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The Girl Who Fell Beneath Fairlyland and Led the Revels There

Written by Catherynne M. Valente

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The Girl Who Fell Beneath Fairyland and Led the Revels There

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CHAPTER I

Exeunt in a Rowboat, Pursued by Crows

In Which a Girl Named September Keeps a Secret, Has a Difficult Time at School, Turns Thirteen, and Is Finally Nearly Run over by a Rowboat, Thereby Finding Her Way into Fairyland

Once upon a time, a girl named September had a secret.

Now, secrets are delicate things. They can fill you up with sweetness and leave you like a cat who has found a particularly fat sparrow to eat and did not get clawed or bitten even once while she was about it. But they can also get stuck inside you, and very slowly boil up your bones for their bitter

soup. Then the secret has you, not the other way around. So we may be very glad that September had the better of her secret, and carried it with her like a pair of rich gloves which, when she was cold, she could take out and slip on to remember the warmth of days gone by.

September's secret was this: She had been to Fairyland.

This has happened to other children in the history of the world. There are many books about it, and for ever so long little boys and girls have been reading them and making wooden swords and paper centaurs and waiting for their turn. But for September, the waiting had ended last spring. She had fought a wicked queen and saved a whole country from her cruelty. She had made friends who, in addition to being funny and brave and clever, were a Wyvern, a Marid, and a talking lamp.

The only trouble was, precious few books about swashbuckling folk have much to say on the subject of how to behave when one gets home. September had changed profoundly from a girl who desperately wanted such things to be real to one who knew they were real. Such a change is less like getting a new haircut than getting a new head.

It did not particularly improve her school life.

Where once September seemed merely and quietly odd, staring out the window during Mathematics lectures and

reading big colorful books under her desk during Civics, now the other children sensed something wild and foreign about her. The girls in her grade could not have said what it was about September that so enraged them. If you sat them down and asked them about it, the best they could have managed might have been, "She's just not like us."

And so they did not invite her to birthday parties; they did not ask about her summer vacation. They did steal her books and tell lies about her to their teachers. "September cheats on her algebra," they revealed in strictest confidence. "September reads ugly old books during physical exercise." "September goes behind the chemistry building with boys." They snickered behind her back in tones that sent up prickly hedges all around their tight huddles of lace dresses and ribboned curls. They stood on the inside of those hedges, the whispers said, and September would always stand on the outside.

Against all this, September held her secret. When she felt awful and lonely and cold, she would take it out and blow upon it like an ember, until it glowed again and filled her up: A-Through-L, her Wyverary, snuffling at Saturday's blue cheek until he laughed, and the Green Wind stamping his emerald snowshoes in the wheat. All of them waiting for her to come back, which she would—soon, so terribly soon, any

moment now. She felt very much like her Aunt Margaret, who had never seemed quite the same after coming home from her travels. She would tell long stories about Paris and silk trousers and red accordions and bulldogs and no one understood her particularly. But they listened politely until she trailed off, looking out the window as if she might see the river Seine flowing by instead of acre after acre of wheat and corn. September felt she understood her Aunt now, and resolved to be specially attentive toward her when she visited again.

Every evening, September carried on. She washed the same pink-and-yellow teacups that she had always washed, minded the same small and increasingly anxious dog she had always minded, and listened to the tall walnut-wood radio for bulletins about the war, about her father. The radio loomed so tall and huge in their parlor that it seemed to her like a terrible door, ready to open at any moment and let bad news in. As the sun set on the long yellow prairie each day, she kept a keen eye out for a flash of green on the horizon, a spotted pelt flashing through the grass, a certain laugh, a certain purr. But autumn dealt its days like a pack of golden cards, and no one came.

Her mother had Sundays off from the airplane factory, and so September fell in love with Sundays. They would sit

together comfortably by the fire and read while the dog worried their shoelaces, or her mother would slide under Mr. Albert's miserable old Model A and bang at it until September could turn the key and hear it grumble into life once more. Not so long ago her mother read out loud to her from some book or other concerning fairies or soldiers or pioneers, but now they read companionably, each to their own novels or newspapers, quite as September remembered her mother doing with her father, before the war. Sundays were the best days, when the sunlight seemed to last forever, and September would bloom under her mother's big, frank smile. On Sundays, she didn't hurt. She didn't miss a place she could never explain to a grown-up person. She didn't wish her small dinner with its meager ration of tinned beef were a fey feast of candy and roasted hearts and purple melons full of rainwater wine.

