



Andy & Don: The Making of a Friendship and a Classic American TV Show

By Daniel de Visé



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A lively and revealing biography of Andy Griffith and Don Knotts, celebrating the powerful real-life friendship behind one of America's most iconic television programs.

Andy Griffith and Don Knotts met on Broadway in the 1950s. When Andy went to Hollywood to film a TV pilot about a small-town sheriff, Don called to ask if the sheriff could use a deputy. The comedic synergy between Sheriff Andy Taylor and Deputy Barney Fife ignited *The Andy Griffith Show*, elevating a folksy sitcom into a timeless study of human friendship, as potent off the screen as on. Andy and Don—fellow Southerners born into poverty and raised among scofflaws, bullies, and drunks—captured the hearts of Americans across the country as they rocked lazily on the front porch, meditating about the simple pleasure of a bottle of pop.

But behind this sleepy, small-town charm, de Visé's exclusive reporting reveals explosions of violent temper, bouts of crippling neurosis, and all-too-human struggles with the temptations of fame. *Andy and Don* chronicles unspoken rivalries, passionate affairs, unrequited loves, and friendships lost and regained. Although Andy and Don ended their Mayberry partnership in 1965, they remained best friends for the next half-century, with Andy visiting Don at his death bed.

Written by Don Knotts's brother-in-law and featuring extensive unpublished interviews with those closest to both men, *Andy and Don* is the definitive literary work on the legacy of *The Andy Griffith Show* and a provocative and an entertaining read about two of America's most enduring stars.

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Editorial Review

Review

“A liting labor of love, a book that captures a golden moment in modern Americana. You'll not only return again to Mayberry, you'll feel as though you've never left.” (Tom Shales *Pulitzer Prize-winning television critic and author of Live from New York*)

“This delightful book, written by Knotts’ brother-in-law, traces the production of the series and the friendship of its two leads, a friendship that continued long after the actors went in different career directions, right up to Knotts’ death in 2006.... A well written, respectful, and informative look at a classic TV show and the two friends who made it great. Delicious comfort food for boomers and, really, anyone with cable.” (*Booklist (starred review)*)

“An intimate look into the lives of two thoroughly unique human beings who became not only household names but icons. What a thrill to take a peak down the alleys of Mayberry and beyond.” (Billy Bob Thornton)

“De Visé, Knotts’ brother-in-law, has written a rewarding dual biography that is the definitive story of their friendship.... As a story about a TV show and a creative partnership, *Andy and Don* satisfies. It’s also a lively look inside the entertainment industry in the latter half of the 20th century. But more than anything, it’s the story of a beautiful friendship.” (*News & Observer*)

“The perfect holiday gift for your aunt, uncle, grandma, or hipster niece, this well-written, often eloquent chronicle is just what fans of the show have waited for every fan of *The Andy Griffith Show* – and the great actors and writers who made it come alive – will treasure it.” (*Missoulian*)

"A delightful, affectionate tribute to the show, and to the two stars whose unique chemistry, both on and off the screen, was the key to its enduring appeal." (Richard Zoglin *author of Hope*)

“Andy Griffith and Don Knotts are one of the most famous comedy duos in America, and in this tender tribute, De Visé, Knotts’s brother-in-law, chronicles their relationship.... De Visé offers an intimate look at the lives of these two stars, and his access is invaluable to understanding their lifelong friendship. He captures the complexity of both men and the intimacy of their friendship with extreme detail and sensitivity.” (*Publishers Weekly*)

"This is the book about *The Andy Griffith Show* you didn't know you needed. De Visé shows that Griffith and his equally famous sidekick were far more complicated, troubled—and interesting—than their public personae ever let on." (Jennifer Keishin Armstrong *author of Mary and Lou and Rhoda and Ted*)

“An engaging, well-researched portrait of what made one of the great comedy duos of the television age tick.” (*News & Record*)

“This book by a Knotts in-law shows how the magic was created.... The author chronicles their parting of ways, career and marital ups and downs, cast reunions of the old show, and later their reteaming in Griffith's popular series *Matlock*. De Visé examines the childhood, early careers, and outsize ambitions of both men, explaining why their chemistry made them click. By turns humorous, informative, and poignant.” (*Library*)

Journal)

“Veteran journalist de Visé returns with a plethora of memories about actors Andy Griffith and Don Knotts, who propelled *The Andy Griffith Show* to enormous popularity in the 1960s.... As the author reminds us, the show about rural Mayberry remains in the popular culture: it's never been off the air, he writes, and Mount Airy, North Carolina, continues to profit from fans' visits and its annual ‘Mayberry Days.’” (*Kirkus Reviews*)

“Well-researched and discerning, *Andy and Don* shows us Griffith in both darkness and light: a haunted, powerful actor as well as the gentlest of comic straight men.” (Scott Eyman *New York Times* bestselling author of *John Wayne*)

“The true story of Andy Griffith's and Don Knotts's incredible friendship. A penetrating and moving tribute.” (James Carville, political consultant)

“*Andy and Don* will be a must for any *Andy Griffith Show* fan and anyone with a taste for showbiz gossip.” (*Star-News*)

“A well-written and heavily sourced book with details that may be new or even surprising to some fans.” (*SitcomsOnline.com*)

“Put this book on your holiday list for your favorite Griffith-Knotts fans.” (*Charlotte Observer's "Reading Matters" blog*)

“This is the story of their friendship, filled with laughter and stories about this classic TV pair. *Andy and Don* is a must read for any *Andy Griffith Show* fan.” (*Grand Forks Herald*)

About the Author

Daniel de Visé is an author and journalist who has worked at *The Washington Post*, *The Miami Herald*, and three other newspapers in a twenty-four-year career. His investigative reporting has twice led to the release of wrongly convicted men from life imprisonment; he shared a 2001 Pulitzer Prize. A graduate of Wesleyan and Northwestern universities, de Visé lives with his wife and children in Maryland. He is the author of *I Forgot to Remember* (with Su Meck) and *Andy and Don*.

