

Them Pretty Faces

fiction by J. Clyde Wilson

My sister she's funny. Pa says she's funny and Ma says it too. Everyone says she's funny.

All she wants to do is sit on the porch and stare at the sky like she does, and Pa will say: "Get out in the field woman, we got crops to hoe!"

or
"I told you to feed them hogs!"

So she gets up with them eyes that look right through you at nothing and go feed the hogs. First to the pump to fill two buckets of water and she carries them, and then to the grain-bin for the feed and I carry that. She never talks to me cause I'm not there. She never looks at me till we get to the hog pens, till she takes the feed and pours it in the trough. Then she turns to me and says:

"Let's go to the top of the hill."

She likes for me to go with her cause Pa has to yell at both of us then. So we climb over the fence and walk into the sunflowers and I say:

"I'm telling Pa; he's gonna yell at you."

But she keeps on walking and faster than me cause she's big. We come out of the sunflowers on top of the hill and she sits down with her legs white like a milk cow under the dress. She doesn't look at me cause her eyes can't look that close. She looks down the hill at nothing, at the highway with the cars driving by all red and blue and green.

"Just look at them Willy," she says. "I wonder where they're all going?"

I try to watch where they're going, but they just go over the hill. They go so fast all you can see is the red and the blue and the green. So fast you wouldn't even know they were cars if you didn't know they were cars.

"Why doesn't Pa have a car, sis?"

"I wonder how far they've come?" she says.

"Will he ever have a car, sis?"

"I bet they're going to town," she says, and then I know what she's thinking cause all she thinks about is town. Pa won't even take her no more unless she starts to cry and Ma makes him. And then she wears her good dress and Pa yells at her and says it ain't proper to wear your church dress to town, but Ma lets her.



"You stay right here, Willy," she always says when we get to town. "I'll be right back."

But she never is, not even when I wait for her, not even when I pass her on the street and she looks the other way. So I sit in front of the hardware store and watch her walk up and down the sidewalk. She looks in the store windows and stops in front of the one with the music and the glass boxes and the people's voices inside the glass. She smiles and says things to the people on the street, but not to me cause I'm not there. And when Pa's ready to go he always has to look for her. One time he couldn't find her and she didn't come home till past dark and Pa had to hit her like he does Ma sometimes.

I don't like to watch the cars for long and I keep saying, "Let's go back, sis, I wanna go back," till she turns to me with them eyes looking right through me at nothing and her face round and pale and frozen like a statue.

"Okay Willy," she says, and we go back then to have Pa yell at us, at her really cause she's funny and I'm not there.

So I knew something was wrong right away when she didn't go to the hill no more. Pa didn't know and neither did Ma; it was only me that knew. She would come down to help Ma with breakfast and them eyes of hers would be closed, like she was still sleeping. And she would sleep the whole day and walk with her eyes closed that used to look so far away. And Ma would say:

"What's the matter, child? Are you sick?"

"Sick hell!" Pa would say. "She's just lazy! Stumbling around all day half asleep; I oughta slap her face!"

Then I heard her sneak out the window one night and run through the yard. I listened for her a long time and she didn't come, and the next morning she was downstairs with her eyes closed again. So I listened the next night and the next and the next, and she snuck out the window every time.

"How come you never watch the cars any more? I'm gonna tell Pa what you're doing," I said at breakfast, and she turned to me with her eyes all cloudy and red and dark underneath.

"You keep your mouth shut, Willy," she said and went out to do chores asleep.

Then I waited and followed her out at night. She crawled out the window in her good dress and tip-toed through the yard and ran down to the highway. I followed a ways behind so she couldn't see me and walked back in the trees alongside the highway all dark and shadowy beneath the moon. And when I saw the lights I knew what it was.

A truck-stop cafe. One of them that stays open all night long. She walked right in the door like we did sometimes for pie and coffee, and I figured on walking in too. But when I got to the window she was on behind the counter with an apron round her waist, and I knew she wouldn't give me no pie.

Next morning I told Pa she wouldn't give me no pie and he said, "What? What pie? What are you talking about?"

"The pie she wouldn't give me at the truck-stop where she goes."

Pa looked at her with his face all covered with scratchy black hair and said, "What are you up to now?"

"I've got a job, Pa. I'm the night waitress at the cafe down the road."

"Night waitress? You mean that's why you been half asleep stumbling around here not doing your work?"

"Pa, I want—"

"Leaving your Ma and me and your little brother to do your work! Huh? Is that what you're doing?"

Pa grabbed her and Ma yelled at both of them and Pa said, "Where's the money? Give me the money!"

"No! Please, Pa! I got things I want to do!" she yelled but Pa ran to her room and found the money in her purse. She yelled at him and he slapped her and she didn't yell no more; she came back to the breakfast table and sat down. And them eyes of hers were wide open now, looking right through you far away again.

Pa said she couldn't work no more and Ma said she could. Then Pa tried to take the money she brought home till she didn't bring it home any more and he yelled at her. She stood with them eyes wide open and her face frozen like a statue, like Pa wasn't there either, not even when he yelled, not even when he hit her. And after he was through she ran to her room and stared at the crack in the wall and I said:

"Sis, how much money do you have?"

She stared at the crack that wasn't nothing but a crack in the plaster all yellowed and falling off.

"Is it enough to buy pie and coffee like we used to do?"

The crack was there and I wasn't.

"Why do you never buy me any pie?"

