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opening extract from

The Girl Who Could Fly

written by

Victoria Forester

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The Girl Who Could Fly

Victoria Forester

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To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting.

e. e. cummings

CHAPTER ONE

PIPER DECIDED to jump off of the roof. It wasn't a rash decision on her part.

This was her plan – climb to the top of the roof, pick up speed by running from one end all the way to the other. Jump off.

Finally, and most importantly, don't fall.

She didn't make plans in the event that she did fall, because if you jump off of the roof of your house and land on your head, you really don't need any plans from that point on. Even Piper knew that.

So that's what she did. She jumped clean off of her roof.

But before we get to what happens next, you'll probably need to know a thing or two about a thing or two.

Piper lived with her ma and pa on a farm. It wasn't much of a farm to be sure, just an old clapboard house and a bank barn that leaned dangerously to the left. For

longer than anyone could remember, the McClouds had lived in Lowland County on those same twenty rocky acres of land. Piper's grandpa and great-grandpa and great-great-grandpa, and so on and so on, all breathed their first, last, and everything in between right in the same house where Piper was born, and because of that, the McClouds never planned to live anywhere else. Betty McCloud felt that folks ought to stay in one place and not move around too much so that the Almighty knew where to find them if He needed to.

'If the good Lord wanted things to keep changing all the time, then the sun wouldn't rise up the same way every blessed morning.' Betty was a plain, no-nonsense, solidly round woman who believed in only two things: the Good Book and something that she called 'providence,' as in –

'I told Millie Mae not to fool with that newfangled gardening hoe. Can't say I'm surprised them black beetles is eating clear through her tomatoes now. It's providence, I tell you. Providence.'

Unlike Millie Mae, Betty McCloud never tempted providence.

Joe McCloud, a lanky man with sun-weathered skin the colour of browned autumn leaves, never said a word about providence, but then he never said much about anything. If pressed with a question, he'd likely ponder it

for a long stretch before finding the words to answer in his measured way, 'Well, that's just the way things is.' And the way things was, was plenty good enough for Joe McCloud.

So it was in this manner that Betty and Joe quietly went about the business of tending to their land, as the seasons and years passed them by, one no different from the next. And never was it heard to be said in Lowland County that a McCloud didn't do things as they were supposed to be done. That is, until someone said precisely that.

'No, I ain't. It's not the way of things.' Betty McCloud argued with Doc Bell when he announced that she was pregnant. After all, Betty had celebrated no less than twenty-five barren years of marriage and was no longer considered a young woman.

Four months later Betty McCloud birthed a baby girl.

That baby girl was named Piper. Piper McCloud.

News of Piper's birth travelled with great speed through the remote fields of Lowland County, where cows outnumbered people by a ratio of ninety-three to one.

'It's not the way of things,' Millie Mae hotly declared to the ladies' Tuesday afternoon sewing circle, each one of whom immediately pressed her ears more closely inward. 'Fancy a woman Betty McCloud's age prancing around with a newborn baby! A first-time mother at that. It ain't right!'

Many of the ladies nodded in agreement. Dire predictions soon followed that the child was sure to grow up queer in such circumstances, and without a sibling to boot.

For the first time in her life Betty McCloud was tempting providence. And she knew it. She certainly didn't need the whispers of local gossip to inform her of the fact. In an attempt to restore balance and appease providence, Betty and Joe set about the business of strictly rearing Piper in the prescribed way that McClouds were raised. Which is to say, without a lot of fuss and nonsense and a solid portion of hard farmwork thrown in for good measure. They were simple and honest farmers and they didn't hold with any fancy child-rearing notions that some city folks got into their heads.

Much to their relief, Piper was what every other baby was. At first. It was only when Piper reached the age when most babies were learning to crawl that her development took an entirely different turn.

