

“The Card Game”

Once a month, right after the “eagle flies,” if you know what I mean, a couple of my friends and I get together in my place in Avondale to play a little draw poker, an excuse really, to just shoot the shit. That is what true friendship is all about.

We have a lot more of that to throw around than we do cash. Metaphorically I mean. We aren’t a bunch of sexually frustrated neurotic chimps in a cage with nothing else to do but play with our own crap. We’re just a bunch of ordinary guys who have drifted together like loose branches in a stream.

Some of us are just as rough, too. Lonnie Bartell owns a medium-sized construction company that does a lot of work around town. Bartell Construction has a build going on downtown right now. But when it comes to money, Lonnie is one of the cheapest bastards I have ever met. For example, I heard from some of the crew he has working down there, that they had a bitch of a time getting him to supply port-a-potties, so the crew could relieve themselves in a civilized manner. But Lonnie did not permit that until the structure had reached a certain height. Until then, it was catch as catch can, or drip as drop could. Workers were running in and out of the Hamilton County Office Building and nearby businesses just to take a piss. Finally, they convinced him that this situation was slowing

things down, so he finally had some of the blue/green potties delivered to the site. Except one thing—he had them modified so that they were coin operated!

Can you believe that?

He is a poor sport too. If he ain't winning at cards, which he never does, we have to keep playing until he at least breaks even.

Jim Powell is retired from the University up there on the hill. He retired from what used to be the College of Applied Science over on Victory Parkway, but its departments have been dispersed among others on the main campus. That land was too valuable to remain just a part of the University despite its teaching and great placement success. The only graduates who did not get jobs were the ones who didn't want a job. James is the passive/aggressive type. He always has something to say under his breath, even if he wasn't in the argument. Like a lot of teachers, he tends to be long-winded when he does talk. You ask him a simple question and you are liable to end up somewhere you don't recognize. Ask him how long it takes concrete to set, and he winds up telling you about how the Romans had it when the rest of the world did not. Now, that's some useful information! Who cares if there is a big old building in Rome with a huge concrete dome? What's that got to do with my life?

Bill Jones is coal black, the first thing you notice about him--other than he is six feet two, and two hundred and fifty pounds. He looks like the kind of guy you wouldn't want to piss off, and that is about right. Bill is a retired University of Cincinnati police officer. He retired early when his boss became a woman. I don't mean his boss used to be a man who had "the operation," but she was always a female. Bill said he could not work for no woman; should be the other way around according to Nature and his Southern Baptist god. He is here because he is my brother-in-law. My older sister, Birdie, is the kind of woman who will bounce a lamp off your head if she gets riled up, so he spends most of the day out of the house. She say she don't need a man around in the daytime. She is the only person who has no fear of Bill.

Then there is me. My name is Oscar. I have always worked a number of different jobs, done different kinds of work. I get bored too easy, so when that happens I just do something else: chauffeur, waiter, Uber driver, the kind of jobs that don't take all your time. Some folks say that I am just lazy. I say maybe so but you aint seeing me with high blood pressure! I would say that I am comfortable.

We usually start around 7:30 in the evening, sitting around the card table that I set up in the living room. Bill had a band aid on his head. I asked what happened,

and before he could answer, Lonnie said, "He must 'ave got home too early for Birdie's liking."

Bill bristled, "I ran into a doorway at home."

"Who do you expect to believe that? What was you doing running in the house anyway? Do you mean Birdie slammed the door in your face?" I asked.

Bill said, "Ok, Oscar, try this: I slipped on the ice outside."

I said, "Remember, we all know my sister."

Bill said, "If you were my friends you would have told me about her *before* we got married."

I said, "Understand, we were desperate to get that woman out of the house."

Lonnie said, "I cant see why you would marry a woman like that when you cant work for one."

Bill replied, "That's exactly why I retired. I get enough bossing at home."

I said, "It's more serious than that. You show up again looking like you been beaned, and I'm going to call 911 to get you in concussion protocol."

