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There I Go Again

William Daniels

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THERE I GO AGAIN

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W I L L I A M
D A N I E L S

There I Go Again | How I Came
to Be Mr. Feeny, John Adams,
Dr. Craig, KITT, and Many Others

Potomac Books

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Set in Lyon by Rachel Gould.

For Irene

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PREFACE

Whatever success I've had in my life—and I've had considerable success—has come to me almost accidentally. Granted I developed acting ability and I've worked hard at it. You don't do years and years of eight performances a week on Broadway or on tour or six and seven years of starring roles on television series without working hard. But still, I'm left with the feeling that none of my success was really due to me.

When I'm sent a script to consider, I only see its problems, not its strengths. I have almost always had to be talked into a role, even when the project turned out to be tremendously successful. I've been known to go to the wrong theater to audition for a role I subsequently got—and played for years. Once, while auditioning for a musical, I forgot the lyrics of a song I'd sung for months on Broadway; they hired me anyway. I insisted on having no billing on a series I thought was silly, and that series (*Knight Rider*) ran for years and even after all this time I still get fan mail.

I went “ass backwards” into just about everything—and what a lucky guy I've been.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wrote this manuscript in longhand on yellow legal pads, so I have to first thank Rachael Lobermann, who spent many hours typing it all up. I have excellent handwriting, but I don't know a damn thing about computers.

Laurie Horowitz took the typed pages and made them resemble something that looked like a book, with paragraphs and everything.

In today's literary landscape getting a publishing deal is difficult to say the least, and so I'm immensely grateful to my literary agents Elizabeth Evans and Laura Biagi with Jean V. Naggar Literary Agency. Elizabeth was the first person interested in shopping the book to publishers, and together with Laura I was introduced to the University of Nebraska Press and the Potomac Books imprint. Acquisitions editor Tom Swanson has been immensely supportive.

Tom's assistant Emily Wendell, along with Jenny Worman and Brian Hamilton, were all very helpful with technical matters.

Jay Matthews had written a wonderful article about the *St. Elsewhere* Emmy night for the *Washington Post*, and so I turned to him and his wife Linda to create a presentation for the publisher (and it was instrumental in selling the book to Potomac).

Finally I'd like to thank Loren Lester, who not only suggested the title but also brought his showbiz knowledge and communication skills to writing and editing the final manuscript.

Note: If I failed to mention my wife, Bonnie, it wouldn't be the first time, but without her this book, and my life as detailed here, would not have been possible.

I'd Rather Be Elsewhere

In 1985 I was nominated for a third straight Emmy award for *St. Elsewhere*, the NBC series I did from 1982 to 1988. Having lost twice, I didn't want to go to the Emmy Awards show and lose a third straight time, but there I was with my wife Bonnie, dressed to the hilt, starting out in the limousine but not getting very far. Halfway between the Coldwater Canyon and Laurel Canyon exits on the freeway the limo conked out. The motor went dead—and there we sat.

Since Bonnie's gown was even less conducive to hiking through the Valley heat than my tuxedo, she stayed in the car with the driver and I walked the half mile to the Laurel Canyon exit. As I trudged under the tunnel of the freeway on my way home, a car stopped and a little old lady leaned out the car window.

“Can we drive you?”

There I was in a tux, collar unbuttoned, tie undone, looking like a short Dean Martin coming home from an all-night binge, and two little old ladies (one driving) wanted to take me home.

“Uh, no thank you,” I said and continued walking. They slowly followed in the car. She leaned out the window again.

“We know who you are. Are you sure we can't drive you?”

Well, what the hell.

“Okay,” I said and got into the backseat. “Take a right. I live just a couple of blocks down.”

They dropped me off in front of my house. Out of the monkey suit and on with the TV to watch a McEnroe tennis match.

Not for long. Bonnie was back with a new limo and was standing over me.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Watching John play—it's the finals.” (I was a big McEnroe fan.)

