

CENDRILLON

By Macdara MacColl

“**G**irlfriend, I have got to buy you a fashion magazine!” Polly pronounced as her friend Tina came through the door.

As usual, Polly and Tina were hanging out at Polly’s house. Polly went to private school, watched lots of cable TV and knew all about designer clothing. Tina lived next door. She was home-schooled, went to church twice a week and thought elastic waistbands were the greatest invention since sliced bread.

“What do you mean?” Tina asked. “I look fine.”

Polly laughed. “Tina, you can’t wear a striped shirt with flowered pants. And green socks? With pink and purple pants? You’re a mess! Maybe I could find you some of my old clothing.”

Polly headed into her bedroom and disappeared into her huge

closet. Tina followed slowly. She knew Polly was trying to help. But Tina didn't want Polly's clothing. She wanted Polly's friendship. Polly emerged with a tangerine-colored t-shirt emblazoned with the slogan "Juicie girl" and black jeans stitched with hot pink flowers. "Try this on."

Tina took the clothing and headed into the bathroom to change. She closed the door, and stood in front of the full-length mirror, looking at herself, trying to see herself as Polly did. She could hear Polly's voice, "You're a mess." Tina's shoulders slumped forward. "She's right," Tina thought. "I am a mess. Maybe I need to wear this stuff." She dropped the outfit on the ground and started to change. Just then, Tina heard somebody cough. She looked up, and there, staring out of the mirror at her was a large woman wearing a purple dress. She had grey hair falling down her back, bright blue eyes, and a huge smile. "Hey there sugar," the woman exclaimed. "Someone here in need of a fairy godmother?"

Tina looked around. She was alone in the bathroom. This woman was clearly on the other side of the mirror—wherever *that* was. "Fairy godmother?" Tina asked, "Like Cinderella?"

"One and the same! Pleased to meet you. Just call me Sister Godmomma."

"I thought so," Tina muttered. "Sister Shrug sent you, didn't she? Geez, even she thinks I need a fashion make-over."

"Sister Shrug? That little grandniece of mine? Great gal! But no, she didn't send me. And fashion make-over? I don't know nothing 'bout no fashion. You mentioned what I did for Cinderella. That's what you need, too, sugar pie."

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“You made her a dress,” Tina said. “So she could go to the ball.” Sister Godmomma looked blankly at Tina. “Where’d you get that idea?”

“From the movie.”

“Movie?” Sister thought for a moment and then smiled. “Oh, that one with the blonde girl and the mice? Yes, by that nice boy, Walt Disney. Sweet fellow, but he did get his facts wrong. Now Cendrillon did go to a ball, of course. And as I recall the prince did fall in love with her, but she didn’t care two shakes about that.”

“Cendrillon?” Tina was really confused now.

“Yes, well that’s her name in French. You know, she lived in France in the time of King Charlemagne?” Tina shook her head. “Oh my, we’ve got our work cut out for us, don’t we? I think I’d better just show you.”

Sister held out her hand. “Come.” Tina slowly stretched her hand toward the mirror. As soon as her fingertips brushed the cool glass, there was a loud KABOOM. Tina felt herself being sucked into the mirror, and her body began shaking. Light swirled around her; she began to spin. Downward, downward she spun. Then quite suddenly, everything was still. She was standing next to Sister Godmomma in a large stone-walled kitchen. A girl stood at a wooden table, crushing something inside a stone bowl. Tears ran down her face, and she was speaking to herself. “It’s not fair,” she said. “Not fair!”

Sister Godmomma coughed, and the girl looked up. She had a simple face, red and blotchy from crying, that drooped forward from her neck. Her brown hair fell down her back in a braid. And her long, grey tunic dress hung limply from her slumped shoulders. “Oh my,”

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she exclaimed, “who are you?”

“I am your Fairy Godmomma,” Sister said. “And this here is Tina. We came to help.”

Just then, two girls ran into the kitchen. They were younger than the first girl. Both had shining black hair and open, happy faces. “Cendrillon, Cendrillon” one chanted, “let’s do our lessons!” The other girl jumped up and down and clapped. “Yes! Please read to us from Psalms again. It is so beautiful.”

