The Leaving

David Oshel*

*Iowa State College

Copyright ©1965 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
"Sam?" The question floated through the kitchen. She followed it. She half ran. “Yeah.” His beat-up hate swung wearily on the hook by the door...
The Leaving

by David Oshel

Journalism, Jr.

"SAM?" The question floated through the kitchen. She followed it. She half ran.

"Yeah." His beat-up hat swung wearily on the hook by the door. The jacket rested in his hand, trailing on the floor. On the porch stoop, undisturbed, the old hounds dreamed old hound dreams. The porch light fell on them; they didn't care.

"Did you find him?" She kept herself from wringing her hands.

"I found him. He was down at the depot. Wouldn't talk to me. I tried, Molly."

"What's he doing?"

"Sittin'. Just sittin'. Waitin' for the bus."

"Did he eat anything, do you know? A sandwich maybe?"

A box sat on the table. It had chicken in it.

"Don't know, Moll. He might've. There's a counter there. Coffee cup on the bench beside him."

She poured a cup of coffee. Another. They sat down.

The cups clicked.

Her eyes look awful, he thought. She thought a lot of the kid.

"Chicken? Shouldn't let it go to waste." She laughed, a little.

Don't, Moll, he thought. Don't try to laugh. Don't toss your head like that. Like, he thought, a rag doll. Too gay.

"The boy's got his ways," he said, trying to explain. "You know that. He's always had his ways."

"I know, I know." She opened the box and pushed a drumstick at him. "Would you look," she said, "Would you look at that? I put in a salt shaker. What did I think he was going to do with a salt shaker? What in the world?"

He studied his coffee. Sometimes, he thought, maybe it's better when a man stares into a little puddle of black and lets his woman rattle on some. Maybe it's better.
And look! A cloth napkin. What's a boy going to do with a cloth napkin?"

"Maybe he ain't a boy no more, Moll."

Regret smote her at that. Made her small. "Yes. Yes, he's a man now. Can't vote yet or nothing, but a man. Why can't I remember that, Sam! I always use the wrong word. He told me that once. 'Maw,' he said, 'why in God's green earth do you always use the wrong word?' 'Always,' he said."

He slumped over the coffee, swirled it in the cup, hoping maybe a word of comfort would float up to the top.

"Well, now, I ain't rightly saying he's no man, Molly. Just maybe as how he ain't no more a boy. As maybe as how he's got to find out. That's all."

She didn't listen.

"I remember the time he said I was the best maw in the whole world. Gave me a big bunch of dandelions. It was so pretty."

He leaned back heavily in the chair. Leaned forward again. Toyed with the piece of chicken.

"Moll," he said, "remember the old tomcat?"

"Oh, Sam," she said gently, "don't mind me. I know what you're going to say, but don't you think I've said it to myself over and over since yesterday, when he got so mad and walked out?" She smiled.

He pushed his stratagem anyway.

"The old tom, he's king of all the backyards in town. He comes back now and then. You know that."

"Don't I feed him when he does?"

"And he ran off plumb soon as he weren't a kitten no more."

"I know, Sam, and he came back here to lick his wounds after the first fight, and I washed his cuts and fussed all over that cat. I know."

"And remember how all the neighbors talked when he brought a kitten half across town just for our approval? Couldn't rightly remember anything like that before, they said."

She was smiling, but weary. "I remember. Finish it, Sam."

"The boy, well, maybe he's got a little caterwaulin' to do."
Maybe he’s got to get all scratched up and half beat to death. Maybe he’s got to fight a little. Prove as how everything he’s been sayin’ about bein’ growed up is true. He’ll get in scraps, and run wild a little and pretty soon some tabby’ll come along and tame him a little and then ‘fore you know it, he’ll come home again, and with a different light in his eyes. Promise.” He was holding her hands.

“I know, I know. And we’ll be grandparents. And proud. And have grandchildren to spoil the way he wouldn’t let us spoil him. I know all that. But, Sam, it’s so hard.”

“That’s the way things are.”

The smile flickered around the edges of her mouth. She looked at him almost pityingly. She nodded. Drew a breath. Changed the subject.

“Sam, it’s late,” she said. “There’ll be twice the chores in the morning.”

He grinned, relieved. “Yeah. Yeah, I hadn’t thought of that.”

He leaned over, put his rough hand on her cheek, kissed her.

“Well, going to bed,” he yawned. “Coming?” He put out the porch light. One of the dogs whined a lazy question at him.

“I’ll be along,” she said.

The moon broke from behind the clouds. A beam of it caught her through the window and made shadows on her face and something sparkling out of a drop sliding slowly down her cheek.

She whispered something, goodbye maybe. Her fingers wagged slightly, the last motherly attention, unseen by any but the moon. She was glad for that.