On Sundays, she almost didn't think about Fairyland at all.

Sometimes she considered telling her mother about everything that had happened. Sometimes she burned to do it. But something older and wiser within her said, *Some things are for hiding and for keeping.* She feared that if she said it out loud it would all vanish, it would never have been, it would blow away like dandelion cotton. What if none of it had been real? What if she had dreamed it, or worse, had lost her mind like

her father's cousin in Iowa City? Any of these were too awful to consider, but she could not help considering all the same.

Whenever she thought those dark thoughts, that she might just be a silly girl who had read too many books, that she might be mad, September glanced behind her and shuddered. For she had proof that it had all really happened. She had lost her shadow there, on a distant river, near a distant city. She had lost something big and true, and could not get it back. And if anyone should notice that she cast no shadow before or behind, September would have to tell. But while her secret remained secret, she felt she could bear it all—the girls at school, her mother's long shifts, her father's absence. She could even bear the looming radio crackling away like an endless fire.

Nearly a year had passed since September had come home from Fairyland. Being quite a practical child, she had become very interested in mythology since her exploits on the other side of the world, studying up on the ways of fairies and old gods and hereditary monarchs and other magical folk. From her research, she reasoned that a year was just about right. One big, full turn of the sun. Surely the Green Wind would be sailing back over the sky for her any day, laughing and leaping and alliterating his way back into her world. And since the Marquess had been defeated and the locks of

Fairyland undone, this time September would have no awful feats to perform, no harsh tests of her courage, only delight and fun and blackberry trifles.

But the Green Wind did not come.

As the end of spring neared, she began to worry in earnest. Time ran differently in Fairyland—what if she turned eighty before a year passed there? What if the Green Wind came and found an old lady complaining of gout? Well, of course September would go with him anyway—she would not hesitate if she were eighteen or eighty! But old women faced certain dangers in Fairyland, such as breaking a hip while riding a wild velocipede, or having everyone do what you say just because you had wrinkles. That last would not be *so* bad—perhaps September could be a fabulous withered old witch and learn to cackle. She could get quite good at that. But it was so long to wait! Even the small and gloomy-faced dog had begun to stare pointedly at her, as if to say, *Shouldn't you be getting along now?*

And worse, what if the Green Wind had forgotten her? Or found another girl quite as capable as September at defeating wickedness and saying clever things? What if everyone in Fairyland had simply dropped a curtsy for the favor and gone about their business, giving no more thought to their little human friend? What if no one ever came for her again?

September turned thirteen. She did not even bother inviting anyone to a party. Instead, her mother gave her a stack of ration cards tied with a velvety brown ribbon. She had saved them up for months. Butter, sugar, salt, flour! And at the store, Mrs. Bowman gave them a little packet of cocoa powder to crown it all. September and her mother made a cake together in their kitchen, the small and frantic dog leaping to lick at the wooden spoon. The treat had so little chocolate that it came out the color of dust, but to September it tasted wonderful. Afterward, they went to a film about spies. September got a whole bag of popcorn to herself, and toffees as well. She felt dizzy with the lavishness of it all! It was almost as good as a Sunday, especially since she'd gotten three new books wrapped specially in green paper, one of them in French, sent all the way from a village liberated by her father. (We may be certain September's father had help in liberating the village, but as far as she was concerned he had done it single-handed. Possibly at the point of a golden sword, atop a glorious black horse. Sometimes September found it very difficult to think of her father's war without thinking of her own.) Of course she could not read it, but he had written in the cover, "I will see you soon, my girl." And that made it the greatest book ever written. It had illustrations, too, of a girl not older than September sitting on the moon and reaching out to catch stars

in her hands, or standing on a high lunar mountain conversing with a strange red hat with two long feathers sticking out of it that floated right next to her as pert as you please. September pored over it all the way to the theatre, trying to say the strange-sounding words, trying to tell what the story was meant to be.

