

*Janet Winn*

## **Maggie's Children**

Barnet leaned against the window and watched the scene in his rear view mirror. A stranger in a car behind was biting his lips and banging his fist on his steering wheel, obviously expressing the rage over lost time that everyone else in this backed-up line of cars must have felt. Then they moved again, rolled a few yards, and stopped once more on the motorway's cement ribbon. Mile after mile, Barnet damned the delay and thought about how to deal with Maggie's children.

She had told him he had to do something about them. "They just stand there," she said.

He knew it was not her mind failing. She was old, for sure, but she knew reality and she knew fantasy. Those children annoyed her and it was up to Barnet to make them disappear.

Every second Friday afternoon, Barnet left Oxford and instead of going home to Burford, he headed north. He'd eat, while he drove, a sandwich Karen had made that morning, and an apple. Maggie, his mother, would give him a proper dinner. That's the way she put it: "I'll give you a proper dinner when you get here, Barney." A six hour drive to Windermere; what he wanted at the end was a whiskey.

He brought out her card table, covered it with a darned linen cloth and set it with unmatching plates, spoons and forks. Then he'd put out the meal he prepared out of remnants from her fridge, weary lumps of cheese, carrots, rewarmed rice, a terrible meal. Maggie enjoyed each mouthful. She said food went down when there was company. "Oh, and you look! There's a cake in the box," she always said, as if, each time, he should be surprised.

Small as a child, voice gone whispery with time, head of white fluff, body shrunken to waistlessness, lost in the big smocks she wore, she sat up to the table with a thick cushion to lift her the way a telephone directory had lifted Barnet when he was three or four years old.

The cake was always something tasteless, brought in by Mrs. Frost from the rooms below — sweet, grainy icing over something artificially flavored, lemon or walnut.

Maggie would struggle into a nightgown while Barnet washed the dishes. Then she'd climb into bed, sitting up against pillows, a sweater around her shoulders, and Barnet would read to her. Biographies. Always she was hungry for the stories of other lives, and she could no longer read to herself.

On Saturday morning, Barnet made breakfast and left Maggie eating hers from a tray in bed, while he went to the shops to resupply the refrigerator and cabinet shelves.

She'd be up and dressed and in his way, looking into the paper bags, putting boxes away, patting his arm, amethyst eyes bright. "You're a dear boy. You've brought me a sweet again!"

Barnet knew there would always be some mistake. "You bought Sunshine soap? What is it made of, do you suppose? I'm used to Pears." or "I'll have to manage to eat those big things, now won't I? I do so like the little bite sized ones, Barney." "Orange juice? Oh dear, I suppose you couldn't find the apple juice?"

Barnet would not have minded the Saturday morning crowded supermarket. He could stand the long lines. In Burford, his wife bought the groceries; he found he enjoyed the shops. But his mistakes kept him on edge.

Groceries put away, he'd be out again on other errands. She'd have a non-grocery list waiting: a wrist-watch band, or a little pillow for her chair, earrings that wouldn't slide off her thin earlobes or slippers that would go over a hammer toe yet not fall off her narrow feet. He knew she pored over her lists pencilled on the backs of envelopes, items scratched out, tea spilled on the paper. He knew she took pleasure in each item, anticipating. Each was a means of managing, of getting along by herself. Once she asked him to find wine in little cans, so she could have one glass alone in the evening.

He'd search, in and out of shops on the street that ran downhill. Where to find a throw pillow? He asked clerks, and learned he wasted time following their suggestions. He'd go back to the house where Maggie rented three upstairs rooms, cursing the stairs, wishing she kept whiskey on her shelves, knowing what he'd bought would be wrong: slippers too large, watchband too stiff, pillows the wrong shape.

They'd spend the afternoon at Maggie's desk, Barnet on a kitchen chair that left his lower back aching after an hour. Perhaps it was the

accounts that hurt his back. Maggie wrote checks in a hand as whispery as her voice, quavering optimistically uphill and often right off the edge of the check. She could only vaguely make out what she wrote — or where. She paid for the milk and the newspapers and the vegetables brought by small trucks to the door, all by checks. She sent off for corsets; she paid taxes and rent.

