

MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE

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They decided to re-model the roof of our office block so that flying aliens could not land on it. *They* had already sunk the foundations deeper so that amphibious aliens could not enter through the ground. The walls were already treble-thick, the phone cables had trip devices and the sewage pipes were blocked against back-surges.

They say that this organisation is so perfect that only aliens can stop it from being profitable now.

So when *they* told me, aliens from another world themselves, that I must re-draft the contract for the reconstruction of the roof to ensure it would be proof against alien landings, I meekly did as I was told.

I am weak and *they* are strong.

I could have said: “but if the aliens do land I doubt if the courts will be open to give us judgment. If the aliens do land, what do you want me to do – take out an injunction?”

But nobody answers *them* back. We are all weak. *They* say; we do. That is what management is all about. *They* say; we do – no matter how bizarre the order.

What I should have said was “*Alien invasion!!! Are you crazy?!*”. How am I supposed to define “alien invasion” in a legal contract?”

Perhaps the reason that I did not say that was because I, secretly, sit at my desk day-after-day and hour-after-hour praying that aliens will come and take me away. *They*, the people who come into my office with these insane instructions, frighten me more than aliens with scalpels, lasers and space-saucers ever could.

They slither around this building that resembles a huge spaceship. The silently closing doors, subdued colours and quietly glowing technology. It is hermetically sealed off from the outside world – our own gym, our own restaurant, no need to go outside.

They talk about this place as though it were a temple and *they* talk about what we do here as though it were a religion.

“Have you seen the predictions for the next quarter cycle?” “The chairman believes ...” “We must have faith in the market.” “God, I love working here.” “The corporation’s practice manual is my bible.” “Work smarter, not harder.”

¹ In which an office drone in an enormous corporation dreams of flying while his insane chairman blames the corporation’s failures on malevolent alien interference. The drone shares his weakness and his hypocrisy with us: praying that aliens will take him away. Most of all he fears *them*, the corporation’s devoted cadre of brainwashed middle management who believe anything the corporation tells them. It is an ennui with which anyone who has worked in a large, modern corporation can identify.

Alright, so the last one is not religious – but around here you would think it was. After all it involves a distortion of space-time that only a god could achieve. I already work a 12-hour day. Since my assistant, Mandy, was downsized I now have to do her work as well as my own. Quite literally the corporation wants 24 hours of each available day.

Ironically, they let me stay away on Sunday because I pleaded religious observance.

Many of the people who work here sought out this job – can you believe that people from the real world would ever *want* to work here? – after reading a book called *Masters of the Universe*. That book told them – apparently in such a way that they believed it – that the people who trade money in places like this ruled the world. And with such simple propaganda they come in their droves to be burned alive in the furnace ovens of our trading floors. Each new trade scorches a little more of someone’s soul.

Now that things are going a little wrong with our profit & loss account, our insane chairman has told us all that he thinks our falling stock-price can only be attributable to alien interference. No-one here can remember a time when we last made a profit. But we have so much money that it does not seem to matter. Too many important people rely on us for their loans and so forth that they dare not let us fall. The chairman thinks that our failure is caused by aliens and that only his swami can protect us.

Needless to say the PR people took their time over his original draft of that press release and modified the language from “profits have been hit by an insurgent force of aliens which is using gamma rays against us” to read “unknown forces have created exceptional volatility in global markets”. Everyone on the outside thought our chairman meant financial market movements. We all knew, and *they* knew, that he meant aliens. To most people reading that press release I am sure that he might as well have written it in Venusian.

Yet, none of *them* really disagree with the chairman’s alien gamma ray theory. You see, *they* say that our corporation is perfect. It must be a success because we all spend so long, day-after-day, minute-after-minute, conference call after conference call, making it perfect. It is considered by many doctoral theses funded by the corporation to be the most perfect human organisation in the known world. Therefore, only aliens could be preventing it from being profitable.

These are the things of which I am guilty. I am a hypocrite and I am weak.

