



Cinderella  
Nancy Baxter

The ancient washing machine, its moving parts oiled with sand and seaweed, flew into a tantrum during the spin cycle and flooded the cottage floor for the third time that day.

"I have to wash," Katie thought moodily as she mopped up the mess. "They can't sleep in bathing suits." She had called the repair man six days ago. "Leaks and squeaks," he had dutifully noted on his service sheet. And had probably added "antiques"—one of those Green Lake antiques. They hated driving twenty miles to fix twenty-year-old washers.

From the front porch of the cottage the record player ground its way slowly through Rumpelstiltskin. "Is your name Leg o' Lamb?" asked a soothing woman's voice. Soon it would stomp Rumpelstiltskin through the ground and go on to Cinderella.

"Do they listen to that same record all the time Mrs. McKenna?" Margaret Bascomb, the teen-aged next door neighbor Katie had brought to babysit with Eric and the twins had come out of one of the back bedrooms. She was dogged by ten-year-old Anne, who slouched in the same way, chewing on bangs which hung in her face just as Margaret's drab straight hair did.

"Yes, Mother, that fairy tale stuff is gross," said Anne. She looked adoringly up at Margaret, not caring that the older girl's face was the color of cold bacon fat and that her glasses framed mouse eyes that contact lenses would never improve.

Katie stuck the mop in the corner. "Children like repetition. It makes them feel secure." She smiled, watching Margaret con-  
complacently lift a corner of the fractured linoleum with her tennis shoe.

"Does the record bother you?"

"Oh, sort of. I'm too old for all that jazz about the little men

and mean stepmothers. And we don't have too much noise around our house, with just Mike and me."

"Mike listens to records doesn't he?"

"He listens to them in his room," she said with a certain emphasis which Katie knew wasn't intended to be rude, but as she unloaded the machine she sighed in spite of herself.

To Anne, Margaret was a miraculous "Teen-Ager" and therefore to be worshipped by all preteenhood as "in." But Katie knew better. Margaret was at that age in which, if her identity had been printed on her sweatshirt instead of "I Love The Rolling Stones" it would have said: "Half woman, half child." She was in thirteen-year-old limbo. She wound her hair skillfully in enormous blue rollers; yet she still couldn't cut her own fingernails. She read "Teen Dream Magazine" and Mickey Mouse with equal ease, and liked hide and seek almost as well as dancing the "Duck." The one thing which was marking her incipient adulthood, however, was her growing discernment.

In the close quarters of the family-shared lake cottage Margaret was learning a lesson in differences in family living. Katie knew it must be difficult for a quiet thirteen year old to land like a flopping fish in the boat in the midst of five noisy children who wore mix match sox and trailed peanut butter and banana sandwiches through the house. They were "country casual" as the furniture catalogues always said. And Margaret's family was decidedly "sleek suburban."

Katie had caught the revelatory flash in Margaret's eyes as they drove up to the cottage sitting friendly, brown, and dilapidated with its porch leaning like a lap almost to the very shore of the lake. She saw her look from the wicker chair with one rocker off to the rusty turpentine can half submerged among the reeds. A stray dog flopped his curling tail at them; a rowboat showed its paintless bottom to the sky.

"Look at the sailboat, Margaret," Anne had said, eager to have her like the cottage. It was bright green and white, with "Wicked Witch" across its stern, and it was the only thing in the place which showed any of the care Jim and his two brothers had for this joint family venture.

"I don't know much about sailboats," Margaret had murmured, obviously disoriented by her introduction to the typical lake cottage.

And from that moment on Margaret, excellent baby sitter that

she was (she allowed no between meal popsickles or pillow fights, had no boyfriends and told no stories about "The Ghostly Arm"), waged an undeclared and certainly unconscious war. It would go down in future history as Mrs. McKenna Vs. My Mother or Killing By Comparison.

