

Invisible Ellen: Chapter One

Occasionally, though not very often, Ellen Homes would wonder how she had gained two hundred and seventy-three pounds and simultaneously disappeared. Not that she necessarily needed an answer, or even wanted one, because, simply put, being unseen was everything that Ellen Homes had ever wanted.

It was also all she could remember. Her mother, a noun she used for lack of an inoffensive alternative, had apparently at some point forgotten that she'd had a daughter. Ellen had a vague memory of the woman packing up her vodka bottles and glass pipe before leaving her alone in a grubby room of a halfway house when she was five. The only thing she clearly recalled from that event was gnawing hunger, and the joy of eating a cinnamon bun someone had eventually given her. But details of life with that woman, and especially that particular day, Ellen enthusiastically and effectively smothered, preferably under artificial, nondairy dessert topping or gravy.

Her memories of being found by the police, turned over to social workers, and the different foster families she'd subsequently been forced upon were also spotty and best forgotten. Ellen had ultimately been discarded in a group home. There, adults and kids alike had either taunted or ignored her. Preferring the latter, Ellen had adopted evasive techniques, avoiding attention by adopting a silent, watchfulness and eluding all but the most necessary contact with others.

What Ellen did remember was how she sought out shadows to avoid the repulsion she met in the light. She found dark corners and attics to hide in. Hoarded packaged food, when she could get it. She learned to wear her straight brown hair longer, so that it covered the left side of her face, veiling her from the world around her and hiding the scar that permanently drew her left eye halfway closed and limited her vision. Since every human she'd ever met preferred not to look at her, a half step backward or an inverted slump was often sufficient to avoid potential scrutiny or even notice. Ellen became very good at being absent, even when she was there.

At nineteen she'd first noticed her complete visual absence. Ellen had tentatively offered help to a man staring with frustration at the bus schedule. He started as though addressed by a disembodied voice. His eyes, flicking past her, quivered slightly at the point her face would have been, and then he hurried away.

And Ellen had rejoiced, thrilled that a lifetime of cultivating the skills required for averting human interaction had finally paid off. The quality of being looked through, instead of at, felt so right.

Ellen reveled in her anonymity. She learned she could sustain her visual absence at work—the nighttime cleaning crew at a Costco—on busy streets, where people shifted their bodies away if she drew near as though shying from a cold draft and best of all, in her tiny apartment, where she spent most of her time watching the neighbors from behind the embracing arms of closed doors.

Observing silently from the shadows may have begun as a crucial survival technique, but it had eventually grown into her most passionate interest. Real life enthralled Ellen—as long as it did not include her. The rare occasions she needed to be seen exhausted her. It was just too much effort, and opened the door to participation, the prospect of which horrified her more than running out of snack food or, unthinkably, bacon.

By twenty-four, Ellen had perfected her own invisibility to the degree that even her cat, Mouse, seemed only vaguely aware of her. Ellen and Mouse shared the one-room apartment and a love of caloric excess—especially bacon—but not much else.

The front door of that narrow studio apartment opened onto the main room, a dozen steps brought her to the kitchenette, which ended in a back door featuring a small window. Gazing through a triple layer of smog-grimed screen, dirty glass slats, and wrought-iron security bars, Ellen could see into a tiny courtyard smothered in gravel the color of bleached tombstones. It was a desolate spot. No whimsical water feature softened its echoing walls and there was an utter absence of refreshing greenery. Occasionally, Ellen would notice a weed that had strained its way upward through the sharp chunks of granite, but inevitably, its goal finally realized, the vegetation would take a look at the harsh environment, topped off by a miniscule patch of smoggy, dirt-brown sky, and die. She imagined that its last thought, if plants had thoughts, had been, I'd rather be mulch.

Across that narrow back access space, she could look into the kitchens of the neighbors she so vigilantly avoided. In the window across from hers was a blanket, sun-faded and tacked up with nails she had watched the young couple pry from the molding, until the fabric blocked her view into the only other upstairs unit with infuriating opacity, but on the ground level there were two apartments whose renters were so lazy and hopeless that they had never bothered with any kind of window

covering, probably because, Ellen thought, it had never occurred to them that anyone would take an interest in their lives.

