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One

Friday April 13th – London – Grey rain clouds have enveloped the sky and the monotonous drone of an aeroplane can be heard from somewhere above. It is raining and the masses at street level scurry for cover, heads hung forlornly, not a smile to be seen. This is the sight that greets thirty-nine-year-old actuary Adrian, as he lifts his weary eyes from the graphs at his desk and out of the sixtieth floor of the building that serves as the home of Vincent & Ernst, one of the city's premier actuary firms. Adrian however does not interpret the view in a forlorn manner; in fact he does not interpret it at all. Perhaps because it is not in his nature or just maybe because tomorrow he departs on a two day trip to Athens, one of six short breaks that he takes each year.

'It's party time,' he murmurs with as much enthusiasm as he can muster. Even for an actuary it is a particularly feeble effort. This would come as no real surprise to anyone acquainted with the industry or in fact Adrian, a man dulled by the standardisations and mundane mechanical nature of his existence. Placing both hands on the beech effect melamine desk, Adrian spins his superior zero gravity chair, complete with lumbar, lower back supports and Safco seat cushion precisely ninety degrees and rises to his feet. He gently lowers the sleeve of his grey M & S one hundred percent cotton shirt and glances at the G-9000 Mudman Casio watch that adorns his wrist.

The watch had been purchased from kbsuppliers.co.uk for seventy pounds, a real bargain. The corners of Adrian's lips rise slightly as he smirks at the thought of his two colleagues, who have recently bought what he deems to be inferior Tag Huers, for more than eight times the price. Once more Adrian recites silently the description of the G-9000 Mudman, as outlined on kbsuppliers.co.uk. He had memorised the information the Saturday morning it arrived from Amazon, during a four minute break from his television viewing itinerary.

'Tough resin body, 200 metres water/mud resistant, 1/100th second stopwatch measuring to 999:59.59.99, auto calendar to year 2039, button operation tone on/off, blue backlight, countdown timer measuring up to 24hrs in 1 min increments, 5 independent alarms, 4 one time alarms and a snooze alarm, hourly time signal, low temperature resistant to -20 degrees Celsius. World time for 29 zones, including 48 cities, approximate weight is 56g; dimensions are 52mm x 46.3mm x 16.3mm.'

The corner of his lips rise further to form a genuine smile of contentment, both at the genius of his purchase but also at the prospect of tomorrow's indulgence, a Canon EOS-1D Mark IV. Adrian lowers his eyelids and tentatively licks his lips, as the features, as outlined on digital-newworld.com appear before him. Just like on the day he had first read them, one month previously.

Canon EOS-1D Mark IV:

- 16.1 MP APS-H 27.9mm x 18.6mm CMOS sensor
- Full HD (1080p) movies with manual control
- 3.0" Clear View II LCD with Live View mode
- Shutter speed: 30-1/8000 sec (1/2 or 1/3 stop increments)
- Dimensions 156 x 156.6 x 79.9mm

- Weight (Body Only): Approx. 1180g

Several minutes later, Ethel, the most senior female actuary in the firm, on noticing Adrian clearing his desk remarks,

‘Adrian are you off already? But it’s only 18:33.’

‘Yes I must be going, packing to do and travel insurance to organise,’ replies Adrian, who then adds in an excited tone,

‘Insurance Options have a new annual multi trip package.’

He is oblivious to the fact that Jenny one of the secretaries’ groans audibly from two desks down and Ethel’s smile evaporates instantaneously, to be replaced by a rather startled expression. Adrian continues. ‘If you are planning to travel a few times a year then an annual policy offers both convenience and value for money.’ He inhales deeply before continuing. ‘Insurance Options annual multi trip cover includes:

- 1). Winter sports for free from 15 up to 22 days.
- 2). Travel as many times as you like over a year – maximum trip durations range from 50 to 90 days.
- 3). Up to 3 under 18’s included free per insured adult.’

‘Well that’s not much use to you is it, I assume you’re going alone or have you made another friend in that internet forum of yours,’ exclaims Jenny taking delight in placing Adrian in a potentially embarrassing situation.

‘If you would allow me the opportunity to outline the remaining features, you would understand why Insurance Options annual multi trip cover is my package of choice.’

‘Very interesting, I’ll bear it in mind for our family trip to Disney in November,’ says Ethel. Adrian does not take the hint from Ethel to stop and continues. ‘Where was I, oh yes,’ he states gleefully. ‘There are four levels of cover, so it is a simple matter to pick the right policy for your needs. One receives cover for emergencies, personal belongings, travel delay, personal liability and legal costs, in addition to much more.’

A now scowling Ethel uses this interlude to change the subject. ‘Well have a great time and we’ll see you next week.’ Adrian accepts the invitation to shut up without further ado and after taking a sanctimonious glance at Ethel’s inferior Gul Micro chrome analogue watch, he departs, deep in thought about its inferiority to his own.

He trots out of the office and across the lobby, presses the down switch for the elevator with the thumb of his right hand, and then proceeds to wipe it on his Irish linen hemstitched handkerchief, to eradicate any germs. Moments later and he’s off, whooshing down the sixty floors before walking through the marble hall and out through the revolving doors. With his early departure from work - he usually leaves the office at nine or even ten p.m. - and with nothing of particular note on Sky Plus for several hours, Adrian decides to be unusually adventurous and go to his local public house for a pint.

Social interactions have become fairly infrequent events for Adrian in recent years. His wild university days, which were really not that rebellious, lie far in the past. Adrian has spent the majority of the last decade and a half creating algorithms to estimate the probability of occurrences such as death, sickness or loss of property and the value of insurance policies based on these findings. This arduous and rather dull work has been achieved with consummate ease, for Adrian is both diligent and intelligent.

A little over an hour later Adrian arrives at The George. He pushes open the door and walks over to the bar. The pub’s air is stale and musky, the carpet a heavily stained garish purple. To the left of the long wooden bar is a fruit machine with luminous lights that flare incessantly.

Adrian, his heavily built six foot one inch frame now leaning against the bar, takes sips from a pint of Kronenbourg whilst he inspects each feature of his Nokia phone in turn, relishing its slim design and full touch glass display. He begins to recall some of phone's characteristics, mouthing them silently. 'Fully integrated social networks, free GPS navigation, and 8MP camera.'

He would have recalled many more of the Nokia features had he not been interrupted by a tapping on his shoulder. Turning he is surprised to see Cedric, a printer and daily frequenter of The George.

'Did your colleagues like the business cards?' asks Cedric.

Tilting his head towards Cedric Adrian replies, 'I think so yes. Can't say I was however overly impressed with their gifts. Take this pen for instance.' Reaching into the inside pocket of his grey single breasted, one hundred percent wool suit, Adrian takes out an antique effect silver pen, before continuing. 'Absolutely useless, not yet four months old and it is already all but broken. I cannot understand why manufacturers still insist on using tungsten carbide for the rotating ball when brass or steel are superior alloys and no more expensive.'

Cedric does not respond. Adrian takes this as an invitation to continue. 'The business cards were exquisite and a truly remarkable example of the photo lithographical process; I must congratulate you.'

