

The Transparency of Fame

A Children's Story by John Benjamin Sciarra

Wilbur! Why did they name me, of all things, Wilbur!

Wilbur Rembrandt Pennington III was the name his father bestowed upon him. He tried in vain to get the kids at school to call him Willie, but they all reveled in the fun. They insisted on calling him by his full title and with an air of superiority and a mock British accent. The ridicule was non-stop and it irritated him to no end.

Wilbur was fifteen-years-old and ordinary looking enough. He was perhaps a little too thin and the glasses made him stand out like a major first class geek. But Wilbur was no brainiac. He loved sports, but wasn't good at anything. He was great at watching them on television. However, there were no events at watching sports; no Olympic games that he knew of. His father liked to call him an armchair quarterback. His father was named Wilbur Rembrandt Pennington II. His father was rather ordinary, too. An insurance broker, but Wilbur had no idea what he actually did.

He only had one friend in the whole world and he was weirder than Wilbur. Not his name—Freddy Coin—but his manner of everything. Freddy was really a genius. Especially chemistry. He knew how to combine chemicals to do almost anything. Wilbur befriended him as a consolation prize: he was the only person in the world the kids ridiculed more than him. It was Freddy, surprisingly, that would provide Wilbur with the one thing he thought he needed more than anything else in the world: fame.

If I were famous, then the other kids would have to respect me!

It happened innocently enough at exactly 1:13 PM in science class. It was a Monday. Freddy was forbidden to touch most of the chemicals since the infamous explosion three weeks ago. Fortunately, no one was injured, but it had damaged one of the workstations in the science lab of the high school.

Wilbur knew Freddy had something up his sleeve from the wild-eyed look on his face. "Drink this," said Freddy.

Wilbur responded with a look of horror. "Are you crazy! I'm not going to drink that. What is it?"

"The answer to your problems. It will make you invisible."

"What? Why would I want to be invisible? You drink it."

"I don't care what the other kids think of me, but I know it bothers you. I know you want to become famous. Being the first kid in the world to become invisible will make that dream come true."

Wilbur thought about that for a moment. Maybe it was too early in the week, but it made sense.

"How do you know it will work? How do you know it won't kill me instead?"

"I already tried it on my cat and my hamster."

"And it worked!?"

"Of course! I'm a genius. Remember?"

"Are you absolutely sure it won't kill me?" Wilbur stuck his nose over the opening to the flask and removed the top. "It smells like...chocolate."

"It's your favorite thing in the world, isn't it?"

“How long is this going to take...”

“Wilbur! Freddy! Stop your talking or I’ll send you to Principal Dean’s office this minute.” It was Mr. Allgood, their science teacher. Although he liked Freddy, he was a little frightened by him. Sometimes it appeared Freddy knew more about chemistry than he did. He didn’t like Wilbur at all and constantly picked on him.

Wilbur whispered under his breath to Freddy, “If I were invisible, I’d put a Bunsen burner under his butt.” They both began giggling at the thought of Mr. Allgood running around holding his backside. Mr. Allgood looked over at them over the top of his glasses with a scowl.

“Quick, give me the flask again.”

Freddy handed the flask to Wilbur and he pulled the cap off and slugged down the whole bottle before Freddy could stop him.

“What did you do? You were only supposed to drink a sip!”

“So? What’s the big deal?”

“I only gave a drop to the animals. I...I...don’t know how long you’ll be invisible.”

“How long did it take for the animals?”

“I don’t know. They’re still invisible.”

“What? Why didn’t you say that before?”

“I didn’t think you’d drink the whole thing!”

“Well...it tasted good. How soon should I become invisible?”

“Wilbur? Are you still there?”

“Don’t get funny. I still see myself.”

“Wilbur? If you’re there, move something so I know you’re okay.”

“Freddy, stop it. You’re scaring me. You can see me, can’t you? You can hear me, right?”

“Listen. I know you’re still there. I forgot to tell you something. I won’t be able to hear you. But you can move things in the room.”

“Are you nuts?” screamed Wilbur at the top of his lungs. No one in the room turned. He realized it was true. No one could hear him. No one.

Wilbur picked up a pencil off his desk and began to write on his worksheet: Why can’t anyone hear me?

Wilbur whispered, “The chemicals that make you invisible on the outside are like a curtain around you. It changes your atomic structure so that you don’t exist in the real world. You can still move things, but I don’t completely understand why.”

“Mr. Coin, who are you talking to? And where is Mr. Pennington?” asked Mr. Allgood.

“Uh...I don’t know. He disappeared.”

“Don’t get funny, Mister. Where is he?”

“I don’t know where he...oooh!” Freddy jumped when Wilbur pinched him on the arm.

“Come up here this instant, young man.”

Freddy walked slowly up to the front of the class.

“Now. If you don’t tell me where Mr. Pennington is, you can write the atomic tables on the board for us. And include the atomic weights as well.”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you, Mr. Allgood.”

