

The Other Side of Light

BY WILLIAM BENNETT

Julie put down the book and stood up before the big front window, running her finger over the buff woodwork. She looked disdainfully at the teddy bear on the bed—its head cocked a little sideways, its glass-button eyes staring admonishingly at her.

"OK teddy," she whispered suddenly, "I'll tell you." And she laughed at the funny round face—half black and half yellow.

She leaned over the bear and giggled something in the big floppy ear, butting it comradishly on its yellow shoulder.

"That's right," she said with a musical lilt to her voice, "I'm going to do something really big, something to make everybody wise up—everybody's such a fool, teddy."

But the bear stuck tenaciously to the silly grin; the big eyes seemed to sparkle at the thought of what wondrous thing Julie might do.

"Oh, teddy," her voice changed, "It would be nice to stay here with you for always, it's so easy to be sweet and innocent, to be just what everyone wants, with you." The sound of her own voice frightened her for she was speaking loudly in the empty room.

But it was all wrong, somehow. The pale, placid room bored her as well as comforted her. And she could faintly hear her mother's singing downstairs. She grabbed the little bear.

"How do you do it," she said, "everything's the same to you; you in your two colors."

She laughed and wrote the word "phoney" with her lipstick in big scrawling letters over the all-white dressing table. She took a step back and the unchanging smile from the bear told her that he approved.

She chucked the little bear under the chin and said "goodby" to him, her attitude became intentionally melodramatic: "At least

you'll never care what they say about me, will you?"

She looked at him a little doubtfully, but the old smile of torn stitches and ragged wool reassured her, and she had to laugh as she pulled on her great baggy sweater.

"No excuses to a teddy bear," she murmured.

She had the usual hopeless feeling at the top of the stair. Certainly someone had told her mother something about the party at Hauser's, the scene in the school parking lot, or something. It was always something. But when she got down everything had the appearance of peace and quiet; her mother was simply sitting in the den staring out the window at the retreating fall day.

"Where are you going tonight, dear?" she asked automatically.

"Nowhere in particular," she answered.

She looked at her mother's tired eyes with the tiny pink streaks in the corners. Her mother was dressed very similarly to Julie except that her skirt was tighter. Too, they both had that same emerald-like withdrawn quality that somehow struck people as carriage or poise. Only the whiteness of her mother's eyes and her caked, mas-queish complexion gave any immediate notion as to their ages.

"I really wish you would stay home tonight, Julie," her mother said. "The Dolbeys are coming over, you know, Councilman Dolbey and his wife, and a few other people. I'm sure they would like to see you. I thought it was so sweet the way Martha stayed around with her date when we were over at the Bigalow's the other week. Just like one of the crowd."

"Mother, please . . ."

"Oh, of course they left after a little while."

Julie merely stared at the ceiling, her eyes blinking thoughtfully. Over and over again, she thought, every argument just a rehash of the last.

"But I've somewhere to go."

"Where—to meet Chuck?" she snapped as a lawyer might snap his piece de resistance at a jury. "Oh God help us."

"Why must you believe everything you hear," the words flew back at her mother. "I can't say it again . . . we're just friends. Friends—that's all." The words sputtered into existence and then trailed off into a lie. There was so much that needed to be said, and yet the appearance of her mother's horror gave her only a frantic desire to run, lash out and then run.

"Your father is quite upset with me about this whole thing and..."

"That's right, take it from both sides," Julie mimicked, "you beautiful martyr."

"Julie, why Julie."

"You bastard."

"Julie!" Her mother was frightened.

And here we go again, Julie thought, all over some word that wasn't really any different from any other word except that it was one of the few words that would rescue her for a few moments from her mother's tired voice. But it was typical, another sign, another symbol. Life had become just a conglomeration of plus and minus signs.

"Julie, you'll be sorry Julie. Why must you always destroy things. You know only you can . . . well, keep your father and I together. But you must turn this house into a turmoil or . . . or . . . something."

