

## Mannequin Makeover

Fashion Barn owner June Dimza readily consented to loan out her twin female mannequins, 'Ida' and 'Irene', for a makeover contest. The twins had been on display unchanged since "plastic was invented and molded," according to an affable Barn patron.

"Can't hurt business. Might help it some," June told the contest promoters as she cranked up the volume of her brown Panasonic radio on the counter.

"Two local luminaries are vying in the Mannequin Makeover Contest this Saturday, August 8 at 3:00pm at St. Stanislaus School. The contestants are undertaker Wilbur Probst of Eternal Time-Share, LLC and beautician Loretta Mabry of Becoming Coiffures. Welcome to the program," the AM radio interviewer's voice broadcasted.

June and others stared at the sound-emitting relic, ready for whatever amiable, on-air sparring lay ahead.

"You all know Loretta's professed motto, 'If your hair is not becoming to you, you should be coming to me!'" The interviewer shuffled his notes. "And you know Wilbur's impeccable reputation for providing 'dignified, compassionate internment of a loved one.'"

"When it's time for me to depart this world, I'm leaving all arrangements to Wilbur." She blushed across the table from her opponent.

"There's none better than Loretta Mabry for sprucing up for those special occasions of the living populace—birthdays, proms, weddings and the like," Wilbur returned with a whimsical glance.

"Of course, listeners, you know that with all that freezer space at Eternal Time-Share, Wilbur does a brisk business processing steaks and sausage during gun deer season. It goes within saying he's a great taxidermist, too!" the interviewed plugged.

"Wilbur, isn't having all those cadavers lying around unnerving?" Loretta chirped gaily into the microphone.

"Not in the least, Loretta. But isn't it curious that Becoming Coiffures patrons return over and over again? Mine never do," Wilbur quipped.

"Obviously, Wilbur, your Eternal Time-Share clients don't return at all, or do they?" Loretta countered with a twinkle in her eye.

"Boo!" Wilbur grinned and wiggled ghost fingers at her. Laughing, she returned the gesture brushing his extended fingertips.

“Those of you out there in radio land can weigh in on Saturday,” the interviewer broke in. “Who will it be? Come see for yourself which doll wins, Loretta’s or Wilbur’s.”

Wilbur nodded affably, giving Loretta and the interviewer a thumbs-up.

“Listeners, you’ve been enjoying guests Loretta Mabry and Wilbur Probst,” the interviewer continued. “Remember the Mannequin Makeover Contest is this Saturday, August 8 at 3:00pm at St. Stanislaus School. Free and open to the public, so bring the family and cheer your favorite Fashion Barn doll. Mademoiselle Ida or Mademoiselle Irene!”

After the radio banter, the next day June decided to visit her friends Loretta and Wilbur individually over coffee.

“You know, Loretta, Wilbur is only three years older than you, single and available—a very handsome, thirty-two year old bachelor. Financially secure. A fine catch. Wasn’t he high school valedictorian? Exceptionally bright. Witty, too.” Pausing to sip her coffee, June observed an encouraging blush.

“He needs a woman, Loretta, to make a home and family. Why not you? At six foot three topped with that distinguished piebald and those elegant suits, why, he’s any girl’s dream.” Loretta’s hint of a smile glowed through wisps of latte vapor.

“Wilbur told me he reads voraciously. Poor man, what else is there for him to do during long, lonely nights?” After another sip Loretta felt warm all over.

“Wilbur’s not as athletic as some, but he’s toned and keeps himself clean and neat. Have you ever noticed that wonderful citrus-musk aftershave? And so courteous. Everyone says, ‘Wilbur planned such a nice ceremony, very respectful with professional and personal attention to every detail.’ His funeral services are simply the best.” A waitress refilled their cups.

“And, Loretta, I’m sure you know he likes you.”

“Likes me?”

“I asked him about you. He caught his breath and flushed like a schoolboy,” June winked. Loretta fluttered. “Look at the time. I’ve got to run. It’s been nice visiting with you.”

June directed her path across the square to the café where Wilbur Probst lunched routinely during the workweek. Sitting in his usual corner two-top secluded behind an opened newspaper, she spotted him. Without a word, she sat down in the vacant chair opposite. Wilbur peered over the paper.

“Well, June, breaking out of the Barn?” he asked politely. “Are your mannequins ready and willing for their big day?”

“I shook the mothballs out of their pockets this morning. I admit it’s been awhile since they were touted and painted up. They’ll get the royal treatment from you and Loretta.”

“We’ll try our best. I’m looking forward to it.”

“So is Loretta. She’s excited about being on stage with you, Wilbur.” He folded the paper. “Considering all the guys swooning over her, I’d say that’s a nice compliment she’s paid you. So pretty and petite with that cute, stylish cut in the latest trend. Fine complexion and beautiful blue eyes, too, don’t you think?”

