Invisible

"Oh darn, I'm still invisible!"
—The Invisible Woman, Universal Pictures, 1940[1]

They looked through her like she wasn't there.
As if the Invisible Woman did not exist.

Actually, it wasn't neutral like that. It was like she was a worm. Unsightly. Less than dirt. Grotesque.[2]

Actually they did see her, but only for an instant, the flick of a movie frame that nobody sees, though of course everyone does see in some subliminal way, but only registers when something is wrong with the projector or when there's something bad in the air, a pollutant, something poisonous, after the discovery of which everyone looks away either irritated, pissed off, offended and demanding their money back, or, if they are kind, or sympathetic as a saint, either pretending not to have seen or if having seen then also to have seen past the problem, whether the brief, fixable one as in the case of the projector

and/or atmosphere or the long- (if not forever) term, inherent, unfixable one as in the case of the Invisible Woman.

This looking is done—I'm talking about away from the Invisible Woman now, not the movie projector—so as not to embarrass or make uncomfortable anyone. For what is "seen," i.e., the Invisible Woman, is so perverse, unnerving, grotesque and so on, that it renders everyone, that is, some people, speechless.

Then there is their seeing but wishing they hadn't, and then their pretending they hadn't, then looking away—the whip of the head, the spin of the hips—which makes their not entirely graceful selves bumble and stumble around like a bunch of bumpkins. Look how they fall all over themselves! All over one another! It's kind of funny, really, the way they flail around as if the floor is covered with banana peels. They look like the Keystone Cops! Like Charlie Chaplin in that factory scene, or is it the meal scene, when everything—soup, glasses, plates, spoons—keeps flying at him from the conveyer belt. Like the cat's eyeballs when the kid takes it out of the dryer. They fall all over themselves as they scramble to get out of the factory, the kitchen, the courtroom, the theater, studio, tavern, bar, bedroom, her bedroom, bed, her bed, The Invisible Woman's bed.

How on earth did they get there?

None of us is stupid anymore. We know what brought them here and know as well how desperate they all are to get away. For what if someone saw them here? With the Invisible Woman? How would they explain? That they have "a scientific interest"? Or "are interested in learning about all of humankind, even in its most egregious, filthy forms?" Or are just "curious"?

As if we don't all know what killed the cat.

For One—not her real name—is curious. Not only that, is so inclined. And goes, therefore, in secret, ashamed, to meet the Invisible Woman.

One meets her in the dark of night, in a bar across the tracks. One meets her where the poor folks live, the dive down by the docks. Self-loathingly, her-loathingly, One goes to get the thing One needs from her.

One hates to want the way one does
thus being one whom One revileth.
No wonder One will not admit her kind.

One—not her real name—has good reasons, One tells oneself: it's nobody's business, it's private and no one else would really understand. Besides, One tells oneself, I'm not like them.

One never will admit, at least not until One has to because it's about to be splashed all over the department, the neighborhood, the soon-to-be published unauthorized biography[3] or mistakenly (har har) over the intercom,[4] or in the courtroom, the rehab farm, ("It wasn't really me, it was the alcohol . . . and . . . my . . . um . . . tragic childhood")[5], etc., ad nauseam. Then One will scramble again, the way One did when one was first seen in the Invisible Woman's company, and treat us, again, to yet another almost laughable, were it not so damned offensive, festival of lies.

As if anyone with half a brain would believe One.

For everyone with half a brain had figured One out long ago and was like, Do you think you're kidding anyone any more? Get over yourself, you spineless shit.

No wonder she's invisible.

Though, admittedly, even we didn't see her at first.

Or saw her only from the corners of our eyes, while looking furtively. For we'd been told to look away and did until we couldn't anymore for we were pulled. Then glimpsed in fear then longer looks then weirded out then panicked then with recognition, awe, and then at last with eagerness, overt and sloppy, slobbering like a puppy on a leash.

Then once we knew the way we were and ways we were not them, we thought of bigger things. Then either decided or realized there were ways we did not want to be either like or part of them. We had our reasons. We talked about these reasons very loudly, very earnestly, sometimes over the top-ly, and frankly, retrospectively, overbearingly. We may have done silly or even arrogant, as is the way of youth, things, but whatever, we did not—ever—lie.

For lying there is no excuse.

Well, maybe a few.

Such as youth. But then everyone grows up, right? Even One. Or such as when in some places you need to in order to not be shot, have your hands cut off or something rammed up you (in order to show you what it's like to be a real something or to, uh, encourage you to not) or tied to a fence, beaten and left to bleed and/or freeze to death. In cases such as these it is not only permissible, it is very strongly advisable to tell those thuggy Cro-Magnon fuckers whatever they want to hear. Lie through your teeth if it'll keep you alive and then as soon as you can, get the hell out of there and never, ever go back. In situations like that "lying" isn't lying, it's life-saving.

However, lying *is* lying if the only thing one may perhaps lose is a bit of cash, a contract, one's "reputation."

Which will then eventually be that of a lying, first-class coward.

For lying like that, for then continuing to lie when everyone else with even half a ball is beginning to tell the truth, there is no excuse. Not one.

For others had begun to tell the truth and therefore other others looked and then began to see, then other others also did, then more and more and then, gosh, Invisible Women were popping up all over the place! Not only down across the tracks or where the sailors went, but also in the studio, the academy, the theater, the library, the bed, the bed, the bed.

One's bed.

This made One nervous. Why wouldn't those unsightly ones just stay quiet about it? Why rub everyone's nose in it? Why not just mind their own business?

Because it *was* their business. As it was One's. For One was one and lots of people knew it. Which made One really, really nervous.

One told oneself that One wasn't like the rest. Which of course was partly true in that One was not like those who told the truth. However One *was* like those who were intelligent, creative, magnetic, etc., which begs the question, what exactly was it about them that One found so grotesque?

For One was not above us, or so different from the way we were. No, One was, rather, among us (slumming?) frequently, in all places we were found—across the tracks, down by the docks, inside our bed.

For One was one of us. Yes. Yes, you were.

