



“Cecile! Where are you, child? Get yourself up to this house right now. I need help with supper.”

Cecile sat on the long branch of the dead tree, dangling her feet over the river. Grandmama couldn't see her and Cecile didn't want to answer. She wanted to stay with the river, even if only for a few more minutes in the deepening shadows of the March afternoon sunlight.

“Cecile! I need you now. Stop your nonsense and get up here.”

“Sorry, River. I have to go.” Cecile hopped off the branch and headed to the house.

As she walked away, she heard the river. The river murmured to Cecile from underneath the wind blowing in the naked branches of the cottonwoods, and Cecile felt the sap rise up in her.

“You know my secrets, River. I'll help with supper tonight, but I'll be back to see you tomorrow. I have more questions for you.” Cecile walked slowly back to the house, holding her new feelings close inside her jacket pockets where they kept company with her hands.

Cecile grew up in Granddaddy and Grandmama's house, an only and lonely child. They lived on the high plateau of northwest New Mexico, dry but for the wonders of the Animas River, sustainer of life and neighbor to the property out behind Granddaddy's barn.

Cecile Alma Kirshbaum's granddaddy was a fire-and-brimstone preacher. Cecile didn't know what brimstone was but she understood fire. Fire was where evil people would spend eternity and although granddaddy never said it, she knew he meant she would be part of the everlasting burning.

Cecile was born evil, this much was clear to her. Her daddy was eighteen and a run-around, out-of-control boy when Cecile arrived. Her mama was sixteen but Cecile didn't remember her. She ran away early on, her only contribution to Cecile the part of her name demonstrating mama's people. *Alma* is Spanish for soul, close to Animas in meaning, the name of Cecile's beloved river, and maybe why she felt so at home sitting next to it. Cecile knew deep down her mama didn't want to leave her but had to because she could not breathe under the crushing condemnation of Granddaddy.

Cecile remembered Daddy tossing her small self in the air and saying, “Hey Cecil, where's Beanie?” She never knew where Beanie was and her daddy would laugh and pull her back to his chest and hang on to her. He smelled dangerous like cigarettes and french fries. Pretty soon Cecile's daddy was gone, too, lost to whiskey and a car crash on a dark lonesome highway in the middle of the night.

When Cecile sat by the river out behind the barn, she could feel the Alma part of her. It came to her in the breeze from the cottonwoods and the wide blue sky covering her world. The long name of the river was *El Rio de las Animas Perdidas*, meaning River of the Lost Souls. Cecile understood the whisperings of the river because it sounded

like the language of her mama. The river understood Cecile, too, when she talked to it.

Cecile left her childhood body behind early on. By the time she was fourteen, she didn't fit anymore into her long black skirt, high-neck white blouses, and the little-girl life Granddaddy boxed out for her. She scavenged for teenager clothes, and left them at her friend Mary's house where she went every morning early to change before

the school bus came. Her grandparents thought she left before a decent breakfast to go to the early Bible study group at the school. Cecile knew they wanted to believe this.

March is the brown time in the high desert. Grass is dead. Tree branches are bare. The river is low, showing its rocks and its own shade of tan. Even the sky seems browner as the spring winds blow dirt past anyone who dares to be outside. But the promise of spring is in the blowing dust as the days begin to lighten up.

That March when she was fifteen, Cecile sat next to a good-looking boy in math class down at the high school. One brown day he followed her to the river and they sat down to watch the buds on the Navajo willow think about pushing out. The river was perking up a bit, and moving toward its spring green color. It was a warm day for March, the sky was springtime blue, and the air smelled like earth.

“What is it you like to do out here?” the boy said.

“I sit and talk to the river. I watch the ducks and the leaves budding out in the trees. The clouds tell me stories, too.”



Photograph by Don Allen

"You are a strange girl, Cecile Kirshbaum. Don't you have any friends? Don't you like to hang out?"

"I have Mary. But she doesn't like to sit by the river. Sometimes we listen to music."

The boy had no answer as he picked up a stick and threw it into the river.

Before long, Cecile and the boy started talking to each other with their hands instead of their voices. Before she knew what happened, they were lost in the wonder of each other, the wonder of lips and tongues and bare skin. As the afternoon shadows grew longer, the boy looked up and realized he better ske-daddle out of there before Cecile's granddaddy saw she wasn't home and would come looking for her. He put on his clothes and left.

Cecile did not let on anything new had happened to her by the river and the routine in Granddaddy's house didn't miss a beat. By the time big trees were blowing their cotton into the air and the river was rising fast and high from the snowmelt in the mountains above, Cecile noticed her clothes weren't fitting so well anymore. Her time of the month—her lady time—was very late and her belly felt crampy and loaded, like it wanted to burst out. Her nipples hurt and her white blouses were getting tighter across her chest. Cecile was afraid of what might be happening so she didn't tell anyone and she tried not to think about it.

