

INTRODUCTION

It started with a dance.

Curtains part. Out unfolds a strong tan leg. A shapely calf begins to kick to the beat of the music. A woman emerges, a tall blonde goddess whose slender arms lift over a golden halo of curls. Tapered fingers pinch together, wrists softly begin to circle. Her slim hips undulate. She is small-waisted, not overly bosomy. From the sounds of the music and the look of her costume there is more than the hint of the Orient. She neither acknowledges the audience nor seeks their approval. She moves in a fantasy world of her own making, ebbing and flowing with the soar of violins. Her skin is flushed by a cool violet light that spills across her perfect skin, a lustrous pearl.

The corners of the sheer panel of her skirt are raised between her hands. She twirls. The music accelerates. She turns faster. She is utter perfection to look upon. She is the Unobtainable One. Her bra of gold rope shimmies back and forth, shoulders seesaw up and down as the music crashes. Enticing. One leg thrusts to the side, then the other. She rises on her toes. Her chest heaves. The flat of her stomach swells.

Her body is on display, her thoughts hidden under yards of cherry red chiffon. She covers herself—her *real* self—with the illusions of the stage. She barely glances at the audience. She is so expert a performer that each man believes she dances solely for him.

The music rises. Her chest lifts, bangles shake, a slight sheen appears at her hairline, the only evidence she is working hard. The dance is not as effortless as it appears, as she makes it. Her act is art, finely crafted, labored over for hours. Her moves flow seamlessly. A stretch of the leg, a twist of the rib cage, the reach of an arm. Her neck is slim and long and delicate and often compared to a swan's or a queen's. She arches backward. The movement says *take me, take me*. Her mind moves with her body; she doesn't censor herself. Her whole body snaps forward, then back again in movements that echo the beast inside.

Sex. It is the writhing movement of copulation at its most powerful. Rising. Her body lifts. She is about to reel in the audience as the music dips quietly. A tease of a pause.

It started with a beautiful girl, long of leg, graceful and lithe with green cat eyes, a dimpled chin, soaring dark brows. She is six feet tall in her gold-sandaled heels. Firm, muscled legs, elegant fingers and feet. A cool gaze to melt the hearts of many.

It started with a dance.

Heat pours from her skin. Platinum curls swing. She arches, uninhibited, overtaken by the music of desire. She dives to the stage, floor leg outstretched while the other points above her head. She is triumphant. Longing and sex—pure sex—rises from her skin like perfume.

She reaches up, her arms moving through the air, hands grabbing, hips swinging. She is off the floor and revolving upstage, stretching toward the break in the curtains. A pause. A look. A finger to the red of her glossy, swollen red lips. Hesitation. Then, as if she had been a mirage, she vanishes.

It started with a dance.

It started with desire.

It started with a beautiful girl.

It started with the dance.

LILI ST. CYR WAS BORN WITH THE CONVENTIONAL AND SOMEWHAT uninspired name of Marie Frances Van Schaack. Eighty-one years later her death certificate would identify her as Willis Marie Van Schaack. No matter. The world knew her as Lili St. Cyr; the Blonde Venus, the Form Divine, La Belle Lili, the Anatomic Bomb, Goddess of Love Incarnate. Of course no one really knew Lili St. Cyr. Obsessively private, shy to the point of rudeness, she would seek confidence in romance, pills, and, later, memory-dulling drugs. A thoroughbred filly, high strung, unpredictable, and hypersensitive. Ulcers and stage fright would plague her. The discomfort of her physical ailments was nothing compared to overwhelming insecurity and foreboding, a dread of aging. Death would take her in obscurity, once she had become the thing she had most feared, irrelevant.

The face Lili St. Cyr presented to the world was that of a confident, aloof stripper. She was recognized for her tempestuous and numerous marriages, for rumor and innuendo, for headline-grabbing suicide attempts, for arrests, for wealth and a lifestyle of extravagance.