The previous November in this same pub Cedric had shown Adrian some examples of the business cards his company had recently designed. Impressed by the craftsmanship, Adrian had promptly ordered some as Christmas presents for his senior colleagues. On opening their gifts they had appeared rather bewildered, for they already had business cards and felt at any rate that they made rather impersonal presents.

'Yeah thanks, they've been selling alright this year,' says a smiling Cedric, mildly embarrassed by the flattery.

'Bet they have. I am a big fan of photolithography myself but must also confess to being quite enthused by electron beam lithography and nanoimprint lithography.'

Cedric is quite taken aback, for he is accustomed to the standard compliments of the, 'oh isn't that paper shiny,' or, 'the letters look nice don't they' variety.

'I find nanoimprint lithography a novel method of fabricating nanometer scale patterns, quite ingenious and practical with its high throughput, resolution and low costs,' continues Adrian, in a rather condescending fashion.

'However do you believe that this is the future of printing, or...' Adrian utilises the pause here, in a futile attempt to build suspense and then adds, 'interference lithography.'

Cedric opens his mouth as if to reply but Adrian placing his index finger to his lips, emits a gentle 'sssh' noise and then says, 'the benefits of using interference lithography are obvious....'

Cedric chuckles but a cold stare stops him in his tracks and he stands upright as if to attention.

'The quick generation of dense features over a wide area,' continues Adrian. 'Without there being a loss of focus and its ability to be used for patterns that would take too long for electron beam lithography to generate. However its limit to patterned arrayed features is an obvious drawback as is the addition of non-optical effects, such as secondary electrons from ionizing radiation.'

Cedric now somewhat alarmed blurts out, 'nanoprint lithography.'

He then waits quivering for Adrian's contemptuous reply, however it is not forthcoming. Adrian is silent, his balding head tilted upwards as he delights in the extent of his printing process knowledge. Cedric uses this opportunity to provide evidence for his answer. 'Because umm nanoprint lithography is more flexible and needs err less expertise.'

'Yes indeed,' quips Adrian.

'Err Stella was it,' asks Cedric.
'Kronenbourg.'

22:30 – The George's atmosphere is increasingly raucous and jovial. Adrian and Cedric are on their sixth pint of the evening and Adrian's cheeks have reddened somewhat from their cumulative effect. Cedric takes a memory stick from his pocket, holds it aloft with one hand and exclaims, 'this contains some of our new templates for next year.'

'I would very much like to see them.'

'Umm possibly another time, must be getting back to mother,' replies Cedric, who at forty one years of age is still living at home.

'It won't take long; I only live round the corner in Shipley Street.'

Cedric agrees and off they set, Adrian in his earnestness almost breaking into a jog. On entering the house, Adrian scurries across the hall and into the sitting room, snatches the memory stick from Cedric's outstretched hand and inserts it into the Presario laptop.

'Don't suppose you've got any beers?' enquires Cedric.

'No I don't keep beer in the house. However there is some vintage edition single malt whisky.' Without further ado Adrian goes into the kitchen, grabs two glasses and the whisky from the drinks cabinet before pouring it and adding some ice cubes from the freezer.

Within a minute the templates are appearing on the computer screen. Cedric wishing to explain the first template begins to speak. 'It's a ...,' but is interrupted by Adrian with the words, 'let me do my own investigations.' This is followed by a pause of no more than two seconds.

'This is obviously an example of nanoprint lithography, and as for this, it has been created using electron beam lithography has it not,' says Adrian, who then remarks,

'Pleasing to the eye if a little amateurish.'

Cedric goes along with Adrian's observations, uncertain himself in every instance, which method was utilised.

Half an hour later Cedric is snoring loudly from his position hunched on one of Adrian's Burlington leather lounge chairs. To Adrian's consternation Cedric is dribbling onto one of its large curvaceous arms. He awakens suddenly and glances at such speed at his watch; Adrian is unable to discern the manufacturer, let alone the model.

'Fuck its past midnight, mother will be worried.' With a cursory good bye he's off into the night.

Adrian looks at the Mudman G-9000 and in his weary state does not dwell to savour any of its features but merely to check the time. Reclining on the Burlington leather sofa he turns on the Sky Plus control and watches the Panasonic fifty inch 3D television come to life. A commercial for Vizio televisions appears on the screen. Adrian turns his head to the side in disgust and mutters, 'it's far too late at night to be witnessing such tacky merchandise.' He laughs aloud as he compares his Panasonic to the inferior Vizio and then switches channel. A short time later he shouts 'yes' very loudly, clenches his left fist, punches the air and exclaims,

'Only nine hours to go.' The nine hours he is referring to is the amount of time there is to elapse before the collection of the Canon EOS-1D Mark IV.

A squalid slum appears on the television's screen. Adrian, unsure where it is assumes that it is either Sugar Mountain in Manila or perhaps Jakarta. Citing the injustices of the global economy and its unrighteous policies, a more sombre mood descends upon him. With his arrogant self-righteousness, materialism and almost autistic grasp of

human relationships, Adrian often appears devoid of typical emotions; this however is not always the case. For if one were to observe him very closely, there are points in time such as now, evidence that Adrian is not entirely estranged from others in his behaviour. A small smudge on his logarithmic graph paper at the office, caused by a single tear, days after the death of his dear mother also bears testimony to this.

A combination of the late hour and consumption of alcohol has left Adrian fatigued and he stumbles up the flight of stairs to bed. So exhausted in fact is Adrian that he does not linger with the bed light on, to delve into one of his manuals, as is generally his habit. He is asleep within a minute of his balding head hitting the microfiber orthopaedic cervical neck support pillow. The room is silent, apart from occasional muffled snores.

03:00 - Adrian's brow is damp with sweat and his body is twitching nervously. Dark ominous clouds are circling his now tortured mind and from somewhere far in the distance a drone is audible. The clamour, its origin unexplained is growing persistently louder, more threatening and chaotic. Far ahead the distinctive outline of a person is visible, its arms and legs stretched outwards; an impression suspended in the air. Moments later the figure is enveloped by a mist of tenebrous nebulosity, only for the cloud to surge onwards revealing the figure once more. In spite of his subconscious state there is a determination in Adrian to find out who this distant ghost like figure is and he struggles forward through the sky towards it.

The infernal clamour continues to increase in volume and is reaching almost deafening proportions now. Adrian is confused and fearful; his breathing coming in fitful gasps. The figure approaching yet closer, reveals itself to be a middle aged man, clad in a tan brown two piece suit.

Adrian despite his apprehension finds himself approaching the man, calling out to him as he does so. The noise is now so loud that Adrian is forced to clasp his hands to his ears. It is a sound that he has never previously encountered, a diabolical roar, senseless, unrecognisable and increasingly terrifying. The dark and threatening clouds loom around Adrian, who panicking crouches to the ground and screams in fear, his adventurous spirit crushed by these alien inhospitable surroundings. Engulfed in terror he wails incoherently for what seems like an eternity.

