

The Tenure Trap

Neal R. Wagner

CreateSpace

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Chapter 1

[Times Roman, 11.6 pt, 1.06 stretch]

Stephen Dedekind looked out at a landscape straight from Hell, like one of those crazy Hieronymus Bosch paintings of a literal Hades, filled with smoke and fire, elaborate machines, and the most fantastic demons tormenting the damned. A tiny figure near the bottom was Stephen himself, half swallowed by a fish-like creature.

He had started the day in the dark when the first of two alarms woke him. He'd turned off the second and staggered into the kitchen for a quick meager breakfast while his cat Iphigenia frantically rubbed his leg. The apartment's cooling system groaned in the background—not a regular air conditioner, but only the cheap swamp cooler that locals used in the dry climate. He'd resolved to call the editor early today, find out once and for all. This tenure business was starting to consume his life, keeping him from work and pleasure both. He fed Iffie and headed out, locking his shabby one-story rental.

He drove the old green VW bug along dusty dark streets, with a glow in the east promising dawn soon, past scrawny trees and cactus plants. He turned onto Butte Avenue, a larger four-lane street that bordered the university itself. Then up a hill and into the faculty lot, almost empty

this early. As he left his car the east was getting bright. Already the sulfur dioxide in the air made him choke and cough. He trudged along next to the road past a billboard written in Spanish for the locals. Five years in this god-forsaken place and he still knew only a few Spanish words. It reminded him of how little he knew about the cactus plants he was passing, with only his private names for them, such as pincushion or fuzzyspikes, but what their real names were he hadn't learned.

Stephen walked on the loose gravel beside the road and reached the top of a small hill, with a larger one ahead. The sun was up now and would be visible from the next hill. Rows of light-brown stucco university buildings squatted on either side like giant loaves of bread. Then he finally reached the top of the larger hill with a view of the entire valley—the familiar vision for those like Stephen stuck in purgatory, hoping for salvation, but expecting a trick, a sneaky push from behind that would send him off from the university into the pit in the distance, or maybe into some lowly non-tenured job. The brassy sun shown horizontally through a haze of pollution, illuminating the school where he taught as an Assistant Professor (*tenure-track*)—the school that spread out before him: the State University, but he called it SDU, for *Stinking Desert University*. Many fancy buildings large and small, but the best ones reserved for the athletes. Further away was the giant copper mining pit—with lights that never went out and machines that never stopped. What kind of a school would allow an open pit mine right beside its campus, on land that it owned? Well, Stephen knew the answer.

Past the huge pit itself and beyond a few low hills, the land dipped down to the river and the copper smelter—with four giant smokestacks spewing pollution, mainly the sul-

fur dioxide that made the campus barely habitable. In the far distance across the valley, at the top of the highest hill opposite, was the statue of Mary, the Queen of Heaven. He called her Our Lady of the Stinking Dessert, or sometimes the Blessed Virgin of the Stinking Dessert. One of his friends said they should run a smelter pipe up through the statue and out her mouth, so she could belch out sulfur.

It was all there in front of him: his school, and what he hoped was the closest to Hell he would ever get in this life.

Chapter 2

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Chapter 3

[New Century Schoolbook, 11 pt, 1.3 stretch]

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Chapter 4

[Palatino, 11 pt, 1.15 stretch]

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