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The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making

Written by

Catherynne M. Valente

Please note that this book contains references to sexual abuse.

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'A mad, toothsome romp of a fairy tale.' Holly Black

The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making



CATHERYNNE M. VALENTE

THE GIRL WHO CIRCUMNAVIGATED FAIRYLAND IN A SHIP OF HER OWN MAKING

The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making



CATHERYNNE M. VALENTE



A Corsair book

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For all those who walked this strange road with me,
and held out their hands when I faltered.
This is a ship of our own making.

Dramatis Personae

September, a Young Girl

Her Mother

Her Father

The Green Wind, a Harsh Air

The Leopard of Little Breezes, His Steed

Hello, a Witch

Goodbye, her Sister, also a Witch

Manythanks, their Husband, also a Witch, but Additionally, a Wairwulf

A-Through-L, a Wyvern

Lye, a Golem

Good Queen Mallow, Former Ruler of Fairyland

Charlie Crunchcrab, a Fairy

Several Glashtyn

The Marquess, Current Ruler of Fairyland

Iago, the Panther of Rough Storms

Saturday, a Marid

Calpurnia Farthing, a Fairy

Penny Farthing, her Ward

Numerous Velocipedes

Doctor Fallow, a Spriggan

Rubedo, a Graduate Student, also a Spriggan

Citrinitas, an Alchemical Genius, a Spriggan as Well

Death

Two Lions, Both Blue

Mr Map, the Royal Cartographer

Nor, a Nasnas

An Unfortunate Fish

A Shark (Actually a Pooka)

Hannibal, a Pair of Shoes

Gleam, a Lamp



CHAPTER I

Exeunt on a Leopard

In Which a Girl Named September Is Spirited Off by Means of a Leopard, Learns the Rules of Fairyland, and Solves a Puzzle

Once upon a time, a girl named September grew very tired indeed of her parents' house, where she washed the same pink-and-yellow teacups and matching gravy boats every day, slept on the same embroidered pillow, and played with the same small and amiable dog. Because she had been born in May, and because she had a mole on her left cheek, and

because her feet were very large and ungainly, the Green Wind took pity on her and flew to her window one evening just after her twelfth birthday. He was dressed in a green smoking jacket, and a green carriage-driver's cloak, and green jodhpurs, and green snowshoes. It is very cold above the clouds in the shantytowns where the Six Winds live.

'You seem an ill-tempered and irascible enough child,' said the Green Wind. 'How would you like to come away with me and ride upon the Leopard of Little Breezes and be delivered to the great sea, which borders Fairyland? I am afraid I cannot go in, as Harsh Airs are not allowed, but I should be happy to deposit you upon the Perverse and Perilous Sea.'

'Oh, yes!' breathed September, who disapproved deeply of pink-and-yellow teacups and also of small and amiable dogs.

'Well, then, come and sit by me, and do not pull too harshly on my Leopard's fur, as she bites.'

September climbed out of her kitchen window, leaving a sink full of soapy pink-and-yellow teacups with leaves still clinging to their bottoms in portentous shapes. One of them looked a bit like her father in his long coffee-colored trench coat, gone away over the sea with a rifle and gleaming things on his hat. One of them looked a bit like her mother, bending over a stubborn airplane engine in her work overalls, her arm muscles bulging. One of them looked a bit like a squashed

cabbage. The Green Wind held out his hand, snug in a green glove, and September took both his hands and a very deep breath. One of her shoes came loose as she hoisted herself over the sill, and this will be important later, so let us take a moment to bid farewell to her prim little mary jane with its brass buckle as it clatters on to the parquet floor. Goodbye, shoe! September will miss you soon.

'Now,' said the Green Wind, when September was firmly seated in the curling emerald saddle, her hands knotted in the Leopard's spotted pelt, 'there are important rules in Fairyland, rules from which I shall one day be exempt, when my papers have been processed at last and I am possessed of the golden ring of diplomatic immunity. I am afraid that if you trample upon the rules, I cannot help you. You may be ticketed or executed, depending on the mood of the Marquess.'

