

OFFICE HOURS: A GHOST STORY

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Professor Edgar McHaley died on November 7, 2006, but like many emeriti faculty, he still dutifully came to his office every morning at 7:55. He often stayed late into the evening, poring over seminal works in folklore studies.

Professor Edgar's office had previously belonged to the department chair of romance languages and literatures, but once he hauled in his tomes and steel-reinforced bookshelves, no one dared move him out, even after his death. Instead, the outer office, formerly for department admins, had been converted to shared graduate TA offices, though most TAs refused to work there. They swore they could hear shoes shuffling back and forth at night, and the clink of glass on glass as someone refilled from a decanter. Janitorial staff refused to enter the office, except once to burn sage and set off the building's fire alarms.

Derek Leonhardt was the only one who had ever spoken to the late Professor Edgar or had seen him since his death. At the time, he was a first-year TA and hadn't yet been brought into the loop on why none of the other TAs used the office. But he was often out-of-the loop on many things in life. It was midafternoon on a Tuesday, and Derek was skimming through a fresh stack of freshman English essays. Professor Edgar's door opened, and he tottered out, his full orange beard disheveled, his Harris tweed sports coat threadbare and tight around his belly.

"I am expecting a student to come by with a paper," he said. "If I'm not in, please ask her to leave it on my desk."

The encounter, as trivial as it might sound, was shocking in real time. To begin, Derek hadn't been aware that this door in the TA office even led to another office. He assumed it was a closet, and an unused one at that, as directly in front of it sat a box of outdated composition readers and an old, wooden coat rack. When Professor Edgar opened the door, the coat rack tipped and clattered to the floor, and Derek spilled a hot cup of Starbucks all over his stack of essays. Professor Edgar was kind enough to close the door behind him, though the box of textbooks remained pushed away from the door with about a year's worth of newly disturbed dust showing the box's path. After calming himself with a few *what the fucks*, he knocked lightly at the door and tried the knob. The door was securely locked.

Derek brought up the encounter with his advisor, a stern film studies professor with owl-like tufts of hair on his balding head and veins in his neck

that bulged every time he said *Foucault* in class. His face was unreadable. He borrowed a set of keys from the department administrator, walked briskly with Derek back to the shared office, kicked the box out of the way, and opened Professor Edgar's door. His hand felt around for a moment until finding the light switch.

Professor Edgar's office lay buried in books and papers. Anywhere a book could sit, it sat. Not only had he supplemented the standard fare of office shelving with his own steel compact shelving, but he'd placed thick, roughly cut plywood planks between shelves and built bridges of books, which bowed precariously beneath the weight of dusty hardbacks. His desk was unusable, stacked as high as it was with paper and empty tobacco tins. A recliner sat in the corner next to an antique floor lamp with books piled on either side. Just beside it sat a small, metal serving cart with a glass tray, two tumblers, and a crusty ring about the size of a decanter.

"Professor Edgar didn't have anyone to manage his estate," Derek's advisor explained. "He had two children from a past marriage who didn't want to advise on his effects." He paused. "For a variety of reasons, no one ever took the effort to relocate his things... and so here we are. The Dean asks about the office from time to time, but she's not allowed us to replace retiring faculty anyway, so it's a moot point..."

"But I can assure you that no one has used this office for the last decade."

And that settled that, until a week later when Professor Edgar again upset the coat rack opening his door. Derek had had a long night and was nodding off at his desk when the coat rack clattered, and Professor Edgar emerged, once again leaving instructions in case anyone came by with a paper. And from that point on, Derek encountered him regularly. In the morning, Professor Edgar came through and disappeared into his office. Derek saw patches of light and shadows beneath the inner office door when he left in the evenings. He never saw Professor Edgar leave, but sure enough he would always return in the morning. Derek got to saying hello, which received only a kind nod and grunt from the old folklorist. In fact, Derek sensed an overwhelming irony that the dead professor was easier to find than most living faculty members, many of whom were already insisting on exclusively online office hours. But then, true to form in death as in life, Professor Edgar hated technology almost as much as he hated university service and faculty senate committees, and would fight to the death and beyond to avoid all three.

