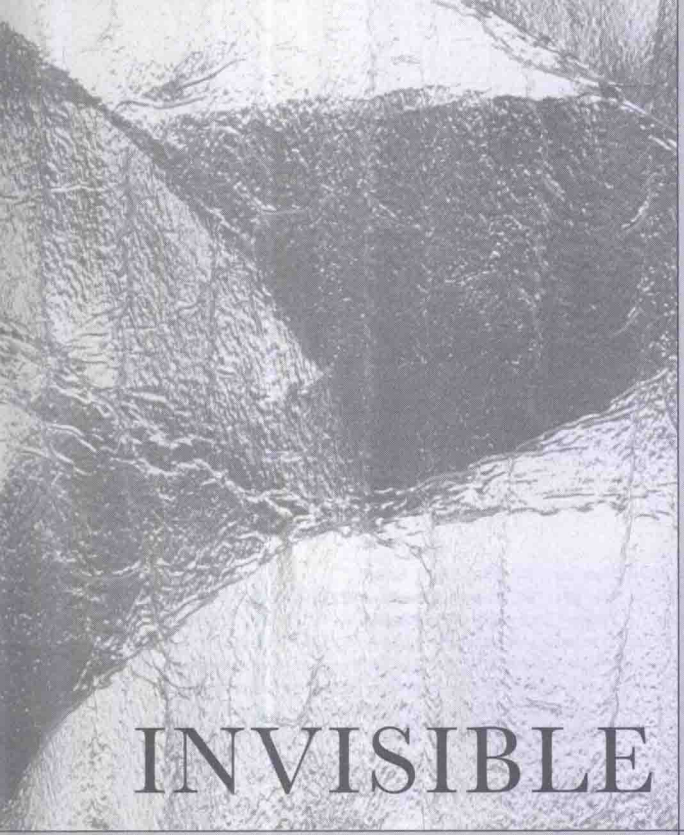
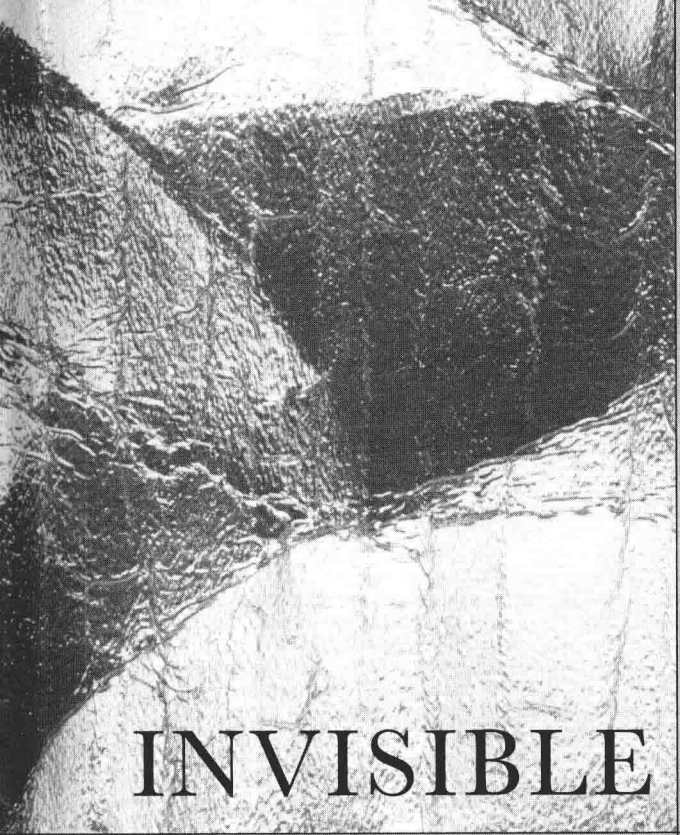


INVISIBLE PREY

John Sandford

G. P. Putnam's Sons
New York



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INVISIBLE PREY

1

AN ANONYMOUS VAN, some-kind-of-pale, cruised Summit Avenue, windows dark with the coming night. The killers inside watched three teenagers, two boys and a girl, hurrying along the sidewalk like windblown leaves. The kids were getting somewhere quick, finding shelter before the storm.

The killers trailed them, saw them off, then turned their faces toward Oak Walk.

The mansion was an architectural remnant of the nineteenth century, red brick with green trim, gloomy and looming in the dying light. Along the wrought-iron fence, well-tended beds of blue and yellow iris, and clumps of pink peonies, were going gray to the eye.

