

Invisible by Steve Rasnic Tem

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Over the past few months something painful and awkward had come into the light. Ray was never quite able to define it, and of course did not feel he could check out this perception with anyone else. It would be an odd thing to say, and he knew he had a reputation for saying odd things, although no one had actually told him so.

There were days he could barely stand to open his eyes. Something in the atmosphere, perhaps, that stung the cornea. Every object he looked at was outlined in bright white light. A brilliance he was not supposed to see, a visibility not meant for him. These haloing strokes appeared hesitant, as if part of an unsure painting.

It was the kind of light he imagined you would see at the end of the world: a sad, quiet fading of form and color, as if all earthly materials were dissolving from a mass failure of conviction.

Although he did not expect confirmation of his anxieties, or really want one, Ray listened to the hourly radio weather reports, noting the announcer's tone when he spoke words such as "overcast," "upper atmosphere," and "visibility." There was anxiety in the slight, random trembling of the otherwise smooth voice. Did the weatherman hold something back? The answers were all there, he suspected, floating through the air, hiding in the aftertaste of water, momentarily visible in the bright, painful regions of reflected sun, if one only knew the right way to see, to taste, to hear.

He called his wife two or three times during the day to see how she was feeling, thinking she might be sensing something similar, but he was unable to ask her directly. At some point they'd stopped authenticating each other's sadder perceptions about their places in the universe.

At least in the office there were few windows, and the predictable lines of the cubicles were comfortably familiar. Weather ceased to be a factor once he arrived at work.

Anyone up for lunch? Ray had waited an hour or so for someone to make the invitation. He normally timed his work so he could be available any time between noon and one.

He stood up in his cubicle. Several other heads popped up out of the maze of short, upholstered partitions, like prairie dogs out of their holes. The others waved to the speaker—Marty, a lead programmer—and grabbed their coats. After an awkward pause with Marty staring straight at him, Ray tentatively raised a hand and waved as well. Marty's expression didn't change. He couldn't have missed Ray's intention.

Ray saved his work, jotted down some notes, stood and slipped on his coat. He got to the elevators just as the doors were closing. His coworkers stared out at him without recognition. No one tried to stop the doors. He waved again, said, “Hey!” He ran down four flights to the lobby. He almost ran over a woman on the second floor landing. He stopped to apologize but could see the distaste in her eyes (or was it pity?). Out of breath, he reached the outside doors. He watched as they pulled away, all of them jammed into Marty’s green Ford. How did they get out there so quickly? Again he waved as the car swung past the entrance and out the driveway. A woman from another office scooted by him and out the door. It suddenly embarrassed him that she’d seen him with his hand up, waving to no one, greeting nothing as if nothing might wave back, and he lowered it.

He went back upstairs to his cubicle, hoping no one had seen him return. He went back to work on the day’s projects, not thinking to remove his coat. From time to time hunger pains stroked his belly like nervous fingers. He had a lunch in the office refrigerator—he always had a lunch in the office refrigerator—but he didn’t bother to go get it.

The sky outside went from a misty white to a deep blue, then to grays and oranges, as if painted on an enormous turning disk. He did not learn this from looking out the window but saw it reflected in his computer screen. Days passed in this awkwardly glimpsed view of the world. He could feel his hands on the keyboard begin the painful petrification that must surely lead to transparency. At some point Marty and the others wandered past as they returned from lunch, louder than usual. Marty eventually brought some papers by for Ray to look at. There was no mention of the missed lunch. Ray thought perhaps his intentions had been misunderstood. They were all well-meaning people here. The world was full of well-meaning people. It wasn’t their fault he didn’t know how to conduct himself.

At the end of the day he took the stairs down to the parking lot, leaving fifteen minutes early. He did this every day. It was unlikely he’d be fired for such an offense, but he somewhat enjoyed imagining the possibility. Perhaps an announcement would be made. Perhaps he would be forced to exit through the reception area carrying his box of meager belongings as other employees stood and watched. Would any of them wish him well in his future endeavors?

Outside the air shimmered with possibility. He did his best to ignore it.

Traffic was again heavy and slow, the cars unable to maneuver beyond the occasional lane change. There was a quality of anger in the way people sped up and slowed down, changed lanes, slipped into the breakdown lane in order to make an illegal pass on the left. The anger made Ray feel as if some explosion was imminent, some volcanic eruption of blame he might drown in.