Sometime later Adrian becomes aware that he is back in the bedroom. His rapidly beating heart resonates through his body as he reaches for the bedside light switch. The fear only begins to subside once the room is immersed in light. All is quiet now, save for the chirping of a robin in a neighbouring garden. Turning the sodden pillow over, Adrian lies down, still breathing rapidly. Though shocked at the traumatic nature of the dream, he rationalises that the whole fearful episode is a result of an excess of alcohol. Despite this, some lingering dread results in him spending the remainder of the night sleeping fitfully, with the bedside light left on. On awakening later that morning, Adrian sits up and peers around the room cautiously, before admonishing himself for drinking so much the previous evening. Recalling the fact that today is the day he collects his Canon EOS, normality is restored instantaneously.

Three hours later - Adrian clambers out of the taxi, stuffs a twenty pound note in the hand of the driver and then heads off at a trot in the direction of Premier Electrical Goods. Asad, the shop's proprietor is stooped in the corner of the store, loading one of the display shelves with new lenses.

'Hello, I am here to collect the Canon EOS-1D Mark IV,' greets Adrian on entering the premises.

'It arrived early this morning,' replies Asad, as he rises to his feet. Adrian smiles broadly and punches the air with his clenched right fist in triumph. Though having met Adrian on a

number of occasions in the shop, Asad appears bemused by this display. Walking over to the front desk, Asad picks up a cardboard box and tentatively begins to remove the tape that is securing its lid.

'I will deal with that,' instructs Adrian, grabbing the box from Asad's grasp and feverishly clawing at the tape with his finger nails.

After ripping open the FedEx box and the bag contained therewith, he catches a first glimpse of the Canon EOS's matt black compact body. Pulling it from the open bag, he holds it up towards the light and inspects it. This is the first time that he has actually clasped a Mark IV in his hands and he marvels at how so much ingenuity could be packed into a mere one thousand, one hundred and eighty grams, not including batteries. Meanwhile Asad paraphrases the terms and conditions of purchase. In spite of his usual meticulous attention to detail, Adrian ignores Asad, and instead paws through the manual with his right hand whilst the other clasps Canon's latest offering to his breast.

The manual is to remain open for the entire duration of the taxi journey home, as Adrian memorises the features, relaying them back in his mind and checking them against the functions on the camera's display panel. He is particularly impressed by the information pertaining to photographing in low light, so much so that he reads the information aloud.

'Low Light Shooting - Thanks to the EOS-1D Mark IV's exceptionally wide ISO range of 100 to 12800 - expandable up to an incredible ISO 102400 - shooting need never stop even in the darkest of conditions.'

Four hours later - Adrian is standing in the check-in queue for British Airways flight B7310 to Athens. He is wearing a beige safari jacket with numerous pockets. This tiresome, rather lengthy interlude allows him the opportunity to scan his fellow travellers' baggage. Whilst he does this he reminds himself of the features of his own Samsonite Pro-DLX. These appear in his mind as bullet points:

- Organised interior is provided with elastics, dividers, etc to keep the case well organised.
- Removable camera shuttle is a padded compartment designed to carry your laptop computer and help protect it from shocks while travelling.

An hour and a half later, Adrian is on the aeroplane awaiting take off, looking slightly perplexed and rather angry. In the next seat is an overweight boy munching loudly on pretzels. However the cause of his consternation is not this but rather the on-board announcement that is being relayed to the passengers:

'The following electronic devices may not be used during takeoff or landing: portable music players, portable computers, and cellular phones, which should be in the off position and stowed away.'

Adrian wonders what leisure pursuits are left available to him, as he is not in possession of a book. Then remembering the Canon EOS, his hand shoots up into the air, at the same time he shouts out to an air hostess stood in the aisle way, a couple of yards in front of him. 'Excuse me it is acceptable I assume to familiarise myself with my new camera, after all it is impossible that it could affect the electromagnetic interference either of the on-board equipment or ground based networks.'

'You can't take photos at any time on the flight I'm afraid,' replies the air hostess.

'Why of course,' responds Adrian. 'I meant only to remind myself of the features on the navigation display.'

‘Put it away or we’ll be forced to confiscate it until landing,’ retorts the air hostess, who then turns curtly and walks away down the aisle.

The three and a half hour flight passes largely without incident, save for when Adrian pulls up the window shutter and is met by a view of closely knit clouds. He shudders as recollections of last night’s fearful nightmare comes flooding back and slams the shutter closed. Despite the protestations of the overweight child, his mouth still full of pretzels, it is to remain so for the duration of the journey.

17:00 - Athens airport – Adrian, passport in hand is awaiting the arrival of his luggage.

17:41 – Adrian is standing at the entrance of the majestic Athenaeum TransGlobal Hotel, smiling contentedly as he gazes up in wonder at the colossal structure. Slowly inhaling, he fills his lungs with Athens’s notoriously polluted air. ‘What a choice,’ he murmurs aloud seconds later. A porter with a large moustache approaches with the intention of collecting his luggage. Immediately recognising Adrian to be English, he greets him:

‘Good evening Sir, please I takee bag.’

Bringing his index finger to his lips Adrian silences him and slowly yet purposefully with both hands clutching the Canon EOS, proceeds to raise it upwards. It is as if he were the captain of a World Cup winning football side on first clasping the trophy and holding it aloft to the heavens. The preparation for the Canon EOS’s baptism has been fastidious, the ideal format having been set on the bus. Exposure control, program ae auto, anti-blur, natural light, portrait, landscape. With two quick clicks on the zoom out control, the majestic main tower of the Athenaeum TransGlobal is perfectly positioned on the camera’s screen.

‘One, two, three,’ whispers Adrian. The flash instantly illuminates the screen. He stands motionless, revelling in the moment.

Minutes later and Adrian is standing in the centre of his room. The porter on attempting to explain how to use the various in room facilities is once again silenced and departs clasping his measly tip, a one Euro coin, mumbling obscenities under his breath. Standing with his arms outstretched Adrian slowly rotates three hundred and sixty degrees, surveying the room as he does so. A smile adorns his face, as he savours the décor and furnishings.

As with every hotel Adrian has visited over the last decade or so, he feels the need for an inspection, to scrutinise every aspect of the room thoroughly. Removing the Compaq Presario laptop from the suitcase, he places it on the bedside table and then opens one of its Excel spreadsheets. As with all prior inspections it begins with the dimensions of the room, which he grades a four out of five; he never gives fives. After this he proceeds to move onto the more specific aspects, the wallpaper, furnishings, electrical appliances, towels and the like.

‘Pleasant enough wallpaper, yes I agree a plain purple bordering on lilac is a satisfactory choice for a room which benefits from an abundance of natural light. I will give it a three,’ states Adrian aloud. In spite of it being dark, he has already noted the room faces east. The data is entered. The figures are then inserted into a Dijkstra algorithm, an unimaginably complicated process that most mortals could not even begin to comprehend, it looks like this:

```
1 functionDijkstra(G, w, s)
2   for each vertex v in V[G]           // Initializations
3     d[v] := infinity                   // Unknown distance function from s to v
4     previous[v] := undefined
5   d[s] := 0                           // Distance from s to s
```



```

6  S := empty set                // Set of all visited vertices
7  Q := V[G]                     // Set of all unvisited vertices
8  while Q is not an empty set    // The algorithm itself
9      u := Extract_Min(Q)        // Remove best vertex from priority queue
10     S := S union {u}           // Mark it 'visited'
11     for each edge (u,v) outgoing from u
12         if d[u] + w(u,v) < d[v] // Relax (u,v)
13             d[v] := d[u] + w(u,v)
14             previous[v] := u

```

Dinner at the Athenaeum TransGlobal as with all TransGlobal hotels is a delight. The cuisine is aimed at the hotel's largely business clientele and varies only marginally across the TransGlobals' vast chain. Tired solitary businessmen are seated at a number of the tables drinking wine. A jovial middle aged couple studiously reviewing an Athens tour book is the only evidence of any kind of family life. Adrian feels at ease in this five star business environment, for although on vacation, he appears as a business visitor and therefore does not seem out of place without family or friends in attendance.

