CHAPTER 1 SHADOW

SHADOW

Shadow. It's my name. It *suits* me. It tells you pretty much all you need to know about me.

Shadow. It's where I live. Where I work. It's the frontier, the no-man's-land where the Light battles the Dark. It's where safe, sane day gives way to dangerous, magical night. It is my element. My realm.

Shadow. It's my nature, suspended between darkness and light. All I can do is hope that there is more light than darkness in me. But I do know this: Shadow cannot exist without light, and pure darkness will consume it. So I fight the darkness, seek the light.

Shadow. Sometimes it's what I do.

Like right now, shadowing a Grey Man on a beautiful summer day in Chicago. I had picked up the Grey Man's trail early that afternoon, in the plaza just upstairs from the Union Station commuter rail hub at Madison and the river. I had stopped to listen to Blind Zeke play to the lunchtime crowd. If you have ever been there, you probably remember Blind Zeke. His shining coal-black skin, his white cumulus cloud of hair. His ancient Ray-Bans, the earpieces held on with safety pins and the lenses so dark you could not tell whether he had eyes, much less what they looked like. He was wearing his signature faded green jumpsuit and his yellowed straw fedora with the snakeskin hatband. As usual, Zeke was sitting on a seventies vintage lawn chair made of battered

aluminum and nylon straps, so frayed that you wondered how they could hold him up. He was playing Delta Blues on an old guitar with frets worn down to nothing.

Zeke played at the plaza pretty much every day, rain or shine, for tips from the endless stream of office workers on break and commuters and tourists disgorged by the trains every day. On the ground next to his chair were his battered white cane, his dog Sam, and his open guitar case with some change and bills already deposited and clamoring for company. I had been listening to Blind Zeke play there for years. Zeke insisted that he was the only authentic Delta Bluesman left in Chicago. In fact, he *swore* that he had actually played with Robert Johnson, but Zeke swore to a *lot* of flat-out-unbelievable things. He didn't look like he could be more than sixty or so, and seeing as Robert Johnson died in 1938, that claim seemed particularly dubious.

As I approached, Sam's head came up, ears pricked forward. His tail thumped the leg of Zeke's chair, and Sam offered a little whine of greeting. Sam liked me. I liked him too. Zeke brought *Walkin' Blues* to a close.

"Judgin' from the way Sam's tail is jackhammerin' my chair, I guess that our old friend Shadow has joined on this fine summer mornin'. Is that right, Sam?"

Sam barked once, soft and happy. "I thought so," Zeke laughed. "Welcome to the show, Shadow. Hope you can stay awhile."

Living in Chicago as long as I have, I've listened to Muddy and Buddy and Pinetop and Wolf and all the other great ones, I love the Blues. But I especially love Blind Zeke. Zeke has a dark, sweet voice as bottomless as a well, with just a touch of whiskey and tobacco. And those gnarled hands fly over the fretboard, squeezing out

thunderclaps one minute, then notes as soft and sweet as ice-cream the next. He can bend a note until it about breaks your heart. So I hoped I could stay awhile too.

But it was not to be. Just as Zeke played the opening riff of *Cross Road Blues*, a vile stench like rotting meat and burnt cotton candy erupted from the stairway that climbed the two stories from tracks 5 and 7, below. Sam was on his feet now, facing the stairway with his hackles up, his tail down, and his teeth bared. He growled almost inaudibly, deep and low. I knew how he felt.

Zeke continued his intro, but under his breath, just loud enough for me to hear, he said, “Sadly, Sam, it ‘pears that Shadow has some pressin’ affairs to ’tend to, so we will not have the pleasure of his comp’ny this mornin’. You fix your mind on your own business and make sure nobody snatches our rightful earnins out of that guitar case.”

Zeke turned to me. “Happy huntin’, Shadow! See you soon.” He turned back towards the audience gathered in front of him and began to sing: “I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees.”

I turned back to the stairway. The stench was pouring out, even stronger and fouler. People were pouring out of the stairway, too. Commuters off to work in the Loop and tourists and locals off to the Architectural River Tour, Navy Pier or the other attractions of summertime Chicago. None of them noticed anything out of the ordinary.

I knew, though, that in the midst of the workers and tourists, there *was* one of the emerging throng who *could* smell that reeking miasma, though to him the scent was home cooking. I saw him as he rose up out of the underground into the light. To the people climbing the stairs around him, he looked just like another office worker in his khaki Dockers, his powder-blue button-down Oxford shirt and his tasselled brown Bass

Weejuns. But to me, the Grey Man looked like what he really was – a demon. Hell come calling.

Demons are not locals. They come from a different plane, and not one that landed at O'Hare. A magical plane of existence, and they are made of magic. Spellcasting is as natural to them as breathing is to us. They can assume whatever form they like. And with limitless freedom to create any horrific form they wish, demons, being as stupid and limited as most of them are, always seem to opt for the same few cliches. This one had adopted the "Creature from the Black Lagoon" template: the eight-foot height, the reptilian head and body, the claws, the fangs, and the spines. Most *especially* the huge tallywhacker that would put a narwhal to shame. I swear to God, demons are worse than teenage boys when it comes to obsession with penis size.

The Grey Man skipped up the last small flight of steps up to street level, then stopped at the top of the stairs, turning his head slowly from side to side, eyeing, sniffing. There used to be seafood restaurants where they had live lobsters in a clear tank. Diners could pick the one they wanted to boil alive, dismember and eat. I had a feeling that that's what this demon was doing right now – checking the tank for a prime lobster. The thing about demons is that their *sole* reason for being is to *consume*. Not food or drink, but the living essence of the unlucky human they choose. The *elan vital*, the life force. They crave it like a biker craves crystal meth, only more so. They eat you like you eat a pomegranate, turning you inside out and sucking out the sweet part, leaving an empty, flaccid skinbag and nothing else.

The Grey Man turned east onto Madison and merged into the crowd, heading into the Loop. I melted into the crowd behind him. I could not see him over the crowd,

but I didn't need to. I could smell him – rotting meat and burnt sugar. As I passed by Blind Zeke, he finished Crossroads and swung right into *Hellhound on My Trail*. Of course. The story of my life: "*Shadow – A Biography by Robert Johnson*, afterword by Blind Zeke."

