

Click Man

Here's what happened:

The Clark City news ran a story about civil servants slacking on the job – garbage men napping in the backs of their trucks and meter maids doodling on the margins of unused parking tickets were captured by the unfeeling eye of a journalist's lens. It's common knowledge that nothing sets a population off like the notion of wasted tax dollars. I can imagine the scene across the city while the story ran: husbands and wives perched in front of the TV after dinner, the knee-jerk manifesto of “This is where my taxes go?” shooting through neighborhoods like gossip. This, at least, is how I felt. And so we the people rallied around city hall, demanding that efficiency in city workers be not the exception but the rule. Most of us were unemployed; we marched day and night. On the demonstration's fifth night our mayor stepped out onto one of city hall's decorative balconies and raised his arms like a prophet to calm us.

“People of Clark City,” he announced, “for five days you have demanded efficiency from those whose salaries come from your taxes. So for five days your city council and I have done our best to oblige, working together tirelessly to create a system under which not a single of your pennies will be wasted. Today we succeeded.”

The mayor paused and flashed the warm smile that won him the election, and gazed out over us with the sensitive blue eyes that kept him in office. He was an ultimate nice guy, the boyfriend we could never get mad at. The entire crowd was paralyzed by his charisma.

“We propose to you, the people of Clark City, that each of your civil servants be given pay not based on an annual salary, but by the amount of work actually done. We will create a new 'Department of Quality Assurance' to oversee the efficiency of every last man and woman on the city's payroll. Wasted time will become too much to afford. Workers will work! Waste,” he declared, arms once again outstretched, “will become a thing of the past!” An impeccably timed fireworks display went off in the sky behind him and a curtain dropped from one of the other balconies, revealing a children's choir that began to sing *Ode de Joy*. We all went wild. The new system was already a hit.

First it was our sanitation system that went down the tubes. I had gotten a job with the Department of Quality Assurance as a Quality Agent. My job was to follow an assigned civil servant and click a small button each time he completed a task. Each click was worth one “efficiency point,” and pay for each man was determined by a convoluted equation involving his number of efficiency points and the relative difficulty of the tasks they represented; there was one of us for every city employee. Our qualifications were those required of anyone on a government payroll: rudimentary motor skills and the ability to recall our Social Security numbers. We each got a handbook the size of a telephone directory to pretend to read and they sent us out on our way. My first assignment was to follow a city hall janitor. I can remember, the day after the Department was created, my subject spreading the contents of a waste bin like birdseed and putting it back in, over and over again. He obviously planned on collecting as many efficiency points as possible. I diligently clicked my button each time he filled the bin.

“I think you might be taking advantage of this new system.” I said.

“Maybe, but I need a new pair of shoes!” He pointed to his feet and the cracked brown leather that kept them.

“Just don’t overdo it.”

The exchange left a bad taste in my mouth. The day wore on and he continued his scheme, the unique twinkle that comes from having beaten the system in his eye. He was a spectacle of course, and among those who stopped to stare were other janitors, They caught on and the twinkle spread like a rash. And so it became the norm, halls chaotic with the endless cycle of vandalism and tidying. I saw men trading off the jobs of spray painting dollar signs onto the walls and painting over them, whole cartons of eggs dropped and mopped, cedar chips spread as if covering vomit and swept up, things done with tar and oils and peanut butter. My man filled a Super Soaker with coffee and another with club soda and went to town. I clicked my button with each intentional messed cleaned, and there was nothing I could do. My job description prevented me from intervention; if I did anything other than observe and click my efficiency could have been compromised. I was reprimanded just for talking to him. Not many other quality agents were concerned. We ourselves were given quality points for each click.

There weren't many bars in town, and so word of the janitors' scheme soon spread to Clark City's garbage men. They made withdraws from the dump and piled filth on top of curbs, hauling them back immediately after. Garbage Day became a thing of the past. Combined with standard garbage production the piles rose faster than they could be taken away. The driveways on my street got to be too cluttered to use; snow shovels were taken out well before winter. Piles of garbage rose like boils. They popped when the animals got to them. After a week the buzzing of flies came to drown out the gentle roar of traffic. Sidewalks became useless. I saw the smell drive a man to tears.

I went to my supervisor's office to complain about the new system; I told him quantity was taking the place of quality.

“Fill out this grievance acknowledgment request form in triplicate and return it to our branch office downtown,” he said, without even looking up from his desk. I filled it out and brought it to the branch. The clerk said it was the wrong form, and tagged it with a rubber stamp that said 'INVALID.' A man behind him clicked his button. The clerk told me to come back with the right one. I stepped out of the office and into the hall, where I tore the useless form to shreds and let it drop to my feet. A janitor swooped in and brushed the pieces into a dustpan. A quality agent followed a few step behind him and made a single click. We nodded to each other.

