

8-29-2014

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## Recommended Citation

O'Wain, Randal (2014) "Shadow Play," *Booth*: Vol. 6: Iss. 8, Article 5.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/booth/vol6/iss8/5>

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## **Abstract**

Before Bobby vanished, him and me sold plastics to the Shade Point PD in exchange for candy corn, chocolate bars, and chewing gum. Our go-to guy, Lieutenant Hurns, was a two-ton boa constrictor with jack o' lantern eyes, but he always took our goods. I'd known The Boa since my days on the force, back before I got canned. Back before I became a private eye and took up the junk trade. We scavenged, mostly—Bobby and me. Dumpsters, vacant houses, and the occasional big lift from department stores kept us in steady supply. Usually we got The Boa strong fibered stuff like Honey Walkers, Catalina Black Cats, and Potato Heads. I prided myself on doing good business. Treat a customer right and he'll come back—that's what Sarge always said...



August 29, 2014

## Shadow Play

Fiction by Randal O'Wain

**B**efore Bobby vanished, him and me sold plastics to the Shade Point PD in exchange for candy corn, chocolate bars, and chewing gum. Our go-to guy, Lieutenant Hurns, was a two-ton boa constrictor with jack o' lantern eyes, but he always took our goods. I'd known The Boa since my days on the force, back before I got canned. Back before I became a private eye and took up the junk trade. We scavenged, mostly—Bobby and me. Dumpsters, vacant houses, and the occasional big lift from department stores kept us in steady supply. Usually we got The Boa strong fibered stuff like Honey Walkers, Catalina Black Cats, and Potato Heads. I prided myself on doing good business. Treat a customer right and he'll come back—that's what Sarge always said.

Two days had passed since me and Bobby fought over priorities. Bobby wanted to diversify, and I wanted to stay the boss.

"We gotta beef up our angle," he'd said. "Every urchin out there is diving for plastics."

"Beefed up, say?" What could Bobby, who weighed eighty-two pounds, possibly know about beefing?

"Norm, it's all we can do to stay afloat—"

"That's it? You're scared of The Boa," I said. "We keep his belly full, so nothing stirs."

“Yeah, well. What if I want to be boss for a change?” He kicked my desk, scuffed the white rubber of his Converse.

I turned my swivel chair to face the wall and said, “Let me alone Bobby.” He made for the door. “Not there.” I pointed to the fire escape. “There,” I said, and made him leave through the window to show him I was still boss.

Normally we hawked junk-goods on the street where no one cared what they got, just so long as they got. But later that night Bobby took a junk supply of pick-up sticks to The Boa, and that was the last time I laid eyes on him.

I needed to get this thing ironed out, and so I picked up the Campbell’s direct line and rang the loose bells on The Boa’s end. After the third jingle, he picked up.

“What do you want, Norman?” I hated his voice, shrill like a crow-call.

“Where’s Bobby?” I asked. Direct. That’s what The Boa responded to.

“Norman. Stop this, okay? Like, you know where Bobby is.”

“All I know is I sent Bobby to you and now he’s—”

The Boa coughed, and his voice turned wet. “Mom!” he yelled and dropped the line.

After that I decided to call the one person I could trust—Sarge. I rang bells on our special line, the Green Giant direct, and he picked up on the first jingle.

He said, “Norm, your mother wants you to come down and eat dinner.”

“No time to eat, Sarge. I’m in a bind,” I said. “Bobby’s missing. I called the Boa, but turned up loose leaves.” I waited to see what Sarge would say, if he knew anything or not. “I need your advice.”

The Sarge inhaled. He always inhaled when he needed me to understand something fully. “Norm.” He paused. There was some rustling, and the Green Giant cable moved up and down on my end. I imagined him lifting his glasses and rubbing the red pockmarks on his nose. He said, “When we don’t quite understand something, we have to backtrack. Retrace our steps.”

“Backtrack, say?”

“Norman,” he said. “When you find Bobby, are you prepared for what that might mean?”

“He’s my partner,” I said.

“Come down to dinner, son.”