“Bill,” she said, “if we don’t go, I am going to be so depressed. I’ve spent so many times buying a dress for an occasion, getting the makeup on, getting the hair done, getting all fixed up for something, and we don’t go, or we walk out, because you’re in a snit and I have to go out smiling at everybody, missing everything I was prepared to do. We walked out on the opening night party of *The Graduate*, and we walked out on the film premiere of *1776*.” She paused, flustered, and then added, “Goddamnit, I just think you should at least be able to go there and sit through this thing. We’re going to Pasadena!”

So I did as she asked, but I was still seething. I got back into the monkey suit, climbed into the new limousine with Bonnie and the same driver, and headed off to Pasadena. Don Johnson was going to win. I knew it. I just knew it. I was certain the studio had sent him a limo that wouldn’t break down.

I don’t know how long the show had been going on when we arrived. We tip-toed down the aisle and into our row of reserved seats. *Excuse me, sorry, excuse me.*

We had just sat down when I heard, “And the award goes to William Daniels.”

Good God! Here we go again back down the row . . . *excuse me, sorry, excuse me* . . . bumping into people’s knees, getting out of the row. Someone slapped me on the back—“Congratulations!” Lord, I hadn’t prepared anything to say. Oh well. Up on the stage someone handed me the award.

“Thank you, thank you very much.” I looked out at the crowd. “You know, I almost didn’t make it here.” Big laugh.

I went on to tell them how the limo broke down and the two little old ladies, who were probably watching now, rescued me. “Thank you again for the ride,” I said.

I was getting laughs, so I figured all wasn’t lost. Later that night the press wanted to know if I’d made up the story I’d told in my acceptance speech. What a question. Why would I make up a story like that?

By 1987 I had had a total of five nominations and won twice for my work on *St. Elsewhere*, the famous one-hour series about life in a run-down Boston hospital. *You might be confined here, but you’d*

rather be “elsewhere.” It was an ensemble show much in the spirit of the game-changing, Emmy-winning series *Hill Street Blues*, which was an ensemble cop show (also from MTM, Grant Tinker’s company, which was producing *St. Elsewhere*). And it paved the way for future hit medical dramas such as *ER* and *Grey’s Anatomy*. When *St. Elsewhere* was being developed, I received an offer to play the part of Dr. Mark Craig. An unprecedented five one-hour scripts came with the offer. There was a large cast of characters, an ensemble, with only the occasional appearance, often very brief, of Dr. Craig. When the producer, Bruce Paltrow, called to hear my reaction to the offer, I said that I thought the scripts were wonderful and often very funny but that the part of Dr. Craig was rather small.

“Billy, when the writers see what you do with it they will write for you.” And that was exactly what happened—the part got bigger and the storylines got deeper.

In my research for the role I trailed a real-life surgeon at UCLA and even watched him operate on the heart of a small child. He was a great doctor during surgery and a real son of a bitch outside the operating room. The Dr. Craig that the TV audience eventually saw was like this surgeon but also a lot like me. Just ask my wife. I can be rather abrupt, very critical, and sometimes judgmental—a real martinet. As the producers and writers got to know me, they poured all my traits, both positive and negative, into Dr. Craig, who was a great surgeon but not always a nice man. Dr. Craig considered himself the smartest man in the operating room, perhaps the smartest in the entire hospital, and he made no attempt to hide his sense of superiority.

The show had a thirteen-episode order, but it also had a rocky start. We were halfway through filming the first episode when Bruce Paltrow returned from finishing a feature film in London. When he saw the dailies, production came to a halt. The cast was told to take a few days off. Days turned into weeks, and when we were called back we found the director was gone, the cinematographer and camera crew were gone, and several of the actors had been replaced. The sets had been repainted a more drab color, ceilings had been put in to cut down the lighting, and the overall look was of a rather run-

down hospital in a lower-class neighborhood of Boston, St. Eligius Hospital, whose façade appeared in the opening shot of the show. Paltrow put together a fine cast of actors, including Ed Flanders and Hollywood legend Norman Lloyd (who as of this writing is still working at the age of 102), along with Ed Begley Jr., Denzel Washington, Howie Mandel, Christina Pickles, Mark Harmon, and David Morse, who all became stars in their own right. During the show's six-year run we also had a roster of guest stars that were the envy of any show before or since: Alfre Woodard, Helen Hunt, Kathy Bates, Tim Robbins, Dorothy McGuire, Betty White, Doris Roberts (who won an Emmy for her role), and Eva Le Gallienne. Real-life couple Steve Allen and Jayne Meadows had Emmy-nominated comedic recurring roles as the hippie parents of Ed Begley Jr.'s character.

