

Fallen Words

Tale · 12-character play · 4 women, 3 men, 5 either · 22 min · Beginner · Ages 10+

In Clairval, every night, a word vanishes from the big book kept at the town hall, and from the mouths of the people who live there. This morning, it is the village's own name that has started to fade on the cover. The eleven students of the last class decide to spend the night in the town hall to catch whoever is taking the words, before it is too late.

Clairval, a small mountain village whose town hall is also the school: the classroom, the attic, the bell tower. One autumn night, today.

Casting

ZOÉ (Female role, Teen) 12, class representative.

INÈS (Female role, Child) 11, the baker's daughter, up before everyone else.

ELENA (Female role, Teen) 13, the eldest, starting secondary school in town next year.

MILA (Female role, Child) 10, the youngest, the last baby born in the village.

LÉO (Male role, Teen) 12, tore Marco's kite a year ago.

MARCO (Male role, Teen) 12, hasn't spoken to Léo since that day.

JONAS (Male role, Child) 11, grandson of the former mayor, who has moved to town.

SAM (No gender marker, Teen) 12, mother is the town hall secretary; has the key.

NOA (No gender marker, Child) 10, collects insects in boxes.

CHARLIE (No gender marker, Child) 11, keeps the class notebook.

ALEX (No gender marker, Teen) 13, grandfather used to ring the village bell.

L'ARCHIVISTE (No gender marker, Adult) has lived in the town hall attic since the village's very first word.

SCENE 1: THE PALE PAGE

(The classroom in the town hall. At the back, on a lectern, a very big book, closed. The students come in with their school bags.)

CHARLIE

In Clairval, there's a town hall, a bakery, a bell tower and a school.

ALEX

The school is us.

ZOÉ

Eleven students. The last class.

MILA

And in the town hall, there's the book.

NOA

The big book of the village's words.

JONAS

Everybody's written in it. My great-great-grandfather, my grandmother, my Grandpa.

CHARLIE

For five nights now, the words have been leaving.

(Inès opens the book. The others lean in.)

INÈS

Another hole.

SAM

Show me.

INÈS

There. Between "sorrowful" and "sort". Last night, there was a word there.

MARCO

What word?

INÈS

If I knew, it wouldn't have gone.

ELENA

Look in your mouth. Maybe you've still got it.

INÈS

My mouth is empty. Like the book.

(Charlie opens the class notebook.)

CHARLIE

I wrote them all down. Look.

ZOÉ

There's nothing there.

CHARLIE

Exactly. Five lines, five holes. Even my pencil has forgotten them.

NOA

I remember the first night. It was the little bug that lights up in the grass, in summer. There used to be loads of them, where we live.

ELENA

The second night, the game with the chalk squares. You hop on one foot.

JONAS

The third was my Grandpa's word. The one he shouted when he stubbed his toe.

ALEX

And after that, the song you sing to babies to make them fall asleep.

SAM

And last night, the word you say when you've trodden on somebody's foot.

(Léo steps back onto Marco's foot.)

MARCO

Ow!

LÉO

Oh. Sor... sor...

MARCO

What, "sor"?

LÉO

Sor... sorcerer.

MARCO

Sorcerer?

LÉO

No. Sor... sorrowful. Sort of. It won't come out.

MARCO

Forget it. You never said it anyway.

(Marco goes and sits far away from Léo. A pause.)

MILA

Who's doing this? Who's taking our words?

JONAS

A thief.

ELENA

Or two thieves.

NOA

Or a whole gang.

INÈS

Or nobody. You can't steal words. They're not scooters.

ZOÉ

Then explain that.

(Zoé closes the book. They all look at the cover.)

MILA

The letters. They've all gone pale.

SAM

"The Words of..." I can't read the end any more.

ALEX

It says "Clairval". Well, it used to say "Clairval".

CHARLIE

Why the village's name? It's the easiest word in the world.

INÈS

And if the name goes tonight, what's left?

ALEX

A village with no name.

ELENA

A blank space on the map.

MILA

The school bus won't know where to stop.

MARCO

My dad says the bus shouldn't even bother stopping in this dump.

ZOÉ

The school's closing in June anyway. It says so on the door.

SAM

So we don't let it happen. We guard the book tonight.

LÉO

All night? In the town hall?

SAM

My mum's the town hall secretary. The key hangs on a hook in our hall.

ZOÉ

Right. I'll take care of everything. Eleven o'clock, outside the door. Who's coming?