You met the Invisible Woman late at night. You went to her to get from her the thing you hated wanting. You did with her the truest thing that made you who you were.

Then every kiss she gave you, you denied.

* * *

The Invisible Woman arrives in town late on a winter night. There's snow on the ground and the wind is high and everything is black and white and gray. We see the prints her feet leave in the snow as she walks the lonely road up into town. The wind is howling, pushing her, but she has had to learn to push back hard against it. She's covered completely from head to toe—a long wool coat and low-brimmed hat, a scarf around her face. Black glasses, almost goggle-like. A heavy pair of gloves. There's no place where her skin's exposed. She carries a doctor's bag. She opens the door and the wind howls in. In the kitchen, the barman's wife shuts her eyes and sighs in sweet relief. At last! The conversation in the pub goes quiet. The locals are used to strangers here, especially at night, but even so, they all look up to see who's just arrived. Everybody stops and stares, the pints upraised in drinkers' paws, the dart about to fly. Even the snuffling dog looks up but oddly, though his human companions believe this is a stranger, sniffs a single, recognizing sniff, then lowers its head contentedly and shuts his trusting eyes. No one can tell, but no one wonders, whether the stranger is a woman or a man.

The Invisible Woman asks for a room. "Of course, Doctor," the barman says and goes to get the key. But you, the dutiful barman's wife, tell him he's busy, dear, so you'll see to the guest.

Besides, you know, as the clueless yobs that drink here every night do not, this guest has come for you.

You also know the sweet and unsuspecting stepdad of your son won't notice, as he has not before, you grab a bottle of something

nice—champagne? a vintage port? a fabulous old claret?—to steal up to the room.

"My bags are at the station," the Invisible Woman says, "Can you bring them up?"

"Not 'til tomorrow, I'm afraid," the barman says, "There won't be anyone there until the next train's due in the morning. Don't worry about them, though, ours is a trusting town."

The Invisible Woman attempts to sound disgruntled.

You gesture for her to follow you; you'll show her to the room.

"What took you so long," you whisper nervously as soon as you're out of earshot.

"The storm," the Invisible Woman says. You fear someday that the Invisible Woman will be caught. Then who will be your paramour? Who else will know and tolerate your lies?

You lead the way up the winding stairs. You know that with your each and every step the Invisible Woman behind you is watching the sassing of your hips, the swish of your skirt and breathing the milky scent of your perfect skin. You lead her to "our" room as you and she, after all this time, refer to it. Amazing how your husband(s, and there've been a few, they somehow never last) has never noticed how often bulkily clad strangers come to town and how oddly gruff yet oddly high and curiously alike their voices are.

Once in the room, you close the door behind you both and lock it. You double the lock and put the key in your apron pocket. You show the Invisible Woman the closet (har), the table, sink, the bed, the bed, the bed. Your bed.

You don't dive into it just yet, but coyly, as if the ingenue, go to the window and gaze out at the stormy sky. Making sure to present your best side, you pose and consider how the romantic, *sturmy und drangy* sky will frame you.

The snow's still falling hard and fast. You say, in your best, though not very good, Bacall, "It's going to be a long, cold night," and though

you're still facing away from the Invisible Woman, a smile plays across your face. You're not, of course, saying this for her, but for the camera rolling in your head that's filming the epic movie starring you. How to play it this time? Your charming, elegant, witty self? Or your sultry, world-weary sophisticate? Innocent or jaded? Sweet or cynical? Bold or shy? Crusader for the truth, though that one's rather difficult . . . For you are very versatile. The rest of us know that no one can be all things to all people without being any one at all. But that doesn't stop you from trying. You close the curtains and turn to your Invisible Woman who is still standing in her clothes.

That's weird. Usually by this time she's naked in your bed. Usually by now the most we can see is the shape of her body beneath the sheet and the pillow's slight depression. Tonight, however, she's still in full Invisible regalia: coat, scarf, glasses, gloves, etc., and looking, at least her glasses appear to be, straight at you. You can't tell, because of the glasses, the kind a blind girl wears, if she is looking away from, at or through you.

As if you are not there. Or don't exist.

Suddenly you're uncomfortable and look down at yourself. You are wearing your dress, your apron and gloves (necessary for anyone who works in food preparation), your stockings, shoes, etc. You are still fully covered.

Composure regained, you ask, "What's taking you so long?"

"I was wondering," your guest replies, "if this time you would undress first. In the light."

You haven't. Not for ages.

"No," you tell her. "No." For a moment she doesn't move. "I'll check the door again," you say. You always worry about the lock; the Invisible Woman doesn't.

The Invisible Woman sighs, then slowly, reluctantly, slides off a glove. We see the empty, open, hollow sleeve. The other glove comes off and, after they are both dropped to the floor, we see a pair of empty

sleeves. The end of one of the empty sleeves appears to remove her glasses. Where her eyes should be is only dark, two empty sockets framed by gauze. She lifts a hand we can't see to remove the scarf that covers the lower half of her face. Around the hole where no mouth is, an edge of gauze appears to puff, then there's a rising and a fall as if an opening and closing of her mouth, as if a pair of lips. There is the sound of a moving tongue, of air pushed over teeth, of breath, a swallowing.

The Invisible Woman is trying to tell you something.

You won't hear.

"Come *on*," you say impatiently. You're not here in this room to chat.

There is another pause—as if she hopes—but then another tug, a lift of a flap and the gauze around her invisible head unravels and unravels into nothing. And then the hands that we can't see unbutton the headless overcoat and drop it to the floor. The pants kick off the shoes, unzip and drop to the floor. The long-tailed shirt unbuttons itself and falls to the floor and we see no one. Then there is a sound of the mattress being sat upon, the sight of slight depression in the bed, the shape of a head on the pillow.

You open a bottle and pour a couple of drinks. You hand one to your invisible guest but tonight she doesn't take it. When you have had a few, and hers as well, and heard yourself tell her the things you won't tell anyone else, you check again that the door is locked, turn out the light and undress in the dark.

