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Opening extract from

The Girl Who Soared Over Fairyland and Cut the Moon in Two

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CHAPTER I

The Invisible Cloak of All Things Past

In Which a Girl Named September Tells Several Lies, Hoards Money, Turns Fourteen, Wears Trousers, and Goes on a Joy-Ride

Once upon a time, a girl named September told a great number of lies.

The trouble with lies is that they love company. Once you tell a single lie, that lie gets terribly excited and calls all its friends to visit. Soon you find yourself making room for them in every corner, turning down beds and lighting lamps to

make them comfortable, feeding them and tidying them and mending them when they start to wear thin. This is most especially true if you tell a very large lie, as September did. A good, solid, beefy lie is too heavy to stand on its own. It needs smaller, quicker, more complicated lies to hold it up.

September would be awfully crushed to hear us call her a liar, but it cannot be escaped that she and honesty had not got on well for some time.

There are many sorts of lies. You could fill a shop with them. To be sure, lies are terribly common. Few would pay particularly good money for fibs when they are so busy making their own at home for nothing. But if you peek inside the shop door of the heart, there you will find a full stockroom. Lies to conceal dastardly deeds stack up smartly along the shelves. Over in the refrigerated section hang lies told so long ago and so often that they turned into the truth and get taught in history books. Lies told to make oneself seem grand pile up high on a special four-color display. And in the front windows, laid out so nicely no one could blame you for having them, snuggle up little harmless lies told to spare feelings or save face or keep a friend from trouble.

Of course, nothing is really harmless. Sometimes telling the truth can bang the world about its ears just as much as any lie.

But you must always be careful when you visit that little shop where lies are kept. They are always looking for a way out.

The first lie September told was very simple indeed. It was such a tiny lie, in fact, that if you were not looking carefully, as we are, you would surely miss it. She told it on a rainy, blustery, squalling day, which is just the right sort of day to start down a strange and secret path. Long, cindery, smoky-colored clouds rolled and rumbled over the Nebraska prairie. The storm fell in silver streamers, stirring the thirsty earth into a thick soup. September sat in her mother and father's house, looking out the window at the sloshy drops plunking into mud puddles the size of fishing ponds. Everything glittered with the eerie, swirling light of the heavy sky. Her familiar fields looked quite like another world.

September had a book open on her lap but could not concentrate on it. Her cup of tea had gone altogether cold. The pink and yellow flowers on the handle had worn almost to white. A certain small and amiable dog rolled over next to her, hoping to have his belly scratched. September did not notice, which deeply offended the dog. Her mother read the newspaper by the fire. Her father napped quietly with a checkered blanket thrown over his poor wounded leg, which never could heal quite right, no matter how many long trips

into the city they took to visit his doctors. A bubble of thunder burst and spat. September's mother looked up, leaving off an interesting article about a modern new road that might run very near to their house, and asked her daughter:

"Whatever are you thinking about, dear? You seem quite lost in your head."

And September, very simply, answered, "Oh, nothing really."

This was wholly, thoroughly, enormously untrue.

September was thinking about Fairyland.

Now, you might say that September had been lying all along, for certainly she never told her parents about the magical country she had visited twice now. That is what grown-up sorts who are very interested in technical terms call a lie of omission. But we will be generous and forgive September for leaving her adventures out of suppertime conversation. How could she ever explain it all? *Mama and Papa, you might be interested to know that I flew away to a land of Witches and Wyverns and Spriggans, fought the wicked Marquess who was in charge of it all, and won—please pass the roast beets?* It would never do. *Papa and Mama, not only did I do all that, but I went back! My shadow had been making trouble, you see, and I had to go to the underworld to fix it all up again. Shall I do the washing up?*

No, it seemed best to leave the matter where it lay. And

where it lay was deep inside September where no one could take it from her and ruin it by staring at it too closely. When she felt afraid or alone, when her father was in such awful pain he could not bear to have anyone near him on account of the terrible racket of their breathing and thinking and swallowing, she could take her memories out and slip them on like a shawl of fabulous gems.

Poor September. Everyone has their invisible cloak of all things past. Some shimmer and some float. Some cut all the way down to the bone and farther still.

If you could only hear the little trumpet of that lie, calling all its brothers and sisters to muster!

And muster they did. What was September to do when her teachers asked her to write a composition on how she had spent her summer vacation? Five paragraphs on *I brought my father's shadow back from Fairyland-Below where my own shadow had pulled it over from the war in France and I carried it all the way home to put it back together with his body again*? Certainly not. Like all the other students, she wrote a nice essay on the unusually hot August she had spent bringing the harvest in, learning lacework and how to repair the brakes on Mr. Albert's Model A.