“Try me.”

“He...he...he’s invisible!”

The entire class began to laugh and some of the children were banging their desks with their fists.

“Class. Class! Be still or you’ll all stay after school and join Mr. Coin in his assignment on the board.”

Suddenly, without warning, the Bunsen burner ignited on the black tabletop at the front of the classroom. Freddy groaned and whispered, “Don’t do it.”

“Very funny Mr. Coin. Stand over there in the corner until class is over. Now, Mr. Coin.”

Freddy walked over to the corner, but suddenly lurched forward and fell on his face. The class broke out in uncontrollable laughter again.

“I’ll get you for this!” said Freddy under his breath.

The class stopped laughing all at once. They watched with a mixture of fascination and awe as one of the lunch bags levitated off of a student’s desk. It was Althea’s lunch. They all knew that Althea always had the best lunches since her father was a chef for a fancy restaurant.

They continued to watch without anyone uttering a word as the bag settled on Wilbur’s desk and opened—all by itself. Out of the bag floated a thick gourmet roast beef sandwich. It was filled with enormous slices of roast beef, lettuce, Muenster cheese, and tomatoes.

The corner of the top piece of marbled rye lifted and a tomato slid out and then sailed across the room in Freddy’s direction. Wilbur hated tomatoes. It caught him in the face. Everyone was too frightened to laugh. There was now a look of terror on all of the children’s faces. Mr. Allgood couldn’t seem to get his mouth closed. It just hung there on his face as if completely unhinged by what he was seeing—or not seeing.

Something invisible bit down on the sandwich. The teeth marks became immediately visible.

Then a section of sandwich fell to the floor. Another bite and the same thing happened. Another and another and then the sandwich sailed across the room.

One of the girls screamed and chaos broke out as everyone ran for the door at the same time in a panic including Mr. Allgood. Screaming could be heard like an echo getting smaller and smaller as the entire class ran down the hallway, out of the school and into the parking lot outside.

Freddy stood there and tried to figure out where his friend had gone. “Wilbur? Are you still there?”

A note pad lifted into the air and sailed over to where Freddy was standing. His pencil lifted from his pocket and began to write on the notepad: I can’t eat. Why didn’t you tell me?

“I..I didn’t know. I thought you’d just become visible again.”

Why can’t I eat, appeared on the pad as Wilbur’s invisible hand moved the pencil.

“I think because everything inside you is in some other form. Only the outside atomic structure has any effect in the world. I didn’t think you couldn’t eat.”

Am I going to die?

“I don’t know. But, look on the bright side. You’re certainly going to become famous. It’s what you wanted, isn’t it?”

It isn’t worth it, wrote Wilbur. The pencil broke as he wrote the last word. He was slowly fading out of existence.

The next morning Wilbur awoke in his own bed. He didn't remember getting there or anything after he wrote that last mysterious message on the pad. He thought he had already died. All he knew was, he was ravenously hungry. So hungry, in fact, he could eat a whole cow by himself.

He got up and looked in the mirror. He could see himself in it, but that didn't mean anything, apparently. He saw himself yesterday after he became invisible.

Rather than get upset, Wilbur decided to at least have some fun before he died of starvation. His sister was in the bathroom grooming her hair as usual. She was a senior in the same high school. Likely she had heard of her famous brother by now.

He walked into the room and sprayed her right in the face with the water bottle she used to mist her hair. Missy slapped him across the face and yelled at him. "Knock it off! What do you think you're doing?"

Wilbur was stunned. "You can see me?"

"Are you out of your mind? What're you, invisible or something? You're such an immature child, Wilbur. When are you going to grow up?"

I'm no longer invisible? This was wonderful news. He couldn't wait to get to class and explain to everyone what had happened the day before.

Wilbur got off the school bus and walked proudly past all the students. He thought at least *they* might have heard of the invisible kid by now. But, no one paid him any attention. He even heard someone say under his breath as he went by, "Look, it's Wilbur Rembrandt Pennington...the third!"

Wilbur ignored them and went to his science class. He thought it odd that even Mr. Allgood didn't pay him any attention.

Althea's lunch bag sat prominently on his desk and he remembered how good that sandwich looked as he walked by her desk. He suddenly felt queasy when he remembered he could have died if he remained invisible.

Wilbur took up his seat at the lab table and his partner Freddy came up and sat down next to him.

"Aren't you surprised to see me?" asked Wilbur.

"Huh? Why should I be surprised to see you?"

Freddy took out a glass flask from his bag and set it on the lab bench. Wilbur's eyes became wide. "Get that away from me!"

"What? What's wrong with you? It's just fruit juice from home."

"It's not the chemical to make me invisible?"

"You know, I think you lost your mind."

It was then that Wilbur realized he had had a terrible nightmare. It was so real, however, he decided he never wanted to be famous ever again.