

# The Invisible Girl

Ted let himself in and turned on the hallway light. He yawned, and headed for the bathroom, pleased that he had decided to leave the party early. He'd been working hard this week and was tired.

Switching all the lights off as he went, and navigating by memory and feel, he found his way to his room and got ready for bed. With a sigh, he slipped under the duvet, and his hand touched flesh. There was a shriek.

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"What the..." said Ted, and switched on his bedside lamp.

At first his brain refused to understand what he saw. He felt as if something had gone wrong with his eyes because, next to him in the bed was one of Mike's t-shirts. Sitting up.

"Don't..." said a voice. A girl's voice. "Don't..."

The sleeve of the t-shirt moved and a hand touched his arm.

"I thought that you weren't coming home tonight. That's what you said to Mike and Julie."

"Who are you? Why can't I see you? What is going on? How do you know what I said to Mike and Julie?"

"Sorry. I so wanted to sleep in a bed again. Just for one night."

"Why? Where do you usually sleep?"

"In your attic. Well, for the past week or so, anyway. There's a sofa up there. I have a sleeping bag and some blankets. No one ever goes up there."

"Why can't I see you? Is this a trick. This is impossible!"

The invisible girl started to cry. Ted stretched out his hand and put it on her shoulder, or rather, where her shoulder should be, and felt her collapse against him, sobbing. He closed his eyes and held her, comforting her, like he'd comforted his little sister. It felt like he was holding a normal girl. She smelled of his shower wash and Mike's deodorant.

"You're our poltergeist!" he said, as the penny dropped. "You took Mike's shower gel. It smells like you moved on to mine! You borrowed Mike's shirt. Well, that solves one mystery!"

"Yeah," she said through her sniffles. "I steal things. I have to. I can't work. I can't go into shops. I can't even talk to people! This is the first real conversation I've had for ages."

"You're invisible?"

"Yeah."

"How did that happen?"

"I don't know," she wailed.

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Mel stepped out of the shower and started to dry herself. She froze. Her mind refused to process what she saw. She could feel the towel in her hand, but it just appeared to be hanging in the air. Water drops trickled down her skin. She could see them, but she couldn't see her leg, and she automatically moved her hand to wipe them off. The floor and wall of the bathroom were visible where they should have been obscured by her leg.

Mel collapsed onto the bathroom chair. She couldn't see her body, only the towel wrapped around what seemed like thin air. She felt dizzy and light-headed. Tears flowed, as she held her invisible head in her invisible hands. How? Why? She had thousands of questions and no one to ask. Her dizziness faded, but she couldn't think what to do.

She stood up, wrapped her towel around her invisible body, and rushed out of the bathroom and into the lounge.

“Pim, Wendy! Help! Help me!”

Pim dashed into lounge. She screamed, rushed out, and Mel heard her bedroom door slam.

Wendy came in. “Oh my God. What... ?”

“Help me Wendy! Help! I can’t see myself. I can’t see myself!”

“Mel? Is that you? Oh, my God. What’s happened to you?” Wendy’s hand was shaking as she stretched it out towards Mel.

“I don’t know! I had a shower and I was like this! What shall I do?”

“I’ll ring the emergency services!”

But that was no help. Wendy couldn’t get anyone to take her seriously.

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Of course Mel couldn’t go to work, so she called in sick, but she couldn’t keep doing that. Eventually she would be fired for absenteeism.

One day, Mel was in the sitting room when Pim came home from work.

“Hi, Pim,” Mel said, but Pim ignored her and rushed into her room. Mel could hear Pim praying under her breath as she dashed past. From then on she would not come out if Mel was there.

“What do you think about all this?” she asked Wendy.

At least Wendy didn’t run away, Mel thought.

“Uh!” Wendy still jumped when Mel spoke to her, and she tried not to look at Mel’s clothes which appeared to float in mid-air. Sometimes Mel would come into the room to find Wendy looking around and under things, as if she thought that she could discover an invisible Mel, somehow.

