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The Mysterious Trip of Mark Markethrudder

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One frosty December morning I left my abode in a hurry. I was wearing my best three-piece suit, perfect for something between a secular party, a funeral, and an expensive theatre performance. On my head was a foilinder. Don't worry, please, the foilinder is a personal invention of mine and you could not have heard of it.

See, I don't like the way people make protective headgear out of tinfoil. These people, most of whom are crazy conspiracists, have no sense of taste at all. But I'm a different kind: my beliefs are irrefutable and I do have a sense of taste. I wanted to keep my mind protected from external energies, vicious vibes and fierce forces, and the context of the meeting I hurried to obliged me to look distinguished. I bought a classic top hat cylinder at a flea market and wrapped it in foil. Thus the foilinder was born.

My head was buzzing. Not because of the foilinder, of course – it was comfortable enough – my brain was swarming with thoughts, like a horde of bees scurrying inside the hive. I strode to my destination, keeping the wind from taking off my hat. To lose it would have been an

intolerable fiasco. Without the foilinder, the Entity and its high-tech minions would hear me, analyse me, control me, show me each and every thing, and force me to buy it all. That's what they do. The Entity feeds on people's desires and controls their attention. The more pseudosatisfied desires are, the stronger the Entity becomes, because then you want more and more and more and more. They know everything about you. They know what you want and don't want. Together with its minions, the Entity makes you wish for things you would never have thought to wish for using the most intricate and advanced methods. Too bad your mind is so brainwashed that you're afraid to even think about it. You just flip through colourful pictures, bewitched and beguiled, under the sway of the invisible force. You've been too reckless in relation to your digital trace and now your desires are compromised.

I know how it happens. I know what it does to people.

First you mention to your friend in a café that it would be fun to buy new green socks (with dinosaurs), the next day green socks are everywhere on the internet. The green socks become ineluctable.

First, you open Instagram to check up how your friends are doing, the next hour you spend watching ads interspersed with funny videos and sometimes faces of your friends.

First, for the sake of "better experience" and, oh my God, "better ads", you trust apps your personal data: email, phone number, places you go, lists of friends and preferences; then, they make it public "by mistake",

or sell it to each other and use it to manipulate what you eat, watch, listen to, laugh about, your interests and even political beliefs.

First, you google what is crypto money and blockchain, the next day you are a shitcoin gambler.

Conversations online and offline, things you put out on public display, the random clicks and crumbs of thoughts - they track it all. It's not Russian hackers who do it, it's your beloved tech companies. They say they don't spy on you but they lie. I decided to end this and threw my phone into a river when my famous namesake (who is also a robot, the Entity's emissary) told the world that "It's all a conspiracy theory". Shameless denial. The sign I needed to prove my point. It's not a conspiracy and it's not a theory.

Even private individuals are involved. You open your feed and all you see are your ex-classmates and friends are trying to sell you something. *I'm a successful entrepreneur now, my book can teach you how to get rich like me for just $19.99. Special offer for a friend.* Screw you, my dear Richie Rich. *I'm an esoteric-spiritual-magical-whatever-yoga trainer, I can open your chakras to good vibes. Book an online session for $49.49 (P.S. – the price goes up in a week).* Shut up. *I'm working at a company that can make you wealthy. You just need to make a deposit and invite two people to do the same. Easy money, friend.* Be a friend to yourself and shut the hell up. Shut up, you all! (If you are one of those people – my sincere condolences. I hope at least your parents like you.)

But I neither blame you nor the tech abominations. You are either in

the game or not. No half measures. I tried to build apps myself but soon realised it's not possible without serving the Entity, and quit. We all are just minions, ants who play their part in collective work to support the colony, the queen.

The Entity leans toward your face, breathes the odour of oniomaniac plague into your nose, and whispers, gently: "Do you fancy this, little boy?" It has a velvet voice with a touch of hoarseness. "I know you want it. See how it can make your life better. The dream is one tap away." While you are absorbing the spell, losing yourself in the imagery of better things, better life, better self, the Entity fastens the unseen strings to your weak-willed soul.