Yes, Mrs. Franke, that was all. Nothing interesting in the slightest.

And when Mrs. Bisek, who taught physical education, remarked on how fast September could run nowadays, could she possibly pipe up and announce: *I have had good practice while migrating with a herd of wild bicycles, as well as escaping several alarming creatures?* Out of the question. It was all up to helping her father learn to walk properly again, of course. Together they made endless circuits of the acreage so that he could get strong. And worst of all, when Mr. Skriver, the history teacher, asked if anyone knew the story of Persephone, September had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from crying out: *I went to Fairyland on a Persephone visa and I ate Fairy food and both of those put together mean I shall go back every year when the seasons change*. Instead she let one of the girls whose fathers worked at a bank in Omaha and wore smart little gray hats answer, and get it wrong at that.

All around her, the children September had known since her first days of school were growing up. The girls loped tall through the hallways and talked about their boyfriends in the same thrilled and thrilling tones you and I might use to discuss marvelous flying dragons. They shared the mystic secrets of keeping one's golden hair perfectly golden and one's ivory skin perfectly clear. Some of the boys had bits of beard or mustache coming in, of which they were very proud. September was excluded from the mysteries of golden hair

and ivory skin, having neither. Nevertheless, she was getting taller, too. She would soon find herself taller than all but three or four girls her age. Her face was turning into the face it would be when she was grown. But she couldn't see it, for no one can see themselves change until they have already done it, and then suddenly they cannot remember ever having been different at all.

And above all the bustle of thirteen-year-olds becoming fourteen-year-olds floated the great and powerful rumor: The war would be over soon. Everything was going to go back to normal.

Spring melted over the farms outside Omaha like butter in a pan. Sharp, green days full of bold white clouds. September could not help smiling a little smile, all day long and in her sleep, too. Waiting for Fairyland was like waiting for a raspberry bush to fruit. One day you thought the whole thing was dead and hope lost, and the next you were drowning in berries. But the fruit always came. That is what September told herself. Of course, faith and patience are very hard tricks for a heart to learn. It would be easier for our girl to learn how to somersault off a trapeze than to believe that the dastardly, dashing world tends to do things whenever it pleases, on its own persnickety timetable and not that of

yearning young people. She watched April rumble through like a bright, wet train and May burst in close behind, warm and noisy and full of wheeling, boisterous birds.

Her fourteenth birthday came.

September's father felt well enough to help with her present. It was a present so wonderful it came all the way round again to terrible and so terrible it sped through to wonderful with a quickness. September felt so nervous and excited her skin flashed cold and then tingly and then hot as a stove.

September was going to learn to drive.

On the morning of September's birthday Mr. Albert's creaking, cranky Model A Ford sat out in front of the house like an old horse ready for the races again. A little orange ribbon fluttered in the wind, tied round the burlap Aroostook Potato Company sack that covered the spare wheel. The Model A could not claim to be young nor fast nor good-looking, but it made fantastic snarling noises. Alongside her mother, September had worked her fingers into almost every part of that engine. Now those fingers twitched with eagerness, remembering valves and pistons. With some coaxing and bargaining, she knew, the aged beast would roll down the road to town, grumbling plenty all the way.

And now it was *hers*.

At least for the afternoon.

The moment it became her own, September saw the Model A as quite a different animal. It was no longer a chore to be finished by supper, but a glorious monster, a puzzle smelling of gasoline with a lot of parts like teeth. She touched the battered, accordioned vent—the paint had not won its battle with fifteen Nebraska winters. Once it had been pure, dark, wintry green. Now it looked like a pelt, with spots and stripes of naked metal and rust showing through. The black fenders curved up and over piebald front wheels, hoisting the near-flat spare and big froggy headlights. The chrome had not dreamed of shine since Mr. Albert had whacked it up against a beech tree a month after he bought the thing. The cracked windshield sparkled in the hot sun. It had a cloth top you could pull over your head, but the day glowed so warm and still that September knew they wouldn't bother with it. Not today. She would drive with the wind in her hair and get a marvelous roadster's sunburn.

"Hullo," September whispered to the Model A, just as she would to a crabby old horse who didn't want her apple, thank you very much. "Don't be afraid, I shall try very hard not to crunch you or whack you in any way. Of course, I cannot promise, but I am usually quite careful when dealing with terrible engines."

