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THE GREAT SILENCE

THE KEYS TO A PREVENTION CULTURE

The Great Silence

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The author

Joan Junyent Dalmases, Valls de Torroella (Barcelona), 1965, is a Mining Engineer and has a Master's degree in Work Risk Prevention. With over fifteen years' experience working inside mines, his posts have ranged from Shift Manager to Director. He is a passionate reader and is a writer in his free time.

The book

It is precisely in this blend of writer and Mining and Accident Prevention Engineer where the idea for the book was born.

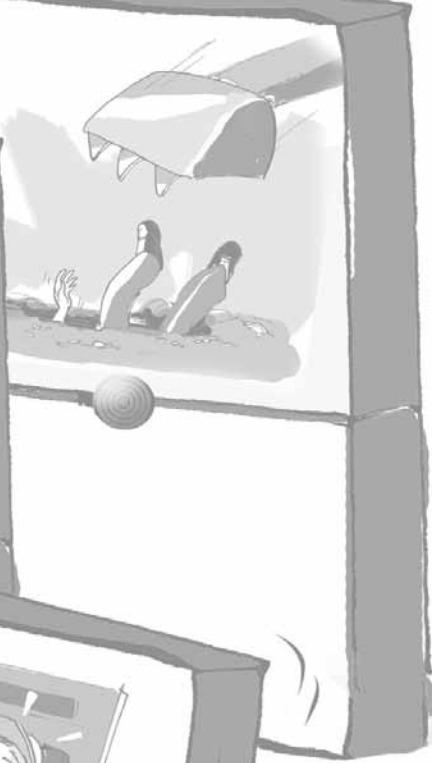
In an industry brimming with technical books, *The Great Silence* is a necessary book that offers a simple vision of what prevention is and what it means from a highly unusual point of view. It is a readable book, with curious and comprehensible reflections that set out to give drivers and workers an insight into accident prevention.

In the midst of our stressful lives, *The Great Silence* aims to be a good read while at the same time setting off a series of arguments that are no less rigorous for it.

The Great Silence acts as an analysis of a work-related accident in a mine, yet to a large extent everything that is related can be applied to accidents in general and to traffic accidents in particular. As an entertaining exercise, we suggest that before you read it, you imagine an accident, so that as you read the book your imaginary accident runs parallel to the story that you're reading, looking for the connections and coincidences that you're bound to find.

Enjoy reading it!

The author



The Great Silence

An accident seven hundred metres below ground



Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday... One after the other, the days go by like a slow-moving river until suddenly a scare makes you wake up with a start.

Even today I don't know how I knew that that day was going to be different, I just knew. I only remember that the night seemed blacker and sadder than usual. And that it felt cold.

There was barely an hour to go before it would start getting light.

I got to the car park and they were all there, quieter and more hushed than ever, but roughly awoken by the raw truth.

The square was full of people when they should have been getting ready for the change of shift or going off to bed after their relief had finished.

And it was then that I no longer had any doubts: work was stopped. And stopping work meant one thing: a fatal accident in the mine...

Cigarette tips glowed in the darker areas, where my colleagues hid their tears. They moved in slow steps, sleepwalking, not knowing where to go.

They didn't have anywhere to go **now**. Because **now** it was too late. **Now** there was nothing that could be done.

Darkness and silence reigned. So too, pain and sorrow.

Little groups of shadows talking in low voices. Miners in civvies, with no miners' helmet or boots, no soul and no joy. No miners' songs.

Tearful and simple giants, capable of tearing out the heart of the earth, capable of loving that tough work, stricken to the heart by an absurd loss.

One of their colleagues would never smile again...

In a daze, I parked the car and walked slowly towards the nearest group.

They're the three questions that go around your head at these moments:

What's happened?

How did it happen?

Who did it happen to?

But of the three, just one shines out like a beacon:

Who?

Because the answer to this one is more painful. Because the answer to this one talks of a specific person, a face, a family, a friend... **Who?**

My thoughts wandered and I still remember the day I joined the company as though it were only yesterday.

‘Come on in, Alex. Close the door. Please, sit down.’

It was the first time my boss had asked to see me alone. I’d heard more than enough about his reputation for being tough, so fearfully I sat and waited.

‘Alex, please listen to me carefully, as what I’ve got to say is very important.’

I swallowed and sat quiet and attentive like radar.

‘Our main problem,’ my boss continued. ‘Is managing to work without any accidents. We move around below ground, with large machinery and the risk that that involves, so we always have to pay the utmost attention. Look at our statistics: one person dies every year in the mine. And if, as sometimes happens, we get a year where that doesn’t happen, two die the following year.’ My boss paused to let his words sink in, words that I stored forever in my memory. ‘So, I’m urging you to do everything in your power to help break this pattern once and for all. Without any doubt, it would be our greatest achievement ever.’

My boss's hard words were branded on my brain like molten iron, and at the same time they told me that what I should be fearing was not him or his hard nature but those dreadful accidents.

Without a doubt that was our challenge. So accidents became my enemy. From that moment on, I unreservedly put all of my determination into fulfilling the honourable objectives that my boss had set.

Accidents are the enemy.

But I also remember how that short talk conditioned my way of seeing things.