Perhaps that is not a particularly damning list. In itself it discloses nothing which is necessarily a crime. But I am not talking about crime.

I am talking about guilt.

These are the things of which I am guilty. I am a hypocrite and I am weak.

I am aware that this requires a little more detail before pronouncing sentence. Surely sentence follows establishment of guilt?

I am a hypocrite because I dream incredible dreams which I do not attempt to fulfil. With each passing day I betray myself. I know that if I really applied my mind to it I could fly – but I never do. Night after night I crouch, sweating, on my window-sill and dare myself to jump. I never do. I am too weak even though I know in my heart of hearts that if I did jump I would prove that I can fly.

Every morning the alarm rings at 7.00 am and I run like a frightened rabbit into my tiny bathroom and scrape a razor across my dehydrated face. One bank holiday weekend I gave up shaving and started to grow an extravagant beard. *They* had circulated a memorandum requiring all employees to be clean-shaven unless they had a religious reason for not doing so. That bank holiday weekend I flirted with the idea of growing a beard just to see what *they* would do. If anyone knew, I knew as one of the corporation's lawyers that *they* could not ban us from wearing beards.

On the first morning after the weekend I shaved as I always shave: scraping that thin sheet of metal across my face and hating myself for doing it.

My employer does not exist. I work for a company. In England we have companies – although *they*, the Americans in management, insist on calling it a “corporation”. We do have corporations too but they are something different under English law. The company which employs me does not exist. It is an entity for which we all work. It only exists because we all conspire to work for it. Our participation makes the corporation exist: without our complicity it would be nothing.

The company is a god. A “god” is any entity which does not have any tangible existence but which exists because people believe that it exists. Employees who work for companies work for gods. Every company has a logo: that is its mark, its sign, its rune. They come to the office block each day, see their god's rune over the doorway, see it on the letter-headed stationery and see it on their pay-slips. So they believe that the company exists. It becomes a god: it has no tangible presence but everyone believes it exists.

Truly all of the employees work for a god – a being we never see, which we know we will never see, but in which we believe. *They* play softball and wear its rune, its logo on *their* t-shirts. *They* dance about in the gym and drink mineral water from plastic bottles with its logo on the side. In return for this supplication our benevolent god delivers us enough money to pay for food once a month.

I work for a famous investment bank: G. We tell people that we work for G as though that defines who we are. At parties when I tell people who I work for they bow their heads very slightly. They mutter at what a joy it must be to work for such an

organisation. They bend their knee before my god. My god is not the god they work for but they know that my god is a very powerful one. You see, I work for a god – a bank – which has the magical power of money.

We live in a world of gods – all of them with their little runes, their little branded logos. At parties I notice all the little runic gods: labels on t-shirts like the Nike swoosh, Adidas stripes, drinking Coca-Cola, spilling it on Lacoste polo shirts.

As a bank my god has more god-like power than their gods: my god has money.

So much money. And that money does not exist either. The “money” which my unseen, non-existent-but-yet-existing god owns is built entirely on belief. Other people and other gods believe that my god has money. It is a bank and therefore we all assume that it has money. In truth, my god has the largest credit line in history. Everyone believes my god has money and so it does have money because other people give things to us when we show them our god’s rune. Our rune, the letter G contained in a neat square with a determined arrow forwards: [G>].

With that imagined money my god can make magic happen. With a promise of the transfer of a number on a computer screen (again a small televisual display of powerful runes) my god is able to order the construction of huge office blocks, the acquisition of food and the ruination of competitors. My god is a vengeful god.

And its other source of magic is to make people slave for it. I slave for my god even though I stopped believing in it some time ago. When the alarm rings every morning I hate myself for the weakness which made me set it the night before. Every night before sleep comes I have the same battle: whether to set the alarm or not. I am guilty of knowing that I could just not turn up. That I could lie. But somehow in this panoptic space I know that my god would be watching me and that it would know. It would tell *them*. I would displease my god.

