

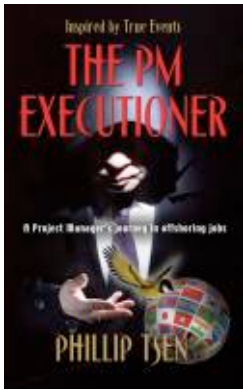
Inspired by True Events

THE PM EXECUTIONER

A Project Manager's journey in offshoring jobs

A man in a dark suit and purple tie is shown from the chest up, looking down with his hands held out. In the lower right, a globe is covered in various national flags, with a yellow bird in flight above it. The background is dark with a spotlight effect on the man's face.

PHILLIP TSEN



Inspired by true events, the story follows one man's fall from grace and into the waiting arms of pride as he administers the deadly blows of offshoring. Corporate bottom lines are spared, but thousands of jobs are executed. He battles with betrayal, alienation and consequences of life and death. As he tries to reconcile his increasingly indefensible decisions, he finds the fallacy in a career that has taken so much from so many, including him...

The PM Executioner: A Project Manager's Journey in Offshoring Jobs

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A Project Manager's Journey in Offshoring Jobs

Phillip Tsen

Inspired by True Events

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First Edition

Chapter 1

Ruthless Prospect

*Corner of Fiftieth Street and Fifth Avenue,
Manhattan—September 11, 2002*

There were nine of us packed into the small, windowless storage room when I heard the cursing from down the hall.

“Go to hell!”

Before the commotion began, we had been sitting elbow to elbow around a circular table meant for a tighter crowd. The cords from our nine laptops snaked together in a tangled scrum, each of them competing for access to the dual power strips and network router at the center of the table. When you have a job like mine, you don’t make many friends. The executives at the client companies always want to keep you hidden to avoid mass panic from the workers. These kinds of cramped, secluded spaces come with the territory.

We had been doing this same thing for months—the nine of us meeting here in this dreary space to talk about the client’s workforce like it was just another corporate process we could trim into the pinnacle of efficiency. On any project, it was always around this time that I would start to miss my wife and two daughters almost more than I could bear. On any project, it was always around this time that I stopped thinking about the cuts I was advising as something that would affect the lives of real people, and started thinking about the cuts I was advising as the last few

tasks to finalize before I could call the project complete and catch a flight home.

The calendar on my laptop screen related the momentous date. This was supposed to be a significant and tragic anniversary for my country, and despite the fact that I knew I'd be spending it in that small, windowless storage room just like any other day, I wasn't oblivious to the psychological significance of the date. Beyond the thousands of people that died in those towers, hundreds and even thousands of times more of us had spent the year subjected to a sensationalized stream of media-induced patriotism and fear-mongering. When I'd woken that morning, I couldn't help but feel some measure of trepidation—like maybe this anniversary would end in similar tragedy.

What I had originally mistaken for a man merely hollering randomly from down the hall quickly bloomed into the sound of several people scuffling. Men jawed. A table skidded across the polished cement flooring, sending the hollow whine of wood on stone into the air. A woman screamed. It was clear now: not twenty feet outside this room, a fight had broken out.

I looked to Shanice, a young and energetic coworker who always acted like a kind of mother to the team. Just moments ago, she'd been tapping her flaming-red polished fingernails on the table and asking me if I thought maybe we should start the meeting. She didn't seem so motherly now. The color had drained from her face.

“What, um . . . ,” she said, her voice failing her. “What’s going on out there?”

“Probably just a couple guys blowing off steam,” I said, but I knew it was a lie. In our line of work, we had seen this kind of thing before. This was no minor disagreement; this was a disgruntled former employee. From the sound of the struggle outside, it was clear at least that he had only brought his anger and his fists. I had read about cases where the offended party brought a gun. Thankfully, I had never seen that in person.

As the others in the room seemed to tense, I tried to keep calm. It didn’t take much guessing to recognize that this conflict was meant for us, but as long as we all stayed in the room, it would never *find* us. Then I realized the problem: there were supposed to be nine of us here. Why was I only seeing eight? “Who’s missing?” I said.

“Anil just stepped out,” someone offered.

I groaned. “Well, let’s hope it’s not *him* out there, causing all that bad noise.”

A nervous chuckle escaped a few of my coworkers. The others only had wide eyes for the door.

My laptop chose that moment to go dark, its black screensaver kicking in and creating a reflection of myself in the screen. In that reflection, I saw an aging face. My hairline had receded, the graying evident above my ears. *You should calm them*, I told myself as I looked to each of the seven other troubled faces in turn. *Remind them that no one knows we’re in this room. Tell them everything will be all right as long as we keep our mouths shut and lock the door.*

Shanice's hand closed tightly over my arm. Her lips trembled as she spoke. "What's going on, Peter?"

I pressed my index finger to my lips and listened.

There, again, was my reflection in the laptop screen. Under the dim light from the ceiling's fluorescent lamp, the plastic cover of my visitor badge glimmered. The badge read *Global ITM Services*, with the words *PETER FALLON: PROJECT MANAGER* scrolled across the bottom in bold typeface. On any other day, it was this badge that would allow me access to the building's many wings. On this day, this badge would label me as the man chiefly responsible for the loss of hundreds of people's jobs. I suspected that whoever it was that was fighting outside had come in search of me.

We all jumped at the sound of the hollering giving way to someone rushing toward the door from outside.

"Someone lock the door!" I called, but it was too late.

A flash of light from the hall preceded the figure pressing through the door. When my eyes adjusted, I saw that it was Anil, and I sighed. Anil was my counterpart from the India side of the offshoring equation.

