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Food for Life

WANDERING EMPTY-HANDED in the valley of poverty, and without the fighting sword of work in my hands to stave off the beast of indebtedness, in my fight for survival I was left defenseless.

Christmas of 1934, I found myself thoroughly snared in the claws of that formidable beast, a debtor to all—the landlord, the grocer, the baker, the doctor, relatives, friends. My once-hopeful spirit was now weak, as all my optimistic forecasts had turned into fables and my promises into lies. Months behind my rent, I feared I would face eviction before I could make another full payment during the cold winter months ahead. My credibility with the grocer and the baker was sagging under the weighty sums I owed them. My word of honor, symbolic of the reliance and trust inherent in all my financial dealings, now evoked but pity. A rare opportunity to cut soap at the factory would send me running to my creditors and lenders with the niggardly portions of a day's wages just to appease them for a day or two. But the beast of indebtedness was insatiable.

Hunger was written in the beast's mouth. I feared my family would starve. But more appalling than my battle for survival was now the terror of its imminent outcome—my becoming a beggar. Begging for help. Begging for pity. What a dreadful thought! I'd rather starve—I could never beg. Or would I beg, for the sake of my loved ones?

On New Year's Eve Chrysa reminded me that there was no food in the house. I looked at her and felt a great guilt. Stark misery was in her eyes; and she had become very

thin. I responded with a nod and turned around to leave as if I were going to do something about it, but I was just trying to hide my tears. There was nothing I could do that evening to earn a single drachma.

As I was leaving, she told me that our little boy Terpandros was ill and that we should take him to the doctor. I reached into my pockets. Two drachmas. The doctor's bill was going to be at least fifty! Would someone see my pitiful estate and offer me a handout so I would not make a humiliating plea? Would I find any crumbs under anyone's table before I have to shamefully beg? "God, help me!" I murmured.

As I stepped into the alley I saw my mother, my brother, and some friends coming to our house for a visit. I wished then I had left a moment earlier. There was nothing in the house to offer them for a treat, and I could not bear the embarrassment of not having something to offer. Then I realized they were all carrying pots and pans—they had brought dinner! I tried to welcome them with cordial smiles and laughter as usual, but I found it difficult to pretend. I was no longer the Charlie* of the company—my humor and laughter had turned into tears.

That night my mother and my brother handed me 150 drachmas. I went into the other room and fought some stinging tears. Deep inside me I knew that my misery was hiding behind a veil of pride. It was not just help I was seeking to find, but a way to avoid begging for help. That made me feel guilty. Worse yet, I dreaded the haunting fear that I might soon have to openly beg for help, the very thought causing me to wallow in self-pity.

HAVE a bite today, starve tomorrow—the routine of misery. There were too many mouths to feed, and I would have fed them my very soul.

Chrysa would do some sewing, but that would barely put a bite on a plate. Poverty had of necessity taught

* See photo, p. 114.

many a home the skills of a tailor. “Come spring, there’s going to be work for us all,” my mother-in-law Theodora and her mother would say to give me courage. Bottled up inside the house, these staunch and honorable women kept gazing resolutely at the gray sky, looking for the sunshine that would guide their footsteps to the distant hills where they might dig out greens and herbs for dinner. But they knew as well as I that in the meantime there would be many a cold, hungry night devoid of hope.

Many families shared the same plight, and scores of desperate people committed suicide. That frightened me. It seems that everyone else in my position would have long ended his life, I thought to myself. Why not I? What stops me from doing it? Hope for a better future? My innocent boy? My pregnant wife? She’d be hurting less crying over my dead body than going on in life like this.

I checked the newspapers. Special columns listed all suicides and the manner in which they had been committed. Some men threw themselves down from high cliffs or buildings. Others drowned at sea or hanged themselves. Many used a gun.

The idea of suicide had been foreign to me, but as it began to pervade my mind through the news I became fearful of it. I feared that the tendency to commit suicide was an uncontrollable obsession born within the mind as suddenly and unexpectedly as a massive heart attack. So, rather than be caught by surprise, I thought I would challenge suicide and deal with it once and for all by writing a note—a suicide note. Knowing that I did not have a gun in my possession and that I could not afford one, I wrote how I would do it—with a gun.

Having established that, I was able to toy with the idea of suicide daily, though at the end of the day I would always find some excuse why I hadn’t committed the act yet. All I need is a gun, I would think to myself. Maybe I can use Tony’s gun. Yeah, he’s got one. But no, that might incriminate him. They might accuse him of murder, or of

forcing me to write my suicide note at gunpoint. That's the kind of heart I have—I care to harm no one.

