

The Tenure Track Lottery

1. Type each tenured faculty name in 14-point Times New Roman font.
2. Cut the names into one-half inch strips, standard letter paper width.
3. Fold each strip five times in one inch sections.
4. Place in the urn.

My dear mentor Mac, author of the list, was nothing if not precise.

On this the eve of my third lottery here at St. Peter's, a small Catholic college perched on Maryland's Calvert Cliffs overlooking the Chesapeake Bay, I complete these steps and remember Mac, Dr. McKinnon, once chair of the English Department. Tonight as I celebrate my first lottery without Mac, I feel his presence in all that I do.

Mac was always straight with me, a rare quality in academia. Yet on that afternoon in late August eleven years ago when he offered me the job here at St. Peter's, he was intentionally vague about my *special* lottery duties. Pressing his trembling finger to a line on the academic calendar, he'd said, "Note the third Saturday in May, three years hence, Ned."

I scanned dates.

With doddering effort, Mac came to stand, leaned over the desk, and brought his gnarled, spotty hand to the paper again. "This event occurs every four years."

"Like graduation," I said naive as a newborn.

. "You'll have special duties that night, Ned, duties you will learn about in due time,"

Mac told me, each word as slow as a Georgia porch swing

If Mac had handed me a syllabus outlining my possible lottery duties, I STILL would have accepted the position here. I was desperate. By the time I interviewed at St. Pete's, I had been looking for a university job for over a year, ever since I finished my doctoral thesis in poetry of the Pacific Rim. I longed to stop delivering pizza and start being called *Doctor*.

And as the young always believe: I was certain St. Pete's was a stepping stone to a bigger brighter university. I wouldn't be here long, I told myself especially after Mac assured me that I could never get tenure at St. Peter's. "All your degrees are from state colleges, Ned, and not even name state colleges. Alas, our faculty must have degrees from the Ivies, Stanford, Duke or Hopkins."

And once I taught my first class, I began to understand why I could not be tenured. You see St. Pete's, like many small colleges today, struggles to stay afloat financially and must accept almost any student who can rustle up our substantial tuition. Not that our students aren't sweet kids and the few intelligent ones masquerade as supernovas in our very 'milky' way. Only our faculty's credentials and the fresh blood that comes from a steady turnover of tenured faculty members keeps us from being completely mediocre.

Tenure means a professor has a job for life, but at St. Pete's there's a catch to it. Of course if our tenured faculty retired when normal people do, there would be no need for a lottery. But alas none of us, including the great tenured ones, can afford retirement. If not for the lottery, our entire faculty would soldier on into their eighties or nineties, wearing Depends, shuffling to class on walkers, where they would wind themselves up, cut off their hearing aides, and lecture for whole class periods.

As I emerge from the brightly lit stairwell onto the shadowy Columbus Center's roof lit

only in fairy lights, a hush falls over the crowd gathered here, faculty and deans of the School of Arts and Sciences.

Never do I, a lowly term appointment, enjoy such deference from these dignitaries, so I slow my movements in order to savor the moment. At the same time, I listen to the slosh of the mighty Chesapeake abusing the rocks a thousand feet below. A portion of the Columbus Center's roof hangs over the cliff like a diving tower over a pool.

In the fading dusk, all eyes remain on me or rather on the thing I carry, the urn, as in "Ode on a Grecian..." Except ours is faux, made of Styrofoam, painted gray in order to appear stone-like.

"Couldn't we get a new one?" I asked Mac before the last lottery when I discovered a hunk of Styrofoam had fallen off.

But he just shook his shaggy gray mane. "The funny old thing was here before me and will be after."

And he was right about that.

The evening is cool for late spring and as the light seeps away, an almost full yellow moon hangs low like a watchful eye over the roof, large and flat as a dance floor. It was probably built as an observatory for the astronomy classes we offer, which combined with geology form the freshman science requirement students dubbed "rocks and stars," a slightly less objectionable nickname than their nickname for abnormal psych's "nuts and sluts."

"Stir those names very, very thoroughly, Ned," Riley, tenured in history, jests as he pats me on the back and moves off, his girth rolling side-to-side, into the crowd forming a semi-circle around me.

I have an evil thought: I would not want to have to scrape Riley off the side of the cliff,

something I had to do when Dr. Sam Adler was chosen at my first lottery. Instead of making a brave leap, Sam had to be forced off the roof by a faculty stampede.

At my interview, Mac had shown intense interest in my hobby, rock-climbing, and had questioned me on my rappelling skills. I understood why when I spent the evening after my first lottery, scaling the cliffs below to find Dr. Adler's body parts and send them into the Bay to be food for the fishes.

Although Riley is a friend, I give him a solemn nod. Some of the faculty, especially the men act light-hearted, but it's all bravado.

I take my lottery duties seriously and never joke about what we're about to do.

