

A photograph of a minimalist room. On the left, a large window with a black frame looks out onto a city street. The room has white walls and a dark wooden floor. A single wooden chair is positioned on the right side of the room. The lighting is soft, coming from the window, creating a calm and quiet atmosphere.

I'm in the

Room

Lawrence Weill

Prologue

Nothing is so common-place as to wish to be remarkable.

-Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.,
The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table (1858), Ch. XII

It is an oddity of life that a person can never completely know one's self because, even if it were possible to completely define a person, just the act of defining that person would change the definition. The only possible way, then, to know about people is to try to see who they are becoming rather than who they are. But if we want to see who they are becoming, we must see who they were, for the act of becoming presupposes being. You must already be someone in order to become someone (or something) else. Such is the case of Allen Johnson whom no one saw—or at least rarely saw. It wasn't that he was invisible, but simply that he was not very visible. The people around him, indeed, the world in general was not interested in seeing him. What he did not realize for a good deal of his life was that his understanding of his lack of visibility would eventually set him free. To be unknown is liberating. But he did not always know that; in fact, he could not have known that until the circumstances allowed the assorted variables in his life to bring that understanding to him. First, the fact of his being had to manifest itself. The abstract external characteristics of his life had to be established. Then he would need to align his own stars to be able to determine his fate.

Thesis

To be fit for life in society every child, as well as every dog, must be housebroken.
-Edwin G. Conklin

It's not clear when Allen Johnson discovered that no one saw him, but certainly he had seen the possibility coming long before it happened. Perhaps he only really knew how invisible he might be two months after he turned thirty-one. That was when he made the Flying Leap, as he later described it when he told tales of life to his nearly-invisible children and then later to his mostly-invisible grandchildren. But that Flying Leap wasn't until well after he had started down the path to anonymity and had placed that invisibility in opposition to the prominence he dreamed of as a child and then as a young man. Allen Johnson alternately struggled against his obscurity and reveled in it, so he was ever engaged in a kind of bittersweet dialectic. And eventually, as with all dialectics, he found himself in a position of self-revolution and then complete devolution. At that point, Allen Johnson made the Flying Leap. But in the meanwhile, he developed every sort of sometimes ingenious, sometimes absurd scheme to overcome his hiddenness.

It's important to realize that Allen Johnson had not always been turning invisible. For most of his life, he wavered somewhere between perceptible and imperceptible, and his numerous strategies for overcoming his obscurity were generally predicated on the basis of volume and color. This is certainly true of his early years. Born one bright May morning in the late fifties, he was a mostly-distinguishable baby and was destined to grow up in Evanston, a town in the western end of Kentucky that was mostly unknown to the outside world, despite being the self-proclaimed corn-on-the-cob center of the universe.

With this proclamation came a yearly celebration of corn with the ever popular ear toss and coronation of the Cob Queen, a title highly coveted

by the cheerleaders and pom-pom girls at Evanston Senior High School. Unfortunately the winner, who wore the genuine gold-colored tiara with rows of corn designed, etched, and painstakingly assembled at Goldberg's Trophy House, Pawn Shop, and Bait Store, was obligated to relinquish the tiara to the new Cob Queen the following year. But that did not dissuade the young ladies from entering the contest, as they were also determined to shine forth from the shadows of insignificance and ride in the convertible supplied by Jimmy Jones Ford in the annual Corn-on-the-Cob Parade.

Even as a baby, Allen Johnson tried diligently to be perceived in this town of which so few from outside were even aware. Allen threw up quite often colorful, viscous baby food and managed to drool on anyone who picked him up, traits that clearly made people notice. Early on, he discovered he could see his own hand and could even shove it into his mouth, and if his parents—youthful, eager, and naive—did not notice him, he had a plan to remedy that. He would let out a highly audible yowl that caused dogs in the neighborhood to cringe and guaranteed that his parents and other sentient creatures were aware of his existence.

Yet even then, despite his precocious volume, despite his very existence as a flesh and blood baby, sometimes Allen's own mother, Jean, just didn't see him. A romantic movie (she was especially fond of Doris Day movies) would show on the Afternoon Matinee, and she would get caught up in it, completely missing the obvious fact that Allen was there and demanded constant attention (like all children until the age of twenty-five). He used his trusty tool, the 120 decibel yowl, but if it was during the Dialing for Dollars segment, his mother didn't see or hear him and went on watching the movie until Doris fell in love with the scoundrel she had treated like the plague for an hour and a half. It was as if Jean was certain the answer to her family's occasional financial woes would be remedied by a random call from the television station.

