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Wright: The Ethel Merman Show

THE ETHEL MERMAN SHOW

BY

KIRBY WRIGHT

My kid sister, Julie, loved dressing our father up as a woman. After he fell asleep on the couch, she'd hustle to her room and return with a box filled with essentials: our mother's old auburn wig, lipstick, rouge, eye shadow, and mascara. Julie called it *The Ethel Merman Show* because, once wigged and packed with makeup, he bore an uncanny resemblance to the famous Broadway singer. Julie would invite our mother to come in and check out her handiwork.

"My," she would say, "I didn't know Ethel Merman was visiting."

I think my father secretly liked the attention. Once I'd heard him chuckle while Julie applied lipstick. "Not so hard," he'd instructed when she dabbed on eye shadow. He had even helped by raising his head so she could pull on the wig. Sometimes, after the transformation, he'd laugh at himself in the living room mirror.

It was a mystery why my sister was doing this. She was only six, but I sensed *The Ethel Merman Show* had become an obsession. Was she trying to make him seem less threatening? He'd recently told her to stop cutting her hair short, to help more around the house, and to quit eating snacks. He'd warned her she might become "a fatso watso" that no boy would want, despite the fact she was rail thin. Maybe Julie was doing to him what he was trying to do to us—turn us into creatures he could shape through control and manipulation. Part of my creaturehood was wearing clothes my father approved of, keeping my hair short, and lugging around a book bag he'd selected at Long's Drugs. "What a nerd," I'd heard one of the Cool Kids mutter at Punahou School.

My father was particularly harsh during a pork chop dinner. He said my big brother Barry and

I were both freeloaders and, if we didn't get into a good college, we were on our own after high school. He reprimanded us for getting poor grades and told us his partner's son got into Harvard. When my mother tried defending us, he said the chops were "dry as a bone," the beans were soggy, and the rice was burnt. She retaliated by saying he was lucky to get anything, and he told her he was tired of sending her mother checks. That cooled her jets. He didn't say much to Julie, except that she should sit up straight and wear more than a Banana Splits top and shorts to dinner. It seemed ludicrous that he should dole out advice on table manners considering he talked with his mouth full, hunched, and wore a white undershirt over stained khaki shorts.

"Bet I know why you're mad," Barry told our father.

He stabbed a lima bean with his fork. "Why?"

"Cause Mom's splitting tonight for her Women's Guild meeting."

"Yeah," I piped up, "and that's at the Cheney house, where Mr. Cheney lives."

My mother nodded. "Paul Cheney is the most handsome man in Kahala."

Julie toyed with her brown bangs. "And maybe the world," she chimed in.

My father chewed a piece of pork on the side of his mouth like

gum. "That Cheney's a punk." Sometimes, when my father

was in a vile mood, we stuck together and fought like a team. It reminded me of the movie *Mutiny on the Bounty*, where Fletcher Christian stands up to Captain Bligh and rallies the crew. The only problem was we couldn't throw my father overboard.

My mother waltzed out of her changing room wearing a platinum wig with a sexy flip, a sparkling green dress with a slit up one side, emerald pumps, and jade clip-on earrings. Julie and I followed her into the master bedroom and watched her apply green eye shadow and mascara. She picked up her lipstick tube and colored her lips pink. She had the charm and sophistication of the movie star Grace Kelly. As a teenager, she'd made the front page of *The Boston Globe* lying in a one-piece on Swampscott's Beach; when her singing career didn't take off, she reluctantly took a job as a secretary at MIT. She'd had her pick of a dozen suitors with promising futures, everyone from MIT eggheads to brash BU business students, to frazzled lawyers-to-be at Harvard. I could never figure out how, given all that competition, my father stole her heart.

"Can I borrow your lipstick, Mummy?" Julie asked.

My mother smacked her lips

and capped the tube. "You already have red for Daddy," she replied.

"Kirbo!" Barry called from down the hall.

"What?" I called back.

"Your teacher's on *Hawaii 5-0*."

"Al Harrington?"

"Yeah. Come watch!"

