

FINDING FAIRYLAND

1. Fairy Rings

Julia could barely sit still and listen as Sister Bernadine explained the math lesson. She kept fiddling with a strand of brown hair that had come loose from her ponytail and fidgeting in her seat. She would look at the teacher, then the clock above the door, then over to McKenna, one of her best friends, and then back at the clock again. After math on Fridays was recess for fifth grade and since it was a warm September afternoon, they would be allowed to go outside. The two girls would be able to talk in private and Julia could show McKenna the book she had brought from home and reveal her discovery.

McKenna will be as excited as I am, Julia thought, watching the second hand slowly tick tick tick around the face of the clock. Julia had been searching for fairies and a way to get to fairyland -- forever it seemed. She first became interested in fairies when she was six and her mother had read her a book about them and what fairyland was like. She loved the story so much, she had her mother read it to her every night for a week. Finally her mother tired of it and they went to the library for more books. Julia was hooked.

Four years later she was still fascinated by fairies. But since last year she had made it her goal to actually find fairies and get to fairyland. Her mother knew about her search and so did her sister. They understood and sometimes helped her. At school, though, anyone who found out about her quest giggled, looked at her like she was goofy, or teased her.

She flipped the pages of her math book. Julia knew she should be listening but the teacher's droning explanation of the math lesson couldn't keep her attention and her mind wandered to the book she had tucked into her desk. Leaning back in her seat, she lifted the desktop and peered inside. It was still there. She knew it was before she looked but she checked anyway.

Julia glanced at the clock again. Time could move so slowly sometimes, she thought.

At lunch, she had tried to tell McKenna that she had discovered something about fairyland but some of the other girls -- the Divas, Julia and McKenna called them -- had heard her and teased her about her interest in fairies. Trying to ignore them, she glared at her sandwich and didn't say anything the rest of the break.

At recess, though, she knew she could get away from the nosey Divas. Then she could show McKenna her discovery.

It was a simple landscaping book -- one that had been on the bookshelf in the living room at home for so long she never even bothered looking in it. It was just part of the décor. But the night before, as her mother read a chapter from the book her older sister Laura had picked, Julia had been stretched out on the floor in front of the sofa. She had pulled the lawn care book off the shelf and started turning pages, just looking at the pictures and sometimes reading the captions. Then she read the description beneath a picture of mushrooms. And squealed.

'What's the matter?' her mother had asked, pausing in her reading.

'I found it!' Julia had exclaimed, jumping to her knees.

'What?' her mother had asked.

The girl held the book up. 'Fairy rings.'

'What about them?' her mother asked.

'Listen, ' she said and read aloud. 'The growth patterns of several varieties of fungi create circles in lawns which can damage turf and create unsightly bare patches. Called "fairy rings," these circular growths, most visible in spring and early summer, were believed in past times to be the results of fairy visits and could be used as portals to the land of the fairies. Instead, they simply cause damage to grass, flowering plants, and sometimes deciduous trees.'

'Mushrooms?' Laura asked. 'I thought you wanted to go to fairyland.'

"Hmm, I'd forgotten about fairy rings,' said their mother. 'If you sit in the middle of one, it's supposed to be a way to get to fairyland.'

Julia had leapt up and stood in front of her mother. 'If you knew about them, why didn't you ever tell me?' she asked.

'I didn't think of it. We have them in our yard. I'll show you where one is tomorrow. Over by the bird feeders.'

Julia had begged her mother to show her the ring right then. After a few comments about how late it was getting and that it would be easier to see in the morning, her mother had conceded. With flashlights shining yellow circles in front of them, Julia, Laura, and their mother had walked out into the yard and through the dewy grass. Her mother had searched for a moment, shining the light in a figure-eight across the grass several yards from the bird feeders and the maple that shaded them.

'Here,' her mother had said, holding the light steady. 'Can you see them? The little brown mushrooms in the grass. Follow my light -- they trace a circle.'

Julia had stared, amazed, and shined her own light on the ring. She traced its outline with the small beam and saw some shriveled umbrella-shaped mushrooms scattered around in a circle.

'The grass is darker closer to the ring because the mushrooms enrich the soil there,' her mother explained, 'but then after it spreads out, the grass gets thinner in the middle. That's why people don't want them in their lawn. It's hard to see in the dark like this.'

Julia hadn't cared. She'd knelt down, instantly soaking her pant legs, and rubbed her free hand around in the grass, following the outline of the circle. She picked a mushroom and held it up in front of her flashlight. It was all dried up but it still looked like a mushroom with its thin stem and cap-like top.

'It doesn't look too magical,' Laura commented.

