

KLIDARITHMOS PUBLICATIONS

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# When Greece turned into a little Japan



A novel



## One

"Last call for flight 131 Olympic Airways to Zurich. Passengers are kindly requested to proceed to gate number 3," the female voice filled in the busy airport in a thin Greek accent that May morning.

Alex jumped out of the taxi, paid the driver, and, holding his briefcase in one hand and a small suitcase in the other, struggled through the long lines and the dozens of pieces of luggage spread on the floor to reach ticket counter for Switzerland.

"Hurry up, Sir," shouted in an irritated voice a short rather overweight clerk. "You are holding up the airplane!" He handed his passport and ticket to her and placed his small suitcase on the scale next to the counter.

"Are you Papas, Alex Papas?" asked the woman as she checked meticulously the name on the passport and the old picture that showed him with a beard and long hair.

"Yes," replied Alex detecting some kind of curiosity in the woman's face.

She put the passport aside and turned to her computer, searching for a seat for him. The cursor moved up and down several times, until it stopped at seat 7B, next to passenger Yoko Temura.

"What is taking so long?" asked Alex, checking his watch uneasily.

"I'm looking for a seat for you, Sir, the airplane is full," the woman replied irritated by Alex's question. "Ah, I found you something." She placed a sticker on the suitcase and turned back to the terminal. "All domestic flights are delayed due to the flight attendant's strike" the female voice filled the airport again. "Another strike?" He asked himself, glancing at a group of people laid on the floor. "What are they after this time?" He continued thinking, as the woman handed him the boarding pass and passport.

Throwing a quick thanks to the not-so-friendly clerk, Alex grabbed the boarding pass and passport and rushed through passport control to gate 3, straight to the shuttle bus and on to the aircraft.

"Flight attendants, place doors in lock position," sounded the pilot's voice, as Alex looked for seat 7B. The plane was indeed almost full, and, for the moment, he thought he was in the wrong plane. Half of the passengers were Asian, Japanese it appeared.

"*Gai-jin*, foreigner is late," someone whispered as Alex's eyes fell on seat 7B, next to a young Japanese woman who was staring out the window.

Under the uneasy sight of the flight attendants already in position for take-off, he fastened his seat belt, placed the briefcase under the seat in front and closed his eyes for a moment trying to relax. The last two days in Athens had been very hectic, visiting friends and relatives, talking with politicians and university professors, eating late and staying up well past midnight. He was hoping to have some time for himself after his lecture in Saint Gallen. Mount Santis was nearby and he was planning to take a cable ride to the top.

As the plane began ascending, he turned his head slightly toward his fellow passenger. She was still staring out the window. Her mind seemed to be captivated by the golden sunrays of the shining spring

morning. Her thoughts appeared to travel over the blue Aegean Sea, side by side the surfing boats and the white seagulls, searching perhaps for the beauties and the magic of the ancient Greek world. Her face was calm and peaceful, her lips closed and her eyelids slightly lowered.

"She must be in her early-to-mid-twenties," Alex thought, as his eyes began to examine her body. He liked her dress, cherry in colour with a design of little sunflowers frugally arranged around the neck area, perfectly matching her long deep dark hair.

"She is very beautiful," he thought. "An Asian angel God sent to Greece," he told himself as his eyes continued to scan her body and a strange feeling began to make his body tingle. "The most aesthetically beautiful products of Japan are not her ivories, her bronzes, her porcelains, her swords, nor even her lacquers but women," he recalled the words of the great Greek-American scholar of last century Lafcadio Hearn, who had married a Japanese and lived in Japan.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the captain has turned off the no-smoking sign," sounded the flight attendant's voice, interrupting Alex's thoughts.

He reached down for his briefcase and pulled out a batch of papers with hand-written notes. He was to participate in an international conference on foreign investment the next morning in Saint Gallen and give a lecture on Japanese investment in Europe, and some details had yet to be worked out.

"You are lucky, Yoko-san, you are sitting next to a *gai-jin*," whispered a thin female voice from the seat in front in a rather sarcastic tone. It was then that the woman of the next seat turned slightly towards Alex and discretely took notice of his arrival. She seemed surprised and a little bit uneasy but made no comment on her friend's remarks.

