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## River Birch

by Candida Lloyd

It was hard to know if the name River Birch prophesied the person she became or if her hippy Californian mother lucked out in selecting something so fitting.

Her skinny, branch-like limbs gave her the appearance of a creature who had been raised in an enchanted wood. She had translucent, pale, tissue paper skin and her matted, yellow hair hung in a fuzz down her back. Attempts by her mother to smooth it with a brush were fruitless. The poor child's head would be yanked backwards as the bristles caught the tangles. This must have hurt River Birch, but she would never complain which her mother found disconcerting. Did she not experience pain?

It was as if she was absent somehow, unconcerned by the every-day things that preoccupied everyone else. She never got hungry, for instance, but would eat food when it was placed in front of her. Time meant nothing to River Birch – she had plenty of it. She was incapable of keeping to a schedule because she would inevitably get lost in some absorbing distraction along the way. But somehow, she was never short of people to chivvy her along and make sure she did the things she needed to do.

They were drawn to her by her wide purple-green eyes which absorbed everything but gave nothing away. Into these eyes, others could project a fantasy of the kind of person she was – intelligent, creative, wise, insightful? Her ability to detach from the world was an appealing quality. One that most people try to achieve through meditation, running or some other mindful activity. Failing that, drugs. But she could attain it effortlessly and others wanted to be spirited away with her.

River Birch was the kind of person you lose easily. When her mother gave her a simple instruction, it was impossible to tell if she was listening or if her mind was elsewhere. Her daughter could easily become immersed in an activity to the exclusion of everything else.

Once, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art they saw an installation piece which consisted of a wall covered in bright orange fur. Most of the visitors enjoyed running a hand across the surface or tracing a circle against the grain with a finger. They would then move on to the next exhibit. But River Birch stood with her entire body flat against the furry wall, moving her limbs and rubbing her face against its softness. Then she danced around, drawing large circles in the velvety pile so that others moved out of her way. She took interactive artwork to a level the artist probably hadn't imagined her Mother thought as she looked on with a familiar mixture of embarrassment and admiration. People stared, incredulous at her utter absorption.

When she had at last finished, River Birch's gaze returned from a place far away, her eyes vivid against the colourful backdrop. Her mother worried that one day she would lose her completely and she would never return from wherever she'd been.