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# Idle Pulleys; or, the Art of Becoming a Good Public Servant

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SHORT STORY by HORACIO QUIROGA
Translated by WASHINGTON C PEARCE,
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When one time I had a whim to be a national employee, I heard tell of a man who, during the two years he held a public position, never responded to even a single memo.[1]

"That there is a superior man," I said to myself. "It's worth a trip to go see him."

I should confess that the standard, compulsory behavior to respond to every memo that one receives is the most inconvenient part of my aspirations. The delicate mechanism that is the national administration (which nobody can deny) requires that every memo we have the honor of receiving is answered both fatally and patiently. Casting just one memo to the side, even the most insignificant of them all, throws a wrench between the deepest of teeth in the cogs of the national machine. From the memos of the President of the Republic to those from the most obscure police sergeant, every one demands equal response, every one represents the noble administration incarnate, every one holds identical austere transcendence.

In spite of having been convinced (as a proud citizen of the Republic) of the importance of these duties, I had not yet dared to plainly swear that I would reply to every memo that came my way. And now I had heard of a man, still living, who had lasted two years in the national administration without answering—or sending, in fact—a single memo.

Consequently, I went to see him, at the heart of the Republic. He was an old man, Spanish, and cultured—the kind of unexpected intellectual that is found at the feet of the quebrachos, or in the burn pit of a rubber plantation, or in a Bedouin camp in the Sahara, and is one of the many tropical surprises of the region.

My man laughed at my juvenile admiration when I told him that I had come to see him. He told me he wasn't certain, at least about how long he went without answering a single memo. He had been made the school supervisor at a national colony, and he had let at least a year pass by without approving the response to a single memo. But this was essentially unimportant, as they were all answered by others …

At this point my man stopped suddenly, and began to laugh again.

"Would you like me to tell you something more deliciously entertaining than all that?" he said. "You'll observe the absolute model of a public official … Do you know just how much time passed where I didn't lower myself to so much as glance at anything that came my way? Two years and then some. And do you know what office I filled? I was a governor … ah, now your mouth drops open in surprise."

In short, I deserved it. Like a timid bridegroom—as it were—of the National Administration, nothing had opened my eyes wider about my future reality than the exploits of this administrative Don Juan … I begged him to tell me everything, if he knew it, and quickly.

"If I knew it?" he responded. "If I knew my job well? As if I weren't the governor that had replaced him … Listen more closely now, from the beginning. It was back in … well, let's say eighteen-eighty-something. I had just returned to Spain, still sick from a fever I'd picked up in the Gulf of Guinea. I'd spent that year in Elobey Chico … You do know your geography, right?"

"Yes, I understand. Please, continue."

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Good. You know, then, that there is no region more unhealthy in the *entire world* than the Niger Delta. Until now, there is no mortal born on the entire planet that can say, after crossing the mouth of that river:

"I don't have a fever."

I began slowly, then, to establish myself in Spain, when a friend, a close relative to the Ministerio de Ultramar,[2] offered me the governorship over four hundred or so islands that make up the Philippines. I was, according to him, the best man for the job, in large part for my long-standing activities among negroes and their kind.

"But not with Malaysians," I responded. "I understand that they are very distinct …"

"No need to worry, they're all the same," he assured me. "Once the color of a man's skin darkens two or three grades, they're all the same … So, is this agreeable? I have a mind to give you the assignment right away."

I conferred for a while with my conscience—and more deeply with my liver. They both agreed, so I accepted.

"Very good," said my new patron. "Now that you're one of us, I need to let you in on a few details. Do you know, even if it's just by his name, the current governor of your islands? Félix Pérez Zúñiga."

"I don't, well not outside the author."

"It's not that Félix, though almost, almost they're worth about the same … And I don't say that to be mean. Well, it's been two years now and nobody knows what's going on there. We've sent millions of memos, and you would think that they would at least be capable of putting quill points to paper, even the least well-born official … And yet nothing, nothing as such. You will bring, along with your promotion to the post, the dismissal of this person. Is this still agreeable?"

Certainly it was still agreeable. Unless this fantastic governor were of a temperament as lively as his simple mishandling of the memos.

"No way," he responded. "According to the reports it's just the contrary … I think you'll understand him marvelously."

