

# Drogo's Follies

Giovanni Drogo's mistakes, lessons learned, and suggestions on prevention.

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## The Tartar Steppe

In Dino Buzzati's [The Tartar Steppe](#), young Giovanni Drogo is sent to Fort Bastiani, a remote fortress on the edge of the Tartar Steppe. Like every other young officer in Italy, this is the last place he wants to be. There are no women, no peers, no fun. Other cities are considerably more attractive in terms of amenities and people. But like every other young officer in Italy, he accepts his assignment, albeit begrudgingly, having no other choice.

Arriving at Fort Bastiani, Drogo is met by the tenured soldiers on post and is quick to express his intent to leave this place as soon as allowed. This is met with a hearty chuckle and warning that it won't be that easy. Drogo soon learns about the reason for the fort: the Tartars. An ancient people that are "legend more than anything else", they pose a threat to Italian sovereignty and all it stands for, requiring soldiers to guard the border they would invade from.

Eventually the tailor, Prosdocimo, is introduced, and explains how he plans to leave within only a few short days:

I am here on a merely temporary basis. I expect to leave any day. But that the colonel won't let me go.

The tailor's assistants then explain the situation to Drogo:

Did you hear him? Do you know, sir, how long he has been in the Fort? Fifteen years, sir, fifteen accursed years, and still he goes on repeating the same story—I am here on a temporary basis, I expect to go any day... But he will never move from here. He and the

commanding officer and lots of others will stay here till they're done—it's a kind of illness. You're new, sir, watch out—you're newly arrived; watch out while there is time.

Drogo naively replies:

I am here for only four months. I haven't the slightest intention of staying.

Drogo eventually changes his mind without realizing it, rejecting a chance to be sent back to the city and sentencing himself to a life at the Fort.

Drogo has decided to stay; what keeps him there is a longing, but more than that alone—for perhaps the heroic cast of his thoughts itself would not have sufficed. For the time being he thinks he has done something noble, and is genuinely surprised to find himself a better man than he had thought. Only many months later, looking around him, will he recognise the paltry ties which bind him to the Fort.

Four months passing with the monotonous rhythm of routine duties had been enough to entammel him:

He had got used to the trips every so often with Morel to the nearest village...to the wild races up and down the level ground behind the Fort...to his room, to reading quietly at night, to the crack in the ceiling above his head...to the creaking of the door when it rained...All these things had now become part of himself and it would have hurt him to leave them. But Drogo did not know, he did not suspect, that his departure would have been an effort nor that life in th Fort would swallow up the days one after another, one exactly like the other, at a giddy speed. Yesterday and the day before it were the same; he could no longer have distinguished one from the other. Something which happened three days befoore or three weeks before seemed equally distant. Thus unknown to him time fled on its way.

Time continues to seep by in this manner, days and weeks and years blending in with one another, the quotidian routines lubricating the flow and blinding Drogo to its passing. His desire to stay there is fueled by the thought—calling it a chance is a long shot, historically speaking—of the Tartars invading.

Meanwhile time was slipping past, beating life out silently and with ever increasing speed; there is no time to halt even for a second, not even for a glance behind. "Stop, stop," one feels like crying, but then one sees it is useless. Everything goes by—men, the seasons, the clouds, and there is no use clinging to the stones, no use fighting it out on some rock in mid-stream, the tired fingers open, the arms fall back inertly and you are still dragged into the river, the river which seems to flow so slowly yet never stops.

Talks of war with the Northerners make their way around the Fort, followed by predictions of when it will happen. Six months some say, 10 others, and two years yet others. But time continued to move, turning

Drogo's a "sad yellow colour" and a regular "disheartening feeling of fatigue". The invasion is the final straw, causing him to faint with excitement after witnessing battalions marching in.

The penultimate chapter involves Drogo being taken from the Fort as his fellow soldiers prepare the battle of a lifetime: *their* lifetime. The one most have been waiting for since arriving 10, 15, 30 years ago. The one many had foregone a family and memories for. The one they'd believed was on the horizon, but never came to fruition. Drogo helplessly watched as he was carted away for his own good, away from his sad life's purpose.

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## Allegories

Drogo's story is an allegory for two concepts: waiting and complacency.

### Waiting

Many people wait for major events to just happen, blinding themselves to life and other less significant, but arguably still important, events passing them by. The anticipation of what *could be*, yet isn't, grips their attention and energy, pulling a majority of each towards the could-be event. Responsibilities are neglected, one-time opportunities forgone, and ambitions and desires from before forgotten.

The opportunity cost in these situations is immense, and a bird in the hand is often better than two in the bush. Much is to be lost and little to a lot is expected to be gained. People often overestimate the impact—both positive and negative—an event will have on their life. Those waiting for the big event expect a drastic increase in their quality of life, happiness, and so on, but the lucky few who do get to experience their event are left still wanting more, unsatisfied with what was supposed to be a massive impact on their life. While Drogo doesn't necessarily fit the bill since he didn't truly experience his life's big event, his opportunity costs can still be examined. He never experiences having a love life, much less a family. He never forms and develops a true career—sure, he attains the rank of major, becoming second-in-command of Fort Bastiani, but what does that really mean? He never ventures outside of the corridor between Fort Bastiani and his home city. Meanwhile his old friends have avoided the waiting disease:

his old friends have made careers for themselves, occupy important positions...his brothers are constantly away from home; one has married and lives in another city, another still travels; there are no more signs of family life in the living rooms

All of this in anticipation of an invasion by people no one truly knows exist (read: in anticipation of what is probably nothing). In the end Drogo's "prediction" (if it can be called that) paid off in the sense of it occurred, but he never experienced it and incurred a rather extreme cost in waiting for it: his life. The entirety of life was wasted waiting for that moment, and in the end he had nothing to show for it.