“And now it's time to call today's lucky viewer . . .”

“Aiyeeee!” Allen howled, his diaper uncomfortably heavy and wet. The family cat scampered into the farthest reaches of the house.

“Hush, Allen, Bob Bolger might be trying to call us.”

“Today's number is in the Rosemont area . . .”

“Oh, that's where Carol lives. I wonder if he's calling Carol.”

“Aiyeeeee!” Both the pitch and the volume increased. Neighbors a block away looked up from their newspapers curiously.

“The first three digits are five, three, six . . .”

“Oh, that's the same as Carol's number.”

“Aiyeeeeeee!” Allen’s face bulged red with effort. Birds stopped flying over the house.

“What if she doesn’t know the secret clue? I’d feel awful if she didn’t know the secret clue and Bob Bolger called her.”

“Aiyeeeeee!”

Whirrrr, whirrrr, whirrr. “Carol?”

“Aiyeeeeee! Aiyeee!” Other children in their homes joined in the chorus, their mothers perplexed by the sudden outbursts.

“Carol, are you watching the movie on channel seven? You are? Great!”

“Aaaah! Waaaah! Aiyeeeeee!” Allen’s eyes bugged out with effort now.

“We’re dialing the last of the number now . . .”

“Well, I’d better get off so Bob can reach you if he’s calling your number.”

“Aaaaah aaaaah haaaaah! Aiyeee!” The windows rattled now.

“What? What did you say Carol? I’m sorry, but the baby’s—”

“Waaaah!” Paint began to buckle along the wall.

“Hush up, honey. What? Oh, okay, bye.”

Bob Bolger shook his head as he hung up the phone. “Well, our number was busy, so the pot for tomorrow goes up ten dollars to three hundred twenty dollars.”

“Aiyeeeeee!”

“Well, I guess it was somebody else’s number.”

“And now back to Pillow Talk.”

“Aiyeeeeee!”

Somewhere down the street, a dachshund cried mournfully.
“Oooooooh. Yipe, yipe, oooooooh.”

His father, Roger, who had handed out the stale cigars with “It’s a Boy!” printed on them to all of his friends; who had bounced Allen on his knee until he vomited (Allen, that is, although sometimes that made his father gag as well); who had promised Allen before he could see that Allen would be the shortstop he himself had always wanted to be; sometimes seemed incapable of seeing Allen. Roger Johnson would pull the Valiant into the drive after driving home from the Motor Pool Division of Northwestern Kentucky Electric Corp. where he was the Assistant Dispatch Manager Trainee, and Allen would hear the familiar ping of the engine and make himself as visible as possible, usually by spurting forth a whitish liquid. But when Mr. Johnson came in, his necktie pulled loose and his jacket over his arm, he sometimes didn’t see the boy he was certain would be an All-American shortstop. Instead, Roger would plop himself into a tattered wingback chair and call to Allen’s mother.

"Jean. I'm home."

"Yes, dear. What would you like for dinner?" (Although, dinner usually was well under way.)

"I don't care. I'm too tired to think. I'm exhausted." Then he would drop his heavy arms loudly on the arms of the chair. All of this, of course, was a cue for his wife, and she almost never failed to get it.

"I'm coming." And she would hand him a can of Falls City beer that would somehow revive him and made his breath both sour and sickly sweet. Jean would rub his neck and shoulders. Then his eyes would adjust, and he would finally be able to see Allen. He would walk heavily over to the playpen and smile, his eyes looking tired and puffy in Allen's face.

"Here's my big boy." His eyes softened with affection.

"Aah!" Allen cooed back.

"Did you have a good day, little Ken Boyer?" Roger leaned closer and picked up Allen, holding his son above his head now to look up at him. Allen smiled back, caught a whiff of his father's breath, gasped for fresh air, and vomited.

When he was a baby, Allen's aunts and uncles saw him quite well. They goo-gooed and made faces at him; he watched them with a mixture of amusement and horror. Their faces were funny enough to look at, but the notion that these odd-looking folks with contorted mouths and exaggerated eyes were related to Allen by blood frightened him terribly. If he could have been overlooked by his Aunt Gertie, he would have gladly, but when Allen was a baby, Aunt Gertie always saw him. Despite the fact that being seen was Allen's single mission in life at the time, he could never forget the image of her face very close in his, her eyes bugging out toward him and her saying, "Hesa bitty baby! Yes, hesa bitty baby! Uh huh, he is. Hesa bitty baby!" It was not something Allen or any child got over easily. In fact, for the rest of his life, he always had a certain ambivalence for his parents' siblings and their children.