You get into bed and the Invisible Woman does the thing you want, the thing you told her long ago that made you who you were.

She used to hope that someday you'd stop lying. But she no longer does. She feels your most recent plastic fingernails running down her back and makes herself not twist away.

How long has it been since she's felt your skin? She's beginning to not remember.

You fall asleep, as you usually do. The Invisible Woman doesn't.

She watches you sleep, as if she could see, beneath the things you've done to yourself, the person you once might have been—transparent, without guile. The Invisible Woman loved you once.

When you are sunk in sleep, your breathing low, she runs her hands, not touching, but above and very close to what she remembers of your body, beneath the touch-ups and the patches, grafts, the implants and the silicone. She thinks about how much of you is lost and how what is left is lies.

This time, unlike the previous, you don't wake up and leave her: she leaves you.

She steps over the clothes and bandages on the floor, finds the keys in your apron pocket and lets herself out, naked, of your room. She leaves the door unlocked and she imagines, as she leaves, what happens next.

You are awakened by the sound of someone screaming. The too much that you drank last night has made you oversleep. It's morning and you're still in bed, though not your own. The sheet's tossed back and you're not dressed, so the maid who's entered to do her chores (she knocked, but there was no response, and the door had not been locked) has seen something grotesque, a mess of wig and pancake make-up smeared around as if by a four-year-old. A couple of blue-black smudges beneath a skewed pair of movie-star-thick eyelashes. Scar-covered bulbous silicone boobs and bee-sting lips, a Frankenstein fabrication made of vanity and shame.

The terrified maid runs screaming from the room and, brought by her shouts, your husband appears with a few old sots who've come by for their breakfast.

The Invisible Woman, who loved you once, sees all this from the

comfy chair she sits in at the toasty warm cafe at the train station. She waits for the train that will take her far away. She sees, as if by magic, close-up, both in black-and-white and color, the gasps on the faces of those that find you—their mouths open wide in horror, their hands held in front of their eyes as if to push away the sight.

You yank the sheet to cover the bits of you: "It isn't what you think!" you screech, "I can explain!"

But this time, finally, you can't. They see the proof before them of your lies.

We cannot see, not even us, the reaction on the Invisible Woman's face.

But we can guess.

It used to be she pitied you. Not anymore.

NOTES

1 *The Invisible Woman* (1940), Universal Pictures, directed by A. Edward Sutherland, starring Virginia Bruce and John Barrymore, story by Joe May and Kurt Siodmak based on characters created by H. G. Wells)[6] was the second movie to follow James Whale's *The Invisible Man*[7] of 1933. During the 1940s, there were four sequels to Whale's original (all of which you can see together on the Criterion Collection disc), three serious and tragic, or at least intended to be seen as so, and one fluffy romantic comedy, the only one about a woman.

In 1933, Claude Raines played what the opening credits called "The Invisible One." (As if one could be or become something no one else could see and therefore could not tell whether one is man or woman or other.)

It was Raines's first major film role and we don't see him—only hear his voice—until the end of the movie when the Invisible One is killed. It's only then, when dead, that one becomes visible again.

James Whale made movies about monsters—Frankenstein's, Invisible Ones and Men in Iron Masks—who looked not right or just plain wrong or wanted to find a mate like them or not be seen or seen as they were not or born not in the right skin and then were killed.

James Whale was a homosexual.

He was also, like H. G. Wells and Claude Raines, a kid from one class trying to pass for another. To seem to be somebody he was not.

2 When it was first published in 1897, Wells's *The Invisible Man* was subtitled "*A Grotesque Romance*," as if he saw that though we might advance in science, i.e., in how we see ourselves in relation to the universe, matter and time, we would advance less quickly in the ways we see and let ourselves be seen Romantically.

Grotesque is how too many see too many too invisible.

H. G. Wells bios are all over the place, from those little paragraphs in the start of the cheap editions to massive fat hardbacks you can find used. One of the most funs ones is in *Graphic Classics: H. G.*

Wells, Volume Three: The Time Machine, The Invisible Man & Six More Exciting Stories!, 2nd ed., Eureka Productions, 2005. htpp://www.graphicclassics.com. What I especially like about this collection is the fact that they have a cartoony rather than a reproduced photo-thing of Wells on what in an old-timey book would have been called the frontispiece. There's something about Wells that is suited to this oddly two dimensional face, more like Dr. Spock or Data than some kind of end-of-the-nineteenth-century guy.

Arthur C. Clarke wrote a nice little intro to the Modern Library edition (2000) of *The Invisible Man*, and some unnamed, invisible as it were, poor sod wrote the nice little biographical note.

I wonder what H. G. Wells would have thought of how we read him, what we make of him now a hundred or so years after he invented us, I mean his books invented us. Or saw us. Or saw how we wouldn't see ourselves, each other.

Will what is in the heart remain invisible forever?

3 Susan Sontag, for almost her entire life, had always, when asked about her personal life, foregrounded her one-time marriage to a man and the resulting son. Not until the impending publication of a book-length biography that was going to reveal the many long-term, creatively and intellectually significant relationships Sontag had had with lesbian lovers throughout her life did she, in a pre-book article in the *New Yorker*, publicly admit that she was homo. At which point she fell all over herself to explain that she had never actually *lied* about being in the closet as her gayness had always been a kind of "open secret." She wanted us to know that she had simply chosen not to foreground something "private" (as opposed to a heterosexual marriage, which is not "private"). The latter lie, that she had never been in the closet, the lie we might refer to as the cover-up, is more offensive than the initial lie, i.e., her presumed heterosexuality. Why didn't she, when she finally did come out after all those years, say something such as "I stayed in the closet for decades because if I'd come out earlier, I would have been ghettoized as lesbian and not able to do the work I wanted to do. That I can come out now without losing the respect I have earned as

a thinker is partly due to the work other lesbian and gay people have been doing for decades."

It wasn't like Sontag hadn't known she was gay. The September 10, 2006 issue of the *New York Times Magazine* published excerpts from her diaries that included the following:

Nov. 19: 1959:

"The only kind of writer I could be is the kind who exposes himself."