Her father eased himself into the passenger seat, his face a little red and flushed with the effort and the sunshine and the bustle of a birthday. He tightened the straps of Mr. Albert's driving goggles over September's head and pulled the extra pair down onto his own big, lovely nose. September could hardly breathe. Her excitement leapt and sputtered in her as though the car were already speeding down the road.

Now, a Model A does not start and stop the way automobiles whose acquaintance you and I have made do. It has a good number of levers and valves and switches, and operating one is something like puppetry, something like lion taming, and something like dancing. September's mother pointed and explained the peculiar workings of the rusty creature with an engine for a heart.

"Now," she said brightly, her warm, firm voice full of confidence in her daughter. "There are important rules in driving an automobile, rules from which no one, not even your own mother, is exempt."

"Tell me the rules," said September with that secret little smile her mother could not interpret.

"Some are easy: Go on Green, stop on Red. Use your mirrors, they're there for a reason. Look both ways before turning. Brake into a turn and accelerate out of it. But most of the rules have to do with not killing the car while trying to

get it started. Getting things started is always such a difficulty! But, like so: the brake must be on before you can begin. This seems backward, but it's important. Turn on the gas valve and push the spark lever—that's the one on your left, dear—all the way up. It's fire that makes a car go, my love, fire and fuel. Now pull the throttle lever—on your right, darling—a little ways down. Imagine a clock, where the throttle is the hour hand. Put the hour hand at four o'clock. See how at four o'clock the accelerator pedal goes down all by itself? That's how you know you've got it right. You must turn the carburetor—that shiny knob there—one full turn closed, then one full turn open. Put the gear in neutral—neutral means neither forward nor backward nor fast nor slow, and it is the place from which you must always begin. Closed before open. Brake before beginning. Now, at last, turn the key to ON. But it is not ON yet, no matter what the key says! Pull the carburetor rod back, and press this button on the floor which is the starter. Wait for the engine to turn over—that sound like it is clearing its throat and will soon begin talking up a storm—and let the rod go."

September thought the rods and buttons would slide smoothly into place with satisfying sounds and clicks. Once you knew what to do, well, doing it would be no trouble! But it was not like that at all. It took all her strength to drag the

throttle lever into position. She thought her wrist might snap before the gearshift would agree to grind into neutral. The Model A spat and gargled and shuddered awake, but not all at once. First she gave too much gas; then she was too slow to press the starter after yanking back the carburetor with both hands and her shoulders put into it in earnest. No wonder Mr. Albert thwacked that beech tree.

September's father put his warm brown hand over hers and let the spark lever down a little. There were more strange words—*clutch* and *choke* and *shift,* like the car was a body and quite alive, if a little sick with bellyache or cough.

Had she been less excited by the phlegmy roar of the Model A, September might have noticed how much she had grown in order to touch the pedals with her feet and see out the windshield while sitting up very straight and proper and not boosted on heavy books. But the car jangled and her heart jangled with it. When she released the brake, there certainly was much clutching and choking. September let out a whoop of joy that was swallowed up in the raggedy protestations of the engine, and off they rattled down the dirt road, bouncing and jostling and knocking and bonging. When it came time to shift gears, the Model A bolted forward ungracefully. When it came time to slow down, it whined and sputtered. September did not care. She leaned into the

road, mud spattering her goggles, laughing into the May wind.

It was, after all, so very like riding a Wyvern.

Nothing else happened that day.

The sun set without peculiar happenings and no sooner than she could blink, September once more lived in a world without the Model A, as if none of it had ever happened. The wonderful, monstrous, noisy car vanished back to Mr. Albert's garage. No Wind of any color came rushing up behind the exhaust-blast of the car. When she lay in bed that night, she could still feel the vibration of the engine in her bones, like when you have spent the whole day swimming and the sweet rocking of the water lulls you to sleep long after you're good and dry. *I shall not worry just because the Green Wind did not come today,* she thought over the echoes of shifting gears shivering her skin. *Aunt Margaret says worry only turns down the bed for bad news.*

Instead of fretting over a day here or there, she would prepare. The place that fear took up in her heart she would fill with provisions and readiness. She was a seasoned Adventuress now, after all. It would never do to keep turning up in Fairyland like a helpless lamb with nothing but the wool on her back. Grown-ups didn't just wait around for things to

happen to them. They made plans. They anticipated. They saved up and looked out and packed in. September slept very well that night. She dreamed of neatly filled suitcases and lists with every item checked off.