Soon I began to think more in terms of taking my life than finding excuses. A bullet in the head is better than a bullet in the heart, I reasoned. My heart hasn't been infected yet—I want to keep it clean. It's my head that has brought about my calamity. Why didn't I heed the repeated warnings of those who'd known Tony's character for years? Why did I turn a deaf ear to my wife, who insisted that I base my partnership on a true friend's tried integrity rather than on a distant cousin's untouchable riches? And why was I too proud to admit my growing fears of him even from the very start of our partnership? It's my head that dug my own grave. Yes, it's my head that deserves a bullet in it.

But then it occurred to me that perhaps the act of suicide was not at all a thing that took its victim by surprise. Rather it was the end result of careful planning and contemplation—already my daily preoccupation.

I became filled with uncertainty and fear. I dreaded the thought that I might have already gone past the stage of simply toying with the idea of suicide and fallen victim to the norm followed by those who would inescapably commit the act. I feared that I had already reached the point of no return in a downhill path to my eventual demise.

Daily reminders now roused my fears. Whenever I saw a policeman or a soldier I would think of a gun. But not only guns: if I saw the open sea, I would think of drowning; and if a tall building, of jumping from its top floor. Worst of all, one day I would be talking with a friend, and a couple of days later I would be looking for his name on the suicide lists.

My mind had ballooned with the agony of uncertainty and fear, despair and self-pity—a sure prescription for suicide. I dreaded my mind. My thoughts haunted me constantly—they had become my sole enemy. They were telling me that I had reached the nadir of my sanity and that I should hurry up and take my life before I turned insane.

Yes, maybe that's the reason why I should do it, I thought. What a horrible thing to become insane, locked up in an asylum! I'd rather die. On the other hand, if I went insane I'd be able to commit suicide without any further ado—or could it be that I wouldn't even have the mind to think of a way to do it? ...

Disgusted with all the morbid, frightful thoughts I was having, thoughts that seemed to feed on themselves, I asked myself if there was indeed a reason for living. Unable to come up with an answer, I felt I needed some rationale, a fabrication of some sort for not having taken my life yet. So I managed to wheedle from my conscience an excuse. A man who has cultivated within himself a sense of self-preservation, I began to reason, does not allow his mind to be filled with the degrading, dehumanizing thought of suicide. Then why am I waiting? Am I a coward? No. So what is it? Hope? Hope for what? I no longer have goals in this life, the life of the absurd and nonsensical. For one's goals reflect his personal values. And what personal values have I? None, except—except my pride!

My pride! Is that it? Oh, yes. My lousy pride. The pride that would prevent me from begging for help while my family starved. The kind of pride that eventually kills the conscience. So that's what stops me from finishing it all. Pride is the motive behind my survival. That's how base my sense of self-preservation is. Yet that's what prods me to hold on until, perhaps some day, I can brag about having made it on my own strength.

AT LAST in the middle of 1935 a few signs of an upward climb in business and travel gave floundering, desperate survivors like me hope for some respite.

One day, on my way to look for work for the nth time, I was accosted by a wealthy middle-aged businessman, the owner of a private mail service firm that had survived the choking grip of a sinking economy. Mr. Mihelakis, short and slightly overweight—about my size when times were

good—was a man whose fine features and thin gray hair spoke of refinement.

“Good morning, Mr. Zachariou,” said Mr. Mihelakis, doffing his hat.

“Good morning, Mr. Mihelakis,” I said.

“How’s the hard-working man?” he said as he walked toward me, his right hand extended.

“As fine as the green plant he’ll be selling you this afternoon, Mr. Mihelakis,” I replied with a smile.

“Looking for a job?” he asked, his head raised so his impersonal dark eyes looked at mine right above the lower edge of his small round glasses.

“Name a job I haven’t looked for and I’ll name a job that doesn’t exist, sir.”

“Come by my office later this afternoon. I’ve got a job lined up for you,” he said curtly in his low, assuring voice.

“Yes, sir!” I said excitedly, stretching out both hands for another handshake. “I’ll be there—and with that green plant, too!”

On my way home I stopped discreetly at the church of St. Nikolaos and lit a candle out of gratitude. I had on occasion in the past lit a candle to Saint George and asked for the priest’s benediction, especially when I was about to cross the Cretan Sea in bad weather, but I had kept that a secret. Now I was particularly cautious not to divulge my secret to anyone for fear I might be regarded as one who, due to psycho-economic pressures, had turned religious.