Allen's grandpa always saw him, and Allen loved that. Allen always felt safe and loved unequivocally around his grandpa. Grandpa was a stoic, practical man who bounced Allen gently on his knee and said things like, "It doesn't matter how you find it out; it only matters that you know what you know." But Grandpa lived in Ohio somewhere, and Allen didn't get to be seen by Grandpa as much as he would have liked. And his other grandfather, known affectionately as Grandfather, was already very old when Allen was born. Besides, he had some fifteen other grandchildren, so he never saw what the big deal was about yet another squalling kid.

He always acted as if Allen wasn't there. And only once did Allen try the yowling routine, because when he did, his grandfather practically threw Allen and his parents out into the street.

"Don't bring that damn Chihuahua back until you get a muzzle on it," and Grandfather slammed the door. At the time, Allen's feelings were hurt, and his parents were angry. But once Allen chose to take the Flying Leap, none of that mattered.

When Allen was five, his parents made him even more unknown, or at least it seemed so to him; they had another child whom they fussed over and carried on about as if they had never before seen a baby (and Allen knew they had. They had seen the perfect baby: him). They named Allen's new sister Darlene after someone's great aunt, and she immediately became the focus of their lives, or so it seemed to Allen. If they ever did see Allen, it was to have him hold the baby so they could take a picture. And when the picture came back, the focus was always on Darlene, and they didn't even care that you couldn't see Allen in the picture. They would ooh and ahh over the picture as if Allen's face wasn't blurry or even sliced off at the nose. As long as "the princess" could be seen, nothing else mattered.

Allen did not like the lack of attention that came as a result of Darlene, and he took a two-pronged approach to remedy the situation. He decided on the one hand that his parents must notice him at any cost. If he could make that happen at the same time that he made his sister unhappy, so much the better. Nearly burning down the house by placing all of the baby's toys in the oven and putting it on broil was a small price to pay for finally getting some attention, although the whipping he received seemed a greater price perhaps. On the other hand, he decided that part of the problem stemmed from the fact that his parents, for some reason, thought Darlene was cute. (He honestly didn't see it. And she couldn't catch a baseball, even when he threw it directly at her face.) He sought to remedy his parents' misperception, first by painting Darlene's face various colors with permanent magic marker, then by cutting off her hair once she grew some. Again, the whipping no doubt was a great price to pay, but at least his father had to see him to whip him.

Even Aunt Gertie couldn't see Allen if Darlene was around. She walked right past him, grabbed the baby, bugged her eyes out and said, "Shesa bitty durl! Uh huh, she is. Shesa bitty durl! Uh huh!" It never occurred to Allen that being jealous of the consideration Aunt Gertie gave Darlene made no sense, since he generally avoided Aunt Gertie's attention. (She had developed the disgusting habit of kissing him, and she wanted him to

kiss her back!) No, having a baby sister was not to Allen's liking. But they had not sought Allen's opinion. Had they, he would have told them to forget it, to forget the whole concept of a little sister. But they had not asked.

When he was eleven, he was like all boys, preoccupied by the concept of his own conspicuousness; he balanced precariously between seen and unseen. He wanted to be noticed by a variety of folks. He played catch against a wall with an old tennis ball behind his family's house on Saint Ann Street with the fervent hope (and belief) that Red Schoendienst from the St. Louis Cardinals lurked about the neighborhood. Red would witness his dexterity and remarkable ability to throw out the league's fastest runners streaking for first; surely a contract would arrive in the mail any day now. In his daydreams, which he learned to nurture at an early age, Allen was the surprise starting pitcher for the Cardinals, the first rookie to pitch a no-hitter in his opening game (at eleven!). He also went four for four at the plate (each one a homer) and finally was deliberately walked in the last inning, after which he promptly stole second, third, and home. The hero's parade in Evanston shamed the Corn-on-the-Cob Parade.

Also about this time, Allen began to eagerly seek for the attention of the little girl around the corner on Parrish Avenue, Karen Dobroski. He walked slowly in front of her house, sometimes kicking at a stick or a can, trying to see if she was peeking out the window at him (she wasn't) without being caught looking.