So in the stalled traffic, Barnet was not eager to reach Windermere. He ought to be home in Burford. Jon and Willie were teens now, not a good age to be challenging their mother every fortnight. Not bad boys, but puzzled by the world, he thought. They'd left behind the time of toys and stuffed bears and bedtime stories. Jon was trying to make his hair stand on end and saving to buy a fake leather jacket. Barnet had seen him one afternoon by chance, not at first registering this was his own son, lounged against a store front with a cigarette hung from his lips, eyes squinted against the smoke. Willie, younger of the two, wanted a black plastic jacket, too, and no doubt had tried the cigarettes.

"You don't need smokes, Jon," Barnet had said at dinner.

"What smokes, Da?"

"Jon, smoking at your age is stupid, but lying I won't stand for."

"Ah, you can't let off, can you? Spying and acting like I can't take care of myself. I can, you see. I don't need you. I want to be a whole person. I want to be given a chance, Da, to stand alone."

Then, last Saturday night, Jon came in rather early to have gone to a film, and went to his room. Willie followed him and then came and sat in the front parlor where Barnet and Karen were reading. The boy opened a book, put it down, fiddled with a pen-knife. Then he went down the hall, spoke to Jon, and came back. After the third such trip, Barnet said, "What's up, Will?"

The boy's eyes went here, there, up and down, as restless as his actions.

"Willie?"

He sat down on the couch. "Jon," he whispered.

Karen lowered her book.

"I think you'd best do something, Da."

Karen and Barnet were down the hall and into Jon's room. The boy sat on the floor, leaned against his bed, legs straight out, head back, eyes rolled up.

"Jon?"

Jon began to shiver. "I can't move my fingers," he said. His hands were stretched toward his parents, fingers wide apart—rigid.

Willie clutched Karen's hand. "Do something, Mum."

Sitting in the car on the motorway, Barnet winced at the thought. The boy had panicked. A bad trip on too much marijuana. At some weary hour before dawn, Jon told his parents about the brownies someone had baked, with cannabis leaves and stems chopped in. All week long after that night, the fifteen year old slept on the floor in a sleeping bag beside his parents' bed. At some point each night he'd wake in terror and Barnet would have to get down on the floor and hold the shaking boy.

Barnet went to Windermere every other week-end because his mother asked him to. Was that, he wondered, as the motorway slid past the ugliness of Manchester, reason enough? He and Karen had visited the Lake District perhaps three times a year since Maggie moved there. They would bring Jon and Willie, stay in a bed-and-breakfast, hike with the boys on steep paths along the Cumbria Way, take them on a boat trip the length of the lake, and treat Maggie to a lunch in Ambleside. That was all Maggie wanted — then. She had a part-time job in a goods store; she had friends — a few women in their fifties and sixties, widows or, like Maggie, divorced, who went to taverns together, sometimes going as far as Keswick to find a pub to their liking. Some of them downed a good many pints. Maggie played bridge and Scrabble and bingo; she went to movies. She walked the tiny paths through sheep meadows, down into town. She said plainly, when they came to visit, that they were to make themselves useful and not interfere with her. Barnet could dig out the old azalea bushes that weren't doing well. Karen could take the boys to the lake. "Do get them out of doors," Maggie said. Irritated, Barnet felt he was not a large part of Maggie's life. "Do get out of doors," Maggie had said when he was a child, and she shooed him out to play in the street. She was always busy.

On into her sixties, she worked at the shop in London. Then she retired to Windermere. She clerked part-time. She went to the pubs, the bingo game, and she walked the paths on the hills. Then abruptly she lost most of her vision. It had been a year now of visits to eye doctors. No one would tell her what she asked them to say, that her sight could come back. No more taverns for Maggie; no more bridge. The women who would ride the bus with Maggie to a pub in Keswick did not climb the hill to visit her. She asked Barnet to move to Windermere.

He explained he couldn't, after all, leave his job. They compromised on his making the fortnightly trips.

Maggie first mentioned the children after yet another disappointing visit to an ophthalmologist. Barnet had heard, since then, more and more references to the children. He'd have to make some move to deal with them.

How? he wondered, turning his car out of the two-lane highway onto the tiny hedge-hidden road that climbed a hill above the lake. How?

He walked into the heat of Maggie's rooms, the scent of musty closets and the dusting powder she wore.

"You're late and I'm hungry. I will probably be too hungry to eat."

"Mother —" He dropped his suitcase down in the hallway and went into her tiny sittingroom. She had the electric fire turned up high. Her chair faced the heater the way her neighbors' easy chairs faced television sets. The set Barnet had bought for his mother for Christmas was blank. He had never seen her use it.