And pulls.

Only I, like a knight in my aluminium helmet, can cut the strings and bring you salvation from the puppeteer. I just need to figure out how to do it. No one seems to believe me and treat this seriously enough hence I have no choice but to use the enemy's methods. And I will learn the secret today.

The whole world is the lotus-eater's island, and I am Odysseus in it.

I came out of my quiet alley onto the high street. Frayed three-floor buildings disappeared and I found myself surrounded by the treeless endlessness of shopping malls. I walked into a long arcade, the only part of the old town that wasn't swallowed by the progress. Both the bravest and the most desperate often hide in the epicentre. Advertising,

advertising, advertising again. A billboard here, a billboard there. The least harmless form of it but still... The eyes of the invisible God, your reflection in the abyss. *Vendo animum imperium.*

People and advertisers started waking up and populating the empty city again. A flyer. No, I don't want it, man. Get off. Leave me alone. Doesn't work on me; I don't give in, I'm protected. Soon, very soon. My thoughts and desires are mine and only; no one can use them. Not you, not the Entity.

I left the arcade to see the young sun. Perhaps, for the last time, who knows? What are the odds you return from the underworld? One just needs a tiny bit of luck. I quickened my pace to overtake a black cat and turned onto another gloomy lane. Gentle breeze, the smell of ammonia. Away from the noise.

I turned right from the lane, protecting the foilinder from the wind's surprises, and finally approached my destination, an ordinary old building, dingy and shabby but not overly so: two large trees, some leftover leaves, a stucco façade, two gargoyles in the shade, one missing an ear. No sign, no banner. A fleeting relief developed into a gurgling mixture of feelings: awe, anxiety, anticipation, and exquisitely woven fear, almost imperceptible. Soon I will know the secret, and everyone will hear me. Soon, very soon, I will fix everything.

Who *will* fix everything, if not me? A question people rarely ask themselves.

My lungs sucked and spat out the cool morning air and I took a couple of tentative steps towards the large oak door with the metal ornamentation. The door was heavy and fit tight. It wasn't locked, no, but it felt like someone was holding it from the inside. I tugged the doorknob for a while, vainly. I hung on to the big ring with my feet against the wall. It didn't work and I was about to give up, turn around and go home when suddenly the door swung open and in a moment my back was on the porch.

The foilinder flew off my head and fell next to me. Phew. The hat was fine. I fixed the slightly crumpled edge, got back to my feet, shook a few leaves off my suit and went through the door.

The reception, if you could call it that, was empty. In the murk, only the abandoned desk and the sign "← Elevator" greeted me. A kaleidoscope of colours poured on it through a stained-glass window with abstract patterns, like Kandinsky. On the desk stood a small speaker and almost inaudible gentle piano tunes were leaking out of it into the hollowness of the hall, mixing with the smell of dust and mold.

I looked up and saw a six-meter ceiling covered in cracked frescoes with images of people, fighting and making love to mythical creatures with horns, hooves and tails (sometimes multiple of each). I looked down. In the inconspicuous corner behind the reception desk stood a large white statue of a muscular, shabby, bearded man in a chiton. His hand held a long staff. Like all ancient statues, he had no pupils and it seemed he was looking at me, everywhere and nowhere, all at the same time. Resembles

Hades.

I followed the sign's advice and turned my gaze toward the elevator. A dull, cold light oozed from the gap between its doors. Beckoning or frightening? A mystery. Hope. Fear.

There was no "call elevator" button, but as I stepped closer, the doors opened, revealing a small, well-lit metal capsule.

– Hey, wait!

I flinched.

– Oh, hello. You scared me.

A round, moustached middle-aged man, wearing big, thick-rimmed black glasses and a reflective vest with an anime-inspired three-headed dog t-shirt, and green socks, appeared behind me. A guard? A gatekeeper? A concierge?

The man came out from behind the reception desk and waddled towards me.

– You forgot to sign this, clumsy.

