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## LILA LEICHENBERG HIDES A CARD

LILA LEICHENBERG, THE BAPTIST PASTOR'S WIFE, taught home economics at my high school. We called her Lila behind her back, although she always insisted on people calling her Mrs. Leichenberg. She loved playing the local peak of society in redneck Burleson. She enjoyed the spectacle of herself.

She hired me to remove a stump from their yard when I was 15. Then she hired me to help move her husband's mother into an assisted living place when that woman did not want to go.

I already knew her daughter Cynthia, quite carefully, in the dark backseat of a car driven by her dad on the way back from the Cotton Bowl championship. But Lila continued to push her at me. She even bought her a white bikini to entice me. I know this because she told me. This was in the 1970s, before AIDS, when nothing of a sexual nature had consequences that couldn't be cured with penicillin, or so we thought.

Her son was a short little freshman basketball player who was obsessed with the movie *One on One* (1977). He carried a basketball with him everywhere. The other teachers were afraid of Lila and her husband's influence on the school board, so he was treated like a redneck blue blood.

Lila wanted me to be a yell leader at the school, but I refused.

When some of the male teachers grew mustaches, she shamed them by blithely implying that men who grew mustaches were insecure about their penis size. Poor timid Mr. Renick immediately shaved his mustache off.

When I dated a girl who was considered a great beauty, Lila talked to us in class about getting stuck with high school boyfriends and girlfriends when we met people in college. I thought it was odd because most of the students at our high school did not plan to go to college. Then she talked about a film she'd seen, *Barry Lyndon* (1975), that had an interesting playing card scene. She kept looking at me the whole time.

An announcement came over the speaker later that day, telling me to go

see Mrs. Leichenberg. I went to her classroom, and she locked the door and sat on her desk.

She stared at me for several moments. She wore one of those doe-eyed “meaningful” looks. I shrugged.

“This is serious, Alan,” she said.

“Oh shit,” I thought.

She picked up a deck of playing cards and had me shuffle it. I relaxed. She wanted to learn poker, I thought. I’d been on a legendary hot streak for the past few days, winning everyone’s spare money at lunch.

She fanned the cards, looked carefully through them, and pulled out the Ace of Hearts. Then she slid the card into her blouse under her bra.

“I have hidden a card about my person,” she said.

I stared.

“I have hidden a card about my person.”

I gaped.

“I have hidden a card about my person.”

“Is this from *Barry Lyndon*?” I asked.

She nodded. “I have hidden a card about my person, and I need you to find it.”

I nodded. I did nothing.

She grabbed my hand and slowly slipped it under her blouse and bra. She held it there, tight against her nipple, and stared at me. I thought of Cynthia, with whom I’d just made out at the Mountain Valley pool. I thought of Mrs. Robinson from *The Graduate* (1967).

The door handle jiggled. I jerked my hand, but she pulled it back hard against her breast.

“Mom?” It was Jeff.

“I’m in a meeting,” she said.

“Mom, I’m going to John O’Neill’s house.”

“Yes, go. I’m in a meeting.”

He left. I’ve always wondered if he knew I was in her classroom. He probably heard the announcement over the intercom like the rest of the school.

Years later, I finally watched *Barry Lyndon*. The character Lila referred to actually hid a ribbon, not a playing card, so I’m not sure if she actually saw the movie.

She pushed her daughter at me again after she went off to college, al-

though we had hooked up before that point. Then she ran an interior decorating business for a while and sold my mother a bill of goods for the living room and den. I was embarrassed for both of them.

She eventually became a woman who sold gold jewellery out of a case and wore a gold necklace with a gold nugget around her spray-tanned neck. She made her husband take a post in Baptist bureaucracy and build a Tudor house.

When her husband developed Parkinson's, I helped him move into his first assisted living place at Lila's behest. She said she wouldn't take care of him because she couldn't. As I turned to leave, he stopped me. The tremors quaked and fluttered his form. He said he was relieved to not live with Lila. "It's like being married to a clockmaker, and I'm a clock she's constantly adjusting, taking apart, tweaking, unsatisfied that I don't keep perfect tempo."

Four decades later, Lila continues to strut her stuff, vain as a female peacock. Cynthia became just like her—the type of wreath she hangs on her door, the type of dresses she wears, the fact that her daughter and granddaughter must remain painfully thin. She spends her time going to weddings and bridal showers, going to shows at Bass Hall, or going to see her granddaughter and dispense advice on decorating her home in Virginia.

I used to feel for Cynthia, but she molted and metamorphosed into a Lila. She was once concerned with those who needed help, but then one day she was a lotus-eater like her mother. She slipped into that trap of honey and money.

Yes, the Leichenbergs slipped into the lotus darkness that separates the world. When I find myself pressed into inescapable corners from time to time, I must admit that I could have become a lotus eater myself. I could have joined the Leichenbergs who run this wannabe Junior League of a world.

Then I think of Jeff jiggling the handle on that classroom door. I accidentally escaped an enchanted prison of privileged crinkercrunkum. Let them have that country club life with trips, holidays, and name drops. Let them rip, rend, and consume each other.

Lila came by to see my father, now in his 90s. She asked him to have me call her, but I did not call her. I find solace in the fact that I don't talk to Lila, who has become so religious and pious—much more so than her long-dead husband.

Though we live more than 100 miles apart, I catch sight of Cynthia from time to time. I always try to hide from her, and I don't think she notices me or, if she does, recognizes me. It's odd that I see her so often. These sightings are like a minor motif in a great symphony or ripples from an ocean plane crash that still lap the shore.