

## The Visible Man

'I feel ashamed.'

'Why so, Sam?' came the kindly voice of the counsellor.

'Because I can't see anymore.'

Counsellor paused, esoterically infusing the air with a scent called person-centred. 'I can imagine you're finding some things challenging, Sam, by not seeing as much as you used to, but can I ask, why do you feel ashamed?'

Sam liked Diane, but thought her sentences had too many soft, surplus words – were they the weave of a verbal safety-net to catch, or couch, a fallen child?

He thought to answer by saying he couldn't see the blackboard in class and, even though teachers would read aloud as they wrote, classmates would help with textbooks, he still, nonetheless, felt ashamed. He saw himself as less-than, like the sign he'd learned in maths, the arrow pointing left, clinically yet gratuitously at the vagabond number, the one that literally counts for less than its righthand counterpart, left as in left out, left alone, left behind.

Before his hospital sabbatical, the mystery laying-low that doctors were still trying to fathom, he'd roar with the ruffians up and down the football-pitch, soar across the playground like a biplane in a dogfight. There'd been an archery class on the cricket-field, he'd got one in the red, at child-friendly range, but now he couldn't tell what direction the target was even in. Like an anti-Cupid, he swivelled in the dim, hoping his close-to-random loosings might lead to something resembling love.

Now he had to sit in the library-annex, learning braille, or do this, be counselled by Diane, who the school had got in specially. 'I feel less-than,' he faltered, but he knew what kind conjuring Diane had in mind, trick the client into thinking like the people who

care for them, so, this described, they find themselves asking, 'Well, if they care for me, why shouldn't I?' Diane obliged.

'How do you think your family and friends see you, Sam?'

'Better than I see them,' he thought to say, but didn't want to be sarcastic, or make her feel bad for her colloquial use of the word 'see'. She'd pulled herself up for this before, even though Sam knew full well a figure of speech when he heard one. He still said 'see you later' to people without dissolving in a torrent of tears. He was more upset that she thought it might upset him, wondering sometimes who was counselling who. She might have to take such a slip to her supervisor. Even therapists have therapy, and must pay for it, too, a cost that could filter down to the school, and if that got too much he'd have nothing to do when Billy and the mob were hurtling about the rugby-field.

Diane was still hanging compassionately on the hook of her last question. 'Do you think your friends see you as less-than? Or perhaps they perceive you as their old friend Sam, who needs some help from time to time.'

'I think most of them see me as the same person,' he began, feeling for a compromise, 'but now I can't see much, some of them are awkward because I've changed.' He waited for Diane to admit, in the name of flexible reality, that some of them might feel awkward or, perhaps we could say, a little unsure sometimes, but she was playing a canny hand and said nothing. 'I think some see me as less, though. Lance Wakeman says I look like Stevie Wonder because of my dark glasses.'

'I rather like Stevie Wonder,' came lame Diane. Sam recalled last week's *Top Of The Pops*. Hadn't she heard 'I Just Called To Say I Love You'? It sounded like he'd written it on a home-organ with settings like 'diapason' and a button marked 'end' for when you wanted a tune to finish with a flourish. It was quiet as the syrup of the song seeped deeper into the sponge of Sam's brain - he would never tell someone he loved them in

that trite fashion. Diane thought wrongly that Sam didn't want to work on self-esteem anymore, so offered a different target. 'How are you getting on with the braille?'

'Slowly,' said Sam. 'I've learned the alphabet, but now we're getting on to contractions - a lot of words are just one symbol. Also, there are contractions for common endings of words, like "tion", and "ness", and...'. His animation fizzled, as he realised this was a replacement for a thing lost, not a new thing on top of things kept.

Diane went up a gear. 'So one character on your braille-machine is the equivalent of writing out a whole word?'

Sam found her quickfire inspirational disappointing, and wondered if it was even well meant. There were only five minutes to go, and she liked to do a bit of heart-shaped topiary to end their stroll around Wellbeing Gardens. He thought to be sarcastic, force a jagged ending for a change, see how she worked with that. But no, he was feeling conciliatory. 'Yes,' he said, saluting the parkkeeper, 'quite a lot of long words are just one symbol, braille's good like that.' At least now one of them could leave feeling better about things.

Sam was very sensitive to the light, so walking home into a low sun was difficult, and home was west all the way. He wore his dark, wraparound shades, and held his friend David's arm. Their friendship was the main link between before and now. David, quiet and professorly, would let Sam know if there were steps ahead, whether they were up or down - he was a flagger-up of domestic hazards. A traditional stop-off point was Harper's on the high street. There was a step up into their gleaming, life-organising stationery section. David knew Sam knew, they'd been going there a year, well before Sam fell ill, so on their first visit in the aftertime he just said, 'Remember the step?' Among the setsquares, they held a brief post-mortem which concluded that, although Sam did indeed recall the step, he still found it useful to know when to engage. Through

these exchanges David came to know what Sam needed, although Sam refuted the notion that he needed much at all. He was willing to accept David's notifications as politenesses for such time that he was likely to be thus inconvenienced. He'd been telling friends his sight would be back in a few weeks – his doctors had been telling his parents his sight may stabilise, but would not return until new treatments were available. Since returning to school, they'd both bought several stencil-sets, protractors, highlighters – Sam didn't know what to do with them.

