

# A Synopsis of *THE ANGEL OF POLK STREET* A Novel by Celeste Newbrough

This psychological drama intertwines the fates of a child and mother, and relates a unique narrative of coming of age. Lee, is taken from his mother to live for years with a violent kidnapper, to return to his home and mother after eight years as a transgender teen.

LEE, a sensitive blonde boy, is lured away from his mother, Veronica, and upscale Berkeley home to endure years of captivity in a remote shack with an erratic and delusional criminal, Sam.

As a way of surviving, Lee invents a guardian Angel as his confidante and guide. Even in the dark night of his soul and his impoverished life, the child takes joy in watching old movies on TV, reading the Gideon Bible and planting a desert garden: *I have no shovel or trowel so I dug into the earth with my bare hands, scattering weeds and small stones, building up a frame of earth like they showed on TV. I don't have a wood boundary, but I make the edges straight. I work in the chicken manure until the soil looks rich with growing power. Then I plant the seeds. I feel a deep well of happiness rising inside me. "We need to water every day," I tell Sam and he nods. We trudge inside to get two glasses of water, which I pour over the planted seeds. I straighten up in the sunlight, looking from my garden to the far line of the prairie with its long hills under the big blue sky. It's so beautiful to be out in the sunshine*

*(Angel) Peace comes to the mystic in unexpected ways. At the edge of a garden patch in a scruffy, scalded land. When possibility has been seeded. And might bloom.*

When Lee approaches puberty, he becomes increasingly aware of that he identifies as female: *... I was a bud, and now I am turning into the flower. Yes, even locked up in this tiny shack in the middle of nowhere, I bloom. The feelings I have that are sexy live all over my body and in my mind. They ache deep inside my belly in some invisible space, like a hidden baby ready to be born.*

Secretly she changes her name to LESLIE. The young transgender escapes and hitchhikes to San Francisco to the derelict Tenderloin District, where she performs in a strip act in a transgender club as the Angel of Polk Street, in a costume of her own design. She falls into a miasma of prostitution, drink and drugs, yet manages to pull out of it. She is discovered by a police officer who originally worked on the kidnapping case who identifies Leslie as the boy, Lee, who disappeared many years ago. Leslie begins a new life with Veronica, struggling with nightmares. Shunning sexuality, she pores over math and literature, finally coming of age as an elegant young transwoman.

VERONICA, Lee's loving and dedicated mother, is a Jungian psychiatrist. When Lee disappears, she becomes embittered. She moves from her dream therapy practice into criminal psychology, becoming a

coveted prosecutor's witness. She mourns her son and spends years searching for him. When her kidnapped child returns as a girl, she is shocked and deeply grieves for her lost son. But she plunges into the task of nurturing Leslie, rediscovering the lost, tender feelings of maternity, to help her child transcend the deficits of her narrow, trauma-filled existence as a victim and a street youth.

SAM, Lee's kidnapper is an ignorant and ironically well intentioned pedophile. He imagines that as the "pack leader", he will teach charming, smart boys about the ways of the world as he sees it. Given to violent outbursts, he creates hell for Lee and the few other boys he brings to his desert shack. As Lee sees it: *The problem with Sam is he's just plain stupid... I can't believe in this great country of America there wasn't someone, somewhere who didn't blow the stupid out of Sam.* The manhunt for Sam finally succeeds and he is brought to trial.

Leslie convinces Veronica that she must plead for Sam's life, which she does in a riveting court scene. At a community playhouse, Leslie writes and directs a drama telling the story of Lee, herself acting the role of Luke's Angel. Finally, Leslie falls in love. The non-linear structure of this novel moves from real-time to the dramatic enactment of the boy's life in captivity in the words of Luke and the Angel. At the end the audience realizes these earlier dramatic dialogues are actually scenes from the play written by Leslie.