

Prestidigitation:
A Tale of Stolen Fingers in verse
by Philip Powell

Adapted by
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CAST

Billy: A fat, apparently catatonic, 12 year old.

Barney Lee: The world's worst magician, and a man with a secret.

Frau Oafeen: An evil human being, Billy's loving mother, and a woman with a secret.

Ted Faint: A furious hostage, and a man with a secret.

NARRATOR

Once — as these things often must begin —
A mansion stood, and the people tucked within
Attend a birthday party thrown so well
It seems to have landed somewhere deep in hell.

Young Billy — fat and brutish, short and dull,
With beady eyes set far back in his skull
Is turning twelve today — he would have phoned ya,
Were he not stewing in sweet catatonia.

His mother, Frau Oafeen, 'smore animated —
So much so she ought to be sedated,
Fuming like she is at Barney Lee,
The hired magician, juggling horribly.

Too bad young Billy finds them unbeloved.
(See, Mother and Magician are both be-gloved.)
Oh, and there's a madman named Ted Faint

Gagged and screaming in the corner — but just wait,

For lest you think we haven't got a play,
Magic fingers, come and take us all away . . .

INT. DREARY MANSION – DUSK

The lights fade up an a surreal scene.

It's Billy's birthday party. He sits, catatonic, wearing a hat that clearly someone else placed on his head.

The gloved Frau Oafeen fumes silently at the hired magician, Barney Lee.

He's juggling very poorly.

In the corner sits a screaming madman, Ted Faint. He's gagged and tied to a chair, desperately trying to communicate something to Barney.

Barney, also gloved, finishes and bows with a flourish.

BARNEY LEE

So, did I wow you? Did I out and out amaze?
No need for all this silence. Shower me with praise.

There is a strained pause. Barney coughs to prompt her

Don't keep me waiting here. Don't make me overwrought.
I'm dying of suspense; do tell me what you thought.

FRAU OAFEEN

You cannot juggle, dance, or even half amuse.
Your flatulence and phlegm, I simply can't excuse.
Each trick that you attempted left me filled with dread.
Your pigeons were all palsied! That poor rabbit's dead!
Just listing all your many faults would be too slow.
My point is, Barney, that magician-wise, you BLOW!!

BARNEY LEE (indignant, hurt)

My Act was never meant for you, the bourgeoisie!

It's brilliant! Trust me! I've a graduate degree!

He begins to leave, but Frau stops him.

FRAU OAFEEN

Departing now would not be in your best behalf.
According to your contract, Billy has to laugh.

BARNEY LEE

But that's impossible; He sits there dazed, eyes glassed.
Not to be rude, but are you sure he hasn't passed?

FRAU OAFEEN

It's Billy's birthday, and I promised him a laugh.

She produces a gun.

He better get it, or I'll shoot you clean in half.

BARNEY LEE (back-pedaling)

Uh, yes, well, I see now the fault is fully mine.
It's clear his sense of humor is just more . . . refined.

FRAU OAFEEN

That's right! My baby hasn't laughed, since . . . the "event."
I'm worried. Make this good! Or face your own lament!

BARNEY LEE (stalling)

I know the perfect trick! Called, um, well "RANDY TOAD."
It's guaranteed! He'll pee his pants! He'll just explode!

He begins rummaging through his trunk, still stalling.

FRAU OAFEEN

"The Randy Toad" is not a name that one expects.
Why not get started!? Is it overly complex?

BARNEY LEE

It's HARD, yes! Synchronizing stuff both great and small
Like flinging knives, wet floors, and donkey basketball.

FRAU OAFEEN

So do it if you can, and end my Billy's woe.
I promise, after that, you're free. I'll let you —

TED FAINT

NO!!!

Frau gives Ted a smack . . .

BARNEY LEE

Excuse me, who is he? Seems rather furious.
A madman bound and gagged, well, makes one curious.

FRAU OAFEEN (covering)

My Uncle Brutus, he's severely chicken brained.
Unfortunately dangerous, best kept restrained.

BARNEY LEE (trying to get in Frau's good graces)

How true, yes, kindness to the crazy makes me ill.
"Bring back the rack, lobotomies, and the Bastille."

