I showed her how to make a nose look real. I think that it was more that she felt bad for me than her really wanting me to go. I knew I should be excited that somebody finally asked me to do something, but I just find people exhausting. I asked my parents if I could go, expecting a firm no. Which my dad gave me... until my mom talked him into letting me. "She finally has a friend. Don't you want her to be normal?" She didn't know I heard that. I sat in the corner at the party and watched for a while. A guy came over, I think his name was Justin, he brought me a drink. I decided to just go with it. Drown out everything. I hooked up with him and didn't make him wear a condom. I kind of hope that I'm pregnant. Maybe then I will finally meet

HIM. He brought out a needle after and asked if I wanted some too. Even if I'm not pregnant, I found something to hold onto. When it hits, HE is there. More real than even my dreams. More real than my life feels.

Reese read through the night and went to see her first thing the next morning. The facility where she was kept was beautiful – brick veneer and ivy. It looked like the cover of a college brochure, carefully groomed camouflage to help the neighboring “normals” feel more comfortable. The sterility of institution didn't hit until the doors. There were two, both of which you had to be buzzed through. The nurse at the sign-in looked at him sideways and pursed her lips at his bloodshot eyes and the whiskey still on his breath.

She was sketching on her bed when he walked in her room. Her room was spotless, walls completely covered.

“You came to ask me about my son?”

He paused, not knowing how to respond.

“You know that he isn't actually your son right? Your medical records indicate that you have never been pregnant.”

“Of course I know I've never been pregnant. But we both know he is still mine. His guardians do a good job, and I know that they are his biological parents. But he is mine.”

He couldn't argue, not after everything he'd seen last night. Part of him wished that he had never caught her. Ryan had been her entire life, literally. Yet she only spent a few hours with him, and he, he would never know her. It was tragic. He'd had a million things that he had wanted to ask her, a million things that he didn't want to believe were possible. But the truth was all over her face, in the boxes, covering her walls. So instead he asked one:

“Why did you reach out to him after so long?”

“Because I am leaving soon.”

“What do you mean you are leaving?”

“I’m going to die.”

“Why do you think that? Are you planning to harm yourself?”

“Of course not.”

When he left, he headed straight to the station. Wordlessly he put his badge and gun on the chief’s empty desk and walked out.

RYAN

He was having dinner with his parents when he felt it hit, just a pin prick at first. It burrowed in through his heart to the bottom of his soul. The tunnel it left behind grew wider and wider until the walls collapsed in and in and in, a sucking pit of empty. It was unbearable. He made some excuse and walked in a daze to his room. In his closet, in his old soccer bag, he pulled out the letters. He couldn’t explain why he’d hid them from his parents that night they’d found him with the drawings. He didn’t know why when he read them, he felt a question answered that he’d had his whole life and never been able to name. The phone rang and he knew what it was. She was gone. He could feel his parents relief at it from upstairs.

All he felt was the black hole in his chest, and inside the pain, his emptiness grew a name. Mom.