David had begun to speak up when Lance would mock Sam's glasses, or call him Stevie Wonder. David, with the luxury of a purely amateur relationship with Sam, was able to bring more nuance to the debate than Diane. He thought 'I Just Called To Say I Love You' was indeed quite bad, but did like Wonder's early album, 'Songs In The Key Of Life'. But this rebuttal would be lost on Lance, who also shouted 'gay' because Sam held David's arm.

'Alright Gaylord?' he'd jeer.

David at first believed Lance was talking to him, and thought to say, 'I'm not gay', but the reply would be, 'If you have to say you're not, then you are', and the loop would go on. After a few encounters, however, it dawned on David that gayness was a false foundation for an insult – his sister had gay friends, and he wasn't going to disown anyone simply because Lance liked bellowing rubbish. Sam's loss sowed the seeds of David's growing wisdom – he was sad, and grateful.

Sam didn't know who Lance was addressing. He assumed it was him, because one big wound is like Charybdis the whirlpool, it draws in other wounds. It struck him too that the insult was hollow, but he took the hurt from the intent, not the content. He felt opened up, a specimen, more seen than seeing.

At home, Sam had a stack of talking books read by local volunteers. When he listened to 'The Country Of The Blind' by H G Wells, which he would listen to again and again, he wondered how it would be to have these things, textured walkways, aromatic gardens, braille signs in designated places, music on tap at stopping-off points. Though it comforted him, he felt there and not there, as in a dream. He began somewhere on the outskirts, a gravel path leading him on. Yes, he could feel its crunch underfoot, find his way with ease to the sensory garden, be lulled by the breeze-borne tinklings of tasteful chimes, the dainty choir of birds in branches above. Inhaling, he'd feel the thrill of lobelia and lavender caressing his airways, to rest couchant in his lungs. Yet he saw it also from a different angle. Almost stalking himself, perhaps guiding, a few paces behind, he would watch this new, stooped figure tread his tactile path to solace in a bower. He would have in mind his safety, watch for wayward thorns in the garden, if there were any.

The next day, they had cookery. Because of health'n'safety, Sam sat aside, practising braille - one six-letter insult in print, a mere three symbols in braille, a tiny win for the raging child in a hurry. At the end of the lesson, cookers off, washing-up dried, Viola came over with a meringue. 'Hi Sam, are you going to the disco?'

Why would she ask that? She couldn't care, not now. He was less-than. Perhaps she was enquiring for a plainer friend, Olivia, who walked oddly and was never at lunch. Sam knew enough to say no. Eyes mattered in romance. Eyes met across crowded rooms, smoke-filled sometimes, although smoking was bad for you. People looked into each other's eyes, could be lovestruck, eyes produced an equal-sign between participants, a match. He couldn't see Viola's eyes, her face was a blur, though he knew it to be beautiful, because he remembered it, and it couldn't have changed that much in two months. She now came with her own pedestal - he couldn't reach her, he couldn't

even see if she was up there. Why would she be calling down about discos to the lowborn? He had to save her from himself. 'No,' he said. It was simple and quick.

'Oh,' said Viola, in a tone he took to be disappointment on Olivia's behalf, but was actually shock at his abruptness, on her part. From hunter to hurter he'd turned; she gave him a meringue, turned and returned to the girls.

Next was games, or Diane in the library-annex.

'Do you think you'll go to the disco, Sam?' she gently enquired.

Why was she asking this? He'd already told her he wouldn't be. Maybe she was doing some technique, giving him a safe space to change his mind in, because we all have the right to change our mind. As with Viola, his reply came in abattoir-staccato. 'No.'

'I bet Viola's disappointed you're not going,' said Diane, from a safe glade of age-appropriate playfulness. This was irresponsible, because if he went back to Viola declaring he would now go to the disco, she might have made other plans, or suddenly say, 'Oh brilliant, Olivia'll be cock-a-hoop!' One gravel path, two turnoffs, no garden. But how to answer Diane? Telling her he felt less-than, and that he thought Olivia was less-than, would be a double-disaster, which Diane might consider a failure on her part, and then there'd be three less-thans. 'Perhaps Viola likes your new shades.' Where had this come from? They weren't new, they were necessary, medical, they weren't shades, they were shields. 'That new band, Madness, all wear glasses like yours. They were on *Top Of The Pops* last night.' Had they supplanted Wonder as the go-to shades-wearers? Lance would be spoilt for choice.

At the end of school, there was a gentle buzz in corridors and cloakrooms, and at the gate as pupils dispersed – some were coming back for the disco.