'These are here because of fairies?' Julia asked, looking up at her mother who had leaned close by her to inspect the mushroom as well.

'It's where the fairies danced,' her mother had answered. 'That's what forms the ring. When the fairies dance they go around in a clockwise circle. The mushrooms spring up afterwards and that's how people know that the spot is magical.'

'How do you use it to get to fairyland?' Julia had asked.

'I don't remember,' her mother had answered. 'You'll have to find out. Tomorrow. Now it's time to get inside.'

Her mother stood. Julia watched her walk back to the house with her arm over Laura's shoulder.

Julia stayed kneeling. She shined her light around the circle a few more times, trying to see what was special about the fairy ring. She wanted to stay and figure out how to use the portal. It had to work, she told herself. She knew immediately in her heart that she had discovered her way to fairyland.

She had giggled, thinking how it had been right there all the time. Mushrooms that grew in the lawn were the way to fairyland. So simple. Julia couldn't believe it: a door to Faerie that she could see from her bedroom window.

"Miss Julia, would you please join us in this world," Sister Bernadine called. "Let's stay focused on division."

Julia looked up, flushing. "Yes, Sister," she said automatically as she heard several other students giggling. Next to her, Kaylea-em snorted. Julia made a point not to look at her former friend, now the leader of the Divas, who seemed to sneer at everything.

She had been Julia's best friend last year and Julia had confided in her about wanting to visit fairyland. Kaylea-em had seemed to share her enthusiasm for searching for a way to see fairies.

Julia tried to look like she was paying attention to the teacher but was thinking about Kaylea-em. During the summer, Julia had invited her over to her house but her friend had spent the day complaining. She complained because Julia didn't have cable or any good CDs, that she didn't want to go outside because it was too hot, that everything Julia suggested was 'dumb.' She even said that it was stupid to look for fairies. Julia's mother had lost patience with Kaylea-em and when the girl said she wanted to go home instead of spending the night, Julia's mother offered to take her right away. That was the last time Julia had heard from her during vacation and when school started, her former best friend had a new group of girls following her around. Unfortunately, Sister didn't know that they were no longer friends and sat the two together.

From her seat she could see McKenna at the front of the class, her bright orange hair tied in a ponytail similar to Julia's. They had known each other all through school, but Julia had only this year become good friends with her.

On the first day of school, Julia had wandered alone over to the edge of the schoolyard during recess. She wanted to examine a clump of bushes that she always suspected was a perfect location for a fairy nest. Kneeling in the grass and peering into the branches, she poked a stick into the tangled vegetation every now and then to get a better look.

'What are you doing?' a hesitant voice behind her asked.

Julia spun around and dropped the stick. It was McKenna, a girl from her class that she had barely spoken to in the past and who sat near the front of the room. She was often one of the nuns' favorites since she was always prepared and had her homework done neatly in ink. Sometimes she even raised her hand faster than Julia to answer a question Sister was asking.

'Nothing,' said Julia.

'You looking for something?'

'No. Yes. But you'll laugh,' Julia said and picked up the stick again and started scratching letters in the dirt.

'Fairies?' asked McKenna.

'What? Oh my gosh! Who told you?' exclaimed Julia.

'No one,' McKenna answered.

'Why'd you say fairies?' asked Julia.

McKenna shrugged. 'That's what it looked like you were looking for.'

'Do you?'

"Yeah. Sometimes.'

'Ever find any? Or really find a nest or a house? Did you ever find a way to fairyland?'

'No. I never found anything. I think I saw where some lived a few times. And my mother says she saw fairies when she was a kid.'

After that McKenna became Julia's new best friend and the two of them had been searching for fairies every chance they could squeeze into their days. Julia was impressed with how much McKenna already knew about fairies and the two of them shared books and movies and whatever they found out about fairies and how to find them. The two never told anyone else what they were doing, except for Julia's mother and sister, because they knew other kids wouldn't understand and

the grownups would just tell them they were wasting their time. And with Kaylea-em knowing about Julia's quest, the Divas picked on the two of them whenever they could.

Now Julia had discovered the secret of fairy rings and she couldn't wait to tell McKenna so the two of them could begin searching this weekend. They'd been looking in the wrong places. She was angry with herself for not finding this before but more excited about her discovery.

She was staring out the window thinking about showing McKenna the book and missed the math homework assignment.

"Come here, I need to show you this in private," Julia whispered at McKenna a few minutes later. They rushed past the mob of blue sweated and white bloused girls and boys, all wearing the school's plaid skirt or dark blue slacks, everyone in a hurry to get outside to the playground.

