

“The Correspondence Between the Governess and the Attic”

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OPENING

The changeling hides in the window seat. On one side of her is glass, gauzy with rain. On the other, a thick curtain. November whistles through the crack in the window frame, but she dares not move. In this house she is a creeping, persecuted thing. Best if they don't see her.

She opens the book. Reading, she knows, is dangerous: none of the books in the house are hers, nothing is hers, and the family will hold this small act against her. But reading is a better escape than none at all.

Boards creak. The changeling looks up from the book's eerie paintings. She tries to breathe without noise. But she is only a frail orphan, without friends or magic, and she is not hidden well enough.

The curtain is pulled aside. Together, you are dragged into the beginning of the story.

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THE RED ROOM

For fighting back, they punish her. The orphan pounds at the door of the haunted bedroom. Her screams claw down the hallway, but no one will save her.

She dies her first death in the red room.

There will be others.

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THE INTERVIEW

Afterward, the girl is interrogated, to see if she has learned her lesson:

“And what must you do to avoid hell, child?”

“I must keep in good health, and never die.”

This gives the family pause. Only yesterday, the orphan shrank away from them. Now she is upright, glittering, dangerous. Death will do that to some people.

“I am not deceitful,” the changeling says. “If I were, I should say I loved you. But I am glad you are no relations of mine. If anyone ever asks how you treated me, I shall say the thought of you makes me sick, and that you treated me with miserable cruelty.”

This will not do.

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THE SCHOOL

The family washes their hands of her in a respectable way: They send her to school. This is not a clean, well-lit institution but a prison, where unwanted children stand in rigid lines and faint from hunger. The servants bind the corpses in cheap linen and line them up in the courtyard for collection.

The changeling's fury sustains her. When the headmaster singles her out for abuse, she glares at him. She will not die, not again, not so soon.

She is befriended by Helen Burns, a girl with a saintly smile and a red cough that will martyr her before the story is even underway. Burns counsels the embrace of suffering, and dies (beautifully) to illustrate her point.

The changeling is not convinced. She scratches the walls of her prison, searching for a way out. A kind ancestral fairy drops the solution on her pillow: She will become a governess.

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THORNFIELD

Jane (let's call her Jane now, everyone else does)—

Jane Errant sets out for a house called Thornfield, where she is to tutor a clockwork French girl who sings stuttering arias.

The housekeeper claims the house has no ghosts in it. The changeling chooses to believe her, although she already knows that the servants laugh too loudly and that strange footsteps sound in the attic. As she lies awake at night, the attic creeps into the governess's thoughts, just as it creeps into yours. Dreams of yellow wallpaper, and women who will not be caged.

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THE CLOCKWORK GIRL

Adele, unlike Jane, is ideal.

At eight years old she is already pretty, with bright blue eyes that are empty of thought. Her golden hair falls in ringlets, and when she sings she tilts her head just so and shakes her curls as her mother taught her. She smiles frequently at men, displaying teeth that are white and straight.

If you let her, she will sing for you. She will recite poems that she doesn't understand, raising her hand in the places her mother taught her. When she has finished, she will sink into a curtsy and look up demurely through her fringe of golden hair.

In France, her audience pretended to find this sweet; the gentlemen watched her with eager eyes as she danced for them like a music-box ballerina. Afterward she was sent to sit on their knees. Sometimes in their laps.

Adele dislikes the governess's lessons, for they are full of big words and numbers that clatter noisily in her head. But she likes the governess well enough, though she is a plain, mousy thing with a thoughtful face. At eight years old, Adele already knows that women should never be thoughtful. They should be pretty and work hard to catch men's eyes and keep them.

It takes a lot of concentration not to think of the footsteps she hears in the attic, but Adele has been practicing the art of thoughtlessness for a long time. Her mother began the clockwork process—to aid Adele's dancing, she said—and now Adele has almost completed it on her own. Sometimes, when the ghosts in the attic threaten to dig their way into her mind, Adele likes to think about her clockwork body, how solid it is, how quiet and regular. Her body will last forever, and unlike people, it will never abandon her.

The noise in the attic starts again, but Adele turns away. She places her hand over her heart, feeling its fleshy beats thud disgustingly against her ribcage. Soon, she thinks, her transformation will be complete. Then she will be perfect. Then she will be loved.