Round one saw Margaret helping Katie ready the beds. As they tucked in the wrinkled corners and pulled up the blanket, Margaret observed with a slight sniff, "My mother always irons the sheets."

Round two saw Margaret aghast when Janet and Jimmy, the twins, had plopped a coffee can of snails on the front porch.

"Take those things away," she yelled. "Why, I hate to think what my mother would do if I brought—"

"But they're EXPECTING, and I need to keep an eye on them," Janet protested.

"Dump them in—" Katie had dashed out in time to rescue the entire maternity ward, explaining that she allowed animals on the porch, and wondering why color needed to creep up her neck because of it.

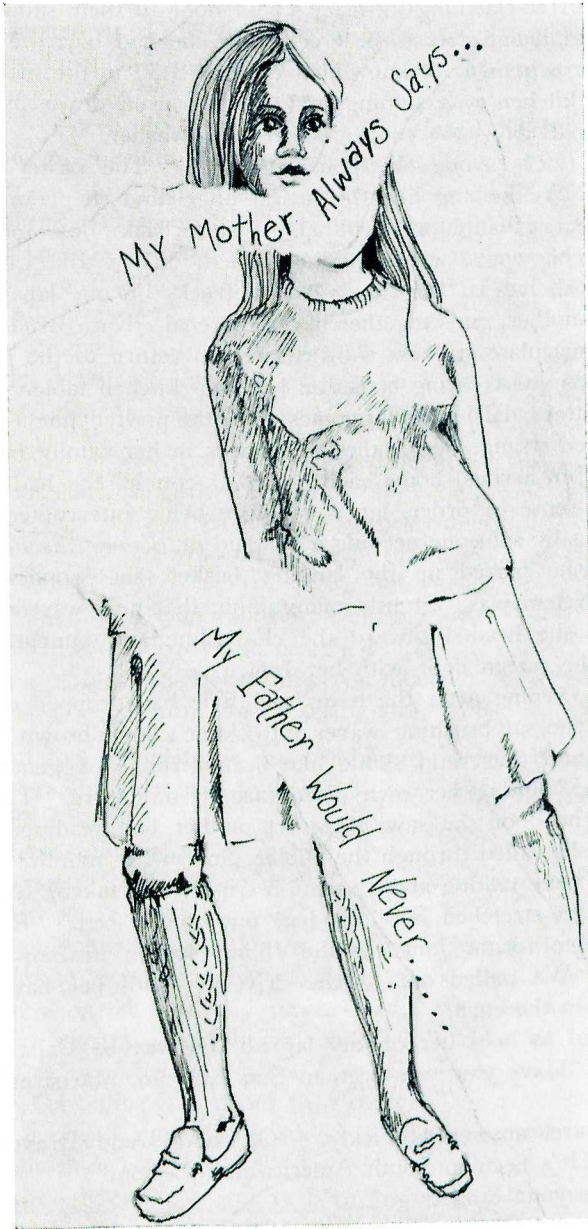
The war escalated considerably as the week wore on. Margaret commented, "Oh, is that packaged Spaghetti Sauce? My mother gets up early in the morning the day we have spaghetti. She simmers garlic and bay leaves all day for the sauce." "My mother" squeezed real lemons instead of defrosting cans for lemonade; "My mother" scrubbed the floor on her hands and knees; she could make Napoleons. And through it all, Katie couldn't even feel angry. Margaret was too innocent to be insulting.

Yesterday morning had been the day-before-Daddy-comes-up cleaning day. Starting after breakfast, Katie had furiously assaulted every spidery corner, defrosted the icebox and even scoured the claw feet on the bathtub. When she finished, she dropped into the fanbacked old wicker chair in the living room. The older children were going to the beach and Margaret viewed her exhaustion unmovedly as she strode through the living room. "My mother does that every morning," she said.

Katie felt herself goaded into rebuttal. "She cleans the bathroom every day?"