Derek never knew how to broach the subject with others as to whether they, also, could see Professor Edgar. How do you even ask someone if they see dead folklorists? He watched others' reactions when he saw Professor Edgar

in the hall, but students generally stared at their cell phones, ghost or no ghost, and faculty were clueless about most things in the land of the living and wouldn't recognize a good haunting if it came with a flourish of trumpets and a hearty *Tada!* Derek tried a few ideas out on other students in his gothic novel seminar —maybe professors never really leave when they retire, he opined. Perhaps they just folded themselves into the library stacks and faded away. No response, though a couple other students asked him afterward if they could bum a joint.

He did, however, believe that at some unconscious level the entire department *felt* Professor Edgar, even if they did not see or acknowledge him. After graduating and staying on as an English Instructor, Derek had more access to water cooler talk among faculty. He kept a list of frankly bullshit reasons why people said no one ever reclaimed Professor Edgar's office. Most, like his advisor, blamed the mysterious deadbeat heirs, though why the department never asked library staff to come in and haul away his books remained unanswered. And later, after a miserable year as an English instructor, Derek took a job in the university archives and offered numerous times to box up Professor Edgar's things. But folks hemmed and hawed and came up with sundry reasons why that would have to wait, though it was a remarkable idea, they all agreed. According to some, the room was infested with mold, or the floor had structural issues. The associate department chair swore that he had a memo from Facilities Management somewhere saying that they detected sagging in the floor and put that part of the building on their renovation list, though if this were true, Derek guessed, more concern would have been expressed about the department's specialist in Shakespeare's contemporaries who occupied the office directly below. Few people liked him, to be fair, but just because people stopped inviting him to department parties didn't mean they wished him to be buried in an avalanche of Stith Thompson Motif Indexes.

And of course there were the myriad unexplained phenomena that all seemed to indicate Professor Edgar's presence. Some were subtle, such as the conference room coffee maker that always brewed extra strong coffee—Professor Edgar's favorite—regardless of how few grounds were added. At first, they all blamed the Hispanic literatures specialist for the horrid coffee, but it soon became evident that it really didn't matter who made the coffee, or what brand of coffee they used, or even whether you swapped the old, crusted model out for a newer one. Even the Keurig coffee tasted awful. And then there was the fact that the building lost power every time someone brought up course assessment in department meetings. Even though it happened three times that Derek could remember, no one really discussed why. At some point,

the department curriculum committee chair simply suggested that they move assessment meetings to the library since it had better “resources.” And better coffee. Starbucks.

And then there were the weird issues with cell phones in the building. Most blamed it on the thick walls, though they really weren’t all that thick. You always saw frumpy professors slogging down the hall fussing with their cell phones and asking if you could hear them. And Google maps never worked. Ever. Try coordinating a luncheon at a Thai restaurant in uptown while inside Hamilton Hall, and you’d end up at a hot dog joint downtown. It was reliably bad.

Professor Edgar was a quirky but completely benign revenant. After leaving for the archives, Derek would still stroll through Hamilton Hall when he had the chance to see if he could spot Professor Edgar, or to see how long it took for new TAs to stop working in the shared TA offices.

Things took a sinister turn five years later with the arrival of Chancellor Snively. Chancellor Snively was a known firebrand, a mover and shaker as he was described in the public sessions during the interview process, a real “hands-on” administrator. To the Regents, Snively represented the sort of change that the University sorely needed, with flagging enrollments and deepening deficits. The university was collapsing under the weight of itself, one regent told the university community when announcing Chancellor Snively’s hire, and this was the sort of leader who could right the ship.

Snively’s first moving and shaking happened with middle management. He moved the whole bag of current deans and directors, turned it upside down, and shook the whole lot of them out onto the street with their careers stuffed into neatly packed brown boxes. New deans were brought in, all from prim East Coast state colleges, dressed in black suits and sharp glasses, armed with bullet-proof spreadsheets, enrollment and retention data, and vague academic credentials. They hit the campus in a cluster and scattered like billiard balls to every corner pocket of the university.

