

The Maine Event

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Tom Garvey shivered as he walked across the campus toward the administration building. The cold wind cut right through him. “Crap, it had never seemed this cold in Colorado. Must be the damp Maine air”, Tom thought. Not that he was in a hurry for his meeting with the college president Susan Crutchfield. The old president David Booth hired him. Booth had recruited him from his job as chair of the math department at Colorado. Booth had convinced him he was serious about improving academic quality at Hamilton College and wanted Tom as his new dean.

Once a high quality small liberal arts college, Hamilton had fallen on hard times, both academically and financially. Although Hamilton still thought of itself as the “Harvard of Maine”, others did not. Worse, at least from the perspective of the board, the college was in serious financial trouble. Fewer and fewer parents were willing to pay Hamilton’s Harvard-like tuition and donations from alumni were off sharply. Booth had told Tom that he had a plan to turn the college around financially and that he wanted Tom to help him restore Hamilton to its former glory academically. Tom took the job.

Booth’s financial recovery plan was simple, effective and insane. Cut football. The board fired him on the spot. The board hired the new president, Crutchfield, with a simple mandate; do whatever it takes to restore the College to financial health, without of course hurting the athletic program or angering potential donors.

Tom was ushered into Crutchfield’s office. Susan smiled and said, “Sit down Tom. Tom, I’ll be blunt. We have to cut costs. I need you to cut your budget by 10%. I don’t care how you do it. Eliminate departments if you have to.” Tom started to protest but Susan cut him off. “Look Tom, I know you think I have no academic values but if the College goes bankrupt nothing else matters.” Tom inwardly blanched; transparency was a mortal sin in a dean. “Look, Tom, Booth left me a College teetering on the edge. We have to increase revenue and slash budgets. And I can’t cut things that will piss off the alumni or hurt enrollment. So just make the cuts”. The meeting was clearly over and Tom turned to leave. “Oh, Tom, if you can’t make the cuts I will find someone who can.”

Tom walked back to his office in a daze. It wasn't that he didn't have some lousy departments; hell most of them weren't very good. The history department was terrible, but a liberal arts college had to have one. Still, he would have to cut a department or two. Tom knew he could resign, maybe should resign, but Crutchfield would just bring in someone else to make the cuts. Just freezing hiring wouldn't be enough and an across the board cut of untenured faculty would cripple his few good departments. So, whom to axe?

Tom sat in his office staring at the wall. God, the faculty would crucify him for unilaterally axing a department. Even though he was a new dean and not yet as cynical as he should be, Tom knew what he should do. Set-up a faculty committee and at least pretend to consider their input. But there wasn't time for faculty input.

There was a knock on his door; Tom's secretary stuck her head in. "Sorry to bother you Tom, but Herbert Meyer wants to see you. He says it's important." "Shit, not that pompous old fool." Meyer, the long time head of the Geography department was a poster child for the ills of the college. He was pleasant, affable and blessed with a third rate intellect. Tom smiled, "Herbert, good to see you again. What's up?"

"Tom, Jeff Hamm is leaving. You remember Jeff?" Tom cut him off. "Yes, I know who Jeff is." Hamm was a guy Tom wanted to retain. Unlike the other members of his department, Hamm was a modern geographer whose work involved crunching huge computer databases. Although young, Hamm's work on the effects of future volcanic eruptions of Cascadian volcanoes on the population of the Pacific Northwest was highly regarded. He published frequently, was a dynamic teacher and had a large grant.

"What can we do to keep him?" Tom asked. "Who is the offer from?" "The USGS has offered him a position at the Johnson Observatory. I asked what we could do to keep him and he said he wasn't looking for a counter-offer. Said it was his dream job. He's leaving at the end of the year." "I'll talk to him anyway," Tom said although he knew he had nothing to offer Jeff. "Thanks Tom, we don't want to lose Jeff," Herbert replied.

In truth Herbert was not sorry to see Jeff go. Jeff had the bad habit of making the rest of the department look bad, and he had a tendency to make waves. With Jeff gone the department could return to normal.