"Yes. Even the bathtub. And I mop the floor for her."

It was probably true. She had lived next door to Karen Bascomb's spotless housekeeping for five years. They had never



reached coffee-clatching intimacy (next door in their suburb meant down the hill and across the creek) but she had borrowed enough cups of brown sugar to know that even at 8:30 in the morning the Bascomb kitchen was shining and spotless even down to the last copper mold above the copper colored dishwasher.

The floors shone like polished ponds. The pastel of four-year-old Mike looking like the littlest angel and the framed headlines (Bears Slaughter Cardinals—Quarterback Bascomb Scores Two Touchdowns) were without a dot of dust. Mike's toys lined the cedar shelves of the family room, trucks on one labeled shelf, boats on another, guns together like an arsenal. Katie often lingered in the immaculate stillness a little sorry to return to the clutter of coffee cups and coloring books on her own kitchen table. It didn't really matter; daisies and poppies in little pewter pitchers would have looked strange beside the guinea pigs in her family room. By the time Jim arrived home each night, of course, she had shoveled out some sense of order, but not before being interrupted at least forty times by someone needing a bandaid or *Winnie the Pooh* read. Now as she picked up the laundry basket, she wondered what Karen's system was. Stoutly maintaining that hers was not such a bad way, she headed toward the clothesline and punched a hole through the screen door with her foot.

That evening after the twins and Eric had dropped exhausted into bed, she sat brushing waves into Anne's long brown hair. It was rich and thick and shone like beaten fudge: a genetic trick, Jim's hair framing her own pixie face in miniature. Through a crack in the door she saw Margaret on her bed reading. "Come join us," she called through the bobbie pins in her mouth.

"We were talking about vacation trips we've taken," Anne said as Margaret stretched her long legs out on the bed. "Remember the time we forgot Janet in the filling station in San Antonio, Mother? We pulled out of the driveway with her bawling her head off on the curb."

"I had to hold her on my lap all the way to Dallas," Katie laughed. "Have you ever been to San Antonio, Margaret?" Anne asked.

Margaret answered quickly. "Oh, no. Daddy travels a lot, though. He's been to South America and Lisbon."

"Does your Mother go?"

"Yes, and last year they took Mike. To New Orleans it was.

But I'm in school, so, of course, I couldn't go."

She looked at the floor, then brightened. "But Daddy says that maybe I could go to school in the East. If my grades were only better."

"But I've been left places, too," she continued, her face flushed. "Daddy leaves me all the time." Her laugh was self-conscious. "When he goes to the pool, he sometimes takes me, and last month he forgot me and went home. Four hours later I had to call Mother. Then he left me in a restaurant in the northern part of the state. I just waited and in about an hour he came back. He does that all the time."

Anne laughed. "Strange," thought Katie.

She let Margaret come with her to kiss the twins good night. They sucked their thumbs sleepily as she stroked their hair and sang,

Sleep my dear, the red bee tells  
The silent twilight's fall  
Eaval from the gray rock comes  
To wrap the world in thrall

A lyan van o my child my love  
My joy and heart's desire  
The crickets sing you lullaby  
Before the flickering fire.

"What sort of lullaby is that?" Margaret asked dreamily.

"My grandmother used to sing it to me. She came from Donnegal."

"Do you sing it to all of them?"

"Of course," Katie whispered. "Even Anne says she can't get to sleep without it."

She could see Margaret's eyes glowing in the dusk, marveling. She waited for some comment about her mother, but it never came.

About noon the next day Jim arrived. He went first to greet his sailboat, then the bear-brown children. When he had seated himself in a lawn chair and asked how Katie's week had been, she couldn't resist telling him about the "contest."

"But it must be over," she added. "I haven't heard any odious comparisons since last evening."

"You're stir crazy, or you've been listening to too many of the kids fairy tale records. I think she's just loyal to her own family."

You can't expect her to change that."

