

MAN OF SHADOW

by Larry Edwards

*"... and the words of the prophets
are written on the subway wall. . ."
"Sounds of Silence"
Simon and Garfunkel*

My name is Willie Jeremiah Mantix—or at least that had been my name before I became a shadow, when I was made flesh and blood like the rest of you—now I'm just plain old Willie. Willie the shadow. Yeah, it's true. I am a shadow.

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that ole' Willie boy ain't quite right in the head; and you're thinking that if ole Willie boy is a shadow, then how comes he's atalking to me. Well, I'll answer that question. You see, you don't exist either. You're not here. You're not even a shadow like me. I know. It's true. You don't become a shadow until you come to understand that you don't exist. When you can say to yourself, "I don't exist", then you'll know. Then you'll be a shadow like me.

I can see you don't believe me. That's okay. I didn't believe it at first neither. I was just as skeptical then as you are now. But I learned different. I soon found out what it meant not to exist. What it was like to be a shadow.

When I first came here I was, like I said a minute ago, pretty much like you. I had a family—or at least I thought I did—and I had what I thought was a golden opportunity. You know—the old American Dream; two cars, a thirty-year mortgage on a twenty-year house, meat six times a week. You know. That's what I miss most about being a shadow and knowing the truth. The meat. What I wouldn't give for a juicy, tender T-bone steak right now!

You see, even now I sometimes forget that I'm a shadow and that other stuff isn't real. Sometimes . . . yeah, sometimes it hurts to know the truth; and even the truth can't keep you from wondering about it every now and then.

Yes, sir, you can't help but to think about it now and then. It's enough to drive you crazy until you say to yourself that even your thoughts aren't real! Then you can exist with them knowing that they aren't real and never were.

When I first came here I was all set on conquering the world; I was going to make it sit up and take notice of old Willie boy. But it didn't. No sir, it didn't. Didn't pay the least bit of attention to me. It was as if I didn't exist.

And my wife—or at least what I used to call my wife. You see, she never existed either. Just lived inside my head like the rest of the world—anyway, my wife started telling me to make people notice me. Urged me to do things. So, you know what I did? I quit my job. Yes, that's what I did. I quit my job.

You might think that that was a pretty stupid thing to do if I wanted people to notice me, but it wasn't. No sir, it sure wasn't. For one thing my wife noticed me, though not in the way I imagined she would. She couldn't understand why I had quit what she called a golden opportunity—a job where I could rise to become the twenty-second junior vice-president in only five or thirty years. You see, she never could understand about how things are. Guess I didn't either, then. But I do now. Oh yes. I do now.

Anyway, she just kept on nagging me to go back and beg for my old job, but I had what they used to call pride. I just couldn't bring myself to crawl back. So I told her that; but she didn't understand. Instead, she asked me to think about her, her and our son.

I didn't tell you about him, did I? That's because he never existed either. He, like the rest of them, was just my imagination playing tricks on me. They weren't real.

Yes, she told me to think about her and him; about how I should be taking care of them the way I had promised her I would. What could I do? I sucked in my pride and went back; and no one even knew who I was!

When I told them I had come back for my old job, they just stared through where I was standing like I wasn't even there. At first I didn't understand, so I just waited for them to say something. But they didn't. Not for that whole morning. The people would just walk around me; not looking at me or anything.

Well, I'll tell you one thing. I was confused; that is until I saw this new man walk into the office and take my old desk—just sat down there like it was made just for him! Though I didn't know it then, that was my first hint that I didn't exist; but I was too stupid to realize it then.

I went back to my thirty-year mortgage, twenty-year house and told my wife. She liked to have bitten my head off. Then she started crying and moaning, clutching her breast and hanging her head like she was dying. Then she started calling me names—all kinds of names that don't mean nothing now; but they did then.

I took her in my arms, but she kind of threw me away from her—like I was just an old dress that she had worn out—and told me not to touch her, that she couldn't stand the thought of being touched by a loser! Again, what could I do? I didn't know any better.

Feeling the tears in my own eyes, I begged her to give me another chance, that I'd get a better job than the one I'd had. She was all smiles then, and she let me take her back into my arms for a little while; then she shoved me out the door, telling me that there was no time like the present. I can almost see her now—if I try hard enough—standing in the doorway, smiling and waving and saying, "Go get 'em, Tiger!"

I went, just as I told her I would. But I didn't find me a job that day. Nor the next. Nor the next for that matter. In fact, I never did find me a job. Even after seven weeks of constant searching I never found me a job—not the kind that my wife wanted me to have.

You see, she wanted me to get a job with potential; where I could rise, and subsequently, she could rise. But when I went to those kind of places they acted like I wasn't there either.

Oh, at first they would talk to me, asking me all kinds of questions like, "Why did I leave my last job?", and "Just exactly what are you looking for?" But when I found that I couldn't really answer them, they stopped looking at me; kind of like I was quietly and slowly fading away. At each interview I must have faded more and more because at the end of the third week my wife started to stop noticing me. She wouldn't answer me when I talked to her; and when I took her in my arms at night she just lay there; her face kind of twisted like she was having a nightmare or something. It made me feel funny; not knowing what was happening, not knowing what to do.

The fourth week of looking for a job and not finding one came and went, and as it did I found that more of me was disappearing with each new failure. It got so that the people on our block would look the other way when I met them; or they wouldn't answer when I said good morning. And my wife had stopped cooking dinner for me. But that was alright; I started eating carrots and apples and stuff like that, so I really never missed the food.

