

The Review

By Phil Young

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'Swissshhh'

The doors slid closed behind the crumpled figure as he shuffled over to the reception counter.

"Good Morning sir! How may I help you?"

"Mr Gaul... I've got an appointment with Mr. Gaul. At 9."

"Certainly Sir. I'll tell him you're here."

She picked up the handset and pressed a key or two.

"Hi Sal. Iva's 9am is here. Okay... thanks."

"Please take a seat. Mr Gaul will be with you soon. Would you care for a coffee...?"

Tea...? Water?"

"No thank you miss", and with that he shambled across to a large leather lounge and submerged himself in its billowing upholstery.

The old gentleman barely had time to scan the cover of the top magazine on the coffee table when a tall man in a dark suit entered the lobby. A smile forced its way between his lips as he extended his hand.

The resultant greeting nearly lifted the visitor off his feet with its energy. The host was trying a little too hard perhaps.

"Did Rita offer you a coffee...? Tea...? Water...?"

"No. I mean yes she did, but no thanks. I'll be fine."

"Okay then, let's go into the board room" he said and ushered the smaller figure through the full height doors and into a long room that contained the quintessential conference table. It was surrounded by high-backed dark leather office chairs that sat at all angles, as if the room had been hastily emptied by a large gathering, perhaps quite recently.

The old man sat where he was directed, two seats from the head of the table. The chair felt warm. He took a stone tablet from his pocket and placed it on the table in front of him, brushing a little dust from the chiselled text as he did so.

Mr Gaul then made himself comfy at the head of the table and opened a leather bound folder that lay in front of him. The brass corners glinted in the down lights over the liquor cabinet as he turned the front cover over. He clicked the pen in his right hand and glanced at the form in front of him before peering up at his visitor.

"Thank you for coming in. It's good to see you again. It's been what... five years since our last review?" he said checking the date again on the document.

"I know these contract reviews can be a bit of a nuisance but I..., we, wanted to go over a few things this time, in light of recent developments."

"Umm..." came the noncommittal response. The visitor was looking a bit uncomfortable although that was nothing new by the look of him.

"I was looking through your Key Performance Indicators and noticed that there's been very little change in them, since the first signing back in 2000. That's about eight hundred opportunities to update the service level agreement that have been missed. What's more, I can't find one instance where you've even met much less exceeded your KPIs."

The crumpled coat shifted nervously. His whole existence hinged on this contract and things weren't looking too good for an extension. He had been half expecting this at each review over the past few hundred years and it looked like the time had finally come.

'I must say' he mused to himself, 'They've finally got wise to it. I certainly slipped up there. Oh well, I guess it's time to pay the piper.'

"Now this first one, here. 'Provide spiritual peace and security for human kind'. From my reading and personal experience, there has never been a time when there wasn't a war going on and I've yet to meet a victim of war who feels secure, much less experiences spiritual peace. There have been short periods in history when you seemed to be making progress on that front but recent events appear to be dragging us in the other direction again. How do you explain that?"

"It's the free will thing. It doesn't matter what I try to do. Man just gets greedy and does what he wants to try and fill his basest desires."

"But didn't you create the 'Free will thing' as you so quaintly put it?"

"Well yes, I guess."

"Did you or didn't you? Because if you did, then you must have known all along that there would be trouble meeting this KPI. It says in your manuals that you did."

"If it says so then I must have, mustn't I?"

"Okay. That being the case I'm seeing the possibility of a case of misrepresentation on your part when signing the original contract, perpetrated of course in every subsequent extension. That's 800 instances of intentional fraud. That'd put a pretty penny in the coffers of the PTB if we chose to pursue it.

What do you intend to do about it?"

"Well I could smite everyone. Pass it off as Armageddon maybe." That would satisfy quite a few people. There'd be no-one left to fight and nothing to fight over anyway. I would need a new contract though to take custody of the resulting lost souls for eternity and I suspect that would stretch your budget somewhat."

"Don't try and pull that one on me. The lost souls would be the result of your screwing things up. You create them, you take care of them. Should be easy. You do claim to be omnipotent after all."

"Well here's the thing..."

"What! You're going to try and back down on omnipotence now. Next thing you'll be claiming a lack of omniscience too."

He was enjoying this. The words rolled off his tongue in a way that he felt just oozed linguist elegance. (He was wrong of course).

He straightened himself up in the chair.

"It says here in your contract documents that you're all powerful and you can see all and hear all." He tapped the cover of the Koran that topped a pile including the Bible, the Guru, a bunch of Vedic scriptures, a copy of the Torah and some Buddhist texts that were erroneously added by an over zealous middle manager back in the late 19th century.

"Well I can. Or more precisely I could, but now you've taken over the omniscient market with things like CCTV and Skype, and what with the spread of materialism, there are fewer and fewer people who believe in me. You might not have figured it out but the less support there is for my existence then the less power I have. In fact do you realise you're playing with fire as it were, just questioning my contract? You'd do well to think carefully before terminating our agreement. It might not go well for you."

"Are you threatening me?"

"No. Not all. Just pointing out the logic of a potentially bad outcome if you maintain your attitude."

"Sounds like a threat to me. We don't take lightly to threats here at the PTB."

"I think perhaps you've embraced one of my less sensible creations a bit too vigorously. Ego, I mean. Remember who created you."

"What? You, created me? I think not. I am a self-made man..."

"In which case you lost a few of the parts during construction. Might I suggest they were your marbles?"

Mr Gaul's face went red and his blood pressure rose rapidly.

"How dare you, you, you little weasel. As head of the PTB I could make you disappear... like that" and he clicked his fingers in the old man's face. "And take that rock off the table while you're at it. You'll damage the walnut."

"As you wish." The target of his vitriol complied with pleasure, sliding it heavily onto his lap, leaving substantial gouges in the polished surface.

You would almost think steam erupted from the ears of the taller man.

In his amusement the other started to raise his hand as if to make it so, then thought better of it. He was tired of this conversation. In fact he was just plain tired of everything. 'Enough is enough' he thought. 'Some experiments are destined never to work out.' It seems this was one of those and he pushed back the chair and began to rise to his feet.

"Where are you going?" said the younger man. "We're not done here yet."

"Oh I think so", came the reply.

"Very well then. The contract is terminated. You no longer exist to us" and with that the old man disappeared with an audible 'pop'; followed closely by Mr Gaul, Rita, Sal, the PTB, the PTB building, the city, the country, the planet, etc. etc. etc...

Sometimes it pays to leave well enough alone.