

## The Bureaucratic Tale of the Harbor Master and the Collector of Customs

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When the Harbor Master entered his office and saw the sheet of blue paper on the table, he nodded slowly and grimaced so that no observer, even one ignorant of all that had gone before and the reasons behind the matter, would have had any doubt that the gesture was ironic, as if by its simple presence that paper had confirmed certain pleasurable and, by anticipation, tasty expectations. He sat down at the desk, and his first gesture, after having stretched smooth the coat-sleeves of his uniform and brushed away invisible dust from his gleaming stripes, was to push this piece of paper aside. Then, methodically, he examined and signed documents, made some telephone calls, answered some, gave out orders and instructions to the workers on his staff, received and talked with captains of two ships at anchor in the harbor, and, when it was time, went home to lunch, as always. After lunch, as she poured the coffee, his wife asked him if he had already taken care of the request, to which he replied that he would do it that afternoon. Indeed, on his return to his office, the Harbor Master, after having sat down and repeated the gesture of straightening his sleeves and brushing off his stripes, took up the paper that in the morning he had rejected without so much as reading it, settled on calligraphy, round and airy, that seemed appropriate to a seaman but contrasted with the miniscule, crawling handwriting of the petition, and he wrote, Taking into consideration its manifest ill-timing and that it seems deliberately to ignore that a reduced staff makes uncertain the provision of service, this petition is denied. He rang his bell and told the sailor who was acting as messenger, Go to the Customhouse and place this on the director's desk. When, hours later, at the end of his workday, the

Harbor Master returned home, his wife once again questioned him, Did you take care of it? and he responded, I took care of it. He didn't say how, because, as he understood the matter, confirmed through long observation, the separation of functions implies that in no instance does the knowledge of facts anticipate the moment of occurrence, for if it were otherwise there would be a dangerous alteration in the harmony of the world, which, given as it is to lack of reflection and caprice, would not survive for long.

On the following day the Collector of Customs entered his office and, spotting the petition, felt a pounding at his heart. He knew that the news in the dispatch was not good. As a candle in the wind bends and stiffens, the Harbor Master's handwriting scrawled across the paper and, dominating the petitioner's low, flat writing, evoked an image of the victorious fleet, hovering proudly in sight of the floating wrecks of its enemy. The Collector of Customs did not have to look to the reasoning of the dispatch; he looked only at the ominous word Denied. In an angry outburst he dashed the paper to the floor, only to retrieve it, soon afterwards, in humiliation. Then, keeping himself from thinking about the lot that compelled him, as the Head, to be a subordinate as well, he plunged into the work that had accumulated since the day before. He looked up rules and regulations, worked out percentages, calculated duties, issued instructions and gave out orders, received two dissatisfied exporters and one grateful importer, sent word to a freight agent to come back in a couple of days, and, when it was time for lunch, went home to eat, as usual. He was hardly in the door when his wife asked him, Well, and he answered, Denied. You mean to say that we are not going on vacation? Exactly, we are not going on vacation. And why not? Because we are short of help in Customs and in the Harbor. You are not part of the Harbor staff, you are Collector of Customs. So I am, but in the administrative hierarchy, Harbor Master outranks Collector of Customs. And now what? We shall have to wait until things improve. And in the meantime there will be no vacation? That's right, there'll be no vacation. And does that seem right to you? It doesn't seem to be right or wrong; I'd have done the same thing in his shoes. Why don't you write him a conciliatory letter, appealing to his feelings, telling him that you are very tired, that your wife has been dreaming about this vacation, things like that. I don't think it will work, but I can try it. And that's what he did. Returning to the Customhouse, he told the clerk that for the next hour he wasn't in for anyone. Then he locked himself in his director's office and set about writing

his letter. Not a single letter, but various letters, because he did not like the first drafts; to him they seemed feckless, spineless, unpersuasive, and if they were unconvincing even to him, the one writing them, they would be even less capable of bringing about a change of mind in the Harbor Master. Finally he satisfied himself when, trembling out of pure compassion for himself, he found his eyes welling up as the words issued forth from his wounded psyche. Only if the Harbor Master's heart were made of stone would he be able to keep himself from giving in. He folded his letter, inserted it into an envelope, and called out to the messenger. Go to the Harbor Master's and place this on the Master's desk. Afterwards, alone, he leaned back in his chair and let himself go imaginatively to the place he had chosen for his longed-for vacation, for he wanted to believe that, before a letter steeped with humility, pungent, even straying off course, the Harbor Master, out of pure compassion, would annul his first dispatch and grant the request. At home, his wife, even without having read the letter, was of the same opinion and shared the same hope. To get a jump on things, she began to pack.