Some mornings, in the early dark, I leave a voice-mail for my devout secretary which pleads illness. I do it so well that *they* cannot believe that I am not ill. My secret is this. I lie on the floor in the cold of early morning before I have spoken to anyone. My voice sounds terrible then. I leave a wheezy, feeble-but-not-so-feeble message claiming to have been up all night. I am sure that across the phone and on a voice-mail playback that I sound very ill. Then I go back to bed for a while and later I go out.

I never enjoy those days out as much as I should. I have this feeling that the god I cannot believe in is nevertheless watching me. Watching me out in the world, spending money in shops owned by other people’s gods. Really living.

I am a hypocrite. I know that I should not wear the global logos. I know that my trainers were manufactured in Thailand. I think I can see the blood of a fifteen year old girl caught up in the threads on the uppers of my trainers. Blood she lost as she

pricked her fingers in some sweatshop. I can see her, having lied about her age to get the job to earn money for her family, weeping with tiredness and stubbing her thumb on a needle. Weeping with tiredness at the end of a fifteen hour shift at the end of ten consecutive days. I know I should not wear the logos but I am a hypocrite and I am weak.

I drink the brown chemical drinks we all drink. I know I should not. I know it makes me unwell, that it rots my teeth, that it too exploits me. But I lapse too often. It is too difficult sometimes to find another kind of drink. It would required me to walk too far and to search too hard when I want that drink immediately. When I want that sugary, metallic rush within an instant, as befits my rights as a consumer. I also know that that is their plan – to make it too difficult to find another kind of drink by flooding the market – and that I have simply surrendered to them in my weakness.

I know all these things. And yet I am too lazy to do anything about it. I am waiting for the aliens to come for me because I am too lazy to go and find them for myself.

They watch me every minute of every day. *They* are the people who eel around the workplace – flown in from the USA to make sure that we lazy Europeans work harder, to show us what a real work ethic looks like. *They* wear cheap cotton shirts that are too tight and so thin that *they* show the t-shirts *they* are wearing underneath. *They* wear too much after-shave. If they are women they wear coat-dresses in blue with shiny gold buttons. Some of *their* women also wear too much after-shave sometimes. *They* all drink diet cola to keep “pepped up” or *they* drink our vile vending machine coffee from mugs with “[G>]” on the side. *Their* window ledges are littered with clear plastic cubes inside which are cards the size of formal invitations commemorating bond issues *they* have worked on. *They* have trophies celebrating contracts where simple pieces of paper were sold!! *They* worship paper and runes and false gods.

They talk about their invisible partners back home in the USA. *They* think Bruce Springsteen is the last word in culture and berate *their* televisions for having insufficient channels. CNN plays in every common room in the building to keep *them* in radio contact with the mother ship at the Federal Reserve Bank in the USA. Even the “European” news prefers to show footage of the US president merely walking across a lawn instead of reporting the wars, earthquakes and poverty happening in the rest of the world.

When some of *them* first arrive here, *they* are surprised to find that London is not just north of Boston. *They* complain that things like toilet seats, pizza and the rain are not the same as in the USA. *They* say:

“you speak our language – you should be like us. The words “colour” and “labour” have no “u”. There is no “u”, there is no you, there is only us.”

Oh, and despite all of the dress codes as to what you can wear to work for dress-down Friday and when meeting clients, they still consider wearing cowboy boots with a suit to be smart.

I would rather work with aliens. Aliens have more chance of sharing some aspects of my culture instead of simply selling me theirs. And yet still the aliens do not come.

The following story might be apocryphal but Mandy assured me it was true. One of *them* went to a meeting in Italy to make a presentation to prospective clients. He talked for an hour using lots of PowerPoint slides and then he thanked them for coming into work on their day off to listen to him. The Italians looked at him, shifting uneasily in their gorgeously tailored Armani clothes, and asked him what he meant by “coming in on their day off”. He pointed out that they were all wearing “sports coats” – his word, which demoted them to some kind of tracksuit – and they pointed out painfully slowly that this was how they dressed for work. Mandy promised me that she had been there. That she had crammed her fist into her mouth to stop herself from laughing, gagging back the beautiful embarrassment of it.