Next were matters of space. Ancient geology professors whose rock samples had sprawled into adjoining labs soon found themselves duly excavated, their specimens piled into a dumpster behind the building. Lunch rooms were appropriated and converted to classroom space, as were conference rooms, laboratory supply closets, and department libraries. The Department of Economics was folded into Management, their building repurposed as a dormitory. Or as a *residence hall*, as Snively insisted on calling them. A quarter acre of compact shelving was removed from the

library, the collections boxed and sent offsite where they could ostensibly be summoned by grad students, or traveling wizards, or the rare Google-resistant bibliophile.

The university was being folded inside out. Derek's office was moved twice in four months, until they finally just cleared out some vertical files in storage in the library basement and dragged his desk and all his post-it notes and white gloves down there. It would be more efficient for him to be near the collections, he was told. Derek was pretty sure they'd just box him up and put him in storage at some point.

But perhaps the strangest development since Chancellor Snively's arrival were the Visitors. Derek wasn't quite sure at first what to call them — he had never noticed them before. It started with the old man with a tattered newsboy cap and a monocle who sat on the bench outside the student union holding the end of a small pendulum in his hand, watching it tick back and forth endlessly. University towns attract a disproportionate number of strange ducks, and Derek thought nothing of it at first. Nor did he think twice about students avoiding the bench where the monocled man sat, as that is generally how Abercrombie and Fitch-wearing students treat such folks. But then came the man who paced back and forth in front of the classics library with his hands folded behind his back, pipe jabbed in the corner of his mouth, mumbling to himself in French and Latin, and occasionally Old Norse. And then the return of Dr. Loraine Wigglesworth, the brilliant but eccentric astrophysicist who would pause her cutting-edge research on dark matter to rehome stray cats that came into her yard... Every stray cat. This all started a week after Hamilton Hall closed mysteriously for "HVAC renovations," though many suspected as the chain link fence and sheeting appeared around the perimeters, that Snively might have had larger plans for the building.

Derek spent an afternoon researching whether there was a collective noun in the English language for a group of old Professors—a murder of crows, a kindness of ravens—before finally creating one himself. *Oddity*. Indeed. An *oddity* of old, dead faculty gathered in the quad, pacing, lecturing, grading papers, reading books, measuring invisible substances carefully into invisible glass beakers. As the oddity grew, a cold hush fell over campus, and black clouds gathered overhead. The quad emptied of students and the usual annoyance of hawkers selling posters, tie-dyed sheets and big wooly sweaters. The street preacher remained the longest, though after another week, even he found the weather too cold these days for the proper saving of souls and relocated outside the Hookah shop just off the edge of campus.

While waiting in coffee lines, Derek overheard students complaining about how dreary the weather had been, and how much construction had

overtaken the campus. Entire routes through campus were warded with a gauntlet of orange cones and fencing. Gaping holes appeared in the sidewalks. No one had the foggiest idea where and when shuttles came and went, including the shuttle drivers, who also congregated in coffee lines and spoke conspiratorially about the changes they've seen on campus. The entire campus panicked the day Main Street completely disappeared from Google Maps, though it later reappeared followed by a campus-wide announcement from University Communications assuring the campus community that the street was indeed still there, and that it was just an unfortunate software glitch, according to Google.

No one, however, was prepared for the events that transpired the day Chancellor Snively set his sight on the English Department, and he and his army of black-jacketed administrators laid siege to Hamilton Hall.

The English department was alerted via a University Communications memorandum in March of the intent to "remodel." This should have come as no surprise, as crew from Facilities, accompanied by a university architect, had scoured the building a month prior, taking measurements and chattering in hushed tones in the hall. The Department would be moved into a temporary "bubble structure" near the university pool in May after the semester's end. They would share the space, they were told, with the university daycare, and their bathrooms would double as changing areas for the swimming pool. Aside from the squeals of delighted children and a few misplaced pairs of men's Speedos, this arrangement was acceptable for the short term. Though as the University delayed remodeling for much of the summer, faculty started to suspect that something was rotten in the state of Denmark. Sure enough, the local newspaper announced the plans for a new University STEM Workforce Center and Maker Space at the end of Fall term, and it became clear that the English Department would continue to encounter mostly naked students and community members in their restrooms for the foreseeable future.