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Andy and Don

1.

Don's Demons

DON'S JOURNEY to Hollywood began on a broken-down farm outside Morgantown, West Virginia. William Jesse Knotts, Don's father, a man of average build and sky-blue eyes, made a living buying derelict farms, fixing them up, and selling them again. By the close of the 1910s, Jesse and his wife, Elsie, had settled on one farm long enough for Elsie to bear three children, all boys. Jesse raised crops and mined some coal he had found on the land. Theirs was not a prosperous life, but at least it was stable.

One day, probably in 1919, Jesse collapsed in the fields. He was borne home by other men. “I can't see,” he cried, although it seemed to others that he could. They called it hysterical blindness. Jesse lay in bed,

sightless, for two weeks. His vision returned in time, but his mind did not. Jesse Knotts was said to have suffered a nervous breakdown, though more likely he was an undiagnosed schizophrenic. His physical health, too, fell into rapid decline, and soon he could no longer mind the family farm. Elsie, his wife, was left to tend the family fortunes.

When Elsie lost the farm, she moved the family into town to occupy a succession of rental homes, sometimes sharing the space with various Knotts kin; Jesse's incapacity had brought the Depression to the Knotts household a decade early.

Into this arrangement Jesse Donald Knotts was born on July 21, 1924. His first home seems to have been a boxy American Foursquare on Jefferson Street in Westover, just across the Monongahela River from central Morgantown. By 1929, the family had crossed the river and settled into a permanent dwelling: a large house on University Avenue, which Elsie rented from the Galusha family, owners of a corner grocery store. Elsie confined her family to the main floor; the upper rooms she rented to students, itinerants, and anyone else who could put a dollar down.

Don was fourteen years younger than his next youngest sibling, William Earl, a boy so slender he was called Shadow. Don was an accident. Elsie, thirty-nine and married to a forty-two-year-old invalid, had not planned to bring another child into the world.

Don's childhood was bleak, even by the sepia-toned standards of the Depression. The house on University Avenue sat in a crowded row of unkempt wooden colonials set against a steep hill. He slept on a cot in the kitchen, next to the stove. Two of his older brothers, Shadow and Sid, shared a bedroom with a boarder. Willis Vincent "Bill" Knotts, the most ambitious sibling, had already decamped to seek his fortune as a manager at Montgomery Ward. Don's mother and father slept in the living room, and Jesse Sr. spent most of his waking hours on the sofa, staring into space. Don's brothers liked to drink and fight; there was little to distinguish them from the vagabonds who paraded in and out of the University Avenue home.

Don emerged from infancy with a ghostly pallor, a skeletal frame, and a predisposition to illness, traits he shared with his older brother Shadow. "I did not come into the world with a great deal of promise," Don recalled. "By the time I started grammar school, I was already stoop-shouldered, painfully thin, and forever throwing up due to a nervous stomach."

Three decades later, Elsie Knotts would ask Don, "Do you remember when you were in nappies, and your father used to hold a knife to your throat?" Don did not. Only in therapy did the memories come flooding back. Don spent his first years living in fear of the monster on the couch. Jesse Knotts harbored a primal jealousy toward Don, the unexpected baby who drew Elsie's attention away from her bedridden husband. From the day Don arrived, he competed with his father for his mother's care.

The only path out of Don's kitchen bedroom led through the living room, where his father lay. Don would try to tiptoe by. Sometimes he would pass unnoticed. Other times, the father would emerge from his fever dreams and train his bloodshot eyes on his youngest son. Don would freeze as he heard the ragged growl of an unpracticed voice: "Come here, you little son of a bitch." Don would slowly retreat from the room. Usually, the summons was an empty threat. But on occasion, Jesse would rise from the couch like a shambling ghoul and stagger into the kitchen to find a blade. Then he would stumble through the house in search of his son; the hunt wouldn't take long, as there was nowhere for Don to go. Jesse would pin Don against the wall, raise the knife to his throat, and terrorize the child with dark oaths: "I'll kill you, you son of a bitch."

Jesse terrorized the rest of his family, as well. He was twice confined in the state mental hospital in Weston after threatening Elsie with a butcher knife. Those stays bought Don moments of relative peace in the family home.

Over years of shrewd observation, Don learned to divine his father's moods, to read his face and voice. In this effort, Don developed a preternatural power to interpret body language and vocal tics. Perhaps Don's hypervigilance was a source of his comedic gifts: What was the Nervous Man, after all, if not an ensemble of twitches and quirks?

Repulsed by his father, Don was drawn to his mother. Elsie Knotts was the angel to Jesse's foul-breathed demon, the sunlight to his darkness. Elsie was "one of the truly good people of the world," Don recalled, "more comfortable with the downtrodden than the high and mighty. Elsie found time to help any soul who needed her."