"Hours late. Hours. I've been nibbling biscuits."

"Construction on the motorway, Mother. Took me fifty minutes to make five miles, near Preston." He was taking bacon and onions from the fridge, and potatoes from the bin, cutting the potatoes while he fried the bacon, and answering her questions when he could hear them. The tiny kitchen was in one end of the sittingroom. But Maggie's voice always stayed whispery as dry leaves.

"They're here all the time," she was saying.

A dog barked outside the windows. Another answered from a yard nearby. "The dogs?" Barnet asked, unfolding the card table.

"No, Barney, the children." She waved her hand as if brushing away a cloud of insects to her left.

"Oh, the children."

"They just stand there and look at me. They're watching everything I do. And always silent. Just looking."

He set down two glasses of cider and bent over her arm chair to help her up. "Do you think this dark patch you see is some damage done by an eye test?" He put a hand under her arm and felt the pull of her weight. "Up you go."

"Damage," she said, looking bleak. "But isn't it odd how they come and go?"

Through dinner they discussed the latest news. Maggie listened to a little radio that stood on a dresser between photographs of Barnet and his late uncle. Barnet listened to the radio in his car. So they could battle happily over the rights and wrongs of the Conservative government's latest actions. Barnet was a Conservative, Maggie a Socialist.

Each relished the other's arguments all the while denouncing them as rubbish. It was the only part of visiting Windermere that Barnet quite liked.

Maggie rapped her spoon sharply on the tablecloth, endangering the glass of cider. "The government is bleeding the old," she said. "Don't you think it strange that an elected party refuses to help the weakest people? The government owes us that for all our years of work and taxes. So we won't be leaning on our sons and daughters." Under her powder puff of white hair, the startling amethyst eyes pierced like a weapon. She sat up small and straight in her chair, looking almost but not quite directly at Barnet. "Or do you think it is the job of governments to make sure money flows only into silk-lined pockets?" She flapped a hand off to one side. "Shoo. They just stand there."

A year of not walking about had weakened Maggie. Barnet noticed, month by month, the seeping away of strength. She tottered now when she walked across the room. Losing her sight seemed to have undermined her whole body. Karen and Barnet could take Maggie into their house in Burford. It would mean they'd postpone buying Karen a piano. The only space for another bed would be in the sunny room off the diningroom where an upright piano was to go. But Maggie sharply refused whenever Barnet slipped the possibility into a conversation. "I'm not leaving the lake," she said. "All those years hard at work in London. At last they pension me off and I have enough saved to live where I've always wanted to be, in sight of those hills and that lake." It was a return to the place of her childhood. She'd come back on a train, followed by three crates of possessions, to rented rooms in an old house not far from the farm that had been her father's. There was an illusion of the past. She knew the roads and the houses and outbuildings on farms overlooking the town. But the people were gone. A few names from the past were there, only the faces were wrong; a new generation with a new generation's ideas. Mason Pickett's boy walked just the way Mason did sixty years before. The boy would be fifty now, grey hair gone white in tufts over the earlobes just the way Mason's did. Mrs. Dumphy's daughter sold the bread where Mrs. Dumphy had when Maggie was a girl. Tourists had multiplied, filled the pavements and the pubs. The place of her childhood was not there, not for Maggie. But the lake and the hills were hers.

"You'd be happy in Burford," Barnet said, thinking of giving up the long drive to the lake district.

"That's not for me," was her response.

"Mother, your eyes are getting no better. I don't like your staying alone."

"Poppycock. Get out the dominoes before you put me to bed. We'll have us a game."

Barnet could feel the hours of driving in his lower back. He stood up and rubbed the sore flat triangle above his tail bone. "Not poppycock, Mother. Karen and I are worried. What if you fell, alone here?"

Maggie's eyes glittered blue. "If I fall —," she stressed the hypothetical if, "and if I break a bone, I might just as well die. You've got to be your own person. I've been trying hard enough since my eyes went. But without my legs, what would be the use? Time to quit."

That wouldn't be Maggie, Barnet thought, hunting for the dominoes on a shelf at the back of the room. A pool of water had formed on the wood below a small window there. He'd have another leak to repair in the morning.

But morning brought rain sluicing down the windowpanes. The puddle on the livingroom windowsill overflowed in drips onto the darkened wood of the floor.

