

PAUL WITCOVER

# EVERLAND

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*And Other Stories*

**Introduction by Elizabeth Hand**



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*e-mail:* editor@pspublishing.co.uk • *Internet:* <http://www.pspublishing.co.uk>

## CHANGELING

**B**ACK WHEN I LIVED WITH JUDY, THE APARTMENT ALWAYS seemed too small. We were forever bumping into each other, getting on each other's nerves. But once she was gone, it suddenly became full of space. So much space, I felt lost in it all. I'd catch myself wandering from room to room as though waking from a dream, look at my watch and see that hours and not minutes had gone by. Yet though a whole month had passed since Judy walked out, it seemed like just yesterday. I could still hear the front door slam. I wondered if some obscure law of physics was at work.

I started spending extra time at the institute. Late nights, weekends. I even took up jogging. Jogging! But sooner or later, I always had to return to the apartment and memories of Judy. Things weren't going too well.

That Sunday the parking lot of the institute was empty. The security guard, watching a football game on a portable set, was surprised and put out to see me. He eyed me with suspicion, plainly disapproving of my jogging suit and sneakers, not at all the proper attire for whatever it was he imagined we scientists did.

I had the whole place to myself. My footsteps rang in the empty corridors like the footsteps of a giant. Once in the cubicle I shared with Dr. Sanford, I punched up last week's data and set to work.

This was the unavoidable drudgery of the search for new particles. They were so rare, so maddeningly random, that only by amassing mountains of data did we have a prayer of detecting them at all. And our method! Shoot

electrons at each other and watch the sparks fly. Like kids playing at marbles, as Judy used to say.

Even so, somewhere in each haystack of data a needle of proof might lurk to prick a probing eye. I wasn't hopeful, but it was easy to become lost and forgetful amid the simulated tracery of subatomic collisions generated upon the computer screen, brightly feathered trajectories suggesting an order invisible to the naked eye, like angels dancing on the head of a pin. There was a kind of comfort in that.

But not a lasting comfort. The tracks I followed did not lead away from Judy, but towards her. Her absence was everywhere; she was so much a part of my universe that she might have been an electron herself, a cloud of electrons spread wider than the Milky Way. Not once in all the years we'd known each other, not when we first met, or fell in love, or moved in together, had she seemed so beautiful, so desirable, so perfect to me as she did now, lover no longer, split up, moved out, gone beyond the reach of telescope and microscope. Gone.

I had her new number, but I'd promised not to call until I heard from her. She needed her space. I was determined to honor this open-ended promise in order to prove my worthiness and win her back. Of course at heart I was afraid to call, afraid to hear the tone of her voice as she recognized my timid hello. Afraid above all to hear the voice of my rival: for there must always be a rival. If there were no rival, it would be necessary to invent one.

But this particular rival was Judy's invention. Though I didn't know him by name or sight or smell, his existence was more than theoretical despite her denials. He was no particle indicated in the equations but not yet proved to be or not to be. That he was, I knew, and I knew, too, *what* he was: everything I was not, uninhibited Hyde to my too gentle Jekyll. I didn't hate him. On the contrary.

The urge to run came over me like it always did when I thought of Judy in the arms of her lover. The service tunnel to the institute's particle accelerator—the synchrotron—made a perfect track nearly five miles in

circumference. Over the last month I'd gotten into the habit of doing a lap each weekend before leaving the lab.

I hurried down the hall to the small room that housed the target area, final destination of the accelerated particles. From there I entered the service tunnel along which, through shielded tubes attached to the ceiling, the particles were accelerated by the generation of electromagnetic fields to speeds approaching that of light.

I turned on the fluorescent lights and gazed for a moment at the tangled network of white pipes and dark cables. I was standing upon the metal grill-work of the technicians' walkway. Before me the tunnel curved gently out of sight. Behind, an identical view presented itself.

I took a deep breath, touched my toes to limber up, and began to jog. Though all portions of the tunnel were so alike I might almost have been running in place, I was able to gauge my progress by the appearance of a thin black line along the inside wall every tenth of a mile.

I imagined that the synchrotron was activated. My body tingled as if electrons streamed overhead, quickened towards the violent collisions out of which some unstable particle might be born to pass away in an eyeblink of decay. I felt like I was drawing nearer to Judy with each stride. Or, if not to her, then to my rival. How could I approach one without approaching the other?

The echoes of footsteps came from ahead of me and behind me, as if I, pursuing, were myself pursued. I stepped up my pace, hoping to overtake the footsteps in front while outdistancing those behind. But they matched me with mocking exactitude. I realized that the footsteps I was chasing and those chasing me belonged to the same person. But who that person was, my rival or myself, I could no longer say.

I was a quarter of the way through. I passed the halfway mark. Then three-quarters. Was that a stranger's back I glimpsed vanishing around the next curve? My side ached, my lungs wheezed, my legs were slabs of lead, but I spurred myself on with a final effort.

Just then I heard a dull wallop as if the air up ahead had hiccupped. But no alarm jangled; the fluorescents cast their edgy light without a flicker. The only sounds were my breathing and the slap of my sneakers on the grill-

work. I rounded the curve and found myself back where I had started, outside the target area.

I reached for the door, only to yank my hand back. The handle was hot. "Hello!" I cried. "Anyone in there?"

From the other side of the door, I heard something like a moan. Removing my shirt, I wrapped it around my hand and, thus insulated, wrenched the door open.

A gust of hot air swept over me. I fell back, shielding my face with my muffled hand. Then I entered the room.

A naked body lay upon the floor. The body was so shrunken, the skin so shriveled, that it resembled a withered log more than a human being. The eyes were hard knots bulging beneath dry wood, the nose a branch snapped off, the limbs blunt stumps. Steam rose from the skin as if freshly pulled from a fire. The room and its equipment, as far as I could tell with a quick glance, were undisturbed.

I knelt beside the body. "Are you all right? Can you hear me?"

Once again I heard a weak but urgent moan, though I saw no sign of the mouth that made it. What must have been an arm rose in a gruff pantomime of pleading. The limb was like a rough-hewn club. A perverse fascination compelled me, despite my revulsion, to touch it.

Suddenly there was a hand where there had been no hand. It burst from the blunt end of the club in a flowering of flesh, strong pink fingers wriggling to intertwine with those of my own hand. I strove in terror to pull away, but could not. My limbs were petrified. My strength served only to raise the man—for I saw now that it was a man—higher, as though lifting him from a bed. At the sound of my shriek, the bark that was his face cracked in a sort of smile, and the knots that were his eyes ran with the sap of sight.

I felt myself shrinking as I watched the man grow. Before my eyes he took on the semblance of my very self, his skin soft and malleable as hot wax. Our hands were gloved in a single flesh; it was impossible to tell where I ended and he began.

All horror fled. How could I fear myself? No, it was not fear that I felt; I yearned to embrace the strange, familiar form, to feel its warmth, to taste its salt. But whose desire was this? What had overtaken me? I tried to put my

questions into words, but no sooner did my voice begin to croak than it sputtered and fell away, stolen.

Our eyes locked. I shivered at what I saw there. Then his lips were on my lips. A powerful suction drew my tongue into his mouth. I felt my soul unspooling.

All that remained was a small green sapling. I took it with me when I left the institute and planted it in a pot on the balcony of the apartment. I whispered the old words to make it thrive, wondering what shape it would take. Later the phone rang. When I lifted the instrument from its cradle, I heard a voice like Judy's, only smaller.