Julie said nothing; there was never anything to say. She looked momentarily into the empty eyes that leaped around the room fretfully in an uncertain attempt at control. It was the same look that in her childhood had constantly frightened Julie into behaving, with the threat of leaving forever, of walking out the front door, hat and coat in hand, and then returning to the house in condescension to the frightened screams of the child.

As they faced each other now the same consciousness welled up and Julie wanted suddenly to apologize.

"Oh there just isn't room, Mother," she said, interrupting her own thought with words, "not here among this Danish furniture and white coffee tables and rose upholstering and ash wood and . . ." The pitch of her voice rose steadily. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Father would understand, I know he would."

The whole thing was like a mad dream where for all her efforts she could only run in place, never getting anywhere because the whole dream was always against her.

"Oh please, don't just sit there ready to cry. It . . . it depresses me."

The fresh newness of the crinolines gave the faintest notion of her trembling. Her mother, like an old mannequin, was now standing firmly by the rose covered chair. They swayed in the lists like two emasculated knights ready to fight with all the meanness of modern conflict. Her mother's eyes were bright with astonishment.

"Good night, good night mother. No, we can't talk, we can't even look at each other." She turned on her small pointed heels and pinching the bridge of her nose with her fingers she ran out into

the hall.

"Wait Julie . . . wait."

But Julie was gone then, the sharp ring on the richly waxed hardwood in the hall and finally the slam of the front door was all that remained.

There was a great stillness in the fall night and traces of fires still glowed and smoldered in the gutters—a fine smoke rose from them, was caught on one side by a street light, and then faded off into the darkness. She stood for only a minute, her girlish face screwed up into a comical—a tragi-comical—expression, and then pushed on around the side of the house to her old car parked behind her father's and mother's in the driveway. The sparkle of the street light on the cars' new finish winked slyly at her as she climbed into her own. She pulled her skirts clumsily about her in the tiny front seat and backed out of the driveway with a grass-ripping rush, leaving a long ugly rut in the lawn. The shadow of her mother's face was in the front window.

The smell of smoldering leaves even hung to the inside of the car, but she didn't mind so much as it was remote and reminded her sweetly of something dying, something rising up to join the impersonal, elemental night sky.

"Damn you," she yelled automatically at a man driving slowly along the boulevard smoking a pipe. He took the pipe from his lips and started to call something back as her old car swung past him and raced on down the dark street, but realizing that it was only a young girl, he braked his automobile in surprise.

She could observe his empty face in the mirror and it sent her face into a frown, for she hated, and feared too, the disapproving set of his blurred features.

"Why do I keep going against a whole world of faces like that," she whispered into the mirror. But the car and the man only disappeared in the haze giving no answer, as if none had ever been expected.

The night slowly enveloped her as corner after corner fled by, filled with drug stores and gasoline stations and more of that false whiteness which makes a mockery of dark. She repeated some and some were new, as she wound in and out along the periphery of the city. The lights were first thick and bunched. All the corners seemed crowded with high schoolers after the usual football games or old men leaning back in old chairs or young couples waiting for a trolley.

She imagined them staring at her and drove straight through one traffic light to avoid the greasy, inquisitive eyes of a group huddled around an open magazine stand. Other places the lights were thinner and the avenues of homes like her own rushed past half obscured by a considerate night. At first nothing was new, rather everything was old, the difference in the type of streets was practically indiscernable, only perhaps the light became a little dimmer as the corners rolled by.

Soon though the houses were getting closer together and while the lights were still the same distance apart they were from some other decade and were yellow, leaving long stretches unilluminated in the front line of the building. The big neon tubes of the boulevards were gone now and these lights were only single bulbs looking under their round metal shades, like so many Chinese coolies.

