

Conversation Pieces
Volume 3

Changeling

Novella

by

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Changeling



This is a place where I never was before: here breathing is different, and more dazzling than the sun is the radiance of a star beside it.

It is always possible to spot the newcomers to the city, for when they emerge on the street, they throw back their heads and stare in wonder. In truth, long-time city dwellers and repeat visitors often feel the same surge of joy in their hearts. They have merely learned the art of appearing blasé when awestruck.

But even the most jaded among them cannot resist the temptation to play tour guide. “Look,” they say as they pass a skyscraper built from red-tinged granite, “that is the tallest building in the city. It takes seven and one-half minutes for the elevator to take you to the top, but when you arrive you can see for hundreds of miles in any direction.”

Or as they walk up the steps to a building of odd angles and glass overhangs, its rough exterior walls the color of sand with just the faintest hint of pale orange, they say: “Did you know the museum has the latest

paintings by Alexis Li? The distorted nudes that provoked such a scandal?”

Let them overhear someone admiring the gilt-covered gingerbread on one of the great theatres in the heart of the city, and they will interrupt to observe, “It was designed by Pieczynski, you know. She also designed the hotel across the street—see how it repeats the same motif? Such a great architect, before she went mad.”

Great cities should provoke admiring responses in their residents and visitors, and those who live here have worked to make that happen. The place sparkles at night. All of the really tall buildings—and there are so many that most people lose count before they complete a tally—are accented by lights so that even their most obscure corners glitter. A slender pyramid shines gold, while a group of buildings connected by walkways and hanging gardens gleams silver with streaks of green.

Far below, giant, bell-shaped streetlights make the major avenues almost as bright as in the daytime. Neon signs advertise places to drink and dance, their style ranging from elaborate, unreadable script to block print variations on “BAR.” Hotels and theatres set in place a vast array of lights to give their patrons the feeling of being celebrities.

(And if there are parts of the city not so well-lit at night, dark passages in which the person who enters might come back out as someone else entirely, or perhaps not come back out at all, well, these are not the places a tourist needs to know about.)

Unlike many cities that dazzle the eye at night but look dowdy at noon, this one also glows in the sunlight. The streetcleaners come out before dawn and sweep up the trash so carelessly abandoned by late night revellers, so that when the sun comes up, the city looks neat and fresh. Even in the parts of town in which the skyscrapers are clustered, the sun reaches down to street level, for mirrors and prisms catch the light at strategic points on the buildings.

On several buildings, garden platforms have been interspersed at different levels—all placed so that the highest do not block the sun from reaching the lowest. You can step outside on the thirty-seventh floor and lose yourself in a country garden. At ground level a park snakes its way around the city, forming an irregular circle of green.

(And if in some neighborhoods the sun and its blessings do not quite reach all the dark corners, well, that is only to be expected.)

They say the city reached its pinnacle of beauty in a massive thunderstorm some years past, a storm so powerful that it knocked out the entire electrical grid and left the great place completely dark. For several hours lightning played high above the city, striking the massive metal rods (some elaborate and ornate, some just straight shafts) that top all of the tall buildings, jumping from them to the towers located at strategic points throughout the park. This light show outdid any of the artificial ones, proving once again that nature will have the last word, even in great cities.

Nancy Jane Moore

On her tenth birthday Margaret Hines watched that storm from the top floor of an abandoned warehouse at the southern end of the city. The irregular lines made by the lightning as it jumped from spire to spire were etched in her brain.

Maggie loved this city above all else. But she didn't live there. She didn't even know where it was.



...an apparent fencing in of the apparent thing.

Maggie Hines lived in Wichita Falls, Texas, a city on the Great Plains that sweep from Central Canada all the way to the Texas/Mexico border. The Great Plains possess their own harsh beauty—a sea of grass that shimmers in spring breezes, blue sky that stretches for seemingly thousands of miles in all directions, a view of the stars at night that makes one pine for a starship and all the time in the universe—but in the last hundred and fifty years human beings have tried to tame the land. Now the plains are crisscrossed with roads and fences, and the people have built towns and cities that mimic the ones they ran away from in the East (which mimicked the ones their ancestors ran away from in Europe).

