

Toyon: Multilingual Literary Magazine

Volume 69
Issue 1 *Volume 69: The Sex Issue / El Edicion del Sexo*

Article 9

2023

Parting

Katelyn Elwess
Sacramento State

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Recommended Citation

Elwess, Katelyn (2023) "Parting," *Toyon: Multilingual Literary Magazine*: Vol. 69: Iss. 1, Article 9.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/toyon/vol69/iss1/9>

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Parting

Katelyn Elwess

All morning, she moved through the bare apartment with a nervous energy. She raced from room to room, checking the mail or removing curlers from her hair or making phone calls. The boy, to his credit, never disturbed her. He stayed in his spot on the carpet, right in front of the TV, and watched his cartoons with silent concentration. Never once did he complain, even though she imagined he was very hungry. After all, she was too.

She tried to stay busy in their room. She took her time getting ready, even if it was a foolish thing to do. It was a Saturday. She knew she needed to beat the crowds, but she wasn't ready to say goodbye. Once her hair was finished, she applied the smallest bit of blush to her cheeks in slow, languid movements. When she was done, she reached for her mascara. Just as she was about to put it on, she felt compelled to see the boy again, to memorize each detail of his face.

She crept through the kitchen as quietly as she could and watched him. He sat cross-legged, bobbing his head to the cartoonish sound effects. He wore the rich blue sweater she had given him for Christmas. Although he faced her, he was rapt by the animated bear on the screen. She smiled at the way his eyes crinkled. She would remember that forever. She would remember his dimpled chin—the same as hers—and his cheeks, tanned from the days they spent outside. A song began, and he moved his baby doll to the music. He liked to play with them—baby dolls. She never minded, but the man had. Perhaps that was why he left. The boy noticed her watching and gave her a toothy smile. She smiled back, then returned to the bedroom.

Twenty minutes later, her makeup was finished and nearly all her clothes were packed into a burgundy suitcase. On the bed, she had out a mint green dress that came to her knees and a blue blouse and white skirt that she couldn't decide between. The boy's clothes remained in the closet. She would ask him to pick her outfit for the day. She sat at the edge of the bed and ran through the previous day's mail again: three past-due bills and an eviction notice. Her stomach ached. She imagined if she had anything to vomit, it would be on the floor in that moment.

The phone rang. She stood up and walked to the kitchen to answer it. It was one of those phones that mounted to the wall, right next to the doorway. It was a pale yellow, just like the one her grandmother used to have. When the man had first brought her and the boy to live there, she scoffed at him for finding them such a cheap old place. Now, she was sure she would miss the apartment very much, though he hadn't seemed to. She imagined him on a beach somewhere at that exact moment, drinking mimosas and eating fresh pineapple under a warm sun.

"Hello?" she answered. Her voice was strained.

"Hi, yeah," a man said. He sounded young. "I'm calling about your ad. Are the kitchen table and chairs still available?"

She ran her thumb over the medallion on her necklace. It had a picture of the Salt Lake Temple on the front. Her parents had gifted it to her after her baptism. She'd been just a few years older than the boy. "No, I'm afraid they're not. Just sold them yesterday."

"Damn," the man said. "Thanks anyway."

She looked at the boy. "The television is still for sale, though. Did you see the pictures?"

"Yeah, I did. It's nice. A bit out of my budget, though. Thanks again."

"Wait," she said, her voice booming into the speaker. Then, more quietly, she said, "I can knock thirty dollars off the price."

There was a pause before the man said, "I appreciate it, really. It's still a bit too much though—"

"Fifty, then," she said. "I'll take fifty dollars off."

"I suppose I could swing that," the young man said. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," she said. "You could pick it up tomorrow morning if you'd like. Or this evening, even."

"This evening would be great."

"Okay," she said. She was nearly whispering. "627 43rd Street. Apartment 4B. Say, six o'clock?"

"Six o'clock," the young man repeated. Then, the line went dead.

She put the phone back on the hook and leaned against the wall. The TV would give her fifty dollars. She added that to the money she'd made from selling the kitchen table set and the man's recliner. It wasn't much—not enough to make the rent, by any means—but it would be enough to start over in St. George.

She approached the boy and leaned in front of him with her hands on her knees. "How's the show?"

"Good," he said. He held the baby doll like a newborn. "What are we going to do today?"

She stood straight and smiled. "I thought we'd run by the store for some sandwiches and have a picnic in the park."

The boy smiled. "Really?"

"Really," she said. "I just have to get dressed first. What do you think? Should I wear green or blue?"

He looked at her for a moment. "Blue."

"I'll go get dressed and then we can leave, okay? Five minutes, tops."

She went back to the bedroom and slipped out of last night's pajamas. She placed them into the suitcase, then put on her outfit. She'd sold so many things in the last few months. It started small—the boy's gerbil, the microwave, a few end tables. Then her vanity, the entertainment center, and the boy's bed. The money went as quickly as it arrived and they were no better off.