Maggie was cross because the milkman's truck had not yet arrived; there was no cream for her tea. She pouted at her tray as Barnet set it over her knees.

"Go!" she said, startling him. She flapped her napkin off to the left.

"What?" His head ached.

"It's those children."

"Why children, Mother?"

"Ah well, you see, they are small, and they're pests. And they watch. With children you have to be on your best behavior." She stirred four teaspoons of sugar into her tea. "Now Barney, when you go to the shops, you're to look for yeast."

"You'll be baking?"

"Not at all. Brewer's yeast. Mrs. Frost says it will improve my health and my eyes."

Barnet didn't like Mrs. Frost. She seemed an odd woman, dirty, and too earnest. She'd tried once to pray over Maggie, but Maggie had put a quick stop to that. Still, the woman was his mother's only human contact many days of the week. If she told Maggie to eat yeast and Maggie believed it could help, why interfere? "I'll look for the stuff," Barnet said, and went out into the rain.

Pants drenched, shoes and socks full of water, he came back into the house, irritable from the long search for her yeast. The house was dark — in mid-morning. A black sky gloomed down over the hills and lake,

rain thrumming in puddles in the gravel outside the door and making mud in the grass. Barnet stalked in and dumped down his parcels on the table and turned on a lamp. "Mother," he said, "there's no yeast to be had in this town." He stuffed items from the market into the fridge and put on the kettle for tea. His feet were cold and he'd only the one pair of shoes. "Mother?"

He looked into her room. She wasn't in the bed. Her tray had been set, as it always was at this hour, down at the foot of the bed. In the lav? "Mother?"

"Umph!" A sort of grunt came from behind the shower curtain.

Barnet drew back the plastic drape and found Maggie, in her night-gown, tumbled into the tub.

In the early evening, after exrays and time in surgery to set a broken thigh bone, she whispered to Barnet from her hospital bed, "I don't know how I got there."

"It's all right, it's all right." He held her hand; he was able now, at last, to sit quietly with her, and now self-disgust alternated with a suffusing tenderness for his mother. He's been so self-centeredly angry about his wet shoes, while she lay, broken, in a tub. "We'll take you to Burford as soon as they let you leave here," he said, and ignored her head moving back and forth on the pillow and her whispering, "No!"

Six beds in a row, grey light on white walls, white sheets, grey floors, grey blankets, nurses' uniforms a blue that was grey in this chill; an odor of urine and disinfectant washed the room like the light — a grey smell. One old woman lay with eyes open and mouth agape, inert, tied down by tubes to her nose and by needles in her arms. Beyond her, a form under blankets whimpered continuously. On Maggie's other side, a doughy woman slept, snoring. Her sheets had slid askew, revealing a naked mass of flesh pocked with sores. Barnet pulled the blanket up. The woman, still snoring, kicked and bared her hip, buttocks, and one swollen leg. He turned away. Would this be Maggie soon?

The next morning she was well awake, sitting up, sipping tea. Barnet averted his eyes from the other women. He would have to do something to help them if he looked.

"I'll take you out of here," he said, putting a box of chocolate iced biscuits in Maggie's lap.

"Not Burford," Maggie said sharply.

Barnet was startled. "You can't stay alone." He sagged into the upholstered chair by her bed. His back ached.



"I will. Those children are watching me. Didn't I manage all those years after your father showed us his heels? In the city, working, standing behind a counter eight hours until my feet swelled out of my shoes every day, standing on the bus to and from the shop, smelling the stink of the vans and the noise. Waiting on people sometimes made me feel I was so low. But I knew I wasn't low because I could manage, I could do for myself. They're watching me Barney."

He patted her hand, joggling the tea mug, and had to mop up the splash of spilled tea.

"Didn't I manage when I was sick and had to find someone to look after you?"

Barnet had never before thought of that time with anything but resentment. At seven he had had to pack his small suitcase and carry it across the street to the apartment of a couple who had a daughter a year older than Barnet. No one explained to him why he was there. He'd picked up from adult talk over his head that his mother was sick, but how sick he had no idea. Would he have to stay forever with that hateful girl, who teased him loudly, out on the pavement where everyone could hear, because on his first night in her house, he wet his bed? He felt his mother had done something inexplicable by leaving him with these people. It had to be that she no longer loved him. Only now did he see she'd managed in a tight spot.

But she wasn't going to be able to do for herself any more. The leg would be months mending, if it ever properly healed. "Karen and I have room for you; why shouldn't you take it?"