The day construction was set to begin, Snively and his hoard of dark-coated, spreadsheeted administrators showed up early and clustered around the entrance of Hamilton Hall. It was a windy and blustery day, and the tarps covering the old hall's bare bones flapped with vigor. University Communications showed up, all set to film a groundbreaking session with cranes and construction crew in the background.

Snively stood at the ready with his golden shovel, but there was not a crane or hard hat in sight. The contractors were set to arrive at 8 a.m. sharp. But 8 soon turned to 9, and then 9:30. At 10, Snively's secretary arrived and quietly whispered in his ear. He cocked his head in disbelief, and she repeated it.

Apparently, all of the construction equipment and machinery had arrived safe and snug at 8 sharp up at the large, rival university. They were wondering when Snively and his damned golden shovel would show so they could get to work tearing shit down.

Snively took out his phone and plotted a course via Google Maps between the contractor's headquarters and his beloved university, and sure enough, Google led them straight to the English Department building at the rival state university. The large rival university's English faculty had already started protesting the unexpected arrival of construction equipment and had called an emergency session of their Faculty Senate.

A temporary setback, sneered Snively, who had his admin create and email a flawless set of directions in PDF format to the proper site. The next day, he raised his golden shovel and ushered in an army of dump trucks and cranes and men in hard hats marching like Thoreau's ants throughout the worksite. Cameras flashed, and Snively's teeth gleamed, and his minion of dark coated administrators clucked like hens laying platinum eggs.

Construction commenced and thundered forward for a week until the onset of Kittengate.

It was a Tuesday morning. Chancellor Snively had been hobnobbing with Senators the night before and was expecting to sleep in and start late. His cell phone rang. Then the land line. Then his wife's phone. He ignored those, sat upright in bed, ruffled his graying hair. He heard the ding of alerts on his computer as he shuffled downstairs to make coffee, and his phone buzzed incessantly in the pocket of his silk pajamas.

"What the fuck?" He answered casually. Then spit out his coffee.

He turned on the local news, as it seems most of the local stations had already caught wind of the story and were stationed outside of Hamilton Hall.

Overnight, the construction site was overrun by cats. Not just a couple. An old-fashioned, biblical plague of tabbies, torties, Siamese, Maine coon, orange, gray, black, striped. They dangled off of exposed beams, pawed at power tools, chased each other, and caterwauled lasciviously. A beat reporter for the local NBC affiliate stood in the misting rain with cranes rising apocalyptically in the background, trying to be heard in her microphone over a mangy gray cat perched on the fence post behind her, bleating like a goat.

"Cats," she said. "Hundreds of cats have beset Hamilton Hall, home of the English Department. Construction has *paused* on the new STEM Workforce Center until a solution can be found for this *meow*-lange of kittens."

By the time Chancellor Snively arrived on campus, a cat pun graced the front page of every major news venue, and swarms of students with cell

phones clogged every artery leading to the English department. Selfies and cute cat footage abounded. YouTube exploded. Snively wormed his way through and into the construction fence, where the foreman barked orders to construction workers pausing to record the cute antics of the furry invaders. Snively's swarm of administrators were all on their phones, calling local shelters, zoos, local cat whisperers to find a solution to the *cat*-astrophe.

"What the *fuck*?" Said the foreman as Snively stumbled forward. "Where the *fuck* did all these cats come from?" He turned to his assistants, who were trying unsuccessfully to chase the cats into a large bin. "And someone tell me why this coffee always tastes like *fucking shit*!"

Derek watched from afar. The oddity of professors were sprinkled throughout the crowds of YouTubers, and he swore he saw Dr. Loraine Wigglesworth threading throughout the masses, cat in hand.

The real storm started at midday when, pestered by throngs of reporters about what he planned to do with the clowder of cats, he first asked, in a hot mic, what the fuck a *clowder* was, and then said he didn't care.

