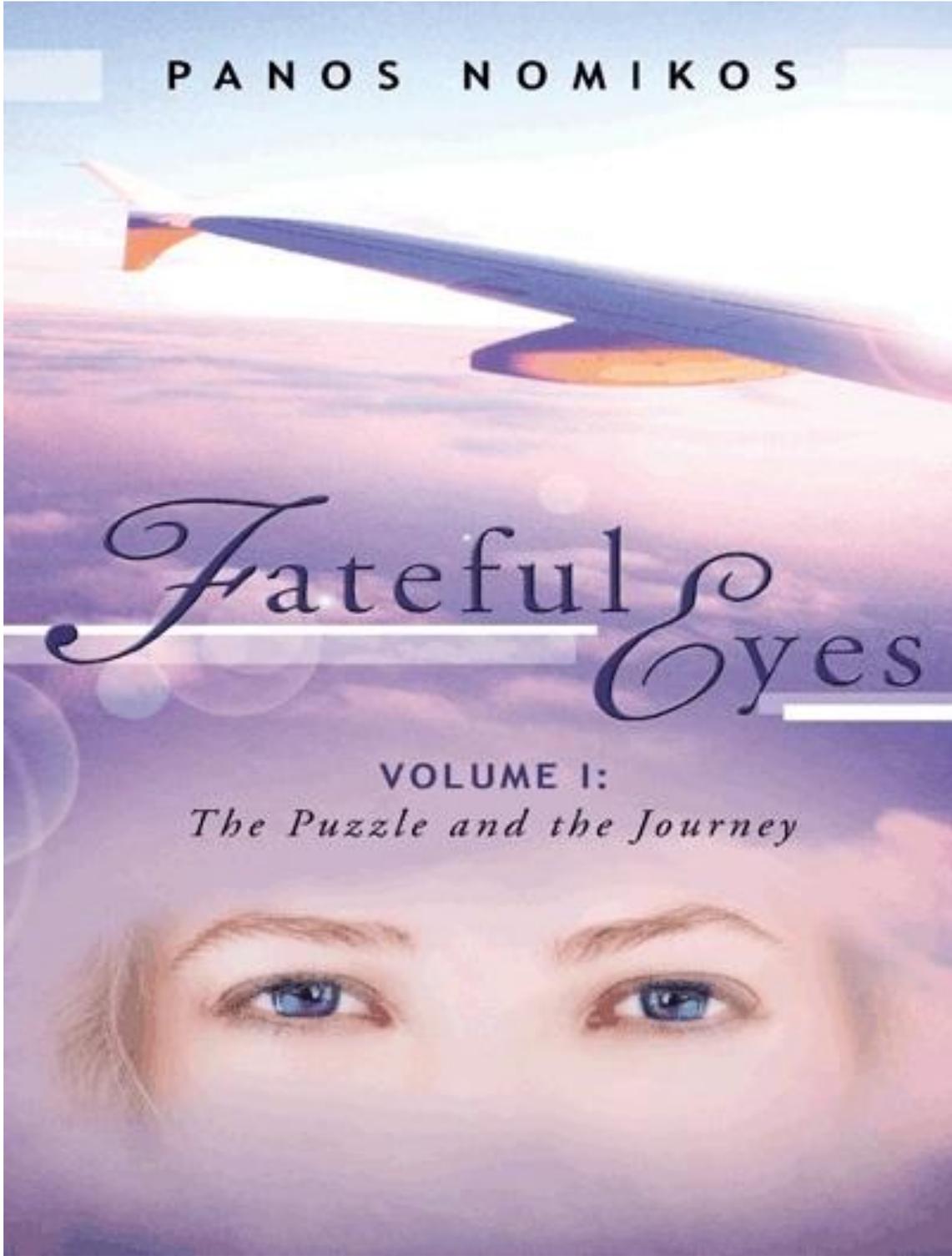


PANOS NOMIKOS



Fateful Eyes

VOLUME I:
The Puzzle and the Journey

LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear reader,

Thank you very much for sharing this intriguing story about a life spent searching for love, accomplishments, and true fulfillment, within the world upheavals that, unfortunately, characterize the beginning of the new millennium. In my own life, I have travelled in many continents, I have been acquainted with many different people from different cultures, and I have also humbly attempted to comprehend the dizzying pace of events that are unfolding in such a frenetic tempo around us.

I aspire to share those experiences with you, by narrating the story of Peter, a cosmopolitan Greek who is traveling around the world, trying to solve a great puzzle, trying to locate a mysterious lady who came from his distant, youthful and lustful past, and upset his life and his relationship with his affectionate lover.

Yet, the puzzle itself is not the essence of this novel. The puzzle is only a 'pretext' to justify the exposure of Peter's tortuous and twisted path in life (in his Greek style of using the English language), as well as to narrate the lives of everyone around him, as they all become unwittingly entangled into the rolling thunder of the world's current upheavals, terrorism, wars, and economic crises. Like a modern Odyssey, the real essence of this novel is Peter's long and tormenting *journey* towards his destination, towards the completion of his mission. As the great poet Constantinos Kavafis wrote "when you set out on the path to Ithaki, wish for the journey to be long..." Peter's struggle is indeed very long, hard, and yet, ultimately fulfilling.

Notwithstanding the mystery, the problems, and the upheavals, this story also celebrates love, affection, optimism, and the enthralling beauty of marvelous life. "*My fascination with your book is happily continuing. You genuinely do have a heartening story to tell*" was the comment that I was honored to receive from a previously unknown to me person, who came across the first drafts of this book. I will very much welcome your own comments too, at **pnomikos@ath.forthnet.gr**

I have narrated this story in two volumes. This book in hand is the first volume. I must emphasize in advance that the mysterious puzzle is **not** resolved in this first volume. The final cathartic revelation will take place in the forthcoming second volume. If you like this story and wish to be informed about the release of the next volume, please visit my Facebook page **www.facebook.com/panosnomikos** and become a fan ("Like" it). On that page you can also contribute your comments and ideas about the future development of the plot and on the probable solution of the puzzle, and win a free copy of the forthcoming second Volume.

I wish that you will feel the same pleasure in reading this book as I have felt when writing it. Enjoy!

Panos Nomikos

*Our small lives roll, bumping around
in the world's chaos...
Yet,
that's all we've got...*

CHAPTER ONE

Saturday 9 July 2005

As the day slowly breaks, a dim light sneaks through the narrow window of the cell illuminating the grey walls and the heavy cast iron door in a soft hazy light. Peter tosses on his uncomfortable narrow bed under the filthy blanket half awake, unable to relax, tormented by the horrid nightmare that he has been thrown into so abruptly.

The calm predawn silence is broken by cracking footsteps on the corridor and the screeching noise of the door opening. A stern guard appears on the threshold. "Come with me please" he orders Peter who stands up dizzy and bleary-eyed, throws hastily some water on his face from the sink tap and follows tottering the guard in the maze of corridors that are bustling with frenetic activity as dozens of policemen and detectives are rushing hastily around carrying papers and barking orders on their radios.

The inspector is already waiting for Peter in the windowless interrogation room, sitting at the table next to a young uniformed policeman who is busy typing into his laptop. The fatigue and huge anguish are evident on the inspector's red eyes and wrinkled face too, yet he manages to break a polite smile. "Good morning Peter, did you manage to have a good sleep?"

"Don't fool me Robin. This is a bloody nightmare..."

"Yes it is, for all of us Peter. Do you want some coffee?"

"I need it very badly" Peter yawns.

"Can you get some for us David? I would love some too..." the inspector asks.

"Certainly Sir" the policeman gets up to bring some fresh hot coffee.

"Any news?" Peter asks impatiently anticipating any flicker of hope.

"No news Peter. She is still in the same condition. We are doing our very best..."

"Damn!" Peter sinks again into desperation. "I must be by her side! She needs me! When are you going to let me go? Am I a prisoner already?"

"Not yet Peter. At the moment you are only 'our guest'. But before we let you go, we need to understand why she got into that trouble" Robin insists sternly.

"I told you a myriad times Robin! By chance! She has nothing to do with it!"

"You need to convince me about that Peter. Somebody did it. At the moment, in our eyes this could have been anybody. For me, yes it could have been even her! Can you convince me otherwise? Can you tell me why she was there? Did you remember anything else last night when you went to sleep, any other seemingly 'unimportant' detail that could give us any clue whatsoever?"

"Unfortunately no Robin, nothing... I am also desperate to find out..."

"Okay then, let's start from the beginning again. Tell me now minute by minute, step by step, what have you been doing for the past four days..."

Tuesday 5 July 2005

(four days earlier)

The damn alarm clock breaks the dark predawn silence at 4am. Peter pops out of his dream reeling with uncertainty. Did he manage to take a nap at last? He spent the night fighting his bed sheets agonizing about all that happened during the past week and tormented from the horrid expectation of what lies ahead today.

Ah, today is my big day at last! The day that on the one hand holds the promise of the cathartic revelation of the mystery that has tantalized my life, but on the other hand also holds menacing threats, he ponders tossing in his bed refusing to get up, tormented. He tries to avoid thinking what lies ahead. For a moment he wants to quit, submerge under his sheets and escape back to his fascinating youth when everything was plain, pure and pleasant. Yet at the same time he is also grateful to Marvelous Life for dawning this beautiful day, the day he has managed to complete his life's puzzle. And in these mixed feelings of joy and anguish he makes up his mind, throws away the sheet and stands up firmly! He must go!

Dizzy and half-asleep he tries to balance his uncertain self. He hovers for a few moments trying to zoom back into space-time. Oh yes, he is in his old room, in his homestead in Ampelokipoi, on the fifth floor of a drab block of flats in that drab Athenian neighborhood where everybody lives on top of everybody else in endless rows of cramped, ugly and dark apartment blocks. Yet for Peter, like millions of Greeks, this is the place he calls 'home'. He has spent the last fifteen years of his life's tortuous journey crisscrossing all the continents of the planet, traveling and living in faraway places. But it was here in this flat that he grew up before emigrating abroad. Here he had good laughs with his school pals, within these walls he felt the intolerable but so sweet sensations of first time love... He turns the light on staring at the cozy familiar surroundings that accompanied his long-gone but so fascinating youth years. The intimate environment, linked to so many sweet recollections and vivid past experiences, relaxes and encourages him in today's dire agony. Now in his early forties he looks back with sweet nostalgia upon those happy child and college years. Back then he had been promised a bright future, but that promise has since turned into disappointment for all his dreams that have not been fulfilled yet, at least not until today.

Yet this is my day! If I will manage to handle this murky affair with due care and plan my actions well, then hopefully all my wild dreams will at last come true! I will put my life back in order! I will reach the final destination of my long journey! Peter ponders and rushes to the bathroom.

It is yet another sweltering day in an Athenian July and Peter finds himself drenched in sweat. He immerses his body under a cold shower trying to rid of the

drowsiness and the agony. But in vain... His reflection in the mirror stares back at him with two dark, bloody red eyes.

A dim light comes from the kitchen. His mother, lady Christine, is already awake in order to prepare his breakfast and see him off. Silently he gulps down some cereal and sips his coffee in a hurry. His mother keeps staring at him compassionately. Of course she feels sad that her son is leaving once again but she cannot complain. Although Peter is a permanent resident of London, during the past three years he has been visiting her quite often. She has stayed in Athens in the midst of the scorching heat wave only to take good motherly care of her son. She will return to her cooler village in the Greek countryside tomorrow, to spend the rest of the summer.

Peter has not told anything to his mother about his special mission today. There is no point in letting her worry about a murky situation where he has not yet got all the answers. Whenever he will be assured then he will inform her about all that is really happening. He gives his mother a warm kiss goodbye, she whispers her blessings begging the Almighty to protect her son at his trip and he takes the elevator to the ground floor clinching his baggage.

Out on the street this predawn moment is supposedly the coolest and most refreshing time of the coming hot day. However the motionless sizzling air takes his breath away. Peter has always boasted to his non-Greek colleagues that the temperate climate of his native country is a rare blessing that is enjoyed only by very few lucky spots on the Earth: Northeast Mediterranean, California and South Africa. All other places on the globe are either very cold, sizzling hot, damp or arid. However there are exceptions to this blessing. And this day dawning in Athens is one of these exceptions.

As always Babis, the company's driver, arrives in his Mercedes taxi on time, at 5am sharp. He has been serving the transportation needs of the company and its personnel for many years anytime, day or night. Babis greets Peter with a loud "good morning" smiling warmly under his thick moustache and shoves Peter's suitcase in the trunk. Peter stretches his tall body on the leather seat enjoying the welcome relief of the air-conditioning. "Where are you flying to today Mr. Peter?" asks Babis joyfully trying to enliven his sleepy guest.

"To Frankfurt" Peter calmly replies. He does not reveal that Frankfurt is only the connecting airport for his *final destination*. Nobody knows where he is heading. At his colleagues in the office in Piraeus, the large port next to Athens, he hasn't mentioned anything substantial about his trip today. "I will be out of contact for a couple of days. If anything urgent happens you can reach me on my mobile" Peter told them. Nobody asked for any further explanations. After the huge troubles that the company has been going through lately, everything seems futile and irrelevant.

Only his lovely wife back in London knows everything. She is the only person who has shared his dire anxieties over all those agonizing years fighting hard to foster their love in the midst of all the uncertainty and upheavals.

The Mercedes with the windows firmly shut speeds gracefully down Mesogeion Avenue as the night slowly recedes. The scenery of the freshly awakened city rolls out of the windshield like a silent movie. One by one the kiosk owners open their street stores. The first morning buses are filled with immigrant labourers who are heading to their harsh daily travails in this inhospitable metropolis. Tormented darker-skinned people wearing worn out clothes are carrying engraved in their faces the troubles they have suffered fighting to escape the misery of their home countries to sneak almost illegally in Greece, the supposed 'promised land'. They work hard in jobs shunned by the Greeks trying to make ends meet through innumerable daily harassments and insecurity.

This beautiful sun-drenched but arid land in the southeast corner of Europe has missed entirely the industrial revolution. It has long been accustomed to centuries of severe underdevelopment and dire poverty. As a result, generations upon generations of destitute Greeks were forced to migrate to faraway places such as America, Australia and Germany to escape the misery. However a startling reversal of Greece's fortunes took place in a single decade when the ascension of the country into the European Union, coupled with the collapse of all her neighboring ex-communist countries, resulted in the rapid transformation of that backward land into a regional powerhouse that enjoyed a booming economy based on European subsidies and loans. The locals have welcomed the spoils but have been baffled to see the country suddenly flooded by hundreds of thousands of destitute immigrants from near and far away destitute countries. This supposedly 'booming land', basking proudly in her newfound status as an 'advanced European country' after the crowning success of the 2004 Olympics, hovers uncertainly between an errant past and a future that holds both promise and menace.

Nevertheless Peter is preoccupied with other troubles today. His employer, the mighty 'Arnamar Shipping', has had very serious problems lately. Peter has been fighting hard, together with the rest of his colleagues, to resolve them. The time is 5:15am in Mesogeion Avenue and that is still 10:15pm in the previous night in New York. His anxiety is huge. He tries to reach Patrick, Arnamar's lawyer in the U.S., on his mobile. Patrick had arranged to meet the lawyers of Arnamar's opposing side for dinner at 7pm trying to reach a last-minute compromise or at least to secure the staff. Patrick rejects Peter's call diverting him to voice mail. That is rather good news. Peter reasons that Patrick is still sitting in the dinner and discussing. Three full hours have passed and they are still talking. *Let's hope...* Peter crosses his fingers.

The luxurious car enters the brand new Attiki Odos highway that links the capital with the brand new airport and roams ahead on the empty four lane superb motorway. "Babis don't speed up please. We are not in a hurry. I am flying at 6:30" requests Peter.

"Very well Mr. Peter, but then why did you wake up so early?"

"I had to make a phone call..." replies Peter and tries to reach Patrick again. At last Patrick picks up the call. He has just finished his dinner and he is also sitting in a taxi heading to his home in New York. "Unfortunately no, they have not accepted anything" Patrick informs Peter about the unpleasant news. The opponent lawyers will relay Arnamar's positions to the other side but their indications are firmly negative. Peter plunges into sadness and disappointment. And yet he manages to stand firm. He has grown accustomed to withstanding bad news for so many years. And especially today, this distinctive day, he can withstand this and much more. Irrelevant troubles...

Peter takes a deep breath and composes himself. He requests from Patrick to write a full report to Vassilis within tonight and to copy it also to Mike in London and to Captain Vaggelis in Piraeus, Arnamar's top brass, "...and please do that in time for them to find your report in their email when they will get to their offices in a few hours."

Peter hangs up disappointed and stares vaguely ahead at the miles that the elegant car is devouring grandiosely and at the dark mass of the Ymettos Mountain to his right. He tries to concentrate. He is not certain if he feels sad, relieved, or both. At least he got rid of this anxiety. Now he must remove this cancerous Arnamar's affair from his mind and focus his full energy on his true mission, his *destination*, his forthcoming meeting with *her*. The wild dream that has been powering his life for the past four years is at last going to be fulfilled today.

He approaches the airport again. His life's long journey is being spent between departure and arrival gates. However this trip is the most important and decisive in his life. Ignorant of Peter's travails Babis parks the car outside the departures hall and rushes to unload the suitcase from the trunk. "Have a nice trip Mr. Peter" he wishes.

The well-dressed young lady behind the counter is trying to awaken the early morning travelers with her warm smile. No trace of fatigue is visible on her beautiful face adorned by her perfect makeup and her well-tended hair. "Do you prefer a window or an aisle?" she asks Peter.

"A window please" is Peter's standard seat request.

Sipping a strong Frappuccino outside the departure gate Peter tries to concentrate. Should he send a text message to his affectionate wife in London, to inform her? *Poor girl, you have been through so much...* he feels a bit guilty for all the troubles, all the agonies that he has caused her. Yet there are things that he cannot help in any way. It wasn't his fault. Things happen... Life...

One more worry perplexes him. *Well, shall I text her now or later?* It is almost 6am in Athens and therefore in London it is only 4am. She will be asleep and the message will probably wake her up needlessly. On the one hand Peter does not want to disturb her valuable resting time. Yet on the other hand he knows that she is expecting his news to calm her own grave anxieties. She is the only person who knows everything and who suffers all the consequences. He must inform her or whatever... He sends his message out hoping that she will be so deeply asleep that she will not notice it. *"Good morning my love, I am boarding for Frankfurt shortly. In NY fiasco. They did not accept anything. So be it. I am moving ahead."*

He is right of course. In the pitch darkness of the bedroom in her flat in London, Peter's wife toils with the linen sheets on her cozy but so desperately lonely bed, unable to fall asleep. She stretches unwittingly her bare hand towards the empty space on his side of the bed fondling affectionately the edge of his thick pillow, fantasizing that she is caressing his lush dark hair and his handsome face, his wide hairy chest, his flat belly with the two funny black moles, his... Her disappointment that he is not really there to roll over on top of her, take her into his arms and satisfy her strong arousal mixes with her dire agonies stemming from all those stormy years that she has been trying to secure his true love and affection, to win the top position in his mind amongst all those other women who have been vying for his attention... With every passing day that Peter has been getting closer to the fulfillment of his mission, to the final solution of the mystery that has been tormenting both their lives and their relationship, her agony was also climaxing alongside his. She has also been desperately waiting to see what will come out of this peculiar affair.

And yet all those murky worries have been eclipsed in her mind by *that possibility* that she cannot contemplate, that she avoids even thinking about... As her sleepless hours tick minute by minute towards early morning her anxiety peaks. At around the time that she had started thinking *perhaps it is time to do it...* her mobile phone flashes and blips in the darkness. It is Peter's incoming text message...

Two minutes later her reply whirrs his mobile in Athens International Airport. *"Don't bother my dear and focus only on your true mission, your destination! Only your lady counts! Have a nice trip. I love you."* Ah, 'your lady' again... Peter feels her delicate irony in between the lines, her feelings of jealousy and uneasiness... However he cannot help her any more. *His lady* is also a very important person now in his life and his wife must grasp the true dimensions of this reality.

"Go back to sleep my love, I should not have waken you. I will contact you again in Frankfurt, I am boarding now." Yet she will not follow his advice. His message finds her wide awake with the lights on, looking into her purse to find *it*.

In Lufthansa's Airbus a tall blond gentleman sits next to Peter. He is probably German. Apart from a polite "good morning" they do not exchange any other word. The aircraft fills up quickly and taxies to the start of the runway. It roars violently and roams ahead. Despite his innumerable past take-offs, this wild roaring flushes Peter with adrenaline every single time. A pilot had told him once that during every take-off there are five seconds when even the crew are scared. During those five seconds the beast has reached such a high speed and has advanced so far in the runway that it can no longer abort and stop safely if any emergency develops, although it has not yet reached its flying speed. If anything goes wrong during those five seconds then the pilots are powerless to react. They look at each other, take a deep breath, count to five, and that was it: They lift it off the ground and tame it.

The beast leaves Mother Earth gracefully and points its nose towards the sky. Out of the window the vineyards of Markopoulo fade away. Shortly they are passing over the port of Rafina where three large ferries are docked side-by-side and one more vessel is returning from her nightly round of the Aegean islands scratching a white trail in the deep blue water. They make a swift U-turn to take a Northwest direction high above Athens. The vast grey expanse of the capital glows in a yellow haze that emanates from the extreme heat and the air pollution. Peter is looking for that line that most likely is Mesogeion Avenue and follows it where he hopes that he can see Ampelokipoi. He sends mental kisses to his mother when the pilot switches off the 'fasten your seat belt' sign. The stewardesses rush to hide behind their curtains to prepare the breakfast whilst the aircraft passes over Piraeus port where Arnamar's impressive headquarters towers over the docks with the large passenger ferries. Peter feels a pinch in his heart recalling that shortly his colleagues will be reading the bad news in their email.

Over the canal of Corinth the stewardesses start serving breakfast. They hand to each passenger a small tray with a sandwich and two slices of apple. Diet food. Out of the window Peter can figure out in sequence Corinthian Bay, Patras Bay with the new bridge, one of the longest in Europe, connecting like a glistening string the mountainous bulky landmasses of the Peloponnese and mainland Greece, and then Aitolokarnania, Vonitsa, Epirus and Corfu, until they leave the Greek airspace. All those places that have played such an important role in his life without him being aware...

The stewardesses remove the tray in front of him. He folds his table and tries to expand his feet in the limited space. His mind lowers gear. He expands his stare out at the blue sky and tries to guess *her* looks on the contours of the distant lonely clouds. Does *she* have the same fantastic fateful eyes? All those years that Peter had been desperately looking for *her* he had not yet managed to see what she looks like, he had not seen any picture of *her*. For Peter *she* was not yet born. Until last week...

Now he is somewhere in the middle. In his handbag he is carrying an old low-resolution photo that he downloaded from the Internet and a blurred black-and-white printout from a head contour that likely is hers. Last week, when he solved the grand mystery at last, he replayed in his mother's old VHS player both CCTV tapes that were given to him in that bar in Rockwell after that horrible day in September. Yes, Peter has probably discovered *who* she was. In the video's blurred images he tried to distinguish *her* features, to follow *her* movements, to catch the pulse of *her* own body.

She appeared in both tapes, on Saturday's and on Tuesday's. On Saturday's she was hidden in the large crowd. Peter could barely discover her. On Tuesday's there were much less patrons at the bar. His sweetie could be clearly distinguished as she approached the bar to order a couple of drinks, before Peter's arrival, and then when she tried to approach again the bar for a second time, close to where he was seated. Yes, Peter saw clearly that *she* moved hesitatingly towards him, towards the vacant stool that he had reserved for her. Alas, on television the horrible hullabaloo had already started and nobody could think of anything else. She was also stunned from the terrifying spectacle and backed up petrified. She never appeared again.

Peter informed his wife and she scanned those blurry images, processed and cleared them digitally as best as she could and emailed them back to Peter for printing. *I suppose she had as much curiosity to see that girl's true face as I did*, Peter reasons to explain his wife's painstaking work in revealing *her* face.

After the discovery Peter also asked Alfredo, his trusted local informant, to verify it. Two days ago Alfredo sent back his reply: Yes, someone with *her* name had indeed entered the country on the 5th of September and *she* had departed on the 13th flying back to Frankfurt. Therefore Peter is now certain that it was indeed *her*.

The intolerable anguish inundates him mixed with huge curiosity and sweet expectation and happiness for managing to solve *the puzzle* at last. All the feelings swirl inside him in a stormy muddle. He puffs impatiently whispering "damn" to himself and slams his fist hard on the seat handle. The German looks at him in surprise. Peter is simultaneously happy, desolate and extremely worried. As all the vivid recollections from his four-year tumultuous journey and agonizing search since that damn September of 2001 return one-by-one into his tired mind, the anxiety, fatigue and drowsiness overwhelm him. He lets himself immerse into a deep sleep as the aircraft cruises towards his *destination*...

CHAPTER TWO

Saturday 8 September 2001

The tropical sun rises slowly and lazily over the fuzzy horizon around 5am to torment for one more day the millions of unlucky souls in the slums who fight hard just to survive from every 'today' to the next. The intolerable heat, the stifling dampness and the asphyxiating pollution have covered the megacity with a grey veil that the sun rays strive very hard to penetrate, finally reaching the ground dim and weak. Only the midday tropical storm will flush temporarily the sludge from the atmosphere but it will also aggravate the unbearable humidity.

As usual millions of Filipinos rush out on the streets of Manila since the predawn darkness to fight their daily battle for survival, trying to take advantage of the few cooler hours of the day before the unforgiving sun will rise high up on the sky extinguishing the shadows and turning any outdoor activity into an unbearable misery. A misery that these laborers endure stoically, packed densely in the jeepnies, sweating profusely as they are trying to reach their jobs where they will strive to earn a few pesos before nightfall. They look around in hazy tired glances, sporting handkerchiefs round their necks or in front of their mouths to wipe the sweat and filter the stench.

Thousands of jeepnies, carts, pickup trucks, cars, lorries, bicycles, tricycles and every other conceivable types of vehicles are squeezed into the narrow streets that snake amongst the shacks. The vehicles move laboriously yard-by-yard, pile up at every crossroad in a city-wide logjam that starts at dawn and continues till late night in the horrible heat and humidity. This is Manila, a living hell, where every transit within the slums or towards the port or the commercial center in Makati takes several hours.

The burning morning sun can neither penetrate the heavy curtains in Peter's bedroom nor affect the pleasant temperature that is maintained to a steady twenty two degrees Celsius day and night. In the privileged modern apartments and villas of the foreigners and of the few affluent Filipinos who live inside the walled and well-guarded neighborhood of Rockwell, daily life rolls in a different tempo. It gives to the privileged tenants the illusion that they live in Miami or in Singapore, of course as long as they will not dare to venture outside the walled perimeter. A small and well organized privileged township floats above an ocean of destitution and misery.

Although today is Saturday the alarm rings at 6am. Peter reluctantly abandons the coziness of his bed and drags himself to the bathroom. In this corner of the world there are neither working days nor weekends. The few lucky people who have permanent jobs work as long as there is work to do, and there is always a lot of work to do. Only Sunday is a resting day, but even then not always.

So be it, mumbles Peter, the sooner I can finish this bloody job the better, to get out of here! When he had freshly arrived in Manila three months ago he was

inconvenienced to be forced to work on Saturdays, being accustomed to Europe's relaxed work standards with long weekends, public, private and annual holidays and other benefits of an easygoing work ethic. He found out soon that Manila is located in a different continent, in a different meridian. Here, if you are a foreigner, you work as hard as you can to finish your assignment as soon as possible and leave!

Peter takes a quick shower, eats some cereal and leaves the small apartment that the company has given him locking carefully the door. Like every morning Juan, his personal driver and bodyguard, is already waiting in the garage. When Peter arrived here he was told in no uncertain terms that he must never ever venture outside on his own. A white man alone in Manila is a prime target for the gangs. It is not only because he can easily fall prey to armed robbery and lose whatever cash and valuables he happens to be carrying with him. No, the gravest danger is a kidnapping that frequently ends when the victim is murdered whether the ransom is paid or not.