Did I tell you that every once and a while I thought about meat, although I know that it never existed? I did? Funny, I can't remember. Just goes to show you that you don't exist, else I would have remembered that, wouldn't I have?

Anyway, the fifth week I found a place where the people could still see me a little bit. I got a job in an all night gas station. It didn't pay much, but it kept food on the table.

Oh, I remember coming home and telling my wife I had found a job. It's funny, but somehow my finding that job made her able to see me—but just for a moment. Until I told her what kind of a job it was. Then I faded completely from sight again, because no matter how much I tried to talk to her, she'd not be able to hear or see me.



Then came the night when the station was robbed. I was knocked unconscious by one of the robbers, and while I lay there on the floor, they opened the cash drawer and took all the money. But they didn't get far. In fact, they were caught before they could get off the drive.

You see, the owner of the station had a little deal with the police captain of the neighborhood. If the captain would send all the police cars to the station for gas and maintenance, then the owner'd send him a little contribution each month—sort of like a thank you card, only this one was green. Anyway, a police car had just driven onto the drive—it was “thank you” time—and had seen the robbers stealing the money.

Of course they captured the robbers. Afterwards they called the owner and told him about the attempted robbery. It didn't take him but five minutes to get there.

All this time I was still lying there on the floor, half conscious and feeling like I was in a dream of some kind, and no one was paying any attention to me. Even when the owner arrived. Instead of asking me how I felt, he counted the money and checked it against the books to see if the police had kept any of it.

I moaned a couple of times, but they still didn't see me, so I grabbed one of the policemen's feet. He must have thought that a dog had bit him or something, because all he did was to kick backwards with his foot. But he missed. That was because all the while they were standing there I was gradually beginning to fade away even more.

Finally realizing that they weren't going to see me, I managed to stumble to my feet and started to walk home. It didn't take me long. Perhaps an hour. Perhaps a year. It really doesn't matter how long it took me, because it never really happened in the first place.

Anyway, after a while I got home, way before I was supposed to be home. I put my key into the door and found that it wasn't locked, but I didn't think anything about it. I just opened the door and went inside, not bothering to turn on the lights.

As I approached the bedroom I heard my wife crying or laughing—I couldn't tell which—they both sounded alike. Perhaps she was having a dream. Or a nightmare.

I started to turn away, but I heard another voice; a deeper, more masculine voice. It was laughing. And my wife's voice was laughing. And the other. And my wife's.

I opened the door, and there on the bed was my wife and a man I had never seen before. I started to say something, but I couldn't think of anything to say; that is, nothing appropriate to say. I just stood there, hoping that they wouldn't see me, wishing that they would so that they could explain to me what was happening to my life—to me.

But I shouldn't have worried. They couldn't see me. They couldn't see me nor hear me, even if I yelled at them. You see, I was standing in their shadow; I was in the bedroom's shadow, in the house's shadow, in the world's shadow.

I think it was about then that I began to understand how things really were, but I was still confused. Closing their door so they wouldn't be interrupted, I tiptoed from the house and began walking—walking and thinking

I thought I knew why the people hadn't been able to see me when I had gone to all those interviews. I was sitting in someone else's shadow; the shadow of the person who had last had the job. And when I stood or sat in someone's shadow, I became part of that shadow. I became that shadow!

I walked, and thought, for the rest of the night; not returning home until well into the day. When I got there, I noticed something funny. There were cars all around my house. And people. And an ambulance was shrieking away; its lights flashing and its siren crying like a lost soul.

This time I made sure I stood in no one's shadow! I hurried to the crowd and passed through them like I was made of smoke; until I came to a policeman who was holding the others back. He grabbed my arm and said, "Alright buddy. That's far enough!"

But as I said, this time I made sure I wasn't standing in anyone's shadow. Pulling free of him, I shouted that I was the owner of the house. People in the crowd echoed my voice and the policeman let me through.

Inside the house was another policeman, and he had his arm around my wife's shoulders. She was screaming and pulling her hair.

When I asked what was going on, she shrieked again and leapt to her feet, her finger pointing at me like a gun, "It's your fault, you bastard! It's all your fault! If you had been home when you should have been, he wouldn't have gone outside to wait for you! He wouldn't have been crushed by that car!"

She collapsed into the policeman's arms and I began to feel myself start to fade away again, only this time I knew that the job would be complete; that I'd fade until there was nothing left of me. I looked at my wife's face, and at the policeman's face, then at my son's picture on the wall.

I turned and walked from the house, stopping at the street, and seeing that red smear on the pavement. That red smear and a tiny, torn teddy bear. That was all that was left of my Son! No! I couldn't be!

A hand touched my arm and I jumped. It was the policeman who had been holding the people back. He had a sad look on his face and his mouth looked like it was struggling to get the words out, words that it didn't like the taste of, "I'm sorry, but I've just got word from the hospital. He never made it."

When he said that I felt myself fade completely away. It was then that I knew that what most—what everyone but me—calls reality, doesn't really exist! I had never had a son! Not a son who was only a red smear on the pavement! And I had never had a wife who slept with other men, who would lie with others while my son was being made into a crushed heap of bones and flesh and blood!

Suddenly everything was clear. There was no reality! There was nothing! Just shadows! And that's why you don't exist. You're just the product of a shadow, a shadow which doesn't exist! And the tragic thing about it is that you don't know. But how could you, when you don't even exist to know that?

I'm sorry. I can't continue. Even though I know that you don't exist, even though I'm a shadow, I can't help thinking about things which never were—and about how much I miss them! Oh, the pain—the pain of Knowledge! Of remembering a son who never was and will never be! The pain of being a shadow.