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THE ATTIC

It is time we speak of the attic, this space around which Thornfield's stories turn. Thornfield is a fairy-tale prison, after all; its thorny walls must guard *something*. But do they guard it from the world or guard the world from it?

The changeling lies awake in her virginal governess's bed, listening to the attic. Are those footsteps she hears real, or figments of her imagination?

One night, tentatively, she writes out a note, and slips it through a crack into the attic: *Who are you?*

Excellent question. Sadly, it goes unanswered for weeks. During this time Adele lisps her lessons and the governess is bored. Idly, she plans a trip to the crossroads.

One day she finds a note pinned to her door. The pin is long and sharp; its head is red as blood. The creased paper contains a single word: *Myself*.

The governess writes a longer note, filling the margins with carefully phrased questions. She never receives an answer. The attic has already told her all she needs to know.

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THE CROSSROADS

At midnight the changeling goes to the crossroads. She puts her delicate hands to the dank, pressed earth and digs a hole as deep as her forearm. She takes out the charm—a simple thing made of rags and rabbit's blood, like the ones her nurse used to make—and drops it down.

There, the changeling thinks. *Now do something*.

Nothing happens.

The changeling lets a breath out she did not know she was holding. She formed the charm to ask for a change, a breath of excitement in a life fast becoming dreary. But of course nothing will happen. Her nurse's tales were fantasy only.

Then the hair rises on the back of her arms. Her sweat crisps into cold jewels of ice and skitters to the ground. It pools around her accusingly.

Looking up, the changeling sees a lone dog rushing toward her, eyes gleaming like underwater coins. Her nurse told her stories about dogs like this, fairy guardians of solitary ways.

She feels a surge of fear. Is this another beginning for her? A rough hand come to drag her into yet another story?

The dog rushes past her. It's his master—and hers—who stops. Falls, actually, tumbling from his horse with a clatter of bones and ugly deeds. It's up to the changeling to help him to his feet again, a dark man with gloomy manners.

If he had been handsome, if he had smiled, if he had treated her kindly—this story would be different.

She is used to rudeness, and to the insults he hurls in her direction. She offers him a hand and helps lift him up, into a story she—mistakenly—believes unchanged.

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THE SECOND INTERVIEW

“When you came on me in the Hay Lane last night, I thought unaccountably of fairy tales, and had half a mind to demand whether you had bewitched my horse. I am not sure yet. Who are your parents?”

The governess tells her master the truth: She has none she can remember.

“And so you were waiting for your people when you sat on that stile? Did I break through one of your rings, that you spread that damned ice on the causeway?”

The changeling feels an unaccountable chill at Rochester’s words. Does he know? But see how perfectly she answers, mimicking her master’s ironic tone:

“The men in green all forsook England a hundred years ago.”

The lie looks well on her, reflecting in the light of her preternatural eyes.

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BLANCHE

A party of gentlefolk has arrived at the great house. The servants scurry through Thornfield’s dark chambers, trying to scrub away layers of Gothic with harsh brown soap. The governess can think only of the woman she heard talked about: Blanche Ingram, the lady the servants say her master will marry.

On the night of the party, the governess sees her rival for the first time: a woman white as bleached marble. Blanche has an imperial air about her, the crackle of repressed power. She is careful not to touch the governess, not even with the hem of her gown.

Oddly, there is something about Blanche that reminds the changeling of herself. Ignorant of all but the most basic instincts of the fey-blooded, she cannot tell what it is. She only knows that Blanche’s power is to be respected; that her anger will make itself felt even at great distances. She knows, also, that Blanche has inherited a feral cruelty that the changeling herself does not possess.

Oh, thinks the governess, as Blanche passes by. Is this the kind of woman her master likes?

The changeling has learned to love her master (poor thing). And why not? In his rough way, he has treated her kindly. At least, he has been interested in her, and to those who are used to being ignored, interest is a kindness.

Besides, Thornfield is a dreary place. There is little else for a young woman to do here but fall in love or go insane. The changeling chose the first option (she thinks). She cannot unlove him now, merely because he has ceased to notice her.

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