The plains are not a land that civilizes easily, and nature regularly punishes these upstart inhabitants with tornadoes, blizzards, drought, and baking sunshine. They are hardy people, though, and so they refuse to leave, refuse to acknowledge that perhaps this land was not designed for the lives they envision. After every tornado, they rebuild; after every drought, they replant.

There are few cities in this area, and no great ones. The influx of people led to a need for concentrated marketplaces, and so some small towns have grown until they fill the role of cities. But on the Great Plains, these places jut oddly into the landscape, completely out of context.

Perhaps none of these cities is so out of context as Wichita Falls. A pathetic clump of buildings no higher than ten stories constitutes downtown. The rest of the city sprawls, clustering around golf courses and malls. The elite meet at the Oilmen's Club at the top of a downtown hotel to drink bourbon and ignore the lack of view. Everyone else drinks beer in more forgettable bars at street level.

Maggie's earliest memory was not of Wichita Falls, but of vast spires seeking the sky. In kindergarten, when the other children were drawing boxy houses occupied by stick-figure daddy, mommy, and kids, Maggie drew rows of skyscrapers. When asked about the picture, she said she'd been born in one of those buildings.

Her daddy became very angry when she said that. "You were born right here in Wichita General."

"No. I was born in the city."

"Don't lie, young lady," her father said. Yelled, really, and scowled so fiercely that Maggie hid behind her mother.

Maggie's mother was a tall, slender woman with dark curly hair. Maggie looked more like her mother than she did her father, a beefy man with bright red hair and the kind of white skin that never tans. But Maggie's hair was more auburn than black, as if the red had been determined to make its mark.

Her mother put a comforting hand on Maggie's head and said, "Now, Jerry. You know children Maggie's age like to make things up."

And Maggie stamped her foot and said “I’m not making it up” at the same time her daddy said, “That’s no excuse for telling lies.”

Her mother said, “Jerry,” in a warning voice, and her father turned on his heel and went out to the garage.

Maggie said, “But I was born there, Mom. I remember it.”

“I was there, and I can guarantee you that it happened at Wichita General.” Amanda Hines smiled tightly at her daughter.

At five Maggie wasn’t yet ready to interpret facial expressions, but the image of her mother’s smile at that moment stayed with her. By the time she reached her teen years, she knew her mother was lying, though she still didn’t know why.

Maggie didn’t stop drawing the city, but she did stop insisting she had been born there. And she didn’t show the pictures to her parents. Although they couldn’t help seeing them when they went to school for parent-teacher night, because the teachers posted student art work. And Maggie always drew pictures of the city.

Her father always turned red in the face when he saw her painting of a golden pyramid. But he said nothing. Her mom patted her hand and said, “That’s very good, dear” and then asked about someone else’s picture. Maggie came to understand that her city was one of those things (like Grammy’s drinking) that no one ever talked about.

So long as Maggie never mentioned the city, family life was good. Her father seldom got angry about

anything but the pictures. He personified patience itself when he taught her to ride a bicycle down the flat streets of Wichita Falls, running along behind her with one hand on the back fender, helping her stay balanced. In her elementary school years, he coached her soccer team (even though he had to teach himself the sport, being a football man himself), and while he didn't buy her a horse when she went through the classic young girl's equine fixation—"We have no place to put it"—he did spend two years getting up at the crack of dawn on Saturday mornings to take her to riding lessons.

While Maggie found shopping boring, she loved the trips she and her mother took to Dallas. The exhibition of goods in Neiman Marcus might not have been quite as exquisitely arranged as those in the stores in Maggie's dream city, but it came close. She loved the windows at Christmas that showed Santa's workshop or perhaps a scene from the Nutcracker with great detail and elaborate mechanical movement: elves built toys, the Sugar Plum Fairy danced, reindeer flew. And tomboy though she was, Maggie enjoyed looking at the dress-up clothes, draped on the mannequin in a way that suggested the eventual wearer would be more sophisticated and beautiful than anyone else at the ball. All of Maggie's high school prom dresses came from Neiman's.

After shopping, she and her mother would go to lunch in a nice Dallas restaurant and eat fancy salads full of arugula and watercress followed by chocolate mousse or strawberry cheesecake—food her father

would have pooh-poohed. Girl's Day Out, they called it, and Maggie enjoyed it even after she got to be fourteen and would normally have rather died than go shopping with her mother.

