

Billy and Me

By Peter Barnes

From More Barnes' People - Seven Monologues

Loud entrance music

Billy Alright, let me answer your question.

Jennings I haven't asked a question.

Billy I'll answer it anyway. Yes, of course, that's my wife. Would I have a maid that ugly? I may be out of touch with the common man but, by God, I can still spot a common roach.

Jennings I was only going to tell you I just saw a man-eating shark in the zoo.

Billy That's nothing. I just saw a man-eating herring in the park. And what's so great about playing the piano by ear? My grandfather was always fiddling with his whiskers. No, no, in all due modesty I really don't deserve this award. But then I have woodworm and I don't deserve that either. So where are you? Look at Lake Placid - all that water and that's only the top.

Jennings Good

Billy Your timing's off.

Jennings My timing's off! I've got three lines.

Billy Three, thirty-three or three hundred and thirty-three - that's very difficult to say without taking a breath - you're still slow. And if you're slow, I'm slow. We're a double act remember.

Jennings You're right. I'm depressed.

Billy We've had this conversation before.

Jennings We've had every conversation before. I know I'm often depressed, but today I've turned it up a notch or two. I looked out of the window this morning and saw a grey sky, grey walls, grey streets, grey coats and faces as worn as stones.

Billy Ladies and Gentlemen, meet Michael Jennings, the original black hole of fun. Take another pill, Mike. Speak to him, Major, you're his uncle.

Major Pull yourself together, Laddie. Shoulders back, feet together - fire!

Jennings I've got this feeling if I sold candles the sun would never set, if I sold coffins people would stop dying, and if it rained gold I'd be asleep under some roof.

Billy Sailing down the north face of the Eiger I've often asked myself how come I'm not on anybody's short-list. But I certainly admire the way you've refused to let success undermine your natural lugubriousness.

Jennings No jokes. I'm not in the mood.

Billy Impossible. I'm only here to make jokes. Take another pill, Ambrose.

Jennings All my life looking for something that wasn't dull and boring. When I was eleven I got bored with my parents. My mother played the piano at children's parties and took in lodgers, and my father liked to watch his fingernails grow.

Billy We've heard it all before. Aunt Agnes, say something.

Aunt Agnes Don't be silly, Michael, your parents weren't boring.

Jennings All parents are boring. One hundred and ten on the Richter scale of boredom.

Aunt Agnes Your Uncle George wasn't boring. When he retired he re-wrote hundreds of books, giving them all happy endings. Thanks to him Romeo and Juliet didn't die, Othello and Desdemona patched up their differences, and the Three Sisters got to Moscow. Uncle George was a great humanitarian.

Uncle Pat And sure his wife went bald in a cupboard, didn't she?

Billy You tell him, Uncle Pat!

Uncle Pat O'Pat to you.

Jennings I don't care about Uncle George. I feel so dull I can't even entertain a doubt. I'll turn white and die.

Billy You sound like six volumes of Dostoevsky. You're always being invited to parties.

Jennings They want to see you. Nobody would invite me without you. I just stand around using up air.

Billy True, but don't forget some of my brilliance is due to you.

Jennings *Some* of it? All of it.

Billy All of it? Take another pill, Delilah.

Jennings Yes, all of it. There's nothing you say I don't say for you.

Billy Delusions of grandeur now, matey.

Jennings No delusions, we're the same, you and me.

Billy Don't flatter yourself, Jeffrey. We're chalk and cheese, oil and vinegar, Cain and Abel. Anyone with a pair of ears can tell that. We're absolutely, totally, unutterably - God that's a hard word to say when you're playing a nose-flute - different. Hey, maybe we should do the act with you playing a nose-flute through your left nostril? Think you could cope?

Aunt Agnes No, please don't try it, Michael. You could do yourself an injury.

Jennings There's no way I'm going to do anything with a flute stuck up my hooter. We're two sides of the same coin, Billy, take my word.

Billy I'll take nothing from you without wearing rubber gloves. We're different. I'm me, you're you, and never the twain shall meet.

Jennings I'm me *and* you.

Billy Take another pill, Alonso. You're unstable.

Jennings Of course I'm unstable. Everybody knows I'm unstable.

Uncle Pat Sure he's unstable.

Major Send for the MO.

Aunt Agnes Poor boy.

Jennings But I still know what I know. I created you.

Billy You what?

Jennings Created you.

Billy The ego of the man! If you walked down Lovers' Lane you'd hold hands with yourself. You couldn't create buttered turnips.

Jennings No, but I created Master Billy Benton.

Billy It's absurd. We're dealing with a fully fledged one-hundred-proof loony.

Jennings Why do I have to keep repeating it? I created you, dummy.

Billy That's a terrible thing to say. I'm really upset, Arthur.

