

Author's note: This is the prolog of a larger work. It is my hope that this story will be looked upon by future readers as a "what if" fantasy of an alternate reality. Yet, my fear is that it may be prophecy.

"Seven minutes till midnight "

A story

By

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Prolog

"Civil War"

San Francisco had become his home. It had been the fog at first, reminding him of his beloved London. Now after five years as a local reporter for the BBC he had begun to think of San Francisco in all the little ways one feels about home. The little subconscious things that one takes for granted, the myriad flavors of substance and feelings that connects an individual to their reality. You could blindfold him, drop him in any part of the city and he could still find his favorite restaurant in North Beach.

But now his home seemed more like a madhouse.

From his location on the tenth floor of this no-name building, he leaned over the low brick wall and looked at the streets far below. People ran from doorway to doorway, the sounds of gunshots near and in the distance echoed in the air. Further away, in the direction of Market Street, he could hear the sounds of muffled explosions. There had been thousands of protesters there earlier in the day. Oblivious to the decree of martial law imposed by the Homeland Security Department, small groups of protesters had begun to gather in several parts of the city. Each group moved from street to street, swelling their numbers as they went. Eventually, the many groups of protesters converged and became one near Powell at the cable car turnaround.

There had been speeches, prayers, songs and a sea of signs and banners calling for the incumbent President to accept the third recount of the '04 election and step down. This was a way citizens voiced their feelings in America, this was how America worked...that was, till the tanks came.

A well-known actor had just finished his condemnation of the incumbent's recent actions when a loud rumbling from the west began to drown out the sounds of the rally. Several blocks away three Abrams battle tanks entered Market Street from Ninth Street. Behind the tanks were a number of trucks. The tanks proceeded toward the gathered crowd then stopped about fifty yards from the rally's edge. The trucks stopped also and from them emerged two battalions of federal troops clad in military riot gear; each soldier carrying a large plastic shield. The soldiers formed up on either side of the tanks. From a loud speaker mounted on the center tank a voice unemotionally announced, "This rally is an illegal assembly and for reasons of homeland security all attending should disperse immediately. Those not responding immediately will be subject to punitive action."

No one on either side spoke a word; the soldiers and civilians stood there just looking at each other. Then, a young blond woman at the edge of the rally stepped out and walked toward the tanks. She wore jeans and a white tee shirt with a single word in capital letters across the chest, 'PEACE'. In her hand she carried a bouquet of white roses. She walked up to the center tank

and laid the bouquet on it. She then moved back a couple of steps and raised her right hand in the air making a peace sign.

He couldn't tell where the shot had come from, but he witnessed the result. As if the strings of a marionette had been cut, the young woman crumpled to the pavement; the writing on her shirt blotted out in a dark crimson patch.

There was silence again... Those that had believed American soldiers would never fire on American citizens had been terribly wrong.

A trooper to the left of the center tank dropped his shield and ran to the lifeless form on the pavement. He fell to his knees beside her and pulled his helmet off. Tears streaming down his face, he cradled the girl in his arms and began to scream for help.

Suddenly, a deep guttural cry that seemed to come from the earth itself erupted from the crowd. Large numbers of them ran as one toward the tanks. The soldiers began beating their shields with nightsticks, making a rhythmic sound like African warriors in an old movie.

Within minutes of the first shot, hundreds of men, women and children lay dead or dying. It was open season on anything that moved, protesters, police, media, soldiers, it didn't matter. The tanks had begun to fire and they kept firing. If he had not been there, not seen it with his own eyes, he would not have allowed himself to believe it.

Two hours later National Guard forces arrived. That was when the real fighting had begun. The tanks had been reinforced by more Federal troops and were controlling most of the downtown area. After seven hours of door-to-door fighting, National Guardsmen along with police units and civilians had regained most of the areas that had been taken. Blood ran down the gutters like water from a hateful rain.

That had only been this morning; though it seemed ages ago. He looked up from the street below and turned toward the bay. Like a burial shroud, a low fog was moving slowly in from the water.