Life was good, but Maggie never forgot about the city.

One morning when she was about eight, Maggie explored the city of towers. She found herself in an aerial walkway that stretched from a mirrored building gleaming in the sunlight to another that narrowed story by story to a single point. The walkway was glassed in; looking out on one side, she saw many stories below to the street, where people the size of sugar ants bustled along. Looking out on the other side, she discovered an arboretum suspended between the two buildings. This glassed-in garden was several stories high, its ceiling on a level with the floor of the bridgeway on which she stood. At first Maggie was overwhelmed by a riot of colors in the garden and could distinguish no pattern. Gradually, though, she realized that all the plants of each color were grouped together and that the collection formed a giant color wheel like the one the teacher had showed them in art class at school, except that the wheel here was flatter, more of an oval than a circle. The yellow flowers—she was sure they must be flowers, though she couldn't see enough detail to tell what kind—blended gradually into the green ones. Blues followed, then purples, reds, oranges, and back to yellows. Within each color, the tint ranged from very pale at the outside edge to the deepest of hues at the center ring.

A group of trees covered in delicate white blossoms took up the center area; Maggie could see these flowers clearly, since the trees reached almost to the top of the arboretum.

A red-haired girl—perhaps about her own age—walked among the blue flowers. The girl must have come from somewhere, Maggie thought. She looked closely at the points where the arboretum connected to the buildings and was pretty sure she could see a doorway at each end. She hurried down the walkway into the nearest building, hoping to find a staircase or elevator that would take her down to the garden level.

Just as she entered the building, she woke up. For a minute she lay in her bed, disoriented. Where had the city gone? When she finally realized she had been dreaming, she began to cry. The city was real. It had to be real. It couldn't be a dream.

She cried loud enough to bring her mother, but when asked what was wrong, she mumbled something about monsters under the bed—one of those things no one ever talked about.

If her mother knew Maggie was upset about something more than ordinary nightmares, she never said anything.

After that, Maggie realized that almost all her dreams took place in the city. She began to record her dream adventures in a series of notebooks that she told her mother she needed for school. In her desire to draw better pictures of the city that she saw, she asked the elementary school art teacher for help. He showed

Maggie how to look at an object as a series of lines, so that she could draw it piece by piece instead of being overwhelmed by the whole, and encouraged her parents to sign her up for art classes at the museum. Her pictures became increasingly complex as she moved from crayons to watercolors and mastered some of the technical skills of art.

She spent hours of dreamtime—for the dreams often continued sequentially, night after night—exploring a great monument that sat at the southern end of the greenway, shaped something like the rook in a chess set and built of huge blocks of stone. She guessed that each block came from a different kind of rock, for when she examined the structure carefully she could see minute differences in texture and color among them. A block of purest white was placed at the very base of the monument, just to the left of the ten-foot black iron door. Maggie could not see even a hint of another color in this stone, but the one next to it included flecks of off-white. When she stood on her tip-toes and reached as high as she could, she touched a block that, had it been by itself, she would have called white, but which was, by comparison to the others below it, a pale beige. The stones at the very top of the monument appeared solidly black from a distance, but when examined up close they, too, turned out to vary in color. The darkest of these was blacker than coal, than ebony—a shade of black so dark that it might never have been touched by light.

The monument reached toward the skies—as tall as or taller than the highest skyscrapers in the city—making Maggie contemplate Sunday school lessons about the Tower of Babel. Over the doorway an inscription apparently explained the purpose of the monument, but the letters, though clearly formed, did not come from any language that Maggie had ever seen.

For three nights she climbed the worn concrete stairs that led to the top, lighting her way with a flashlight (taken to bed with her after the first night, when she had climbed the stairs in the dark). When she finally reached the top, she could see the wide and winding river that formed the lower boundary of the city. A thick growth of forest covered the far bank, and beyond that lay scattered homes. To the north, her city spread out. She could see the rooftop gardens and elegant penthouses that topped many of the skyscrapers. But while the individual features that made up the city were beautiful and impressive in their own right, it was the overall view that enthralled her. There the greenway snaked; there buildings soared. The city seemed to extend into infinity, though a hint of green at the northern edge suggested that it might be bounded by another river. She spent what felt like hours there, leaning on the wall of the observation deck, basking in the view.

