

From *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison

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.

Chapter 13

I took a bite, finding it as sweet and hot as any I'd ever had, and was overcome with such a surge of homesickness that I turned away to keep my control. I walked along, munching the yam, just as suddenly overcome by an intense feeling of freedom — simply because I was eating while walking along the street. It was exhilarating. I no longer had to worry about who saw me or about what was proper. To hell with all that, and as sweet as the yam actually was, it became like nectar with the thought. If only someone who had known me at school or at home would come along and see me now. How shocked they'd be! I'd push them into a side street and smear their faces with the peel. What a group of people we were, I thought. Why, you could cause us the greatest humiliation simply by confronting us with something we liked. Not all of us, but so many. Simply by walking up and shaking a set of chitterlings or a well-boiled hog maw at them during the clear light of day! What consternation it would cause!

I let out a wild laugh, almost choking over the yam as the scene spun before me. Why, with others present, it would be worse than if I had accused him of raping an old woman of ninety-nine years, weighing ninety pounds. . . blind in one eye and lame in the hip! Bledsoe would disintegrate, disinflate! With a profound sigh he'd drop his head in shame. He'd lose caste. The weekly newspapers would attack him. The captions over his picture: Prominent Educator Reverts to Field Niggerism! His rivals would denounce him as a bad example for the South. Editorials would demand that he either recant or retire from public life. In the South his white folks would desert him; he would be discussed far and wide, and all of the trustees' money couldn't prop up his sagging prestige. He'd end up an exile washing dishes at the Automat. For down South he'd be unable to get a job on the honey wagon. This is all very wild and childish, I thought, but to hell with being ashamed of what you liked. No more of that for me. I am what I am! I wolfed down the yam and ran back to the old man and handed him twenty cents, "Give me two more," I said.

Hot fried pies, I thought sadly, moving away. I would probably have indigestion if I ate one —now that I no longer felt ashamed of the things I had always loved, I probably could no longer digest very many of them. What and how much had I lost by trying to do only what was expected of me instead of what I myself had wished to do? What a waste, what a senseless waste! But what of those things which you actually didn't like, not because you were not supposed to like them, not because to dislike them was considered a mark of refinement and education —but because you actually found them distasteful? The very idea annoyed me. How could you know? It involved a problem of choice. I would have to weigh many things carefully before deciding and there would be some things that would cause quite a bit of trouble, simply because I had never formed a personal attitude toward so much. I had accepted the accepted attitudes and it had made life seem simple. . . But not yams, I had no problem concerning them and I would eat them whenever and wherever I took the notion. Continue on the yam level and life would be sweet —though somewhat yellowish. Yet the freedom to eat yams on the street was far less than I had expected upon coming to the city. An unpleasant taste bloomed in my mouth now as I bit the end of the yam and threw it into the street; it had been frost-bitten.

[. . .]

"Dispossessed?" I cried, holding up my hand and allowing the word to whistle from my throat. "That's a good word, 'Dispossessed'! Dispossessed,' eighty-seven years and dispossessed of what? They ain't got nothing, they can't get nothing, they never had nothing. So who was dispossessed?" I growled. "We're law-abiding. So who's being dispossessed? Can it be us? These old ones are out in the snow, but we're here with them. Look at their stuff, not a pit to hiss in, nor a window to shout the news and us right with them. Look at them, not a shack to pray in or an alley to sing the blues! They're facing a gun and we're facing it with them. They don't want the world, but only Jesus. They only want Jesus, just fifteen minutes of Jesus on the rug-bare floor. . . How about it, Mr. Law?"

Do we get our fifteen minutes worth of Jesus? You got the world, can we have our Jesus?"

"I got my orders, Mac," the man called, waving the pistol with a sneer. "You're doing all right, tell 'em to keep out of this. This is legal and I'll shoot if I have to. . ."

"But what about the prayer?"

"They don't go back!"

"Are you positive?"

"You could bet your life," he said.

"Look at him," I called to the angry crowd. "With his blue steel pistol and his blue serge suit. You heard him, he's the law. He says he'll shoot us down because we're a law-abiding people. So we've been dispossessed, and what's more, he thinks he's God. Look up there backed against the post with a criminal on either side of him. Can't you feel the cold wind, can't you hear it asking, 'What did you do with your heavy labor? What did you do?' When you look at all you haven't got in eighty-seven years you feel ashamed —"

"Tell 'em about it, brother," an old man interrupted. "It makes you feel you ain't a man"

"We're dispossessed," I sang at the top of my voice, "dispossessed and we want to pray. Let's go in and pray. Let's have a big prayer meeting. But we'll need some chairs to sit in. . . rest upon as we kneel. We'll need some chairs!"

"Here's some chairs down here," a woman called from the walk. "How 'bout taking in some chairs?"

"Sure," I called, "take everything. Take it all, hide that junk! Put it back where it came from. It's blocking the street and the sidewalk, and that's against the law. We're law-abiding, so clear the street of the debris. Put it out of sight! Hide it, hide their shame! Hide our shame!"

"Come on, men," I yelled, dashing down the steps and seizing a chair and starting back, no longer struggling against or thinking about the nature of my action. The others followed, picking up pieces of furniture and lugging them back into the building.