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THE WELLS STREET JOURNAL

My Double Life as a Standup

Standup comics who have been doing standup comedy for any length of time tend to forget what it was like those first few months or years when they were first starting out. The curious mix of emotions (elation, dread, hope), the inexplicable drive that keeps us pursuing the comedy thing even through the bad experiences. Chicaogan Bill Bunker manages to capture those early feelings while he examines the dual identity of father and comic in installment #2 of "My Double Life as a Standup"

It's Saturday night at Carolines in Times Square. I'm standing before a packed house, gripping the microphone, about to fulfill two ancient dreams: performing on a Big Apple stage and being the opening act for Richard Lewis, my long-time comedy hero. From the moment I bounded onstage I sensed that I was, metaphysically speaking, somewhere I had never been before, and that the feelings churning inside me were the harbinger of some kind of life-altering change.

I felt cocky, and spontaneously abandoned all written material, even the sure-fire bits. I had never improvised like this before. The results were overwhelmingly positive. I worked in a near-weightless state, my body and mind hitting some uncommonly common frequency that transformed me into the type of comic I had never been before.

Physical comedy, impressions, sound effects, I was doing it all. Nothing over the top, no Gallagheresque sledgehammers or Carrot Top mincing. I was finding just the right balance of personal yin and audience yang, an elastic flow of individual risk-taking and communal give-back that had me feeling like Jimmy Swaggert on Easter morning. I didn't know what I was going to say or do next and it was paying off brilliantly. The narrative excursions and snap one-liners were channeling down from a higher source and I understood, with laser-beam clarity, that my instincts were pure. Wherever I was heading this ride was going to be unforgettable.

Word had circulated that people from the Letterman show were in the crowd to see Richard Lewis. From my vantage on-stage I spotted the two producers sitting with their dates at a side table. I caromed a wry jest into their corner about how I'd be perfect for

the show. It was a risky gambit, probably a mistake, but I could see these career-makers were taken with my audacity, charmed as much by the calibrated execution of my bon mot as they were by its lethality. In the rapture of their expressions I caught a glimpse of my new future: guest appearance on the Late Show begetting sitcom (*Everybody Loves Bill?*) begetting mega-movie deal (yes, everybody *does* love Bill) begetting Congressional Medal of Honor (making it illegal not to).

All I needed was to finish big. How long had I been up here-- 20, 30, 45 minutes? I was on such a roll that a strong finish seemed secured. But I stumbled slightly following a big laugh. I don't know where it came from, this hiccup, but the crowd suddenly saw that I was vulnerable. It was an almost imperceptible misstep, yet in a microsecond I wholly lost command and the vibe in the room flattened out.

My vision grew faint. The crowd, including the network VIPs, who had so recently presented themselves to me in bursting Technicolor, was now dissolving hazily. When you're dying they say the last sense to fade is your hearing, and right now the sound of their dwindling laughter was the only thing keeping me from the embalming table. My head began to pound; not from within like a migraine, but strangely, from the outside. Within moments the pounding was unbearable and I knew the crowd had deserted me. Letterman, the sitcom, the film deal-- lunch with Colin Powell-- all plundered by the pounding outside my head.

I summoned my strength by turning slightly and willing my vision back into focus. I'd seen Superman do this. Fuzzy gray shapes came into view. Although it was still dark, I could now make out three definable objects. A small hand. A plastic bottle. A boy wearing cartoon pajamas.

It's Tim, my 18-month-old son. And he's... hitting me in the head with his... milk bottle? Yes, that's it. He must have woken up in the middle of the night. My wife, hearing his cries, must have lifted him from his crib and brought him to me onstage. She must have given him a bottle of milk, with which he is now pounding me in the head. He must be hoping I will stop working and relieve him of it. In the year and a half that I have known Tim, I have learned that he values nothing if not explicit communication. He has also learned a few phrases. I take the bottle from his hand and place it on my... nightstand? "Thank you," he says in his tiny voice, and rolls over and closes his eyes. Next to the bottle on my nightstand is my alarm clock. It's 4:38. Now I'm awake. I have to go to work in two hours.