She had been disciplined on returning to London. She had not received a pay increase that year. *They* called her into *their* office and solemnly handed her an envelope which contained a letter with the words “Pay increase: nil” typed across it. *They* then proceeded to dismantle her character and human worth while reading from a buff-coloured file.

Mandy bought a blue coat-dress that weekend and began to drink her herbal tea (or, “-erbal tea” as they called it) from a mug with a “G” on the side. In fact the mug read: “G-ee I love it here”. The hyphen in “G-ee” ensured that we all caught the joke. Despite Mandy’s gruelling year of obsequious devotion to the job and all her unpaid overtime *they* sacked her twelve months later. *They* claimed she had stolen her mug even though she had a receipt for it. She knew she had a claim for unfair dismissal or at least for her money in lieu of notice – she was a good lawyer with a first class degree – but she claimed she was too broken and just wanted to cut all ties.

My god is a vengeful god.

I think that I am perhaps suffered – with my English paunch and my striped English school ties – as though some sort of complex whipping boy. Occasionally I am sure that trainees are brought past the tiny Perspex cube in which I work in the middle of a floor full of research analysts just to show them what a heretic looks like.

More and more my panoptic work space bothers me. My rank as a lawyer entitled me to an office. So they constructed this cube which just meets the legal minima – I measured it one Saturday morning – but which is made entirely out of Perspex. There is no place in my cube from which I am not entirely visible to the people around me. And so I cannot rest. It is truly panoptic – like Bentham’s design for the Panopticon prison – in that I am totally visible to my gaolers so that even if *they* were not actually watching me I would still behave as though I was being watched.

Sometimes, after half-an-hour bent over some papers pretending to work (but secretly drawing aliens on a legal pad) I would look up sheepishly to realise what I had

thought was someone watching me was actually a stack of photocopying paper. I used to encourage the people who delivered the paper to stack it up against the wall of my cube and so form a small wall. Unfortunately, one of *them* would come instantly and have it moved away.

I even came to consider brackets, when used in typing a sentence, to be a way of concealing an idea from someone reading the rest of the text around it. I began to hide my thoughts and fears in the act of typing between brackets. My work became littered with parentheses. Small pockets of resistance protected from the reader's gaze by their very inscrutability.

I also knew that the software programme at work had a "supervisor" function which allowed the "supervisor" to watch everything I typed as I typed it. My computer supervisor was one of *them*. There were the rolls of flab on *her* fat thighs which hung out of the bottom of *her* short coat-dresses, *her* tales of the legendary "Nigel" and half *her* lipstick on *her* teeth. *She* watched everything I typed.

You think I am paranoid now but *she* generated statistics on how fast I typed, how many mistakes I made and so on. My annual appraisal always pointed out that I typed too slowly. I pointed out that I was a lawyer and therefore required to think carefully and not simply to type fast. *They* pointed out that, according to *their* statistics, I still typed too slowly. I knew that the "supervisor" – an administrator brought from the mother ship to spy on me – could watch my screen from *her* computer as I typed. Apparently *she* was supposed to maintain our quality assurance processes. In fact *her* job was to watch me type.

So, I would type legal gibberish. "On the 14th inst. allowing for polar additional flange estoppel (hereafter "cruet clauses") reaming nineteen as hereunto thereforeafter unstatedforsooth trouser drawer grandfathered reversible trinket bonds" – and so on. I could see *her* fat face screwed up with incomprehension.

I needed a cover to make *them* think that I was both strange and harmless but also committed. At work there was a Christian affairs discussion group. *They* work for this devil-god called [G>] and yet *they* go through the motions of believing in a Christ from two-thousand years ago. All of *them* would go to the meetings. And I would wail louder than any of *them*. Talking of His grace. Only occasionally allowing myself to become puzzled and wonder whether I loved the bank more than Him.