"Good morning Sir!" Juan greets him loudly bowing slightly and rushes to open the door of the large Cherokee with the dark-tinted windows. Peter, raised in the rebellious spirit of his insubordinate home country, in his early days in Manila was taken aback by the mock servility of the Filipinos who are assigned to take care of him and who treat every white person as a semi-god. He has realized since then that the servility of these proud people is a result of their great financial strains and need to gain the favor of foreigners who hold a financial advantage.

Juan locks the car from inside and moves on. Soon they reach the gate that separates the lucky insiders from the unlucky outsiders. The guards stand to attention, lift the railing and the large SUV enters into Manila's daily traffic chaos. The avenue linking Rockwell with Makati is wide, supposedly well-guarded and out-of-bounds for the jeepnies and tricycles. However the mass of people who need to be transported daily to the financial center of this city is so large that even the few restricted avenues clog with thousands of vehicles and trucks, American and Japanese models with dark-tinted windows to block the view of the passengers from outside and prevent the gangs from targeting them when they happen to be passing through the slums. Staring out of his window at the murky grey sky and the lush dark green tropical vegetation that covers the few vacant land plots of this huge metropolis, Peter ponders on the peculiar forces in his life's tumultuous journey that have driven him to try to earn a living in this far away desolate city during the past three months...

Peter Romanos, a Greek who went to Manchester in 1986 to study Information Technology and stayed thereafter in the UK for the rest of his life, found himself unexpectedly in The Philippines following the swirling path of his problematic career as an I.T. professional. During the huge crisis that hit the I.T. sector after the busting of

the dot.com bubble in early 2000, he was made redundant and was forced to take temporary assignments as a freelance I.T. consultant.

Fortunately his rich professional experience and the connections he had nurtured during his previous work years helped him find rather quickly this project that got him here to Manila. His customer who has hired him to manage this project is 'Noviasoft Informatics', a large multinational company in Information Technology based in New York. In order to survive the abrupt and severe crisis Noviasoft decided that it must gradually replace most of its expensive European and American programmers with cheaper workers. To test this idea Noviasoft decided in early 2001 to create a pilot software development centre based in Manila and staffed with Filipino programmers.

Since this project is experimental and to avoid demoralizing its workforce in the middle of the crisis, Noviasoft decided to keep it secret and outsource the daily management of the project to outside consultants. Peter had earlier distinguished himself when he had worked in Noviasoft's London office in the early 90s, before moving on to other companies. Noviasoft's executives, who remembered very well Peter's skills and trusted his capabilities, rehired him and assigned him the leadership of a small team of consultants whom they sent to Manila in a hurry in early June 2001 with the mandate to setup the new programming centre as soon as possible.

The agreed fees and relocation bonuses were very good, were an unexpected windfall for Peter, taking into account the carnage taking place in Europe in this sector after the bursting of the dot.com bubble and the thousands of ex-highly paid I.T. professionals who are suddenly losing their jobs. He accepted Noviasoft's proposal without giving it a second thought. He was worried of course for agreeing to spend six to nine months in this faraway country for which he had heard some bad rumours but he did not have the financial capacity to reject the tempting offer.

Back in early June Peter was staring through the tropical mist and the dark clouds the evergreen jungle and the paddy-fields of Luzon feeling awe and an underlying fear, while the large jumbo jet was slowly approaching Manila to complete the long flight from London. He felt a chill trickling down his spine when he saw from high above the endless sea of tin shacks in the slums surrounding the airport but he said to himself *it is only six months, time will pass by, I will get my money and I will get out of here.*

During the following three months the project has advanced considerably, pushed by Peter's managing skills. The Filipinos know very well how to offer to the large multinational companies very cheap but reasonably skilled labor with rather good knowledge of the English language. The Philippines is, after India, the second best country world-wide offering outsourcing services in Information Technology, in call center staffing and in many other areas. These are the laws of the relentless globalization: Jobs will simply go where cheap labor is offered.

Yet today Saturday is a new day and Peter must fight hard to earn his living too. His daydreaming on the clogged highway ends when he reaches at last the large glass towers of Makati. In this sector Manila presents a different face. It has avenues and roads with pavements, traffic lights, pedestrian crossings and well-kept stores and small shops selling coffee and newspapers. Here the power lines are underground and not hovering above the heads of the passersby like a spider's web, as they do in the shanty towns. For a moment one may even feel as though they are in London or New York. Only the jeepnies keep reminding you that you are still in Manila, these old American army Jeeps handed over by the thousands to the locals who added a carriage with benches and seats, painted them in bright colors and decorations and pack them with commuters every day as they are the most popular, affordable mass transit medium.

Since arriving in Manila Peter and his two British teammates have hired a local company, 'Rosario Specialist Services', who specialize in assisting with the setup of large outsourcing centers. Peter and his team settled temporarily in Rosario's premises in one of Makati's high-rise towers. Since then Rosario has taken care of everything: to rent apartments for the three foreigners in Rockwell, to hire cars and drivers for them and to prepare everything else that is necessary to start the project.

The black Cherokee reaches the destination tower and descends into the garage. At the gate the guard approaches the car politely and Peter must lower the window to show his face. As soon as the guard notices a white passenger he salutes loudly with a broad smile "Good morning Sir!" and rushes to lift the railing. The car goes down in the garage and Peter takes the lift to the twentieth third floor where the office of Rosario is located.

When he arrives at Rosario's entrance a few minutes before 7am everybody else is already at work. The security guards at the entrance stop chatting with the young female receptionists and stand to attention to greet him. Entering his office the young fellow who is assigned to serve his every need rushes behind him carrying a cup of hot coffee exactly as he likes it. In order to avoid losing precious time in booting up his computer his secretary has already printed the most important emails and has left them on his desk for his immediate attention.

Peter calls his whole team into the large conference room for their daily teleconference with Noviasoft's headquarters in Manhattan at 7:30am sharp. On the other side of the globe the time is 7:30pm in the previous day, Friday, the last working day in New York. The two Noviasoft managers who oversee this project in the U.S., Roger and Sean, are ready at the other end of the line to discuss any developments and to give any further instructions.

Every day of the week America issues instructions during the first morning teleconference, Manila executes them while America is sleeping and reports back in the second daily teleconference that takes place at 7:30pm, that is 7:30am and the start of

the same day in New York. America will study the reports while Manila is sleeping and will give the new instructions the same evening in the U.S. that is the next morning in Manila. In this way the work continues uninterrupted in consecutive twelve-hour shifts from this to the other side of the Pacific and vice-versa.

Upon finishing the morning teleconference Peter and his team board the large Jeep to visit their worksite in Eastwood, Quezon City. The Philippines' government has built here a modern technology park equipped with all necessary infrastructures in electricity supply, high-speed communications and transportation. A frenzy of building activity has gripped the whole park since there are many multinationals that are hurriedly transferring labor-intensive activities to Manila by building or extending their own outsourcing centers. Cranes and construction workers are building continuously new large worksites while large trucks carry building materials.

Tens of thousands of Western employees, programmers, receptionists, office clerks, will lose their jobs in Europe and in the U.S. and will be replaced by tens of thousands of Filipino programmers, receptionists and office clerks. These are the relentless laws of globalization. Jobs will go where cheaper labor is available. Tens of thousands of Filipinos who will replace the westerners will benefit. The lucky Filipinos will extricate their families from the absolute misery, hunger and desolation of the tin shacks, they will feed them and house them in homes made of bricks and mortar. The cheaper products and services will benefit those westerners who will remain in a job and who will be in a position to buy them.

Once upon a time, during his college years, Peter was participating in protest rallies and political struggles to prevent all that from taking place. Now he observes the developments in a critical attitude. He observes and reflects but he cannot decide what is black and what is white. Seeing with his own eyes the extreme poverty and destitution that plague the unfortunate peoples in the underdeveloped countries, he feels some moral justification in working hard to offer them a few hundred new job positions and help a few hundred poor families extricate themselves from their daily misery. Of course he realizes very well that in this way he is gnawing at his own personal prospect to find a normal permanent job as an I.T. professional. When this project will be completed and Peter will return to the UK in the midst of this savage crisis, he will have to face additionally the British programmers of Noviasoft who will become redundant precisely due to the establishment of this programming center in Manila and who will compete against him for the very few jobs that trickle in today's job market in the UK. What is 'moral' and what is 'right'? To consider his own personal interest as a well-paid western employee secured by the lush provisions of the welfare state or to take care of the interests of the hundreds of Filipino families who are malnourished? He cannot make up his mind. His life has become complex. Globalized. Swirling.

In Noviasoft's new worksite at Eastwood the air-conditioning has not been installed yet and the tropical heat is unimaginably unbearable in the interior as the building was not designed to have any windows or other openings. Peter and his team are well prepared for such extreme conditions. They are wearing their lightest clothing and have brought along many tissues and cool juices. Nevertheless it is absolutely impossible to stay in this furnace for more than an hour. They cannot believe their eyes observing the workers who are toiling stoically in this unbearable heat, such as those workers who are now fitting the carpets. The white consultants complete summarily the inspection and the meetings with the foremen and exit the building to get some 'fresh air'. It is about time for the midday tropical storm. The menacing dark grey sky is ripped apart by thunderous lighting. A torrential hot rain pours down on the city and creates ponds everywhere and turbulent streams of water. The downpour refreshes for a short while the poor city during the midday scorch but the humidity reaches red alert levels.

The best time of the day is when the merciful midday rain wets and cools temporarily the streets and the shacks. The worst time of the day is when the short-lived storm passes away and the merciless sun pokes out again, the hot tarmac sizzles with vapor and the tin roofs drip like sponges immersed in water. The breath is arrested by the onslaught of the burning heat and the body sweat is impossible to evaporate and inundates the filthy clothes gumming them onto the skin. Peter and the other white consultants rush panting back to their air-conditioned luxury car and depart leaving the Filipino foremen to return stoically to continue their work shift within the caldron.

Inside the car Peter relaxes observing Juan who strives very hard to navigate the large vehicle in the unbelievable traffic jam. As always the downpour has caused yet another power outage and everything is out of order on the streets. Even worse, all the smaller, unstable vehicles that had pulled over to take cover during the storm are now trying to reclaim the drenched roads en mass and in a hurry. From right and left cars, carts, tricycles, trucks and jeepnies blow their horns frantically trying to squeeze ahead in any possible manner almost pushing and touching the other competing vehicles. In this city, just to manage to move from one block to the next, one must fight with the same intensity that everyone is fighting for their daily survival, without the slightest mercy or second thought for the right of others to use the same road.

Peter enjoys the mess relaxed. On other occasions, when he is really in a hurry, the traffic chaos frustrates him. However today it is Saturday and his business schedule is lighter. There is no need to hurry. Before arriving in Manila he considered that Greeks are the most undisciplined drivers in the world. Well, the Filipinos are even worse.

At a major crossroads in front of them the traffic lights are out of order and an absolute chaos has taken hold. All the traffic directions are tangled in an inextricable mess and nobody can move even a single inch forward. In the stifling heat everyone is

extremely irritated. A loud mix of honking and swearing emanates from the vehicles. Filthy beggar kids approach the Jeep and stick their tiny dirty faces on the windows sniffing and begging for a few dimes. They scream at the top of their voices as they try, in vain, to be heard through the tightly shut windows, crying hard and begging in Tagalog, the local dialect, for the generosity of the white men. Even though the beggars are part of everyday life in traffic jams Peter is always shocked by the spectacle and feels very uncomfortable.

Juan is not only uncomfortable, he is greatly worried. The luxurious black Cherokee immobilized dead in the center of Manila, carrying three whites, is a very attractive target. Juan knows that frequently the kid beggars are scouting on behalf of the gangs. As they stick their faces on the windows they try to distinguish who is inside and what is their seating arrangement. Juan opens slowly his jacket flashing the handle of the revolver that he is carrying in his inside pocket, taking care to display explicitly this move to the oldest boy who has stuck his face on the driver window and who seems to be the leader. The speechless boy pays close attention but does not make any move. Juan lifts his hand and touches the revolver gesturing his intentions in a very clear way. The boy nods and all the kids suddenly disappear.

As Peter follows Juan's movements terrified by the vague threat and his pulse climbs, he does not pay attention to the buzzing of his mobile in his trouser pocket that notifies him that he has got a new text message. He looks around like a caged bird feeling a huge impulse to thrust himself out and run away from this menacing gridlock. But he cannot, he must not. Inside his luxurious cage he is a lot safer than he would be outside. He rattles his teeth and clinches his fists on the door handles trying to calm down as his heart beats at a breaking point. *Damn the bloody moment that I accepted this mission to come to this hell!* Peter swears to himself. "GET US OUT OF HERE!" he screams to Juan.

Juan in a panic decides to risk it all. Honking and screaming devilishly with its headlights flashing the huge Jeep roars in a thunderous rage as it slowly opens a way forward pushing aside tricycles and carts, forcing the carriages to give way, striding pavements and almost scratching the other vehicles. Awestruck by the furor of the black flashing beast the Filipinos give way, move aside. In the last jeepnie that blocks their way the wretched driver, drenched in sweat and sporting a miserable cigarette on his lips, is snubbing them unabashed. Juan, hellishly mad behind the tinted windshield, starts shouting at the poor guy all the insults he knows in Tagalog screaming at him to give way and blows his horn relentlessly while repeating the same gesture that he did earlier to the boy: he opens his jacket and flashes the handle of the revolver. Seeing the revolver the poor driver loses his apathetic attitude, turns pale and finally moves the jeepnie aside.

At last the Jeep escapes the deadly gridlock and thrusts ahead. Everybody is on edge. The passengers in the back seat take some Coca-Colas out of the cool box and serve everyone a drink to calm down. Nobody mumbles a word. They are quietly ashamed for being scared by fears that could have been unfounded. They prefer to calm down each on his own, speechless. At the next traffic jam they are calmer. There are no beggars here whereas a police car rolls quietly on their side. Relaxed they start joking. Peter remembers the text message that is still waiting for his attention.

The call registry shows that the message was sent by a Greek mobile number that has not been registered in Peter's phone memory. He is surprised. Whomever he knows back in Greece (his mother, his sister, some old friends), he has already registered in the device memory. Who else knows his private Philippine number and is texting him? Even more intriguing, the message is written in English:

"My search is ending. I am here. I am anxious. I hope that you shall accept me, but I am not yet certain. Check your email."

Not signed. Who is that? Peter tries to call that number. No luck, it is out of reach. He replies by text message too. *"Who is there? Are you mistaken perhaps?"* No reply. It may be a hoax, it may be a mistake. Soon he forgets about it.

At last the Makati towers can be seen in front of them. They are back to base. They meet again briefly to wrap up the week's issues and they are dismissed around 5pm.

Before calling it a day Peter shuts himself in his office to have a quiet last look in his personal email. Two years ago his mailbox was full of messages from colleagues, friends and acquaintances. It pulsed lively as all of them together were striving to build a bright new world. Now, after the collapse, everyone is gone, everyone is trying to make do with whatever temporary job they manage to find. Now Peter is only expecting the daily sweet messages from his beloved lover whom he has left behind in rainy London. Back there it is only 10am and his sweetheart will be still asleep cocooning during her Saturday morning. There is no message from her yet.

Amongst the deluge of spam that Peter is deleting quickly and carelessly there is a peculiar message titled *"Geia sou Petro"*, that is *"Hello Peter"* in Greek. He notices it at the last moment, a fraction of a second before hitting the 'Delete' key. For sure this is someone who knows the Greek greeting therefore this is probably not spam. The sender has a mysterious name, *'Kerguelen'*, that does not ring any bell in his memory. He decides to read it after all. Despite the Greek title the body text is written in English:

"I am here! It is unbelievable but I managed to come down here. Twenty hours of claustrophobia and this unbearable heat. But I did it!

I have been looking for you for so long. I wish to see your face. I want to talk to you, to learn who you are. I need you (???)

But I am afraid. Will you believe me? Will you understand?

*I have been living in a cage for years. I have been looking for the keys. In vain...
Nobody cares. Nobody. And I am afraid.*

*Of course they say that life is beautiful, that it is worth living. What is it worth? Do
you know? Can you understand?*

*I have been searching for a long time. Very long. Nobody knows the answers. So I
am talking to a stranger, to you, you are a part of me but you don't know me and
neither do I know you. But you are my only support. I am afraid to see you, I am afraid
to face your stare.*

*I grew up in the cold and the darkness. I am the proud daughter of the snow and
the wind. Proud. The loved ones are gone, the friends are indifferent. They only drink all
the time. Someone told me that the sun and the sea shine in your eyes, that your heart
is warm. Did they tell me the truth?*

*Our pitied lives bounce around uncontrollably. What for? Why did you bring us out
in this cold world?*

*They told me that you know a lot. You know how to love. Really? I don't know how
to believe. I only know how to mock. I know how to detest. I am sorry...*

*Anyway, finally I came here. I started from afar, I passed through Ampelokipoi,
through Kensington and I found you here at the edge of the world. At least here the sun
is truly hot. Why have you come this far? Since I came I shall try to get to know you.*

If you wish, please try to listen to me..."

**** (same day, at night) ****

It is a tropical Saturday night in Manila, at the beginning of September, just before
the end of the rainy season. The sky clears, the humidity recedes and the pale moon
shines above the desolate city. The air temperature lowers, it becomes just bearable.

Like every Saturday night Peter enjoys his drinks at Madrugada, the bar in
Rockwell where almost the entire community of white foreign residents congregates. In
any case he does not have any alternative. Every weekend Juan goes to his young wife
and daughter who are waiting for him in a village in northern Luzon, about a five-hour
drive from Manila. Alone and without protection Peter has no other option than to walk
the half mile from his flat to Madrugada in the safety of the guarded neighborhood. It is
the only opportunity for a walk that he can enjoy by himself in this desolate place.

Tonight Ramon, the owner and chief barman, has hired a Brazilian band who
enthrall the patrons with their strong samba beat. It is a Saturday night and the bar is
full of revelers. Europeans, Americans and wealthy Filipinos fill up the few tables sipping
their drinks swaying to the beat of the music in the congested bar. A group of wacky
American teenage girls shake their bodies wildly in the small dancing floor area. They
are the daughters of the embassy staff. Their brothers together with their fathers stare
at them boozing and smoking lazily with blurry eyes. Elegant Filipina escorts, strikingly

beautiful, wearing luxury dresses with large openings at the top and at the bottom, dally amongst the lone male diplomats and businessmen, caress their balding heads, pretend to cuddle their protruded bellies, kiss them fleetingly laughing and bring them more drinks from the bar.

Peter hobnobs in the company of his British teammates. The Brits are talking to a Dane and to an American from Kentucky. Two beautiful escorts, Rita and Esmeralda, approach them to enliven their company. The men welcome eagerly their marvelous smiles and their bottomless décolletages and order one more bottle of scotch.

Peter is sitting alone at the edge of the cheerful company. He is boringly following the bland conversations and the silly gags with the hired lassies. His mind cannot escape from the poetess of the afternoon. Who could have written all these murky things? What did she mean? And how did she manage to find his mobile number? Very few people know it. On the one hand he feels excited, curious. This lady is writing like his Athenian comrades did in Kypseli's artistic commune back in his youthful college years. Yet on the other hand he is worried. In this country where everything is usually worse than what it looks on the surface, where deception and traps lurk everywhere, becoming the target of strangers is very worrisome. Of course Manila's gangsters neither have the same existential quests as his old comrades in Kypseli did, nor do they know anything about his homestead in Ampelokipoi. However he cannot be relaxed. He wonders if he must talk about this strange affair to Rosario and ask for increased protection.

The rhythmic tempo intensifies and the bodies soaked in alcohol cannot resist the beat. The boys who had been sitting silently at the tables abandon their fathers who continue boozing alone. The small dancing floor is filled with youngsters swaying wildly. The American teenagers freak out screaming and clapping their hands. Someone is taking pictures, the flash from the camera contrasts with the stage lights.

The whisky washes every thought away from Peter's mind. Everything is lost in a featureless confusion buried under the boisterous rhythm that bashes his eardrums. The accumulated weekly fatigue, horrendous heat and heavy drinking are taking their toll. It is past 3am, time to go home. He convinces the cheerful company of the juvenile oldies to abandon the beautiful cocottes and to head to their beds. At this late hour and in this condition it is impossible for him to walk the half-mile back to his flat. Thankfully the Dane has got a car and offers to give a lift to all of them.

**** (next day) ****

Blessed Sunday is dawning on this miserable city. Following their daily habit millions of wrenched souls rise up before dawn to enjoy the few cooler hours. They make themselves up, adorn their best attire and rush to Sunday's mass that starts at 5am. Their strong devotion to Catholicism is the only balsam to the unbelievable discomfort of their daily struggles.

Sunday's mass is followed by limited pleasure time. Millions of Filipinos rush out to the few parks and sandlots, to the large dirty seafront with the murky waters and palm trees, wandering around cheerfully, buying sweets and ice cream, from about 8 to 10am, before the true master of their lives, the sun, before it will climax high up on the sky and the scorching heat will empty the parks and the seafront and will force them to seek comfort in their backyards under the pergolas to enjoy their Sunday meal all together the extended families, the parents, the grandparents, the many children, the uncles, the cousins and the second cousins.

Towards noon, at the hottest time of the day, the sizzling sun rays as always fail to penetrate the thick curtains in Peter's window and disturb the tranquility of the well-conditioned air in his room. The hangover from last night and the fatigue of the past tiresome week weigh on his body and do not allow him to abandon the cozy comfort of his quilt. He has been half-awake for many hours unable to recover fully. His mind is busy with his pending job issues searching for solutions to the urgent matters and for replies for the executives back in New York. That peculiar email also hovers from time to time in his thoughts, fleetingly. It could have been a mistake, or maybe someone is trying to sell something, or it could be a clever hooker's trick to attract customers. At last he gets up lazily from his lonely bed, showers, switches the radio on and tosses two eggs with bacon in the frying pan to be served with plenty of bread and a strong coffee to sweep the alcohol from his body and relieve him from the heavy hangover.

Today is the only day of the week that he can devote to himself and his personal life. Staring around at the 'standard issue' impersonal gravures hanging on the walls of this flat for short-staying foreigners that resembles a dull hotel room, Peter ponders on his enforced solitude and nostalgia for his beloved sweetheart whom he has been forced to leave behind thousands of miles away in rainy London for so many unbearable months. *Oh, what a horrible mess my life has been so far... Why am I so unlucky? Why?*

**** (Peter's past life in the UK) ****

In his long swirling journey in life Peter has been accustomed to waking up every now and then in a different room, roaming from city to city and from hotel to hotel, unable to establish a firm foothold in any place and sustain firm relationships with friends and lovers. In 1986 he got his Bachelor's Degree in Mathematics from the University of Athens, had already finished with his mandatory yearly military service in the Greek army (like all Greek males) and took a flight to England to study for a Master's Degree. Since then most likely he has boarded airplanes more times than he has boarded buses. Being a solid achiever, he opted to specialize in the budding sector of Information Technology and enrolled in the renowned UMIST College in Manchester. The Master's Degree that he got with very good honors and outstanding referrals in

September 1987 opened for him all the right doors for a bright career anywhere he would opt to get a job.

At first his mother pushed him to return by her side in Athens where she had 'arranged' an enviable job offer for him at the Commercial Bank, Greece's second largest state-owned bank where his father had spent his entire career before passing away from a sudden heart attack shortly before retirement. State bank employees were the most privileged of Greek Public Sector workers enjoying secure and well-paid jobs for life enriched with many bonuses and benefits before and after early retirement. Petty politicians from all the parties right and left were busy bloating the public sector with superfluous employees in order to satisfy the pestering demands of their constituents. Because of his father's sudden death and the family's connections with MPs from the ruling socialist party, a lavish job position was waiting for Peter.

However Peter had already seen the real world. He explained calmly to his mother the difference between a career built working in a place like London that is located at the very core of the global financial and geopolitical developments, compared to working in a remote and disconnected place like Athens in an insignificant and backward corner of the world. Lady Christine, who had grown up in a small, poor village in the Greek provinces and was well aware of the huge difference between the metropolis and the periphery, reluctantly gave way. She bid farewell to her beloved son and wholeheartedly wished him the very best of success in his aspirations.

Peter started his career in one of the large multinational companies in Information Technology, 'Noviasoft Informatics' (that is the same company that has hired him again as a consultant and has sent him to Manila today). Noviasoft's European headquarters was located in the City of London. Young, bright and efficient, working in a young company that was leaping ahead in a young sector that had started to transform radically the global socioeconomic environment, where all the senior managers around him were also young people, Peter soon managed to distinguish himself. Within five years he had been promoted to Head of the North and Central Europe division covering an area from Oslo and Helsinki to Vienna and Paris. He was traveling to all these countries very frequently. Every two or three days he was picking up his travel bag heading to Heathrow or Gatwick for a short flight to a European destination. Once every two months he was crossing the Atlantic to report to his supervisors in Manhattan.

A month into his new job he started dating Nicole, a beautiful redheaded assistant at Noviasoft who was fascinated with his handsome Mediterranean features and his passion for life. He was attracted to her shining green eyes, her bridging eyebrows and her lovely freckles. Nicole had grown up in a dull town with dull red brick houses under the dark rainy skies somewhere in Yorkshire next to the huge smokestacks of a foundry where both her parents were working. She spent her teenage years flirting and sexing

boys searching desperately for true passion and devotion amongst dull males who would rather spend their nights drinking with the pals than looking after their sweethearts.

On the contrary Peter, in 1987 in his twenty six years of age, was still heavily influenced by the rich intellectual and political fermentation he had vividly experienced when he participated in the youthful sociopolitical movements in Greece in the early 80s. He was still mesmerized by his passionate quest for the Beauty of Life and by his strong obsession for sentimental and sensual fulfillment in every facet of his life. He knew very well how to channel his vivid fervor towards his girlfriends and treat them like Queens and that, for a young lady from Yorkshire, was a true revelation.

They spent four happy years living together in a small rented flat in a North London old three-story house above an Indian restaurant. The chilly air drifted in their living room from the cracks in the old wooden windows during the harsh winters and the floor squeaked every time they tramped on the worn out carpets but they didn't mind as long as they had each other for comfort. Peter had been worn out by the intellectualist travails and the snotty sentimental distance that his Greek ex-girlfriends had been dutifully keeping from him during his preceding college years in Athens. He let himself succumb to the passion of this English woman who regarded him as a living god.

It is true that in the beginning Peter was upset by the unending hours Nicole was spending in front of the telly and by her total indifference for anything 'artistic' and 'cultural'. Their attempts to find a common preference for any Saturday night movies or plays would always lead them into quarrels. They clashed many times when they tried to select the wall decorations, the flowery designs on their bed sheets and the furbelowed covers on their night table lamps. But when they were laying their bodies on that bed together, whatever decoration their sheets happened to have, they forgot everything and threw themselves into skyrocketing primordial sexual passion. Nicole knew very well how to dance on his naked body in a manner that none of his Greek ex-girlfriends ever attempted, and for Peter that was the end of all his anxieties.

So Peter gradually relinquished his artistic and socioeconomic quests and was assimilated by the typical British way of life, spending the rainy nights watching the soap operas on the telly, boozing heavily in the pubs on Saturday nights and picnicking in the parks during the few sunny summer Sundays.

Peter and Nicole amassed some good money from his high salary and bonuses and decided to buy a proper house and get married. They got a mortgage in August 1991 and bought a cosy two bedroom semi-detached in a quiet back street in Guilford, Surrey, with a nice porch in the front and a spacious land lot in the back next to rolling tranquil green fields where cattle were grazing all day. Having grown up in the Ampelokipoi dungeons where huge grey concrete walls were blocking his every view outside his windows, Peter was very excited to move for the first time in his life into a

house in the countryside where every morning he was greeted by nature's fresh air and sweet smell. Their only problem was the two-hour daily commute to the City.

The following September they got married in a solemn ceremony where both his bride and his mother were shining full of joy and happiness. Lady Christine got on very well with her daughter-in-law even though she could not speak any English whatsoever. The women always managed to find the correct gestures to communicate effectively.

During the following harsh British winter, every morning Peter was waking up at 6am to toil along under the rain and snow on the trains and in the airplanes rushing from Guilford to the City or to any other European city. He was returning exhausted every night or every other night to drowse in front of the television. And sometime during those years, somewhere between the suburban rail coaches and the Saturday shopping at Sainsbury's, somehow their passion got lost and died and neither the pub rounds every Saturday night nor the idyllic weekends in Cornwall or in Brighton could resurrect it. Their love disappeared, was washed away by the grey sky and the monotonous drizzle, by the stillness of the countryside and the dullness of a country that unfortunately fails to keep alive someone who has been raised under the scorching sun.