“I don’t know, Mel. It’s really weird. What worries me is, what are you going to do for money? We need to pay the rent next week!”

Mel was aware that they were always short of money, and the flat was in Wendy’s name. “I’ll give you some of my savings. That will help for now.”

“But what about after that, Mel? What about when that runs out?”

Mel spent the time when her flatmates were out searching the Internet for clues about her condition, but there was nothing except for some old films. She emailed the local university, describing her problem, without giving details, but didn’t get a reply.

Wendy kept talking about the rent. “We need to do something, Mel. If you weren’t using that room, we could get someone in.”

“Should I leave, then?” Mel asked. Wendy couldn’t see that Mel had gone rigid with shock, but would have been able to see that the pen that Mel’s invisible hands were fiddling with had suddenly stopped moving.

“We don’t want you to go, of course.” Wendy’s voice wasn’t convincing, and neither was her body language.

The final straw came a couple of days later. Mel had heard her flatmates leave for work, and opened her bedroom door. A piece of paper was taped to her door, and the message, in Pim’s writing, read ‘Get out, witch!’ followed by a reference to a verse in Pim’s Holy Book.

Mel penned a quick note to Pim and Wendy, gathered her backpack, and left. She had been preparing for this moment for a while now.

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“I decided to leave the flat,” Mel told Ted.

“They effectively kicked you out. Where did you go?” he asked.

“Oh, I don’t blame them. It was pretty weird, and we weren’t close. I slept in a church for a few nights. Then a school. That was OK, but then I had a brilliant idea! Or so I thought.”

“Why didn’t you try harder to involve the authorities, Mel? They might have been able to help.”

“I don’t know.” She paused. “I think I was scared. Like if you see a policeman. You know that you’ve done nothing wrong, but you still feel guilty, don’t you? I thought of going to see the doctor, but I don’t know. I would have had to actually go there, and at first I was too scared to even go out.”

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It was dark and evensong had just finished at Saint Steven’s Church. Mel, wrapped in a thick coat and carrying her backpack, had slipped into the church when no one was looking. When the service ended, the priest herded his parishioners out of the building.

He made his way back to the offices at the back and disappeared from Mel’s view for a few moments, before reappearing. Tidying his church and putting various items away, he moved backwards and forwards, and disappeared from Mel’s view again. He emerged in his street clothes. Whistling a hymn off-key and swinging a large ornate key on a chain, he strolled down the church, and opened the church door. He paused and looked around his domain, and Mel held her breath as he strolled back to the rooms at the rear of the church. “Car keys, car keys,” he was saying to himself. The priest returned, exited the church and shut the door. The sound of his key rattled in the lock.

Mel relaxed with a sigh. Dim emergency lights were the only illumination as she crept out of her hiding place and started to explore the church.

“Locked, locked, locked,” she said to herself, as she tried the doors. “Aha!”

One of the doors opened onto a small corridor. Offices and stuff. She found a cupboard with tins of food in it. Charity donations, she thought. Yes! Doubt touched her mind. These donations were for the poor. The destitute. But she didn’t have any money, apart from what little was left of her savings in the bank! She had nowhere to live. Sobbing, she sank to the ground with a tin of beans in her invisible hand. What was she going to do?

She sighed, pulled herself together and stood up. Wandering down the corridor she found a small kitchen, with a small stove. Yes! Exploring further she found a room with a small bed in it. Camp bed, she thought. Maybe the priest took a nap between services? Perhaps it was in case someone got sick? She didn’t know.

Her stomach rumbled, and she backtracked to the kitchen and heated her beans. She’d not eaten that day, so she wolfed the beans down. Then she tidied up so that no one would know that she had been there. She spent the night on the priest’s bed. The next day she spent most of her time hiding in a small loft that she had found and pondering her fate and her future.

She was there for three days, and then overheard a conversation between the priest and one of his parishioners.