The private side of Lili was artist, dancer, and craftsman. She had been a savvy

director of her career and life. “She was entirely self-controlled, aware every moment of exactly what she was doing.”¹

She explained there was purposely “a certain stand-offishness between myself and the audience. The further away and in awe I can keep them, the better.”² She withheld, mysterious like her idol Garbo. Called both icy and untouchable, Lili masked herself as such, knowing what she was doing. “The more mysterious the act the more intrigued the audience becomes.”³

Like Liberace whose image was synonymous with candelabras (Lili used them too) or Elvis with his blue suede shoes, Lili’s signature piece was her bathtub. Or tubs, as she would use many; elaborate, transparent, antique, gilded, Styrofoam, even wood. The audience would thrill as pink and lavender bubbles floated over their heads while Lili bathed for them.

The world in which Lili pirouetted, the world of burlesque, was considered a second-rate entertainment bordering on sleaze. Burlesque was as misunderstood as the lady herself. Critics were outraged by the multitude of scantily clad women disrobing onstage. Lili shocked even further. She created a boudoir onstage and entered the scene nearly nude. She bathed, dressed, and caressed herself in front of curious eyes as if in the privacy of her own room. The act was erotically intimate, a personal ritual not performed so publicly before.

She danced in diamonds and pearls, designer gowns and mink coats. She had a uniformed maid onstage. She was like no other.

Lili St. Cyr burst into stardom in 1944. She had been working her way through the ranks of chorus girls since 1939, when she was hired at a Los Angeles nightclub. Lili’s beauty, regal bearing, and five-foot-nine physique were said to have dazzled the owner who offered Lili a job on the spot.

Lili revolutionized stripping and redefined what a stripper could be. Lili’s audience held their breaths, mesmerized by her queenly carriage. She was classy. She would surpass Gypsy Rose Lee in terms of fame, though hers would not be as lasting. Lili didn’t write books, host a televised talk show, or have her life made into a musical that has become a theatrical perennial for fifty years. But Lili had a better body and a sexier act than the “Gyp,” as she was known to her friends. Lili didn’t just strip. She acted in silent “pantomimes,” creating stories that sought a clever way to incorporate losing her clothes.

Her stories were personal. Whether a damsel in distress over the loss of a love (“Suicide”), or a sensuous game between matador and bull (“Carmen”), the audience got to peek into what they thought was the intimate world of Lili St. Cyr.

At the height of her notoriety Lili never showed too much, though it seemed as if she showed it all. Lili didn’t bump and grind and fling herself around the stage like the big-bosomed Tempest Storm or the feisty Blaze Starr—both Lili’s

contemporaries, though they came on the scene a decade behind her. Lili wasn't a Margie Hart or a Rose la Rose, who were known to pull a G-string aside and "flash" pubic hair. Lili thought Rose la Rose "vulgar" and Hart got burlesque banned in New York the year Lili was starting out.⁴ Lili would bring her act into swank Hollywood nightclubs. She was the first exotic dancer brought to a Las Vegas resort. She played there well into her fifties.

Lili did much to legitimize burlesque and turn stripping and herself into a first-class entertainment. But Lili was never a snob and she never forsook her roots, returning repeatedly to dingy theatres and tiny clubs where leering men were at her feet—literally and figuratively—aroused over her glowing flesh.

Stripper, ecdysiast, exotic dancer, peeler, whatever one called her, Lili St. Cyr topped the marquee, gliding across stages in Balenciaga and Dior. She danced to the music of Gershwin and Rimsky-Korsakov. Her props were genuine antiques, costing thousands of dollars. She made a fortune in the thirty years she teased and tantalized.

Much of her story is shrouded in myth and lies, half-truths that she never bothered to correct, many of the deceptions her own.

Journalist James Bacon, who saw Lili perform many times, wrote, "Her sexy beauty surpassed anything Hollywood had to offer."⁵ Hollywood had little to offer Lili, who much preferred the details she lavished on her act in the theatre. And it was profitable. She once figured she worked a total of seventeen minutes for a couple thousand dollars. She didn't like getting up early and she loved staying up late. Nightclubs and the theatre were her world, not the chill of early-morning sound stages.

She scorned the movie-making process because she had no control over the end result. On *her* stage she was in charge of how the audience reacted. And by meticulous attention to detail and nonstop work she felt "necessary."⁶

She infused her performances with a level of artistry not often seen in burlesque, though oftentimes denying what she did had anything to do with art. *No*, she wasn't an artist, when asked. *No*, she wasn't proud of what she did. Never let them see the real Lili St. Cyr.