(One hand goes up, then another, then all of them. Marco's last.)

LÉO

I'm coming. I'll bring the light off my bike.

MARCO

I'm coming. But I'm not keeping watch with him.

CHARLIE

And what do we tell our parents?

SAM

Nothing. We're in bed asleep. And we get up very, very early.

SCENE 2: THE WATCH

(The same room, at night. Torch beams. The students tiptoe in.)

NOA

At night, the town hall makes noises it never makes in the daytime.

MILA

Creaks.

ELENA

Sighs in the pipes.

LÉO

And a tick-tock you never hear during spelling tests.

(Sam locks the door again. Inès takes out a paper bag.)

INÈS

I brought yesterday's croissants. The ones we didn't sell.

JONAS

And I brought this.

(Jonas holds up a butterfly net.)

MARCO

A butterfly net? Against a thief?

JONAS

Against a word thief. Words are light, right?

INÈS

And who'd come all the way here to steal anything? There's nothing here.

ZOÉ

Listen to me. I've made a plan. Sam and Charlie, the door. Noa and Mila, the windows. Elena and Alex, the book. Inès and Jonas, the corridor.

LÉO

What about me?

ZOÉ

You and Marco, the stairs.

MARCO

No.

ZOÉ

Marco, please.

MARCO

I'll guard the stairs. He can guard the bottom of the stairs.

LÉO

The stairs don't have a bottom. Well, they do, but it's the same stairs.

MILA

Why don't you two talk any more?

LÉO

No reason.

MARCO

A kite.

MILA

The red one? With the ribbon tail?

MARCO

He ripped it in the big oak tree.

LÉO

That was the wind.

MARCO

You were the one holding the string.

ELENA

That was a year ago. A whole year without a word.

LÉO

I tried to say a word to him. It wouldn't come out.

CHARLIE

And now it's gone.

(A pause. Somewhere, a clock strikes the half hour.)

ALEX

Half past eleven.

SAM

Lights off. Nobody move.

CHARLIE

Wait. I'm writing down the time. "Half past eleven: Jonas eats his third croissant."

JONAS

Second.

INÈS

Third. I'm counting, they're my croissants.

SAM

If my mum wakes up and sees the key's not on its hook, I'm the one the whole village will be out looking for. Not the thief.

(Almost darkness. Whispers.)

NOA

Alex, are you asleep?

ALEX

No. I'm listening for the bell. My grandfather used to ring it every Sunday, back then.

NOA

And now?

ALEX

Now it doesn't ring any more. The rope's still up there.

INÈS

I'm never asleep at this time anyway. At four o'clock, my mum lights the oven.

MILA

Are you scared, Marco?

MARCO

No.

MILA

I am, a bit.

MARCO

OK. A bit.

LÉO

Me too, a bit.

MARCO

Nobody asked you.

ZOÉ

Shh. You're arguing, but at least you're talking to each other.

(Midnight strikes in the bell tower. Alex counts the strokes in silence, finger by finger. On the twelfth stroke, the cover of the book lights up.)

ELENA

The book!

CHARLIE

Don't move. Look.

(Something comes loose from the cover and rises slowly, like a leaf

falling the wrong way up.)

INÈS

No. That's not possible. Words don't fly.

ZOÉ

So what's that one doing?

INÈS

I didn't see anything.

JONAS

I did. And I've got it!

(Jonas swings the net. The word is caught. The net drags Jonas towards the stairs. His feet slide on the floorboards.)

JONAS

It's pulling! It's heavy for a word!

ZOÉ

Léo! Marco!

(Léo grabs Jonas round the waist, Marco grabs Léo. They pull together, backwards.)

LÉO

Hold on!

MARCO

I am holding on. You hold on!

(The word slips out of the net. It shoots up to the top of the stairs and through the trapdoor in the ceiling. Jonas, Léo and Marco end up sitting on the floor, in a heap.)

JONAS

It went through the hole in the ceiling.

SAM

It's not a hole. It's the attic trapdoor.

ALEX

Nobody goes up to the attic. My grandfather said it was out of bounds.

SAM

Out of bounds. Not locked.

(A noise, up above. Light footsteps, then the sound of a lid being

screwed on.)

NOA

There's somebody up there.

ELENA

Or something.

ZOÉ

We're going up. I'll go first.

MILA

We're all going up. Even me.

(Marco looks at Léo, who is still sitting on him.)

