Not me you are grinning at, not me your confidential looks
Incriminate, but that other person, if person,
You thought I was: let your necrophily
Feed upon that carcase... 

T. S. Eliot, Family Reunion

Prologue

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids -- and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination -- indeed, everything and anything except me.

Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of a bio-chemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves. Then too, you're constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision. Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy. It's when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. And, let me confess, you feel that way most of the time. You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out
with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful.

One night I accidentally bumped into a man, and perhaps because of the near darkness he saw me and called me an insulting name. I sprang at him, seized his coat lapels and demanded that he apologize. He was a tall blond man, and as my face came close to his he looked insolently out of his blue eyes and cursed me, his breath hot in my face as he struggled. I pulled his chin down sharp upon the crown of my head, butting him as I had seen the West Indians do, and I felt his flesh tear and the blood gush out, and I yelled, "Apologize! Apologize!" But he continued to curse and struggle, and I butted him again and again until he went down heavily, on his knees, profusely bleeding. I kicked him repeatedly, in a frenzy because he still uttered insults though his lips were frothy with blood. Oh yes, I kicked him! And in my outrage I got out my knife and prepared to slit his throat, right there beneath the lamplight in the deserted street, holding him by the collar with one hand, and opening the knife with my teeth -- when it occurred to me that the man had not seen me, actually; that he, as far as he knew, was in the midst of a walking nightmare! And I stopped the blade, slicing the air as I pushed him away, letting him fall back to the street. I stared at him hard as the lights of a car stabbed through the darkness. He lay there, moaning on the asphalt; a man almost killed by a phantom. It unnerved me. I was both disgusted and ashamed. I was like a drunken man myself, wavering about on weakened legs. Then I was amused. Something in this man's thick head had sprung out and beaten him within an inch of his life. I began to laugh at this crazy discovery. Would he have awakened at the point of death? Would Death himself have freed him for wakeful living? But I didn't linger. I ran away into the dark, laughing so hard I feared I might rupture myself. The next day I saw his picture in the Daily News, beneath a caption stating that he had been "mugged." Poor fool, poor blind fool, I thought with sincere compassion, mugged by an invisible man!

Most of the time (although I do not choose as I once did to deny the violence of my days by ignoring it) I am not so overtly violent. I remember that I am invisible and walk softly so as not to awaken the sleeping ones. Sometimes it is best not to awaken them; there are few things in the world as dangerous as sleepwalkers. I learned in time though that it is
possible to carry on a fight against them without their realizing it. For
instance, I have been carrying on a fight with Monopolated Light & Power for
some time now. I use their service and pay them nothing at all, and they
don't know it. Oh, they suspect that power is being drained off, but they
don't know where. All they know is that according to the master meter back
there in their power station a hell of a lot of free current is disappearing
somewhere into the jungle of Harlem. The joke, of course, is that I don't live
in Harlem but in a border area. Several years ago (before I discovered the
advantage of being invisible) I went through the routine process of buying
service and paying their outrageous rates. But no more. I gave up all that,
along with my apartment, and my old way of life: That way based upon the
fallacious assumption that I, like other men, was visible. Now, aware of my
invisibility, I live rent-free in a building rented strictly to whites, in a section
of the basement that was shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth
century, which I discovered when I was trying to escape in the night from
Ras the Destroyer. But that's getting too far ahead of the story, almost to the
end, although the end is in the beginning and lies far ahead.

The point now is that I found a home -- or a hole in the ground, as
you will. Now don't jump to the conclusion that because I call my home a
"hole" it is damp and cold like a grave; there are cold holes and warm holes.
Mine is a warm hole. And remember, a bear retires to his hole for the winter
and lives until spring; then he comes strolling out like the Easter chick
breaking from its shell. I say all this to assure you that it is incorrect to
assume that, because I'm invisible and live in a hole, I am dead. I am
neither dead nor in a state of suspended animation. Call me Jack-the-Bear,
for I am in a state of hibernation.

My hole is warm and full of light. Yes, full of light. I doubt if there
is a brighter spot in all New York than this hole of mine, and I do not
exclude Broadway. Or the Empire State Building on a photographer's dream
night. But that is taking advantage of you. Those two spots are among the
darkest of our whole civilization -- pardon me, our whole culture (an
important distinction, I've heard) -- which might sound like a hoax, or a
contradiction, but that (by contradiction, I mean) is how the world moves:
Not like an arrow, but a boomerang. (Beware of those who speak of the
spiral of history; they are preparing a boomerang. Keep a steel helmet handy.)
I know; I have been boomeranged across my head so much that I now can see the darkness of lightness. And I love light. Perhaps you'll think it strange that an invisible man should need light, desire light, love light. But maybe it is exactly because I am invisible. Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form. A beautiful girl once told me of a recurring nightmare in which she lay in the center of a large dark room and felt her face expand until it filled the whole room, becoming a formless mass while her eyes ran in bilious jelly up the chimney. And so it is with me. Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well; and to be unaware of one's form is to live a death. I myself, after existing some twenty years, did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility.