

A "You're Fired" Scene
From *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison

Down the sloping lawn below me the male students moved toward their dormitories, seeming far away from me now, remote, and each shadowy form vastly superior to me, who had by some shortcoming cast myself into the darkness away from all that was worthwhile and inspiring. I listened to one group harmonize quietly as they passed. The smell of fresh bread being prepared in the bakery drifted to me. The good white bread of breakfast; the rolls dripping with yellow butter that I had slipped into my pocket so often to be munched later in my room with wild blackberry jam from home.

Lights began to appear in the girls' dormitories, like the bursting of luminous seeds flung broadside by an invisible hand. Several cars rolled by. I saw a group of old women who lived in the town approaching. One used a cane which from time to time she tapped hollowly upon the walk like a blind man. Snatches of their conversation fluttered to me as they discussed Barbee's talk with enthusiasm, recalled the times of the Founder, their quavering voices weaving and embroidering his story. Then down the long avenue of trees I saw the familiar Cadillac approaching and started inside the building, suddenly filled with panic. I hadn't gone two steps before I turned and hurried out into the night again. I couldn't stand to face Dr. Bledsoe immediately. I was fairly shivering as I fell in behind a group of boys going up the drive. They were arguing some point heatedly, but I was too agitated to listen and simply followed in their shadows, noticing the dull gleam of their polished shoe-leather in the rays of the street lamps. I kept trying to formulate what I would say to Dr. Bledsoe, and the boys must have turned into their building, for suddenly finding myself outside the gates of the campus and heading down the highway, I turned and ran back to the building.

When I went in he was wiping his neck with a blue-bordered handkerchief. The shaded lamp catching the lenses of his glasses left half of his broad face in shadow as his clenched fists stretched full forth in the light before him. I stood, hesitating in the door, aware suddenly of the old heavy furnishings, the relics from the times of the Founder, the framed portrait photographs and relief plaques of presidents and industrialists, men of power-fixed like trophies or heraldic emblems upon the walls.

"Come in," he said from the half-shadow; then I saw him move and his head coming forward, his eyes burning.

He began mildly, as if quietly joking, throwing me off balance.

"Boy," he said, "I understand that you not only carried Mr. Norton out to the Quarters but that you wound up at that sinkhole, that Golden Day."

It was a statement, not a question. I said nothing and he looked at me with the same mild gaze. Had Barbee helped Mr. Norton soften him?

"No," he said, "it wasn't enough to take him to the Quarters, you had to make the complete tour, to give him the full treatment. Was that it?"

"No, sir . . . I mean that he was ill, sir," I said. "He had to have some whiskey. . ."

"And that was the only place you knew to go," he said. "So you went there because you were taking care of him . . ."

"Yes, sir . . ."

"And not only that," he said in a voice that both mocked and marveled, "you took him out and sat him down on the gallery, veranda --piazza -- whatever they call it now'days -- and introduced him to the quality!"

"Quality?" I frowned. "Oh -- but he insisted that I stop, sir. There was nothing I could do . . ."

"Of course," he said. "Of course."

"He was interested in the cabins, sir. He was surprised that there were any left."

"So naturally you stopped," he said, bowing his head again.

"Yes, sir."

"Yes, and I suppose the cabin opened up and told him its life history and all the choice gossip?"

"I started to explain.

"Boy!" he exploded. "Are you serious? Why were you out on that road in the first place? Weren't you behind the wheel?"

"Yes, sir . . ."

"Then haven't we bowed and scraped and begged and lied enough decent homes and drives for you to show him? Did you think that white man had to come a thousand miles -- all the way from New York and Boston and Philadelphia just for you to show him a slum? Don't just stand there, say something!"

"But I was only driving him, sir. I only stopped there after he ordered me to . . ."

"Ordered you?" he said. "He ordered you. Dammit, white folk are always giving orders, it's a habit with them. Why didn't you make an excuse? Couldn't you say they had sickness -- smallpox -- or picked another cabin? Why that Trueblood shack? My God, boy! You're black and living in the South -- did you forget how to lie?"

"Lie, sir? Lie to him, lie to a trustee, sir? Me?"

He shook his head with a kind of anguish. "And me thinking I'd picked a boy with brain," he said. "Didn't you know you were endangering the school?"

"But I was only trying to please him . . ."

"Please him? And here you are a junior in college! Why, the dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie! What kind of education are you getting around here? Who really told you to take him out there?" he said.

"He did, sir. No one else."

"Don't lie to me!"

"That's the truth, sir."

"I warn you now, who suggested it?"

"I swear, sir. No one told me."

"Nigger, this isn't the time to lie. I'm no white man. Tell me the truth!"