CHAPTER 2 HAPPY BIRTHDAY

TIMMY

Timmy woke up tired on his twelfth birthday. Nothing new there. Jeff had been crying until late, and Timmy couldn't help but hear the muffled sobs. Couldn't help but hear everything. Even so, he was up at the first hint of light in the eastern sky, as usual.

He looked out of his second-story window. A sullen sun climbed over the Chicago Bungalows lining the east side of the street, painting the gray undersides of the washboard clouds a dull red. "*Sailor take warning,"* Timmy thought. But he didn't really need a warning to know there was going to be hell to pay today. He slipped into his baggy shorts and T-shirt as quietly as he could -- Mrs. Groomer slept like a cat. Timmy inched his bedroom door open, glad that he had oiled the hinges the day before. He crept down the stairs, clutching his battered sneakers.

Timmy made it downstairs without making a sound. He was skinny and short for his age, so the old wooden stairs did not squeak, as they always did for the overstuffed Mr. Groomer. Timmy was hungry (wasn't he always?), but he didn't dare grab food from the kitchen, even though it meant he probably wouldn't eat all day. Things would be bad enough as it was. He didn't even want to *think* about the consequences of eating without permission.

He silently turned the oiled handle of the front door and stepped out onto the front porch. He drew in a lungful of the cool, humid summer morning. *He was out!!!* Timmy tiptoed down the four porch steps and sat on the bottom step to put on his shoes. *Don't blow it now!*

The street was lined on both sides with identical Chicago Bungalows, looking like they'd been cloned. He tiptoed down the gangway alongside the house to the alley, where he was less likely to be spotted by the Groomers or nosy neighbors. From the alley, the houses all looked different, with additions, dormers, and sunrooms that had been grafted on over the years.

Timmy took off running down the alley. He flew past the Arvidas's garage with its basketball hoop and backboard. The four Arvidas brothers were always playing sports in the street or the alley. Timmy had spent hours at his bedroom window, watching, wishing he could play with them. Fat chance. The Groomers would never allow *that*. Besides, the Arvidas boys were all tall, strong, and athletic, and Timmy was not. He sucked at sports. He didn't even know the rules. And who was going to teach him? "*God knows Mr. Groomer has no interest,"* he thought. Mr. Groomer's interests lay in a very different direction.

So to the Arvidas kids, Timmy remained just the wimpy foster-kid-who-lived-down-the-block. "*Just as well," he thought. "If I ever did play with them, they would just make fun of me*. *Or feel sorry for me, which would be even worse.*" After a few blocks, Timmy turned onto a side street and headed east. As usual, running made him feel better. It was the one sport he was good at. Ten minutes later he was out of breath, but he was also almost a mile away from the Groomers'. "*I'm free. Freefreefreeee!!"*

Some kids dream of a new bicycle or a video game system or a baseball glove or a dog for their birthday, but not Timmy. He had learned early that dreams were not for kids like him. He had only one birthday wish this year – to spend his birthday away from

the Groomers. One day without Mr. Groomer's greasy hugs. Without Mrs. Groomer's casual cruelty. A SPECIAL BIRTHDAY!

Timmy jogged into the large park that was next to his school. He looked around, but no one else was there this early in the morning. A black metal fence stood between the park and the school, with large round finials atop the corners. Timmy walked over and lifted one of the finials, revealing the hollow fence post underneath. Stepping up onto the bottom fence rail and reaching up, he slipped his hand down into the fence post, fishing around inside. "*Got it*," he crowed. He pulled out the plastic ziplock bag he had taped to the inside of the post on the last day of school, where it would be safe from the Groomers' routine searches of his bedroom. Inside it were several pages of handwritten notes, along with printouts of maps, directions and other information about the Loop.

The Loop. Downtown Chicago. To Timmy, it was like a fairy tale. A place of wonders. A place of parks, museums, skyscrapers, amazing stores, attractions, and events. Timmy had lived in Chicago all his life but he had never been to the Loop. Of course. He had begged the Groomers to take him there, but he realized pretty quickly that they would never do it. But this year was his SPECIAL BIRTHDAY, and Timmy had decided that he was going to make it extra SPECIAL. He was going to go to the Loop, whether the Groomers liked it or not. He had spent hours on a computer he was not allowed to use, doing research he was not allowed to do. He had come up with a plan.

Timmy walked over to the school playground, the place where he had hatched his plan. He remembered that spring day some months ago, standing atop the Spider

Climber during recess. Across the playground and baseball diamonds and soccer field, and over the tops of the bungalows and the trees, he saw a towering black skyscraper.

Timmy knew that tower. Probably every kid in Chicago knew the Willis Tower. When first built, it was called the Sears Tower, and it was the tallest building in the world. Not anymore, but eighth graders from his school took a field trip there every year, visiting the Skydeck on the 103d floor. They bragged about daring "The Ledge", a glass box that stuck out four feet from the side of the building so they could gaze between their feet at a quarter-mile drop straight down to Wacker Drive.

Timmy had seen the Willis Tower from the expressway and many times from the school playground, but when he glimpsed it that day from the Spider Climber, he suddenly knew how to turn his next birthday into a "SPECIAL BIRTHDAY." He'd go see the Willis Tower. He'd see all the skyscrapers. Close up. He wanted to stand at their feet and look up and up and up until either his eyes got to the top or he fell over backwards, whichever came first.

"*The thing is, I don't even know how to get there," he thought. "And even if I did get there, what should I do other than look at skyscrapers? If I'm going to make this a SPECIAL BIRTHDAY, I have to do every cool thing I can possibly do in the Loop. But they probably cost money, which I don't have. What do I do about that? I've got to figure this out. I may never get another chance. I might get grounded for life. Or worse. I'd better do some research*."

Timmy was good with computers. He had taught himself by using prior foster-parents' computers, and learned more at school. It came easy to him. To do his Loop research, all he needed was a computer with access to the internet. The Groomers'

computer was out of the question, though. They had only one, and it was in their bedroom, password-locked. They didn't let him use it much, and when they did, they watched him like hawks. If they saw him researching downtown attractions, it would be the end of his SPECIAL BIRTHDAY.

