

THE INVISIBLE NATION

A Story by Jon Swan

We could choose whether we wanted the walls painted bright yellow or sky blue. I wanted it bright in there so it would look like the sun was shining even when it wasn't. There were only three votes for bright yellow. The rest of the class was for sky blue. That was the same day they said there was a new principal. We were glad to hear there was a new principal, but they shouldn't have asked us about what color we wanted the walls if they knew they weren't going to paint them. Instead, they said the money would go into buying playground equipment, something every child could use and enjoy, and an outdoor drinking fountain since we didn't have one. The walls in our room are yellow, but not bright yellow. They're closer to brown. The ceiling is full of long cracks. Flakes fall when there's a fire drill or when the whole school has to get down on the floor under their desks. When the drill's over you'd think it had snowed and the snow had got dirty on the way down.

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I wish that instead of getting a new jungle gym and a fountain they had got a new art teacher. I can't draw very well, but I love drawing horses, so sometimes I put a horse in a house looking out a window. She says that I'm old enough to know better, and what I don't say is that if I'm old enough to know better maybe I do. People don't know what to do at home. They're always telling you to be quiet or to pick up, or watching TV, but horses would have

fun in a house. If they got bored they could kick down the walls and in one jump be out in the country. So now I put people in my houses, but she doesn't like them very much either. She says they look ugly. What I don't say is that my people are her.

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We got in the bus today and there was a new driver. He didn't know where to let us off and we didn't tell him either, so we drove for hours and hours, up the long hill and around all the back roads. He kept asking if we lived here or there, and we all just shook our heads and went on singing, and by then it was night and his lights didn't work. So he got out, and said he was going to walk to the nearest house and phone. Then he shut the door from the outside, and locked it so we couldn't get out, and walked off. As soon as he was gone we opened the windows and climbed out. We played hide and seek until we couldn't see each other anymore. We were way out in the country where nobody had ever been before. We turned the bus into a house. We hunted, and the girls cooked. We spent the whole day out hunting. When we came back our clothes were all torn, so the girls made us clothes out of deerskins. I was the only one who knew how to make a fire. I wasn't the chief though. When I said I knew how to make a fire, I said I would make it on one condition, that we would never have a chief, or if we did, then just for a day. A chief doesn't have to listen to anybody if he doesn't want to, I said, and that's why people want to be

chief. When our old principal used to talk to me he never listened to a word I said, or else he would tell me what I meant when I said something, and he was always wrong. That wasn't what I meant, but you can't talk to people when you know they've got a ruler in the top drawer. Even if he doesn't even take it out you get so scared you say the wrong thing every time. Which is why I didn't want us to have any chief. When I explained this everybody agreed. I gave my speech at night, around our campfire. We didn't stand up when we spoke. Sometimes you couldn't tell where the voice was coming from. I used to wish the fire would speak. It did once, all about colors and how they felt and where flames are trying to go when they fly up, and that fire was our friend, our best friend on earth together with water, and that most people didn't know this until the minute they died, when they turned into fire and water and dirt. We all sat around the fire, listening to the fire telling its story, and now maybe you wonder if any of this is true, and it isn't. I was just telling a story too, about the day our bus got lost. It never got lost. We always get let out at the right place, and when a bus stops all the cars behind it have to stop too.

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When I asked the teacher what indivisible meant, she said it was something you couldn't divide. Then she said it meant one, but what I didn't say was you can divide one too, and that she had taught us how herself.

I used to think it meant invisible, like God, which comes right after that, and that we lived in an invisible nation under Him. My mother says you can see God when you're dead though. When she turned out the light I thought it would be funny if He couldn't see us when we're alive either. I would like to be invisible sometimes, even if only to God. In geography class, when the teacher starts talking about some faraway place like India, sometimes I shut my eyes, and feel myself getting smaller and smaller until I'm not in the room anymore but over in some city she's talking about, and as long as I keep my eyes shut and can see the shops and the people and the holy monkeys and the people lying in the streets, I feel I'm invisible to everybody in class because I'm not there. As soon as she starts talking about crops and climate though, there I am right back in that crummy room. Instead of buying us a new jungle gym they should let us all go over to India. We would learn more that way. I would keep my eyes wide open! Yesterday I shut my eyes too long and fell asleep. I guess the bell rang before the teacher noticed because nobody called my name or pulled my hair. When I opened my eyes the walls looked red. Everybody looked red, including our teacher.

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Three of us have races around the building sometimes. One stands by the back door and one runs around the building one way and the other the other way. You're really only supposed to play out on the playground behind the school, but that only makes us run faster so nobody will see us. A ramp goes up each side, and there aren't many windows on the sides, so you don't need to worry too much about anybody seeing you there. It's around the front where you really have to run. There are lots of windows and only a few bushes and then the front stairs. You can usually tell who's going to win by where you meet in front. If you've already passed the stairs and he's only made it to the flagpole, you can be pretty sure you're going to win. But you can't

