

ARTIFICIAL LIGHT

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The oppressive Captain Murphy—human host of ‘Murphy’s Puppet Pirate Hour,’ and a staunch method actor—had it written somewhere in his contract that all the lady puppets in the Sea Wench Choir were to bat eyes at him as he arrived on set each morning. He was also known to cavort inappropriately with the puppets backstage, advancing on them with the lusty, drunken aggression and general lack of couth befitting his onscreen character.

One morning, the puppet Sissy Slimbitches, Queen of the Wenches and light of my life, had had enough. “Bat your eyes at this,” she said, and she doused Murphy in a shower of homemade napalm—nothing more than frozen orange juice concentrate soaked in gasoline. The icy, gelatinous fluid splattered across the front of Murphy’s frock and dribbled down his lace jabot. His shoulders leapt in an elaborate shiver just as Sissy pressed the lit match to his collar.

For a moment, it appeared as if Murphy couldn’t register the sudden shift from wet chill to fire, and he shivered once more as the flames ignited. Staring into Sissy’s vast acrylic eyeballs, he seemed, more than anything, puzzled to find his reflection therein burst afire—as if it were some kind of illusion, some trickery of TV magic. It wasn’t until his wig began to sizzle and stink that he ran screaming into the waterfall on set, which was made mostly of felt, cellophane, and Styrofoam. It, too, erupted into flames, and soon Murphy and his entire set were reduced to ash.

To his credit, he never once dropped character, even when facing death. “Ye mutinous puppet whore!” he hollered at Sissy. “Ye’ll be worth fuck-all without me at yer helm!” It was sweet irony to watch Murphy, a sham seaman, drown under his own phony molten polystyrene waterfall. But the sweeter irony was

that Captain Murphy's program was sponsored by the very same orange juice concentrate with which Sissy concocted her napalm.

I'm fairly certain these circumstances are ironic. Irony is goddamned confusing, but I've always wanted to say 'the sweet irony of it was...' and be right about it, and be the person that tasted that sweetness without consequences. I think I am that person, finally, because I have just declared it here for the immortal annals—I, the boy behind the camera, capturing those glorious fireworks on film, so that Captain Murphy may die in my sitting room every afternoon.

As for Sissy, my eventual bride, she tasted the sweetness, but with all the consequences—convicted of murder and arson in the first, and sentenced to fifty years as lead inmate on the show 'Puppet Prison.' After the inevitable cancellation of the 'Pirate Hour,' I had no other option than to apply as a cameraman for the prison series. I watched on as Sissy suffered unspeakable torment at the hands of the human prison guard players for having immolated such a beloved puppeteering icon as Captain Murphy. I knew the violations were even worse off camera than on. "Stop this incessant travesty!" I have often imagined Sissy shrieking at her backstage assailants. She has never spoken to me of the details, and I was only ever allowed to witness those tortures intended for my lens, so imagination is the last tool I'm left with. I often find myself having to speak for her: "There are no cameras to record this violence, no looming microphones, no artificial light!" I say in my cartoonish imitation of Sissy's voice.

The only detail I do know—because of the way Sissy now stares at me in bed, ragged and emotionless—is that at some point in the solitary confinement of the props closet, she broke off the aluminum rod affixed to her left elbow, fashioned it into a shank, and turned it on herself. She plunged the weapon deep into the back of her head, destroying the wire rig that controlled all her facial expressions.

I love her still, knowing she will never again smirk seductively, never flash her perfect fiberglass teeth, never swivel her glistening marbled irises toward me with sultry welcome, and wink, even once—her thick painted lashes flapping with the celerity of a hummingbird's wing. Sometimes I fool myself into seeing her blink at me from across the dinner table, but I know these movements are now confined to the reruns of the 'Pirate Hour.' At night, when Sissy is asleep upstairs, I sneak down to savor the old footage. I watch those enormous purple eyelids batting at the camera, through the lens, the screen, straight to me—the boy behind it all.

I do not ask her whether it was worth it—the fifty years—to have seen Murphy scramble under the flaming OJ napalm. To have heard him wail with horror and rage until his larynx combusted. To know he looked upon the world with infantile terror as his fleshy eyeballs melted in the citrus-scented blaze. Above all, to have witnessed that moment of sublime realization—which I have relished again and again on film—when I swear Murphy understood, just before his death, the sweet irony of his being immolated by the very product that funded his charade. Watch the tape: prostrate, smoldering under molten polystyrene, Murphy lifts his blackened head to see, in the distance, Sissy still holding the canister she dumped on him. He has time enough still to read its label, to take in its meaning. And though it's inaudible—because his throat is already scorched bare—if you look closely, you can see it: he begins to laugh. He begins to glow.

I do not ask Sissy if it was worth it—I, a mere boy behind a camera, capturing that gruesome footage, which was afterwards used in court to convict Sissy. I do not ask her because for me there were no fifty years confined. No violent, lustful men awaiting me in each dark corner of the penitentiary set. No Captain breathing liquor down my back in a dressing room. No human hands reaching deep into my skull to drop a hood over my eyes.