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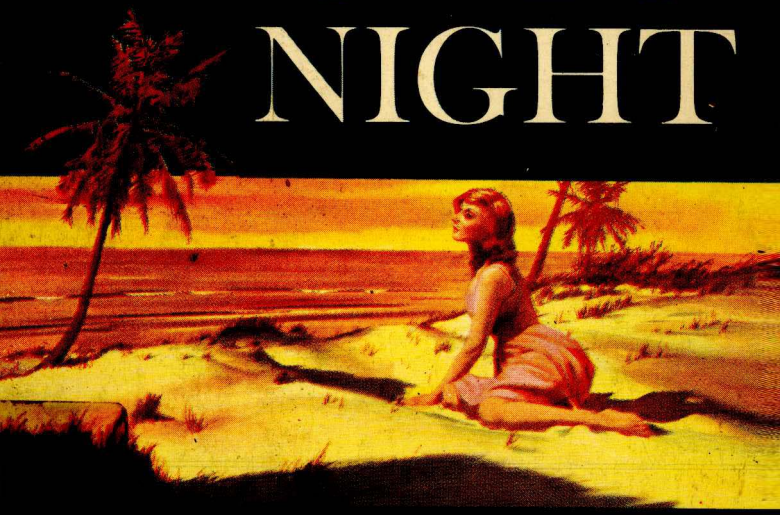

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NIGHT UNTO NIGHT

BY PHILIP WYLIE

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POPULAR LIBRARY EDITION
Published in August, 1963

Published by arrangement with Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc.
Holt, Rinehart & Winston edition published in September, 1944
Five printings

Dedicated with love
to my wife

FREDERICA BALLARD WYLIE

Table of Contents

The heavens declare the glory of God: and the firmament sheweth his handywork.

Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge.

There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard.

Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them hath he set a tabernacle for the sun.

Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race.

His going forth is from the end of the heaven, and his circuit unto the ends of it: and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof.

PSALM 19.

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air;
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve;
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

THE TEMPEST, ACT IV, SCENE I.

PREFACE

Here is a novel about death—a novel, that is, about the living and their thoughts of death. In human life two absolutes exist: birth and death. Of the two, we can anticipate only our end. Life is a struggle against ever-nearing death. But in it, as Sigmund Freud has found, there is a wish for death.

Part of the business of the living is to learn the meaning of that strange wish. Most existence on this planet is so primitive, alas, that it concerns itself with an effort to escape the inevitable doom of every man and even the naked thought of doom.

For this futility we struggle. Materialism is man's defiant attempt to overshadow destiny with the panoply of cities, the hurtling activity of his body, the absorption of his five senses through ceaseless compulsion—with toys and furnishings, games, stone jewelry, and fine processions—with listening and looking and smelling and touching and tasting—with all and everything that serves to stave off introspection for a minute, an hour, a lifetime. . . .

Peace is not the perquisite of nations. Individuals, alone, can savor peace. The peace of the world will come only when the people who compose it have found the way to inner peace. Materialism offers no such way—and cannot offer it. As long as we are wholly extraverted—yes, as long as we ascribe "rights" to property or defer to a "right" of possession or consider nations "righteous"—we shall have no peace. That is not an economic statement but a description of a far-off attitude few living men can guess at—and a measure of its distance from us, nowadays.

The shimmering constructions of our postwar world will someday lead us back—through envy and inhumanity, through greed,

and through the lust for expressing lust without first examining it—to more wars. Wars are a collective fulfillment of the death wish; they are made necessary by the failure of individuals to reckon with themselves. Wars are a response to the orderliness of nature.

We are governed by laws which lie wholly outside the cognition of most of us—and need not. Our ignorance makes us lawless and the laws compel us to turn upon each other. They need not.

Churchly law cannot suffice for us. any longer. Our churches have studied politics instead of virtue; they have accumulated property instead of wisdom. Meanwhile, each church has dragged into these hopeful days its neolithic ritual and the medieval shabbiness of its dogma. Each has become the mother of darkness. Each now cunningly promulgates darkness to retain adherents so that they, in turn, will hold its power and its property. Christ repudiated the churches of his time with raging eloquence; they were guiltless compared to our own—naïve perforce, where later churches could be clean.

