

## The Geranium Curtains by Sheryl Carter – 2nd Place Winner

Maggie Foster smiled as she stepped out of the old green Pontiac as it came to a halt on the street in front of the dry goods store. Her short dark hair, freshly released from their pin curls barely an hour before, shone in the sun. Her dark dress with the small print matched the sturdy black lace-up shoes with the thick sensible heels. She tucked her navy cordoroy clutch purse under one arm. “I’ll pick you up in an hour,” Jack, her husband said as he drove off with a wink and a friendly wave of his hand.

Glad for a whole hour alone just to shop, choose, and think, Maggie headed into the store, list in hand. After picking out some buttons to update an older housedress at home and a spool of practical white thread, Maggie checked out the bolts of fabric lining the shelves and piled on a nearby table. Material was to Maggie what paints are to the artist. She loved the different varieties and designs and the feel of each piece as she ran her hand over the various lengths of fabric. Her eyes gleamed as a figured piece suddenly caught her eye.

Woven in a sturdy twill weave with a creamy white background, the cloth was happily splashed with large peachy pink and orange-red geraniums with lifelike green leaves and stems. The whole effect was so pleasing and delightful that Maggie laughed out loud. *“Perfect!”* she thought. *“This will be just perfect for my new living room curtains. I can’t wait to get them sewed and hung up!”*

She held her breath briefly as she checked the price on the bolt end. Good. She could afford it. But without any hesitation, she placed the card of buttons back on the rack, ensuring that she would have enough to pay for the needed yardage.

“Cut me off 12 yards,” Maggie determinedly told the salesclerk. A soft smile lit her lips as she took the hefty brown paper package securely tied with string and stepped back outside. It rustled heavily in her arms. Quickly, she finished her other shopping and met Jack at the prescribed time.

The next morning in the farmhouse right outside Lindenville, Maggie hummed a little tune as she spread out the long piece of cloth on her living room floor. The old wool rug underneath had been freshly swept with the Bissel hand sweeper just the other day, so she had no fears of it dirtying the new length of fabric. The dishes were done and the house picked up. Jack was gone for the day and the girls, Jill and Susan, were in school.

Maggie’s scissors whisked through the thick stuff as she cut according to the measurements she had already taken and written down. The morning progressed as Maggie, seated at her grandmother’s treadle sewing machine, added a white piece of fabric behind the top casing to give a little extra length. Generous three and a half inch bottom hems made the curtains look full and rich.

Just before it was time to stop and make supper, Maggie pressed the last panel and hung the new curtains up. Stepping back to observe her work, her heart sang. They were lovely. The afternoon sun shone through them accentuating their already lush colors, adding a whole new dimension to the plain room.

Those curtains hung in Maggie's living room, making her smile every time she glanced at them for the next 25 years until one day, Jill came by for a visit.

"Oh, Mother," she said, sipping her cup of hot coffee with cream and sugar, "You don't still have those old curtains up, do you? They are so *dated*. And," she went on, fingering one of the now faded panels, "some of these actually have holes in them from the sun." Slightly stung, Maggie looked at the curtains in her now much fancier living room. "Yes, I guess you are right. Maybe something different would look better."

Reluctantly, but knowing her daughter was probably right, Maggie took down the geranium curtains and folded them away in a box. She bought some new stylish beige ones that looked like shot silk, but were not, and hung them up instead. But she never liked them as well as the other ones.

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"I don't know what to do about Mom," Susan said to her sister, Jill. "She looks so sad lying there. I wish there was something we could do to cheer her up a little bit."

"Yeah," Jill said with a bit of sarcasm, "I guess neither one of us would be any too happy knowing we were dying of cancer." Tears glistened in her eyes.

Susan reached out and gathered her sister close. "This is so hard on all of us, but especially Mom. If there was just some way to give her a little joy.... I don't think it will be long now."

