

THE YEAR WITHOUT PANTS



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CHAPTER 1

THE HOTEL ELECTRA

When Mike Adams wrote code, he put the back of his laptop on his legs and looked down at the screen. His fingers hung over the edge of his keyboard as if his wrists were broken. He looked like a happy astronaut writing in space, whimsically violating the rules of conventional physics. His brilliance reflected this independence as he regularly found his way through challenges with a grace matched by only a handful of engineers in the world. At twenty-nine years old, he was young enough not to have repetitive stress injuries to his body, but watching him work in comical contortions across various sofas and couches made it hard to believe this would last. Behind his thick glasses and fuzzy beard resided an iron will for solving problems. He often worked long hours immune to hunger or other physical discomforts until his understanding reached his level of satisfaction. His proficiency was all the more impressive because he'd never read a book on computer science. He was self-taught, brilliant, collaborative, and, at times, hysterically funny. And the best part is he worked on my team.

There were four of us hard at work in the lobby of the ominously named Hotel Electra in Athens, Greece. As is the case with many other famous Greek characters, Electra's tale is a delightful mix of revenge and matricide. According to Sophocles, she plotted with her brother to have her mother and stepfather killed to avenge the murder of her father. Just imagine how fun holiday dinner

must have been at their house. Sophocles' tale is perhaps the inspiration for Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, but no one really knows. For me, whenever our work in Athens turned sour, I couldn't help but think of Elektra and all the things that go wrong with families and teams. I kept this to myself, of course: leaders should never joke about mutiny. Our team had been getting along well, and I didn't want anything, mythological or practical, to get in our way.

We were called Team Social, one of many teams of programmers working on a website called WordPress.com. This singular website is where millions of popular blogs and other websites live, and it's the fifteenth most trafficked website on earth. My team's job was simple: invent things to make blogging and reading blogs easier. If you watched us work in that hotel lobby, you'd have discovered many unorthodox and courageous methods in how we worked. Actually, that's not true. There are many unorthodox methods, but in watching us work, you'd be unlikely to notice them. With a superficial glance, you'd assume we weren't working at all.



We sat in a small lounge across from the hotel bar, tucked around a blind corner of the large lobby. It's as if the architect had been offered a bonus by the bartenders to make the bar hard to find, and he succeeded. We commandeered a set of puffy red chairs

and couches, shaping them into a semicircle of web development, a veritable fortress of geekdom. The yellow walls behind us had small prints of late Renaissance family portrait paintings in thick wood frames. They were obscured by the glare from gold light fixtures, each tilting haplessly away from each other, a glare that made our laptops harder to see. The shared glass coffee table between us was too low, meant for coffee cups and bags of souvenirs rather than use as a makeshift desk for a team of engineers. To provision for power, we unplugged one of the floor lamps in the corner, an act, we believe, has made the sole bartender, a portly middle-aged Russian man, refuse to serve us despite our enthusiasm for overpriced, hand-delivered, umbrella-laden cocktails.

While I'm a decade older than the rest of the team, we all look to be in our mid- to late twenties. To any observer, it would seem we are simply spoiled young travelers choosing to play with our laptops and gadgets in a horror show of hotel discomfort and decor confusion rather than enjoying the glorious tourism opportunities Athens provides. Had we stood in the lobby carving ice sculptures with chainsaws, the work itself would provide a spectacle for observers. Hotel visitors passing through would have stopped and stared, asking questions, intently curious about what we were doing and how it was done.

But all of our work was invisible, hidden inside the glowing screens of our laptops. What no one could possibly know is at the click of a button from any of our web browsers, we could launch features that would instantly have an impact on millions of people around the world. Yet for anyone sitting nearby, for all they knew we were playing solitaire. An amazing thing about our digital age is that the person next to you at Starbucks might just be hacking into a Swiss bank or launching multiwarhead nuclear missiles continents away. Or maybe he's just on Facebook. You can't tell the difference unless you're nosy enough to peek over his shoulder.

