One More Time for Donny Deadborne

Stephen Roger Powers

For Zeke Jarvis

I'm a feature comedian. That means I go on stage after the emcee opens the show with ten or fifteen minutes of announcements and lukewarm jokes. I'm on for about a half an hour, sometimes a little longer, right before the headliner, who carries the show with an hour-long set. Depending on the club, I do six shows a weekend, one on Thursday night, two on Friday night, and three on Saturday night. This weekend I'll only do five. I started this seven years ago when I was twenty-three, and I've been featuring for four. I'm not sure I'll ever be good enough to headline, otherwise I'd probably be doing it by now. Most of the time, I'm okay with that.

My first time on stage was at the Safehouse, a Milwaukee spy bar with secret passageways and trick mirrors and a password required to get in. I was a tour guide at Miller Brewery then, misunderstanding people's questions if they asked them near the loud bottling lines. Reciting a memorized script for the tour groups and walking them down the same route over and over all day long soon made me feel like I was on a tape loop, dazed with boredom, and so it wasn't long before I threw in deadpan one-liners about yeast and hops and kegs.

My brewery buddies dared me to sign up for the comedy open mike at the Safehouse. Tell a couple of your beer jokes from work,
they all said. Of course I bombed. But it led to another spot the next week, and then another, and so on, with a couple new jokes each time.

Eventually, a round, greasy, drunk-off-his-ass booking guy offered me my first paid gig (twenty-five bucks and a free drink, maybe two if the manager liked me) at a bowling alley south of town. It took two years to polish and hone myself enough to move up from the steak-houses and Knights of Columbus halls to the comedy clubs full time, where, these days, I perform the same show at every venue, sometimes two or three times a night. There's an odd comfort in only doing material that's so familiar I could lip-sync my act. I've been tempted to try that, give my voice a rest once in a while. But I'd probably not hear the cue and end up horribly out of synch.

So, yeah, I'm deaf too. I lost a good part of my hearing when I was three. Fever. I'm not totally deaf, just hard of hearing enough to play it up and make a gimmick out of it. It makes me talk a little funny too—people often think I'm British. Road comics are a dime a dozen, and if you don't have a gimmick you ain't going nowhere.

My opening line is Heckling me is a waste of your time, and the rest of my act is about misunderstanding everything I hear. Like when the telemarketer asks me if I'm interested in switching my long distance and I say it's none of your fucking business how long my dick is.

After my first round of one liners, I say Folks ask me all the time what it's like being hearing impaired. The punch line is Well, women take their underwear off when I tell them I read lips. Of course that's a groaner, but I follow it with And then they turn the lights off and I have no idea what the hell they're trying to say.
A lot of people say they would love a life on the road. These are the people who pretend to have read Kerouac and Nabokov. They'll tell you that Kerouac and Nabokov are their favorite authors. Sometimes I agree with these people. Nothing better than heading down the highway in the middle of the desert in New Mexico when the sun is just coming up, the corners of your windshield are still fogged, the taste of orange juice and toothpaste is still sour in your mouth, and your hair is still wet from your quick motel shower. Maybe Hank Williams or Judy Collins blaring on the stereo, and you've got nothing to worry about for another three hundred miles or so. Just you, Hank, and Judy. And a show at the end of the day.

But you do that every single day for a few years, and you can sing those songs better than Hank or Judy. You face nothing but three hundred miles of roadside signs that point out where everyone just like you has stopped for no reason other than to pick up a Milky Way and a local sights brochure. You'll admire the picture of a fancy resort on the cover, and then you'll toss it in the backseat and never read it again.

Three hundred miles of passing semis, vast stretches of cactus and shrubs with high hills in the distance, the passenger seat empty the whole way, and all you want to do is stop in Las Cruces and find that Mexican restaurant you ate at when you were a kid dreaming of a life of travel. You remember that Mexican restaurant had a tree growing in the middle of it through the ceiling.

