

# Rendered Invisible



*Stories Of Blacks and Whites,  
Love and Death*

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ISBN: 978-1-935514-35-0  
Library of Congress Number: 2010923420

Cover art by Stephen Babalola  
Cover design by Susan Bright

## Acknowledgements

Gratitude to the following publications for publishing these stories: “Homeless M.F.” in *Warpland: A Journal of Black Literature and Ideas*. Vol. No. 1, 1995, 21-24; “Junior Ain’t” in *Proverbs for the People: An Anthology of African American Fiction*, Kensington Press, 2003, 84-86; and “Black Messiahs Die” in *The Vanderbilt Review*, Vol. XX, Spring 2005, 134-42.

*To my wife, Dioncia*



## Contents

Rendered Invisible	9
Black Messiahs Die	99
Homeless M.F.	115
Junior Aint	123
Another Continent	129
It Falls Between	139
About the Author	147



*The fact is that you carry a part of your sickness within  
you, at least I do as an invisible man.*

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*



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*Excerpt*



## Chapter Five

*Barbershop talk—*

“I’m tired, Kwam, Eddie. Let’s quit for the night, okay? Pick it up tomorrow.”

“Okay, kool.”

“Tomorrow it is,” I said. “But remember, I go back to Ohio next week, and I need this story to complete my book.”

“My story,” Johnny said. “My story. Remember that.”

“What do you mean? Now, you don’t want me to have it?”

“Naw, I do, but it’s bigger than that,” he said, rising, reaching toward the ceiling. “Gets to a point where the people who know your story, some of them dead or not in your life no more, so the story you carry is the only connection you got left with ‘em.”

“Yeah, I hear ya,” I said, rising, more tired than I’d realized. The darkness outside invited us all to take a break, and I was ready to leave.

“That’s how I feel, Eddie, man. It’s theirs, but it’s mine, like my dead friends’ stories done walked into mine, so mine is heavier now.”

“What did you do to my son?” she screamed into the phone.

“Nothing, Bridgette, nothing. Calm down.”

“Don’t you tell me to calm down, and don’t say ‘nothing,’ when you get on the phone saying that my baby, my son, is in the Emergency at the hospital. What happened, Eddie? What the hell happened?”

“We were playing ball, at the Rec, and they knocked him down.”

“What do you mean, ‘they knocked him down?’ I trust you with my son, you can take him anywhere you want with you and then you let him get mugged. And he thinks you’re some kind of god, and then you go and get him hurt? You did this to get at me, didn’t you, Eddie? Didn’t you? You know I don’t trust you anymore.”

“He was going up for a dunk, and a couple of cats clothes-lined him. Knocked him down, hard, so he wouldn’t embarrass them. Told him about embarrassing black cats down in the hood.”

“I’m on my way, but I don’t trust you anymore. I don’t. You did this to me, too.”

I wanted to tell her it was part of the game, and that the cats thought he was white and showing off, and that he’d be a better player in the long run for it. Shit, he’d be a white secret weapon. College coaches were always looking for white cats who could ball like brothers and here was one who was a brother but could pass for white. They could play him and still meet their quota of white boys on the court.

“Where is he now? Eddie, did you hear anything I just asked you? Where is Anderson, now?”

Her words pulled me back. “The doctor is looking at him, I think. I’m in the waiting room.”

She hung up the phone. Turned out, he’d broken his forearm, as he’d tried to break his fall, as he went flying. Dude had taken off from just inside the foul line, on a break-away dunk, and they’d met at his body, two O.G.’s, old-time ballers who wanted to teach a young blood a lesson.

“Damn’, man, why’d you do that?” I asked him as we drove to the hospital. His eyes were bloodshot, he was holding his left arm like it was broken. And he’d had to be carried to my car by me and Josh, an old friend who still played ball, too.

“Told you I could dunk on anyone,” he winced a confident grin.

“But you can’t,” I said. “Sometimes you can’t fly, man.”

She slapped me.

“Don’t you ever, ever, ever, hurt my son, again. I will kill you, you no-good, self-centered, arrogant bastard.” She was crying and yelling in my face. I’d stood when I spied her running down the hospital corridor toward me, to greet her. And now she was in my face, talking loud enough that the entire waiting room was staring. “You’re supposed to be taking care of him, watching out for him, and this happens? Take me to my son. Where is he?”

She left me for the counter. I stood and watched as they led her back to him.