Peter devoted all his energy to his career, to his business trips and his customers with whom he was a star performer. Nicole withdrew and isolated herself in her quiet secretarial position, in her daily two-hour discomfort on the suburban trains and in her isolation in the quiet house with her cats and tea in front of the television. It just happened that she became pregnant once, they were both rather embarrassed with the prospect of having a baby, but four weeks later unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately) she miscarried. That was their first and also their last half-hearted attempt to approach the issue of giving the joy of delivering a grandchild to Lady Christine who nevertheless kept demanding it, but in vain.

In December 1995 Peter made his next career move. He quit Noviasoft and was appointed as Chief Operations Officer at 'British Logistics Systems', a large British software firm with a global footprint. His salary and his bonuses doubled, but on the same token his commitments doubled too. When he was not travelling overseas he stayed in the office until 10 or 11pm every day. And when he was travelling, he was indeed travelling a lot. More than half the days in each month he was visiting faraway places such as North America and especially the resurgent Asia, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Shanghai, following the booming markets.

Since there continued to be only twenty four hours in each day (contrary to Peter's strong efforts to increase them) he was forced to rent by himself an one-bedroom flat in Notting Hill so at the very least he managed to stop losing two valuable hours every day commuting from Guilford. Nicole refused to join him in Central London although she did not ask him to divorce yet. After ceasing to work together in the same company the

couple were seeing each other only one or two weekends every month, whenever Peter happened to be staying in the UK.

Naturally under these circumstances a third person soon sneaked into their relationship. Nicole's burning temperament and passion, coupled with her boredom in waiting forever for her Greek husband to return from his long trips to have sex with her, made her develop an intimate relationship with Mark, another colleague younger than her. Due to the high monthly mortgage payments (that were higher than her entire meagre salary) and her husband's fat income she was forced to stay in the marriage but gradually she threw Peter out of her bedroom and in practice they separated.

Peter, who was of course very sorry with the miserable status of his marriage but could not salvage it due to his extremely heavy workload, found a glimmer of hope in 1998. It was the dawning of the age of the Internet, the start of the dot.com frenzy. Many visionaries were quitting their jobs launching Internet-based startups aiming to revolutionize the global economy within a few months or years.

Peter decided to join the excitement. He partnered with two of his colleagues, Ross Harris and Muammar Al Hamdan, a Lebanese man raised in Beirut who had come to London as a civil war refugee. They got together and started to secretly lay out their plans drinking together in the pub or spending long weekends at Peter's flat in Notting Hill sharing pizzas and curries. They planned to create an Internet-based service that would revolutionize the global trade in containerized goods.

They had plenty of ideas and plenty of enthusiasm but very little money. Peter had invested about thirty thousand Pounds in the Greek stock exchange in the early 90s following the advice from some old friends of his. In the heat of the frenzied Greek bull market, by 1998 that investment had grown to one hundred thousand. Peter decided to invest that money in his new venture and hurriedly sold the shares to his Greek friends, discarding their advice to hold on to them since the stock-market upsurge was predicted to last for some more time. He had his own dream to follow and he needed the cash. His friends obliged and bought the shares. About a year later, just before the eventual crash, they sold those shares and pocketed three hundred thousand Pounds.

Ross contributed another eighty thousand from his life savings and Muammar, who was married to Fatima and had two young children, borrowed from a rich uncle another hundred thousand. Uncle Khalid was a wealthy Lebanese merchant and had helped financially Muammar's father when all of them hurriedly left burning Beirut and came to London at the beginning of the civil war in 1975. Uncle Khalid agreed to lend that money to Muammar only on the condition that the team would accept amongst them his daughter Leila who was in a very difficult period of her life having just gone through a painful divorce. In order to help Leila her father gave her another seventy thousand Pounds and demanded that she would be accepted as another shareholding partner.

Therefore three hundred and fifty thousand Pounds were amassed, an amount that was still inadequate for the size of this endeavor. Peter realized that he ought to find additional money in order to secure an adequate starting capital for their nascent company. Most important, he wished to secure for himself a bigger portion of the shares than the Lebanese family. This venture was his own idea and he did not want to relinquish the controlling interest to outsiders. He had no other choice than to take the only available big decision. He sent a message to Nicole that he would return home to spend a full weekend with her, bought a lush bouquet of flowers and expensive Beaujolais for the dinner that she would prepare, put on his best attire and set out for Guilford rehearsing in the train the arguments that were needed to persuade her.

Nicole was expecting him full of curiosity and anticipation. She had not seen him at all for two full months and had realized that he was preparing 'something' rather important. She was contemplating perhaps an announcement about a promotion or a move to a different company. She cleaned and tidied well the whole house and threw away the empty beer cans that she had been drinking on her lonely evenings. She tried her best cooking skills in preparing his beloved roast beef with mashed potatoes, very well-done and with plenty of garlic as Peter had always liked it. She dressed and spruced herself up, let her shining red hair loose on her shoulders, arranged elegantly her most expensive china on the large dining table, dimmed the lights and lit some candles to create an inspiring atmosphere.

They enjoyed the luscious dinner and the excellent wine chatting calmly and joyously, as if they were dating for the first time, and then relaxed on the sofa with their liqueur and tea to start the discussion. Peter explained to her all the recent developments in technology and the Internet, about the 'New Economy' that would revolutionize the global business world, about the new Internet giants that sprung out of nowhere, out of the garages and backyards of visionary founders and were catapulted to golden listings in the global stock exchanges making their young founders instant multimillionaires. "Whatever these lucky pioneers have achieved can be repeated by whoever will move fast enough" he told her.

And so he started explaining his own idea about the new company that would allow everyone to follow-up the movement of the containerized goods world-wide through his new Internet service. According to the business plan they would amass hundreds of millions of Pounds in profits every year. And then, after a few years, they would be able to forget about their small house in Guilford and their daily toil in the suburban railways that forced them to split apart and would retire with their huge fortune in a quiet villa in Southern France or in California to live luxurious lives without ever needing to work again, neither themselves nor their children, should they decide to have any.

Peter only needed about two hundred thousand Pounds to realize his dream. The only way was to sell their house. Pestering his wife with passionate arguments Peter finally managed to persuade her. On the one hand Nicole had deep distrust about this unknown and risky affair, but on the other hand she closed her eyes and allowed herself to be carried away by his dream. Most of all she let herself to be carried away by her own husband whom, for the first time in many years, she was delighted to see full of passion and ambition again, as she had adored him during their early years. Because she had already abandoned dull Mark and had been left alone and unloved for many months in that empty house drinking beers in the sole company of her cats.

Therefore Nicole gave her consent to sell the house and build their dream and that same night she welcomed him back to her bedroom. They spent a sensual weekend together as if they were an affectionate couple who just fell in love. Within a month the house was gone and they moved in the tiny flat in Notting Hill. They were squeezed in the limited space but they had their rekindled love and their dream to nurture and did not care about anything else. As a backup Nicole still kept her low-paid job in Noviasoft so that they would secure a bit of income "until the real profits start clinking in."

The startup capital was collected, the lawyers were hired to draft the incorporation documents and on the 5th of May 1998 they launched the new company that was named 'Loginet'. They also hired three more programmers and started working furiously in order to build their dream pushing out in the market and evangelizing their idea.

In the autumn of 1998, after spending the summer without taking any holidays whatsoever, the Loginet team managed to complete the software and proudly launched the brand new service to the market but unfortunately with meager results. Very few customers accepted to enroll. Income was not materializing, expenditures were still gushing out, the initial half million Pounds was drying up fast and great anguish ensued. Nicole started worrying gravely but Peter adamantly stuck to his dream.

While their dream started turning into a nightmare, around them the world was changing at jet speeds. The global stock exchanges continued their upward gallop and the investors were seized with Internet-fever, ready to splash out millions on whatever idea sounded modernistic and oriented towards the 'New Economy'. Uncle Khalid, who had cultivated the right connections to the right business networks in London, introduced the team to venture capital investors ready to splash significant sums for a share of Loginet's stock. The Internet madness was so strong those days that Loginet managed to secure within a few weeks an investment of five million Pounds in exchange for just a third of the shareholding. That deal immediately turned Peter and his partners into millionaires, at least on paper.

And therefore in April 1999 triumphant Loginet got the five million in cash and moved into spacious premises in the City, hiring two dozen more people. Everybody

rushed to grow the business. Peter was appointed as CEO and secured a handsome salary, the fattest salary he had ever clinched in his career. During these crazy months the Internet startups that employed just a few dozen people and made next to zero sales were paying much bigger salaries than the large multinationals.

When the summer arrived Peter, who's self-esteem had been strongly boosted by his foresightedness to predict correctly the developments in the market and to hit bull's-eye at last, full of optimism for his bright future, managed to offer to his beloved wife a ten-day holiday in the Greek islands that he had not visited since his college years. They spent ten happy days in Paros and Santorini before returning to cloudy London and to the sixteen-hour workdays.

The dot.com craziness in the markets and the substantial investment brought credibility to Loginet. The investors, having all the right connections to the inner sanctums of British business, were introducing the team directly to the large and important transportation companies who were ready to discuss six-figure deals. Peter's dream started materializing in earnest. His bank account was swelling again by his fat salary and bonuses and Nicole was jubilant at his side.

With all these employees on payroll enjoying their hefty paychecks and with all the other running costs, the invested five million would be burned out by the spring of 2000. A new cash injection was urgently needed again, a fact that, in those crazy times, was the easiest of all possible goals. The same venture capitalists rushed happily to the task of arranging a new and much bigger round of funding of fifty million Pounds. That meant that Peter's personal fortune would rise automatically to about thirty million Pounds but unfortunately still only on paper, in shares and options that could not be cashed before the much anticipated listing of Loginet on the stock exchange.

To celebrate the sudden success and everybody's dreamy prospects, Loginet booked a private room for the entire staff and their companions for the spectacular Millennium night in a posh restaurant on Thames banks. Everybody cuddled together on the restaurant's terrace and marveled in awe at the spectacular fireworks from Westminster and from the Dome when the first minutes of the new Millennium ticked in. They ate, drank and danced until the early morning. That extravaganza cost fifty thousand Pounds to Loginet but who cared? The future and the new century were theirs.

The second investment round of fifty million was being hastily prepared and the lawyers were putting the finishing touches on the new contracts when Black Friday came on the 14th of April 2000. It was a breezy but pleasant spring afternoon and Loginet was bracing for another hectic weekend when, at around 3pm, all the manager's computers started bleeding red ink due to the collapse of Nasdaq.

At first everybody was talking about a temporary 'correction' but unfortunately the collapse continued unabated during the following weeks. Nasdaq was tumbling and there

was no turning back. Suddenly everybody realized that the bubble had been pricked and the value of the online 'behemoths' was crashing as fast as it had been sky-rocketing during the previous months. The Loginet team, scared, kept toiling along until a dull Monday morning in late May when the investors presented to Peter and his partners their new terms in order to approve the new funding: They would no longer invest fifty million but only twenty million, would take absolute control of the company and appoint a new CEO. Peter was demoted to a VP position. The founder's team revolted in anger but every resistance was fruitless. Either they would accept those humiliating terms or they would go bankrupt immediately. Unwillingly they conceded and signed.

Thus in Peter's life the most nightmarish period started. The investors, seeing the desperate deterioration, refused to continue the funding without paying attention to the protests of Peter and his teammates. Within two months half the staff had been fired or resigned whereas the fat salaries of Peter and his colleagues were slashed below a quarter of their previous levels, and even that was not always paid on time. Peter ended up receiving even less money than his wife who had retained her original secretarial position in Noviasoft. He was also forced to return all the extra money that he had managed to accumulate in his bank account during the previous plentiful months.

Every day in the office was a depressing nightmare. Failures and disappointments kept coming one after the other and the debt was piling up. By the end of that horrible summer of 2000 Loginet had been left with only five people who of course abandoned the previous posh premises and relocated in a dusty attic in the investor's office. Every night Peter was returning wrecked in his cramped flat in Notting Hill crashing on the sofa. He could not relax in front of the telly or in any other way. He started drinking heavily. He would drink up to half a bottle of scotch every night to blur his mind and get rid of his worries, but in vain. He could no longer sleep. He was tossing in his bed the whole night tormented by the alcohol and by his vain attempts to figure out any miraculous solutions to Loginet's problems. Every morning he was waking up red-eyed by the insomnia and the anguish.

And yet deep inside him he was surprised to find extra courage to keep fighting, to avoid collapsing. *I will not let it crush me*, he was telling himself every so often, *I can do nothing other than keep fighting. There is no alternative. Even if we go bankrupt, even if I go to jail, I don't have any other option than to continue the struggle.*

Peter had always been an optimist. He believed in life. He was always striving to discover the inner beauty in the small and insignificant aspects of it. His friends teased him sometimes that he was excessively optimistic, or even naively optimistic. Whatever might be happening around him, however adverse a situation might be, he knew how to look around and draw strength from the mere fact that Marvelous Life was still moving

along and that he continued taking part in its rituals. He was well aware that this blessing will someday have a definite and irrevocable *ending*.

This realization gave him courage to continue. He understood that in his swirling journey in life everything is transient, temporary, both the good and the bad. He clinched his fists, accepted stoically every new hit, then took a deep breath and carried on. Against the tide, against the whole world who was trying to rip him apart he kept fighting with teeth and nails. There was no alternative. He continued struggling looking for a miracle, just in case he could manage to save anything whatsoever minimal.

Nicole was the first amongst the partners who realized that the bubble had been pricked and there was no salvation. Her inmost fears were affirmed in the worst possible manner. Her panic became even bigger when she realized that Peter continued living in his hallucination. He kept talking about 'temporary difficulties' insisting that this 'bottleneck' will clear the field from the 'weak competitors' and that whoever will manage to cross it, will survive and will prosper again very soon. Little by little she lost her trust in the lunatic Greek who had lost his mind and refused to face the stark reality. Their old sweetness was soon replaced by strong brawls that Peter, who was returning furious every night from the rampant hell he had been facing in the office during the day, could not manage well at all.

Nicole soon realized in a panic that, apart from the trust to her husband, she had also lost everything else. Gone were the beautiful cozy house and their fat income. Their debts kept piling up. With her meager secretary's salary she had to pay the rent, the bills, their food and other living expenses and to support her bankrupt husband. The situation was deteriorating alarmingly fast.

She did not hesitate to move resolutely forgetting about the romance and the sweetness. A rainy evening in early September 2000 Peter returned to their tiny flat, exhausted and crushed by the failures of yet another terrible day, to find only a note from Nicole left on the sofa. She had packed her stuff and left. She ordered him to address any further questions to her lawyer whom she appointed to file for a divorce.

That night Peter, for the first time in his adult life, cried heavily, heartbreakingly, alone on his bed for hours. He drank half a bottle of scotch and five beers, he vomited thrice due to the turmoil and to the excess alcohol and by the morning he was a wrenched soul. That horrible night Nicole managed to kill his eternal optimism. At least he restrained himself from committing suicide. He picked up the ruins of his life and crawled to the office to face the next tormenting day.

The only person who offered him consolation was Leila. During all the past terrible months she had been trying to encourage him as best as she could. Alarmed by the sudden downward spiral of Loginet's fortunes, Leila had been desperately clinging on his eternal optimistic faith, while he had been desperately searching for any kind soul who

would offer him any consoling and supporting hand to lean upon. Both had clung desperately on each other to get some extra courage to continue the fight.

Leila's female intuition had also quickly noticed well in advance the cracks that had started riddling Peter's marriage with Nicole for a second time, when things started turning nasty. Initially Leila had restrained herself and avoided exposing her developing feelings for him. When Peter had confessed privately to her several weeks ago that Nicole was pushing him heavily, Leila touched his hand warmly and only told him to be patient, keeping everything else to her.

That morning when Peter arrived in the office spoiled, unshaven and misty-eyed Leila took him to the restroom, washed him, combed him and told him not to worry, "everything will be ok someday." The same evening she shyly invited him to move in her own apartment on one of Kensington's posh streets (one of the many apartments belonging to her father) where she had spare rooms. She excused her gesture by offering to host him 'temporarily' so that at least he would not need to pay any rent until things 'would get better again'.

The following weekend Peter left the Notting Hill flat and moved to Kensington. It was the second weekend of September 2000. The first night he slept in his new room, the second night he slept in Leila's bed and since then they have been lovers.

**** (Peter in Manila in early September 2001) ****

Exactly one year later, on the second Sunday of September 2001, Peter has just woken up with a heavy hangover from last night's boozing. He is taking his brunch in his flat in Rockwell in faraway Manila, thousands of miles away from his beloved sweetheart Leila. Today is the first anniversary of their first erotic night. He has arranged for a nice surprise for her: He has ordered on the Internet a lush bouquet of flowers to be delivered to her house today at 12 noon in London that will be 7pm in Manila. As he is sipping calmly his coffee he smiles with anxiety trying to imagine the joy that his sweetie will feel when his colorful bouquet will be delivered. He glances at his watch that shows 12 noon here in Manila rejoicing in anticipation of her marvelous large honey eyes widening in excitement when she will read his e-card in seven hours from now but also at the same exactly time as now, when the sun will be at exactly the same apex spot on the sky but in a different place on the Earth, as always hidden behind the heavy clouds, here because of the daily midday tropical storm and there because of the autumn drizzle that is pummeling London for weeks, when a sudden buzz on the intercom startles him.

The guard at the outer entrance appears on the monitor. "Very sorry to disturb you Sir, a courier has brought a package for you. He says that it must be delivered at 12 noon sharp. Are you expecting anything Sir?"

"No" replies Peter sharply, frustrated.

"Then with your kind permission we will open it to check. Don't worry we shall take care of everything. Sorry for disturbing you..." the guard is about to switch off the link.

"Wait a moment! Where did it come from?"

"Let me have a look Sir... from England Sir... it was dispatched in Kensington... but the name of the sender is not shown... I can't find it Sir."

"It doesn't matter. I know where it came from. For God's sake don't touch it and bring it up here RIGHT NOW!" shouts Peter in astonishment.

"Yes Sir! Right away Sir! Thank you Sir!"

In a few moments the panting messenger boy rings Peter's bell and delivers the package. Within the courier's plastic wrapping a wide grey carton box has been very carefully sealed. He opens it with his eyes wide open, pulsating with curiosity. Buried under the plastic bubble covers and wrapped carefully with plenty of paper he discovers a stunning silver frame containing the beautiful photograph that he and Leila had taken in Thames' banks last June, a few days before he left for Manila. The photo has been digitally enhanced so that in the background the dark clouds that were threatening to unleash a shower upon them that wet afternoon have disappeared and in their place a marvelous rosy sunset illuminates both of them in a soft orange light. A virtual image of Big Ben rises at the other side of the river although the real photo was taken in the Docklands. Overall this is a stunning picture. Both of them appear gorgeous in front of marvelous London scenery. Peter bursts with loud laughter. His beloved Leila knows how to create digitally enhanced miracles on her computer using Photoshop!

Her card though, that accompanies the framed photo carefully sealed in a pink envelope, is not digitally enhanced. It is authentic and written by her own hand: *"We spent a year together full of anxiety, joy, sorrow and beauty. You stood by my side and healed my wounds. I am so deeply grateful for all that you have done for me. I have tried to support you in your own struggle. I hope that I managed to soothe your worries a little bit. Now that you are gone I have realized how much I owe you and how much I love you. I adore you and miss you. Thank you so much. I love you so much!"*

Peter is numb. Her surprise has been a far bigger stunner than his. He feels an immense impulse to rush to the airport and board the first flight to London. But it cannot be done. At least to call her on the phone. Neither that can be done. In London now it is just 5am. It would be barbaric to wake her up at that time on her lazy Sunday morning. He starts compiling a text message but he changes his mind. *No, better leave it. I shall reply with my own surprise. When she will wake up and will start worrying if her surprise has been successful, then I will send my flower-response. That will be best.*

He lays back on the most comfortable armchair in his small living room to study at ease the framed photograph and her endearing card. He tries to reflect her figure when she was compiling it, to adore the expression on her face, to touch her lush black hair, to kiss her hot voluptuous lips, recalling nostalgically all that have glued them together during the past gruesome year...

**** (The love affair of Peter and Leila during the past year) ****

During the dark autumn of 2000 Peter and Leila huddled together to protect themselves from the storm that was raging around them. They united their bodies and souls in a common fist. Suddenly they had everything in common: They had very painful recent failures in their marriages that they needed to overcome and a common struggle for survival in their business lives, at Loginet that was slowly dying day by day. Their dire sentimental and financial wounds glued them together instantly and inextricably. Their lovemaking was very intense and powerful, recharging them with raw bodily energy every night in order to keep fighting during the next day.

Unfortunately their passionate sexual encounters did not mitigate their tremendous business problems. In the investor's attic Peter and Leila, together with the three other remaining Loginet staff, were living through a daily hell. The investors ceased paying any amount whatsoever and the couple's last hopes were being diminished day by day. Only bills that were impossible to pay were coming through the post. In September 2000 they were paid their vestigial salaries for the last time.

When Leila was first introduced to Peter back in 1998, during Loginet's early days, she already carried a traumatic past. She was born in Beirut where she spent her childhood. She arrived in London in her very early teens as a civil war refugee, together with the rest of her family, and she was gradually assimilated and actually enjoyed the secular and easy-going British way of life, although she still kept her Muslim faith. As a young beautiful woman she enjoyed flirting with handsome guys who were attracted by her Mid-Eastern complexion, her long dark hair, her large honey-colored eyes and her lush curves. She happily became involved in a couple of insignificant relationships taking care to avoid becoming too sentimentally attached to those passing guys until she finally attracted the interest of the prince of her childhood fairy-tale dreams, a real Saudi minor prince who had a distant relationship to the Saudi royal family and a much closer relationship to the huge petro-dollar wealth of that country. She closed her eyes and was happily carried away by his affectionate expressions of love feelings and by the lavish lifestyle a true billionaire was able to offer her. She did not hesitate for a moment to marry him when he proposed and to move with him to Riyadh in 1996.

Unfortunately she soon found out that in Saudi Arabia women are considered to be inferior to men in every aspect of their daily lives. Even worse, her prince bowed to pressure from his family, forgot all his previous expressions of love and affection and

abruptly threw her out of wedlock rudely when both of them found out that she is barren. All her fairy-tale dreams for a happy and rich life were smashed in the most brutal way and she returned to her parents a physical and emotional wreck. Her trauma was compounded by the realization that she can never bear any children.

To help his daughter restart her life, Khalid gave her seventy thousand Pounds and demanded that she would be accepted as a partner to Loginet in 1998. Carrying quietly her pain, Leila joined Peter's team wishing nothing other than to calm down. She was taking care of all the administration tasks in the office. She devoted herself to her job in order to forget all. She admired Peter's energy and stamina as a boss and partner and she was impressed by the passion of the whole team. She was also attracted to his handsome Mediterranean complexion but in the early years she pushed herself to forget about that. *He is a happily married man and you have already had more than enough of that trouble!* Leila kept admonishing herself. She got to know Nicole and could not avoid being discreetly jealous of Nicole's marvelous luck to have such a dynamic husband and to be so much in love with him. Leila was wondering why they did not have any children, but she understood that the Europeans snub and delay as much as possible what her own misfortune deprived her, the joy of childbearing. She mourned for her bad luck quietly alone while trying to put aside her sorrow and devote her full energy to her work, but unfortunately with mixed results. When Nicole decided to abandon Peter she left the door open for Leila to reveal her intimate feelings for him. Leila jumped on the opportunity and did not hesitate to invite him to her apartment and to her bed.

The new couple, Peter and Leila, cemented quickly their bonding through their common struggle and ferocious lovemaking, but that could not solve their huge financial problems. Their personal pay from struggling Loginet was reduced to almost nothing. Someone had to intervene again to save both of them. Leila was forced to beg her father for financial assistance once more.

Leila's father Khalid had been Peter's adversary during Loginet's early years in 1998 and 1999 when they had clashed about who would control the growing fortunes of the new venture. When Loginet started prospering riding the dot.com boom, Khalid had relaxed. He appreciated Peter's energy and farsightedness that had fetched in just two short years many more millions than Khalid himself had managed to accumulate toiling for a whole life. Of course Peter's tens of millions were only 'paper-money', tied up in Loginet shares that could not be cashed before the company would be listed. Khalid's much fewer but real millions were deposited in cash or were invested in premium real estate in London's best neighborhoods. However during the dot.com lunacy nobody was paying attention to such 'details'.

Eventually Peter and Khalid became friends. During Loginet's good times Khalid was inviting Peter and Nicole for dinner frequently at his villa to discuss their common

strategy. However Khalid had never been truly cordial with Nicole. As a first-generation immigrant he had difficulty connecting culturally and befriending a white English woman. He was discreetly satisfied when Nicole abandoned his pal after Loginet's fortunes turned south. His underlying antipathy towards that snobbish woman was reaffirmed.

When the bubble was pricked Khalid realized the huge error he had made to invest so much money and his own daughter's life effort in a black hole. Having grown up on the Lebanese mountains, where family ties are sacred, he felt compelled to save her once again. However, in addition to Loginet's death spasms, Khalid faced the extra complication that Peter suddenly became Leila's boyfriend. Most likely, if he would be asked if he approved of the fact that Leila took Peter under her protection and into her bedroom so fast and without marrying him, Khalid would rather disagree. His conservative Islamic upbringing made him feel uncomfortable. However, having been exposed to Western tolerance over many decades and witnessing his daughter who was trying hard to recover from the deep wounds of her recent divorce and, worst of all, after discovering that she is barren, Khalid put aside his reservations and welcomed her new Greek boyfriend, just in case Allah had been merciful at last and brought to his daughter a potential groom who does not seem to care about her disability even though he is affiliated with another religion. Understanding the couple's dire financial difficulties, Khalid did not hesitate to switch the rental income from five of his large holdings in Central London to Leila's bank account. In addition he found a new secretarial position for Leila at Mr. Jeremy's Law office, who was an old family friend, so that she would complement her income.

That money saved the couple. By the end of November 2000 the investors decided that Loginet cannot be saved and filed for bankruptcy. Peter was left in a desolate position without a job, without any money, without a home and without a family in a foreign country where nothing was left binding him there anymore. However optimistic he might have been in the past, he could no longer overlook the grim reality that he had failed, had lost all. In desperation he started contemplating abandoning everything and returning to his native Greece to seek assistance from his mother and from his sister, to attempt to restart his career from scratch.

Leila stopped him. After losing everything else in her life she could not afford to lose her newfound lover on top of all that. If she would be left alone in her large empty apartment she would collapse into depression and desperation. During the first weeks of the couple's common high-powered struggle and their intense sexual and sentimental bonding, she gradually developed true feelings of love and affection towards him. She was physically attracted to him strongly and enjoyed thoroughly their passionate sexual unions managing to reach intense orgasms almost every time. Orgasm after orgasm gradually she cracked open her inner self and one day she realized that she had fallen in

love with her fallen warrior. She could no longer afford to let him go. She would treat his wounds and assist him to stand up again. Since she could never nurture a child of her own, she applied her motherly instincts in healing her lover's sentimental ulcers.

Yet on top of her intimate love feelings, her sexual attraction to Peter and her 'motherly instincts', her overarching motivation was sheer panic. Prior to her failed marriage, she had been a confident and energetic young woman who had been enjoying the intense attention she was generating from almost all the males around her who were vying to gain her favor. She had been playing her love games in a dignified and yet enjoyable manner radiating a sense of calmness, confidence and self-esteem, waiting patiently for 'Mr. Right' to come into her life, the prince who would raise her to a heavenly life.

All that confidence and easy-going mentality was smashed down to Earth after the spectacular failure of her marriage and the revelation of her disability. In a panic she realized that, in her prime age, she was no longer eligible to secure the long-term commitment of most men of the same prime age who would now bypass her looking for brides who could deliver children in order to build families. The prospect of growing old alone and unloved without any partner by her side haunted her. Suddenly the pool of 'eligible men' shrunk to only those who either professed that they did not want any children in their lives, or those who had already built young families but had divorced. She clung onto Peter since he had always been expressing indifference about having children and in practice he had avoided parenthood in his past marriage. *All said and done, perhaps he is indeed My Man*, she calculated. She begged him to stay by her side and gladly offered to sustain him from her father's financial contribution.