"Fuck you!" Bill said. "Let's play some cards, man."

I dealt a hand. Five cards down. Bill threw away three cards, took three more.

Since he always did this when he was holding a pair of something, I knew what he likely had. But Bill folded. I didn't have anything, but I threw in one card and took one, hoping to bluff a round. The pot was a dollar each with a betting limit of five dollars. I threw in two dollars and looked at Jim. He threw away four cards and took four more. That was as good as saying that he was hoping for divine aid for something, anything. Lonnie kept two and tossed three, then he saw my dollar and raised me fifty cents. Cheap bastard, I thought; he has a pair but is too cheap to bet to win. I raised him another dollar plus his fifty cents. Jim folded and that left me and Lonnie. My bet was too rich for his blood, so he folded. I won even though he had the better hand.

"Shit!" he proclaimed and threw down his cards. "What did you have?"

I said, "That is the kind of question that you have to pay to have answered."

"God damn it," he said, taking out his wallet to count his remaining bank notes.

He sat hunched over as if he was afraid we would see what he had in there.

Bill said, "If it's going to break the bank, maybe you shouldnt play."

"I will keep playing because I never lose."

"That's because we never let you lose," Jim said.

“That’s right,” I said. “You whine like an old whipped dog when you get down in the betting.”

Lonnie said, “Oscar, if you owned a business you would appreciate the value of a dollar.”

“If you weren’t such a skinflint maybe you would win this game every so often, “I said. “Then you would appreciate the value of many dollars.”

“I swear to god, sometimes I think you all are cheating me. I should be winning more often”

Bill chimed in, “How would you know if you were being cheated? You cant tell what’s happening around the table anyway. You more afraid to lose than hope to win”

Jim said, “This is a bit more difficult than bossing around those Mexicans you hire on your work sites.”

Turning red in the face, Lonnie said, “I did that to learn Spanish, you know from real Spanish speakers, right from the horse’s mouth, so to speak.”

I said, “If you were a horse, I’d say you were talking out of the other end.”

Jim said, "You pick an odd moment to decide to learn the language of our brown brothers from south of the border."

Lonnie said, "Hell, they're taking over anyway. In Miami you can't get a job unless you speak Spanish. Right here in our own country!"

Jim said, "You do know that the Spanish were here before the English by about one hundred years: Remember Christopher Columbus? Then you count the Vikings who came down from the north in the tenth century. The British were at least third in line in the seventeenth century. But, what the hell, I am just glad I don't have to learn Norwegian."

Bill said, "Deal another hand."

We played four or five more hands and I'll be damned if Lonnie didn't turn up ahead by a dollar fifty. "Who's cheating now?" I asked.

"Let's take a break. I want to relax and enjoy my winnings," Lonnie said.

I went into the kitchen to bring out more beer and some snacks. You would not believe it, but the snacks provoked a harsh reaction. Usually I served up the usual chicken wings, chips, pretzels, dip, etc. But I thought, why not try something different and even healthy for a change. When my friends cast their eyes on the food, you would have thought I had taken a knee with the flag passing by!

Lonnie looked over the kale chips, hummus, and flatbread arrayed on my table.

He said, “What are those green things?”

I said, “Those are kale chips. There is a sour cream dip there too.” There was also a dessert of stuffed kumquats, according to my grandma’s recipe. (We used to be so poor. Stuffing kumquats is not easy!) Then he looked at me and, dripping sarcasm, said, “This is all the fault of political correctness.”

Jim said, “When I was teaching I might have told my students to eat this crap, but I would never do it myself.”

Bill said, “What’s wrong with the usual stuff we eat? Aint it good enough for you all of a sudden?”

I was just about to set the quinoa bars on the table, but I decided not to.

I said, “I just wanted to change up, try something new and maybe even healthy, for a change. This don’t have nothing to do with political correctness, either.”

