

POMP
AND
CIRCUMSTANCE

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ONE

The first time Lily Putnam had seen the campus of Lakewood College with its old red brick buildings and captivating brick sidewalks was when she had come for her interview. It was like something out of another time, like a staged setting for a movie about college life, with its stately oak and elm trees and well-tended sward. It was exactly the place that Lily had dreamed of spending her academic life, quiet and contemplative, teeming with the beauty of years of intellectual pursuits, a symbol of the best that life had to offer.

Her roommate Sylvia Birch had expressed surprise that Lily had even applied to Lakewood. "It's Podunk U," she'd said, "stuck off down there in the sandy Florida panhandle, miles from anywhere."

"It's forty miles from Tallahassee," Lily had said.

"Well, whoop de do! That ain't Atlanta," Sylvia had said.

Lily had completed her course work for a PhD in American Literature at Emory University and had begun her dissertation on Toni Morrison. She was weary of the routine of classes and bored with her fellow graduate students and anxious to begin her teaching career. There was an opening in the English department at Lakewood, and Lily had applied.

"I've never heard of it," her major professor, Ralph Davidson Swanzy, said. He had edited a widely used anthology of American short stories. "But I'll certainly write you a glowing recommendation. Maybe, when you get down there, you can get them to adopt my textbook."

"I surely will," Lily said.

Her roommate Sylvia was skeptical. "I don't see why you're so anxious to run off and start teaching," she said, "you can get a teaching fellowship here while you write. And it's Hotlanta!"

"I'm tired of Atlanta," Lily said. "I'm tired of all the slobbering graduate students and young faculty members trying to get in my pants."

“I’ve told you before. It’s the way you dress.”

“It’s the way I *look*,” Lily said. “I don’t want to be a sex object.”

“Oh, I should be so lucky,” Sylvia said.

“Besides, I dress the way I want to dress, the way that pleases me,” Lily said. “Why should I have to pay because men can’t handle it?” Lily was fond of miniskirts, the more micro the better, and tight blouses. She was proud of her figure, which she had been told since she was thirteen years old was perfect.

Lily came from a little hick town called Gilbertown, in the red clay hills of south Alabama. She had spent her high school years fending off eager boys and yearning to get away for good. She had done her undergraduate work at Birmingham-Southern College and had gone on to graduate study at Emory. Now she was ready to begin her life in earnest.

Lily had spent the night in the guest house on campus, and she was now walking over to Comer Hall for her interview with Rufus Doublet, the chairman of the English department. She had met Dr. Doublet the day before, when he had picked her up at the airport in Tallahassee after her short flight from Atlanta. He had rambled on and on during the drive out to Lakewood, and Lily remembered very little of what he had said. She was so excited and nervous. Rufus Doublet—he pronounced his name Doob-lay—was handsome, in an aging frat boy kind of way, probably in his late forties, and spoke in a soft, almost affected Southern accent. He wore a gray tweed sport jacket with a meticulously knotted knit tie and a button down, oxford cloth shirt. Lily recognized it as the uniform of the male college professor. He dressed exactly as her professors at Emory had dressed.

He told her all about the school, but she retained very little. If she got the job, she would have time for all that. She walked across the enchanting campus, pausing at the corner of the quad. Doublet had driven her around, giving her a quick tour of the campus before dropping her off at the guest house, a curiously antiquated brick cottage square in the middle of the campus, across from the library. She was careful on the brick sidewalk, because of her high heels; Dr. Doublet had warned her about that. “Don’t turn one of those beautiful ankles,” he had said, with a syrupy smile. She stood looking out across the quad; it could not have been more perfect. Across the way was Peterson Hall, a small, two story building with a charming cupola. Dr. Doublet had told her it housed the president’s office and his staff. “It used to be the music building,” he

had said, “until we built the new music building. When I first came here, as a young instructor, back during the Punic Wars, ha ha ha, I would walk on the quad at night and hear piano students practicing. Their delightful music would roll, from the open windows, gracefully across the quad. It was lovely and beguiling.” Lily was impressed.

She sat in Dr. Doublet’s office, nervously twisting a tissue in her fingers, as he rattled on about the details of the job. She would teach twelve hours each semester, three freshmen sections and a sophomore world lit survey.

“I had hoped to teach more literature,” Lily said.

“Well, upper division courses are taught exclusively by senior professors,” he said. “Eleanor Bufkin, our American lit scholar, has been here since ... since ...”

“The Punic Wars?” Lily asked.

“Oh?” He chortled. Then he whispered, “Don’t let *her* hear you say that!” He smiled his winsome antebellum smile.

“Yes sir,” she said.

“Of course the world lit survey gives you a chance to spread your wings. There is some substantive literature there. The best of the west, as they say.” He chuckled.

Was he as jittery as she was? She realized, of course, that it was her countenance, her looks. Her *image*. She had chosen a skirt that was not quite so micro, but she had still noticed him focusing on her legs. When he looked her in the face his eyes lingered for just a fraction of a second on her breasts. Had she expected that department chairmen would not, after all, be male?