Alex was not bothered by her response. An economist with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), he had spent two years in Japan studying the Japanese management system, and he knew that Japanese feel uneasy next to a *gai-jin*, an outsider who does not belong to their group, a foreigner.

Sensing her uneasiness, he delved into the notes trying to forget all about his beautiful companion. He flipped the pages slowly and stopped at page 3 to examine the tables that compared and contrasted the size and the structure of Japanese investments in the US and Europe. He took his pen out and wrote some comments, continuing on to the next page and drawing a chart. He went over some newspaper clippings and took a close look at a of headlines, "America up for Sale," "A Piece of America's Soul to the Japanese," "Your Next Boss May be Japanese." Then he took his eyes off the paper and tried to summarize his thoughts, to concentrate, but like a thick cloud blocks the sun, something else blocked his mind, something that would not let him think clearly. "So her name is Yoko," he thought.

The questions continued to invade his mind. "What part of Japan is she from? How long will she be staying in Zurich? Is she a student?" Like a flirting teenager, he felt an urgent desire to listen to the sound of her voice, see the gestures of her face, talk to her and learn all about her life. Yet he did not know how she would respond. He was afraid that she might be cold to him and reject his overtures. He decided to wait for the right moment.

"What would you like to drink, Sir?" the flight attendant asked.

"Orange juice, please."

"And you, Madam?"

"Coke, please."

"Is this your first time Switzerland?" Alex asked, seizing the opportunity.

"Yes," she whispered, lowering her eyes to the floor.

"My name is Alexander Papas, but my friends call me Alex. And you must be Yoko."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Yoko replied hastily, in a tone revealing both surprise and curiosity.

"I am Yoko Temura, but how do you know my name?"

"Your friend called you by it earlier." Alex observed.

"You must speak Japanese. I assume."

"Just a little. I spent two years in Japan on an OECD mission."

"I see," she nodded, with a sign of relief. "Did you like Japan?"

"Oh, I had a great time. I like the food and love the people. They know how to respect one another and make foreigners feel at home."

"Really?"

"Really. I enjoyed my stay very much."

"Then you should visit Japan again."

"I will. As soon as I get a break from work."

"Do you still work for the OECD?" She asked looking at the paper cover of his conference paper and other stationary with the OECD logo.

"Yes. And you, are you a student?"

"No, I'm too old. I'm a career woman," she replied in a rather proud tone.

"A career woman?" asked Alex, in a teasing mood. "I have never met a Japanese career woman. I thought career jobs are just for men. I thought beautiful women like you stayed home and raised children."

"Times have changed in Japan. Nowadays, with half of the Japanese labor force being women, we are as important as men in our economy. Even the Crown Prince married a diplomat, a woman who studied law at Harvard."

"Did you study at Harvard too?"

"No, what makes you think so?"

"Your English is very good, almost perfect" observed Alex looking her straight in the eye.

"I did not study at Harvard, and my English is not so good," Yoko replied in an apologetic and very Japanese way, dropping her eyelids to the floor. "I studied international relations at Cornell University, in New York."

"That's also a good school."

"Not as good as Harvard," she admitted glancing at him. Their eyes met for the first time, and he found the nice feeling returning; his heart began pounding in a strange yet familiar rhythm. "What about you? Which school did you study at?"

"I began with Columbia University, in New York, continued with the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, and ended with Harvard University."

"Ah, you have studied in many good schools. You must be smart," she observed, as she pulled her dress slightly to cover her legs.

"How long will you be staying in Zurich?" Alex continued, changing the subject of the discussion.

"For one night only. Tomorrow, I will travel to Saint Gallen and stay there for two weeks. I must attend a seminar that the Japanese Embassy is organizing for my group."

"Saint Gallen! That's where the International Conference on Foreign Investment is being held. That's where my lecture is."

"Really?" she asked with just a bit of surprise in her voice.

"Really. And you should come to listen to my lecture. I am talking about Japanese investments in Europe," Alex added pointing to his lecture notes.

"Yes, I would like to come. It would be a good idea for me to come. Your lecture is sure to be interesting. But I cannot come, I have to stay with my group."



"I understand," Alex nodded in a disappointed voice. He recognized the long answer as the polite but inefficient Japanese way of saying, thanks, but no thanks.

