The Indicator

Bill Nolan*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©1964 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
THE CITY honked and blinked on and off around him in the hot, still dusk. The street was alive, shimmering with bright lights and sparkling chrome. He sensed the nervous, racing activity of people going somewhere. Their anticipation reflected off the hot sidewalk and flashed in the windows of passing cars and blinked in the neon—on, off, up, down, red, white, one line, two lines, three lines, flash, one line, two lines, three lines, flash—and defied the subtle dignity of the night overhead.

He walked slowly and alone, while couples and crowds passed him on the sidewalk and rode beside him in the street and sat oblivious of him behind the polished marble walls. He absorbed their noise and their bright light and their anticipation, but he resisted their current. The flowed all around him bumping into him, splitting up to get around him, re-merging in front of him, and hurrying on ahead to catch the light or get in line or squeeze through the door before it pressed back into the wall.

He didn't feel that he was part of them, yet he couldn't help believing that besides the general excitement of the street, he felt a certain personal, individual excitement. He
couldn’t help sensing that somewhere there might be a place where he would become a part of all this life that flowed around him. And the possibility of this being true, the possibility of there being a circumstance, a time and place, a golden hour, a significant glittering sliver of being and living and inter-reacting with the being and living of others prevented him from submerging his small personal excitement. Instead, he unconsciously nurtured it, hoping it would grow and burn away his evening loneliness and his weary sense of bland detachment from anything significant and real. It was the detachment that held him back, that resisted the current. He was a heavier element, an insoluble particle that remained in the solvent but never merged with it.

Yet he wasn’t sure whether this detachment was permanent or merely a function of circumstance, likely to change at any given moment, at any corner, on any day. And he wasn’t sure whether instead he would dislike more the oblivion of being completely dissolved, completely absorbed in and by the blinking, bleating, racing mass that surrounded him.

His past was childhood, another form of oblivion. And another form of detachment. All that was now insignificant and unreal had been in childhood very real and very significant. He had been involved completely with his small life, oblivious of where he was going, who he was. But at the same time childhood, by its very nature, had cultivated a delicious, fascinating kind of detachment. There was a natural separation then from adult life, a separation that he had unconsciously treasured and had enjoyed as often as possible, without ever being aware of its existence. Now the oblivion had vanished—the merciful, mesmerizing oblivion, and he had become instead painfully aware of the detachment, which he had somehow retained, and of the oblivion of everybody else.

He was almost too young to have an adult past, somehow too old to dismiss the present as a mere transition to an adult future. He couldn’t quite justify his insolubility with life as simply a temporary predicament, a transition. And with each succeeding day and month, each evening walking alone and each morning waking up to the hollow, impotent day, the detachment seemed to become more permanent.
But there was always a hope, a last resort. There was always the possibility of something else coming at him from tomorrow, something that would change everything.

He turned a corner behind two couples and allowed them to run interference for him past a string of theaters and bars. He walked a little faster to keep up with them and remained in the dead space just behind them like a bird flying in the eye of a hurricane. Suddenly the two couples stopped and began filing through a door into a bar. He almost bumped into them. The cool, dry air flowed out and enveloped him and made him want to escape the heat outside.

He followed the couples in and found a stool near the end of the bar. The atmosphere was quiet and relaxing, and it didn't seem either crowded or empty, but somewhere pleasantly in-between. No one seemed to be paying any attention to him, so he lapsed into a state of casual observation, grateful for something to occupy his mind and keep him from thinking about himself. He ordered a drink simply because the bartender assumed he wanted one, and because he unconsciously felt more at ease with rather than without one.

As he surveyed the room he sensed something lacking, something incomplete, and then discovered the reason for it. Most of the room was painted or upholstered a sterile, non-committal blue-gray. It looked uncomfortably anonymous and slightly dusty. But isolated spots glowed hot and stark from indirect red lights. The front window and everybody that passed by it on the outside or sat near it on the inside were bathed in the bawdy liquid redness of a neon sign that hung against the glass. The flat grayness and the air-conditioning together with the silky hot color left him with a hollow, unfulfilled feeling, like two notes sounded together on a piano.

He noticed that everyone who came in automatically changed to either gray or red—like chameleons—depending on where he sat down. This idea amused him; he toyed with it in his mind for lack of anything more pleasant to think about. He began studying individuals to see if the "red" people behaved differently from the "gray" people, and became so absorbed that he lost track of who came in
and who went out. A crowd flowed in from a nearby theater and filled the empty booths.

After a while, he slowly became aware of something vaguely distracting off to one side. He glanced over and met the eyes of a woman who'd been looking at him from her booth. She quickly turned back to her drink when he saw her. He felt a small spark of excitement stir up inside.

He was attracted to her instantly. There was something different about her that he liked, something intriguing and yet familiar, as if he understood part of what she was without ever meeting her. She was sitting in a “red” spot instead of a gray one, but somehow the strong red light was becoming to her. It tinted her pale skin and left highlights in her hair, which was a natural, soft blond. She was full-bodied and high-breasted. Her simple dress wasn’t cut extremely low, but it didn’t have to be; he could sense her firm fullness without seeing it.