FRAU OAFEEN

Quit stalling! Hurry up! I made my boy a vow.
Let me be clear! My finger's twitching, do it NOW!

BARNEY LEE (a new tact, still looking through his trunk)

Of course, of course that is my fondest wish as well.
I'm missing something though, a high explosive shell.
Good grief! Oh, clearly I am an amnesiac.
I left it in the Hyundai. I'll just be right back.

He tries to leave again, but Frau raises her gun.

FRAU OAFEEN

Enough! My patience is exhausted, you big liar!
It's time to meet your maker. Ready, aim and FIRE!

BARNEY LEE

No, STOP! My tricks are, granted, not aesthetical.
Don't blame me though. My fingers, they're prosthetical!

He removes his gloves to reveal clumsy mechanical fingers.

Without my gloves, you see, they're artificial things,
Made not of flesh and bone, but wood and screws and springs.

FRAU OAFEEN (a half aside)

Dear Lord! It's you! You're him, from that night long ago!

BARNEY LEE

Thank God! You recognize me, yes?

FRAU OAFEEN (covering)

Um, sorry, no.

BARNEY LEE

Once, long ago, they called me "Barney Lee the Grand,"
A great magician, famous for my sleight of hand.
My misdirection skills caused thunderous applause.
Sad. But in truth, I used them just to hide my flaws.
My speedy hands hid faults of major consequence
Like pimples . . . and occasional incontinence.
At Albert Hall that night, I finally met my fate
Performing my illusion "Coins-De-Shuffle-Ate."
My fingers moved with terrible ferocity.
I couldn't stop increasing their velocity.
Those digits blurred and hummed, exceeding my commands
Then BLAM! It happened! Eight of them flew off my hands!
Each one, a streaking, spinning, pinkish ballpoint pen.
That night, I lost them. Never to be seen again.
It's sad to say: since I became this amputee
I am, unfortunately, only what you see.

FRAU OAFEEN (suddenly nice)

That's great! I mean — uh, what a dreadful tale, quite grim.
And please forgive the gun — it's just the Crack and gin.
I'm sorry I was mean, my "Dearest Barney Lee."
I tell you what. You stay right here. I'll bring your fee.

Giggling to herself, Frau exits the room.

Ted begins chattering furiously, muffled by the gag.

BARNEY LEE

I'm thinking that it's time for you to lose that gag.

TED FAINT (gasping)

Get out of here! She means you harm! So beat it! Hide!
I'll help!

BARNEY LEE (uncertain)

You promise?

TED FAINT

Sure. Just help me get untied.

BARNEY LEE

But Uncle Brutus, I don't know, we might get caught.

TED FAINT

You fool! She wants the last two fingers that you've got!

Frau re-enters, carrying several items.

FRAU OAFEEN (calling out)

I'm going to pay you now!

TED FAINT (whispering)

Wait! Don't believe her!

FRAU OAFEEN (getting closer)

Hope you don't mind pennies.

TED FAINT (Still whispering)

Look! She's got a cleaver!
And a second and a third! Quick — untie this knot!

FRAU OAFEEN (stopping at the table)

I know bills are preferred, but coins are all I've got.

She sets a jar of pennies on the table.

Just reach across the table and collect your fee.

BARNEY LEE

Why so far?

FRAU OAFEEN

Um, it's, uh, the custom locally.

Barney reaches for the jar.

BARNEY LEE

Okay . . .

TED FAINT

Look out!

FRAU OAFEEN (Swinging the cleaver towards Barney's hand)

Hi ya!

BARNEY LEE (Yanking his hand away just in time)

You aren't trying to pay me!

TED FAINT

Told ya!

FRAU OAFEEN (Noticing Ted's face)

Where's your gag!?

BARNEY LEE

You're trying to maim me!

So tell me why you want my fingers, you old cow!

FRAU OAFEEN

Because they'll match the six of yours I've got right now!

She removes her gloves to reveal that six of her fingers are the wrong size for her hands and appear to be stitched on.

