

AUTUMN AFTERNOON

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"It's a very sad time of year to be cleaning out the attic," said Miss Elizabeth Simmons. "I don't like October. I don't like the way the trees get empty. And the sky always looks like the sun has bleached it out." She stood hesitantly at the bottom of the attic stairs, her gray head moving from side to side, her pale gray eyes uncertain. "But no matter what you do, here comes October," she said. "So tear September off the calendar!"

"Can I have September?" Juliet, the small niece with the soft brown hair, held the torn calendar month in her hands.

"I don't know what you'll do with it," said Miss Elizabeth Simmons.

"It isn't really over, it'll never be over." The little girl held the paper up. "I know what happened on every day of it."

"It was over before it began." Miss Elizabeth

Simmons puckered her lips and her gray eyes grew remote. "I don't remember a thing that happened."

"On Monday I roller-skated at Chessman Park, on Tuesday I had chocolate cake at Patricia Ann's, on Wednesday I got eighty-nine in spelling at school." Juliet put the calendar in her blouse. "That was this week. Last week I caught crayfish in the creek, swung on a vine, hurt my hand on a nail, and fell off a fence. That takes me up until last Friday."

"Well, it's good somebody's doing something," said Elizabeth Simmons.

"And I'll remember today," said Juliet. "Because it was the day the oak leaves started to turn all red and yellow."

"You just run and play," said the old woman. "I've got this job to do in the attic."

She was breathing hard when she climbed into the musty garret. "I meant to do this last spring," she murmured. "And here it is coming on winter and I don't want to go through all that snow thinking about this load of stuff up here." She peered about in the attic gloom, saw the huge brown trunks, the spiderwebs, the old newspapers. There was a smell of ancient wooden beams.

She opened a dirty window that looked out on the apple trees far below. The scent of autumn came in, cool and sharp.

"Look out below!" cried Miss Elizabeth Simmons, and began heaving old magazines and yel-

low newspapers down into the yard. "Lots better than lugging it downstairs," she gasped, shoving armloads of junk out the window.

Old wire-framed dressmaker's dummies fell careening down, pursued by silent parrot cages and riffling encyclopedias. A faint dust rose in the air and her heart went giddy so she had to find her way over to sit on a trunk, laughing breathlessly at her own inadequacy.

"My lands! Good grief!" she cried. "How it does pile up. What's this?"

She seized a box of clippings, cutouts, and obituaries, dumped them out on the trunk top, and pawed through. There were three neat small bundles of old calendar pages clipped together.

"Some more of Juliet's nonsense," she sniffed. "Honestly, that child! Calendars, calendars, saving calendars."

She picked up one page and it said OCTOBER 1887. Across its front were exclamation marks, red lines under certain days, and childish scribbles: "This was a special day!" or "A wonderful sunset!"

She turned the calendar page over with suddenly stiffening fingers. In the dim light her head bent down and her tired eyes squinted to read what was written on the back: "Elizabeth Simmons, aged ten, grammar school, low fifth."

She turned the faded pages in her cold hands and stared. She examined the dates, the years, the excla-

mation marks and red circles around each extraordinary time. Slowly her brows drew together. Then her eyes turned blank. Silently she lay back where she sat on the trunk, her eyes gazing out at the autumn sky. Her hands dropped away, leaving the calendar pages yellowed and faded in her lap.

July 8, 1889, with a red circle around it. What had happened that day?

August 28, 1892; a blue exclamation point. Why? Days, months, and years of marks and circles, on and on!

She closed her eyes. Her breathing came swiftly in and out of her mouth. Below on the parched autumn lawn, Juliet ran, singing.

Miss Elizabeth Simmons roused herself after a time, and moved slowly to the window. For a long while she looked down at Juliet playing among the red and yellow trees. Then she cleared her throat and called, "Juliet!"

"Oh, Aunt Elizabeth, you look so funny up there in the attic!"

"Juliet. Juliet, I want you to do me a favor."

"What?"

"Darling, I want you to throw away that nasty old piece of calendar you're saving."

"Why?" Juliet blinked up at her.

"Because, dear, I don't want you saving them anymore," said the old woman. "It'll just make you feel bad later."

“When later? And how? My gosh!” Juliet shouted. “I’ve got to keep every week, every month! There’s so much happening I never want to forget.”

Miss Elizabeth gazed down and the small round face peered up through the apple tree branches. Finally, Miss Elizabeth sighed. “All right.” She looked away. She tossed the box down through the autumn air to thump on the ground. “I guess I can’t stop you collecting if you must.”

“Oh, thank you, Auntie, thanks!” Juliet pressed her hand to her shirt pocket where the entire month of September was stashed. “I’ll never ever forget a day like today. I’ll always remember, always!”

Miss Elizabeth looked down through the autumn branches that stirred in the quiet wind. “Of course you will, child,” she said at last. “Of course you will.”