There was nothing left to say. My liver took a little solace, and on a fine day I marched out for the Philippines. That being said, I seemed to arrive on a bad day, with a stomachache like a blow from a typhoon, and the bad attitude of the Governor-General hanging over my head. From what I could gather, he had been sidelined within the whole replacement process. Nevertheless, I won him over and gained his goodwill, and went on my way to my island, which lay so far away from any maritime route that, if it weren't at the end of the world, it was evidently located in the graveyard of all civilized communication.

I'll abbreviate here, since I notice that you grow tired … No? Onward then … Where were we? ... Ah! As soon as I had disembarked, I found my man. I had never received such disappointment. Instead of the massive, atrabilious, and grouchy man that the reports had given me the impression of, I found myself with just some guy. A young man with blue eyes—great big eyes like those of a joyful, trusting bird. He was tall and thin, bald for his age, and the hair that he had left—abundant along the sides and back of the head—was dark and very wavy. He kept his forehead and bald crown well-shined. His voice was clear, and he spoke slowly, without rushing, with the long intonation of a man without reason to hurry and who reveled in explaining and receiving ideas.

In summation: a good man, without doubt very intelligent, open and cordial, and with an attitude that dared to be happy in whatever situation he might find himself.

"Come in, sit down," he said. "Make yourself comfortable. Would you have anything to drink? No, nothing? Not even chocolate? ... What I've got is detestable, but it's worth a try … Here's how it happened: The other day a coastal barque came all the way out here, and it brought me ten pounds of cacao … the best of the best of all cacao. I entrusted the labor of making it all to a native highly talented in the manufacture of chocolate. You'll get to know him soon. The cacao was toasted, ground up, mixed with the sugar—the same as before—all in my sight, and with extreme care and precaution. Do you know what happened next? An impossible thing … Would you like to taste some? It's worth a taste … After, you can write to me from

Spain how this thing is made … Ah, you won't be returning! ... You'll be staying here, yes? And you will be the new governor, no doubt? ... Congratulations …"

How could this happy little bird be the miscreant administrator whom I was going to replace?

"Yes," he continued, "it's been twenty-two months now that I shouldn't have been governor. And it wasn't hard to divine that it would be you … It was when I became fully convinced that I would never be able to answer a single memo again. Why? This is a very complicated thing … Later I will tell you something, if you wish … And meanwhile, I will deliver everything to you, if you desire it … Ok? ... Then let's begin."

And so we began. First of all I wanted to find out all about the matter of the incoming official correspondence, given that I should be well informed about what had been transmitted.

"The memos, you say? It's my pleasure. Here they are."

And he put his hand upon a large open barrel, in one corner of the office.

Frankly, even though I had anticipated some great negligence from the official, I hadn't expected to find so many sheets with royal letterhead, piling up at the bottom of a barrel …

"Here they are," he repeated with his hand on the rim, looking at me with the same placid smile.

I came closer, then, and looked in. The whole barrel, and it really was immense, was effectively full of memos; but not a single one had been opened. Can you believe it? Every single one had its respective envelope intact, piled up like old newspapers unopened and still tied together, with the governor just standing there so calmly. Not only had he never answered even a single communication, which I now saw for myself, but he had never even bothered to read them.

I couldn't help but just stare at him for a moment. He did the same, with the smile of a child caught making a mess, but perhaps a mess that he was a little proud of. Finally he broke the silence, laughing, and grabbed me by the arm.

"Listen to me," he said. "Let's sit down and talk. It's so pleasant to receive a surprise visitor like yourself after two years of isolation! These memos! ... Do you want, frankly, to conserve for the rest of your life a peaceful conscience, and a less congested liver—I see it in your face at once … Yes? Then don't ever answer another memo. Not even a single one. You don't believe me, that's plain … Your prejudice is so strong, my good sir! And do you know why? Because you believe, as in the Bible, that the administration of a nation is a machine with gears, pulleys, and belts all so intimately connected that the simplest slip of a single miniscule cogwheel is capable of seizing up the entire marvelous mechanism. Error, profoundly in error! Between the august hand that signs "Myself" and the hand of a police officer who must append every minute title so that he is known to exist there is a group of hands that could abandon said wheel without causing the ship to veer off course. The machinery is marvelous, and every man is a single cog, effectively. But three-quarters of them are idler pulleys,[3] no

more and no less. They still spin, and appear to be solid players in the grand administrative game, but truthfully they spin in the air, and a few hundred of them could stop without any disturbance. Believe me, I have studied this business in all my spare time when I'm not digesting chocolate … There is no continuous and uninterrupted line of gears connecting that police officer to His Majesty the King. That is one of many things that forms a fake base to our reality … No? But here you have a blatant case … You have seen the island, the shape of its inhabitants, much fatter than I; you have seen the Governor-General; you have traveled the world and come from Spain. Now, have you seen any signs of disturbance in any parts? Have you noticed a dangerous imbalance on the Ship of State? Do you believe, sincerely, that the progress of the National Administration has been hindered by a single hair between the cogs' teeth because I have decided to refuse, systematically, to open a single memo? They've relieved me; you are to replace me, and you will learn how to make a good chocolate … This is the whole of the disturbance … Don't you see?"