“Still playing poker on Friday, Eddie?” the agent asked me.

“I might.”

The situation got worse. My next assignment was at a firehouse in the suburbs. Each fire put out was a quality point. It occurred to me that firemen are not generally in need of encouragement to stop an inferno, but I reminded myself of my futile effort to criticize the system and put the thought out of my mind. One day the men in the station were having a conversation in a hushed, secretive tone. Their eyes darted at me periodically, and they distanced themselves to in inaudible range. They were arguing over something. Finally one of them shouted, “Fine!” Apparently he'd been the odd man out; his companions congratulated each other and slapped him on the back. “Lock and load, Click Man,” one of them shouted at me. There was no alarm.

Sirens blaring, the truck flew like a banshee to a small house on a peaceful residential street. The men gave each other knowing glances, and I watched as one of them stuffed a rag into a bottle of gin. My eyes widened and the men grew anxious. He lit it on fire and threw it into the house. I was aghast.

“What the hell are you doing?” I demanded, heaving from shock and indignation.

“Listen, Click Man,” one of them began, “this one looks like it might get a little out of hand. You just push that little button of yours and step back a ways.” The blaze behind him grew.

“There could be someone in there!” I shouted.

“No, we checked. It’s abandoned.”

“You should get back. And I wouldn’t want to tell anyone what you saw, either. Just click, man. Otherwise you might end up taking your work home with you, if you catch my drift.”

“We got a live one!” another fireman yelled. They all began to fight the fire they agreed to create. My thumb trembled as I hit the button.

Like my encounter with the janitor without nice shoes, this proved not to be an isolated incident. Within another week fires were commonplace. Firemen started them and firemen tamed them. I awarded a quality point each time, and each time I became more disillusioned. To the firemen's credit, they came up with an effective solution to the problem created by the garbage men, but the smell began even less pleasant.

It was after the police urged them to burn the methadone clinic down that I had had enough. I didn't bother going to my supervisor, the empty bureaucratic shuffling of papers wasn't going to solve a thing. I went to city hall and barged past a very confused secretary right into the mayor's office.

“Hello,” he said, “can I help you?”

“I've got a grievance I'd like acknowledged,” I said.

“I'm afraid I don't quite understand,” he said, keeping his cool. “Do you have an appointment?”

“No I don't, but I'd appreciate it if you'd listen for just a minute. I'm an agent for the Department of Quality Assurance, a click man. It seems clear to me that this system is being abused.”

“You mean the garbage.”

“And the fires.”

He rose from his desk and opened the blinds as if to gaze out over the majesty of his realm. Instead a window washer was wiping paint over the glass with a squeegee while an inferno raged a street away. The mayor shut the blinds and sat back down.

“Do you see what I mean?” I asked.

“Listen...” He trailed off.

“Eddie. Eddie David.”

“Listen Eddie, I'm glad you felt you could come and see me, and I admire your concern for the city's wellbeing. But this whole thing is based on a very complex economic model. Now we've got guys with more PhDs than I have rooms in my house working on this thing around the clock. This is very complex stuff! It'd make normal guys like you and me tired just looking at it. If I understand your meaning, and I think I do, you'd like us just to count this new department as a silly mistake and pretend we never made it. Now as far as I'm concerned until those brainiacs upstairs share your sentiment, to do so would be downright irresponsible. It wasn't exactly smooth sailing when Russia switched to capitalism, but I don't think anyone would fault them for doing it. These things just take time settle down, Eddie Believe me, Clark City is in good hands. Do you understand?”

“I'm not sure I share your optimism, sir.”

“We just need to have some faith that this will all work itself out. Let's give this some more time!” His earnestness was dumbfounding, and though he avoided the issue presented to him the caliber of the evasion itself warranted immense admiration. He flashed that smile of his and broadened his shoulders. His face lit up with enthusiasm and it seemed like the room itself got brighter. His charisma was a monument. I almost believed him for a second.

“I suppose some more time couldn't hurt,” I said, dizzy with the mix of dejection and artificial pride. I'd hoped for a more receptive audience, but it was clear that his

optimism, or the guise of optimism, was not going to be compromised by the likes of me. He'd been blinded by his own rhetoric.

“I'm glad you've begun to come around,” the mayor said. “And even though I don't think it's totally necessary I'll run what you said by the eggheads.”

He winked.

“Thank you, sir.”

“And Eddie – next time make an appointment.”

“I will.”