Yet he was, at other times, mortified by the thought of someone looking at him. If his parents gazed at him, motherly or fatherly love cleansing all vision, he would shoot a look back and bark, "What?" If he had to walk across a crowded room, he would hang his head and scuffle across the floor so that no one would notice him (which, of course, they did, because he was shuffling across the floor as if he had some strange ailment that curved his head and spine and prevented him from lifting his feet). It was also about this time that Allen began to understand how to sometimes control his perceptibility. He used that knowledge to his own gain, meager though that gain might be. Once, for instance, he had walked inconspicuously into the Ben Franklin five and dime and managed to shove a whole box of cherry cordial candies under his shirt. He sauntered out nonchalantly and then sprinted to the corner where his trusty Stingray bike with the banana seat stood at the ready in the rack next to the drug store. He pulled the contraband from under his shirt and pedaled off down the street to his best friend Joey's house where Allen proceeded to eat the entire box of candy. He had made himself invisible

for just long enough to become a petty thief and then had become miserably ill as a result.

Of course, Allen didn't realize that his father, in spite of his advancing years (what was he, thirty-two? Thirty-three? He was definitely middle aged to Allen's way of thinking), had many of the same struggles. But he had his own avenues for maintaining his sense of self, of imposing his own kind of order on a chaotic and unfeeling universe. For example, Allen's dad had, for many years, collected small boxes and hoarded little odd-shaped bottles and jars. He kept them and filled them with various tiny objects that otherwise lay around in drawers, jumbled and tangled together. He had one box that had come originally with a Christmas ornament but was now filled with thumbtacks. A jar, aromatic from maraschino cherries, held a lifetime supply of those little add-on erasers that go on the end of pencils. Another jar, stained slightly with pickle juice, kept any size machine bolt ever needed handy, but no wood screws were in that jar. Allen's dad certainly would not have wood screws or even hex nuts in with the machine bolts. Everything had its own container.

Sometimes Allen ventured into the basement where his dad's cache of containers lined the shelves along one shadowy concrete wall. Those with screw-on lids attached to the shelf above by virtue of a nail through the top that held tight the accumulation of tiny finishing nails and cotter pins. It was exhilarating just to be there, for this was his father's special place to repair small appliances and various broken toys and furniture. The place had a magical feel; items went in damaged and came out whole.

Dad's collection of containers sat in careful disarray. There was no order to the system of which box went next to which jar as far as Allen could tell. But they stood neatly at the ready at the back edge of the shelves, facing the front if they had a face, or hanging from the pine board above. The sight of them filled Allen with a sense of pride and envy, at least when he was a young boy. He was glad the Johnson family had this unending supply of brass brads and paper clips. Nobody else Allen knew had such a collection, at least to his knowledge. But Allen was also jealous of the splendor of all those little containers. He too could have found some nails, and where would he have put them? Didn't he have those marbles that needed sorting? And then there were his little metal cars and trucks that really could have used some order if only he had one of the cigar boxes that now held a collection of rolls of tape. But Allen did not have the collection of organizers that his dad had. Allen might have started his own collection of jars and boxes, but for some reason his dad seemed to have

dibs on the really good ones. It really was unfair. Perhaps his dad's toys were, by definition, more important than Allen's. As a result, they made his father more important, ergo, more visible than Allen. In that sense, even his dad's jars and boxes in the basement made Allen imperceptible.

Allen decided at one point that the futility of his entire life was a vast conspiracy being carried out by everyone in his known world. Everyone in Evanston, including his parents, his teachers, his friends, even his little sister, had surely been selected carefully by the government, perhaps even the United Nations, to perpetrate an elaborate scheme wherein Allen Johnson was to be henceforth unknown beyond the confines of Kingfisher Lake, the farthest reach of Evanston in Allen's experience. Perhaps it was because, in actuality, he had some amazing ability that no one else did, and the government wanted to prevent his finding it out for fear he would exact some terrible calamity on the country, indeed, the planet. It explained why his major league contract hadn't arrived yet; they couldn't allow Allen Johnson out of Evanston because he just might discover the secret about himself that was being maintained. Sometimes Allen pondered on just what that power might be. He knew it wasn't the ability to move objects with his mind; he had tried that and been unsuccessful (although he had managed to develop a massive headache). He also discovered that it wasn't the ability to fly; that resulted in a minor fracture in the arm (really nothing a cast wouldn't remedy). Whatever the secret, they were doing a good job keeping it from him and keeping him hidden from sight. When his family began taking vacations, first to various campgrounds in the Midwest, then to cities like St. Louis and Chicago, Allen's theory ran into considerable difficulty. It was conceivable that the other campers had been screened by the government, but an entire stadium of Cardinals fans? How could they keep from staring at the superhuman in their midst? In the end, Allen abandoned his theory for the much more obvious and plausible answer. No one said anything, no one let out the secret, and no one stared at Allen Johnson because he was, despite his greatest efforts throughout his childhood, completely unremarkable.