

The First

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Donna Lee was squatting on the sidewalk, forehead wrinkled with concentration as she painted in long, thick lines with sidewalk chalk.

Suddenly her streak of bright yellow encountered a barrier of darkness. A shadow.

Frowning, Donna Lee looked for the owner of the shadow, but when she raised her gaze she saw that she was still alone.

Curiously, she abandoned her chalk and reached a hand out to touch the formless darkness. Her tiny white palm rested on the hard surface of the sidewalk. It was cool. Strange. She moved her hand outside of the shadow. The concrete was warm from the summer sun. Moving her hand back into the range of the shadow the chill almost shocked her into pulling her hand away. She forced herself to keep her hand flat on the concrete, feeling the little bumps and dips of the cement as she looked around for a source.

The shadow looked kind of like a cloud, but there were no clouds. It looked sort of like a rabbit, but there were no animals nearby. Unlike normal shadows this one bore no attachment to a solid object. No attachment to reality.

Donna Lee was about to call it a lost cause, give up and return to her chalk drawings, perhaps on the other end of the driveway, where strange shadows didn't lurk about, when the shadow *touched* her. She yelped and pulled her hand back, staring at it intently. No mark. Cautiously she returned her hand to the ground.

There. A gentle tendril of smoky darkness reached up, caressed her hand hesitantly, then pulled away. Fascinated, Donna Lee did not move. Donna Lee kept her hand as still as she possibly could.

"What are you, little guy?" she asked, using her talking-to-animals-or-kids-much-littler-than-she-was voice. There was no direct answer, but the shadow did reach up another tentative finger, wrapping it around Donna Lee's wrist so gently that it may as well have not existed.

A third tendril wove itself so intricately around Donna Lee's pinky finger that she giggled. It made her skin look like a zebra; dark imposed over light in various stripes. And now she realized that when the shadow touched her some of it *left* the ground. The blob was smaller, and growing smaller still as the shadowy mist wove its way up her arm, over her elbow and shoulder. Vaguely, Donna Lee thought that perhaps this was wrong. Perhaps she should pull away. Perhaps mother would disapprove of playing with a shadow on the sidewalk that seemed to have grown a mind of its own. But she remained still, the force of curiosity keeping her rooted to the spot. She was not afraid, as she supposed her mother would be. The wispy shadow was too fantastic and surreal to incite fear, even as it swirled away from the concrete.

And suddenly the shadow was gone. The sidewalk glared up at her, a shiny gray that reflected the sunlight. The entire blob had migrated onto her skin, creating fantastic mosaical patterns that she stared at in awe. Then, she felt something new – a sudden presence, as real as if her mother had stepped onto the front porch. Except when she looked around she was still alone.

Will you be my first? The thought popped into her head on its own accord, making her jump, the first tickle of fear teasing her stomach. The thought did not belong to her, but it had not been spoken aloud either.

Someone was in her mind.

“Who are you?” Donna Lee whispered, her eyes falling to the shadowy pattern on her arms and legs.

Will you be my first? The voice repeated, and Donna Lee thought that she could sense an edge of desperate hope to that voice. Sensed also that the voice, whatever it was, belonged to the shadow. A little of her fear ebbed – after all, how dangerous could a shadow be?

“Your first what?”

My first home on this side.

“On what side?”

This side. The other side. The new side.

That gave Donna Lee pause. She didn’t know what it meant to be a home. A home was a house, with a bedroom and a kitchen and a mother that read you bedtime stories. It was not a six-year-old girl who spent summer days alone with sidewalk chalk.

I will keep you company, the shadow said, as if reading her thoughts.

“You’ll play with me?” Donna Lee asked. She had never had a playmate before.

Yes.

She hesitated. “Okay, then,” she said. “I can be your home.”

And the shadow shuddered and seeped deeper and deeper into Donna Lee’s ivory skin until it had vanished completely.

Thank you, the voice in her head said.