“Yes, that’ll be nice. I’ll enjoy that,” she said.

“The starting salary for an instructor,” he continued, “will be \$12,000 a year. It will be a one-year appointment, renewable each year, until such time as you’re placed in the tenure track and become eligible for promotion. That is, should you be offered the job. And should you take it.” The smile again. “I certainly hope you will give it serious consideration, Miss Putnam. You are the type of young person I want to work for me. Your recommendations are excellent, and you are a winsome young woman.” Winsome? “I must tell you—and I will deny it if you ever repeat it—ha ha ha, that your interviews with Dean Wallace and President Steagall will be mostly mere formalities. They are very busy men.”

“Yes, sir,” Lily said.

It turned out that Dean Wallace was in a meeting and Dr.

Steagall was out of town, so those interviews were canceled. Lily was horrified. She almost cried.

“Don’t worry about it, Miss Putnam,” Dr. Doublet said as he drove her back to the airport. “These things happen. I can assure you, though, that my recommendation carries the day, and I want to offer you the job. Does that make you feel better?”

“Do you mean you’re offering me the job?” Lily asked tremulously.

“No. Actually, *I* can’t offer you the job. That’ll have to come from higher up. But I can tell you, confidentially, of course, that you are one of only two applicants for the job. So ...”

“You mean only two people applied?”

“Well, no. And this is off the record, you understand. We got a bunch of letters and resumes, which were so awful we threw them in the waste can.”

“You didn’t reply to them?” Lily asked, shocked.

“You wouldn’t believe how crude and illiterate most of them were, Miss Putnam. They didn’t get beyond the first glance. But yours stood out. Yours jumped up and grabbed me by the throat.”

“You’re shitting me—I mean,” Lily caught herself, “I mean you’re kidding me.”

“No,” he said, “I’m not ... kidding you, Miss Putnam.”

He dropped her off at the airport and two weeks later the letter came offering her the job of Instructor in the English Department of Lakewood College. The letter came from the president on college letterhead, on lavender paper, with the college seal: a lamp of learning with the college motto. *Sapientia*.

TWO

Willow Behn watched the younger woman walk down the hall to her office. The walls of the hallway, painted a pale institutional green, were over-lighted by the harsh fluorescent bulbs overhead, giving the space an eerie, noxious brightness. The younger woman, Lily Putnam, wore a black mini skirt and boots—a micro mini, Willow thought, the very definition of one—her blonde hair cropped close in a style of which Willow did not wholly disapprove. It was radical, almost masculine, but Lily Putnam was anything but masculine; she was curvaceous and kittenish—her hips undulated sensually beneath the tight black cloth as she walked away—one year out of graduate school, an ABD from Emory, with a half-finished dissertation on Toni Morrison that Willow predicted to herself would never be finished, varied excuses piling up spring after spring as Lily Putnam vainly came up for promotion and tenure, assuming Lily made it past her initial one year appointment. Willow had been the lone dissenting vote in the younger woman’s hiring. A vote she had found difficult to defend. She had realized she couldn’t come right out and say she mistrusted the girl because she was pretty and attractive, but nonetheless, that’s how she felt. She didn’t trust her. The girl was lying when she insisted she’d finish her degree by the end of the academic year. Willow could tell.

Willow had been at Lakewood College for twenty-two years, since just before it went coed. Up until the mid-fifties it had been Florida College for Women; with the advent of men students it became Lakewood College, The State College of the Liberal Arts. (It was located in the small panhandle town of Lakewood, the highest point in the notoriously flat state. The hill was little more than a bump. The school, begun as Florida Industrial Institute for Women, had been founded in 1881, teaching such courses as sewing, butter making, cooking, and inscribing, a quaintly odd way of describing the handwriting arts.) As a girls’ school the enrollment had shrunk to nearly 500 students, so the legislature had made it coed, with the first male students living in a hideous new

dorm directly across the quad from Main Hall, the huge women's dorm that was actually three buildings tied together, three buildings that had been built in different decades and different styles, so that Corinthian columns stood side by side with Doric and Italian. The facade of Main Hall was covered in wisteria and smilax and formed a cool and somewhat private front stone porch complete with overlarge rocking chairs. The porch was called "The Loafing Porch."

The new men's dorm, Woodfin Hall, named for a turn-of-the-century professor of history who had been the first male instructor at the school, was a square brick box with narrow windows and a front door that opened directly onto the sidewalk, which was laid concrete and not the red brick streets elsewhere on campus. The college was famous for its brick streets and sidewalks, which gave the heavily shaded campus a distinctly nineteenth century look and led to turned ankles for unsuspecting female visitors and students and faculty who were foolish enough to wear high heels, which often broke clean off in the cracks.

