SAVED BY STANDUP *(by Nancy Stanley)*

I fell in love on February 25, 2011 in the front row of the Orpheum Theatre in Phoenix, watching the comedian Lewis Black. He was brilliant, of course, but that microphone…well, it was downright mesmerizing. I knew -- without forethought then or hindsight since -- that that piece of metal was my way out.

What I needed "out" of was middle-aged disaffection. I was 56, with a 17-year old daughter poised to take wing, a son not far behind, and a marriage that clearly would not survive their flight. After years of heavy parenting -- the kind involving Girl Scout campouts and driving marathons – I could see that they were emerging as competent, confident individuals.

In the "mom lite" world of young adults, we were revolving around each other in the expanding orbit of their autonomy. Soon, there would be nobody to take care of.
Nobody, that is, but me.

One infrequently articulated benefit of parenting is that it tempers your narcissism for at least ten to fifteen years. Little humans count on you, above everyone else on earth, for their survival and security and comfort. Your instincts kick in. Indulgent habits fall away. Daydreaming and self-examination seem like quaint vestiges of a bygone era compared to the urgent, gritty process of organizing other people's lives. You don't wake up on a Saturday morning and wonder what you might do to amuse yourself. What you have to do is so patently obvious and exhausting that sometimes you'd just like to go right back to bed.

At least in the early years, there are no existential questions hanging like conversation bubbles above your head: there is just a lot of work.

But even if I could have separated from the industriousness of parenting, I would not have escaped its emotional web. In upper-middle-class contemporary culture, the mandate for mothers is to pawn your own life for what you want your children to have. In my case, that wasn't a collection of things with physical properties, but the more ephemeral goals of creating experiences, banking memories, building confidence, teaching them about the world.

It was a daunting enterprise that consumed me emotionally as they grew. Oh, I kept a day job, took classes, and spent plenty of time away from home. I traveled sometimes, to dine in restaurants without costumed characters, to fall asleep without my arms wrapped around a slender little waist. I always felt a deep, vague ache, like phantom limbs reminding me what was gone.

I know women who are much better at managing the psychic load. Their identity isn't subsumed in either the role or its endless details. They don't rely so much on their children for emotional sustenance. They are more balanced, less enmeshed.

I had no ability to moderate, so soon it was impossible to tell where they ended and I began. If I began at all. And as the knot between parent and child loosened, as it had to, I thought I might just drift away.

It was all about to change.

That was my backstory as I sat in the Orpheum with my son James, the one who no longer snacks on the dog's food or needs help planning his science fair project. Then Black came onstage to charm the crowd. And I fell in love with his mic.

When it works, the energy transfer between comic and audience is a thing to behold. Here, it was stunning. Not ten minutes into his performance I knew that standup could consume me like parenting, but with profoundly lower stakes. Maybe I could make people laugh, and at the same time confront the absurdities of life. My life. Maybe by studying this craft, watching its masters, and telling my stories, maybe I could write my second act.

I might have said it aloud, looking at the stage, "I have to do that.´

I never believed much in epiphanies, leaning more towards the rational than the magical. I don't believe in love at first sight or that things happen for a reason or that anything is particularly pre-ordained. It's just that -- sometimes -- you are raw enough and needy enough to divine significance from the ordinary. Then it seems like a fresh revelation – an epiphany – when, in truth, you wouldn't have discovered the matter if not for the void.

Before having kids I had changed courses a couple of times, first learning the TV business from scratch and then becoming a lawyer for about five minutes. Those moves were designed to help me crawl out of credit quicksand and, frankly, to make me shape the hell up. But this attraction wasn't strategic. It made no sense at all. It was visceral. It seemed impossible. It was fabulous.

Comedy became my organizing instrument, an energy engine. Within eight months, I had gone to a standup workshop and filled notebooks with bad material. I braved open mic nights and held the stage on a cruise ship lurching around in the Caribbean I found a "home" club with a supportive comedy village and a tribe of 25 year-olds who accept me in much the way they tolerate the crazy bird lady at the park. (While not much surprises me, the idiosyncrasy of the comedy subculture is on the shortlist.)

On one otherwise uneventful morning my daughter Sarah looked at me and, in a moment of preternatural maturity, said, "I've been thinking about you, and how funny it is that I'm watching you kind of grow up while you're watching me grow up." It wasn't a bid for discussion or a question, but merely a simple statement that reflected the year just past. I can't imagine what other endeavor could have saved me so completely.

My act, about a fifty-something woman entering the post-child phase of her life, ends up being no "act" at all, which doesn't mean it is true, just authentic. It's work. You can't skip the writing and testing and honing or you're just another joke teller with an index card. Forget stealing jokes from the internet. Don't even try to imitate. Little things count, so much that two words reversed can make the difference between a belly laugh and a polite chuckle. The old adage, "timing is everything" never rings as true as when you are trying to get people to laugh. When done right – and I'm not close – comedy can employ every cognitive and emotional skill you have, as well as your best instincts.

This is a DIY project, to be sure. Nobody else delivers your set. Others can analyze. They can coach or encourage. They can get you more stage time or a better venue. But they can't ensure your success. Being alone in this environment doesn't make me feel lonely, though: It makes me feel powerful. It makes me feel brave. It makes me take care of myself.

There's also power in the commitment you make to your act, whether it's the next joke out of your mouth or the life experiences you've been reluctant to own. I didn't understand that about comedy at first, that the best material comes from the parts of yourself you most want to shroud.

Ultimately grounded in paradox, standup is perfect avocation for people like me, those who score high in confidence and low in self-esteem. That way, I can experience the thrill of a solid set, then immediately start obsessing about the next. I love that part.

Here's the very best thing: I don't care if I'm a truly awful comic. I'll never be touring on the standup circuit, or outshining the young, hungry legions who populate clubs hoping to land a headliner's gig. I don't dream of a TV spot or making an actual living. None of that belies my passion: I may be a hobbyist, but I'm no dilettante.

Waiting for my turn, I know I've already had my big break. There will be other times to tackle relationships, retirement, money, and the capital-F Future. For the moment it's just me in the spotlight, being steadier than I thought I could be.
The house announcer says my name and I step onto the stage. The mic feels substantial in my hand, a nine-ounce metaphor for my reinvention. I smile and draw a breath, tamping down the fear that I've blanked on my opening line. It comes back to me, like it always does, and as I start my set I'm still slightly surprised that the voice I hear is my own.