A hand touched lightly on his shoulder, "Mr. Sanders, we're ready." He turned to see Marcus Darnel, his new technician, nodding his head in the direction of the cameras and lights at the far end of the roof.

"We have a stable uplink Marcus?"

"Yes sir, satellite's locked in and we're good to go."

"Well then, we should best enlighten some inquiring minds before our signal is bugged up again."

James Michael Sanders assumed his position in front of the cameras; Marcus connected wires to Sander's headset and microphone. Sanders saw a young woman beside the cameraman. She carried a clipboard in her right hand and was counting down with the fingers of her left. When she reached one she pointed at Sanders.

Sanders could hear an anchorwoman's voice as she introduced him...

"We take you now to James Sanders who is reporting to us live via satellite at an undisclosed location in San Francisco, California. James, this is Patricia Douglas here, at the moment yours is the only signal that seems to be reaching us from the US, could you tell us the situation?"

He paused, choosing his words for political correctness; how many times in his life had he stood before a camera? Stood there being just another 'talking head' encapsulating moments of importance in semantics and sound bites. Thoughts of what he had seen that morning flashed

before his mind's eye; his mouth was dry and for an instant he was unsure if words would come. Inhaling through his mouth, he took a deep breath of the moist night air...then he spoke...

"Insanity Patricia, sheer insanity. What can only be referred to as a new American civil war is taking place here in California. Indeed, it seems by all reports to be happening in many cities across the U.S. We don't have exact figures yet, but by rough estimation the costs in civilian lives alone are in the tens of thousands. Innocents brutally slaughtered by forces loyal to the incumbent regime. I was present myself just hours ago at what is already being called the Market Street Massacre. We have received reports of fighting in Los Angeles, Chicago, Seattle and a myriad of other locations. With some of the worst reports coming from Washington, DC and the President's home state of Texas, America is pulling itself apart."

"James, from what we've gathered, it seems that the incumbent has retreated to the security of Mt Weather, VA. Have you heard any news regarding the President-elect?"

"Patricia, the incumbent it appears has indeed retreated to Mt. Weather. The move took place shortly after the fatal heart attack that took the life of his vice president and the suicide of the incumbent's closest adviser, the man he referred to as 'the boy genius'. Regarding the President-elect, only a few scant details have reached us so far. Most have been unverified, but what we do know is this, the President-elect has been on the run and in hiding for the last two days, with the incumbent calling for his arrest. The Vice President-elect is being held under guard at Andrews Air Force base. Both are accused of high treason."

Sanders began to continue to speak, but a loud burst of static came through his headset making him wince in pain...

"Bloody hell Michael, what the fu..."

"Sorry boss, we lost the link for a moment, but you're back up now."

"James, James are you there?"

"Yes Patricia, we're back, just a glitch. As you well know, all uplinks to American satellites have been locked down. But our talented Mr. Darnel has connected us, shall we say unofficially, via a Chinese satellite. I've also just been told that we are receiving reports from some other cities, other news sources, and we will pass them along as they come in. We may have a few moments of static, but we'll stay with you as long as possible."

"James, everyone has heard the official media releases regarding the events leading up to this. But could you give our listeners the back-story to this tragedy and the American perspective?"

Sanders eyes closed; he thought of white roses.

"James, are you alright?"

"Yes Patricia, not a bother."

"Well, where shall we start? As many of you know, the incumbent administration was dealt a serious blow in the November election when they were soundly defeated by a landslide vote in favor of their opponent. Following the election, with what was considered a blatant manipulation of the Supreme Court, the incumbent succeeded in attaining three separate recounts of the ballots.

With each recount, the incumbent became more and more adamant that a conspiracy was afoot. Those accusations of a conspiracy culminated in this statement after the third recount; Sanders reached out to take the clipboard being handed him by the young woman, "I quote his words exactly..."