Julia had slipped the book from her desk when Sister dismissed them and she carried it tucked under her arm. With the other hand she grabbed McKenna's elbow and strode quickly away from the building.

"Off to fairyland again?" called a voice from behind them.

Julia stopped mid-stride and looked back. There was Kaylea-em and her group of Divas -- Kaylea-ess, Britney-arr, Britney-aye, and Melissa -- all with their heads tilted and mocking grins on their faces. They wore the same outfits as everyone else but somehow made them look different by wearing their shirttails untucked and more buttons undone than Sister would allow if she saw them. The girls laughed when they saw that they had upset Julia.

"None of your business," was all Julia could think to say and this made the girls laugh again, louder.

"Sister says there's no such place as fairyland," Kaylea-em said.

"It's foolish and silly," Kaylea-ess added.

"It's not real," Britney-aye chimed.

"You're wasting your time," Britney-arr said.

"Yeah," said Melissa. Then added, "Lame-ohs."

Julia wanted to say something back and some words she knew her mother didn't want her to say formed in her mouth. But she pursed her lips closed and glared at the other girls, then turned, grabbed McKenna by the elbow again and nearly dragged her along behind her as she headed toward the back of the schoolyard where it became a wooded hillside.

McKenna followed and didn't say anything until they were almost to their favorite spot -- two stumps just under the edge of the trees. They went there most recesses and would sit and talk about what they were going to do when they did find fairies or a way to fairyland. Then McKenna said "They're such dumb divas."

"No," Julia said. "Just ignorant. They don't know any better because they listen to the people who don't believe anything good. Don't believe in fairies. They just think everything's bad or dumb or boring. They don't think for themselves."

Julia sat cross-legged on the leaf-covered ground next to the stump, facing the woods, her back to the schoolyard and all the other kids out at recess behind her. She opened the book on her lap and flipped pages until she reached the right one.

McKenna knelt next to her, pulling the hem of her blue-plaid uniform skirt down under her knees and leaning slightly against the nearby stump.

"Look at this. I found it last night," Julia said, pointing at the picture in the book. Then, before her friend could lean in and read the caption, continued, "My mom showed me one in our yard last night. But it's all dried up so I think it won't work. I'm also thinking that we need to find one soon -- see, it says spring and early summer mostly so maybe in the fall, when it rains a lot like it did last week, they come back. We don't have much time before we'll have to wait until next spring to find

one and go."

Her friend looked up from the book. "Go where?" McKenna asked.

Julia leaned toward her. "Don't you get it? We can use a fairy ring to get to fairyland."

McKenna didn't understand it at first and Julia had to explain, elaborating on when and how the fairy rings worked, or she assumed they worked. They'd have to test it, experiment, she told her friend. It all made sense to her and she was excited about the possibility of actually finding fairies. She believed they existed and wanted to prove it to others.

"But it says that people believed they worked, not that they really did," McKenna said.

Julia looked straight into her friend's blue eyes and grinned. "Remember what I told you the man at the book store said? There's truth in all the old stories and myths and legends. He said sometimes people hid things in stories and that what people believed -- the folk tales and the sayings and stuff -- really worked for people who believed. People used to watch nature, he said, and believe more in magic than in science and taking things apart. And the person who wrote this didn't believe what fairy rings could do but there must be a reason he put it in there. I think it's because it's true." She ran out of breath and slapped the book shut, brushed her hair from her face and smiled at her friend.

"Like what Sister said about how people predicted the weather," McKenna said.

"Precisely. Before they had radar and computers, they watched and observed. Maybe they were wrong about how some things worked but they lived in nature and paid attention."

"But that isn't magic. That isn't about fairies," McKenna countered and sat back on her heels. "Did he ever say anything about fairies?"

At this Julia stood up. "Yes. In a way. He said that anything was possible, especially if you believed it was. I believe fairies exist and I'm going to find them. And now we have a way to do that."

McKenna turned her freckled face up to Julia and asked "How are we going to do that?"

"It's simple," Julia began. "We find a fairy ring and sit in it until something happens. If we sit in one and think really hard about finding fairies, they will come to us and maybe even take us to fairyland. The fairy ring is a place they go to regularly to dance and such. They should come back when we're there and quiet."

"Do you think the ground will open up and we'll fall into a hole that leads to fairyland?" McKenna asked. "I read it's supposed to be underground."

"Like in Alice in Wonderland?" Julia asked and smiled. "That could be but I think it's more like a door opening up out of nothing in the air. That way we would be able to get back too."

"That makes sense," said McKenna. "But maybe it's a door to a cave or hole?"