Which left school, where computer use, especially internet access, was tightly monitored. "*Yeah, RIGHT!*" thought Timmy. Ms. Grady, the librarian, was an elderly lady who was marking time until she could retire with a full pension. She knew almost nothing about computers. Timmy was excused from PE class, and he had to report to the school library during those time periods. For years, Ms. Grady had relied on Timmy to show her how to use the computer and to fix any computer issues that arose. He knew all of her passwords.

Ms. Grady liked to take a few sips of vodka from the flask she kept in her purse and sneak in a nap during the day. As she snoozed, Timmy had done a LOT of computer research over the years. Now he was going to research the Loop!

As he stood atop the Spider Climber on that spring day, looking at the Sears Tower (as most Chicagoans still call it), the bell rang to end recess. Timmy climbed down, walked up to the library, and started his Loop research while Ms. Grady snored softly in her chair. On that first day, he learned that the Sky Deck cost money. "*No go,*" he thought. He was really bummed until he found out that the John Hancock Building had a restaurant and bar on the 95th and 96th floor with a three-hundred-sixty-degree view of Chicago and Lake Michigan. Timmy thought maybe he could sneak up there somehow and take a look around, unnoticed. He was good at going unnoticed.

For the rest of the school term, Timmy researched and his plan took shape. Now, sitting on top of the Spider Climber on his twelfth birthday, Timmy smiled. Step 1 of the plan – Ditch the Groomers – had just gone off without a hitch. Now for Step 2 – Get to the Loop.

That presented some problems. The loop was miles away, way too far to walk or run. Also, the path downtown ran through some rough neighborhoods. The El – the Elevated Train -- was Timmy's only option. But the El cost money, and Timmy never had a penny in his pocket. The Groomers made sure of that.

Timmy clambered down the Spider Climber, checked one of his maps, then jogged out of the schoolyard, headed for the Kennedy Expressway. It was *a ways,* but he loved to run. Besides, he was WAYYYYY too amped to walk. *I'm goin' DOWNTOWN!!*

Timmy heard the expressway before he saw it – the engine and brake noises of semis rumbling their way across the country at sixty miles an hour were unmistakable. Soon enough, he saw the El station ahead. The small ticketing building was twenty feet above the El tracks, and stairs led down from there to the passenger platform, which sat between the inbound and outbound lanes of the Kennedy Expressway.

It was still early, and no one was in the ticketing building but a uniformed CTA employee. He was sitting in the little glassed-in ticket booth, his head bent intently over his phone. The booth was right next to the turnstiles, which passengers had to go through to get to the platform. Timmy approached the station along the sidewalk, where the wall of the station blocked the CTA man's view of him. As he passed that wall, Timmy sidled around the corner of the station, scrunching down to stay below the glass

of the booth, out of the man's line of sight. Bending down further, he snuck under the turnstile and down the stairway to the platform.

There were only a handful of people on the platform. Timmy glanced around guiltily at them, but none of the bleary-eyed commuters paid him the slightest attention. "*Is that it?" he wondered. "Is it that easy to get away with a crime?*"

Apparently, it was. Timmy walked around the platform, checking out the route map and the signs, figuring out which set of tracks went downtown. When the next El stopped, he got on and sat in a seat where he could see the route map above the doors. Right in the middle of the map, the Loop was marked with closely-spaced stations with names of presidents like Madison, Adams, Jackson, and Washington – Timmy's stop. "***DOWN – TOWN!!!!***"

The Roboannouncer called the stop: Washington and Randolph. Timmy stepped out onto the subway platform and followed the signs to Washington. He walked up the stairs into day. Tall buildings blocked the sun, so he couldn't tell which direction was which. He walked down to the nearest corner, where the street signs told him that he was at the intersection of Dearborn and Washington. To his right, the sun blazed down the tunnel of skyscrapers, tinting the glass of the buildings and turning Washington Street into a golden canyon. "*Okay, that way is east*," he concluded.

Timmy looked to his left, his attention drawn by a bustle kitty-corner to him. People were setting up booths in a big open space for some event. A sign announced that it was the once-a-week Daley Plaza Farmers' Market, which he knew all about through his research. He had decided that the Farmer's Market would be the first place he'd visit on his SPECIAL BIRTHDAY.

Timmy crossed the street and wandered around the plaza, checking out the booths, which were filled with fresh produce, flowers, and baked goods. *Tables* of baked goods, from pies and cakes of every imaginable kind to bread – from wheat and rye to zucchini, pumpkin, blueberry, and lemon. His stomach started to whine and gurgle. He almost regretted not snatching something from the kitchen on his way out of the house.

He walked over to the Picasso sculpture. The inclined base of the sculpture had been polished by generations of children using it as a slide. Timmy took a few rides down the slide. Pretty tame. *"But I just slid down the Picasso!! I am DOWN* ***TOWN*****!!!"**

SHADOW

I followed the Gray Man across the Lyric Opera Bridge over the Chicago River and into the Loop, leaving Blind Zeke and the Blues behind. The Grey Man headed east on Madison, and I kept a low profile to avoid spooking him. I could follow the charnel stink of him without seeing him. As we walked, office workers peeled off to their office buildings. The rest of the crowd – out-of-town families come to see the sights and suburban teenagers looking for urban adventures – continued toward Michigan Avenue and Millennium Park.

As the crowd thinned, I was able to study the Grey Man. He was constantly looking around, sniffing the psychic currents. Hunting. For hours I hunted *him,* stalking him through the Loop, hoping to catch him in a deserted spot where I could corner him and end him. No such luck. I felt like I was running out of time. The Grey Man would not be able to wait much longer before he fed. When we got to Dearborn and Washington,

he sniffed the air again and came to a quivering stop. He took off doubletime, heading east on Washington. "*Uh-oh!*" I thought, "*he's found his lobster*."

He crossed Washington to the Daley Plaza. It was still lunchtime, and the Farmer's Market was in full swing. The plaza was jammed with office workers eager for a taste of the country, and vendors' booths selling anything that country folks thought they could get city folks to buy. The Grey Man had a different taste experience in mind. He followed a winding trail through the market that meandered and doubled back on itself again and again. I stayed on the outside, keeping him in sight. When he finally emerged, he headed east on Washington.