By 1 PM, the local chapter of PETA hit campus, along with a persistence of student protestors. The student newspaper reported that the administration sought to offload the kittens in buckets to shelters for mass execution. A University Communications email touting the virtues of no-kill shelters went largely unread, as with most University Communications. By and large, people think the worst of administrators, and most saw the makings of a kitten genocide. The campus Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) placed an emergency call to contacts in Memphis, TN, to see if this was something it should be chiming in on. The Governor started receiving emails from concerned parents about the inhumane treatment of cats. Kittengate was the last thing the Governor needed, and she phoned the Chair of the Regents and told him to put a lid on it. Right *meow*, she almost said.

It took several days to clear the cats and most of the YouTubers. At that point, the only remaining onlookers were the dead faculty who paced and wandered and hovered by the worksite. The contractor complained to university officials that he had trouble keeping workers on the site, not just because of the cats and the oddly horrible coffee, but because they claimed to *feel* a sinister presence, or perhaps not quite *sinister*. One worker described it as the sort of guilty you felt when you got called into a teacher's office and asked why your essay was identical to something found on Wikipedia.

The Regents called Chancellor Snively into their office. Metaphorically speaking. It was really a cushy conference room. Chancellor

Snively's conference room, in fact. But Chancellor Snively felt the pins and needles in his ass as he duckwalked in.

"What the *fuck*?" Was all they could say, though luckily the coffee tasted much better.

Construction outlasted Kittengate. And it slogged on, despite the weird phenomena, like missing hammers, and weird noises, and radios that played only angry Danish speed metal. And the STEM Workforce Center powered on.

Though seeds were planted, and the chatter in Starbucks lines and in local op-ed pages centered on whether Snively was fit for office. Memes of Snively doing awful things to doe-eyed kittens haunted social media.

Derek sat dreamily contemplating these matters during an extra long ride into work on the university shuttle, which had followed a poorly-marked detour and had ended up on the freeway heading north toward the other State University. In the reflection of the shuttle window, he saw the scruffy face of Dr. Edgar sitting beside him. He turned. Dr. Edgar looked forward, a leather satchel placed across his lap. It had been raining, and Professor Edgar's coat and beard were scraggy with wet. His umbrella, which had seen years of service, was in a half-open/half-closed state in the shuttle aisle.

"I hate service," fumed Professor Edgar.

Derek cocked his head.

"Say again?" Said Derek. He looked behind him and clutched his ear like he was talking on an ear piece.

"Service." Said Edgar. "University policy — 40% research, 40% teaching, and 20% service. But I hate the service. And wish I had more of the teaching.

"I stay in my office so they can't put me back on the Faculty Senate," he said. And Derek blinked, and Professor Edgar was no longer there.

Back on the Faculty Senate, thought Derek. When had Professor Edgar ever been on Faculty Senate?

An hour later, when the shuttle rumbled by the Library, Derek hopped off and tumbled down the steps to the lower levels, the university archives. Campus urban legends declared the lower levels to be eminently haunted, though Derek could now say with certainty that the archives were perhaps the *only* place on campus that were not haunted, unless you held the belief that the gnome-like staff of the university archives were otherworldly creatures. But the basement sure seemed like a haunted place. Concrete floors, cold, steel shelving, flickering overhead lights that gave the impression of torch-lit hallways. Derek felt like he was exploring catacombs beneath ancient Rome.

The archives were not haunted, but they still had ghosts.

The Faculty Senate records from 1951 to 2010 devolved from brown, leather-bound tomes to warped, plastic three-ring binders in the latter years, before moving to digital files only. He blew the dust off the records and stacked them on an oak table beneath a swinging, naked lightbulb. No one could ever fault the faculty senate archives for being too eventful. Decades of curriculum changes, petty grievances, riveting accounts of math professors who took the floor and never gave it back. But he found it.

2001.

