

## The Changing Child

Hannah Redbriar didn't always believe in fairies. When her Grandmother Marie would tell fairy tales, Hannah's mother always reminded her that they were only stories. As a child, Hannah failed to notice the scolding looks her mother would give her grandmother. As Hannah grew older though, she saw her grandmother less, and not only did Hannah not believe, but she started to forget the tales.

Years later, Hannah's best friend, Ruby, had a baby. Since Ruby was now a single mom, Hannah stepped in quite often to help her out with things, especially since Hannah was looking for a new job.

Ruby told Hannah how blessed she felt, having such a good baby and a great friend to help out. Everything was normal the first couple of weeks. Any time Hannah would visit she'd play games with him while Ruby would tackle some menial chore or just sit and enjoy the company of an adult.

When Ben was about three weeks old, Ruby decided it was a good time to start taking him to the park on walks and enjoying the outdoors. One morning, Hannah went along.

They finished with their walk and they stopped near the edge of the woods and Ruby took him from the stroller to lay him on a soft blanket. It didn't take long for Ben to fall asleep, so both Hannah and Ruby sat down and relaxed.

In the middle of their conversation Ruby suddenly stopped and stared over Hannah's shoulder. Hannah turned towards the trees behind her, not seeing anything, but heard a jingling noise. Hannah saw what she thought was a small figure, a child possibly, standing amongst the bushes.

"Hello?" she called out. A giggle rang out in the air, followed by the sound of feet running deeper into the woods. The giggle floated back to her as she stood up. She stopped, remembering Ben, laying on the blanket, still napping. She turned only to see Ruby laugh and run into the trees.

Hannah felt a giddy feeling welling up in her chest. What was that she wondered? The jingling sounded again this time with a giggle, this time off in the distance. She stood, conflicted on what she should do. Ben lay behind her, and she couldn't leave him, but her best friend had just taken off into the woods after some strange kid.

Hannah nearly jumped out of her skin when a giggle rang out just as a short green figure appeared, barely visible in the trees. It stood just under three feet tall, had large almond shaped eyes, and wore clothing that looked like a collection of things it had found in the forest, especially leaves. Hannah started, jaw dropped. Then a wicked looking smile spread across it's pointed face, and her bewilderment was broken. Hannah shook her head, and immediately started panicking.

"Who- No, what are you?"

Just as she stepped closer, it lifted a skinny hand and snapped it's fingers, and disappeared just as Hannah made a grab for it. She blinked in surprise.

Hannah immediately remembered Ben, and turned back towards him.

He was crying now. Hannah crouched down beside him and picked him up to try and soothe him. It was then that she finally heard someone running towards her through the trees. She braced herself, holding Ben closely until she saw it was Ruby.

Ruby looked relieved, she ran to him, took him from Hannah and spoke, "I'm so sorry my little darling. I don't know what came over me. I won't ever let it happen again."

He screamed louder.

Hannah was confused. She could see Ruby was too. He'd normally calm down.

Something seemed off about him. Ruby looked him over, trying to figure out what bothered him. She rocked him, offered him a bottle, his pacifier, and yet, he kept wailing.

She looked around as she started bouncing him gently, telling him "There, there now. It's alright. Mommy's back."

Obviously flustered, she tried putting him into the stroller. He arched his back and squirmed. She begged him to calm down, but nothing worked.

After a lot of struggling, they decided to take turns holding him on their walk back to Ruby's house. Hannah put the stroller away, while Ruby carried him inside, Hannah followed her in and shut the door. Ruby suddenly held him out at arms length and shouted, "Will you please stop crying?".

It was then, Hannah noted something in his eyes. For just a moment, she could see his eyes change from a normal bright blue to a glassy hollow look. Even when his eyes changed back to normal, she thought for a moment that they looked off. No, she convinced herself. He was fine. Maybe he just got too much sun.