But he didn’t mind the traffic per se—it gave him the opportunity to gaze into

the interiors of the other cars, to see what the people were doing when they thought no one was looking, observe the little things (singing, grooming, picking their noses) they did to divert tedium, follow the chase of expressions across their faces, all of them no doubt feeling safe and assured of their invisibility.

His was simply one more can awash in a sea of metal. He was content to wait until the tide brought him home.

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Janice didn't turn around when Ray walked into the kitchen. "It's almost ready," she said. "We have to be there by six-thirty. We can't be late."

"If we're late, she might think we're not coming. We can't let that happen."

"No, we can't." She dealt slices of tomato rapidly into the stew. "So, what did you do for lunch today? Did you go out with anybody?"

She always tried to sound casual about it. She always failed.

"No." He started to make up a satisfactory reason, then gave up. "I worked through." He looked over her shoulder into the bubbling liquid, always fascinated by the way carrots and meat, potatoes, peas, and corn blended simply through constant collision. He pulled back when he remembered how much she hated him looking over her shoulder when she cooked. "How did you do today?"

She dropped a handful of peas into the pot. She filled a pan with water, slid it onto the burner, took two eggs from the fridge. "No one noticed my new hair. A hundred and twenty dollars. If it had been anybody else, they'd say something. Even if they didn't like it."

She stood there with her back still turned, eggs in hand. Ray reached to touch her arm but stopped an inch or so away. "I'm sorry, honey. I don't know why that happens."

"It's always the same conversation, isn't it?" she said. "It's like talking about the weather for us."

"It shouldn't happen that way," he said, not knowing what else to say. When she didn't respond, he started to go upstairs to change.

"But what I hate most is that it's all just too damn *silly!*"

He paused in the doorway. "It's not silly if it's hurting you." She was crying, still with her back to him. The right thing to do would be to put his arms around her. But he couldn't bring himself to do it. He didn't want to talk about this. He didn't want to say that he, too, felt it was silly and stupid and he felt small and petty every

time his own feelings were similarly hurt. And he didn't want to say that he was angry with her for not being better at this than he was. She'd always been the more socially adept of the two of them—if she couldn't solve this, what hope did he have?

“There are people without homes,” she said, “people who have lost everything. There are people whose every day is a desperate gesture, and here I am crying because some silly women at the office where I work didn't notice my new hairdo!”

“I know. But it's more than that.”

“It's more than that. It's the lunches. It's the conversations. It's all the moments you're not invited in.”

“It's feeling like whatever you say, they're not hearing you. That no matter how much you wave your arms and jump up and down, they're not seeing you. You feel stupid and crazy and paranoid, because you know it doesn't make much sense—it has to be something you're doing, but you never can find a good enough reason in the things you're doing to explain it.”

“And when you ... when we die, no one but our daughter is going to remember we were ever here.”

“I just can't believe that,” he said.

“Really? You don't believe that?”

“I can't *accept* it,” he said.

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The high-school parking lot was full and then some. It was all senior kids in the show, and for many of these parents it would be their final opportunity to see their children as children, even though so few of them looked like children anymore.

“I never imagined her this way,” he said.

“What way?”

“Grown up. It's ridiculous, but I never imagined this day would actually come.”

“Wouldn't it be sad if it never came, Ray?”

“Oh, of course. But still, it feels as if she just went out to play one day, and never came back.”

They ended up in the overflow parking by a rundown grocery. They crossed the street nervously, watching the traffic. Visibility was poor. Wet streets and black, shiny pavement, multicolored lights drifting in the wind.

Ray kept glancing at the front entrance as he pushed forward. Around them the headlights and car reflections floated randomly, like glowing insects looking for somewhere solid to land.

The lobby was packed with parents and their children, leaving little room for movement. Molly would already be on stage, waiting nervously behind the curtain. Janice wanted to rush into the auditorium, always afraid they'd be left without a seat, but Ray held back. Like Janice he hated crowds, but he needed to take in this part of it one final time. He would never experience this again. No more opportunities to act like other parents, in front of other parents.

These were families he had seen at dozens of events over the years, not that he really knew any of them. Some looked so pleased they actually glowed. But most had the anxious look of someone who has forgotten, and forgotten what they have forgotten.