The Collector of Customs was right, but only up to a point. Indeed, on the next day the Harbor Master could not keep from shedding a tear or two while reading the letter—of course it was only a couple of tears, but, since we are dealing with the military, this effect is worth noting. If this commotion lasted any longer than the exact time it took him to dry his tears, there's no way of knowing, but his hand did not tremble when, in turn, he wrote the word that would shrivel and dry up the Collector's blossom of hope. It was No, that he was very sorry, that no one understood the situation better than he, but that the duties of his charge and the responsibilities that went with each of the two jobs did not permit him to decide unjustly by ignoring the letter and spirit of the law and the regulations pertaining to the case, which, under these circumstances, as in all other instances, call from those in public service a dignified example representing the sacrifice of particular interests in favor of the common good. For these reasons, and despite his regret at having to disappoint him, he stood by his dispatch and maintained his denial. He ordered the letter taken to the office of the Collector of Customs and—in sorrow—went home early. His wife thought it strange, grew worried, Don't say you're sick, now that the Collector of Customs has gone on vacation, and he responded, Neither am I sick nor will the Collector of Customs go on vacation. But then, what about the letter? It hurt me but regulations are there to be followed, I am merely the hand through which the law enacts its sentences. Do you think he'll come to

accept that? He'll have no choice, countered the Harbor Master. He paused, then said, I'm going to lie down for a bit, maybe I'll get some sleep, and while I sleep, I'll forget. Wait a moment, let me unpack first.

The next day the Collector of Customs responded with a fiery letter in which he began with the accusation that the Harbor Master lacked a sense of institutional solidarity, and ended, feigning irony and eschewing all distance, by asking himself if he, the Harbor Master, did not constitute an acute case of clinical megalomania. Had his braid gone to his head, did he think he was an admiral, he remonstrated. The Harbor Master, his authority under attack, did not respond well to this impertinence. Again he wrote, threatening the Collector of Customs with disciplinary action, punishment, and suspension, but his threats went for naught, because the Collector of Customs came back insolently, Suspension, suspension, that's the way I'll take my vacation. There was, therefore, no disciplinary action, and the bitter exchange of correspondence continued. At some point all reference to the central reason for their discord ceased altogether—no longer was there any mention of vacations—the letters, on both sides, were now taken up with accusations, denunciations of ancient and recent mistakes, of slights, a complicated history of bureaucratic indolence and sloppiness, and, the worst thing of all, by insinuation at first, then with open displays of proof, of acts of active and passive corruption committed on both sides in the course of their jobs. Where did he get the money to buy a car? Where did he get the money to build his house? The Harbor Master no less than the Collector of Customs was going around with his head cut off, feverishly writing letters in which the very handwriting had undergone change, the Harbor Master's now level and small, the Collector's challenging, contentious. At home, each of the belligerents would get things off his chest by talking with his wife—The Harbor Master belongs in jail, The Collector of Customs should be in a madhouse—but her replies, while proffered with different intentions or inflected differently, were, word for word, the same. It was all over a vacation, to which the Harbor Master would reply, No, it was all the blame of an insubordinate, and the Collector of Customs, No, blame it all on an authoritarian. In an attempt that would turn out to be his last, the Collector of Customs changed his tune. Too late, as it turned out, if there ever had been a time when the Harbor Master's obstinate resistance could have been removed. To the imploring tone of the Collector of Customs, the Harbor Master came back with the words, dry and definitive, Stow it.

With this, the Collector of Customs committed suicide. On the way to the cemetery, the funeral procession paused before the Harbor Master's building and the Customhouse. In both places flags were flying at half-mast, and from the windows of each building the sailors and the civilians whose duties kept them from joining the cortege said their goodbyes to their chief. Crushed by this unexpected mourning, his wife was advised to stay behind, at home. After her friends had left, leaving behind their many recommendations that she must be patient and resign herself, she returned to her husband's goodbye note and reread it. This is what it said, Now you can go on vacation; never again will the Harbor Master deny requests. Then, thinking about dresses that might be suitable for dyeing black, the widow opened the chifferobe. There it was, with its shining braid, the uniform of the Harbor Master.