But you can't think like this, or you're not going to be in any mood to do your show.

Let me tell you how I got in the mood for tonight's show. About an hour out from town, I started playing "Silent Night" and "Jingle
Bells" on my car horn. If you time it just right, it doesn’t matter if the
tune is a little off. Try it sometime. You get pissed at the guy in front
of you, just give him a blast of “Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer.”

After ten miles of caroling on my horn, the excitement wore off a
bit, so then I wondered how long it would take to completely empty
my windshield washer fluid reservoir. I ran the wipers and washers
non-stop while rooting “Angels We Have Heard on High,” and it
took about six minutes for it to run dry. Never mind that the cars
behind me were trying to run me off the road by this point. So if you
were out on Highway 41 this afternoon and your car got splashed,
yeah, that was me.

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Any performer who tells you we aren’t in this for love is lying. But
being a comedian ain’t like being in a rock band. Most of us only get
miles and miles of yellow center lines pointing in a direction we’ve
probably been down before. One or two lucky ones will be touched by
someone’s ten-foot pole.

Meanwhile, the rest of us shake hands, sign a soggy napkin or
two, pose for a picture maybe, but if you’re not super famous the
customers only ask you to do these things if they think you’ve given
them their money’s worth. On Monday morning they’ll go to work
and tell their colleagues about, say, this funny deaf guy they saw at the
comedy club on Saturday night.

But they probably won’t even remember your name. The only
thing you’ve left behind is your fingerprints on the motel alarm
clock’s snooze button.

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In this business, it's either love or the road, never both.

The one woman I always came home to anyway, however, was Katelyn. With her I discovered that sliced Granny Smiths are finest soaked in dry red wine, which tasted best right off her lips. She loved how I kissed and kissed and kissed her until we were drunk. It's not that she didn't love me, it's just that I failed over and over again at making the choice.

I remember one morning when I was out on the road for a month. I left my motel, mailed her a post card, drove another couple hundred miles, went up on stage again, and had fun with a crowd of about two-hundred-and-fifty people at a supper club in the middle of nowhere.

A young woman in the front row winked at me and looked me over several times. When I got off stage, I had the waitress send her a beer. The headliner commented on the young woman in the front row's expensive jewelry, but she only held the beer bottle up and heckled him.

After the show, I sat at the bar by the main doors and waited for her to come out from the show room. But then she just high-tailed it right out of the place and into the parking lot without stopping to talk to me. The January moon reflected on her necklace, and she disappeared among all the cars and people.

Late that night, I was lying in bed in my motel room with the curtains open. Even with my hearing aids out I could hear a truck approach on the highway. It must have been a mail truck, because my post card to Katelyn was singing as it passed.

You think I'm kidding about that. That's what loneliness on the road does to you.

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Sometimes I wonder why Katelyn stayed with me as long as she did. Maybe it was the quasi-glamorous lifestyle, the hobnobbing with comics she recognized from HBO and Comedy Central and Leno, the seediness of the whole thing. Or maybe she even felt a little sorry for me.

I was still a local emcee when we met, about to break into featuring. The microphone wasn’t turned on when I opened the show at Donovan’s Reef that night, and I didn’t know it. I’d had one too many rum and cokes to drown the sore throat and headache creeping up on me, so I was nowhere close to the top of my game. I thought the people yelling that they couldn’t hear me were hecklers. So I did the first few minutes of my set with the microphone turned off, until the lanky owner came up on stage in a huff and turned it on for me.

Katelyn introduced herself after the show. Then she knocked over my hard lemonade, handed me a stack of napkins to wipe it up, bought me a buttery nipple, and took me to her house for a massage, some aspirin and tea, and a bubble bath.

Whatever it was that she saw in me, she eventually learned that there isn’t all that much money to be made for an undiscovered feature act, even one who works the comedy clubs almost every weekend of the year and does one-nighters at resorts and private parties the rest of the week. No insurance. No benefits. My car has 236,428 miles on it, and it’s only five years old.