TIMMY

Timmy left the plaza and walked east on Washington. He crossed a street with El tracks running down it overhead, a passing train screeching and rattling so loudly that he had to cover his ears with his hands. Once past the tracks, he could see the Frank Gehry bandshell ahead. It looked like a roll of aluminum foil that got caught in a lawn mower. At the next intersection, Washington Street ended, as did the tunnel of skyscrapers. A big sky, bright sunshine and lots of green opened up ahead of Timmy. "*Millenium Park,"* he thought. He wanted to yell. He could feel some sound – maybe a victory cry -- trying to get through his throat and out of his mouth, but he choked it down instinctively. "*Don't get noticed,"* he told himself.

He crossed Michigan Avenue, barely able to keep from running. In front of him, a long, broad staircase rose toward the bandshell. He climbed to the top and walked into the pavilion, with rows and rows of seating in front to the stage. Further back, there was

a HUGE lawn, covered by a grid of overhead metal pipes with speakers and lights suspended from them. Timmy had read about the free classical music concerts in the summer. He had seen pictures and videos that showed the grass covered with blankets and lawn chairs and coolers. And people, families and friends, sitting on their chairs watching the orchestra play, listening, eating, laughing and talking. "*I wonder what that's like*," he thought.

Timmy visited the Bean, pausing to consider the distorted reflection of the city, the sky and himself. He took his shoes and socks off and waded in Crown Fountain's inches-deep reflecting pool, watching the videos of ordinary Chicagoans projected on the fifty-foot glass towers at each end of the pool. He walked south through Millennium Park until it became Grant Park. Drawn by a column of water shooting high into the sky, he sat on a park bench by Buckingham Fountain for a while.

But he didn't stay long. He had seen something that drew him like a magnet. Lake Michigan. He crossed Lake Shore Drive, coming to a stop on the breakwall, where land met lake. From where he was standing, the only shore he could see was the shore he was standing on.

"*It's like an ocean*," he thought. A forest of masts rose up from the sailboats moored in the nearby harbor. "*I've lived my whole life in Chicago, and I've never been this close to the lake*," he thought. "I have never been IN IT!" All of a sudden, he could not bear that thought for another second. The water was only a foot or so below the breakwater, so he took off his shoes and socks and sat down on the edge of the land and dangled his feet in the waters.

He sat for a long time, struggling to identify the unfamiliar feeling that he was feeling. “Am I happy?” he thought. He sat for a while longer. “No, not happy,” he concluded. “Maybe content.” He felt very peaceful, very connected, his butt on the ground, his feet in the water, the sun pouring down on him and the breeze ruffling his hair, caressing his scalp. Earth, Water. Fire. Air. His eyes watched the sunlight glint off the tops of the waves while his mind wandered away for a while.

When he came back to himself, the domes of the Planetarium and the Aquarium beckoned from a small peninsula jutting out into the lake. He headed that way, staying as close to the lake as he could as he jogged, listening to the small waves lap at the breakwall. When he got to the Museum Campus, he made a beeline for the Planetarium, because kids got in free that day.

Timmy loved the night sky, at least the faded remnant he could see through Chicago’s light pollution. He had always wanted to see a Sky Show. He walked in like a conqueror surveying his prize. He breezed past the ticket window to the guard at the entrance.

“I’m under 14,” he said.

“You look it,” the guard said. “But free admission is for Chicago residents only with proof of birth date and residency. Do you have proof of birthdate or residency? ID?”

“No.” His pockets were empty. So was he. He turned away, not wanting the guard to see the tears in his eyes. “*Not a SPECIAL BIRTHDAY after all,”* he thought*. “Oh, well. Nothing new*.”

“Hey, kid!”

He turned back to the guard, a gruff looking man with close-cropped gray hair. He looked like a retired cop.

“Do you live in the city, kid?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What’s your address?”

Timmy told him.

“What’s your date of birth?”

Timmy told him.

“Today? Today is your birthday?”

Timmy just nodded, his head down. He was afraid that if he looked at the guard or opened his mouth he might start bawling like a baby, and he DID NOT CRY!

“Kid?”

“Yes, sir?” A whisper. He could imagine what the guard was thinking. *What kind of kid does not have ANYONE - no family or friends -- around him on his birthday? How can a twelve-year-old kid be such an unloved loser that he is all alone on his own birthday?* Timmy did not look up. He knew that he would see either contempt or pity in the guard’s eyes, and he could not bear either. He started to turn away.

A hand on his shoulder. Soft. Warm. A voice in his ear. Soft. Warm. “Go on in, kid. Go on in now. Happy Birthday.”

CHAPTER 3 NAVY PIER

TIMMY

Timmy looked out over the lake. He had spent hours at the Planetarium. The Sky Show had been amazing. Planets and constellations were projected bright and clear onto the dome in the darkness of the theater. Exactly as they would appear if you were lying under that night sky in the middle of the ocean. They could even move the stars around to show you how the sky looked in different seasons, or even in the past. "***SPECIAL BIRTHDAY***!!" Timmy also loved the space-telescope pictures of colorful nebulas that billowed like the cumulus cloudscapes that towered over Lake Michigan now, creating a patchwork of shadow and glinting light over the blue-green waters.

Timmy turned his back on the lake. He walked north on Michigan Avenue, headed for the Art Institute, which was free for kids every day. When he told the guard there that it was his birthday, she just waved him in without asking any questions. He spent some time looking at paintings. He really liked the Impressionists, but his favorite thing was the medieval armor collection.

When he left the Art Institute, there was a crowd of people gathered on the sidewalk below the bronze lions, staring up into the sky. Suddenly there was an ear-shaking roar from the sky.

"What was *that*?" asked someone in the crowd.

"That," said a man in the crowd, "is the Blue Angels -- the Navy's precision stunt flying team."

“What are they doing?” asked a boy, who from his clothes and his lost expression, was probably from out of town.

“They’re practicing,” said the man. “This weekend is the Air and Water Show, and they are practicing their performance today. They always fly over the Loop and give us all a thrill.”

As he said it, another roar exploded over the building. Timmy caught his first glimpse of the navy blue and yellow fighter jets as they streaked over Grant Park and disappeared out over the lake.

“That was SOOOOOOO cool!” said the out-of-town kid.