I wanted to join her, to go back with her to see about him, as a family, but she let me know time and again that we weren’t. It was three separate couples: she and I; he and I; and the two of them. They were family, I wasn’t. Like the time I chastised him, and he lied, saying I’d choked him, when all I’d done was grab him by the shoulders and say, “don’t steal,” and “don’t let me catch you going into stores taking things that don’t belong to you.” This had been during our first year together, and I had a hard grip, but I hadn’t tried to hurt the little dude, just let him know that when I took him out, he couldn’t be trying to cop a five-finger discount. “Especially since people are going to wonder why a tall black man has a little white boy stealing for him. So, no, you can’t be stealing when you’re with me. Because they will lock my ass up, not yours!”

*Timeline: Saturday, September 27, 1980*

Today is the funeral of the 14-year-old, Glenn Dunn. Ray Hill, a white local news columnist, attends the service and writes an impassioned piece on it: *Revenge is the Lord’s*. But some at the funeral speak of taking

revenge themselves. They speak of arming themselves in order to fight this unknown assassin. The small sanctified church can't hold the hundreds who have come to offer their sympathy, condolences to his family, father, mother and grandmother. When the pews fill up, they sit in folding chairs, and they stand in the aisles. The church sings, *I'm Going on a Long Journey*, and the preachers preach about *God's inscrutable will*.

The words of the reporter, Hill, are eloquent, as he, recalls how "Dunn, a black boy, once in the church Sunshine Band, was now dead." I'd been in the Sunshine Band, too. And I wondered what the killer saw, or didn't see, to compel him to kill the kid.

One of the first of many racial incidents to result from the shootings occurs outside Dunn's funeral. During the service, two cars of white youths pull up outside the church and begin taunting blacks entering the church, attending the funeral. The white hecklers had painted their faces and bodies red and drawn bullet holes on their faces. The head of a mannequin smeared with a red, blood-like substance, is perched on a fender of one of their cars, presumably in mockery of the dead child. Further, according to witnesses, the whites follow the funeral procession on its route, taunting, heckling, and jeering at the mourners.

*Sunday, September 28, 1980*

Harold Green, who was actually the second victim shot, dies today.

Today, uniformed police guard the guests at the Black Achievers Banquet held at the Statler Hotel. More than 1,600 turn out at the hotel to honor twenty-six people at the 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Black Achievers Dinner. More than 300 persons are turned away because there's no room for them. Mayor Griffin, County Executive Rutkowski and other local leaders attend. Blacks in attendance know that the numbers who came and the appearance of the dignitaries are at least partially due to the killer, signs of solidarity on the one hand and political expediency on the other. City Councilman Herbert Bellamy, addressing the gathering, says, "This is the answer to a lot of Buffalo's problems—people pulling together."

The Bills win again today, and are 4-0, but people in the city wonder when the bubble's going to burst.

*Johnny's Story, continued:*

I slid over to the driver's seat in Bill Reilly's car, and switched the radio to the news. The newsperson said, "The manhunt for the crazed killer known as the .22-caliber killer has polarized the city. Racial animosity has reached an-all time high in Buffalo. Local Black leaders are calling for a

boycott and a rally.” I switched to other stations. Some of them played music. Others played news. It was all the same, really. Craziness in Iran, with the hostages. Craziness here in Buffalo with the killings. Craziness in my home. What home? I decided to find and follow Bill, at a distance. Maybe he would lead me to my woman. Maybe he was the .22-Caliber. Probably not. But maybe, just maybe, this white man knew where my wife and daughter were. If he did, I’d kill him.

*Timeline:*

*Monday, September 29, 1980*

All four men died from bullet wounds from the same gun. All four were shot on the left of the head. The papers run editorials calling the apprehension of the killer the *highest priority* and an *urgent task for police*. The Buffalo Police rule out the possibility that Joseph Paul Franklin, wanted for questioning in the shooting of National Urban League president, Vernon Jordan, and other blacks in five cities, is a suspect in Buffalo.

Investigators from Buffalo, Niagara Falls, and Cheektowaga, all three communities where the slayings occurred, have hit a dead end, in spite of hundreds of tips and clues. Moreover, the longer the killing spree continues, the more tense the situation will become, according the Rev. Bennett Smith, local coordinator of Operation PUSH. Rev. Smith also expresses concern that the FBI isn’t involved yet, stating, “It would be a simple matter for a case to be made for civil rights being violated.” PUSH begins raising reward money.

*Tuesday, September 30, 1980*

The reward begins to grow from different sources throughout the city, from both the black and white communities, as well as local businesses: a \$1,000 reward is put up by The Buffalo News and WKBW TV for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the killer.