Elsie was raised a born-again Christian. But as an adult, she hewed to her own code of right and wrong. She was, in a sense, the real-life Aunt Bee. Ever mindful of people's feelings, Elsie couldn't bear the thought of walking home from the A&P past the window of the Galushas' grocery store, lest the Galusha brothers should see her carrying groceries from another market. Instead, she and Don would detour around the block to the back of their house. Elsie also thought it improper for a Knotts boy to walk through the front door of the city jail. When Don's older brother Shadow was locked up on a drunk-and-disorderly charge, she packed a box of sandwiches and tobacco and instructed an Opie-aged Don, "I don't want you going into that jail. I want you to go around to the back and yell up to the window there and get him to come to the window and throw this up to him."

Though she embraced fundamentalist Christianity, Elsie also loved to play cards, and she collected autographs from the stars of screen and stage. "My mother took me to movies from the very beginning," Don recalled. He and his mother probably saw *Steamboat Willie*, the first Disney film with synchronized sound, and *Broadway Melody*, the first talking musical, at Morgantown's Metropolitan Theatre. But nothing impressed Don quite like Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, the nation's premier comedy duo. Don was transfixed by their choreographed slapstick, just as he was mesmerized by Jack Benny's uncanny comic timing on the radio. Don loved the way those men could make his mother laugh. He dreamed that Elsie might ask for his own autograph one day.

Elsie Knotts had a lovely, infectious, musical laugh, and everyone in the Knotts home wanted to hear it. Laughter brought escape from the pall that threatened to envelop them all. From an early age, Don set about finding the skills to summon that beautiful laugh. His principal instructor was his sickly brother.

Shadow Knotts, born in 1910, had been the baby of the family for more than a decade when Don arrived; thereafter, it seemed as if Elsie Knotts had two youngest children, as their personalities developed along strikingly similar lines. Shadow suffered from asthma so severe that he slept sitting up. Yet, he filled the Knotts home with irrepressible wit. Don would follow Shadow around the house like a pint-size Ed McMahon, encouraging his cracks with peals of delighted laughter. Long before Don's birth, Shadow had fallen into the role of family jester. He was about ten when his father's mind broke, and he discovered, long before Don, that laughter could deliver his family from the darkness of dementia and poverty. Don once recounted the typical scene at the Knotts dinner table, where Shadow would labor to repel the chill that rose from his father, stony and silent at the head of the table.

"The clowning would begin with Shadow buttering his bread as if it were a violin, tucking it under his chin and using the butter knife for a bow," Don recalled, "and it might continue with Shadow commenting to Sid

under his breath, but loud enough for all to hear, that poor Tom Helfrick”—a beloved boarder who joined the family at the table—“had helped himself to two helpings of meat already. Sometimes the dinner hour would become complete mayhem, and I would laugh so hard I would have to leave the table, and the tears would run down the cheeks of my dear mother.”

Shadow seemed a natural comedian. He would walk past the university clock tower, look up to the man cleaning its face, and yell, “Hey, buddy, you wouldn’t happen to have the time?” Once, while Elsie Knotts hosted a bridge party, Shadow walked into the bathroom, left the door ajar, and emptied an entire bucket of water into the toilet in a slow dribble, creating the impression of a ceaseless flow of urine. By the time he was done, the ladies at the bridge table were ashen.

Shadow’s humor endured even when he was bedridden, which was often. During one such spell, Don asked him what was wrong; Shadow replied, “Everything I eat goes to my stomach.”

Whenever Shadow opened the door to leave the house, Don would beg him to stay. Once Shadow was gone, the family home would sink into despair. Don would escape the gloom “by filling my space with imaginary characters with whom I would act out some happy drama. This was my first stage and, I suspect, the beginning of my acting career.”

Don’s other brothers were a mixed bag. Bill, seventeen years older, was off working for Montgomery Ward by the time Don entered adolescence, moving from place to place with the retail chain. By the standards of the Knotts clan, Bill was a staggering success. He would send money home to help keep the family afloat, supplementing his mother’s meager income from renting rooms and sewing and cooking for students. Nonetheless, Elsie Knotts was compelled to sell her beloved upright piano one month to pay the rent.

Ralph “Sid” Knotts, the eldest brother, was another story. By the time of Don’s birth, eighteen-year-old Sid had already run away from home, married, and fathered a child, who was discreetly dispatched to a grandmother on a family farm upon Sid’s return. “Sid was a real hick,” recalled Richie Ferrara, Don’s childhood friend. “Sid was the decadence of West Virginia. He was a coal miner and he was an alcoholic, and he’d go out and get drunk and come back and get mean. He’d get mean to Don. Sometimes he would attack him, abuse him, hit him.”

Between odd jobs, Sid brewed moonshine to survive. Don wondered, later, whether drink had damaged Sid’s brain. Sober, he was a gentle soul, joining brother Shadow in high jinks at the dinner table. Drunk, he was a bully. Once, Don stumbled upon Sid in the house, drinking home brew with friends. Don thought of their mother and scolded Sid, “You can’t be down here like that.” Sid raised the bottle and emptied it over Don’s head. “Now I’m gonna tell Mama you’ve been drinking,” he slurred.

Sid would crash into the house after a midnight binge, singing, “Is it true what they say about Sidney?” to the tune of “Is It True What They Say about Dixie?” Then he would storm into the kitchen to clatter around and fry eggs, waking Don on his cot. When Don would protest, Sid would slap him across the face, saying, “Ha ha, get back down, you little brat.”