Because their lives weren't interesting, except, of course, to Ellen, who found constant fascination in how the occupants, whom she thought of as her pets, spent their hours. The girl in 1B she called Heidi because when she wasn't dressed for work—a cocktail waitress or a prostitute, to judge from the outfits—she wore her blonde hair in two braids that hung limply down the sides of her scrubbed pink face. The man in 1A, she dubbed T-bone, because he was as thin as a rib and the bandanna he appeared intent on wearing until it rotted off was the color of raw meat.

A few months earlier, Heidi's midsection had started to swell. Her pregnancy, now at about eight months, Ellen guessed from the soccer-ball protrusion under her straining T-shirt, caused an interruption in whatever employment she did have, and now Heidi spent most of her time in the apartment, screaming at herself in a mirror or crying at her kitchen table. Ellen followed Heidi's antics with the enthusiasm of a sports fan during a playoff series. Tonight, with a bag of chips in one hand and a Tinkerbell pen in the other, Ellen made notes on one of the lined school pads so generously, and unwittingly, donated by her employer to her cause. "Heidi gets a beer," she wrote as she crunched a handful of cheddar chips into paste. "Debates over whether to drink it for ten minutes, then downs it in forty-five seconds." A minute later she added, "Throws up beer in the sink."

Shifting her gaze to the next window, she saw T-bone. The most interesting thing T-bone did was repackage big bags of marijuana into smaller ones. Tonight he was seated in his easy chair, smoking what Ellen had overheard him call a "Bob's Big Boy." The smallness of the space and the unmuffled solidity of the courtyard's walls sent any sound echoing up to her apartment, so it was easy for her to hear what she wanted to, and impossible to block out what she didn't. T-bone kept a sad potted plant on his windowsill, which he'd forgotten to water again today, a misdemeanor Ellen dutifully recorded. She had quite a collection of these notebooks, and glancing at the shelf where she kept them, carefully labeled with the corresponding dates, she felt a sense of accomplishment.

Slow night, Ellen thought as she closed her notebook, stuffing it into a large canvas sack. The impending entry to the world outside brought on a bout of compulsive, repeated stroking of her hair down over her left cheek. A habitual, unconscious warm-up, like an athlete stretching before a workout. She donned her faded black drawstring pants and loose smock shirt in preparation for work. She scowled at the sole of her left sneaker, the toe of which had come unglued from the canvas top, causing the rubber

sole to flap each time she took a step. She needed to buy new ones, but that distasteful task could be put off awhile longer with the clever combination of ingenuity and a half a yard of duct tape. After applying the technology required, and field-testing it with a lap around the apartment, requiring a grand total of eighteen steps, to see if it would hold at least for the night, she dumped some dry food in Mouse's dish, snapped on her fanny pack, the girth of which she had extended with a child's belt, and checked to be sure that the front stairs were free of human occupancy before venturing out.

The short walk to the bus stop was clogged with people returning home for the evening but, as usual, the busy sidewalks cleared enough for her to pass. A small group waited impatiently for the number twelve bus to stop, air brakes shushing out a harsh reprimand as it pulled to the curb. Ellen assumed her usual space in the queue, left open by people whose eyes swept past her with only the slightest shiver as their sight line crossed the space she occupied. She climbed the two steep, rubber-stamped stairs and collapsed onto a pair of open seats, effectively occupying one and a half of them. No matter how crowded the bus became, no other rider ever took what was left of the seat next to hers. She passed the time switching her attention from passenger to passenger as though changing channels in an attempt to find something intriguing, or at least educational, to watch. She tuned in first to a few seconds of a young man bullying his younger girlfriend, but quickly became bored with the girl's frightened passivity. She flipped over to an elderly woman performing a lonely monologue, then switched to a man leaping nimbly up the stairs onto the bus. He flopped onto one of the handicapped seats, set his gym bag on the other and opened a paper. Pulling out her notebook, Ellen wrote, "Healthy guy sits in the handicapped seats." His infraction duly recorded, she returned her attention to the teen couple, the girl was looking less frightened and more pissed as the boy taunted her. Ellen felt a shimmy of detached anticipation. Pencil poised, she settled on that channel and hunkered down to enjoy the show.

But she was distracted from the promising scenario when the doors hissed open at the next stop and Ellen heard a woman's clear voice call out, "Is this the twelve?" She perked up. The number 12 was clearly displayed on both the front and side of the bus. Hoping for the antics of at least an eccentric personality, if not a full-out lunatic, she waited eagerly to see what would unfold.