"I hope you will have a successful lecture," she added in a comforting tone, looking Alex in the face.

As their eyes met again, the happy feeling returned to his mind and the strange rhythms to his heart. Like a strong medicine that flows through the brain vessels, the sight of her numbed his mind and made him drunk. And like a man who talks without thinking, "you're a beautiful woman," he managed to say staring deeper into her eyes.

"I am not pretty," she whispered as her face turned all red and her eyelids lowered to the floor.

"You are very modest . . .," Alex went on, seeing that she did not repel his compliments, trying to look at her face again. She looked so bashful and the pink blush added more to her almost perfect features, as she deliberately had already turned to the window, staring at the thick clouds over the Swiss Alps, perhaps embarrassed by an aggressiveness that many Japanese would consider rude, perhaps flattered by his compliments. He could not say. , Japanese have learned how to hide their feelings from others, especially outsiders. His old Zen teacher came to his mind: "Try to create your own privacy" he used to say. "Disappear within yourself and build your own impenetrable wall whenever you sense danger. Only then you may survive."

He returned to his documents glancing at the charts, taking notes occasionally.

When the plane touched the ground in Zurich, Alex placed his papers back to his briefcase. He had not done much work, but he was happy. He had an interesting trip. "You do not always get the chance to sit next to a beautiful woman," he thought recalling his last trip to New York sitting next to an elderly lady who lectured him about religion and life after death all the way from Athens to New York.

"You do not always get the chance to talk to her for so long," he ruminated as the plane moved slowly towards the gate. For the moment he tried to forget all about it. He wanted to think of the whole trip as a nice dream doomed to fade in day-light, a snatch of song that ends before it begins. But it was too late. Orpheus have already been playing his magic rhythms, and the Muses begun their erotic dance around him in a misty spring morning.

"Forget all about her," a voice whispered in one of his ears as a strange feeling of sadness overwhelmed him. "Get a date," a voice echoed in his other ear, and the happy feeling returned. "But you are too busy for an affair," the first voice continued. Suddenly, he felt confused, even panicky. He did not want to end it this way. He wanted to see her and talk to her again. He felt that they shared a lot of things in common. It was a deeper inner feeling that could not be suppressed.

"Which hotel will you be staying in Saint Gallen?" he decided to ask, in an almost indifferent way.

"Hotel Helvetia," she answered briefly, in a whisper.

"I'll be staying at the Swiss Palace Hotel. Perhaps we can meet again and have coffee," he said, smiling as he got up.

"Japanese coffee or Greek?" Yoko asked, smiling.

"What makes the difference?"

"I've heard Greek coffee lasts for half a day," she continued in a teasing mood. "Is it true?"

"It depends who you have the coffee with Perhaps we can take a couple of hours and have both Greek coffee and Japanese. That will be a fair compromise. What do you think?"

"Perhaps."

"*Sayonara*, Good-bye," he said in perfect Japanese, making room for Yoko to exit first.

"*Sayonara*," she returned the greeting glancing at him with a funny twinkle eye. Then reluctantly turned her back and walked away.

Whah, Alex whispered, as he saw her thin image vanishing from sight. He had never been stirred by a woman, not in that way at least.

## Two

"In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, we are all part of an emerging world economy and Japan is destined to lead it. Japanese investment will very soon be replacing American investment in Europe, and that is good for European people: it brings to the Member Nations fresh capital, revitalizes declining industries, generates jobs and income and transfers modern technology and management to European factories. Europeans must understand the new realities in the world economy, overcome fear of Japanese competition and escape nationalistic rhetoric. Liberal legislation and financial incentives can turn Europe into a magnet for Japanese investment. Thank you for listening to me." With these words, Alex Papas wrapped up his lecture on "The Prospects for Japanese Investment in Europe."

"Mr. Papas! Mr. Papas! I am Haruo Tanaka, called out a polite Japanese man following him on his way to the exit of the conference room. About 5 feet 10, skinny, with dark hair combed straight up and above the ears, he had to be in his mid-thirties, perhaps older. Alex could not say for sure.

