

by Tom Wolfe

The Invisible Wife

The Invisible Wife arrived at the party with Her Husband, but Her Husband was soon vectored off into another room by one of his great manswarm of chums, who began pouring an apparently delicious story down his ear.

The Invisible Wife had gone to the trouble of getting a sideswept multi-chignon hairdo and a Rue St. Honoré Chloe dress with enormous padded shoulders surmounted by piles of beading sewn on as thick as the topping on a peach melba precisely in order to cease being invisible. But from the moment the social current swept her into the path of Her Husband's business friend Earl, her intracranial alarm system warned her that it would happen, nonetheless.

After all, she had only been introduced to Earl four times in the past, at four different parties, and this time Her Husband was in another room.

"Hello, Earl," she said clearly and brightly, looking him straight in the eyes.

Earl's lips spread across his face in a great poly-urethaned smile. But his eyes were pure panic. They contracted into two little round balls, like a pair of Gift Shop Lucite knickknacks. "Mayday!" they said. "Code Blue! I've met this woman somewhere, but who inna namea Christ is she?"

"Ohh!" he said. "Ahh! Howya doin'! Yes!—"

The little Lucite balls were bouncing all over her, over her hairdo, chignon by chignon, over her blazing shoulders, her dress, her Charles Jourdan shoes, searching for a clue.

"How're the children!" he exclaimed finally, taking a desperate chance.

This was the deepest wound of all for the Invisible Wife. The man had just passed his eyes over \$1,650 worth of Franco-American chic and decided that the main thing about her was . . . she looked *matronly*.

How're the children . . . "They've got Legionnaire's disease," she wanted to say, because she knew these people didn't listen to the Invisible Wife. But she went ahead and did the usual.

"Oh, they're fine," she said.

"That's great!" Earl said. "That's great!" He kept saying "that's great" and looking straight through her, frantically trying to devise some way to remove himself from her presence before somebody he knew approached and he was faced with the impossible task of *introducing* her.

At dinner the Invisible Wife sat next to a man who was an investment counselor with an evident interest in convertible debentures. *Convertible debentures!* An adrenal surge of hope rose in the Invisible Wife. Somewhere down Memory Lane she had actually picked up a conversational nugget concerning



convertible debentures. This nugget had to do with an extraordinary mathematician from MIT named Edward O. Thorp who, using computers, had devised an *extrinsic formula* for beating the stock market by playing convertible debentures. So she introduced her conversational nugget—Edward O. Thorp and the Convertible Debentures—into the conversation. She dropped it in, just so, ever so lightly; for, being a veteran of dinners like this, she knew that a woman can ask questions, introduce topics, interject the occasional *bon mot*, even deliver a punch line now and again, but she is not to launch into disquisitions or actually *tell long stories* herself.

"Edward O. Thorp!" the Investment Counselor said. "O my God!"—and the Invisible Wife was pleased to see that this topic absolutely delighted the Investment Counselor. He launched into an anecdote that lit up his irises like a pair of bed-lamp high-intensity bulbs. There is nothing that a man hungers for more at dinner than to dominate the conversation in his sector of the table.

The Invisible Wife soon noticed, however, that when the man sitting on the other side of her turned their way to listen in, the Investment Counselor looked right past her and directed the entire story into *the man's* face. Not only that, when this man was distracted for a moment by the woman on his other side, the Investment Counselor stopped talking, as if his switch had been turned off. He stopped in mid-sentence, and his eyes clouded up, and he just waited, with his mouth open.

After all, why waste a terrific yarn on an Invisible Wife? □