And of course, my wife, Bonnie Bartlett, joined the cast in the fourth episode of our first season and remained with us for the entire six seasons of our run, garnering two Emmy Awards along the way.

The casting of Bonnie was rather fortuitous. In one episode, while performing a heart operation, Dr. Craig bragged about how he got his wife to stop smoking; he went out on their front lawn and yelled loudly about her smoking for all the neighborhood to hear and that did it—she stopped. In the next episode, at an awards dinner for “Surgeon of the Year,” an honor Craig continually assumed he would win but each year went away empty handed, there sat his wife, who proceeded to light up a cigarette when the doctor left the table for the men's room. At the casting session for the episode, after a number of names were thrown around, Eileen Mack Knight, the casting director at MTM, said, “Why not ask his wife, Bonnie, if she might do it, as a favor?”

The part only had a line or two, and under normal circumstances Bonnie would have turned it down. But the scripts were so well written and we both had such high hopes for this show that she agreed to do it. Now came the hard part—Bonnie didn't smoke! I took her out to the pool house, so as not to stink up our home, and we worked on it. It was a pain in the ass because I'd given up smoking about twenty years earlier, but I taught her how to hit the pack and pull out a cigarette, how to tap it on the back of her hand, how to light

up—all of which she got down pat. But inhale—no way! She'd hold the smoke in her mouth and then kind of cough it out.

“Don't cough it out—let it out slowly,” I said.

With luck she wouldn't have a coughing spell. The whole preparation of lighting up sold it, and she got the laugh, but you shouldn't look too closely at the actual drag on the cigarette.

The producer and writers must have liked the look of the two of us together because Mrs. Craig became a regular on the show, and she had many wonderful scenes with me and without me for the rest of our run.

For me the role of Dr. Craig was a joy to play. There were so many contradictions in his character—top-notch surgeon and strict disciplinarian in the operating room, yet so foolish in the outside world. Playing such a role over a long run offered a wide range of situations: at one end there was the challenge of facing the loss of a son and at the other the inanity of Dr. Craig's desperately wanting to be named “Surgeon of the Year.” I enjoyed the freshness each new story offered, a welcome contrast at the time to the theater, where the same lines are said over and over again.

Led by Tom Fontana and John Masius, the writing was extraordinary for television—or anywhere else for that matter. *St. Elsewhere* succeeded not only because of good writing and a superb ensemble cast but because it always seemed believable to the audience. To capture the frenetic activity of a real hospital the producers relied on a theme song with a throbbing beat that became one of the show's signatures. The music accompanied Dr. Craig and his colleagues in every episode as they strode through the corridors, patient records tucked under their arms, on the way to surgery. *St. Elsewhere* was one of the first TV shows to adopt that walk-fast-and-talk-fast technique, and it was not always easy to pull off. The cameraman had to hold the camera on his shoulder as he was pulled down the hallway on a dolly, shooting the actors behind him. If one person in the crowd of actors made a mistake, we would have to shoot it all over again, and it might take half a day. I personally liked the walk-and-talk scenes; they involved action and took the burden off the script, which otherwise would have to carry the show.

I became fond of Ed Begley Jr., who to this day remains a friend and lives just around the corner from me. Ed's father, Ed Begley Sr., and I had worked together in the days of live television. Ed Jr. and I were the Mutt and Jeff of prime time: he was tall, I was not; he was young, I was middle-aged; he was a hippie, I was the opposite. We often sparred, onscreen and off. Before the cameras rolled, Ed would sometimes drive me crazy because he never learned his lines in advance. I would be ready to film a scene, and he would be over there, learning his lines. He's more of a film actor—a much more improvisational actor than I—and I'm from the theater, so I always knew my lines in advance and he knew he could learn his during rehearsals. I would lay into him occasionally and say, "Any time you're ready, Ed. Is that the way you're going to say it?" And he'd answer, "I'm learning it, Bill. I'm learning it."