"There's some guy out there causing a stir about losing his job," Anil whispered through heavy, hysterical breaths. "He's big. Got a blonde crew-cut. They're trying to hold him back, but he's coming this way." He sat beside me at the table, keeping his hands wide and flat on the desk as if he feared he might fall over without support.

“He doesn’t know we’re here,” I said, but something told me I was wrong, and the words fell flat.

This is it, I thought. *This is why you were dreading this day*. Maybe fate had given me that sense of trepidation since the morning. Maybe the feeling had been a warning. From wherever it came, it drove me now to think one prevailing thought: if you have to fight today, just don’t do it in front of the others. You have to go out and meet him.

“I’ll go,” I said.

Shanice drew an audible breath as she placed her hand on my wrist, holding me down. I looked to her, and she shook her head. With a slow smile, I pulled away and rose.

“You all stay in here,” I insisted. “Keep the door locked. No sense in letting the cat out of the bag over one angry employee.”

“Ex-employee,” Anil corrected, and I’m not sure why, but the word made me scoff.

Everyone stared at me with obvious concern as I removed my jacket and rolled up my sleeves.

It was Shanice who made the connection. “You’re not going to—”

“Fight him?” I said with a sorrowful grin. “No. I’m just going to talk some sense into him.”

“He’s a big guy, Peter,” Anil reminded me. “Just don’t get too close.”

Now my heart skipped. I had been trying to look courageous—maintain the part of the leader. But the truth was, no one could ever describe me as big. Quite

the opposite, really. Here I was, rolling up my sleeves to face a conflict I had no business being a part of. If I didn't, it would come find us in this small, windowless room. So what choice did I have?

For some reason, as I prepared to leave, I couldn't stop my mind from drifting back to that day of my brother's funeral, that day I left Helen and Tiffani behind in the car.



Upstate New York—May 1990

Under the glint of the sunlight, the handful of dirt I scattered onto the lowering casket glittered like stars. When the service was finished, I went to my sister-in-law, who held her daughter Mimi in her arms. She looked at me with the blank stare of the bereaved, and I embraced both of them at once.

“You know how to reach me, Catherine,” I said. “Call me for anything you need.”

I felt her nod against my shoulder as I gave her one last squeeze. Then I slowly returned to my car, where I found my pregnant wife, Helen, waiting in the back seat with our five-year-old daughter, Tiffani.

“Why can't I see Uncle Paul?” Tiffani asked tearfully when I slid in behind the wheel.

Helen choked up at the question as she took her place beside me in the passenger seat. She was eight and a half months pregnant with our second daughter, and I could see that she was uncomfortable in both body and spirit.

“I want to say goodbye to your brother, too.”

Helen and I had decided that she would stay behind in the car with Tiffani, because we thought our daughter would be better off not experiencing such a sad moment so early in her life. We wanted to spare her the kind of pain that comes from seeing the finality of death. I had witnessed it myself just two nights earlier, when—in place of a devastated Catherine—I had gone to the basement of the funeral home to cover my brother's charred remains with his favorite throw blanket from when we were kids. It was my way of comforting his drifting spirit, and a symbol of home for my brother to take with him on his final journey. I knew how deep such sorrow could cut.

“Daddy?” Tiffani said, sounding on the verge of tears.

“Yes, honey?”

“You ride in planes sometimes, don't you?”

My lower lip quivered as I buried my chin in my chest. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see my wife crying silently. “That's true.”

Tiffani began to sob. “I don't want you to go like Uncle Paul in an airplane crash.”

Helen turned to face the window, not wanting her daughter to see her tears. I wheeled around and knelt in the driver's seat, leaning back to take my daughter into an embrace. “Sweetheart,” I began breathlessly, “you don't have to worry.” I pulled back to look into her big brown eyes. “Computer science students almost never fly.”

For a long time by then, I had been sure that I was doing the right thing by moving on from my artistic career and into computers. The textile industry in the US had changed. When I had expressed my concerns to Helen, she had been quick to encourage me to go back to school, even with the baby on the way. It would mean financial struggle for us in the short term, but we both knew that a computer science master's would offer far more promise long-term. The transition would make life difficult for my wife, but perhaps it was her native Chinese philosophies that drove her to support my decision with such insistence.

From the back seat, Tiffani nodded as she sucked her lower lip anxiously.

"I'll always be right here, honey. You don't have to worry about any airplanes taking me away."



Meeting Room, Manhattan—September 11, 2002

When I came back to reality, my mind flickered with images of all those flights I had taken since that day. Then, all at once, I snapped out of it. I had protected my daughter that day the best I could, and today I would protect my coworkers in exactly the same way. But how? There was nothing in the corporate handbook that mentioned what to do if a laid-off employee ever came knocking with the intent to bludgeon you with his fists. *Do something!* I thought.

In all my years in this role, I had gotten used to speaking to people feeling a little on edge about their

situations—entire rooms of workers worried about whether they would keep their jobs. By now, I had developed a kind of sixth sense for how to connect with people and ease their anxieties. *This is just like any of those times*, I told myself. *Just do what you always do.*

“I don’t like this job anymore,” Shanice said. “I’m scared, Peter.”

Three of the others in the room mumbled their agreement.

“Just keep quiet,” I whispered. “Stay away from the door. I’ll be back before you know it.”

Just as I reached the door, I heard a man’s shrill voice call out. “I’m looking for the executioner.” The words carried from a distance, but I could sense that the speaker was drawing closer. The source of the voice was clearly unhinged. His footsteps were heavy on the linoleum just down the hall. It didn’t sound to me like anyone was holding him back anymore.

“The executioner?” Anil mouthed at me.