"I work for the Japanese Embassy," added Tanaka bending forward and handing his business card to Alex with both hands. "I enjoyed your lecture, Sir," the man continued in a polite diplomatic voice, as Alex was searching his wallet for his own card.

"You made some interesting remarks about Japan's economic leadership in the world economy, and I would like to discuss them further," continued Tanaka.

"Thank you," replied Alex, handing his card to Tanaka with both hands, and bending forward slightly.

"My Embassy is holding a reception for the conference speakers, and I would like to invite you, continued Tanaka, receiving the card with both hands and bending even lower than Alex. Would you be kind enough to join us, Sir? Our Ambassador and the Embassy staff will be honoured and delighted to meet you."

"Thanks," replied Alex. "It's very kind of you. When is the reception?"

"Tomorrow night at eight, at the Helvetia Hotel, Sir."

"Helvetia Hotel," Alex thought quickly. "That's where Yoko is staying. Maybe I can get the chance to see her again. Maybe she will be at the reception." Like a strong dream, the image of Yoko returned to mind, and that warm feeling returned. "I will try to make it," he replied, looking at Tanaka.

"It will be an honour and a privilege to have you there, Sir. My office will deliver a formal invitation to your hotel."

"Very well," added Alex, waving to a bowing Tanaka.

Built over two hundred years ago, the Helvetia Hotel is located at the centre of Saint Gallen. With many renovations and a luxurious interior design, it is the best that Saint Gallen has to offer for high calibre receptions and conferences. Over the two hundred years of its history, the hotel has hosted diplomats, prime ministers, presidents, and even kings from all over the world.

At exactly eight Alex arrived at the hotel by taxi. He tipped the driver and approached the main entrance, but he did not have to search for the reception. Just behind the door, Tanaka was waiting for him dressed in a black suit with a blue tie. "Welcome, Mr. Papas. This way please," showed the way Tanaka, greeting his guest with the traditional Japanese bow.

Bowing slightly, Alex followed Tanaka to the Grand Room where the reception was about to begin. Japanese businessmen, foreign diplomats and dignitaries were already there. Two other participants from the previous conference sessions were also there talking with each other. For a moment, he thought of joining them, but the reception setting drew his attention.

The Japanese had put on quite a show. Antique tables with lavish tablecloths and bouquets of spring flowers were all over the room. Waiters with bow ties were moving up and down serving the guests delights from all over the world. In one of the corners, Japanese chefs prepared *yakitory* and *sushi* for the Japanese food fans. Trays with exotic fruits were placed at several locations around the room. In a balcony setting a band played international rhythms. He was quite impressed but not surprised. He remembered this setting. He must have seen it before. "Ah," he thought, it must have been at the reception of Kobe Steel at the Waldorf Astoria in Manhattan a few years before. That was a big party with over two hundred guests.

When his turn came to greet the Ambassador, his eyes met with a pair of piercing intelligent eyes.

"Mr. Ambassador, Mr. Papas is here," Tanaka introduced the guest, bowing and making room for Alex.

"Hello, Mr. Ambassador," greeted Alex, shaking hands and exchanging the traditional bows.

"Mr. Tanaka has talked to me a great deal about your work, Sir. I understand you lived for two years in Japan studying our management

system. I have had a chance to glance through some of your books, and I am impressed by your work. You know, in today's world of Japan bashers, it is hard to find economists who stand up and say a few kind words about Japan."

"Thank you, Sir. I just express my views as a social scientist. I write the way I understand things," Alex continued, smiling.

"I hope you enjoy the evening," the Ambassador added politely with a touch of mastery in his voice, turning to the next guest.

Exchanging greetings with half a dozen Japanese staff members, Alex walked towards the bar, but his eyes were searching for Yoko. He had a feeling she was here. She must be here. After all, the Japanese Embassy organized this reception, and she had come to Saint Gallen to attend seminars organized by the Japanese Embassy. "She should be here," he said to himself as he grabbed a Kirin beer and dug into a plate of *sushi*.

"She's Japanese and would have gotten here early," he continued thinking, as his eyes scanned the room. No, not a chance. Yoko was nowhere to be seen.

"Mr. Papas, Mr. Papas," a voice called him from the back. I enjoyed your lecture," the voice continued.