Oak Walk was perched on a bluff. The back of the house looked across the lights of St. Paul, down into the valley of the Mississippi, where the groove of the river had already gone dark. The front faced Summit Avenue; Oak Walk was the second-richest house on the richest street in town.

Six aging burr oaks covered the side yard. In sunlight, their canopies created a leafy glade, with sundials and flagstone walks, charming with moss and violets; but moon shadows gave the yard a menacing aura, now heightened by the lightning that flickered through the incoming clouds.

"Like the Munsters should live there," the bigger of the killers said.

"Like a graveyard," the little one agreed.

The Weather Channel had warned of *tornadic events,* and the killers could feel a twister in the oppressive heat, the smell of ozone thick in the air.

The summer was just getting started. The last snow slipped into town on May 2, and was gone a day later. The rest of the month had been sunny and warm, and by the end of it, even the ubiquitous paper-pale blondes were showing tan lines.

Now the first of the big summer winds. Refreshing, if it didn't knock your house down.

ON THE FOURTH PASS, the van turned into the driveway, eased up under the portico, and the killers waited there for a porch light. No light came on. That was good.

They got out of the van, one Big, one Little, stood there for a moment, listening, obscure in the shadows, facing the huge front doors. They were wearing coveralls, of the kind worn by automotive mechanics, and hairnets, and nylon stockings over their faces. Behind them, the van's engine ticked as it cooled. A Wisconsin license plate, stolen from a similar vehicle in a 3M parking lot, was stuck on the back of the van.

Big said, "Let's do it."

Little led the way up the porch steps. After a last quick look around, Big nodded again, and Little pushed the doorbell.

They'd done this before. They were good at it.

THEY COULD FEEL the footsteps on the wooden floors inside the house. "Ready," said Big.

A moment later, one of the doors opened. A shaft of light cracked across the porch, flashing on Little's burgundy jacket. Little said a few words—"Miz Peebles? Is this where the party is?"

A slender black woman, sixtyish, Peebles said, "Why no . . ." Her jaw continued to work wordlessly, searching for a scream, as she took in the distorted faces.

Little was looking past her at an empty hallway. The groundskeeper and the cook were home, snug in bed. This polite inquiry at the door was a last-minute check to make sure that there were no unexpected guests. Seeing no one, Little stepped back and snapped, "Go."

Big went through the door, fast, one arm flashing in the interior light. Big was carrying a two-foot-long steel gas pipe, with gaffer tape wrapped around the handle-end. Peebles didn't scream, because she didn't have time. Her eyes widened, her mouth dropped open, one hand started up, and then Big hit her on the crown of her head, crushing her skull.

The old woman dropped like a sack of bones. Big hit her again, as insurance, and then a third time, as insurance on the insurance: three heavy floor-shaking impacts, *whack! whack! whack!*

THEN A VOICE from up the stairs, tentative, shaky. "Sugar? Who was it, Sugar?"

Big's head turned toward the stairs and Little could hear him breathing. Big slipped out of his loafers and hurried up the stairs in his stocking feet, a man on the hunt. Little stepped up the hall, grabbed a corner of a seven-foot-long Persian carpet and dragged it back to the black woman's body.

And from upstairs, three more impacts: a gasping, thready scream, and *whack! whack! whack!*

Little smiled. Murder—and the insurance.

Little stooped, caught the sleeve of Peebles's housecoat, and rolled her onto the carpet. Breathing a little harder, Little began dragging the carpet toward an interior hallway that ran down to the kitchen, where it'd be out of sight of any of the windows. A pencil-thin line of blood, like a slug's trail, tracked the rug across the hardwood floor.

Peebles's face had gone slack. Her eyes were still open, the eyeballs rolled up, white against her black face. Too bad about the rug, Little thought. Chinese, the original dark blue gone pale, maybe 1890. Not a great rug, but a good one. Of course, it'd need a good cleaning now, with the blood-puddle under Peebles's head.

OUTSIDE, there'd been no sound of murder. No screams or gunshots audible on the street. A window lit up on Oak Walk's second floor. Then another on the third floor, and yet another, on the first floor, in the back, in the butler's pantry: Big and Little, checking out the house, making sure that they were the only living creatures inside.

WHEN THEY KNEW that the house was clear, Big and Little met at the bottom of the staircase. Big's mouth under the nylon was a bloody O. He'd chewed into his bottom lip while killing the old woman upstairs, something he did when the frenzy was on him. He was carrying a jewelry box and one hand was closed in a fist.

"You won't believe this," he said. "She had it around her neck." He opened his fist—his hands were covered with latex kitchen gloves—to show off a diamond the size of a quail's egg.