The years of filming *St. Elsewhere* at the CBS-Radford Studios in Studio City, about two miles from our home, were happy ones for our family. Both Bonnie and I were able to avoid the horrible traffic jams on LA freeways. We never worked five full days a week. Our scenes sometimes took only an hour or two, rarely more than half a day, and then we went home to our two real-life sons.

Learning lines for an hour-long show isn't easy, especially as you age. Bonnie remembers me sitting out at the pool, day after day, memorizing my lines by saying them aloud. I had to have them down pat because so much of the script was highly technical medical jargon. And on camera I had to make every speech seem like second nature while simultaneously performing heart surgery. The scripts were often very difficult. I knew I was going to be handling surgical instruments that were totally unfamiliar to me, all the while ordering around the other "doctors" in the operating room. So I had to know my lines cold.

Was I convincing as a doctor? Maybe. Several times I've been invited to return to Northwestern University, where Bonnie and I went to college, and to other universities to speak at medical school graduations. I turned down the Northwestern invitation and most others because, after all, I was not a doctor. I had absolutely no insights into medicine that would have impressed anyone with a

medical degree. But while I was doing the show I did accept one invitation, to speak at the Salk Institute in La Jolla, the headquarters of Dr. Jonas Salk, who developed the first polio vaccine. When I got up to speak I said something like, "I think Dr. Salk thinks I am a real doctor." I got a big laugh. I don't remember what else I said other than to make a few remarks about all the good work done by Dr. Salk and the March of Dimes to save children's lives.

It was somewhere between the pilot and the first season pickup of *St. Elsewhere* that our producer, Bruce Paltrow, invited the cast of the show to his home for dinner. When I arrived I was greeted by his and Blythe Danner's daughter, Gwyneth. Blythe had played Mrs. Jefferson in the movie *1776* with me ten years earlier, but it was the twelve-year-old Gwyneth who was evidently acting as hostess for the evening.

As I entered, Gwyneth's first words were, "What can I get you to drink?" Amusing, coming from a twelve-year-old, especially since we had never met before, so introductions might have been in order.

"How about a vodka and some ice," I said.

"Regular or producer's size?" she asked.

"Producer's, of course," said I.

What a kid! Lively, precocious, and just as lovely that night as she is today. And Gwyneth has turned out to be as talented as her parents, as the rest of the world now knows. In 1998 she won the Academy Award for Best Actress for her lead role in *Shakespeare in Love*.

St. Elsewhere was actually canceled after the first season, so Bonnie and I took a trip to Europe. When we returned, my son Rob casually said to me, "Hey, I think your show got picked up," and that was the first I'd heard of it. Brandon Tartikoff, the head of NBC programming, was a big fan of the show, and he decided that the show would be allowed to try and find an audience in spite of the terrible ratings. The show never ranked higher than forty-ninth place in the Nielsen ratings, which often determine which shows survive and which die. But over the seasons it attracted a following, especially in the eighteen-to-forty-nine age demographic so important to producers. The critics generally loved us, and our TV colleagues admired us enough that the show won thirteen Emmys

for writing and directing, as well as for acting. In 2002 *TV Guide* ranked *St. Elsewhere* number twenty on its “50 Greatest TV Shows of All Time” list.

I won the Emmy in 1985, and the following year both Bonnie and I were nominated for Emmys for *St. Elsewhere*, she for Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Drama Series, I for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Drama Series—and both of us won. That’s only the second time, as far as I know, that a husband and wife both won acting Emmys in the same year, for the same show. The first couple to do so was the legendary Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, who won in 1965 for a made-for-TV movie about Supreme Court justice Oliver Wendell Holmes.

In 1987 Bonnie also won an Emmy for the show. There followed the usual publicity pictures of winners holding their awards. When that was finished, Bonnie and I started to leave, but more photographers stopped us to take pictures of Bonnie.

“Mr. Bartlett, would you please step aside?” one of the photographers said. *Mr. Bartlett!* I stepped aside and the flashbulbs went off. My fifteen minutes of fame were over.