Peter agreed to stay on with her primarily because, in his desperate situation, he needed any support whatsoever that was offered to him. He was of course very much attracted to the stunning beauty of this gorgeous brunette and enjoyed thoroughly having sex with her. However, at that horrible stage in his life's journey, he was preoccupied with a lot more pressing problems than his love affairs. He felt like a wounded beast. Without a job or any other occupation he was shut in that apartment in the midst of a gloomy British winter. Sometimes he was dipping into depression and sometimes he erupted in pointless rage. His life had been destroyed. His savage fight had brought him nothing. He was rambling from room to room having nowhere to vent his anger. Inside the flat he was stifling and outside it was freezing cold and wet.

When he could no longer stay inside he was tucking his heavy coat venturing out to get some fresh air under the maddening drizzle. He was searching for any new thread of optimism, to find some courage to reset and restart his life. *Look around*, he kept pushing himself, *you will not be able to enjoy that forever!* He was pleading for the 'Beauty of Life' to pop out again round any street corner, but the harsh grey winter kept

hiding it behind the dark clouds. At least the frosty wind was reviving him a bit blowing away his dark thoughts. But when he was frostbitten and decided to return to the warmth of the apartment, he was feeling that the walls would fall and crush him.

Why on earth did this proud warrior end up with this misfortune? Just a few months ago he had accumulated nearly thirty million Pounds and was respected for his farsightedness and shrewdness with his Internet venture. His old pals back in Greece, these ex-anarchist comrades from the commune in Kypseli who sneaked into and milked the state apparatus in the 80s and 90s when the Left was elected into government, from his one hundred thousand Pounds quickly made three hundred thousand and run away with the hot cash before the Greek stock market bubble burst in late 1999. For a brief moment he had owned thirty *million* Pounds in shares, in paper money, but did not manage to cash out like his pals. The dot.com bubble burst too and he has lost all his hundred thousand, his cozy house in Guildford, his wife and everything else.

Why my journey has been so agonizing? Why have I found myself now reduced to depending on the welfare of strangers during the freezing, damp winter, without a penny to my name? My whole brilliant career has been destroyed, all my dreams have been squashed and now in my forties I must re-launch from scratch a new career in any sort of new job that I must find in the midst of the deep financial crisis. When will any tiny light flicker again at the end of this long tunnel? Peter was despairing.

Thankfully a guardian angel had come unexpectedly in his life to relieve and take good care of him. Leila's love and feminine instincts saved him. She calmed him, absorbed his anger and eruptions, soothed his pain and encouraged him to shake off his depression. She tucked away all the booze from her house and almost never left him alone to be tormented by his gloomy thoughts, even if she had to endure his bursts of anger. Little by little she revived him. She gave him the thread he was looking for. Her love revealed to him again the Beauty that he had lost. Her mission became her own balsam that mitigated the deep sorrow from her past troubles.

Even though Peter did not fall in love with Leila in the same intensity as she did fall for him, he nevertheless was deeply thankful for her valuable support. Struck hard by all his misfortunes, for a while he laid back and surrendered himself completely in her careful hands. He let her guide his entire life whilst he tried to recoup some of his earlier strength and stamina. For a few terrible winter months she was the only bright spot in his life, his only life raft. He appreciated tremendously her kind offerings.

At the beginning of 2001 Peter, motivated by Leila, begun little by little to overcome his depression and move outward, searching for any new work opportunities. It was the worst possible timing. Thousands of ex-highly-paid I.T. professionals were desperately competing against each other searching for any scant job offers. Fortunately Peter was in a slightly better position since he had both rich technical skills and

extensive managerial experience. He started securing small projects here and there as a freelance I.T. consultant earning a meager income, gradually boosting his morale.

Then at last in May 2001 he landed his best possible deal: Noviasoft was looking to hire consultants that could be trusted to undertake the delicate pilot project in Manila. His old pals at the company, who had in the meantime become senior executives, remembered very well Peter's strong skills and effectiveness. They immediately agreed to offer him the role of General Manager for that project. Sean, the Scottish executive who is overseeing the project from the company's Manhattan headquarters, was a subordinate of Peter during his old tenure at Noviasoft's London office in the 90s.

The Manila mission was forecast to last for at least six to eight months. Manila was a place very, very far away, both for Leila who was gravely alarmed and for Lady Christine, however the expat fees and bonuses were exceptionally good. Peter needed the cash desperately to recover. So with a heavy heart he packed his bags in the middle of June 2001 and boarded the plane for the fourteen-hour flight.

**** (Peter in Manila in early September 2001) ****

Peter is now relaxed in his tiny living room in Manila during the slothful Sunday afternoon, his whisky in hand, almost dozing in front of the telly that shows a silly quiz game, waiting impatiently for the long hours to pass till 7pm when his surprise bouquet will be delivered to his beloved sweetheart in faraway London. He powers up his laptop and compiles an email full of love and gratitude for her morning gift but he does not send it yet to avoid getting in touch with her before his surprise gift gets delivered.

Boredom sets in amidst the tranquillity of his lonely flat that keeps him incarcerated indoors. Outside the merciless sun has reached its apex and does not allow him to leave the protection of the air-conditioner. These long hours of passivity and soul-searching frustrate him when he recalls the adverse twists in his life's journey. He is forty years old and what has he accomplished? Nothing! All is gone with the wind. Early in his life, when he was a student, he was dreaming of utopian societies, self-ruled communes, a rich life full of love, lust, revolution, art, beauty and poetry. More recently he was dreaming of changing the world in a different way, of bringing forward a new paradigm in technology and business life. His life has rolled around, tumbled left and right, and what was the result? Naught! Everything has been destroyed. All his dreams have been squashed, all his savings have been wiped out chasing a chimera, a mirage. He has found himself without a job and without a career, relying on an obscure project that has forced him to travel to the opposite side of the Earth, restrained into this tiny flat without daring neither to venture outside nor to call his beloved ones, forced to endure those miserable quizzes on the telly in a language that he cannot comprehend.

The only glimmer of light in his dark life is his wounded girlfriend who has been glued forcefully to him to support him and to be supported herself. He understands very

well, he can feel Leila's anxiety that he might abandon her because she is infertile, that he might make up with any young elegant Filipina and might leave Leila in her unbearable loneliness. He feels and shares her worries, he does not stop repeating to her that he loves her truly, he tries his best to reassure her, but deep inside him he is not so certain of what exactly he wants. He is rather confused.

In his forties this is his last chance to build a family, to have children. He has never considered this topic up to now, since he had been devoted solely to his career. Now that his dreams are dead, he realizes that he has not yet had the chance to explore a part of himself that might excite him, might assign him a new mission: the responsibility and pleasure of bringing up a child. *However this cannot be done with Leila.*

He throws away those strange thoughts. *What's wrong with me now?* he bashes himself. Instead of being thankful that he has found a merciful soul to nestle him during the wild storm, to sustain him so that he did not end up penniless and ruined together with the other homeless people in the Strand, those who are spending their nights inside carton boxes at the entrances of the large Department stores trying in vain to protect themselves from the freezing wind and the rain, instead of being grateful to Leila, he feels disturbed by the fact that this woman who saved his life has a problem that he had never ever considered that would affect him. *Don't be greedy,* he admonishes himself, *don't ask for more than you can afford under the circumstances!* If Leila had not been barren she would have delivered by now three to four children to her Saudi prince and Peter would have ended up in the Strand. Her sterility has clearly benefited him and every other adverse thought is gross and greedy. He buries again deep inside him the vagaries that his solitude produces.

Outside the sun fades in a dim humid sunset behind the horizon in Manila Bay's murky waters. The temperature drops a little bit and the Filipinos reemerge for their evening walk packing the parks, the squares, the seaside with the palm trees and Star City's large amusement park. A festive, joyous atmosphere covers the poor city. The streets are filled with smiling faces, elegant young girls displaying their sleek Asian bodylines and ethereal gait teasing the noisy parties of boys who flirt with them laughing loudly. Lively music fills the air from the hundreds of bars, restaurants and street vendors who sell ice cream, popcorn, coconuts and mango. The excitement would give the illusion of a tropical paradise if it could be limited at the luxury hotels of the seafront and forego the millions of stacked tin shacks a couple of blocks inland, where filthy children play in the muddy pot holes.

Away from the stifling misery and isolated in their privileged modern world Peter and Leila fire up their mobile phones a few minutes after 7pm exchanging fiery love messages about their mutual surprises and passionate feelings. They logon to instant messaging and continue their frenetic virtual lovemaking through the wires. Peter

jubilantly downloads Leila's emails amongst his other incoming messages when suddenly he gasps: Another message from 'Kerguelen' lands in his inbox:

"I saw you last night. Well okay, yes, you look almost like I have imagined you. You are calm. You might know...

I haven't spoken to you yet. I was not ready. Sorry.

Of course you don't know who I am. I understand. You are anxious. I cannot tell you from afar. Can I meet you? Can I explain myself?

I have been looking for you for a long time. I have been searching in Athens and London. I followed you down here. You must understand. I need to talk to you.

I have got lots to talk about. I wish that you will receive me well. But I am afraid.

Anyway, I will stay here for a few more days. I will contact you again. I hope that you will welcome me. I am sending you your picture. You are handsome. Sweetie."

A file is attached to her message. It is a jpeg, a picture. Peter is afraid to open it. It might contain a virus. He launches the antivirus to check it. The software informs him that the file is clear, no viruses are detected. Hesitantly he double-clicks on it.

He jerks in astonishment! The photo shows himself and his colleagues last night at the bar. Peter is shown holding calmly a glass of whisky in his hand staring vaguely in front, absorbed into his inner thoughts. His pals around are laughing boisterously. Some of them have embraced the Filipina escorts. Suddenly he remembers! That was the photo flashing last night, during the heavy reveling! He did not pay any special attention then. However it was *him* who was being photographed! He is maddened by anxiety. Who is following him? Who has targeted him?

His laptop clinks and startles him again. It is a false alarm. It is just Leila who has returned to the Messenger waiting to continue texting him. Frightened, he explains to her the whole story about the mysterious messages and emails. He forwards all of them to her for her comment. A cacophony of alarm bells start ringing in Leila's mind. She cannot figure out what to say... *Could that be an old lover of Peter? Could that be Nicole? Who is that damn lady who has followed him down to Manila? Will she attempt to take him away from me?*

Peter on the other hand has similar but different worries. *Could that be a trick set up by a Filipino gang? Or a trap set up by one of Loginet's unpaid creditors searching for me to demand their lost money back?* Every upsetting possibility crosses both Peter's and Leila's minds.

Peter searches in his mobile for yesterday's text message from the Greek phone number and texts a reply: *"For God's sake who are you? What is this game with the email and the photo? Why are you following me? This is unacceptable!"*

The Greek number replies after a while: *"Don't worry, there is no mal intention. Sorry for disturbing you. I will tell you more in another email shortly."*

Indeed ten minutes later another email arrives from Kerguelen:

"Apologies if I have worried you. Believe me, I am not threatening you. I am your friend. I am more than your friend, but I cannot explain yet. I know that I am intriguing you. I understand you are worried. You will understand when I will be able to explain.

Please give me the chance to meet you and explain face-to-face. Only then you might understand. And believe me there is nothing threatening you."

Leila follows all these peculiar developments connected with Peter on instant messenger. He forwards to her all the correspondence to get her opinion and ease her worries by exposing everything to her. Peter emphasizes that he will resolutely reject any advances from the mysterious woman. Together they compile Peter's reply:

"I cannot meet anyone anywhere if you will not reveal who you are and why you are following me. If you will not tell me then I will go to the police."

Of course Peter is well aware that this is a bluff. The police in this country are mostly incompetent. Only private security can provide any sort of protection.

"You know that here the police is incapable of helping you. But you will not need it. I beg you to believe me that you will not need it.

I need you. I don't want any money and I am not threatening you. But I cannot tell you from afar what I have got to say. I have to tell it in person.

I don't have any other way to convince you. Either you will believe me as I say it or not. If you don't believe me and you don't want to listen to me that is fine, I will leave and you will not hear from me ever again. The choice is yours...

I will be waiting for your decision."

Peter is pondering what to do very seriously. Leila advises him not to reply yet, to think it over calmly. She also needs to calm down herself and think carefully how best to avoid pushing her lover into the arms of another woman. Within every single line in that lady's mysterious messages, Leila's instinct detects an intimate approach that is a mortal threat to her own relationship with him. Peter agrees with Leila's reservations due to his own fear and feeling of a developing menacing threat. He replies to Kerguelen: *"I don't know. I am cautious, as you would also be in my position. I will think about it and I will reply tomorrow."*

"Fine. I understand and I will be waiting. But be aware that on Wednesday I will leave from Manila. I need only a short meeting with you to explain. In any place you prefer and at any time that suits you. I will be waiting for your decision..."

**** (next day) ****

On Monday morning one more troubled week dawns on the miserable city. Today Peter's schedule includes a visit to the software development centre of another large American multinational company that manufactures mobile phones and other electronic gear. Peter's team wants to investigate and learn from the other company's experience

any methods to be applied in their project for Noviasoft. When they reach that centre they marvel in astonishment. Fifteen hundred programmers toil laboriously in huge open workspaces following a strict and very well-organized system.

Another five hundred openings for programmer positions have been announced recently at that programming centre. Thousands of applicants have submitted their CVs and about two hundred of them are now waiting anxiously in a large reception area to pass through their first interview. Young boys and girls wearing their best attire, holding their degrees and other certificates in hand, wait nervously for their turn to be interviewed. For them, this interview will be the sole differentiating crossroad between a life lost in the slums and their one and only chance to escape the misery, to get a decent salary and the ability to sustain their extended families. It does not matter that their first salary will be at most three hundred dollars per month. What matters most is that this is a very decent salary for someone who has grown up in the slums.

Peter and his teammates vigorously take notes on the working methodologies and experiences that they share with the managers of the outsourcing center. In a few weeks they should be ready to kick-off the same procedures for Noviasoft's project. They leave deeply impressed and depressed. Until now they have had the impression that in Noviasoft's project they are on the right track, approaching the finishing line. What they have seen today revealed that they still have a huge amount of work to accomplish before a successful completion can be declared. They are not yet even close to halfway and the dreadful deadlines are approaching fast.

Filled with anxiety Peter returns to his office in Makati late in the afternoon. Notwithstanding all his other work troubles he must also take care of this peculiar affair with that strange woman who is asking for some kind of a peculiar favor. As if he had no other issues to worry about... However he cannot ignore someone who is shadowing him. That would be dangerous. Reluctantly he meets Joel, the young boss of Rosario, and explains the situation to him. Joel ponders very skeptically about this odd story but eventually agrees that it would indeed be dangerous for Peter to reject the proposed meeting. Perhaps it would be better for Peter to meet the lady to find out her real intentions and then he will get a better understanding of how to react.

Peter's last act of the first tiresome day of yet another tiresome week is when he emails Ms. Kerguelen and proposes to meet her tomorrow evening at 9pm in Madrugada, the well-known bar in the well-guarded area that he knows very well and where everybody knows him. As an additional security measure Joel will arrange for Peter to be escorted discreetly by three armed bodyguards. In half an hour her reply lands in his inbox. Kerguelen is accepting his invitation with pleasure. Peter keeps Leila fully informed about the fixing of tomorrow's meeting and returns to his flat to crash on his bed exhausted by the day's hard work.

**** (next day) ****

That incredible Tuesday dawns on wild Manila. The luminary star rises above the Pacific Ocean bright and brilliant and starts roaming over the globe. First it wakes up Sydney, Tokyo, Manila and Peter, Beijing, Singapore, then it will wake up Mumbai, Lahore, Dubai and Riyadh, towards the afternoon it will wake up Istanbul, Athens and Mrs. Christine, Rome, Paris, London and Leila and in the evening it will wake up Rio, Buenos Aires, New York and Roger and Sean.

Peter wakes up very early and heads anxiously to the office. He is speechless and absorbed in his thoughts while Juan toils to manage the huge Jeep charting a way through the nightmarish traffic jams. The new day starts arduously and hastily.

Following yesterday's stressful visit to the other company's outsourcing center, Peter's team wonders what to report during the morning teleconference to their supervisors in Manhattan where it is still Monday evening. Everybody is perplexed trying to judge what to reveal and what to keep for themselves in order to avoid the expected dressing-down. Thankfully the morning teleconferences are almost always painless. Roger and Sean are usually exhausted by the preceding full-day's work in New York and lack the stamina to examine any situation in detail. The Americans vaguely instruct the team in Manila to prepare a comprehensive report that must be delivered by the evening in Manila that will be the morning of the same Tuesday in New York. The headquarters will then study the report at ease whilst Manila will be sleeping.

Peter rushes to organize the compilation of the report efficiently, hoping that his team will manage to convey a positive picture to head office. He gives instructions and apportions the job to all his teammates who sit down hastily to prepare their own parts. Everybody takes a lite snack for lunch and nobody moves from their desk before the completion of the job. When Mrs. Christine wakes up the lads in Manila have a first meeting to review the report drafts and make the necessary amendments. When Leila wakes up they have a second meeting to make the final corrections, summarize the findings and prepare the discussion. When Roger and Sean wake up the Manila team is ready. They have already emailed the presentations to Manhattan and are waiting nervously for the telephonic discussion.

When the Americans lift their handsets brisk and jolly in their office at 7:30am in New York, 7:30pm in Manila, they sound satisfied with the first quick glance they have had at Manila team's report. The Americans follow quietly Peter's presentation, ask only some minor clarifications and greet everybody goodnight informing them that they will discuss the report in detail with their senior management. All senior executives of Noviasoft will take part in a 'business breakfast meeting' at 8:30am on the top floor restaurant in their Manhattan office tower. Roger and Sean will convey the

management's feedback and any new instructions during the evening's teleconference for New York that will be tomorrow (Wednesday) morning in Manila.

Peter and his mates exhale a collective sigh of relief and relax smiling at last. Perhaps they have managed to pass this difficult test without any adverse effects. Peter thanks everybody for their help and they pack-up and call it a day. Unfortunately for Peter the day is not over yet. He must attend that strange meeting with Ms. Kerguelen that fills him with apprehension. Joel calls Peter in his office to introduce him to the three bodyguards in order to plan carefully their movements. The bodyguards will enter the bar first. They will sit at a back table in a quiet corner of the bar and will be shadowing closely Peter's movements. The bodyguards leave for the bar and Peter follows them alone in Juan's large Jeep ten minutes later. The traffic has eased as the night falls and the city calms down.

The bar has much fewer patrons than during the weekend. The lighting is as always dim and the music is soft. It is still early. The three bodyguards are already sitting at the agreed table and pretend to be talking supposedly without paying attention to Peter. However in reality all three follow him vigilantly with the tail of their eyes.

When Peter enters the bar he glances around to identify the face of any mysterious lady but he cannot find anyone matching the image that he has painted in his mind. As always the bar is patronized by plenty of American teenagers from the embassy families and other daughters of western diplomats, Filipina daughters of the wealthy local families with their friends and companions and amongst them a few discrete Filipina escorts who approach the solitary customers to entertain them. None of these women appears to have anything special, anything peculiar or noteworthy.

Peter anxiously heads directly to the bar, reserves two adjacent stools, nods to Ramon who prepares dutifully a double Jack Daniels with plenty of ice, politely turns away Esmeralda who has noticed the second empty stool and approaches smiling 'to keep him company', sips the first drops of whisky and looks around nervously searching for the woman who should be looking at him and should be approaching, when his mobile buzzes in his pocket. An incoming call.

Tuesday 5 July 2005 (Continued)

(Four years later during Peter's flight from Athens to Frankfurt)

A sudden bump and a pinch in his stomach wake up Peter abruptly. The 'fasten your seatbelt' sign buzzes overhead. He tries to stretch uncomfortably. The pilot announces "we have started our descent towards Frankfurt". The stewardesses walk up and down the aisles waking up those who are still dozing, ensuring that all seatbelts are fastened securely. Peter stares out of the window. A dazzling whiteness blinds his view. The blazing sun rays reflect on the upper side of the thick cloud cover producing an extremely glaring white halo. This is a sure sign that a storm is raging under the clouds. This is another rainy summer day in Frankfurt.

Another strong bump startles him. And one more. The wings wobble ferociously. No matter how often Peter has been flying, notwithstanding the endless thousands of miles he has crossed on the air so far, he cannot avoid being terrified when he sees the wings bouncing like a springboard. *Who knows when will they break?* The pilot seems to share Peter's inner fears. He dives the craft sharply downwards to escape from the strong turbulence. Further below he finds even worse turbulence. He throttles the engines and tries to lift the beast out of trouble. Peter's stomach squeezes violently either from the abrupt fall or from the rapid ascent.

Peter glances at the German sitting next to him to check if he is as frightened as himself. Yes he is, the German looks petrified. Perhaps he is even more worried than Peter. Immediately Peter takes his eyes away from his fellow passenger. All the passengers, following their unspoken code, avoid staring at each other to stop spreading the panic. They keep desperately looking for any reassuring signs, for anyone who can calm them down and signal to them "don't worry, everything is under control". There is a single passenger who does not pay attention to the violent shaking. He continues reading his newspaper nonchalantly. Everybody fix their gaze on him to take courage. *Hasn't he been frightened yet? Perhaps we are all overreacting...* At the next turbulent bump he tucks away the newspaper and looks around worried too. *Oh damn!*

The aircraft continues shaking violently. It is getting worse every passing second. Even the hostesses look worried and rush to secure themselves in their stations. Peter cannot relax, he is dead frightened. He recalls why he is flying and where he is heading to and a chill spills down his spine. *Does my damned fate, that has been chasing me for the past five years, does it intend to crash this plane before I reach my journey's destination, before I manage to meet my girl? Before I can see her eyes, before I can manage to admire her smile? Bloody life you have crushed me! Everything goes awry, destruction, bankruptcies, war. Death. Everything is going awry and I keep swimming against the tide, trying to hold on to nothingness, on an invisible and empty promise, on a girl who passed by without stopping, on a girl who still keeps me alive until I will find*

her and explain to her. And then I can go. Please my beloved airplane, please don't crash yet! Keep me airborne for one more day, just for a day, crash upon returning, not now. Upon returning! So that I will be able to pass away complete, happy. And let everything else go to hell!

Death. Dark ending. The dark nothing, the eternal dark nothing. The fear that darkens our dreams...

A race to catch up... When 'that moment' will arrive, to be able to look back and feel joy. To see behind a full life. Full of experiences, full of wisdom. And to manage to leave something behind... Something valuable. It could be a girl. A girl whom I have not managed to meet yet.

Gap! One more horrifying shock. *How do you feel in a falling plane? How can you realize that it has crossed the threshold, that the pilot can no longer control it? What if it has crossed it already and we are not yet aware?* Another crashing shaking, another pinch in the stomach, another free fall. Peter is drenched in cold sweat. The pilot throttles up, fights hard to stabilize the beast. A few calm seconds and another fall. The pilot aims for the clouds, to penetrate them at the right spot.

The aircraft blackens, shakes, wrestles, creaks. It sinks in the clouds. A thick grey sludge covers the windows and darkens the cabin. Terror. Death. It is the same nightmare that Peter experienced four wacky years ago, when he *lost her!*

**** (Four years back in the bar in Manila during September 2001) ****

It is Joel's damned call: "Switch on the TV, *now!* Your office in Manhattan is on fire, it is on CNN! Switch on the TV to see it! *And beware, anything can happen!!!*"

Behind the bar a large television monitor streams constantly MTV clips. Peter orders Ramon to switch it to CNN. Ramon looks at him puzzled. Peter BARKS in his face to switch to CNN. Ramon reluctantly complies. In a moment the screen flashes.

As the North Tower is burning, the one that houses Noviasoft's headquarters, and everybody around Peter forgets the drinks, the music, the dancing, the whores and fix together with the whores their wide-open eyes on the unbelievable images on the screen and the newscaster says that perhaps a plane has crashed on the skyscraper because its navigation system malfunctioned, Peter initially thinks that it cannot be, they will surely manage to extinguish the fire before it spreads to the lower floors where Noviasoft's offices are located, or at least the staff will manage to get out on time

until he remembers the 'business breakfast' on the top floor restaurant that is gushing pitch-black filth like a heavy duty foundry smokestack and he freezes.

He panics, recovers, manages to get composed again. The bodyguards rush to cluster around him pushing away everyone who happened to be sitting nearby, playing nervously with the gun triggers inside their jackets. Peter is alarmed that an accident could happen and orders them to sit around him but to keep calm.

He searches the memory of his mobile for Roger's phone number, he hasn't got it, then for Sean's, he finds it, he calls him, the voicemail says that the subscriber is busy, Peter is relieved, *he is alive, alive and talking to someone, perhaps to a loved one.*

Yes he is alive, but where is he?

Peter tries again, Sean's phone is always busy, terrified, scorched, in whom sweetheart's soothing words is Sean trying to find the courage to survive?

Peter tries again with his eyes fixed on the television, he bumps always on a busy signal, on the screen the tower is constantly shown in a still frame, its lower half glitters in the crystal clear morning sun, its upper half is spewing dark filthy smoke and the same rigid female voice is constantly repeating "the subscriber you are calling is busy, please wait while your call is being diverted to the voicemail." Peter's bodyguards, trained to protect him, have turned their backs to the screen and with their hands ready on the revolvers in their pockets keep staring suspiciously at all the astonished wide-eyed open-mouthed patrons who have gathered around them to view this inconceivable spectacle and don't turn around till a wild panicky desolate freakish scream pierces the air when everybody else watches live the second plane entering the frame like a bullet from nowhere and crashing spectacularly on the South Tower in a fiery flamboyant orange cloud of glass, steel, paper, kerosene and burned flesh.

Screams, shouting, pandemonium, the lasses and the whores are crying wildly, the Filipinos are making the sign of the cross in astonishment and disbelief, the Americans are shouting "Oh my God!", everybody is ululating and gesturing wildly and pinching themselves to wake up. The panicked guards draw their pistols aiming at the heads of everyone around barking at them to step back. A huge melee ensues, the American teenagers cry in horrible angst both for what they are witnessing on TV and for the guns that are trained on their heads and the Filipinos and the white diplomats step carefully backwards petrified with their hands raised above their heads. Peter stands up shouting at the top of his voice for everybody to calm down and to his bravos to put their guns away. They obey. All that could be just a trailer for an upcoming disaster movie.

It is not. It is live coverage, at 9:06am in New York, at 9:06pm in Manila. Horrified, stunned and shaking from the inconceivable live nightmare that is unfolding before their eyes they witness the Twin Towers that are burning like two huge smokestacks. The pitch black smoke billows out in the clear blue sky over the ocean. Eventually everybody, including the newscasters, realize the unthinkable: It is an attack! The start of the Third World War! Torpor, shiver. Death. Horrified they witness the towers burning out, the trapped victims jumping from the hundredth floor to escape the flames and the overbearing buildings pulverizing one after the other like card stacks in a huge plume of dust. Sean's mobile was never picked up.

Tuesday 5 July 2005 (Continued)

(Four years later during Peter's flight from Athens to Frankfurt)

The grey sludge outside the windows disperses. A last bump takes the aircraft out of the dark cloud. The dim light of the cloudy day lights up the cabin once again. The beast stabilizes and calms down. Life has won again. Peter and his fellow passengers are pale and exhausted. A wild rain ruts the windows. Underneath a dark green landscape spreads on the outskirts of Frankfurt dotted with the roads, the autobahns and the white houses with the dark red roofs. The Airbus straightens approaching slowly the distant runway. All the features of the landscape keep approaching, the green fields, the trees and the autobahns with the speeding cars and the trucks with their lights turned on in the midst of the summer storm.

The craft crosses the airport fence. The wings swing again as the pilot tries to align the beast with the runway and beat the strong wind. Another pinch in the stomach and it touches the ground with a big loud bump. The pilots throw the reverse throttle and the beast roars angrily braking with a huge noise. Everybody lay back relaxed and relieved. They have escaped death once again. They have touched down on Earth.

Peter calms gazing at the airport traffic. Dozens of airplanes are taxiing in the rain. Service trucks, trailers with luggage containers and buses full of passengers move around continuously. Far away a huge jumbo-jet takes off gallantly and disappears into the thick low clouds.