Then she explored the levels under the monument. Here the stairwell smelled of mildew, and she could hear the drip of water. The concrete steps had crumbled in places, and she was glad to have the flashlight. Often she thought she heard someone, or something,

in the building with her, though she never saw another person. On the lowest floor, she found rows of cells, with doors made of iron bars, some with manacles set into the walls. Her flashlight began to dim just as she found specks of something red on the floor (places a tourist need not know about). She banged the light once, twice, saw a larger patch of red, and then, propelled by a desire not to know anything else (at least not yet), hurried back to the stairs and stumbled three times running back up them.

When she awoke the next morning, the batteries were completely dead on her flashlight.

When Maggie was ten, the Hines family moved from their starter house in Faith Village to a four-bedroom, three-bath house (with a three-car garage attached) in Country Club Estates. Maggie didn't understand why they needed such a big house for the three of them—she was an only child. “Guest rooms,” her mother explained, though they never had overnight guests. Her mother's mother lived nearby, in the elaborate house built by her grandfather's earnings in the oil patch, and when aunts and uncles and cousins came to visit, they stayed with Grammy. Her father was an orphan, so they had no other relatives.

“And to entertain,” her father said. Though the only entertaining they did were small, boring parties where grownups stood around in little groups, drank cocktails, and gossiped. Their old house was big enough for those parties, Maggie thought.

“Your father’s business is doing very well,” her mother said. Jerry Hines had worked for one of the larger local oil companies as a landman for years but had finally started his own independent firm. Her mother had gone back to work when he started it—“just in case”—but she didn’t quit when they moved into the new house.

Maggie’s primary duty in the move was to take care of her toys and other personal possessions. She had taken great care to put her pictures in a set of flat boxes and to label the box that contained her diaries, but when she unpacked after the move, she couldn’t find them. She stormed down the stairs and found her parents in the kitchen. “Some of my things are missing,” she said.

Her mother gave her father a look. Her father turned away, though Maggie could see his face turning red. Her mother said, “You know we talked about this, Maggie. You agreed that I could give some of your toys to the Goodwill.”

“Not the toys,” Maggie said. She was not going to be sidetracked. “My diaries, my paintings.”

Her mother’s face froze into the tight smile. “Well, dear, there really wasn’t room for all your things.”

“No room?” Maggie said scornfully. “This room is twice as big as my old one.”

“Some things just won’t fit in with the new look.”

The new look was French provincial, with a white and gilt fourposter and lots of ruffles.

“They were mine. You shouldn’t have thrown them out without asking.”

“Maggie, dear, sometimes you have to trust that your parents know what’s best,” her mother said.

She looked at her mother with utter contempt.

Her father turned then, and yelled, “Wipe that look off your face, young lady. It’s way past time you got over this nonsense.”

Amanda put a hand on his arm, but he shook it off. “Time you grew up, and realized how things are.”

“Jerry.” Amanda’s voice was sharp.

Her father exhaled heavily.

Maggie stalked out of the room, but at the door she turned and said, “I was born there.”

“God damn it,” her father said, but Maggie had already raced up the stairs and didn’t hear the rest. Her parents’ voices were raised throughout the night, and she knew they were fighting.

I don’t care, Maggie told herself. I’m going to leave as soon as I’m old enough. I’ll find the city; I’ll go back where I belong. She sat atop the silly bed and tried to remember all the things she had written down. To her surprise, most of her dreams came as full, vivid memories; she remembered her times in the city as well as she remembered the church group trip to the State Fair in Dallas or the school field trip to the museum. It was as if her memories of the dream city were as real as anything she did in waking life.

I don’t need the diaries, she thought. And the pictures were babyish. I draw better now. I’ll make new ones.

Nancy Jane Moore

By the next morning at breakfast, the household had reverted to the place where they never discussed the city. Her mother allowed Maggie to talk her into an art camp for the coming summer. And when Maggie spent her carefully saved allowance on an easel and oils, no one said anything. Not even when she managed to get purple paint on the white and gold quilted bedspread.