

WEIRD, WONDERFUL MRS. BECKER

By Claire Blatchford

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“**MRS. BECKER IS WEIRD,**” Cat said at suppertime one evening soon after Thanksgiving.

“Caitlin, please don’t talk that way about our new neighbor. We hardly know her,” Cat’s mother replied.

“But she *is* weird,” Cat insisted. “Her front door was wide open when we got off the bus today, and she was carrying rocks into her house.”

“Big rocks,” Lisy added.

“They were covered with mud,” Cat continued. “Who in the world would want a lot of dirty rocks in their house?”

“Maybe she has an aquarium,” Cat’s father suggested.

Cat shook her head. “They were way too big for that. They were as big as the rocks in Mr. Turnbull’s stone wall.”

Mr. Yates raised his eyebrows. “How old do you think Mrs. Becker is?” he asked Mrs. Yates.

“About Gammy’s age.”

“She got us mixed up again, too,” Cat added.

Cat was eleven, and Lisy, although she was only half an inch shorter than her sister, was eight. When people confused the two or, worse yet, asked if they were twins, Cat got cross. Very cross. It wasn’t fair that she had such a tall younger sister.

“I’ll make cookies for her sometime soon,” Cat’s mother decided.

“Cookies?” echoed Lisy. She loved making cookies. Even more, she loved eating raw cookie dough.

The next afternoon when Cat and Lisy got off the bus, there was Mrs. Becker in a blue parka in front of her house. This time she was shoveling earth from her garden into three bushel baskets.

“Hi,” she said, pausing to wave at them. The bun of white hair on top of her head looked as though it was about to unravel.

“Hi,” said Cat.

“Did you have a good day?”

“O.K.,” answered Cat. She really had had a good day, but she wasn’t sure how friendly to be with this strange lady who dug in her garden in December.

“Looking forward to Christmas?”

Both girls nodded.

“Me, too. It’s my very favorite time of year.”

“I have to do my homework now,” Cat said. She nudged Lisy with her elbow, and they started up the driveway to their house.

“She’s watching us,” Lisy whispered while Cat fumbled for the key in her pocket and then unlocked the door.

Once inside, Cat dumped her schoolbag on the kitchen table.

“What’s she doing?” Cat wondered.

Together they went into the living room and peered out from behind the curtains. Mrs. Becker had resumed her digging. When the baskets were full she carried them, one by one, up the front steps and into her house.

At suppertime that night, Cat announced, “Mrs. Becker is *really* weird.”

“Caitlin...”

“She took a lot of earth into her house,” Cat said quickly.

“*Black* earth,” Lisy added.

Mr. Yates raised his eyebrows again. “She seems nice enough,” he said, “but that is an odd thing to do.”

“Are you still going to make cookies for her?” Lisy asked.

Mrs. Yates nodded. But there was no time for baking that evening, nor the next, nor the one after that. Mrs. Yates was too busy wrapping packages to send to relatives. Then there were the Christmas cards to write and address. Secretly Cat hoped her mother would forget all about cookies for Mrs. Becker.

On the afternoon of the nineteenth, everyone was predicting the season’s first snowfall, and on the morning of the twentieth, Mr. Yates woke the girls with the good news: “No school!”

“Yippee!” Cat yelled, jumping out of bed.

The snow was coming down so thick and fast she could barely see their own garage. Mr. Yates left early to catch the train, but Mrs. Yates stayed home.

After breakfast the girls bundled up, went out, and waded around the backyard, heads bent, snowflakes stuck to their eyelashes. Lisy got cold and went in, but Cat continued to brave the storm. She crouched under the forsythia bush and pretended she was in an abandoned wolf’s den.

Sugary smells greeted her as she came in for lunch.

“Don’t take your snow pants off yet,” her mother said. “I want you to take these cookies to Mrs. Becker.”

“Me?”

“It’ll only take a few minutes.”

“What about Lisy?” Isn’t she coming?”

“Her snow pants are soaked.”

“Mine are, too.”

“Caitlin...”

Cat stuck her tongue out at Lisy, who was licking the mixing bowl. Cat took the bag with the cookies and stomped back outside. If she fell into one of the holes in Mrs. Becker’s yard and froze to death, they’d be sorry!”

She made it to Mrs. Becker’s front door without any mishaps and rang the bell.

A second later the door flew open, and there was Mrs. Becker in a red sweater with a spray of holly sticking out of the bun on top of her head.

“Here-are-cookies-from-my-mother,” Cat said in one breath.

“Thank you,” Mrs. Becker said, taking the bag. “I’m baking, too. Let’s have a swap.”

Before Cat knew what had happened, she was inside the house, and the door was shut.

“My mother expects me home for lunch.”

“I’ll be quick.”

Mrs. Becker hurried into her kitchen.

Cat looked around. There was a cuckoo clock on the wall in front of her. She peered into the living room, and her mouth fell open.

“*Wow!*”

There entire floor in that room was covered with moss and grass – *real* moss and grass! There wasn’t a chair or table or a TV in sight. Instead there were potted plants of all sizes and shapes half-buried in the grass. Rocks (the big rocks Cat had seen Mrs. Becker carrying into her house) lined a path leading to a Christmas tree in the center of the room. Candles and straw birds adorned the tree. A gold star shone from its top.

“Come,” Mrs. Becker said.

Cat jumped. She hadn’t heard her return.

“Those are paper-whites, here are tulips,” Mrs. Becker said, pointing at some buds as they went down the path. “I’m hoping they’ll bloom on Christmas Eve.”

“Is it ... is it always like this in here?” Cat asked.

Mrs. Becker laughed. “No, this is my Advent garden.”

Cat looked puzzled.

“The rest of the year I have furniture, but the four weeks before Christmas I change everything. We did it as children. My father would tell my sister and me a

fairy tale as we made the garden. It's about a poor family that lived deep in a forest. One Christmas Eve when they had nothing to eat, the ice and snow suddenly melted away. The light grew warmer, and the flowers opened. They found all kinds of nuts and berries to eat while the birds sang, 'It's Christmas!' ”

Cat didn't say anything. She felt she'd slipped into another world. She stood there smelling the earth and grass while the snow outside swirled up against the windows and the wind whistled.

“I know you wondered what I was doing the day you came home and I was carrying the rocks into the house,” Mrs. Becker said. “I decided I wouldn't tell you then; I'd invite you and your sister over for a surprise on Christmas Eve.”

Cat turned to her. “Can we still come?”

“Yes.”

“Mum and Dad, too?”

“Of course! But try to keep it a secret till then.”

“Lisy can't keep secrets,” said Cat, “but I can.”

“I know you can,” Mrs. Becker said with a smile. “You're older.” Then she leaned over, broke a little spray of holly off a plant, and gave it to Cat.