His heartbeat calms, the panic is over, his nerves ease up. The fear of death is replaced by the fear of the unknown. *During that damned crazy day I lost her. Now I am back at her trail. Soon I will manage to see her at last. Oh yes, but what am I going to find? What will be waiting for me there? Will she welcome and embrace me? Will she attack to kill me? Will she curse me and spit on me? Will I manage to see her smile?*

Wednesday 12 September 2001

(Four years back in the bar in Manila in the aftermath of 9/11)

The next day from the inconceivable day dawns and finds all of them glued to CNN. It is 5pm of the previous day in the bleeding city, 5am of the next day in the miserable city and all television channels are broadcasting non-stop images of ambulances, fire-engines, panicked people dredged in tower-powder like living cookies wandering dazed and shocked, like everybody else everywhere else.

Crazy scenes, scenes that had never been described not even in the screenplays of the most creative and outlandish disaster movies. The twin smokestacks against the crystal blue sky, the grey-powdered yuppies, surreal scenes, Dali paintings, Picasso's Guernica enlivened. Life halted. The thousands of the pulverized dead, the powder from the bodies of Roger and Sean scattered on the streets and on the demolished cars, on the jackets of the dazed fortunate souls who managed to run away just on time.

The whole planet watches in awe the attack unfolding and bleeding America trying to recover and react. On the newsrooms all sorts of dumbfounded newscasters, commentators and critics reel off their ignorant piffles. On the streets and in the buses in all the world's cities the passersby are numb, frightened. They whisper discreetly on their mobiles with their beloved ones, try to soothe the old, the kids, the horrified and the powerless without knowing what the next day will bring.

Death. Dark death has befallen. Terrified, solitary the people throw their eyes on the ground and avoid looking at each other frightened, ashamed. The old men shake their heads fatalistically, the old women mumble prayers. The young ones, those who must act, react, protect and foresee, look down, powerless, silent.

The bodyguards stay attached to Peter. Nobody knows what will happen next. Nobody dares to approach them. One by one the bar patrons leave to return to their families. They feel disbelief seeing again the sunrise, they cannot return to reality.

Peter is desperately looking either for Leila or for his mother on the phone, to learn what is going on in Europe, to seek solidarity. Calling out of Manila has always been problematic. Today it is impossible. The maddening monotonous bip-bip-bip-bip that signals that the network is overloaded drives him crazy.

Suddenly, after many tormenting hours, he manages at last to connect to London. In his ear buzzes the familiar British incoming call double-ringing, drin-drin, drin-drin, drin-drin. His heart stops. It is only 10pm in London, yet his sweetheart does not respond yet. *C'mon pick it up!* Peter orders her mentally.

Leila's tremulous voice responds at last, full of agony. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, yes, okay, okay, and you?"

"Okay, okay, I am fine too..."

They both burst into tears. All the strain, all the panic gushes from their hearts and is washed by their tears. They cry like babies, Peter at the corner of the bar in Manila and Leila in her father's living room in Kensington.

"Any news? What do you know?" asks Leila, sobbing, about the fate of the Noviasoft staff in the tower.

"Nothing, absolutely nothing. Only whatever you are also watching on television. Nothing more. It is impossible to communicate with them." Peter's trembling voice recites to Leila his last conversation with Roger and Sean before they ascended for breakfast at the top of the Tower of Hell. On the other side of the world Leila is crying wildly. Her soul has stopped distinguishing good guys from bad guys, Americans from Arabs. She keeps crying for the common wretched misery that has been forced upon all by the Apocalypse, crying and cursing the wicked mind of whoever planned and executed this monstrosity.

Amongst the chaos Peter is additionally worried that this attack, even if it will not bring about the immediate launching of the Third World War, at the very least it will bring either the bankruptcy of entire Noviasoft or an abrupt ending to his project. The whole planning and execution of this project was known only to a select group of senior executive confidants, the same executives who most likely have already perished in the damned 'business breakfast'. In the midst of panic who on Earth will undertake to give further instructions and funding for this project?

"My darling" Leila urges him from afar, "move, do whatever you can do, save whatever you can save! Don't wait. Take your life in your own hands and fight it out! That is what you have always been doing, isn't it? Try it, fight, don't quit!" They hang up promising to stay side-by-side and keep fighting as best as they can.

Leila's encouragement raises Peter's morale and at last he decides to act. He is the last to leave the bar and come out to the scorching sunlight. Accompanied by his bodyguards he heads directly to the bank as soon as it opens. He withdraws in cash the full amount from Noviasoft's money that he is authorized to withdraw on his own, as a backup. After all that has happened, he can neither be certain if the banks will operate tomorrow in the States, nor if Noviasoft will be in business tomorrow. He takes with him as much cash as he is allowed to carry and heads sleepless to his office in Makati, looking for Joel in order to plan their next moves.

Shortly the whole team joins them. Joel had been working alone in the office when the attack started and obviously spent the whole night there stuck in front of the TV. He had searched into all his rolodexes for any Noviasoft phone numbers that he could find, but in the early hours it had been impossible to communicate with anybody. Finally around 12 noon, midnight in New York, they manage to reach one of Roger's assistants on her mobile. Talking to her on the speakerphone they almost pass out. The lucky-

unlucky woman does not have any bodily injuries but is being treated for severe shock in the emergency center that has been setup near Ground Zero. Her screeching voice is still trembling as it is further distorted by the shabby phone lines. She mingles her narration with screams and crying. After the impact she got out together with all her colleagues of the eighth floor. Perhaps everybody in her floor escaped safely. However Roger and Sean had gone up to the restaurant. She could not locate them anywhere.

The only positive piece of news that she is giving them is that the President and the CEO were not attending that goddamned meeting. They are both away traveling. At last Peter and Joel can exhale solaced. These two executives know all the details of the Manila project. The CEO had authorized it himself personally and is following it up.

Searching again their phone directories they discover the President's mobile phone number. They keep trying to reach him but his phone is always busy. Obviously the guy is trying to manage the emergency. After three hours of continuous attempts at last someone picks it up. No it is not the President himself. It is one of the assistants in Noviasoft's Munich office where the President happened to be visiting when the attack occurred. The assistant has been assigned to inform all the callers that he is busy in a non-stop meeting and he cannot take any calls whatsoever. His instruction to everybody is that the situation will shortly be under control, almost all the employees have escaped unharmed, backup copies of all the computer files have been safely stored in a separate location and in a few days they will restart their work from temporary premises. All the projects will continue moving ahead. The firm and strict directive to all the offices worldwide is to continue their normal daily operations as if nothing has happened and shortly the coordination from the headquarters will be restored.

Peter, Joel and the whole team allow themselves for the first time an attempt to smile slightly. The worries remain, the future of the world is still dark and murky, but maybe, perhaps, the immediate danger to discontinue the project may have been averted. They order some pizzas and beers and allow themselves to be dismissed to go home and take a short but much needed rest from the horrid vigil of that crazy night.

In the blasting tropical heat the traffic is light, similar to a Sunday. The Filipinos have spent the night in front of their TVs and are afraid to venture out or go to work on a day that the fate of the whole world hangs on the balance. Nobody knows what will happen next, what will be the consequences of the attack, what will be the reaction of the wounded giant, who is next on Grim Reaper's list.

Nestled in the security of the huge Jeep Peter is looking down, at his feet, trying to put some order to his chaotic thoughts. In his briefcase, tightly cradled between his legs, he is carrying over two million dollars in cash, Noviasoft's money, an astronomical fortune for the standards of this city. Juan, who is still in shock, keeps pestering him with dozens of rumors about farfetched attacks and counter-attacks, sickening rumors

that are spread from mouth to mouth like the plague. Peter orders him to shut up, greatly annoyed. Peter has always sneered at the incredible disposition of the Filipinos to invent the most improbably destructionist rumors. However he lowers his head timidly when he realizes that an attack with missile-airliners at the Twin Towers had not been conceived by any of the most wicked and freakish Filipino naysayers.

Upon entering his flat he double-locks the front door and tries to get some rest, but in vain. He switches on the television. The worthless and pointless commentaries continue unabated while all the channels replay again and again the shot of the second airplane becoming a bright orange fireball that envelops the South Tower.

His body is exhausted by the vigil, the fatigue and the anguish but his mind refuses to relax and let him get some sleep. He fires up his laptop to prepare an email to Leila about the news from Noviasoft's President and his eye catches the previous mysterious emails from that mysterious lady. He jolts remembering her! *Goddamn, what has happened with this affair? Why did she disappear? Why the planes crashed at the very moment when she was due to meet me? Does this mysterious lady have any connection with all this chaos? This lady who is following my movements, who must therefore have been well aware that my employers had their headquarters in the destroyed tower, is she in any way involved in this freakish nightmare?*

Another chill rolls down his spine. He is afraid. He is *very* afraid. That was a terrifying night, an endless night. He stares worryingly at the black attaché containing the two million dollars. It is still there. He shoves it under his bed and slips under his quilt. Sleepiness overcomes him and plunges him into an uneasy nightmarish slumber.

**** (same day, in the evening) ****

The nightmare does not allow him to relax, to enjoy a descent calm sleep that he needs so much. He springs up from his bed drenched in cold sweat. It is only 8pm. He didn't manage to sleep for more than three hours. He switches the TV on again. As the next day dawns in America, the world remains petrified, panicked. In the news they estimate that about ten thousand people have died.

Peter calls Leila, she is calmer. She has sent him an email. He calls his mother, tries to give her courage, to calm down her terrifying anxiety, to assure her that he is safe and well. He switches on his laptop to receive Leila's email and jumps up startled once again. Another email from Kerguelen lands boisterously in front of him:

"Death. Shock, awe and dark death.

I am afraid Peter, very afraid. I am not afraid of dying. I am afraid of the death of life. We are swirling.

I could not leave. My flight was cancelled. Perhaps tomorrow. I am triple-locked in my hotel room, terrified.

How are you? Are you okay? Are your loved ones okay? Did you have any friends there, in New York?

I need you. I am very worried and I need you. I didn't manage to talk to you. Your bravados were not allowing anyone to approach you. I understand. You were afraid. But I must talk to you.

Please believe me, I need you! Can we meet somewhere? Anywhere. Do you want to come to my hotel? It is safe. Come anytime...

I will explain.

I will be waiting.

Please..."

Peter's heartbeat raises, his breath shortens. Another threat! He looks at the briefcase, it is still there, securely locked under his bed. He rushes to secure the front door again, calls the guard at the main gate and asks him to be extremely vigilant in these violent times. The guard reassures him that his superiors have trebled the sentries on duty while the situation is so volatile.

He calls Leila on Messenger, sends her that email and asks for her opinion. Leila advises him not to reply. Something evil is behind all this, perhaps it is a trap. Now that the world has come upside-down, there is no reason whatsoever to risk anything more. *"Let the mysterious lady proclaim anything she might wish and don't follow her."*

Peter agrees. He decides to ignore that email. In a short time he receives in his mobile phone yet another text message from the same mysterious Greek number. *"Peter I am very worried, are you okay? Please check your email! Please get back to me..."* He ignores this message too, replies nothing at all. After an hour he receives an incoming call on his mobile, a voice call, from the same number! What an unbelievable audacity! She is pushing to reach him with such obstinacy. Peter rejects the call. In ten minutes another incoming call rings from the same number. He rejects that call too and switches his mobile off. He hopes that the mysterious lady will understand at last that she must leave him alone. He goes back to his bed worried and distressed.

Friday 14 September 2001

The great worry remains but the dust settles and the uncertainty clears little by little. The world rises slowly again and tries to put some order to the chaos. There are perhaps five thousand dead or less, not ten thousand. Voices demanding revenge are raised together with voices suggesting patience and restraint.

At their office in Makati Peter and his team can barely function. They are waiting impatiently for instructions from anywhere. Noviasoft's website informs the markets that the vast majority of the employees have escaped safely and only very few are still unaccounted for, safe backup copies exist in a secure location for all the company's computer files and a temporary work space is being hastily prepared in a company's

warehouse in Long Island. Possibly on Monday the headquarters will be operational again. The company was fortunate that their offices were located in the lower floors of the North Tower and the majority of the staff managed to escape, except for the unfortunate few who were in the business breakfast meeting on the top floor.

On the website an important announcement signed by both the President and the CEO is prominently displayed on the front page instructing all the regional offices and their partners to continue working as scheduled. Reluctantly Peter's team tries to obey the order knowing very well that all these instructions are empty words to reassure the customers, the investors and the stock exchange. The real instructions and the probable major reshuffling will be announced quietly later.

Nevertheless Peter decides at last to relieve himself from a huge burden. Early on Friday morning he returns to the bank and deposits the two million dollars back into Noviasoft's account. At least the banks seem to be operating normally now and there is no more reason to be at risk carrying such a huge amount of cash in his briefcase.

Later in the afternoon Peter confidentially composes an email to both the president's and to the CEO's personal email addresses. He introduces himself, reports briefly the major tasks and milestones of his project up-to-date and informs them that he is dutifully waiting for their confidential instructions, in light of the emergency situation. He reads his message, corrects it, re-reads it, amends it, re-corrects it, reads it one more time and finally 'blesses' it and presses the 'send' button anxiously. This is the first time that he is addressing the top executives but there is no alternative. Only these two people can give him viable instructions.

As he is sending out his critical email, yet another message from Kerguelen lands boisterously in his inbox:

"I have lost you Peter. Are you okay? I have been trying to contact you both on your email and your mobile phone while I was still in Manila but without luck. Are you okay? Please, please tell me if you are okay!!! If anything has happened to you too then I will freak out!!!

Myself I am gone now. I have returned home. Capricious fate did not allow us to meet this time, how odd! Maybe later then, somehow, somewhere...

However before leaving I have sent you by post some important evidence that I have brought along all the way from home to hand over to you, whenever we would meet. I had hoped that we could talk about it face-to-face, but that has not been possible. Anyway, when you receive it please write back to me so that I can explain what it is about, about myself and about us...

By the way, when are you coming back to Europe? I must see you, to explain...

I am anxiously waiting for any news from you!! Please tell me, are you okay?"

This time Peter is grossly annoyed and angered. His blood pressure drums up into his head. In the midst of his agonizing struggle to save his job, he is also forced to deal with this whacky lady who keeps following him playing crazy, puzzling games. *Is that bloody Nicole? What would she want from my life again? Or is it anyone from the gang of Loginet's investors? They have poisoned and destroyed my life enough already!* He does not believe a word of what this 'Kerguelen' persona is claiming. He is certain that some deadly trap lurks below this peculiar story. She keeps pestering him in this stormy time for no apparent reason. He does not hesitate for a moment to express his fury on the spot. He rattles his keyboard in ferocious anger:

"Whoever you might be and whatever you might want, disappear from my life NOW! Leave me alone! I am neither rich, nor I wish to have sex with any hooker, nor marry any young beautiful Filipina, nor discuss anything with anybody! If you are after money or sex then let me tell you explicitly that I do not have any money whatsoever and I do not want sex and therefore get lost! If you wish to tell me something else then stop playing those silly games and SAY IT at last and then get lost FOREVER!"

In a furious mood he blasts this email away, switches off his laptop and leaves the office in the large Jeep. In his tiny flat he tries to calm down. He scrambles two eggs, gulps half a bottle of wine to blur his mind and stop thinking and attempts to fall asleep. But in vain. He tosses in his bed agonizing. At around 1am his phone rings. It is the CEO's personal assistant. She asks him if he is available to receive a call from the CEO himself at 4am Manila time. Due to the ban on flights in the U.S., the CEO got stuck in Noviasoft's Los Angeles office. Peter replies that of course he will make himself available for such an important call, anytime whatsoever.

He gets up again, fires-up his laptop and prepares all his reports and other files to be ready for that critical phone call. He leaves the laptop switched on and his mobile phone plugged to the charger. He tries to get some sleep until 4am but again he fails, he cannot relax. His anxiety has overtaken him.

**** (next morning) ****

He abandons his vain effort to sleep at around 3:30am on Saturday. He checks again his phone, it is fully charged. He checks his laptop, everything is ready! He prepares a cup of strong coffee and waits impatiently to learn what lies ahead.

His phone rings at 4:15am. The assistant connects him directly to the CEO himself. His first word is to apologize for disturbing Peter at such an inappropriate time in the early morning. Peter is glad. At the very least the CEO is a polite person. Frequently the Americans forget that the rest of the world is asleep during their working hours.

The conversation is brief but full of substance. Peter reports dutifully the progress of the project so far and asks for confidential guidance on what to do next. The CEO reaffirms Peter personally in the most assuring manner that the Manila project will

continue exactly as it has been planned. Shortly a new supervisory team will be appointed to replace Roger and Sean. Until that time, the CEO urges Peter to put his best possible effort to accomplish the planned goals and meet the deadlines. The CEO also asks Peter to encourage the rest of his team and raise their morale. Peter promises to do his very best and thanks the CEO for the trust that he has invested in him. The conversation ends in the most optimistic and reassuring mood.

Peter exhales a deep breath of relief. A huge weight has been suddenly lifted from his chest! At last for the first time since that damned 9/11 day, he has received a solid reassurance. He has got the CEO's personal commitment that he will continue to be employed for the coming months! He shouts jubilantly "yahoo!" jumping around in his tiny living room celebrating alone in the predawn hour.

It is almost 5am and outside the new day is gradually breaking. In about an hour he must set out for the office. There is no time left to try to fall asleep again. Today he will go to work jubilant, despite being sleepless.

He sits down to compile an email to Leila, to inform her about the good news. When sending it out, the expected reply from Kerguelen lands in his inbox. Hesitantly, but also rather boringly, he opens it to read it:

"Very well you pigheaded male, since you so wish I will let you know why I have been looking for you and why I came down to the other side of the Earth to find you. Be informed that you have been talking to your own daughter. The one you have never met and who therefore no longer wishes to meet you. Never ever!! Son of a bitch!"

Peter gasps in disbelief and astonishment! *What the hell is this bloody joke now?* He keeps reading this short message again and again, trying to absorb its meaning and consequences. *A daughter??!! Who and how? When? Oh no, no, that can't be... That is a farce, part of the same trick or rather the same trap.* He refuses to believe it. He panics. Terrified he feels that this affair is suddenly blown out of proportion. Entirely out of proportion! *This 'lady' and whoever else is hiding behind her, this gang who have been shadowing me so closely and photographed me, who have learned where I grew up and also discovered my private mobile phone number and, most importantly, those who had arranged to meet me at the exact time of the grand catastrophic 9/11 attack, these thugs who are now putting forward this unfounded, preposterous claim, they must have laid a very large trap, a huge trick that they are trying to trip me into, to achieve their unknown menacing goals.*

Perhaps another grand murky plot related to Noviasoft is unravelling now after the 9/11 catastrophe. Perhaps the conspirators have discovered me, the petty isolated and exposed consultant, forgotten down here at the far side of the Earth, involved in a 'secret and unmentionable' project, perhaps they intend to use me as a pawn in their dangerous plans and destroy me. If some unknown person has appeared suddenly from

nowhere, has followed me but without actually showing up in person and now claims so unexpectedly that she is my 'daughter', then what else can they possibly claim in the future? What else will they demand and how are they going to blackmail me?

A cold chill trickles down his back. He is sitting here fully exposed, ten thousand miles away from home, away from his loved ones, away from the familiar Western countries with reliable police forces and lawyers where he would know where to address his worries and how to protect himself. He has been tangled in a machination that is engulfing him in a spider's web, without having anyone and anything to rely upon and escape. How can he be saved? Terrified he sits down to compose his reply, this time addressing all those who are hiding behind 'her' stupid nickname:

"I am flatly and categorically rejecting this ridiculous and preposterous claim. How can you prove something like that? I don't know AND I DON'T WANT TO KNOW any silly 'daughter' and any other unfounded nonsense. I demand that you stop harassing me IMMEDIATELY with this ludicrous bullshit. I have already informed my lawyer and the authorities and if you will ever approach me again, I will take all the necessary steps to protect myself from your threats and harassment." He sends it out immediately.

He feels an immense urge to communicate with Leila but decides not to disturb her in the middle of the night. He is well aware that ten thousand miles away Leila cannot do anything more. He will talk to her later, when she will wake up in London and they will consider together very carefully how to proceed.

Sleepless and terrified he descends to the garage at the usual time to start his daily toil with Juan. He mumbles a half-hearted "good morning" and slips into the Jeep. Today he follows the traffic jam nervously, he is on edge. *Could Juan be an accomplice in the same plot? Could the gangsters pop-out behind the next corner and could he stop the car and turn me over to them?*

Juan is taken aback by his boss' gloomy mood today, but he has learned to avoid commenting on the vagaries of the white people. *Who knows, he considers silently, he may have learned some bad news from home, or something bad for his company, such rocky times as we are going through...* Speechless he drives Peter to the Makati tower.

Peter enters his office frazzled and inarticulate. *Who amongst my lads is part of this plot? What are they preparing for me next?* In the usual morning meeting he informs the team about his conversation with the CEO. However, instead of being upbeat and optimistic, his mood is so gloomy that his teammates have doubts about the supposedly 'great news'. They consider discreetly that he is telling them only half-truths in order to keep their morale high.

This agonizing day toils along slowly in the office. Peter absolutely cannot concentrate and work. Instead he keeps reading again and again 'her' messages trying to discover what is hidden behind the lines and where is the plot.

At some point in the afternoon Peter's personal assistant enters into his office perplexed. A peculiar letter has just arrived for him in the post. On the envelope his name and Rosario's address are hand-written, but no sender information is shown. A large "*strictly personal and confidential*" note is scribbled across the envelope.

"Do you want us to check it before you open it Sir?" his assistant asks him.

"No leave it, I will open it myself. Thank you."

He opens the letter with trembling hands whilst his heart beats ferociously. *Is this the next fearful development in the murky plot?* Inside he discovers a photograph, a picture that has been cut in the middle. It shows himself during his college years. His long dark hair is shown flapping in the wind and his intense white smile shines in between his curly beard. He is wearing his favorite black t-shirt and washed out jean shorts. He is sitting on a small rock on some Greek golden beach during the summer. The azure sea glitters in the background and the crystal clear blue sky shines spectacularly above. He is deeply tanned and has a happy, proud and wild look due to the wind, the dust and the saltiness. His shaggy hair and thick beard are giving a primordial handsomeness to his overall appearance.

On his right he is embracing a girlfriend but Kerguelen has cut her, apparently on purpose. Peter cannot distinguish who she is. Only her left hand is shown, also tanned, laid over his shoulder and suspended lazily down his left side.

Peter flinches, completely astonished! Yes of course, this photo is authentic, that is him! That is one of the hundreds of photos that he shot with his girlfriends during his happy and careless years at college. The mysterious lady who has had this picture at her disposal has clear access to his past life. His heart and temple are beating tremendously.

He checks the envelope again. Inside he discovers a tiny piece of cardboard. On the one side Kerguelen's well-known Greek phone number and email address are hand written. "*Please call me to explain what this all means. Please call, I beg you!*" she has written twice, once in Greek and once in English.

On the other side he discovers a small bunch of a woman's hair taped on the cardboard. His mind clears! Yes, now he can understand very well why Kerguelen has sent him this photo and this bunch from her hair. And he knows what he must do next.

For the first time he calls her mobile number. It is inactive. He calls again. Inactive still. He rushes to his desk to send her a message, to explain. It is already 3pm here in Manila, therefore back in Athens it is 10am. Before he can start compiling his message her reply arrives in his email:

"Very well filthy pig, do not worry and you will not need to throw away your money to the lawyers. I am going to disappear for good! I have already sent by post to your office the proof that you have asked for.

In addition to what I have already sent in that letter, you may take note that my mother, when she talked to me about you, told me that down below on your belly you have two large black moles striding the scar from your appendix operation. This is just to prove once more that I am not fooling you.

I could not anticipate if you could become a true father for me. I had known another father, another idiotic fat pig like you! Suddenly, one day my mother revealed to me that this bearded boy in the photo is my true father instead of the other pig I had known until then. She explained how she met you, what you have lived through together and how you drifted apart. Oh yes, she told me a lot about you. But she did not have any idea if you were still alive and where on Earth you might be living.

And so I started looking for you, you arrogant fool! I was wondering what you would look like, what kind of person would you be, if it would ever be possible for you to accept and understand me. I spent a fortune to locate you. I was glad when I made it at last. I thought that perhaps you might be a loving person, not a ruthless beast. Unfortunately I was mistaken. Tough luck!

My mother told me that back then you had captured the flame of life. Your eyes were shining when you were talking about Beauty. You knew how to discover Beauty. You could find it in the swinging foliage of the trees, in the dance of the birds in the air, in the sparkling surface of the sea. You would lie on your back on the beach sand during the warm summer nights, fix your gaze straight up at the stars and you would not be afraid to stare at the dark core of grand eternity. You said you would conquer death through love. Well, you have defeated death Mister, you brought me into life! Unless I decide to go before you do. Ha ha ha, I can slip away so easily...

You were handsome, and you still are. At least I have managed to see you. But is that you, the same person that she had been admiring so much? The first day I saw you looking down dizzily, lost and muddleheaded by the whisky and the whores. Where was your flame? Where was this renowned 'Beauty' that my mother kept pitching to me and I had believed her stupidly? All that was lies, you son of a bitch, LIES!!!

The second day I saw a yuppie scum shouting orders on the mobile, with your bravados around terrifying the innocent people with their guns. Who are you Mister? Have you become such an important pighead? 'Congratulations', it seems that you have 'managed' to become 'someone'. Bravo, idiot!

Therefore 'calm down', I will certainly disappear from your life for good and you will never hear anything else from me, never ever! But please disappear from my life as well and NEVER EVER attempt to find me. You are worthless to become my true father. I detest you and I spit on you from the depth of my heart. Get lost, malaka!"

CHAPTER THREE

Sunday 30 September 2001

During the only day of the week that Peter is allowed to rest in his tiny flat in Rockwell, early in the afternoon he is sitting in his small sofa watching the news on CNN, trying to figure out where is the world heading to, after the grand catastrophe, and where his life's journey is taking him, after all those spectacular and baffling upheavals.

Since that damndest day three weeks ago when the world flipped upside-down and Peter met but did not get to know his 'daughter', his swirling life became even more tumultuous. It took him some good time to recover his senses after receiving that email, to absorb this unfathomable piece of news. That photograph was an authentic relic from his very distant past. The old photos from his student years were stashed in dusty albums in his parents' attic in Athens. He had never shown them neither to Nicole nor to Leila. That photograph, that email, the deep and intimate knowledge that this lady had demonstrated so vividly that she possessed about his youthful past, were irrefutable proofs of a strong and personal bond with someone *very special indeed*.

Upon reading that mind-boggling email he sat trembling on his desk and tried to calm down, to get composed. Yes, that woman who has smashed her way so abruptly into his life is apparently someone exceptional. But is she *a daughter*? How could that be? Under which circumstances? In his twenty years of adult life, he had not had the slightest indication that he could have ever fathered a child. He zipped quickly through his memory, searching for the possibilities. Yes of course, during his happy youthful years in Greece he had had some intense love affairs with young adorable women. However he would imagine that, if he had impregnated any of these past girlfriends, then most likely she would have had an abortion, or at least she would have told him, or in any case he would have learned about it from the large circle of other common friends and acquaintances. Why would any of these ladies opt to keep such a secret, give birth and raise a fatherless child alone at such a young age? What would be the compelling reason? It simply did not make any sense, for Peter.

He could not figure it out, he could not understand... His disoriented attention turned again to the piece of carton with the taped bunch of hair. *Oh yes, I know what I am supposed to do with that...* he realized. He called a courier on the spot and sent urgently that piece of evidence to Leila, together with a bunch from his own hair. Then he sat down calmly and composed a long email to Kerguelen, apologizing sincerely for his brash attitude, explaining under what extreme misconceptions he was led to misunderstand her approach. And of course he expressed his strong desire to meet her at last to understand what part of his life exactly she can fill.

He never received any reply back. Nothing. He sent and resent his email several times at Kerguelen's address, always apologizing, always expressing his eagerness to

reestablish contact. Nothing. He tried many times to call her on her mobile. Nothing. Her phone has always been unavailable. He sent her many text messages, begging her to reply. Nothing. Kerguelen disappeared as swiftly as she had appeared.