### Complacency

A friend once mentioned that ambition tends to decrease with age. This is true as a generalized statement. Ambition also (generally) decreases as a function of time spent in a condition. This can be reworded to say complacency (lack of ambition) increases as a function of time spent in a condition. These effects can be cumulative and self-perpetuating: as one ages, ambition decreases, making it less likely to leave the current condition, increasing complacency. The hurtful cycle continues on, leaving the person trapped in a sub-optimal, less-than-desired life.

The only way out is a burst of intrinsic motivation or an impactful, external event that forces a reevaluation of the situation, values, and goals. The motivation spike is difficult to come by. It can happen at random with little to no stimuli, or can be initiated if the trigger(s) are known and understood. Reliability of this is hit-or-miss, with spikes varying in size despite identical stimuli, random or coordinated.

The "impactful, external event" is required to be random, or at least unknown up to the time of its happening. Near-death experiences often result in this: workaholics have a heart attack, barely survive, then reevaluate their decision to work 80 hours a week for marginally more pay; soldiers lose a limb (or multiple, or their life), then reevaluate their decision to serve while supporting a family. These events can be experienced vicariously by others, albeit the effect may not be the same. A parent dies from a stress-induced heart attack, causing the children to reevaluate and reconcile career and life goals.

Drogo quickly becomes complacent after arriving at Fort Bastiani. He makes excuses for why he shouldn't leave, and ultimately rationalizes his decision to stay at the decrepit, long-forgotten Fort. He occasionally recollects the ambitions from his former life, but quickly dismisses them. His increasing rank is not due to hard work and diligence, but (seemingly) earned simply through time in the service.

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## Suggestions

Note that the following suggestions are entirely subjective, and based on personal goals and tolerances.

### Waiting

How long one waits for "the big event" should be determined based on probability, risk tolerance, and expected value earned from said event occurring.

Probability is obvious: higher chances of the event happening justify both waiting itself and waiting for longer durations.

Risk tolerance is related to probability in that if the event doesn't happen, some negative cost is incurred, whether it be real or in opportunistic terms. Regret is a powerful force, causing more of an effect when inaction is the driver. From Gilovich and Medvec's [\*The Experience of Regret: What, When, and Why\*](#):

When people are asked about their biggest regrets in life, it seems that they tend to focus on things they failed to do in their lives: "I wish I had been more serious in college"; "I should

have told my father I loved him before he died"; "I regret that I never went to Europe." As troubling as regrettable actions might be initially, when people look back on their lives, it seems to be their regrettable failures to act that stand out and cause greater grief.

If the event isn't realized, how much regret will be felt at the fact that the time was "wasted" (note that just because something didn't work out doesn't mean it wasn't a valuable experience—lessons can be learned, skills honed) and could have been better spent elsewhere (again, the experience during that time may be more valuable in the long-term). The intensity of the regret is likely to increase based on a few factors.

Longer waiting periods generally result in more opportunities lost along the way, assuming they aren't being pursued concurrently. Waiting a week loses little, but a year? A decade? Much can be lost in time periods on that scale, and can very easily be things that can't be recovered.

As mentioned, other tasks can be done while waiting. These may be supplementary to the main event or completely unrelated. If no progress is made towards any project while waiting, regret will increase.

Expected value is another obvious aspect: how much utility will the event provide? More utility justifies both waiting itself and waiting for longer durations. Interim or alternate activities' expected values should be considered before waiting for too long. Intentionally underestimating the expected value also provides value. Unless there is legitimate data or similar available, expected values are likely to be overestimated, causing some degree of disappointment if realized. If the the expected value was underestimated initially, then a happy surprise is in store.

In sum, if waiting is an option that's being considered, look at the probability the event occurs, personal risk tolerance and past experiences with inaction regrets, and the expected value the event is likely to return.

## **Complacency**

Complacency correctly has a negative connotation associated with it. It's a form of satisfaction coupled with laziness and lack of ambition towards greater goals. Drogo's mistake and problem was a potent combination of complacency and ignorance, the former of which requires some type of conscious recognition of the situation, the latter of which requires *no* conscious recognition of the situation. If the ignorance is in effect for too long, the likelihood of complacency occurring is greater. Excuses take effect: "I'm too old", "It's too late", "It's not worth it".

Catching this early and critically examining the situation is the best mitigation and/or prevention strategy, and the only way to do this is to regularly remind and review one's ambitions and status.

Reviews are best done on a time-based schedule, with some immediate reviews being done on an as-needed basis. Depth, and by extension intensity, should increase by time period, i.e., daily reviews are short and simple, weekly or monthly longer and more critical, and bi-annual or annual the longest and most critical.

An example review schedule could be as follows, adding in other frequencies (quarterly, bi-annual) as seen fit:

- Daily:
    - Are there any current pressing issues? Write it down to review at the next monthly.
    - Work on installing trigger-action plans.
    - Visually review all goals to keep them in mind. This can be done by printing out the goals, keeping them as a wallpaper/screensaver, etc.
  - Monthly:
    - Review pressing issues from daily review and outline plan to resolve issue.
    - Review current status of all short-term goals, the more important long-term goals, and methods of achieving both. Can the methods be improved?
  - Annually:
    - Review pressing items over last year and rate resolution (is it completely resolved, improved, not improved, worse?) and method of resolution. What works can be noted to be used for future issues.
    - Review current status of all long-term goals and methods of achieving them. Can the methods be improved?
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## See Also