Adrian orders roast duck with caramelised red onion and juniper. On the dish's arrival at the table, he leers over it with the Canon EOS and then zooms in to capture the culinary delight. The waitress witnessing this incident stifles a giggle and flees to the safety of the kitchen where she laughs hysterically. Having consumed the meal, Adrian tentatively dabs his lips with his napkin and then slips a one Euro coin onto the silver plate containing the bill. The waitress emerges. Noticing the tip her humour dissipates instantaneously.

Dijkstra algorithm analysis provides the post dinner entertainment. Periodically Adrian takes sips from a glass of Angostura eighty percent proof rum, a product of Spain and a quite superior example, he concludes. He is reaching for the bottle to pour a second glass when recalling the nightmare from the previous night he returns the bottle to its resting place.

Adrian turns on the room's LCD Panasonic television complete with ultra wide viewing angle. A BBC World documentary on the subject of Penicillin has just begun and Adrian as a test to himself attempts to remain one step ahead of the narrator. Sitting in an upright position, he scrutinises his mind in a calm, deliberate and determined manner. This is a test worthy of his majestic intellect. He inhales deeply and then begins; 'Penicillin is a widely used antibiotic agent; it is derived from the *Penicillium* mould. Penicillin's molecular formula is $R-C_9H_{11}N_2O_4S$, where R is a variable side chain.'

A minute and a half later this information is imparted by the narrator. Adrian in his customary manner clenches his fist in victory and punches the air in delight. 'It was in 1928 that Sir Alexander Fleming observed that colonies of the bacterium *Staphylococcus aureus* could be destroyed using the mould *Penicillium notatum*,' he continues confidently.

Eager and smiling broadly, he awaits validation and then repeats the clenching of the fist, this time with an additional victory jig around the bedroom. By eleven p.m. the documentary has finished and a contented lethargy has engulfed his fatigued body; sleep finds him shortly thereafter. The only sound is the barely audible whir from the Zwicker air conditioner and the occasional buzzing of a lone mosquito. The hours pass; 12:00, 01:00, 02:00.

02:47 – Adrian appears restless, his breathing agitated and his brow speckled with dots of sweat. His mind is no longer a tranquil dormant void, as he finds himself floating through a sky, rapidly filling with sinister rain clouds. At the same time an incessant drone reaches him, growing persistently louder by the second. In the distance partially obscured by the clouds, a figure appears. Adrian trembles uncontrollably and attempts to turn and flee,

there being none of the curiosity in him of the previous night but through no want of his own is involuntarily drawn closer to the figure. Fear turns to panic on the realisation that this eerie figure is the same man in the tan suit from the previous night.

Adrian desperately continues to attempt to halt his progress but to his dismay his efforts prove to be in vain and he floats ever forward. The man remains slightly ahead of him, as they begin to descend slowly downwards towards the infernal clamour. Holding his hands to his head Adrian screams uncontrollably but it is to no avail and he continues to descend, all the while the ominous commotion increasing in volume and intensity. Moments later he is below the cloud level and descending still.

What appears to be flat ground lying far beneath him is drawing closer now, as the racket continues remorselessly. As the descent continues unabated, his semi-conscious mind becomes aware that beneath him is not flat ground at all but a myriad of tiny dots growing steadily closer and more distinguishable. Moments later and they are no longer dots but an impenetrable mass of human faces, which stretch for what seems like eternity in every direction, peering up at the sky as they wail incoherently. Yet closer the petrified Adrian is drawn, hovering now not more than fifteen metres or so above them. Wide-eyed with terror he continues to wail, a hideous mindless sound that is lost in the commotion of the multitude below.

A loud knocking sound awakens Adrian and he sits bolt upright in the bed, drenched in sweat and gasping desperately for air as he turns his head rapidly from side to side.

The knocking continues and a faint voice can be heard. 'Hello you ok? Guests say very noisy.'

All is quiet now save for the savage beating of his heart. The panic begins to subside somewhat on the realisation that he is in the hotel room. Reaching to his left he turns on the bedside light.

'Jesus Christ what was all that, it must have been a dream but...'

The voice of the porter in the hallway interrupts him. 'Hello, hello why scream, is everything ok?'

'Everything is fine thank you; it was merely a bad dream,' replies Adrian in as calm a voice as he can muster.

'Ok very good, goodnight sir,' replies the only slightly reassured voice. The light remains on, as Adrian's heart continues to thud rapidly and his breathing remains accelerated. Questions bombard his anguished bewildered mind. Each one he whispers aloud in a muffled fearful voice, as they appear in his now disjointed chaotic mind.

'How can that just be a dream? Why two nights in a row? It was so real? Who is that man? Who are all those people? Why these nightmares when I am calm and on holiday? Why was I floating? How is this rational thought?' Adrian does not have time to contemplate an answer for any given question before he reels off another, his rational thought processes in disarray. As the minutes pass, his heartbeat gradually slows and pace of breathing subsides. An hour and a half later he is asleep once more.

Early the next morning Adrian is laying on the king sized bed, gazing out through an opening in the curtains at a brilliant blue sky. He sighs wearily, satisfied that all is safe now and that normality has been restored. It is the very same sensation that people have felt since the time of the Neanderthals when experiencing the comfort that is dawn and its salvation from the perils of the darkness.

Even though weakened both physically and emotionally, he is ready for the rigours of the day having consumed a continental breakfast. On the king sized bed, Adrian places items he deems necessary for the forthcoming adventure, a visit to the famed Acropolis. He scrutinises the items and then places them in his olive drab Maxpedition Pygmy Falcon II backpack. The items are:

- 1). A small hand towel
- 2). A World executive city guide to Athens
- 3). A pocket map of the city and surrounding areas
- 4). A 10cl bottle of Evian
- 5). The Canon EOS-1D Mark IV

08:20 - Adrian crosses his arms across his chest, each hand holding on to the opposite shoulder strap and he's off. Though it is early in the year, the thermometer rises steadily and he is soon perspiring from the exertions of the ascent to the Acropolis. The first stop is the Propylaea, next the Pinacotheca, followed by the temple to Athena Nike and then the remnants of the Erechtheon. With each stop comes a relentless clicking of the Canon EOS; each scene being captured in a myriad of different settings to be analysed later that day.

10:30 - Adrian is standing in front of the Parthenon. The temple's great Doric columns tower above as he scurries around capturing every conceivable image with the Canon EOS; the friezes, metopes and pediments that had filled the pages of his childhood text books. The constant exertion of the morning's sightseeing is beginning to fatigue him; his pace slows and the unremitting clicking begins to wane. He is about to sit down for a minute or so to recuperate sipping water and studying the city guide when something catches his attention.