He couldn't focus on any single group or conversation for more than a few seconds. He closed his eyes against the growing insect buzz, opened them again to clusters of colored dots vibrating asynchronously. If he were only a little smarter, he might understand what was going on here.

A man a few feet away exclaimed "Hey there!" and started toward him. Ray recognized him as a neighbor from a few blocks away—the daughter had been in Molly's classes for years. Ray felt his face grow warm as the neighbor—Tom? Was his name Tom?—held out his hand. Deep in his pants pocket Ray's hand itched, sweaty, as he began to pull it out.

"Quite the special evening, don't you think?" said Tom, if that was his name.

Ray had his hand out and managed a smile. Tom looked somewhat startled, nodded curtly, then brushed past to shake the hand of a man behind Ray. Ray wiggled his fingers as if stretching them, then stuck his hand back into his pocket.

Janice tugged at his sleeve. "Let's just go inside," she said, strain in her voice. But Ray didn't think he could move.

The lights blinked twice, and he was thinking there might be a power outage when he realized, of course, they were signaling the curtain. The crowd pushed forward and he felt himself dragged along, Janice's hand clutched in his.

When the curtain rose and the music started—an impressive storm of violins

and horns—they craned their necks looking for Molly. The bandleader tended to move her for almost every performance. Ray always had the fear that she would be left out, that she'd be depressed that evening and hide out in the bathroom (she could be surprisingly dramatic for an offspring of such parents), or that she'd be miscued, misplaced. He was always prepared to defend her with his anger, for it was one thing to ignore him, or to ignore Janice, but it was beyond bearing for the daughter they both adored to be ignored, to have her feelings hurt.

But there she was! Second row back, close to the end of the row, her black bangs whipping as she vigorously sawed with the bow. He could feel Janice settle back with relief. He sighed and started to lean back himself when he heard the high cry of a violin and looked up, already knowing it was Molly, playing the first solo part of the night, her eyes streaming. Leaning so far forward he could breathe the warmth of the woman's head in front of him, Ray felt himself beginning to cry and buried his face in his hands as his daughter's violin made that sweet, lonely sound floating high into the rafters and beyond.

He barely heard the rest of the concert, but it sounded impressively professional. Not that he was qualified to judge, but it had none of the rough, slightly off-key flavor he had expected. Nothing to impress the way Molly's moment in the spotlight had, but quite good, surely, none the less. He and Janice decided to sit through the break, not wanting to wade into that crowd scene again. He watched the audience: some still on the edges of their seats, some leaning back in bored, awkward semblances of relaxation. A few with heads bowed, touching each other, as if praying.

Did any of these people realize they were being watched? In their private moments did they imagine they, too, were invisible?

He glanced back up at the stage. Molly was staring at him. He felt a rush of embarrassment, hoping she didn't think he had been ignoring her performance. She looked smaller, younger, and it made him think of when it seemed she had been mostly his and not this almost-adult traveling at the speed of light out of his world. *Claire didn't invite me to her sleepover and I'm, like, her third-best friend!* The way she had looked up at him that night, surrounded and embraced by toys she'd soon find babyish, he had thought she was demanding some explanation. It was as if she'd suddenly discovered she'd inherited his leprosy—why hadn't he told her before?

“These things happen, sweetheart.” Of course they do, especially in this family. “I'm sure she didn't mean to hurt your feelings.” Because she wasn't aware of you or your feelings. “Sometimes you just have to be the organizer, the party-thrower, and invite her.” It had been good advice, but he had prayed she wouldn't follow it. What would he say to her when they ignored her invitations?

In fact, Molly did not follow his advice, and he never heard another word

from her on the subject. Perhaps she understood better than her parents. A child prodigy in the realm of invisibility. If she had friends after that, if she were invited places, she didn't share that information.

After the concert they made their way backstage to congratulate her, even though the seeming aggressiveness of the crowd agitated him. Janice pressed herself as close to the walls as possible, her cheekbone practically rubbing the brick. Finally they stood huddled together backstage as rivers of people flowed around them, spinning off into laughing, celebratory groups. Ray scanned the room for Molly, thinking that of course none of this should be any cause for anxiety, but he felt a rising tide of nervousness, beginning with an itchiness in the bottoms of his feet, tightening his calves and creating small but intense shooting pains in his knees. He held his head up stiffly and gulped for air. The room grew suddenly gray, the people moving around him outlined in ice and silver. He held one hand out, the skin ragged around the outlines, fading.