And the man, always with his knee between his hands, looked up at me with blue eyes like a complacent bird, appearing very satisfied that he would be fired, and I would replace him.

It needs to be said that, now that you know my own story from when I was made supervisor, that this devil-child was as seductive as any demon. I don't know if it was what made him a balanced man; but his pagan philosophy, without a pinch of acrimony, was a fabulous temptation, and not much time went by before we understood each other on every point.

However, I didn't let myself go groggy.

"It is necessary," I told him, becoming serious once more, "that I should open just this one correspondence.'

But the young man grabbed my arm, looking at me with shock:

"Are you crazy?" he exclaimed. "Do you know what you'll find in there? Don't be a child, by God! Burn this lot, barrel and all, and throw it into the ocean …"

I shook my head and thrust my hand into the barrel. He shrugged his shoulders and sat back down again on his armchair, holding his knee between his hands. He watched me from the corner of his eye, shaking his head and smiling.

You might guess what the latest memos said, right, directed to an official who had freed himself for two years from answering even one of their number? They would make anyone blush, even in a darkened room, even the least embarrassable official … And I would have to take all this on, and answer them one by one until I'd finished them all …

"Now don't you see what I've prevented!" the young man said with sympathy. "You're going to sweat even worse when you have to answer them all … Take my advice, there's still time: Burn the damn thing like your own effigy,[4] and you will feel happy."

He was quite entertained! And so as I continued to read, my man, with his shiny crown, his halo of curly hair, and his canvas smock, continued to sit balanced, satisfied in the reality he had managed to fit his life.

I sweated heavily, because every new memo was a new smack to the face, and I quit from exhaustion.

"Aha!" He stood up. "You're tired already? Would you like to drink something? Maybe try my chocolate? It's worth it, I've already told you …"

And despite my refusing gestures, he brought the chocolate and I tried it. It was detestable, but the man was still content.

"See? It can't be drunk. And to what should I attribute that? I will not rest until I know … I'm delighted that you couldn't drink it either, so now we can dine early. I always dine in the daylight … Very well, let's eat in an hour, and tomorrow we will finish with the memos and the rest …"

I was tired, very tired. I took the most wonderful bath, since my young friend had wondrous and luxurious facilities for doing so. We dined, and a while after my host accompanied me to my quarters.

"I see that you are a cautious man," he told me as he watched me retrieve mosquito netting from my bags. "Without that, you wouldn't be able to sleep. I'm the only one who doesn't use it around here."

"Mosquitoes don't bite you?" I asked, only half surprised.

"You don't think so?" he responded, laughing and rubbing his bald forehead. "So much … But I couldn't stand the netting … You haven't heard of people suffocating inside their netting? You might call it nonsense, or innocent neurosis, but it does happen. Come, look at my mosquito netting."

We went to his quarters, or, that is, to the entrance to his quarters. My friend raised the lamp up to eye level, and I looked in. Well, the entire door, from left to right and top to bottom, was covered in a veritable lattice of spiderwebs, an insoluble jungle of spiderwebs so thick as to not even admit the head of a match without disturbing the entire fabric. It was so full of dust that it looked like a wall. From what I could understand, since I couldn't see it all, the webs ran the entirety of the room as well, only God knows how far.

"And you sleep there?" I asked after looking at it for a long moment.

"Yes," he responded with infant pride. "No mosquito ever enters. Nor do I believe that any has entered, nor ever will enter."

"But how do you get in?" I asked, worried about the answer I might receive.