The laws—the truths—which govern man abide nowhere in churches.

Agnosticism will solve the dilemma of an individual—and leave him with half a life: the half he chooses by deciding he knows so much he is unable to know anything. Such a man may be moral; busyness will replace his spirit. He will learn no more about life than a sparrow learns.

In *Night Unto Night,* I have concerned myself with these matters—not with the laws, so much, because in the finding of them lies the source of spiritual strength, but in a description of certain avenues of search. This book contains a few small ways to begin to think rather than the thoughts. Here are attitudes, lines for investigation, and statements of common problems which are too often either shuffled off for mundane affairs or flatly rejected as valid subjects for study.

This is, then, a religious book—even when it attacks organized religion. For the "organization" of a religion is, again, and individual task and not a public work. As in *Generation of Vipers,* I have borrowed freely from the brooding of others so that the reader will not have to depend entirely upon the workings of my own most ordinary mind for his entertainment or his interest. But I have written this book as a novel rather than as a sermon because, while much of what I say here belongs to logic, much more belongs to experience. I want my readers to explore human

values even more than to take inventory of our collective predicament.

One or two credits should be added to this introduction—and one explanation.

Night Unto Night was not my idea. A year and a half ago, at the home of my friend, Milton MacKaye, in Washington, I was talking about that vast portion of American civilization which has been unwittingly erected as a sanctuary from, or a concealment of, human death. Our conversation led thence to immortality, and to ghosts. We also discussed the phenomenon of man's evolution in two million painful years; and we considered consciousness—which has, I believe, a relation to space and time different from the one momentarily in acceptance among university pedants.

Mrs. MacKaye, who writes stories under the name of Dorothy Cameron Disney, suggested that my argument had made the theme for a novel; forthwith she outlined its principal characters, its setting, and its central problem. The evening's talk was thereby personalized. I thought about that kernel of commencement for a month or two—and spent the best part of a year writing this book.

Those not used to the kind of books I write to my private specifications may feel that I have taken some undue advantages here. Two of my characters are unusually disquisitious; but this whole novel is a kind of monologue. As in *Finnley Wren,* I have set one fable and half of a second in the story. They are allegories for changes of mood. And among the pages ahead will be found a section from "another" book—fragments of a chapter in a make-believe work by William Percival Gaunt. These bits are set in a different type; they may be skipped by all who are allergic to themes and concerned with surfaces alone. The altering of the type-style will make it easy for such persons to find their places again.

The title is taken, of course, from the Nineteenth Psalm, the second half of the second verse: ". . . night unto night sheweth knowledge." But it is intended to suggest, also, the thought expressed in a phrase from *The Tempest:* ". . . our little life is rounded with a sleep." Part of the psalm and the speech by Prospero are quoted on the page immediately preceding this note.

Since I believe that life and death also are parts of something else and since I believe the meaning of that otherness is different for each individual, I am made arbitrary by my own definitions.

The content limits here are my own; the principal discipline is an effort not to seem obscure in *Night Unto Night.*

Its readers will doubtless wonder if I have ever seen a ghost. I have not. But most of the "supernatural" events in this book have been witnessed by me and I have set them down as I observed them, exactly—though in other contexts and situations. All are as true as I can make any description—the description, say, of my desk, or yesterday's street accident, or of an autumn-clad hill. The black, amœboid shape—the abnormal tide—premonition—the dream of "unknowable" event—are experiences with which I have had to cope as intelligently as I could.

The story of the bowl of marigolds is my story also. The scene of that astonishing occurrence was carefully examined by my friend, Dr. William A. Gardner, a well-known New York medical man and a brilliant physical scientist. In no other way or sense, incidentally, does William Gardner resemble my character Maddox—who makes the investigation in the book. Whereas I have had Maddox take a skeptical view of the affair, Gardner, for all his empiricism, came to the conclusion that a knowable explanation did not exist for what had happened to my marigold bouquet.