Was he crazy? Who could eat at a time like this? *Bobby’s out there, and someone’s gotta know where.* I’d have to go to The Boa myself. I needed to think. *Retrace my steps.* The last time I saw Bobby was after our fight. He waved goodbye from the fire escape stairs. He wore a blue and red knit hat and his fur-lined bomber jacket. Something was off, though. He didn’t have on his shark-tooth necklace, but I saw him wearing it earlier that day when we played ball out front of Headquarters. Bobby only took off his lucky shark tooth when he got mad at God. He often threw heat against God, but he always told me why. Like he couldn’t play professional baseball on account of his mismatched legs. One foot stopped three inches shy of the other. He also got low on air sometimes. Once, his sister, Betty, dressed him up like some two-bit Raggedy Ann and forced him to drink tea. Halfway through an imaginary crumpet his lungs gave out, and an ambulance drove him to the hospital while he was wearing a dress and bonnet. Saddest day of my life, seeing my partner hauled away all dolled up like that.

At my desk, I turned on the world lamp and pulled out a Buck Rogers scratchpad. I wrote *Missing Shark Tooth*. Things were getting deep. I had nothing to go on and needed more clues. I wrote down *The Boa*. Shaking a cup full of throwing dice, I closed my eyes—*If not The Boa, then who?*

A knock brought me back. *One. Two. Three. One. Two.*

“Come in,” I shouted.

A woman walked in with a dropped smile and fat lips, looking like every person who ever came through my door. What this time? Lost dog? Sister out with Benny Price? Any number of woes could hang on the back of a dame in this city. She looked familiar, like I knew her from somewhere back in time—yellow summer dress, a blue apron with white paisley flowers, a mop of blond curls around her forehead. Grey eyes.

“Norman?” she said.

“That’s me,” I said.

“You have to help me understand, honey,” she said. “I need your help.”

Every person who walked through that door needed my help, and I told each one, “It’ll cost you.”

“Norman!”

“Detective Norman,” I corrected her and tapped my pencil on the edge of the world lamp.

“I see,” she said. “It’s about Bobby—”

“My partner?” I said. “What is this?”

“He’s gone, honey.”

“I know he’s gone. I’ve been racking my pool balls trying to retrace my steps. Where is he? Does The Boa have him?”

“Betty hates it when you call her that, Norman. You know she does,” the woman said.

“Betty-shmetty. Where’s Bobby!?”

There was a quick knock at the door, and Sarge walked in. Always in the nick. I had a feeling he’d dig up some dirt.

“He’s a detective,” the woman said in a grumpy tone I didn’t much care for.

Sarge nodded. He would know how to get answers out of her. “Detective Norman, I have a case for you,” he said. “It won’t be easy.”

The woman blew air from her nose like a horse neighing before the calvary charge.

“As always I accept your job with utmost care,” I said. “But as you can see I have one distressed dame to look after first.” *Treat a customer right and he’ll come back.*

“Norman! Don’t refer to me as *dame*,” the woman said.

“Detective,” Sarge said, “I know this woman, and that’s part of your assignment.”

“Bobby?” I mumbled.

Sarge nodded.

The dame turned cat eyes on Sarge and said, “James, stop!”

*She knew something, but what did she know?*

Sarge continued, “As always you’re the only one who can handle the job.”

The woman walked toward the door. “James,” she said. “In the hall.”

Sarge held a finger up to his nose, secret code for play it cool. I did the same.

The two walked out into the hall and shut the door. I turned off the lamp so I could snoop. They whispered, but I made an ear horn with my Buck Rogers scratchpad and caught some clues: *Two Bones*, and *The Miller*.

They stopped whispering. I turned the world lamp back on and waited.

“We’re ironed out,” Sarge said. “Let’s get down to business.”

The woman ran her fingers through her hair and rubbed the corners of her eyes. When she brought her hands away tears had wet her cheeks. “No one is getting down to any business until we eat and get some sleep,” she said. “That’s final.”

Sarge nodded in agreement. He squeezed her shoulder, but she jerked away from him leaving the door open on her way out.

I wanted to ask Sarge what kind of turkey business this Two Bones and Miller meant, but something cold in his eyes kept me from trusting him in that moment. The way he’d acted with the dame, something was fish-eyed, and I couldn’t risk it. Bobby’s life depended on me.

“That woman knows something,” I said.

