

THE CHANGELING

By Mark Cornell

He thrashed about in the shallows of the blue ocean. His body as thin as a blade of straw. The first people to see him, with his translucent skin and skeletal body, said he's not long for this world. The stranger babbled in a language nobody understood. They bandaged his bleeding head, threw their jackets around his icy body and carried him through the dunes. It seemed the poor boy couldn't use his legs. His hooded blue eyes were the same colour of the waves that had borne him to the shore. There were no reports of shipwrecks or missing persons in this part of the South West Coast. At the crest of the last dune, the stranger insisted on turning around to the ocean, and smiled as a fin sped through the waters. A nearby ancient cliff carving of a thylacine observed the goings on.

The locals decided to approach, Alexandria Brown, who lived with her husband Iain, in a bluestone whaler's cottage on the edge of their town of New Brae. Her house was empty as all three of her children, Bill, Chuck and Dave, had been sent off to Boarding School in the big smoke. The stranger heard the roar of the ocean, as he drifted in and out of consciousness. Suddenly everything went black. Dreams coiled around the recesses of mind. Green skies, where the orb appeared as a liquid jelly fish, his travels along the seal strands with his good friends, his thatched home below the kelp forest, strange metallic creatures bigger than whales, then the screaming wall of sound which made his body spin like a propeller, the blood pour out of his ears and nose. With the terror of disorientation, his tingling body, his hammering head; the stranger gave out a cry.

1. 'Listen to him, will you for hell's sake we've got to contact the traps, or put him in a loony bin,' growled Iain Brown. He was a large, slim, fisherman with thick curly black hair.

After a few drinks his crew would call him, 'a long streak of Pelican shit.'

2. 'It's too late to do anything about it now Iain anyways we should leave the poor thing to rest up for a while, he looks badly done in,' replied Alexandria. She was a small fair haired woman, with the beautiful symmetry of face known to western Scottish women. Iain stormed off to the pub, The Drumcondra, and spent the night ranting to his bemused crewmates about the skeletal spy in his house.

Purple branches of sunlight pierced the black sky. The sun appeared like a fat budda gut over the golden ocean. The red fingers of our closest star, stroked the rooves of New Brae. Sunlight trickled onto Alexandria's face. She was smiling as she floated inside a dream. Her smile disappeared as she wondered what her children would be up to now. Alexandria's sunny character altered after the last of her three children, Dave, went off to boarding school. Immersed in a cloud of melancholy she cried non-stop for several days. Her house echoed with emptiness. Her husband insisted that Boarding School was character forming. Iain, several miles offshore by now rolled his first cigarette for the day. The signs were good thousands of Shearwaters were dive bombing the nearby sea creating bubbling foams of death.

Alexandria gently changed the stranger's bandages and let him sleep, and sleep he did for three days. She had to restrain Iain several times at night from bursting into the troubled visitor's room.

'He's a spy I tell you! He's a Jonah; he'll bring bad luck to this town '

'Oh Iain don't be ridiculous whoever he is or whatever he is, if he was going to cause us harm something would have happened to us by now.'

'I've seen submarines out there; they're planning something I tell you!'

3. 'We're not at war with anyone now, why don't you go to bed?'

'I'll do better than that I'll piss off to the The Drumcondra,'

'Then go! Good! Get out my sight you drunken sot!' Alexandria pointed to the door.

Alexandria never forgot the way the stranger's body flailed and flapped like a fish on the end of a line, after she drew the curtains open. The mother of three quickly closed them again, then approached the crying stranger. She couldn't help but to sit next to him on the bed and place his head on her chest. The stranger noticed her sweet watery fragrance. As she stroked his long raven black hair it appeared waxy, the boy's body smelt of ozone. Poor wee thing, she thought to herself. What in heaven's name can I do to help you? Alexandria asked, then gestured to boy where his family were? The boy kept pointing out to the sea.

Years passed, it was time for Morgan to go to High school, unlike her previous three children, Alexandria insisted on sending her son to the local school at New Brae. Morgan was inquisitive and loved to tell otherworldly stories concerning magical apple trees and the Land of Promise. Due to his strange accent the kids would ask the boy where he came from, “overseas,” he’d reply. Because he was ever cheerful and entertaining he was popular. However some of the more brutal adolescents, Bill Evans and Lee Saxton, turned jealous and began to psychologically intimidate him. One afternoon Morgan found himself ambushed behind one of the schools portables and had the living daylights punched out of him. A black and bruised Morgan told his weeping Catholic mother there was no God. Morgan refused to go to school for a fortnight.