For the rest, I shall let the book speak and the reader think, if he cares to.

PART I

THE BEACH

1

Nothing was wrong. The phrase spoke in Ann's mind. Nothing was wrong. She repeated it so that she could savor its comfort. He would come back. His ship would turn in between the brown boulders that formed the jetties. Canvas would shroud the outpointed guns. The metal canisters of TNT would be neatly ranged astern, like barrels in a grocery store, painted gray and laid horizontal. They would be places to sit in the sunshine again, not bombs. Nothing was wrong. The gulls would yaw like little angels, flying—talk like demons—and dive at the garbage. Small craft would dip in the bow's spreading corrugation. The men would be tired—some pale, some burned by the sun—all furred with a week's beard. They'd come in smartly, back water hard, foam it, annoy the pelicans, and lean the subchaser against the pier.

At the wooden gate, gray like the ship, gray as the bombs, the women would wait. The yeoman's wife with the baby and the tart with tourmaline eyes. Ann, too. They'd all be there. They'd represent hot coffee, cold beer, cocktails, perfume, music, clean sheets, low lights, love-abed.

Ann sat down in the sand. She had walked only a little way along the beach.

Perhaps the depth charges would be gone, this time. Perhaps the forward gun would hang like a broken finger. There might be a toothy hole amidships. The ship would come in grim and faster still, throw fish with her propellers, crackle against the

dock. Besides the women, there would be ambulances. White-clad men running aboard with stretchers. They'd carry off Bill. He'd be smoking a cigarette. He'd see her among the women and wink. They'd pretend that they were casual about it, too, until they were alone together after the shrapnel had been successfully removed. She'd wink back. She'd chuck the yeoman's baby under the chin and smile at the girl with lovely eyes.

When Bill was well again, a small but fiercely proud swastika would be worn by his ship.

Nothing wrong about a subchaser, four days overdue.

The edge of the moon showed like a slit in the door of a white-hot furnace. It dissolved the radiant mist that had preceded it, welled, shouldered up, cast from its face a small cloud, shredded it, and shone upon the frail fragments. These, for a little while, took color, pale and prismatic. For a little while they made a rainbow against the blue night; but its phosphorescent tones resembled the spectrum of sunless plants; they were pallid; they profused a rainbow without promise, detached and lunar, like the unseen rainbows in the frosted gases of Uranus.

The moon soon floated cleanly above the roof of cumulus. Below, the sea displayed its track—the thousand-spangled broad highway that leads from every beholder to nowhere. On the beach, dimpled depressions of human feet took rims of shadow. Encroaching palms rattled, green and glistening. The onshore breeze was warm.

Ann ran sand through her fingers, feeling the day-long heat in it. South, toward the lighthouse, miles away, the underbelly of a cloud burnt briefly with orchid fire. Lightning. A gunflash. Or the wet flame in the core of a depth-charge blast. She held her grains of sand tensely, unable to know. She had seen burning tankers. But she could not tell storms on the marine backdrop from naval action—and Bill always shrugged.

Lieutenant Dodge had been—how?—over the phone: "No, Ann. No report. That is—nothing for dissemination. He told you, didn't he, that the regulation period could stretch out? That he might be on his way someplace? Iceland? England? That's how we go, you know. We can't inform the wives—not even new and beautiful ones. It's war, gal. You'll have a whole lot of this sort of thumb-twiddling to do. Bridge, maybe? Mrs. D. and I would like to have you—and the candidate list for a fourth would be as long as the Navy roster—"

She took apart each sentence. Did he know anything he could not tell? Did he sound worried? Did he flatter her too much?

Was the invitation to play bridge an attempt to maneuver her into a position from which she could be bolstered against shock?

There were widows' walks around the tops of some of the houses in the New England town where she had been born. They would show you, in one, an exposed timber worn saddle-shaped by the shoe leather of a wife who had watched there—in the moonlight, in the rain, in the feathery snow of winter—for the topmast of a homebound whaler.