Her bomb shook both Peter's and Leila's lives violently. Even as Peter was baffled and could not reach a firm conclusion yet about this mysterious lady, Leila's side of the story was much clearer and much more worrisome. After Peter sent her all his correspondence with Kerguelen, explaining in detail all that had happened, Leila considered that she faced a clear onslaught by another female antagonist who was using 'cheap womanlike tricks' to pull Peter away from her, while she was far away and could not react and defend their relationship. Claims by past girlfriends to have become pregnant or, even worse, to have given birth to lost children, cannot be ignored or resisted by the men under attack. They are the most effective weapons in the arsenal of a woman who wants desperately her ex-lover back, especially since it was, unfortunately, impossible for Leila to defend herself using the same 'trick'.

Even more, the peculiar circumstances of this particular case, where the attacker remained anonymous after dropping her bomb and thereafter she disappeared back into nothingness, convinced Leila that the whole story is a filthy scam. Surely no daughter exists in reality. Even more worrisome, the attacking ex-lover is so committed to succeed, that she took the pain and cost to travel down to Manila to cast her net on him. Her machinations may have been disturbed by the coincidence of the 9/11 attacks, but she is certain to return with a different plot sometime soon.

Leila did not hesitate to express her opinions and worries to Peter with absolute clarity and insistence. She demanded that Peter should stop immediately trying to contact Kerguelen. Sensing Leila's anxiety and panic, Peter did not dare disagree with her. He calmed her down by accepting all her arguments and by insisting that in any case he would repel Kerguelen's 'extraordinary assault' resolutely. To his credit in Leila's eyes, Peter had done just that already. He had already pushed away that mysterious lady in the most brutal and uncompromising manner. Yet deep in his soul he doubted. Something really big was happening and he could not figure out what it was exactly. Nevertheless he kept those doubts private to himself, to avoid alarming Leila.

After 9/11 the days were passing and no major plot or other intrigue appeared in the making. Life was slowly regaining a pattern of normality. The world did not disintegrate into chaos and anarchy. Flights were resumed. The global stock exchanges and all the other markets started operating again. Noviasoft did indeed manage to establish a temporary headquarters and restarted functioning little by little. No other extraordinary or adverse situation involving Kerguelen surfaced. Peter refocused his attention on his effort to fulfil his promise to the CEO by directing his team to gradually restart taking good care of their project. *Perhaps Leila is right after all*, he started

contemplating. *Perhaps this has been indeed a failed attempt by some ex-lover of mine to get in touch with me again...* He was flattered by this possibility, but he also dismissed out of hand any such approach. Leila did not face any real danger. Peter did not harbour any erotic interest in any of his past girlfriends. For him, these were old stories, forgotten a very, very long time ago. All but *one*.

What a funny mess! Peter ponders on his sofa, with his whisky in hand, in his tiny flat during the quiet Sunday afternoon when a buzz on the intercom startles him.

"You have a visitor Sir" the guard announces sternly.

"A visitor? What visitor?" Peter is surprised.

"Mrs... Mrs. Leila Al Hamdan" the guard stumbles spelling her name.

"Who??!!" Peter exclaims in astonishment.

"Yes it is me Peter. Let me in please..." he hears her voice in the background.

A couple of minutes later she is standing in his front door, a gorgeous figure of a woman, wearing a flamboyant sexy dress and high heels, her marvelous eyes radiating a sweet sensation of desire and anxiety.

"What..." Peter can only mumble in utter amazement.

"Surprise!!" she laughs flirtatiously. "I missed you so much, I took a week off from Mr. Jeremy and decided to pay you a surprise visit. Am I bothering you at all?"

"Oh, of course not..." he laughs back as he takes her gently into his hands and seals her mouth with a hot kiss while fondling her lovely slender body.

"Mmmm..." she sighs giggling, "...darling, hold on a minute. I have been fourteen bloody hours on that plane. Can I just refresh myself a bit?"

"Sure my love!"

Ten minutes later, after taking a quick shower and wearing only her bathrobe over her alluring naked body, leaving on purpose many openings for him to peek and admire, Leila is relaxing on his sofa with her whisky in hand. Peter cannot believe his eyes and his unexpected good luck. "Wow, what a fantastic surprise!" he smiles warmly as he leans on top of her vividly excited, seals again her lips with another seductive kiss and pushes aside her bathrobe...

Much later in the night, after a couple of frenzied lovemaking sessions and a good nap that she had to take after her exhausting overnight flight, Peter and Leila are relaxing having enjoyed a nice dinner that he had prepared for her.

"I love you so much Peter, you cannot imagine how much..." Leila exhales with a hint of nervousness and anxiety as her gaze darkens.

"I love you too my darling, but is there something wrong?" Peter senses her worry.

"Well..." she starts stumbling, "I... I do not know how to say it..."

"Something happened?" Peter starts being worried too.

She takes a very deep breath. Hesitating during every word she mumbles "Actually my love... I came down here to tell you in person... about the result... The result of the test. I got it last Wednesday..." The DNA test on the hair. Her voice is trembling and she is shivering, but she has uttered it. There is no going back now.

Peter's heart starts beating ferociously. He stays silent for a few seconds as he tries to calm down sipping the last drops of the sweet red wine he had served for dinner.

"I am ready..." he declares at last.

"Well, my dear... the lab said that this bunch of hair belongs to a person with very... very strong genetic affiliation to you! It belongs to a close relative of yours!" she mutters shaking nervously.

"Oh my God! Oh Goodness!!" Thankfully Peter is already sitting otherwise he would have been knocked off-balance.

Several ensuing seconds of deadly silence alarm her. "Are you okay my love?"

"Am I? I have no idea..." he gravitates trying to regain his foothold in space-time. "How can that be true?" he tries to get some guidance out of the quagmire.

"That is what the test showed. What can *you* make out of it?"

"I am numb! Do I have a daughter? *A daughter!* How come?"

"Is it absolutely impossible?" Leila plays her last desperate card, hoping...

"Well... no, I suppose not. Nothing is impossible. There could have been some women many years ago that in theory could have... But..."

Leila finally realizes that she has lost that game for good. "Well my dear..." she concedes her defeat "...if it is not impossible... then one can assume that it is possible. At least according to that test."

Both fall silent for a lengthy pause. Peter's limbs freeze and his eyesight dims. He is dragged violently down a tumultuous sentimental vortex that punches his head and heart. *A daughter!* That astonishing word keeps bouncing into his head from temple to temple, whilst at the bottom of his descent a glorious fountain of luscious sweetness and happiness sprinkles from his heart and fills him with joy.

"Peter! Peter! Are you okay?" Leila tries to extract him from the daze.

"Ah... hem... so..." he tries hard to regain a foothold to reality, "and... and what do *you* make out of that?"

Leila has been well prepared for that critical question. During the long hours on the plane she had been quietly reciting her reply and preparing her defence. During the past weeks, she had known well in advance the date that the result of the test would be ready for collection. She had been anxiously waiting for it, but she had not informed Peter. She did not want to raise in advance his expectation and undermine her earlier narration about the 'cheap womanlike plot'.

Unfortunately the actual result has been a slap in her face. Just as she had painstakingly convinced him that this affair had been a scam, her story collapsed and she has been left exposed. And that is the less painful part of the problem. Suddenly she realized that her lover is no longer alone in life. He can never again dedicate himself exclusively to her, as every woman demands from her man. He has another *commitment* in his life now. He will be committed to a new and totally unknown person who, sooner or later, will enter his life with unpredictable consequences for their relationship. He will be committed to another woman from another country, a woman that Peter could someday consider even more important in his life than Leila. He will be committed to a foreigner who might dislike Leila, pushing Peter to drift apart and return one day back to Greece.

Even more worrisome, behind the daughter there is also the mother, the real and most menacing threat for Leila. The mother who suddenly decided to reveal to her daughter the existence of Peter and has apparently guided her daughter towards him. What is her real motive? Does she want to claim him back? That mother who has fired her irresistible weapon that no man can ever repel... That is Leila's true big problem.

Yet Leila is also a fighter. She had to accept the new reality, adapt and prepare the ground for the unavoidable entrance of that daughter into their common life. She decided that she should counter-attack, pre-empt the potential enemy, the sooner the better. Immediately after she received the DNA test result, she went to the nearest travel agency and booked a flight to Manila on the spot. She chose to fight for her lover face-to-face, whilst she still had some advantage in attracting him sexually. She put on her most elegant, sexy clothing and boarded that plane. Upon disembarking she was the last to leave the ladies room. She spent close to half an hour in there washing up well, applying seductive lipstick and perfume and fixing her makeup and hair. Thereafter she entered seductively his solitary apartment and let her bathrobe slip loosely open...

After exhausting Peter with a feast of sensual sexual overdose, Leila sits confidently by his side, stares straight into his eyes and plays her last desperate card. "That is now *your* call my love. She is *your* daughter. You have to find the right spot in your life for her. It can be big, or it can be small. It is up to you and her to decide. My own feelings are secondary. I can only tell you that I love you and I need you desperately. If you want me then I will stay by your side with you and with your daughter if you want her or with you and without your daughter if you do not want her."

Peter takes his eyes away. He senses immediately Leila's discomfort and anxiety. He realizes that, from now on, his life will be dominated by two competing women. Yet he has to play his part correctly, keeping a delicate balance amongst them.

"Of course I apologize for proclaiming this story a scam without waiting for the results... I am really sorry..." Leila rushes to appease him, sensing that she is losing him.

"That is not an issue. I was convinced too that you had been right. Not an issue at all" he tries to appear friendly and to ease her discomfort.

He does not make it. Leila can no longer bear the burden. She cannot remain calm and composed. She turns her head away, trying to conceal her tears. She does not make it. Peter notices those tears. The developing overwhelming emotional storm threatens to drown them both. Neither of them can take it any longer.

"My loveliest..." Peter takes gently Leila's shaking hand into his shaking hand "I need you more than ever! I cannot handle this alone. This is huge! Please... Please..." at last he opens up offering an escape. She grabs the chance to throw herself into his arms, as they both burst into violent and cathartic crying.

"I love you, I love you more than my life!" she proclaims crying wildly, begging him to let her retain her earlier exclusive position in his heart.

"I love you too and I need you now more than ever!" he is preoccupied instead with his own pressing need for a stepping stone to rest upon and calm down, to get advice and guidance on how to handle this unbelievable revelation. *A daughter!!*

"And... and what shall I do now..." he agonizes.

"I suppose you have to try to find her again, what else? Then you will see how that will develop..." she dries her tears.

"A... after all that has happened? Will she accept me now? Don't you remember what she wrote last time?" Peter starts panicking.

"My darling, if she is indeed your daughter, then she will come back to you anyway. Unless if you do not want her anymore..."

"I don't know..." he tries to find an escape "I have to absorb it first... It is huge."

Much later, in the steep darkness of his bedroom Peter is tossing on the bed unable to fall asleep, whereas Leila by his side has crashed into a deep slumber, exhausted by the long flight and the tumultuous sentimental ups and downs of the day. In the stillness of that quiet hour, without the need to soothe the fears of his partner, Peter is able at last to reflect at ease and start coming to terms with the reality that he is a *father!* He is gradually overcome by a sweet elation. His lonely and aimless life suddenly has acquired a valuable essence, a *destiny!* He is not *alone* any more. Life endowed him with a companion and a reason to keep fighting. He starts feeling grateful again to Marvelous Life for this extraordinary gift that was bestowed to him, after the trouble he endured during the past turbulent years. For so many harsh months he has been desperately searching, in vain, for any slight glimmer of hope. Suddenly, out of nowhere, this unanticipated blessing has been granted to him.

**** (next day) ****

Alone in his office around noon, during the next day, Peter shoots a brief text message to his daughter: *"I got the DNA results. You are right. I am indeed your father! Please, please get back to me! I must explain!"*

"Oh Goodness!" Kerguelen flashes back soon afterwards and in these two brief words Peter senses her own astonishment and excitement. Yet immediately she disappears again back into nothingness. Peter tries to call or to text her repeatedly, always in vain, always facing her nerve-breaking silence. Yet Peter is a fighter. He is not deterred. He grinds his teeth, focuses his willpower and composes yet another multipage email, spelling out all his strong emotions. Once again he finishes his message apologizing from the bottom of his heart for his earlier misbehaviour, begging for her forgiveness. He fires his soul testimony away and heads home in a fuzzy state of mind, keeping that whole exchange secret from Leila.

October 2001

The most mesmerizing and at the same time agonizing period starts in Peter's life, after the Earth shaking revelation that Leila has carried over from London. Hypnotized by the sheer strength of the shock, Peter spends several days trying to absorb the unfathomable news and understand the huge consequences for his life and mental composure. During the first week of October Leila is at his side to console and assist him in his effort to settle his emotional status in some new order, to reach a new equilibrium.

He is working as always very hard during the day and when he is returning exhausted to his flat in the evening, Leila has already prepared a luscious dinner that is followed by passionate sexual feasts, cementing their love. During that carefree week, Peter is striding around the desperate city with a bright smile on his shining face, bypassing all the hitches that are troubling his companions. He has found again his inexhaustible optimism and manages to pass it to his whole team. They restart work on their project with fresh enthusiasm, focused on meeting the strict deadlines.

Leila was right in opting to fly to Manila to break in person the news to Peter. During the week that they spend together, they manage to absorb little by little the new reality and fit it into their relationship. Peter continues displaying his utmost love and affectionate feelings towards her and manages to somewhat calm her anxiety. He renews his commitment to their relationship in a reassuring manner. Leila relaxes and reciprocates. She gives him her full love and affection and starts offering her support for his new role as a father, trying to soothe his new anxieties.

His new and so exciting role unfortunately cannot be fulfilled yet. No reply is coming from Kerguelen. Leila leaves Manila the following weekend and Peter is left alone, still trying to reach his daughter, in vain... All his pleas are falling on deaf ears. He sends dozens of text messages on her mobile. No reply. All his messages evaporate in thin air, are sucked into the black hole of her unbearable indifference. Peter starts

feeling sad and angry with her prolonged silence but tries to control himself. *Maybe her harsh attitude is just a childish stubbornness that has been caused by my own ugly rejection and insults. Perhaps she will soften up in time...*

Nothing.

Deadness. No reply, no sign of life. She has been devoured by cyberspace. As she appeared suddenly out of nowhere, so she has disappeared back into nothingness.

Peter starts doubting if she is indeed receiving his messages, if her email address and mobile number are still functioning. He starts worrying gravely if the girl is in such a bad state of mind, due to his cruel rejection, that she might no longer be well. Perhaps she is depressed or, *God forbid*, something worse might have happened to her. As the days pass one after the other and his desperate attempts are crashed against a black wall of silence, his initial joy and optimism evaporate and are replaced by anguish. His life's Black October. Instead of becoming his unexpected blessing, his girl has passed by his side invisible. He turned her away in the most brutal and insulting manner and she vanished back into nothingness, leaving him in tatters.

All alone in wild Manila, besieged in the fortress that protects the whites from the misery of the masses, Peter has to muster as much courage as possible to avoid collapsing into depression. He is surprised to see that he is still holding out, keeps struggling. *One more bloody misfortune to fight back, one more rocky turn in my journey*, he keeps saying to himself. *As long as I am alive, I will keep fighting*. Yet this hit is stronger than anything he has endured in the past. There are moments that all this sounds like a joke, a farce, and moments that he is overwhelmed by desolation.

Leila, his guardian angel, remains his only solace. She is writing to him continuously, calling him, giving him advice and courage. From ten thousand miles away she keeps comforting and consoling him. She is fighting her own struggle to support him, to prevent him from caving in.

When Peter finally digests that young lady Kerguelen, his daughter, is not going to heed his pleas and reappear anytime soon, he decides to get out and start searching for her himself. If a young girl managed to reach him at the far corner of Asia, then for sure he can also discover her in a small place like Greece.

The only certain fact that he has at his disposal is that Kerguelen had been in Madrugada on Saturday 8 and on Tuesday 11 of September. Nothing more. As much as Peter squeezes his mind, as much as he is trying to recompose the memories of the dancing American teenagers, he cannot recollect any Mediterranean-looking female face who might have been staring at him persistently. And yet she had been there. She even photographed him. But he did not notice...

A hot Sunday towards mid-October, around noon, Peter visits Ramon to ask if he had noticed anything peculiar during that horrible night, if he recalls any mysterious

woman who might have been acting strangely. Ramon remembers very well the chaos, the fiery live explosions on TV, the freakish panic in his bar, the pointed guns of Peter's bodyguards, but of course he could not have diverted his attention to anything else of lesser importance. His business, an upscale bar with plenty of loyal patrons, is frequented by dozens of Europeans and Americans every night. It is impossible for him to recollect any peculiar lady who ordered some drinks from the bar a month earlier and has since disappeared altogether.

"Yet I have something that can be useful to you" Ramon says to Peter. "I have a CCTV camera to check the bar and the cashier. If that lady did approach the bar to order her drinks like everybody, then she must have been captured by it." Peter smiles. He will be able to see her face! Even if he does not know how to distinguish it, at least he will see it again. The next day Ramon delivers to Peter two copies of the tapes, one each for the nights of the 8th and the 11th of September.

Peter spends three consecutive nights in front of his video player, witnessing again two full nights in Madrugada. In the fuzzy black-and-white frame parade fleetingly many dozens of women faces. In Saturday's copy a chaotic but festive mood prevails as joyous young female heads are popping in and out of the screen, pushing hard their way to the bar, swinging in the beat of the music. A different sort of chaos has gripped all of them in Tuesday's copy. Everybody's stunned faces are stuck on the TV with wide open eyes and mouths in horrible expressions of freakish panic.

Despite all the long sleepless nights that Peter spends in front of the video player, he is not able to distinguish any face that can instinctively appeal to him, that can possibly have a resemblance to him or that has any Mediterranean characteristics. Yet he does not relent. He knows that in there, in his cupboard, stored in some frames, perhaps in just a few frames, *her* face is engraved, waiting to be discovered. He keeps zooming at random on any female faces that happen to attract his attention. Nothing. He is neither able to discover anything intuitively, nor to combine faces and movements in the two different nights in order to reach any conclusions.

Peter realizes that he needs professional assistance. He talks to Joel asking for someone who can discover needles in a haystack, fast and efficiently. The next day Joel introduces Peter to Alfredo, if that is his real name. Alfredo is a guy who, in the West, would be called a 'detective', but in a place like Manila, he has a more complex role.

Alfredo works fast and methodically. He gets copies from the CCTV tapes and, within a couple of days, presents his first results to Peter and Ramon in Madrugada: "During Saturday the 8th of September, perhaps around ninety-three white women were served at the bar. During the 11th of September, almost certainly only forty-four were served. Of them, eighteen appear in both tapes. Here they are..." and lays in front of them eighteen stills showing the eighteen target faces. "...What can you make out?"

"I know three of them," replies Ramon, "they are frequent customers."

"Okay, then let's ask your other customers too, to rule out any other ladies that they happen to know themselves" suggests Peter. He spends the whole weekend at Madrugada, looking at Ramon who is discreetly asking all his various customers if they know any of the ladies shown in the photos. By dawn on Monday morning, seven women have been identified in total. The targets of the inquest are narrowed to eleven unknown faces. Which one is the right one?

"Tough, very tough boss..." Alfredo scratches his head. "There are several thousand white expatriates living in Manila, plus a similar number of occasional travelers. Anyway, I will try to search the guest records of the large hotels. There are twelve hotels where whites usually stay. Let's hope that she lodged in one of them. I will need a thousand dollars for each hotel, twelve thousand in total, and about a month of work. And I repeat, I cannot guarantee that I will discover anything useful." Gone is half of Peter's profit for his six-month adventure at the far corner of the Earth. Yet he does not have any alternative. He has to proceed. He pays a deposit to Ramon and waits...

In the meantime Peter tries to analyze all her emails one-by-one, but he cannot discover any useful clue. Firstly, her email address points to a Hotmail account and is impossible to trace backwards. The real owner of this email remains anonymous.

Surprisingly, almost all her messages are written in English, with only two rare exceptions: The Greek insult 'malaka' (meaning 'wanker') that she used to close her very last message and her hand-written note in Greek on the cardboard where she had taped the bunch of her hair. Why did she compose all her other messages in English? Did she have any doubts about his mastery of his native language? That could be a possibility, taking into account his long absence from Greece. Nevertheless that fact was convenient for Peter too. The laptop that he is using in his daily work, given to him by Noviasoft, has been setup in the UK and is unable to display the Greek alphabet. If Kerguelen had sent him her emails in Greek, they would have appeared garbled on his screen and he would have discarded her messages without reading them. Could Kerguelen have been aware about that fact too? Highly unlikely.

Then Peter Googles for her quaint nickname, 'Kerguelen':

"The Kerguelen archipelago is located in the South Indian Ocean, in the middle of the distance between Africa, Antarctica and Australia, at approximately five thousand miles from each continent. The shores of the Kerguelen Islands are rocky and swirling, with deep fjords whereas, the interior has large glaciers.

The climate is very harsh with cold, sleet and snow most days of the year. Gale-force westerly winds blow continuously. Wind speeds of more than 100 miles per hour are usual, whereas gusts of up to 150 miles per hour have been recorded. The condition

of the sea is in accordance with the status of the prevailing winds, with frequent waves of thirty to forty feet high.

The islands were discovered in 1772 by the French admiral Kerguelen. The British explorer Cook named them 'Desolation Islands'. Today they belong to France who maintains a scientific base with fifty meteorologists, geophysicists, astronomers, etc."

Wow what a distant, cold and harsh place. Why did the young lady choose an alias that represents such an inhospitable place? Peter realizes that his young love is probably in doldrums and depression. Depression and disappearance. She continues to completely ignore all his desperate messages. Since no good news is coming from anywhere, he starts sinking into depression too. Little by little he starts losing his optimism and willingness to continue fighting. With every message that is left unanswered, Peter falls further into desolation. He starts neglecting his job and spends several days without contacting Leila.

Once again his guardian angel intervenes to save him. Without informing Peter, Leila sends to mysterious lady Kerguelen-Romanos her own message, a womanly message full of kindness, affection but also firm discipline. She explains to her in the clearest manner that her silence is gradually driving Peter crazy. If she is indeed his daughter, then she also has a *responsibility* to act humanely.

"Dear and very kind Mrs. Leila, thank you for your advice.

Please tell Peter that I am fine. Nothing bad has happened to me. But please also explain to him that I have my own problems that he is not aware of. After all that has happened and because of the unacceptable and most insulting manner he has treated me, I cannot see him, I don't want to see him. Please explain to him that I have the right to demand that my wish be respected. Perhaps, if he will let me calm down, maybe, after some time, I may be able to forgive him. If I might wish to talk to him again, then I know where to find him. But in the meantime, until I myself decide to approach him again, I beg him to leave me alone. I think that he owes me at least this favor, following the despicable manner that he has treated me.

I am sorry and I thank you!"

At last a wide smile illuminates Peter's face when Leila forwards to him Kerguelen's first ever message since the disaster. At last a reply! At last some good news! She is fine, receiving his messages, she exists in his life! She may have once again refused to reappear, but at least she exists. And her existence can continue fulfilling his life, giving it meaning. Life and Hope still exist! He takes fresh courage to continue his struggle.

In the meantime Alfredo continues his search in Manila's big hotels. He manages to identify three more ladies in the photos, but none of them is Greek. He also searches the records of the airport's Passport Control Department. During the period of interest about five hundred foreign women passed through Passport Control, but none of them held a

Greek passport or had a Greek-sounding name. The only Greek names that have been registered are male.

Thursday 22 November 2001

During a fresh chilly morning in California's mild early winter, Peter is sitting in a taxi that is navigating the logjams in Los Angeles' wide highways, heading to Noviasoft's office in that city to meet the CEO and discuss the future of his project. For the first time, Peter temporarily put aside his agonizing quest to find his daughter and instead focused his attention on preparing this critical meeting for his future career.

It is the first time he is setting foot on U.S. soil after the 9/11 attacks and the memories are still vivid. Arriving at the West Coast metropolis after an exhausting flight from Manila, he found the city on the surface the same as he has always known it. The same huge glass towers, the same vast wide highways with the hundreds of thousands of cars immobilized in huge traffic jams, the same people on the streets who are rushing hurriedly to their jobs in the fresh breeze of a November morning.

The only particularity that reveals that something terribly important has happened and scratched inexorably the soul of this country, are the flags. Thousands of stars and stripes are flying everywhere, on porches, on doors, on windows, on shop fronts, hoisted on poles in the parks and in the front yards of most houses, stuck on car bumpers, flags everywhere. Flags calling this huge nation to overcome the shock, boost their morale and prepare for the big war that has started unexpectedly. *Where is this war going to take them? What will be its consequences?* Peter is wondering as he is rushing to his meeting.

With mixed feelings and plenty of anxiety he reaches the large tower that houses Noviasoft's local office in Los Angeles. One more imposing flag is hanging from the dome in the large entrance hall, whereas new security barriers have been installed to check and control every visitor. He presents his credentials to the guard and takes the lift to the fiftieth floor.

The CEO has allocated only a half-hour for their meeting. He listens carefully to Peter's progress report and then announces the company's decisions: Because of the unexpected crisis, Noviasoft has been forced to take drastic reorganization and cost-cutting measures in order to survive. A large portion of the expensive staff in Europe and North America will be let go and the software production will be moved to countries where labor is cheaper, such as Manila. Therefore Peter's project will be hastily and solidly upgraded and will become the central pillar of the new strategy.

For Peter the news have both good and bad sides. The bad news is that, due to the enhanced importance of this project, its management will be taken away from Peter and will be assigned to some other Noviasoft senior executive, to be announced. The good news is that, for the same reasons, Peter's contract will be extended at least until the

spring of the New Year, since the new center will now be built on a much bigger scale. In addition, the CEO offers to Peter the opportunity to be hired at the new center as a permanent executive, after the expiration of his current interim contract. Unfortunately the CEO is forced to clarify that Peter's offered remuneration cannot be lush, due again to the ongoing financial crisis. Peter sincerely thanks the CEO for his offer and commits to reply to the surprising job offer by Christmas, and the meeting adjourns.

The Director of Noviasoft's office in Los Angeles and host of that meeting is Richard Jacobs, an old friend of Peter. Richard is not any average executive. Extremely clever and energetic, he possesses Ivy League Degrees and credentials. When he was hired at Noviasoft in the 80s, he was placed in the 'fast track' program for the rapid promotion of selected young bright cadres that leads to the most senior executive positions. Richard was placed in the London office for a few years in the late 80s and early 90s, as part of his early world-wide tours of duty for his training concerning the global dimensions of the business. There in London he met Peter and they became friends.

Initially their relationship started antagonistically. During those early years, Peter was still carrying the full-blown leftwing ideology of his college years in Athens, the intellectual soul-searching and the militant disposition to change the world even if he did not understand exactly how. At that time Peter was a strong believer in 'social justice', in the 'inequality of capitalism' and in some kind of socialist dream, in a utopian and anarchic future social fabric and 'renaissance'.

Peter started teasing the smarty American, encouraged by his fellow British colleagues who also disliked Richard, both out of envy for his placement in the fast-track promotion ladder, and also due to the simmering love-hate syndrome that characterizes the intra-Anglosaxon cultural contention of the two 'special-relationship' partners.

Peter attempted to convert Richard, to convince him that capitalism is wrong and 'morally unjust'. The American did not throw in the towel. He accepted the challenge head-on and set out to convince Peter that, on the contrary, Peter was confused and ideologically outdated. Richard was emboldened by the recent (at that time) disintegration of the Soviet bloc and believed that he could easily prove his ideology.

Richard was not any dogmatic conservative fundamentalist. Politically he leaned towards the Democratic Party and used to mock sarcastically the Republican's 'intransigence and stubbornness'. However he had learned to worship the new 'deities' of effectiveness, flexibility and free markets. He had also learned very well, in the elitist universities, to apply a sound method and structure into his thinking, to analyze the facts in a detailed scientific manner and to avoid any kind of dogmatism whatsoever. Therefore Richard accepted to be exposed to Peter's militant leftwing ideology out of genuine curiosity. He wanted to learn more about this 'peculiar European phenomenon', finding for the first time live in front of him a genuine left-winger.

