

PSST!

By Stephen Baily

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A compelling existential narrative with strong dramatic affinities to Beckett that could just as easily have been titled Huis Clos. We were taken with the open-ended dialogue between the speaker and a stranger that has no real beginning or end and plays upon the absurdist possibilities of miscommunication—all the while thinking they are communicating. The absence of setting and the clever use of in media res fine tunes the sense of isolation and entrapment and Baily's astute, phonic vernacular is the credible voice of alienation.*

Not long after I announced I was leaving home, my father began complaining of pains in his chest.

—I'm sorry—what was that?

You heard me.

—Of course I heard you, but were you talking to me?

I don't see anyone else on this bench.

—Because—correct me if I'm wrong—I've never laid eyes on you before.

That makes two of us.

—And yet out of the blue you expect me to take an interest in your father? No offense, but what nuthouse did they just let you out of?

I admit my abruptness may seem a bit odd, but—

—I don't like the look of you either. You're the kind of guy, if I saw you coming, I'd cross the street.

I keep forgetting to go to the barbershop.

—Leave your grooming habits out of it and tell me again why I should give a damn about your father. I had a father, too, you know.

I don't doubt it for a minute.

—Except I wouldn't dream of buttonholing a complete stranger about him.

My apologies. You looked to me to be suffering from the heat. I guess I thought you could do with a little distraction.

—I can always go to a movie if that's what I'm after.

I meant verbal distraction, not some spastic quasi-opera that's all recitatives and no arias. Christ, movies are ridiculous. Remind me not to watch another ten thousand of them.

—Remind yourself. I'm not your conscience. You're nobody to me.

I suppose not, but you still haven't said if you are or you aren't.

—If I are or I aren't what?

In need of verbal distraction.

—Well, since you mention it, I could probably do with some—yeah. But I warn you, the muggier it gets, the shorter I am on patience.

Fair enough.

—So did he have a heart attack or not?

I didn't stick around to find out. A carnival was passing through town and I made my escape with it.

—Not so fast. I thought this was about your father.

When did I say that? It's about me—about what happened to me after I left home.

—But I don't know a thing about your home, so why should I care what happened to you after you left it?

To cite only the high points, on my first night with the carnival I lost my virginity.

—Who to?

The bearded lady—whose beard turned out to be real, by the way.

—That's why they invented electrolysis.

She also gave me the clap.

—That's why they invented antibiotics.

In a month, I dropped twenty-five pounds from living on rice, peas, and margarine.

—That's why they invented food stamps.

I sank into anomie.

—That's why they invented antidepressants.

You don't believe in making things easy for a person, do you?

—I didn't approach you, you inflicted yourself on me, in the apparent smug conviction I'd find the story of your life captivating. Don't take this personally, but there's a name for someone like you—someone who expects other people to drop everything whenever he opens his mouth. It starts with a W and ends with a—

Okay. I plead guilty to too much haste. Suppose I go back and focus a little more on my father.

—You had your chance.

You wouldn't enjoy hearing about the medal he won in the war for taking out a machine-gun nest with a water pistol?

—Some other time. Right now, it occurs to me there's a new feature at the RKO.

Piece of garbage.

—Maybe so, but at least the place is air-conditioned, they sell popcorn by the tub, and—who can say?—there might even be a lonely housewife in the seat next to mine.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

What inspired your story?

The muse,—t hat obdurate bitch—for a change condescended to spare me a spark.

Your intention when writing it?

To save the world—what else?

Your stylistic and/or literary influences?

No comment. I wouldn't want to appear to be holding others responsible for my defects.

BIO: Stephen Baily has published fiction in some forty-five print and online journals. He's also the author of ten plays and three novels including 'Markus Klyner, MD, FBI' which is available as a Kindle e-book. He lives in France.