“You know your mother has forbidden it,” Cendrillon replied tartly. “Please go and tend to your needlework. As you can see, I have guests.”

The girls looked at Sister and Tina with irritation, but left the kitchen obediently.

“You see how it is,” Cendrillon replied.

“Um,” Tina said. “I’m a little confused here. Who were they? What’s this about reading? Aren’t you crying because you can’t go to the ball?”

Cendrillon looked shyly at Tina. “Ball? What ball? No. I’m crying because my step-mother has forbidden me to go to the new school of King Charlemagne. You see, my father died a few years ago. But he was a wise man and a great favorite of the King’s, and before he died he secured a place for me in the King’s new school. It is the most amazing academy of learning. And he allows a few girls to attend! I could study religion and philosophy and astrology. But my step-mother feels girls should learn only needlework. She wants me here, helping in the household and helping her girls prepare for marriage. So no school for me.”

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Just then, a loud rapping sound rang through the house. They heard muffled voices. A few minutes passed. A door slammed shut, and a shriek pierced the kitchen.

“Cendrillon, Cendrillon!” the girls came running in. “King Charlemagne has returned to the castle. He’s announced a grand ball for his son, Prince Charles. Tonight! Mother says we must get ready immediately!” The girls ran out of the kitchen in a clatter.

“Ah, the ball you spoke of,” Cendrillon looked at Tina. “You are going? For myself, I couldn’t care less about dances. I would rather stay home and read.”

“But wait a minute,” Tina said, “didn’t she just say that King Charlemagne will be there? So you could go. And you could ask him to let you go to the school.”

Cendrillon shook her head. “Maidens can’t march up to kings and ask for things.”

“Why not?” Tina said. “That’s what I’d do.”

Sister Godmomma, who had been listening with great interest, snorted in agreement. “Seems to me we have a ball to get you ready for.”

Cendrillon eyed Sister uncertainly. “Even if I could go, I don’t have the right gown. You can’t appear before the king in a common dress. I would need silks with fur trim.”

“See,” Tina said. “I told you it was all about a dress!”

But Sister only smiled. “Don’t you have an old dress of your mama’s?” she asked Cendrillon.

“Yes,” the girl replied. “But it’s not fancy enough for the king.”

“Let’s just see.”

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“Cendrillon,” a voice rang out. “We must leave now.”

“It is my step-mother. I must attend her.”

Cendrillon wiped her hands on her dress front and headed into the great sitting room.

“Oh Cendrillon, look at us!” Both young girls were wearing gowns of red silk, stitched at the sleeve and waist with golden thread. Their long hair was clipped up in ruby-encrusted barrettes. On their feet, they wore new slippers, made of ermine fur. Soft and luscious.

Their step-mother addressed Cendrillon. “You, I presume, will not be going. It is fortunate the girls and I have been sewing these gowns all winter. If you did not spend so much time reading, you might have had time to make a proper dress. What a shame.”

Cendrillon bowed to her step-mother. “I understand, my lady. I was not expecting to go. I shall lay the fires for tonight so the rooms will be ready when you return.”

The girls giggled and all three pulled on fur-lined cloaks and swept out of the house, to the carriage waiting to take them to the castle.

“All right,” Sister announced when they had left. “Let’s go see your mama’s best dress.”

Cendrillon led Tina and Sister up the stone steps to a small bedroom. She opened a trunk and took out a simple tunic gown made of dark green wool. It had no special embroidery, no fur. As for slippers, she had only what she wore on her feet, plain brown booties made of leather. One shoe had a hole in it and her big toe poked through.

“Perfect!” Sister announced. “Get dressed!”

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Tina looked skeptical. “Um, listen, I don’t really know much about fashion—but even I can tell that isn’t going to be good enough. Those other two had lots of fur and gold thread and pretty shoes.”

“Tush,” said Sister. “Don’t you know the secret of fashion? It’s not the dress that makes the girl. It’s the girl that makes the dress.”