(Ed. Note: . . . unless that "self" *is lesbian.)*

Dec. 24, 1959:

"My desire to write is connected with my homosexuality. I need the identity as a weapon, to match the weapon that society has against me."

"I am just becoming aware of how guilty I feel being queer."

Sontag wrote these things a decade before Stonewall and ages before the modern American feminist and gay movements. The point is not that she did not come out in 1959, but that she continued to deny her lesbianism for decades while writing about an "erotics of art," the "revolutionary implications of sexuality in contemporary society," etc. How long was she planning to keep up her charade?

I have felt sorry for self-loathing and/or cowardly homophobes when they have no examples, resources, contexts in which to come out. But when they continue, after having been given lots of examples, resources, contexts, etc., to lie and to ignore the existence of others who were working to make the world better for them, I do not feel sorry for them. I feel, rather, like Get over yourself, you spineless shit.

4 Ellen, a TV character. As in, would Ellen (Rosie, Sontag, whoever) have the career she has now if she had come out at the start of her career? Or would she have been pegged as a homo and not allowed to have a mainstream career at all? Don't get me wrong. I love how Rosie was America's girl next door and then came out as gay, and I love how

Ellen is America's new girl next door. It's true, and it always has been: Jo, who dressed like a boy as much as she could and referred to herself as "the man in the family" in *Little Women*, Nancy Drew's friend George, the Kate Jackson character on *Charlie's Angels*, every single female camp counselor ever. America's girl next door really is a big old chummy dyke.

If only people saw what they were seeing.

Plus, when my mother was dying, she loved watching Rosie because Rosie made her laugh and I was able to sit with my mother and hear her laugh. Plus, when I told my mom that Rosie was gay, as all gays knew before Rosie came out publicly, my mom said, "Really? Well, she seems nice . . ." (Remember when Rosie was "Queen of Nice"? Talk about passing!)

But "niceness" has a ring of willful forgetfulness when someone says, "Gee, I finally, after X years in the closet, came out and everyone has been so nice and accepting of me!" Whereas the reason that person did not come out X years ago was that she would never have been hired or would have been fired or wouldn't have the career she has now or not have access to the people who are so nice to her now.

Quick, name your favorite lesbian TV, movie or mainstream theater actresses who have been out their whole careers! Need a little more time? That's okay. No one else can come up with anyone either.

(BTW: Anyone remember when kd lang was on Rosie? That was funny—watching Rosie scramble to not be near an out lesbian. And how about all those years Rosie was talking about "Ooooh, Tom Cruise!" Actually, that really is pretty funny. They would have been a perfect pair.

But I really, truly do admire her, really and truly. I recognize that she had to do what she did in order to become America's best gay friend.)

Maybe this kind of forgetting is not that different from girls today saying "I'm not a feminist, I just want to be a lawyer," unaware that a generation ago not many girls were able to go to law school.

Is this progress, when things change so much you forget they were ever different?

Is progress everyone else forgetting or never even knowing what you once thought was so important?

Or is it just that I'm getting old?

Maybe this is what getting old means. That one starts wanting other ones, the ones who are replacing one, to know about one's heroic, terrible, glorious past and all the things one did back then to make the world a better place. Or maybe it's wanting to go back, but to a different past, and do things differently. Or maybe it's wishing one had been born later when the things one thought were terrible were over and everything had gotten easier. Or wishing one was someone else because one is a has-been? Or worse, a never-been?

5 Mark Foley, an icky creep, made similar excuses when he was caught bonking interns. Around the same time, there was also that fundamentalist minister, Ted Haggard, who had a long-standing affair with a gay hustler. They took speed together, too, and then, because Haggard was such a vehement opponent of gay marriage, the hustler finally came out with their story. A while after this story broke, I read in the paper that Rev. Haggard, having been through some kind of therapeutic deprogramming, was, and I quote, "completely heterosexual." Praise the Lord!

A few months later, I read that the hustler fellow wrote a book about his relationship with Haggard. I wish him all the best in his literary endeavors.

6 H. G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* was published in 1897, two years after the first of his great science fiction novels, *The Time Machine*. Wells had turned to writing out of desperation. Trained in the sciences and working as a teacher, Wells was stricken with tuberculosis, which meant he had to quit work and spend a lot of time recuperating in bed. Strapped for a way to make a living, he read *When a Man's Single* by J. M Barrie (the same J. M. Barrie of Peter Pan fame, regarding whom we will refrain from making comments as to why such a man might be "single"), which described how to write saleable columns

for newspapers. Wells followed Barrie's advice and was soon selling articles, stories and serials.

Wells's father was, at various times, a gardener, a professional cricket player and a shopkeeper. Wells's mother was a housekeeper and lady's maid. Wells, known as Bert, left school at fourteen to apprentice to a draper, then got a scholarship to the Royal College of Science where he studied with T. H. Huxley, who instilled in Wells a belief in social as well as biological evolution, i.e., the perfectibility of humankind. Nice idea.

On the other hand, "perfectibility," or any form of perfectness, can sound a little scary. As in perfect equals pure, as in the purity of the races, the eradication of imperfect ones, of ones with impure impulses, etc.

One man's purity is another man's filth.

Is history the repeating of the stories we deny?
Do we forget the awful ways we were?

Wells sort of believed in the perfectibility of humankind for a while (*Mankind in the Making*, 1903; *A Modern Utopia*, 1905). He was a socialist and, until he quit after a series of arguments with George Bernard Shaw, a Fabian, a visionary.

The Invisible Man is a book about vision and seeing and not being seen, about who sees whom and when, and what happens when we look away and why. It's about how it isn't just believing but acknowledging what we see, and that we sometimes see things we do not know the names of yet.

In order to belong you must be seen.

The plot: A scientist named Griffin figures out how to become invisible. He makes a potion and does stuff with light and refraction and becomes invisible and it's fun for a while, giving him access to a secret life that no one else can see.

But later on it's not so fun. He can't make himself visible, which cuts him off from things he needs and wants.