She went to her dresser and fished out a safety pin from the top drawer, then she took in an inch of her skirt. Afterwards, she folded her green dress and packed it in her suitcase. She placed it in the back of the closet, out of sight. She would come back for it later. She grabbed the bottle of Coco Mademoiselle, nearly empty, and dabbed a bit onto her neck and wrists. The perfume had been one of the last gifts the man had given her before he left. She decided she would leave it behind. She took her purse from the bed and counted what was left. There wasn't much—enough for maybe two sandwiches and a bottle of juice for the boy. She was tempted to take from her stash in the suitcase, but decided against it. It would have to do.

The supermarket was much busier than she had anticipated. They had to circle the parking lot twice before they found a space far in the back. As they walked to the entrance, they passed teenage boys carrying bottles of soda, elderly women being walked to their cars by baggers, and happy mothers pushing their children in shopping carts. She held her hand out for the boy to take. "Come here," she said. "Stay close to me."

He carried his baby doll in one hand and held her hand with the other. When they reached the front of the store, he saw an old kiddie ride. It was a galloping chestnut Mustang. The sign below said, Sonny the Horse, 50¢. The boy ran right up to it and climbed on. "Can I ride it?"

She clutched her purse. "I don't know if we have enough."

"Please?" he asked, holding on to the horse's neck.

"Maybe after we get our lunch."

The boy climbed down and returned to her side. "Okay."

She took his hand and led him through the store. They passed the meat department, staring at the lamb chops with a hunger they'd felt for days—her nine, him three. They cut through the cereal aisle on their way to the pre-made section, where they passed mothers older than her, picking out boxes with their own young children. They strolled through the bakery, peering at the cakes with their intricate buttercream flowers. On the top row, there were single cupcakes, chocolate and vanilla with swirled blue and green icing.

"They look good," the boy said. She agreed. He walked ahead of her to look at the breakfast pastries. She motioned for the girl behind the counter to package one of the cupcakes. She would only be able to afford one sandwich, but it was fine. It was almost his birthday. Then, she met him at the table of free samples.

"What is it?" she asked the woman.

"Pasta salad with an asiago sauce. Great hot or cold. Go ahead, take one."

She grabbed one for herself and one for the boy. They ate their portions in two quick, big bites. She said, "It's delicious."

"Yummy," the boy said.

"Only \$4.99 a pound," the woman said, smiling.

She wiped her mouth. "Oh. Well, maybe next time."

When they got to the pre-made sandwiches, the boy ran up to the display, swinging his baby doll. "I could eat all of them!"

"You're telling me," she said. She walked over to the mini-fridge of drinks and grabbed him a bottle of apple juice. When she came back, he was still staring at the sandwiches.

"I can't choose between ham or turkey," he said.

She smiled. "Take your time."

He looked for a bit longer, then grabbed one on the second shelf. "This one."

"Turkey club," she read. "Good choice. Let's go ring up and get to the park."

"Where's yours?"

She grabbed the doll from him, holding it under her arm, and reached for his hand again. "I'm not that hungry anymore."

Ten minutes later, they walked out of the store. He carried his baby doll again. She held a bag with his sandwich, juice, and cupcake. He tugged at her skirt.

"Can I go on the horse now?"

She looked in her purse. There was a one-dollar bill, six pennies, a dime, and four quarters. She handed him fifty cents. "Looks like you can."

He took the money and raced over to the horse. He climbed on top, carefully holding his baby doll, and slipped the coins into the slot. The horse began to move back and forth while "Old MacDonald" played. The boy giggled. She smiled, tying the bag closed. Shoppers passed by.

An older woman, maybe in her fifties, stopped on her way to the door and watched the boy. Her hair was cut at an angle, and it swished back and forth when she turned her head. "Your little brother is adorable."

"Thank you," she said without correcting the woman.

"What's his name?"

The ride came to a stop. She left the old woman and walked over to the boy and gave him two more quarters. She ran her thumb along his cheek, over the little freckle under his right eye. His hair, light brown, was longer than usual, and she felt stricken knowing she wouldn't be able to take him for another haircut. "One more time, okay? And then we have to go."

"Okay," he said. He put the quarters into the slot and giggled again. She walked back to the woman, pulling at her skirt. Her stomach fluttered.

"I have a grandson about his age," the woman said, smiling.

"That's nice," she said. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "I need to use the restroom. Could you watch him for me?"

"Of course," the woman said.

She watched the boy move up and down to the rhythm of the song, holding the baby doll firmly in front of him. She handed the bag to the woman. "Would you mind holding his lunch too? I don't want to take it back in there."

"It's no trouble," the woman said, taking the bag.

"All right," she said. "I'll be right back then." She walked back to the entrance, stopping a couple feet away. She could still hear his laughter from her new spot. She turned back, making sure the woman was watching the boy, and the boy wasn't watching her. When no one noticed, she headed back to her car.