To the right of one of the Parthenon's columns, about twenty metres or so away from his position stands a family of four. The family consists of a mother, father and two young children; a small girl with pigtails and a boy of five or so, who is drawing circles in the dust covered stone at his feet with his index finger. It is not any of the family members that have drawn Adrian's attention however but the item slung casually over the father's right shoulder; a camera but not any old camera. 'Highly unlikely,' mutters Adrian to himself, 'not a Canon EOS-1D Mark IV, they only came on the market days ago, must be another model, a Canon 30D or a 40D perhaps. It is just too bloody far to be certain. If only I had brought my Swarovski binoculars.'

He makes the decision to approach closer and then slightly hunched begins to edge forward towards them, slowly yet deliberately, as a hunter would on stalking a red stag in the Highlands of Scotland, not wanting to draw attention to himself. The family remain oblivious, seemingly in awe of the majestic Parthenon and he is soon no more than eight or so metres away. 'Just too far out,' exclaims Adrian before concluding that another two point five metres should be adequate to discern the model.

Crouched and silent, the approach continues. The father turns slightly, about twenty degrees or so and is no longer broadside, the outline of the camera becomes obscured. Adrian, having reached the neighbouring pillar stands with his back against it, planning the final approach. Turning anti-clockwise round the column he tiptoes forward; the family are no more than four metres away but are still too far. Then it dawns on him to zoom in using his own Canon EOS; he scolds himself at his slowness of thought in realising this.

Patiently he raises the EOS, not wanting any sudden movement to disturb his prey. The mother though has spied the crouching Adrian out of the corner of her eye and whispers to her husband, who is admiring the Parthenon's spectacular metope. 'What's that very strange man just behind us doing? He keeps getting closer.'

The husband turning around glares at Adrian and then blurts out to his wife, 'must be one of those bloody paedophiles, quick children let's go.'

All four are running now down the steps of the temple as Alpine chamois might on being alerted to the hunter in their midst. Adrian stands upright and sighs deeply, 'I'll never know now,' he exclaims lamentably.

The Acropolis is followed by a visit to the beautiful neoclassic building that serves as the National Archaeological Museum, ranked among the top ten museums in the world. Departing the museum a few hours later, Adrian glances at the G-9000 Mudman and is

surprised to see it is almost three p.m. A wave of spontaneous trepidation resonates through his body at the thought of the approaching night. Attempting to forget this lingering concern he saunters off to the Atelier Spyros Vassiliou, eager to inspect the gallery's lithographs. In anticipation of these, the perils of the night are forgotten.

20:03 - Adrian is in the hotel restaurant taking sips from a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon whilst scrutinising the menu. He speaks quietly to himself as he rationalises his choice:

'One course will be adequate, a restful night's sleep is the priority, absolutely no cheese or chocolate. Veal escalope, yes indeed.'

23:03 - Adrian is transferring the last of the day's photographs from the EOS's memory stick to the laptop.

23:41 - Adrian is asleep, snoring gently and contentedly. The bedside light is left on.

02:45 - He awakes alarmed, subconsciously aware that this is the approximate time the previous night that the ghastly nightmare had begun. Reassured to find himself in the hotel room, he yawns wearily and turns his ponderous frame to the side. The window is slightly ajar and a gentle warm breeze is causing the curtains to flutter softly. Adrian yawns again and stretches his tired body. Eyelids flicker briefly and then sleep finds him once more.

03:10 - Dark menacing clouds are encroaching on the tranquil enclave that had been Adrian's mind up to this point. If awake he would no doubt have passed it off as a change in the weather but he is not.

The noise reaches his ears, barely discernible yet familiar. Clasping his hands to his ears Adrian moans softly but it is to no avail. That same infernal clamour as evidenced during the previous two nights is increasing in volume by the second. Staring out inanely, Adrian views with distress the tenebrous storm clouds heavy with rain rushing through a foreboding sky. The myriad of faces appear far beneath him, their wailing terrifying and unintelligible. A distant figure is approaching ever closer; Adrian becomes aware that it is the man in the tan suit from the previous nights and that he is speaking, in a quiet yet earnest tone. Somehow he can hear the words even above the sound of the lament emanating from below: 'It's me Charles, Charles Middleworth,' says the man. Adrian stares at the man in shock, unable to respond.

'It's me Charles, remember now,' continues the man.

Adrian awakens panic stricken, sitting up in the bed struggling for breath. He shouts out 'Canon EOS, Canon EOS, Canon EOS, Canon EOS,' continuously in a very loud voice, attempting to cling to this bastion of rationality and logic in the face of the unexplainable chaos he has just witnessed. A voice is calling out from the other side of the door, 'what is it sir, open door, open door.'

Adrian does not respond. Motionless he stares sobbing at the lilac coloured far wall. The banging on the door continues unabated. A short time later it stops and there is the sound of a key turning in the lock; then the door opens. Three people enter. The porter from last night, the hotel manager and a third, a heavily muscled member of the hotel's security team with a large badge pinned to his lapel. There is a look of grave concern on all three of the men.

'What has happened here, what is the problem,' enquires the manager.

Adrian in terror jumps from the bed and rushes for the door screaming inanely, fearful that these people are members of the multitude from the dream minutes earlier. Held back by the security guard, Adrian struggles desperately to free himself from the vice like grip, shouting 'GET ME OUT, get off I must get out of here,' as he does so.

'Calm now, calm down,' says the manager, beckoning with both hands in downward motions.

'Why such noise,' asks the porter.

The security man stands steadfast and silent, holding Adrian securely by the arms, as he continues to try and free himself with ever feebler efforts. Gradually it dawns on an ashen-faced and timid Adrian what has occurred and he confesses,

‘It was another nightmare,’ in an apologetic tone.

‘This is unacceptable; the guests have been upset for a second night,’ says the manager sternly, pointing accusingly at Adrian. ‘You will spend the rest of the night in a ground floor room, away from the other guests’.

Adrian leaps out of bed, packing his possessions at a furious pace, as the three men look on. Then it is down to the windowless ground floor room where he is left to his own devices. So distraught is he that these frightful nightmares are continuing each night and are now impinging on reality that he is too terrified to sleep. He wonders why that man Charles Middleworth keeps appearing in his dreams. For he is quite sure he has never come across anyone bearing that name and with a near photographic memory, this is something that he can be quite confident of.

15:00 – The Next Day - Adrian is on a flight back to Heathrow. Earlier that day during check out, his much valued TransGlobal club card had been confiscated and his name entered onto the hotel chain’s blacklist. The same list that contained the names of guests caught smoking marijuana on the premises, or had brought back undesirables to their rooms. Not only did Adrian raise no argument, he also did not even inspect the bill in his haste to depart. Had he done so, he would have noted that he had been charged for four cans of Fanta Orange from the room’s mini bar that he had not drunk; at the exorbitant rate of five Euros a can.

Adrian, his head resting disconsolately against the window beside him notices a misty canopy of grey swirling nimbus clouds some way beneath the plane. He pulls the window shutter down.