MARCO

You can get up now.

LÉO

Yes. Yes.

SCENE 3: THE ATTIC OF JARS

(The attic. Shelves right up to the roof, covered in jars of every size, each one with a label. In the middle, someone in a long ink-stained coat is screwing the lid onto a jar with a glow inside.)

ELENA

In the attic, there were shelves right up to the roof.

ALEX

And on the shelves, jars.

CHARLIE

Hundreds. Maybe thousands.

MILA

And in the middle, someone.

(The students climb out of the trapdoor one by one. The Archivist turns round, jar in hand.)

ZOÉ

Put that down right now.

L'ARCHIVISTE

Not until it's shut. If I let go, it goes straight through the roof.

JONAS

That's our word. We saw it leave.

MARCO

You're the thief.

ELENA

Or one of the two thieves.

L'ARCHIVISTE

Neither one nor the other. I don't steal anything.

INÈS

You've got a word in a jar. That's called stealing.

L'ARCHIVISTE

I don't steal anything. I catch.

SAM

Catch what?

L'ARCHIVISTE

What falls. A word that nobody says any more grows light. A little lighter every day. And one night, it comes loose.

NOA

Like a leaf.

L'ARCHIVISTE

Like a leaf. But the wrong way up: it falls upwards. If it gets past the roof, it's lost in the sky, and nobody ever finds it again. So I stay here, under the roof, and I catch it.

CHARLIE

Since when?

L'ARCHIVISTE

Since the very first word of this village.

MILA

That's a long time.

L'ARCHIVISTE

A while.

INÈS

I don't believe you. Prove it.

(The Archivist puts the jar on a shelf and takes down another one, a

very small one.)

L'ARCHIVISTE

Every jar has its label. Who wants to read?

NOA

Me.

(Noa takes the jar and reads the label.)

NOA

"Fell on the first night. Last said six years ago, at the edge of the pond."

L'ARCHIVISTE

Open it.

(Noa unscrews the lid. A tiny light rises out of the jar.)

NOA

Firefly. Firefly! I can say it!

L'ARCHIVISTE

Up here, yes. Close to its jar, a word comes back into your mouth.

NOA

Six years ago, the fireflies went away when they put up the streetlights. After that, we didn't need the word any more.

(Noa closes the jar. Jonas grabs another one.)

JONAS

"Fell on the third night. Last said two years ago, in the mayor's kitchen."

(Jonas opens it. Listens.)

JONAS

Jumping Jehoshaphat. That's him. That's Grandpa. The day he sold his house, he walked smack into a box.

ELENA

Is there one for me?

(The Archivist hands Elena a jar. Elena reads.)

ELENA

"Fell on the second night. Last said four years ago, in the school playground, by a big girl of nine." Hopscotch.

MILA

You're the big girl of nine.

ELENA

I remember. I said: "We're not playing hopscotch any more. There aren't enough of us."

L'ARCHIVISTE

After that, nobody said it again.

(Mila reaches for a jar higher up. The Archivist takes it down for her.)

MILA

"Fell on the fourth night. Last sung ten years ago, to the last baby born in the village." That's me, the last baby.

L'ARCHIVISTE

Lullaby. Your grandmother sang it out of tune, but you fell asleep all the same.

(Léo and Marco look at the same jar, without touching it.)

LÉO

What about that one?

L'ARCHIVISTE

Read it.

LÉO

"Fell on the fifth night. Should have been said a year ago, under the big oak. Nobody has said it since."

MARCO

Sorry.

(A pause. Léo looks at him.)

MARCO

It just came out by itself. I'm not saying it to you.

LÉO

I know. It comes to me by itself too, up here.

MARCO

But you don't say it.

LÉO

Not up here. Not as pretend.

ZOÉ

And the village's name? Tonight's word?

(The Archivist points to the jar still glowing on the shelf. It is the biggest one of all.)

L'ARCHIVISTE

It's there. And on the label, I didn't know what to write. I don't know who said it last.

CHARLIE

But it's written everywhere. On the sign, on the map.

L'ARCHIVISTE

Written, yes. But said? You say "here". You say "where we live". You say "this dump". Your parents say "it's better in town".

INÈS

My mum says "the bakery round the corner". She even took the name off the shop window.

ALEX

My grandfather said "Clairval" with every stroke of the bell. Since he stopped ringing it...

SAM

So it isn't a thief taking our words.