Sarge looked flushed, sea sick—like when he and Bobby and I were out on the ferry and the Sarge barfed after a guy, asleep on the deck, crapped his pants. The man didn't wake up, or even notice. Sarge hugged iron, heaving over the deck's edge while Bobby, quick on his feet, tossed a soda in the soiled man's face. The guy jumped at Bobby. "Who are you to stop time!" the man yelled. And just like that, time stopped.

In my office, Sarge said, "Bobby isn't with us anymore."

"I had a feeling. That time jumper from the ferry?"

Sarge smiled, but he wasn't happy.

Before dawn the next morning, from out on the fire escape, I looked through the window and into the office me and Bobby shared for all those years. The lights were off, and I thought of Bobby standing where I stood, waving goodbye. It was dark inside and out. I traveled light, a leather satchel packed with a flashlight, rubber pencil, Buck Rogers scratchpad, high-quality plastics, my lucky silver dollar, and a handful of atomic fireballs.

I needed to see The Boa.

To reach his lair, I had to climb down to street level, crawl through a break in the chain-link fence, and walk up two flights on the fire escape. The other option, walking all the way around to the front, was out of the question. Back in first grade, a Jumper trapped me in shadow, and by the time I busted loose he'd managed to steal my jacket and shoes. It was Bobby's idea to never go solo down that dark path, and I hadn't set foot up the fence line ever since, except once when Bobby fell during our ballgame. Running after a fly ball, he tripped on his tall shoe and hit the ground so hard you could hear his hip smack asphalt for miles around. He slung his arm over my neck, and I shouldered him back up the fire escape to our Headquarters.

Once I reached The Boa's entrance, I jingled the bells on the Campbell's direct, but there was no answer. I tapped the secret knock with my finger and waited. *One. One. One.* Nothing. *One. One. One.* Nothing. *One*—the window flung open, and The Boa stuck his head out—long blond hair, triangle eyes.

"Norm!" The Boa said. "Like, stop. Okay. Leave me out of this." He paused, looked me over. "Whatever *this* is."

"You know where Bobby is. Now spill!"



“Stop, okay. Just cut it out,” The Boa said. “You and your stupid games.”

“This is serious. What do you know about the Miller? Or Two Bones?” I took the rubber pencil from my leather satchel. The Boa closed the window and walked out of his room.

“Not so easy,” I said. I tapped, waited, and then tapped again—*One. One. One*—but The Boa didn’t return.

Out on the street, shadows hovered around lampposts. Time Jumpers. I could feel them. Nasty like split-pea soup, dirty like the man who pooped himself on the ferry. To be safe, I kept in the light and away from walls, or bushes. Bobby had a keen ear for Jumpers; at any moment he’d turn to me and say, “Let’s go, Norman. I don’t like it here.” I’d listen because although Bobby was a year younger than me he had intuition. Christmas, a few years back, he knew exactly what Santa had brought me. When I asked him how, he just shrugged and said, “I guessed.” But I knew he had rare gifts other people often overlooked on account of his short leg. I hoped the Jumpers hadn’t found out, too.

Garbage collectors were out on the street. I pulled my hood down over my eyes—garbage men and I were on the sharp edge of a fence since I broke into their racket without paying dues. In the window of the wig shop that ran under The Boa’s place, a grey mannequin face sported a foot-tall bouffant; another had an ear-length bob like Bobby’s ma, Mrs. Tulane. They looked more robot than human.

Once the garbage men passed, I kicked at a pile of damp leaves mounded against the curb. Damp leaves held secrets. One day the crows were digging around—“What are they doing that for?” I’d asked Sarge. “They saw something shiny,” he said. From then on Bobby and me left no pile unturned, and we came out spoiled most of the time. Before bending down to investigate, I peeped around for shadows overhead. Jumpers could nab you anywhere, and *Bang!* I saw a restaurant sign—Two Bones BBQ. If I had the right Two Bones, then Bobby didn’t make it very far. The Jumpers must have had set-eyes on Headquarters, already had set-eyes on Bobby.

Two Bones BBQ sat at the intersection of Madison and Doyle. Madison had four veins for cars to drive, and Doyle had two. A stoplight changed from yellow to red, and a black Chrysler drove fast down Madison and nearly lost control when it turned too tight on Doyle just in front of me. I jumped away from the road and crouched against the building. I heard a scream like a hurt dog—high and cut short—as tires

squealed and the driver fishtailed out of there. When I looked up, expecting to find the dog, there was nothing but dark road.