“Daddy?”

Molly stepped out of the bright light and into his reach. She carried her violin folded into her arms like a baby. Her eyes were wide, frightened, but they did not blink, did not avert from him even for a second as she looked at him, looked at him.

He pulled her to him and the three stood close together, not hugging—none of them good about hugging in public—but making sure they maintained contact as the world spun and jerked and solidified in its slow return to the real.

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Molly hardly spoke on the way home, turning away their compliments with uninviting syllables, grunts, and nods, even refusing her father's proposition of hot dogs and sundaes at a neighborhood shop. She retired early, but they could hear her playing her romantic classical CDs softly, rearranging furniture, “doing her inventory” as Janice called it, packing for college and the life to come. She'd been packing for more than a month, trying to decide what bits of her old life to bring forward. The plan was she would leave in three weeks for a summer job at a music camp in upstate New York, and from there to school in the city. They had argued for months over whether they would drive her—it felt wrong not to be there with her for the big transition. It seemed all terribly too grown-up and recklessly premature to Ray, who already missed her to the point of physical pain. But something about Molly's determination that she do this alone finally persuaded him, and Janice reluctantly went along. Now Janice refused to speak about it.

The most difficult part of it all was that he was almost thrilled she was leaving. He imagined her going north, being absorbed into the life of the city and coming out of it a success, a famous person who had escaped the sick anonymity passed down from her unfortunate parents. In his imagination she became a fabulous, soaring star, and even as his heart was breaking in anticipation of her absence, his lost, invisible

voice inside was saying *go, go, go, don't look back...*

Even with that sense of hope, however, they could not escape what their lives had become. An hour later Ray and Janice were ready for bed. They lay down together in loose-fitting pajamas, pushing off the bedclothes lest they bind and constrict. They both could feel the pain approaching, as if from a long distance gathering speed, its mouth open and the night wind whistling through the narrow gaps between its needle-like teeth.

They clasped hands as their spasms began, Janice's rocking her body almost off the bed. She clutched his hand until he cried out, which triggered even worse convulsions in the both of them, bodies snapping at the ends of whipping arms, mouths pulled back in fish-expression grimaces, tears and sweat burning across their faces and softening the roots of their hair. He willed his body to stay together, to remain solid, begged it to stop its flow across the bed and onto the floor, as every skin cell fought against transparency and his mind battled evaporation.

They bit their lips until they bled, clamping their mouths to prevent the escape of their cries. They had decided long ago that Molly must not know, that if she weren't told she might even escape this. And if she were to overhear, what could they say to her? For how do you explain the terrible pain of invisibility?

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A month later Molly was gone as planned. Another week and she'd still not called to check in. It bothered them both, but perhaps Janice the most. Now and then he would catch her visiting in Molly's room, but she would not speak of any of it.

Eventually Janice quit her job without notice. She'd been there fifteen years, but she said she'd "never felt welcome."

"Never? Not even in the beginning?" Ray couldn't quite believe it. He was a little angry with her—they needed the money, and she hardly seemed ready for job hunting.

"In the beginning I pretended. I don't know why, but now I can't pretend anymore. I go in and I shut my office door and I cry all day."

"All day?" He wanted to be sympathetic, but he was too shocked. He'd believed she'd been happy until the last few years. She hadn't been like him—she'd seemed to have friends, she talked as if there'd been a camaraderie at work, her opinions were respected. He'd always suspected that the invisibility she'd felt these few years had been something she'd contracted from him. "I'm so sorry ... I had no idea."

She collapsed in his arms. He wanted to tell her he understood, that he knew

how she felt.

Finally, a few days later, Ray decided to call the place Molly worked. At first the person on the other end claimed never to have heard of her. Ray sat down on the edge of the couch, holding the phone to his chest. Then someone else came on who knew her, then finally it was her voice, distant yet energetic, interested in a way he'd never heard in her before, and yes she was all right, she'd just been busy, yes she would write, but she was just so busy.

Ray didn't tell her that her mother had quit her job. He said they were doing wonderfully; they had so many things to do they couldn't fit them all in. He went so far as to make up the name of a couple they'd recently met, with similar interests, and the events they had attended together.

Molly responded with a few stories of social events of her own. He had no idea if she was telling the truth, but he decided to believe her, and she did sound convincing. She sounded as if her parents had no further place in her life. Although this brought a note of genuine sadness into everything he said to her after that, he still cheered her on, and actually hoped, God help him, that she stayed as far away from them as possible, for her sake.