I shook my head tersely, but I knew what the man meant. He meant me. I’m not sure whether I managed to maintain my courageous composure on the outside, but inside, my nerves were firing hot.

“Where are you hiding the team from ITM?” the voice barked from the hallway.

I heard a muffled sniveling in reply. The room didn’t need a window for me to picture the man holding one of his former managers by the collar and dragging him toward the hall.

The voice grew more enraged. “Tell me where I’ll find the one responsible for ruining my life!”

From the fearful mumbling that came in reply, I could sense that the manager had given up our location. It would be a short walk down a barren hallway. It wouldn’t be long now before we would hear the knob on our windowless door turning. It was too late now. He was going to reach us before I could stop him. Even if I opened the door this moment, he would be on us. I got up and made my way to the door.

“Be careful, Peter,” Shanice said. “He might be carrying.”

“Carrying?” I asked, my voice squeaking unexpectedly.

“You know.” She shaped her hand into a gun. “He could be packing.”

“Oh.” The breath went out of me as I pondered the thought.

“Are you sure you want to face him like this?” Shanice asked. Her eyes were wide and glazed with fearful tears.

I knew she was right. All at once, my bravado evaporated and I found myself reaching out to lock the door.

When I turned back to the room, Shanice was nodding her approval, but everyone else was looking at me like I had just eaten their lunches. “I don’t think we are guilty,” I whispered—and immediately I wondered why in the world the word “guilty” had entered my mind. I had never before harbored any guilt for what I did for a living. Why should I start

now? “What we did to this man was a tragedy,” I said to the others, as if clarifying my point. “But it was *necessary*. Just remember, even if he comes through that door, we weren’t responsible for firing hundreds of people; we were responsible for *saving* hundreds more by making this company solvent again.” I looked from colleague to colleague. Most of them were staring at me in disbelief, a hero who had failed them. “We have only done what was necessary.” Even as the words escaped my lips, another part of me knew they weren’t true. “If I’m guilty,” I said, a grumble of spite bubbling up unexpectedly, “then you’re all guilty.”

Eight pairs of eyes reflected back at me. There were blue eyes and green and brown, all of them wide and pleading and white. The look of them made me regret my words.

“What can we do, Peter?” Shanice asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Ask for his forgiveness? I don’t think that’ll work.”

“So your name is Peter Fallon,” the man cried from beyond the door. My heart sank with the realization that the manager had given up my name. My nametag suddenly felt like it was burning a hole in my chest.

“You think you can just get away with sending my job to India? Well, there are hundreds of us whose lives you’ve ruined, Peter, but I’m not going to just stand back and take it.”

His footfalls echoed closer with each slow step.

A cold sweat broke across my brow. I knew that collective feeling of a group huddling together in fear. I found myself stepping toward the door just as two shadows arrived to interrupt the yellow light casting across the floor.

The man must have heard my shoes scraping over a surface I only just now—after all these months—noticed was nothing more than dusty concrete. “Is that you, Peter?” he said.

I didn’t speak. I *couldn’t* speak. My voice seized as my throat constricted. When the man tried the doorknob, I felt a wave of hollow relief wash over me to learn that the lock actually worked.

For the moment, we were safe. For the moment, there was silence. None of us breathed.

“How many people do you have in there with you, Peter?” the man said after a time.

I said nothing.

“How do the rest of you feel about the coldblooded work you do?” the man asked. For the first time, he sounded something less than angry. His voice quavered as if he was ready to cry. “Anyone in there feel like dying to save the man in charge of firing hundreds of people like me?”

Before that moment, I hadn’t known it was possible to actually hear the nervousness of a roomful of people, but that’s what I felt. It was as if my mind filled with every tense shift, every frightened whimper, every held breath.

“So who wants to get out of here?” he asked. “And who wants to get what Peter Fallon’s got coming to him?”

In unison, all eight of my coworkers rose and began inching toward the door.

“Don’t,” I whispered. “He sees a mob at the door, who knows what he’ll do?”

That stopped them. Together, they took a step back. The women turned toward one another, embracing in fear. No one spoke.

Suddenly, I felt a new sense of confidence surge within me. *He can’t get in, I thought. And it won’t be long before the police come to save us. All you have to do is wait him out.*

I remained in the room, trying to think of a way to talk the man down. Something told me to appeal to his morality. “Are you a religious man?” I called out, my voice rising as I spoke.

“That you, Peter?” came the reply.

“Yes.” I looked back at the others. “Are you a religious man?”

There was a long, gripping silence before the man replied. “What’s it matter?”

I drew a breath to calm myself. “It matters because, the way I see it, there’s good and bad that coexists in all of us. I figure it’s up to each of us to decide whether we’ll be saints or devils. So I guess you could say we’re all the god of our own actions.”

He scoffed. “Don’t give me that religious garbage. Come on out, Peter. I just want to have a talk with you and your friends in there.”

“It’s just me in here,” I lied.

His laughter was cold. “You must think we’re all stupid around here.” He tried the knob again, his hands working with more force this time. “Do you honestly think none of us have noticed your team skulking around back here these past three months? You might not know me, Peter, but I know you. Not one person in there would stick his neck out to save you—and even if he did, it wouldn’t be much of a fight. I’ve paid my dues. You made sure of that. I’ve come here today to pay them back. And if I have to get through eight people to get to you, all the better.”

So he knew us well enough to know our exact number. I could sense the others’ desperation growing. If I was going to talk my way out of this, I wouldn’t have much time.

“What’s your name?” I asked through the door.

More derisive laughter came in response. “What does that matter to you? I’m just another sheep you sent off to slaughter.”

“It matters a great deal to me,” I insisted.