As I shook the screaming tires from my mind, I brushed off the grime that muddied my knees and rear. I was glad Bobby hadn't seen me turn chicken. He needed me to be tough, especially now.

Two Bones was shut up tight. There were no store hours posted, just a dark dining room with round booth seats and big tables. The place stunk of Jumpers. Cobwebs hung around the entranceway, and empty bottles were strewn at my feet.

I left the front and ran through the dark alley that separated Two Bones from the neighboring housing complex. Around back, I found a metal dumpster full of rotting smells and cardboard boxes. But before I could investigate further, I heard the crackle of feet on dried leaves. An old man stood, rubbing his hands against the cold.

"Been shut down about four years now," he said. Loose skin hung from his neck, and his teeth moved with his lips as he talked.

"Years, say?" The shadows stretched over us.

"I remember taking my son here, when his mama had to work. Lou would set him up with a bowl of banana pudding." The old man stared up toward Doyle. "Damn shame," he said. "Bobby, I mean."

*Dirty rotten Jumper, always gaining a rise.* "What'd'ya do with Bobby!?"

"Norm, that's not fair," he said. "You know very well what happened to Bobby."

"Do I? Listen, Jumper, I'm tight with The Boa."

Looking toward the corner of Madison and Doyle, the old man seemed lost in thought. I followed his gaze down the alley. Shadows had broken in places, lighting most of the road.

"Your father's damned half-baked scheme," the old man said. "Won't tell you the truth. Don't want anybody else to say nothing. I say bullshit!" He spat on the ground.

"You won't find Bobby in this world," he told me. "That's for certain."

“Tell me what world he’s in then! You’ve had your fun.”

He said, “You want to know, Norm? Go down to the Millers. Ask them—”

“Millers!” I said. “Where’s the Miller?”

The old Jumper told me I could find the Miller at the corner of Peabody and Third. It took the better part of an hour to hike downtown. The Miller’s stone building had no windows, and if it weren’t for a little wooden sign hung over the door I would’ve barreled right past the place.

The doorknob below the Miller’s sign wiggled but didn’t give me any inches. I rubbed between the stones. Sarge always said to study cracks. The stones stopped and became an alley, but because of the building’s height no light shone down that narrow pathway. All shadow.

A tiny door was hinged inside of a larger garage gate that took up most of the alley wall. I tried my luck and found the small door unlocked. Inside were two long station wagons with no windows except for in the front. A platform elevator, held together by chains and pulleys, sat next to a stack of slender, long wooden crates.

I was getting a plug on the Miller.

Pressing the UP button on the elevator, I was raised into a blinding, bright room. When my vision cleared, I made out plastic containers of liquid pumping through large metal machines. I was so distracted at first that I didn’t notice that each fluid connected to tubes, and those tubes fed into a person. Someone had stuffed a fat man inside of a clear sleeping bag and laid him out on his back. A smell like gasoline hung around his body. I poked the man’s belly, but his fat made no waves. The man was stiff as rubber. *Zombie slaves?*

I felt a biting deep in my lungs and feared for Bobby.

An office sat across from the zombie ward. I took note of a desk and books but didn’t pilfer. Moving on, I kept my back flat to the corridor wall and soft-shoed up to a door with a large window. Inside, little white cabinets lined white walls. I held my breath deep down the way Sarge taught me and mental-named the Mets’ players until I felt brave again.

The first thing I noticed inside the room was the cold. I had chilly-bumps and could see the smoke from my lungs. Hanging on a few of the cabinet doors were clipboards and papers. One clipboard read Donna Earley and had numbers and letters written in pencil. Jumper code. Afraid that zombies sat just behind those little doors, I wanted to scam, but a clipboard next to Zombie Donna raised my hat—Bobby-Jean Tulane.