Jennings Of course you're upset. I'm upset so you're upset. How many times do I have to tell you? You're as thick as two planks - in fact you are two planks!

Billy And that comes from a man with the IQ of a dead trout.

Aunt Agnes Now, now, boys.

Jennings No, this is between Billy and me. Don't anyone interrupt.

Billy Just when did this act of God take place?

Jennings When I was ill.

Billy When you were inside for your breakdown, you mean. So that's when you created us is it? One fine day you said BANG ...and there we were.

Jennings No, it took years. He-ah-oh, he-ah-oh, he-ah-oh, trying to speak clearly, ah-oh-he, ah-oh-he, ah-oh-he, exercising my mouth, he-who-he, he-who-he, he-who-he, and my face muscles, who-he, who-he, who-he. Every morning and evening in front of the mirror learning to pronounce every word distinctly without moving my lips. Zzzzzzz-zod-zod-zod. That's how your voice was born, Billy, out of my voice. It had to be vibrant and strong. Mmmmmmmmm-ooooooo-mmmmmmm, laaaaaabaaaabambam-aaaa-mmmmm. Other exercises to strengthen the tongue, moving it around in circles in front of the teeth, biting it eight times and sticking it out six; saying words like 'she, train, town, talk, guess, next, test' and 'sack' at speed, over and over, under and over. Then bringing you to life with finger manipulation. Do you know there are five distinct movements of the lever to open your mouth to say 'Hello, how are you'? Of course you don't. It's my movements that give you life, make you Billy Benton, and you Aunt Agnes, and you Uncle O'Pat, and you Major. For every emotion

there's a different movement, sometimes two or three. When you laugh, Billy, I have to move the headstick back and forward. When you're surprised I open your mouth and move your body backwards. You can go from surprise to laughter, and back again in seconds. All the movements have to be that fast. Bolts of lightning put life into Frankenstein's Monster, with you it was sweat. My sweat made Billy Benton and the rest of the family.

Billy You've reduced Aunt Agnes and the others to silence.

Jennings I have to for the time being.

Billy Are you saying I'm just a ventriloquist's dummy?

Jennings Yes, yes, yes!

Billy But I feel real enough.

Jennings Say 'Little Billy Benton is only a dummy'.

Billy Little Billy Benton is only a dummy, little Billy Benton is only a dummy, little Billy Benton is only a dummy.

Jennings There you are.

Billy Why me? I'm just an inoffensive little fellow. Never done anyone any harm and then I have this pie thrown in my face. It's a bit of a let down and it's not worthy of you, Gregory.

Jennings But it's true.

Billy That's no excuse. Where would we all be if everyone went around telling the truth? It's horrible. This world's run on lies. Without lies we'd all be stripped bum-naked. Who could bear it? I think I speak for everyone here when I say who wants to know they're blocks of wood? Agnes doesn't nor does the Major, and certainly not Uncle O'Pat who's heard too many thick Irishman jokes already. How would you like it if some old guy with a long white beard came down and said 'Sebastian Jennings, you're nothing, you don't exist, it's all me. My hand stuck up your back controlling every action you make from the time you open eyes - that's me - of a morning, till you close them - that's me too - at night. You've no thoughts or feelings of your own, everything's me.' I mean, Carlotta, that doesn't exactly encourage personal initiative does it? Pulls the rug right out from under. You'd ask yourself 'Why bother? I've no will of my own so what's the use?' It's particularly bad for someone like me who needs his own space. I'm just on the point of maturing like good wine. But every time I try to branch out, take my own road, you fill me with stuff like the truth, just to pull me down. It's cruel, Gerald. And I'm easily hurt. You don't think of me - ever.

Jennings It's not true. When we went on that tour of Israel didn't I remember to pack a pencil sharpener for you?

Billy That's a good joke - dirty, but good. But I'm in no mood for jokes. That tells you how upset I am.

Jennings I'm sorry, Billy, but I had to do it. The more independent you get, the duller I seem. All my natural wit and exuberance goes into you. I only get invited to funerals.

Billy But according to you I'm you anyway, so what's the problem?

Jennings Psychological. The fact you're becoming more independent is a sure sign I'm becoming more schizophrenic.

Billy OK. But it's great for the act.

Jennings There are other things beside the act.

Billy Not for me, Gotlieb.

Jennings No, I guess not. What a sham identity is. I used to stand for hours in front of a mirror in Jameson Psychiatric Wing looking at myself, not believing it. No link with me and the me staring back at me.

Billy Bad times. What with your voices and all.

Jennings They were going on in all directions, babbling one after the other, accusations and insinuations every twenty seconds. I was turned upside down. The voices knew things I didn't seem to know. Voices outside of me mocking in every corner, attacking from all sides.