It was a long while before the man spoke again. “Brian Watson,” he said, sounding resigned.

I thought about what must have transpired to drive Brian Watson to this moment. It wasn’t my fault he had received a pink slip. I was just doing my job, like any other man would. And as much as people in his shoes tended to dislike me, as far as I was concerned, I was only helping companies like his to survive. As many jobs as I had helped cut, I had saved many thousands more. I could remind Brian of this fact, of

course, but I knew that would only return him to his rage.

I'm not sure from where my words came. "The world isn't a perfect place, is it, Brian?"

My heart skipped with the sound of his snorting laugh. I could hardly keep still from the nerves as I waited for his reply.

"No," he said after a time.

"Then I guess the question is whether you recognize that life sometimes deals us setbacks."

I became intensely aware of the collective whoosh of air as the other eight sucked in their breath. They feared my words were too bold, my tone too challenging. It seemed a long time in waiting for Brian's reply. I tried to imagine him out there as he looked down at his hands—hands that had apparently struck some of his former coworkers. I wondered if he thought about the state he had driven everyone to, whether they sat huddled inside or outside this room. I pictured him as a burly man running a large hand through a head of thin blonde hair. I wanted to think that he was having second thoughts, giving himself up—but for some reason, doubt now ruled my heart.

"Setbacks?" he said, the edge returning to his voice.

"That's right," I said nervously.

"Life doesn't deal setbacks. *You* deal setbacks. I lost my job. I'm going to lose my home. My wife and son have left me. All because of you."

Something told me to slide away from the door. Moments later, I heard the cracking strain of the cheap

hollow door on the cheap wooden frame as Brian tried to ram his way through. I glanced back at the others. Eight pairs of eyes blinked wildly. Brian tried breaking through the door again, but somehow it held fast.

“You going to come out from the darkness, Peter?” he said. “Or are we’re going to see if life has any setbacks in line for you today? Because I can assure you, I make it through this door, you’re going to see one hell of a setback.”

I slid down to take a seat with my back pressed to the wall. As frightened as I was, I felt no remorse over the pain I had caused the man so bent on hurting me. I was only doing my job. Time slowed for me as I pondered the choice I now faced. The longer I stayed in here, the less respect I would retain from my coworkers. But the longer I stayed in here, the better chance I had of escaping this mess without getting any part of me broken.

“Someone call the police,” I said softly, but as soon as the words escaped my lips, I remembered the consistent annoyance that was this room. For as long as we had been working here, our cell phones had never worked. If we ever needed to make a call, we had to step into the hall or sneak down to the conference room to use the land line. I also realized that somebody out there surely would have called the police by now.

“What’s it going to be, Peter?” the voice called through the door. “You coming to me, or am I coming to you?” He hissed a mirthless laugh. “What’s that

you said earlier? We going to see firsthand if a saint or a devil lives in your heart?"

I turned to the eight pairs of eyes in the room. Time stopped. I thought about Helen, how the death threat implicit in Brian's voice meant I might never get to hold her again. I thought about Tiffani and Ashley. I would miss Tiffani's senior prom. I would never see Ashley in high school. I would never walk either of my daughters down the aisle. And if it went down that way, it would be because I was just doing my job. I was good at this job, yes—maybe even too good—but it wasn't my fault Brian had gotten the axe. I sympathized with the loss of his family, but it certainly didn't have anything to do with me. I only made a recommendation. It was his employers that—

"You've ruined my life, Peter!" Brian interrupted, "You and the rest of you bastards in that room. I curse you and your families! You can all go to hell." I heard him rise and could feel that he was rearing up to barrel into the door again. "Open the fucking door!" The sound that followed was unmistakable. Brian began to rage at the door panel, hammering at the thin plywood. I wasn't sure what he was using, but suddenly the wood split open, a sharp metal point hacking into the crack. When he pulled back to carve another slice out of the door, I saw it there in the light from the hallway: it was a hunting knife.

I wanted to tell him to wait—suddenly wanted nothing more than to step forward and offer myself up in exchange for the safety of my eight innocent

colleagues—but something replaced my words with another thought.

“We’re just doing our jobs,” I told them. “We’ll be all right.”

I shoved myself so hard against the wall beside the door it hurt. I prayed that the door would hold, that this wouldn’t be my time, that this roomful of people who only wanted to do their jobs would be able to move on with their lives. We hadn’t made the decision to offshore Brian’s job. The blame didn’t lie with us; it lay with Brian’s CIO, CFO, CEO, and all of those other C-suite officers; it lay with the offshoring-to-India trend that had become the norm in US corporate culture. If this man killed me, he wouldn’t be killing the problem.

He would just be killing me.

The fear crept up my spine and gripped me. I stared at the light shining through the crack Brian had made in the door, but with every infinite second, it appeared to retreat. In time, all I could see was the darkness. All I could hear were the desperate pleas of my coworkers and the sound of Brian’s hand wrenching at the doorknob as he hacked away with his knife.

“This is it, God,” I said to myself. A shivering of cold nerves ran from my toes up through my spine. “I’m in your hands now.”

Then, suddenly, it stopped.

Another loud crash carried from outside. “Drop that!” someone yelled. “Hands up!”

An unexpected feeling rose in my heart as I heard the shouting and struggling in the hall. It was hope.

When the shouting started to retreat, I stood. A short while later, the noise of the struggle ended. Someone down the hall yelled that the police had come and taken Brian away. We were free.

All around, my coworkers began to babble in relief. I felt that same relief, but I couldn't really hear them. I was too lost in watching the tiny particles of dust flowing inside that stream of light beaming through the slit Brian had carved in the door. It had become so vivid as it pierced the otherwise dark room.