Between her sons’ escapades and those of her boarders, Elsie Knotts spent countless hours policing propriety in her home. “I think my mother spent half her time chasing girls out of the rooms she rented to male students,” Don recalled, “to say nothing of my brothers’ tarts. More than once as a youngster did I see a half-naked woman dive out a bedroom window, and my mother charging through the front door, broom in hand, in an effort to head her off at the pass.”

The Depression brought hobos, as well, and a steady parade passed through the Knotts home. Some would try to jump the rent by lowering their suitcases from the window. But some of the male boarders would show a paternal interest in Don, who was essentially fatherless, taking him aside and teaching him small amusements. An itinerant guitarist showed Don how to play the ukulele. A carnival barker revealed how he fleeced his customers.

Don spent many hours in his uncle's barbershop, a welcome escape from the perils of home. Uncle Lawrence, in some ways an antecedent to Mayberry's Floyd, would keep the customers laughing for hours with jokes and tall tales while Don sat and soaked it up. Lawrence would cut Don's hair for free, but only after the last paying customer had left.

Don feared Sunday church just as he feared his father's daily schizophrenic ravings at home. Church was a weekly spectacle of fire and brimstone; overwrought parishioners would work themselves into a froth of faith, speak in tongues, fall to their knees, and roll in the aisles, sweating and twitching and weeping. Don would watch the congregation shake and shudder and babble, plainly enraptured by the Lord, and he would sit and wait for the wave of divinity to wash over him, and it never did. He feared he was doomed to hell.

Finally, Don brought his fears to his mother. Elsie took him to see the preacher.

"It's all right, son," the preacher said.

"But—I'm not feeling that thing that everyone's feeling," Don said.

"Don't worry, son. You're saved."

Jesse Knotts, Don's menacing father, died of pneumonia in spring 1937, at fifty-five. The family mourned; yet, after a time, it seemed to Don as if a bitter chill had lifted from the University Avenue house. His demon father exorcised, twelve-year-old Don began to come into his own, embarking upon that path of socialization and self-promotion that renders someone visible who has previously been invisible.

With Shadow often too sick to jest, bit by bit the role of court jester in the Knotts household passed from him to Don. His first performances reprised scenes from Laurel and Hardy films or Abbott and Costello routines from the Kate Smith radio show. Don would play them for his mother while she baked bread. She would laugh in all the right places and offer rich dollops of praise when he was done. She was his first fan. Years later, when an interviewer asked why a scrawny kid such as him thought he could make it in New York, Don replied, "Because my mother said I could."

It occurred to Don that magic might be his way into show business. Whenever he could gather ten cents, he would send away for a magic trick from Johnson Smith & Company, a mail-order house that advertised on the backs of comic books. He would approach his brothers at the card table with his new tricks, only to be shooed away when Shadow would crack, "How about doing that disappearing trick?"

Around the start of junior high school, Don glimpsed a Johnson Smith ad that beckoned, "Send ten cents and get your Ventrilo." Don was thrilled: He never missed Edgar Bergen's radio show. Sadly, Don opened the Ventrilo package to find a glorified birdcall. But it came with a book explaining the art of throwing one's voice. By happy coincidence, a neighborhood grocer was selling a miniature Charlie McCarthy dummy on a promotion for a somewhat richer sum—fifty cents and three proof-of-purchase seals from Cocomalt drink mix. Once Don had amassed the necessary coin and Cocomalt, he rushed out in a rainstorm to buy the dummy. When Don returned home, Shadow leaped up and ran toward Don excitedly, hands outstretched.

“But when he got to me, instead of grabbing the dummy, he grabbed [my] umbrella, sat down, put the umbrella on his knee, and asked it, ‘Who was that lady I saw you out with last night?’?”

Don practiced and practiced until he could voice the dummy without moving his lips. He went out on the front porch and tried his act on passersby. It worked, and one woman protested, “Have you got a recording in that dummy?” He wrote some material, borrowing heavily from the Bergen-McCarthy act. One day, a neighbor asked him to perform at his party. They passed the hat, and Don returned home with nearly a dollar in change. “I was in show business at last,” he recalled. Word spread, and soon Don was performing at other parties. A local handyman crafted Don a professional-quality dummy in his workshop. Elsie sewed him a tiny outfit. Don named him Danny.

Don’s professional world was about to expand. One day in the seventh grade, Don found himself in gym class, standing on a wrestling mat opposite a much larger boy. “We were supposed to wrestle each other,” Richie Ferrara recalled. “I must’ve weighed fifty pounds more than him. We looked like Laurel and Hardy. And we laughed at each other. And we walked off and we had a Coke together.”

Richie, the son of Italian immigrants (his mother called Don “Donuts”), was bright, effervescent, and talented. He played the violin, the piano, and the banjo. He hosted a live revue at lunchtime every Friday in the school auditorium. At Don’s request, Richie put him onstage with Danny. They were a hit, and soon the two boys were talking of a partnership. Don admired Richie for his extroversion. Richie respected Don for his talent and wit. “We blended together,” Richie recalled.

Don invited Richie to his home to write material. They would test their ideas on Elsie in the kitchen. “She would sit in her rocking chair and smile,” Richie recalled. “When she laughed and approved of it, then we’d go out and have confidence.”