Wilbur looked intently at June.

“Most important, of course, is Loretta’s outgoing, friendly nature. Weren’t you two in high school together? I heard lots of fellows chased after her, but I guess she just hasn’t found that special someone yet, Wilbur.” June watched a lump in his throat bob up then descend as he adjusted his tie.

“Loretta is a happy, carefree sort. I think she clings to hope for a secret admirer.”

“Secret admirer?” Wilbur echoed.

“Yes, and meanwhile, she swims and plays tennis to stay trim. I wonder if it’s sun highlights or platinum frosting in that lovely golden hair? Dates young men only to pass time. Otherwise, she keeps busy with her salon business. Works wonders transforming some of those toads. Well, that’s another story. They go to her mainly to relax and feel happy for an hour or two, just like lying in a hammock filled with jasmine and gardenias. Anyhow, she’s lovely, don’t you think, Wilbur?”

He nodded as the image swung gently in a far away glade. Satisfied, June stood and patted him on the shoulder.

“Until Saturday then, Wilbur, good-bye.”

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The celebrated day soon arrived. June had transported the twins in the bed of her pickup to the school venue the night before, along with Fashion Barn flyers containing discount coupons for the big “Mannequin Makeover Contest” weekend sale. She taped the flyers all over the school grounds and placed them on the seats of the metal chairs set up in the school cafeteria. Around noon, not a few event goers commenced pre-fueling at the local watering hole, the Pint of No Return. As the inquisitive throng made its way into the makeshift theater, the audience pocketed the flyers and observed the two contestants on stage, seated on a portable dais.

A panel of three impartial judges, assembled at a table under a disco ball to the left of the stage, presided to pass judgment. The magistrate bench consisted of the indomitable president of the

local Daughters of the American Revolution, a young female high school chemistry teacher and girls cheerleading advisor, and the venerable county sheriff with greying temples and hearing loss.

“Welcome, friends and neighbors,” the DAR president announced. “On behalf of the nominating committee, I’d like to thank our contestants, Loretta Mabry and Wilbur Probst, as well as June Dimza for loaning the mannequins as well as Principal Cindy Brilowski for the use of the school cafeteria. Now, the first order of business is to draw names to pair up our contestants with their designated dolls.”

Drawing names from a hat, Loretta was coupled with blue-eyed brunette Irene, and Wilbur with green-eyed blond Ida. The two contestants smiled at each other and the audience. The gathered crowd cheered their respective choices. Many placed their bets, which were held by pious Norbert.

“From start to finish the allotted contest time will be one hour, including makeover and dress up,” the president continued. “Given her bingo calling experience, June over there is the official timekeeper.”

The bubbly chemist said, “Contestants may select clothing and accessory items—none of which are duplicated—from the fashion table at any time within the duration of the contest. Each contestant has identical sets of makeover equipment and products.”

Under the arms of two Eagle scouts in uniform, both naked dolls were toted onto stage and placed supine on top of operating tables. White sheets were quickly draped over each mannequin leaving only their heads exposed to the craning audience. Wigs of wild, stringy hair glued to their domes incited a collective gasp from attendees. Nearby tables were heaped with women’s clothes, fashion jewelry, shoes and stockings, handbags, and other apparel and accouterments June made available.

Wilbur and Loretta stood at makeover stations identically equipped with portable shampooing basins, handheld hairdryers and curling irons, and arrays of cosmetic paraphernalia and products including brushes, scissors, combs, dyes, sprays, creams, eyeliners, blushes, lipsticks and more. All items were donated from catalog purchases via cookie and baked goods sales by the high school 4-H club, which was acknowledged with a boom from the DAR president.

The sheriff rose as if rounding up a posse.

“When I ring this here cowbell, the clock starts. We’re ready for some real plastic surgery!” As he lofted the cowbell above his head, the packed schoolhouse cafeteria brimmed with anticipation.

“Let the mayhem... I mean contest... commence, sheriff!” someone cried out to laughs as everyone leaned forward, pressing nearer the stage.

The cowbell rang ‘Go!’ to screams of encouragement from the large, vociferous crowd behind the judges’ bench. Boisterous foot stomping and jumping to support their respective contenders ensued. In the contestants’ frenzied blur of motion around Ida and Irene, excitement mounted with each tick of the clock. After whipping the sheet from Ida’s plastic torso, the fastidious Wilbur sprinted to the clothing table and tore through the pile searching for something conservative, but with a splash of flair.

“Not that horrid navy polka dot thing, Wilbur!” someone shouted. “My grandmother wears that sort!”

“He’s goin’ to bury her, so what’s the difference?” one of Loretta’s backers hollered.