The first and most important of these preparations began with a mason jar under her bed. September had been saving pennies for some time. She was her mother's daughter and that meant a frugal girl with a weakness for hoarding what she never knew if she might need. But now her efforts had a clear purpose: September was quite fed up with the problem of having *needs* in Fairyland but no *means*. It was no better than her own world! Worse, in fact, since she hardly had a notion of what money meant over there at all. But she would have no more First Kisses traded on the open market this time, nor rubies wedged out of a Fairy sceptre that might well have been an oversized log back in Nebraska. She would never be a rich girl, neither here nor there, but she could at least make a go at convincing magical folk that a bit of copper was as good as a kiss.

And so September offered herself up to all her neighbors: no chore too big or too messy, guaranteed no complaining! She fed sheep and chickens and weeded kitchen gardens. She pinned up washing like blowing white sails on seas of long grass. She wrote letters for Mr. Killory who couldn't read and

wasn't about to start learning now. She looked after the dusty, crabby Powell workhorses, fed and watered and combed them while they snorted in pointed disapproval. Mrs. Powell gave her a half-dollar as pretty as a plate when the big roan turned up pregnant after they'd long given up on the notion. She took over her mother's errands for Mr. Albert, driving round the county to fetch or deliver or purchase. Dimes and nickels and pennies went into her jar, filling it up like glinting jam.

Being prepared meant standing at the ready at any moment, should Fairyland come for her—and this was how she conceived of it in her deepest heart: a whole world drifting ever closer in a beautiful chariot of air and light and ocean, a whole world coming to collect her. Thinking everything over and laying her fairy-habits out one by one like butterflies in a tray, September had to admit that shifts and dresses were not the most practical of traveling clothes. She had only one pair of trousers, but they became dear to her—wearing them meant that she would soon be tumbling over stone walls and chasing down blue kangaroos. They meant going and doing and daring.

September also took her father's temperature every day, though when he offered her a dime for being such a steadfast nurse, she would not, could not take it. She asked after his pain as though it were a visiting relative and recorded the

answers in a little book given to them by his doctors. He went to Omaha every three months. Ever so slowly those doctors were straightening his leg. There was nothing to be done about the piece of bullet lost somewhere in his thigh. September watched him go each time from her window, disappearing in the long, sleek Packard sent by the Veterans' Association. Each time she had the peculiar thought that he was under a spell just like hers, compelled to leave home and return to a strange city over and over again.

While she did her small work from farm to farm, September thought often of the Sibyl who guarded the entrance to Fairyland-Below, where her shadow had made its home. The Sibyl had loved her work, how she had known since she was a child that the work was as much a part of her as her own heart. *What is my work?* September thought, and not for the first time. *What can I do that is useful? What have I done since I was small that comes as natural as guarding to a Sibyl?* She did not know. It was probably not planting kitchen vegetables or driving a car. The Killorys' bleating sheep and half-blind rooster seemed to tell her with their black eyes that she was not so good at looking after them that she should make a life of it. The pregnant roan did not deign to share an opinion in any fashion. September considered herself quite good at reading and thinking, which was mostly what her

father had done in his classroom before the war. She could, it certainly seemed, depose monarchs fairly well. But these did not seem to add up to what one might call a profession. September knew that some girls worked hard at training to be a quality wife and a mother to children that would one day be born. But her mother did all that and also made airplanes fly with just a wrench and her own good brain. September also wanted to do wonderful things with her own good brain. It was no easier to wait for such a profession to become clear than to stop looking for signs of Fairyland around every stone wall and fence post.

September tried to fill up her good brain with these sorts of things, to fill it so full that she simply could not think about anything else. May relaxed into its flowers and songbirds. June took the summer's baton and sprinted down its dry, golden track. The big hay wheel of the Nebraska moon looked in through September's window at night. And once, but only once, she held her jar of coins in the moonlight and thought finally the terrible thing she had not allowed to come in, no matter how it knocked on the doors of her heart. *Maybe it's because I am getting old. Maybe Fairyland does not want me because I have been trying so hard to be a grown-up person and behave in a grown-up fashion. Maybe Fairyland* is *for children. I am fourteen now, which is ever so much more than twelve. I have jobs even if they*

are not very good ones. I can drive a car and remember to record Father's temperature at the same time every day. Maybe I am getting too big—no, worse, maybe I am getting too usual *to be allowed to go back.*

She woke that night with a start, sure she had heard a Wyverary's deep *haroom* right next to her.

But there was nothing. In the warm, still dark, September cried.