He told Janice about the call, making it seem that he and Molly had talked far longer than they actually had. She nodded as if disinterested, but he could see the wetness of her eyes, the stiffness in her features. She wouldn't talk about it.

That night the spasms were more violent and painful than ever before. Janice's sweeping arms broke a bedside lamp, and he spent half the night comforting her and bandaging her wounds.

At work Ray made himself say hello to everyone in his office every morning. It was part of a plan to make himself present. Never mind that he had tried similar tactics before. He used to keep a journal of such attempts: times he'd said hello with no response, times he had been ignored in conversations, obviously excluded from invitations. Stores where he had been unable to get sales assistance, restaurants where the waiters ignored him even when he waved menus in their faces, times cars had almost struck him in pedestrian crosswalks, days in which he'd had absolutely no human contact before the daily escape home to Janice and Molly.

Now he pulled this journal out of his desk and threw it into the trash, determined once again that these things wouldn't happen to him again or, if they did, he would ignore them. He would be his own company, if need be. The best of companions.

That afternoon the building had a fire drill. He walked out with the other employees, offering up his own jokes to match theirs. He couldn't be sure whose jokes were being laughed at, and whose ignored. Too much noise and confusion.

But he at least felt like part of the group.

Out in the parking lot the group of employees separated into two groups, one on either side of him. He looked around: he was at the exact center, the point of separation, standing with neither group. He turned to the group on his left, listening to the general conversation, seeking an opening. Finally he offered up some comment about the hot pavement. He could almost see his words slide by their faces, catching on nothing, drifting beyond the group. He turned to the group on his right, wondering aloud how long the drill was supposed to last. The group appeared to stare up into the hot sun, preferring to blind themselves rather than to acknowledge him. When the all-clear sounded, the other employees returned to work upstairs. But Ray climbed into his car and went home.

Another month passed and he noticed Janice seemed to have less and less to say to him when he called home. Then there was a period of days in which she didn't answer the phone at all. After work he would walk into the house to confront her, and her excuse would be she must not have heard the phone ringing, she'd been out working in the yard (their yard, layered as it was with gravel and wood chips, seemed to have little to work on), or she'd been out shopping (but what did she buy?).

Then there came the morning Ray called home every ten minutes with no response.

A few minutes after his last call he found himself loitering outside his boss's office door, coughing, trying to look as ill as possible. He felt like a kid. He winced dramatically as he walked through the door, then looked up to see his boss hadn't noticed. Of course.

Ray cleared his throat. No answer. "Excuse me, Jim?" Jim appeared to be hypnotized by whatever he had up on the screen. "I'm feeling really ill. I have to leave!" He practically shouted it.

His boss looked up in surprise, said, "Sure, do what you have to do," and turned back to his computer.

At first he couldn't find Janice. She wasn't in the kitchen, and the living room TV was cold. He called her name from the bottom of the stairs, but there was no answer. He went outside and walked around the yard looking for signs of her supposed gardening activities. The yard looked as sad and neglected as he'd expected. He felt compelled to look into the shrubs, pull back weeds and search the ground for her body. He found some of Molly's old toys: a yellowing Barbie and a toy ice-cream truck. They must have been hiding out there at least a decade. He looked up at the house. It appeared abandoned. The roof was badly in need of repair. How long had it been deteriorating? He looked at his hands, half expecting them to be an old man's hands. Had he been asleep? How many years had he lost?

Finally, in their bedroom, he found her.

She writhed in pain, an insect pinned alive to the bed. Her arms and legs wriggled, her mouth opened and closed silently. He'd never imagined she did this alone—*this was something they'd always shared*.

He looked more closely. Some distortion of the body. Then he realized she had no hands, no feet.

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Ray called in sick the rest of the week and stayed home with Janice. The week after, with her no better, he applied for two weeks of sick leave. On the phone his boss again seemed nonchalant. *Do what you have to do*. As if Ray really had a choice. Did his boss even know Ray was married? Ray didn't think the man had ever asked. Ray wore a ring, but it was pale yellow, blending into his skin. Invisible if you weren't really looking.