'Is she very terrible?'

The Green Wind frowned into his brambly beard. 'All little girls are terrible,' he admitted finally, 'but the Marquess, at least, has a very fine hat.'

'Tell me the rules,' said September firmly. Her mother had taught her chess when she was quite small, and she felt that if she could remember which way knights ought to go, she could certainly remember Fairy rules.

'First, no iron of any kind is allowed. Customs is quite strict on this point. Any bullets, knives, maces or jacks you might have on your person will be confiscated and smelted. Second, the practice of alchemy is forbidden to all except young ladies born on Tuesdays—'

'I was born on a Tuesday!'

'It is certainly possible that I knew that,' the Green Wind said with a wink. 'Third, aviary locomotion is permitted only by means of Leopard or licensed Ragwort Stalk. If you find yourself not in possession of one of these, kindly confine yourself to the ground. Fourth, all traffic travels widdershins. Fifth, rubbish takeaway occurs on second Fridays. Sixth, all changelings are required to wear identifying footwear. Seventh, and most important, you may in no fashion cross the borders of the Worsted Wood, or you will either perish most painfully or be forced to sit through a very tedious tea service with several spinster hamadryads. These laws are sacrosanct, except for visiting dignitaries and spriggans. Do you understand?'

September, I promise you, tried very hard to listen, but the rushing winds kept blowing her dark hair into her face. 'I . . . I think so . . . ,' she stammered, pulling her curls away from her mouth.

'Obviously, the eating or drinking of Fairy foodstuffs

constitutes a binding contract to return at least once a year in accordance with seasonal myth cycles.'

September started. 'What? What does that mean?'

The Green Wind stroked his neatly pointed beard. 'It means: Eat anything you like, precious cherry child!' He laughed like the whistling air through high branches. 'Sweet as cherries, bright as berries, the light of my moony sky!'

The Leopard of Little Breezes yawned up and farther off from the rooftops of Omaha, Nebraska, to which September did not even wave goodbye. One ought not to judge her: All children are heartless. They have not grown a heart yet, which is why they can climb tall trees and say shocking things and leap so very high that grown-up hearts flutter in terror. Hearts weigh quite a lot. That is why it takes so long to grow one. But, as in their reading and arithmetic and drawing, different children proceed at different speeds. (It is well known that reading quickens the growth of a heart like nothing else.) Some small ones are terrible and fey, Utterly Heartless. Some are dear and sweet and Hardly Heartless at all. September stood very generally in the middle on the day the Green Wind took her, Somewhat Heartless, and Somewhat Grown.

And so September did not wave goodbye to her house or her mother's factory, puffing white smoke far below her. She

did not even wave goodbye to her father when they passed over Europe. You and I might be shocked by this, but September had read a great number of books and knew that parents are only angry until they have discovered that their little adventurer has been to Fairyland and not the corner pub, and then everything is all right. Instead, she looked straight into the clouds until the wind made her eyes water. She leaned into the Leopard of Little Breezes, whose pelt was rough and bright, and listened to the beating of her huge and thundering heart.

'If you don't mind my asking, Sir Wind,' said September after a respectable time had passed, 'how does one get to Fairyland? After a while, we shall certainly pass India and Japan and California and simply come round to my house again.'

The Green Wind chuckled. 'I suppose that would be true if the earth were round.'

'I'm reasonably sure it is . . .'

'You're going to have to stop that sort of backward, old-fashioned thinking, you know. Conservatism is not an attractive trait. Fairyland is a very Scientifick place. We subscribe to all the best journals.'

The Leopard of Little Breezes gave a light roar. Several small clouds skipped huffily out of their path.

'The earth, my dear, is roughly *trapezoidal,* vaguely *rhomboid,* a bit of a *tesseract,* and altogether grumpy when its fur is stroked the wrong way! In short, it is a *puzzle,* my autumnal acquisition, like the interlocking silver rings your aunt Margaret brought back from Turkey when you were nine.'

