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Harriet's Closet

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Abstract

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Harriet's Closet

by Sandy Whipple

English, Sophomore

HARRIET Wilson smiled at her reflection in the medicine cabinet mirror and fluffed up her steel gray curls with her fingertips. The children would be proud of their pert grandmother.

"Oh dear, I wonder if I put too much blue in it this time." Straining close to the mirror, she separated a few strands and scrutinized the roots.

"Stop your damned primping, Mother," Lester would have muttered. Harriet chuckled and sighed. She envisioned her late husband standing in the bathroom doorway in a rumpled argyle sweater, his apple-bowl pipe clamped between his teeth at the side of his mouth, and the latest issue of *Field and Stream* dangling by a corner from his hand.

Harriet swung open the cabinet door and rummaged through Polident cans and milk of magnesia bottles to uncover her dime store rouge. "Such a dear man, Les was, even if he *was* tempted with a curse word now and then. Oh, *here* it is. Mercy, what's it doing behind the Geritol?" Snapping the tin lid off the rouge, she drew the pink pad across her cheeks in careful circles.

Bong. "Gracious, could that be the children already?" Harriet scuttled across the linoleum and into the living room. Tiptoeing, she peeped through a tiny window in the front door. "You can't be too careful these days. Ah, only the paperboy." She slid off the chain guard and tugged open the oak door.

"Why, how's my Tommy?" November gusted into the room, ruffling the tinsel on the Christmas tree.

Tommy stepped inside and let the storm door slam shut behind him. "I'm O.K.," he shrugged, his glasses fogging. "Dollar-fifty, Mrs. Wilson."

"Dearie me." She rummaged through her pocketbook and extracted six quarters. "And here's a nickel for a good boy to spend however he wants. Its not too many weeks 'til Christmas, you know."

"Thanks." Tommy shoved the nickel into his jeans pocket and counted the quarters in his palm.

"Can you smell the pumpkin pie baking? I have a little grandson who's twelve—just about your age—and his family is coming for a visit." Harriet patted Tommy's stocking cap. He squirmed. "Yes, they should be here in a few hours. My son lives two hundred miles away, you know."

As Tommy ripped off a receipt ticket, Harriet padded over to the coffee table and returned cradling a bulging imitation-leather photo album in her arms. "Here, I'll show you some pictures of my grandson; he plays in Little League."

"Uh, Mrs. Wilson, I gotta go. I hafta hurry up and get done or I'll miss my Scout meeting. Maybe some other time." He laid the receipt on a doily-covered magazine stand and disappeared through the frosted storm door, pulling the oak door closed behind him.

Harriet watched him leave, then put down the album and went into the kitchen to baste her turkey. "Children are so busy nowadays." She opened the oven and yanked on the wire rack until it grated out.

Stooping over the speckled-blue enamel roaster, she mentally leafed through her closet. Les's favorite dress was the lavender flowered jersey. It *would* set her hair off nicely, but perhaps it was too springy. No, the mauve was better for November, and she could fasten Aunt Beulah's cameo brooch at her throat.

The telephone shrilled. Startled at the interruption,

Harriet dropped her basting cup into the pan. She fished it out of the juice and shoved the rack back into the oven. The phone rang for the fourth time.

"Hello?" Harriet was puffing as she sank into the over-stuffed chair by the phone.

"Mother Harriet, this is Marge." The voice deep inside the black plastic receiver crackled in Harriet's ear.

"Oh yes, dear. Haven't you left yet? No?" Harriet fluffed her hair again as she concentrated on the braided rug. "Oh my. No, I hadn't heard the weather reports yet this morning—I've been so busy. . . . One hundred per cent ice-packed? All the way? . . . Yes, I know. Les always said it was a dangerous highway *any* time."

Harriet was silent. Her pink-rouged cheeks sagged a little. "I see. And next weekend Jim's going to St. Louis. And the next weekend the children are all singing in the church Christmas pageant." She fondled the edge of a crocheted afghan spread over the back of her chair. "Yes, I knew you were all spending Christmas vacation with your sister and her family."

Staring through the arched doorway into the dining-room, Harriet studied the row of framed family photographs lining the top of her china closet. "Yes, anytime you can come will be fine. . . . No, dear. Don't worry about your Christmas presents for me. You can bring them when you come after the first of the year. Christmas is really for children, anyway. . . . But, Marge, postage is so expensive. . . . I can put the turkey in the neighbors' deep freeze, and we can have it then. . . . Twenty pounds . . . It's all right, dear. Give my love to Jim and the children. Yes, goodbye."

The phone clicked. Harriet sat listening to the dial tone and finally replaced the receiver in its cradle. She scuffed into the dining room and picked up each hand-painted plate from the table, one by one, stacking them carefully into her china closet.

Although Sandy's work can not be considered a short story, it is a well-executed character sketch—an item for which there is a dearth of submissions. Within the confines of which she chose to work, Sandy makes the image of Harriet come through quite well, pathetically ever-searching for the dime-store rouge behind the Geritol.—E.B.