Yes, these gloves were hiding digits that came from you:

An index, middle and ring, multiplied by two.
You're not the only one who has a tale of woe
I also have a story from long, long ago.
They called me "Eve the Grand." Our circus was renowned.
"The Planet's Strongest Lady," my physique profound.
But something soft, deep down inside me stirred and grew.
I prayed, "Let it be gas, or maybe Spanish Flu!"
The feeling was too strong though. I could not endure.
Oh God forgive me, I caved to temptation's lure.
Resisting not, on that romantic Sunday drive,
The charms of "Fred LeBarge, The Fattest Man Alive."
His backseat prowess bordered quite on the occult.
One night, and baby Billy, was the end result.
But when I cradled him, not knowing my own touch,
His funny bone was shattered: loving him too much.

She approaches Billy and gently strokes his face.

Though, with your fingers, so filled with dexterity
He feels my true touch, sure of its sincerity.

BARNEY LEE

One Sec! I need to think all through this really slow . . .
[Gasp!] YOU'RE the rat that stole my fingers at the show!

FRAU OAFEEN

Well, DUH . . . oh, and of course that jerk-face got a few.

She indicates Ted.

BARNEY LEE

WHAT?!

Barney wheels around to Ted.

TED FAINT (shrugging sheepishly)

She's right.

BARNEY LEE

I don't believe it! Brutus, friend, et tu?

TED FAINT

Um, I'm not really her "Uncle Brutus," you know.
My real name's Ted, and I too have a tale of woe.
Unlike you both, I wasn't anything "The Grand."
A more fitting title would have been "Ted the Bland."
A teacher, oh so boring, that I must confide
Each class, I lost eight students, just to suicide.
I needed human touch so badly, don't you see?!
I joined the Ku Klux Klan, so folks would spit on me.
But with your fingers, I could just make things "Appear"
Like friends and fiancées, or stars like "Rosie Greer."
My life was happy then. I didn't feel so wronged.
I had a family. I felt loved. I belonged.

BARNEY LEE (To Frau)

Why was he hostage? Don't you want "his" fingers too?

FRAU OAFEEN

He did inherit one small useful trick from you.

TED FAINT (as if he's saying it to a crowd)

"Oh, look at what I found behind my ear, one cent."

He pulls a penny from behind his ear and drops it in the jar.

FRAU OAFEEN

It only takes us sixteen days to pay the rent.

She suddenly notices:

Hold on just a minute now! How'd your hand get free?

TED FAINT

While you stood there yakking, this guy was helping me.

BARNEY LEE (Backing away)

You'll never get these pinkies! Not against my will!
Cause I've a black belt in . . . some manly fighting skill.

Ted frantically tugs at the ropes around his legs.

TED FAINT

You fool! I can't be stopped or hindered. I'm a truck!
Yes I'm a — OUCH! Well . . . hold on, my legs are still stuck.

FRAU OAFEEN (raising one of her cleavers)

Now nothing stands between your hands and me, you swine!

Ted finally snaps the rope.

TED FAINT

Wait, now I'm free! So back off witch! That boy's all mine.

He snatches up one of the cleavers.

FRAU OAFEEN

En garde!

They begin fencing with their cleavers.

TED FAINT (bravado)

I'm not afraid of you!

FRAU OAFEEN

Yes, so you say.

TED FAINT (bravado)

Its true!

FRAU OAFEEN

How odd, I thought I smelled some pee.

TED FAINT (an admission)

Touché.

They continue fencing while Barney tries for their attention.

BARNEY LEE

Before we kill each other, I've one last request.
That night, what happened?! Tell me please!

FRAU OAFEEN, TED FAINT (together)
Geez, you're a pest!

They drop their cleavers on the table.

TED FAINT
We were two strangers, crowded in row triple Z.
We stuffed ourselves together in seat forty-three.

FRAU OAFEEN
But we were not exactly what you'd call best chums.

TED FAINT
She kicked my shins!

FRAU OAFEEN
He called me names!

TED FAINT
She bit my thumbs!

FRAU OAFEEN
Then suddenly you took the stage. They yelled "Hooray!"
Your act transported us, it blew us both away.

TED FAINT
Your fingers spinning a sublime symphonic ode.
We couldn't help it. Our emotions overflowed.

They hold hands.

FRAU OAFEEN AND TED FAINT (together)
Together "Encore! Encore! Encore Sir!" we'd shout!

