It had been a ghastly summer, followed by an awful autumn and an even worse winter. Iphigenia didn't know what to do. More revision? She knew everything by heart already. See friends? She had never been any good at friends. The kids from school had all gone their separate ways. Kiusis. Aleca. The tall guy from the volleyball team: she didn't have anything in particular to say to that one, that Adonis who was going to study P.E. Vasso, the baby, Niketas… They lived in a different world. The only people available to her now were Nerina and Stellakis. But Stellakis was only a little boy, and Nerina kept company with people she, Iphigenia, had nothing in common. She tried spending the evenings with the grown-ups at Uncle Iakovos's place: they talked about politics, family, their blood pressure and cholesterol. She was bored.

Sometimes it occurred to her how different things would have been if she had passed her exams and was now at university. Such thoughts made her so miserable it scared her. That was so immature of her! She would think, *Next year, I'll try again next year, w*ith bated breath, sounding like a broken record even to herself. *Next year*. She would then make a timid attempt to breathe freely. One, two, three, breathe deeply, all the smog from the big city inside her lungs. She relaxed. *Next year*.

Uncle Stavros wrote from Guatemala. 'How is my future colleague doing?' he was asking. Iphigenia was so embarrassed! If Uncle had written more regularly, he would have already known that she had failed her exams, she was not at university, and was spending the whole year dawdling about at Vasso's or Uncle Iakovos's house. The letter contained some photographs of pre-Colombian pottery. 'Mayan pottery is the real treasure,' Uncle Stavros wrote, 'let the fools look for non-existent gold and gems.'

She would have liked to write back, arguing that Greek pottery was a real treasure, too, in a long essay proving her point. That's what she should have been doing. But instead, she was wasting her time watching soap operas on TV.

'Don't tell him I didn't get into university, Papa,' she said.

Papa had spread out his writing paper and envelopes on the kitchen table and was writing a letter in his old-fashioned handwriting, full of human warmth and spelling mistakes.

'My dear Cousin Stavros …'

'Don't tell him, Papa, please!' she repeated.

Papa put his pen down and looked at her with an irritated look.

'No need to be ashamed about it,' he said. 'You did your best. It wasn't your fault.'

'Well, there is no need to report to America what is going on inside our house,' Mama interfered.

She *had* to interfere and spoil the moment! If she hadn't, Papa would have got up and placed his arm around Iphigenia's shoulders protectively. 'Don't be silly!' he would have said. 'You'll outshine your Uncle Stavros one day, mark my words.'

But Mama did interfere, and the moment fled. Iphigenia felt terror rise inside her: now they would start arguing again, each fixed on his or her own point of view, oblivious of the other's.

But if Mama and Papa hadn't had that fight, Papa would have never told Uncle Stavros about her failure. He would have never done anything she hadn't wanted him to do. And Uncle Stavros in remote Guatemala, on the faraway continent of America, would still believe she was a student in a Greek university. It would probably be years before he wrote again. Her Indiana Jones Uncle had so much else to think about! And then Iphigenia would have never found out what her failure meant to Uncle Indiana Jones. Perhaps it would have been better that way …

The thing is, Papa's letter struck some invisible chord with that stocky, adventurous little man. Perhaps it reminded him of his own youth, when he washed cars and did the paper run and unloaded cargo in Chicago to pay for his studies. Perhaps it was the same chord shared by all poverty-stricken boys from

rural Greece – now a species under threat – who had a sharp mind and a mulish perseverance and the stamina of a buffalo, boys who dreamed of becoming scientists and academics and made their dreams come true against all odds.

On the 25th of July, along with a batch of bills and travel agency brochures for dream holidays, another letter came from Uncle Stavros. The results of the Hellenic University Entry Examinations had been posted on the school announcement board just the day before.

Silence reigned in Iphigenia's house that day, the same silence that had been prevalent for the last few weeks, since she had sat the examinations for the second year. On the last day she had come out of the examination hall pale, her lips white, and told Mama that she hadn't got even one answer right.

The only one who dared utter a word was poor Uncle Iakovos:

'Don't distress yourselves over it now. All diseases come from stress. As long as the child is well, that's all that matters.'

As long as the child is well … And that child was she, Iphigenia, Iphigenia the idiot, Iphigenia the loser! All those tears that she had kept inside the previous year, when she had missed the examinations due to her unexpected appendectomy –isn't sickness send by God, after all? -, had burst out like a debt Iphigenia was repaying, and with interest, for twenty days now. Stupid loser! How on earth had this happened to her and to the perfectly oiled machine that was her mind, which she had been so proud of controlling? What devil had inserted a screwdriver inside one of the thousands of microchips in her computer-like brain and damaged it?