“*Special Birthday*,” thought Timmy. He continued north on Michigan, admiring the skyline. He knew the names of only a few of the buildings, so he named some himself – the Beehive Building; Rusty Red; the Broken Diamond Building; the White Castle Tower; the Copper Top; and the Blue Tower.

He crossed the river on Michigan and entered the Magnificent Mile. The sun was beginning to sink and the shadows of the skyscrapers were crawling toward the lake. Timmy dawdled in stores, looking at things he would never own. He spent a while in the Apple Store, torturing himself with unattainable IPhones. He saw hotels and boutiques, and the Water Tower that had survived the Chicago Fire.

And wonder of wonders, when he got to the Hancock Building, he found an extended family with enough kids that they did not notice an extra one. He latched onto them and rode the elevator up to the 96th floor. He moved around, looking north, south, east and west out of the surrounding windows. He was up so dizzyingly high that skyscrapers looked like little bumps far below him. He watched the sun set over the city

and the sky turn pink behind it. As the sky in the east began to darken, the lights of Chicago started to come on. He used his superpower of unnoticeability to gawk for some time. When the staff finally figured out he was alone and penniless, they put him on an express elevator back to ground level. But still. SPECIAL BIRTHDAY!!

Timmy knew exactly where he was going next. Navy Pier. He had seen it from the Hancock building when he looked out over the lake. From high above, it looked like a kilometer-long boat about to cast off from shore and cruise west across Lake Michigan. The towers at either end were the smokestacks and the giant Ferris Wheel in the middle was the wheel that would steer the colossal vessel.

Timmy had always wanted to see the skyline from the lake, and while he couldn't afford the tour boats, the view from the end of Navy Pier was supposed to be just about as good. But the very best thing was the free fireworks display at the Pier every night of the summer. Timmy loved fireworks. That would be the grand finale to his SPECIAL BIRTHDAY!!!

Timmy worked his way toward the pier. He saw the Ferris Wheel first, rising almost 200 feet into the darkening sky and rotating slowly. Timmy quickstepped out onto Navy Pier. He wanted to see the skyline from the very end of the pier while there was still enough light to see the buildings. He ran through the crowd, barely avoiding headlong collisions with the other visitors, who were ambling along and enjoying the sights and sounds. At the end of the pier Timmy stopped by a railing, looking over the lake. The sky to the east was already indigo. He turned back to the city, and his breath caught in his throat. The sky had lightened to a dusky blue overhead, and behind the

silhouetted skyline, the few fleecy clouds were pink and gold on top, lavender at the bottom.

Timmy moved to the north side of the pier to see the skyline on that side, including the unmistakable Hancock. As he watched the western sky, the gold disappeared, then the pink, then the red. The heavens were now mostly indigo, purple and black. A cueball moon was rising, perched on the horizon. He sat down on a bench, thinking: "*This is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.*"

He stayed there for a while, just looking. At the changing sky. At the twinkling white pathway on the lake that was the light of the rising moon. He felt that he could tread that pathway across the water if he dared, perhaps to a different world. He breathed very deeply, feeling something inside himself rising with the moon. He did not know what it was, but he felt that it was something *like* the moon. Something deep and calm and secret.

Although he didn't know it, and certainly didn't understand this new feeling, Timmy was happy. All he knew was that he wanted to hold on to this feeling – this moment – for as long as he could. He walked slowly back towards the south side of the pier, still breathing deeply and drinking in every sight, smell and sound. "*This is the first time I've ever really been alive,*" he thought.

Navy Pier burst with life all around him, bright with T-shirts, shorts, sun dresses, tube tops, banners and bar and restaurant awnings in bright summer colors, raucous with thousands of voices talking and laughing all at once. A band was playing classic rock somewhere on the pier, something about a brown-eyed girl. Brats were sizzling on a grill, and a Mexican restaurant exhaled the smells of salsa and lime and cilantro.

Outdoor bars were three-deep with people waving money and credit cards and shouting drink orders. Boats of all kinds – from dinner cruisers and windjammers to water taxis -- were docked bow-to-stern all the way down the south side of the pier. The Ferris Wheel turned ponderously, the lights along the rim and radii a slow-motion Catherine Wheel. Out past the end of the pier, pleasure boats from yachts to dinghies were jockeying for position and tossing their anchors.

Timmy's senses had never been so keen. He saw everything with a razor-edged sharpness. He could feel every wisp and every shift of the cool breeze off the lake. On the breeze, he could smell the cotton candy from the little concession stand at the edge of the pier, and the praline pecans from the one next to it. The smells were so powerful that they became tastes, and the tastes hit him hard. "God, I am so HUNGRY," he thought. Suddenly, he felt lightheaded. Events didn't flow smoothly. Time seemed to move in staccato bursts, a blink at a time, like a silent movie. He felt dizzy. He sank to the concrete, his back up against a low brick wall, his knees pulled up to his chest. "Celebrate good times, come on!" exhorted the band. He had to smile. His head dropped to his knees.

He awoke with a start, to an explosion. He was on his feet before he knew he was awake. Groggy, disoriented and afraid, he looked around him. "*Are the Blue Angels back*?" he wondered. Another explosion, this one accompanied by a burst of white light in the sky and the oohs and aaahs of the crowd.

"THE FIREWORKS!!" he thought. "*How could I have forgotten about the fireworks? It's the main reason I came to Navy Pier. The perfect ending to my SPECIAL BIRTHDAY!!!"* He looked around. The fireworks were out over the lake, and all the

prime viewing areas were taken. Almost everyone in the crowd towered over him, and he couldn't even catch a glimpse of the fireworks. He saw a father pick up his son and rest the boy on his shoulders. The boy looked all around him at the unobstructed view of the sky, and raised his fists straight overhead, shaking them. He whooped a victory cry, then bent forward to lock eyes with his father, whose head was bent back to do the same. They smiled delightedly at each other, and the father did a little three-step victory dance – Right, Left, Back. "*It's not fair*!" thought Timmy.

He looked around, looking for a break in the crowd, something to stand on to see over them, ANYTHING. "*Nothing. Crap*."