Barry and I sat on zabatons in front of the TV. My Samoan history teacher had landed a plumb role as a detective, but I grew impatient waiting for him to show up. I got sick of listening to Steve McGarrett banter with his sidekick, Dan-O. Then came an onslaught of commercials for Tang, StarKist Tuna, and Fritos.

I nudged Barry's shoulder.

"What was Al Harrington doing?"

"Jumping over a fence."

"Your teacher has a very small part," my father said. He was sprawled on the couch with his fingers interlocked and hands resting on his chest. It looked as if he were praying. His glasses, combined with the deep lines etched between his eyes and brow, gave him a scowling appearance. He lifted his leg and farted.

I heard heels on the dining room floor. My mother walked over to the living room mirror and fluffed up one side of her wig with her hand. "You men have a good night," she said.

"Have a good meeting, Mom,"

Barry answered.

My father sat up on the couch.

"Cheesus, June," he said, "you're going to a meeting dressed like that?"

"What's wrong with the way I'm dressed?"

"You're trying to impress Paul."

"I certainly am not."

Julie ran barefoot through the dining room and joined my mother at the mirror. She clutched the fabric on my mother's hip.

"You look like a lady of the night," my father continued.

"Boys," my mother said, "do I look like that?"

Barry turned around. "No."

"You look good," I told her.

"You look like a hooker," my father countered.

"I'm leaving," my mother said.

I got up, opened the front door, and flicked the porch light on. "Have a good time, Mom."

"I will, despite all those terrible things he said."

Julie and I watched from the doorway as the Barracuda backed out of the garage. I knew my mother was mad by the way her car burned rubber leaving the driveway. I shut the door. Julie followed me to the living room, and we stood watching the final credits.

"Did Al Harrington say anything?" I asked.

"No," said Barry. "All I heard

were grunts when he fought this

"Did he win the fight?"

"Duh."

My father swung his legs back up on the couch. "Don't you boys have any homework to do?"

Barry got off the zabaton. "Homework, dopework," he snickered. His blond hair sprouted over his ears, and I knew my father resented him for not cutting it.

Barry's creaturehood was turning defiant, but he still did all the crazy weekend chores our father invented to keep us under his thumb, things like scrubbing dust off the outer walls of the house with a bristle brush and digging up leaking pipes in the garden. Julie and I followed Barry past the lanai's sliding glass doors. I caught our reflection in the glass: we were a parade of Troll children, with the oldest leading the way and the youngest bringing up the rear. Barry retreated to his room and closed the door. I knew he wanted privacy because I heard him push the lock button on the doorknob. Julie lowered her head and walked the hall.

It was my turn to do the dishes, so I scraped pork bones and scraps off the plates into the trashcan. My father had refused to buy a dishwasher because he said they wasted too much water and electricity. I put the stopper in the sink, squirted in dish soap, and turned

on the hot water. When I was eight,

my father had given me written instructions on the proper order for cleaning, and I followed that now: first came the glasses, followed by the plates and saucers, and finally the silverware, pots, and pans. I washed, dried, and put everything away. My father's newly amended instructions required wiping down the counters with ammonia, so I did that too. The kitchen smelled clean, but the ammonia burned my nostrils and made my eyes tear.

Julie showed up in the kitchen carrying a box. "Time for *The Ethel Merman Show*," she whispered.

"Is our victim asleep?"

"Dead to the world," she said and led the way. My father was snoring. I turned up the TV's volume a smidgen while Julie tiptoed over to the couch. She touched the stems of his glasses with her index fingers and slowly slipped them off. She dug through her box for supplies. I watched her color his lips bright red and pat turquoise eye shadow onto his upper lids. She didn't forget about eyeliner, and she fattened his eyelashes with a mascara brush. She pulled the wig out of the box and rested it on his head.

"Daddy's missing one thing," she said.

"What?"

"I'll go get it."

While she was gone, my father made a noise deep in his

throat that sounded like a garbage disposal. His molars hid his front teeth but only because he'd whittled them down after years of biting pencils at work and chewing ice at home.

Julie returned with a spray bottle of Chanel No. 5.

"Ah," I said, "*la piece de resistance.*"

She floated the bottle over him and misted from head to toe. "There," Julie said. "Now he smells sweet."

I sniffed the air like a dog. "Sweet as a daisy."

