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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. Chicagoan Bill Bunker manages to capture those early feelings while he examines the dual identity of father and comic in this, his latest installment of "My Double Life as a Standup"

Purgatory Gig

Tolstoy said that all good gigs are all alike, but every bad gig is bad in its own way. He later revised it, of course, but had he gone on to become Moscow's last comic standing, he might also have mentioned how the bad gigs are so uniquely bad that they have the power to crush your self-esteem and wipe out any recollection of the good ones all together.

But age and maturity have taught me is that there is yet a third kind of experience existing between the extremes of good and bad, which tends escapes notice because it never rises to the level of gig in the first place. This seldom-mentioned experience functions like a random Act of God, inasmuch as comic and audience are equally victimized and equally blameless for the sudden, tragic carnage it engenders -- the type of thing you might read about in Anna Karenina, although personally I've never been able to get much further than the first paragraph.

Last winter, in the fabled green room of Zanies in downtown Chicago, I readied myself for a one-night-only, twenty-minute feature spot that I was called upon to do at the last minute. Following me on stage that night was Tom Wilson. While I sat quietly sweating on the couch, Tom occupied the chair across from me, calmly tuning his guitar, a simple gesture that nonetheless served as a sharp reminder to anyone who cared to notice as to my own dubious talent. Like most comics I've met, Tom is very friendly, and the more we chatted the more we formed the kind of fast fraternal connection that comes to those serving a higher common purpose-- similar to that which foxhole buddies often speak of, and somewhat akin to the between finalists on Dancing With The Stars.

I discovered that Tom is part of cinema history. He revealed to me that he is the actor responsible for assaying Biff, the iconic bully in the "Back to the Future" cinematic juggernaut. In fact, the role proved so influential for Tom that he once had several of his character's catchphrases running simultaneously in cultural syndication ("Hello, McFly!" and the indelible "Butthead")-lines of dialogue so resonant with the nation's collective unconscious that they have shadowed him like Travis Bickle into adulthood. Tom is continuing to work in Hollywood while refining his standup act-- as a strategy to generate new roles, but also as a means to propel himself once-and-for-all beyond the gravitational pull of the Biffster. As he spoke, I nodded my assent to his professional strategy while musing privately upon the inescapable contrast his life presents to mine. Hollywood blockbusters, Michael J. Fox, actor salary compression, that crazy Crispin Glover guy-- I could talk about this stuff all night. If, of course, that had been my fate.

It is a standard convention of The Theater (or so Wikipedia tells me) that the story arc is sometimes altered swiftly and unpredictably by the appearance of a powerful, improbable force from above known as the *deus ex machina* (from the Latin for "God from the machine"). And so it was for me that night in the green room, although fate didn't quite announce itself from above so much as squeeze itself through the narrow Zanies door jamb in the person of a fleshy fellow I'll call Bob. Bob was an expensively dressed, middle-aged businessman who was demonstrably shit-faced.

Life can sure change fast. One minute, I'm flirting with worldwide fame, projecting my destiny

skyward through a vicarious transposition of lives with Tom Wilson. The next minute, I'm cheek-by-jowl with shit-faced Bob, a total stranger not ten seconds ago who I now noticed to be in possession of some kind of clipboard that he was hugging closely to his teetering carcass like it was a life raft. He finally dropped his soggy ass down beside me on the couch.

"Are you guys comedians?" Bob grunted, his lungs pumping three parts whiskey to one part CO2. While I made a mental note to investigate alternative fuel sources, Bob looked up at us from beneath hooded eyes, his pencil poised to tic our names off some kind of checklist on that clipboard of his, which in fact contained no paper.

Never comfortable assessing my own status in this regard, I paused, deferring to Tom, who responded without hesitation.

"Yeah," he said with a slight edge. "Are you with the club or something?"

Unfazed by the pointed question, Bob plowed on. "One of you has to help me out on Saturday night. I need a comedian for my wife's birthday."

Bob? Married? I held my silence.

"Well, I gotta be here Saturday," offered Tom. "So it looks like Bill's your man."