Amber in a snug white shimmering dress, so unlike the black tents most faculty women wear, comes to my side. "Neddie," she whispers in my ear and looks up at me big-eyed, teetering in high heels like a fawn, all eyes and legs.

"Don't stand too near the edge, Darling," I say, for I love her and am glad neither of our names is in the urn. Tonight I rejoice that I am not an Ivy Leaguer or a Dukie, for only the names of tenure-track faculty are in the urn. We lower echelon folks, adjuncts, term appointments, such as myself, and graduate teaching assistants like my Amber, are safe.

Stroking the hair of my knuckle, Amber whispers, "You think Snyder will be okay, right?"

I shrug and tell her, "There are no guarantees except for us."

I secretly despise her boss, Dr. Snyder Carrboro, who I believe is trying to sleep with her. She's often at his condo late at night helping him edit his latest opus, a pop historical account of the Battle of Little Bighorn. I wouldn't be surprised if it isn't mostly plagiarized, a practice in vogue with historians nowadays. Nevertheless, like his other books, this one will probably be made into a PBS special.

I've suggested to Amber that the way he treats her verges on sexual harassment, but she is not the type to make waves, nor is St. Pete's the kind of place where that sort of charge would go far.

Still I continue to seethe inside after walking into his office last week and finding Amber with her hand up Snyder's shirt. "His back itched," she explained later, "He asked me to scratch it. Funny, Ned thought, I too have an itch I'm about to scratch.

I check my watch. Five of eight. Almost show time. All the tenured have become silent and pale. Only the adjuncts are chatting now, exchanging reviews of the latest book or restaurant. "I've discovered a delightful little Cambodian place," says Reese, the most senior adjunct, a wealthy retiree, a wicked twinkle in his eye when he meets mine.

I'm not sure why Reese or any of the other adjuncts come to this proceeding. I attribute their presence to *schedenfreude*, the pleasure derived from seeing the great ones squirm as their herd gets thinned by one.

Snyder Carrboro, the star of Arts and Sciences, the biggest fish in our little pond, makes his grand entrance, his graying hair moussed to perfection, wearing a black close-fitting jacket and black t-shirt, trying to achieve Upper East Side but coming off as resoundingly bridge and tunnel.

He comes right up to me and pats my balding beige corduroy. "Ned, my man," he says, "Another lottery. How swift the passage of time."

I give him a curt nod then sigh with agreement. At St. Peter's, semesters flow into semesters, punctuated by graduations, summer sessions. University work is like quicksand, hard to find but once you're in it, hard to get out. After my first gruesome lottery, only Mac's assurances that seldom did a professor resist as Sam Adler had done, and the fact that I had gone

to the Modern Language convention resume in hand and gotten not a nibble, convinced me to stay.

Now Amber keeps me here. Our goal is for her to get a term appointment too, so that we can afford to get married. I fear she thinks she has to sleep with Snyder to make this happen, but there is another way.

At 8:00, I nod at Dr. Marrianna Von Hoff. Now that Mac is gone, Marrianna is the oldest faculty member of the School of Arts and Sciences, so she will officiate. She is a woman of regal bearing except for her height. At 4'10 she's technically a dwarf and looks it tonight because wisely she's chosen not to wear high heels.

As she moves toward me with the good book under her arm, I recall the last lottery when Mac drew his own name. By that time his shaggy mane was gone, and he was bald as a newborn. Of course Mac, ever the considerate gentleman, put his slip of paper into his jacket pocket, ran to edge, and leapt straight into the Chesapeake Bay, so there would be no need for me to rappel.

Afterward when I sat in his office shredding the names, step eleven on my laminated *Lottery Duties* list, I realized that Mac, having been seriously ill for a few years, had pulled a fast one on me. His name was still in the urn. He had made his own slip then dropped it out of his sleeve like a magician.

"Welcome all to St. Peter's University's 17th lottery," Marrianna says in a croaky voice that does not project.

I fear she sounds like this in the classroom as well. St. Pete's may sneer at us state college grads, but at least we had to take courses in public-speaking and teaching methods.

"We're all a bunch of old bores," Mac used to say, "sawing on about Chaucer or the Peloponnesian Wars."

Marrianna begins to read the scripture about a time to sow, a time to reap

I place the urn on a small table always used for this purpose and stride to the edge of the roof, where there's a gate in the wrought iron balustrade.

As I open the gate and secure it to the balustrade, a brisk wind rises from the Bay, ruffling my hair. I avert my eyes from the immense darkness below, but I can hear the water's slap against the base of the cliffs as if there were a monster down there hungry for the blood of a tenure track one.

I return to the urn.

Marrianna, who may be remembering that Mac drew his own name last year, has begun to shake as if she's chilled.

I never told anyone the truth about Mac. "The integrity of our lottery must always be maintained," Mac often said to me. I would dishonor his memory to do otherwise.