Steel whales, she thought.

There were no widows' walks in Florida.

She turned.

Bill's uncle's house looked at the moon with its unlighted windows. These glassy eyes, and the mouths of separate porch roofs, grimaced. She tried to read their expressions. The effort caused her to see the house itself and not its character in the dark. It was three stories high. Its weathered wood and rusted steel had survived hurricanes, but the buffer dunes had been gouged and flattened by great waves. Three stories of porches —balconies on the sides—gables on top, steep, shingled slopes —and, wreathing every edge, the scrollwork Bill's uncle had cherished. It festooned the house like blanched seaweed.

She could not see the need of paint, but remembered it, only, for the coiling frets glowed as if in fresh white lead. That was the dew, she decided. But there were boards—beams and clapboards—paint-stripped by the scouring sand and bleached by the salty wind which, on close inspection, were so warped, so gullied, and so nude as to belie ax, saw, plane and brush. These boards, rather, were suggestive of nature—of the weathered stumps of fallen trees and branches desiccating on bare mountaintops; they matched exactly the pale lumber discarded by the sea.

The house seemed entirely dark. Because of its situation, that seemingness of utter dark was a response to military regulation —a defense against the foe that cruised offshore and used the lights on land for silhouetting targets. Targets, Ann thought, are always people.

But there was illumination in the echoing intestines of the structure. She and Bill had made a blackout room of Uncle Paul's den on the ground floor—nailing worn comforters over two small windows, manufacturing a light-lock of Navajo rugs, arranging a devious corridor for ventilation, and adding to the contents of the place certain amenities against the embattled nights.

An ivory battery radio, "streamlined" as if it were a projectile, gleamed amid Uncle Paul's collection of walking-sticks. Under the dusty trophies—stuffed snakes and alligators, the tarpon, a turtle and a time-pecked buck's head—was a modern overspread of jacketed novels, electrical cooking appliances, stacked tins of food, tubular steel chairs with chrome plating and colored cloth seats, magazines, and—now—the white uniform coat on which she had been sewing a shining button.

Not an extensive refurbishing, considering the size of the house. They couldn't afford much.

Ann dug into cooler sand. The invisible but penetrating expression faded from her eyes. She could see parallel lines that edged the serpentine walk from the beach dunes to the steps —conch shells, set touching, all that distance. Their inner pinks and outer browns had been chalked by the decades. After each "blow" Uncle Paul had patiently re-collected them, replacing the lost shells and the broken ones, tossing his discard onto a pile in back where it stood shoulder-high, overswarmed with various vines which, on sudden mornings, were in turn buried by their own flowers—red—yellow—blue—salmon.

At the left of the house was a wooden sign, its rear supports showing from where she sat. But, as if she were facing it, she read the legend: "For Sale or Rent. Reasonable. Enquire Your Agent or Phone 5-3841."

The house was Bill's inheritance. They wished to sell or rent it—to move from the jungles and the barrens north of Miami Beach—and to settle in a smaller, more graceful abode near other young men in white coats and brass buttons, other young women with dark hair and fair hair, pretty blouses, peasant skirts and bare legs. The new development—Cinnamon Beach —would be nice, Ann thought. It was only a few miles farther up. Miles meant more minutes, and more people on the bus, but neither mattered.

She continued to gaze at the dilapidated mansion and its environs; her twisted posture was uncomfortable but she did not know that.

To the north stretched an enormous "vacant lot"—a tract of land that had been cleared during the real estate boom in 1925 —but not again thereafter—so that it was thickly covered with the rankest of Florida's trees and plants. Thatchboled petticoat palms thrust up through the sea grapes. Tough creepers ran out on the sand to the spindrift margins. Saw-grass and Spanish bayonet made ragged stands. Vines laced and inter-

laced the underbrush. Their leaves tented over large areas, giving them a smooth external contour. To the south was genuine jungle: gumbo limbos and mahoganies lifted huge trunks, adorned, according to New England standards, with too few branches and too few leaves; around them boiled a green blur of mangrove—dense, leafy, house-high, supported by roots shaped like croquet wickets which were sunk in steaming muck and as rhymelessly interrelated as their greasy tops. At night, noises came from this Amazonian swamp. By day and night, it stank.