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It’s been a year since I was last here in upper Michigan at Keeper of the Fire Tropical Casino, but it feels like I’ve never left. They’ve put me in the same hotel room. I’ve somehow brought along the same stage clothes to wear as last time. Even the audience looks exactly the
same. Regulars sit in the same chairs. The same drunk snowmobile mechanic from Escanaba stands up and pulls his pants down when I tell my cochlear implant joke. I'll show you my cochlear implant, he shouts. The same bouncer drags him out. The same friend from back home calls me after the show to see how it went. I can't get steaming hot water in my room, just like when I was last here. I spend ten minutes in the same tepid Jacuzzi. Same bath salts, same rough towel marked with a black C in the corner, same cigarette butt overlooked under the hotel services booklet. Before bed the same Britney Spears special is on TV, same channel, same time.

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One Sunday morning last July, on a weekend when I was working my home club for once, Katelyn sat up, tucked her long bed-head brown hair behind her ear, bit her lip, and looked under the covers. By the way she shot out of bed and into the bathroom, I didn't have to ask what unexpectedly early problem she was having.

I pulled some pajama bottoms and a dirty t-shirt out of the hamper, put my hearing aids in, and drove down the block to the store. I picked up a box of tampons and started toward the registers. A stout woman in a pink sweatshirt and black leggings was pushing a cart loaded with diapers, ground chuck, Hamburger Helper, soda bottles, and frozen pizzas. She stopped me right there in the feminine care aisle while I was holding the tampons box to tell me she'd seen the show at Giggles Cafe last night and thought it was phenomenal.

Usually I don't mind running into people who recognize me. But I was in my pajamas and my slippers, no jacket on. My hair was all wild, my stubble was itchy, and I was stinking like last night's whiskey sours, cigarettes, and sex, which, now that I look back on it, had been
restrained and tentative, with Katelyn quiet and rhythmic and far away, a stark contrast from her usual bucking and clawing.

I actually let the woman in the store take a picture of me with her cell phone camera. I almost told her to piss off, but I didn’t know what else to do except be nice to her. I didn’t want her to tell all her friends that she’d run into Donny Deadborne at the store and he was acting like an asshole.

After I paid and was on my way back to Katelyn’s house, I started writing a new bit in my head based on that experience, repeating it over and over to myself so I wouldn’t forget it before I wrote it down. Something about how my girlfriend sent me to the store for some Kotex and it busted up our relationship because I thought she told me to go get some hoo sex.

Katelyn came out of the bathroom a few minutes after I delivered the box to her. She sat down next to me on the couch we’d bought together. She announced that her ex-boyfriend, the yacht company executive, had been coming around again—for quite some time now, in fact—while I was gone. He was taking her to Spain next week for the rest of the summer and fall, and she said it would be best if I was out of her house by the time she got back. Then she said she was sorry and started to cry, so I held her for a while, numbly wanting to ask details and yet not, feeling as if I knew them anyway.

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Now it’s the second night of our five-show run at the casino. I spent the afternoon driving around the backwoods highways looking for something to do. I stopped in at the Chamber of Commerce in town to find out what some of the local sights were. The lady at the information desk suggested I might enjoy the comedy show at the casino.
"No shit?" I said to her.

I haven't worked with this weekend's headliner before. Her name is Smidgen. Women headliners are rare in this business. Midway through her act, Smidgen pulls a Hostess fruit pie from her bra. She tosses it to a heckler in the front row after he catcalls her. Then she pulls out a calendar and pen and asks the man when he's free for a date.

He says he's married.

"Is your wife here? No! Then let's have our date right now." She pulls a bottle of Heineken from her bra. "Don't like beer, huh?" So she pulls out a pine-colored bottle of champagne. The man pops the cork and they each take a swig. Then she pulls a disposable camera from her bra. "A souvenir," she says, and takes the man's picture.

There's just no other way to say it. She has big boobs. Okay?