In that light, I saw hundreds of my own life moments flash by and vanish. For the first time in years, I understood how dangerous this job could be, how fragile this life could be, and how much like dust I was when faced with the choices I had made. At that moment, nothing mattered to me but Helen, Tiffani, and Ashley. I knew that, whatever happened from here, I would need to rededicate myself to the promise I had made to Tiffani on the day of my brother's death. Right then and there, I made a vow to myself that I would always be there for my daughters, just as I had said I would be.



JFK Airport Runway—May 14, 2007

“We are third in priority for takeoff,” the pilot announces. His Asian accent comes through clearly over the intercom. “We should depart in five minutes,

before the storm comes. Flight attendants, please prepare for takeoff.”

I’m glad to hear we’ll beat the storm. Otherwise, we’d be idling on the runway for hours, and with my thoughts as dark as they have been, that is the last thing I want to do. I can guess at why I’m thinking about my brother’s funeral—it flashes in my mind every time I board a plane—but I can’t quite put my finger on why I’m pondering that day in September 2002. I try to put it out of my mind as I get comfortable in my usual seat: 2A, business class and by the window. I’m alone in my row because I’ve made friends with the lady at the elite check-in counter. She’s always sure to block my adjacent seat whenever possible. I like to travel quietly and peacefully, especially on a long overseas flight. Conversation with strangers has never been my cup of tea. The less professional travelers can be so nosy, always wanting to know everything about my life—or, worse, wanting to brag endlessly about their own lives, on and on for hours.

I gaze through my window at the world outside. The sun traces beautifully near the horizon, outlined as it is by the early tendrils of the coming storm. From the trees in the distance beyond the runway, I can see a blustery wind picking up. It’s early summer, and the sunset is golden. Far to the north, a wall of dark clouds looms. The rain casts downward in a great black curtain, connecting the sky to the ground, swallowing everything of the horizon from north to

east. I ask myself why this peaceful and harmonious moment must be interrupted by the pall of the storm.

*Is this what a life
prefers? There's always
some unpredicted,
unpleasant thing to
disrupt our harmony. By
the time of our late
middle age, these little
catastrophes of
circumstance seem to
overwhelm.*

I have encountered such sunset scenery many times, but on this day, my mood reflects philosophically. I recall a time from when I was younger—back before I ever heard the name Brian Watson. Before that day, I had always looked at my surroundings with a positive perspective. In retrospect, I had hardly achieved anything in life yet. Back then, Helen and I still struggled to make a good life for our daughters, Tiffani and Ashley.

Now, as I sit on this airplane, waiting for my latest in an endless line of takeoffs, I know two things with a certainty. First, I have achieved much—more, indeed, than the young version of myself ever would have believed. Second, my worldview has become decidedly negative. Whereas before a sunset like this would have filled me with hope about what my future would hold, it now symbolizes the age I'm beginning

to feel more each day. I'm supposed to know comfort about how secure my family's finances and my retirement will be. I've seen too much in my career to know what real comfort is like anymore. I've seen so many people suffer from job loss and career change, so many people languish as they endure those unpredicted disruptions. I wonder how many men and women my age I've sent spiraling into uncertainty.

My thoughts break at the roar of the plane's engine spinning to life. The sound cranks louder and louder as we whip across the runway, careening toward the dark horizon. The fuselage begins to rattle metallicly. Then, suddenly, the shaking stops. The plane parts from the runway, gliding quietly through the air. The landscape of the airport bends to a twenty-five-degree angle. My body sags into the back of my seat. The sunset shines through the window, casting a golden hue onto the Chinese black ink painting of the Great Wall plastered inside the cabin's arcing interior.

I breathe a sigh of relief to have once again escaped an unpleasantly long delay. The smoothness of the takeoff seems a good sign. I have always been one to read the quality of a journey to my destination as a foretoken of how my business venture will ultimately unfold. I'm not a prophet, nor am I a fortune-teller, but I do sense that this particular business trip will be among my most eventful.

Nearly every week, I fly somewhere either home or abroad. I spend three quarters of every year in hotels. Most weekends, I live in my home in New Jersey. But this time, I bought a one-way ticket to

Shanghai, and with it, a commitment to a one-year international assignment.

“Mr. Peter, one-way ticket this time?” the lady at the elite check-in counter had inquired before I boarded the airplane. “Are you moving to my country forever?”

I smile as I recall the memory. She is a sweet and abundantly friendly Chinese girl. I have seen her face at least once per month over the past two years. Every time I have traveled to China, she has been there to check me in. She calls me Mr. Peter because she has a hard time pronouncing my last name. She used to call me “Mr. Fall-On,” until I tried to correct her. “Fall-On” sounded too much like “fallen” to me, and that’s not a concept one likes to ponder prior to boarding an airplane. It’s the same for most of the people I meet in China. To them, I am “Mr. Peter.”

The airplane pierces through a thick, dark cloud. The rain drips and splatters along the windowpane. Random flashes of thundering lights warm through the foggy sky. Then, suddenly, the clouds disappear below us. We emerge into clear space. A glare of golden lights dazzles my eyes as a sea of dark clouds writhes below. Spots of popping lightning ripple through as if the clouds boil from within. I see that we are in heaven, and that beneath us lies hell.

I close my eyes and drift, as I always do, into memory . . .

Chapter 2

We'll Be All Right

New York—September 11, 2001

I've heard my neighbor Tim's story a dozen times, so picturing it has never been difficult for me. The way it goes is that Tim ran down the streets of Manhattan, his laptop bag slung over his shoulder. Everyone was running and yelling.

