The Fantastical Adventures of the Invisible Boy

Lloyd Alexander

When I first met The Gawgon, I never suspected who she was: climber of icy mountains, rescuer of King Tut's treasure, challenger of master criminals, and a dozen other things. But that came later, after I died – nearly died, anyhow.

"They really thought you were a goner," my sister said cheerfully. She had come to stand at my bedroom door. "What a nuisance you are."

In April of that year – one of those sour-tempered Philadelphia Aprils – I had the good luck to fall sick. I was delighted. Not that I enjoyed the worst part of it, but the best part was: it kept me out of school. Aside from a beehive buzzing in my head and a herd of weasels romping through my insides, I was beginning to feel pretty chipper.

No one told me straight out what ailed me. I was eleven and had not reached complete visibility. My relatives, talking among themselves, tended to look through me – the Amazing Invisible Boy – or change the subject. I did overhear my mother and my aunt Rosie whispering in the hall about something Aunt Rosie called the New Monia. "Thank heaven it wasn't the Spanish Influenzo," she said to my mother. "Spaniards! What else will they send us?" Aunt Rosie lived in a state of eternal indignation and distrusted anything foreign.

"That's right, you nearly croaked," my sister happily went on. "Uncle Eustace was ready to sell us a tombstone."

Uncle Eustace, my father's brother, indeed sold tombstones for a living. As a result of sinus operations, deep scars criss-crossed his face. It made him look grim and sombre, an advantage in his line of work.

"If I croaked" – I made frog noises – "it wouldn't bother me. I'd come back as a duppy and haunt you."

Duppy was the West Indian word for "ghost". I learned it from my father, born in Kingston, Jamaica. The prospect of meeting a duppy scared the wits out of him. Otherwise, he was completely fearless.

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"There aren't any duppies in Philadelphia," my sister said. "So shut up about them. Just be glad you weren't quarantined."

I was not glad. I was disappointed. I would have liked one of those red or yellow stickers plastered on the front door, a badge of distinction. We still lived in the house on Lorimer Street then, and I had seen a few go up in the neighbourhood, usually for measles, chicken pox, diphtheria (the Dip Theory, Aunt Rosie called it). Every so often a boy suddenly vanished as if the goblins had got him. The black-lettered warning would appear, then a few days later, the boy himself, grinning behind the windowpane, his face magnificently blotched – almost as good as being tattooed. What was done with girls, I had no idea. They were a tribe apart.

As for what I did: apart from reading everything I could lay my hands on, my favourite occupation was making up stories and drawing pictures to go with them. Before coming down sick, I had taken a fancy to piracy, gorging myself on Treasure Island, Captain Blood, and The Sea-Hawk. Now sitting up again, I went back to the high seas.

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