*Wednesday, October 1, 1980*

The FBI enters the investigation because, according to U.S. Attorney, Richard J. Acara, the civil rights of two of the victims *may have been violated* because *the killer interfered with their right to public accommodations*. One was shot in a restaurant and one in a supermarket parking lot. The locales of the shootings allow the authorities to use the old Civil Rights legislation, from the sit-ins, to bring the Feds into the case. This legislation links the Buffalo violence to the 60’s struggles when blacks in the South

integrated lunch counters, soda fountains and any other facility *which serves the public and is principally engaged in selling food and beverages.*

For Buffalo blacks, walking on the street, eating a hamburger and fries, have become gestures of courage, acts against fear and paranoia which link the city with the struggles of the past, when young blacks sat down at lunch counters knowing they would be beaten, spat upon, jailed. Now, we knew we might die just for being black.

According to the police, a white man in a neighborhood where one of the shootings happened said to a black woman, *You're next* or *You're going to get it* and then fled. But no black women have been shot, just brothers.

By this point in the investigation, the police have gotten over 200 calls and tips, including one from a man who identified himself as the killer. And there's another where, according to the media, a wife called the cops to say she thought her husband was the killer, but she refused to give his identity.

*Thursday, October 2, 1980*

Police officials from the Niagara Frontier, Buffalo, Niagara Falls and Cheektowaga meet in an attempt to *reassure the black community that the investigation had been a coordinated effort from the beginning.*

But the black community is not assured, and continues to wonder if it would have been different if brothers weren't the only victims.

*Johnny's Story, continued:*

I drove in the exact direction Riley had walked, toward the bus stop at Bailey and East Utica. I figured he'd take the Bailey out to the suburbs.

I drove south down Utica, toward Fillmore. I crossed over Fillmore, thinking maybe I'd just search through the streets of the city, looking for him, looking for them, my family. He couldn't have gotten very far, walking. But I didn't see him at any bus stops. I switched the dial as I drove, hoping to find the right station, one that would give me some clues. I drove slowly, hoping I'd see them at any moment, or like the killer was around the corner. I stopped the radio on a station that was playing some Michael Jackson: *Rock With You*. I laughed, recalling how Nisey and I would put on a show for Laney, each of us with a white glove on one hand, Baby Girl and me singing with Michael and moonwalking. She'd sing, *Rock with me, daddy*, and I'd moonwalk around the kitchen table, while Laney would stand at the sink or the stove, as always, shaking her head

at us. Damn, I missed those days. Rain-sleet was falling, so I couldn't see as clearly as I would like to, but what was I looking for? Delaney? Reilly? The killer? I didn't know, guess I'd know who I was looking for when I found 'em.

I saw a crowd, ten, fifteen people in a circle on a vacant lot, beside some boarded-up buildings.

"What's up?" I parked across the street from one of the buildings. It had a bunch of church revival signs posted on it, so you couldn't see no building, no wood, just signs.

One of the signs I could make out from the car: *Souls Saved. Bodies Healed. Signs And Miracles.*

I needed a miracle. I rolled down the windows of the car and looked into the dark crowd. Music was blasting, like it was a party, or something, and people was shouting. But they wasn't party shouts, more like yells and screams, so I got out the car, careful to look around, careful to take my pail with me. People, on both sides of the street, standing by, staring at the circle, with the hollers and screams coming from inside that circle.

Crossing the street, walking toward the crowd, I made out shouts, "Get his ass. Stomp him to death. Kill that mofol!"

Mingled with the shouts were cries of, "Help! Help!"

After crossing the street, I stood back, behind the crowd, and got my gun out my pail, careful so no one saw. The rain-sleet mess was coming down harder now. It was that usual Buffalo, cold rain-sleet like we were gone have another snow storm in October. Somebody was on the ground, surrounded by the circle. The body on the ground was punched, kicked, hit, with fists and feet and wooden boards and baseball bats. They stomped on that body like they were dancing, and it was the dance floor: *Rock With Me.* They stomped, and I just stood and stared. It was a dude's body. It was a white man. Surrounded by a group of young, hungry black men, beating him, stomping his ass into the ground. I approached slowly, to see better. They stomped and laughed and cussed his ass into the ground. I moved even closer, amazed none of them acknowledged my presence. Maybe they didn't care; maybe I was invisible to them. Maybe this poor white man was all they saw.

It was Bill Reilly.

"Oh no," 'cause it was like Bill Reilly was meat and they was all taking bites. They was cursing, kicking him, and laughing. Each dude who kicked him, kicked him into somebody else's foot, until another foot kicked his ass across the circle. Like he was a log on the ground. And when he tried to get up, they kicked him back down. They didn't care where they kicked him, in the face, the head, wherever.