With a porcine swiftness Jackie Gleason would admire, Bob swung his girth around with the tight turn radius of a luxury SUV, his clipboard grazing my nose. His sweaty eyeballs pressed down on me like two glazed moons.

"So will you do it?" he asked. "I'll give you five hundred bucks for twenty minutes."

I almost said no out of reflex. But five hundred dollars amounted to roughly five hundred times my regular wage. When I opened my mouth to snatch up the offer, Tom suddenly raised his hands in the background (the very hands he used to torment the McFly family), seven fingers wagging.

"Seven hundred!" I blurted.

"All right, be there at seven-thirty."

Tom's seven fingers dissolved into two thumbs pointed skyward.

"Don't you think you should hang around and see my act?" I asked Bob.

"Yeah, I guess you're right," he muttered, and stumbled down the staircase to the showroom, taking his paperless clipboard with him.

Now that my evening had become an audition for Bob, I became nervous, but nevertheless moved through my set with all the mechanical reliability-- if not the imagined, life-changing potential-- of a flux capacitor. Not that poise mattered to Bob. From my vantage onstage I could see that in spite of the late hour he had not stopped drinking. Alone at his table, his bearing had taken on that of a man simply relieved to have checked another of life's objectives off his to-do list. The clipboard took on a new, metaphorical meaning.

After the show (Tom Wilson is very funny, by the way), Bob grabbed me.

"Call me tomorrow," he said brusquely, fumbling for a business card. But when he couldn't find a business card he grew red with frustration, and finally yanked an oversized conventioner badge off his suit jacket and scribbled something on the back. "Here. Seven-thirty."

"Great," I said.

"Good," he said, "this is good," and then he turned away abruptly to find his waitress. I caught a glimpse of Bob's tab in his hand, the total-- \$67.80-- scrawled in large, red Sharpie numbers, an extraordinary sum for one man over the course of a ninety-minute show. Whoever Bob was, planning his wife's birthday party had certainly made him thirsty.

The next morning in my downtown office, in the heart of Chicago's financial district, where finance guys like me show up for work, I studied the glyphs on the back of Bob's nametag. It seemed the man was not impervious to the effects of booze after all, for the numbers he'd scrawled there resembled nothing numerical whatsoever, nor for that matter the work of a grown man. What he'd left were nine so-called digits--too few if he had meant to include the area code, too many if he had not. Now who's being shadowed by Travis Bickle, I wondered. One thing was clear: if I was going to

get to Bob's gig by seven-thirty it was going to require the help of either a supercomputer or a Talmudic scholar.

Then I flipped the nametag over. To my astonishment there appeared his laser-printed name, along with a very distinguished job title: "President and CEO, Consolidated Metals." Clearly, Bob was more important than I had taken him for, which meant he was probably traceable through the Internet.

Bob's company Web site registers an extensive list of his professional accomplishments; all rendered in tight columns marching down the page flanking his stern-looking headshot. The photograph, in which he wears a dark suit and striped tie and affects a look as cold and hard as consolidated metals-whatever those are-had obviously been taken before sundown.

I knew that making personal contact with Bob through corporate channels would not be easy. Guys this far up the ladder always separate themselves from the general population through a complex of gatekeepers whose job is to keep the Bobs of the world aloof from the concerns of the Bills of the world. I finally got through to his personal assistant.

"He hired me to do some freelance work this weekend," I said nonchalantly, leaving out the nature of the work, and the fact that Bob was soaked when he hired me.

"All right, I'll tell him, Mr. Buckner," she said.

"Bunker," I corrected.

"Excuse me?"

"It's Bunker, not-Hello?" She'd hung up.

One of the first things I'd been advised about standup, many years ago, is that a comic has to be unflappable. There are too many crushing obstacles to overcome, and if you pause long enough to consider them rationally you'll stop yourself dead in your tracks. Because who would do this if he or she didn't have to? So when my phone rang later that day displaying an "Unknown Caller" message, I knew I shouldn't pick up. But couldn't help it, my rational brain has long since been recircuited. Sure enough, it was Bob.

"Are you the comedian I talked to the other night?" he said, sounding like he had a stupendous head cold.