Two

The ground floor study does not benefit from an abundance of natural light, as a result of this and the lack of ventilation it has a rather stale musky aura. A legion of small dots of dust and tiny threads of fluff cascade slowly downwards; visible only as they pass the illuminated circle of light that surrounds the antique ceramic desk lamp. The wallpaper is brown and nondescript, the dark purple curtains slightly frayed. A mahogany desk, the room's centrepiece, is covered in small piles of bound papers and files, some of the papers are tattered around the edges. An austere looking elderly gentleman with angular features and closely cropped grey hair is sat at the desk conversing on the telephone, with the owner of an employment agency named Percy.

'We appreciate the applicants are not, at the high level you require and that we endeavour to supply you with,' says Percy.

'I know you're trying,' replies Colin.

'There just aren't any suitable applicants out there,' remarks Percy.

'I appreciate that believe me.'

'We must be a dying breed Colin.'

'I concur; it's the decline of the church and family values I say.'

'Sure,' replies Percy. 'Do any of the résumés look promising?'

Colin fingers through the résumés on the desk, selects one, holds it up for closer analysis and remarks, 'I require someone young, keen to learn, well educated and presentable.'

'Yes go on,' says Percy.

'It's a good solid profession with high earning potential.'

'Well people have to die.'

'Then why Percy is the industry attracting people like Kurt,' continues Colin. 'Kurt lists his interests as Megadeth, Bauhaus and The Hurting. No idea what they are, I can only assume Megadeth, spelt incorrectly I might add is the term coined by Herman Kahn, the military strategist in his book Thermonuclear war to describe a million deaths. How on earth can that be an interest?'

'Megadeth are a Goth band Colin,' replies Percy struggling to stifle laughter.

'Not Goths again,' replies Colin. 'Virtually every other job application I receive these days is from one. How do you know about Megadeth anyway Percy?'

'My daughter Beatrice listens to them,' says Percy, his voice now taking a sombre tone. 'She only wears black now and she's umm; well she's threatening to become a vampire.'

'Oh no how beastly, I'm so sorry,' says Colin, who makes the decision not to explore the issue further, as he does not feel it appropriate, although he is intrigued. Instead he picks up another résumé from the desk. 'Another candidate for some unknown reason sent in a photo of himself,' he remarks. 'Pale as a ghost, purple Mohawk, facial piercings with what appears to be a bone through his nose. It's just intolerable.'

‘God only knows, these Goth adolescents are all over Lyme Regis, it’s a bloody disgrace,’ replies Percy. ‘If only there was still national service.’

‘Why is it that they are so keen on death anyway?’ asks Colin.

‘It’s the usual scenario,’ responds Percy. ‘Adolescents wanting to rebel and the death thing; well it’s a taboo isn’t it?’

‘Come to think of it Percy, don’t think I’ve seen an older Goth; suppose death becomes less appealing the closer you get to it.’

‘I haven’t seen an old one either,’ says Percy.

‘Maybe they die young from not seeing the light of day.’ Colin considering what Percy has just told him about his daughter feels immediately remorseful about this statement.

The discussion continues for several more minutes. At the end of the conversation Colin hangs up the telephone and looks down at the desk. The image of the Goth with the Mohican and facial piercings stares up at him. He grunts in disapproval, turns the offending image upside down and brushes it beneath a pile of papers; normality is restored instantaneously. The phone is ringing, Colin answers it.

‘Good afternoon Colin Raven.’

‘Hello father it’s me.’

‘How was the holiday?’

‘It was err, interesting,’ replies Adrian, who then adds, ‘I’m planning to come and stay next weekend, if that is convenient.’

‘Why of course. Your brother will be here with Natalia, will be a good chance for us all to get together.’

‘I will arrive Friday at seven p.m., bye.’

Colin places the receiver down and reclines back in the antique wooden chair, somewhat puzzled as to why Adrian was so uncharacteristically uncommunicative. Reaching the conclusion that the reason must have been that he was busy, Colin bends forward picks up the pile of résumés from the desk and feeds them into the Ativa paper shredder at his feet.

A wood pigeon is cooing softly in the beech tree at the end of the garden. Small pointed brown sticky buds are visible at the ends of the tree’s slender twigs that protrude from the beech’s branches like skeletal fingers. Adrian oblivious to the joys of spring is perched on an Ikea garden chair, preoccupied with the horrors of recent nights. Weary and feeling of a delicate disposition, he sips tap water from a porcelain mug. The Canon EOS-1D Mark IV lies forgotten, forlorn and partially submerged in the grass at his feet. With no rational coherent understanding for the nightmares, Adrian is deeply distressed, particularly with the forthcoming night and the potential horrors it could yield.

On Adrian’s lap are an array of small packets of medicines, they are for the promotion of sleep and the relieving of anxiety. The non prescription varieties had been purchased from the chemist that day whilst the more potent ones originate from the bathroom cupboard. Benedict, Adrian’s younger brother had previously had something of a dependency on prescription drugs and had left them in the house, the previous year. One of the boxes has a large ominous black X and a detailed description at one end. Adrian reads the name aloud, pronouncing each syllable deliberately, ‘N-o-r-m-i-s-o-n.’ He then outlines the drug’s characteristics from memory in his mind. They appear as bullet points and look like this:

- Normison is branded Temazepam.
- Formula C₁₆H₁₃CIN₂O₂
- Acts as a Gamma-aminobutyric acid modulator and anti-anxiety agent.

He is concerned that the consumption of Temazepam will impair his alertness and concentration. With work the next day this is not an ideal scenario. However after reflecting once more on the events of recent nights, Adrian takes the last remaining two pills from the packet and swallows them with the aid of a gulp of water.

22:00 - Adrian is collapsed on the sofa, his head resting on its soft eiderdown cushion. Though awake his eyes are barely open, he is drooling slightly. Reaching out with one arm, he attempts to clasp the television controller on the floor in front of him, but in his listless state is soon defeated by the physical exertion of the activity.

An empty whisky tumbler, its contents having been downed some hours earlier lies dejected on its side. Next to the tumbler is a half empty bottle of Cardhu single malt whisky, its base sunk into the soft blue carpet. The reddish brown contents appear to Adrian to be swelling as the sea might on a blustery day. His weary and addled mind, a combination of fatigue, Temazepam and whisky makes this uncertain and he continues to stare at the bottle, trying to ascertain if this is indeed the case. As he focuses on the liquid, Adrian recollects on the beautiful clear morning, the frost still clutching at the grass, when his father, Benedict and he had visited the Cardhu distillery, two years previous.

‘Cardhu is a Speyside distillery in Morayshire,’ murmurs Adrian in a quiet voice. ‘Founded in Eighteen- twenty-four by John Cumming and currently owned by Diageo. This particular bottle, dated November, Two thousand and three, is from the very last batch of single malts produced, prior to the distillery commencing with vatted malts.’

Adrian would have continued with some complex chemistry relating to the formation of malt whiskies, had the combination of Temazepam and alcohol not brought a halt to the proceedings, resulting in him losing consciousness.

Only the faint ticking of the Seiko kitchen clock and the sound of Adrian breathing slowly and deeply, interrupted at intervals by muffled snores, are perceptible now. It is as if Adrian’s lethargy has contaminated the surroundings, for the air is heavy and still.