As he expected, Tom was unable to convince Jeff to stay. On the other hand with Jeff leaving Tom couldn't think of a reason to keep the Geography Department. The department was full of older, tenured full professors who rarely published. And when they did, no one cared. The remaining faculty were all regionalists. Regional geography had fallen out of fashion in the 50's so when one of the faculty published an infrequent article on say the oystermen of southern Maine, few cared and even fewer cited it. The department had few majors and its service classes had low enrollments. And a liberal arts college didn't have to have a Geography department. It wasn't like a Math or English department after all. Why the more Tom thought about it the better the idea seemed. The Geography faculty was old and thus had high salaries. That meant bigger savings. And Tom comforted himself; they were almost all eligible for retirement so losing their jobs won't really be such a hardship. Why even the department secretary must be close to retirement age. Yes, closing down the Geography Department was the thing to do. It wouldn't be pleasant but... .

Tom told his secretary to schedule a meeting with Meyer for next Friday. Friday morning Tom's stomach was in knots as it had been all week. Despite his rationalizations, he hated doing this. This was not what he wanted as his legacy. This was not what he had come to Hamilton for. Meyer was shown in. Tom decided to dispense with the small talk. "Herbert, come in. I am afraid I have some bad news. As you know the College is in serious financial trouble."

"Does this mean we are not going to be able to replace Jeff?" Herbert replied. "No, it's worse than that, much worse! Sit down. On Monday, I am going to recommend to President Crutchfield that that the Geography Department be closed." There was dead silence. Tom saw the color drain from Herbert's face. Shit, he had forgotten that Herbert had a heart condition. "Herbert, are you OK?" It took Herbert a long time to reply. "All right? Fuck no, I not all right! You can't close the department, why we are one of the oldest departments at Hamilton. Look, Tom I know enrollments have been a little low lately but we can turn that around." "I am sorry," Tom replied. "I don't like doing this

but I don't have a choice, Crutchfield is demanding I cut departments." This was not strictly true, but what the hell. "What's going to happen to the faculty?" Herbert asked. "I am afraid all of you will be let go. The contract allows the termination of tenured faculty in the event of department closings. Most of you are near retirement. I'll do the best I can to get the president and the board to approve a buyout package. But I can't promise anything in the current financial climate."

Back in his office Herbert was having trouble breathing. The Geography Department had been his life, especially since his wife died. He looked around his office; an oil painting of his grandfather Herbert Meyer the first graced his wall. His grandfather had been department chair for 20 years. His family history was bound up in this place. Why even his desk, made from the timbers of a Maine whaling ship, had been his grandfather's. He couldn't imagine not being at Hamilton. Not that he would suffer financially. He had made his money the old fashioned way. He'd inherited it.

Judy the department's long time secretary stuck her head in. "My god Herbert you look terrible. Are you all right? Did you forget your heart medicine?" Judy reached into her purse for Herbert's digitalis. Herbert forgot his medication so frequently that Judy had started carrying a bottle of it with her. "No, no" Herbert exclaimed, "I took some a few minutes ago. It's, it's well, Tom wants to close the department."

Judy turned pale. As an employee with 30 years of service she doubted she would lose her job, she would just bump someone. But she had always worked in the Geography Department. She couldn't imagine working elsewhere. "Herbert, tell me what happened." Herbert filled her in. "Has Tom told anyone else this?" Judy asked. "No" Herbert replied, "I don't think so. I don't think even the President knows." Judy paused, finally she said "I am sure there is something we can do, I am sure it will work out in the end. And don't forget you have to go to that fundraiser tonight." With that she turned and left.

Herbert sat at his desk in a funk. "Shit! Well he certainly wasn't going to go to a damn fundraiser. Both Tom and Crutchfield would be there." Then, wait; Herbert thought, so would several board members and wealthy donors. Perhaps a little quiet lobbying would be in order.

Herbert normally loved fundraisers. Schmoozing was his strength. But tonight he was not in the mood. The room was packed and he was unable to corner any of the board members. Surprisingly he saw Judy. "I wonder what she's doing here," he thought. Then he accidentally ran into Tom and they exchanged awkward glances. "Damn," Tom thought. "Why is he here?" Tom scurried away temporarily abandoning his scotch in his haste. Herbert stood there his hear racing. His fingers played with the bottle of heart medication in his pocket as he looked at Tom's drink.

Sunday morning Herbert opened the Sunday paper. The article below the fold jumped out at him. "Thomas Garvey, Dean at Hamilton College Found Dead." Hebert began to read. "Dean Garvey had been found dead in his home on Saturday. Time of death was estimated to be late Friday night or early Saturday morning." Sheriff Coleman was quoted as saying that the cause of death appeared to be a heart attack and that foul play was not suspected "at this time." Herbert frowned slightly at that, then smiled, poured himself another cup of coffee, and went back to the paper.