The problem began with Latin. Iphigenia had taken a look at the examination sheet in front of her and was drenched in sweat. She could not remember what *posteritas* meant: future fame, or future time? She had forgotten everything. She could not even understand the questions. There was such a strong pain in her stomach that last year's appendicitis seemed almost pleasant in comparison. Sweat was trickling down her spine, her legs were shaking. The letters were dancing on the grimy and stained examination sheet. *My God, I will fail again. What will become of me if I fail again?*

One of the invigilators saw her state and approached, but she couldn't see him as she was bending over the paper.

'Is anything the matter? Are you all right?' he whispered to her with compassion.

'Yes, yes, I'm fine,' she whispered back, her mouth dry, still hoping she would recuperate.

But it was too late. Students were finishing and turning their papers in, one after the other. Those microchips of the brain are so sensitive. Once they are burnt out, there is nothing that can replace them…

It all went downhill from there. She failed all the rest of the subjects.

Mama was hysterical: 'I've always said it, haven't I? You lose your nerve too quickly, Iphigenia. But how could you? How could you do this to yourself?'

Iphigenia felt deeply ashamed for disappointing Mama like this. She felt sorry for her too, for her inability to say, though she was obviously trying: 'It doesn't matter, you'll try again, next time you'll succeed.'

Try again? Having failed twice already? No, there was no point. There would be no next time. She was a loser. She couldn't face another winter watching daytime TV and spending the evenings with the grownups. And the books … She couldn't even look at one of those books without reliving the nightmare in the examination hall and the dancing letters of *posteritas,* and the excruciating pain in the stomach. No, she would never be able to go through that again, ever!

Iphigenia was not the weepy type. She'd rather be angry and shout. She had noticed how everybody pitied and wanted to help a silent, sad, weepy type. But nobody liked a shouting child unless they knew a lot about children's psychology. So that's what she'd do this time. She'd begin to shout at them all. She was sick and tired of their sympathy and their endless 'How could this happen?'s and 'How could you?'s. As if she'd done it on purpose, as if she'd failed her exams in order to hurt them! Well, she would send them all to hell, even Papa, who banged on about how he was sure she would do it next time. Then she would shut herself up in her room. And perhaps … perhaps at night, when they were all asleep, she would climb up the winding iron staircase to the terraced roof with a view to the Acropolis, and she would cross the low parapet, without even one look at the

Acropolis – such a scene would only be good for a sentimental film. She wouldn't look at the street way down below either. She would only take off her soft teddy-bear slippers and she would cross that low parapet … Perhaps … Perhaps ... She would be neither the first nor the last. She just hated Mama's sleeping pills, and she couldn't even stand the thought of Papa's rifle that killed innocent little birds...

Niketas was standing on the iron staircase. It was just before nightfall. Just before Iphigenia shouted *I can't take this anymore!* Niketas was alone, without Vasso or the baby. He didn't tell her he had come to see her; he didn't need to. He didn't say anything to the grown-ups, gathered together for another evening of more of the same. He only said 'Good evening.' Then he took Iphigenia by the hand and they climbed up the iron stairs together. As if he had thought that the first thing that would occur to her would be the roof. Or maybe not. Maybe he only thought that it would be too hot to sit inside her room, and the only place they'd be undisturbed was up there.

They sat side by side on the top step. He did not hug her. He did not say, 'How could this happen to someone as strong as you, Iphigenia, how could this happen to a top student like yourself?' He did not say, 'Don't worry, there are so many other things you can do.' He did not say a word.

Once he had told her: 'Iphigenia, you sound like your mother. This isn't you, poor girl, and it's such a pity.' It was when he had been trying, in vain, to persuade her not to miss the five-day school trip for school leavers. How come he knew her so well, how come he understood? But of course he knew, of course he understood. How could *she* have forgotten? Niketas was her friend.

The silence between them was so heavy that she felt she couldn't bear it anymore. And then she felt herself soften. Like a miracle.

'It's not the end of the world,' she said.

'Of course it's not,' Niketas said.

'My brain has totally flipped.'

'No wonder, being inside such a crazy head.'

They laughed. The flat roof was now just an ordinary flat roof in an old neoclassical building. Iphigenia lifted her head and looked at the Acropolis as if for the first time. It was dark now, but the citadel was illuminated. She remembered a phrase from a book she'd read once – she couldn't remember either author or title now – a phrase that went like this:

'Tomorrow it will all look better.'

'Tomorrow it will all look better,' Niketas said.

What the hell! Was he reading her mind now?

'What did you say?' she asked, surprised.

'Tomorrow it will all look better – you've been mumbling this for the last five minutes.'

Oh. At least she wasn't crazy.

'It's from an old book, I can't remember which,' she said, relieved.

'Well, the author knew a thing or two then. *Dum spiro spero*. As long as I breathe, I hope, as the Latin saying goes.'

'Please don't speak to me of Latin!'

Then Niketas reached out and hugged her.

'Tomorrow it will all look better,' he said. Iphigenia smiled at him under the moonlight, through her tears, the first soft, quiet tears she was shedding after all these stormy days. He did this for her. Niketas, her white fur coat on a cold winter's day. Her light of the full moon. Niketas, her true friend.