It was as though he'd struck me. I stared across the desk thinking, He called me that . . .

"Answer me, boy!"

That, I thought, noticing the throbbing of a vein that rose between his eyes, thinking, He called me that.

"I wouldn't lie, sir," I said.

"Then who was that patient you were talking with?"

"I never saw him before, sir."

"What was he saying?"

"I can't recall it all," I muttered. "The man was raving."

"Speak up. What did he say?"

"He thinks that he lived in France and that he's a great doctor . . ."

"Continue."

"He said that I believed that white was right," I said.

"What?" Suddenly his face twitched and cracked like the surface of dark water. "And you do, don't you?" Dr. Bledsoe said, suppressing a nasty laugh. "Well, don't you?"

I did not answer, thinking, You, you . . .

"Who was he, did you ever see him before?"

"No, sir, I hadn't."

"Was he northern or southern?"

"I don't know, sir."

He struck his desk. "College for Negroes! Boy, what do you know other than how to ruin an institution in half an hour that it took over half a hundred years to build? Did he talk northern or southern?"

"He talked like a white man," I said, "except that his voice sounded southern, like one of ours . . ."

"I'll have to investigate him," he said. "A Negro like that should be under lock and key."

Across the campus a clock struck the quarter hour and something inside me seemed to muffle its sound. I turned to him desperately. "Dr. Bledsoe, I'm awfully sorry. I had no intention of going there but things just got out of hand. Mr. Norton understands how it happened . . ."

"Listen to me, boy," he said loudly. "Norton is one man and I'm another, and while he might think he's satisfied, I know that he isn't! Your poor judgment has caused this school incalculable damage. Instead of uplifting the race, you've torn it down."

He looked at me as though I had committed the worst crime imaginable. "Don't you know we can't tolerate such a thing? I gave you an opportunity to serve one of our best white friends, a man who could make your fortune. But in return you dragged the entire race into the slime!" Suddenly he reached for something beneath a pile of papers, an old leg shackle from slavery which he proudly called a "symbol of our progress."

"You've got to be disciplined, boy," he said. "There's no ifs and ands about it."

"But you gave Mr. Norton your word . . ."

"Don't stand there and tell me what I already know. Regardless of what I said, as the leader of this institution I can't possibly let this pass. Boy, I'm getting rid of you!" It must have happened when the metal struck the desk, for suddenly I was leaning toward him, shouting with outrage.

"I'll tell him," I said. "I'll go to Mr. Norton and tell him. You've lied to both of us . . ."

"What!" he said. "You have the nerve to threaten me . . . in my own office?"

"I'll tell him," I screamed. "I'll tell everybody. I'll fight you. I swear it, I'll fight!"

"Well," he said, sitting back, "well, I'll be damned!" For a moment he looked me up and down and I saw his head go back into the shadow, hearing a high, thin sound like a cry of rage; then his face came forward and I saw his laughter. For an instant I stared; then I wheeled and started for the door, hearing him sputter, "Wait, wait," behind me.

I turned. He gasped for breath, propping his huge head up with his hands as tears streamed down his face.

"Come on, come," he said, removing his glasses and wiping his eyes. "Come on, son," his voice amused and conciliatory. It was as though I were being put through a fraternity initiation and found myself going back. He looked at me, still laughing with agony. My eyes burned.

"Boy, you are a fool," he said. "Your white folk didn't teach you anything and your mother-wit has left you cold. What has happened to you young Negroes? I thought you had caught on to how things are done down here. But you don't even know the difference between the way things are and the way they're supposed to be. My God," he gasped, "what is the race coming to? Why, boy, you can tell anyone you like -- sit down there . . . Sit down, sir, I say!"

Reluctantly I sat, torn between anger and fascination, hating myself for obeying.

"Tell anyone you like," he said. "I don't care. I wouldn't raise my little finger to stop you. Because I don't owe anyone a thing, son. Who, Negroes? Negroes don't control this school or much of anything else --haven't you learned even that? No, sir, they don't control this school, nor white folk either. True they support it, but I control it. I's big and black and I say 'Yes, suh' as loudly as any burr-head when it's convenient, but I'm still the king down here. I don't care how much it appears otherwise. Power doesn't have to show off. Power is confident, self-assuring, self-starting and self-stopping, self-warming and self-justifying. When you have it, you know it. Let the Negroes snicker and the crackers laugh! Those are the facts, son. The only ones I even pretend to please are big white folk, and even those I control more than they control me. This is a power set-up, son, and I'm at the controls. You think about that. When you buck against me, you're bucking against power, rich white folk's power, the nation's power -- which means government power!"