He smiled and handed me a pen and a couple of A4 pages packed with letters. *We store your personal data. It will be used to improve the organisation, analytics,* and a lot of other such stuff. Sixth font. Some serif. Hurts my eyes. Can't understand anything.

– Oh, forget it. Sign and go, nobody reads it. Just some necessary bureaucracy.

I shrugged, scribbled the best part of my last name in curly lines at the bottom of the sheet along with the date and handed the agreement over to the guard. An important date. The world will remember the 5th of December.

– Have a good day, – said the man and smiled. – Oh, I almost forgot. Your key card.

The guard handed me a white card with a golden branch engraved on it.

– What's it for?

– What's it for? To get in.

How can this big chap know I have an appointment and he can give me the key card?

– I don't need to know. I got a nose for it.

The guard tapped his temple with the index finger of his right hand and smiled again.

– Nice hat, by the way.

Cannot be.

– Thank you.

A nervous smile. Have I really said it out loud? Fool.

– Good idea, though. All right, good luck.

He saluted in a demonstrative and deliberately wrong way.

I turned around and walked inside the elevator. Negative one, negative two, and so on to negative ten.

Since the elevator didn't go up at all, why have minus signs in front of each number? A frown on my eyebrows suggested that the upward elevator was somewhere else.

The doors closed behind me. The elevator stood still. I looked around the metal cage. Silence. My finger reached for the control panel. Shaking a little. I didn't fear anything, no – it must have been something subconscious. The main thing was not to mix floors up - I needed the tenth. I always thought there were nine floors, though. Where would the tenth one come from? Are they tricking me? Maybe it is a prank... But I had no choice. Assuming deceit would mean sacrificing an opportunity that came only once in eternity.

I held my breath and stuck out my little finger. It didn't shake as much, and by its size it reduced the chance of clicking the wrong button. The elevator screeched and began to descend.

I looked around again. No mirror! I fixed my suit and tucked loose strands of hair under the foilinder focusing on the blurred reflection on the metal wall.

At some point, time stopped passing evenly, and I lost all ability to follow it. It seemed to resist my comprehension on purpose. How many minutes elapsed, I don't remember. What I thought and did at the time, I do not know. Floors flew by, slipping different colours, sounds, and smells into the gap between the elevator doors. What kind, I don't remember. Perhaps the miscellanea were hidden from me. Perhaps they erased everything I wasn't supposed to see that day, though this was unlikely, thanks to my foilinder.

The doors opened again and I hurried out, lest the elevator inadvertently takes me back. Large hallway, stone floor, grey-tiled walls, flashing lights on the ceiling like an interrogation room, turnstile gates, the smell of stale air, inoperable ATM-like machines. An aura like an abandoned underground station. Of course it was the underground. I knew advertisers lobbied underground architects to add more ad space in there. One more special circle for them here, too.

I walked up to the turnstiles. The lights on all the payment terminals were yellow. I approached the nearest one looking around and used the card I had been given. The yellow light changed to red. Maybe the card has been demagnetised? I tried again. It didn't work. One more time. Same result. A couple more times. Terrible service.

I started snapping my thumb and middle finger's nails on my left hand.

As soon as I thought it was strange there was no one there but me, no one to ask for help – whether I had such a special chance to be stuck alone at the bottom of the world – an old man, a skinny, hunched,

bearded creature in a black uniform and a reflective waistcoat came out of a nearby room. I stopped snapping my nails and froze. Be polite. Don't think about anything.

– Good morning, sir.

I raised my foilinder slightly.

– Yes, unbelievably good! – Grunted the old man. – Young people these days! Aren't even able to jump the turnstile. No courage.

Muttering something more under his breath, he walked over to me, put the card that hung around his neck to the terminal, and the turnstile opened up.

– Dead already, are you, lad? Go before it closes. I don't let in twice.

I hurried through the turnstile gate, turned around and hat-tipped my thanks to the old man, but he was already limping back to his den, flashing green dinosaur socks.

There was a rusty escalator going down into the deep. The elongated electronic panel above it said "Abandon Adblock ye who enter here." I have something better than that.