Ruby took in a deep breath and let it out, and went to lay him down in his pack n' play. This seemed to finally calm him down. Both Hannah and Ruby stepped back slowly and walked out of the room.

It didn't take long before they heard him crying again. Ruby, obviously at her wits end walked into the living room leaving Hannah standing in the entrance way alone.

It was time to call her mother. Maybe she'd know what to do. After explaining what had happened in the park, her mother scoffed and told Hannah she must have been dreaming and they should really be more careful about keeping an eye on the baby. Something came into her mother's voice when talking about keeping an eye on the baby. Hannah thought she might be over analyzing as her mother went on about other reasons that a baby cries that way.

Hannah got off the phone, more frustrated than she had been before. Her mother had said he probably needed a good nap. That, and is he hungry? Let him cry it out. But how do you feed a baby that doesn't want to eat.

Hannah thought about what she saw in the woods. It couldn't have been her imagination. What was that creature? Who else could she call? Something definitely happened today, and Hannah wouldn't let Ruby go through this alone.

It occurred to her then, that her grandmother, who her mother refused to speak to, may know something. Her mother had always told her that her Grandmother Marie was a little crazy. Hannah didn't have many options.

She made the call and Marie picked up.

Hannah apologized for calling out of the blue, but she couldn't think of anyone else who could help.

In the other room Ben still wailed. Her grandmother must have heard it because she said, "Oh my dear, does he normally cry that way?"

Hannah, pinching the bridge of her nose told Marie about how before their outing in the park, he was a perfectly happy baby. But now... they just couldn't get him to stop crying.

Her grandmother clucked her tongue and asked Hannah if they'd left the baby alone for any length of time while they were at the park.

Hannah replied, "Well no-" but she corrected herself. She needed to be honest. "I did turn my back for a few minutes but I don't know what came over me. Ruby completely lost it and ran into the woods. I was distracted by Ruby's disappearance

and the next thing I knew I was standing face to face with some small person dressed in green.”

Grandmother asked, “Dressed in green, or had green skin?”

“I- I don’t know. It was so disorienting. I don’t quite remember.”

Her grandmother made some kind of tisk tisk noise on the other end and said, “I warned your mother of this, but she refused to listen. You must listen to me. That baby upstairs isn’t your friends baby. It is a changeling child!”

Hannah gasped. The stories came flooding back to her from childhood. Panicking again she covered her mouth, “Where is Ben?” She sank to the floor, letting the phone fall to her lap in her hand before bringing it to her ear again.

“You need to get a hold of yourself now child. Listen to me. Wrap it in a cabbage leaf. That should help with the crying. Take it to the fairy glen. Can you find that clearing? That’s the place you’ll be looking for.” Marie said. She also said she’d deliver something that may be helpful.

Later, Hannah explained what she found out to Ruby, which took some time.

Eventually Ruby understood, so well that she could hardly look at what she now knew wasn’t her baby. Hannah decided to take on the task of getting Ben back on her own, and received the useful object from Marie that turned out to be a custom iron tipped knife. In the early afternoon she found their resting spot near the trees and carried the whimpering changeling now wrapped in a large cabbage leaf to the clearing where Marie said she’d find it and now saw the circle of fairy stones. They stood in a wide circle around one stone in the middle with a flat surface. They weren’t very tall, maybe knee height, and mostly covered in moss. Stepping forward, she laid the changeling on the slab of rock in the middle and unwrapped it from the cool cabbage leaf. Immediately it began to wail loudly again. Seeing Ben’s form made her second guess herself and linger a moment, but logic had her shaking her head and backing away. Grandmother had told her to leave the changeling and watch from a safe distance in the trees.