West of the house an eighth of a mile was the road that served the seaside—black asphalt embedded with and littered by fragments of coral as white as monument marble.

In no direction could another dwelling be seen.

The solitude of Uncle Paul's "villa"—he had once possessed enough money and effrontery to call it that—had at first enraptured its new, young tenants. Then it had palled. They had not discussed the worrisome aspects of it, but, rather, its many attendant "inconveniences." With the war—with Bill's enlistment and his graduation from the subchaser school as an ensign—the solitude had become Ann's chief possession. She had protested her satisfaction with the dwelling. But she paid for her courage with a deepening of the shadows under her eyes and a tendency to look backward in the twilight, to whistle at her work, and to start easily, even in crowds. An ensign's salary imposes such conditions—and harder ones—on many persons.

"We'll have to rent the damned Victorian pagoda—or sell it," Bill would say whenever his ship was docked in Miami. "Can you hold on till a client comes?"

And Ann would answer, "I love it. I'll miss it."

He would try to envisage the sort of person who would take the house: "A spoiled younger son of a rich mother, deceased. Somebody about sixty years old, with a scratchy housekeeper. Sinus trouble. No. Arthritis. Arthritis—and amateur archæology. He'd have a book to do. He'd have found some ruins on the one expedition his mother financed—while he was still a postgrad at Cambridge. Sodom, more than likely. Gomorroh, at the very least. Did you ever think, Ann, how easy ruins are to find? That is—did you ever hear of an archæological expedition that *failed* to find ruins? World's littered with 'em. More ruins, I expect, than extant cities. Looking for ruins is no harder than looking for free public libraries. Anyhow—this old beggar would now be hunting for a place to write his book. Guys like him always think places write books—not people. He'd have a title for the

tome, certainly. After all, he has had his notes for thirty-odd years, hasn't he? He's been talking about settling down in a quiet spot and doing his 'work' all that time, hasn't he? Lemme see. How about 'The Potsherds of the Stricken Infidels'?"

"It wouldn't begin with a 'The'," Ann had said. "Just—'Potsherds—' and so on. How about, 'Shards from the Hand of Jehovah,' or—wait! Why not, 'Pillar of Salt'?"

They had agreed on Pillar of Salt.

Ann smiled and became rigid. She turned her head slowly. It was only the sea. One of the small, gushing waves had pushed on the sole of her sandal. She watched it recede, swift and scintillant in the moonlight. The great track on the water was eye-confusing because of the length of time she had devoted to appraising and remembering the house standing in the low key of moonrays. Sharp reflections traveled distances on ridges of the unquiet ocean; they shimmered, flickered, and vanished into unexpected blacknesses. The sea itself was soundful. Whispers, lascivious laughter, bubblings, the gurgle of midget breakers and the indolent hiss of filtering sand formed together not a composition but the accompaniment for music there was no one to play.

The tide was very high.

Higher, Ann perceived, than it had ever been before. The moon, round, austere, imaginably tremendous and heavy, was pushing the sea ahead of its slow circumscription of the earth. Ann thought of the tide upthrust and spreading west across the Atlantic, all the way from Africa, opposite which she sat. She threw away her sand to banish the picture of tide in such dimensions.

Downtown, in Biscayne Bay, it would be seeping toward people's lawns. A tide this high would brim the canal along Dade Boulevard. Things would be killed by it—hibiscus, orchid trees, mangoes, sapadillos—and elsewhere, perhaps, golf greens. They'd have to slack off on the hawsers that held the new destroyer across the end of the Navy pier. Between the jetties—the jetties through which Bill would come home—the welling sea would flood all but the topmost stones. When the ebb came, against the breeze, there would be a maelstrom, wild with steep cones of water, sparred with darkly dashing palm fronds, aglow with churned phosphorescence. It would be nothing to a strong ship, steadily handled.

Nothing at all.