Graceful, breathtakingly beautiful, flamboyant, selfish, narcissistic, extravagant, haughty, there were many sides to Lili.

Lili professed to live for love. She had to be "obsessed with a man." Men were her drug of choice. "I like to spoil men. That's my hobby. I always make a fuss over whoever's around me."⁷

Her string of famous lovers included Orson Welles, Yul Brynner, Vic Damone, Artie Shaw, Jack Dempsey, José Ferrer, just to name a few. Limousines were sent for her, champagne corks popped, jewels draped around her neck. There were many professions of love whispered in her ear. She fell in love often and hard.

She could be predatory and went after a man if she wanted him, not caring if he was married. She searched for someone to fill the emptiness inside. Seldom would she stay with one relationship for long. She wasn't often faithful. She would claim she hated being married because it made her "responsible" for the other person. The longer she stayed with someone, the more trapped she felt.⁸ Freedom and the quest for it ruled her like the moon ruled the tides, like the planet Mercury ruled her sign of Gemini.

The twin. The Gemini personality is characterized by duality, described as quick-witted, clever, fickle, restless, easily bored, sometimes lacking in loyalty. Lili spent a lifetime flitting and fleeing, constantly on the move, the life of a gypsy. She detested any sort of restrictions. Like others of her sign, she didn't like to verbalize deep emotion. She was not introspective. Either supremely selfish or fiercely independent, she did what she wanted to do and damn the consequences.

She believed in making money, and if men wanted to spend time with her, it came with a price. She charged for "dates," which by no means included sex. She married for love. None of her husbands were rich. She would support most of them. Money was to be spent, not saved for a rainy day. As she was always working, she assumed there would always be money. Her lack of savings would bring terror and worry to her later years. But she remained a generous tipper, even when she had nothing. She would reach in the pocket of her robe to pay for her dinner and hand a twenty to the kid who had just jimmed open her apartment door with a credit card.

There were two Lilis: the private and the public. The public one, expertly coiffed and wearing pearls, long tanned limbs gracefully stepping in and out of a glass tub, who was defended by Hollywood's most notorious attorney during a trial that would make her infamous. The public Lili would be rushed to the hospital numerous times to have her stomach pumped; men brawled over her; and there were the divorces, six in all.

But there was the private Lili, who lived quietly, loving nothing better than to sit in her elaborately decorated home in complete silence, reading and sewing and cooking in perfect tranquility.

In the end, the misconceptions were long. Lili was a slut who would sleep with anyone, a cold-hearted bitch who used men. She was a feral Amazonian hunter. She was Wolf Gal (quite literally, Al Capp created the character after meeting Lili). She was devastated by drugs and poverty. She was fat. She was skin and bones. Her apartment was a Hollywood time capsule where she was living like Norma Desmond. She lived in filth in a dangerous neighborhood. She was *Sunset Blvd.* and *Grey Gardens* combined.

After her first transatlantic crossing, still in her teens, she vowed to travel first class through life. She did. Enjoying life on a lavish scale. She saw and accomplished

things few women of her era did. A poor girl from Minneapolis raised with a secret by relatives who weren't who they said they were. Her family carried a multitude of lies. She learned from those closest to her.

Her life was filled with joy and laughter and much adventure. Heartache too. A deep despondency that sometimes overwhelmed her ran in her blood. It would often bring her to her knees. But time and again Lili would rise out of the ashes of despair and emerge once again to hear the roar of adoration and acclaim.

She had few, if any, long-standing friendships and claimed to despise women. In the end she shunned contact with what remained of her splintered family.

For a woman who made a career of her astounding Nordic beauty, the loss of it affected her most. When her spectacular looks vanished she felt she had nothing to offer. She was used to a great commotion being made over her every whim. People "bowed down to her." When it was gone she decided to go "Garboesque" and retire from public—and private—view. She would close the door for nearly twenty years.

The woman who collected handsome men, antiques, minks, and jewels would in the end have nothing but stacks of photos that she sold for a few dollars to keep a roof over her head.

This then is the story of an extraordinary, private, complex, witty, misunderstood woman. Sex symbol, icon, enigma. This is the story of Lili St. Cyr.