03:09 – Adrian becomes subconsciously aware that he is descending through a sky clustered with clouds of the vertical cumulonimbus variety, as often witnessed prior to a sudden deluge. Emanating from somewhere far below a sound is discernible, an unremitting incoherent roaring that increases in volume with each passing second. The outline of a man appears in the distance, partially obscured by the clouds and approaching closer. Within a minute or so it reveals itself to be the tan suited figure from recent nights, Charles Middleworth. Even in his dormant state Adrian is able to recall the name.

The great swathes of faces of the chaotic multitude appear in the distance beneath him, at first as a congealed hate-emitting mass, but as Adrian continues to descend their individual features become distinguishable. These are different people than the previous night, yet they are equally pernicious, the huddled figures irate and irrational. An old man with piercing green eyes, his features contorted in anger stares upwards. To his left an emaciated woman with tortured features and rabid irksome eyes, her head swathed in a purple shawl, speckled with dots of soot and grime. The din is deafening, Adrian holding his hands to his ears once more is lifted from his slumbers by the shouting and agonizing wails all around him.

Awake now and back on the sofa still screaming, his eyelids remain firmly shut for almost a minute, before the realisation dawns on him that he is back in the sitting room. Anxious and sweating profusely, he sits upright and looks around the room, each breath coming in quick succession, mouth agape in horror.

Some minutes later having regained a modicum of composure, there is astonishment and anxiety in equal measure that having taken twenty milligrams of Temazepam only hours earlier, how such a vivid terrifying nightmare could have occurred. There is anger that this member of the benzodiazepine family has not adhered to its stated purpose, as a potent anti-

anxiety medication. Adrian reaches out and grabs the bottle of whisky from the floor, unscrews the top and takes a large gulp. After which the thought occurs to him that he is at the mercy of a force he cannot comprehend and therefore is unable to control. He lies back down on the sofa and repeats 'Canon EOS, Canon EOS, Canon EOS...', repeatedly for quite some time. Eventually sleep finds him once more.

11:00 - The Next Day - Despite the hour it is as if it were night, for the sun is notable only for its absence, concealed behind a blanket of impenetrable cloud. Inside the office of Vincent & Ernst, Adrian's desk is littered with all manner of paperwork; letters, graphs, insurance policies, and print outs of complex mathematical tables and algorithms. Adrian rests his heavy head in his hands and sighs wearily. The episodes of recent nights and the lingering after effects of the Temazepam are not compatible with complex mathematical analyses and he is struggling to maintain concentration. Leaning back in the superior zero gravity chair complete with lumbar, lower back supports and Safco seat cushion, he looks across at the framed print on the far side of his desk. The picture is of James Dodson, a renowned eighteenth century mathematician, actuary and insurance industry innovator. Usually if struggling to maintain concentration, a momentary glimpse at the severe features and glistening eyes of Dodson would inspire Adrian and his work rate would reach a feverish pace. On this occasion though there is no renewed vigour.

A shrill voice begins to call his name repeatedly from a neighbouring desk, the sound excruciating and invasive. The voice belongs to the office secretary Jenny, the only member of the office's staff Adrian actively dislikes. 'Yes,' responds Adrian after the fifth repetition of his name.

'You're very quiet today,' says Jenny. 'How was your holiday?'

'It was err, interesting,' replies Adrian, struggling to find words to describe the trip.

'Did the multi trip insurance come in useful?'

'No, not on this occasion,' states Adrian. 'But it is always best to have multi trip insurance cover and not to need it than to need multi trip insurance cover and not to have it.'

He then proceeds to pull a couple of sheets of paper from the top of the pile in the in-tray on his desk; they have numbers scrawled in pencil across them. 'Oh yes,' murmurs Adrian to himself, 'the life expectancy tables for asbestos poisoning sufferers in Northumbria.' Rapidly he scrutinises the numbers, a simple task for an actuary of Adrian's brilliance, even in his current condition. Within a minute the decision has been made to use the formula $Lx + t = (1-t) Lx + t lx+1$ for the likelihood of death.

Next Adrian opens a new Excel spreadsheet on the computer, saves it as NorthumbriaAsbestosMortality1.xl and begins to type using only his right hand the column headings, in a bold, Times New Roman font, size sixteen point five. He is at the point of entering the formula in column D when he is interrupted once more by the piercing high pitched voice of Jenny. The sound of which causes Adrian to press his thumb so hard against the pencil clasped in his left hand that it snaps in two.

'Adrian what's 700x7-64?'

Adrian grits his teeth in annoyance and then replies '4836!'

Jenny and the temp she sits next to, whose name Adrian can never remember, giggle. It is a common occurrence in the office for Jenny to test Adrian on his mental arithmetic, as she revels in the fact that he is always able to answer instantaneously. Not that she interprets it as a positive thing but rather that it reinforces in her mind the aura of Adrian as an oddity, which she finds most amusing. Adrian for his part finds the questions so simple that they do not distract him from his work. Today however is different.

'Adrian!' exclaims Jenny yet again.

'What now?'

Jenny would have been wise to sense the tone in Adrian's voice but she does not and asks, 'I was just wondering what 17x32-7 is?'

Adrian rises to his feet and marches over to her desk, where he now stands, towering over her. Jenny looks up at first surprised to see Adrian there, then in fright on seeing the veil of animosity that has descended upon him. 'Here is a question for you, an easy one,' says Adrian. 'Even you should be able to calculate it. 16x8.' He then counts to three and asks, 'well what's the answer?' No answer is forthcoming; Adrian taking this as invitation to continue says, 'might I ask what you are doing working in an actuarial firm when you don't even know your times tables.' Jenny does not respond. Instead she cowers in her seat and begins to sob.

Some of the other members of the office having heard the shouting are now standing around Jenny's desk. Adrian walks back to his own desk, sits down and resumes work. His bewildered colleagues stare after him and then return to their own desks, without a word. Ethel passes Jenny a box of tissues and tells her not to worry, putting a reassuring hand on her shoulder as she does so.

13:06 - Adrian is in the process of leaving the office for lunch when Ethel stops him as he walks past her desk. 'Is everything alright Adrian?' she asks in a concerned voice.

'Good thank you. The Northumbria mortality tables are now completed.'

Not wanting anyone else in the office to overhear Ethel whispers, 'what was all that with Jenny? She was in quite a state and has gone home.'

'She was being annoying,' responds Adrian casually.

'So you attacked her for not knowing her sixteen times tables.'

'Well err, yes.'

'Most people learn times tables up to times twelve not sixteen Adrian.'

'Possibly, but regardless she was affecting my pattern of thought.'

'I can appreciate that, but it's not like you to lose your temper and well what happens if she now walks off claiming discrimination or something,' says Ethel. 'You know as well as anyone the litigious nature of working life these days.'

'Ridiculous, for shouting at her.'

'You were intimidating her,' replies Ethel, standing up as she does so and looking at Adrian sternly. 'There's no place for that kind of behaviour here.'

'I must disagree with your definition of intimidation,' states Adrian. 'For my understanding is that it is to force into or deter someone from an action by causing fear and...'

'It was overly aggressive behaviour,' interrupts an annoyed Ethel.

Adrian gets no further than 'But...,' before he is interrupted again.

'We're both senior members of staff and on a level here, but in addition to our normal workloads, I look after employee relations and you're in charge of selecting software.'

