

PROLOGUE

WARNINGS

TIME REPORTED LARGE numbers of animals deaths, from thousands of birds found lifeless in two U.S. states in the deep South, to the one hundred thousand dead fish in arid locations such Arkansas.

Strange deaths had caused alarm among naturalists and environmentalists in all nations. Birds fell dead from the sky. Fish washed up on shores and rivers across the whole planet. People, however, had other things to care and worry about. Mainstream media focused on economic crises, financial scandals, sovereign states at risk of defaulting in the Euro zone, the Arab Spring, and the global war on terror.

The link was there. We were the sapient species on earth, clever enough to connect the dots no matter how far apart they were. We should have done our job to connect them. But we were too busy, too preoccupied with other facts to ask ourselves: What the hell is happening?

Nature's red flags went unnoticed and animals—scores of them—kept dying. We kept living our own lives...

THE PURGE

THE LAST DAY

NOTHING PREPARED US for the last day. I arrived at work as usual, after dropping off my daughter at school. A too-bright Monday morning and sunny for early February. The weather had been mild during the weekend, much warmer than it should for the season.

My wife, Mary, complained about the warmth, worried this would be no good for plants and the garden.

“Everything’s waking up. See all the buds? They will burn when it freezes again.”

Indeed, those days felt like early spring. I liked that.

The whole winter had been harsh with average temperatures way below freezing. To leave home and take my little princess to school on my way to work was an exercise of will—even more so when my day started at 6:15 a.m. and it was still dark outside.

“I go to bed and it’s dark. I get up, dark...yet again. You know how it bothers me,” I told Mary every time she asked, “What’s going on, sweet pea? You’re pensive.”

She still called me that even though it had been years since we were high school sweethearts and I’d played quarterback for our school team. Thank the Lord, she never said it in public. No one

protects a “sweet pea” quarterback or fights to catch his passes. And let’s not even think about the harassment from teammates.

Mary had just turned sixteen when we first met. Something of young lovers remained between us, even after thirty-two years, a twelve-year-old daughter, and life in three countries. We had an easy way to keep count of the time the two of us had spent together: ten years of dating, ten of marriage and then our first and only child. Total number of years? Twenty, plus our daughter’s age.

When I got to work, I waited as usual for the gate to open. It was a solid slab of metal and stood next to the guard house, a bulky construction with thick, tinted windows and dark concrete walls. Sliding slowly on its rails, the mechanism paused long enough for me to drive through, reminding me this place was not meant for everyone.

I could never tell whether anyone was seated in the guard house or not. The first times I passed that gate I wondered if I needed to wave good morning to some invisible man. Now I simply drove through, conscious of my right to cross the thin threshold separating those inside from the rest of the world.

I had to cross another barrier before entering, had to swipe my badge and be greeted by the welcoming green light. I went down the ramp slowly, giving the gate below time to open, enough to let me pass without having to wait. With the years, my timing had become impeccable. In the underground garage, my place, Number 98, was in the last row so I had enough time to realize something obstructed it. I slammed on the brakes and raised my hand to hit the steering wheel in exasperation. Two wood crates sat in the middle of my slot.

The parking also served as a reception area for the Publications Department. Slots in the middle section had been eliminated to give room to the storage areas where all deliveries received by the Pub’s colleagues were collected and where confidential publications were packaged for shipment. No one thought that arrangement to be efficient and sustainable. At times, I had to wait for small crate lifters to operate. A short wait but frustrating when colleagues waited for me at a meeting. Complaints to Human Resources and Logistics & Operations had so far produced no results. And now this.

I stepped out of the car to check for any of the storage workers but no one was around.

The crates were empty. They weren't particularly heavy. I only had to slide them a short distance, zero risk of injuries or other silly things like tearing my trousers or jacket.

Although I didn't train anymore, my body still enjoyed the results of those past years of football—semi-professional level—and the task took only a few seconds: no sweat. I parked. Weird. Things like that were not supposed to happen; the workers had a list of unoccupied places that they could use.

With my badge in hand, I walked toward the third security point to cross. I swiped it and entered the monthly code on the keyboard. Invisible eyes witnessed and recorded the entry. The transparent, bullet-proof glass doors opened and let me into the buffer zone, a concrete walled box with a little painted red square on the floor.

The procedure required one to stand still on the red mark without moving while something or someone evaluated my credentials. I hated this last step. After all the security steps I'd gone through so far, hadn't I proven my identity, my right to be allowed onto the premises? I almost questioned the invisible guard about those crates in my parking place but I hesitated. This was something to sort out with the Hospitality Team instead. They look after logistics and other annoying stuff.

Besides, if I moved or wiggled too much while standing on the little red square, the glass door behind would open and I'd have to go through the whole procedure again, suffer a lecture from the guard and waste even more time, *his* time. I stood as still as I could...and waited.

It took a few seconds more than usual and I thought to complain when finally I heard the welcoming beep; the opaque entrance glass doors slid aside and I walked in.

From the parking-level entry, one accessed a hallway dotted with settees aligned along its gray walls. In front, a huge glass wall spanned the whole height of the building and showed a magnificent view of Lake Lemano and the mansions of rich Swiss and foreigners wealthy enough to enjoy the scenery from their large estates.

After a last glance at the glorious day unfolding outside, I started down the stairs to reach my desk one level below. The entire organization believed in full visibility so, to foster collaboration and communication among personnel, it had no offices...just open spaces and vast halls filled with large desks.

No cubicles, a la North American style, but shared spaces in between with desks arranged in islands of four separated by panels with a transparent top-third. Though you couldn't look at what your colleagues were doing, you had a clear view to establish eye contact; everyone sat in sight of everyone else. Hard to say whether this architect's dream resulted in any real increase of communications between teams. I still have my doubts.

Entering the hall, I peeked to see whether my highest-ranked collaborator and friend, Rose, had gotten in already. We had an established tradition between us: the morning cappuccino.

"Hi, Rose. How's it going?"

"As usual. The guys from Microsoft say they should be able to finish in time."

"Good, good start for the day. Cappuccino?"

I led and defined the effort for a major collaboration platform of the highest security. It included all possible technical bells and whistles, video conferencing, and social networking to support all the initiatives running worldwide with our constituents.

Highly confidential matters were discussed on our system, especially on the encrypted video conferences and we enforced an absolute *off-the-record* policy. Journalists and others, I am sure, would have loved to eavesdrop on what we heard those days, particularly Arab League's discussions with the Americans.

Everything we did to support and enhance the platform was required *yesterday* and costs or efforts were never a factor. The pressure was constant, criticisms abundant and congratulations scarce. It was a thankless job any sane person would avoid. How in the world I ended up in that trap is still an open question. Anyway, as the only director who had been able to *herd the cats*, we had released a working platform in spite of everything and within the agreed timeline. Not exactly Big Brother, but Orwell would be proud.

A few desks away, I spotted the American consultant. Hired and imposed on the team to speed up the project and *automagically* solve all problems. He looked at his emails, showing no interest in our conversation or our whereabouts. The guy only knew one thing well and kept selling that as an IT panacea: A framework—and not among the best ones—to create websites. He advocated the solution as the ultimate silver bullet.