Down again. More floors or just the big tenth? I stood on the moving steps, and they started dragging me down into a void of unrecognisable colour. It was something in between dark blue, almost black, and dull yellow, or rather glimpses and slight shades of yellow. Together it made

a colour I'd never seen before.

After a minute, the acid imagery of billboards, posters, low-resolution panels, and long, stretched-out screens began to flash around me. Nauseating. I had to squint, cover my eyes with my hand, and look away. But I could still feel the energy emanating from them. It was like the Entity was tickling my cheeks and ears with its tongue. But it had no effect on me apart from generating disgust. The energy was somehow flying, sliding past me and disappearing in the depths of the void. The foilinder must be working. This couldn't have pleased me more.

I saw everything. Fruit, vegetables, dairy - fifteen-minute delivery. Propaganda posters from the thirties and forties. New and old phones, TVs, radios, fridges, gadgets. Invitations to carnal pleasures. Body cream and pill to double or triple or 10x your beauty and strength. A debit card with an overdraft at forty percent APR. Illegal substances. Rocket salad. Rocket salad for vegans. Legal substances. Dating beautiful people nearby. Diapers. Cognac. Commercials. Voluminous buttocks in jeans. Tires. Front upper body parts in underwear (also quite voluminous). Soda with sugar. Soda without sugar (but sweet). Gluten-free meat. Biscuit-flavoured tea. Tea-flavoured biscuits. Self-improvement coaching.

This went on for a long time, but at some point, I started to see abstractions on the banners. Such things are impossible to see, but somehow I could see them. They were expressed beyond the usual three dimensions. Although I could hardly describe it, I perceived the

advertisement of socialism, happiness, bright future, intellect, orgasm. I could fit all of these on myself like a hat. Wait. Is it still working? Fear took me. What if all my work with the foilinder has been futile? Maybe I should have made it conical... What if the ads' penetrative effects on my brain have worked and now..?

No, it cannot be.

Exotic fruit, smartphone, mortgage, watch, subscription to ten productivity tips, CBD.

No, I don't want to buy any of those things. Or do I?

Success, fancy furniture, free pdf of exclusive content, cigarettes, ziggurats, vape, water.

I was definitely thinking about it, but the desire to grab a slice of happiness promised to me didn't seem to exist.

I guess I'm just scared. Advertising doesn't work on me. Of that, I can be sure. I prepared well. Concentrate. Soon, very soon.

Thus in a stream of thoughts, advertising, thoughts about advertising, advertising of thoughts, I floated down the escalator into the glittering void.

There was no use in closing my eyes – I could still see the flashes, or rather the snapshots of them on my eyelids. The Entity whispered something in my ear, tickling my soul with its slimy, rough tongue.

“Desire,” it said, “this is exactly what you need. I know. I know all about you.” ASMR nightmare it was. But I resisted, perhaps not without the foilinder’s help. Doubts began to assail me that it had stopped working.

I didn’t know how long it could last. I sat on the moving steps and began to wait.

All the history and essence of the world I had left behind was expressed in a flickering roundelay of sounds and images. I felt myself a Christmas tree, surrounded by dressed-up people in elf costumes, but instead of carefree fun, they wanted something else from me. I knew they weren’t people at all. They were projections of the Entity, omnipresent, all-penetrating.

Metaphysics ad?

Electric cars, fart-inspired cryptocurrency, libertarianism, audio drugs, green socks with dinosaurs, dinosaurs made of plastic (not tested on animals).

The steps stopped and with them my stream of thoughts. The ads were gone. That blue-yellow darkness embraced everything around. It seemed to get into my head. The foilinder was no obstacle for it.

I began to hear my internal organs moving. A throbbing and gurgling sound crept into my head. The buzz got harder than before, so loud that I could no longer hear my thoughts. How long it lasted - a minute, two minutes, an hour, an eternity - I don’t know and I don’t think I want to

know.

Suddenly a door creaked open a few paces in front of me, and a faint cold light burst from it. The silhouette of a tall woman appeared in the passage.