“Yes, it does,” Lonnie replied. “It is the exact equivalent of when the mayor of New York a few years back—I cant remember his name-- a fat little Jewish guy, tried to tell the people how big they could order their soft drinks and shit.

Americans don’t need no government agency telling them how much they can eat and drink, or what to eat and drink. Now you bring your friends this so-called

'health food.' Who is to say this stuff is healthier than a big fat nourishing cheese burger?"

Jim said, "You know that eating meat is why our brains are so big."

I said, "Not to mention your gut."

Bill said, "Stop, you're making me hungry," and looking at the table, "I sure as shit aint going to eat this stuff."

"Well fine. Starve to death for all I care."

Bill sighed and said, "We still got beer." That statement restored order in the room. Then he continued, "But I could sure use a chicken wing."

We played a few more stimulating hands of five card draw, and sure enough, Lonnie began to lose, and to whine about it. I decided to have a little fun busting his beignets. "As a white man, what do you feel your people do well in sports?"

Jim and Bill looked at me wide-eyed, as if they could not believe what had come out of my mouth. Lonnie said, "Well I guess all of them. What's your point?"

"I just was thinking that a way to measure worth is money. How much do pros make if you break it down along the Mason-Dixon line, you know. Who are the best players in the NBA, for example?"

Lonnie said, "I don't know. You tell me." His face began to redden.

I replied, "Certainly the black players are better because they get paid more. The former owner of the Los Angeles Clippers, a certain Mr. Sterling, was consulting with his GM and coach over whether they should sign J.J. Redick for a large sum of money. The coach and GM were in favor: He is a pretty good three-point shooter. Sterling, however, was dubious. He said, 'Are you sure this guy is worth all this money? He's not even black!' True story, I swear."

Jim said, "Is this the guy who the League forced to sell his team?"

I replied, "Yeah. And he had a black mistress, too. Sterling did not want her sitting with her black friends in the stands."

Lonnie, red in the face, said, "What does this have to do with anything? We're playing cards, and the only way you can beat me is to cheat."

Bill said, "Everybody knows that black and white are equal when it comes to cards."

"That's it," I said. "Lonnie is just delusional. I'd say he was bi-polar but he's cheap all the time."

Lonnie said, "I don't know why I hang out with you guys."

I said, "Who else would have you? Did you ever think about that?"

"Two washed up retirees, and a lazy bum" Lonnie said. "I'm the only one being a productive member of society. I work so you guys can lay around and cheat me out of my money. God only knows what you do with it."

Jim said, "It aint really that much. We're playing with a five-dollar limit, after all. No one is going to vacation in Acapulco with their winnings or cheatings from this table."

"Let's cool down," I said. "I'll bring out the Jim Beam."

"Now you're talking," Jim said. "I'll get some ice."

I don't know why they call alcoholic beverages "refreshing." If the blurring of reality you find "refreshing," then you have a different idea of refreshment than I do. Refreshed means you stand up bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, not look around for the nearest chair to fall into. Well, whatever it is called, we all do it even if we don't know exactly why.

Some say that booze loosens the tongue, which is true for those already inclined to talk too much, but it also loosens the memory. Each of us was in Viet Nam back in the day, but at different times and places. That experience is part of what keeps us together as a group.

Lonnie said, "What are you muttering about over there?" Sure enough we had all settled back into our chairs around the card table bourbon glasses in hand.

I replied, "I was just thinking about the 'bad old days,' Viet Nam."

Bill said, "Why would you want to rake through those coals again. They're dead, gone, and forgotten."

I said, "Yeah, but some of it was funny, even if not intentionally so."

Bill said, "That's the funniest kind of funny."

Jim said, "Agreed! Funny depends on your point of view, but basically it is a not very covert form of aggression."

I said, "Here goes the "professor" again. Here is a true story that I witnessed.

When I am finished, tell me why it is funny."

Lonnie chuckled, "Suppose it aint funny?"

I said, "It's funny, motherfucker."