The big front room of the old farmhouse had been turned into a bedroom for Maggie, a room she had been sent home from the hospital to—in which to die. Maggie wasn't worried, really, about dying, she knew where she was going, but the time in between now and then wasn't any too pleasant. Sometimes the pain was very bad, and when it wasn't, she lay listlessly, no longer caring much about anything.

Jill's steps echoed quietly through the old house as she sped up the stairs to the attic and soon returned, carrying an old cardboard box. "What's that?" Susan asked.

"Mom's geranium curtains," Jill replied. "We're going to put them back up for her."

"Why?" Susan asked perplexed, thinking now was hardly the time to redecorate.

“Because,” Jill answered, “she always loved these curtains so much. I thought if we put them up for her again and took down those boring beige ones, it might give her something more cheerful to look at.”

Quickly, the sisters worked while their mother slept through a morphine-induced sleep.

Maggie opened her eyes, feeling groggy and ill. Someone beside her offered a sip of cold water through a straw. She drank gratefully and sighed as she settled back on the pillow. Her eyes caught the light beaming softly through the still lovely colors of pink, orange-red and green, and widened in surprise.

“My geranium curtains!” she exclaimed in a weak voice. “Where did they come from?”

“We put them up for you, Mom,” Susan explained lovingly. “It was Jill’s idea.” She looked at her sister who stood on the other side of the bed, holding their mother’s hand. Tears filled both their eyes.

“I always liked those curtains,” Maggie said in a soft voice, gazing at her old friends. “They were always so cheerful.” She sighed and the girls watched her for a moment and then quietly left the room.

Three days later Maggie lay, her breath coming in gradually more shallow gasps. She was alone. Through half-opened eyes, she saw that daylight was filtering through the windows. She felt strange; an unearthly feeling overwhelming her. The room grew warm and began to be filled with light. Maggie gazed, poised on the brink of something new. Suddenly, an angel came gliding through the window, right through the geranium curtains. He smiled and held out his hand to her.

“Did you come for me?” Maggie said wonderingly in a little girl voice. A beautiful smile spread over the angel’s face and he reached down and took Maggie’s uplifted hand and together they sailed through the pink and orange-red flowers.

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The auction was speeding along at record pace as the auctioneer sold items in his singsong spiel. The handlers picked up new things as quickly as the last ones sold. The grassy lawn around the little old house was filled with people, those who came to buy and those who just came to look and while away an interesting afternoon. The sun was warm overhead as the buyers and the curious looked through the household belongings of a life and a family.

Carol saw her friend Mindy and waved to her. At Mindy’s feet was a cardboard box she had just bought, filled with sundry items. Carol’s eyes sparkled as she spied the colorful lengths of fabric folded on the top. Disappointed at missing that box with the pretty fabric, she made her way over to Mindy’s side.

“Carol!” Mindy squealed. “It’s so good to see you!” The two friends laughed and hugged.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” Carol asked. “Are you still biking?”

“Oh, yes,” Mindy said with a pleasant laugh, “I love to bike. I’m going to bike in Canada next summer.”

“You sure got yourself a nice box of goodies there.” Carol said, indicating the carton on the ground.

“Those curtains are so pretty.”

“Oh, those things? I don’t like them at all. I think they’re ugly.”

Carol couldn’t get the words out fast enough. “I think they’re beautiful! Can I buy them from you?”

“Shoot, no,” Mindy said, in her characteristic straightforward way. “Just take them, I won’t ever use them. I think they’re awful.”

“Thank you, Mindy!” Carol said as she gave her friend another hug.

Carol scooped up the curtains and rushed back to her family. “Look at these,” she gushed, her hand gliding over the cloth wonderingly. “Aren’t they beautiful? I just love them. Geranium curtains. Who would have ever thought?”

High in a tree overhead the leaves gently rustled, but there was no breeze on this calm day.