“All that I know is that there were more tins of beans. There’s only six of them now and I’m sure other tins are missing.”

“But you can’t be sure, Miriam.”

Miriam sniffed. “Oh, I’m sure, Father. I’m sure.”

The conversation faded as they moved away, but Mel decided that she needed to get out.

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“You had to move on?” said Ted.

“Yeah. They might have searched the church. They might have found where I was camping out in the loft. I had some blankets and some pillows that I’d borrowed from inside the church up there. Plus my backpack, and that had my wallet in it.”

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“Excuse me, I wonder if you could spare me half of your sandwich?”

The guy looked round. Mel was sitting on the bench beside him, wrapped in her thick coat. She had her hood pulled down low over her face, and was wearing sunglasses. She had a scarf around her lower face. The guy considered. She didn’t seem to be the usual sort of beggar.

“Erm, well I...”

Mel’s scarf slipped and all that the guy could see was a dark void where her mouth and lower face should be. She quickly wrapped it around her face again, but it was too late.

“What the... ? Oh, my god!”

He stood up, threw his sandwich at her, and ran. Mel scooped up the sandwich and hurried into the adjacent park. She huddled down behind a bush, opened the plastic package and ate the sandwich.

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“You bummed sandwiches off people?”

“Yeah. And stole them. I was desperate. It’s a good job it’s winter. I can go out, sometimes, if I’m fully wrapped up. With me, it’s either totally wrapped up, or starkers.”

“Starkers? Oh, I see. Have you been around the flat, em, listening to us?”

“Sorry. A couple of times. I try not to intrude, but I really miss talking to people. Upstairs, in the attic, I can hear your voices and that’s quite soothing, but a couple of times, like when I’m using your shower, and one of you comes home early, I can’t get out.”

“You surely don’t exist on the bits and pieces from our fridge?”

“I order in, online. Pay up front. Tell them to leave it at the door. That sort of thing.”

“Oh, yeah. Hey, that explains that Chinese food delivery that turned up at the door! None of us knew who had ordered it!”

“Yeah. That was supposed to be my dinner.”

“Sorry. We ate it.”

“Doesn’t matter. There was left-over curry. I had that. It’s going to be hard when I run out of money in the bank though.”

“Where did you live after the church?”

“I stayed in a school. But even though they provided school meals, the kitchen was locked after hours. I had to leave after a couple of days.”

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Mel camped down in a room at the back of the gym. It smelled a bit of old sweat and was dusty, but it wasn’t too bad. The gymnastic mats were soft, and she had pulled two of them out to make a bed behind a wooden horse. She couldn’t be seen from the door, even when she was in her sleeping bag.

Someone entered the room and Mel tensed. A girl and a boy. They settled down on the mats on the other side of the horse, kissing and giggling.

“Oh, I like that! Do it again. Oh!”

“I’ll just undo ...”

“Yeah, stroke me there again. Oh, wait! Don’t do that, Scott! I don’t want a hickey! My mum will kill me.”

“Ok. Sorry. How does that feel?”

“Oh, Scott!”

Mel tossed a basketball over the wooden horse and it crashed into the wall. There was a moments silence.

“What was that?” said the girl’s voice. It shook.

“I don’t know. Quick, we need to get out! Someone might have heard that! We can’t get caught. We shouldn’t be in the school at this time of night.” The boy sounded panicky too.

“Where’s my sweater. Oh, there! Here’s your jacket. Quick! Let’s go!”

Still tucking in bits of clothing, the couple left the room. Mel sighed. She didn’t expect anyone to come searching, but she was a little tense for a while. Just to be sure, she moved to a room with a couch just down from the school sick room. The sick room itself was locked.

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Ted laughed. “So you chased them out!”

“Yeah. I didn’t want to listen to that! Gross! Anyway, I had to move on from the school. I could only find snack foods, and I needed better than that!”

“So where did you go next?”