The mayor's unwavering faith in his own absurd dogma made me question the fundamental conceit of our time: that every citizen's voice is not only heard but recognized. This doubt did not last long. The next day he held a press conference to address the issues I'd brought to him. I, apparently, was not the only one to find fault with the new system. Angry citizens huddled around the balcony, a collective tantrum of curses and bellowing. Men shouted their own personal grievances: woodsheds and lawns burned beyond salvage, filth littering the streets like ticker tape after a parade, teachers giving children obscene amounts of homework, the negative aesthetics of heroin addicts shuffling through the streets like lobotomy patients. I was off the clock, and so I only stood and watched. A police officer working riot control provoked a man until the necessity of taser fire became plausible. He did, and his click man clicked. As if by psychic transference the other officers got the same idea and attempted found their own fights. The clicks of quality agents competed with those of newspaper photographers. The police took less than kindly to the prospective visual record of their abuse of power. Police began to brawl with journalists. Journalists shouted their rights and got what pictures they could before their cameras were smashed. Click click, click click. It was a bad situation, bound to get worse. Ambulance drivers on the peripheries of the mob watched the scene play out with the anxious anticipation of a dog eyeing the can opener; the shit was a hair's breadth short of the fan, and there was big money to be made if it did. Critical mass was imminent, and as if on cue two spotlights on either side of the crowd boomed on towards the balcony, the clicks to end all others. The everyone froze and

waited. After a beat the mayor emerged and looked out over it all. He raised a single open hand.

“I think it has become appallingly clear that something here is not right,” he announced. The crowd murmured in agreement and some of the police officers hung down their heads, ashamed. The mayor continued. “Yesterday a man came to see me in my office. A click man. He said that he was worried about the state of things in Clark City. He said that he was worried the Department of Quality Assurance wasn't quite working out the way we hoped it would. I told him it was complicated, that we can't discount the whole thing because of a couple rough weeks. And, despite what I've just seen I still believe that. But he got me to thinking that maybe the system *could* use some tweaking. It seems I was right. So rather than abolishing the DQA, I propose this: the creation of a new department to oversee it, the Department of Quality Assurance Quality Assurance. Each quality agent, each click man, will distribute quality points not simply for each task completed by a city worker, but for each task completed and approved by an agent from the DQAQA. A trash bag hauled away by a sanitation worker won't be counted if he put it there in the first place. If one of our city's brave fire fighters extinguishes a blaze he set himself it won't do him a shred of good beyond saving face. Entrapment won't benefit the police, and blind clicking won't benefit click men. Efficiency, quality, will be assured.”

The crowd was mollified by his speech. His plan was just crazy enough to work.

The next week the Department of Quality Assurance Quality Assurance was up and running. At the end of each work day I was required to fill out a lengthy form documenting the reason for and circumstances surrounding each click I made. That form was then sent to my immediate DQAQA superior so that each quality point might be approved. It seemed logical at first; if I wrote in my report that a city-contracted tow truck driver hauled away a car after towing it in the first place to a hospital zone, the click was denied. To abuse one's power was to assure poverty. Like all things logical, though, it was too good to be true. DQAQA officers, answer men as they came to be called, got to be progressively stricter in their definition of acceptable clicks. Emergency room doctors were awarded quality points based on the severity of the injuries treated. If a wound

could have reasonably healed on its own the click didn't count. Biodegradable garbage no longer counted because it would eventually decay to the point that its removal became unnecessary. Police got rewarded only if the criminals they caught acted out of premeditation. The dousing of legitimate fires were denied if it rained later in the day. While the system no longer compelled abuse, it began to undermine its own cause for being. Workers started slacking. This time was different though – they weren't being paid for it. There still weren't many bars in town, and the City's employees gathered around battered wooden tables and pint glasses, bitching and trying to think of how to get paid. The idea that came was like the perfect name for a dog, obvious and obtuse at the same time. The DQAQA prevented each city employee from creating his own tasks to complete – fair enough. But what was to stop garbage men from burning down part of the prison to give both the firemen and police work? What was to stop the firemen from letting those inside breathe a bit more smoke that they could have to give the doctors more jobs? What was to stop the animal control people from sending out worthless junk mail for the mailmen's benefit, or the mailmen from enticing dogs into escape to help out animal control? If you scratch my back I'll scratch his, he'll scratch yours and the other guy's. There would be power in numbers. They should have thought of it sooner. I watched them plot from the other side of the bar, and a cold rattle ran down my spine.