He drank her in as long as he dared and then reluctantly shifted his eyes away to nothing in particular, keeping her in the corner of his eye.

For a moment or two she remained glued to her drink, as if thinking about something carefully. Then she looked up and rested her eyes on him again.

He could feel her evaluating him, examining him a piece at a time. He wanted to look directly at her but he was afraid she would turn away. He liked having her look at him. And it was obvious that she liked what she saw. He began to feel instinctively that she was within his reach, that with very little maneuvering and effort he could obtain and enjoy a certain degree of intimacy with her.

Finally he could stand it no longer, and threw his gaze once again fully on her.

She hesitated, but then evidently realized that he wasn’t annoyed, so she smiled faintly. Then she suddenly slipped out of the booth and walked slowly over to him, never dropping her eyes from his.

“You stare very nicely,” she said with her faint smile.

“So do you,” he answered with amusement.

He hadn’t expected her to walk right over to him; he
couldn’t remember any girl being that candid before. Especially one like her.

“Would you mind ordering me a drink?” She asked evenly.

“No, not at all . . . what would you like?”

“A Martini, please.”

He ordered two Martinis and wondered where he would go from there.

She stood very close to him.

The bartender handed him the drinks.

“Do you want to sit down?” he asked.

She nodded.

As they walked over to her booth he felt everybody watching them pass. And he could still feel them watching after he had settled in the booth with her.

“Are you married?” she asked bluntly.

“No.”

“I didn’t think so.”

She took a tiny sip of her Martini.

“But I thought I’d make sure,” she added.

“Why?” he asked, imitating her bluntness.

“Oh, to test my judgment.”

She took another tiny sip.

“And to see how closely you fit the image I have of you,” she said significantly.

She evidently wanted him to lead her on, so he asked, “What image is that?”

He frowned slightly. She had been classifying him, an idea which didn’t appeal to him very much.

“I call it the Bright Young Man image.” She smiled, evidently at him and at her own thoughts.

“Under it I can lump together most of the attractive men I know. They all seem to have something in common. And you’ve the most typical example of a Bright Young Man I’ve met so far. If I were to describe the image, I’d have to describe you.”

He frowned deeper.

“I don’t see what your image consists of, besides ordinary physical attraction.” He kept on frowning. For some reason he disliked what she was trying to do, but he didn’t know
why. And he hadn't intended to become involved in this kind of conversation at all.

"Actually, that's a great deal of it," she continued. "The over-all effect is physical. But when you analyze what causes this effect, then you begin to understand the image." She hurriedly sipped the Martini again and began a fresh attack. "The key to the whole thing is subtlety—even though the effect is anything but subtle. The Bright Young Man has a subtle expression of intelligence molded on his face, yet there's just enough boyishness left to make him look subtly innocent and clean cut. The clothes he wears have been carefully tailored to fit just snugly enough, just enough to emphasize and enhance his masculinity. His walk is a fascinating blend of athletic swagger and cool, careless dignity, together with a touch of boyish hesitance."

She paused for emphasis.

"You see? Subtlety. Everything carefully controlled, cultivated since boyhood until the first moments of manhood add the final nuance, mellow slightly the rough edges of immaturity."

She smiled knowingly.

"You have this thing all thought out, don't you," he said, a little sarcastically.

"Yes, I have, haven't I? I noticed all this long ago, and I've become fascinated by it. It somehow gives me an insight on life, a different view of things which other people don't have."

"But I still can't see where this image distinguishes me from all the past generations. Every man goes through this transition from youth to maturity, when he subtly combines the characteristics of both stages."

"But today's young men are different from yesterday's. In the first place, they're more worldly and more careful to conceal their wordliness. It isn't fashionable with them to be outwardly urbane, sleek and all-knowing. Instead they strive to be as casual and unobtrusive as possible—a form of conformity I suppose. And they're masters of the understatement. Their whole sense of humor is based on this device. The result is satire, running from cruel, biting satire to off-hand, tongue-in-cheek satire. It's the Ivy League rearing its
Eastern head. Mix Ivy League subtlety with athletic virility and Midwestern matter-of-factness, and a touch of West Coast materialism and you have the mid-century image."

"Maybe," he said, "and maybe I resemble that image, but I'm not just a face or a mannerism. I'm also a brain and a soul, and that's where the resemblance ends."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that," she replied. "The Bright Young Men aren't just skin deep either. And they aren't really 'bright.' I mean they don't strut around in cheerful, positive oblivion. On the contrary, they're thorough-going negativists. They view everything in a pessimistic light. Their philosophy, even though it's collective, exists just the same. They're guided by what is IN and what is OUT, and negativism has been solidly IN since the inception of their type."

He didn't respond for a moment, but mulled her words over silently. He had an idea of what she was getting at. But he didn't like the idea of lumping together a whole segment of people and pinning a label on them. Especially that segment, because he was in that segment, and almost everyone he knew was in it with him.