Sam and David took a circuitous route home, partly to avoid Lance, but mostly to sample a new office-supplies shop near the Slushpuppy vendor. Then homework,

dinner, and Doctor Who awaited them both. The new video-recorder meant Sam could tape Tom Baker in his every detailed deliberation, and watch that week's cliffhanger repeatedly. But early evening, post-dinner, pre-Who, the doorbell rang. Sam answered to see a blur of cardinal red looming in the porch. It was David in a new t-shirt. 'I was just wondering if you'd like to come to the disco,' said the scarlet debonair. 'Olivia just rang, she's going, do you want to come along?'

'What?' thought Sam. David's not a less-than, so why's he speaking to Olivia? But I'm a less-than and he speaks to me - but he knew me before I became a less-than, so he has to out of honour. Is David a less-than? His thoughts were a labyrinth - not even a mythological retro-seamstress could unpick this ball of knots. 'What about Doctor Who?' Sam posed, wallowing in stasis.

'You can record that.'

Ten reluctant minutes later, Sam was wrestling himself into a red check shirt, fluffing a quiff for that Henry Winkler look, brushing his teeth and spraying on deodorant - panic made jittery his actions, yet framed them in a stalling sluggishness. Dad, excited by this hint at continuity, called up the stairs, 'Come on Sam, don't be late, there won't be much disco left at this rate.'

No shades were needed as the two embarked, reds made golden by a sunset backdrop. Maybe this was the meet-Viola-at-the-disco moment that was meant to be, despite personal fragilities. Yes, love is stronger than anything, it binds things that can't consequently be unbound.

Mingling with stragglers at the gate, they could hear the pounding of pop across the playground. It was better to be late, heroes are often late, and all the more heroic because of it. He could see coloured lights flashing in the window - already, they stung. Bass thundered down the corridor as they braced themselves in the cloakroom,

'Temptation' by Heaven 17 – it was a sufficiently poppy take on primal drives, a line prepubescents could stand on and dance to, but not cross. As they approached the inferno, Mr Hooper pulled open the door. Then, engulfed in a single step, the clamour was disorientating, the lights, without shades, attacking swathes of neon jaggedness, flickering on and off as if to sift out the shy. David had already been drawn in by anonymous voices. On the shores, Sam flinched as a brilliant white beam seemed to question his very presence. Turning, he sought the door, bumped into Mr Hooper who yelled, 'What's up, forgotten your shades?' Sam felt himself cringe in polite submission, but there was no time to show it. The cool air of the corridor greeted him, and he went towards it. In echoing stone, he found his way to the cloakroom and sat among the hooks.

When the song was over, someone emerged from the disco, and footsteps approached. 'Are you alright?' asked David, like the steady scholar he was.

Sam's head was bowed. 'It's too bright, the noise, I can't tell what's going on.' David looked saddened, but forgot to verbalise it. 'Any sign of Viola?' Sam asked, practising nonchalance.

'Yes, she's with Olivia, they're dancing,' replied David, unsure whether to downplay the fact or not.

The telescope had turned, Sam was at the distant end now. 'You can go back in if you want,' he said. David had accommodated Sam's difference, so Sam should accommodate David's sameness.

'There's only a few songs to go, I'll be back shortly.' David turned, torn between loyalty and longing.

Outside was a parental cab-rank. Olivia waved goodbye from the back of a Cortina as they passed through the gates. Sam could hear Viola some distance behind, laughing at

Lance's jokes - he felt less-than, even though Lance had been her second choice, which seemed to make him third in a contest of two. He longed for the hubbub to drown her voice, but he couldn't unhear her. Maybe Diane had been right to say that hearing steps up when sight bows out - if so, the disability dividend was double-edged. He practised insults in his mind - one, four letters in print, was only two in braille, another little victory.

At night, Sam tried a new story, 'The Invisible Man'. Drifting, he heard it as if through a heatwave, distant, shimmering. The tape ended with a click, a propeller-plane bled into the silence, and he mused on the story so far. Griffin, craving invisibility, achieves his goal, then feels compelled to dress in bandages and shades, to conform to the custom of being seen, detectable, accountable. Fading into view, torn between spectre and spectacle, his quandary is clearer than he. Sam would bring the see-through more nobly into view. He felt the crunch of gravel underfoot. In glass armour, he'd lumber into war beneath a banner in large-print and braille, imbued with a chivalrous doctrine - duties, be seen to adapt acquiescently to not being able to do certain things, be seen to cope with equanimity with any new challenges that arise, be seen to accept it might take longer to do certain things, in a nutshell, be seen. He'd occupy the role of ability-mascot with panache and alacrity. Onlookers would get a kick from a glimpse of the poster-boy of less - yes, retch turned rescuer, his fall would be their favour. They'd be jostling to jump in the way of his laissez-faire loosings, just so they could say they were there on the day this satchel-wearing serotonin-surge finally emptied his quiver and loss, at last, became more.