Like all of these self-deluding Christians none of *them* can really believe in the supernatural. *They* do not believe there is actually an entity out there called "god". *They* believe in quarterly profits reports and market share statistics. To establish my religious credentials and so keep me from work on a Sunday I had to attend this group. It met at lunch-time under the chairmanship of one of the senior partners – definitely one of *them*, despite the fact that he often fucked his trainee in the toilet late at night – and so I was able to waste work-time by dragging out the group's meetings with questions about the Semenites, a little-known Judean sect I had invented. And my tactic was to believe in god more than anyone. My devotion terrified and unsettled *them*: just as *their* devotion to G terrified and unsettled me.

In time the roof was covered with small irregularly set panels which made it impossible for alien spacecraft to land flat on our buildings. The panels themselves were blessed by a local priest, who now has a new roof for his church, and also charged with positive energy by the chairman's faith healer. This small swami follows the chairman around each of our office blocks in 92 world cities blessing the panels on each roof. I understand that the chairman intends to levitate all of our offices, with the swami's help, when the aliens finally do come.

And I have to draft the contracts.

We want cash damages if the buildings will not rise. A restraining order against an eclipse of the moon and a motion filed against interference by comets. My moon-landing clauses have become my favourites. I stick them on the walls of my cube because I do not have any of those oblong Perspex statues everyone else has to celebrate their bond issues.

On the front of each of our office buildings is our logo, our attempt at sidual magic, our rune. It will protect us from aliens.

I am a hypocrite. I could have murdered our chairman and I failed to. If I had killed him it might have saved Mandy and some of us. His death might have made *them* realise that our god cannot save us from death.

I had drafted a clause for the Frankfurt office. The particular concern our chairman had was that aliens might come by means of the river which ran alongside the office building and try to climb through the windows while his swami was otherwise occupied on the roof.

Only that morning I had heard our chairman being respectfully listened to by a CNN economics reporter as he gave his prognosis for the global economy – or rather the American economy, it's the same thing – in the coming quarter. The PR people had warned him not to mention the aliens in public because the aliens themselves were bound to be monitoring his broadcast. When he asked whether the aliens listened to all of his conversations *they* reassured him that his after-shave, blessed by the swami, would prevent the aliens from overhearing ordinary conversations. Obviously the after shave could not have the same protective effect via the television.

The PR people were very worried that the chairman would talk about the aliens. Finally they convinced him that to discuss them would simply be to play into the aliens' hands. He had only shown a sign of weakness when the interviewer had asked him why the chairman thought that rates had gone "through the stratosphere".

Even though I had been deputed to advise the Frankfurt office, I knew no German law. So I was guessing whether or not there were any restrictions in German law on alien abduction clauses. I could not face the embarrassment of approaching German counsel and so had simply made up German composite nouns on my computer. I noticed my supervisor almost fall into a dead faint while trying to read this.

While I was enjoying torturing *her* with this pleasant task, the chairman had summoned me to see him. My heart began to hammer in my chest. Had they realised I was writing gibberish? Surely the chairman would not waste his time on dealing with me himself though?

When I arrived, I sensed that *they* had warned him that *they* thought I was not taking matters sufficiently seriously. *They* had noticed me turning pale when *they* demanded clauses in the contracts to pay damages if gamma rays short-circuited our computers. I made my way to the top floor and waited in an ante-room until I was called into the celestial presence of our chairman and his swami.

The chairman's arrival in any office outside the USA was greeted with twitching, reverential devotion by *them*. I was instructed on entering the room that I was to kiss his ring and to genuflect deeply, reverentially.

As I entered I saw the swami for the first time. I had expected a small man in a loincloth. Instead I was faced by a wiry New Yorker wearing Donna Karen spectacles staring at a Bloomberg screen while ordering sushi over the internal phone. His thick hair was flicked up into curls just above his collar in a dandyish fashion. It was only when he turned to face me that I realised his perfect profile had disguised the fact that his eyes were far too close together either side of a pinched, hooked nose. He wore ludicrously circular spectacles which he adjusted with his tanned, manicured hands. Added to his height, this gave him the appearance of a Secretary Bird.