He saw no evidence, however, that his remaining home did her any good. During her better times she would lie there, staring at the ceiling, her skin glowing with the gray of fish in shimmering pools. Now and then one piece or another of her would fade into shadow, or bleach to the color of the surrounding sheet, making of her body an archipelago as she slept. These bits would fade back into visibility as she awakened, and sometimes she would be reinvigorated, getting up and walking around, fixing herself something to eat.

At her worst she shuddered and convulsed, gripping the sides of the bed with hands that weren't there, the skin on her arms and legs flickering in and out of existence like quick bursts of lightning. Despite his growing horror at touching her, he would lie down next to her and embrace her, hold her tightly as if to anchor her to the world. The irony was that he rarely convulsed himself during this period and had not been aware of his own painful invisibility for some time.

"I'm taking you to the doctor," he said one morning. "It's ridiculous that we've waited this long."

"You can't," she said from under the covers. She'd pulled them up over her head, so that all he could sense of her was her frail voice, a few rounded shapes, stick-figure limbs beneath the quilt. If he went over and pulled the covers back, would he see anything?

"Why can't we try?"

"He won't believe you."

"Maybe there have been other cases, and they're not letting on because it

would cause a panic. Besides, he'll see the spasms, he'll see what happens to your body, your skin."

"Do you *really* think he'll see anything? Do you think he'll notice anything at all?"

Of course not. But he would not say it. "We have to do something. *I* have to do *something*."

"Stay with me. That's doing something."

And he did.

One night he awakened to her coughing. He lay watching her, her naked back glowing, pulsing with each cough. There was a pearly green aura he thought strangely beautiful, and he felt guilty that he could think it beautiful. She sighed. The coughs grew softer, the color shifts more subtle, a gauzy, greenish cream. She seemed to recede from him into the other side of the bed. Cough. Into the wall.

And then he was looking at the bare wall, the empty plain of bed beneath it. He held perfectly still. And waited. He gave it time, gave her time to come back to him. Waited an hour. Then waited two hours. And then began to cry. And then began to sob.

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He did not leave the house for several weeks. This was a conscious decision. Not out of grief. He wasn't even sure he was grieving. His reasons were investigative. Experimental. Since she had vanished so suddenly, couldn't she reappear suddenly as well? He could be sitting at breakfast, and she might suddenly be sitting in the chair across from him, sipping her coffee and reading the morning paper. Or perhaps she'd show up at the front door, knocking, since she hadn't had her keys when she disappeared. Or perhaps he'd wake up one morning and she'd be lying in bed beside him, her face nuzzled against his arm, because their bed was the last place he'd seen her.

Ray worried that if he wasn't in the house when she arrived, Janice might panic. It made perfect sense to him that she would arrive back in this world in a state of some confusion. He couldn't let her go through that alone.

He didn't bother to call work. It certainly didn't surprise him that they didn't call him. He imagined going to work as usual, then disappearing out of his cubicle leaving a half-eaten sandwich behind. How long would it take them to realize something was amiss?

But it seemed less funny after four weeks with no one calling. The automatic deposit of his paychecks continued uninterrupted.

Each day he spent an hour or so sitting in different chairs in different rooms. He saw things he had never noticed before: a small truck in the background of a painting, a birthmark on the ear of an anonymous relative in one of the photographs in the living room, a paperback book he'd thought lost under one side of the couch. He developed a new appreciation for the pleasant home he and Janice had created together.

After that first month he considered whether he should come up with a story to explain her absence to the curious. For the first time he realized how suspicious the circumstances of her disappearance might look to the police. He thought it fortunate that Janice had quit her job. She had no living relatives that he was aware of, and no friends out of her past (had there even been any?) ever bothered to call. Wouldn't the neighbors be a bit curious, wouldn't they notice that now he lived alone? Of course not.

Molly had to be told eventually. The next time she called he would offer some sort of explanation. He owed her that. But what if she never called? Should he track her down, introduce this sad twist of physics into the life of the one human being he still held dear?

Ray could not bear the idea that his daughter might never look into his face again, making him feel, at last, *recognized*. But it seemed as inevitable as his wife's fade from the world.

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Four years later Ray was walking past a church a few blocks from home. It had become his habit each night to walk the nearby neighborhoods, not returning home until sometime after midnight. Each house window was like a dimly-lit television, the people inside moving about with unexplained purpose behind partially drawn shades and curtains. The noises could just as easily be sobs or laughter, and he had no responsibility for knowing which was which.