Peter and Richard spent three years together in London during the early 90s, full of substantive conversations and inquisitions. Living in that metropolis at the center of global developments, they had easy access to the vivid pulse of the worldwide geopolitical and socioeconomic stage. They exchanged statistical reports, articles and books from University libraries to further their intellectual quest and had lively debates over a couple of beers until late at night in Peter's bedroom, while Nicole was watching her soap operas in the small living-room next door.

Soon their antagonism subsided and they started respecting each other. Each was listening carefully to the other's arguments, trying to counter them with strong counter-arguments, avoiding fanatic dogma. They considered that none of them moved away from their ideological roots. Richard always supported rightwing, pro-capitalist ideals and Peter was always in favor of the leftwing, socialist ideology. However in reality they were both influenced by each other and moved towards the middle. Richard grasped the importance of the dialectic transformations and social dynamics in politics and the economy. Peter understood that the expression of those dynamics on a financial level may be similar to what the capitalists name as the 'laws of the free market' or, more precisely, with what some other theorists call 'creative destruction', with whatever consequences this has to the issues of effectiveness, efficiency and free competition.

These fruitful discussions continued until Richard was seconded in 1992 to Noviasoft's Singapore office and left London. Peter and Richard separated as good amicable friends and continued contacting each other, exchanging their news and thoughts via email or face-to-face whenever possible. Since early November 2001, when it was decided that Peter would visit Los Angeles, both old friends have been waiting anxiously to meet again to discuss the critical developments that will follow 9/11.

After the meeting with the CEO adjourns, Richard invites Peter for dinner to one of the city's best restaurants. 9/11 is raised immediately upon sitting at their table.

"I was there" Richard starts in sorrow mood.

"Oh my God! How?"

"I was also due to take part in the same managerial breakfast meeting with the others, at the top-floor restaurant. Fortunately my affairs were slated to be discussed at around 9:30am, so I am still here talking to you..."

"Gosh! Thank God! You have been so extremely lucky then!" exclaims Peter.

"Lucky? You recon? Oh no, no, I would never put it that way..." Richard shoots back, his deep sadness and anger flashing in his eyes.

"I am sorry. Really. I meant that I am just very glad that at least you *are* here talking to me. At least yourself..."

"Yes my friend, I can understand your feelings... The same feelings were shared by my family too. I just happen to still be alive, out of sheer coincidence... Yet I cannot consider myself 'lucky'. That was hell! Hell..." Richard recites with tears in his eyes.

"Tell me about it... If you can of course..."

"I can. I have to overcome it, and a way to do that is to talk openly. I was at Linda's office preparing my paperwork for the damned meeting, when the building shook violently, like a strong earthquake. We were frightened, had no idea what had happened and what was going on. Initially, Security told us to stay put in our offices. If we would dare to get out we would be crushed by the crowds in the stairs. Fortunately our anxiety was so big that we did not heed that disastrous advice. One-by-one we were escaping to the staircase. Finally the order came to evacuate the building immediately.

"In the dark staircase there was absolute chaos. A packed crowd was squeezing and pushing down the stairs one-by-one very slowly, whereas from a corner the fire fighters were pushing their way up. From the workers coming down from the higher floors we learned that a big explosion took place somewhere high up, yet nobody knew exactly where or how. We were descending very slowly, painstakingly, one step at a time, all the way down the ten floors. We were worried, but fortunately we were still unaware of the mortal danger that we were facing, so there was no uncontrolled panic.

"At last we reached ground level and ran out. Then the real panic ensued. The South Tower had already been struck too and the plaza was full of debris. Dead bodies of those who committed suicide jumping from the high floors were lying around. The policemen and the fire-fighters were screaming to us, at the top of their voices, to run and get away. I ran as fast as I could to the corner of the plaza. There I stopped and turned around to see what was happening at last. Both towers were billowing dark smoke from the middle floors and upward, like huge smokestacks. I suddenly realized the danger that those who were still in the restaurant were facing and almost fainted, since I could have been trapped up there myself.

"I had barely finished this thought when in front of my eyes the South Tower started collapsing, as if it was made of sand. For a couple of seconds I stood there dead-frozen, staring at the astonishing spectacle, as the debris started falling on the ground. Suddenly we all realized that the huge volume of the collapsing cement and twisted metal will crush us. We started running again, screaming like lunatics. All around us the ground was trembling and the tower was disintegrating with an eerie noise. Fortunately the corner was only ten yards away and the debris did not reach us, we escaped. Only the dust reached us that blackened entirely the daylight and choked us. We could not breathe. Our lungs were burning and our eyes were stinging.

"We ran for our lives for five, ten blocks and stopped to take a breath. The dust and smoke had created surrealistic smog that burned our eyes. The whole island was

filled with a burning stench. I can still smell it... I felt crazy. I did not know if all that did happen was real or if I was dreaming. I walked mechanistically up to the Brooklyn Bridge where I paused to recover.

"Then I remembered my colleagues. I thought some of them might be wounded. I headed back to help. The police did not allow me to approach again. They guided me to a reception centre for the wounded that had been setup hastily nearby. Since I was covered entirely in dust, they started treating me as a victim. They asked me if I was okay, gave me water and prepared to send me to a hospital. I replied that I was just fine and I only wished to check if any of my colleagues were wounded.

"There I learned for the first time what had really happened, for the aircraft that smashed into the towers, and I was shocked for a second time. Up until that point I thought that all that was a result of an explosion or some other freak accident. I collapsed on a chair trying to absorb the enormity of the catastrophe. Fortunately the nurses left me alone because some real casualties started arriving after being pulled out from the debris. When I realized that I had nothing useful to contribute, I decided to get out of their way. I walked back to my hotel that was three blocks uptown. That's all."

"Wow! Unbelievable... And what have you learned about Roger and Sean?"

"In that goddamned breakfast we lost fifteen colleagues, most of them good friends of mine. When Sean realized that he could not escape, he called his home from his cell phone. He did not find anybody in the house so he left a ten-minute goodbye message for his wife and three daughters. His wife gave it to us and all the managers have a copy of the cassette. I listened to it twice. I forced myself to listen to it as a tribute to him and to all the good friends who perished while I was lucky to escape. Every time that I listened to that recording I had to drink half-a-bottle of scotch and could not speak to anyone for at least three days. I have totally lost my sleep since that damned day. Every time I lay down on my bed, I have horrible nightmares."

A deep silence falls between Peter and Richard. Mere words are incapable of lifting the insurmountable graveness of the circumstance. Dumbfounded and speechless they are staring for a long time at the empty dishes in front of them. The waiter breaks their meditation by bringing the main course.

"Unbelievable wasn't it? Incomprehensible..." Peter mumbles.

"A gruesome monstrosity. This guy Bin Laden must be hanged by his intestines."

"Of course! Yet why did he do that? Don't you wonder?"

"Why should I wonder?" Richard is agitated. "This maniac killed three thousand innocent people. He killed fifteen friends of mine and nearly missed me. Why should I care about his motives? I only wish to take revenge, to show them that they made a huge mistake in attacking us. I wish to crush them!"

"Don't you worry that perhaps he might try to drag you into a conflict that he has prepared carefully on his own terms?" Peter insists.

"No, I don't agree! This ludicrous buffoon thought that America will collapse under this attack. He failed. He wounded us, that is true, we bled, but we did not collapse. We are far more powerful than this gang of bandits. We shall destroy them!" Richard blasts.

"Yet don't you consider that you will have to confront all the Muslims?"

"No, we will not confront the Muslims. This monstrosity was condemned swiftly by everybody. Everyone sided with us, including the Muslims. We are an open, tolerable society and you are well aware of that. Every normal person is most welcome whatever their religion. This is our true power and that is why we will crush these fanatics!"

"And yet all nineteen hijackers were studying here in the West, in the U.S. and in Germany. They had been integrated into our societies. Why did they opt to die in order to renounce our society and its values?" Peter presses his point, still baffled himself too.

"I don't know. However I am terrified. You cannot easily stop a terrorist who is bent on killing himself," Richard shares Peter's anxiety.

"Haven't you considered searching for their social motives?"

"No I haven't!" Richard replies agitated again. "I cannot understand what 'social motives' these thugs could possibly have. As you have been saying in the past, you can fight for a common cause in order to improve the world. What 'world improvements' are these lunatics seeking? None! They are only interested in dying in martyrdom, instead of dying on their bed from old age. This I define as religious bigotry and nothing more!"

"You know that I cannot agree" Peter insists on his opinion. "If we will not find the social background and the true reasons that pushed them to this monstrosity, then we will not be able to fight them effectively. You will take a wrong direction in the war that has already started and then you will find yourselves in even greater danger."

"Peter, now is not the time to engage in those leftwing intellectualistic 'analyses' that you enjoy so much... We do not have the luxury any more. After such a grave bloodstained challenge, we must react immediately. Now! What should we be afraid of? Just a few years ago we destroyed the USSR, an entire superpower who ruled a third of the world. Are we going to be frightened by a bunch of fanatics? We will blow them out!"

"Are you sure? Your generals were declaring the same arguments during Vietnam. You were much stronger than your enemy then too. Yet you made wrong assessments, you drafted a wrong strategy and in the end you were thoroughly routed. Consequently your defeat brought along the huge financial crisis of 1973 with the oil embargo. This war that has just started, what other crises will it bring along? That is my worry."

"Our Vietnamese enemies were supported by the Soviet Union and by China, our strong arch-rivals. That is the reason we lost." Richard ponders. "Who is supporting these Al-Qaeda thugs? Nobody! Yes it is true, in Vietnam we suffered a big setback, we

lost and retreated. But we fought hard, reorganized, improved our efficiency and came forth again. It was us who won the Cold War. Subsequently we all entered into this era of prosperity that these lunatics now want to interrupt by attacking us. That is why they are truly dangerous. If they ever manage to prevail in the Middle East and control the oil wells, then my friend that would be a true disaster for everybody. We must prevent that. We must fight to eliminate them before too late!”

“Richard, the issues are not so simple. Every big war destroys the old powers and elevates new ones. This war that has just started, where will it lead for you? I don’t know if a confrontation in the Middle East would be advantageous to you right now, since your next true big adversary will be China, sooner or later.”

“On the contrary my friend, on the contrary! We must get rid of the thorny distraction in the Middle East as soon as possible, in order to focus our energy on facing China’s future challenge. And right now there is nothing that can stop us.”

“There is. Oil. I don’t know Richard, I cannot figure it out. The only certainty is that this maniac has ignited the Third World War. Let’s hope that we will be able to survive it as best as we can...”

“Don’t worry my friend. This is a big, powerful country. We have always been successful. Always! It is engraved in our DNA. We will make it once again. Whatever the temporary hiccups and setbacks in the long term we will be victorious!”

“I wish for the best Richard... Now tell me about yourself. How have you been doing since we last met?” Peter wishes to start sharing their personal life’s news.

“Same as you have always known me my friend. I always have a huge amount of work and responsibilities. Especially with this sudden crisis, after the catastrophe in our headquarters, every day we are facing big problems that cannot be easily tackled... But we are fighting tooth and nails to survive, and we will survive!”

“I will do my best to assist you Richard.”

“Thank you my friend, thank you! At this difficult hour, every helping hand is invaluable. We are going through a tough nightmare!”

“I understand... What about Samantha and the kids?” Peter asks about Richard’s wife and family.

“Oh, the lucky young fellows are just fine. Samantha is nervous of course about what lies ahead... Obviously there will be no bonuses this year, only cutbacks in our salaries. We will be lucky just to keep our jobs. I am trying to conceal most of my nightmares from her, in order not to frighten her, but I cannot hide everything... And what about you my friend? What happened with this Loginet venture of yours?”

“Oh, me too I went through my own terrible nightmare Richard...” Peter starts narrating his agonizing experiences from his failed venture and his failed marriage. He then describes how he met and started an affair with Leila.

"How kind of her to help you like that! She must be a kind person, isn't she?"

"Thank God yes, I am really lucky to have met her and grateful about all she has done for me..." Peter remembers nostalgically his sweet partner whom he has not seen for so many lonesome months.

"Are you going to marry her?" Richard throws abruptly.

"Oh, Richard..." Peter is taken aback, "I... I don't know... It is too early Richard. We have been together only for a year and I am still hanging in the air... no real job, no money... I am in a very insecure position to start thinking about a second marriage... And then you see... 9/11 had tremendous consequences for my personal life too..." Peter hesitantly starts narrating his unbelievable experience regarding the appearance and disappearance of his daughter, and his subsequent futile efforts to discover her.

"Amazing!" Richard gasps in disbelief. "What are you going to do about that?"

"I am going to shake the Earth and the Sky until I will find her Richard, what else?"

Monday 31 December 2001

On New Year's Eve, the usual huge holiday travel congestion has taken hold at Heathrow airport. Thousands upon thousands of travelers are standing patiently in large queues that snake laboriously for dozens of yards in front of the check-in counters. Passengers for Malaga, Alicante, Prague, the ski resorts at Graz and Courchevel are waiting in a festive mood to check-in, pushing overloaded trolleys full of bags, suitcases, snow gear and thick anoraks. It appears that during this holiday season the people have decided to put aside their fears about possible new terror attacks and board the planes en-mass again to escape to the mountains, the snow and the beautiful countryside away from rainy, dull England, to forget about wars and crises.

During this bustling holiday season the British Government must reassure its people and display to the world that the situation is under strict control, that the capital is well guarded and no terror strike could possibly succeed against London and its airports. Dozens of heavily armed police officers in their black uniforms, wearing bulky bullet-proof vests and toting large submachine guns, with their fingers gently touching the triggers with barrels pointed towards the floor, patrol sternly amongst the crowds and mingle into the baggage queues checking for any suspicious activity.

Late in the cold evening Peter and Leila leave their Kensington flat and take the Piccadilly Line to Heathrow. They have been booked on to a British Airways' overnight flight to Athens. The trains heading towards the large airport are full of Brits who are hastily leaving this city to spend the New Year holiday away from the UK, whereas the trains returning from the airport are full of tired tourists who have just arrived from every corner of the world to spend the New Year holiday in London.

Peter returned to London a week ago from Manila to spend the holidays with his loved ones, after six long months of absence. He spent the first leg of his vacation with

Leila in the peace and quietness of their cozy yet spacious apartment. They visited Khalid and the rest of her family and wandered around in the illuminated festive streets enjoying their careless holiday shopping. They went to the theater, the movies, their beloved Chinese restaurant in Chinatown and they also managed to take a walk on the banks of Thames during a calm winter afternoon when the sun managed to poke for a short while, despite the frosty wind. They enjoyed several much needed days of calm and rest to recover from the misfortunes of the past miserable year.

Most important they enjoyed and reinvigorated their love, quenching their passionate lust after the long months of separation. Peter cuddled warmly by her side and Leila huddled close to his tired body to warm up in the middle of the harsh winter, since he returned at last just for a few days to heat-up her cold lonely bed.

Tonight they are leaving to spend another two weeks on vacation in Athens, to warm up a bit in the Mediterranean mild winter, relax in the cozy cafeterias in Thissio below the Acropolis, pay a visit to Peter's mother and sister and, most of all, to start in earnest his investigation. The investigation for that lost soul who passed mistakenly by his side and disappeared.

The beastly bird, with the British insignia on its tail, takes off on time at 11pm, rips through the heavy clouds that threaten to drench in heavy rain the revelers who have started to gather at Piccadilly for the New Year's fiesta and takes a course towards Athens' milder skies. Peter and Leila celebrate quietly the arrival of the New Year on the air inside the dull cabin. They pretend to clink their plastic cups with Chardonnay that was served during dinner, wholeheartedly wishing to each other their warmest wishes for the New Year to be better than the miserable previous one. After dinner they huddle closely together trying to clench a quick nap during this tiresome overnight flight. Leila falls asleep almost immediately. Peter cannot relax. Finding himself in an airplane once again, he ponders on all that has happened in the past four tortuous months in his life's swirling journey, as he tries to put some order to the chaos.

Still no progress. Deadlock. Nothing has come back from his daughter. After his meetings with Noviasoft's CEO and with Richard in Los Angeles, Peter returned to Manila hoping to hear any positive news from Alfredo, but he was disappointed once again. Alfredo had concluded his research in Manila's big hotels and had identified four more girls. Unfortunately none of them were Greek. Peter was drained of cash and could not afford to pay for the continuation of the search. In any case any result would be uncertain at best. Since he failed to find any answer there, he decided to shift his quest to Greece. He will attempt to locate his past girlfriends in his home country, to start looking for any clues there. That is the main reason that he is riding this flight to Athens, a flight that he hopes will guide him towards his true *destination*.

**** (New Year day 2002) ****

At 4am high above Lefkada Island the pilot slows down and starts descending. He turns on all the cabin lights, waking up the sleepy passengers, greeting them "good morning" and asking them to fasten their seatbelts and prepare for landing. Bleary, red-eyed, pale-faced and towheaded poor guys stretch themselves slothful and agitated by the uncomfortable short sleep that they did not manage to enjoy. They stare at each other stupefied and rush to the toilets to freshen up. This uncomfortable overnight flight is nicknamed 'red eye' for good reason, both for the crew and the passengers.

Leila refuses to wake up, perched cozily onto Peter's lap like a baby. He fastens her seatbelt and lets her continue her leisurely nap. He cannot fall asleep easily on planes. He spent the past couple of hours of inaction stuck in his seat, staring aimlessly at the dark cabin, lost into his thoughts and anxieties recalling all that took place the past four tormenting months.

He is returning to the country where his young dearest sweetheart resides. He did not heed her request. Since he realized that she is okay, that she is receiving his messages even if she does not wish to reply, he continued bombarding her daily with emails and text messages. He realized that she would not reply, but he did not care. He wanted to display his affection and care, kept trying to change her mind, to persuade her to reappear and meet him again, to explain...

No reply. All was lost in a void.

Of course Peter will not quit. If young lady Kerguelen does not wish to show up again, then he is going to discover her himself. Forcibly! He has got the right, he is her father. He will find her, will meet her and will try to explain what happened. If the youngster will not listen to him then fine, he will leave her in peace. But at least he must see what she looks like. His daughter cannot remain a vague immaterial concept in his mind forever. He has got a burning desire to see her, even for just five minutes.

Yet Peter has no idea where to start searching. When he enrolled into the School of Mathematics of the University of Athens in 1979, he was deeply involved in the student's rumbling political movements of that turbulent era in Greece. Amongst his leftist comrades he met lots of different people and made many friends with a wide variety of lifestyles and interests. He also got mixed-up with several young girls into stormy love affairs that started passionately and ended almost invariably in short and spectacular failures. He did not manage to cement any serious long-term relationship. When he left Greece for the UK, Peter drifted away from almost all his past friendships and lovers. He never heard anything from any of them. He does not even remember all of them well. In his mind he mixes up their names, the dates and the distant memories.

He does not quite remember... All but *that one*... Who has scratched a deep scar into his heart and made him abandon everything, seeking oblivion and a fresh start in a foreign country. *Could she be the mother?* Peter wonders nervously as he is throwing

guilty glances to his sleeping sweetheart who is leaning on his lap. *What should I do if...* He cannot yet contemplate the possibility, whilst a chill trickles down his spine.

British Airways' Boeing takes a straight course over the Saronic Gulf and crosses vertically the sea shore over Vouliagmeni, heading towards Mesogeia. It is the first time that Peter arrives at the brand new Athens International Airport and he is curious to see firsthand this huge new project in his home country. The landing is smooth under the dark predawn sky. For the first time in Greece, Peter disembarks into a jetway. Together with Leila they observe the sparkling white marbles and the shiny floors. The new 'Eleftherios Venizelos' Airport is modern and functional, but it is also rather plain and dull. Yet at least this airport has no similarity whatsoever to the chaotic and primitive old 'Hellinikon' airport. Here the well-known Greek sloppiness appears to have vanished.

Peter and Leila collect their luggage and look for an ATM to get some cash. A huge queue snakes laboriously in front of every available ATM.

"What is going on? Why so many people?" Peter asks the guy in front of them.

"Ah, tonight everybody wants to lay their hands on the first Euros!"

Tonight the old miserable drachma is passing away and the country enters the privileged club of the developed countries, fulfilling the wildest dreams of a nation who has been struggling to rejoin the West for the past two centuries. From tonight onwards, the inhabitants of this ex-miserable country will be carrying in their wallets the strongest currency in the world. Centuries of backwardness and underdevelopment are over, as the country is officially declared rich and prosperous.

Sleepless, weary, red-eyed, having just pocketed their first starched Euro notes, Peter and Leila get out in the refreshingly sweet north wind that wakes them up and join the queue for a taxi. It is a normal and civilized queue, same as in every other European airport. *Unbelievable... A civilized queue! Has this country been transformed so radically already?* Peter wonders in amazement. "To Ampelokipoi please," they instruct the taxi driver and stretch their tired bodies in the back seat for their first encounter with the brand new Attiki Odos Highway.

For Leila this is her first visit ever to Greece and, since she cannot make any comparisons with the past, she is unimpressed. Peter, on the contrary, has the feeling that he has landed at a wrong destination. A modern, clean and functional airport, a civilized taxi queue, fresh starched Euros in his pocket, a superb four-lane highway...

"What is this opening in the middle of the road?" Peter asks the driver.

"Ah, probably they will lay suburban railway tracks there, sometime... They say that they will build that for the Olympics" the driver replies amazing again Peter. Suddenly, out of nowhere, they get stuck into a huge, veritably Greek and chaotic traffic jam at 5:30am.

"What happened? An accident?" Peter asks again the driver.

"No, the tolls are ahead."

"Why is it so busy at this early time? Is it because of the New Year's eve?"

"No, this one is for the Euros. Everybody is coming to the tolls to pay in Drachmas and get change in Euros, just to see how the new notes and coins look like..."

Ah, fine... Peter is amused discreetly. *I have not landed in a wrong country.* His same old familiar Greece is alive and kicking around him, returning varnished and plush from her New Year reveling with loud ethnic music blasting out of the open car windows, queuing up for hours in the daybreak just to get hold of her brand new gadget...

Friday 4 January 2002

Peter is already in Athens but still no news. No progress. The youngster keeps ignoring all his repeated messages. Every day, upon waking-up in his homestead, he is hoping that perhaps 'today' he might find her somewhere, perhaps she might respond at last to his desperate messages and they will meet again. In vain. Nothing, no light.

Every day he is walking in the streets of Athens, staring intensely at the 20-something girls like a flirtatious lovelorn idiot, trying to discover anyone who might have any resemblance to him, anyone who might recognize him. He strolls together with Leila up and down Patisision Avenue, Hermes Street, Kolonaki Square, all the posh marketplaces frequented by women doing their holiday shopping during the days of chaos, the days when people are paying in Drachmas and getting change in Euros, the days when stores keep double tills with two different currencies, nobody has any idea how much something costs now and how much it was costing last week and nobody has grasped how and why the price of a humble cheese-pie quadrupled in just a single week.

Peter also tries to trace the real owner of Kerguelen's Greek mobile phone number that she had used to call him in Manila, when she first tried to approach him. This is a Vodafone number. Peter visits a Vodafone store and asks the shop assistant if there is any possibility of finding the owner of this number. Unfortunately it is not possible. This number is a prepaid-card phone and its owner is unregistered and therefore unknown.

Leila is following him perplexed and confused. The first week of his holidays that they spent together in London, before coming to Athens, she had him all by herself. During that first week he had devoted to her his full attention and affection and managed to rekindle her burning love-fire. Following her similarly positive experience, during her earlier surprise-visit to Manila last September, Leila started considering that the existence of Kerguelen perhaps might not threaten their relationship after all. Yes, Peter was keen to discover his daughter, he was passionate about discovering his daughter, but at least he was equally passionate in his expression of love and dedication to Leila. She calmed down and started in earnest to support him in his quest.

Her positive mood has changed during their brief stay in Athens. Here, at the home-turf of her rival, in a totally foreign and unknown land for her, where she cannot

play the game in her own terms, Leila feels uneasy, to say the least. Peter, feeling the proximity and the imminence of his daughter's presence in the very same city, breathing the same air with her, has become extremely anxious and impatient. He is always on edge, always nervous and intolerant, worsening with every passing day that he is failing to get in touch with that daughter. Leila is forced to follow him step-by-step, as he is strolling around aimlessly, like a wild beast, on the boulevards and plazas of the city. She does not want to leave him alone even for a second. She will not allow him to slip by her side and fall prey to the traps laid by that *other woman*. Leila realizes that Athens is a very dangerous place for their relationship, a place that magnetizes Peter away from her and towards her arch-enemy, towards *the mother* of his daughter.

During one of those aimless tours, around noon, they walk to Constitution Square and descend underground to visit the brand new metro. More bright marbles are shining everywhere. A city that is choking in dust, worksites for the Olympics and chaos toils above ground, whereas a totally different orderly and brightly clean city strolls calmly underground. They take the red line towards the Acropolis.

Peter ascends to the Parthenon to show to Leila the Temple and its masterpieces. Then he leans on the edge of the wall of the Acropolis to stare at Athens' sea of cement below. At least he manages to see *her* house, even though he does not know which one exactly it is. Somewhere amongst the ugly grey chaos, someplace at the edge of his gaze, somehow *her* flat also exists, lost in the dull sea of bricks and mortar.

Sunday 6 January 2002

A bright crisp Halcyon day Peter borrows the car of his sister and drives Leila to Poseidon's temple at Sounio. They stand below the columns and stare at the sparkling Aegean Sea and the islands that are floating, together with the passing ships, above the mist. Peter tells her the story of Aegeus, the King of Athens, who waited at this spot for the return of his son Theseus who had killed the Minotaur in Crete. When Aegeus saw a black sail on the horizon, he thought that Theseus had failed and had been killed. In desperation, Aegeus committed suicide by falling from the rocks, giving his name to the Aegean Sea. Unfortunately it was all a huge misunderstanding because Theseus, heavily drunk from celebrating the killing of the beast, had simply forgotten to apply on his return journey the agreed code that was to hoist a white sail on the mast if successful.

"So what can I say now about my own journey in life, after losing my daughter due to another crazy misunderstanding..." Peter sighs melancholically.

"At least you know very well that your daughter is alive and well. Come on now, step back before I lose you too" Leila teases him and pulls him back from the edge of the abyss. She is scared by those precipitous rocks that are gaping dangerously below the feet of her gloomy partner.

"Yes I know. But is it better that I know? Would it not be better if I had not learnt?"

"Would you really not want to know that you have a daughter? Do you really believe that?" Leila asks excited.

"No... rather not... But I don't know my love... I am tired too much..." Peter sighs again as he sits on the temple's marble foundation and hides his head into his arms.

Leila will not let him get mired in depression. She sits astride on his knees, pulls his hands aside, takes his head amongst her palms, looks him straight into his eyes and seals his mouth with a long, passionate kiss. "Isn't it you who is fighting for everything? Who never quits? Who believes in beauty?" she shakes him.

"I suppose that is me... We shall see..." Peter takes a deep breath and lifts his gaze to the sun and to the sparkling sea behind her luscious cascading black hair. They leave to bury their agonies with ouzo, shrimp and squid in Anavyssos' fish taverns.

Back in his parental home, Peter immerses into the attic to discover his old dusty photo albums, looking for any evidence that will shed light to his search. From the depths of his past youth sprinkle images of love and passion, laughs and songs, endless beaches under the bright sky, games on the froth of the azure sea, friends and beautiful lovers in the freshness of their youth who are sending him shrewd glances and fleeting kisses through the lenses.

Peter tries to match his old seaside photos with the halved piece of evidence that he has at his disposal. He does not manage to reach any conclusion. A bright blue sky, sparkling water, a white sandy beach... The same motifs are repeated in all the photos that he took every summer on every different island that he had visited with his friends and lovers. He cannot locate in Kerguelen's clipped photo any point in the landscape that distinguishes the exact island or matches with other photos from any specific beach. His clothes were common, his lush long hair and thick beard were his 'trademark' during all his college years. He does not discover anything that helps him locate the exact place or year, to understand who the mother is, sitting at his side but clipped out by Kerguelen.

"Well, what do you think?" Peter asks Leila, exhausted, after spending many hours poring unsuccessfully over hundreds of old photos.