Grandmama figured it out first. She marched Cecile down to Doc Matthews's office and he figured it out, too. Grandmama was fit to be tied up in one of those hay bundles stored in the barn. She didn't talk to Cecile, but Cecile could tell. When Grandmama started to cry, Cecile knew it was bad.

Finally Grandmama spoke. "Shame, Cecile Alma, shame on you. You are carrying the mark of the devil. You bring sin into this family. What will Granddaddy say? What will he say to his church people?"

Cecile had no response. She ran out the back door and took herself down to her river, the river of her lost soul. That day, the river had no answers for her. She sat and watched the greenblue water move fast over the underwater rocks she had been able to see only a few weeks before when the river was low. The ducks came calling when she threw out some chicken feed but they couldn't help her, either. Cecile sat and cried as the ducks scrambled over each other for the food.

The next day, Grandmama put Cecile's books in a brown paper grocery sack and carried them to the high school. She set them down on the counter in the front office and asked to talk to the principal. Grandmama dropped Cecile from her classes. She told the principal Cecile was moving to Oklahoma to live with relatives, and they would send for her transcripts later. She came home and told Cecile she was done with that high school and the evil boys there. Cecile would stay home and go out only to church. She would not be allowed to talk to any of her friends, because they were all taken up by Satan.

The summer got hotter as Cecile sat in the dark living room, doing Grandmama's mending tasks with the sewing basket beside her. She darned socks and sewed buttons back onto Granddaddy's work shirts. Granddaddy worked in the oil fields because it paid the bills and helped him keep his church open. His roughneck buddies called him Preacher because all he ever talked about was Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. They respected him as a good worker but no one wanted to be around him at lunchtime. They respected him in no small part

because he went to work on time, did his share, and started every day with clean clothes, full buttons attached. This was Cecile's contribution to the family now.

Grandmama let Cecile out every afternoon for an hour to get fresh air and to stretch her legs. Cecile went to her river and watched the water moving along, sometimes carrying sticks from upstream. Cecile watched the summer heat flow over her and the river all the way into the fall season when the mornings got chilly and the leaves began to turn. This was her favorite river time. It looked different every day. When the clouds lifted after a rainy blowy fall storm, the river went to a slate color matching the sky. Cecile sat by the river and saw the first coat of white snow on the top of her mountains, a fall cap to cover them over to get set for the oncoming winter.

Cecile spent her afternoon times outside talking to the baby.

"Hello to you today, Baby Maggie." Cecile knew the baby was a girl. "How are you today?"

She felt only a small movement, but she knew it was an answer. Maggie

was happy to talk to her mama.

"When you are here, Baby Maggie, we will have a good time. We will leave New Mexico and find ourselves a place to live in a city near an ice cream parlor. We will have friends. We will walk to the park and swing on the swings."

The baby kicked hard when she heard those ideas. Cecile could feel they were happy kicks.

"When you are old enough to walk around, we will go to Disneyland. We'll ride on all the rides and meet Mickey Mouse and Cinderella."

Cecile put her hand on her expanding tummy and patted Baby Maggie. She knew the baby heard her even though this time she didn't kick. She was probably taking her afternoon nap.

These afternoon visits gave Cecile comfort. It was the first time in her life she didn't feel completely alone.

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Someone else was there with her. Someone loved her and she loved someone back. She began to understand she was not evil, she was not a lost soul.

She looked forward to meeting this new person face to face, but didn't know how or when that would happen. Granddaddy and Grandmama didn't talk about the baby or ask how Cecile felt or pay much mind to her other than to remind her to listen up in church, eat her peas, do the dishes, and sweep the floors. They prayed over her but left the baby out of all conversation.

When winter set in for real and the riverside tree branches were bare and black, Cecile felt a shifting inside her. She sensed something was changing, and maybe the baby was tired of kicking around in there and wanted out. On a day when there was a thin coat of ice on top of the river and the ducks were tiptoeing around it, she started back to the house in the long afternoon shadows. A slicing pain in her middle section nearly doubled her over.

When she made it back, Grandmama saw something had happened.

"What's going on girl? Is that baby on its way out now?"

"It was like something stabbed me down there."

"Go lie down. I'm going to call Aggie to come over and take care of you."

Cecile wanted nothing more than to go to bed so she did while Grandmama went to the phone. A while later—Cecile wasn't sure how long—Aggie knocked on the back door and came in to see after Cecile's lying in.

Cecile did not know there was such pain in the world. It came and went in waves and she only partly remembered what happened. By the time Aggie realized she was in over her midwife head, Cecile was gone from consciousness.

