II

AND THEY INVENTED MATH

After an hour on a plane, two in a taxi, three on a decrepit ferry, and then four more on buses driven madly along the tops of sheer cliffs by Greeks on cell phones, I rolled up to the front door of the vast and remote monastery. The spit of land poking into the Aegean Sea felt like the end of the earth, and just as silent. It was late afternoon, and the monks were either praying or napping, but one remained on duty at the guard booth to greet visitors. He guided me along with seven Greek pilgrims to an ancient dormitory, beautifully restored, where two more solicitous monks offered ouzo, pastries, and keys to cells. I sensed something missing, and then realized: no one had asked for a credit card. The monastery was not merely efficient but free. One of the monks then said the next event would be the church service: Vespers. The next event, it will emerge, will almost always be a church service. There were thirty-seven different chapels inside the monastery's walls; finding the service is going to be like finding Waldo, I thought.

"Which church?" I asked the monk.

"Just follow the monks after they rise," he said. Then he looked me up and down more closely. He wore an impossibly long and wild black beard, long black robes, a monk's cap, and prayer beads. I wore white running shoes, light khakis, and a mauve Brooks Brothers shirt and carried a plastic laundry bag that said EAGLES PALACE HOTEL in giant letters on the side. "Why have you come?" he asked.

That was a good question. Not for church; I was there for money. The tsunami of cheap credit that rolled across the planet between 2002 and 2007 has just now created a new opportunity for travel: financial-disaster tourism. The credit wasn't just money, it was temptation. It offered entire societies the chance to reveal aspects of their characters they could not normally afford to indulge. Entire countries were told, "The lights are out, you can do whatever you want to do and no one will ever know." What they wanted to do with money in the dark varied. Americans wanted to own homes far larger than they could afford, and to allow the strong to exploit the weak. Icelanders wanted to stop fishing and become investment bankers, and to allow their alpha males to reveal a theretofore suppressed megalomania. The Germans wanted to be even more German; the Irish wanted to stop being Irish. All these different societies were touched by the same event, but each responded to it in its own peculiar way. No response was as peculiar as the Greeks', however:

anyone who had spent even a few days talking to people in charge of the place could see that. But to see just how peculiar it was, you had to come to this monastery.

I had my reasons for being here. But I was pretty sure that if I told the monk what they were, he'd throw me out. And so I lied. "They say this is the holiest place on earth," I said.

I'd arrived in Athens just a few days earlier, exactly one week before the next planned riot, and a few days after German politicians suggested that the Greek government, to pay off its debts, should sell its islands and perhaps throw some ancient ruins into the bargain. Greece's new socialist prime minister, George Papandreou, had felt compelled to deny that he was actually thinking of selling any islands. Moody's, the rating agency, had just lowered Greece's credit rating to the level that turned all Greek government bonds into junk—and so no longer eligible to be owned by many of the investors who owned them. The resulting dumping of Greek bonds onto the market was, in the short term, no big deal, because the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank had between them agreed to lend Greece—a nation of about eleven million people, or two million fewer than Greater Los Angeles—up to $145 billion. In the short term Greece had been removed from the free financial markets and become a ward of other states.

That was the good news. The long-term picture was far bleaker. In addition to its roughly $400 billion (and growing) of outstanding government debt, the Greek number crunchers had just figured out that their government owed another

$800 billion or more in pensions. Add it all up and you got about $1.2 trillion, or more than a quarter-million dollars for every working Greek. Against $1.2 trillion in debts, a $145 billion bailout was clearly more of a gesture than a solution. And those were just the official numbers; the truth is surely worse. "Our people went in and couldn't believe what they found," a senior IMF official told me, not long after he'd returned from the IMF's first Greek mission. "The way they were keeping track of their finances—they knew how much they had agreed to spend, but no one was keeping track of what he had actually spent. It wasn't even what you would call an emerging economy. It was a third world country."

As it turned out, what the Greeks wanted to do, once the lights went out and they were alone in the dark with a pile of borrowed money, was turn their government into a piñata stuffed with fantastic sums and give as many citizens as possible a whack at it. In just the past twelve years the wage bill of the Greek public sector has doubled, in real terms—and that number doesn't take into account the bribes collected by public officials. The average government job pays almost three times the average private-sector job. The national railroad has annual revenues of 100 million euros against an annual wage bill of 400 million, plus 300 million euros in other expenses. The average state railroad employee earns 65,000 euros a year. Twenty years ago a successful businessman turned minister of finance named Stefanos Manos pointed out that it would be cheaper to put all Greece's rail passengers into taxicabs: it's still true. "We have a rail-