In 1895, two years before the publication of *The Invisible Man*, Oscar Wilde was prosecuted for "gross indecency between males." (The big bio of Wilde is Richard Ellmann's *Oscar Wilde* [Vintage, 1988]. There's also some great stuff in *The Wilde Years: Oscar Wilde and His Time*, edited and with text by Tomoko Sato and Lionel Lambourne [Barbican Art Galleries and Philip Wilson Publisher, 2000]. For a general history of homos: *Completely Queer: The Gay and Lesbian Encyclopedia*, Steve Hogan and Lee Hudson [Henry Holt, 1998]). Wilde had fallen in love, in 1891, with a beautiful boy half his age. Lord Alfred "Bosie" Douglas, Wilde wrote, in imagery like that in the play he was writing at the time, was "quite like a narcissus—so white and gold." Wilde began to write his version of the Salome story, in which an old man is destroyed by his desire for a beautiful young thing, shortly after he met Bosie. Bosie was a poet too, and later translated Wilde's *Salome* from its original French into English.

Bosie's father, the Marquis of Queensberry, became convinced that Wilde was corrupting his son, that is, his *other* son. For Bosie was not the only sexually suspicious offspring of the Marquis. The elder brother, Francis Archibald, Viscount Drumlanrig, was reputed to have had an affair, while working as his "private secretary," with the Liberal politician Lord Roseberry. Lord Roseberry became prime minister in 1894 and elevated Francis to Baron Kelhead, thus allowing the son a seat in the House of Lords, an ambition the father had never fulfilled. Queensberry was furious with Francis and his "patron" and threatened to expose the prime minister's taste for young men unless the government prosecuted Wilde. In 1894, Queensberry wrote a letter to Bosie suggesting that "Snob Queers like Roseberry" had turned his sons homo. That same year Francis died in a mysterious hunting accident that may have been suicide.

What had poor old Queensberry, a notorious womanizer and the man who codified the rules of that most macho of sports, boxing, in

his magnum opus *Queensberry's Rules*, done so cosmically wrong that both of his boys turned out to be pansies?

Provoked by an insulting telegram from his son Alfred, the Marquis sent a letter to Wilde's club addressed "To Oscar Wilde, posing Somdomite." Not only was the Marquis of Queensberry bad at spelling, he also seemed to think—hope?—that Wilde and Bosie were only pretending to be homos in order to shock people. Which might have made sense because the aesthetician Wilde had suggested that the pose, rather than the fact, was what was important: "To have done it was nothing, but to make people think one had done it was a triumph." In this case, however, Wilde had not been posing, he had been in love.

Queensberry was pushing it to send that card, but Wilde was just plain stupid to do what he did next: he brought a libel suit against Queensberry.

Did Wilde object to the fact that Queensberry suggested he was *only* posing?

Or was Wilde egged on by Bosie because Bosie hated his father and even blamed his father for his older brother's death?

Or did Wilde think that, as a darling of London culture, he could get away with anything?

Or was he really smart, knowing that suing his boyfriend's father would bring it all out in public? "Things are because we see them," Wilde had written in "The Decay of Lying" in 1891, and the trial of 1895 made what had been invisible very seen indeed.

Or was Wilde, in a parallel that could only happen in life because it's just too tidy for fiction, repeating the history of his own father?

In 1864, when Oscar was ten, Wilde senior had his shady sex life put on trial. Sir William Wilde was accused by a girl of seducing her while she was under chloroform. Sir William, like his son when he was brought down later, was at the peak of his career. He was the leading ophthalmologist in Britain, a medical writer and had just been knighted. His wife, now Lady Wilde, was a poet who published under the name "Speranza." She was not, however, the only person writing under that pseudonym. In early 1864 a pamphlet claiming to be the work of "Speranza" accused a "Dr. Quilp" of raping "Miss Price" under

chloroform. When Lady Wilde discovered that the pamphleteer was Mary Travers (not the Peter, Paul and Mary one), she wrote a letter to Travers's father denying the pamphlet's "unfounded accusations." (For the Sir William Wilde and Mary Travers material check out Ray J. Defalque and Amos J. Wright, "Travers vs. Wilde: Chloroform Acquitted," *Bulletin of Anesthesia History* 23, no. 4.)

Mary Travers found Lady Wilde's letter and sued her for libel, and Dublin and the British medical world had a trial to salivate over. Though it was widely known that Sir Wilde was a womanizer (he fathered at least three illegitimate kids), and there was evidence that he and Travers had had a long-term—uh—affection of some variety or other, Wilde's wife defended her husband's fidelity. After the five-day trial, the court ruled against Sir Wilde, but, believing Mary may have been a willing participant, the judge made the doctor pay damages of only one farthing (one quarter of a penny). The trial took a toll on Sir Wilde. He lost interest in medicine and twelve years later he died.

Did Father's ghost make Son repeat the cause of family shame? What is it fathers pass on to their kids? What unseen things repeat in them? What history?

Is history the repeating of the stories we deny?
Do we refuse to learn as if we're different?

Or did Oscar Wilde actually want people to think that, as much as he loved beauty, and especially the beauty of boys, he, a married man and father of two, whether posing and/or a "somdomite," could also be an ideal husband?

An Ideal Husband opened in London three months before Wilde had Queensberry arrested for criminal libel. The play was a tremendous success, the trial was swift and the day Queensberry was found innocent Wilde was arrested on the charges of "committing acts of gross indecency with other male persons." Though Wilde's plays continued (*The Importance of Being Earnest* was running in the West End too), his name was removed from the theater marquees.

On the one hand, Wilde was fortunate it was 1895. Until 1861, when the maximum punishment for buggery was reduced to life imprisonment, sodomy had been a capital crime in the UK punishable by hanging. In 1885 the punishment was further reduced to two years hard labor in prison, but the law also expanded the scope of the "crime" from mere buggery to "gross indecency."