"Is it real?"

"It's real and it's blue. We're not talking Boxsters anymore. We're

talking SLs." Big opened the box. "There's more: earrings, a necklace. There could be a half million, right here."

"Can Fleckstein handle it?"

Big snorted. "Fleckstein's so dirty that he wouldn't recognize the *Mona Lisa*. He'll handle it."

He pushed the jewelry at Little, started to turn, caught sight of Peebles lying on the rug. "Bitch," he said, the word grating through his teeth. "Bitch." In a second, in three long steps, he was on her again, beating the dead woman with the pipe, heavy impacts shaking the floor. Little went after him, catching him after the first three impacts, pulling him away, voice hard, "She's gone, for Christ's sakes, she's gone, she's gone . . ."

"Fucker," Big said. "Piece of shit."

Little thought, sometimes, that Big should have a bolt through his neck.

Big stopped, and straightened, looked down at Peebles, muttered, "She's gone." He shuddered, and said, "Gone." Then he turned to Little, blood in his eye, hefting the pipe.

Little's hands came up: "No, no—it's me. It's me. For God's sake."

Big shuddered again. "Yeah, yeah. I know. It's you."

Little took a step back, still uncertain, and said, "Let's get to work. Are you okay? Let's get to work."

Twenty minutes after they went in, the front door opened again. Big came out, looked both ways, climbed into the van, and eased it around the corner of the house and down the side to the deliveries entrance. Because of the pitch of the slope at the back of the house, the van was no longer visible from the street.

The last light was gone, the night now as dark as a coal sack, the lightning flashes closer, the wind coming like a cold open palm, pushing against Big's face as he got out of the van. A raindrop, fat and round as a marble, hit the toe of his shoe. Then another, then more,

cold, going pat-pat . . . pat . . . pat-pat-pat on the blacktop and concrete and brick.

He hustled up to the back door; Little opened it from the inside.

"Another surprise," Little said, holding up a painting, turning it over in the thin light. Big squinted at it, then looked at Little: "We agreed we wouldn't take anything off the walls."

"Wasn't on the walls," Little said. "It was stuffed away in the storage room. It's not on the insurance list."

"Amazing. Maybe we ought to quit now, while we're ahead."

"No." Little's voice was husky with greed. "This time . . . this time, we can cash out. We'll never have to do this again."

"I don't mind," Big said.

"You don't mind the killing, but how about thirty years in a cage? Think you'd mind *that*?"

Big seemed to ponder that for a moment, then said, "All right."

Little nodded. "Think about the SLs. Chocolate for you, silver for me. Apartments: New York and Los Angeles. Something right on the Park, in New York. Something where you can lean out the window, and see the Met."

"We could buy . . ." Big thought about it for a few more seconds. "Maybe . . . a Picasso?"

"A Picasso . . . " Little thought about it, nodded. "But first—I'm going back upstairs. And you . . ."

Big grinned under the mask. "I trash the place. God, I love this job."

OUTSIDE, across the back lawn, down the bluff, over the top of the United Hospital buildings and Seventh Street and the houses below, down three-quarters of a mile away, a towboat pushed a line of barges toward the moorings at Pig's Eye. Not hurrying. Tows never hurried. All around, the lights of St. Paul sparkled like dia-

monds, on the first line of bluffs, on the second line below the cathedral, on the bridges fore and aft, on the High Bridge coming up.

The pilot in the wheelhouse was looking up the hill at the lights of Oak Walk, Dove Hill, and the Hill House, happened to be looking when the lights dimmed, all at once.

The rain-front had topped the bluff and was coming down on the river.

Hard rain coming, the pilot thought. *Hard* rain.

2

SLOAN CARRIED a couple of Diet Cokes over to the booth where Lucas Davenport waited, sitting sideways, his feet up on the booth seat. The bar was modern, but with an old-timey decor: creaking wooden floors, high-topped booths, a small dance floor at one end.

Sloan was the proprietor, and he dressed like it. He was wearing a brown summer suit, a tan shirt with a long pointed collar, a white tie with woven gold diamonds, and a genuine straw Panama hat. He was a slat-built man, narrow through the face, shoulders, and hips. Not gaunt, but narrow; might have been a clarinet player in a fading jazz band, Lucas thought, or the cover character on a piece of 1930s pulp fiction.

"Damn Diet Coke, it fizzes like crazy. I thought there was something wrong with the pump, but it's just the Coke. Don't know why," Sloan said, as he dropped the glasses on the table.