So, I began, "I was with the CBs in 1968 north of Hue and Quang Tri City, right after the TET offensive. I remember seeing Hue was really shot up. We were spread along the Quang Tri River as one of our perimeters. Camp was right across from the DMZ, so close that one afternoon when some of us were watching a

movie while off duty, a short artillery round from friendlies landed in camp. It makes a characteristic ripping sound that I am happy to never have heard again. We cleared out of that tent fast, and rumors began to bubble up that the NVA had moved their artillery into the DMZ to fire on us. Our knees began to quake since this was also close to the time when Khe Sanh was under siege. Marines were sitting under daily artillery barrages for months, January to July 1967-68. When I was on base security sitting in a sand-bag bunker along the river, one of my mates was an ash-haired Irish kid who had been at Khe Sanh. Quietest Irishman I ever met.”

Lonnie interrupted, “I ain't hearing anything funny. Except maybe you crapping your draws when that short round landed.”

“I didn't say I crapped my pants, I said our knees shook. I just mention that stuff as context for the funny part. The prevailing mood was one of dread, so certain were we that the NVA was going to ultimately invade and run over us.”

I continued, “While on base security we rotated watches among three of us who basically lived in the bunker during our period of service. One night-shift that I had I sat atop the bunker staring out at the Quang Tri River quietly flowing past in the moon light. Then, I heard over the radio some guy in another bunker radio

into the watch commander saying that he thought that he saw a periscope sticking up in the river. Radio central questioned him a couple of times asking if he was sure about what he was seeing. The guy swore up and down that he saw a submarine periscope in the river and asked for permission to fire his grenade launcher at it. Permission was granted! One or two rounds were fired at what had likely been a reed sticking up near the banks. I don't know what damage they believed that a grenade could have done to a sub."

"You can probably understand why normally we were not allowed to keep bullets in our guns, or presumably, grenades in our grenade launchers. Following the logic here leads you not only into the fog of war but also the fog in the human mind. Firing that grenade launcher was the product of supposedly rational procedures and logic. Think about it."

Jim said, "I was not aware that the North Vietnamese had a navy equipped with submarines, let alone submarines that were capable of submerging in a river. They would have been very small, the gooks being a small people, perhaps one-man affairs, with a reed for breathing but not a periscope. In that case it would have made sense to fire a grenade at it. In fact, there may have been a flotilla out there, and your man's shot scared them off."

I said, "Fuck you. And don't say 'gooks' around me."

Bill said, "We all said it often enough when we were over there."

"Fine," I said. "So, we haven't learned anything in 45 years?"

Lonnie said, "We're getting pretty deep here. I suggest that we come up for air."

As the bottle of bourbon made its rounds, we got more "refreshed" as time passed, sinking further into our chairs. I picked up the deck of cards and dealt another hand.

I said, "You know there is a category of things that I never thought I would see."

Jim said, "If you live long enough a lot of things turn out like that."

"I thought I would never see the day when Compton's own Snoop Dog would become a game-show host."

Lonnie said, "Who the fuck is Snoop Dog? I thought the comic strip was over."

I said, "You're thinking of Snoopy the dog in the *Peanuts* comic strip. I'm talking about Snoop Dog, the gangsta' rapper. It just seems odd to see this anti-establishment character now flowing in the mainstream."

I said, "The presentation is meant to hint at evil in that Snoop is dressed in a red jacket with black lapels that recalls the devil in some of his more sophisticated disguises. And, of course, there is some dirty language."

Jim said, "The possibility to commodify something, anything, even a rapper's odious persona, will always win out if it is believed there is money to be made."

I said, "The most respected people, it turns out, are not always the safest."

Bill said, "Why are men, especially black men, called, call themselves, *dogs*?"

"Yeah," I said, "We used to be *cats*." I looked at Lonnie and said, "Which would you rather be?"

"Well, cats are kind of sneaky."

Jim said, "Historically, cats have been associated with women for precisely that reason. Women are weak, so they have to pursue their interests, not in the straight forward way of men, but slyly and from the side."