A mumbled, indifferent reply from the semicatatonic driver seemed to satisfy her, and Ellen watched curiously as a white stick tipped in red tapped its way onto the aisle, followed by a young woman with dark hair cascading from an arrogantly orange cap. Though it was rapidly growing dark outside, the twentysomething woman wore sunglasses. Reaching one hand in front of her, she felt for an available handicapped

seat. The man in running shoes rustled his newspaper in annoyance as she brushed his shoulder, saying irritably, "These are taken. There's open seats halfway down."

With a disdainful smile that clearly said she knew he didn't belong there and thought people like him were descended from a long and undistinguished line of particularly disgusting silverfish, the girl groped her way on down the aisle. She was steps away from Ellen when the bus lurched out into traffic, sending her stumbling forward. She fell to her knees, one arm smacking on the empty seat next to Ellen. The girl reclaimed her balance and, holding the seat back to steady herself, struggled up.

"I'm fine!" she called out in an amused voice to the bus full of people studiously not helping her. "Don't bother about me, save yourselves!" With a light, derisive laugh, which she clearly relished, she slid in next to Ellen, making squishy contact with Ellen's overlapping thigh and midriff.

"Oh, sorry," she said, turning only partially toward Ellen. "Didn't see you there." Then she laughed again and pulled out a book, opening it to a plain, white textured page marked by a ribbon. "The face, pretty" Ellen noted without assigning the quality any particular value, angled toward her again, as though studying some fascinating object up ahead to the right.

She said, "Sorry to be a bother, but could you possibly let me know when we get to Grant Avenue?"

Ellen felt her neglected voice catch in her throat. She was being spoken to. Of course, the girl couldn't see her any more than anyone else, less actually, but she had felt her. "Uh, okay," Ellen muttered.

"I've always depended upon the kindness of strangers," the girl said in a sorghum Southern accent, then added from the side of her mouth, "But I wouldn't recommend it; most of them are bastards." Then she put her head back and a burst of laughter so hearty escaped her that Ellen felt physically assaulted and pressed herself protectively against the cold of the window. Unaware, or uncaring, of Ellen's reaction, the girl began to run her fingers over the blank white pages of her book.

Though Ellen was flustered by even the girl's partial, uninvited acknowledgment, the unabashed laughter resonated in her. She puzzled over it for the next few blocks, jerking whenever the blind girl would chuckle unexpectedly at something her fingers had converted from bumps to wit.

It wasn't, she thought, that she'd been "noticed," though that was novel. She knew it had only been the curious accident of physical contact that had enabled the blind girl to perceive her. No, what intrigued Ellen was that this young woman—topped off with a ridiculous hat roughly the size, color, and shape of a crushed traffic cone—was utterly unconcerned with the people around her, even the ones who stared blatantly. She couldn't see them, so they didn't matter.

The possibility of this was a revelation with the impact of a small, localized explosion in Ellen that cracked open a thin fault line of panic. Maybe she had wished for the wrong thing, and a thought struck her. Maybe it's better not to see than to be unseen. A strange jealousy gripped Ellen; cold green fingers slid across her rib cage and squeezed on her stomach. She could feel ragged fingernails piercing the well-developed organ.

Ellen checked her watch. As usual she was an hour early for work, a precaution that allowed her to check the assignment list and get started before the rest of the crew was still stumbling into the locker room. There were easily forty-five minutes to spare if she chose to get off the bus two stops early; why shouldn't she? Suddenly overcome with a need to know more about this unique person seated next to her, Ellen blew the dust off her guts and cleared her throat.

"Next stop, Grant," she said.

The girl tilted her tangerine topper to one side, causing it to flop like a day-old daisy. "Yeah, that's what I thought. Thanks."

Ellen hoped her reluctant grunt would suffice as an answer.

The girl put away her book and stood up in preparation for disembarking, keeping a firm hold on the back of the seat in front of her. "Have a nice day," she said.

Turning to look out at the dusky gloom and strangely reluctant for the girl to leave, Ellen risked a connection. "Uh. It's pretty much night."

The girl slung her satchel over one shoulder and gripped her stick. She angled toward Ellen again, and leaned down.