"Go! Go! Go! Go! Go!"

The sound of sirens from police cars and fire trucks echoed between blocks upon blocks of buildings. Two blocks behind Tim, a giant monster of ash and debris climbed ten stories high, rolling ever faster and consuming the open air of the street. As Tim quickly turned to the side street, another giant cloud of dust rushed toward him from the opposite direction, this one even closer. He saw a small convenience store five yards away. He saw people waving at him behind the storefront, shouting without sound.

"Come in!" their lips said. "Over here!"

It was too late. Tim was enveloped by the dust. Everything went dark. The noise of the sirens became filtered and muffled. Tim held his breath, willing himself not to suck in any of the choking ash. Blindly, he reached out for the store's door handle. When he found it, he cranked it open to great protest.

"Shut the door!"

Tim stepped through, coughing violently before opening his eyes. He was covered with gray ash from head to toe, looking like a victim caught in Medusa's lair.

*Tim's tears are running down his face
which twinkles by the sunny light
coming through the window.*

When the ash settled outside, Tim stared through the sooty window. He immediately noticed that something was missing. Only one tower stood at the World Trade Center. The building opposite the one in which he worked was now gone. Tim stood motionless at the window. The store was crowded with people, but other than coughing, there was no sound. No one spoke.



Home—June 9, 2002

The stories I had seen on television about that tragic day were as real as Tim's story, but there's something about hearing it from your dear neighbor that makes it hold more weight. It felt as if I was there, witnessing the entire ordeal. The way he spoke, I could feel his relief at escaping to another day with his beloved family.

Nine months after Tim survived the 9/11 horror, I joined many of our shared friends and neighbors in gathering around his backyard deck and swimming

pool. Tim was flipping hamburger patties on the grill with one hand as he raised a beer bottle with the other.

“You know, I just received my twenty-fifth anniversary award,” he said as if trying to lighten the mood.

“Cheers!” someone hollered.

“Life is good,” Tim offered with a smile.

I walked over and congratulated my friend. “So you got your tenure?”

He chuckled. “Yep. Our CIO made the announcement at this town hall meeting at our new office.”

I nodded, remembering that Tim’s office had been moved up the island of Manhattan following the loss of the previous offices to the attack. I wondered, in that moment, how many of Tim’s coworkers had died that day. Then I wondered whether he felt guilty about not being one of them. I had read about that strange feeling among survivors. The ones who had shown up late to work that day, the ones who had been somewhere other than in those towers when the planes hit, harbored an unshakable sense of remorse for having been spared the fate that had befallen their coworkers and friends. It was only natural, I suppose, to carry guilt for living while so many others died.

“The CIO told us that we were the most valuable asset to the company after Nine-Eleven,” Tim said as a look of sadness crossed his face. “So I guess I still have a job, even after all that’s happened . . . even after the dot-com burst.”

Most of Tim's guests worked in the IT industry. Naturally, this meant that most conversation focused on technology stock and the wavering job market.

I turned my attention to Jenny, Tim's wife. "Beautiful boat you have." I pointed at a shiny new boat perched on the trailer behind the garage.

"That's Tim's new toy," she replied as she playfully smacked her husband's arm.

"We decided to enjoy life a bit more while we're still alive," Tim said with a smile. "You should join us for a sail sometime this summer, all right? You, Helen, and the girls can all come."

I smiled gratefully, though I suspected the outing would never happen.

"Would you like a beer?" Jenny asked.

"Lemonade is perfect," I said. "No alcohol for me."

Jenny giggled. "Never changed, huh? Good for you."

Tim and Jenny had been our neighbors since we moved in ten years prior. For ten years, they had been wonderful company.

My cell phone rattled. I flipped it open. It was a text from a sales executive at my office, a man named Scott.

Hey, Peter, he wrote, getting right to the point. Contract was signed. Meet at the coffee shop, corner of Fiftieth Street and Fifth Avenue, on Monday morning, eight thirty.

Sure, I replied.

I clacked the phone shut and returned it to my belt clip holder. With apologetic eyes at Jenny, I asked

Tim about how he liked his new offices now that his company had finally set up a new space for themselves.

“It’s a great location,” Tim replied. “Corner of Fiftieth Street and Fifth Avenue. Can’t complain.”

I felt the blood drain from my face. Tim and Jenny must not have noticed, because they went right along talking and laughing. I excused myself, my mood dropping to the bottom of a valley as I found another corner of the party where I could be alone for a while. *Corner of Fiftieth and Fifth*. I checked the text from Scott again, trying to will the address to be something different. I was disappointed to see that I had made the connection just right. My next job would align with Tim’s job. I stayed quiet for the rest of that afternoon.



The next day was Monday. I entered the coffee shop at Fiftieth and Fifth. Scott seemed a little nervous about the meeting. His eyes kept flashing to all the customers around us. As a confident, brash man who always wore suits that cost more than most people’s cars, this was not at all like him. When he spoke, he whispered as if telling me a secret.

“Now that the contract is signed, we have a tight schedule to deliver.” Again, his eyes darted to the customers sitting around us, all of them oblivious to our conversation. “We have to meet all contractual obligations to avoid penalties. Any help you need, just call me right away.”

“Got it,” I replied.

Later, Scott, another six employees from the company, and I rode an elevator to the twentieth floor of an office building. The moment the door opened, we were greeted by a man who shook Scott's hand and quickly waved us after him.

“Follow me,” he said, sounding tense.

I found it odd that we didn't have to sign in at the reception desk. The man took us to a small conference room. From the look of it, this was once a storage room, but it had been converted to a small office far from the main seating area, offices, and meeting rooms at the opposite side of the floor. The walls were barren. There were no windows. The only thing in the room was a small round table with a network router set up in the middle.

