

AN INVISIBLE MAN

by

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Almost 30 years ago, Ralph Ellison wrote the now classic novel, The Invisible Man, about a black man's struggles to define his existence in world that considered him invisible. Though times have changed, we still have invisible men whose only record of existence lies in the annual prison statistics, and in the chilling "released by death" notice on a prison's daily count sheet. The following story is about one such man. To date, he's managed to ward off the final statistic, but it's been a battle.

His name is Odis Connell Chalmers. He's a 30 year old black man serving a 4 year sentence for Attempted Robbery and Assault. He's currently at the Federal Prison Hospital, at Springfield, Missouri because he has terminal abdominal cancer. His life, his illness, and now his battle against death is a story that needs to be told. Not because he is unique, for he's not, but because his story, to a greater or lesser extent is the story of many of his fellow prisoners. Like the tree in the forest that falls without anyone hearing it, many of the men will die without anyone hearing their fall. Perhaps this will at least serve as a faint sound to let people know that Odis is among us.

Odis was born in Louise, Mississippi, 30 years ago. At the age of 4, his mother moved to the west side of Chicago, as part of that great migration of blacks who came up from the south looking for a piece of the "American Dream." For Odis, the dream soon became a nightmare. Life in the big city is expensive, and to survive, Odis, his mother, and the little brothers and sisters found themselves sharing an apartment with aunts, cousins, a crippled uncle in a wheelchair, and his grandmother.

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Odis spent his adolescence sleeping on a roll-up cot in the living room. The games of childhood were selling newspapers at Chicago Stadium. School work was a luxury he was told would improve his lot in life later on. But when you're cold and hungry, later on becomes something you don't think about. The reality is trying to stay full, and warm. This resulted in Odis being transferred to 3 separate grade schools before he was sent to the Moses Montifier Social Adjustment School.

At age 11, he became tagged as someone who needed to be adjusted was "adjusted." After 3 years of being "adjusted" he in great shape to be "corrected." He was sent off to the Illinois Training School For Boys. His crime was being a menace to his neighborhood. The folks in that neighborhood should have asked for a refund from the school board.

Released 9 months later, he entered McKinley Upper Grade School, where he managed to spend a quiet year before being arrested for auto theft. The judge decided he needed to be "corrected" some more, so he sent him away to the Forestry Camp at Savanna, Illinois. He was "corrected" for 8 months.

33 days after he was released, he was arrested for shoplifting. He got "corrected" for another 60 days.

Somehow, all this "correcting" didn't seem to be working. 3 months after getting out of jail he was arrested again. This time it was for 4 counts of rape and robbery. The only thing that his prior trips to be "corrected" did for him this time was to insure that his bail was because he was a persistent offender - would be too high to get out. He spent 9 months waiting for trial. To pass the idle hours, he started experimenting with drugs. Drugs are prevalent in jails in prisons because they offer a way to control part of the population. Odis thought he was getting over, but it was his keepers who really got over. When the first of his trials came, he was acquitted. Odis said that this scared his lawyer worse than it did the prosecutor. As a result, the lawyer convinced him it was in his best interests to plead guilty to the other charges for a concurrent 4 to 5 year sentence, including jail time. It was a case of a Monty Hall School of Law graduate playing, "Let's Make A Deal." Odis's reaction to this latest bout of "correcting" was to immediately get in trouble at the Pontiac State Prison, where he served his full sentence.

Released one more time, he managed to get a job as a seamster trainee. Doing piece work, he worked for 7 months before deciding to improve his lot - like he'd been told as a little boy it would happen - by going to work at A. B. Dick. " I thought it was going

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to be a real chance. " he says, " My boss even promised me that if I showed him I could do the work I'd get journeyman's pay. Only he didn't keep his word. After 4 months, I quit when I saw that I was just being strung out. They just wanted to work me as long as they could, cheap. " He quit.