"Sorry to bother you at work, Bob, but I lost your other number." I lied. I don't know why I lied, it just came out that way. I didn't want to lie to Bob, but I suppose I didn't want to tell him that I couldn't read his handwriting, either, in case it would shame him to know that I was aware of his drinking problem.

"Never mind all that," he said. "I blacked out and lost my phone the other night and can't seem to find it," he said without a trace of embarrassment. "So, anyway, we're still on for Saturday. Be at Woody's Tap at seven-thirty. Do like twenty minutes. Make my wife happy and I'll give you five hundred bucks."

"Seven hundred," I corrected.

"Excuse me?"

"The amount. It's seven hundred, not five-Hello?" He'd hung up.

* * *

Every comedy club has its distinguishing characteristics. I have found all of them, though, to be similar in one respect: the combination of stage, tables, and ubiquitous reek of stale booze create a relaxing vibe of uniformity that allows a comic to construct a work mentality that can be transferred readily from club to club. But as I taxied over to the fiftieth birthday bash of the wife of the CEO of Consolidated Metals, I struggled to consolidate a calming image of uniformity. There were too many variables. I would be in a bar, that was all I knew. But would there be twenty people, or two hundred? Would there be a stage? A microphone? Would Bob be sober? Okay, so I knew two things.

A local tavern in a big city on a freezing Saturday night is usually packed, and this place was no exception. I squeezed myself past people lined three-deep at the front bar, absorbing the high-ball atmosphere and the special birthday party décor that festooned the walls, which consisted largely of depictions of the Grim Reaper boring mortal doom down upon us through his bony white finger. I

tried visualizing positive outcomes for myself, but couldn't imagine any.

The crowd extended like a dense carpet of human heads clear to the back of the bar, broke for a bit near the bathrooms, then picked up again into the back party room. Which is where I spotted Bob looming over his party guests, his wide body and very nearly handsome crop of dark hair suggesting that he once might have been captain of the football team. But even Bob's dominating presence was dwarfed by the roistering crowd. He was huffing out instructions from a microphone on a stageless patch of tile in the back room, but the party had spread beyond his control. No one was listening.

I was within a whisker of turning heel and running for the door when Bob spotted me. His face lit up. I suspect it was not out of any real pleasure in seeing me personally, but from the realization that I was the one guy in the bar who was there to share his pain and not add to it.

"There's way more people here than I expected," Bob said to me through labored breaths. "Why don't you start?" he added, handing me the microphone.

Let me just say that I broke new personal ground in this moment, as this became the first gig I had ever attempted in an overcoat. But the pride of professional accomplishment soon gave way to more pressing challenges, like overcoming the fact that the microphone was attached to an amplifier the size of a shoe box, and that the ground I occupied was directly in line with the kitchen and its army of caterers hustling food in and out like they were in a Bob Fosse number.

But I pressed on, weirdly euphoric, driven by that "nothing left to lose" freedom that Janis Joplin used to sing about before she overdosed on heroin. Amazingly, I was now surrounded by a group of people who seemed focused solely on me, trying to figure out what I was saying. True, they were not laughing, but it was a start. A hand shot up. Unusual, but I was ready to roll with anything.

"Yes, you have a question?" I inquired of a not-so-young woman with metal studs in her face.

"Can you move? You're blocking the buffalo wings."

Bob swiped the microphone out of my hands and said to the crowd, "Maybe we should try this later." Glancing my way, he added, "Why don't you take off your coat and stay awhile?"

Bob had just gotten the biggest laugh of the night. His joke at my expense lightened his mood considerably, that and perhaps the IV of Johnny Walker Black he'd been running since five o'clock. Unfortunately, while our shared ankle bracelet of anxiety had been cut from his leg, it was still tightly attached to mine, and no amount of microbrew was going to help me get back up in front of these savages. I had no idea where this might go next.