Leila is a lot more exhausted than him, physically and emotionally. Sitting quietly by his side, she has been staring extremely intensely at each and every one of his past girlfriends, trying to sense who her true menace is. Her heart has been beating heavily in panic, while she endured the harsh multi-hour torment of having to view and judge her past rivals. She had been checking what they had been wearing, how they had been styling their hair, trying hard to suppress her impulsive feminine instinct to discard them all. Instead, she had been trying to judge 'objectively' who had been attractive (and, *ah, awful*, almost all of them had indeed been attractive) and, most important of all, to guess who might still look more attractive than her. She had been looking at the photos, then she had been looking at Peter himself, *how is he reacting? How is he staring at*

each of them? Is he displaying any special feelings, any nostalgia? "Sorry, but I cannot reach any conclusion neither myself... With whom had you been most in love?" Leila asks him, revealing her true anxiety.

"What does that have to do with my search?" Peter is surprised.

"I don't know... I am a woman. I don't know the facts, so I am trying to follow my intuition. Could this child be the product of a *special* feeling?" Leila presses on.

"It does not make sense... If I had been in love with any of them, or vice-versa, what difference would that make? Why *that* would have compelled her to hide the kid?"

"I told you already, I don't know... I just feel... So, have you been in love with any of them?" she insists on the true question that is burning her.

"No..." Peter lies, agitated.

Leila understands that he is lying, but does not say anything else. "Well, if you can't find any clue in the photos, then perhaps you need to look for the facts."

"Yes I know... I have to find my diaries too" Peter says and climbs hurriedly back on the attic, to cut short the dangerous discussion.

Saturday 12 January 2002

Peter's brief vacation in Athens is over. Tomorrow he will fly back to the Far East and still no news, no progress. His random attempts at bumping on his daughter on the streets were obviously futile, in a city of four million people. His pestering bombardment with emails and text messages to persuade her to show up, since he spent almost ten days in this city eager to meet her at last, were again met with her painful total silence and indifference. He starts realizing that the youngster is not going to show up. Therefore he must take the initiative to start searching for her in earnest. Yet he has no idea where to start. He has lost contact with all his past girlfriends and cannot even remember where they had been staying back then. All but *one*.

Peter patiently waits until Leila leaves for London today, on the evening flight. He does not want to start his search with her on his back. He gives her a lift to the airport in his sister's car and, immediately after kissing her goodbye, he drives straight to Korydallos, looking for *that* home. He follows the same route, from the back streets of Piraeus where, almost twenty years ago, he was stealing the passionate kisses of his affectionate past lover for a stressful quarter-of-an-hour, in the dark, in his mother's car, after her evening classes. Thereafter he was driving like crazy, through the western working-class neighborhoods, to her house in Korydallos. He had to take her home on time, so that her strict, old-fashioned parents would not notice her delay and her 'mischief'. How stressful were those encounters, and yet how sweet were those stolen kisses... How powerful had been the tempest in his heart back then...

He follows the same trail twenty years later, this time at ease, trying to remember the route. Few things remind him of the old times. New shops, new kiosks, new

buildings... He drives through those western neighborhoods that have always been housing the poor, the refugees and the victimized. In the old times they housed the Greeks who were cleansed from Asia Minor, after their defeat by the Turks in 1922. Now the newly arrived refugees and illegal immigrants, the Pakistanis, Albanians and all others, enliven again the old ravaged houses that have been abandoned by the prosperous Greeks, blowing new life into the neglected inner-city areas.

Trembling from anxiety and nostalgia, Peter eventually arrives at the 'corner of anguish', at that spot where he had been kissing *her* one last fleeting kiss goodnight, always sad about the separation and anxious to avoid detection by any malicious, gossipy neighbor... Yet unfortunately her old, two-story house is no longer there. In its position has been raised yet another dull block of flats. None of the surnames on the front-door bells sounds like hers. Peter waits patiently outside the main entrance for anybody to go in or out of the building. The first tenant coming out is an Albanian who has absolutely no idea about the past history of that place. The second is an elderly owner of a third-floor flat. He informs Peter that the previous landowners, her parents, sold the old house to a developer in 1990 and moved somewhere in downtown Piraeus, he has no idea where exactly.

Very disappointed Peter returns to his mother's house, packs all his evidence, takes his diaries with him to pore over at ease and prepares his suitcase for the long trip.

**** (next day) ****

Around noon, after having enjoyed his last traditional Greek Sunday meal together with his beloved mother in his home country, Peter picks up his suitcase, kisses her goodbye soothing her tears and takes a taxi to the airport, to start his long tiresome return trip to the Far East. His Christmas holidays are over.

Athens is calm in this quiet sunny Sunday afternoon, in the middle of Greece's mild winter. The Athenians are relaxing in their homes and the traffic is light. At almost every major traffic light, scores of Pakistani beggars, wearing filthy worn-out clothes and woolen caps, compete to wash the windscreens of the few approaching cars for a few dimes, or try to sell fancy but useless toys and gadgets. These first-generation immigrants, who have recently arrived in this newly developed country to escape the misery and starvation in their homelands, who live in their ghettos in Nikaia and Patissia and speak almost no Greek at all, are trying desperately to make ends meet abandoned by everyone in their harsh fate. They accept any job whatsoever that is shunned by the locals or, if they cannot find any, they end up begging at the traffic lights, staring at the Greeks inside the cars with envy and fear. *The same scenes, the same miserable faces yet again, yesterday in Manila, today here in Athens...* Peter is baffled by the peculiar third-world scenes unfolding in the center of Athens, a bustling western metropolis that claims to be a regional powerhouse.

At the entrance tolls of the Attiki Odos Highway, the cashier greets the approaching taxi "good day" smiling broadly and sends them off with a "have a nice journey". The taxi driver replies politely "thank you". Peter is astonished. *Pakistani immigrants, modern highways, the impressive airport, taxi drivers who actually say "thank you". This country is being transformed so rapidly... Can it be true?* He cannot be convinced yet.

Reaching the airport, he joins the queue in front of the check-in counter. This is the first leg of a very long journey. He is flying on Gulf Air, first to Bahrain and then onwards to Hong-Kong. These flights to the Arabian Peninsula are filled with Indians and Pakistanis, connecting to flights to the Subcontinent. They are the same first-generation immigrants, like the beggars at the traffic lights. Yet the Pakistanis at the airport are returning to their villages and therefore all are freshly spruced and perfumed, wearing clean, crisp, quality clothing. Some of them have donned traditional robes whereas others are wearing western costumes and ties and are displaying golden watches, rings or other stylish jewelry. At their destination their whole family will be waiting to welcome them back. They must show that they have made it, that they have become prosperous.

To please the welcoming party, each of them carries heavy suitcases and huge carton-boxes stuffed with goods and gifts for their friends and relatives. The impeccably uniformed and politely smiling airport staff-members try their best to accommodate those huge packages, but it is not an easy task. They direct the Pakistanis to special weighing counters where they must pay hefty overweight charges. The Pakistanis refuse to comply, complaining loudly about the trouble and the heavy fees. The smiling staffers quickly lose their civilized attitude and revert to the well-known Greek way of serving unruly customers, barking at the Pakistanis to obey the orders. The calmness of the shining marbles is shattered by the loud screams of the quarreling passengers and staff, amusing Peter. *No, it is not yet true. This is still Greece, very much so...*

With his pint of lager in hand, he is relaxing quietly at the last bar in front of the departure gate, waiting for the boarding announcement and observing haphazardly the multinational throng of his fellow passengers. Dozens of Indians and Pakistanis, a few Arabs, some solitary white businessmen heading to the Gulf... At the next table, a strange company of four middle-aged Greek women are chatting amicably sipping coffee and juice. The most senior amongst them is actually an impressive figure of a quite old woman with snow-white hair in long braids. She is dressed in a traditional pitch-black thick dress with a smock-frock and a tight scarf covering her head. She is an image of an old rural babushka that is very rare even in the remote areas of contemporary Greece. Intrigued, Peter focuses his attention to their conversation, unobserved.

He realizes quickly that all four of them are first generation Greek emigrants, returning to their homes in Australia via Bahrain, after the Christmas holidays. They left their destitute villages, high up on the rocky mountains or in remote barren islands,

during the miserable years after the war, to escape destitution and hunger, seeking a better future. Yet, in contrast to the recent Pakistani immigrants in Greece, the Greek emigrants in Australia and elsewhere at the four corners of the Earth have reached by now a different social and economic status. They have lived together in their tightly knit communities in Sydney, Melbourne, Astoria and Dusseldorf, washed mountains of dishes in restaurants, swept hundreds of miles of pavements and toiled endless shifts in the huge industrial complexes, before managing to open their own restaurants and shops and to build their own cosy houses. They are now proudly calling themselves Australian or American or German citizens of Greek origin.

From the manner that they are addressing each other, Peter understands that these four women are strangers to each other. He assumes that perhaps they met either at the check-in counter or here at the bar and decided to socialize in order to feel more secure, amongst the dozens of strange foreign males around them. Excited, he listens to their stories unobserved, as each of them introduces herself to the others.

The old babushka speaks first in a very thick provincial Greek accent that Peter cannot understand from which part of Greece it originates. She complains stoically that she is returning to Australia because her children insisted to have her by their side, apparently to look after her. Locked in her time-capsule, she left her remote village as a young girl, was stuck in Australia's Greek ghettos and kept following the time-honoured traditional customs as they have ceased to be followed back in her motherland since a very long time ago. She spent her whole life in between a country that evolved and moved ahead, while she was absent in a country that she never managed to comprehend. This is peculiar sample of a Greek woman frozen in the mentality of the 50s and transplanted in Australia.

The second lady who introduces herself is a bit younger than her peer, but still comfortably middle-aged. She is travelling all-alone, flying back to Melbourne via Bahrain and Hong-Kong. She is on the last leg of a trip around the globe for leisure and had to accept some uncomfortable connections in order to reduce the total price.

"Around the globe for leisure?" ask the others in amazement.

"Yes, I had promised this trip to myself for my fiftieth birthday" she replies. "I started flying from Melbourne to Peru. I had already visited Latin America in the past, but this time I wanted to see Machu Picchu..."

Her narration is interrupted by the boarding announcement and Peter reluctantly has to move away from them, greatly disappointed. A Greek old woman with a scarf and long braids, locked in her time-capsule, untouched from all that has happened over the past fifty years. Another vivid Greek woman donates to herself a tour round the world for her birthday. Both are Australian citizens. The Pakistanis who return triumphantly to their home villages, carrying all that they managed to amass selling dolls and flowers

and washing windscreens at Athens' traffic lights. And Peter who is flying out to Hong-Kong and Manila, craving to finish his bloody project in order to return and start searching in earnest for the sole Greek woman who has become the essence of his own life... Marvelous Life enlivening a dull aircraft...

An aircraft that fills up with dull Pakistani men who make Peter feel uncomfortably cramped. Thankfully, this time he has got a seat by the aisle so he can enjoy a bit of extra legroom. Astonishingly, he notices that in front of him two seats by the window remain teasingly vacant. They are located in the very first row of this cabin compartment and they are usually allocated to families with babies or to passengers with disabilities. Peter waits patiently to see if any late-boarding passenger has booked them. When the doors close and the seats remain tantalizingly vacant, in true Greek style he jumps ahead and stretches his body wide on the window seat, extremely happy that he has managed to secure for himself both those privileged seats in the front row, with the ample legroom.

His unexpected good fortune continues. As the plane taxis towards the runway, a stunning young blonde appears out of nowhere and asks for his permission to sit next to him, astonishing him. *Where did she come from, amongst this planeload of males?* His slight discomfort in having to be squeezed again is moderated by the attractiveness of his new companion. *Hmm...*

The young woman sits quietly next to him and opens a crosswords magazine in some Eastern European language. Peter guesses that she must be Polish. *What is a solitary Polish doing in a flight from Athens to Bahrain?* he wonders. Soon after take-off, a stewardess lingers above them and starts talking to the blonde in the same Eastern European language. The two ladies giggle joyfully. *Ah, the mystery has been solved.* His beautiful fellow-passenger apparently is a stewardess too, who is flying off-duty.

The on-duty stewardess leaves to prepare the dinner, leaving Peter alone with his fellow-passenger. They introduce themselves to each other. She is not Polish, she is Czech and her name is Julia. She had been working in Prague as an office clerk, when she responded to a recruitment ad by Gulf Air. She passed a series of interviews, passed an extensive training program and here she is, flying all over the world. She lives in Bahrain in an apartment given to her by the airline that she shares with three other Czech female colleagues. Right now she is returning to work after a full month's relaxing holiday. She spent two weeks with her parents in Prague and another two weeks with her Greek boyfriend and his parents in Athens.

"Your Greek boyfriend?" Peter is surprised.

"Yes, I met him in Adelaide. He is the son of Greek emigrants who have returned to Greece in the meantime. I hope to marry him soon."

"I wish you the best" says Peter as he starts narrating about his own life, about Leila and about his job...

Peter soon discovers that, having the extreme luck to socialize with an off-duty beautiful crew member, is even better than flying in first class. The on-duty crew pass-by always smiling above their heads, ensuring that they miss absolutely nothing. Double and triple food portions, extra treatment and lots of extra alcohol, wine, whisky, vodka, Tia Maria, everything... Peter and Julia spend three joyful hours in the air, with a full glass always in hand, drinking, chatting and giggling amicably. They talk about Greece, the UK, the Czech Republic, Lebanon, Arabia, Australia, China, The Philippines, exchange memories and compare countries, people and attitudes. They open up their minds like the winds of the aircraft and travel through their experiences to the four corners of the Globe. Yes, that is how it is. The whole world is a single beautiful neighbourhood. Seven countries shared amongst two people, soaked into the sweetness and blurriness of booze, the richness and the beauty of Marvelous Life spreads lively in front of them, enlivening their own lives' journeys, somewhere up on the sky high above Syria...

**** (next day) ****

At around noon the next day, Peter is still sitting in another Gulf Air plane that is making a short stop-over at Bangkok airport, on its way to Hong-Kong. The previous assortment of mainly Arab and Thai passengers from Bahrain have disembarked and now the aircraft is filled with young Chinese men and women who are probably returning to Hong-Kong after vacationing in Thailand. A young and very shy Chinese girl sits silently next to him and rushes to disappear into her colorful lifestyle magazine that is full of the ideograms that Peter has no way whatsoever to comprehend.

Ah... he sighs remembering nostalgically beautiful Julia and his exciting previous flight... When they arrived in Bahrain she left smiling "goodbye" towards the arrivals area, whereas he headed to the transit area to wait for his next flight. They separated warmly after having spent such a marvelous time on that flight, but without proposing to "keep in touch". *What is the point of keeping contact with a young stewardess who is spending her days crisscrossing the world whilst dreaming of marrying her sweetheart?* Peter wondered and avoided proposing any exchange of contact numbers. *I have got enough trouble with two demanding women in my life already...*

The plane takes off and Peter stares out of his window at the thick dark-green Thai jungle and the paddy fields, until they hit the dark clouds and the turbulence of the midday tropical storm. He is quite agitated. He has already spent seven long hours on this plane. As always he has not managed to sleep at all. Unfortunately, he cannot stand up during the ascent and the strong turbulence. He wriggles uncomfortably into his seat, annoying the Chinese girl who nods in displeasure and sinks deeper into her magazine.

Eventually they cross above the clouds and the turbulence ends. A shiny sparkling white cotton-like thick mass of vapor stretches to the far end of the horizon. Peter leans on the window trying to guess *her* figure on the cloud contours, recalling all that failed to happen during his brief two-week holiday in Athens. *Ah, what a disappointment! Nothing, nothing, bloody nothing! Naught! Here I am in this damned plane that is taking me again thousands of miles away from her. Oh, I cannot stand it for long! I am getting crazy! I will finish this bloody project as soon as possible and rush back to Athens, to continue searching house-by-house, door-to-door, until I will locate her!*

Wednesday 16 January 2002

Another day dawns indolently in Far East's subtropical meridians. The alarm rings at 6am in Peter's dull hotel room, on the thirtieth-fifth floor. Slothfully he rises from his bed, peeking quick glances to the outside world behind the heavy curtains. The hazy day breaks slowly behind the glass monsters that hide the view of Hong-Kong's big port with the thousands of small and large vessels that sail endlessly in and out. In Kowloon's opposite shore, the lights at the tall skyscrapers are still on.

He takes hastily his English breakfast, picks his attaché and disappears into the underground, towards Wanchai. Here the underground is old, like Victoria Line in London. The stations are coated with dark-green tiles, dampened with the humidity and stench of the tropics. Thousands of freshly-awaken, enduring Chinese men and women pack the trains going to work, dressed in the latest western fashion.

In the underground systems of the world, Peter touches the soul of every different city, of every country. During his first years in the UK, whenever he was descending into the underground labyrinths of London and Manchester, he was wondering how his fellow passengers would feel belonging to a big nation of sixty million souls compared to the tiny ten million inhabitants of his native Greece. Here now, at the far corner of the Earth and at the center of the most populous country in the world, Peter wonders again how these average Chinese residents of a seven million mega-city might be feeling, the citizens of an enormous country with almost one-and-a-half *billion* souls. A country that has over one hundred and sixty cities, mostly unknown to the westerners, each of them housing over a million inhabitants. A country located in the dead-center of Asia, the continent that is home to sixty percent of the world's population.

Following the flock of thousands of black-haired heads in the morning rush hour, Peter squeezes to the escalators and to the damp and misty underground corridors, until he manages to reach the surface. He is relieved to be breathing some fresh air again. It is the middle of winter, the only season that the subtropical atmosphere is not stifling hot. A refreshing breeze blows and the temperature in the early morning is close to fifteen degrees. This is the only season when the Chinese inhabitants of this province need a sweater to go out. Peter feels comfortable in his spring suit, without sweating.

Unfortunately, whatever rare pleasure is granted by the kind subtropical winter, is taken back by the chaos of the huge crowded metropolis that starts the day in its usual frenzied tempo. Peter emerges from the underground straight onto Queens Road, the busiest central thoroughfare, congested with masses of pedestrians and vehicles. Overloaded double-decker trams and buses snake laboriously into endless traffic jams, under the huge glass-tower buildings. Almost nothing differs from the rush hour in the City or in Manhattan. Even the street signs and the shop names are in English. Everything has a western flair, except the Asian features of the hasty employees who rush to disappear into their office towers.

Peter also enters the glass tower that houses the Far East division of Noviasoft and ascends to the twentieth-sixth floor. His two British colleagues are already waiting for him, together with the Chinese executives of the local branch office. Together they start a full-day meeting to update him regarding the progress in the project thus far.

The truly critical meeting starts in the afternoon. The new executive team from New York headquarters arrives to undertake the management of the project. They come to the meeting straight from the airport. Peter's team is introduced to the new project director, James Berg, and to his two subordinates. All of them are senior Noviasoft executives with a long service at the conglomerate.

The long meeting lasts for many hours. The three Americans demand to be updated in depth on the full details of this project. They are strict in their inquisitions and demanding at the points where delays or problems have been observed. The two British consultants, who had been managing the project together with Peter during the past months, start feeling uncomfortable by the pressure that the new managers are exerting on them. Their responses start acquiring a slight British sarcastic tone that the oblivious Americans fail to comprehend. Only Peter can understand the eternal latent rivalry between the Brits who lost their empire only a generation ago and the Americans who are fighting teeth-and-nails to establish their own.

In between the Americans and the British stand their Chinese colleagues who don't know whose side to take. The younger Chinese cadres follow the skirmishes in panic, trying to avoid being blamed for the delays and errors in any of the activities that they had happened to get involved. The older Chinese managers follow the quarrel stern and expressionless. Peter is certain that they are thinking *fight it out amongst you, foreign dogs. Soon our own turn will come...*

At the end of a long and tenuous deliberation, James finally decides that the endless quarrelling does not benefit anybody and intervenes. He interrupts abruptly his Texan colleague, who was arguing with one of the Brits, and he declares that, notwithstanding the "minor hiccups", overall Noviasoft, and also he personally, are pleased by the results that Peter and his team have accomplished to date. He adjourns

the meeting for the next day and dismisses everybody to go to rest. Sending-off everybody, he discreetly calls Peter by his side and invites him for dinner at his hotel.

During the dinner, between the spring rolls and the delicious Cantonese duck, James relays to Peter the warmest greetings of Richard, who is a common friend of them both, and asks to learn from Peter all the real secrets of this project that must be mentioned only by the mouth of the preceding director to the ear of the successor. Finally he relays to Peter the positive opinion of the CEO himself, and reminds Peter that Noviasoft is still waiting for his reply to the job offer that the CEO made to him during their last meeting in Los Angeles, in November.

"Before you give me your answer, let me explain a few points that will help you understand better the essence of our proposal. First of all last year was true hell for us..." James starts his long monologue. "We are still fighting very hard to survive and still we have not seen any light at the end of the tunnel. The orders have dried up, the grandiose projects have been canceled, the customers have retracted and nobody has got any funding for new technology. And on top of all that mess, the attack on our Twin Towers headquarters has come to worsen the desperate situation.

"Yet the situation will change, it cannot continue like this. The outsourcing center that we are building in Manila is pivotal in our new strategy. By moving our programmer labor from the exorbitantly expensive America and Europe, to the cheap countries of Asia, we hope to halve our costs and manage to survive. The crisis will pass, sooner or later..." James takes a more positive tone, relaxing on his chair and lighting the cigar that the waiter brings along, together with the coffee.

"Our analysts are already detecting signs of a recovery. They are telling us that the worse is behind us. Take for example this immense new market, China. One-and-a-half billion people are waiting to be extracted from poverty and underdevelopment, to buy houses, clothes, cars and services. If that billion-and-a-half of Chinese will manage to achieve just half of what the Japanese achieved in the 70s, then in ten to fifteen years they will have an economy twice as large as America's. I hope, therefore, that you understand how strategically important our investment in Manila is today."

James concludes repeating the company's proposal for Peter to be hired and move permanently in Manila. For the time being, perhaps the assignment sounds unpleasant and the offered salary is not great, but back in Europe the job market is also in dire doldrums. At least here in Asia the prospects for recovery and progress are much better than in the Old World. "If you are going to make any real money someplace in the next few years, then most likely this place will be here in China, or somewhere nearby" James closes his effort to persuade Peter.

Peter replies politely that he is thinking about the job offer very seriously, but he also has other personal commitments that keep him attached to Europe. Nevertheless he thanks James sincerely for the offer and promises to give his final reply by tomorrow.

**** (next day) ****

The following morning the meeting starts at 7am and lasts exhaustingly without any break until 12 noon, when James must update by phone the CEO who is in Los Angeles, before the end of his day, since in Los Angeles it is only 9pm in the previous evening. After that phone call everybody is dismissed and allowed to relax. They break for lunch and arrange to meet again in late afternoon at the airport, where all of them will take the evening flight to Manila.

Peter eats hastily some noodles with sweet-and-sour chicken from the nearby fast-food kiosk and ascends towards the tram that will take him to the Peak, the mountaintop with the marvelous balcony perched upon the steep hill above the city. The Peak dominates decisively the city's skyline, eclipsing the glass-and-iron monsters.

Up on the Peak, Peter leans on the balcony parapet and spreads his gaze out over the fascinating landscape that resembles a giant brush, leaning on its back at the foot of the mountain. All those thousands of fifty to eighty-floor skyscrapers that rise aiming for the sky, a packed dense forest of gigantic needles, this futuristic spectacle compresses, under a single sweep of the eye, the dynamism of the British-organized imperial trade centre that is however based on the Chinese commercial acumen and the tireless diligence of this innumerable crowd that look in the face the transoceanic giant full of overbearing optimism. The Chinese are contesting the American world hegemony just a single decade after the crushing of America's old rival red superpower.

As Peter looks straight out onto the innumerable vessels that come and go in all possible directions in Victoria Harbour, leaving in their wake a frothy spaghetti, super tankers, container ships, passenger boats, fast ferries, catamarans and dozens of fishing boats, evidence of the huge importance of this merchant hub for the global commerce, he wonders how come the Iron Lady Thatcher herself was persuaded to relinquish to her bigger future competitors this diamond that creates almost as much wealth as London. He recalls James' words and he can see them materialize vividly in front of his eyes. He can feel the pulse and dynamism of this city that, together with Shanghai, pull puffing like twin locomotives the Chinese colossus to its destiny.

Oh yes, all that progress and prosperity perhaps will happen sometime in the future, and in the meantime James is of course right. Compared to the chaos that has engulfed the Western economies and the joblessness in the Old World, the solid growth of the Far East is the only real hope for a needy consultant to find a good opportunity and secure some hefty remuneration, even on a temporary basis. Oh yes, if he were alone, he would take easily that decision at this pivotal moment in his life's tortuous

journey. As he left without any hesitation unimportant Greece to start a career in London fifteen years ago, in the same way he would not waver for a moment to leave the European dysfunction behind and to try his luck in the Chinese Eldorado.

Yet he is no longer *alone*. There is a soul out there that is *his*, part of himself, and he must search for her. For the first time in his life he cannot take a decision based only on his financial interest and the opportunities. For the first time he has got a family connection to setup and maintain. A connection with someone who could stay by his side and care for him even after his mother will have passed away.

He lies lazily on the parapet, watching vaguely the glass beasts that sparkle under the sun under his feet and the dozens of vessels that come and go in the port. He tries to concentrate as much as possible, against the distraction caused by the dozens of noisy tourists around him. What is the proper thing to do in this peculiar circumstance?

He cannot, he does not manage to decide. His rational mind tells him that it is stupid to throw away the solid job opportunity that has been offered to him and return jobless and insecure to start looking for a new job in the UK, a country that is mired in a deep recession. Yet his heart tells him that it is impossible to migrate thousands of miles away from his child that he has yet to meet. It is impossible for him to choose between the voice of his mind and the voice of his heart.

He seeks the assistance of the only person who would ever influence his decision, who would advise him on the correct course to take in his agonizing journey. There at the balcony on the Peak, Peter compiles and sends a text message to the only number of his beloved Kerguelen that he has at his disposal: *"They are offering me a good permanent job here, in the Far East. I must reply now. What shall I do? Shall I accept it or shall I return?"* He sends his desperate cry out, to disappear in the ether of the mobile networks, and sinks in his depression. He cannot decide and there is nobody who can shed a light for him. Nobody except a soul that keeps ignoring him.

He lets himself drift for a long time, viewing from afar the bustling city, lost in his dire agony. At the moment that he decides reluctantly to return to the tram station, his mobile phone buzzes in his pocket. It is a call from London, from his sweetheart Leila. Peter picks it up relieved. He desperately needs to hear a friendly voice. "Good morning my love, how are you?" he greets her smiling.

"You will not believe it my love, but I have just received another email from your daughter. She is asking me to tell you to return to Europe, but not to start searching for her yet. What does she mean?"

A huge smile brightens his face. A huge burden is lifted from his chest. Suddenly he feels like flying weightless over Hong-Kong, over Asia, over Athens, until he lands in the arms of his beloved lost soul.

During the same evening, on the plane in the flight to Manila, he whispers to James that he is grateful to him and to Noviasoft for the job offer but, due to important personal reasons, he must return to Europe and therefore he regrets that he has to decline it. He will stay in Manila until Easter to complete his mission and deliver the project and then he will return to Europe.

Thereafter he fetches from the overhead locker the first of the three handwritten notebooks where he had been keeping his youth diaries. He has brought them along from Athens to pore over them at ease, searching for any clues and facts that will lead him to discover *the mother* amongst his past girlfriends. He must look into the details, he must read inside and behind the words, to understand in which happy holiday that clipped photo was shot, to recall his own feelings and those of his partners month-by-month and week-by-week, to sense the mood and circumstances of his every sexual encounter, in order to understand which one was the fateful moment, who was the fateful lover and why did she opt to disappear from his life, to give birth and raise that child alone, keeping such a shocking secret for so many years.

He opens the diary and starts reading at random. In front of his eyes enliven again scenes from his past forgotten love affairs, adventures, journeys, fascinating islands and sparkling beaches, anxieties, stressful moments and inquisitions of an innocent era when he was fighting for a better life, when everything seemed simple and tangible and the only limit was the azure sky and the far end of the horizon.

As he sips his wine that is served by the smiling stunning delicate Chinese stewardess and raises his glance from the old diary, he looks happily around at the faces of the Chinese, Filipino and other Asian fellow passengers. These people may be flying towards their future economic prosperity and kudos to them. Tonight Peter is flying towards the fulfillment of his own dream as well...

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