“I had what I thought was a brilliant idea. You know that big department store? They have a bedding section! I could take my pick from dozens of beds. They have clothes there. Even a sports and outdoors section. But the big prize was their food hall! They even had a staff kitchen that I could use to heat up the food. I thought it was an ideal solution.”

“What happened?”

“Well, everything was going fine for a couple of days, but then...”

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The security guard shone his torch on the closed doors of the department store. His radio was turned down but was muttering to itself. He pulled it from his belt and pushed a button.

“Bernie? No sign of forced entry. Are you sure the motion cameras were triggered?”

“Yeah. Confirmed. Bedding section.”

“How was the intruder dressed? I can’t see any movement.”

“Um.” The person at the other end seemed embarrassed. “The cameras didn’t get a good look. It looked like the intruder was wrapped in a duvet or something. No face visible. Um, no visible weapons.”

The guard considered. “OK. I’m going in. It doesn’t sound like there’s much danger.”

“OK, Al. Noted. Be careful.”

Al walked around the side of the store and unlocked the side door. He cautiously opened it and listened. Nothing. He clicked on the torch and swung it around. Still nothing. He did a tour of the store but nothing seemed out of place. Then he came to the bedding section. There was something on one of the beds.

“Are you there, Bernie?”

“Yes, Al. Did you find something?”

“It looks like a duvet and a sleeping bag.”

“Someone’s camping out in the store?”

“Yeah. Looks like it, Bernie.”

At that moment the makeshift sleeping arrangement erupted and the duvet shot off up the aisle. Al stood there astounded for a few vital seconds then chased after it. He noticed that he couldn’t see any legs below the duvet, and there was no sign of a head above it. The fugitive duvet turned a corner and when Al followed it, the duvet was lying across a large sofa. There was no sign of anyone.

“Well!” said Al and started carefully checking behind all the sofas and chairs. Nothing. He noticed that he was shaking a little. “It was dark. I never got a good look,” he rationalised. “I’ll bring the dog next time.”

Later Al was called back when the alarm on the side door went off. This time he had the dog with him, but neither he nor the dog found anything.

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“You dropped the duvet and hid behind a sofa?”

“Yeah. I took everything off so there was no way he was going to find me!”

“That’s actually pretty neat. Isn’t it?” he asked tentatively.

She laughed shakily. “I guess so.” Then she started to cry. “What am I going to do?”

“Well,” he said. “I need to talk to my flatmates. If I approach it right, I think that we can work something out. OK?”

He hugged her and got out of the bed.

“I suppose. Where are you going?”

“To sleep on the sofa. Enjoy my bed.”

“Oh! Thanks, Ted.”

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“I need to talk to you, guys.”

Ted and his flatmates were gathered around the big table.

“What’s up, Ted? You’re very serious. That’s not like you.”

Ted ignored the teasing. “Suppose something made you invisible. What would you do?”

“What? Is that a serious question,” answered Mike. “Oh, you are talking about the poltergeist, aren’t you? An invisible person? That could explain everything.”

He was joking, but Ted didn’t react.

“Well,” said Mike. “Hmm. OK. People wouldn’t notice you. You could take anything you want.”

“But they’d see the thing that you stole floating through the air.”

“Ah OK. So presumably clothes are out too? ”

“Yes.”

“Mmm, this is strangely specific. Well, you couldn’t have a job, could you? So you’d have no money. You’d have to raid people’s fridges. And steal their shampoo. Stuff like that. Like our poltergeist.”

Ted didn’t react. “Where would you live?”

“Um, in a cupboard? Behind the sofa?”

“What about our attic?”

“Our attic? Yeah, I guess. Our attic? Ted, what is all this about?”

“Don’t freak out, guys. Don’t freak out. You’re exactly right. You’d hide out somewhere like our attic. I’d like to introduce you to Mel. Mel?”

Mel walked into the room. She was wearing a t-shirt and denim jeans with socks and sneakers. Of course, from the neck up, she was invisible. She appeared to have no arms, of course.