Cecile woke up in a hospital room with the winter morning sunlight streaming in on her bed. Something was different. The baby feeling was gone but the pain was there. She wanted to move, she wanted to ask questions, she wanted to know where her baby was, but nothing was working right. She couldn't pick up her left hand, or holler out, or move in the bed.

They told her later she had a stroke during childbirth. She thought strokes were what happened to old people like Howard Simmons who got pushed into church in a wheelchair and drooled during the service while Granddaddy was shouting about eternal damnation. It didn't look like Howard cared much about eternity, but no one knew because he couldn't answer back when questioned.

Cecile did not understand what stroke might mean in her case and, like Howard, she was unable to ask more questions about it.

Grandmama came in after she woke up and told her the baby died when Cecile had the stroke, so she needed to stop thinking about baby matters and get on with her life. God had spoken—the evidence of Cecile's sin had been taken from her and now she was going to have to go to another hospital and learn how to get better and forget about the last year. It was time for Cecile to be forgiven and come back to the fold.

In the deep dark days of winter, they took Cecile away from her river and checked her into a far-away rehab hospital. She never went outside, but she could see the frost on the window and the dark clouds bringing snow and the early dark in the late afternoons. When she closed her eyes, she could imagine the gray clouds moving over her frosty river while the bare branches of the cottonwoods stood guard.

Christmas came with an extra pudding cup and a red bow on her dinner tray. She knew then there was more winter to come.

She could tell it was dark and cold outside. She spent time sleeping. A lot of sleeping. She dreamed of her river and her baby girl. Little by little, day by day, the light was coming back and Cecile was feeling stronger.

Roberto came in to visit her every morning. He talked to her and helped her figure out how to talk back. The words came back one at a time as Roberto encouraged them out of her.

Every time she got a new word, Roberto cheered for her. "Cecile! You are smart and strong and beautiful and you are going to be just fine."

It was the first time anyone had called her any of those things. Cecile started to feel better.

A young woman named Maggie came every afternoon with a wheelchair and took Cecile to a big room in the hospital full of gym equipment. Every day, Maggie helped Cecile move a little bit more. She caught balls, she squeezed rubber toys. When Cecile could catch and hold on to the big red ball, Cecile knew she would get back to her river and walk beside it again.

Cecile knew in her heart of hearts her baby was alive. Sure as she could see the light getting stronger and brighter through the hospital windows, Cecile knew her Baby Maggie was out there somewhere, waiting for her.

The light and air grew warmer and brighter and Maggie took Cecile outside to practice walking. By summer time hot, Cecile could walk with a cane and answer when questioned. A doctor came in and said she was ready to go home. Cecile didn't care so much about returning to Granddaddy's fold, but she was for sure happy to be going back to her river.

Granddaddy and Grandmama came to pick her up a few days later. After Grandmama jabbered her news about people in Granddaddy's church, no one had much else to say to each other on the long ride home. They stopped in Albuquerque at Furr's Cafeteria. Grandmama helped

Cecile with her tray while Granddaddy ate his catfish and fried okra in silence after he offered a loud blessing.

No one was there to greet them when they drove back into the yard. Granddaddy parked the truck by the barn. The house looked the same. The Bible on the table next to Cecile's little girl bed was still there.

The brown time of year had passed by while Cecile was gone. The greener time of spring had passed through, too, when the buds on the Navajo willows showed bright green, the cottonwoods looked hopeful, and the river ran strong and flowing happy from early spring runoff from the snow-capped mountains. When she came home to her river, her alma, the trees were full-out dark green and the flow of the river had returned to its summertime steady.

Cecile used her cane to help her get back to her place by the river. It was harder to move than it used to be, and the rocks in the path threatened to tip her over, but she kept on and slowly found her way back to her perch on her favorite rock behind the barn.

Cecile sat and listened. She heard the river tell her the baby girl was alive and waiting to meet her.

"Yes, River. I know. But where is she? Can you help me find her?"

The river kept on, whispering to Cecile in their secret language, letting her know that Baby Maggie was waiting for her. The river counseled patience.

"I don't want to wait, River."

The river answered back in a language only Cecile could understand. Cecile heard comfort and promises for sunlight and better days to come. She heard reassurances Baby Maggie was waiting for her somewhere and Cecile would find her.

Day by day, Cecile felt her legs getting stronger and her soul coming back to greet her. The sunlight poured over her and warmed the top of her head and the bare skin on her arms. Cecile stretched out and soaked it in. Sure as the sun rose, the river flowed by, and the cottonwoods filled the air with white seed, Cecile would find her baby girl. She would never be lost again.

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