It was a Thursday afternoon like any other that Betty set about changing Piper's diaper on the kitchen table, no differently than she'd done a hundred times before. When Betty turned away for just one moment, Piper rolled, quick as a flash, off of the edge of the table. Now any other baby would have immediately fallen to the floor and screamed itself silly. Not Piper. To Betty's astonishment, Piper simply *floated* in the air next to the table.

'Lord save us,' Betty choked, her hand clutching the terrified swallow inside her chest. Piper giggled and bobbed up and down in the air.

Betty quickly scooped Piper into her arms and held tightly on to her from that moment on. The word *providence* flashed through Betty's mind. *This is what you get when you don't do things as they should be done,* the left side of her head said to the right.

As time passed, and despite Betty's sincere prayers, the situation got worse, not better. Piper was discovered bobbing about the parlour ceiling and either wouldn't or couldn't return to the ground. Joe was dispatched out to the shed to fetch the ladder. Several weeks later in the wee hours of the night, Joe discovered Piper sleep-floating several feet above her crib. Then there was that particularly gusty day when Piper suddenly took to floating and was swept up in a wind that carried her three full fields before she became snared in the branches of a tree and Joe was able to fetch her down.

When Piper reached the age of five and was still known to unexpectedly float across a room, Betty finally felt that the time had come to broach the matter.

'Seems like she ain't normal is all I'm sayin',' Betty helplessly offered to Doc Bell.

'How's that?' Doc Bell questioned. Doc Bell had seen generations come and go and all manner of things happen

to them in Lowland County. He'd seen the youngest Smith boy cough up a screwdriver and a whole package of two-inch nails. He'd been there when Clara Cassie Mareken's head turned all of the way around and then back again. Doc Bell had even seen a grown man talk backwards after he was bumped on the head by a hay baler. The little girl dangling her legs off of his examining table had ten fingers and ten toes, was no taller or smaller, no smarter or dumber, no thinner or fatter than a child her age should be. She was, in short, like every other child in the farming community of Lowland.

'Well, Mr McCloud and I, we've been noticing that she's . . .' stammered Betty, not sure exactly how to describe her condition, '. . . well, she's a might high-spirited.'

Doc Bell chuckled and turned away to wash his hands. 'A child her age should have plenty of energy to spare, but it isn't anything you need worry yourselves about. Give her plenty of exercise and lots of fresh air. Nothing wrong with her. She's as normal as you or I.'

When Doc Bell turned back around, he discovered that Piper had somehow managed to hoist herself five feet into the air, where she was dangling on the light fixture that hung from the ceiling. There she began to swing back and forth. For the briefest of moments, Doc Bell

looked into Betty's alarmed face and the notion that Piper McCloud might indeed be more than high-spirited crossed his mind. Doc Bell was a man of science, though, and so he naturally let the matter go.

'You've got a little monkey on your hands, Mrs McCloud.' Doc Bell chuckled.

And upon that medical recommendation and with great relief, Betty decided to let the child be. All the same, she felt it wise to homeschool Piper until such time that her high spirits, however normal they might be, were . . . well, less high.

By her ninth birthday Piper had long nut-brown hair that was fixed into two braids, bright blue eyes (which she liked), more freckles than the sky had stars (which she hated), and her most constant companion was loneliness, as well as some other feeling she couldn't quite place a name to.

'Ever think something's not right but you can't get at it, Pa?' Perched atop a fence, Piper watched Joe as he fixed a loose blade on the plough.

Joe shrugged uncertainly.

'It's like I got an itch right in here,' Piper continued, pointing to her midsection just below her ribs, 'but I can't get at it and it just keeps scratching at me and scratching at me, but on the inside. You reckon maybe there's something that'll make it stop itching so?'

Joe shrugged again. He often felt dizzy when Piper talked to him. It wasn't that the words she used were so different – heck, Piper talked like everyone else in Lowland County. It was the ideas that the child got into her head. She asked questions he wouldn't have thought up in a million years and couldn't begin to figure an answer to.