The workers' collective urge to profiteer was no longer a disjointed mosaic but instead a cohesive whole. There was now a twisted intelligence to the chaos, and things became worse than ever. The plan went down like it was discussed. Animal control workers began a massive leaflet campaign with the bogus pretense of encouraging pets to be neutered. The mail men delivered the junk mail and the garbage men hauled it back away. It was enough to keep them both sitting pretty. Their thanks came in the form of sabotaging the zoo's locks in the dead of night. Animals, absurd animals roamed the streets as if trying to find a parade. I awoke that morning to a tiger sitting on top of my car and a man with what I hoped was a tranquilizer gun perched behind a pile of discarded leaflets, a click man beside him. During the walk downtown I saw a hippo in a reflecting pond, an eagle swooping towards a terrier, a rhinoceros mounting a Jeep. When I got to the office I tendered my resignation as an agent of the Department of Quality

Assurance. On the way back home I saw an animal control guy laying down a trail of bananas from an indifferent gorilla to a cage just big enough to fit it, and I couldn't help but laugh. Animal rights activists poured out from their covens to protect all the newly liberated beasts. The police roughed them a little bit extra, and the doctors in turn doped up a handful of guys from the psychiatric ward with a pharmaceutical cocktail not unlike PCP in its effects and let them loose. They tore their way through town until the police brought them in to the hospital to be treated. Click click click.

The firemen somehow got a hold of a few of the machines that make snow for skiing slopes and turned downtown into the North Pole, until the plows showed up a minute later. As a token of gratitude the drivers sacrificed an old rundown plow by crashing it through a wall in the wing of the penitentiary that had the most arsonists. Those criminals not injured in the hospital roamed the streets starting fires. I saw my whole block leveled by flame while the firemen concentrated their efforts on the other side of town, riddled with smaller, more numerous, and hence more lucrative fires. My neighbors and I stood in the street and gaped wide-eyed at the inferno that surrounded us. Mothers clutched wailing babies and fathers watched the homes they worked a lifetime to provide for reduced to ash.

“Jesus Christ Eddie,” cried the man from across the street, “you know people on the inside, what the hell is going on?”

“I wish I knew,” I said, “but I just quit.”

It looked like Apocalypse outside, and it had only been a week since the clandestine meeting in the bar, two months since the news story that sparked the whole thing. No matter where I looked something was either smoldering or on fire. Families roamed the streets destitute, to the delight of social services. Animals from the zoo still wandered through town. Clark City's employees The DQA was bound by the DQAQA to keep on clicking. The DQAQA was bound by the infant bureaucracy to keep on telling them to. Quality of life dropped precipitously while quality points multiplied and added up like fruit flies. The ones who used to serve, garbage men, police, mailmen, fire fighters, dog catchers and plow guys all took turns looting the city by their actions.

Meanwhile entire neighborhoods had nowhere to sleep, and for the first time in their lives nowhere to hide from cougars. The balance of power had shifted too quickly, with too little regard for the consequences. The shit had quite obviously hit the fan. The workers were making more money than the town had to pay them. The town was broke, its citizens broke, its garbage men living like kings.

People began to ask where the mayor was. The system was broken and it had taken their lives with it. It didn't make sense for him not to be doing anything. A group of us huddled around a steel drum filled with fire like hobos.

"I don't get it," someone said, "does he really think he's going to get reelected after all this? I'm sure as hell not going to vote for him."

"Guy must not have a shred of decency," someone else said.

A man in a rubber jacket walked to the drum and casually the put out the fire. As he walked away man man behind him clicked a button. We huddled closer.

"Yeah, I mean shit," someone said, "our taxes pay his salary."

It hit me like a medicine ball to the chest. The mayor was on the city's payroll. Was he receiving quality points? If so what would constitute the completion of a task? He must have been benefiting. Nothing else would explain his actions, his lack of action. I explained my theory to the group and we marched toward city hall for a third time, gathering people as we went. This time we did didn't bother waiting outside. The door was locked, so I picked up a pistol from the corpse of a police officer. He looked like he'd been mauled by something. I shot the lock and lead the mob inside. Garbage was everywhere and the lights flickered on and off as if writing out Morse code. We shoved open the door to the mayor's office. He stood behind his desk surrounded by luggage.

"Hello, Eddie," he said, grinning, "did you make an appointment this time?"

"Cut the shit," I said. "What's going on? You can't be oblivious to what's happening out there! It's bedlam! So how do you play into all this? What's keeping your bread buttered?"

"Quality points!" he chuckled.

"How?"

"It's a clause I slipped into the law. Every point for someone else is another one for me. I drafted the law, so they would have been impossible without me. Each click

contributes to my task. Same thing with the DQAQA. Doubled my income. In all honesty I never thought anything like this would happen, but sometime these things just do.”

“You bastard!”

“Yes, aren't I? Now that I'm a rich one I'm off to the Caymans.” He picked up his luggage. I turned and looked at the mob behind me. We moved in toward the mayor, stony determination on our faces. We beat him up, threw him off a bridge, elected a new mayor and repealed the bill. It was a messy process.