She shook her head.

"You used to buy me pie and coffee, don't you remember?"

"All right, Willy, I'll buy you some pie," she said, and she took me down to the cafe every week for pie and coffee. Sometimes twice a week when I'd ask her a lot and she'd stare at the crack with her face frozen like a statue and nod her head.

Then one day she said, "I got something better than pie, Willy," and her face wasn't froze no more and her eyes looked right at mine. She brought one of them boxes out of the closet like the ones in the store window and set it on the floor, and when she turned one of the knobs there was a loud noise and the box turned fuzzy like snow. She turned another knob and there was grey and black people in the box and voices inside the glass.

"It's a television, Willy; it's one of them televisions."

"Where'd you get it?"

"In town. They got one just like it at the cafe."

"What's Pa gonna say?"

"You ain't gonna tell him, are you Willy?" Her eyes looked right at mine. "I'll let you watch it and all just like it was yours. I'll buy you pie every day, Willy."

So I had to say I wouldn't tell and she said I better not if I wanted that pie. She showed me how it worked and we watched it every chance we got. We watched them people with their pretty faces and the cars and the towns bigger than any town ever. We snuck in from the fields to watch it in the afternoon and turned it way

down low after supper so Pa couldn't hear it and yell at us and then I wouldn't get no pie.

So I had to tell when she came home and said, "They don't need me at work, Willy; I don't have a job now. I can't buy you pie no more."

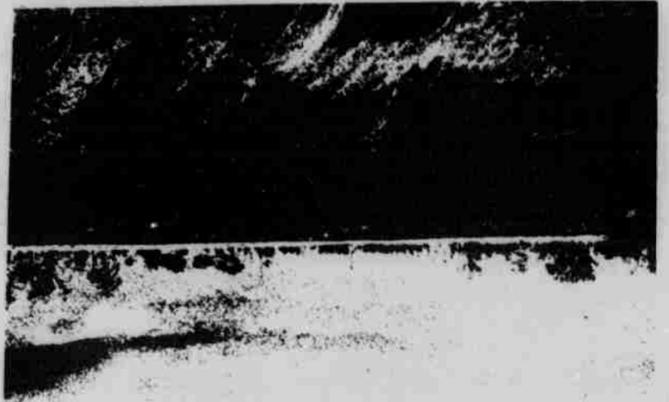
I had to tell when she came home and said that. It wasn't my fault; she didn't have to come home and say I didn't get no more pie.

Pa, he said, "One of them televisions?" and I told him about the faces inside that talked and he yelled at Ma and Ma yelled at him.

"My own daughter!" Pa yelled. "My crops need spray. My animals need feed. My own family ain't got enough to eat and she spends her money on something like that!"

"It's her money; she worked for it!" Ma yelled.

"That don't matter—" Pa sputtered with his face all red like it gets and the words coming out hard like it hurt.



"Stay away from her!" Ma yelled and tried to grab at him and he pushed her down on the floor and ran to the bedroom.

"You ungrateful bitch!" Pa sputtered and tried to yell at her, but his face was all red and the words hurt too much.

"Pa, please! Please!"

He grabbed it out of her arms.

"Pa!" She looked away with them eyes when he threw it on the floor, when the people busted into pieces. Pa tried to say something but his face was too red. He stomped out of the house and slammed the screen door, and then it was quiet. So quiet it hurt my ears. My sister, she sat on the floor with all the busted pieces and her eyes looking right through them at nothing again, and I said:

"Now I won't ever get no pie, will I?"

But I wasn't there. And she wasn't crying. The tears rolled down her cheeks slow and easy and fell on the glass where them faces should have been.

She didn't move; she just sat there for a long time and ran her fingers through the pieces, the broken glass and the wires and the tubes; all tangled and busted together like she was still looking for them pretty faces.

My sister she's funny.

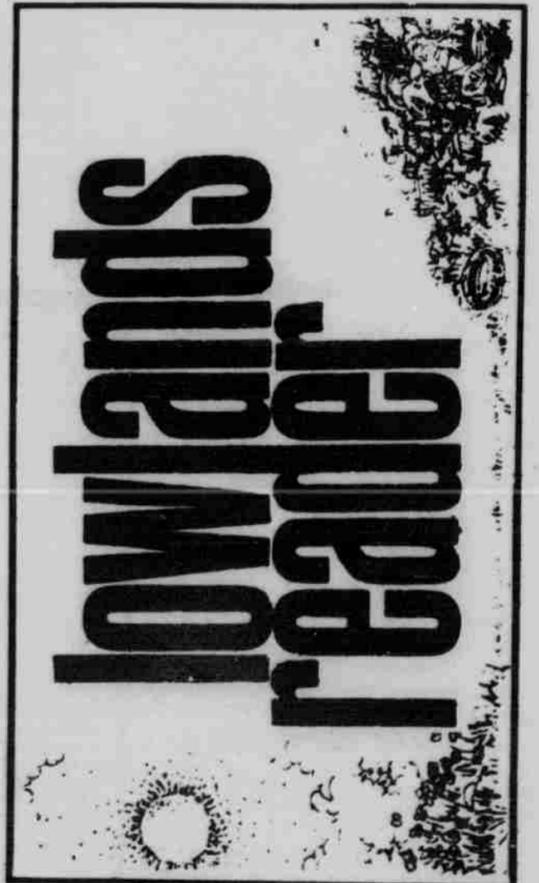


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