“The little gods,” said Julie. “What the heck is this? Ted? You were joking, right? This is trick of some sort, isn’t it?”

“I wish it was a trick. I wish Ted was joking, but, no, it’s not a trick.”

A chair pulled back from the table. The empty clothes sat down, then hitched the chair back closer to the table.

“I need a coffee. Anyone else?” said Julie.

“Please,” said the invisible Mel.

“The Little Gods,” said Julie. Her voice and her hands shook. “OK. How do you like it?”

“Milk. No sugar. Thanks.”

Mike was a more thoughtful person. He held out his hand towards the invisible girl, and when she shook it, he started.

“Well, um, welcome Mel. Welcome. Um, how did you end up in this state? How did you meet Ted?”

Mel told her story.

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Mel was walking down the road with her backpack with her sleeping bag strapped to the bottom of it. She had her hood up, her scarf across her face and was wearing dark glasses. It was a bright, cold day, so the dark glasses and scarf didn't seem too out of place.

Someone was delving around inside the boot of a car, and the door to the nearby house was wide open. Mel didn't stop to think. She dashed up the steps into the house. It was an older house, in the middle of a terrace, and inside the walls were covered in faded old-fashioned wall paper. The worn stair carpet had holes in it in places.

Mel continued up the stairs to the first floor. There was a door open and Mel heard a woman's voice .

“Is that you, Ted?”

Mel fled up the second set of stairs, which ended in a closed door.

“Oh, no!” Mel said to herself.

She cringed back, but if the girl came out of the door there was a big chance that Mel would be discovered. Her hand touched the door and there was a key in it. She spun, turned the key and opened the door. Slipping through it, she closed it behind her.

The girl in the flat below came out onto the stairs.

“Ted?”

There was no one there. The girl shrugged and went back into the flat.

“That was close,” Mel said to herself. She looked around.

It was a dusty attic, with a dusty skylight. There were some rolls of wallpaper stacked against one wall, and a window frame, complete with glass, leaned against another wall. An old cupboard stood in one corner, and bits of carpet were piled in another. Miscellaneous objects, like suitcases and boxes, filled much of the rest of the room. Everything was covered in a thick layer of dust.

There was something covered by a large sheet. She pulled it off and underneath was a large floral sofa. She tried it out, and the soft cushions felt like heaven.

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“But I was wrong,” Mike said. “I've been thinking. You can have a job.”

“What?”

“Yes, there are all sorts of jobs you can do. Many people work from home these days. We can find you a job! We can help!”

“Yes!” said Julie, “We can also help you find out what has happened to you. Why you are... invisible.”

“Oh, oh, thank you, thank you!” They could hear her crying, but apart from a few tears which reached the table they could see nothing.

“Let's try something,” suggested Julie. She disappeared into her room and came back with a wig, “Right, let's see how this fits you.”

She came around behind Mel with the wig and extended a shaky hand, but when her hand touched Mel's invisible hair her whole body relaxed.

“Oh, your hair is quite short! That should make the wig fit better.”

Julie had a look at her handiwork. “Mmm. Looking good. I'll just get some makeup.”

“Julie is a makeup specialist. I’ve had a thought, too,” said Mike and disappeared into his room. He came back with a camera and some bits and pieces. “I can use an infrared mode to get a picture,” he explained. “Is it OK to take a picture of you, Mel?”

Her voice sounded shaky, but she said “Yes, go ahead.”

“Hm,” said Mike as he worked. “This camera doesn’t have an infrared mode, but I think that I can use an external filter to compensate for that. If there is an internal infrared filter, I most likely won’t get a decent image, though. Let’s see.”

He fiddled around for a while trying various lens and filters.

“That’s the best that I can do,” he said running his fingers through his hair. He showed Mel and Ted. “I’ll see if I can get a loan of a proper infrared camera tomorrow.”