After the show I ask her how she keeps all that stuff from falling out. "I'd love to show you sometime," she says.

The next night it's ten below zero outside. She lugs in her paper bag full of props to the green room to get ready. She yelps when she tucks in the cold bottles.

When I get off the stage, she's waiting at the side. Before the emcee calls her name and she goes up, she places my hand on her breast. The beer bottle is hard and pointed through her blouse. She moves my hand to her other breast where the champagne bottle is heavy and bulky as a cowbell. The people sitting near us look at me like I'm some kind of pervert.

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Like Smidgen and her boobs, sometimes I use my played-up deafness as a weapon. I don't always understand what a heckler is saying if I
can't read his lips when he heckles me, so it's easy for me to tear him apart for picking on the poor handicapped comedian. One time, though, during an especially tough show at Hondo's Comedy Lounge, everyone was real restless and tipsy and nobody was laughing much. I understood a big beefy guy with his wallet on a chain loud and clear.

"Suck my dick!" he said.

The crowd just went nuts when I put my hands on my hips and said, "Again."

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A few years ago, at The Twin Cities Skyline Club, a young man in a shirt and tie tried to impress his future mother-in-law. He slipped me a fifty, slowly and obviously so that his future mother-in-law would see. I put it in my pocket. He shook my hand and went on to say how much fun they all had.

"Why aren't you in Vegas?" he said.

I think he also slipped the emcee a twenty. But he didn't ask the emcee why he wasn't in Vegas.

Next was a blonde, dumpy woman in gilded glasses and loopy, beaded aquamarine necklaces.

"You're living my dream," she said after she took both my hands in hers. "And you have the funniest little accent. Where you from?"

"Deafmark," I said, and I immediately turned to shake the hand of the person next in line after her.

"Oh, that sounds like a nice place . . ."

The young man who tried to impress his mother-in-law came nudging his way back in the door, and then he asked me to return his fifty bucks. Maybe I shouldn't have done this, but I smiled at him and
pretended I couldn't hear him. When he asked again, I said, "Thank you for coming, glad you enjoyed the show, drive safe."

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Once in a while I philosophize that this profession is like knowing how far it is to the next town—you've traveled down the same highway so many times you don't notice the road signs anymore. Off stage I sometimes hear my jokes in my sleep, but other times people at parties say Hey, what's your best one liner? and I'm stumped and nothing comes out.

A full-time road comic is like a music box that just keeps cranking and cranking and there's no life to the music because it just keeps turning and tinkling the same thing again and again, but I have to remember that somebody somewhere is still going to open the music box for the first time and be amazed.

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An elderly man in a John Deere cap, his white hair sticking out like little wings, approaches Smidgen, who is sitting at the corner of the bar near the back of the casino's comedy club, in the shadows. The show is over. The last couple of lingerers from the crowd are filing out. Cigarette smoke swirls around the light bulbs and the waitresses are already vacuuming the floor for the next show in an hour. Smidgen's broad back is to the approaching man in the John Deere cap. She apparently doesn't know the man is approaching until he feels him tap her shoulder.

"Hey," the man in the John Deere cap says. "I came to last night's show and loved it, and so I came to see you again tonight."

"Thank you," Smidgen says. She sips her beer and turns back around. She doesn't seem to want to talk to anyone.
“But I’m disappointed,” the man in the cap says anyway. “You did all the same jokes. I want my money back because you did the same jokes I seen you do last night.”

Smidgen ignores the man. “One more,” she says to the bartender. She slides him her glass.

The man in the cap shakes his head and mutters something I can’t hear as he walks out of the show room. Maybe the manager will give him a refund. I’ll probably never see him again.

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I happened to be in town a month after Katelyn got back from Spain. I agreed to meet her at Storybook Holler for the afternoon. Once again, like we used to, we would follow the Jack and the Beanstalk plywood pages all the way through to the giant’s inevitable fall at the end. Katelyn had a surprise for me too, she’d written in her text message, just a small happy thing from Spain.