"Wait. Something." A guy in a blue button-down shirt and tan khakis, looking at him. Smiling at him. Timmy did not like being noticed. He was good at avoiding it, and he was good at feeling eyes on him. He could always feel the weight of Mrs. Groomer's regard as she studied him like a specimen under a microscope. But he had never felt those eyes, never noticed this man. And he should have. This sparrow in his business casual just did not fit with this flock of gaudy, bare-legged Macaws. But even more, this guy just weirded him out for some reason. That smile. A shark's smile.

Timmy moved away from the man. The man moved along with him, staying between Timmy and the crowd. Smiling. Boom!! Another explosion, this one feeling like it went off inside his head. The man moved toward Timmy, and Timmy looked around wildly for help. But everybody was watching the fireworks, and no one would hear him over the explosions even if he screamed.

As the man approached, he seemed to flicker, like a failing fluorescent light. Timmy bolted for the door that led into the interior of the pier, watching the man out of

the corner of his eye. The flickering intensified, then slowed down, and the man slowly changed from the average Joe in khakis and a button-down shirt into something so obscene that Timmy felt his gorge rise into his throat, tasted bile filling his mouth and nostrils. The flicker had been too quick for the image to register on his conscious mind, but some part of Timmy *knew.*

"*Christ. Christ. Christ*," he thought. What the Hell is it? He was running as fast as he could now, trying to go even faster, clumsy with fear and overexertion. He raced straight through the building, no idea where he was going. Just running. Just AWAY. Away from that!! He heard the fireworks now only as muffled thuds. Much louder were the sounds of his heartbeat, the blood pounding in his ears and the panting of his labored breaths. And louder still were the measured footsteps behind him. Gaining.

He looked back, still running, saw only an Average Joe with a shark's smile. When Timmy looked ahead again, a door appeared in front of him, and people he barely registered. He hit the crash bar at full speed, half stunning himself and flinging the door open so hard that it crashed into a wall. He nearly fell, managed to regain his balance, and stumbled into a dimly lit parking structure.

SHADOW

On a soft summer evening in Chicago, shadows fall. True to my name, I move from shadow to shadow, still shadowing the demon. He hadn't spotted me yet, partly because I'm really sneaky, partly because he was preoccupied with finding a human to eat, and partly because demons tend to be pretty stupid. Of course, when you are a supernatural being made of magic and standing about eight foot-six, with razor sharp

claws and great dripping fangs, you don't necessarily need to be Einstein. Stupid was just fine by me. The last thing in the world that I need is the MacGyver of Demonland.

Stupid had led me a merry chase through the tourist attractions of Chicago – the Loop, Millenium Park, the Lakefront, the Museum Campus, Michigan Avenue from the Art Institute to the Magnificent Mile to the Hancock building. Even the Blue Angels made an appearance. I was footsore, and my tongue was hanging out. I was so pissed that I would have gladly killed him even if he weren't a demon. But Stupid was keeping to crowded areas, where I couldn't cut him out and cut him down.

Now Stupid led me to Navy Pier. The sunset was long gone, and night had fallen. As usual on beautiful summer nights, the place was packed with tourists and Chicagoans looking to ride the Ferris Wheel, see a show at the Shakespeare Rep, catch a dinner cruise, or just enjoy the view. Enjoying the view was the last thing on my mind. All I could think of was "Which one?"

Which one? Which of these happy, carefree people was going to be Demon Chow? Would it be that nice young family from Indiana with the pretty Mom, the serious Dad and Big Brother holding his Little Sister's hand so she wouldn't get lost? Was it the heavily inked twenty-something couple headed to the beer garden to listen to some live music? Perhaps the teen-aged skateboarder in the standard uniform of baggy plaid shorts, T-shirts and billed caps. There were thousands of people here, thousands of lobsters in the tank. There was just no way of knowing which one was going to be the main course. Even though this demon seemed pretty stupid, it could spot me at any time. I didn't really fit in with the crowd, and I knew it. Years of practice had made me good at it, but my cover could be blown at any moment. If it was, and if I had to deal

with The Authorities, the demon could slip away and dine at leisure.

As if I didn't have enough to worry about, I was beginning to have a nagging doubt in the back of my mind. Was Stupid just a Tourist or had been summoned. Look, it's freaking hard to get from Demonland to Chicago. The Veil – the wall between their plane and ours -- is virtually impenetrable, other than at the Seam. But the Seam is very well guarded. Stupid had not come that way.

Once in a while, a demon can get here when a temporary fissure randomly splits the Veil and a demon gets involuntarily sucked through to our plane. Those demons are what we call Tourists. They are the least powerful and the most stupid of demons. Stupid fit both of those criteria, which initially made me think he was a Tourist, just here to see the sights and have a good meal.

The most common way for a demon to get here is to be summoned by a Black Adept – a human sorcerer in league with the Grey World. Those demons are often smarter and more powerful than Tourists. But demons that are summoned are so bound by spells and compulsions that they are in a big hurry to do the sorcerer's bidding, since agony typically ensues if they dilly-dally. Stupid had not seemed to be in a hurry since I had picked up his trail, which made me think that he had not been summoned.

And yet. There were things that didn't add up. When Stupid came up the stairs from the Metra station, I could have sworn he was already licking his chops. When his head had whipped around at Madison and Dearborn, I thought for sure he had found his prize lobster, and would attack within minutes. "*Why hadn't he*?" I wondered. "*Could he have been tracking one person all day long*? *Demons just don't do that, unless they are summoned and ordered to do it.*" I shook my head. "*No way of knowing for sure. Back to*

work, Shadow." I looked around for a secluded spot where I could kill Stupid in private, without scaring the Muggles. Nothing.

Then I looked back at the Demon. "*Damn! Too late*!" The demon had at last found his lobster and was getting ready to heat up the drawn butter and tie on the bib. The dead giveaway was that its huge phallus was beginning to stiffen. This is a bit odd, as demons in their actual form don't have genitalia. Likewise, the forms that they assumed in our world didn't have genitalia either, until about fifty years ago. But once demons discovered penises, they became *obsessed* with them, and the stupider the demon, the more they thought bigger was better. Much like teenaged boys. At any rate, when it comes to the stupidest, weakest demons, the ones that we generally see on Earth, a stiffy is an unmistakable early warning sign of demon attack. Not to the crowd on Navy Pier, of course, who saw only a khaki-clad Average Joe. I, on the other hand, could simultaneously see the Average Joe, the Creature from the Black Lagoon with the chubby to end all chubbies, and the demon's actual form. Call it visual multitasking. Basically, it's just that magic doesn't work on me.