Cendrillon had the green dress on now. “How do I look?” she asked Tina.

She looks like a vase of wilted flowers, Tina thought, ruffled, drooping and defeated.

“You look,” Tina groped for a nice thing to say but could think of nothing. She glanced at Sister. “Are you sure you couldn’t whip her up something a little fancier?”

“She doesn’t need fur and gold thread. She just needs to move like she means it. It all starts with the feet.”

“Yes!” Tina said. “Glass slippers! Perfect!”

Sister laughed. “Glass slippers? Can you imagine anything more preposterous? No, no. She needs feet rooted to the earth.”

“Huh?” Tina asked.

Sister took Cendrillon gently by the shoulders. “Put those feet flat on the earth, and pretend they are the roots of a great tree, connecting you downward, giving you strength.”

Cendrillon nodded and shifted her feet so they were flat on the ground.

“Good!” Sister praised. “Now, let the tree’s strength flow up through your legs. They should be strong and relaxed, like the great oak reaching high into the sky but also bending in the wind.”

Tina realized she was following Sister’s commands, too. Feet like

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roots. Legs flexible and strong.

“Now the chest. Wide and open, like a rose in bright bloom. Your heart is where your wisdom lies. Don’t hide it.”

Cendrillon let her chest rise, and her shoulders drop back. She looked proud and confident.

“Now, imagine a mighty hawk gently lifting your head,” Sister touched the top of Cendrillon’s head.

Cendrillon’s neck lengthened. Her gaze was steady and sure.

“There,” Sister said. “Done.”

Tina looked in disbelief. Cendrillon was indeed transformed. Same plain green dress. Same leather booties with a hole. But Cendrillon looked like a queen.

“We must go!” Sister pronounced. The three rushed outside. Sister eyed the dirt road that wended into the black night. A full moon cast ghostly shadows across the way. “How far to the castle?”

“Oh, about a mile,” Cendrillon answered.

“You best get going, then,” Sister said.

“We’re walking?” Tina asked.

“What else?” Sister said.

“Aren’t you coming?” Cendrillon asked.

“Me?” Sister said. “No, no, I’m much too old for such things. But Tina will be along to help. Off now!”

And the two headed down the dirty, rutted road. They walked swiftly and silently, each lost in her own thoughts. Tina could hear the slap of Cendrillon’s leather boots against the road. After about fifteen minutes of fast walking, they approached the outer walls of the castle. Because of the party, the drawbridge was down and the

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great iron gate raised. They headed through the archway and up the wide stone steps of the castle. As they approached the wooden doors, they could hear fiddles and horns playing, and the rippling music of many voices. When they got to the threshold of the great room, Cendrillon stopped. Before them was an immense, stone hall lit by a hundred torches. Lush, intricate tapestries hung on the walls. Long tables held sparkling goblets and trays of glistening fruit. Men and women stood in little clusters, laughing, talking, dancing. Rich silk dresses and bejeweled barrettes shimmered in the firelight. At the far end of the room, a large wooden platform held two imposing, golden thrones. King Charlemagne sat in one, his queen in the other. His son, Prince Charles, stood next to him.

“I can’t,” Cendrillon whispered.

“Yes you can,” Tina said. “Remember what Sister told us. You’ve just got to move like you mean it. Let’s see.” Tina looked at Cendrillon. “Come on now. Are your feet connected to the earth?”

Cendrillon stopped wiggling her feet nervously and stood with both feet flat. “Yes.”

“Good. Now, legs like the oak: relaxed and strong?”

“Um, yes.”

“Good! Now, lifted head, neck long.”

Cendrillon shifted her weight until she stood tall.

“Shoulders relaxed!” Tina commanded. “Chest open like a rose in bloom. Beautiful and delicate but also brave and strong.”

Cendrillon followed each of Tina commands.

“Now take a deep breath, and tell yourself you’re going to move like you mean it.”

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Cendrillon breathed in, and said, “Move like I mean it.”

“The dress doesn’t make the girl, the girl makes the dress!” Tina chanted.