His next effort at trying to improve his life was to try and enroll in a vocational school to really learn the tailoring business. But like much in Odis's life, he was a dollar late, and day short. Or vice-versa. In any event, he ended up spending the next 3 years out on the streets of Chicago, hustling, stealing, and trying to stay one step ahead of anyone with a pair of handcuffs.

In August of 76, he and a friend scored for a small bag of cocaine. His friend passed, and Odis did up the whole bag. What he didn't know when he snorted up this coke, was that it had been heavily laced with PCP. The next 18 months became a nightmare. Having been " adjusted, " " Corrected, " and " rehabilitated, " he was now getting " shrunk. " In those 18 months, he got committed to the nut house twice. His dreams, which hadn't ever been all that great, now became clouded with the dreams of paranoia and suicide.

In February of 78, he attempted to burglarize the pharmacy at the Hines V. A. Hospital. When a nurse tried to apprehend him, he cut her hand. When they finally took the handcuffs off, he was in the Federal Metropolitan Correctional Center in Chicago.

It was shortly after he arrived that he first started having stomach pains. For 5 months he went to sick call, where the doctors played at practicing medicine by prescription. If one pill didn't work, try something a little stronger. Finally, after raising hell, he was told that he would be taken out for x-rays, and tests. Being a trusting soul, he waited 3 months for that day to come. It didn't until he had been sentenced to 4 years, and transferred to Oxford, Wisconsin.

5 days after arrival, he was throwing up blood. This got him admitted to the infirmary where he had an Upper G. I. series taken, and where they put him on a diet of intravenous feeding. The diagnosis was a Peptic Ulcer.

He stayed almost a month before he was accused of ripping off a couple hundred capsules of Benydryl. He maintains that he didn't steal the pills, but rather accepted a handful from the inmate that did. No matter, when they shook down they found a handful in his room. That, along with the fact that he'd been hard to wake during the shakedown, were

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enough to get him transferred to the Federal Prison Hospital in Springfield, Missouri. Better known to most people as the Federal Bug House. And that's where they put Odis. - For 2 months he was in cellblock 10-D, a close custody, psychiatric ward. From there, he was allowed to enter the general population, where he soon became tagged as a trouble maker. In 4 months in general population he managed to land in the hole 3 times. He also had some of his good time taken away. Through it all, he continued to be treated for a Peptic Ulcer, even though nothing that they gave him stopped the pain. This pain, he claims, was the major reason he became such a trouble maker.

In February of 79, after an evening of petty harrassment, and exchanges of words with his cell block officer, he was jumped on by the " goon squad, " and taken to the hole once again.

" They came and got me cause I was arguing with the guard about locking up in my cell. They ran up on me, grabbed me, turned me upside down, and started beating me, grabbing at my privacies, and calling me names. They took me towards 10 building, and when we got around the corner, they dropped me on the ground, and started kicking me, punching me, and telling me that they could kill me, and nobody would know, or care. Then they got tired of that, and they went on and carried me to 10 building. When we got there, they made me take off all my clothes, and they locked me in a cell. I started throwing up blood. When one of the guards seen it, he must have gone and told somebody, cause a bunch of them came back talking about how they wanted to examine me. And the guy that was leading them, a P. A. named Miranda, was one of the same one's who'd been beating on me. I told them to leave me alone. They'd hurt me enough for one night. I lay in that cell all night throwing up blood. "

4 days later

~~XXXXXXXXXX~~, Odis was taken to the hospital, and a gastric bioposy was taken. 5 days after that, Odis was taken out of the hole, and told that he had stomach cancer.

Immediate surgery was called for, but Odis refused. For a month he withstood all efforts to get him into the operating room.

" Those folks had messed me over so bad, I just didn't trust them cutting on me. " But it was the pain that finally convinced him.

" I just got to hurting so bad, I didn't care what they did. I just wanted the pain to stop. "

At the end of March, 79, he finally let them operate. The doctors, once they opened him up, didn't waste much time in closing him up again. Instead of stomach cancer, they found that his stomach, liver, and ~~xxx~~ spleen. He was a terminal case. It was a sentence of death.