Billy Yes and you could've gone around like the rest of them, listening and mumbling to yourself, 'You're a liar ... I don't believe that ... Never ... No I didn't ... It's all tittle-tattle ...', talking to shop windows, trees and Number 10 buses. But you didn't. Instead you made your voices visible, made them work for you. You created Billy Benton and family, live flesh and blood or a reasonable facsimile. Isn't that right, Major?

Major Absolutely. Stout fella, Captain Jennings, didn't panic 'cept in a crisis. Fought the good fight. British grit. Came through with flying colours. Hip-hip.

Billy You'd agree with that wouldn't you, Uncle O'Pat?

Uncle Pat Why, sure, O'Billy. Michael here didn't go around casting his eyes ta heaven like a cat in a thunderstorm. God sent us ta Hell but He can't make us holler. I've got a tongue soft as a feather mattress but I'm here ta tell you we're all proud of you, lad.

Aunt Agnes You remember how we used to go around always accusing you of this and that, Michael. Nagging and complaining, always pointing out your faults, saying you cheated at cards, mugged old ladies, committed rape and murder and never took a bath. We don't say that now, dear, because you're a credit to us and yourself.

Jennings Thank you for your vote of confidence.

Billy I don't know why you need it. Top of the bill at Scarborough last summer and a TV series in the offing. What more do you want?

Jennings I'm still sick. The fact I'm talking with myself like this proves it.

Billy You're talking with Aunt Agnes and the family.

Jennings Same thing.

Billy You've done a lot despite your handicap - no, *because* of your handicap. You're an example to the rest. Mentals have their champions too you know.

Aunt Agnes Look at Miss Rosemary Miller, the catatonic who became a top artists' model. She could stand around for hours not moving a muscle - splendid person. Made a fortune.

Uncle Pat And what about Jack Flynn? So retarded he didn't qualify as a mental defective - leader writer for a Sunday newspaper isn't he? And proud of it.

Major And don't forget Harold Parker. You remember Harold from Ferguson Wing. Acute paranoid with homicidal tendencies. Left and got a job in MI5. Welcomed with open arms. No knowing how far he'll rise. And he's got work for at least five other inmates from the locked ward. Splendid chappie.

Uncle Pat You've joined those heroic ranks, Michael lad. They'll raise statues of you by the Liffey, blue plaques on houses you've never lived in.

Billy You've made ventriloquism do for schizophrenia what MI5 has done for paranoia.

Jennings I'd like to do more.

Billy You've done enough.

Jennings No, no, you've set me thinking. I've helped myself to overcome sickness of soul and mind, now I should try and help others.

Aunt Agnes Michael, you're not going to become a social worker are you?!

Major Shoot me somebody! For God's sake make somebody shoot me!

Jennings No, I was thinking of setting up classes for schizophrenics. It'll be occupational therapy at its best. Instead of art, music and group discussion they can have ventriloquism classes. Rows of schizophrenics sitting with little dummies on their knees practising: he-ah-oh, he-oh-oh,, he-who, who-he, laaaabambambam-aaa-mmm and the tongues clicking and the little wooden head going up down all at once. Aside from the good it'll do for the patients, we could end up with enough speaking dummies to form an acting company - we could put on *Hamlet* or form a choir. A chorus of dummies singing *The Messiah* or the *Hallelujah Chorus*.

Billy I've always wanted to sing Brunnehilde's farewell to Siegfried.

Jennings It could really catch on. We could even play the Albert Hall.

Aunt Agnes That would be nice, dear. You sound really enthusiastic.

Jennings I am. I feel much better now.

Uncle Pat That's grand, laddie, I think we should sing *Happy Days Are Here Again*.

Jennings Not all at once. I can't cope with more than one voice at a time.

Billy You see, talking it out with your family helped. That's why I got so upset when you said I was nothing more than a ventriloquist's dummy. All right, I'll concede I might've been that at the start. But nothing stays the same. Even ventriloquists' dummies evolve, mature, blossom. Let's face it, I've become more than just a block of wood and a voice. I'm a personality in my own right.

Aunt Agnes I think we've all grown a little.

Billy But me more than anyone. After all the show is called 'Billy and Me'! That's why I know I exist. I know! I've got thoughts, feelings. Mine, not yours. Thoughts, feelings, responsibilities. One of which is to see the act is in good shape for tonight's show. You've had your temperamental fit for today, Roger. Now we've got some practising to do. After all, you may be a schizophrenic but you're still a pro.

Jennings Always.

Major Straight down the line.

Billy We all are. So let's pick it up from where we left off ... My reason for wanting to join the Metropolitan Police, ladies and gentlemen, is because I care deeply about the national decline in personal standards, and the corresponding growth of greed and selfishness, plus I like the uniform, the money, the perks, and the unlimited power to bash anyone I want to.

Jennings Yes, but why do you call your dog Blacksmith?

Billy I call him Blacksmith because every time I open the door he makes a bolt for it...

Loud exit music.