

Everyone in the Department of English complained about Lucille Streng, her pushiness, her blasting laugh, her dimwitted mimeographed notices. Yet somehow Lucille served on every committee, chaired every function, and could not be suppressed. Her pushiness had a life of its own. Those unfortunate enough to fall into the quicksand of her presence struggled at first, but soon sank.

"Let me say a few words about Lauren before introducing the others, starting with a little anecdote I thought very revealing." Lucille gave a pleased anticipatory yip, meaning, You'll love this.

"Lauren was a terrific worker. She took on a lot of responsibility. She was busy but very well organized. When I served with her once on the University Task Force for Pluralism and Diversity, I was amazed at how quickly she completed her paperwork. How do you do it, I asked.

"Of course, she didn't have any children, which makes it hard on some of us women professors. But the work she did was truly amazing."

Lucille walked round to the front of the lectern, bent her knee and leaned her buttock against the mahogany. "I'll share with you what she told me, and you may want to use it in your own lives."

Allen nudged Steve sharply with his elbow. "Rather kill myself," he whispered.

"Lauren told me, 'I avoid clutter in everything I do, and I set limits. Whenever I buy a new dress or a skirt, before I hang it in my closet, I give or throw away another dress or skirt. I have many books in my

library. Whenever I buy a new book I remove an unwanted volume from the shelves."

Lucille stopped and let the impact of her words sink in. "An unwanted volume from the shelves," she intoned. "Listen to her words, 'I set limits.' Think about them. Ask yourself . . ." Lucille paused and stared out at her audience. Steve shrank in his seat, hoping Lucille wouldn't call on him. "Would you have the courage to do the same?"

"We will now have five minutes of silent meditation, then a brief selection by the Ars Longa Trio, Schubert's Trio no. 3. Unfortunately, the chair of the English department wasn't feeling well today and was forced to go home early, but we will hear a few words about Lauren Goldberg's scholarly accomplishments from the associate chair, and then a few more words from several of Lauren's students. But first, your silence!"

Lucille marched away from the podium and sat down next to Quinton Bloch with her head bowed. The long silence began. Instantly Steve's mind began to wander. Since grade school he'd been lousy at meditating. He could hear George Reilly still muttering on one side of him, and Allen's stertorous breathing on the other side. The fellow really was asthmatic. Whom did Lauren give the skirt or dress to? Steve wondered. Did she have a regular recipient? Did she advertise? Did she manage to get her old goods out of the house on the same day the new ones arrived, or did they languish in cardboard boxes for a few days in the basement? Wasn't it about time for Allen to stand up and tiptoe away? Or did he think it wiser to wait to hear Quinton?

The meditation was definitely over because rustling broke out all over

the audience in little shuffles and ripples. Allen shifted his flanks but did not stand. The Ars Longa Trio, flute, violin, and cello, three Asian girls dressed in tasteful black jumpers, scurried around the podium, setting up their music stands and whispering to each other. Just then George Reilly, still muttering to himself, stood up abruptly, threw off his tweed jacket and began bumping past Steve's knees towards the aisle. In baggy unspeakable trousers, he stumped to the lectern looking very pale, his longish untidy hair falling in clumps over his perspiring forehead.

Lucille was angry. "Here," she said. "What's he doing? He's not on the agenda. Here," she said with a snort. "George, you're not on the program."

George paid no attention. He gripped the lectern and with a strong visionary gleam stared out at the audience, who stared back transfixed. George was a very attractive man, "black Irish," with pale skin, black hair, green eyes. Tonight his skin had a greenish cast. Big globules of sweat stood out on his forehead. "I'm here to pay tribute to my beloved, who was not appreciated while she was alive . . ." George passed his hand across his eyes, as if wiping away confusing thoughts. "It's hard to believe such perfection is gone. She was a rare human being, clever, kindhearted, a tiger in bed."

With scared faces the student musicians were backing away from George, holding on to their instruments and trying to disappear into the tapestry under the claws of the dove.

"Lauren was everything to me, all beauty and happiness. Her thighs were warm. The skin of her belly was downy and delectable."

Here Lucille put her head in her hands and rocked her stout body forward. Against their wills, a few mourners began turning their heads to their neighbors and smiling, or looking around to see if Lauren's husband was in the crowd. "I never thanked her for my pleasure. I criticized her. I kept her waiting for a message. I forced her to call me at odd hours, all useless sadism." George stopped and gazed downward in despair. With a quick thrust of his right hand, he grabbed at the front of his wilted blue shirt and keened. Nothing happened for a moment. Then George jerked harder with both hands and popped off three shirt buttons, exposing his lean, marble white chest bifurcated by a line of soft black down.

With a shriek the girl with the flute ran down the side aisle and out the door. The rest of the audience sat transfixed. "My God!" George wailed. "What's the use of being alive at all?"

While George was unbuckling his belt and unzipping his fly, Quinton Bloch, who had been a halfback in college, strode across the aisle and interposed his burly body between George and the audience. He was tall enough to reach the top of the lectern without ascending the step. "Hey, George, that's enough," he barked. "You've said enough. Get off the podium!" He fluttered his hands as if scattering chickens, and, to everyone's astonishment and disappointment, George meekly rezippered and rebuckled and placed his hand across his gaping shirtfront. He then moved off to the exit as if pledging allegiance to the flag. He looked backward with a sharp tilt of his head, as if he saw Lauren's angelic form in the bright top hat lighting in the ceiling.

"He's flipped," Steve said to Allen. "There goes his contract for next year."

"He has tenure. Nothing will happen. A semester off at full pay, some

graduate assistant's big bonanza."