During Wilde's first trial for "gross indecency" the jury failed to reach a verdict, and Wilde was tried again. At the second trial he was sentenced to two years hard labor and sent to Reading Gaol. Bosie never visited or wrote to him. Between January and March of 1897, in preparation for his release in May, Wilde wrote, on regulation blue prison paper handed to him one sheet at a time, a long letter to Bosie that was later titled *De Profundis* by Wilde's loyal friend Robert Ross. From that sad book:

> Dear Bosie—After long and fruitless waiting I have determined to write to you myself, as much for your sake as for mine. . . . Our ill fated and most lamentable friendship has ended in ruin and public infamy for me, yet the memory of our ancient affection is often with me, and the thought that loathing, bitterness and contempt should for ever take that place in my heart once held by love is very sad. . . .

By the time he was released from prison in 1897, Wilde's health had gone to hell. He fled to France where, in 1900, wretched and penniless, he died.

The Invisible One is killed becoming visible.

Wilde was not the only literary man who, in 1895, was smithereened by a public who would just as rather he had kept his despicable self invisible. That same year, Thomas Hardy, a mason's son who, despite being from the wrong class, became a writer, published *Jude the Obscure*. This novel is, among other things, a damning look at the strictures of conventional marriage, sex and relationships between the

classes. While not vilified as much as Wilde, Hardy was called a "degenerate" in the press and the book itself was renamed (har har) *Jude the Obscene*.

It wasn't that people from different classes had not engaged in romantic or sexual affairs with one another before. What enraged late-nineteenth-century English society was referring to it openly, making it visible.

Wilde's trial made visible around the world the possibility of same-sex love and what might happen to those who might be so inclined. Gertrude Stein was at Radcliffe then, studying the composition, psychology and philosophy that were to have such a tremendous effect on her ideas of perception, repetition and the continuous present. She was also enjoying a lively social life, although, as she later remembered, she became very upset by news of the trial of Oscar Wilde. Was this partly because she sensed that if she ever fell in love, as she would in two short years, the object of her desire would be a person of her own gender?

> You mean it is the same.
>
> ———
>
> Yes, I know what your idea is.
> Lifting belly knows all about the wind.
>
> ———
>
> Can you suspect me.
> We are glad that we do not deceive.
>
> ("Lifting Belly," *Gertrude Stein: Writings 1903–1932*, Library of America, 1998)

Around the same time, a strange adolescent named Marguerite was falling in love with an invisible voice. Alberto Visetti, Marguerite's stepfather, had, in 1894, awarded a young woman named Agnes Nicholls a scholarship to the Royal College of Music. While Agnes Nicholls practiced her singing in the Visetti's garden studio, Marguerite listened and, before she even laid eyes on the singer, fell desperately in love.

Years later Marguerite, known to her intimates as John and to her public as Radclyffe Hall, wrote *The Well of Loneliness*, a novel that argued for the sympathetic treatment of "inverts" such as its protagonist, Stephen Gordon, a character who has since been called, depending on who is talking to whom and when and why: lesbian, dyke, queer, woman trapped in the body of a man, passing man, transgendered person, mannish woman and a lot of other things.

Who are you when you are someone who's not been seen before?
What are you when the thing you are does not yet have a name?

The Well of Loneliness was published in English in France in July of 1928 and, due to massive sales, went into multiple printings. British publishers had turned it down, but English readers wanted it and copies couldn't arrive from France fast enough. In October, British customs officials seized a shipment of the book at Dover. (For Radclyffe Hall, see Sally Cline, *Radclyffe Hall: A Woman Called John*, Overlook Press, 1998, and the heroic Allison Hennegan's intro to *The Well of Loneliness*, Virago, 1982.)

H. G. Wells, in an article in the *Daily Herald*, attacked the Home Office for the seizure, and a few weeks later, the government began legal action against the book. Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster, like others who may not have found the book to be the best-written thing in the world but supported its right to exist, sent a protest letter to the Home Secretary who had banned the book for its "distasteful subject."

"What," the letter asked, "of other subjects known to be more or less unpopular in Whitehall, such as birth control, suicide and pacifism? May we mention these? We await our instructions!" (Hermione Lee's *great* biography *Virginia Woolf, a Life*, Knopf, 1997.)

Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, coyly subtitled "A Biography," was published by her own Hogarth Press in England on October 11, 1928. Dedicated to Vita Sackville-West, the book is about a time-traveling man who becomes a woman or woman who was once a man and his/her various love affairs. It is, as Woolf wrote to her lesbian paramour-dedicatee, "all about you and the lusts of your flesh and the lure of your

mind." Their affair had begun in 1925. Vita, who sometimes referred to herself as Julian, often dressed, like her friend Radclyffe who called herself John, in male clothing.

A week and a half after the publication of *Orlando*, Woolf went to Cambridge with Sackville-West to deliver the talks on women and fiction that eventually developed into *A Room of One's Own*. Then on November 9, Woolf showed up at court to act as a witness on Hall's behalf, but was not called to testify.

Some things were becoming visible, but not everything. Some things took time.

The Well of Loneliness describes its hero/heroine, Stephen Gordon, as "grotesque and splendid, like some primitive thing conceived in a turbulent period of transition."

Radclyffe Hall wrote more books after *The Well of Loneliness* and hung out with writers and had a girlfriend and a life. (One of her pals and a literary mentor was Rebecca West, a one-time girlfriend of H. G. Wells.) But making visible what she did in 1928 remains what she is known for.

She/he/John/Radclyffe/Marquerite died in 1943, five years before the book for which she/John is most remembered was published in her (his?) homeland. I guess by 1948 they'd found people to truly be afraid of.

Is that progress? The movement from fearing what we shouldn't to what we should? From seeing what we haven't to what we must?

I first read Radclyffe Hall on the sly. I was studying Literature with a capital "L" in grad school, but that did not include, at the time, a writer like Radclyffe Hall.

One of the ways I supported myself then was working in a used bookstore. The guy who owned the store was bald and had a wild gray beard that went down to the middle of his chest. He usually wore overalls without a shirt, unless he was wearing his full tux. In addition to the bookstore, which he lived above, he ran a ritzy restaurant rich

people came to, a scuzzy nightclub he had to throw drunks out of, a carpentry business with his brother and a small drug business. He didn't have the bookstore to make money. He had the bookstore because he was crazy about great writing. I was crazy about great writing too, and that's why he liked me.

