

1 CUSTOM DEATH

A freezing day in February. I had departed from a habit of several years and had gone to my workplace in the afternoon. The sun, which was still high in the sky, dazzled the numerous pedestrians who, like me, had decided to avoid public transportation. The atmosphere in the street felt dense, and passersby looked worried. All of them, except myself. To their chagrin, I defied the norm. Despite the pervasive gloom in society, I remained unfazed. I made sure to smirk at the unkind faces that greeted me.

Oh, of course, this too-apparent cheerfulness earned me many dark—sometimes envious—glances from these people. It is true that my attitude could seem strange, even frustrating. The work stoppages dragged on, leading to increasingly unfortunate consequences: queues at consumer goods distributors were getting longer and the murderous carnage sank into banality. Only government officials, bankers, aspiring criminals, and their attorneys could afford to feel joy. Obviously, this didn't apply to me. At most, I had a prosperous profession that was in tune with the times.

When I arrived at my office, on the second floor of a renovated building, I immediately got down to my boring tasks. My secretary was on maternity leave, and I had wisely dismissed her replacement last week. Her incompetence, her repeated tardiness, and her indiscretion had caused me to lose some of my clients. One wondered where she could have drawn such good references. Probably a move by my competitor. This nasty person had resigned, sabotaging some of my computer files. It was a kind of farewell present. Fortunately, the damage could be repaired. A few hours of work and everything would be back to normal.

Sitting in front of my screen, I experienced a strange feeling. For years, I had been working at night and rest during the day. The natural lighting made me uncomfortable; the dust particles in the air suffocated me. To compensate for these inconveniences, I got up to close the curtains and thus find myself in a more familiar environment. The huge reddish globe disappeared; the room plunged into relative darkness, which relieved my discomfort.

Names passed before my eyes; I added precious statistics, empty of meaning for the average person. Nawa Radja, 38, single, with an annual income of \$19,000, consults her psychoanalyst times a year; Remi Corda, an unemployed engineer, divorced for 4 years and paying alimony of \$700 per month; Chelsia Braol, who died on July 15, has an overdue account of \$8,000...

I was fixating this data when suddenly, someone knocked on the door. At first, this seemed so incongruous that I had no reaction. Who could possibly be at my company in the middle of the afternoon?