"You really want to go spelunking, don't you?" Julia laughed and McKenna joined her.

"Whatever it is," Julia concluded. "It's going to be magical and exciting. And something the diva girls will never get to do."

"Where is the one your mother showed you?" McKenna asked Julia later that afternoon. They were in the very back of the van. On the way home from school, they had stopped to pick up McKenna's overnight bag. Julia had convinced her mother to let her friend spend the weekend. She didn't tell her they were planning to go to fairyland.

Julia's mother and sister were up at the front, talking about something they were listening to on the radio and so weren't paying attention to the two girls in the back.

"It's not far from the house," Julia answered, leaning down behind the back of the seat in front so that her voices wouldn't project up to her mother and sister. Her mother encouraged her to find fairies but Julia wasn't sure what her reaction would be if she knew the girls had found a way to get there -- and planned to go that afternoon. "But the mushrooms are all dried up. We need to find a better one, I think, in order to get it to work."

McKenna leaned forward so that she was shielded by the seat back as well. "Are you scared it will?"

"No. Scared? Why? This is exciting."

"But you don't know what we'll find there. Some of the stories say that fairy folk aren't really friendly. That they are bad and kidnap babies and"

Julia interrupted her. "You can't believe everything you read. Especially when it's written by grownups who don't believe in it and are just trying to scare kids into not going on adventures. Like Sister Bernadine."

The two girls laughed and sat back, making faces as if they were the nun scolding them.

When they arrived at Julia's house, the two shot out of the van and up to the house. They threw their book bags onto the porch and turned to run off across the yard.

"Stop," Julia's mother ordered. "Don't you have homework?"

"Yes, but can't it wait until later? Or tomorrow?" Julia asked. "It's just reading and geography."

"And math," said McKenna.

Julia looked at her, puzzled. "Really?" she whispered.

"Yeah. Three pages of reading and fifteen problems," McKenna answered, also in a whisper.

"When did she tell us that?" Julia asked quietly.

"Be back in one hour, then." Julia's mother said. "You can work on one of the assignments before dinner and the others after."

The two girls ran off together as fast as they could.

They stopped after they rounded the corner of the pole barn, out of sight of the house and Julia's mother and sister.

"Wait, we need a plan and a way to search," said Julia, out of breath.

"Like what?" asked McKenna.

"Well, I was thinking. The book is about lawns so I think the fairy rings are only in short grass or maybe no grass." Julia glanced around at the lawn.

"If they were in long grass, you wouldn't see them," McKenna said.

Julia grinned. "That makes sense. Still, it will be easier at least to look in the short grass. Or the woods. There's no grass under all the trees. Just leaves and such and mushrooms grow good in there."

McKenna rubbed her hands together and asked "So where do we start?"

"Let's go on the trail to the meadow. That way we can look in the woods along the way and in the grass out there."

"We haven't looked in the meadow for fairies in a while," added McKenna. "Even if we don't find a ring or mushrooms, we can look for fairy houses and nests."

Julia nodded and the girls started off at a slower pace, scanning the ground all around them for tell-tale mushrooms, dark grass, or circular patterns. They followed the short grass Julia's mother mowed along the edge of the woods, past the barn and over to an opening in the trees that marked the trail into the trees. Julia and her sister and mother often walked on the trail through their woods and the path was easy to find even though it was covered with last year's leaves and a few of this year's that had been knocked off already.

Though she had walked this trail hundreds of times, Julia estimated, she had never looked for fairy rings. Besides fairy houses and nests, she'd gone in search of butterflies and birds, poison ivy and ferns, even odd-shaped branches or rocks that she and Laura could show their mother. She knew she had seen lots of mushrooms in the woods. But she had never noticed if they formed a ring. She really wanted to find one now.

McKenna saw the first mushroom and called it out to Julia. It was as big as their fists and yel-

low with brown spots on it. It didn't look like the drawing in the book or like the ones Julia had seen the night before, but she suggested they check all around in the leaf litter in the area just in case. She found a small bud of one nearby but that was all. After a few minutes they brushed their hands off on their skirts and started looking again.

When Julia saw the first brownish-white mushroom near the far edge of the woods, she looked past it thinking it was only a curled leaf. Then she saw another a foot or so away and she stopped walking. She scanned between the two and then imagined a line connecting them. She looked in an arc from there and found a bunch of three mushrooms and then another and several more even further around in a circle.

"Stop!" she called to McKenna who had continued walking along the trail. Julia saw the definite outline of a ring.

McKenna ran back to her and Julia pointed to the ground. "See it? It's a circle of mushrooms. We found a fairy ring!"