Mister In-Between
by Dave Carley

Inspiration and Tone:

This short play was inspired by Edward Hopper’s 1940 painting, ‘Office at Night’. The era is a few decades back, when there were messy files and filing cabinets and people used phonebooks and met up in person and men were still named Bill. The tone of the play is intended to be ‘noir’.

In keeping with that, I’ve written it in ‘radio format’, with numbered cues and SFX cues for the foley artist. A staging suggestion is to have the foley artist right on stage with the actors, and close to them. Alternately, the actors themselves can do the foley work.

Synopsis:

Carole woke up this morning to a marriage proposal – on a billboard facing her house. She’s all for marriage, but first she must find out who exactly the proposal is from… and fast.

Cast:

WOMAN – 25-50
MAN – 25-50
FOLEY ARTIST

Setting and Sound:

A small office in an old building in the heart of a city. A window that pulls open. A filing cabinet that rolls out. A door that squeaks open. Floors that creak. My staging recommendation is to have a live foley artist – someone on stage with the actors, visible to the audience, making the sounds. I’ve written it in the audio style, with numbered cues, to facilitate this approach.

Mister In-Between

1. MUSIC: ANYTHING NOIRISH. URBAN. NIGHT.

2. SOUND: INTERIOR. SMALL OFFICE. TYPEWRITER HUNT-AND-PECKING.

3. MAN: (CLOSE. NARRATIVE VOICE) It’s Friday night in the city. I’m working late. Typing up invoices. There aren’t many of them but I’m a terrible typist and I keep putting the carbon paper facing the wrong way up. My sister expects me home for dinner. Boiled fish. But when I’m done here, I’m stopping off for a drink at the first cheap dive if find. Anyplace wet. My sister won’t like that. She doesn’t respect the pressures of the advertising business.

And yeah, I’d go home quicker if – waiting for me instead of fish and a sister – there was a fresh-baked pie. Held by a gorgeous doll. My sister says I shouldn’t say ‘doll’. My sister’s a spinster and she says I can’t say that word either. It’s getting so a man can’t hardly talk anymore.

But all that is irrelevant to this story. Just know, it’s been a bad month. Times are tough in the billboard business. It’s television. It’s killing us. And I’m a lousy typist. And I’m thirsty. And, yeah, I’m lonely.

4. SOUND: FOOTSTEPS UNDER.

5. MAN: I hear someone approaching. This old building has wooden stairs, and the footsteps are getting louder. And they aren’t a man’s footsteps. They stop outside my office door. I focus my attention on the door handle. It’s turning. The door’s opening.

1. SOUND: Door squeak.

2. MAN: (CLOSE) I was right. It’s not a man. It’s a doll, sorry sis.

3. WOMAN: Hiya. Can you tell me where National Billboard is?

4. MAN: I sure can.

5. WOMAN: The phonebook listed this address.

6. MAN: Phonebooks don’t lie. It’s here.

7. WOMAN: But the sign on your door says, ‘W Harman and Co’. No mention of ‘National Billboard’.

8. MAN: I’m W. Harman and Co. National Billboard is a wholly owned subsidiary. I should add that to the door, but I rarely get visitors. Especially on a Friday night.

9. WOMAN: You’re National Billboard.

10. MAN: I am.

11. WOMAN: I need to ask you about one.

12. MAN: One what.

13. WOMAN: Billboard. Wouldn’t that be obvious?

14. MAN: I’m not an expert on obvious. And I’ve never had a walk-in customer.

1. SOUND: DOOR CLOSING FIRMLY.

2. WOMAN: I bet it’s because of - television.

3. MAN: (CLOSE) I stumble dumbly because I am blinded by a deafening flash of insight. I am on the precipice of falling in love. A drop-dead gorgeous - woman – has just walked into my office and, in one word, identified the cause of my entire existential crisis. I struggle to keep my voice from warbling.

4. MAN: Have a seat. About our billboards. We’ve got twenty sites here in Chicago. All in prime locations.

5. WOMAN: I just need to know about one billboard in particular. Your sign in the empty lot at the corner of 4th and Jefferson.

6. MAN: (CLOSE) And, with that, an unfortunate penny dropped.

7. SOUND: PENNY DROPPING.

8. MAN: (CLOSE) A penny dropping is not a strong sound, so let’s go with ‘romantic hopes being dashed’.

9. SOUND: SMASHING NOISE.

10. MAN: The billboard at 4th and Jefferson?

11. WOMAN: The one that currently asks, ‘Carole Will You Marry Me Love Bill’.

1. MAN: Are you a reporter for The Herald? You’re too late. The Tribune already has the story. And I’ll tell you what I told them – I can’t give you Bill’s name because of the billboard industry’s strict code of client confidentiality.

