The Invisibility Factor

Brian Green*

*Iowa State University

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I was trudging through the snow, lost in thought, when I was stopped in my tracks by the sight of a young man perched above the sidewalk on a limb of a gnarled old tree. The limb was about ten feet off the ground, and he was sitting in an apparently comfortable position, with his hands resting beside him on the branch for balance, and his feet hanging below him. His feet were clad in well broken-in hiking boots, his jeans were faded, with a few weak spots, but no holes, and his army surplus trench coat could only be described as dilapidated. His outfit was completed by a pair of once tan leather gloves and a slightly small blue stocking cap. I wasn't used to seeing people sitting in trees above sidewalks, especially in the dead of winter, so I began talking to him.

"Hello," I said, wondering what I should talk about, since I had never talked to a man in a tree before.

He looked down at me (I was almost right below him) and said, "Huh?"

"Howdy."

"Mornin'."

"But it's the middle of the afternoon," I protested, pointing at the sun.

"Yeah, but I always say 'mornin'. It's easier that way."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, everyone else has to keep track of the time and know when to start saying 'good afternoon' or 'good evening'— everybody but me. I just say 'mornin'."

"What about 'hello'?"

"Too formal."

"Howdy?"

"Too informal."

"Hi?"

"Too many people think you're talking about their condition."

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"I see," I said, not seeing at all, but wanting to continue, "so it's just 'morning' all day long, huh?"
"Mornin'," he said, putting the accent on the 'in', "there's no g in 'mornin'."
"What are you doing up there, anyway?"
"Sittin'."
"I can see that, but why are you sitting up there?"
"The branch is too slippery to stand on."
"Let me rephrase the question. Why is it that you are up in the tree at all?"
"I don't know, I just felt like sitting here for awhile and watching the world go by."
"Has it?"
"What?"
"Gone by?"
"Bits and pieces of it, mostly people, which is fine with me, since I'm a people watcher."
"I still don't see why you're in the tree instead of on the ground."
"I want to be as inconspicuous as possible."
"By sitting in a tree?"
"Sure—the best way to hide is to be as conspicuous as possible. The most successful form of shoplifting is to fill a shopping cart and just walk out of the store. Nobody expects anyone to be so blatant, so no one ever sees it happen, or if they do see it, they refuse to believe it, and the shoplifter gets away. You're the first person to notice me, and I've been here all day. If I'd have painted myself day-glo orange, you'd have never even seen me."

At this point I realized that people were passing by us, unaware of the man in the tree and totally oblivious of our conversation. I still thought that the day-glo line was a bit much, though, and I told him so, "I'm not so sure. I think I'd have noticed you from farther back if you were day-glo."

"No you wouldn't have," he said, smiling.
"What makes you so sure?" I asked, irritated by his cockiness.
“You didn’t see me all last week, or the beginning of this week—you didn’t see me at all until I ran out of paint. You see, people have a preconceived notion of reality, and it doesn’t include men in trees, especially day-glo men, especially in the winter, so I sit here, day after day, and watch people.”

Thoroughly confused, but still interested, I asked, “What do you watch?”

“Just ordinary people doing ordinary things—things so ordinary that nobody else notices them. It’s the exact opposite of why nobody sees the unusual. People do the same things and see the same things day after day, until they are so used to it that it becomes automatic. People walk past the same tree every day, and eventually, they become so accustomed to it that, for them, it ceases to exist, and they are truly surprised when the tree is cut down. They had forgotten it existed, and they see no reason for its removal. Or else they watch, curious, and ask the workers if the tree was always there.” At this point, he jumped down from the limb so that he stood next to me. “Anytime anything becomes automatic,” he said, looking me in the eye, “it’s on its way to becoming invisible.” He then began walking away.

“See you tomorrow,” I called out to him.

“I doubt it,” he said, turning slowly, “I’ll see you, but you won’t see me. I’m getting more paint tonight.”