I said, "So, you're saying that when we were cats we were actually repping ourselves as weak like women?"

Bill said, "There are a lot of dead musicians who would not agree."

"Hell, *I* don't agree!" I said.

Jim said, "Dogs are much more aggressive, much more *in your face*."

I said, "Depends on the breed of dog."

Lonnie said, "For the sake of peace among *the brothers*, let's stick with a generic category of dog who is big and bold, like a German Shepherd."

We played another hand, and Bill started to chuckle.

Lonnie said, "Why are you laughing? Didn't get the cards you were expecting?"

Bill replied, "You ought to take a couple of Quaaludes and calm down."

"What are Quaaludes?"

I said, "Ask Bill Cosby. And don't tell me you don't know who he is."

"I don't do drugs," Lonnie said.

Bill said, "Don't take it literally. I'm just saying to calm down, no one is cheating here."

"I have a question about your people. Perhaps you can answer," Jim said, looking at me. "What do you think it costs young black men to get their hair styled to look as though they forgot to comb it when they got out of bed in the morning?"

Bill said, "Did you ever stop and think it might not be a style?"

Jim said, "No. There are too many young dudes who look like that, including professional basketball players."

Since I had long been sporting the bald look, I began to wonder if the conversation wasn't meant to make fun of me. "Why do you pay so much attention to men's hair?" I said.

Jim said, "I am just trying to keep track of the changing styles and what they may mean."

I said, "Why don't you pay attention to women's hair, instead of men?"

Bill said, "Yeah. That's what men do. They don't look at other men. Black women have hair that is worth looking at."

I said, "That's right. Some of their styles are so elaborate they seem more like architectural designs and construction."

Jim said, "I'm just different, I guess. You two are overly macho. And I never said that I did not look at women too."

Lonnie said, "Don't forget about me: I'm macho."

We all had a good laugh over that. I was relieved to see the free-floating paranoia in the room land on Lonnie. I wasn't worried any more about having my baldness be made fun of.

Jim said, "Well, I for one have enjoyed this exploration of black manhood."

I said, "Good. Now what about white manhood?"

Lonnie said, "White men are macho and smarter than anybody else."

Bill's eyes got wide, and he said, "You might have trouble backing that up."

Lonnie replied, "I don't think so. Ask any white person and if they are truthful, they will agree. If it weren't true, why is the world set up like it is?"

I said, "You all do have the money and the power."

Jim said, "Let's tread carefully here: we are friends and want to remain that way, right?"

Lonnie said, "I might have to reconsider unless we forget about healthy snacks. I am not looking to find out what kale chips taste like. I'm not that macho."

Jim said, "Watch out, he'll have us doing shots of Jägermeister next."

I said, "Okay. I will get healthy, while the rest of you stay with the general trend of getting fat. If you have to fly anywhere just know that airline seats are getting

narrower. Last time I flew into CVG there was a fat woman that even the Sky Marshalls, two of them, could not pull out of her seat. They had to uninstall the whole seat and take it and her off the plane. The beautiful part is that she was threatening to sue them over her discomfort.

I don't know if it is true but I heard that this woman, an Italian-American, was pretty hefty. They took her to a hospital where they tested her blood type as they routinely do. It came back marked **ragu!**"

Bill said, "I wonder what happened to the passenger who was scheduled to sit in her seat on the next flight and it aint there?"

Lonnie said, "Oscar, I think it is time to put on the coffee, so we can drive out of here."

I said, "Okay. Should I bring the kumquat dessert?"

Jim said, "No. I think we can forget about that."

A little later my friends were "un-refreshed" enough to be trusted to drive home over the late-night streets. I cleaned up the place and threw out the healthy snacks. I poured myself a night cap and flopped into my Lazy-boy in front of the TV to catch the 11 pm news. The routine description of car accidents, elderly

abuse, and cruelty to animals stories I found strangely comforting, and I soon drifted off to sleep.