“It’s all midnight to me, baby.” The laugh came again, so powerful that it triggered an aftershock in Ellen that levered open the fissure in her protective shield a few millimeters wider.

The cane tapped its way down the aisle, the air brakes hissed their discontent, and, as the Day-Glo cap bobbed out of sight, Ellen felt as though something had been stolen from her. Without thinking, she jumped up to follow the girl and, in her haste to make the door, her oversized bag smacked the newspaper of the bastard hogging the handicapped seats, ripping it in half. “What the f . . . ?” he exclaimed, but Ellen was already off the bus, the closing doors almost catching her billowing black tent of a shirt.

The crowd was a mass of gray and brown as twilight stole the color from all lesser pigment, but the intriguing stranger’s fluorescent hat bobbed above the muted waves of commuters like a beacon. As Ellen hurried to catch up with it, something else snagged the corner of her eye. Two men had peeled themselves from a doorway and started after the girl with the steady focus of predators. In their dirty jeans and baseball caps, they stood out in the upscale midtown neighborhood that was mostly peopled with men and women in business suits, or parents in Lycra yoga pants and matching tops jogging in place behind three-wheeled strollers as they checked their pulse against their expensive watches. With a nasty jolt, Ellen realized that she wasn’t the only one interested in the blind girl and this struck her as grossly unfair. She’d been following her first and she didn’t want to share. She hitched up her fanny pack and went on.

After three blocks, the girl turned off onto a narrow alley, the two men followed, and bringing up the rear was an increasingly determined Ellen, who by now was thinking of the girl as her story and the two men as interlopers. This dead-end access to the surrounding buildings had no other foot traffic and ended in a brick wall with a large dumpster pushed against it. It was clean and lit by a bright streetlamp. On either side of the alley, several large metal doors interrupted the patterned brickwork of high walls. The girl pulled a set of keys from her pocket as she tapped along. The men glanced back, surveying the busy avenue they had just left. Neither of them registered Ellen, hugging the brick, a few feet from the corner, their eyes fixing instead on a cop car sitting stopped at a light. The traffic began to move along the main avenue, and the alley was once again hidden from the prying eyes of the city’s finest.

The men returned their predatory attention back to the girl, and Ellen started cautiously down the alley after them. It was as though the window she usually only looked through had opened, and she were venturing inside instead of watching from

out. The tingly feeling was alien to her, uncomfortable, certainly, but not entirely unpleasant.

All at once, the men stepped up their pace and the girl paused, tilting her head to listen and then she hurried forward. As the men overtook her, she spun, clutching the strap of her bag. Ellen saw the flash of a knife and felt a physical pain in her chest as she gulped in a sharp, silent, terrified breath. In the next second the knife swiped neatly and the girl cried out and cowered, then straightened. She was left intact, but holding nothing but the strap of her bag, now dangling useless. As the men raced back toward the avenue with her satchel, she recovered and screamed after them. “Pathetic bastards!!” she railed furiously. “Police! Police!” She shouted, the words echoing even as they were repeated.

Ellen shrunk against the alley wall, stained the same soot color as the faded black of her clothes, her heart racing. The men sprinted toward her, their eyes fixed on the avenue and escape, only a few paces away. As they came level with Ellen, some limp emotion in her suddenly stiffened. Without planning it, she thrust a foot out into the path of the thief nearest to her. He went down hard, letting go of the stolen bag to catch himself, his hands slapping smartly on the rough cement of the sidewalk and scraping off layers of skin as he slid. Obviously unfamiliar with the buddy system, his accomplice did not pause, but rounded the corner and disappeared like a rat from an attic light.

The satchel was lying on the cement. Ellen darted out and grabbed it up while the thwarted purse snatcher was shaking his head and desperately gasping for the air that had been punched from his lungs. Gulping like a goldfish whose misguided leap for freedom had ended in a rude whack on the kitchen linoleum, he stared around, clearly stunned by both the fall and its cause. Moving behind him, Ellen stomped down hard on the instep of the man’s sneaker and he wheezed a yelp, a choking, airless expression of pain.

“Beat it, asshole,” Ellen screamed, her voice so rusty with disuse at that volume that the words came out in a low, throaty rasp. The asshole struggled to his feet, holding his scraped and bleeding palms out in front of him, and ran off without looking back.