It doesn't take Sigmund Freud to untangle this one.

One thing I've learned about stand-up comedy is that the rest of society views the job as nonwork and the height of irresponsibility. I know, because for a long time I resisted

the temptation to try it out of respect for the majority opinion. I reversed course, finally, when I decided this was its primary appeal. In March 1999, I kicked off my stand-up career at Zanies Comedy Club in Chicago. The punch line to this story is that one week before my debut, my wife gave birth to a baby girl, presenting me with more responsibility I could ever sanely have wanted.

I am now the father of two children, Elena and Tim. They are lovely. They possess sweet dispositions, play well with one another, and, most winningly, are excellent audience members. As the permanent headliner in my own household, my best bit consists of nothing more than having to repeat the phrase, "Uh-oh, Spaghetti-o" upon demand. What could be easier?

Yet, being children, they are also a lot of work. Not just physical, energy-depleting work, but work that requires a complete abnegation of self. This latter is really the great sacrifice of parenthood, and a demand that is utterly antithetical to the needs of a comic, even a neophyte. A stand-up comic at work is nothing if not focused upon him or her self, almost always building an act around the central question of: "What is the world doing to me?" and, its follow-up, "What do I think about it?" My children, rightly, do not care what I think.

They don't care that it's six o'clock on Saturday evening and Dad has to be at the club in twenty minutes, that most of the week's shows have bombed and that he's starting to get anxious and spin neurotically out of control and that what he really needs is some time alone to center himself. Their concerns run the much narrower gamut of "Play with me," and "Where is my food?"

On days when I am not doing comedy, I work in a bank. The job has nothing to do with comedy, or anything funny, unless you are that breed of person for whom interest rate swaps and second lien private placementsare the stuff of laughter. These people exist, by the way. It's a good job and one that is rich in adult responsibility. It pays good money and affords me enough free time to address my kids' concerns. Also, like most "responsible" jobs, this one takes place during daylight hours, which gives me the opportunity to pursue comedy during the irresponsible evening hours. The problem is that it's not enough.

In the four years that I have been pursuing stand-up, I believe I have earned enough stage time and laughs to think that I might be able to do this full-time. Sometimes for fun I will project myself into a fantasy whereby I quit my job, hit the road with our crappier car, work my act and move up the ranks of the employably humorous in places called the Comedy Bucket: emcee, feature, headliner. In an alternative scenario, I take the fast-track approach: I move to L.A., live on my brother's floor and engage in an all-out blitzkrieg of the clubs until I am famous. Both visions are fun to contemplate. Both always end in disaster-- I panic, thinking that either my daughter's school will call

demanding her tuition while I'm still earning emcee's wages, or, if money is no longer an issue, I imagine calling home (or having my agent do it for me) only to find that no one remembers me.

In the face of this reality, my stand-up career exists in whatever state I can maintain it. Perhaps I waited too long to put myself on stage. I like to believe, though, that an artistic life beckons, like a siren, who is certainly not someone to be cajoled or blackmailed into lovemaking. She must call. If I had forced myself to the microphone 15 years ago, youth and inexperience may have brought about a flop so monumental as to resign me to an office cube forever, without hope. My challenge now, as I waver between Scylla and Charybdis, is I run the risk of being distracted from my current life's mission of finding the best deal on diapers.

My responsibilities at home prevent me from pursuing a stand-up career full-throttle. But it must be said that they also provide the inspiration-- not to mention the material-- that make the dream possible at all. I've found that much of the joy I get from performing comes from experiencing the cosmic journey of it takes you on. The three steps up to the stage are for me a threshold to a new dimension-- a family man is transformed into your host and first comic of the evening. Or, as Rupert Pupkin said, "Better to be king for a night than schmuck for a lifetime." Taking the stage is like living vicariously through my other self. As these separate selves converge to make the crowd laugh at Zanies on a Saturday night, the dream is complete and cannot be disrupted, not even by a boy's milk bottle.

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