Sometimes he attended nighttime lectures at this church, sitting near the back to observe. The lectures were usually nonreligious or at least nondenominational. Usually on a social issue "Of Concern To Us All," or a recounting of some overseas trip or expedition. Never anything he hadn't heard a hundred times before.

"Spontaneous Human Invisibility," it said on the church activities sign. "8 P.M. Wednesday." It was five after the hour. The lights inside appeared dim, and he thought for a moment the lecture must have been cancelled. A woman his age, graying hair pulled back, a pale brown, unflattering knee length dress, appeared suddenly out of the shadows and turned into the church, disappearing through the doors. Without thinking he hurried after her.

"In every case the person was physically present, but according to reliable

witnesses of good reputation and standing in the community, the person could not be seen or heard.”

The man at the podium wore a stiff white shirt, striped tie, black pants. Black shoes that gleamed with a high-gloss, plastic-like finish. He reminded Ray of a Jehovah’s Witness who had once come to his door, except the fellow at the altar wasn’t smiling.

Perhaps eight or nine people sat in the front rows and an equal number on the sides. He could see movement in the unlit overflow seating sections off to either side behind rows of pillars: a fluttering as of birds trapped in shadow, a jerky nod, a gleam of cuff link or teeth. It seemed odd that people would sit in the dark, unless they were embarrassed or didn’t want their attendance noted.

Then there was the lady he’d followed in here, sitting a few rows ahead of him. Particularly noticeable in that she was the only person in the room smiling.

“Besides these third-party witnesses, we have limited testimony from the victims themselves, limited apparently because of embarrassment, or because they could not believe anyone would listen to their stories.”

Ray felt movement nearby, saw three men sitting a few feet away, listening intently. They must have arrived after him, but he hadn’t seen them come in.

“We have the story of Martha, who stopped going into grocery stores because not once in six years had a clerk answered any of her questions.”

A nodding to Ray’s immediate left. More late arrivals, but he hadn’t felt or heard them sit down.

“And what are we to make of Lisa, a gorgeous woman from all accounts, who hasn’t been asked out on a date since she was sixteen?”

A stirring in seats all around him, as if the air was charging with emotion.

“These are active, living people, who through no fault of their own have found themselves sadly, spontaneously invisible, often at the very moment they needed to be seen the most. Missed by their children, ignored by their spouses, underappreciated in the arenas of commerce, I contend these are members of the most persecuted of minorities, in part because it is a minority whose existence has gone for the most part *unperceived*.”

These remarks were greeted with thunderous applause. Ray glanced around: every pew, every seat was filled. He stared at some of the faces and saw nothing remarkable about any of them. Nondescript. Forgettable. The lady who’d led him here got up and headed briskly toward the door. He scrambled to follow her.

He passed close to one of the dark overflow areas. The faces staring out at him were gray, with even grayer eyes. They filled every inch of space, a wallpaper of monotone swatches.

When Ray got outside he discovered to his dismay that the woman was already more than a block ahead of him. Her shadow hinged like a stick insect as she made the corner.

“Hey!” he shouted. “Hey!” And ran after her.

He followed her for several blocks, never making much progress. He shouted and screamed until his lungs were on fire, at first thinking the local residents would be disturbed. Infuriated, they would call the police.

No, he thought. No, they won't.

And so he shouted and screamed some more. He yelled at the top of his lungs. There were no words in what he was screaming, only fragmented syllables his anguished mouth abused.

At the end of the street the sky had lightened, yellow rays spreading through lines of perspective, stringing the distant houses together with trails of fire. He could see the woman had stopped: a charred spot in his retina, the edges of his vision in flames.

He arrived breathless and on the verge of fainting, awed by the observation that the sun had arrived with him. All around him the world lightened, then bleached, became day, and then became something beyond. White and borderless and a pain in his heart. He was amazed to find she was looking directly into his face.

“You see me,” he whispered. Then, “But am I still alone?”

It seemed as if he'd never seen pity until he'd seen it in her face. Looking at him, looking at him, she nodded sadly for him and everyone else waking up in solitary beds at the edge of nonexistence.

And the world was silver. Then pewter as it cooled. He waited, and waited, then, finding enough shadow to make a road, he followed it to his house and the rest of his days there. Alone.

And to any eyes that might pry on that place, occasionally, and only occasionally, visible.