She did so, finding a shadowy spot and a natural dip in the ground where she could hide most of her body. All she was supposed to do now was wait. And wait she did. It was nearing dusk when she couldn’t hardly take it any longer, for the wailing never ceased when she finally saw movement. At first she thought it was a trick of the

forest light and shadows. But the figures stepped into the dimly lit clearing. She recognized the small figure immediately but this time it had two others along with it. Hannah couldn't tell if any of them were male or female. The leader, the one she recognized walked up to the changeling and started speaking quickly, angrily. Then it picked the changeling up and cradled it as it shrank down to a smaller size and turned, to Hannah's amazement, green.

At this point Hannah fully realized her grandmother's stories were true and the child had been a changeling. She just couldn't believe it before now.

The lead fairy, as Hannah thought of it, turned its head and looked directly at Hannah before she could duck down out of sight and stared directly into Hannah's eyes. A voice in Hannah's head said, "Changeling child!"

In an instant the fairy stood directly in front of Hannah, eyeing her with disgust. Hannah then felt twin pokes on her sides. Caught, Hannah sat up, raising her hands in the air, then stopped. "What do you mean changeling? You gave me this changeling." she gestured to the small green fairy cradled in the lead fairy's arms. It glared at her. "No, you foolish child. You. Didn't your mother ever tell you? Why have you never returned to the fairy glen where you belong? Do you not know the truth by now?"

Hannah took a step back, and stumbled to the ground, landing on the seat of her pants. "No, my mother..."

The little fairy raised an elegant brow. "You mean your stand in human mother." "What?" Hannah couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"Stupid girl. Your mother is the fairy Neemera. You were supposed to be returned, or run away when you realized how terrible the humans are."

Hannah was absolutely confused, so it took a few moments for her to come to her senses and remember why she was there in the first place.

"Where is Ben? You have your own wretched thing back, now return him to me."

"Not until you come back with us to the fairy realm where you belong." it snarled.

Hannah's shock didn't last long before fury bubbled up in her throat. "Give him back." she demanded.

Hannah looked at the small green fairy baby still cradled in the fairies arms and did the only thing she thought to do. She reached forward and snatched the changeling from its grasp.

“Do as I say!” She stood and held the changeling by the ankle up in the air pulling her knife from her pocket and flipping it open and pointing it at the now wailing changeling.

The fairies in front of her seemed to panic.

The mother fairy yelled for Hannah to stop.

Hannah, anger bubbling in her throat yelled, “Who is more cruel? Humans? Or you fairies who leave their own children with some stranger and take one that isn’t theirs? You disgust me. From this day forward, I will spend my days putting a stop to your trickery and magic.”

The fairies, still panicked, started wailing themselves. It was a horrible screeching noise. The mother fairy covered her ears and shook her head before turning and snapped her fingers, disappearing and reappearing with Ben in her small arms. It then threw her baby into Hannah’s arms hard enough that Hannah dropped the knife and the fairy child so that she could catch him and stepped down on the knife’s handle.

The mother fairy snarled at Hannah after catching her own offspring and said, “You awful beast. You will never win. For you are a fairy yourself. To not believe in fairies is to not believe in yourself.”

“No.” Hannah held her baby tightly, relieved to have him back in her arms. “You are the beast. I would never willingly give up my child and leave him with a stranger. I’m not like you.”

After another glare, the mother fairy and her baby disappeared in a snap of a finger, leaving only Hannah and Ben alone in the clearing. She looked down at him, and sighed in relief with a smile.

The next day, she sat in her own house, recalling the events of the day before. Marie stopped by. Hannah asked her about what the fairy mother told her. As it turns out, Marie had known about Hannah all along but her own mother refused to see the truth.

“Grandma.... Does this changeling problem happen often?”

Marie replied, “Yes dear. Although, not as much as it used to.”

Hannah blurted, “I want to stop this from happening to anybody else. Is there some kind of secret agency that you know of? Maybe you have contacts?”

Grandmother beamed and explained that yes, there was and she knew a guy. She told Hannah she would bring her the information right away.

“Good. Because I think I’ve found my career.”

Hannah Redbriar didn’t always believe in fairies, until she learned the truth.