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Invisible man ralph ellison summary shmoop

The narrator introduces himself right off the bat as an invisible man. Hi, invisible man. He lives off the grid, in a warm hole in the ground where he is hibernating in anticipation of future direct, visible action. But before all this direct, visible action happens, he needs to detail his road to recognizing his invisibility. We get context when we learn that the narrator's grandparents were former slaves freed after the Civil War. On his deathbed, the narrator's grandfather, who had been considered a meek man, confesses anger towards the white-controlled system and advocates using the system against them. The narrator dismisses his grandfather's words and goes on to live a meek and obedient life as a model black student. After writing a successful speech on the importance of humility to black progress (i.e., the idea that blacks can progress as long as they recognize whites as superior), he is invited to give the speech to leaders of his town. The narrator is super-excited to give this speech. Fast forward to speech day: the narrator is forced to strip off his clothes and fight a blindfolded "battle royal" with other young black men in front of white town leaders. Definitely not a speech. Only after the young men fight, egged on by drunken town leaders, is the narrator allowed to give his speech. His big moment has arrived, but the town leaders barely listen. They reward him well, however. At the close of his speech, the narrator is presented with a fine briefcase and a scholarship to a black college. The narrator recalls that the college grounds were beautiful (remember this whole story is being told by a guy currently living in a manhole). He remains a model student and aspires one day to work with Dr. Bledsoe, who heads the school. When he is selected to drive Mr. Norton, one of the school's founders and a rich white millionaire, around the grounds, the narrator is excited. And then things go horribly wrong. The two visit old slave quarters and hear the story of a man named Trueblood, who apparently impregnated his daughter. In need of some fortifying liquids, Mr. Norton orders the narrator to take him to the nearest bar. This happens to be an insane-asylum-and-bar hybrid. (What?!) Well, so much for the narrator someday working with Dr. Bledsoe—the guy kicks him out of school and tells him to go look for work in Harlem, New York. He hands the narrator some letters of recommendation and wishes him luck. The narrator is excited about his prospects in Harlem, but Dr. Bledsoe's letters of recommendation aren't doing any magical employment tricks. Turns out the letters of recommendation are actually the opposite—letters asking the recipient to not help the narrator. Ouch. Crushed and dismayed, the narrator ends up taking a job at Liberty Paints. While there, he makes white paint, is mistaken for a fink (a hired strike-breaker), then mistaken for a unionist, and then is accidentally blown up and used as a lab rat in the company hospital. All-around great first day on the job. It's also the narrator's last day. We don't blame him. A friendly, motherly woman named Mary Rambo takes the narrator into her house and, for lack of a less clichéd phrase, believes in him. This belief is borne out when the narrator witnesses an old black couple getting evicted on the streets and feels compelled to give an awesome impromptu speech (to a listening audience, no less). One of those listening is a white man named Brother Jack, who initiates the narrator into the Brotherhood, a multiracial organization with communist undercurrents. The narrator moves out of Mary's house, makes some good money, and learns the ways of the Brotherhood. He makes some excellent speeches (to people that listen), and gains increasing prestige within the Harlem community. Big mistake, apparently. The Brotherhood re-assigns the narrator to attend to women's issues downtown, which is equivalent to your swimsuit company transferring you to Juneau, Alaska. After a couple weeks, the narrator returns to Harlem to learn that Tod Clifton, a fellow young black Brother, has been missing for a number of weeks. Harlem itself has undergone a lot of change—much of the work the narrator put into the community has disappeared. The narrator is further thrown for a loop when he finds Clifton selling Sambo dolls on the street. He witnesses a police officer shoot Clifton. With Clifton dead, the narrator urgently tries to contact senior members of the Brotherhood to organize a funeral service, but ends up taking matters into his own hands and organizes a public funeral. Mistake! The Brotherhood summons the narrator to a meeting during which they chastise him for taking matters into his own hands. They call Clifton a traitor for selling the racist Sambo dolls, and they reprimand the narrator for organizing a public funeral. Apparently, public demonstrations are no longer part of the Brotherhood agenda. Brother Jack instructs the narrator to visit Brother Hambro, who will outline the new program. The narrator decides to visit Brother Hambro that night, but on the way, he bumps into Ras the Exhorter, a black nationalist who conveniently uses the situation to stir up anti-Brotherhood sentiment. It's a bit of a dangerous situation for the narrator, who sees two men ready to follow him into a who-knows-what kind of dark alley. Deciding that a disguise would be the best course of action, the narrator purchases a prop or two and promptly starts being mistaken for a man called Rinehart. This Rinehart character is a reverend, a gambler, a fighter, and a pimp, among other identities. The narrator realizes that he can have multiple identities—that's the benefit of being invisible. Deciding to discuss the idea with Hambro, the narrator meets up with Hambro and learns that the Brotherhood is planning to sacrifice the people of Harlem in service of a greater, unnamed cause. The narrator decides to spy on the Brotherhood and figure out their true intentions, but is unsuccessful. Harlem erupts into a race riot, and the narrator speculates that this was the Brotherhood's plan all along. Extremely upset, he continues running down the streets of Harlem as Ras the Exhorter (now Ras the Destroyer) urges further destruction. Ras calls for the narrator to be apprehended, but the narrator eludes capture after a brief confrontation. He tries to go to Mary's house, but ends up falling down a manhole. When he awakens, he realizes the full extent of the Brotherhood manipulation and gets angry. He realizes he needs a plan of action and decides to hibernate until then. He tells us that