That afternoon I headed for Mr. Mihelakis’ office wondering what to expect. The possibility of a partnership seems far-fetched, I thought to myself. He knows I went bankrupt and that I have no money. Besides, he has three partners working for him—Angelos, his self-made accountant and bookkeeper; Nick, the collector and salesman; and Manolis, the shipping-receiving clerk and salesman. But I’m sure he’s got a job for me—he wouldn’t have talked to me about a job unless he’d meant it. I’ve always known Mr. Mihelakis to be an honorable man, a man who does not waste words. He might ask me to do a

little bit of everything—collecting, delivering, selling. Perhaps he'll have me do some traveling and promoting, too. He'd be better off, though, giving me the freedom to use my own imagination. Well, in the beginning it won't matter to me what I do. I'll do anything. I just need a job. Mr. Mihelakis knows I can perform, and he knows my integrity. Well, everyone in this kind of business cheats some—at least there are opportunities for it. But it's the kind of cheating you do or don't do that tells you what kind of a man you are. He knows I would never cheat to harm anyone.

But it is possible Mr. Mihelakis might consider holding me hostage, so to speak? Now that businesses are improving—at least that's what everybody thinks—he might worry that I'll start my own business and take some of the most desirable clients off his list again. But he knows better. First, it takes a great deal of capital to get started in this kind of business as well as considerable credibility, which I have lost. Most bankers won't even greet me, let alone loan me money. In any case, whatever he asks me to do, I'll do it. I'll do whatever it takes to make him want to keep me!

MR. MIHELAKIS gave me a warm welcome. Angelos, his tall, self-made accountant, leering and with a permanent smirk on his face, was the only partner present. Strangely, at once Mr. Mihelakis began a series of personal questions.

“How much do you owe your grocer?” he asked casually, while offering me a cigarette.

“About 950 drachmas,” I said.

He signaled Angelos, who was sitting at the desk in front of an old typewriter, to jot down the figure.

“How about the baker?” Mr. Mihelakis went on.

“720 drachmas,” I said.

“Rent?”

“Four months behind.”

He waited, his eyes turning toward me.

“Twelve hundred drachmas,” I said.

“Any loans?”

“Yes. About 2,000 drachmas.”

“Do you owe anyone else?”

“Yes. The doctor—240.”

“That’s all?”

“That’s all, sir,” I said.

He looked at Angelos.

“It’s under six thousand,” reported the accountant.

“Make it six,” said Mr. Mihelakis.

I began to think fast. It sounds like a loan, all right, just as I had suspected. He probably wants to be sure he’s tied me down with his own rope so I’ll work for him for a good long time. But I shouldn’t be suspicious of this man. By this he’s actually telling me that he is relying on my aggressiveness and ability to generate business for his firm. I shouldn’t let him down. After all, he’s not only giving me a loan that would help me restore some of my credibility; he’s going to hire me as well. I should be grateful to this man.

“Sign here,” Mr. Mihelakis said, gently placing the ink bottle and pen closer to me and handing me the paper his accountant had so copiously managed to type on the company’s old typewriter. It was a personal loan contract in the amount of 6,000 drachmas. The interest? Two hundred percent! I stood dumbfounded.

“But—Mr. Mihelakis, how am I expected to—?”

“First—” he said quickly, his eyes batting rapidly, “—first of all, you’re going to be working with us. On commission, just like a partner,” he said, and signaled his accountant to place the money on the desk. “Second, you don’t have to start making payments until December, four months from now.”

Angelos placed the money on the desk. It was all in big notes.

“At two hundred percent?” I said incredulously.

“Well, let’s just say that’s your share of investment as a partner?” Mr. Mihelakis said through slanted eyes, his thin eyebrows raised high.

I fixed a bold stare on those dark, impenetrable eyes. I respected this man. He had helped me in the past, and now he was once again offering me help. I had no desire whatsoever to let a momentary expression of impertinence mar our relationship, but I did want him to understand how I felt about his offer. I felt like saying to him, “You very well know, Mr. Mihelakis, that there’s no money on your side of the scale that could outweigh the value of my services. Yet you dare call me a partner so casually, so loosely. Not even on a contractual basis. So I’m asking you to be absolutely frank with me.”

“All right, Mr. Mihelakis,” I finally said. “What’s the collateral you’re asking for?”

He looked at me in surprise. “Collateral?”

“Your integrity, of course, Mr. Zachariou—” suddenly came from the well-groomed, leering accountant. “Your name, Mr. Zachariou, is well known among us salesmen.”

“That is so,” concurred Mr. Mihelakis with portentous gravity.

The two men remained motionless as I re-examined the contract. The 6,000-drachma figure lying challengingly at the heart of the document took my mind a few months back, when my debts amounted to a much higher figure—though presently I was still deep in the clutches of the deadly beast of indebtedness. Now, by unsheathing the sword suddenly thrown into my hand, I could make a lunge straight into its heart!