Much to our mutual surprise only writer Tom Fontana offered us congratulations when we won the awards. Not a word from Bruce Paltrow. I think perhaps he had gone into “producer mode,” afraid that a compliment would obligate him to give us a raise.

As I said, the days of filming *St. Elsewhere* were happy ones. Because there was such a big cast, I had days off and was able to tool over to Universal Studios (also nearby) to record an episode of *Knight Rider*—the most unusual role I ever had. I was the voice of KITT, a car equipped with artificial intelligence. No one ever saw my face. The dialogue was always between me and David Hasselhoff, the star of the show, and since I wasn’t on the set or location when they filmed the scenes, I would give (on tape) three different readings of a line of dialogue so in the editing they could insert the line to fit how David read his line.

I was never on the set. In fact I never met David except at the annual Christmas party. He’d smile and curse me for having it so easy while he was driving the car around in the hot desert and doing

stunts. Somehow, when they put David's acting on camera and my recorded voice together, it worked. Go figure.

Sometimes interviewers ask, "Were you proud of *St. Elsewhere*? Was it satisfying work?"

St. Elsewhere definitely made a difference in my life. When strangers recognized me in public they still didn't know my name, but they remembered the uptight doctor on that hospital show. It's an odd way to live, but there are many actors and actresses who have had the same experience: we're not the superstars that the American public can instantly identify. We don't draw big crowds for premieres on Hollywood Boulevard or in Times Square. We don't end up on the cover of *People* magazine. But many of us without name recognition make a fine living, put our kids through college, and, if we're lucky, enjoy long careers precisely because we can play many different kinds of roles. We're not typecast. That's the reason I am still working in my late eighties.

As a character actor I became a star, but a very small one, and I saw time and again how the big stars—the leading men—surrounded by sycophants, lost their sense of reality and then lost everything—their families, their marriages, and, in some cases, their lives.

In a little dressing room just offstage at Radio City Music Hall in New York I was standing in front of a full-length mirror checking out my tuxedo. It was 1986, I had been invited to this Night of a Thousand Stars event to represent *St. Elsewhere*, and at that moment I was not convinced of my place in the starry firmament, to say the least.

I was adjusting my tie when I was elbowed in the ribs, and I was sent staggering away from the mirror. When I turned and looked back, a petite redhead had taken my place and was fussing with her hair. I looked closely: it was Lucille Ball, a real star!

"Oh. You, I like!" she declared. Then she was whisked away. I never saw her again, never knew exactly what she meant. Even though she couldn't remember my name, my guess was that she recognized my face from *St. Elsewhere* or from films or plays or other TV shows I'd appeared in over the years.

I've been a working actor for more than eighty years, and yet when strangers approach me on the street or in the supermarket and

say hello, they almost never know my name. Instead they remember my face or maybe a character I played in a TV show or a movie or a Broadway play from years, even decades, before. I tell myself it's better to be recognized than ignored, and it's nice if a stranger, especially an icon like Lucille Ball, says she likes you.

When you think about it, it's a huge compliment for an actor to be remembered for a role he played. It means that, working with the director, the producer, and the writers, I helped create a character, a person utterly different from myself, yet someone real enough to lodge in someone's memory. Memorable characters: that's been the story of my career in show business.

For two years I portrayed America's second president, John Adams, in the Broadway production of *1776*, the musical about the hot summer weeks when the Declaration of Independence was written and the American colonies undertook war against Great Britain. Later I starred in the movie version of *1776*, still a staple in many high schools, where it's shown in U.S. history classes. In movies, I played Dustin Hoffman's father in *The Graduate* and the ugly American who drove Audrey Hepburn and Albert Finney around France in *Two for the Road*.

People under the age of thirty often remember me as Mr. Feeny, the teacher and principal with a light touch who shepherded a boisterous group of kids through school in the comedy *Boy Meets World*. Part of ABC's Friday-night TV lineup, *Boy Meets World* ran for seven years, from 1993 to 2000, and is still shown in syndication.

I never dreamed of having such a job when I was a kid growing up in Brooklyn. Quite the opposite! I never even thought of a life in show business. That was someone else's dream—my mother's.