I walked closer. "God help me," I prayed. "Help me," and I shot in the air.

"Y'all get off him now! Now! Y'all, move!"

Nobody did nothing, like they didn't hear or care. I stepped closer. I shot again, this time on the ground, just outside the circle.

"Y'all move!" I shouted, and some of 'em turned around.

"What the . . ." "one of 'em said.

"I said, move offa his ass. Leave him be." My stomach was hurtin', like somebody fists was punching my gut, but I kept my voice low, deep-like, like I was they boss. Like me and my gun was they boss. *Rock With Me* was all I could think about, me and my baby playing. I almost wanted one of them to run up on me, but they just standing still, with Reilly's body over to the side, except for one short cat who stepped forward. He was dressed in jeans, t-shirt and a brown leather. Had a big-ass hat on his head, almost like a cowboy hat, but I supposed it was a pimp-brim kinda thing.

"That's our car, man," he said, pointing at Reilly's car.

"You tell 'em, Mongo," a voice behind him shouted.

"Hell, yeah!" another yelled. "White man said he was walking home 'cause somebody took his ride, and that's why he was walking over here. Said he didn't want no trouble."

"We told him it ain't safe, told him to get his honky ass back over to white-ville," another shouted.

"Yeah, and then we commenced to beat his ass," the one in front said, grinning like a cat. "We bet you the one stole his car, now why you over here bothering us," he said.

"Yeah, Mongo, tell his ass he better take that stolen car and get, 'fore we give him some of this here," and the speaker stomped Reilly again. Reilly was fetal, on the ground, a white lump of blackness, dirty and soiled from kicks and hits. I said nothing, but inside I was pleading, "Stop, please stop."

"That's our car now, punk-ass thief," the one named Mongo said again, all big and bad, pointing across the street at Reilly's car. Most of the crowd of watchers had left, scattered when I shot that gun. So it was just me, these young cats, intent on revenge, and Reilly. I wondered if anyone had gone to call the cops, but I couldn't be sure and I didn't want that anyway. I would be locked up too.

"That there our car, now," another dude, stepping up next to Mongo said. "And we gone take it. Come on, y'all," he, said, waving for his boys to follow.

I shot at his feet, making him jump. "Don't try me," I said. "Y'all leave. He ain't bothering y'all. Y'all get the hell outa here right now. Leave him be."

“Aw, man, we just getting back at whitey. Maybe this Motha the .22-Caliber,” Mongo shouted. The kid next to him, the Stomper, laughed, and kicked at Reilly again.

“Naw, maybe I am,” I shouted, and shot the Stomper in the leg. He cursed, falling on the ground. “Damn, he ain’t playin’” one of ‘em said, and they began to back up more. This told me none of them was packing, because if they were, I would’ve been toast. This told me they was probably just a gang of young kids looking for something to do, and stomping a white dude was it tonight. Looking at their faces, I could tell they wasn’t that old, maybe the oldest was 15, 16, 17, tops. Anyway, right now, it was punk or be punked. It was my life, and Reilly’s too, ‘cause them baby-faced mugs could kill, would kill.

“Y’all move. Y’all get going. He ain’t nothing but a hippie white dude. Y’all done beat his ass enough,” I said, grinning like I was down for them beating an innocent, defenseless cat. But Mongo didn’t move, like he was daring me to shoot again, but I knew I had to save my bullets, just in case, because if all them jumped me, I was gone, Reilly too.

“Next one gone be lot higher,” I shouted. “I served in ‘Nam and I ain’t afraid to kill somebody,” I lied. I had been in the service, but after ‘Nam, and I had only shot in war games and marksmanship. Mongo stared at me, like he wanted to take me one-on-one, then he took a step back, like I had more guns backing me up, or something.

“Thank you, Lord,” I whispered.

“We gone get your ass, man. Don’t you ever come over here again, Pops,” Mongo said, backing up. “We gone let your ass slide, ‘cause it’s cold and rainy and the cops gone get your sorry ole ass, anyway, with that stolen car.”

“Yeah, Mongo,” one of his boys said.

“And then we gone get you, too,” Mongo said, walking away.

I said nothing back, just stared at ‘em, holding my gun out, pointed at Mongo and ‘nem, watching as they pimp-walked out of sight, halfway looking back, cussing and threatening. I watched ‘til they was gone. Then, I walked over to Reilly, slowly, like they might pounce once they saw me bend down to help. Reilly was hurt real bad. I wasn’t no doctor, but I knew he might probably be bleeding internally.