One of his favorite gestures was to spread his big, sweaty, muscly arms wide, as if to embrace most of the books in the store and say, "Crap, fucking crap." Although there were exceptions. Such as Shakespeare, about whom he'd growl, "That guy can fucking write a play." Or Malcolm Lowry, "That guy can fucking write a novel."

If what I was reading was crap, he'd tell me. But if it wasn't, like Kafka, he'd mumble something like "that pansy" and then go into some long thing about Kafka and the central European artistic tradition and Jewish mysticism and the Kabbalah and the diaries and letters to Felice and I'd learn more in ten minutes of his ranting as he was tramping up the stairs to change out of his stinking overalls than I had learned in a week of class.

This was in Virginia in the '70s. Women had been admitted to the previously all-male university just the decade before and Blacks—the word was not yet "African American"—were beginning to get jobs as professors instead of only as custodians or maids. Things moved especially slowly for gays. Most people hadn't even heard of the Stonewall riots. Those of us who had were on the lookout for one another.

So it made a big impression on me one day when two girls, one of whom was very cute, came in the bookstore. They glanced furtively around to make sure there was no one else in hearing distance. Then the cute one asked, in a voice just above a whisper, if we had a copy of *The Well of Loneliness*. I sat up. I didn't know if we did, but I knew what she was asking for and it wasn't just a book. "Oh," I said coolly, "Radclyffe Hall." They blushed because this showed them that I knew they meant the Lesbian Book. "I don't know if we have it. Check in the back," and I pointed there. They giggled and skittered off together.

I don't remember if they found the book. I do remember several months later, when I saw the cute one at the Gay Student Union dance,

I was not surprised. She was by herself and I asked her to dance. She had broken up with the other one and we danced the night away, etc.

Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* was not a book I would have asked my bookstore boss about. I had started reading it when we were getting way into High Modernism in class, so I snottily found it obvious, simplistic, maudlin, or in the words of my boss, "crap, fucking crap." The "Bible of Lesbianism," I was mortified to discover, was written in fairly awful prose. Now that I am older and a bit less of a snob, I see that despite Hall's pedestrian and utterly mainstream prose, her book was, as it remains, both brave and—something all too rare in art—important.

The Well of Loneliness was a sign, the one title those girls in the bookstore—who I later learned had been cruising me for weeks—knew that if they asked me about, my reaction would reveal if I was gay. Anyone could read other lesbian writers like Stein or Barnes or Woolf because those writers could "fucking write." But you didn't read Radclyffe Hall unless you were a dyke.

Here's how the jacket flap of my copy, a reissue made from the original 1928 plates, describes it:

> *The Well of Loneliness* presents the life story of Stephen Gordon, only child of Sir Philip and Lady Anna Gordon, who ardently desired a son in her place. How this circumstance influenced a natural tendency towards masculinity in Stephen Gordon, her tortured adolescence and her gradual development into maturity in this deviated direction, with all its tragic implications, is the theme of this book.

There were lots of things in this description that made a self-important English Lit grad student like me bristle. For starters, the name Stephen Gordon suggests a lineage with both the first Christian martyr, Stephen, a beautiful boy who was stoned to death, and the ultra-Romantic hero, George Gordon, Lord Byron who, adored as he was by swooning females, also had a thing for young men. In short, the name of the protagonist of *The Well of Loneliness* seemed both

presumptuous and hokey. Secondly, the stereotype of the homosexual being "tortured" and "tragic" was just the kind of thing we were trying to work against in the '70s and '80s. But as I see it now, both the name and the fate of Hall's character were pretty forward-looking.

Prior to Radclyffe Hall, there had been literary portrayals of characters, mostly male and epitomized by the wealthy aesthete in Huysman's 1884 *Au Rebours*, the title of which is often translated *Against Nature*, whose aesthetics hinted at a shadowy, pathological demimonde of sexual decay. These fin de siècle novels did not ask for mainstream acceptance, much less sympathy, for these characters, but *The Well of Loneliness* did. Stephen Gordon was portrayed openly, in the language of the sexologists of the day, as an "invert." Hall's portrayal suggested that Gordon's "inversion" resulted from a genetic predisposition, not a condition to be cured or eradicated. Though the idea of the homosexual as tragic figure doomed to suffer may seem pathetic to modern queers, it was an important step in the development of gay identities.

In the '70s and '80s it was common to look down on Hall. During the women's movement, the last thing radical lesbians and feminists wanted was to be "masculine." If you chose a new name to replace the one your parents gave you, it should be something like Jasmine or Ruthdaughter or June Bloodmoon, not a guy's name like Stephen or John. You didn't want people to see you as mannish, but as a "woman-identified woman." But of course back then few people saw you at all.

In Wells's *The Invisible Man*, the problem is that after Griffin becomes invisible he can't get visible again. He gets kicked out of where he lives and he escapes to an inn in the countryside where he tries to concoct an antidote for his condition. Eventually he runs out of money, steals from people and breaks into the home of a Dr. Kemp. Kemp, hearing a commotion downstairs, goes to check and is stopped by an invisible hand. Here Griffin introduces, or rather reintroduces, himself to Kemp:

"I'm an invisible man ... And I want your help.... Don't you remember me, Kemp? Griffin, of University College? ... a younger

student, almost an albino, six feet high, and broad, with a pink and white face and red eyes."

Most retellings of Wells's book skip over the fact that the man who becomes invisible by means of chemicals and the reversed refraction of light is albino, someone whose skin color already makes him, if not entirely invisible, at least disparaged and reviled.

Some people are just plain born like that, a way that others will not see or will not see as right, only as different, wrong, grotesque.

Maybe part of the reason the albino "stranger," as Griffin is called in the first sentence, becomes invisible is because when he had been visible people looked away from him, repulsed and fearful, or they stared, repulsed and fascinated, and after a while he just got fucking sick of it.