I had always assumed that the swami would be lit from within by a mixture of hallucinogens and a mystical second sight. Instead he tapped incessantly at a laptop computer, reading off columns of figures and barking comments sotto voce to a doll-like assistant in a kind of black sarong. The chairman seemed to bask in this intensity.

As I entered the room the chairman was removing his trousers. I turned to leave, thinking I had inadvertently interrupted him at his toilet. Instead I was prodded to proceed from behind and heard one of *them* mutter at me "what are you doing? Have you no idea how to behave?"

Etiquette appeared to dictate that we watched the chairman change clothes in front of us. It was the prerogative of the truly great to treat the presence of other people with such careless disdain. About a dozen employees buzzed around the room but I seemed to be the only one who was disconcerted by the sight of our chairman's lightly haired knees clambering into a pair of linen lounging trousers as he talked.

“Tell New York to buy into Nixon not Ipsolon, crash Diapon but hold Sentilon. Get me savlon, a direct line to Avalon and turn my Reuters on.”

Through this rhythmic monologue he had been rooting around the inner cavities of his head pursuing a remarkably long trail of snot which he almost lovingly dispatched into a handkerchief passed to him by one of *them*. The passer of the hankie took it back reverentially and continued to clutch it for some time. We all circulated round the alpha male: me, the swami and *them*.

“I want to remind you of the main threat to this company: aliens.”

As this peroration began I was pushed out onto the balcony behind the chairman’s disappearing back. The chairman’s balcony was orientated at the same angle in the building as the vent on Pharaoh Rameses’ tomb in the Great Pyramid. I made my way quickly up the steep steps behind the chairman. I could hear occasional words like “Roswell”, “cosmic energies” and “malevolent comets”. My attention was distracted by the fact that he was readjusting his underwear at the time so it was possible that I missed some of it.

Eventually I drew level. The swami had appeared by my side. I was only absorbing part of what he was saying. Partly that was because I had retreated into the hidden place in my mind where I go when *they* talk to me. Partly it was because the chairman was leaning out over the 14th floor balcony edge. He was talking at a normal level despite the wind and so I would have been compelled to lean out next to him to hear anything he said. It seemed to be more nonsense about alien invasion, ancient Egypt and the legend of Arthur Pendragon.

What captivated me was the fact that he was about to lean out sufficiently far that with one light shove I could have sent him spiralling down to a messy death on the street below. Then, remarkably, I caught the swami’s eye standing on the other side of the chairman from me. From behind those ridiculously round glasses he seemed to be winking at me. In fact he was working his eyebrows so as to indicate that I should push the chairman over. At first he was smiling and then his face changed into a look of earnest encouragement. I could hardly believe it.

And then I was seized by the most terrible dilemma of all: if I killed the chairman I could both make it look like an accident and also set us all free of *them*. Just one tiny movement would do it. One tiny movement of the knee, hand or elbow. He was leaning so far out now and blathering something about “quality assurance”. The swami held me entranced. Maybe it’s just an excuse but that look froze me to the spot. The more he urged me on, the less was I capable of movement.

In time, the chairman stood up again. Said something more about “quality assurance” and “the menace from Mars” and strode back inside.

The swami took a half-step towards me and spoke in a near whisper: “we are all weak – but we cannot rely on them to come and save us. Better luck next time.”

And with that he was gone. Back to his sushi, his laptop and his porcelain assistant.

The god for which I work has money. You and I made the god for which I work. We made it because we believed in it.

Things are only the way they are because we say that they are this way. If we change our minds we can change our world. We could make these false gods disappear simply by ceasing to believe in them.

That is all it would take. If you and I simply refused to believe in this world fuelled by money then all those gods and their little runes would disappear. And so would all the fears which hold you enslaved.

Until then, we will have to keep believing that the aliens will come to collect us. My bag is packed. Is yours?