Stupid was moving quickly and purposefully now, his erection preceding him by a fair bit. He was driving his prey to a secluded spot where he could kill at leisure. "*Shit!*" I thought. "*I screwed up*. *Now I'm going to have to do this on the fly*, *and somebody might die for my mistake*."

The nightly fireworks show had started. People were gathered on the south side of the pier, clumped together and watching the skyrockets explode. Their attention was so taken up with the flashes and booms that they had none to spare for the demon or me. That suited me just fine. I had no time to try to blend in now.

West down the pier we went, past the tour boats and Pavilion and the beer garden and the kitsch emporiums. The demon turned right and headed through the main structure, jostling aside the Average Joes in his eagerness to consume. He burst through a crashbar door, almost taking it off its hinges. I ran after him. It was too late now to worry about busting my cover. I had to get between him and his victim. I went for the door. "*Crap."* There was a cop standing right in front of the closed door. His face was bright red and the kevlar vest he wore under his light blue shirt could barely contain his impressive gut. He spotted me right away. Knew I didn't belong. "Whoa, boy," he said, holding his hand out. "What are *you* doing here?"

"*You're just hassling me because I'm black,*" I thought. But I stopped and tried to look innocent and friendly. I make it a habit not to piss off cops, but he was blocking the door, and I was desperate. I would take him down if I had to. Someone was about to die horribly, and it was my fault. Irreplaceable seconds passed. "*God. Damn. It."*

TIMMY

Timmy ran full-tilt down the lane between the lines of parked cars. The rhythmic slap of running footsteps came from behind, getting closer and closer. He darted between the parked cars to the next lane and dove to the ground, crawling past the rear ends of several cars and then under a Camry, one eye peeping out from behind the rear wheel.

His body wanted to curl up into a ball, but there wasn't enough room under the car. Besides, he knew in his heart that hiding wouldn't do any good. It was eventually going to find him. His only hope lay in making a break for it, trying to outrun it until he

could join a crowd of people. "*Where it probably couldn't kill me," he thought. "Christ, I am such an idiot, panicking and letting it chase me here. Exactly where it wants me.*"

Timmy tried to catch his breath, not easy when he didn't dare make a sound. He strained his ears to the limit, heard faint metronomic footsteps. They came from the lane he had originally run down*. "Crap. It's still between me and the doorway," he thought.* The doorway back to light and people. And life.

He could hear it more clearly now, soft footsteps and an odd, wet *sniffing* sound. "*What the hell is it,"* he wondered*. "And when did I start thinking of it as 'it' instead of 'him'".* But he knew somehow that "it" was right. Timmy peeked out from behind the Camry's rear driver's tire, just far enough to see the lane it was walking down. Closer, closer …. Just then, it loomed into view between the cars, lizard head brushing the ceiling, smiling that same shark's smile. Timmy went cold. Reason fled. "*Oh Christ! Oh Christ! Oh Christ! No! No!"* He found himself on his feet, without knowing how he got there. Warm piss was splashing down his legs. His legs pumped spastically, trying to get him away from what he had just seen. When his joints and muscles finally coordinated, he had to fight to keep from puking as he ran. He felt disjointed and uncoordinated and . . . unreal – the way you do in your worst nightmares. "*It's SO BIG!! AND SO WRONG!!! It has to be 10 feet tall, and its guts are on the outside, wiggling like worms in a corpse. Christ . . . Christ . . . Christ*!"

SHADOW

Just as I was getting set to knock the cop ass over teakettle, the door opened behind him as some people entered. He glanced back, distracted, and that was all I needed. I shot through the door. I wasn't worried about him following me. Chicago's

Finest are not known for their fondness for foot chases at the best of times, and this guy was dragging around about seventy pounds of Krispy Kremes. He was not far away -- maybe thirty yards of running -- from a massive myocardial infarction. He wasn't going anywhere.

I ran out into the parking structure as fast as I could, knowing that I might already be too late. It was almost deserted. I followed the nauseating tang of rotten meat. "*There*!" A ways down the parking structure, by the dim lights, I could see the Demon. He was walking slowly away from me down the line of SUVs, mini-vans and sedans. He looked to his left, and his forked black tongue darted out, tasting the air for the scent of his prey. He was making his presence very obvious, walking slowly up the line of cars where his prey had gone to ground.

This was a standard part of the stalk. Demons prefer their food with a bit of seasoning, bright vibrant life force liberally sprinkled with terror, shock, despair, agony, helplessness and pretty much any other negative emotion you can name. So at the end of the stalk, the demon always lets the victim know what's coming. In this case, the victim would see an eight-foot, bug-ugly juggernaut with slimy blue-gray viscera on the outside of its body. The "inside-out" look had become very popular in recent years in the highly derivative world of demon manifestation.

The horror show sure worked on the intended victim. I could smell the fear from where I stood at the other end of the garage, then the unmistakable odor of urine as he broke cover. He lurched to his feet in a jerky, uncoordinated panic-run, arms and legs pumping out of sync, breath coming in ragged gasps. "*Christ, he's just a kid!"* I thought. Dressed in worn-out shorts, and a faded T-shirt. I caught just a glimpse of mousy brown

hair over a very white face as he shot out from between two cars and raced for the garage exit. Away from me*. "Not that way, kid,"* I thought*. "That's exactly the way he wants you to go."* To the deserted north "back" side of the pier, with no people and no help and no hope. The north side was the service side, with loading docks and dumpsters. It was mostly used by deliverymen during the day, but at this time of night, with the fireworks going off, it was deserted. The demon took off after the small running figure, catching up hand-over-fist. I followed, running flat out, out of the garage and into the night. "*Faster, you sonofabitch!"* I told myself*. "Faster!"*

The boy and the demon were headed east, away from people and safety. There would be no escape now. The kid was well and truly trapped. He stopped, wedged himself in between two dumpsters, then turned to face the demon. He pulled a two-by-four from one of the dumpsters. The kid had guts, I had to give him that. He had a piss stain spreading across the front of his shorts, but he was still standing when most grown men would have been on their knees, whimpering. I'd seen it happen. "*Faster, goddamit*."