Hidden behind our ordinary appearance were unusual facts. Although we were coworkers, our sitting together was a rare

occurrence. Most of the time we worked entirely online. This meeting in Athens is only the second time we have all worked in the same room. We all met once before at Seaside, Florida, where the annual company meeting was held a few weeks prior. To convene at the Elektra, I'd flown in from Seattle. Mike Adams was from LA. Beau Lebens, who I'd bet moonlighted as a secret agent, was born in Australia but lived in San Francisco. Andy Peatling, a charmingly smart British programmer, split his time between Canada and Ireland.

The very idea of working remotely seems strange to most people until they consider how much time at traditional workplaces is spent working purely through computers. If 50 percent of your interaction with coworkers is online, perhaps through e-mail and web browsers, you're not far from what WordPress.com does. The difference is that work at WordPress.com is done primarily, often entirely, online. Some people work together for months without ever being on the same continent. Teams are allowed to travel to meet a few times a year to recharge the intangibles that technology can't capture, which explains our Athens trip. We specifically chose Greece because our boss suggested it, and we quickly said yes before he changed his mind. But the rest of the year we worked online from wherever in the world each of us happened to be.

Since location is irrelevant, Automattic, the company that runs WordPress.com, can hire the best talent in the world, wherever they are. This indifference to physical location is a fundamental assumption of how the company, founded in 2005, is organized and "managed." I put *managed* in quotes because, as I explain later, we are not managed at all in any conventional business sense. Initially the company was entirely flat, with all employees reporting directly to the company founder, Matt Mullenweg. In 2010 he and Toni Schneider, the CEO, decided things were too chaotic, even for them, and considered a better way: they split the company, which by that time had fifty employees, into eight teams. Every team had one lead, the first hierarchy in company history.

The lead role was loosely defined, and it was left to every team to figure it out for themselves. From Matt and Toni's perspective, running simultaneous experiments was a good thing. They could more quickly learn which things might work and which didn't. As an additional experiment, as if all this wasn't crazy enough, they picked one person from outside the company to be one of the leads. That person was me. This meet-up in Athens was historic for the company: it was the first time this new concept called a team had met together in what would be known as a team meet-up.

I'd only been at the company for ten weeks and didn't know my team well, but clearly they were talented. Mike Adams was the eighth employee at the company. He was on track for a PhD in quantum computing, a subject that I won't even try to explain, but his informal involvement with WordPress had grown into a passion. When Matt offered him a job, he left quantum computing behind and has thrived ever since. Beau Lebens, the most versatile programmer on the team, had worked at other companies, experience most coworkers at WordPress.com didn't have. His range of abilities beyond programming, from Krav Maga (the Israeli self-defense technique) to survival training, explains why he'd be near the top of my list for people to share a foxhole with. Despite his many talents, he seemed good-natured, humble, and cool-headed. Andy Peatling complemented the team perfectly: he excelled at the kinds of programming that Beau and Mike didn't, mainly the user-facing parts of software. He was fast at trying new things out, a skill all creative teams need. The three of them together formed a young, strong, confident team, regardless of who led them.

From Mullenweg's brilliant, or possibly mad, perspective, what made me interesting for the job was my experience leading teams, combined with my complete inexperience working anywhere like WordPress.com. Whereas the culture of WordPress.com, a company of sixty people at the time, was highly autonomous and rooted in open source culture, I'd spent my career at Microsoft and consulting with other large Fortune 500 organizations. The very idea

of teams was a dramatic change for the company but not for me. There was genius here: match people together who must depend on each other to survive, only for different reasons. Mullenweg believed I could exemplify how teams should function, and the company could teach me a different way to think and work.

But we also agreed there were no guarantees: my hiring could be a disaster. What if the differences were too great? What if I failed to be productive remotely? Or the culture at WordPress.com rejected the entire idea of leads and teams? There were many big questions. But I confess the uncertainty was central to why I wanted the job. Whatever happened, there'd be a good story to tell, and that story starts with my first day.

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