Richie often stayed for dinner. “They had a little bit of this, a little bit of that, a cupful of mashed potatoes, a cupful of apple sauce. . . . And then after we’d eat, Don would entertain me. Don used me as an audience. And I would listen to all of his skits, all of his jokes. I love to tell jokes, too, but I don’t know of one joke that’s good that didn’t come from him.”

Adolescence brought Don both strength and confidence. One night, probably around his fourteenth year, drunken Sid crashed into the kitchen and commenced slapping Don around. Don picked up a wine bottle, smashed it, and held the jagged edge to Sid’s throat. Elsie burst in and separated the brothers, begging Don to stand down. Later, she asked Don, “You weren’t really gonna do it, were you?” Yes, Don replied. He was.

To the end of his days, Don would recoil at that memory, and he seldom spoke of Sid. Yet, the moment Don rose up against his brother marked a sort of turning point. Don had been a victim, prey to the demons in his home. Now, he would fight back.

Don entered Morgantown High School as a conquering hero. He had vanquished his fears, and he was bursting with creative energy. The next four years would be “the happiest and most fertile of my life,” he recalled, second only to his time on The Andy Griffith Show.

This may have been Don’s first onstage joke, told at a Morgantown High School assembly when he was fifteen, poking fun at Morgantown’s two great passions, church and drink:

“If I had all the whiskey in this town, I would throw it in the river. If I had all the whiskey in this state, I would throw it in the river. If I had all the whiskey in this country, I would throw it in the river. And now,

will the congregation please stand and sing ‘Shall We Gather at the River?’?”

One night, at a roller rink, Don met Jarvis Eldred, a dashing boy from a prominent family who had access to his mother’s ’29 DeSoto. Don quickly became besotted with Jarvie, who was not only wealthier but smoother with the ladies. “His father employed many of the people in town,” Richie recalled. “And he had a car. He was a spoiled kid.” Jarvie was musical, as well. Now, he and Don formed their own duo, with Jarvie on the musical saw. “He’d do ‘Ave Maria’ on the saw, and I’d get a few laughs with Danny, and then we’d harmonize a couple of numbers and do a little soft-shoe,” Don recalled.

Richie, who was a year behind, joined the group when he reached high school, singing and playing mandolin. “We called ourselves the Radio Three,” Richie recalled. “We started to be popular, and we were hired for a few bucks to play the churches, social events. But we [also] did a lot of stuff for charity, like the Rotary, and we became really known.”

Don, the businessman of the group, saw to it that the Radio Three charged for their entertainment, aside from the charity gigs. “We always had some pocket change for fun and dates,” Richie recalled, “which usually consisted of a movie or singing or dancing, a Coke, a hot dog, and sometimes the old West Virginia 3.2 beer.”

Don took a job as an usher at the art deco Warner Theater on High Street downtown. He sometimes became entranced by the movie while patrons stumbled around for seats. One day in fall 1941, while Don was tearing tickets, his brother Sid entered the lobby and walked up to him, clearly inebriated.

“What’s wrong?” Don asked.

“You’d better change your clothes and come home with me,” Sid said. “It’s Shadow. Shadow’s dead.”

Poor, sickly Shadow had perished in his sleep while visiting Bill, his brother, at his home in Illinois. The cause was an unchecked asthma attack. Shadow’s death, at thirty-one, was a blow from which Elsie Knotts never fully recovered. “He never should’ve been left alone,” she said, over and over.

Shadow had been Don’s inspiration, a beacon of warmth amid the gloom of the Knotts home. His death left less in life for Don to laugh about. The next night, Don went downtown on an errand and passed the old clock tower on the university campus, the spot where Shadow had heckled the cleaner. Now, the light on the clock was out. “I had walked by Woodburn Hall maybe a thousand nights and I had never seen the light out in that clock,” Don recalled.

Don had embraced and absorbed his older brother’s dry wit, had watched his own comic star rise within the family home as sickly Shadow’s had waned. Don had learned everything Shadow could teach him. It was time for Don to come into his own.

By his senior year, Don was class president and writing a humor column for the Morgantown High School newspaper. “I was a terrible president, though, because I took nothing seriously,” he recalled. “When I spoke at school assemblies, they usually laughed. I figured they were going to laugh at me anyway, so I always told jokes. I was loose, crazy, and free.”

One June morning after graduation, Don set out for New York with a close friend from high school named Ray Gosovich. Don wanted to audition for Major Bowes Amateur Hour, a radio show that was the American Idol of its day. “We told everyone in our senior class that we were going to New York,” Ray recalled, “and

when you live in Morgantown, West Virginia, and you tell everyone you're going to New York, you'd better go to New York."

Elsie offered Don this parting wisdom: "Remember, Donald, if things don't work out up there, it might be a good idea to come back home and go to college."

The boys planned to hitchhike, but they soon found themselves stranded two hundred miles out of Morgantown in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. They took a Greyhound bus the rest of the way, a concession that depleted their travel funds. They arrived at Thirty-Second Street, near the Hotel Pennsylvania, but rented a room at the more affordable Sloan House YMCA on Thirty-Fourth Street, near the Empire State Building, then the largest residential Y in the nation.

His first night in Manhattan, Don walked over to Times Square. He happened upon the theater that was playing *Claudia*, a forgotten Rose Franken production. A sign in the window touted "two-fers." Don asked the ticket seller if he could have one ticket at half price and got a withering glare in return. Don stood there until the man barked, "Okay," and sold him a nosebleed seat for twenty-five cents. It was Don's first Broadway play.