It was hours and almost all her gasoline before she decided to go. Even then she wasn't sure she was going until she saw the sign focus out of the single brick wall and string of light that was the horizon of the street. "Beer-Wine" the sign said. The name of the proprietor was missing, only the big letter "S" remained of his name. She recognized it immediately for the fact that it was set off from the other stores and buildings. Too, she could see the bare bulbs strung in the garden in back. The front was calm and peaceful: only one old Negro reclined on the bench in front. He sat there dark, just touched by the light from the red and blue sign, slowly buttoning and unbuttoning his pin-striped vest. He spat in the other direction as she came uncertainly along the sidewalk having left the car in a side street.

"H'lo," he said heavily, "whe's yo' friends."

"Oh, they're probably coming, I was just going to meet some one alone." Her voice sounded far off to her, like she was listening to it just as the old man was—his fuzzy chin and golden grin turned up to her with a great expression, an expression he probably wasn't even aware of, or needed to be aware of.

"You all a funny group." His voice was so thick that she could barely untangle the words from the guttural undertones.

"Yes, I know," she said, and patted him on the arm.

And suddenly the darkness and the far off jangle of cheap music seemed to suck her into the bar through the high oak doors; past the coolness of the middle passage and then another pair of swinging doors; and she was inside. The bar was exceedingly cheap. The floors

were rough and the several breaks in the flooring were uncertainly reinforced with metal, while the tables were merely old kitchen furniture—square and plain. The bar itself was dull and cried out for paint. The stools were nondescript; some covered in green, some in red, and some were not covered at all. Too, some were ripped and seeped stuffing, long globs hanging down from the torn bottoms. The room was warm and sweaty. The dark skins began to exude slowly from the walls and the sounds of low throaty conversations, dark and African, gave to the whole scene an almost indefinable rhythm. The only lights in the room were the two blueish white tubes over the mirror. The warm voices and the clink of bottles made her feel better, although it was still not quite right being alone, lacking the easy humor of her friends.

"Hello Miss," the rich voice called out from behind the bar, the big yellow eyes emitting a light of their own, "how's you be?"

"Is Chuck here?"

"Chuck who?" He went on wiping out a glass with his big soft hands. The pinkish nails caught the underground light. His lips moved very slowly; but then again there was no hurry, none at all.

"You know, Chuck."

"Chuck, nows le'me see is he one of your friends?"

"Chuck Bronson."

"Oh, Chuckie, yes, but . . . uh, but he's a colored boy."

The soft vowels just sort of slipped out over the worn planks of the bar.

"Yes, I know," she said, and she felt silly, almost naked, standing there in her four crinolines and fluffy sweater.

"You's a strange bunch all right. Oh I guess he's in the back dere. You be careful now Miss, I don't want no trouble."

But then he smiled at her big and golden putting the glass down between them, and they both laughed. The old negro's voice rolling and falling like deep, disturbed water.

"Thank you," she said finally, "thank you."

"Why tha's all right, right in back there," he said, the voice rolling again like water.

She turned around suddenly and went on toward the back of the rude store. Passing the dark whispering wall she heard some one singing a hollow rock-and-roll tune under his breath. Men and women's voices hung together in a humid constriction drawing up into one soft vowel that was both despair and happiness; and al-

though she could not see one white face in the crowd, no one stared at her. The bright eyed conversations went right on, and she suddenly had an urge to lean over and touch the healthy bodies on either side of her; to touch the bodies and kiss the shiny faces. She suddenly felt secretive and alone; and the Jonah story of descent into understanding was on the edge of her heated mind. It was almost better without the protection—the well-meant barricades of her friends, who despite their cynicism and ribaldry, still instinctively sheltered her.

The garden in back was almost empty and the tables were strung out over the bare grassless ground while the motley of bulbs collected small entourages of insects. A straw hatted trio was sitting up on a low podium at one end of the room, but they merely looked at their instruments while their dark fingers beat out the rhythm of a tune from the juke box, whose bubbly front gave off the only real light in the strange arena. One couple danced, while another made love by the decrepit fence. She stood leaning slightly forward trying to see what other figures hid behind the vines that blanketed the people at the tables. Again when the juke box stopped the same rich voices—low and semi-musical—crept up her body to her ear.

