

Famine

by Michael Hartford

To be perfectly honest, I was lousy at my job. Or at least most aspects of it. The typing wasn't a problem: I can get up to a hundred words a minute on a good stretch of unbroken text, and I'm pretty accurate. I even edited as I went, fixing passive voice and verb tenses in letters and memos. But I always got lunch orders wrong, needing constant reminders that Kathy wouldn't eat whole grain bread, and Cindy preferred her mayo on the side. And I never got the travel and lodging deals the other assistants negotiated, probably because I procrastinated and made the arrangements a few days before the trip.

My biggest failing, though, was supply management. The cupboards were always bare, and more than once I had to slip away to the store around the corner for an emergency load of paper and pencil lead, at a premium price. I seldom submitted reimbursement forms for these trips; their frequency was so embarrassing that I preferred to skip lunch for a week to fit my budget.

And then I read Robert Conquest, who made it all clear to me. In a socialist economy—and surely that's the model we had in my empty supply cabinet—who controls the means of distribution wields the greatest power. I had been holding the lever that ran the corporation for over a year before I realized my might.

First, like Stalin in the Ukraine, I experimented with scarcity. I intentionally let the supplies dwindle down to a few dusty file folders and the felt-tipped pens no one liked. The tension in the office was palpable; people wandered past the supply closet with hollow eyes and twitching fingers, hungry for notepads and paperclips.

Then I faxed in a giant order: cartons of pens, grosses of legal pads, a feast of manila folders and address labels. Within an hour of being unpacked from the boxes that came on a gray metal hand truck, they were gone. I stayed late that night and went through my co-workers' desks; like peasants fearing a bad crop and distrustful of

each other, they were hoarding pencils behind their hanging files and calculator tape under their desks.

I toyed with them like this for a few weeks; the hoarding behavior started to subside as they became more confident, though they seldom dipped into the cache culled from that first big order. Then I took my next step: rationing.

Mechanical pencils, I explained in a carefully crafted memo, had nearly doubled in price over the last six months. While leads would remain freely available in the supply closet, the pencils themselves would be in a locked drawer at my desk. I would keep track of the inventory and dole them out as requested, provided no one was showing carelessness in their stewardship. We are all responsible, I concluded, for doing our part to keep costs down.

There were enough hoarded pencils out in the cubicle village that I didn't see an effect for almost a month. But attrition and vicissitude eventually forced them to come to me, proverbial hats in metaphoric hands, begging for the bits of metal and plastic to hold the lead I let them have for free.

At first I handed them out willingly, though with a sigh and a disapproving frown. They scurried off with their pencils, leaving behind a tiny bit of pride. Then I became reluctant to part with my pencils, and even turned a few beggars away. It was at that point that the next phase in my economy became manifest: bribery.

I got an extra candy bar from the machine, Doris said one day when she came for a pencil. Would you like it?

Sure, I said, taking the chocolate from her nervous fingers. I handed her two pencils.

Then it was Robert with a pack of gum, Julia with a homemade brownie, Megan with a little rubber man who perched on my bookshelf with a worried look on his face. A sort of market price for pencils developed: a pack of gum got you one pencil, a can of Coke got you two; I gave out four for a Koosh ball and six for a bottle of moisturizer (the air in the office was always so dry). I used to fantasize about what Wendy might offer me for a whole box of

pencils, but she never suggested such an exchange; I think she alone was wise to my scheme, and took her pencils one at a time.

I let the bribery bleed into other segments of my economy. For a movie pass, your memo would float to the top of my inbox; let me order a pastrami sandwich for myself, and you'll get an extra cookie in your box lunch; I might be persuaded to squeeze you into the good conference room if you pick up *The New Yorker* for me at lunch. For almost six months I lived like a prince, with my tithing vassals vying for my favor. I had to start taking my ill-got booty home, my cubicle was so crowded with Pez dispensers and Matchbox cars.

Alas, my feudal utopia bore the seeds of its own destruction, though as a student of Marx I knew its contradictions would cause it to unravel sooner than later. The end started when one of my means of production—my computer and carefully-organized floppy disks—ceased to be unique. Overnight, the clunky old green screens my co-workers used were ripped out and replaced with more processing power than they knew how to control.

Now my serfs could type their own memos, run their own spreadsheets. It was painful for me to watch them hunt and peck across their keyboards, mangle number agreement and punctuation in their memos, lose files on their voluminous hard drives. But even more painful were the loss of revenue, and their growing sense of empowerment.

My own role was changing now, too, and I became the “computer guy.” I wrote macros, devised templates, organized network folders. Sometimes I still got a prize for a special project, and even honest gratitude when I salvaged a missing file from the belly of a computer, but the steady income dried up.

It was Mary who finally did me in. Sweet, tiny, skinny Mary, who would have fit perfectly in my coat pocket. I wanted so badly to take her home and feed her rich foods, watch that curly brown hair and those luminous green eyes bent over a plate of asparagus drizzled with Hollandaise sauce or crema Catalan drenched in caramel. Mary was hired to take over my administrative duties, starting with

the supplies. I could hardly object, since I found my new responsibilities more challenging and intrinsically rewarding than ordering supplies, but I still felt a twinge of longing when I handed Mary the office supply catalog.

And she set about on a kind of Perestroika project almost immediately, starting with the liberation of the mechanical pencils. Within two weeks she had the supplies under control, and the reign of graft came to an end.

My own stature declined just as rapidly. As the Lord of Supplies, I had been feared and respected; as the Computer Geek, I was despised. The frustration and contempt they felt toward their workstations was directed at me; surely it was my fault they had lost a letter in a maze of folders, or installed a screensaver that brought their machine to a crashing stop. I found myself apologizing to them for their own displays of ignorance, and begging forgiveness on behalf of their finicky machines.

I resorted to sabotage: staying late to empty the supply cabinets of pencils and tablets; re-organizing the files on the network on the slightest whim; moving printers to inconvenient locations. But all my efforts backfired, as my former subjects became further frustrated with their computers and made whispered plots against me.

In the end, I had no choice but to go into exile, moving upstairs to begin my apprenticeship in the IT department. I rarely spoke to my new co-workers of my glorious age ruling the cubicle village downstairs, though I often thought fondly of those happy days. And Mary, beautiful, underfed Mary, ruled her subjects with a soft and gentle hand, and was loved by one and all.