Clenching the satchel to her hammering chest, Ellen collapsed against the rough bricks. Her whole body was shaking so violently from the unexpected confrontation that she worried she might disintegrate.

It took a full minute before she could hear anything except the panicked thumping of her heart, and when she could, she realized that outside her head it was oddly quiet. The girl had stopped shouting for the police and was standing still, listening.

“Hello?” the girl called out tentatively. “Who’s there?”

“It’s okay,” Ellen gasped. “It’s me, the lady . . . from the bus. I . . .” She sucked a huge lungful of air and tried to direct the oxygen to the sharp pain in her thudding chest.” . . . have your bag.”

There was a moment of silence—then the girl said, “Really?” She sounded dubious.

Ellen couldn’t imagine anything more “really” than what had just happened, but she couldn’t be annoyed. She was having trouble believing it herself. “Yeah . . . really,” she said.

“Sweet.” The click of the cane brought the girl the few yards back up the sidewalk. She stopped just in front of Ellen, who was, no doubt, easy to locate due to the fact that she was panting like a Saint Bernard on an August afternoon. “Are you all right?” the girl asked.

“I . . . think . . . so.”

“What happened? I heard him go down.”

“Um . . .” Ellen shuffled her feet uncomfortably and said, “I tripped him.”

“Nice. I hope he scraped his face off. Thanks. I’m Temerity.” She held out one hand, only slightly off course.

Confused by the gesture, Ellen realized she was still hugging the satchel and thrust it at the hand. Temerity took it, tucked it under her left arm and then extended her right hand again. “And you are?” she asked pointedly.

“Uh, Ellen,” Ellen said. She took the hand between her thumb and fingertips and gave it an awkward shake. From the point of uncommon contact, she felt a creeping sensation spread across the skin of her wrist and up her forearm, as though a swarm of ants were following a parade route over her shoulder and across her back.

“Well, Ellen, can I buy you a cup of coffee or a beer or something to thank you?”

“No,” Ellen blurted in horror, and then fumbled, “I mean, I have to go to work. I work nights.”

“Where?”

“Costco.”

“I didn’t know they were open nights, not that it makes any difference to me.”

“They’re not, I clean.”

“You clean,” she repeated. “Do you eat?”

Ellen glanced down at her lumpy, overstuffed body, the prolonged conversation was making her increasingly anxious, and hollow. She needed food to stabilize herself.

“Sure, sometimes.”

“So that’s good.” Temerity felt along the side of the strapless satchel until she located a small zippered pocket. Taking out a card, she ran her fingers over the raised lettering then held it out. “Here’s my number. I want you to call me tomorrow and I really want to take you to dinner, or breakfast, or whatever works for you. Like I said, it’s all midnight to me.”

In spite of the million-ant march advancing across her skin, Ellen gawked at Temerity in awe. “You eat at restaurants?” she asked.

Temerity’s pretty face scrunched up into a sarcastic scowl. “No, I eat at libraries and furniture outlets. Of course I eat at restaurants, don’t you?”

Ellen wasn’t sure what to say. She wanted to know more about this woman, but the thought of making an actual social engagement spurred the anxiety ants into a fit of competitive flamenco dancing in miniature golf cleats. Uncertain of how to respond, she just said, “No, but, I mean, aren’t you afraid that you’ll, uh . . .” Her nerve failed her.

The head cocked to one side. “Make a spectacle of myself? Miss my mouth? Stab myself with a fork? Eat the toothpick? You don’t have to be a blind to make a complete fool of yourself, and anyway, who cares?” Temerity threw her arms out and spoke the last words so loudly that they echoed against the walls.

“I don’t go to restaurants.” Ellen felt ashamed to say it out loud.

Temerity let out an exaggerated sigh. “In that case, I can truthfully tell you the only thing you’re really missing out on is the onion blossom at Judy’s. So yummy, and impossible to make at home without a grease fire. Fine. Call me, I live here”—she pointed up—“we can talk about your dietary peculiarities, then. If you’d rather, you can come over and I’ll cook at home. How about that?”

“Maybe,” Ellen said, anxious to get away now. “I gotta go.”

Turning, Ellen fled from the first human who had offered her anything in almost six years. And who, ironically perhaps, saw her because she couldn’t.