"Never," was her answer. "I don't need that. I'll tend to myself."

Angry, he tore the paper off the biscuit box. "Here, have one of these," he said. "I'll be off now, to find me a dinner." There seemed no way to argue with Maggie.

Two weeks later he was driving, once more, the long gradual incline toward Windermere in second gear. He was trapped behind a lorry, breathing its fumes, thinking of the many ways Maggie irritated him. He realized he was cataloging them. The slippers, he thought. He was bringing a pair bought in Oxford. He had had to go back to the Windermere shoe store to return the pair purchased there, confronting the sharp faced manager's annoyance. The Oxford pair would be wrong, too. What quirk made her find fault when he put time and his tired back into getting whatever she asked? Perhaps it was those children.

He drove up the road beside the horse pasture with its path where Maggie had taken walks, and past the hedges of rhododendrons in

bloom, purple and rose, and he stopped. Swallows were darting under the eaves of an old shed. A dog bounded toward the car, barking. Barnet climbed out of the car and stretched and rubbed the small of his back. He scratched the dog behind its ears, looking down toward the lake. It was a beautiful scene, and he resented understanding Maggie's refusal to leave. On a day such as this, with wind streaming white clouds across a deep blue sky, he was sure he did understand.

He had come back to Windermere ten days after Maggie fell into her tub. He had driven her from the hospital back to her rooms here, with a cane and a foldable wheel chair and a metal walker. He had persuaded Mrs. Frost to move upstairs. At first he had asked if Mrs. Frost would take Maggie into her first floor apartment. When Maggie got wind of that plan, she rejected it. She'd live in her own rooms with her own things. Mrs. Frost consented to put a bed in Maggie's livingroom, to sleep there, to shop for Maggie, and cook her meals.

"I could pay your rent here in return," Barnet said.

Mrs. Frost pursed her mustached mouth. "I'll have to be lifting her." The woman's rolled-up sleeves revealed powerful arms.

"I could pay your heat, too?"

"I'll be washing and dressing her and cleaning the place." Her small eyes poked at Barnet. He felt harassed. Maggie insisted she would stay in Windermere; this repellent woman seemed the only hope. But already she was going to cost much more than he could afford.

"Yes, I understand, Mrs. Frost. There will be a good bit to do for a time. But my mother is determined to take care of herself as much as she can." Indeed, that was just the problem, he thought. "Would it be enough if I also pay your electric?"

"That will have to do," she conceded.

The cost of Mrs. Frost's electricity bill was going to be a large bite too much, he knew. Karen would never have her piano. In fact, he'd have to sell the new lawn mower.

"Barney?" As soon as he opened the door, his mother's voice quavered from her chair by the fire. It has been just three days since his last trip. He was losing much too much time from work, and his back was in pain from the driving.

Maggie's leg in its cast looked huge attached to her small body. She seemed thinner, faded, shrunken.

Mrs. Frost had laid out tea cups and the pot, under a cosy.

"Barney, would you pour?"

Maggie had always poured the tea. Barnet was shaken by the request and by her voice, so faint it hardly sounded like she meant to be heard.

He put tea and cream and sugar into a cup and gave it to her. Then he got out of his coat and made himself a cup of tea.

"Well, then, tell me — how's the leg doing?"

"I don't sleep for the pain, that's the truth of it, Barney."

"That's a crying shame. I am sorry. Will you eat some of this?" He held out the plate of cake slices Mrs. Frost had left. Maggie waved it away. That worried Barnet. Maggie's sweet tooth gone was a shock.

"That woman has to dress me. I can't put on my own clothes."

"Yes, well, that's what we're paying her for, isn't it?"

"Paying her, yes. My money's run out, hasn't it, Barney? You're paying the rent and that woman."

"It's all right. Do have some cake. You're not to worry about a thing."

"I don't make my own tea now, Barney. I don't do a thing for myself."

"It's all right. It's all right," Barnet said.

They sat in silence, then, drinking their tea and listening to the birds on the roof. For something to say, Barnet asked, "How are those children of yours?"

"What children?"

"Why, those dark images that you saw."

"Images? What images?"

He kept trying. "You told me there were dark shapes off to your left."

She didn't reply.

"Dark shapes, Mother. I guessed something had damaged your retina. You called them your children."

Maggie said something.

Barnet leaned forward, trying to hear her. "Yes?"

"I said the children have left me."