Professor Edgar, who swore never to serve on a faculty senate committee, actually chaired the Faculty Senate for the Spring semester. The elected chair, his dear friend from the Department of History, had suffered a massive stroke, and Professor Edgar reluctantly stepped in in his place and finished his term. He swore as he banged his first gavel that he would never do anything of import. And technically he didn't.

However.

April 2001.

University turmoil recycles like bad fashion, and this had been another tumultuous time. The University truly had no idea what shit was about to hit the fan nationally in the coming months. It was roiling in its own shit. The previous chancellor had resigned after a vote of no confidence from the Faculty Senate, having driven the school into millions of dollars of debt with building projects. Apparently, tensions boiled over when plans emerged to construct a new Design Studies building with no right angles—a big, roundish monstrosity that looked like a zit in need of popping. In theory, this was all behind them—they had a delightfully boring interim chancellor and were searching for a safe, conservative chancellor who could bring them back into the black and not do anything too controversial. Really, the minutes from that Spring semester were trivial.

But then there was that one Space Utilization Committee report. Derek blinked. He spent a week poring over Faculty Senate minutes up to the present day, Regents' meeting minutes, old student newspapers, administrative memoranda. Most likely, no one even remembered this one little report, with its one action item that passed the Faculty Senate unanimously, and was approved by the Regents. It was a highly unusual report that was a product of a particular context, a particular semester of faculty fist raising, but then like many faculty senate motions that are raised in a heated moment, it fizzled out and was forgotten. Yet the policy remained in effect.

Derek copied the document thrice. Each was placed into a manilla envelope. The first was sent to the current Faculty Senate chair, the second to the Chair of the Regents, and the third to the local newspaper. And "sent"

meant that Derek slid them anonymously under doors, or mailed them without return of address, all the while wearing dark glasses and a trench coat. Pure spy craft. He had no intention of letting anyone know that a lowly archivist had put his oar in the water.

The local newspaper truly didn't know what to make of the top secret set of boring meeting minutes that slid across their desks at first, but they caught on after the results of the next University Faculty Senate Meeting... Sort of. The packet was initially poopooed by the Regents, but it hit the Faculty Senate floor with the heft of a dozen wet sea lions. The senate was all set to discuss whispers that the History Department was to be "right-sized" and its building converted to a campus wellness center. The Faculty Senate Chair happened to have a special place in her heart for these orphaned policies that no one seemed to remember. What the Faculty Senate Chair determined upon receipt of the documents and a little further research was that the university had agreed in 2001 that no major university building project would proceed without a majority vote of the faculty senate. The faculty senate discussed the records, held several meetings with university administrators, and then, with a resounding bang of the gavel, successfully passed a vote of no confidence in Chancellor Snively. The Regents Chair secretly wondered whether this mysterious policy was really even binding, but by that point, he was so fed up with Chancellor Snively that, for this and other problematic building plans, he asked for his resignation.

The local newspaper sort of understood what was going on, and after pondering the political nuances of faculty shared governance, boldly declared, "Cat Killer Canned."

Snively resigned. His administrators disappeared into the shadows. Or went out to haunt other small colleges around the country. But in another stroke of irony (or karma, perhaps), Snively retained tenure in the Department of History. Getting ousted from his roost was followed soon after by bouts of reflection and introspection. Snively, it turned out, was an engaging lecturer who made European History truly jump, jive, and wail in class, and after several years, most students didn't even realize that the frumpy historian struggling with the classroom technology in the front of the class had once been Chancellor. They only knew him by his memorable lectures and his surprisingly good Rate My Professor scores. Who knew that there was still a ghost in the old machine!

Derek thought about it from time to time. He often ate his lunch outside the half-finished Hamilton Hall. The English Department had been officially moved into an old dormitory. Hamilton Hall lay indefinitely unfinished, surrounded by fence and tarp and the occasional braying cat.

Once, while eating a ham and cheese sandwich, he looked up to see Professor Edgar walk by.

Professor Edgar stopped.

“That student,” he said. “Finally turned her paper in. Comma splices all over the place, and spelled like she was inventing a new language.

“But it was *brilliant*.”

He started walking, stopped, and turned. “Reminds me why I still even bother to do this.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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