Don quickly secured a job as an elevator operator at the Cornish Arms Hotel, next to the Grand Opera House at Eighth Avenue and Twenty-Third Street. One day, he earned five dollars by doing a ventriloquism show with Danny at the Y. That show led to an appearance at an open-mike night at the Village Nut Club, on Seventh Avenue, giving Don a small footnote in the storied history of New York's bohemian district. By day, Don snatched up the free tickets at the Y and watched dozens of radio broadcasts, taking notes on dialogue, delivery, and timing. When he had a dollar, he would buy a balcony seat at a Broadway show.

Don had no contacts and no clout, and he never did make it onto Major Bowes. A few weeks into his New York odyssey, he finally landed an audition for *Camel Caravan*, another talent showcase. Don showed up with Danny and did his routine for a matronly woman. When he was finished, she told him, "You seem like a nice boy. Why don't you take your dummy and go home and go back to school?"

Don limped back to Morgantown. "New York City was still standing," Don recalled; "I was the one who'd been brought to his knees." He spent the second half of summer cleaning chickens in the stockroom at Raese's grocery store.

In September, Don attended West Virginia University, where his mother had helpfully enrolled him before the ill-fated trip. He worked at the campus employment office, he lived at home, and he studied. Don felt his theater days were over. He applied for an announcer job at the campus radio station and was told he lacked a radio-quality voice, an ironic rebuff for the future radio star. Don parlayed his ventriloquism act into free entry to the Phi Sigma Kappa fraternity, entertaining at parties and representing the chapter at talent shows.

But the fire had gone from Don's belly; this was not the same boy who had blazed through Morgantown High School. "My ambition evaporated, and I became withdrawn," he recalled. "If it hadn't been for the war, I most probably would have become a teacher of dramatic arts."

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor had come midway through Don's senior year of high school. "Most of us in our teens felt obliged to volunteer," Don recalled. But Don did not. Instead, he waited until the draft ensnared him, in summer 1943, at age nineteen.

By this time, Don had already acquired a healthy respect for his own mortality. He had caught most of the

childhood diseases and had nearly died of diphtheria. Friends and loved ones thought him frail. In Don's grammar-school years, a county nurse, alarmed by his emaciated frame, had enrolled him in a government nutrition program. Don was actually in fine health by adulthood, but so many people seemed to think otherwise that he began to believe it. So began Don's lifelong battle with hypochondria.

Don weighed in at one pound below the army's minimum weight requirement for a man of his height, which was probably 125 pounds. He had to sign a waiver to enlist. The waiver gave Don a potential means of escape, and he thought of it often as he slogged through basic training in an antiaircraft artillery unit at Fort Bliss.

Privately, Don began to research which military assignments were the safest and to scheme at how he might maneuver into one of them. But he soon concluded that even a cook or a truck driver could die in a war. At the end of basic training, Don went to his sergeant, produced his waiver, and asked to be released from duty. The sergeant had him step on a scale. Don was horrified to see he'd gained ten pounds. There would be no escape.

Don wasn't a religious man, but this seemed a good time to reconnect. He began to pray, day and night, begging God for a miracle.

Some days later, it arrived. A telegram from the War Department ordered Don to Fort Meade, outside Washington, to join Detachment X, a mysterious unit of the Special Service. Don felt his prayers had been answered, although he wasn't sure exactly how.

Detachment X was a company of army men drawn from various branches who shared a background in entertainment. Don had been chosen for citing "ventriloquist" as a skill on his enlistment form. The company spent two chilly months in rehearsal, preparing a revue titled *Stars and Gripes*, written by Harold Rome, a Broadway composer who would later score the Andy Griffith musical *Destry Rides Again*. Talented men began to trickle in from around the country: three tap dancers, two singers, one magician, and no fewer than four accordionists. The thirty-five-man roster included no big names but several big talents: Mickey Shaughnessy, a New Jersey nightclub performer who would find fame playing lovable lugs in films; Donald "Red" Blanchard, a radio cowboy in Chicago; Red Ford, a raucous comic from Houston; and Al Checco, a song-and-dance man from Pittsburgh who would become Don's lifelong friend.

Detachment X was the USO with helmets. The army wanted a company it could send to the front lines, just behind the invading force, to put on a show and create an illusion of safety, a veneer of civilization. "It was an experimental thing. All the little islands they hit in the Pacific and the South Pacific, they wanted to have something for the morale, to get the soldiers to relax a little bit," Al Checco recalled. "We were in the forward areas, often only a day or two after they were invaded."

Don dutifully polished his ventriloquism act, but he envied the comedians and yearned to join their skits. He was sitting with the guys one night, having a beer, when he noticed Red Ford, one of the pros, seated at another table, staring at him and laughing. Eventually, Red walked over and said, "You know something? You're a funny little son of a bitch." Red began to teach Don some of his jokes and coached him on the finer points of deadpan comedy. "Before I knew it, I was onstage playing Red Ford's second banana," Don recalled. This would be Don's theatrical boot camp.

In March 1944, the men boarded the troopship *Sea Witch* and zigzagged across the Pacific, ever alert for enemy subs. Forty tense days later, they arrived at Milne Bay, an expanse of hard-won mangrove swamp. The scene that greeted Don there sounds in hindsight like a set from *Apocalypse Now*: "It was raining when

we dropped anchor in the harbor. We could see the steam rising from the jungle, and the air was hot and humid. As we looked on from the harbor, the jungle looked beautiful but forbidding.”