"Where do I enter?" Bending over, he pointed with his finger: "Right here. Carefully, of course, and on all fours, it's not too difficult … No mosquitoes and no bats either … Dust? I don't think any gets in either … Inside it's very clean … Suffocate? ... Not I; the only thing that suffocates is artificial, like the mosquito netting fifty centimeters away from one's mouth … Do you suffocate inside a room shut against the cold? And," he concluded with a beaming smile, "there's a special kind of primitive relaxation possible in this room defended by millions of spiders jealously guarding

one's quiet … You don't believe it? Don't look at me like that … Good night, Mr. Governor!" He ended by smiling and shaking both of my hands with his.

The next morning, very early, since we were both very early risers, we went back to our task. In truth, the only thing remaining was to receive the ledger, other than a few other things of insignificance.

"It's true!" he responded. "Ledgers also exist … There's a lot to unpack there … But I'll do it after, all in time. Urquijo! Do me a favor and bring the ledgers. You'll see them, in just a moment … There's nothing filled out, as you'll see but in just a moment … Thank you, Urquijo, you can sit down now, we'll set the books straight. Let's start."

The secretary, who had been interviewed only the day before, was a person of great age, very short and very skinny, sullen, silent, and with an untrustworthy air. His face was red and shiny, giving the impression that he had never washed it. That was only its appearance, since his worn black clothing never had a single stain. His celluloid collar was so large that it could hold twice as much neck as he had. A focused and untrustworthy type, like nobody else.

He commenced balancing the books in the most original way I have ever seen in my life. My friend sat in front of the secretary and did not look away for an instant while the operation lasted. The secretary swept through the receipts and invoices, and did so all out loud:

"Twenty-five months of salary for the lighthouse keeper, at so much per month, is such-and-such …"

And then multiplied it in the margin of the page.

His boss followed along, reading the numbers in a broken line, without blinking, until at last he extended his arm:

"No, no, Urquijo … I don't like that. Put: one month of salary for the lighthouse keeper, at so much per month, is such-and-such. Then, the second month of salary for the lighthouse keeper, at so much per month, is such-and-such; third month of salary… Keep going like that, then add it up. That way I can keep up more easily."

He turned to me:

"I don't know what kind of witchcraft or sophistry exists in mathematics to give me chills up and down my spine … Would you believe that I've never come to understand multiplication? I get lost in an instant … I don't know what the hell to do with these numbers all thrown willy-nilly to the left side … Add them up, Urquijo."

The secretary, seriously and without raising his head, as if it were a common occurrence, began to add them up out loud, and my friend struck both hands against the table:

"That's it!" he said, "that's very clear now."

But on the next set of expenses, the secretary forgot, and went back to:

"Twenty-five months of supply of firewood, at so much per month, is such-and-such …"

"No, no! Please, Urquijo! Put: one month of supply of firewood, at so much per month, is such-and-such …; second month of the supply of firewood, at so much per month, is such-and-such …; et cetera. Add them up afterwards."

And so they continued to balance the ledger, both with devilish patience, the secretary always forgetting and committed to multiplying down the margin of the page, and his boss stopping him with his hand, forcing a count both clear and, over everything, honest.

"And here are the books set straight," said my man after four long hours, but smiling still, with his large eyes like innocent birds.

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There's nothing left to tell you. I stayed there scarcely nine months before my liver brought me back to Spain again. Later, much later, I came here, as an accountant for a business … the rest you know already. As far as that singular young man, I have never heard any more of him. I suppose that he's finally figured out the mystery of how his chocolate, made with excellent ingredients, could have ended up so awful …

And as for the influence of this character …, now you know my performance as supervisor. (Parenthetically, the business of the school has never gone as well …) Believe me: Three-quarters of the ideas of that young pilgrim are true …, including the mathematical ones …

I'll insert here: The mathematical part, I'm not sure, but in the rest—God forgive—he had a surplus of sense. It seems the Administration understood it as well, refusing to confer on me the management of its delicate mechanisms.

**Translator's Notes**

[1] This translation's source text, titled "Polea loca," appeared in Horacio Quiroga, *Ananconda* (Buenos Aires: Agencia general de libreria y publicaciones, 1921), 31–42. The second title is taken from a 1917 magazine publication, *Plus Ultra*, where the story appeared under the title "El arte de ser un buen empleado público."

[2] Or the Minister of Overseas Affairs. A position maintained in the Spanish government until 1899 that was responsible for colonies in Cuba, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and other island territories.

[3] A gear or pulley that exists only to transfer force between two other gears and does not do any work on its own.

[4] Literally, "burn it like Judas." A popular custom throughout many Spanish-speaking countries of burning an effigy of Judas Iscariot during Easter.