"Now, who does Daddy look like?"

"Let's see. Judy Garland?"

"Guess again."

"Raquel Welch."

"You've got one more try."

"Ethel Merman?"

"You win!" Julie said.

My father stirred, enough to make the wig slip down and cover an eye. Julie lifted the wig and hooked the edge on his bushy eyebrow. He looked like an Ethel Merman who'd had a few drinks after a long night of belting out show tunes.

Julie tucked her makeup back in the box. She seemed lonely, so I invited her into my room to look at albums. She always liked checking out the covers and the pictures of the rock stars, especially the albums

of Pink Floyd, David Bowie, and The Beatles. I pulled down the covers through my albums, and I pulled down an old acoustic guitar from the top shelf of the closet. The guitar had belonged to Barry, but he gave it to me because he said he was sick of strumming it and that it took up too much room.

"Wow," Julie said.

"Let's take pictures of Julie Gill the Rock Star," I suggested.

"I'll get Mummy's hat!" she squealed and darted for the master bedroom. She returned with a floppy yellow hat that our mother wore every Easter.

I posed Julie on my bed with the guitar straddled across her lap and the hat plopped on her head. I pulled the Kodak Instamatic out of my desk drawer and aimed.

"Pretend you're playing," I said.

Julie put her hands over the chords and smiled.

"Look serious."

She squinted and puckered her lips. I pressed the button, the camera flashed, and the flashcube turned. "One more," I said. This time there was no flash.

"Can we take one of me with my Trolls?" Julie asked.

"It won't come out. I need a new cube."

The doorbell rang. Julie pulled off the hat and I grabbed the guitar. The doorbell rang again.

"Stay here," I told Julie, "I'll go

see why it is.”

“What if it’s Mummy?”

“She has the key.”

“What if she lost it?”

I walked the hall fast and Julie followed. Barry’s door was still closed. We reached the dining room, and I saw my father standing in the doorway talking to someone. The wig was gone. His hands were tucked in the pockets of his shorts. I veered toward the guest bedroom—it was a good place to spy because no one could see you looking out if you kept the light off. I gazed through the louvered window. Eleanor and Don Torkelson, my mother’s Church friends, stood in the lit alcove outside the front door. The Torkelsons were a short couple that liked to gab with my mother in the parking lot of Star of the Sea. They had Boston in common, and there was usually talk about harsh winters, the Kennedy clan, and future trips to Bean Town.

“Who is it?” Julie asked.

I lifted her up on the desk below the window.

Eleanor passed something to my father. “Now, Hal,” she said, “tell June we stopped by with some homemade mango chutney. All our neighbors rave about it.”

“This chutney’s the real McCoy,” Don added, “but there’s something more, Hal.”

“Oh?” my father asked.

“The mangoes for the chutney

came right off your tree.”

“Very good,” my father said.

“Well, good night.”

“Good night,” the Torkelsons said, and the door closed.

I watched them march quietly over the blacktop to their car. I lifted Julie down, and we ran through the kitchen and past the glass doors.

My father was looking in the mirror. “Chrissakes,” he said, rubbing the back of his hand against his lips. “That damn Torkelson’s queer and now he thinks I’m queer too.”

“He doesn’t think you’re queer,” I said.

He turned and faced us. He’d smudged the lipstick, and it looked like war paint on his cheek. “Doesn’t think?” he asked. “What would you think of a man wearing lipstick and crap all over his eyes?”

“I’d think he was cute,” Julie answered.

He looked down at her and up at me. His eyelids were still lined and his lashes were heavy with mascara. Half-moons of turquoise shadow were perched on his lids. He smelled like my mother. “Julie,” he groused, “don’t you ever put makeup on me again, d’you hear?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“But what if I just answer the door from now on?” I asked.

“Goddammit, Kirby,” my father said. “Never, ever bring this up again.”

That was the end of *The Ethel Merman Show*. Julie spent her nights filling in coloring books and combing the locks of her Trolls. I pretended to study. Sometimes I'd hear Julie using different voices through the wall we shared, putting words in the mouths of her Troll family. She'd use a soft, pleading voice and answer it with one that was deep and angry; the angry voice droned on and on, even after the pleading stopped.