“Use that blue feather boa, Wilbur, to match Ida’s stone cold face and hair color after she DYYYYEES on stage!” another happy heckler croaked.

Wilbur ignored the volley from advice givers as he rifled through the clothing. To nodding affirmations, he selected a smart, Kelly green woman’s suit with contrasting impala tan lapels and shoulder epaulettes with matching pleated skirt, ivory silk blouse, slip, and stockings, black leather high heels and purse. Quickly to the fashion jewelry section, he chose a stylish pearl choker, gold earrings with dangling gilded peacocks festooned with bluish green and purple stones, faux emerald ring set in gold, and simple gold bangles. Placing the items on a food tray, he hurried back to the waiting Ida and prepared to clean her hair and face gently with a warm, soapy sponge.

Nonplussed, Loretta had thrust Irene’s head into a washbasin for a shampoo and rinse. Wrapping Irene’s wet hair in a towel, Loretta affixed false eyelashes and eyebrows, then started adhering ruby nail enhancements to Irene’s fingers and thumbs. She would touch them up with tiny gold stars later, and add hair extensions with platinum highlights.

“Frankenstein would run away screaming at a glimpse of her!” another heckler chortled.

“She’s gorgeous, Loretta, dear!” an Irene fan contradicted.

Both contestants continued blow-drying and hair-styling, spray-tinting the skin as they deemed necessary, applying facial foundation and makeup, whitening teeth, and finishing nail polishing. After completing the cosmetics, Loretta raced to the table to pick out an ensemble for Irene. Flowing metallic silver V-neck gown with delicate scarlet hem and sash, matching scarlet-sequenced pumps and purse, full-length white slip, sheer flesh-tone pantyhose, silver crescent moon earrings with pearl drops, bracelet of false rubies set in silver, and silver tiara. With just three

minutes remaining, Wilbur completed Ida's makeover and began outfitting her and adorning jewelry with formal efficiency. Loretta, back at Irene's side, expertly fitted her doll into her gown, pinning up the fabric for a perfect fit.

Performing truly sublime transformations of the twins' appearances to rapturous roars of admiration, the makeover artists administered finishing touches to the now exquisite mannequins. Even the judges, wide-eyed with approval, could not help emitting 'oohhs and aahhs'.

Just before June signaled the sheriff to sound 'Stop!' with his cowbell, Loretta sat Irene on her knee ventriloquizing loudly and smiling gaily before the judging panel, "Vote for Irene! Vote for me!"

Stunned by this flagrant outburst, Wilbur hoisted Ida onto his shoulder, rushed in front of Loretta and Irene, and boomed, "Not on your life, dummy! Ida's your choice!"

Enervated by the passion of the moment their competitive juices washed over a feverish audience. With a wild-eyed shriek, Loretta grabbed Irene by the ankles and wheeled, slamming Ida off her perch with a swinging head butt. Horrified and enraged, Wilbur picked Ida up off the floor, quickly smoothing her bouffant with opened palms. Then gripping her at the hips and tilting her forward like a lance he lunged, thrusting Ida's head into Loretta's midrib. With the wind knocked out of her, Loretta was laid flat face up with pretty Irene mounted akimbo on top of her. Letting fly a gasping squeal she recovered with an adroit maneuver resembling a wrestling escape to the 'bottom man' position on hands and knees, avoiding being pinned.

"One point for Loretta!" the incredulous crowd erupted.

Panting and foaming like a crazed bull at a rodeo, she bawled, rolling her red eyes and bucking. Irene rode bareback with legs splayed over Loretta's ribcage and arms flailing. She bumped and jolted aloft, looking like an adept, chic bull rider waving and smiling to delirious yodelers.

Meanwhile, Wilbur panicked. He threw Ida like a human cannonball at Irene, knocking her from her vaulted position above snorting Loretta. Frantically, he barreled over the tattered twins, grasping Loretta in a bear hug.

"Now I've got you!"

Like everyone else, the judges leapt to their feet in disbelief of the tumultuous event unfolding before them. "Decorum, decorum, please!"

"Let go of me, oaf!" Loretta brayed into Wilbur's sweating face, his jaw back with both hands. "You brute!"

Pandemonium erupted, as unhinged supporters stormed the platform, wrestling contestants and mannequins alike in a dog pile of flying elbows and knees. In the mêlée, deranged warriors from each camp locked chokeholds on the twins' heads. With a primitive roar, they twisted the disfigured skulls from their torsos like popping champagne corks. The decapitated heads were sent rolling backstage as rouged, blinking gargoyles. They fell unceremoniously—thump, thump—like cabbages on the linoleum by the stainless steel food serving counters by the kitchen. Taking this riotous development as a cue, the sheriff sprang to separate the hair-pulling, obscenity-shouting beautician and mortician, who had locked horns in death grips. Silencing the mob with a piercing cry, the sheriff shouted.