I thought of the fat man all plugged up to those machines and taking zombie juice through high-quality plastics. *Is Bobby next in line, or am I too late?* My heart hummed like the ferry engine as it pushed through the Sound. My ears rushed with a noise like water breaking open against the stern. *Them dirty Jumpers will pay if Bobby ain't Bobby-proper no more.* I jerked at the door handle with all my bones and tried to pry it open, but it was jammed. Frustrated, I planted my feet on the wall and yanked. Nothing. My leverage was all wrong. But I ain't the boss for growing moss, and so I had the good sense to nab a chair from that office I peeped down the hall.

Once I got the chair situated under the drawer, I took hold of the handle. After a few more pulls the drawer eased out with a loud squeal, and cold smoke billowed around the opening. An atomic burn swelled up from my throat, and I nearly lost the stash of fireballs I'd munched along the way when I saw Bobby zipped up in a clear sleeping bag. Sarge gave me tricks to stop the drummer boy from beating his way out of my chest—counting, breathing, naming ball players—but Bobby's face looked distorted through the milk-white plastic, grey like the mannequin heads at the wig shop, and my eyeballs pounded from the drummer's march.

"No tin-heart Jumper's turning my partner into a zombie-slave!" I yelled, and my voice echoed in the white room long after I unzipped the part covering Bobby's head. Slowly I put my hand to his mouth and felt for breath, but his face was so cold I withdrew. *Not in this world.* That's what the old Jumper had said. It all clicked, then. Bobby's body was in a frozen state, in this world, in this time, but where was his mind? I knew I had to wake him up to bring him back, *but how?*

When we scavenged, back before Bobby disappeared, I could lift him up on my back if his leg gave out. The day we fought, he refused to let me carry him home—"Let me alone," he said. "I ain't no wimp." He gripped my hand, and I shouldered him to the sidewalk before nabbing the ball from where it rolled on the other side of Doyle. He wasn't no wimp, and I never said he was. I just got used to carrying him is all. But as I gripped the plastic seam around his head and pulled. I couldn't drag him loose. He was triple weight.

“Come on, Bobby,” I said. My elbows ached in the cold as if I had a fever. “You want to be boss, you got to help me out on this.” I felt overcome with too much drumming in my body, like I might pass out from lack of air, but I didn’t give up. Instead, I climbed on the shelf where he lay to gain better leverage.

I’d never paid much attention to Bobby’s short leg. Unless you looked at his tall shoe, the one with rubber heels three inches high, you’d never know the difference. But somehow it seemed wrong to touch his short leg, naked under the plastic, and so I pushed at the other. The lower half of his body slid out and away from the shelf where he lay, but didn’t drop. Instead, as if an invisible board held him aloft, he levitated. I jumped back down on the chair. Grabbing Bobby’s feet, I yanked at him in jerky little movements, sliding his body off the shelf one inch at a time.

I’d nearly freed Bobby loose when the Miller stalked through the door wearing a white coat over a brown suit and tie. “What’s the idea, kid?” The Miller stared at me, and then Bobby. “Get away from that body!”

I held out the office chair like a lion tamer. “Don’t try and stop me,” I said, sounding confident but shaking all over. “I’ve come for Bobby.”

The Miller sidestepped my thrashing chair but took a hit in his hip. This made him bigger, and he pushed the chair into my chest. I staggered back and watched as he put Bobby’s feet back onto the shelf and zipped the plastic bag. I couldn’t stop him. I couldn’t. He stood ten feet above any man. I watched him shut Bobby back up into the wall. A loud *boom* echoed throughout the chamber.

“Listen, kid,” he said and pointed into the room. “You can’t be in here.”

The Miller had a stuttering problem. Every time he began to talk, he paused. My guess, too many years bouncing time. I had a stuttering problem once, but Dr. Horowitz cured it by making me read Sherlock Holmes out loud with marbles stuffed in my mouth.

With the chair held out against the Miller, I moved closer to Bobby’s drawer. Me and the Miller locked eyes. For a Jumper they were nice eyes—like my mother’s. I couldn’t look away. *Hypnotism*. Bobby’s way of blocking hypnotism was to close his eyes and scream.

“ABCDEFGHJKLMNOP—” I yelled with my peepers locked up tight.

“Kid. Kid!” the Miller said, shaking me. He cut the slow-stutters. Messing up his hypnotism really got him riled. I pushed the chair into his stomach and cocked back once more, landing a direct hit across his arm.

