

Ralph Ellison,
Invisible Man, 1952

PROLOGUE

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.

Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of a bio-chemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves. Then too, you're constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision. Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy. It's when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. And, let me confess, you feel that way most of the time. You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful.

One night I accidentally bumped into a man, and perhaps because of the near darkness he saw me and called me an insulting name. I sprang at him, seized his coat lapels and demanded that he apologize. He was a tall blond man, and as my face came close to his he looked insolently out of his blue eyes and cursed me, his breath hot in my face as he struggled. I pulled his chin down sharp upon the crown of my head, butting him as I had seen the West Indians do, and I felt his flesh tear and the blood gush out, and I yelled, "Apologize!

Apologize!” But he continued to curse and struggle, and I butted him again and again until he went down heavily, on his knees, profusely bleeding. I kicked him repeatedly, in a frenzy because he still uttered insults though his lips were frothy with blood. Oh yes, I kicked him!

40 And in my outrage I got out my knife and prepared to slit his throat, right there beneath the lamplight in the deserted street, holding him in the collar with one hand, and opening the knife with my teeth—when it occurred to me that the man had not *seen* me, actually; that he, as far as he knew, was in the midst of a walking nightmare! And I stopped the

45 blade, slicing the air as I pushed him away, letting him fall back to the street. I stared at him hard as the lights of a car stabbed through the darkness. He lay there, moaning on the asphalt; a man almost killed by a phantom. It unnerved me. I was both disgusted and ashamed. I was like a drunken man myself, wavering about on weakened legs. Then I

50 was amused: Something in this man’s thick head had sprung out and beaten him within an inch of his life. I began to laugh at this crazy discovery. Would he have awakened at the point of death? Would Death himself have freed him for wakeful living? But I didn’t linger. I ran away into the dark, laughing so hard I feared I might rupture myself. The next day I saw his picture in the *Daily News*, beneath a

55 caption stating that he had been “mugged”. Poor fool, poor blind fool, I thought with sincere compassion, mugged by an invisible man!

Most of the time (although I do not choose as I once did to deny the violence of my days by ignoring it) I am not so overtly

60 violent. I remember that I am invisible and walk softly so as not to awaken the sleeping ones. Sometimes it is best not to awaken them; there are few things in the world as dangerous as sleepwalkers. I learned in time though that it is possible to carry on a fight against them without their realizing it. For instance, I have been carrying on a

65 fight with Monopolated Light and Power for some time now. I use their service and pay them nothing at all, and they don’t know it. Oh, they suspect that power is being drained off, but they don’t know where. All they know is that according to the master meter back there in their power station a hell of a lot of free current is disappearing

70 somewhere into the jungle of Harlem. The joke, of course, is that I don’t live in Harlem but in a border area. Several years ago (before I discovered the advantages of being invisible) I went through the routine process of buying service and paying their outrageous rates. But no more. I gave up all that, along with my apartment, and my old

75 way of life: That way based upon the fallacious assumption that I, like other men, was visible. Now, aware of my invisibility, I live rent-free in a building rented strictly to whites, in a section of the basement that was shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century, which I discovered when I was trying to escape in the night from Ras the

80 Destroyer. But that’s getting too far ahead of the story, almost to the end, although the end is in the beginning and lies far ahead.

Barack Obama,
Dreams from my Father, A Story of Race and Inheritance, 1995

I had been to Chicago once before. It was during the summer after my father's visit to Hawaii, before my eleventh birthday, when Toot had decided it was time I saw the mainland of the United States. Perhaps the two things were connected, her decision and my father's visit—his presence (once again) disturbing the world she and Gramps had made for themselves, triggering in her a desire to
5 reclaim antecedents, her own memories, and pass them on to her grandchildren.

We traveled for over a month, Toot and my mother and Maya and I—Gramps had lost his taste for traveling by this time and chose to stay behind. We flew to Seattle, then went down the coast to California and Disneyland, east to the Grand Canyon, across the Great plains to Kansas City, then up to the Great Lakes before heading back west through Yellowstone Park. We took Greyhound buses,
10 mostly, and stayed at Howard Johnson's, and watched the Watergate hearings every night before going to bed.

We were in Chicago for three days, in a motel in the South Loop. It must have been sometime in July, but for some reason I remember the days as cold and gray. The motel had an indoor swimming pool, which impressed me; there were no indoor pools in Hawaii. Standing beneath the el tracks, I
15 closed my eyes as a train passed and shouted as loud as I could. At the Field Museum, I saw two shrunken heads that were kept on display. They were wrinkled but well preserved, each the size of my palm, their eyes and mouths sewn shut, just as I would have expected. They appeared to be of European extraction: the man had a small goatee, like a conquistador; the female had flowing red hair. I stared at them for a long time (until my mother pulled me away), feeling—with the morbid glee of a
20 young boy—as if I had stumbled upon some sort of cosmic joke. Not so much the fact that the heads had been shrunk—that I could understand; it was the same idea as eating tiger meat with Lolo, a form of magic, a taking of control. Rather, the fact that these little European faces were here in a glass case, where strangers, perhaps even descendants, might observe the details of their gruesome fate. That no one seemed to think that odd. It was a different sort of magic, these harsh museum lights, the neat
25 labels, the seeming indifference of the visitors who passed; another effort at control.

Fourteen years later, the city appeared much prettier. It was another July, and the sun sparkled through the deep green trees. The boats were out of their moorings, their distant sails like the wings of doves across Lake Michigan. Marty had told me that he would be busy those first few days, and so I was left on my own. I had bought a map, and I followed Martin Luther King Drive from its northernmost to its southernmost point, then went back up Cottage Grove, down byways and alleys, past the apartment buildings and vacant lots, convenience stores and bungalow homes. And as I drove, I remembered. I remembered the whistle of the Illinois Central, bearing the weight of the thousands who had come up from the South so many years before; the black men and women and children, dirty from the soot of the railcars, clutching their makeshift luggage, all making their way to Canaan Land. I imagined Frank in a baggy suit and wide lapels, standing in front of the old Regal Theatre, waiting to see Duke or Ella emerge from a gig. The mailman I saw was Richard Wright, delivering mail before his first book sold; the little girl with the glasses and pigtails was Regina, skipping rope. I made a chain between my life and the faces I saw, borrowing other people's memories. In this way I tried to take possession of the city, make it my own. Yet another sort of magic.



G. Romney, *Henrietta, Countess of Warwick, and her Children*, 1787-1789
Oil on canvas, 79 in. x 61 in.
The Frick Collection, New York.