'Yes about the software, I recently came across...'

'Not now,' rebukes Ethel angrily, who then continuing in a more consoling tone says, 'if you've got a problem with staff, speak to me. I'm on your side.'

'The probability of her taking action is negligible,' remarks Adrian.

'How do you know what the probability of someone taking a certain course of action is?' responds Ethel, her voice betraying displeasure once more.

'Well if you took x to be Jenny...'

'See you at the meeting this afternoon,' interrupts Ethel before sitting down.

Walking towards the lift, Adrian is acutely aware that the nightmares of recent nights are now affecting his working life. This is a worrying turn of events, for he takes pride in maintaining professionalism and composure at all times whilst at work. Above all he hopes

that the unsettling algorithmic proof uncertainty that has descended upon his life is temporary.

On exiting the building, Adrian is met by the full force of an unremitting deluge that forces him hurriedly towards the shelter of Spitalfields Market. He is not alone in seeking shelter there. The market is a bustling mass of workers on their lunch breaks, desperate for some respite from the torrential downpour. They mill around talking on their mobiles, amongst themselves or simply amble about inspecting the food stalls. This is the sight that greets Adrian as he weaves through the bustling mass of rain sodden bodies moving in every conceivable direction.

Now huddled amongst the mass of people on the market floor, Adrian begins to feel increasingly claustrophobic. The multitude of voices all around him seems as one unintelligible commotion, increasing in both volume and intensity with each second. It is as if he is no longer in the familiar surroundings of Spitalfields Market, where many hundreds of lunch breaks had been spent, but rather once more in the midst of a nightmare. Adrian clasps his hands to his ears. The umbrella falls to the ground. He starts to run, pushing and shoving suited business men, women and tourists as he attempts to flee the hostile surroundings. They are angry and shocked in equal measure, a business man shouting and shaking his fist, a secretary screaming as she is crudely shoved aside.

Escaping the market offers no reprieve; for as he looks upwards, dark ominous storm clouds are visible racing through the sky. Adrian's hands drop down from his ears and he sprints across the wet stone pavement, ignoring the risk of falling on its slippery surface. On reaching his office's building, he swings open its glass door, enters the lobby and cowers inside, struggling to regain his breath. The security guard and receptionist, alarmed to see him huddled behind the door, look at each other inquisitively, as if expecting the other to respond in some way. The receptionist, a tall young woman wearing a plaited skirt, makes the decision to take the initiative and says 'excuse me, is there a problem?'

Adrian does not respond and stares back at her. Standing to her full height to give her voice added resonance, she adds,

'Sir is everything alright?'

Adrian blurts out a barely coherent, 'yes yes it's fine.' With this he hurries across the marble floored lobby, enters the lift and presses the button for the sixtieth floor. On the way up Adrian makes the decision that a visit to the doctor is necessary.

16:40 - The purr of a high performance vehicle can be heard from somewhere in the distance. Seconds later the elegant and perfectly proportioned sleek that is the Aston Martin V8 Vantage S convertible comes into view, exuding a regal air as it glides effortlessly down the country lane, courtesy of its four point seven litre engine and 430bhp of controlled aggression. The Vantage's unparalleled superiority is only too evident to its incumbent, thirty-nine-year-old property developer Theodore Miller, as it passes a Vauxhall Corsa coming in the opposite direction. Behind the Vantage's vinyl steering wheel Theodore sneers at the Corsa's lack of grace and garish blue coat.

16:43 - Theodore pushes his handmade loafer clad foot on the brake pedal. The Vantage responds effortlessly, cruising to a halt opposite Ramsbottam village church.

Lowering the tinted sound proofed window, Theodore closes his eyes and tilts his head upwards, perforating his nostrils to the outside air. Not in the manner of someone enjoying the crisp country air but as a wolf might in the Russian winter taiga, on revisiting an ailing moose, to sense whether it is time to strike or to return when the moose has deteriorated yet further. One single lingering whiff fills Theodore's nostrils.

Attuning his senses, Theodore reviews the findings from his only previous visit to the church, a Sunday service some months earlier. Sitting detached at the pew, as the vicar read from Jeremiah, his inquisitive nature had been drawn to the high beams and thick walls of

the church's impressive interior. The very next thought that entered his mind was that the space would be ideal for converting into luxury apartments and the more he dwelled upon it, the more it appealed. Jeremiah's wise words were no longer audible to him as he scrutinised the aged congregation scattered sparsely amongst the pews. Noting that the church, once the bastion of life in the village was in morbid decline, Theodore had smiled broadly, exposing his ivory white teeth.

The driver door opens upwards in a curvaceous arc. Theodore slides his lithe body out of the full grain leather interior and into the open. Within a few steps he is standing in the church's graveyard scanning the headstones of the graves. As he does so he reads out the year of demise inscribed on each, in a quiet yet purposeful voice, '1912, 1915, 1879, 1872, 1922, 1877, 1899...'

Within a minute the task is completed and he is sitting once more behind the Vantage's vinyl steering wheel, satisfied that the graves are so old as to be all but forgotten and that his plan for the church is gaining momentum. For now however there are other ventures to attend to, but he will return. Taking out the BlackBerry from the inside pocket of his velvet jacket, he types an entry for two months hence. It looks like this:

2011/6/17

Wednesday

09:00

10:00

11:00 'Contact lawyer - check legal status of stiff's'

12:00

Theodore places the BlackBerry back inside the jacket pocket, yawns widely and then runs both hands through the curls of thick black hair that adorn his head. At the same time he inspects his reflection in the rear view mirror. There is concern that his usually tanned complexion has lost something of its lustre and that there is the unaccustomed sight of small shadows beneath the eyes, a consequence of troubled sleep of late. The BlackBerry is vibrating. Theodore removes it from his pocket and presses the accept call button.

'Yes?' enquires Theodore curtly.

'This is Colin speaking'

'Colin how are you?'

'I was phoning on the off chance that Anastasia and you are available for dinner at mine this Friday?' continues Colin. 'Benedict and your sister-in-law will be here, as will Adrian.'

'Adrian?' says Theodore; unsure as to whom Colin is referring.

'My other son. You've met him on numerous occasions.'

'Adrian, yes of course,' says Theodore, who does now vaguely remember having met him. 'We'll free up the time, how's seven-thirty?'

'Seven-thirty it is.'

On hanging up Theodore sighs, for his previous experiences of interactions with the Raven family have been insipid affairs and he can think of no reason why this dinner will prove otherwise. As he turns on the ignition, Theodore reminds himself of the fact that for every adversity there is the seed of an equal or greater benefit. He is acutely aware that the relationship with Colin, his sister-in-law's father-in-law, is one that needs to be cultivated. Not only due to the family connection but also because Colin is a former town councillor and as such could be a useful ally in any future construction plans in the local area.

Meanwhile Colin, sitting in his study, polishing the lenses of his spectacles with a white linen handkerchief, is also not overwhelmed by the prospect of an evening with Theodore and his wife Anastasia. He reminds himself that as with so many things in life, it was an act of duty to invite these new additions to the family for dinner, and that duty and pleasure do not always go hand in hand.

Please click [here](#) to continue.

Thank you

Guy