“Goddamn,” the Miller said.

I kicked his shin and hightailed it out of there—back through the Zombie Ward, down the elevator, and through the little door.

Out on Peabody, I tore rubber and reached third in no time flat. Halfway home, there was an army of filthy Jumpers in the dark parking lot of Joe’s Liquor, and I knelt in the shadow waiting for them to take me, but each Jumper shuffled under the yellow and green of Joe’s neon sun and made no moves. “Trade me out,” I yelled at the Jumpers, and a lady Jumper said, “Get on home. Ain’t no place for games and such.” The whole trek home I stayed in the shadows, but nothing happened. No Jumper came. No shadows opened. Bobby had been so close and—*poof*—I lost him. We fought over plastics. Even though Bobby hated heights, I made him leave down the fire escape to show him who was boss. Then, he got nabbed. Disappeared. Not in this world.

But then, at the corner of Madison and Doyle, in front of Two Bones BBQ, I saw Bobby standing there as if waiting on me. He wore the same bomber jacket and white shoes. My ears boomed with ocean sounds, waves on waves breaking against rock to make sand, and my voice sounded hollow, like screaming underwater, as I called, “Bobby! I’ve been combing for you.”

He said nothing, and so I said, “You got nothing to say?”

But then he ran, and I bolted after him. We passed my cousin Lucy’s house. Then we passed Bobby’s music teacher’s house. “Bobby, goddamn it!” I yelled, like the Miller had. “Stop running!” Bobby ran past Headquarters, past the fire escape and the fence line. “Bobby!” I said. “STOP.”

The kid stopped, and I saw then that it wasn’t Bobby at all, but a neighborhood boy named Ralph. “Fuck off, Norman!” Ralph said. “Mrs. Tulane give me these clothes fair and square, and they’re mine now.” He was crying and breathing heavy.

I bent over. With my hands spread across my knees, I felt icicles scrape up through my throat. “Take ‘em off, Ralph! Get outta Bobby’s clothes.”

Ralph ran home, and I didn't chase after him.

I yelled "Fuck!" and threw myself down on the street. The shadows were dark and heavy over me. "Goddamn it, Bobby—" I struck the asphalt. "Open up, you shit-stained Jumpers!" I punched and punched until I saw blood on my knuckles. And then, like a smack to the head, I remembered seeing Bobby's shark tooth on the road after he tripped. *Daft!* His shark tooth was what he went after, that night, in the road. Must've come unhitched when Bobby dove for the fly ball. Before our fight, before the Miller.

People crowded around me, looking on as I combed the scene for Bobby's lucky shark tooth among the flecks of gold and silver mixed in the asphalt, but I couldn't make out faces. A man grabbed my shoulders and tried to pull me off the ground. I swung my arms around and beat him back—"Gotta find it," I said. And below the Two Bones BBQ sign sat the pile of leaves I had noticed that morning. They looked so dark, wet, but something shined on the inside and I saw it shine. Crawling past the people, around their leather shoes and house slippers, I reached the sidewalk and dug through the leaves. They mushed like putty as I curled my fingers around a silver chain and pulled up Bobby's shark tooth.

"Norman," Sarge said and laid his weight into me. He smelled like Old Spice and sawdust and felt like a heavy blanket. "Come on," he said. "Let's go inside."

"Bobby's—" I choked and didn't say more.

Bobby's sister, Betty, squatted in front of us. "Like probably not the best idea to be in the middle of the road," she said.

Sarge lifted me off the ground. I hugged his waist and buried my face into his shirt. My breathing drew short like Bobby's would when he lost air. My mother wrapped her arms around Sarge and me. Her dress smelled like pot roast and perfume. "He's gone," I said. "Bobby's gone," I said again just to hear the words come out of my mouth. The three of them, my mother, Sarge, and Betty, pushed me toward home, toward Headquarters. I watched all of our feet moving together. Between their bodies, I could see the street, and even though we stood in shadow the Jumpers dared not move.

Randal O'Wain is a fiction writer and essayist from Memphis, Tennessee whose work appears in *The Oxford American*, *Crazyhorse*, *Redivider*, and *Hobart: another literary journal*, among others. He now lives in Iowa City where he is an MFA candidate in nonfiction at the University of Iowa.