Lily Putnam had stopped by Willow's office to ask her advice on the term paper that all freshmen students were required to write during the fall semester. Lily was teaching three sections of freshman English, each with about thirty students, far too many to be effective, but tell that to the administration. Willow, who last year had been promoted to full professor, taught only one section, Honors English, which did not use the standard syllabus required of all other sections of freshman English. (She did not require a term paper; she thought they were a waste of time. But that was *her* secret; it was nobody else's business.) In addition, in fall semester she was teaching a survey course in the English novel and a senior seminar in romantic poetry. There were only thirteen students in her Honors English class, twelve in the English novel, and six in the seminar. So she had a total number of students that was comparable to just one of Lily Putnam's freshman classes; the young instructor also taught a section of sophomore world lit survey with about forty students. But Willow was a full professor, Lily an instructor. Lily had to pay her dues.

Even though there had been a recent flurry of hiring, the number of faculty had not kept up with the burgeoning student body. Since the first men had arrived, the student population had grown to over two thousand students. So English classes were crowded, especially those in the first two years, which were required of all students; history, biology and basic math classes were the same.

“How am I supposed to grade over ninety term papers?” Lily had asked her, stopping by unannounced and uninvited.

Willow sat behind her desk. She had a third floor corner office, bright with afternoon sunlight. She could still smell the fresh damp pungency of the soil from when she’d watered her plants, which sat on her windowsills. “I don’t understand the problem,” she said.

“*Ninety* term papers,” the girl said. “I mean, can you do them justice?”

“Justice is hardly what you’re after,” Willow said.

“I mean ...” The girl did not go on. There was a silence.

Willow sighed. “Have them make notecards. Take those up and put a check mark on them and hand them back to use in their paper.”

“A check mark?” she said.

“Yes.”

“I mean, you *read over* them, right?”

“Of course not. You put a check mark on them.”

The girl looked at her. Her light sweater was tight over her breasts. They were perfectly formed. “But won’t they think the check mark means you’ve read them?”

“They might. But you don’t have *time* to read them, do you?”

“What about the papers?”

“What about them?”

“I mean, same thing? You don’t have to read those either?”

“It’s up to you, dear,” Willow said, wishing the girl would go back to her own office.

“What do *you* do?”

“I have my methods,” Willow said.

“You mean you don’t read them?”

“Of course I read them. I mark them and grade them.”

The girl eyed her suspiciously. “Okay,” she said. She just stared at Willow. Willow thought she might start smacking a big chunk of gum. That’s who she reminded Willow of, the girl who fixed her hair at Hair Solutions. A very pretty young girl who smacked gum in Willow’s ear and breathed on her. Willow stared back. “Well ...” the girl said. Willow did not have much facility for small talk, and even less patience for it.

Willow stood up, as a signal that the conversation was over. Instead of leaving, the girl came toward her. She walked around her desk and stood looking up at Willow. Her eyes were deep blue, crinkled with smile lines, her cheekbones sharp and pronounced.

She was a really stunning young woman. But, Willow suspected, bottom-line dumb as a signpost.

“Thank you, Dr. Behn,” she said. “I think of you as my mentor.”

“Yes, well ...”

“I’ve only taught one semester,” the girl went on breathlessly, “when I finally got a teaching fellowship at Emory. So I’m not, well, experienced.”

“We all have to begin some place, Miss Putnam,” Willow said. She tried to smile but her face seemed stiff and frozen.

“So I really appreciate you,” Lily said. “And please, call me Lily.” The younger woman smiled, her teeth a brilliant alabaster. She reached out and put her fingers on Willow’s wrist. Her touch was like an electric shock that ran up Willow’s arm. Willow pulled her hand away. They just stood there for a few seconds.

“Okay, then,” Lily Putnam said. She eased out the door. Willow watched her walk away, her eyes lingering on the younger woman’s hips.

The phone on her desk was ringing. It was the president’s secretary, Eloise Hoyle, calling for John Steagall to make a tennis date. It still annoyed Willow that John had his secretary call her, though he had been doing it since he was chairman of the music department, then dean of the college, and now president. Eloise Hoyle was in her fifties, tall—about the same height as Willow—and slim with black, dyed hair pulled together in a tight bun; she fancied that it was actually *she* who ran the college, and Willow thought there was probably a grain of truth to that. The students called her Olive Hoyle. John Steagall was a short man, small in stature, dwarfed by the overlarge desk in his office. He was not, and never had been, a suitable opponent for Willow on the tennis court. Willow was four inches taller than he was, wiry and strong, with long arms, and her forehand was sharp and forceful. Her serve sometimes still seemed to startle Steagall and he would flinch, losing any opportunity to return it.

The first time he’d had his secretary call, when he was chair of music (his secretary then was a heavy woman whose husband was manager of the local Piggly Wiggly), Willow was a fairly new assistant professor. She knew Steagall was married, but didn’t know his wife, except to see her once at the reception for new faculty at Flowerhill, the president’s residence. She seemed singularly mousy. Willow was under no delusion that she, herself, was a desirable woman, but still, she was single, in her forties, and out of