Then a hand touched her arm and she turned around to see Chuck. His features took on a dark golden tint in the strange discolored light. He was a handsome mulatto and even his tense sobriety couldn't crush the black sparkle of his eyes.

"Hello," he said, "I didn't think you would come."

"No, why not?" she asked foolishly, and was immediately sorry.

"Well, I know the others but then you . . . well . . . things like this just don't happen. This is like something out of a novel. And even then . . ."

He was speaking stiltedly with a formality which was unfamiliar.

"Say, let's sit down," she said.

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"That's all right. Why were you standing up there?"

"Just waiting for you."

"I know, silly," she smiled.

They sat and talked for an hour or more, while the expressionless combo played intermittently. He talked in gasps and bursts; his politeness and care in speaking made her laugh several times, but after his darting looks of anger and dismay she was sorry. She tried to explain to him but gave up before his resolution to be completely cavalier. The band was louder even than the juke box, and in

this their playing was reassuring, as it muffled speech and seemed to isolate the couple in their own dark world behind the vines; related to the world only by the distant murmur of waterous words. After a while they danced and while they were dancing his dark eyes never left her own. They wound round and round to the coarse music: each body slowly finding the other out. Things seemed a long way from St. John's Blvd. His breath was loamy and sweet on her ear. The truth of the matter was somehow amazingly clear, differences were as foreign as the flickering glow of the high apartment windows high above the vines and the fence, the radio tower off across the shallow buildings of the town's basin area.

"Is it only because you're different," she asked.

His animal eyes intimated yes, but he said merely: "Am I so different? Am I really so much different, now?"

She could only answer, "No, no." His intensity had overcome her and the truth was impossible to explain. There was no easy retreat, no rationale.

They danced over and over again, and still said very little. She only watched his wool shirt flop hopelessly behind the rhythm of his quick body. And before she knew it, it had begun. The tiny bulbs and the black strong faces of the band, her own night injected body, his shirt, the glistening gold neck that moved his head slowly back and forth began to reach her sense of reality and pull her inward and upward to the dark secrets that she had been on the verge of for weeks. The trumpet blazed from her eyes to the back of her head and the call wailed in the night over, about, around his soft Negroid voice—polite, mysterious and above all dark.

"Come on, let's go, please," he said when the band was finally packing up their instruments. "There'll be some place that we can go."

"OK, please," she mimicked him happily. "I guess we can always pull the dashboard up about our knees."

It recalled a half forgotten line of poetry to them both, and they laughed, as the barest trace of dawn filtered into the sky over the apartments in the distance. It gave a hint of lightness to his hand resting on her shoulder.

But as they rushed out of the silent bar into the battered streets of dark town and headed toward her car, they passed several young white men waiting on the corner for the next bus—the last relay in their cross town journey to a drawing board or draperies counter.

Those modern Ulysses in their white collars and grey suits seemed like so many zoo-fed penguins loose in a fog bound morning. She looked into their astonished, white-repressed faces and suddenly—it was quite a new feeling—had to laugh.

One of the men started to speak, but she cut him off.

“Man,” she said, and she really hated the hip talk but it was a good touch, “don’t sweat it; don’t sweat it, man.”

The silence as they swept by was monumental.

And suddenly a word came into her mind. “Prism,” she whispered, and liking its sound she pulled his face down to hers and said it round and circlish into his ear. “You know,” she said, “that’s what the world is, a prism. We’re just broken like so many silly colors into little camps of self-consciousness. Christ, Chuck, we’re just different sides of the same light.” She said it short and hurriedly as if she were afraid she would forget it.

He turned and pressed her to his strong thinness and for the moment the chalk-line faces of the forlorn group on the corner were erased by a rush of mist and wonder.