The performers sat in their ship with nowhere to go, awaiting orders. Finally, the company disembarked. “We were a motley crew as we sloshed through the mud and climbed into two waiting trucks, struggling with duffel bags and drums and horns and props,” as well as rifles and gas masks, Don recalled. “We were driven to a desolate-looking camp where we were dropped off at a structure laughingly called a barracks. It was actually no more than a long roof covering two rows of army cots.”

For days, the men sat in the barracks beneath ceaseless rain. Finally, a commanding officer arrived with a performance schedule. The men would pile into trucks every night and head out into the swamp to play for groups of soldiers stationed at spots around the bay. “We performed on whatever we could put together to be a stage,” Al Checco recalled. “Sometimes it might be just the backs of [the] trucks.” There were no seats, so soldiers sat on boxes or crates, often in pouring rain. “If you wonder why they would sit on a box in the rain to watch a show,” Don recalled, “bear in mind that there was nothing to do in New Guinea, and I mean absolutely nothing.”

The shows were meant to distract the men not just from their miserable existence but also from the constant threat of violent death. “The Japanese kept bombing us at about the same time every night during the first act, just before I was supposed to sing a song,” Al recalled. When the barrage began, “the sirens would go off, and we’d have to stop the show, jump into our foxholes or whatever, and then come out and finish the show.”

One song was called “Pinup Girl,” Al recalled, “and Don was always the closing of that number. He’d come out at the end with hardly any clothes on, and he was the pinup girl.”

Outrageous then, the routines sound comparatively tame now. In one skit, Don and Mickey Shaughnessy are fishing. Mickey’s lips are pursed.

“Whaddaya got in your mouth?” Don asks.

“Worms,” Mickey replies.

Don grimaces. “Well, why don’t you just hold them?”

“Too nasty.”

As much as Don was learning onstage, the long hours offstage proved unbearable. “The constant rain was maddening,” Don recalled, “and our clothes never seemed to get quite dry. Malaria was a constant threat, so we had to sleep under mosquito nets, and they fed us atabrine tablets every day.” The pills turned Don’s skin yellow. “We usually wore leggings, but the mud still slipped into our shoes and slithered down our socks. Some guys grew a fungus on their feet the GIs called jungle rot. Of all things, I began to get it on my hands.”

The tour filled Don’s head with a View-Master reel of horror. He once watched the capture of a Japanese soldier. “He was frothing at the mouth,” Don recalled. “He was so full of rage. He was like an animal. They kept saying, ‘Keep back,’ like he was a rabid dog.” Don watched American soldiers rip the gold teeth from a corpse. And then there was the unsettling performance Detachment X gave for survivors of the Bataan Death March, beaten and starved on a sixty-mile trek through the Philippine jungles. “They filtered in to watch us,” Don recalled, “but they didn’t laugh once. They barely applauded.”

In time, Don began to fear for his sanity. One day, he wandered into the jungle to get away from the miserable barracks. Farther and farther he walked. Suddenly, he was gripped with terror: Don thought someone was chasing him. He began to run, faster and faster. Then he stopped and turned around. No one was there. He thought to himself, "This is it: I'm going crazy, just like my father."

From that day, Don thought he was hiding a terrible secret: he was going insane. That fear made Don reluctant to speak, feeding an essential shyness that would define him for the rest of his life.

Several months into the tour, the company took a five-week leave in Brisbane, Australia. Don's jungle rot cleared up in the hot, dry sunshine, and the dance-hall girls buoyed his spirits. He felt that his sanity was restored.

After the leave, the company moved up the coast to the provincial capital of Hollandia, and then to Los Negros, and thence to Biak and Manus, where the performers gazed upon a vast armada set to invade the Philippines. The men performed on battleships and aircraft carriers. When the Allies invaded, Detachment X followed.

Don's comedic ambitions had outgrown Danny the dummy. He yearned to be a comedian, and he was learning from some of the best, playing second banana to Red Ford and Mickey Shaughnessy. He appealed to the senior officers to let him drop the ventriloquist act and focus on the comedy pairings. They insisted he continue with Danny. When the company sailed from Manus Island, Danny mysteriously vanished. "Out of the clear, blue sky, that suitcase was gone," Al Checco recalled. "When we asked Don about it, he just shuffled back and forth and sheepishly said, 'Well, I don't know. I don't know.'?" Don was free to be a comic.

Don was in a Philippine jungle in August 1945 when someone came running up to the troupe and cried, "The war is over!" The performers were speechless, then incredulous. How could the war be over? "No, it's over," the breathless messenger said. Then, a sense of relief and euphoria washed over Don, like nothing he'd felt before. He had thought it distinctly possible he would be out in the jungles, covered in rot, for the rest of his life.

Most of the entertainers from Stars and Gripes had endured what amounted to a two-year setback in their professional careers. For Don, the military had the opposite effect, honing his skills and restoring the confidence he'd lost in that first, demoralizing visit to New York.

Don returned to West Virginia University intent on continuing his studies and eager to keep busy—if only to ward off the demons that still haunted him after that delirious run through the jungle and the recurring visions of madness. Don was an extrovert again, performing in university plays and resuming his variety act with faithful friends Jarvie Eldred and Richie Ferrara. The Radio Three could now command fifty dollars a night. Don's solo act, newly polished, electrified fraternity parties. He had returned from Detachment X with dozens of stage-ready characters, some of them prototypes of the Nervous Man. One of the best was a harried football announcer who spewed spoonerisms, deliberate slips of the tongue. "Everybody was in stitches with that," recalled Jim Allen, a fraternity buddy. "Even sober, you had to lay down on the floor and laugh."