– Mark Markethrudder? – said a stern, emotionless woman's voice.

I jumped up and ripped off a piece of my jacket. It had stuck in the escalator steps. Fuck.

– Yeah, yeah, me. It's me.

– Come with me. And don't swear here.

The silhouette disappeared while my eyelids fluttered, resisting the suddenness of the light.

Tucking the torn hem of my jacket and holding up my hat, I hurried to the door.

I closed the door and found myself either outside or in a vast room. An impressive but strangely artificial landscape greeted me: black snow-capped mountains touched dark grey clouds stretching across the sky; the rippling surface of a black lake laid far into the distance, all the way to the mountains.

Looks like a monochrome film set.

On the shore of the lake stood an easel. In front of it, with his back to

me, sat a man dressed in a black suit, with a pale neck and short, styled dark hair with gaps of grey.

The two-meter-tall woman, pale skin, long dark hair pulled back with a hairpin in the form of a scythe, appeared beside me. I shuddered. She was all in black uniform except for her vivid red lips (the only colour in the room). A beacon or bait?

No green socks on both.

She leaned toward my ear and whispered:

– No disturbing, no talking until he calls you. Is that clear?

– What's he doing? – said I, loud enough to break the surrounding tranquillity.

– Shh!

She leaned toward my face, wagging her finger and almost nailing me into the ground.

– Can't you see? Serves his sentence. You have five minutes.

I looked at the man sitting by the easel. He left another black stroke on the canvas, waving his brush delicately, like a conductor in front of the orchestra.

– But...

I turned around. The woman was gone.

I folded my arms and gazed about the oppressive landscape around me. The spell lasted a minute or two.

– My eternity won't run away from me, but I have doubts about yours. *Herr...*? – said the man by the easel with clarity and a German accent.

He didn't turn at me and continued working on the canvas.

– Mark. Mark Markethrudder. Or just Mark.

– *Schön, Herr* Just Mark. I do not need to introduce myself, but please don't address me by my name. It breaks the silence of this place. What brings you here?

– Okay, I'll be brief. I want to prove to people that they are under the sway of an invisible force controlling their attention and desires. But no one believes me: they either think I'm crazy or ignore me. So, recently, I asked myself, what am I doing wrong? How can I convince them? I feel that this is my great mission. I'm the only one who can do it. But I don't know how to do it. So I've decided to resort to the methods of my opponent. I want to sell people an idea, one single right idea, the idea that their desires are compromised.

– Then you've come for nothing, *Herr* Just Mark. This is not something I do these days. I can't help you.

– Wait, wait, let me explain. You were also selling ideas and you did it

very professionally, I must admit, despite all their destructiveness.

– *Herr* Just Mark, pardon me, but there must be some confusion on your side. I'm not in the business of selling anything and can't help you with it, *leider*.

– Oh, I'm sorry. I'm not asking you to do that yourself. I just want to learn that secret knowledge. I need insights.

– I'm not a librarian, not an archivist, not a secret-keeper. I just sit and paint.

What happened to him?

– What happened to you?

– You know what happened. Everyone does.

– Yes, but you're different.

– I beg your pardon, but if you came here to ask this type of questions, you'd better find your way out. – said the man nervously, and he paused. – Look around. See?

– What?

– *Nichts*, nothing, that's the thing. Now, my whole world is peace, serenity, and I'm just an artist trying to capture it. I don't mean to disappoint you, but you, *Herr* Just Mark, came all this way for nothing.

– Wait, wait, wait. I got you. I'll do everything myself. I just need some advice, please. The fate of humanity's future depends on whether I can open people's eyes and ears. I need help.

The man paused, put down his brush and sighed heavily.

– Your perseverance and enthusiasm impress me, *Herr* Just Mark. The fate of humanity, you say?

– Yes, exactly. And only you can help me.

The man chuckled. Yes, I too see the irony.

– Perhaps there are a couple of things I could mention briefly.

– Just a second, I'll take notes.

Yes! I pulled out a notebook.

– I'm ready.