They had something in common, yes...

And the more he thought about what they had in common, the more accurate and infallible and universal her annoying little image became.

He scowled and gulped half his Martini down. Its burning sting satisfied him somehow.

"You don't like being a Bright Young Man, do you?" she said, after watching him a moment. Her voice was almost sympathetic now.

"I don't like being called one. Because I'm not so sure I am one, or that anyone is, for that matter."

He wanted to talk about something more pleasant and less mechanical. He allowed his eyes to drop to her bosom. He deliberately stared at it. Immediately he felt a tremendous urge to reach over and grasp her firmly and pull her against him. He could almost feel her fullness cushioned on his chest.

She flushed and then began talking again, somewhat nervously, as if to divert his attention back to her face, where she was less vulnerable.
“Did it ever occur to you that if you weren’t called a Bright Young Man you’d be called something else—the Hollow man, or the Lost man, or the Beat man or something else like that?” She was talking in a slightly louder voice now. “And do you know why? Because everybody looks to you and the ones like you to determine what is going on in the world. They read like a signpost, even though sometimes they write in the words themselves. Then they know where they are, or think they do.” The pitch of her voice gradually rose, and she became more excited as she talked.

But he became more involved with the bare, soft flesh of her bosom.

“It’s reassuring for them to be able to look at you, the indicator, and see the trend of the era,” she was saying. “This era the indicator points to Bright Young Men, and the trend is Negativism.” She smiled an ironic little smile and momentarily carried the idea on in her head.

But he didn’t want to hear any more. There was something to what she had been saying, and at another time or another place he might have followed it through, talked it out and perhaps expanded on it.

But now it was too abstract and analytical. She was picking life apart from a distance, when he wanted instead to be in the middle of life, fused with it. It occurred to him suddenly that she was as detached as he was, and he was weary of detachment. He wished now that they were sitting with the “gray” people instead of isolated in their red spot, and that they were talking about something fresh and stimulating and exciting. Or something that made them laugh until tears came to their eyes and their sides ached. Or something that made them want to hold hands and lose track of time and forget where they were.

But he knew that would never happen. Because they were both red people. Because they were both negatives. They repelled each other, seeking and needing desperately the other valence. He was attracted to her physically and that’s as far as it went.

His mind suddenly turned a corner. Maybe that was far enough right then. And maybe that was all she expected too, if she expected anything.
He glanced at her cautiously. She appeared to be still involved with her own thoughts.

He decided he didn’t really care what she expected. He wanted her physically, and he sensed that he could have her. He had sensed it when he had caught her looking him over, and now that he knew anything else was impossible, he could take her for what she was and enjoy her. Perhaps for while it would even make him forget. For a few moments perhaps he could actually escape the hollowness and merge, dissolve, flow hot and fast, and rear recklessly into oblivion. Oblivion—he laughed inside himself. So that’s oblivion too, he thought wryly. Just another form of oblivion. The adult becomes again the child, and separately and as one they escape, the child with his mind and the adult with his body.

He twisted the corners of his mouth with the irony that swept through him.

But then he cut himself short. He was drifting away again into detachment, picking life apart from a distance like her, and he didn’t want that. Not now. There was something else he wanted now.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked. She had been silent for a while, looking at him.

He stared at her bosom again.

She flushed deeply, even in the red light. She seemed more nervous than ever.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked. She had been silent for a while, looking at him.

He stared at her bosom again.

She flushed deeply, even in the red light. She seemed more nervous than ever.

“Do you really want to know?” he said. The corners of his mouth twisted again. He looked up and deliberately burned his eyes deep into hers, as if he could see her thoughts.

“Never mind.” Her face was crimson. “I think I know.” She breathed unevenly. But she didn’t back away, or pull a shell over her.

Suddenly, instinctively, he knew what to say next. He felt it, thought it, and said it as one brief, unbroken unit of action. It began deep inside him from some source of infallible knowledge, and flowed out involuntarily.

“You don’t want to wait, do you,” he said, still holding her rigidly with his eyes.

It shocked her, but she showed her shock only in her eyes, and only for a moment. Then she was steady, almost calm.

“No,” she answered.
He looked at her a moment longer, gradually lowering his eyes and resting them between her breasts. Then he casually slid out of the booth and stood up.

"Neither do I," he said.

SARAH, child, will you please run outside and get the clothes off the line before it rains," the voice echoed through the old house.

Why did she always have to say Sarah, child? God, doesn’t she know that I’m sixteen and that Jim Bode has taken me out on three dates this month? Why, just last week he took me to the County Fair and won me that black panda bear. I sure wish she’d . . . her mind wondered as she pulled the homemade clothespins off her pale red dress. Gee, I sure looked nice in it last week, even if it was a little faded when I got it from Sis. I guess it’s just like everything else around here—old and run down.

The wind whipped up the dry dust and blew it past her. Whipping, her long hair flew back over her rounded shoulders, revealing her elephant-like ears. Bowing out from her face, her nose slid between two blue eyes. Her boney fingers