“STOP! Don't make me ring my cowbell again! Retrieve those two heads from the food line now!”

Cradling them in the crooks of her elbows, Principal Brilowski presented Irene and Ida's bruised and battered heads, with matted or missing-hair, grotesquely smeared lipstick, and dangling bits of eyelashes and clothing, to the judges.

“My lovely girls are shattered!” June cried.

“Still smiling though with real fortitude,” the DAR president observed.

The spent, bewildered crowd caught its breath in dazed anticipation of what the judges might say.

“Foul play,” one bettor whispered aloud.

“But who wins?” another wondered.

“The Fashion Barn just won't be the same without those twin mannequins in the front window,” a patron lamented.

After a brief consultation, the chemistry teacher served as panel spokesperson. She delivered the verdict in a calming voice with solemnity restored.

“By virtue of balance and poise under pressure, the panel has decided Irene wins the talent category. With her yet coy, captivating smile throughout the ordeal, Ida wins the beauty category.”

The onlookers stood silent, as the judged huddled again.

Interrupting an announcement that the judging panel was at loggerheads on which contestant would be proclaimed congeniality category winner, June spoke up.

“For obvious reasons, no award for congeniality should be made. And the two rogue contestants must make full restoration of my damaged dolls!”

Sagely, the sheriff offered, “Lets all retire to the Pint to deliberate. Winners pay!”

The thirsty bystanders embraced the wisdom of his words, marching out immediately. They soon packed the tavern down the street across from Deacon Norbert's Baptist Church.

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In the emptied cafeteria, Loretta and Wilbur sat in silence looking at the floor in opposite directions, baffled and alone except for June. Holding the Ida and Irene's craniums, June approached them soundlessly and sat in between the dazed couple.

"The flare-up's over, lovebirds," she said. "Time to make up and makeover my mannequins." Taking his hands from his forehead, Wilbur accepted the two heads from June into his lap and stared at them. After a long silence, he spoke in a soft voice.

"Loretta, I don't know what got into me. My behavior was appalling I'm embarrassed to say. I ask your forgiveness."

June softly raised Loretta's chin, then gently lifted Loretta's hands and placed them into Wilbur's.

"It was all my fault, Wilbur, spouting off like that," Loretta said looking into his eyes. "I lost my head, too. I'm so sorry, Wilbur."

A sensation of his tender touch stifled a sob.

"Making up after a lovers' spat is often sweeter than the courtship," June offered. Loretta raised her eyes to Wilbur's, melting away any remnant sorrow, dissipating any wisps of lingering doubt. Timid smiles softened their faces.

"Don't forget about fixing Ida and Irene when I leave you two for the Pint. After all, reattaching decapitated heads of car accident victims for open casket viewing is Wilbur's specialty," June said over her shoulder as she left.

Collecting the twins' body parts and gathering an assortment of equipment and supplies needed, they walked over to the operating tables. Together they started the dolls' makeovers again.

"I confess I'm your secret admirer, Loretta," Wilbur said, as he stitched the heads back to the torsos.

"You are indeed, Wilbur," Loretta replied, as she removed any trace of blemishes. "And I'm your secret admirer, too. It's a nice feeling, isn't it, Wilbur? No secret any longer."

They applied just the right cosmetics selected specifically for each twin, and then dressed them in tasteful clothes and distinctive accessories. Loretta finished the twins' hair extensions and individual styling in stunningly beautiful fashions. The world had never seen more exquisite dolls than Ida and Irene.



Carrying the twins carefully under each of their outer arms, Wilbur and Loretta walked arm in arm to the tavern and through the door.

“You know, there's no going back now, Loretta, you're mine.”

“Oh, Wilbur.”

Upon seeing the reconciled contestants and the gorgeous mannequins in exquisite restoration, raucous cheers welcomed them. The twins were seated at a table where the sheriff and DAR president were enjoying each other's close company. June, who had scrawled dozens of names on a pile of cocktail napkins, burst into tears of joy upon seeing Ida and Irene.

“My girls will be lovely bridesmaids! Here's the wedding guest list,” June said, stuffing the napkins into Wilbur's jacket chest pocket.

“May you two makeover your life together,” the DAR president toasted, “helping each other touch up any rough spots now and then.”

“Here's how!” The wedding invitees quaffed their drinks.

“Madame President, I swear those two ladies just winked at me!” the sheriff stammered.

“Better cut him off, Norbert, or he'll be spending the night sleeping it off in his place of business again.” Ignoring the comment, the sheriff stood and bowed formally, addressing the twins seated at his table.

“May I have the honor of buying you lovely women a drink?”

They smiled demurely.

“Mum's the word, Sheriff.”