2. WOMAN: You really won’t give out your client’s full name?

3. MAN: What if this Carole says no? I could never embarrass my client like that.

4. WOMAN: Then I have a big problem.

5. MAN: Suppose you tell me your big problem.

6. WOMAN: I’m Carole.

7. MAN: You’re Carole.

8. WOMAN: The Carole.

9. MAN: (CLOSE) I need to think. To buy time I creak over the indiscreet wooden floor to my office window.

10. SOUND: FOOTSTEPS ON THE CREAKING FLOOR.

11. MAN: I reach my destination, but I still need to think further, so I fling the sash up, hoping to get a little cooling breeze from the alleyway.

12. SOUND: WINDOW BEING FLUNG UP.

13. MAN: But instead, I get the whiff of after-dark Chicago decay. Dogs. Sirens. Chased with a faint hint of jazz.

1. SOUND: SIRENS. DOGS. A FAINT HINT OF JAZZ CHASER.

2. MAN: (CLOSE) I am a red-blooded man and, as a species, we are doggedly optimistic about matters of the heart, and loins. I don’t know why I added ‘loins’. Just being straight, I guess. I shut the window and turn to face the doll person.

3. SOUND: WINDOW DOWN. OUTSIDE NOISES OUT.

4. MAN: You’re sure you’re ‘the’ Carole. Because I’ve had four of them phone me already today. Four very hopeful Caroles.

5. WOMAN: The billboard is in the vacant lot opposite my house. Directly facing my front door.

6. MAN: That does seem somewhat beyond coincidental. And as I recall, my client was very keen to have that precise location. Well Carole, I need to know. Have you given Bill your answer?

7. WOMAN: So you’ve met him.

8. MAN: Not in the flesh so don’t try tricking a physical description out of me, like did he fill my doorframe with his hulk or did I notice his ice blue eyes. It was a phone sale.

9. WOMAN: What, on the basis of a phone call you put up a billboard saying, ‘Carole Will You Marry Me Love Bill’?

10. MAN: That’s how we do business. I take the order, work with the client on the artwork although in this case it was all text so we only had to agree on a typeface.

1. WOMAN: Futura.

2. MAN: I’m impressed.

3. WOMAN: Mr. Harman, what if this Bill was - odd?

4. MAN: That was exactly what my sister said when I told her about it. He sounded very sincere. Wait – are you saying you don’t actually know this Bill?

5. WOMAN: Oh, I know him.

6. SOUND: CREAKING FLOOR UNDER

7. MAN: (CLOSE) And because she’s on the verge of some sort of confession it’s her turn to get up and walk across that groaning floor to the window. I take advantage of the moment to wipe my sweating brow. Then, remembering where the hanky had been prior to my forehead, I stuff it back in my pocket. She throws up the window.

8. SOUND: Window up and the usual outside sounds.

9. MAN: (CLOSE.) She slowly pulls out a Kleenex from her sleeve. Then she parts her lips in an inviting way. Like she is going to say ‘yes’ to a question I am aching to ask. Propelled by her tongue, a wad of gum slides past her lipstick-tinted teeth and falls inaudibly into the Kleenex. She folds it up and throws it down to the panting dogs in the alley. She pulls the window down.

10. SOUND: WINDOW DOWN AND OUTSIDE SOUNDS OUT.

11. WOMAN: It’s a regular kennel down there.

1. MAN: (CLOSE) She turns to me and with a trembling voice says the 12 words that will change my world.

2. CAROLE: Oh, I know Bill all right. I just don’t know ‘which’ Bill.

3. MAN: I don’t understand.

4. WOMAN: There are two Bills.

5. MAN: Two Bills?

6. WOMAN: I’ve been dating two Bills. And I need to know which one it is. Please. Just his last name.

7. MAN: (CLOSE) A tear forms at the white corner of her violet eye and I start to pull out my hanky but, remembering the places it has been, I stop. Mercifully, her tear also stops so no empathetic action on my part is necessary. I cross over to my filing cabinet.

10. SOUND: MORE FLOOR SQUEAKING.

11. SOUND: FILING CABINET ROLLING OPEN.

12. WOMAN: It’s either Smith or Jones. Does either ring a bell?

13. MAN: You might want to date men with more distinctive surnames. I honestly can’t remember. It was a few weeks ago when he placed the order. It’s somewhere in my files… but this could take a while.

14. WOMAN: Can you recall what kind of voice he had?

15. MAN: Male.

1. WOMAN: That’s a start. Was it deep?

2. MAN: Rich and manly. Does that help?

3. WOMAN: No. Both my Bills have rich and manly voices. I find that attractive in a man.

4. MAN: (LOWERS HIS VOICE) You don’t say.

5. WOMAN: (LAUGHS)

6. MAN: There. Made you laugh. Don’t worry, we’ll solve this. I’ll find his invoice. It might take a while though. Filing is not our strong suit at W. Harman and Co. Or National Billboard. My sister used to do the clerical work here, but we decided it was too much for us to work together and also share a house.