TED FAINT
We hugged.

FRAU OAFEEN
We wept.

TED FAINT

We accidentally made out.

FRAU OAFEEN

Then BLAM! Your fingers popped clean off! In a mishap . . .

TED FAINT

That flung them up quite high, and down right in our lap.

FRAU OAFEEN

We fought for them, but I'm an expert in Kung Fu.

TED FAINT

I didn't do so hot. My crotch still looks like stew.

FRAU OAFEEN

Dear god, you got the thumbs! That's something, Ted! Don't pout!
Well anyway, we made a plan for getting out.

TED FAINT

The masses didn't note our movements, inching back.
We snuck out slowly, like that family Von Trappe.

BARNEY LEE (Snatching all the cleavers off the table)

Ah HA! I've all the weapons now and you have none.

FRAU OAFEEN

I'm glad you said that. I forgot about my gun.

She shoots him and he falls to the floor with a thud.

TED FAINT

He's dead. It's for the best. He lived a masquerade
Unable to accept the flawed man he'd been made.

FRAU OAFEEN

How weak!

TED FAINT

How shameful yes!

FRAU OAFEEN

How cowardly his glands!

TED FAINT

Well, anyhoo . . . Let's sew his fingers on our hands!

They each grab a cleaver from the table.

BARNEY LEE (Sitting up suddenly and grabbing the third cleaver.
Ha!

FRAU OAFEEN AND TED FAINT (together)
What!

BARNEY LEE

Don't be so fast to hang my fun'ral wreath.
For future reference: I catch bullets in my teeth!

He stands up and spits the bullet out.

FRAU OAFEEN

It seems you have the upper hand now, so to speak.
Fine, coward! Run away! I see your yellow streak.

BARNEY LEE

Oh no, Madame, I don't intend to run from you.
Surviving certain death has changed my point of view.

The three begin circling each other, brandishing their weapons.

The following three lines are said simultaneously, following the meter exactly.

BARNEY LEE

You brigand bastards! HA! I've got some magic yet!

FRAU OAFEEN

You wobbly weaklings! HA! I'm strong lest you forget!

TED FAINT

You mindless morons! HA! My brilliance is a threat!

TED FAINT, FRAU OAFEEN, BARNEY LEE (together)

Let me be clear: “I want the undivided set!”

The following three lines are said simultaneously, following the meter exactly.

BARNEY LEE

I need a deep disguise so crowds won't see this troll!

FRAU OAFEEN

My muscles must be under constant safe control!

TED FAINT

I hate my stuffy lonely life, this lump of coal!

TED FAINT, FRAU OAFEEN, BARNEY LEE (together)

I'll chop you into pieces if it makes me whole!!!

Screaming, they charge each other. A melee commences.

FRAU OAFEEN

Quit — AHH!

BARNEY LEE

Hold — OWW!

TED FAINT

Stop — EEE!

FRAU OAFEEN

What IS this in my hand?

TED FAINT

Who bit my . . . ?

BARNEY LEE

AHH! That hurt!

TED FAINT

Give back my prostate gland!

FRAU OAFEEN

You're wiggling — AHH!

TED FAINT

I sliced you — OHH!

BARNEY LEE

Hey, watch your aim!

TED FAINT

Stop stabbing crotches!

BARNEY LEE

Oh my god, we're all the same!

They all collapse to the floor.

TED FAINT (referencing to his wounds)

I've guess I've reached my goal. I'm not a boring man.
But getting stabbed a million times was not my plan.

Ted dies.

FRAU OAFEEN (to Billy)

Billy, I hope you liked your party very much.
Despite the bleeding, shooting, homicides and such.
You know, that Mom, she "loves her boy to pieces," right?
But now, she can't quite keep her promise from last night.
So please just try to laugh a bit, at life, for me?
It's easy babe, 'cause God, he made us funny, see?

She dies with a groan.

BARNEY LEE

There's nothing in my hand . . . and nothing up my sleeve.
My final trick is something you will not believe.
Forgive me, but despite my efforts I do fear

That even dead, dear friends, I fail to disappear.

He also dies.

For a moment there is silence.

Then, young Billy begins to laugh.

FADE OUT