"Thanks," replied Alex, as he turned to face a skinny man with glasses. "I am Professor Goldenberg," from Saint-Gallen University.

"Nice to meet you. What do you teach?"

"Asian Economies."

"You must have spent some time in Asia."

I was a diplomat, stationed in Tokyo first, and then in Beijing." "That's very interesting. I hope we can find some time to chat later" Alex added, grabbing a piece of tempura from a passing by waitress, and seizing the opportunity to walk away from the challenge of a long

academic conversation. He was about to delve a sushi tray, when he heard another voice calling behind him.

"Alex-san, it is a pleasure to see you again," He recognized that voice. Yes, he did. How could he forget! He turned slowly and his heart began throbbing. He could almost hear it. Yoko was standing a few feet behind him holding a glass of coke in her hands and smiling at him. She was wearing a light blue dress with black stripes on the sides just reaching below the knees. Her hair was combed carefully, and her cheeks slightly red from the make-up. Dangling around her neck a small necklace with blue pearls matched the colour of the dress. Her two-inch blue heel shoes made her look taller and prettier. The scent of her perfume and the softness around her seemed to pervade the room.

"The pleasure is mine," Alex replied. "I was hoping to meet you here. How can one forget such a lovely face?"

"Really?" She asked in an innocent, almost childlike manner. "It has only been just two days!"

"I believe a Japanese proverb says that time has not a single measure. It can be like light, like a storm or a sunset or even like a rock. Two days can be a long time, if you're really waiting for someone you want to see, someone special."

His compliments seemed to move her. She was not accustomed to having men flirting her this way. Japanese men do not normally express their feelings, not in the open, any way. She did not know what to think and what to say. Is this man serious? Does he talk like this to every woman he meets? She wished she knew. But for the moment she enjoyed listening to his compliments. She began to like him more and more. Perhaps it was the way he talked. Perhaps it was the way he smiled. Perhaps it was the way he looked. Six feet tall with dark hair and dark intelligent eyes, he looked to her like one of the ancient Greek gods she had learned about in her classical civilization classes



in high school. Like the god Apollo, perhaps. But what she liked most was his charm - the charismatic smile and the facial gestures that had magnetized her in the plane. "He is handsome," she thought, and her face took on that sweet and innocent expression that haunted Alex's mind since he had first seen her on the plane.

"Yoko, you look lovely tonight," Alex continued his charming compliments, interrupting her thoughts.

"Thank you," Yoko replied as she caught his eyes staring at her outfit.

"Why don't we go sit down somewhere," Alex suggested, smiling, pulling Yoko out towards an inner garden.

She followed him obediently without resistance. They found a cosy corner, far from the chatting and socializing guests, and sat closely together. Their legs almost touched, and their faces came close enough so that they could get a better look at each other. They began talking like good friends who had not seen each other for a long time or like two travellers who had seen so many things, so many exotic places, anxious to tell someone all about them. He talked to her about his life on the island of Crete when he was a child. How fun it was to play in the countryside, what customs the islanders had, how everyone watched over everyone else's affairs, how they all shared joy and grief, how protective they were of family and friends; about some traditions in various villages of Crete and how they took law in their hands and how blood crimes were punished by retribution not law; and about the famous writers of the island, classic and modern, and the great politicians who had shaped the destiny of the Greek nation. Then, he told her about his life in Edinburgh, London, and New York. He told her about his family. His arrogant father, who had forgotten how many delis and coffee shops he owned in Manhattan, and about the piles of cash he hid from the Internal Revenue Services in safety deposit boxes in several banks. He talked to her about his

rich uncle, who owned almost half of the Greek commercial fleet and who hated Onassis with a vengeance because he had owned almost the other half. He talked to her about his close friend John Saras, another OECD economist, who was about to become the opposition leader and, perhaps, the next Prime Minister of Greece. He talked to her about Greek politics, the Greek people, their customs, their attitudes, and especially their temper.

Alex was about to talk about his personal life, his failed affair with his high-school sweetheart, but he suddenly stopped his flow of words. He rarely spoke about himself or his feelings. It was as if Yoko had released him from a heavy weight and had become through listening a part of him, a loving conspirator. He flashed that boyish smile at her. "That's enough about me young lady. I've opened my heart to you. Now I am at your mercy," he whispered, as his firm hands reached and touched her delicate ones. "It's your turn now."