writing his story was helpful, and that he's ready to come out of hibernation. He wonders if his story is speaking for us as well as himself. The narrator remembers how naive he was some twenty years earlier. In the present, he feels ashamed for having been ashamed of his grandparents, who were once enslaved but freed after the Civil War. So, just one more time to make sure it's clear: he is ashamed of having felt ashamed. Back to the part about the grandparents. The narrator's grandfather's last words were an admonishment to fight oppression. Known as a meek man throughout his life, the narrator's grandfather expresses anger at the system (that would be the white-controlled system) and advises using the system against the whites. And then he passes away. Okay. So while the rest of this plot summary will be told in the present tense, remember that it's all the recollection of a certain invisible man hibernating in a man hole. As a young boy in a nameless Southern town, the narrator is intelligent and obedient—a model student. He wonders if his grandfather would approve, and if the white people will ever realize that his behavior is actually treachery. Anyway, the narrator gives a graduation speech praising humility as the key to black men's progress. The speech becomes such a hit that the narrator is invited to deliver it to the white leaders of the town. When the narrator arrives in the hotel ballroom, all pumped up to give his speech, he finds the town leaders smoking and drinking heavily. He learns that nine of his schoolmates are there to participate in a "battle royal" as part of the evening's entertainment. He is asked to join them. The young black men change into boxing shirts and gloves, and were then brought up on stage. Someone is already there. A beautiful naked blonde woman is undulating onstage, and the narrator feels compelled to look at her—he feels both obsessed and disgusted. As she dances, one of the young men faints. Another begs to leave and unsuccessfully hides an erection. The narrator describes her face as blank and impersonal. As she dances, the drunken men in the audience reach out to grab her flesh. She tries to flee, but the men chase after her, fondling her and throwing her body up into the air. With the help of men who are clearly more levelheaded, she manages to escape. The boys try to leave. Unsuccessful. The ten of them are blindfolded and ordered into the boxing ring. Each is told to knock the lights out of the other black boys. Under his breath, the narrator continues to practice his speech. The narrator can hear the school superintendent's voice, among others, shouting at the blindfolded black men. A bell rings and the narrator feels like he's being punched at from all sides. He can't even see what's going on but he can hear the men shouting from the sidelines. He tastes blood in his mouth and can't distinguish blood from sweat on the rest of his body. The narrator is punched in the stomach and in the clamor to get up amidst the fighting, he realizes that he can see. Either his blindfold has gotten loose or there's a rip in the fabric. He can now see the nine other boys randomly beating up whatever they can get their gloves on. Now that he can see, the narrator fights on behalf of different groups. Eventually, the boys leave the boxing ring. Only he and the biggest of the boys, Tatlock, are left. He realizes that the other boys settled it beforehand without telling him. The last person standing would be awarded extra money. The narrator gives and takes a couple of punches, and then whispers to Tatlock that he can have the narrator's money if he fakes defeat. The narrator even offers to pay him five and then seven dollars. Tatlock says that his desire to fight the narrator is his own, that it has nothing to do with the white men. The yells from the audience let the narrator know that the white men have put bets on them. This is the evening's entertainment. The narrator takes a bad hit and is knocked out. The fight is over... or is it? The men bring out a square rug with coins and bills on it. The boys fight for the money, realizing too late that the rug is actually circuitred and effectively electrocutes anyone who touches the money. Despite this knowledge, the boys still fight over the money. The white men jeer them from the sidelines, drunk and enjoying the spectacle. The narrator reaches for the leg of a chair, where a man named Mr. Colcord is sitting. Since the narrator's body is still slippery from sweat and blood, Mr. Colcord is unsuccessful in pushing the narrator away. Although unintentional at first, the narrator eventually tries to push Mr. Colcord onto the rug. Instead, the narrator is knocked over and rolls onto the electric rug himself. The rug is moved out of place, and the M.C. announces that the fight is over. The M.C. goes into the back room and pays every boy five dollars, giving Tatlock an extra five for being the winner. Completely beaten up and exhausted, the narrator moves to leave, disappointed that he didn't deliver his speech. But, wait. The narrator is called back into the room and introduced to the white crowd. The men clap and laugh at the boy. He delivers his speech, which quotes a speech given by Booker T. Washington involving an unfortunate ship in need of water and a more fortunate ship who tells the unfortunate ship to "cast down your bucket" so that they can provide the water. The narrator's speech backs the idea of different races working with one another and helping one another. As he delivers his carefully prepared speech, the crowd continues to laugh and drink. The men belittle the narrator's use of big words, making him repeat them several times. When he is told to repeat "social responsibility" over and over again, he accidentally says "social equality." That word is a very big no-no. The narrator covers up the mistake by saying he was swallowing blood in his mouth. When he finishes the speech, the men burst into applause. The school superintendent gives him a present: a fine briefcase with a scholarship to the "state college for N****es." The narrator is stunned into tears and hastily leaves. At home, everyone congratulates him. That night, however, he has a nightmare. He is at the circus with his grandfather, and his grandfather refuses to laugh at the clowns. In the dream, the narrator opens the briefcase to find envelopes within envelopes, finally ending with a note that reads "Keep This N****-Boy Running." The narrator wakes up to his grandfather's laughter. Now suddenly narrating from the present, the narrator admits that this is a frequently recurring dream.

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