He paused to let it sink in and I waited, feeling a numb, violent outrage.

"And I'll tell you something your sociology teachers are afraid to tell you," he said. "If there weren't men like me running schools like this, there'd be no South. Nor North, either. No, and there'd be no country -- not as it is today. You think about that, son." He laughed. "With all your spechmaking and studying I thought you

understood something. But you . . . All right, go ahead. See Norton. You'll find that he wants you disciplined; he might not know it, but he does. Because he knows that I know what is best for his interests. You're a black educated fool, son. These white folk have newspapers, magazines, radios, spokesmen to get their ideas across. If they want to tell the world a lie, they can tell it so well that it becomes the truth; and if I tell them that you're lying, they'll tell the world even if you prove you're telling the truth. Because it's the kind of lie they want to hear . . ."

I heard the high thin laugh again. "You're nobody, son. You don't exist -- can't you see that? The white folk tell everybody what to think --except men like me. I tell them; that's my life, telling white folk how to think about the things I know about. Shocks you, doesn't it? Well, that's the way it is. It's a nasty deal and I don't always like it myself. But you listen to me: I didn't make it, and I know that I can't change it. But I've made my place in it and I'll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am."

He was looking me in the eye now, his voice charged and sincere, as though uttering a confession, a fantastic revelation which I could neither believe nor deny. Cold drops of sweat moved at a glacier's pace down my spine . . .

"I mean it, son," he said. "I had to be strong and purposeful to get where I am. I had to wait and plan and lick around . . . Yes, I had to act the nigger!" he said, adding another fiery, "Yes!

"I don't even insist that it was worth it, but now I'm here and I mean to stay -- after you win the game, you take the prize and you keep it, protect it; there's nothing else to do." He shrugged. "A man gets old winning his place, son. So you go ahead, go tell your story; match your truth against my truth, because what I've said is truth, the broader truth. Test it, try it out. . . When I started out I was a young fellow . . ."

But I no longer listened, nor saw more than the play of light upon the metallic disks of his glasses, which now seemed to float within the disgusting sea of his words. Truth, truth, what was truth? Nobody I knew, not even my own mother, would believe me if I tried to tell them. Nor would I tomorrow, I thought, nor would I . . . I gazed helplessly at the grain of the desk, then past his head to the case of loving cups behind his chair. Above the case a portrait of the Founder looked noncommittally down.

"Hee, hee!" Bledsoe laughed. "Your arms are too short to box with me, son. And I haven't had to really clip a young Negro in years. No," he said getting up, "they haven't been so cocky as they used to."

This time I could barely move, my stomach was knotted and my kidneys ached. My legs were rubbery. For three years I had thought of myself as a man and here with a few words he'd made me as helpless as an infant. I pulled myself up . . .

"Wait, hold on a second," he said, looking at me like a man about to flip a coin. "I like your spirit, son. You're a fighter, and I like that; you just lack judgment, though lack of judgment can ruin you. That's why I have to penalize you, son. I know how you feel, too. You don't want to go home to be humiliated, I understand that, because you have some vague notions about dignity. In spite of me, such notions seep in along with the gimcrack teachers and northern-trained idealists. Yes, and you have some white folk backing you and you don't want to face them because

nothing is worse for a black man than to be humiliated by white folk. I know all about that too; ole doc's been 'buked and scorned and all of that. I don't just sing about it in chapel, I know about it. But you'll get over it; it's foolish and expensive and a lot of dead weight. You let the white folk worry about pride and dignity – you learn where you are and get yourself power, influence, contacts with powerful and influential people -- then stay in the dark and use it!"

How long will I stand here and let him laugh at me, I thought, holding on to the back of the chair, how long?

"You're a nervy little fighter, son," he said, "and the race needs good, smart, disillusioned fighters. Therefore I'm going to give you a hand – maybe you'll feel that I'm giving you my left hand after I've struck you with my right -- if you think I'm the kind of man who'd lead with his right, which I'm most certainly not. But that's all right too, take it or leave it. I want you to go to New York for the summer and save your pride -- and your money. You go there and earn your next year's fees, understand?"

I nodded, unable to speak, whirling about furiously within myself, trying to deal with him, to fit what he was saying to what he had said . . .

"I'll give you letters to some of the school's friends to see that you get work," he said. "But this time, use your judgment, keep your eyes open, get in the swing of things! Then, if you make good, perhaps . . . well, perhaps . . . It's up to you."

His voice stopped as he stood, tall and black and disk-eyed, huge."

That's all, young man," he said, his tone abrupt, official. "You have two days in which to close your affairs."

"Two days?"

"Two days!" he said.