'How did you know about my aunt Margaret?' exclaimed September, holding her hair back with one hand.

'I happened to be performing my usual noontime dustup just then. She wore a black skirt; you wore your yellow dress with the monkeys on it. Harsh Airs have excellent memories for things they have ruffled.'

September smoothed the lap of her now-wrinkled and rumpled orange dress. She liked anything orange: leaves; some moons; marigolds; chrysanthemums; cheese; pumpkin, both in pie and out; orange juice; marmalade. Orange is bright and demanding. You can't ignore orange things. She once saw an orange parrot in the pet store and had never wanted anything so much in her life. She would have named it Halloween and fed it butterscotch. Her mother said butterscotch would make a bird sick and, besides, the dog would certainly eat it up. September never spoke to the dog again – on principle.

'The puzzle is not unlike those rings,' said the Green Wind, tipping his gaze over his green spectacles. 'We are

going to unlock the earth and lock it up again, and when we have done it, we shall be in another ring, which is to say, Fairyland. It won't be long now.'

And indeed, in the icy-blue clouds above the world, a great number of rooftops began to peek out. They were all very tall and very rickety: cathedral towers made of nailed boards, cupolas of rusted metal, obelisks of tattered leaves and little more, huge domes like the ones September had seen in books about Italy, but with many of their bricks punched out, broken, turned to dust. Just the sorts of buildings where wind howls hardest, whistles loudest, screams highest. The tips and tops of everything were frozen – including the folk that flew and flittered through the town, bundled up tight much like the Green Wind himself, their jodhpurs and jackets black or rosy or yellow, their cheeks puffed out and round, like the cherubs blowing at the corners of old maps.

'Welcome, September, to the city of Westerly, my home, where live all the Six Winds in nothing at all like harmony.'

'It's . . . very nice. And very cold. And I seem to have lost one of my shoes.'

The Green Wind looked down at September's toes, which were beginning to turn slightly purple. Being at least a bit of a gentleman, he shuffled off his smoking jacket and guided her arms into it. The sleeves were far too big, but the jacket

had learned a drop or two of manners in its many travels and adjusted itself around September's little body, puffing up and drawing in until it was quite like her own skin.

'I think I look a little like a pumpkin,' whispered September, secretly delighted. 'I'm all green and orange.'

She looked down. On her wide, emerald velvet lapel, the jacket had grown a little orange brooch for her, a jeweled key. It sparkled as though made out of the sun itself. The jacket warmed slightly with bashfulness and with hoping she'd be pleased.

'The shoe is a very great loss, I won't lie,' clucked the Green Wind. 'But one must make sacrifices if one is to enter Fairyland.' His voice dropped confidentially. 'Westerly is a border town, and the Red Wind is awfully covetous. Terribly likely your shoe would have been stolen eventually, anyway.'

The Green Wind and September entered Westerly smoothly, the Leopard of Little Breezes being extra careful not to jostle the landing. They strode down Squamish Thoroughfare, where big-cheeked Blue and Golden Winds went about their grocery shopping, piling their arms with tumbleweeds for rich, thorny salads. Clouds spun and blew down the street the way old paper blows in the cities you and I have seen. They were heading for two spindly pillars at the

end of the Thoroughfare, pillars so enormous that September could not see right away that they were actually people, incredibly tall and thin, their faces huge and long. She could not tell if they were men or women, but they were hardly thicker than a pencil and taller than any of the bell towers and high platforms of Westerly. Their feet went straight down through the clouds, disappearing in a puff of cumulus. They both wore thin circular glasses, darkened to keep out the bright Westerly sun.

'Who are they?' whispered September.

'That's Latitude, with the yellow belt, and Longitude, with the paisley cravat. We can't get very far without them, so be polite.'

'I thought latitude and longitude were just lines on maps.'

'They don't like to have their pictures taken. That's how it is with famous folk. Everyone wants to click, click, click away at you. It's very annoying. They made a bargain with the Cartographers' Guild several hundred years ago – symbolic representations only, out of respect, you understand.'

September felt very quiet in front of Latitude and Longitude. Being young, she was used to most people being taller than she was. But this was of another order entirely, and she hadn't eaten anything since breakfast, and travel by Leopard is very tiring. She didn't think she ought to curtsy, as that was

old-fashioned, so she bowed from the waist. The Green Wind looked amused and copied her bow.

Latitude yawned. The inside of his mouth was bright blue, the color of the ocean on school maps. Longitude sighed in a bored sort of way.

'Well, you wouldn't expect them to speak, would you?' The Green Wind looked slightly embarrassed. 'They're celebrities! They're very private.'

'I thought you said there would be a puzzle,' said September, catching Latitude's yawn. The Green Wind picked at his sleeve, as though miffed that she was not more impressed.

'When you solve a jigsaw puzzle,' he said, 'how do you do it, pumpkin-dear?'

September shuffled her cold foot on the smooth blue stone of the Thoroughfare. 'Well . . . you start with the corners, and then you fill in the edges to make a frame, and then work inward until all the pieces fit.'

'And, historically, how many winds are there?'

September thought back to her book of myths, which had been bright orange and therefore one of her favorite possessions.

'Four, I think.'

The Green Wind grinned, his green lips curling under a green mustache. 'Quite so: Green, Red, Black and Gold. Of

course, those are roughly family designations, like Smith or Gupta. And actually there is also Silver and Blue, but they've made trouble off the coast of Tunisia and have had to go to bed without supper. So the fact remains: Today, we are the corners.' He gestured at the placid Latitude and Longitude. 'They are the edges. And you, September' – he gently pulled a strand of September's hair free of her brooch – 'are the middle pieces, all funny shaped and stubborn.'

'I don't understand, Sir.'

'Well, it's all in the verbiage. One of the pieces is *a girl hopping widdershins on one foot, nine revolutions.* One is *wear motley colors.* One is *clap hand over one eye.* One is *give something up.* One is *have a feline in attendance.*'

'But that's easy!'

'Mostly easy. But Fairyland is an old place, and old things have strange hungers. One of the last pieces is: *There must be blood.* The other is: *Tell a lie.*'

September bit her lip. She had never been fond of jigsaw puzzles, even though her grandmother loved them and had glued one thousand pieces all over her house as a kind of wallpaper. Slowly, trying to remember it all, she clapped one hand over her eye. She raised one foot and hopped in what she hoped was widdershins around the Leopard of Little Breezes. Her orange dress flapped against the green jacket

shining in the sun. When she stopped, September unfastened the jeweled orange key from her lapel and pricked her finger sharply with its pin. Blood welled up and dripped on to the blue stones. She laid the key gently at the feet of the impassive Latitude and Longitude and drew a deep breath.

'I want to go home,' she lied softly.

Latitude and Longitude turned smoothly toward each other, as though they were on pedestals. They began to bend and fold like staircases, reaching out for each other and interlocking, hand into hand, foot on to knee, arms akimbo. They moved mechanically in their strange circus dance, jerkily, joints swinging like dolls'. The street shook a little and then was still. Ever so briefly, Latitude and Longitude kissed, and when they parted, there was a space between their mouths just large enough for a Leopard carrying a Harsh Air and a little girl. All September could see on the other side were clouds.

Solemnly, the Green Wind held out his gloved hand to the girl in orange.

'Well done, September,' he said, and lifted her on to the Leopard's emerald saddle.

One can never see what happens after an exeunt on a Leopard. It is against the rules of theatre. But cheating has always been

the purview of fairies, and as we are about to enter their domain, we ought to act in accordance with local customs.

For, you see, when September and the Green Wind had gone through the puzzle of the world on their great cat, the jeweled key rose up and swooped in behind them, as quiet as you like.