At the end of Wells's book, the Invisible Man is bashed to death by a gang of "normal" men.

This is the description of the dead man's body, now visible again:

> There lay, naked and pitiful on the ground, the bruised and broken body of a young man about thirty. His hair and beard were white,—not gray with age, but white with the whiteness of albinisms, and his eyes were like garnets.

He was old before his time, poor guy. He never had a chance.

In James Whale's movie, Griffin (Claude Raines) is a man who wants to do something great partly because he is a scientist but also to impress his girlfriend. Griffin figures out how to make himself invisible, but not how to make himself visible again. He doesn't realize, until too late, that staying invisible too long will drive one nuts. So he goes nuts.

The police find the Invisible One hiding in an old barn and set the barn on fire to smoke him out. It's snowing so when the barn goes up in flames and the Invisible Man runs out, everyone can see his footsteps. They catch him and shoot him but he doesn't die immediately so there can be a death scene with the girlfriend in the hospital.

The girlfriend sits at the side of the hospital bed. We cannot see the invisible boyfriend, of course, only that the sheets are shaped as if they are draped over a body. There's also that depression in the pillow like someone's head. As Griffin dies, he returns to visibility. We see, kind of like an X-ray (invented in 1893, two years before the book came out!) first the bones, then veins, the sockets of his eyes. Then eyes, then finally, skin.

You only see him fully when he's dead.

But then the Invisible Man gets to live again! *The Invisible Man Returns* stars Vincent Price, and was released in January 1940. Here's the plot: Sir (he's come up in the world) Geoffrey Radcliffe (Price) is sentenced to death, although he didn't do it, for the murder of his brother. But Dr. Frank Griffin, the brother of the original Invisible Man, goes to the prison where Price is being held before his execution. Dr. Griffin injects him with an invisibility drug that allows Radcliffe to escape. Radcliffe meets his loyal, waiting girlfriend at a hideaway. Willie Spears (Alan Napier, later Batman's butler on TV) reveals, under duress, that Cecil Hardwicke, the manager of the mining operation the Radcliffes run, committed the murder. The invisible Radcliffe chases Hardwicke who accidentally dies in a coal wagon. Radcliffe is hit by a stray bullet and nearly dies. Dr. Griffin gives Radcliffe a blood transfusion that not only keeps him from dying but also makes him visible again.

Vincent Price's face was only in the film for a few minutes. For most of the movie he only appeared, like Claude Raines before him, as a disembodied voice, like the disembodied voice of Agnes Nicholls who, around the time that Wells was dreaming up his book, brought forth in the adolescent Radclyffe Hall (still Marguerite at that point) the love that she would be encouraged to keep unseen until she wrote her famous book.

The Invisible Man Returns was released twelve years after the 1928 obscenity trial for *The Well of Loneliness*. Early in the movie there is a scene at the gate of the home of the Radcliffe clan: Radcliffe Manor. As if asking, Radcliffe (Radclyffe)—Man/or something else? Not a woman, exactly—but what? A she? A he?

The Radcliffe homestead gate was not the only one to ask Man

Or? about a female writer. While genteel "bluestocking" scribes of light poetry or romance were allowed to exist and practice the "lesser" or feminine genres, Radclyffe Hall and female writers who were not "genteel" were suspect, intellectuality being a bad thing in a woman, a form of brain sickness that led to their (our) being, in the words of Norman Mailer, "dyke-ily psychotic." (May he burn in hell.)

But other guys were not so threatened, including the hardly feminist Alfred Hitchcock. A couple of decades before Mailer, *Suspicion* (1941, Cary Grant, wonderful as ever; Joan Fontaine as irritatingly wimpy as ever), had room for a perfectly unmonstrous female writer, the mystery scribe Isobel Sedbuck (played by Auriol Lee) and her anonymous mannish female friend in Radclyffe Hall drag (cropped hair, jacket, shirt and tie), and played by some anonymous personage not listed in the credits, who pours the wine and guy-to-guy-ishly calls the Cary Grant character "chap." This woman writer and her man/or something "friend" aren't monsters, they're just a pair of colorful English eccentrics.

Was Radclyffe Hall a man/or something else unseen before? Who sees us when we are not seen? Who would be seen but isn't?"Things are because we see them," Wilde said. "And what we see and how we see it," he continued, "depend on the arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and then only, does it come into existence."

Would you see her without her shirt and tie? Or him without his yellow or green carnation? Maybe there a reason they're so "flamboyant." As if they'd not be seen if they were not.

The Invisible Man Returns includes a scene in which the invisible Vincent Price jokingly asks the girl he loves, "What does it feel like to have a phantom fiancee?" Which I guess is what you are if you can only have a phantom (read: second-class partnership) marriage.

I don't remember what the poor girl said.

7 One cannot hear the words "invisible" and "man" together with-

out thinking of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1954), one of the great American novels of the 20th century. It begins:

> 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. . . . [For Hollywood ectoplasms see above.] My invisibility [is not] exactly a matter of biochemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eye 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.

I am of course complaining and protesting both. I mean, People! How many times do we have to go through this invisibilizing of others? When are we vermin going to get that we're all here, we're all queer (or colored or weird or different) and just get used to it?

Ralph Ellison went to the Alabama Tuskegee Institute in 1933, where he became a clerk in the library and discovered Stein, Joyce, et al. His "aesthete" teacher Morteza Drezel introduced Ellison to Hardy's *Jude the Obscene*, I mean, *Obscure*. Ellison felt an affinity with the book's wounded, unseen, disparaged-by-others hero.

The first scene in *Invisible Man* recounts how a female object, an as-it-were invisible woman, is placed in front of several Negro men by white men to "prove" the lower animal nature of . . . of . . . uh . . . whom?

Them?

Whoever them is. Us?

Whoever it is who refused to see the human in front of one's very particular eyes.

Who is it we're not seeing now?
Who will not look or see?
Who else will we forget
and make invisible?

"Oh darn!" (See note 1 above.)