New Curtains

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Abstract

"That’s all the thanks I ever get for slaving over a hot stove all morning. ‘Can’t you see to it that these potatoes are done?’ It ain’t worth it- cooking for someone like that.”
New Curtains

by Cathy Girres

"THAT'S all the thanks I ever get for slaving over a hot stove all morning. 'Can't you see to it that these potatoes are done?' It ain't worth it — cooking for someone like that."

"Ma, Dad's just tired. Workin' in the field is hard."

"Yeah, so is workin' in here."

Mary watched her mother start to clear the table. Her hands were as gnarled as an old oak. She finished stacking the dishes, wiped her hands on her greasy percale apron, and then pushed back a few lifeless strands of her wiry gray hair.

"Mary, go get a pail of water. I need it to do dishes."

Mary picked up the metal bucket and walked down the dirt path to the well. As she pumped the pail full of slightly rusty water, she fixed her gaze on the distant cornfields. The tall, majestic stalks of corn marched on and on, finally seeming to merge with the azure sky. Indian summer. It was a delicious feeling. She just stood there, inhaling the autumn air. It smelled so fresh — not the freshness of something new, but the smell of something old and dear which had just been washed. Picking up the pail of water, Mary started back toward the house. Her brown pony tail glistened under the golden gaze of the noonday sun and bounced saucily with each step. She opened the screen door and set the pail of water beside the porcelain wash basin on the small painted table.

"Here." Her mother held out the large dish pan, indicating for Mary to pour some water into it.

Mrs. Johnsen set the dishpan on the large iron stove and bent down to get some pieces of wood from a large box on one side of the stove.

"I guess someone will have to get some more wood. This stove is just like a dragon — gobbles up all you'll give it and then bellows for more."
The faded plastic curtains at the window rustled gently as a whimsical breeze floated through the open window.

"Sure is pretty outside, Ma. The corn is just about ready to pick. Looks like a good crop this year."

"Good crop! Be lucky to break even. That's all farmin' is. You work yourself almost to death all year; then, if you're lucky, you make just enough money to start the same thing over again next year."

"It's not that bad, Ma."

"That's what I thought for the first fifteen years, too."

Mrs. Johnsen's sagging jawline hardened and her blue eyes looked bitter. "You can see where farmin' has got us."

Mary fidgeted uneasily and her hazel eyes suddenly became cloudy. She fingered the collar of her homemade blouse and put the other hand into the pocket of her faded blue jeans. She couldn't talk to Ma now. Not when she was in this kind of mood.

From force of habit, she picked up the broom and began to sweep the linoleum floor. Picking up the two rag rugs, she went outside to shake them, and watched as the dust particles from the rugs churned furiously about in the air and then fell listlessly to the ground. At her approach three dozing cats had run toward her, hoping for some food, but she shooed them away. She picked up the rugs, went back into the kitchen, finished sweeping the floor, and then put the rugs down again, strategically covering two brown spots in the linoleum, the products of the main drag of family traffic.

"Thanks, honey." Her mother smiled wanly at her.

"Ma, don't you think Brandt's have a pretty house?"

"I ain't never been in it."

"Well, it's real pretty. They have a mahogany dining room set, and a brand new rug in the front room. The curtains are the prettiest, though. They're real sheer and frilly."

"Oh, that's nice."

Mary twisted her pony tail around her index finger and looked down at the floor.

"Ma, I've been thinkin'. I'd like to invite Jeanie Brandt to come out here this Saturday. I've been at her house a lot."

"All right. Ask her out anytime."

"Ma... they have such a pretty house, and ours is sort of
Still Life
Triune Season
Sketch

... well, you know. I was wonderin' if we couldn't sort of do something to fix it up a little bit. Maybe the front room."

"Honey, you know we can't afford it."

"Couldn't we just get one new thing? Curtains for the front room?"

"Mary, it just ain't worth it. If we got new curtains, everything else would look all the worse."

"Just new curtains, Ma. Please."

"They cost too much."

"I can make 'em, Ma. Really I can. I can sew pretty good."

Mrs. Johnsen walked heavily toward the front room with Mary following. They silently surveyed the room. The overstuffed mohair sofa and chair were planted stolidly across the room from each other, each trying to hide its age by wearing lacy doilies on its worn arms and back. The once-white curtains had taken on a yellowish color and hung lackadaisically at two narrow windows.

"Please, Ma." Mary's plea was almost a whisper.

"I'm sorry, honey. I used to want to fix this place up, but I gave up a long time ago. We don't have enough money."

With this Mrs. Johnsen turned quickly away, reaching for the handkerchief in her apron pocket.

Mary slowly sank into the fuzzy confines of the sofa which at one time had seemed so warm and comforting. She buried her face in the cushions, but they seemed hard and cold.

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"Mary, hurry up and eat your breakfast or you'll miss the school bus."

"Yes, Ma." Mary picked up her algebra book and started toward the door.

"Mary, I've been thinkin' about them curtains. Here. This is five dollars I've been savin' for Christmas presents."

"Oh, Ma, thanks!" Mary flung her arms around her mother's wrinkled neck.

"Go on, honey. The bus is coming."

Mary stepped onto the school bus, and it seemed only a moment later that she was stepping off it. She rushed into the house.
"Look, Ma. I got some material. It's dotted swiss. They had some marquisette, but it cost more so I got this. I'd better get started on them."

"I had Dad oil the sewing machine for you."

Mary eagerly spread the material out on the table and began to cut. It wasn't the best material, but at least it was new. She sat down at the sewing machine and began to sew.

"Ma, the thread keeps breaking."

"Just keep on goin'. That machine never did work right and never will."

After a hasty supper, she went back to the sewing machine and continued sewing. Her feet were getting tired from working the pedal, but she had to finish the curtains. She started gathering the endless ruffles, pulling the thread gently, very gently. Oh, darn. The thread broke. Start over again. Keep on gathering, gathering... .

She had almost fallen asleep. It was late. Ma and Dad had gone to bed. Just a little while and she would be through.

She finished pressing the curtains and was about to put them up when her mother appeared.

"Mary, it's after twelve-thirty. You'd better go to bed."

"Just a few more minutes, Ma. I want to take the old ones down and put these up. Stay and see how they look."

"All right." Mrs. Johnsen started picking up scraps of material while Mary went to the living room, and with great finality, threw the old curtains on the floor.

She stood back to view the new curtains hanging at the windows. The gaudy flowers from the faded wallpaper and threadbare rug seemed to stare contemptuously at the whiteness of the new curtains, and then began to dance jeeringly in front of her eyes.

"Oh, Ma, it doesn't help," she sobbed.