4. During this time the South West Coast’s skies became dark and thunderous, the ocean broiled like a cauldron. The locals noticed the huge strands of seaweed tossed up upon the shore, the driftwood smashing against the rocks. The lighthouse keeper observed shimmering green shapes darting around the waters. He saw Morgan on the edge of the pier, when he should have been inside like any other sensible creature, talking to a seal.

When Morgan went back to New Brae High the blue skies returned. The adolescent was no good at sport and tended to laugh whenever a ball came anywhere near him. But he was a strong swimmer, regularly paddling to the oil rig and back. Morgan won every swimming competition held in the South West Coast and was destined for great things. This land loves a sporting hero and so the bullies left him alone. Morgan always has a pained look on his snow white face during a race, when people asked him why, he’d reply, “swimming should be about enjoyment not competition.”

Morgan’s gift for story telling continued, when he was seventeen he started writing poetry. Alexandria would often see her son late at night, creating words which flowed into his exercise book. He grew his hair long again. He adored music and spent a lot of his time with his, fellow soul, Tally, playing guitars and composing songs about love and the sea. Their music was dream-like and drifty. They were like two peas in a pod. His father Iain was invisible. Morgan didn’t mind he said his real father was Manannan and claimed whenever

there was a full moon and a clear sky you'd see his father plough his chariot over the waves as if he was on dry land.

5. Sally Greendale with her fiery red hair, high cheeked boned face and pearl like skin, fell in love with Morgan. She was the top bargirl at The Drumconda pub who adored Morgan and Tally's sunny disposition, and philosophical conversations. All the regulars in New Brae pub were sullen and all they ever talked about was the footy, horse racing, jobs and the ever changing weather.

Sally, made overtures to Morgan; however he always seemed to be away with the fairies or lost in deep speculation with Tally. Because he was a swimming champion, the local Neanderthals tended to leave the two alone. But you would hear the words like. "wankers, poofters and sheilas," sometimes directed towards the two long dark haired, skinny youths. After Sally told the gronks to shut-up, they stuck their red snouts back into their beer.

Sally asked Morgan to stay back one night after the pub was closed. The two walked through the laneways of New Brae out towards the pier, the Milky Way was an arch of silver broth. Sally took Morgan by the hands to announce that she loved him.

'Oh what's that between your fingers ?' Sally asked.

'That oh don't worry about that its webbing. I was born like that, I refused the operations because I figured we should all accept what the gods have given us...You don't think I'm some kind of freak do you ?'

'Don't be silly.' Sally leant over to kiss him.

'Thank, thank you Sally I'm honoured.' Morgan replied.

6. As Sally took Morgan back to her cabin behind The Drumcondra Hotel, Morgan noticed the silver shine in her hazel eyes. He stroked her long red hair which in the full sunlight looked like a bushfire. Sally helped Morgan take off her shirt and bra. Sally sighed as Morgan caressed her firm apple like breasts. She threw back her head as Morgan circled her nipple with his tongue. Sally gave him a momentary puzzled look, the rumours around town was that Morgan was still a virgin. Sally half closed her eyes and sighed. Her sighs reminded Morgan of the waves hitting the rocks near

the lighthouse. Morgan tenderly explored the curves and plateaus of Sally's young body. Sally peeled off Morgan's pants, he slid her dress off. The two fell onto Sally's couch side by side, then Sally guided Morgan inside of her. 'You're so gentle, *so* gentle and you're going *so* deep,' Sally cried out to her young lover. Morgan studied her open lips and curious sighs. Their naked bodies entwined like coiled rope. Afterwards the adolescent was too excited to sleep. Sally slept like a sun drenched cat on his chest. Her watery breath tickled the dark stubbles of his chin. Morgan smiled at the dawn melody of the first blackbird. He wrote a song about that night, and the many other naked nights he was to share with Sally Greendale. Morgan felt re-born.

It leached up from the disturbed floor of the sea to stretch like dark fingers across the bay of New Brae. A black, slick, shiny poison strangled the life out of the waters, then advanced out to the Straight threatening all of the South West Coast. Sally and Morgan cried as they ran down to the shoreline. Thousands of oxygen deprived fish in their death throes, hundreds of birds, shearwaters, gulls, and penguins were all mired in oil.