When summer break came, Don took to hitchhiking the eighty miles to Pittsburgh and calling on booking agents with his stand-up act. He struck out again and again. He shared his frustration with Richie. Richie offered to go along the next time. Don and Richie made the rounds together, to no avail. They visited one last agent, climbing the steps to her third-floor office. Richie knocked. A woman answered, "It's five o'clock;

we're closed."

Richie cut in, "Wait a minute, it's not for me. I'm a medical student."

Suddenly the agent grew interested. "Do you know anything about irritable bowel syndrome?"

"Sure, I just learned about it."

"Come in."

Richie did, and Don snuck in behind him. Richie listened as the agent bemoaned her irritable bowels, nodding empathetically. Finally, Richie directed the agent's attention to the man sitting quietly in the corner: "He's a great comedian, and he needs a job."

The agent asked, "What can he do?"

"Don, do one of your routines."

Don launched into his spoonerism routine. "And she died laughing," Richie recalled. Don had an agent.

All that summer and the next, Don worked dates across Pennsylvania, playing clubs in Meadville, Oil City, and Wilkes-Barre. His effect on an audience was immediate and electric. "He would just stand up in front of a crowd and he'd say one word, and they would laugh," Richie recalled. "He had something about his nature that was funny. Not for what he said. It was just his expressions, his style, his person, his spirit. There's something in it that's indescribable."

Don earned ten dollars a night, twenty-five dollars on weekends, plus bus fare. "In most cases," Don recalled, "I would pocket the bus fare and hitchhike. Even so, I rarely came out ahead." Once he played a stag show, a realization that dawned only when the first performer turned to Don and said, "Stand by the piano, honey, and I'll hand you my clothes." It was his first glimpse of a naked woman.

Richie Ferrara proved a charming and resourceful friend, and not just with theatrical agents. "When we got back from the army, he was in school and I was in school," Richie recalled. "I didn't have time to arrange a date. . . . So, I'd call up this sorority house that I knew and say, 'Is there anyone available?' I would date one of them, and Don would date the other." One Saturday that spring, Richie brought Don to a campus sorority mixer. When the party ended at five o'clock, they lingered, and soon they found themselves competing with several other young men for the attention of Kay, a petite freshman with arched eyebrows and a delicate beauty. By the time they went home, Don was in love.

Kathryn Metz was a woman of substance, the daughter of a Northern Baptist minister from Wheeling, a West Virginia city so far north that it was almost Ohio. She was studying speech and English. She knew Don as "the fair-haired boy in the drama department. He was often the lead in the plays that they did." And Kay knew of the vaudeville act Don, Richie, and Jarvie played around town.

The university campus was flooded with returning GIs. Kay had many suitors, and Don immediately found himself vying with another boyfriend named Kent. But Don was relentless, and Kay kept saying yes. Don would keep Richie up past midnight moaning and groaning "about how much he loved her."

Don had many fans at the university. Random people kept approaching Kay, unbidden, and urging her to pair

off with him. "He was very charismatic," she recalled. "I recognized that almost immediately. He was funny and outgoing, and we could talk. He had a lot of depth of character, and that was interesting to me."

Given Don's stature on campus, Kay was surprised when, about a year after their first date, he took her home to the threadbare rooming house on University Avenue. They would go there for lunch. Elsie would prepare a full meal, with two desserts, a cake and a pie. Then, the three would sit and watch Elsie's favorite soap operas, and Don would poke fun at the characters and the lines until Kay and Elsie couldn't stop laughing. Kay had a warm, encouraging laugh, just like Don's mother.

Kay and Don dated for two years. One summer in that span, Don drove Kay to a seasonal job at a hotel in Beach Haven, New Jersey. He intended to drop her there and go off in search of stand-up work. But when they arrived and Don sized up the romantic competition among the employees at the inn, he abandoned his own plans and took a job as a dishwasher. He wanted to keep Kay close.

Don married Kay in December 1947 in a ceremony at her father's church. He graduated from West Virginia University the following spring.

Having finally won the girl, Don struggled mightily to support her. He sold shirts for a time. Then, frustrated by the lack of jobs, he enrolled in a graduate theater program at the University of Arizona. Don's successful older brother, Bill, owned property there. But Don and Kay stayed only a few months because Don's GI Bill records were lost and he wasn't receiving his student aid. They returned to Morgantown in winter. Don took a holiday job selling toys at a department store. In quiet moments there, Don would chat up the man playing Santa Claus in the Christmas display. A theater buff, Santa urged Don to return to New York. "Go for it," Santa would say. "You don't need any more college." In later years, Don would tell nightclub audiences that the man's advice had launched his career: "Don't tell me there's no Santa Claus!"

Santa's urgings surely put New York in Don's mind. But the final straw came one day in the university drama department. Don was sitting with some fellow thespians when a young man walked in and cried, "Guess what? Next week, I'm leaving for New York!" At those words, "something snapped inside of me," Don recalled. "'Dammit!' I said to myself. 'I'm going to New York!' And just like that, I made the decision." He rushed home and told Kay. She was ready.

Don had twenty dollars to his name, so once more he hit up brother Bill, who loaned him one hundred dollars for the trip. It was the last time Don would have to borrow car fare.

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