7. WOMAN: You live with your sister.

8. MAN: Only until she gets married.

9. WOMAN: When’s the big date?

10. MAN: First she has to meet someone. I’m supposed to bring a fella home.

11. WOMAN: That reminds me of a play I saw. Does she collect glass animals?

12. MAN: Doilies. Did either of your Bills give a hint about his intentions?

1. WOMAN: Total surprise. I saw the billboard when I was walking out my front door. I no sooner had got to work than I got a call from Bill the Good.

2. MAN: Bill the Good.

3. WOMAN: That’s how I keep them separate. Bill the Good, Bill the Bad. Bill the Good asked me how my morning commute was. I thought, ‘Ah hah’ it’s him. So I fibbed and said I took the bus today and went out the back lane to the street.

4. MAN: Why did you fib?

5. WOMAN: I was still in shock. I didn’t know what to say. He just kind of sighed. You see, I don’t have an answer. I’m not quite sure about Bill the Good.

6. MAN: Fair enough.

7. WOMAN: Right after Bill the Good hung up, Bill the Bad called. He asked how my day was going and I thought, “Ah hah! It’s him!” So I said, “Terrible, my car battery was dead so I had to take the bus via the back lane and now I god a code and I’b goig hobe to bed”. That sounded plausible, didn’t it?

8. MAN: I’b cobbinced.

9. WOMAN: You’re funny. I like that in a man. Neither Good nor Bad Bill is very funny. Anyway, Bill the Bad also gave a long sigh, though it was a very different kind of sigh from Bill the Good’s.

10. MAN: How so?

1. WOMAN: Right after he sighed, he asked me what I would be wearing in my sickbed. You can see my dilemma. I have two very diverse Bills. It’s been driving me nuts. I hardly got any work done all day. So, when I knocked off, I decided to come over here.

2. MAN: You could have phoned.

3. WOMAN: I prefer doing things in person. And sometimes when I walk the gritty city streets, the sirens and barking dogs and faint sound of jazz clears my head. Found anything?

4. MAN: Not yet. Carole, shouldn’t your nicknames for the two Bills guide your answer?

5. WOMAN: That’s exactly what my Ma says. She loves Bill the Good. He’s kind. He’s punctual. And he never uses offensive words to describe women.

6. MAN: You mean, words like ‘Doll’? Sometimes we men forget the power of words to demean.

7. WOMAN: So yes, Bill the Good is good. But may I be honest?

8. MAN: Yes.

9. WOMAN: I also admire rampant sex.

10. MAN: And that’s Bill the Bad?

11. WOMAN: Bill the Bad is very good.

1. MAN: Well one of them has gone to a great deal of expense to propose.

2. WOMAN: That’s another thing. Don’t take this personally. I’m not sure I could ever marry a man who proposes on a billboard. What is it with men these days? Billboards. Dancing waiters. Rings embedded in hamburgers. Whatever happened to the old bended knee?

3. MAN: My sister says it would be a better world if it was the women who did the asking.

4. WOMAN: Your sister sounds wise. She might like Bill the Good. Anyway, here I am – having one of two Bills forcing the issue in a totally public way.

5. MAN: You’re right. It’s wrong. No woman should have to publicly chose between Bad and Good. And besides: what every woman needs is a mix of both. A middle kind of Bill. One who is a blend of everything good a man can offer.

6. WOMAN: Yes!

7. MAN: A Bill who offers rampant sex!

8. WOMAN: Yes!

9. MAN: Delivered on time!

10. WOMAN: Yes yes!

11. MAN: In a way your mother would approve!!

1. WOMAN: Yes Yes Yes!

2. MAN: Using enlightened language.

3. WOMAN: Ohhhh yes.

2. MAN: With plenty of jokes.

3. WOMAN: (Ugh sound) During sex?

4. MAN: After sex!

5. WOMAN: Right after?

6. MAN: Maybe the next day.

7. WOMAN: You’ve found his name, haven’t you.

8. MAN: Sadly, yes.

9. WOMAN: And?

10. MAN: It’s Bill Smith.

11. WOMAN: Oh.

12. MAN: Which one is he?

13. WOMAN: Does it matter? Well, thank you, Mr. Harman. I guess the ball is in my court now. I’ll go home and make the phone call.

14. MAN: WAIT! Don’t go! I - I have an idea. Why not commission a refusal billboard? I could give you a discount and you could turn Bill down. Both Bills. You might enjoy designing a refusal billboard. We should – we could – would you - like to go out for a drink and discuss typeface?

1. WOMAN: I could use a stiff one. You know, we never introduced ourselves. I’m Carole.

2. MAN: No kidding.

3. WOMAN: And you?

4. MAN: Harman. W. Harman.

5. WOMAN: Dare I ask what the W stands for?

6. MAN: William.

7. WOMAN: Another Bill?

8. MAN: I’m afraid so.

9. WOMAN: So what kind of Bill do I call you?

10. MAN: Carole: you don’t have to call me Bill at all. For you, I’m Mister In Between.

11. SOUND: URBAN SOUNDS and MUSIC UP.

The End