'I told Ma about it the other day and she figured it was caused by all the fool ideas I had in my head.' Piper continued, heedless of her father's inability to respond. 'I didn't think my ideas were fool but Ma says that I'd do better to keep quiet, keep my feet on the ground, and to mind my own business. She says it's wrong to be frittering away my hours asking questions when there's work to be done. But I don't see how a question can be wrong. Can you, Pa? Ma says the Bible sets out what's right and wrong so we don't have to bother ourselves with it none but it seems to me that it ain't so matter-of-fact. Like when you kilt that old cow last week and I didn't want to eat it 'cause he was my favourite and so gentle besides. Ma said I was sinful to waste food. But I said that maybe we shouldn't go about killing and eating cows when they was so peaceful-like. Ma said that was foolishness and that God put the cows here just so as we can eat 'em. But that don't seem like such a good deal for the cows to me. Preacher told us not more than four Sundays ago that God loves all his creatures, but it ain't loving to my way

of thinking to create a thing just for it to be food. Them cows ain't never done nothing to us. Which got me to thinking that maybe we got it wrong and they got a purpose we don't know nothing about. Maybe it's a secret. So I started watching the cows, quiet-like so they wouldn't notice, aiming to see if I couldn't guess that purpose. And I think I knows it now, Pa. I do. Wanna hear?'

Joe drew his forearm across his brow to steady the dizziness. Somehow this conversation had spiralled out of control and he was about to learn the secret destiny of cows, a revelation that Joe McCloud was not ready for. Not ready by a long shot. Had he known how to stop Piper from continuing, he would have. Alas, all he could do was stand helplessly rooted to the spot as Piper continued.

Which, of course, Piper did.

'It was the way they was flicking their tails to ward off the flies that gave it away.' Piper leaned in toward Joe and lowered her voice secretively lest the chickens catch wind of her words. 'You see, all of them was doing it but one. The black heifer with the brown eyes was just standing real still, looking off to the next field over where the sheep was grazing. The flies were buzzing around her just the same as the others but her tail stayed dead still. So I got to watching that cow and every day she did the same thing until I realized what she was looking at.'

'What?' Joe asked, breathlessly unaware that he posed the question.

'The place where her calf done died on her not more than six months 'fore. Remember?'

Joe nodded. Indeed he did remember. It had been a difficult birth and the weakened calf had only lived a few hours before it passed on.

'She's mourning him something terrible and it seems to me that if a cow can feel so for its young'un, then it's probably got feelings about all sorts of things. Feelings we don't know nothing about. And then I got to thinking that if each of them cows got feelings, then they can have a purpose no different from us folks. Which got me thinking about our purpose. And I realized that a person should get a handle on their purpose in this life if they aim to do something about it. You know what I mean, Pa?' Piper looked into her father's face and found only lines of confusion.

'Piper McCloud!!!' Betty squawked as she emerged from the henhouse to find Joe, once again, standing like a fool listening to the child.

Joe sheepishly got back to working on the plough while Piper scrambled from the fence.

'But I was just telling Pa how . . .'

'I couldn't care less about your fool ideas and stories.

When there's work to be done I expect you to do it. Now git.'

Several days later in the heat of the afternoon, Piper escaped to the biggest oak tree on the farm and climbed halfway up it to enjoy the breeze that rustled through the leaves there. The itch inside her was acting up and wouldn't give her any peace, and so she rolled over on the branch and held her stomach. From her position, she could spy a robin landing on her nearby nest, where she began feeding a fat worm to her babies. Watching the robin, Piper let her mind wander.

Maybe other kids my age have the same itch. Piper considered. *Maybe if I could talk to 'em they'd tell me how to get at it.* Fat chance that was ever going to happen, what with her stuck out on the farm and all. *I never get to go nowheres or do nothing,* Piper thought to herself. *Only two places I've ever been is church and Doc Bell's.*

'Why can't I go to school like them Miller kids?' Piper had asked her mother a thousand times. Each morning Piper watched them from the hayloft, walking to school. She'd have given her front teeth to go with them.

