

UNSEEN
An African Memoir

At the Nchanga copper mine in Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) in 1940, the weekly Saturday matinee was the biggest event in my eight-year-old life. The Nchanga Bioscope was located over the underground mine, which the chicken-lickens were convinced would cave in at any moment as there had been some accidents in the past.

The announcement of the 1933 film "The Invisible Man" was the talk of the town during the week before it arrived. For lunch that Saturday, Mummy had made a fish stew, which was served to me in the "children's dining room" (a repurposed pantry). My brother was away visiting friends in Balovale, a remote Anglican mission near the Congo, where unbeknownst to all he was busy contracting dysentery and malaria.

Mummy had slaved over the meal all morning, since being American she always let the cookboy and the houseboy go to the native cinema on Saturdays. She was livid when I refused to touch her stinky fish stuff. With clenched teeth she made it clear that if the stew wasn't gone by the time she finished lunch with Daddy in the big dining room, I wouldn't be going to see "The Invisible Man" with my friends. This was crushing, because what child doesn't wish to become invisible and find out how it works?

Left alone with only my conscience as my guide--as Mummy had taken our Rhodesian Ridgeback dog with her--my desperate eyes fell upon Daddy's treasured collection of National Geographic magazines, stored there for lack of a better place. Tearing out a few pages that surely wouldn't be missed, I made a plate out of the glossy paper and wrapped it around the stew. Then I stuffed the whole fishy mess into the space under the bottom shelf of the bookcase and yelled, "Finished, Mummy!"

As she opened the door, her suspicious look changed to a stiff smile. "Good girl. Why don't you wait on the front step for your friends. Mrs. Steffensen will be driving you today."

"I hope she drives fast so we can get the best seats," I said.

Our afternoon wouldn't be complete without a seat in the front row, but how we made sense of the films from that angle I'll never know. The boys sat on one side of the aisle, girls on the other, and there was always a scramble to get the aisle seats, the better for the boys and girls to giggle at one another.

A dusty Land Rover full of kids was fast approaching when Mummy's voice sliced through my musings about what an invisible man would look like. The face looking down at me was scowling with the hint of a "gotcha" smile.

How could she have discovered my secret so fast? Grasping my shoulder in an iron grip she propelled me to the scene of the crime. There was no mistaking the black, moving column entering the window through the screen, continuing down the wall and swarming around a certain spot under the bookcase: voracious African army ants.

At school on Monday my friends gave me a jigsaw-puzzle account of the film, and whispered that my current crush had asked where I was, but it wasn't the same as being there. Films at the Nchanga Bioscope stayed for only one Saturday afternoon and evening before moving on to the next bookings at Nkana, Ndola, Luanshya, Mufulira, and Bwana Mkubwa. The Invisible Man was gone--but not forgotten.

Eight decades later, browsing through DVDs of old movies on Amazon, I came upon--lo and behold--the original 1933 version of "The Invisible Man" starring Claude Rains. This reminded me I still hadn't seen it and was still pissed about it. At this point if the DVD had cost an arm and a leg I might have considered an amputation, but luckily it was affordable. Now if I can just find the right moment with the right ambiance and the right friends to watch it before I move on to the next booking myself ...

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