L'ARCHIVISTE

No.

SAM

It's us letting them go.

SCENE 4: A JAR EACH

(The attic, later. The students are sitting on the floor among the jars. The Archivist is standing by the shelf.)

INÈS

It was two o'clock in the morning.

JONAS

We weren't sleepy at all any more.

MARCO

Or scared at all. Well, hardly.

ZOÉ

Then give them back to us. All of them. Right now.

L'ARCHIVISTE

I can't. A word can't be given back. It has to be taken back.

CHARLIE

What does that mean?

L'ARCHIVISTE

Each of you takes a jar, carries it down to the village, and says the word to someone before the sun comes up. Out loud. For real.

NOA

And if we don't say it?

L'ARCHIVISTE

It comes back up here, even lighter. And the next time it falls, not even I can catch it.

JONAS

I'll take Grandpa's.

L'ARCHIVISTE

He doesn't live in the village any more.

JONAS

His house is still there. I'll shout it outside his window. Grandpa always said the walls have ears.

ELENA

I'll take hopscotch. I'm the one who let it go.

MILA

And I'll take the lullaby. But I don't know who to sing it to. There aren't any babies any more.

L'ARCHIVISTE

You'll find someone.

NOA

I'll take the firefly. But who do I say it to? There aren't any fireflies any more.

L'ARCHIVISTE

Say it anyway. Sometimes the word comes back before the thing.

NOA

Then I'll keep an empty box by my bed. Just in case.

(Léo and Marco reach for the "sorry" jar at the same time. They stop.)

LÉO

There's only one jar.

MARCO

And there are two of us.

L'ARCHIVISTE

With that one, it's often the way.

(They take the jar in both hands, one on each side, without looking at each other.)

ZOÉ

And the village's name, I'll deal with it. On my own.

(Zoé goes to the big jar and tries to lift it. It doesn't move.)

ZOÉ

It won't budge.

L'ARCHIVISTE

That word belongs to everyone. It weighs as much as everyone put together.

ZOÉ

Help me. Please.

(Sam, Charlie, Alex and Inès come to help. The jar rises a centimetre, then drops back down.)

SAM

Even with five of us, we can't do it.

ZOÉ

Usually I do everything on my own. The lists, the plans, the watch rota. It's quicker.

ELENA

Not this time.

ZOÉ

No. Not this time.

CHARLIE

So how many people does it take?

L'ARCHIVISTE

All of Clairval.

INÈS

All of Clairval is asleep. Except my mum, from four o'clock.

ALEX

There's one thing that wakes the whole village up at once.

SAM

What?

ALEX

The bell. My grandfather taught me. Three long strokes, one short, three long. It means: "Everybody out."

MARCO

Have you ever done it?

ALEX

Never. I used to go up with him and count the strokes. He said one day it would be my turn.

ZOÉ

Where's the bell tower?

L'ARCHIVISTE

Right above us. Up there.

(The students look at the ladder. Charlie turns to the Archivist.)

CHARLIE

What about you? Are you coming?

L'ARCHIVISTE

I stay here. Someone has to stand between the words and the sky.

MILA

Don't you ever come down?

L'ARCHIVISTE

Never.

MILA

Don't you ever see anybody?

L'ARCHIVISTE

I see you. Through the floorboards. I know all your voices.

CHARLIE

What's your name?

L'ARCHIVISTE

Nobody has asked me that in a very long time.

CHARLIE

Well, I'm asking.

L'ARCHIVISTE

Then I'll look for it. Maybe it will come back.

INÈS

I don't understand all of it. But I saw a firefly come out of a jar, and I heard Jonas's grandpa. So I believe you.

L'ARCHIVISTE

Thank you.

INÈS

Come with us to the bell tower. Just the bell tower. That's not coming down, it's going up.

(The Archivist looks at the ladder. A pause.)

L'ARCHIVISTE

Going up. Yes. I'd never thought of that.

SCENE 5: THE BELL TOWER

(At the top of the town hall's bell tower. A big bell, a rope, a small window over the square. The students come up the ladder with their jars. The Archivist climbs the last rung, slowly.)

MARCO

At ten to five, it was still dark.

LÉO

But right at the far end of the valley, the sky was starting to go pale.

INÈS

My mum had lit the oven. You could smell the bread all the way up the bell tower.

(The Archivist looks out of the window.)

L'ARCHIVISTE

So that's the village. From above.

SAM

You'd never seen it?