slow down because anything can happen. The janitor can come out the side door, or one of the teachers may be standing out there, like the one who was crying once when I ran past. Then you have to slow down and pretend you're looking for something. Like you lost your lunch money or a milk ticket or something. But nobody came out, and I was running hard, and when I came around the back I knocked a girl over and she fell down and started crying. Some teachers came running over, including our gym instructor, who looked at the girl and then started shaking my shoulders and asking me questions. I didn't even know the girl's name. One of the teachers led her away. The gym instructor walked away too, but the bigger boys, who'd been throwing a football with him, stayed behind. They put their arms around my shoulders like we were all pals and led me over to the drinking fountain. They said, how could I do such a thing? I said I didn't mean to and that I didn't even know the girl's name. Then they made a circle around me so nobody could see, and then three of them picked me up and laid me down with my back against the sharp point in the middle of the drinking fountain. Then the one who was holding my arms pushed down and the other two pulled my legs down. It felt like the point was digging a hole right into my backbone. They said if I yelled they'd do it even harder. But finally I couldn't help it. I screamed. They all started laughing very loud as if it was all a joke and let me down and walked away. My back hurt. I tried not to cry. My shirt was all wet in back and so were my pants, but when I touched myself my hand wasn't red. It was only water. Actually, this didn't happen to me at recess. They did it to me one night when my father and I went to a basketball game. They caught me out in the hall on my way back from the boy's room. They chased me all the way down the hall and out into the playground, and that's when they did it. But I could never figure out why, because they all went to high school and I'd never seen them before, and maybe if I hadn't started

running they never would have chased me and hurt my back like that. When I tell the story I make it happen right after I knocked that girl down, because then it makes sense.

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After that, I started picking worms up off the driveway after a rain. I throw them back onto the grass. I know they don't have backbones and that you can even cut them up and parts of them will live, but they look helpless lying there on the asphalt or on the sidewalks downtown, and it only takes a second to bend over and pick them up and toss them back onto the grass. I thought my father would laugh at me but he didn't. He says they help air out the earth, which needs to breathe too, and that when they die they make the earth richer. I'd never thought of the earth breathing. It must be asleep. I like to think of it dreaming about those cities I go to when I shut my eyes in geography. Except, where would they be if it ever woke up? In spring, all the country roads break up. They call what happens frost heaves. Some are so deep the driver has to stop and shift to get across, but when he's in a hurry and goes over fast, we all bounce until our heads practically bang against the top. You can tell something's alive down there. If it can break an asphalt road apart when it's sound asleep, think of what it could do if it ever woke up! I wish it would. We have the news on when we eat at six.

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Riddle: What has three feet and can't walk?

(A yardstick.)

Riddle: What light has three lights and only one works at a time?

(A traffic light.)

Riddle: If you were in a cave and a big boulder that was too heavy for you to move fell over the only way out, how would you get out?

(way.)

(Be a big bore and get out that

I read the first one in a book. My friend made up the second one. And I made up the last one in class when I was staring up at the ceiling. With



all those cracks it looked like a cave that could cave in any minute. Sometimes, when a jet goes over low enough, like they did on makeup day, big chunks fall out. We were all out on the playground when they went over. It was on a Saturday. We were making up for all those days we lost because of the snow that was so deep the regular snowplows couldn't handle it and they had to use bulldozers. My father and I were walking down the road to pick up some eggs and milk at a neighbor's farm when suddenly we heard a tremendous noise, but we couldn't see where it was coming from. Then we saw a whole mountain of snow coming at us down just below the curve. You couldn't see the bulldozer. All you could see was this big wall of snow moving along very slowly. We had been snowed in for five days. When the bulldozer got close we had to get way off to the side, practically in the woods. We saw a hole in the snow. My father said rabbits lived in there in a little cave they dig and that this was only one tunnel. Then the bulldozer went by and it was easy to walk and when we came back with the milk and eggs the whole road up to our driveway was plowed out. My father said, well that's the end of

that road! The bulldozer had scraped up rocks and cut some right in two. Some of the banks, on the sides, were ten feet tall. I made lots of angels. My father wrote words in the snow with a stick. He said that when the snow melted the words would sink into the ground, or run off to the sea, or go up into the clouds, since we were made out of dirt and water and air, and so were our words, but our best words turn into fire. Sometimes I start a story like that and he goes on with it, or he starts one and I go on with it, but on the way down he didn't want to talk. He said snow made him want to be quiet. It was when we heard the bulldozer that he started talking, and we made up those stories about what the rabbits would do if they couldn't get out and about angels and words.

Anyway, on that makeup day we were all out on the playground when three jets came over. I've never heard anything like it. The bulldozer wasn't half as loud. They came over so low it looked like they were going to hit the trees and crash in the playground. I was swinging. It looked like my feet were going to hit the bottom of the middle jet. I got off the swing fast. You saw them right overhead, and then the noise came.

They came over three times. Everybody looked scared. I thought it was pretty dumb of the teachers to just stand there. You're supposed to run for shelter, or lie flat on the ground, or hide behind something like they do on TV. We all talked about it back in class. My teacher said there was no reason to hide or take shelter because they were our own airplanes and were just practicing. I said we should have practiced too. Practiced what? she said. Practiced hiding. She said there was no reason for that, that there was no reason to be frightened except for the noise, and that anyway, they hadn't meant to scare us. They probably hadn't even seen us they were going so fast. Then she told us to put our heads down on our desks and rest for three minutes, and she put on a record, and we all rested. When I woke up I looked at the flakes on my desk, and this time when I opened my eyes the flakes looked white as snow, and the walls looked white, and my teacher's face was white as chalk, and I thought, I told her we should have hidden, because now we were all dead. □

Mr. Swan's poems have appeared in a number of magazines and his plays performed in Seattle and off-Broadway.

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