His mother arrived from Chicago the same day they operated on

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Odis. Magnanimously, the officials allowed her a half hour visit a day with her son, while a guard stood by keeping watch. On welfare, she'd had to borrow the money to make the trip. Yet, with her son laying in the recovery room with terminal cancer, they only allowed her a half hour a day.

Approximately 30 days after the operation, Odis was transferred out of the hospital, to another part of the institution, and given a job in the clothing room. One might consider it a good form of therapy, only Odis considered it just another form of harrassment. Not only was he in almost constant pain, but he had to walk halfway around the institution to go to work, and while he was gone, other inmates stole most of his personal property. He started raising hell. They moved him back into a semi-long term recovery wing, where he soon managed to complain enough to place him on the list of chronic troublemakers.

When he wasn't being locked in his room, and even when he was, he was started on radiation, and chemotherapy. The effects of the chemotherapy were so severe that he went from 160 pounds, down to 107. Even worse, his body reacted so badly, that they had to operate on him again, and insert a tube into his stomach which is now used to inject the vitamin B, used with patients on chemotherapy. Today, he weighs 112 pounds, has to change the wraps covering the tube sticking out of his stomach daily, and is mad as hell about what's happened, and is happening to him.

It would be bad enough if Odis's anger were the result of the pill pushing he received in jail, the mis-diagnosis of Peptic Ulcer at Oxford, the attempts to label him a crazy, the beatings, and finally the knowledge of having terminal cancer. That would be enough to set the most passive man to screaming. But it doesn't stop there.

In September of 79, he applied to the United States Parole Board, for a medical parole. He had 17 months served on a 4 year sentence. At most, another 17 months would have qualified him for his maximum release. The board showed no compassion. Instead, they berated him for his failure to "adjust" to the institutional way of life.

The vicious circle has come all the way around. He started being "adjusted" in the 6th grade. From there he graduated to being "corrected," and now, on the doorstep of death, the parole board's main complaint against him was, that cancer, or no cancer, abuse, or no abuse, his "adjustment" was the real problem. They told him to "bring it all." That's parole boardzee for, maxing out.

For Odis, "bringing it all," will probably mean dying in prison. But then, Odis is just another poor, uneducated, faceless

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black man, who nobody - except his family - will miss. His record of existence is charted in the annual prison population statistics. This year, or next year, he'll be one of the numbers listed as " Released by death. "

But while he lives, his aggreivation continues. 3 nights ago, I, and a lot of other men watched him walk up to the nurses station for his evening medication. He was 10 minutes late. The nurse told him that he could either refuse to take his medication, or, he could take it, and receive a rule infraction writeup for being late. That is a madness that caused several inmates to speak up. Who in their right mind, especially a supposedly trained nurse, can tell a man with terminal cancer that if he wants his medication, he has to take a writeup with it. A nurse who would withhold medication in an outside hospital would be fired. A nurse who subjected men to such insanity in here, is congratulated for being " tough. "

There are times when Odis talks about another inmate from Illinois, who also learned he had cancer here. This man was Otto Kerner, former Governor, and United States Appeal's Court Judge. When Kerner learned he had cancer, very little time was wasted in freeing him. Understandably, Odis makes some very subjective, and critical references to his treatment, and that received by Kerner. Even when facing death, the rich and powerful who've slipped from grace manage to get preferential treatment.

But when you're an invisible man, who the hell knows, or cares. For men such as Odis, their tombstones should read, Nulla vestigium retrorist, (Not a trace left behind.) This is really what it means to be an invisible man in an American prison.

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SINCE THIS WAS WRITTEN ODIS
CHALMERS CASE WAS REVIEWED BY
THE PAROLE BOARD AND IT WAS
DECIDED THAT MR. CHALMERS SHOULD
BE RELEASED TO DIE OUT SIDE OF
PRISON SHOULD HE LIVE TILL HIS
RELEASE DATE.