The party took its course. Drinks, conviviality, unimpeded access to the buffet; I observed it all with a keen eye, looking for the lull that might cue me to start again. Meanwhile, spontaneous toasts were flaring up, some flaming shots of booze as well, and even a stirring Power Point presentation paying homage to the woman behind Consolidated Metals, Bob's wife Judy. The show was produced by Bob's techie son, and projected against a bed sheet against the bar wall, where for five minutes we witnessed highlights of his mother's life, with special emphasis upon her exotic, booze-laden vacations with Bob—all scored to Tina Turner's uplifting screams of "You're Simply the

Best." The catering staff then wheeled out a giant, candlelit birthday cake and the whole room, myself included, sang a hearty rendition of "Happy Birthday," which was followed by the blowing out of candles and a thunderous round of applause.

It struck me that this party had peaked, and without a single meaningful contribution from the comedian. I wondered whether Bob might change his mind suddenly and renege on our contract, which I now realized couldn't even cite a weak handshake as its foundation. If I was going to snatch my paycheck back from the jaws of Bob's petty cash account, I would have to act quickly.

I strode over to Bob and got his attention.

"Maybe now's a good time to try again," I said.

"Yeah, yeah, good," he countered with more enthusiasm than I expected. Bob grabbed the microphone and bent down to turn up the amp, which let out a raucous peal of static.

"Can I have everyone's attention?" he breathed, his voice reaching only those within his immediate vicinity. "I'd like to introduce a very special guest." Then Bob smiled to himself, like a man who was about to spring a mighty practical joke.

"He wanted to be here personally to say happy birthday," he continued. Bob was now grossly

overplaying my intro, and I could see finally that I stood no chance. I had been recruited to be his patsy from the start and this was to be my Gallipoli-Bob was going to run me out there and I was going to get mowed down. There was no opposing it. I stood quietly, pole-axed, looking up at one of those Grim Reaper cut-outs on the wall.

"So I want you all to give a big round of applause to..." a sharp look of panic flashed across Bob's face. He put his hand over the mike and leaned down to me.

"Tim. What's your last name again?"

"Bunker. And it's not Tim, it's Bill," I said. He nodded quickly and turned back to the microphone.

"Please give a big round of applause for Tim Buckner!"

I stepped to the microphone like Chuck Wepner, the Bayonne Bleeder, hauling himself off the canvas for one more futile swing at Ali.

"It's nice to be here," I said, a bit unsteadily. "Is Judy here? Where's Judy?" I asked the crowd, which in reality consisted of only about four people standing in front of me.

Bob's wife Judy stepped forward. She wasn't unattractive, despite the death grip she had on a hurricane glass containing some kind of blue liquid, and the pink feathered boa around her neck, and the plastic tiara on her head that had a big number 5-0 on the front.

"Well, happy birthday, Judy," I said. "I guess this is a pretty big one." I could see Judy's mind reeling, trying to match me up with somebody from her past, perhaps from one of her exotic vacations.

"I turned forty myself recently," I announced. "My wife got me a number of gifts, including a book titled 'Sex Over Fifty.' Apparently, whatever I'm doing, I'm about ten years behind the learning curve."

My words never reached her ears. Nor anyone else's for that matter. They all just stared at me like I was a stroke victim. Until Judy piped up.

"Excuse me, ah, Tim or whatever," she inquired, heroically remembering my non-name. "Could you move? You're blocking the cake."

Judy got an even bigger laugh than Bob did earlier. I couldn't believe it. These guys must be the life of the high seas.

Bob snapped off the amp and swiped the microphone out of my hands.

"Well, you tried, buddy. I appreciate you showing up," he said, sounding like he meant it. "Here you go."

In the guise of an executive handshake, Bob pressed a folded-up piece of paper into my palm. I assumed it was a check, but I also imagined that it might just as readily be a tip on a horse, or the parking stub for his Lexus. I was just glad to be finished and getting out. I slipped the paper into my pocket without even looking at it.

"Sorry it didn't work out," I offered. "Maybe I can come out to your company and perform or something."

"We'll see," said Bob, disappearing into the throng.

Riding home in the back of the cab I pulled Bob's note from my pocket and unfolded it. It was a check. In the top left corner was the logo for Consolidated Metals. In a small box on the right was a number scrawled in blue ink: \$700. And there in the middle, written in prominent block letters, was the punch line: "PAY TO THE ORDER OF TIM."

You can't make this up, I thought. And then I wondered whether somewhere Mister Tolstoy wasn't wishing he'd stuck with comedy.

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