7. These were the days when it was said all that can be done is to cap the oil rig. Alexandria stormed down to the shoreline and shouted, 'There's no time for tears!' to the youngsters and ordered them and a newly arriving Tally to march into the black water to rescue the birds. Pretty soon Alexandria's and Sally's house were full of feathered wading pools of all sizes and descriptions and all four, despite a protesting Iain, scoured the injured birds with soap and water. Alexandria's three sons now known as William, Charles and David, were on holidays and tut tutted their "eccentric Mother and her Changeling," and spent the summer watching the cricket on the telly.

The steel oil rig loomed over the water like a satanic leviathan. Flames burst up into the foul grey spewing smoke which then stretched over the permanent twilight skies of New Brae. You couldn't see the stars at night. A yellow helicopter valiantly attempted to cap the rig several times. The Petrol Company made a half hearted attempt to clean the oil off the many miles of spoilt coastline. But for months you could walk along any spit of land, turn a rock over and watch the black ooze pool in the sand.

Locals donated their backyard swimming pool to New Brae High; the school gymnasium was soon full of an army of volunteers and hundreds of distressed sea birds. Morgan, Sally, Tally and Alexandria were in the thick of things. Iain and his crewmates sat in the pub mocking the silly bird lovers.

‘Let nature take its course!’ bellowed one drinker.

‘There’s nothing natural about an oil spill you dropkick. This foulness around our town is due to man’s greed and stupidity!’ shouted Sally Greendale. With her fiery red blushing face, no-one dared take the head bar girl on.

8. A curious thing happened that Summer of the oil spill, once the yellow helicopter managed to cap the rig. A mountain range of purple cloud swept in from the Southern Ocean, a fortnight of torrential rain and heavy swell managed to dislodge most of the black filth and disperse it out to sea. By the end of the last downpour all of the rescued seabirds were ready to be set free. The spit of land on which the birds were released darkened under clouds of free healthy birds. The people of New Brae cheered as the birds flew above and waddled below a double rainbow connecting the earth to the sea.

Morgan heard clanking in the water as he swam. He surfaced to see men banging away on the platform of the rig.

‘This is the first of many you skinny wanker,’ shouted the voice from above. Morgan adjusted his hooded eyes to the sun to make out the woolly curly hair of his teenage enemy, Bill Evans. What looked like a toilet brush was the afro hair of his other enemy, Lee Saxton. The skeleton crew on the rig, mostly pisspots from The Drumcondra Pub were preparing the rig to pump oil again.

‘The company is doing sonic tests out in the Straight, there’s heaps of liquid gold out there you poofta!’ Evans spat into the ocean. ‘Sonic tests!’ Morgan suddenly remembered himself spinning around in the ocean like he was in a washing machine. The blood rushing out of his ears and nose. ‘The screaming wall of sound,’ Morgan took a mouthful of sea water into his mouth then disappeared below the azure blue waters.

9. That night the Lighthouse keeper saw the luminous green shapes again; they weren't darting this time, but gathering together like a vast forest. Whatever it was, headed for the oil rig. Reports came of a large freakish green wave which smashed into the rig, and washed the skeleton crew overboard. Evans and Saxton disappeared, presumed drowned so did some of The Drumcondra pisspots. Only three survived, they kept ranting about the watery long green haired bearded devils with pig's eyes and red noses that attacked them with tridents. They were put in the local loony bin.

Morgan disappeared that day too. Everybody in New Brae knew he couldn't have drowned. The locals didn't go anywhere near the rig. The Petrol Company tried to bring in outside crews, but they were always defeated by the natural elements of the South West Coast. The rig slowly rusted away. Whenever there was a full moon and clear sky, Sally would take her daughter to the beach to wave to Morgan as he drove his father's chariot over the sea as if it was on land. The rig finally crumbled to dust. And as the ancient thylacine carving looked out from his cliff face, time carved out a hint of a smile.

Bio

Mark is of Irish ancestry. As a child he grew up listening to stories; either in the form of tall tales told by his extended family or the lyrics of his favorite songs on the radio. He started writing poetry when he was seventeen. He has traveled to Ireland twice and during one of these visits was married to Kimberly in a Registry Office in Dublin. Mark has been writing Short Stories and Novels for a number of years. He took family leave for three years to look after his son Thomas. He now works as a Conciliator with Consumer Affairs.