Yoko at first looked hesitant. She was not used to that sort of confession. No matter what intimacy she had had. But after all - she thought - so what? Who is to tell, and since there's no harm done, why not. She began by telling him about her family and her life as a child in Hokkaido, northern Japan, her family, her mother, who had raised her and sent her to the best schools in the country, and her father, who for his whole life strove to climb the corporate ladder and finally managed to become the president of a company. She told him how lonely she felt when her father was away on corporate assignments. She talked to him about her life at Cornell University and her impressions of the American lifestyle, about her uncle, the president of a major Japanese corporation, who had been shot dead in his hotel room during his first visit to America. She talked to him about Japanese life, about how the Japanese had managed to get along with each other in small and crowded apartments and in tiny streets, crowded with cars bicycles, and pedestrians. She talked to him about group

behavior and how it imposes discipline on Japanese society, about the ways that the Japanese look at Americans and Europeans.

They went on and on talking for over an hour, developing a feeling of intimacy, as they already knew each other. They felt like voyagers whose paths had crossed some time in the distant past. For a moment, his mind traveled to the deep valleys and the volcanic lakes of Hokkaido. For a moment, her mind wondered around the beautiful island of Crete, visiting the ruins of Minoan civilization. And somewhere in between, in New York, they met again. They took the buggy ride together in Central Park on a white New Year Eve; they climbed the Statue of Liberty together; they drove to the Hamptons on Long Island on a summer night.

"Would you care for some appetizers?" the waiter's voice interrupted their daydreaming, bringing them back from their magical voyage to reality. For a moment, they stared at each other and then looked at the tray, but food wasn't what they were after. Love and affection is what they desired. Yet just because they wanted to pretend they were not so absorbed, they both found themselves reaching for the tray delving the silver into international delicacies.

"When are you leaving Saint Gallen?" she asked in a concerned voice.

"The day after tomorrow. I'll be flying to Duisburg in Germany to give another lecture, and then head back to Paris." He hesitated just for a moment, sensing that he was advancing too fast. But Yoko had swept him off his feet, and that this was his last chance gathering up all his courage, he said smiling. "Would you like to come with me and see the Rhine River? It runs right by Duisburg, you know. He knew that he was moving too fast; daydreaming, but he loved thinking aloud about his feelings for her. "We can enjoy the sunset, watch the ferry traffic, have German pancakes for dinner and drink black beer," he continued, trying to be more persuasive.

# When Greece turned into a little Japan

"It's like being in heaven," Yoko muttered coming closer to him.

"Heaven is where love is. Heaven is where the heart finds its best half," Alex whispered in her ear, holding her tight in his arms and sensually caressing her long-dark hair with his lips. Gently, Yoko tried to push him away, but she felt weak in his strong embrace. She tried to escape his overtures, but she was unable to move. He was holding her tight, his large chest and strong hands harboured her. She finally yielded and cuddled closer to him listening to the sound of his heavy breath, his heart beating. Words had lost their meaning. It was just she and he, two souls harmonizing with the whispers of the wind rustling through the pine trees. She started composing a song borrowing the verses from the ancient Greek poets and the Heian era. She wanted these moments to last forever, to reach the clouds and fly together with him forever to eternity.

Like the melodies of Orpheus in the ancient legend echoing from far away, Alex's voice woke her up from her day-dream.

## *A few words about the writer*



Professor **Panos Mourdoukoutas** holds a PhD from SUNY University of Stony Brook. He started his career in the State University of Pennsylvania and continued in the University of Long Island in New York, and Athens University of Economics & Business. He has also offered his services as a consultant in the Greek Ministry of Finance. In addition, Professor Mourdoukoutas has represented Greece in the United Nations, has visited many countries all over the world, and lectured in a series of universities, including Nagoya University, Kobe University, Tokyo Science University, Keimung University, Saint Gallen University, and Duisburg University. Many of his

articles have been presented in academic and business conferences, and published in business journals and periodicals as Barron's, Edge Singapore magazine etc. In 2001, he received the Literati Club Award (UK) as "The Highly Commented Author".



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