At the far end of the bar, the bartender was reading a *Wall Street Journal* by the light from a peanut-sized reading lamp clamped to the cash register. Norah Jones burbled in the background; the place smelled pleasantly of fresh beer and peanuts.

Lucas said, "Two guys in the bar and they're both drinking Cokes. You're gonna go broke."

Sloan smiled comfortably, leaned across the table, his voice pitched

down so the bartender couldn't hear him, "I put ten grand in my pocket last month. I never had so much money in my life."

"Probably because you don't spend any money on lights," Lucas said. "It's so dark in here, I can't see my hands."

"Cops like the dark. You can fool around with strange women," Sloan said. He hit on the Diet Coke.

"Got the cops, huh?" The cops had been crucial to Sloan's business plan.

"Cops and schoolteachers," Sloan said with satisfaction. "A cop and schoolteacher bar. The teachers drink like fish. The cops hit on the schoolteachers. One big happy family."

The bartender laughed at something in the *Journal,* a nasty laugh, and he said, to no one in particular, "Gold's going to a thousand, you betcha. *Now* we'll see what's what."

They looked at him for a moment, then Sloan shrugged, said, "He's got a B.S. in economics. And I do mean a B.S."

"Not bad for a bartender . . . So what's the old lady think about the place?"

"She's gotten into it," Sloan said. He was happy that an old pal could see him doing well. "She took a course in bookkeeping, she handles all the cash, running these QuickBook things on the computer. She's talking about taking a couple weeks in Cancun or Palm Springs next winter. Hawaii."

"That's terrific," Lucas said. And he *was* pleased by all of it.

SO THEY TALKED about wives and kids for a while, Sloan's retirement check, and the price of a new sign for the place, which formerly had been named after a tree, and which Sloan had changed to Shooters.

Even from a distance, it was clear that the two men were good friends: they listened to each other with a certain narrow-eyed in-

tensity, and with a cop-quick skepticism. They were close, but physically they were a study in contrasts.

Sloan was slight, beige and brown, tentative.

Lucas was none of those. Tall, dark haired, with the thin white line of a scar draped across his tanned forehead, down into an eyebrow, he might have been a thug of the leading-man sort. He had intense blue eyes, a hawk nose, and large hands and square shoulders; an athlete, a onetime University of Minnesota hockey player.

Sloan knew nothing about fashion, and never cared; Lucas went for Italian suits, French ties, and English shoes. He read the men's fashion magazines, of the serious kind, and spent some time every spring and fall looking at suits. When he and his wife traveled to Manhattan, she went to the Museum of Modern Art, he went to Versace.

Today he wore a French-blue shirt under a linen summer jacket, lightweight woolen slacks, and loafers; and a compact .45 in a Bianchi shoulder rig.

Lucas's smile came and went, flashing in his face. He had crow's-feet at the corners of his eyes, and silver hair threaded through the black. In the morning, when shaving, he worried about getting old. He had a way to go before that happened, but he imagined he could see it, just over the hill.

WHEN THEY FINISHED the Diet Cokes, Sloan went and got two more and then said, "What about Burt Kline?"

"You know him, right?" Lucas asked.

"I went to school with him, thirteen years," Sloan said. "I still see him around, when there's a campaign."

"Good guy, bad guy?" Lucas asked.

"He was our class representative in first grade and every grade

after that," Sloan said. "He's a politician. He's always been a politician. He's always fat, greasy, jolly, easy with the money, happy to see you. Like that. First time I ever got in trouble in school, was when I pushed him into a snowbank. He reported me."

"Squealer."

Sloan nodded.

"But what's even more interesting, is that you were a school bully. I never saw that in you," Lucas said. He scratched the side of his nose, a light in his eye.

Sloan made a rude noise. "I weighed about a hundred and ten pounds when I graduated. I didn't bully anybody."

"You bullied Kline. You just said so."

"Fuck you." After a moment of silence, Sloan asked, "What'd he do?"

Lucas looked around, then said, quietly, "This is between you and me."

"Of course."

Lucas nodded. Sloan could keep his mouth shut. "He apparently had a sexual relationship with a sixteen-year-old. And maybe a fifteen-year-old—same girl, he just might've been nailing her a year ago."

"Hmm." Sloan pulled a face, then said, "I can see that. But it wouldn't have been rape. I mean, rape-rape, jumping out of the bushes. He's not the most physical guy."

"No, she went along with it," Lucas said. "But it's about forty years of statutory."

Sloan looked into himself for a minute, then said, "Not forty. Thirty-six."

"Enough."

Another moment of silence, then Sloan sighed and asked, "Why don't you bust him? Don't tell me it's because he's a politician."