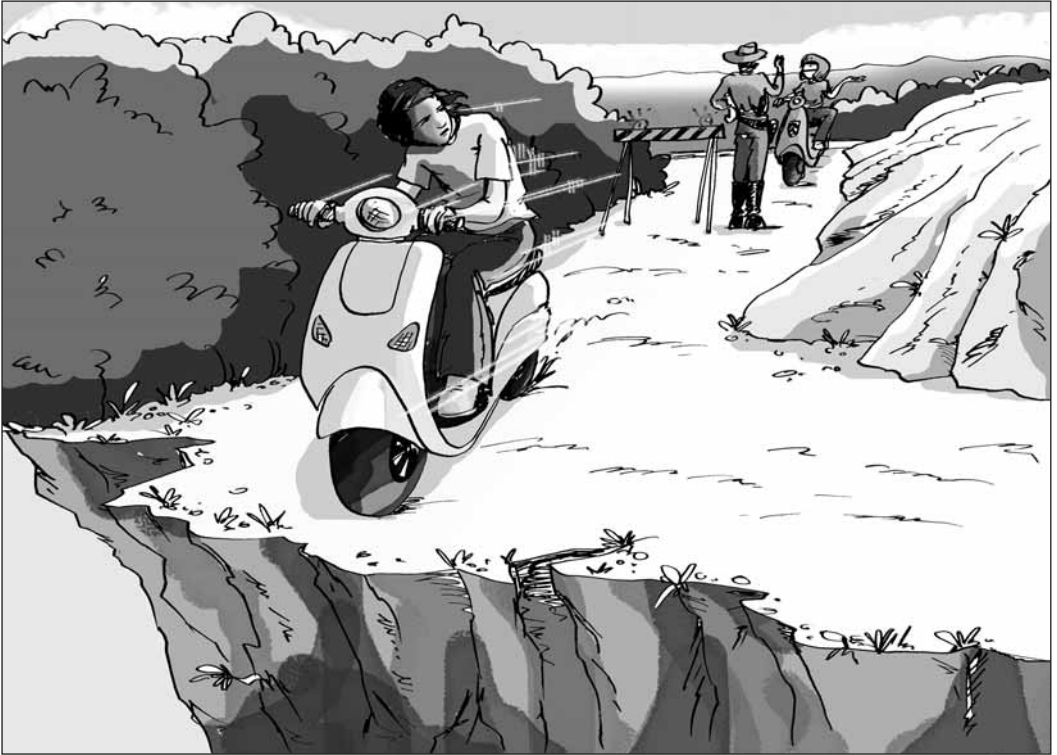
I walked about the mine asking myself who would be next. I chatted to one person, helped another, and I frequently asked myself: "Will he be the next one?" But I quickly cast the idea out of my mind, wanting this not to be the case.

Until I discovered that that really was not the case. It was in the changing rooms, at street level. I was shaving, just before taking a shower, when the question popped into my head again: "Who will be next?", as I watched the reflection of my colleagues passing naked behind me to and from the showers. Which one of them would it be?

The steamed-up mirror gave back a blurred image and I thought that it reflected a deformed reality, until I realised that it was our eyes that really deformed reality. I discovered that everyone's eyes only look outwards, and that this particular angle of vision is sometimes exclusive. Couldn't the next one be the stubborn guy with foam on his face who was staring back at me from right in front and who was nothing more than my own reflection? Of course it could be, obviously it could.

Don't confuse your enemy.

*It will make so much
of what you do sterile*



Accidents are the enemy

Only in the mirror did I see the reality, because there we all were, including ME. So I also had to protect MYSELF.

Who did I think I was to want to protect others before protecting ME first?

It was then that a new form of action was born in me, without that ME, discovered in the mirror, ever becoming forgotten again.

Actions nearly always start with ourselves...

Suddenly I came back to reality on that cold night. Who? Who would it be this time?

But before asking, you already feel fear gnawing away at you. Fear that they say yes, that what you know is true, that someone has died. And an even greater fear, which fizzes through your whole being, that that someone is your friend, a friend you 'll never speak to again... Because people are divided into friends, acquaintances and others. And their deaths do not hurt the same.

'**Who** is it?' I asked, in a thin voice while I searched for the smile that was missing, the smile worn by **someone I knew**.

The serious looks of some and the faces twisted in sorrow of others gave the first clues. You just had to look.

'Durán,' someone answered. 'I'm sorry , you got on well, didn't you?'

José Durán Costa, thirty-four years old, married, with a daughter and his whole life ahead of him.

That was my friend who had been in an accident. That was the full name that the initials in the newspaper couldn't hide from me this time.

My throat and chest clamped tight. A lump that grows and crushes you from within. You hurt so much that you can 't even speak or cry and you can scarcely breathe. Rage and thousands of volts shake your body and you feel chilled to the bone and you're not in control of your actions. Life starts moving slowly and everything goes by as if in a dream, seemingly unreal... The voices, the sounds, everything becomes blurred. It's like you're in a bubble cutting you off from the rest of the world. Because the first thing you do is refuse to accept what you can no longer prevent.

You can do nothing to prevent an accident that's happened.

We cannot look for a solution when the prevention no longer exists.

I walked as though suspended in air to the offices, without pondering on the explanations received like a steamroller.

Durán had died at twenty past three in the morning, his chest crushed. The drilling machine that he was driving, a Jumbo, had overturned and Durán had been trapped with his body outside the cabin. He was helped by two mechanics who quickly brought him out on a stretcher but it was useless. The duty doctor had been alerted and was waiting for them at the pithead, but Durán's life had been blotted out, without a chance. The help had been in vain and he was pronounced dead there and then. Durán's body was in the funeral home.

As I walked, I remembered Durán's story.