I arrived first and waited for her by the entrance, silently rehearsing reasons why I didn’t bring a jacket on this cider October morning that came in all the way down to my ribs when I drank deep, why I was walking in sandals through the grass to the pumpkins.

Sometimes you can’t let summer go, I said when she approached from the parking lot with her eyebrow raised. Because the hayride was closed the last time we came in the spring, I also flapped our tickets like a grandson getting ready to show off a new card trick.

We walked together to the pumpkins without saying anything else. I turned one over, traced its ridges, like rolling stairways, brushed off some dirt. I imagined we’d someday climb up a giant pumpkin stairway to places you only see in the background of others’ travel snapshots, but at the far end of the orchard there was only a single
bare Montmorency cherry tree wrapped in webs, and it reminded me of my grandfather's old hands pulling and stretching yarn in the light of the sun porch.

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While Smidgen is on stage for the last show of the weekend at Keeper of the Fire, the emcee and I are at the bar watching the news on the muted, closed-captioned big screen TV. The reporter solemnly and silently announces that Mars is a graveyard for half the spacecraft ever sent there. The emcee is smashed by now. I've already forgotten his name. He asks me what I think of the scientists arguing that Mars is such an incredibly risky mission.

"It's not like they're shooting for the stars," he says.

The bartender is bored with us. I twirl my last two half-melted ice cubes. I fold up my chewed-on straw and leave it in my glass. Smidgen and her boobs have the crowd in stitches, but after seeing her act five times in three days, I'm bored too. The drunk emcee follows me out to the parking lot for a breath of fresh air.

"Would you just look at that," he says.

Mars is the crown jewel city in a sky of millions of ordinary ones.

Mars should consider itself lucky that comedians haven't tried to go there. For now the only residents will be the broken and cold wreckage of probes that tried but never made it. And sooner or later our own home planet will be too littered with dream corpses floating in our atmosphere.

The drunk emcee and I stand in the parking lot and look up at the stars for a long time, until I remind him that Smidgen is almost done. He staggers back in to close the show and thank the audience for coming.
What will happen to people like us? Will we go to Cape Canaveral and stow away on a rocket bound for the red planet because the odds are better that we'll make it there, because there's nowhere else for us to go?

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Sometimes I worry I'll end up like a bad parody of "The Night Before Christmas" that shows up every year in holiday form letters. I worry I'll be fifty-some years old, a little more deaf with age, maybe divorced because whoever came after Katelyn was dumb enough to say yes, living with my eighty-year-old mother, emceeing only the amateur open mikes at Me's on Water Street because I'm too old and fucked up and worn out to be on the road full time. In spite of my years of experience and stage time, I'll probably drop the microphone when I pull it out of the stand. I'll mess up the name of the first comedian. Then I'll make fun of a heckler's ugly fat girlfriend. The heckler, already tanked so early in the night, will get up to punch me, but his ugly fat girlfriend will pull him back down in his chair and feed him some popcorn. I'll trip through a joke about Jeffrey Dahmer, failing to realize that in Milwaukee Jeffrey Dahmer jokes are never a good idea. Then I'll try to do impressions of Rich Little doing impressions of Ronald Reagan and Bugs Bunny singing "Take Me Out to the Ballgame." People will stumble-flee to the restrooms. The third comedian up will be a young, up-and-coming club professional who's passing through and has stopped in to try out some new material, but instead he will make me the butt of every joke.

In the back of my mind, I'll be more worried about how I'm going to pay some of my bills. I'll be worrying about my liver, by then turned inside out so many times by fast food and booze everyone will
be amazed I'm still alive. I'll worry about lung cancer from all those years of smoking unfiltered Camels to stay awake while alone in the middle of the night, driving home five hours to fall asleep in my own bed at the break of dawn rather than take one more night in a motel room. Maybe that's why I will forget the punch lines for the new jokes I'll have written.