TIMMY

Timmy had no idea where he was running to. His body had bolted and his mind could not catch up. He shot down the lane behind the Camry and out the parking lot exit to the back of the pier. *Deserted.* He turned right, asking his exhausted, hungry, adrenaline-depleted body for more speed. Speed it just did not have. He could hear it behind him clearly now, closing fast and chuckling. Fireworks were going off, faster now, approaching the finale. "*It can't still be going on," Timmy thought. "It feels like I've been running and hiding for hours."*

His legs were trembling, and he was down to a limping jog now. It was right behind him, chuckling. Timmy looked around. No place to run, no place to hide. But to his right were two dumpsters set against the back of the building, a small space between them. He squeezed himself between them, turned around to face the nightmare. "*This is where I make my stand,*" he thought. "*This is where I die*."

To his surprise, Timmy was calm now. He knew he was already dead, so he had nothing to lose. He felt the breeze on his face, saw the lake all around him. He remembered that morning, his feet in the lake as he sat in the sun on the edge of the world, content. He thought about that night on the pier, where he had discovered Beauty and Happiness. He was glad he had done that before he died. Glad that he could think about those things now, instead of the Groomers. He felt now as he had earlier that night, more alive than he had ever been before. He breathed in the cool night air.

The fireworks were reaching their climax now, and though he could not see the fireworks themselves over the building behind him, he could see the flashes in the sky and hear the reports as they went off. And he could see IT approaching, slowly now. In no hurry, knowing the quarry had nowhere to go. Strobe-lit by the firework flashes above, it looked surreal. Gigantic. Slimy bluish guts hanging off its body, fangs dripping iridescent green slaver, long claws and joint spines extending and retracting, extending and retracting as it approached. Chuckling.

It was weird! He should have been more scared than ever, but he found that he was just plain out of fear. And its dick!! It was just ridiculous, massively erect, jutting out so far in front that Timmy couldn't understand how it could walk without tipping over. He

almost had to laugh. It reminded him of Mr. Groomer, strutting around the house sporting one "accidentally" through his robe. "*They're all the same*," he thought.

"You're all the same," he shouted at it. "Come and get me, Chuckles." He couldn't even hear himself over the detonations. He doubted Chuckles could. He pulled a length of two-by-four out of a dumpster "*What the hell am I doing*?" he thought. Then he was advancing out from between the dumpsters, two-by-four at the ready. "*Am I actually attacking this thing?"* he wondered. Now he really did have to laugh, for real. "*Better to die this way*," he thought. Laughing.

The fireworks were going crazy now, the flashes strobing faster and faster, and in their light, Timmy saw something. At first, he thought it was just a moving shadow, cast by the flashes overhead. But it was moving way too fast to be a shadow. And it was coming straight towards him. It was jet black except for its teeth, which were very white. A dog? A dog!! It was practically flying across the ground, faster than he could believe. It was almost on them before Chuckles became aware of it, and started to turn towards it. At that moment, Timmy's eyes met the dog's for just a split-second, and in that moment, his head reverberated to a song that seemed somehow familiar, though he couldn't quite place it: "roar of thunder, fighting those who rob and plunder." It was too much. Timmy blacked out.

SHADOW

The Demon had slowed down now that he had brought his prey to bay. He was outlined clearly against the full moon that had risen over Lake Michigan to the east. He was enjoying this, relishing the moment. He circled around the kid slowly, surrounded

by a reeking miasma of burnt sugar, rotten meat, and brimstone, trying to distill a few more ounces of agony out of the stalk. The fireworks had reached their crescendo, multicolored flashes and resounding air detonations.

And then, unbelievably, this skinny, undersized kid with the mousy hair and the too-white face stepped out from between the dumpsters. Started *advancing* on the demon, striding out with the two-by-four held in front of him in both hands like a katana. His teeth were bared and his eyes were crinkled up. "*What the hell? Holy shit!! He's laughing. He's laughing at the demon*." I was close enough now to hear the laughter, to hear the scorn in his voice. The contempt. And as he laughed, a veil seemed to fall away from him and he *shone.* To my eyes, he shone brighter than the full moon. "*Who is this kid? What is this kid?"*

The wind was blowing in off the lake, and I could smell the demon and its evil and its foulness. I could smell the boy and his exhaustion and I could feel his courage and despair. The battle rage took me then. The hatred and loathing for the demon rose into my throat like bile, and the Love for this brave shining boy seized my heart, and I flew. Everything seemed to slow down. Stupid had finally sensed me through the fog of hatred and hunger and lust and stupidity, and it was turning to face me. "*Too fucking late, demon*." I could smell its sudden spike of fear, see the fear in its eyes.

"*Recognize me? Good. Have a taste of your own medicine."*

Still going flat-out, I leaped at him, aiming to add insult to injury. As my feet left the ground, I glanced toward the kid. For just a heartbeat, our eyes met, and I saw hope flash in his eyes where there had been no hope before. Then The Song filled my head and my heart, as it always does before battle. "*Speed of lightning, roar of thunder,*

fighting all who rob or plunder, Underdog, ooh -ooh -ooh -ooh, Underdog, Underdog."

My jaws closed around that gigantic ectoplasmic tallywhacker, and bit most of the way through the root. Then, with the momentum of my leap and a savage twist of my head, I tore it off in shredded, goo-dripping tatters, and contemptuously spat it to the ground. The demon shrieked in pain and rage and fear. It tried to rake me with its talons, but I wasn't there anymore. I was already behind it, taking it behind the knee and hamstringing it. As it crashed to one knee, I was already at its throat, tearing through its neck and ripping its head clean off its torso. And just like that, it was over. The demon collapsed to the ground in a puddle of ectoplasmic goo, which smoked and bubbled briefly, then evaporated, leaving nothing behind.

I checked on the boy. He had crumpled to the ground, the two-by-four still in his hand. Out cold. But still breathing! He would be okay.

And so, amid the strobing flashes and the detonations of the fireworks, I lifted my head and howled at the full moon rising above Navy Pier, casting its light over the surface of Lake Michigan. I was filled up with light. I howled that light up at the moon as it cast its light down at me. I felt about to burst with joy, because I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that I was a GOOD DOG.