Sketch

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The Friend

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HUMMING a rusty version of “Santa Claus is Coming To Town” Myrtle wound the glittering paper around an odd-shaped package. Her pudgy fingers got in the way of the ribbon as she tried to make a huge bow. Finished with the package, she grabbed another box from the bulging shopping bag and lovingly admired it.

Oh, how Jane will love this. A smile crept over her wrinkled face that sagged under accumulated layers of fat. I can see her eyes now as she opens it. The dear girl will never know quite how to thank me, Myrtle thought.

“The mail is in, Myrtle!” A voice called from the hallway. Jane emerged and picked her way through a maze of footstools and rockers that clogged the narrow living room. Her standard, blue knit suit clung to her thin frame and was highlighted by a mischievous Santa who winked his eyes rapidly.

“Two for you and one for me.” Jane handed the two letters to Myrtle who struggled to hide the present beneath the folds of her flowered jersey dress.

“Thank you, dear.” Myrtle replied.

The ticking of the two cuckoo clocks resounded across the room as the two women greedily eyed their letters.

“Myrtle, Myrtle!” Jane was waving her letter. “John, my grandson, wants me to come to Tucson for Christmas.” A warm glow crept into her sallow cheeks.

“What!” Myrtle’s voice snapped as her naturally red face drained of its color.

“Oh, Myrtle, I’m sorry.” Jane tried to soothe her, but there was too much gaiety in her voice. “I know you’ve been planning Christmas, but, oh, how I’ve longed to go to my families.”
Clasping the letter tightly, she hurried eagerly to her bedroom.

Myrtle sat in front of the paper-strewn coffee table and did not move. Her smouldering eyes were fixed on the small box half-hidden in her dress.

*How could she do this to me? I planned it all, bought all these presents and stocked up on food. She said she hadn't had an old-fashioned Christmas for years. I was going to buy the tree tomorrow and we would put it up on Sunday, just one week before Christmas as we always used to do. And we were going to fill Christmas stockings!*

A drift of smoke from Jane's cigarette floated into the room, snapping her out of her thoughts.

“Darn that Jane,” she mumbled aloud. “Told her about smoking in my house. Thought I got her straightened out on that the first week she moved in.”

“Now Jane. There's just a few ground rules we'd better establish in this house. Kept Dad, bless his soul, from smoking for over twenty years and I don't intend to let it start now. Besides, it will coat my knickknacks something awful until I'll have to wash them constantly.”

“Maybe you should put away a few of the knickknacks,” Jane quietly observed, her eyes surveying the rows of painted dogs, cats, and skunks.

Myrtle's mouth flew open. “Now wait a minute. This is my house and I will have as many knickknacks as I please. There will be no smoking!” Her voice thundered across the room.

There had been no smoking. Except a few times when she'd caught Jane puffing away when she returned home early from her Ladies Aid Circle.

Myrtle stirred in the chair, the box falling from her lap unnoticed to the carpet below.

...Why, I took her in—literally off the street. There she was at the annual summer picnic for hospital employees, sitting all alone.......

“Hello, Jane!” Myrtle puffed out from under the floppy straw hat as she struggled to wedge her large body onto the low picnic table bench. “Great day for a picnic.”

“Oh, yes, it is,” Jane agreed.
"I haven't seen you in ages, Jane. Where are you living?"

"Down on 24th in the home Frank and I always had."

"Must be kind of lonesome, isn't it?" Myrtle's sugar-coated voice drooled with sincerity.

"Yes, a little."

"It must just be filled with memories. Why, you should get out and try a new place," Myrtle carefully suggested.

"Oh, no. I like the house and its location."

"But it's so far from work. Now, look at my place. It's right near the Elm Avenue bus and close to the store..."

Myrtle rambled on.

Jane moved in a month later.

"I guess I've accumulated quite a bit of things," Jane exclaimed, her eyes roving over the packing boxes covering the living room floor.

"You sure have. There just isn't room in this house for all of it. You'll have to keep it in your bedroom. I must keep this room presentable!"

Myrtle glanced towards the kitchen. "When you're done unpacking we will eat." Her stomach was already growling and her mouth watering as she thought about the pineapple-upside-down cake that she had made especially for Jane.

"Don't make me too much. I never eat a large lunch," Jane quickly told her.

"Nonsense! Everyone needs a good hearty lunch to tide him through the day." She turned her back on Jane and hurried into the kitchen.

The chirping of the cuckoos startled her. The room was almost dark. She pulled herself up out of the chair, knocking the coffee table aside. Red and green ribbon tumbled wildly to the floor.

"Jane!" Her sharp voice echoed in the room. "I want to talk to you."

Jane popped her head around the corner.

"Come in here please." Her hands stationed on her billowing hips, Myrtle looked as if she was ready to hold the fort against enemy attack. Her eyes pierced Jane.

"All right, Jane. I've had just about enough. You go ahead and go to your grandson's home. I really don't care."
She paused long enough to moisten her lips. “But, if you do go, take all your things with you.”

Throwing her head up, Myrtle turned and marched into her bedroom. She sat on the edge of the bed, her head cocked, waiting to hear Jane’s apologetic knock. An hour later she heard the scraping of boxes on the porch as Jane cleared her things out.

Opening the door a crack, she yelled out, “Don’t knock my end tables!” She waited to hear Jane’s reply. Hearing none, she slammed the door shut and sat down again.

She didn’t have to wait long. The dull clang of keys on the formica-topped kitchen table told her that Jane was about to leave. Then she heard the creaking of the back door as it was opened and shut.

She got out to the kitchen in time to see Jane get into her Chevy and drive away. Grabbing a hunk of pie she gobbled it down, all the while staring at the keys on the table.

Well, good riddance. I’m glad I found out her real nature before I gave her all those lovely Christmas gifts. Guess I’ll just have to use them myself.

She scooped out another wedge of pie, stuffed it into her mouth, and headed toward the bulging shopping bag of gifts.

Words stop as I push
against invisible walls
with impotent force

—Earl Keyser

English, Grad.