– *Schön*. Ask. What interests you?

I prepared to write.

– How can I make people believe me?

– Right out of the gate, I see. Who do you want to convince?

– Everyone, everybody and anyone. Well, except me.

– Then do what works for everyone. Appeal to their feelings. Don't try to pressure their intellect. The masses don't consist of professors and lawyers, but of ordinary people who are constantly oscillating between one idea and another. Your goal is to make them stop oscillating. In your favour, of course.

– Appealing to feelings, right? Sorry, for the interruption by the way.

– *Absolut.* The majority are not inclined to sound reasoning. They are controlled by their emotions and instincts. You should operate with polar concepts familiar to everyone: love and hate, good and evil, truth and lie. You, *Herr* Just Mark, are you sure of the rightness of your beliefs?

– Wholeheartedly.

– Then show them the truth.

He seemed to have a taste for it, and I could feel his voice grew louder and more convincing.

– Show them what is evil.

The clouds seemed to thicken and the only thing missing for the whole picture was the sound of thunder, but my mind was capable of making it up.

– Make them hate.

Yes! This is what I was expecting. But the man by the lake suddenly got quiet. The clouds got back to their previous state.

– Do you understand me? – He said in his usual voice.

– Of course, I do, yes, I do. But how to do it?

The man paused and pondered. I prepared to write.

– Standing on a square with a placard and shouting how bad things have become rarely works if you stay alone.

I blushed.

– Instead, tell a story, encode your beliefs in it.

– But what story?

– *Ich weiß es nicht, Herr* Just Mark. I can't advise. It must be your personal story. Empathy is a powerful feeling. Once people know what you care about, you can emphasise its importance for them too. You should do it by your example. Show them your struggle. Thus you will find allies, perhaps the most important component.

– But I work alone.

– You can't do this alone.

– Time.

The woman called out from behind. She again seemed to appear out of

nowhere and came up beside me, giving a reproachful stare.

– Wait, wait, I'll be quick. I have one last question.

The woman shook her head.

– Time.

Out of nowhere, an hourglass appeared in her right hand. She pointed at it with her left hand.

– Please, let him ask. – The man by the lake said.

The woman frowned but took the hourglass away. It disappeared to the same nowhere from which it came. She crossed her hands.

– 32 seconds.

– Appreciate it. – I turned back to the man. – How do I know it worked? How do I find allies?

– Time, *Herr* Just Mark, it takes time. You must be patient. You have to have one main message, expressed in a simple and consistent piece of information that can spread like a virus. And then it has to be repeated until the last man on Earth is transfixed by the idea. Then they start reaching you. And for that, *Herr* Just Mark, you need time.

– Time.

The woman grunted.

I continued frantically filling the page with scribbles, the embodiment of what I had heard mixed in with my own thoughts.

– Okay, okay, I got it. I will go back home and tell everyone. Thank you, I understand. I will tell them everything. Thanks.

– *Jederzeit*. I hope this helps.

– Yes, of course, absolutely. All the best, have a good day.

– Have a good day, too. *Auf Wiedersehen*.

The woman grabbed me under my arm and led me to the exit.

– Auf Wiedersehen.

My German was clumsy.

– Wait, *Herr* Just Mark. I too have a question for you.

The woman stopped, still keeping my arm. I looked back. The man by the easel turned left a few degrees, exposing a small part of his profile.

– What year are you from?

– Twenty-one.

– Three thousand?

– No, two thousand and twenty-one.

– Is it possible in your world already to put ideas directly into people's brains without them suspecting anything or even without them thinking about suspecting?

I didn't know what or how to answer. I scratched the back of my head as if trying to fumble for a hole through which comprehension was slipping away, but all I found was the foilinder. I smiled.

– Yes, possible, if they don't know how to protect themselves.

– *Danke*. I get it. You can go now.

Huge thanks and beams of appreciation to David, Betsy, Charles, Tony, Brady, and others from the Soaring Twenties Social Club for their support and immense help with reading early drafts and editing this piece.

Read next part

Hunters

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