“Girl makes the dress,” Cendrillon repeated.

“Go get ’em!” Tina said.

Cendrillon curtsied to Tina, and swept through the great doorway. She walked with pride and grace. People moved aside for her. She nodded to the ladies and gentlemen as she passed, but did not stop. Tina snuck around the edge of the great room so she could hear what was going on. She overheard one gentleman murmur, “Who is that girl? Is she a queen from another region?” Tina smiled.

Cendrillon walked directly to the front of the room. She came to the base of the great throne platform, curtsied, and dropped to her knees just in front of the King and Queen.

“Your sire,” she said. “May I speak?”

Charlemagne nodded.

“I am the daughter of a wise and learned man. My father has passed onto Heaven, but it was his fervent wish that I be educated. I come to ask your permission to attend your palace school.”

Charlemagne raised an eyebrow. “What do you think of this request,” he said, turning to his son.

“I think it a waste of time to teach girls,” the Prince replied. “Surely this maiden would be better used weaving and sewing tapestries.”

Charlemagne turned back to Cendrillon, “My son makes an excellent point. How do you respond?”

Cendrillon lifted her chin and looked directly into the king’s eyes. “I say that tapestries are made more beautiful when woven by threads

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of different colors. Your sire's kingdom is the same. While many of your maidens may weave, surely the kingdom is more beautiful when some maidens add the golden threads of learning."

"Well spoken, maiden," the king said. "You may rise and hear my decision."

The prince didn't take his eyes off Cendrillon. She rose to hear the king's pronouncement, but as she did, her leather boot caught on a piece of loose floorboard, and Cendrillon heard the sound of leather ripping. She looked around, and saw her bootie ripped clean off, stuck to the floor. Her bare foot was exposed for all to see. Her hand flew to her mouth, "Oh no," she gasped. Her shoulders wilted and she looked wild-eyed toward Tina. "It's okay" Tina mouthed. But Cendrillon was too embarrassed. She turned and ran through the great hall, out the wooden doors and into the night. As Tina snuck out after her, she heard the prince say, "What a strange and wonderful creature. Whoever was she?"

By the time Tina caught up to Cendrillon, they were almost back at her house. Cendrillon was out of breath and crying. "I never should have gone!" she moaned.

"Don't say that," Tina said. "You were amazing. Really!"

She put her arms around Cendrillon. Just then, they heard thundering hoof beats.

"Get out of the way!" Tina yelled. The two maidens leapt aside just as Prince Charles's horse approached. He slowed when he saw the girls. "It's you!" he gasped.

He jumped down off his horse and knelt before Cendrillon. In his hand he held the tattered leather boot. "This is yours, I believe, fair

maiden.”

She nodded quietly and took the boot from him.

“You left before you could hear my father’s decision. He has granted your request. You may come to Paris and attend the Palace School. He will see to all your needs. And I hope you and I may spend many hours discussing what you learn.”

Cendrillon looked at Tina. Her eyes welled with tears. “I am so grateful to you,” she said to Tina. “I couldn’t have done this without you!”

Tina smiled. She felt a hand on her shoulder and heard Sister’s voice whisper in her ear, “It’s time to go.” Before she could respond, she felt herself being pulled away from Cendrillon and the Prince, away from the French roadside, away from the world altogether, swirling, twirling through a tunnel of light. And then quite suddenly she was back in Polly’s bathroom, looking at herself in the mirror.

The pile of new clothing was on the ground. She picked it up and went into Polly’s bedroom.

“Here,” she said, handing the outfit back to Polly.

“Didn’t fit?” Polly asked.

“Just wasn’t my style,” Tina said. “I really like what I’ve got on.”

Polly took another look at Tina, who was standing tall and proud, beaming like a rose in fullest bloom. “You know,” Polly said, “maybe I was wrong. That outfit looks really good on you.”

Tina smiled. “It’s the girl that makes the dress, you know.”

Polly laughed. “Hey, that’s great. Maybe we should print that on a t-shirt.”

“Definitely!” Tina said. And the two girls headed outside to play.