“Oh, that’s amazing,” Mel looked at the image and sighed. “I felt that I wasn’t really there! I don’t know if you understand me? But that’s definitely me!”

Ted had a look. The image was monochrome, a little out of focus, and with odd highlights, but it did show Mel’s face.

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Julie returned with a big bag which she dumped on the table.

“Right. Let’s start with a little foundation. This is makeup style, which may not be robust enough. I might need to use theatre makeup.”

She felt Mel’s invisible face.

“Mmm.”

She took a brush and started to apply the makeup. Ted and Mike watched, fascinated. Gradually, it seemed, Mel’s face was revealed.

“This is odd. Usually I can see what my makeup looks like against the skin, but this feels more like painting. It still looks like a mask,” said Julie. As a makeup professional, she wasn’t totally happy with the result. “What do you think, Mel?”

“Hey, that’s amazing,” said Mike, and Ted nodded.

Mel looked into Julie’s mirror.

“Wow, that’s amazing. But I look like a white girl.”

“Hmm, yeah girl, Sorry. You didn’t tell me. I should have guessed from your bone structure. But I could only feel it. We’ll do better next time.”

“I’ve never seen myself like this. It’s amazing! Thank you! Thank you!”

Mel jumped up and hugged her.

“Right,” said Ted. “If it’s OK with you two, we’ll let Mel use the spare room. We’ll have to tell the landlord, but that can wait a couple of weeks.”

He got nods all round. Even from Mel.

“OK, then. Mike, give me a hand with the bed in there, please. It’s stacked up against the wall. We’ll have to move the rest of the junk to one side.”

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It was a few weeks later, and Mel and Ted were watching the news on TV. Mel had removed all her makeup and appeared to have no head or arms, but Ted and the others were used to that now.

Mel gasped.

“What is it, Mel?”

“Look, Ted! Look!”

She held her hand up, and Ted looked at it and gasped. Then he looked at her face.

“Are you, are you becoming visible, Mel?”

“I think so! Oh, I hope so.”



Ted couldn't see Mel's shape, but there was a disturbance in the air, as if there was a thin veil of water. After a bit, Ted could make out Mel's shape, though there were no colours yet. His eye was just becoming more adept at seeing Mel's shape, he decided. If she was becoming visible, it was happening very slowly.

"Oh, Mel, I'm seeing you better by the minute. But it isn't happening fast."

"I know! But it is happening!"

She threw her mostly invisible arms around him and hugged him. They had become close.

"Wait! What?" She spun back to the television.

The announcer was talking over a mostly blank screen, with a line cartoon of a man in the blank space and at the bottom a ticker announced that an invisible man had been arrested when he had tried to rob a bank.

"Oh, the poor guy! He must have been desperate!" cried Mel.

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The invisible man was an instant sensation. His story was all over the news. There were pictures of him, or rather his clothes, and 'reconstructions' of his appearance. Mike snorted, but then nodded in approval when someone decided to try infrared photography. Scientists were called upon to explain how the invisibility worked, but they didn't know.

Of course people tried to understand what it meant to them. The police had to assure the public that there weren't other invisible men out there, so far as they knew, and that they were all safe in their homes. Of course, people jokingly started to blame the invisible man if anything went missing.

The real invisible man was interviewed on TV, but it didn't go well. He was by turns hesitant and aggressive and was visibly shaking during most of the interview. His doctors decided that the invisible man should give no more interviews, and it was hinted that he had become so distressed by his situation that he had become ill.

Meanwhile, Mel was becoming more visible by the day. Julie and Mel were sitting, watching the news one day when Julie turned to Mel.

"Are you glad that you didn't approach the authorities, Mel? That guy seems to have had a bad time of it."

"Yes. It was only instinct, and maybe things would have turned out better for me. I'm glad I didn't try to turn myself in, though."

She stretched out her arms. They looked the same as they were before she became invisible.

"I wonder if I'll ever know what happened to me?"

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