'You do your schoolwork just as well here, that's why.' Betty, as always, was plain and to the point.

All of a sudden Piper was roused from her thoughts by an unexpected drama that was unfolding on the

branch before her very eyes. The mother robin was nudging one of her babies toward the edge of the nest. The little fellow was hardly bigger than Piper's thumb and had a smattering of feathers poking out of him. Using her beak, the robin gave her baby a good shove that pushed him clear out of the nest, over the branch, and into the air. To Piper's horror, the baby robin dropped like a stone in a flurry of wing flapping. But then, just as he was about to hit the ground, he managed to pump his wings so hard that he stopped falling and started slowly, very slowly, rising. Right then and there that little bird learned to fly, and Piper saw the whole thing.

'Holy moly,' Piper breathed, and shook her head in wonder. It was the darndest thing she'd ever seen. Then the mother robin did it again and her second baby was born into flight. By the time the third baby was being readied for take-off, Piper was struck by a lightning of an idea.

Piper sat bolt upright on the branch, almost falling off of it completely. Grabbing hold with both hands, she steadied her body while her mind raced like a jackrabbit.

From the moment she was born, Piper had floated. It came naturally to her, like breathing. Because she'd always done it, she didn't think it was such a big deal. One minute she'd be sitting on the rug in front of the fire and

the next she'd be bobbing up to the ceiling. It happened all of the time and it was fun. The problem with floating was that you never knew where it would take you, which wasn't all bad, but sometimes a person likes to have a bit more direction in their life than to be at the whim of any strong breeze. There's a big difference between floating and flying. Clouds float. Balloons float. But birds fly.

Maybe Ma and Pa just forgot to push me like them baby birds, Piper considered, knowing full well that she was going to have to take matters into her own hands. *It's high time I got to flying too.*

Not wanting to waste any time, Piper quickly shimmied down the tree trunk and immediately set about formulating a plan.

The very next morning Piper woke up before the rooster crowed. The sky was just beginning to glow in the east as she eased her way out of bed. Pushing open her window, she was able to slide across the ledge until her feet hit the shingles. From there it was hard work to crawl up to the ridgepole. She stayed on her hands and knees and moved slowly.

The roof was slick with dew. Just one wrong move and quick as a flash she'd slide right off. She kicked her long, white nightgown away to stop it from tripping up her feet.

It was when Piper had climbed to the very top of the roof and was balancing on the ridgepole that she realized

exactly how scared she was. To be precise, she was terrified. All of a sudden Piper knew that there was a big difference between planning something and actually doing it. The roof was steep and high, and below it the ground was as hard as a rock. If things went wrong, she was going to get hurt, and hurt badly. Piper's breath caught in her throat and for a moment she couldn't breathe at all.

Her thoughts came fast and furious then. *What if I can't fly? What if I smack the ground with my head? Maybe my brains will spill out all over the place and then I ain't never gonna leave the farm and make a friend. Maybe it's best I high-tail it back to bed and forget the whole notion.*

Now perhaps it was because Piper didn't yet believe in a right way or a wrong way of doing things, and so for her, all things were still possible. Or maybe it's because the itch deep inside Piper that no one, least of all herself, could get at was itching so much it was going to drive her crazy. Or it could have been the same reason that Piper was able to float – which is to say, no one really knows. Whatever reason it was, Piper stayed on that roof and didn't go back to bed. Instead she raised her arms up at her sides like an airplane and placed one foot in front of the other. With fear, courage, and anticipation all mixing together in her stomach, she began to walk the ridgepole of her house.

Just below where Piper walked, Betty McCloud woke

with a start. She had heard something; that much was certain.

'Mr McCloud,' she hissed. Joe didn't stir.

'Mr McCloud!' This time Betty punctuated her words with a sharply placed elbow to Joe's ribs and his eyes flew open. 'There's someone on our roof!'