"Haters of America's liberty, unholy forces and liberal elitists are seeking the ruination of American purity. They are baby killers and idolaters that have brought our nation to the edge of

defeat. They have sought through evil manipulation to defame my God given position as the protector of the American Dream. But I tell you now that I have taken an oath, an oath to defend true Americans, I will defend my oath, an oath, my right, American rights; defend them with the righteous fire of my almighty Father if it be. God bless America, God bless America, bless you all.”

Sanders looked up from the clipboard. “That was the last public statement of the incumbent.”

“While the incumbent focused his attention on accusations of a conspiracy to explain his loss of the election, almost every other source we spoke with recounted many different reasons. Foremost among these were the tragic losses on both sides of the continuing Gulf conflict. Which, by last count were well over a million souls.

I’ll list now in no particular order, some of the other points that many believe are related to the election and the present hostilities here in the US...

The U.S. withdrawal from NATO and the UN;

The creation by the U.S. of the AEEC, the ‘American Eastern European Coalition’ or what the Vice President called a ‘New European Coalition’;

The mass arrests and internment of anyone accused of being unsupportive of the administration. Plus, there were the accusations that many of these people were summarily executed;

The revelations dealing with the mass executions of suspected Muslim sympathizers in the Texas concentration camps;

The shutting down of the Internet;

The takeover of public communication and media sources by the Homeland Security Department. This of course, took place after many media sources released information about the now infamous, ‘Malthusian Papers’. As you may recall, an unnamed source close to the incumbent leaked papers documenting a project called ‘Operation Malthus’. This project would have allowed the Federal government, in conjunction with three well-known mega-corporations, to take total control of American food production. Also under their control, would have been primary sources of drinking water. Many of the papers released carried the official seal and signature of the President.

Frightfully, the list goes on...yet in the end, the road that led to this moment in time was paved with the complacency of those that refused to see the truth and sadly, the blood of those that could.”

Sanders stopped speaking, closed his eyes and pressed his shoulders back trying to release some of the tension he was experiencing. He didn’t care that it was an odd act for someone in front of a live camera.

“James, I was...”

“Just a moment Patricia, I think we have something new.” He placed his hand to the headset in his ear. “Yes, yes... Patricia, we are receiving a signal from David Brown in Seattle, it is audio only, but we’ll see if we can patch it through.”

“... seized control.... I say again that local forces have seized control of the city. Federal troops have been ordered to stand down. We are not clear at this time where that order came from, but the fighting has stopped in Seattle.”

Sanders sighed in relief, maybe sanity would rule, maybe...the voice of David Brown returned to his headset.

"What's that sound? Can anyone tell what that sound is? Is that a jet?" "What, what, no that's insane, insane... Anyone that can hear my voice, please..."

Suddenly there came a loud high-pitched whine blasting through Sanders headset. He winced in pain and pulled the earpiece from his head. As he regained his bearings he could see the confusion on the faces of those around him. He saw Michael had also experienced the blast of noise. The young woman that had been by the cameraman was trying to tell Sanders something about Patricia and she kept motioning towards his headset. He looked at the earpiece in his hand and slowly placed it in his left ear.

"James, James are you alright? Dear God, what happened? What's going on?"

"Patricia, I, I'm not, I don't know what happened. We were cut off rather abruptly from Mr. Brown."

He still felt dazed, but he was beginning to focus again.

"James, oh dear God, James, we've just received an unconfirmed report that what appears to be a thermonuclear device has been detonated over Seattle. James, do you hear me?"

"Yes Patricia, I understand."

He was about to say something else when the young woman by the cameraman began to speak, "What's that sound, does anybody hear that sound?"

They were all looking in the same direction now as a loud droning sound approached from the north.

At first he didn't understand, then he began to hear it clearly. He reached up and pulled his headset off letting it fall beside him. He was vaguely aware of the voice calling his name over the earpiece.

At the newsroom in London, Patricia kept calling his name. She stopped and heard his voice as if from a distance. "Oh God, they wouldn't..." A loud high-pitched whine squealed through the speakers of the newsroom.

"James, James are there? Damn it James, are you there?"

Only static answered from the speakers.

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