“The CIO hasn't announced the outsourcing arrangement yet,” our greeter whispered. “The announcement got moved to two o'clock this afternoon. Please keep it low in the meantime.” He handed us each a lanyard. “Here are your visitor badges. The restrooms are down the hall. The internet is open. No password required. My assistant will bring assorted half-sandwiches and drinks later on.”

With that, the man made for the door, Scott departing with him, the two of them murmuring in low tones. The rest of us slid our laptops out of our satchels, plugged into the router, and got down to the business of checking e-mails.

By the time I looked up again from my work, the clock on my screen read 3:10. I got up, stretched, and

walked down the hallway. I passed by the main seating area, which was vacant. I saw no one around. I supposed they were all in the announcement meeting, maybe still waiting with bated breath for the CIO to finish. I wondered if Tim was there. I tried not to picture how he might look when hearing the news. I tried not to think about how he would feel when he learned that it was my company that would be managing this transition for his company. Would he resent me for keeping it secret yesterday? Would he assume that I'd known all along?

I was washing my hands in the men's room when a crowd of people shuffled in through the door.

"Shit!" one man said. "This is it."

"When will we know more details?" another asked. "Who's going and who's staying, and for how long?"

I kept my head down as I moved past the men and bolted out of the restroom. The hallway was crowded with people walking back to their workspaces. Someone slapped my shoulder.

"Peter!" he said. "What are you doing here?"

I looked back with a grim smile. Whoever made the announcement at the meeting must not have revealed that it was ITM that would offshore the jobs to India. This would be the first moment that Tim put two and two together. "Hi, Tim," I said, trying not to sound too much like I was dreading this moment.

Tim stared at me. "Wow! So your company is the one, huh? How long have you known about this?"

I wished I was in a dream. I knew there was no way that I would ever be able to convince him that I

could still be his trusted neighbor, even if our paths had to cross in this way. I wanted to crawl into a hole. I was ashamed and embarrassed, unable to tell him what a coward I had been for not revealing what I knew during his party. I could have given him a head's up—could have been the good neighbor—but instead I chose to be the professional, loyal to my company's confidentiality. I had been a poor friend, and I knew it.

"I'll drop by your house after dinner tonight. We'll talk." I put my hand on his arm and gave it a little squeeze.

Tim looked at my hand with a silent pause. I withdrew it slowly as I realized that he probably thought I didn't have the right to touch him anymore. What a betrayal this had been . . .

That evening, I stood outside Tim's house. What had been a sunny day had given way to night. I rang the doorbell. Jenny greeted me with a cold peck on my cheek. I followed her in. She led me into the dining room, where Tim awaited. I shook his hand with both of mine.

"Sorry I couldn't say anything," I offered sheepishly. "I've been hoping this deal would never get pushed through."

Tim cut me off. "I understand the business protocol. Don't worry. Just tell me when the whole thing started."

"Before Nine-Eleven. The deal's been staying quiet ever since. I'd heard that the negotiation was on hold because of some terms and conditions issues. So

I guess I'd hoped it would fall apart. If you want the truth, I was surprised when I heard the deal had closed. I wish to God it had never happened . . .”

“Am I going to be out of a job?” Tim asked, his eyes never wavering from mine. “Those Indians from Bangalore will be taking over my work.”

“Maybe,” I said softly. “The staffing plan for the new organization will take shape in the next few months.”

“You’re just trying to make me feel better,” Tim said, his thick eyebrows furrowing. “But I know the score. You’ve told me all about it before. Remember? Before a contract is signed, the pricing is based on exactly who’s staying for how long and who’s going during the initial period. Isn’t that right?”

I paused for a moment, not sure of what to say, because Tim was right.

“Twenty-five of my best years in life I’ve dedicated to that company,” Tim said angrily.

I kept silent as the memories of how this deal began almost exactly a year ago in that stale conference room came flooding back . . .



Armonk, New York—June 30, 2001

“We’re not giving the client enough savings. We need to do better.” Scott stood at the head of the stale conference room as he reviewed the solution model the team had put together. His slender shoulders and pot belly were wreathed in the gray-white light of the

projector, making him look like something of a sad and lumpy ghost.

“I get that,” I interjected. “But it’s important we retain the standard twenty-five percent of client employees if we hope to mitigate risks.”

I caught Shanice’s nod out of the corner of my eye. She wore her hair up that day, the tight curls falling in a cascade of loose strands over her ears. I liked the way those curls bobbed with her every twitch. Even though I could sense that I was grasping at straws, it was good to have her behind me. She had been a member of my team for three years by that point. She might have been a little motherly—a little too quick to assume that all responsibilities should fall to her—but I always appreciated a take-charge attitude in an environment full of people just trying to do their jobs without stepping on anyone’s toes. It was exactly this quality that had her giving me that look that suggested she was so frustrated she just wanted to bang her head against the wall. I couldn’t blame her. Scott had been talking in circles for nearly an hour now.

By then, I knew the deal involved a potential offshoring solution for the company for which my neighbor Tim worked. I supported the idea that we should retain more employees, because I knew Tim would make the list of those retained. Deals like these were difficult for me in most circumstances, but knowing that the decision we debated in this room today might impact my neighbor made it especially tough. This wasn’t the first time my job had affected the life of someone I knew, of course. A few times,

during friends' gatherings, I had overheard people talking about rumors of their companies outsourcing their IT departments. I would always keep silent, because I knew very well that the outsourcing component might involve India offshoring, which would mean that their job was surely in jeopardy, if not also in my hands.