"It is time to draw the name," she says in a voice little more than a whisper, but I can tell that everyone on the roof hears her.

I lower the urn to her.

She reaches in and pulls out a name. Her hand is trembling uncontrollably.

She offers the slip to me, while her other hand goes to her throat as if she's been stricken with laryngitis and can't speak.

I sense Mac in the wide sky above me. I can almost hear him say: *When you take the C out FACULTY you get FAULTY.*

How displeased he would be with Marrianna for mucking up our sacred ceremony. Academia has a caste system as strict as that of India. I, a lowly term appointment, ought not to be the one to read the name of a tenure track faculty member.

Still I proceed.

I take my glasses from my inner pocket, carefully unfold the slip of paper, and proclaim, “Dr. Snyder Carrboro.” At the same time I will myself not to grin.

The crowd gasps for he is the department’s star.

Amber shrieks and throws her arms around his neck.

He peels her off and hands her his jacket. Turning, he begins to run toward the opening in the balustrade.

Amber follows him at a slower pace, wobbly in her heels.

My heart begins to thump. “Amber, don’t,” I call.

“Snyde, Snyde, what about Little Bighorn?” she yells. “May I finish your manuscript?”

My girl is ambitious.

Just before leaping into the darkness, he appears to assent.

She turns her ankle and grabs for the wrought iron railing.

“Careful, Amber.” I rush to her, afraid she might topple over into the Bay.

I put my arms around her and kiss her deeply. She pulls away and gives me a reproachful, “Neddie.”

I understand. Faculty romances are frowned upon. We here at St. Peter’s adhere to a strict moral code. After all, we’re a Catholic institution.

But I keep my arm around Amber, as we turn to face the group. It is a moment of pure happiness and triumph for me. My rival is gone. No longer can he call her from our bed to proofread his opus.

Everyone is murmuring about how brave Snyder has been.

“Dr. Carrboro was like his hero, General George Custer,” Amber tells the crowd. Many

nod in agreement.

“Hear, hear,” Charlie says.

In my hurry to get to Amber, I jostled the table. The urn was turned on its side, and some of its slips of paper fell out. Just then a gust of wind lifts the papers into the air above our heads.

People grab at them.

“I need all those back,” I yell. “Do not open them. I repeat: do not open them!”

As usual, the adjuncts, the department’s loose cannons, don’t listen. Reese and several others begin to unfold the papers as if they are fortunes inside cookies.

“Hey, this one says *Dr. Snyder Carrboro*,” Reese says.

“So does mine,” Riley says.

Others chime in.

Amber lets out a shriek, steps away from my side, and turns on me. “Ned, how could you?”

I begin to walk backwards toward the edge of the roof, my eyes on the faculty, who are coalescing into a fighting unit, coming together as they never do in faculty meetings when they argue endlessly about university by-laws governing tenure, raises, and their health insurance co-pay.

I’ve seen them like this only once before when they stampeded Sam Adler off the roof.

I’m at the edge now. In thirty seconds they’ll rush me. I squat and drop down, holding onto the bottom of the wrought iron railing.

There is a ledge below the roof, known only to those who have scaled this cliff. My right foot slips as I try to balance on it. I’m wearing old loafers, their soles so thin they have no grip whatsoever.

I kick them off. They make a sound far below as they hit the rocks. I release the railing, slink down beneath the roof, and crouch on the narrow ledge, glad for my slender boy body. My fingers find rocks I can hold. Darkness covers me like a blanket.

Faculty members gather directly above me at the railing.

I am so close I could reach up, take hold of someone's ankle, and yank her or him into the abyss. What fun it would be to do that, but I restrain myself.

"Anyone actually see Ned fall in?" Riley asks.

"I heard something hit the water," Reese says.

Marrianna clears her throat. "With Snyder's departure, you're head of history, Riley."

Riley thanks her and accepts congratulations from others.

I hear the whine of the gate being closed. They bid each other good night and walk away, grumbling about losing their star, Dr. Snyder Carrboro.

I lift my head slightly and see that two shadows remain. The two exchange whispers.

Riley clears his throat. "You've had a tough night, Amber, honey. Let me just unhook you here and give you a little massage."

I hear the rub of fabric and prepare to lift myself back up to the roof, where I'll flatten Riley that big lech.

"Don't," she says in a tearful tone. "I can't go on without Neddie." With that she flings herself over the railing like a shooting star, a flash of shimmering white, here then gone.

I must...join my love, so I leap and begin my descent to join the woman who gave her life for me.

Falling through the air, I hear Amber's voice above me from the roof, "Now that Ned's gone, you'll be hiring another term appointment, right?"

At that moment I meet my end, directly on top of the white shimmering dress Amber had tossed, a picnic blanket on Styx's last port of call.

I should have known. She always was an ambitious one.