L'ARCHIVISTE

I'd heard it. That's not the same.

ZOÉ

Alex, it's your turn.

(Alex takes the rope in both hands. It is stiff. Alex pulls. Nothing.)

ALEX

It's stiff. It hasn't moved in years.

ZOÉ

Do you want some help?

ALEX

No. Yes. Come and pull with me.

(Zoé, Marco and Léo grab the rope with Alex. At last the rope comes down. The bell rings: three long strokes, one short, three long.)

CHARLIE

Listen.

(Down below, windows open, one by one. A dog barks. Voices.)

INÈS

My mum's come out onto the doorstep. She's still got flour up to her elbows.

JONAS

My turn.

(Jonas opens his jar and leans out of the window, towards a house with its shutters closed.)

JONAS

Jumping Jehoshaphat!

(In the distance, someone bursts out laughing.)

JONAS

See, Grandpa? Your house remembers.

ELENA

My turn. Mila, can I borrow your chalk?

(Mila gives her a piece of chalk. Elena opens her jar and shouts out of the window.)

ELENA

This morning at break, everybody to the hopscotch! There are eleven of us. That's enough.

MILA

Can I play too, even me?

ELENA

Especially you. You're the one who jumps the furthest.

NOA

My turn.

(Noa opens the jar over the window ledge.)

NOA

Firefly.

(Nothing. Then a tiny light passes in front of the window. Or it's a torch, down below, in the square.)

NOA

Did you see that?

INÈS

I saw.

MARCO

Wasn't that a torch?

INÈS

I said: I saw.

(Léo and Marco hold the "sorry" jar between them. They open it together.)

LÉO

Sorry.

MARCO

Sorry.

(A pause. They look at each other.)

LÉO

Why are you saying sorry? I was the one holding the string.

MARCO

For the year. I left you all on your own with the word.

LÉO

Shall we make another one?

MARCO

A kite? A red one. With a ribbon tail.

LÉO

And you hold the string.

(Down in the square, people in pyjamas look up at the bell tower.)

SAM

My mum's in the square. She's looking around for me.

CHARLIE

Wave to her.

SAM

She's seen me. She isn't shouting. She's waiting.

LÉO

Waiting for what?

SAM

For what comes next. Everyone's waiting for what comes next. The heaviest one is still left.

CHARLIE

It stayed in the attic. Nobody could carry it.

L'ARCHIVISTE

It doesn't need carrying. It needs calling.

ZOÉ

Then all together. Mila, will you count us in?

MILA

Me?

ZOÉ

You.

MILA

One. Two. Three.

ZOÉ

Clairval!

LÉO

Clairval!

MARCO

Clairval!

ELENA

Clairval!

JONAS

Clairval!

NOA

Clairval!

INÈS

Clairval!

SAM

Clairval!

CHARLIE

Clairval!

ALEX

Clairval!

MILA

Clairval!

(A silence. Then from below, one voice, then two, then a whole village.)

ALEX

They're answering. They're saying the name.

(Beneath their feet, through the trapdoor, a great light rises from the attic, passes in front of them and goes back down towards the town hall.)

SAM

It's gone back. To the cover of the book.

CHARLIE

And in my notebook, the lines are coming back. One, two, three, four.
There's one missing.

(Mila looks at the jar she is still holding, shut.)

MILA

Mine.

INÈS

The sky's going all white, at the end of the valley. Hurry up.

(The Archivist sits down against the bell. Eyes closed.)

MILA

When do you sleep?

L'ARCHIVISTE

Never. Words fall at night.

MILA

It's nearly day. They won't fall any more. You'll be able to sleep.

(Mila opens the last jar and hums a very simple tune, a little out of tune.)

MILA

It's a lullaby. My grandmother sang out of tune. So do I.

L'ARCHIVISTE

It's the first one anyone has ever sung to me.

(The sun comes up. Charlie looks at the notebook and holds up five fingers.)

(In the square, the light falls on the school door, the notice stuck to it and, above it, the village's name carved in the stone.)

ELENA

The notice is still on the school door.

JONAS

Yes. But this morning, the whole village is outside to read it.

CHARLIE

We'll come back tonight. For your name.

ZOÉ

And tomorrow night too.

(A pause. The Archivist's eyes stay closed.)

L'ARCHIVISTE

Tomorrow.

(The bell, all on its own, rings one last little stroke. Blackout.)

What you can do with it

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