My hand reached for the pen and resolutely drew it out of the ink bottle, then directed its tip toward the huge figure.

I signed.

“Five drachmas for that gorgeous plant?” said Mr. Mihelakis with a limp smile.

“It’s a deal, sir. And you’ve got the gardener to care for it!” I said.

Six thousand drachmas—and a job! I marveled in unbelief as I left the office, my feet determined to bring good news to a dozen creditors and lenders, starting with the landlord.

FOR the first time in months there was a respectable meal on our dinner table, which included meat. Gratitude was silently painted on the faces of my loved ones as we all situated ourselves around the table to eat. The scene caused reluctant tears to surface in my eyes, so I looked for some diversion. I watched Chrysa, now pregnant with our second child, feed Terpandros with great satisfaction. That didn’t help the tears. Fortunately, at that moment Theodora and her mother revived an unresolved problem from the past, creating the diversion I sought. Unlike their nearly-forgotten introductory dinner topic of how the meal was prepared and seasoned, they began to argue who could have a first chance at our most worn-out household item—the broom.

The taste of a delectable meal still on my palate, I took a walk in the fresh ocean breeze and sought to release my mind. That’s where the truth lies, I thought to myself. Where it’s chewed and churned by rich and poor alike—in the mouth. All the toil, all the agony, all the strife, just to conquer the span between bread and bite. Nothing matters more than that which sustains life—food.

Food! Foundation island of the lofty pedestals that display the trophies of man’s mind. Let this foundation of the philosopher, the theologian, or the philanthropist be shaken. Let him and his loved ones be swallowed up by merciless hunger. And when his lofty pursuits have avalanched to the lowest ground, take all hope away. Then let the sea billows wash over his island’s shores and carry him into the deep dark sea. Whence will his salvation come—from his ideals? His beliefs? His values? To brave life’s ocean and dare its dark waves, just to reach an

island—a lonely rock—will be his goal. And if, half-dead, he finds himself on the shore before the tides of fortune shift, he will again seek to reach a higher, more secure ground. And upon that island's plateaus and terraces will he again erect his lofty pedestals to the highest echelons of his mind ...

Such thoughts occupying my mind, that night on our veranda I eased back my chair and gratefully gulped the fresh ocean breeze, my eyes wandering to the clear starry sky. Who made all this? I wondered. And how does all this vastness of grandeur and majesty relate to my meager existence?

Vivid images from every chapter of my life suddenly flashed before my eyes. I reminisced about Panos the scout leader and refugee, the captain, the soldier, the father and businessman, the survivor. My life—an endless strife—was all replayed in an instant. How short life really is! How ephemeral! So what is its purpose? How does the swift passing of my days relate to the meaning of my existence? To be born, to live, to die—is this the sum total of the meaning of life? And is winning my bread with sweat and agony my goal? Is there a goal beyond the winning of bread? An ultimate goal? A destiny? Could it be that at the end of its flow life enters into an ocean of continued existence? How can I know?

From the depths of my inmost conscience there springs a desire to know. But to have the answers may not be my lot—my lot may be to just live on, experiencing the visible, the tangible, the sensational, the real—until I die. And then, who knows? Perhaps in that ocean sublime beyond the realm of the mundane, beyond the stars, lie all the answers. Meanwhile, my desire to know will subsist as a feeble candle flame—weak, but burning, nevertheless—until death's cold breath reduces it to a smoldering wick. And if, perchance, amid the toil for survival this starving flame is fed again by a rare moment of elevated thought, rekindled, as now, by a conducive setting and allaying circumstances,

then my yearning to know will again burst into a colossal fire, its blazing tongues dispelling the darkness so as to take me, alas, but to infinite nothingness until, consumed by its own intensity, the fire is again reduced to a flickering flame.

I have no lofty pedestals to build, no trophies to display. Only questions—questions reaching into infinity, seeking to unlock the enigma of life.

Perhaps there are no answers to be had, only insatiable questions. There may be no known purpose in living this life, nor a destiny beyond the soil I tread. Only the inexplicable burning desire to know.

But such matters are for the cultivated in mind—the philosopher, the clergyman, the erudite, the learned. Why didn't I concern myself with such matters while contemplating suicide? Vain is my search for a meaning in life. It is void of virtue—empty, meaningless. For it stems from my need for an emotional outpouring; a need to induce mental cleansing; a catharsis of conscience that will free me from the oppression of guilt and shame.

Even so, I cannot free myself from these thoughts. They are a part of me, for I am what I experience and feel. My conscience is my memory. And that's just all that life may be.