'What's that?' Joe mumbled, half awake.

'The roof! Someone's on our roof!' Betty pointed upward and Joe heard a scuffling sound above his head.

With each step Piper took, she picked up speed, until she was running down the ridgepole and fast approaching the place where there was only sky and no roof left.

'Like the birds I will fly.' Piper imagined the baby robins.

And then there was only one step left to take. Piper took it, thrusting herself with abandon into the morning air.

It was the cows grazing in the field that were the only ones to see Piper's trajectory. What they saw was a small girl in a long, white nightgown jumping off of the roof and into the sky.

For one blissful moment she hung in the air, like an angel.

Then, just as quickly, the moment passed and that same young girl fell head first, like a freight train, toward the ground below.

The cows had never seen a human do such a thing

before and they watched in moo-less astonishment. Not much ever changed on the farm and even cows can do with a bit of excitement.

Just as Piper approached the first bedroom window, it flew open and Joe, his twelve-gauge shotgun in hand, poked his head out. Joe was completely prepared to deal with a mischievous raccoon or that sassy brown squirrel trying to nest in the roof again. He was even ready to tangle with one of the pesky Carlton boys out rabble-rousing. A young girl hurtling through the air in an attempt to fly, however, was completely outside Joe McCloud's repertoire of possible eventualities.

'Arghhhhh!' Piper screamed as she screwed her eyes tightly shut.

'What the . . . ???'

Joe's eyes bulged at the sight of Piper plummeting at him. He threw himself backwards to avoid a head-on collision and ended up tripping on Betty, who was lurking fearfully behind him. His long legs tangled around themselves and he was sent sprawling onto the bedroom floor, which was a good thing too, because he placed himself in the perfect spot to cushion Betty's fall a moment later. So positioned, they did not see Piper falling past their window.

In three seconds Piper was going to hit the ground head first. It was going to hurt . . . a lot.

Now, three seconds isn't a long time. You can count to three faster than you can read this. Try it. See?

The largest of the cows, the one with a black patch across its right eye, let out a *moooo* in spite of himself. If it was possible to understand cow mooing, it's quite likely he was trying to warn Piper.

Piper's eyes were squeezed shut and her face twisted in certain anticipation of the coming impact.

She was not more than a heartbeat away from eating dirt when the miraculous happened. Like a plane in an air show, Piper grazed the ground in a death-defying loop that changed her course by a hundred and eighty degrees and turned her face from the ground to the sky. She sailed upward with the unexpected thrust and precision of an F-22 Raptor.

With her eyes clenched shut, Piper continued to brace for an impact that never came.

'Cockle-doodle-doo,' the rooster crowed.

It wasn't until Piper was touching the blue and gold of the rising sun – and the mist of a cloud doused her face with a fine, cool tickle – that she allowed herself a tiny peek through her right eye. The vision she caught out of it was so surprising and strange that she closed it tightly again. She tried the view from her other eye and it proved to only mirror her first glimpse. Slowly, very slowly, she opened both eyes.

Oh, but what a world she saw!

The green fields rolled out in every direction and glistening streams cut through some of them. The clouds disappeared into mist the closer she flew toward them, and the breeze lifted her higher.

Piper dipped and dived, twirled and whirled in a sky that was every colour from white to blue to orange to pink.

'Wheeeeee,' Piper gleefully screamed.

'I can FLY,' she called out to the morning sun. 'I CAN FLY!'

In the farmhouse below, Joe and Betty unsteadily rose to their feet. Gripping the edge of the windowsill, they peered out and caught their first glimpse of a little girl in a white nightgown flying through the air.

And at long last there was no doubt in either of their minds that their daughter, Piper McCloud, did not do things as they had always been done.

For once Betty could think of nothing to say. Instead, she watched Piper fly back and forth until the world began to spin and black dots appeared before her eyes, and she sank down to the floor in a dead faint.