"Let's work out a model that allows us to meet the price point first," Scott emphasized.

There was something of an inaudible groan that fell over the room—that feeling that everyone had just recognized that we were going to be here for a long time. Shanice rolled her eyes at me. I felt like smiling in reply, but then I also felt like screaming, so I split the difference and gave her a blank stare. With us at the table was a cadre of suit-wearing new hires I had yet to meet. To this point, all of them had looked far too eager to be here, but now I could see that the exhaustion had started to creep in.

Scott stood to his full height, which still made him by far the shortest person in the room. He glanced at his ridiculously expensive wristwatch and flashed us that down-nose look of his. His slight chin disappeared into his neck, absorbed by a soft white glob of jowl. Scott knew how to get what he wanted, and he never cared who he had to step on to get it. We were all upset at the news he had given us. With one huff and one quick turn, he let us all know that he didn't care. Scott always seemed to revel in how he held a position that allowed him to leave the room while the rest of us got back to work.

By the time he strolled out, I could see through the dirt-speckled windows that the sun was grazing the horizon outside. It would be a beautiful June sunset, I could tell. Long traces of cotton clouds stretched thin near the tree line of a forest that hugged the city. I wondered what Helen and the girls were doing, and found myself hoping that they had thought to enjoy what looked like a beautiful summer Saturday.

When Shanice pulled herself closer to the desk, I followed suit, signaling to the team that it was time to get back to the drawing board. Scott's demands might have seemed unreasonable to me, but I had been at this long enough to know that there was a solution to everything. *Maybe if I work hard enough*, I thought, *the solution can allow Tim to keep his job*.

The more we slogged through it, the more I began to doubt my chances of saving my neighbor from this troubling fate. After hours of rework, it was already way past dinnertime. The team called Scott back into the room.

"If we're going to meet the price point," Shanice said, looking up at him over the rim of her thick plastic glasses, "the model needs drastic change."

"Peter?" Scott said, giving me that knowing gaze. He had kicked back in his chair, his feet up on the desk like he owned the place. It was an odd sight, given that we were renting this for-hire conference room in the middle of nowhere. Sure, this was Scott's neck of the woods, but it takes a special kind of man to look like he would be proud to own such a pile of sticks and dust. "What are the risks?"

I recited from a list of risks that would impact contract execution and potential profits.

“Good,” Scott said. “I like it.” He seemed happy to be greeted by the numbers he had been hoping to see. “Regarding those risks, I need for you guys to come up with mitigation plans that won’t require additional cost.”

The tension in the room seemed to mount. By now, those eager new hires were all but hanging their heads. In their dejected expressions, for the first time, I started to like them. I made a point to ask them their names again, once Scott sent us back to our drudgery.

“Work on the mitigation plans and drop it into the presentation,” he said. “We’ll present it to the client CFO and CIO on Monday.”

I groaned inwardly, my hope evaporating that Scott would at least let us wait for Monday morning to complete the task. We had been working all day on a Saturday. From Scott’s oblivious gaze, I could see that we would be here late into the evening.

By the time the team finished the presentation material, it was already past midnight. When finally I breathed the fresh air outside our building, I found it strangely chilly. A roaring hunger seized me suddenly. It was joined by a sense of dread when I realized that all the good restaurants would be closed. Even most of the fast food places along my route back to the hotel would have turned out their lights by now.

My rental car smelled vaguely of cigarettes—just another reminder of how badly I didn’t want to be here.

I stopped by a gas station to buy a frozen TV dinner. Then I returned to my hotel, just another cracker-box extended-stay hovel populated by jetsetters and divorcees. Through the depression of this setting, all I could think of was the strong possibility that Tim would lose his job in this deal. How would I ever face him and his family? I knew I should tell him, but I was contractually obligated to keep my silence. So instead, I hoped that the deal would somehow collapse.

For nearly a year, I had gotten my wish. But then . . .



*Corner of Fiftieth Street and Fifth Avenue,
Manhattan—September 11, 2002*

Three months after the initial outsourcing announcement, the transition project ran somewhat stressfully, due to resistance by those losing their jobs. Three months had passed by quickly. The cubicles and offices were gradually vacated, and then refilled with young Indian men and women. Most of them were here to capture applications knowledge before returning back home to their Bangalore office.

One afternoon, I felt compelled to stop by Tim's office because I knew it was his last day with the company. When I arrived, his office had already been cleaned out. Tim had left for the day—had left forever, in fact. I noticed a small plaque on his bookshelf. It was the only thing he had left behind. The plaque's engraving read:

The PM Executioner

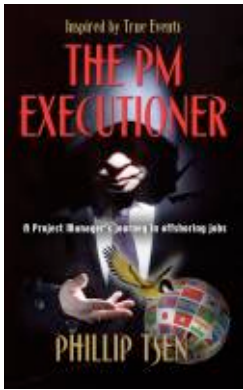
*Congratulations on Your 25th Anniversary
Achievement*

*Your contributions mark a milestone
of your career in our company*

It was that same afternoon when an angry voice shouted from outside that small, dark, closet-like room.

“You’ve ruined my life, Peter! You and the rest of you bastards in that room. I curse you and your families! You can all go to hell.”

“We’re just doing our jobs,” I whispered. “We’ll be all right.”



Inspired by true events, the story follows one man's fall from grace and into the waiting arms of pride as he administers the deadly blows of offshoring. Corporate bottom lines are spared, but thousands of jobs are executed. He battles with betrayal, alienation and consequences of life and death. As he tries to reconcile his increasingly indefensible decisions, he finds the fallacy in a career that has taken so much from so many, including him...

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