

Downstream

The sun shone bright in the backyard of the LeRoy's suburban clapboard house. As she dipped her delicate fingers into the stream that cut through their property, Cyndi's unruly red hair hung in tangled curls down her back, around her face, the tips dangling in the crisp spring water. Cyndi was eight, almost nine years old, and usually at this time in the afternoon she'd be inside doing her recitations, but today her parents had gone to a special Church meeting, leaving her locked in her small room. Her parents, Ellory and Mathilda LeRoy, were devout worshippers, true believers, attending Church three times a week, little Cyndi in tow. They raised their child in strict accordance with the Principles, home-schooling her with only approved textbooks. They were getting on in years, as Cyndi was their third child, a miracle baby that had been left on their doorstep by—well, they liked to think by a Divine Spirit. They'd tried twice before, with their own flesh and blood, but both of those children had grown to be failures. This time, with Cyndi, they were determined to succeed, and gain their rightful standing as Elders.

It had been quite difficult to get out of the house. Her parents always kept her locked up tight, but they did leave a fire escape route, a rope ladder that she could use in case of an emergency. Still, it was a considerable drop from the bottom knot to the ground, and Cyndi had to let go and fall, which she did, grabbing hold of one of Mrs. LeRoy's award-winning climbing rose branches on the way down. The vine was strong, but thorny, and the thorns tore her soft hands. She let the pain surge through her—usually, she went away in her mind when she was hurt, but today she wanted to feel. Dipping her hands in the stream, she watched the gentle trail of her blood disperse into

the cold flowing water. It was as if for the first time, she was consecrated--merging with a power greater than herself. As the blood trailed off, the water formed a figure with its foam—a distinct form appeared to Cyndi, just like the signs her parents always told her to watch for. Whether it was Jesus or Mary or some other Divine presence, it was definitely, absolutely calling to her.

‘Yes, what do you want me to do?’ she asked the stream. The foam-being dissolved then, dissipating downstream, having sanguinated with Cyndi’s blood. She ran after the pink froth, and as she followed the watercourse, another strange thing happened—she’d tracked the stream many times, it was one of her favorite places. It was small, shallow, and eventually it returned to the earth, disappearing into the rich soil, only to spring back out at some later point. But today it was different. This time, the stream turned off into the woods, and she saw a tiny, winged figure—she couldn’t quite make it out, but it was there, ahead of her, sailing down the twisting creek. It turned its head to face her and beckoned, and Cyndi ran to follow.

Mr. and Mrs. LeRoy were deeply immersed in the sermon, bristling with anticipation for when Mr. LeRoy would be called upon to testify. Standing proudly yet with humility toward the Elders, his wife watched rapturously as he stood to announce their news. They had worked very hard to live pure, to be holy, and now they were finally ready. They had atoned for their first two children, the ones who had failed in their purity, failed to pass the Church’s rigorous yet necessary challenge of Divinity. In point of fact, only about half of the children did pass muster, and the rest had to be discarded—driven far away and left to fend for themselves, or if they were particularly stained,

disposed of entirely. The only other option was for the entire family to leave the Church, and few were bold enough to choose that route.

“Our Cyndi is ready to be tested!” Ellory exclaimed, as Mathilda leapt up and yelled, ‘Praise the Lord, our child is ready! Yes she is, Lord, she is ready for you!’”

The whole congregation jumped to their feet then, caught up in the euphoric contagion of religious fervor. The Elders gathered in the center of the church, calling upon the LeRoys to kneel in supplication before them, as the rest of the congregation shouted and whispered their blessings. After the appropriate prayers and incantations, the Elders and the LeRoys left in a solemn procession, ready to take little Cyndi LeRoy to be cleansed and then challenged.

The figure had incandescent, nearly transparent wings, like a tiny dragonfly. Cyndi couldn’t tell if its body was human, for it shimmered when sunlight hit it, and a few times she lost sight of it altogether, sending her into a panic, only to become immensely relieved when it appeared again, sailing downstream on its little boat of leaves. Although Cyndi ran as swiftly as she could as she pursued it along the bank, the faerie-creature seemed languid as it drifted along. Breathless, Cyndi became aware of a throbbing, a pulsation that was visceral, musical, that seemed to pulse through and around her. When she returned her gaze to the leaf-boat, the little creature lifted up, hovering mid-air, head-level to Cyndi.

Breathless, she stood transfixed by the shimmery being, and although it was difficult to focus directly upon it, she knew that it was inviting her, beckoning with open arms. She waded into the stream, which had now become wider, deeper than before. But although her steps were tenuous, the stream normally being lined with algae-covered

rocks, now it was soft underfoot, sandy, caressing her feet. She followed her guide as it led her downstream—she was chest-high in the cold water, but the chill had dissipated...now she felt warm, more welcome in this strange stream with her otherworldly companion than she ever had felt at home with her parents.

“Yes, little one, come to me,” the being radiated, and Cyndi smiled, then laughed, which was normally forbidden.

The water soothed the welts that were forever fresh on her buttocks; the blisters on her feet and ankles felt as though they’d disappeared. Over her short life, she’d learned how to mentally check out, to numb herself from the harsh machinations of the Church, the rigid punishments that her parents saw fit to inflict. She’d always felt as though she’d been dropped into that rough existence by some other force, like she belonged in another place. As she waded blissfully through the clear water, she thought curiously of the photos of the other two children that her mother kept hidden in a shoe box in the corner of the linen closet. She belonged with them, to them, and as the water enveloped her, she knew she was free.