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Carol carried the plastic sack into her daughter’s house. “Are you sure you want to share these with me, Mom?” Rayanne asked, her gray-green eyes searching her mother’s face. Carol looked at the sweet countenance before her, and her heart filled with love for this very special daughter. “Oh, yes, Honey. I cut one up and made little curtains for one of the upstairs bedrooms. They look so cute up there. If you can use these, I want you to have them.” Helping her daughter fix up her house was a favorite pastime of Carol’s and together they did pretty well.

That afternoon, Carol and Rayanne hung up two sets of geranium curtains in the sunny south window of Rayanne and Dave’s rental house in Lindenville. The sun shone through the old fabric, bringing it’s own brand of sunshine into the small room.

“There,” Carol stepped back in satisfaction, surveying the effect. “They look great, don’t they?”

“I like them,” Rayanne said, hands on her sides. Her belly swelled through the maternity top she wore. “They really brighten up the place.”

An invisible presence smiled benignly from high up in the far corner of the living room.

The curtains hung in that little house for about year, as Rayanne and Dave brought home their firstborn, a little boy they named Ned. Rayanne used the curtains in various houses that she and Dave lived in and then stored them away with other odds and ends of fabric and old tablecloths.

“Do you want me to sort through this box, too?” Carol called. “If you don’t mind, Mom,” Rayanne said, as she pushed clothes into the washer in the laundry room. “Honestly, if Ned gets any taller, I am going to have to buy new jeans for him—again.”

Carol smiled, thinking of her precious grandson, now a teenager and his sweet little sister, Cherish. She loved her grandchildren so.

Her fingers opened a sack and her eyes fell on some colorful fabric. “Well, look at these. The old geranium curtains.” She held up a length. “They have been around, haven’t they?”

“Yeah,” Rayanne replied, as she came back into the kitchen where her mother was sorting stuff on the big rectangular table. “Do you want them back?”

“Oh, no, you use them. I don’t want to take them from you.” Carol lovingly stroked the soft old fabric.

“Take them, Mom. If I ever want them again, I know where they are.”

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“Shall we clean house first?” John asked.

“I think so, it will be good to get it out of the way.” Carol moved quickly to wash up the dishes before starting on the next thing. She was so grateful to her husband for his invaluable help these days. The years were making them both tire a bit more easily.

In the room with the wood stove, Carol looked at the checked curtains hanging at the window. They seemed kind of dreary after all this time. Just like her heart had been dreary for the past year and a half. Sadness had dogged their family with first, an unexpected divorce—the sadness of that grief still clung to her. And then Carol’s fragile elderly mother was rapidly going down hill in the nursing home only a few

miles away. The past few months she had fallen several times, breaking bones each time. Things did not look good for her.

Climbing up on the tall step stool, Carol rummaged around in the overhead closet shelf in the small dressing room and found the sack she was looking for. A sack she had brought home from Rayanne's just a few months ago.

Inside were bits and pieces of geranium fabric that she and Rayanne had cut up and used over the years. Only two long pieces were left and one was riddled with holes from sun damage. It didn't matter, she thought, anything goes these days. It will be real shabby chic. She held up a length before the long window. It was unbelievably cheery, a good replacement for the others.

She sped upstairs to her workroom and quickly shortened one length, putting in a new three and a half inch hem to match the generous other one. She noticed the white band sewed on the underside of the top casing. Part of it had a hole or two. It didn't matter. As she pressed each piece, she looked at the stitching and wondered about the long-ago woman who made it. Who was she and did she enjoy these beautiful curtains, too?

Back downstairs, Carol hung the lengths at the double windows and immediately, the whole spirit of the room changed from rather gloomy to much brighter. She smiled as she arranged the pleats she had ironed into each piece to make them hang better.

She moved back and gazed at her handiwork. The soft pink and orange-red flowers still gave off their old charm as the green leaves and stems wove merrily throughout. "In place again," Carol thought as she smiled and walked off to get her dust rag. As she did so, a fold of one of the newly hung panels moved ever so slightly, as if brushed by an angel's wing.