He was prophetic in an unexpected way. The war was not over—it had merely switched combatants. Now it was Jim vs. "My Father." As Katie sat on the porch she could hear Margaret's voice rising occasionally from the beach, where Jim was scouring and scrubbing the boat for tomorrow's race. No, my dad didn't like to sail; football was his sport. Real man's game. He had bought Mike a miniature helmet. No, my dad didn't believe in taking children to the lakes. Children today had too many privileges. My dad didn't wear Madras shorts. My dad had only two gray hairs in his entire head.

Jim was beginning to be bugged—from the top of his crewcut to the soles of his small unathletic feet. "I never knew Pete Bascomb was such a Wheaties poster. I feel like the freshman team. What's with it?"

"Quiet," she warned him, noticing Margaret going to look for baby Eric. "She's only terribly proud of them, I think. I don't quite understand it either, but she is sweet with the children."

The next day the wind blew the lake into confused masses of gray, contending waves. Jim pulled back the curtains and watched the birch leaves shake like kites. "We won't be becalmed anyway," he murmured, then rubbed his hands together.

"Who's going to crew for me?"

Anne volunteered. "May I go?" asked Margaret shyly. Jim raised questioning eyebrows at Katie, who nodded, smiling. "I think it would be good for you, Margaret," she said.

Through binoculars Katie watched the distant triangles bob over the water. She thought she spotted the blue and white sail of the *Wicked Witch* closing in on the other boats. It crept up slowly on all but one. Second, then, they would finish. The boat's image expanded as it crossed the lake after the final gun. Yes, there was Jim at the rudder, and Margaret hunched over the centerboard. She twirled the adjustment sharply to bring up the focus. Anne was lying on the deck, her face twisted in pain.

"The sole of the foot is one of the tenderest places on the body," the doctor said. Anne had gouged out a deep square of skin on the centerboard trunk as the *Wicked Witch* had rounded the last buoy.

"Nothing serious, really, but it may be painful tonight. Anne determined not to cry as the doctor cleaned the raw patch, and hid

her face from Margaret, who was as white as the sails on the *Wicked Witch*.

Margaret was still pale when she felt her way into Anne's room about midnight during what had become an all night vigil.

"Have you been up all this time?" Margaret's voice was fuzzy with sleep. "Is there anything I can do to help? My mother always says aspirin—"

Katie had brought Anne over to the big rocking chair and was snuggling her as she had when she was a baby. "I think this will help her more than aspirin," Katie whispered.

Margaret was silent. She finally said, in a wistful, tiny child's voice, "Isn't she too big to hold on your lap?"

"You're never too old to be babied, now and then, Margaret."

Margaret moved to the window and looked out at the frothy, still churning lake. "Mrs. McKenna."

"Yes, dear."

"Being here this week with you has been just wonderful. Even though it, well, it upset me. Everything's so different." She stood up, her drooping shoulders silhouetted against a sudden flash of heat lightning.

"Someone rocked me once," she said dreamily. "Long ago. I don't remember who it was. Before I came to Mother and Dad."

"*Came* to Mother and Dad—" Katie said involuntarily.

"I was five when I came. Mother thought she couldn't ever have any children. Later on Mike was born."

She became more excited. "I have this picture of myself then. I had these long blond curls and—a smiling, dancy sort of way about me. Mother always says they chose me because I was the most beautiful little girl they'd ever seen. I guess I changed. My hair got gray, and I must have been just naturally dumb. And every time I dance around now I just knock something off the tables in Mother's perfect house." Her large shoulders sagged in despair. Katie felt all the questions she had had about the girl crumble like a cookie in a rainstorm. In a flood of tenderness she laid her own daughter on the bed and put her arm around the hopeless, homely Margaret, who had begun to cry quietly. She led her to her bedroom. Turning back the rumpled covers, she tucked the girl in as she would one of her own.

She sang.

Sleep my dear, the red bee tells . . .