The next morning I'll give in to my mother and answer a Help Wanted ad for a delivery company that needs passengers to ride along so the drivers can use the carpool lane.

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For now, at least, I am still a driver. I'm heading back to Milwaukee for a few days off before my three-week swing through Illinois, Indiana, and Kentucky. A friend and his wife usually let me crash on the sofa in their basement, now that I'm out of Katelyn's house. Can't afford a place of my own. Need to save for a down payment on a new car.

Before I left the casino, the emcee took my room because it has a Jacuzzi and his doesn't. I could tell from the way he and Smithgen looked at each other when I handed him my key card that they would be putting the Jacuzzi to good use.

The woods of upper Michigan are dark and cold. No moon. I watch for deer. It's a game that traveling performers play often, chicken with Bambi.

But the brown pine needle in the ashtray is one of my St. Christopher's. I saved it from several hundred vacuumed out of the trunk last December. Katelyn and I managed to string our Christmas tree with failed guesses snarled in the garland, creased wishes kinked in the tinsel. Both of us topped it with Why don't you come with me and Why must you now leave sad and unspoken behind the eyes of the angel.
I also drive with a lighter from Spain, shaped like a flip-flop. The flame appears from the toe. I might use This smoke is made for walking as a punch line. I'm rarely amazed at trinkets women bring me back from trips to Europe with other men, but sometimes I delude myself into thinking that my Dunhill Lights and my flaming shoe make me more sophisticated than my fellow performers in the green room. Stand-ups need their props while growing older on stages across America. The question is what will make us brittle first, the smoke or the road?

Two air fresheners swing from my mirror, scents long gone. One a red high-heeled shoe, the other a little blue shark. Home one night, I woke up because Katelyn wasn't in bed with me. I found her painting the kitchen. How lovely she was at one in the morning, whip-flip-flipping the paint roller up and down the walls, how superb the disorder of the stove pushed to the living room with the wine rack on top, bottles all around on the floor. The next morning we went to the hardware store for wood trim and thinner, got distracted by the automotive aisle, where she opened the two air fresheners, put the shoe on the shark's head, and stood the shark upright so it teetered and fell over.

The green squirt gun in the cup holder is for protection, never mind that it leaks. Sometimes I pass through sleazy areas, hang out with tough characters. These days, after a show, I just want to crawl into bed with someone I love rather than the occasional wasted stranger. I took a break one weekend to help Katelyn pull up rotting shingles. In spite of shooting water at her from behind the chimney and allowing her, high up there on the roof, to push me down on my back to watch airplanes overhead, it was hinted my homecomings were numbered.
Even an umbrella is a St. Christopher. Mine always stays in the back seat, especially when it rains. Katelyn only came out on the road with me twice. One time, February in Tucson when it was wet, I froze, fear-caught and fascinated, in the rattler exhibit at the Desert Museum, umbrella closed and dripping, and she snuck up quiet from behind and wriggled her fingers up my back.

There's also a yellow ticket stub for the parking lot at Dollywood, left on the dashboard, faded from the sun. A car wash attendant tried to throw it away, but I stopped him. The second time Katelyn came with me, I was booked at a fundraiser near Gatlinburg to tell a couple jokes and sing "Viva Las Vegas" with thirty Elvis impersonators, the governor of Tennessee, and Dolly Parton. People cheered and sang along so loud I couldn't hear the band, so I kept time by watching Dolly and the governor's lips.

I don't often use the corkscrew under the armrest anymore. You never know where you'll need it, so it's convenient to have one handy. Katelyn and I run into each other every now and then at the Metro Market or Leon's Frozen Custard when I'm back in town. We'll go buy a bottle of Sangiovese to drink together slowly before leaving in our separate directions. She'll present me a harmless souvenir or two she's been keeping in her glove compartment. I won't ask her any questions. She used to have a tradition, while traveling herself, of writing post cards to me before anyone else. I'm sure she still does that, even though she no longer sends them. They might be saved somewhere I'll never see.