They demolished the dust-colored birthday cake and September's mother put the kettle on. The dog set upon a powerfully satisfactory marrow bone. September took her new books up and went out into the fields to watch the dusk come down and think. She heard the radio crackling and talking as she let herself out the back door, the pop and spit of static following her like a gray shadow.

September lay down in the long May grass. She looked up through the golden-green stalks of grain. The sky glowed deep blue and rose, and a little yellow star came on like a lightbulb in the warm evening. *That's Venus,* September thought. *She was the goddess of love. It's nice that love comes on first thing in the evening, and goes out last in the morning. Love keeps the light on all night. Whoever thought to call it Venus ought to get full marks.*

We may forgive our girl for ignoring the sound at first. For once, she had not been looking for strange sounds or signs. For once, she had not been thinking about Fairyland at all, but about a girl talking to a red hat and what that could

possibly mean, and how wonderful it was that her father had got a whole village liberated. Anyway, rustling is quite a common noise when fields of wheat and wild grass are involved. She heard it, and a little breeze ruffled the pages of her birthday books, but she did not look up until the rowboat flew at ripping speed over her head on the tips of the wheat-stalks as if they were waves.

September leapt up and saw two figures in a little black boat, oars spinning furiously, bouncing swiftly over the fields. One had a broad hat on, slick and dark like a fisherman's. The other trailed a long silver hand out over the furry heads of dry grain. The arm sparkled metallic, shining, a woman's slim wrist gleaming metal, her hand tipped with iron fingernails. September could not see their faces—the man's back hunched huge and wide, obscuring the silver lady, save her arm.

"Wait!" September cried, running after the boat as fast as she could go. She knew Fairylandish happenings when she saw them, and she could see them bouncing away from her right that very moment. "Wait, I'm here!"

"Better look out for the Alleyman," called the man in the black slicker, looking back over his shoulder. Shadows hid his face, but his voice seemed familiar, a kind of broken, unruly rasping September could almost place. "The Alleyman comes

with his rag cart and bone truck, and he's got all our names on a list."

The silver lady cupped the wind with her shining hand. "I was cutting barbed wire before you were cutting your milk teeth, old man. Don't try to impress me with your slang and your free verse and your winning ways."

"Please wait!" September called after them. Her lungs clenched tight and thick. "I can't keep up!"

But they only rowed faster, over the tips of the fields, and the night had its face on right and proper now. *Oh, I'll never catch them!* September thought frantically, and her heart squeezed. For though, as we have said, all children are heartless, this is not precisely true of teenagers. Teenage hearts are raw and new, fast and fierce, and they do not know their own strength. Neither do they know reason or restraint, and if you want to know the truth, a goodly number of grown-up hearts never learn it. And so we may say now, as we could not before, that September's heart squeezed, for it had begun to grow in her like a flower in the dark. We may also take a moment to feel a little sorry for her, for having a heart leads to the peculiar griefs of the grown.

September, then, her raw, unripe heart squeezing with panic, ran harder. She had waited so long, and now they were getting away. She was too small, too slow. How could she bear

it, how could she ever bear it if she missed her chance? Her breath came too tight and too fast and tears started at the corners of her eyes, only to be whipped away as she ran on, stamping down old corn and the occasional blue flower.

"I'm here!" she squeaked. "It's me! Don't go!"

The silver lady glittered in the distance. September tried so hard to see them, to catch them, to run faster, just a little faster. Let us lean in close and nip at her heels, let us whisper in her ear: Come now, you can do more, you can catch them, girl, you can stretch out your arms just a little further!

And she did clamber faster, she did stretch further, she did move through the grass and did not see the low, mossy wall cutting suddenly through the field until she had tripped and tumbled over it. September landed facedown in a field of grass so white it seemed as though snow had just fallen, except that the lawn was cool and smelled marvelously sweet, quite like a lemon ice.

Her book lay forgotten on the suddenly empty grass of our world. A sudden wind, smelling ever so faintly of every green thing, of mint and rosemary and fresh hay, turned the pages faster and faster, as if in a hurry to find out the end.

September's mother stepped out of the house, looking for her daughter, her eyes puffy with tears. But there was no girl in the wheat anymore, only three brand-new books, a bit of

toffee still in its wax wrapper, and a pair of crows winging off, cawing after a rowboat that had already vanished ahead of them.

Behind her, the walnut radio snapped and spit.