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From Death's Claws

SAILING ACROSS THE ROUGH waters of the Cretan Sea from the port of Souda to Piraeus and back was a welcome past routine. I was responsible for the loading, shipment, and delivery of goods. Since all transactions were conducted on a cash basis, upon my return I would count the collected cash on Angelos' desk per customer invoice, read and sign the hand-written documents Angelos had prepared, and receive my commission. Angelos kept his records, I kept mine.



Souda, Crete. Panos was familiar with all major seaports in Greece.

Mr. Mihelakis would often leave for his Athens office and return after several days. But once he established that business was run pretty smoothly, he began to leave for lengthier periods of time.

By October of 1935, Angelos was going the extra mile to ensure the best of business relationships with me. In contrast to the leering smirk on his face, upon my return from each business trip he would invariably extend his hand of friendship and give me a heartfelt welcome. He would order me coffee, offer me a cigarette, update me on all political issues and local news, and share my great excitement about my newborn and second son, Demetrios (whom we named after Chrysa's father). Greatly obliged, I of course let no opportunity slip by to return such favors.

Angelos' congeniality and obliging spirit seemed to know no limits. One day he even suggested that I have my father come and use a cozy corner of office space for the conduct of his clerical business in exchange for errands he might be asked to run or chores to do—including killing mice. Indeed, his good will transcended my culture. The best way I knew of to repay his kindness was through an overt expression of loyalty to our friendship. Consequently, as business grew and the workload increased, which made paperwork voluminous, I figured I could save Angelos and me time by counting the cash with him and then simply signing all documents.

MEANWHILE, business boomed and profits soared. And though it meant hard work and sleepless nights away from home, I looked for opportunities to handle extra shipments but not via our firm. Handsome pecuniary gains made the extra work worthwhile, and by January of 1937, in just one year, I had paid back nearly one-third of my loan. Were it not for my fear that Mr. Mihelakis might suspect my business exploits and surmise that I would soon become financially independent and go into business for myself, I would have already paid back more than half the loan. In any case, since the business I had generated for him in barely one year had added considerably to his wealth, a contented Mr. Mihelakis was not about to risk creating any ripples in his smoothly-run business by asking me too many questions.

Nor did he seem overly concerned about the way things were now run at his office in Chania. He would leave for Athens and not return until time to collect his money and, unlike in the past, take only a superficial look at the books. I began to fret his new, predictable mode of operation. It left an overconfident Angelos solely in charge of all cash revenues as well as all books and records. That made me feel very uncomfortable. On a number of occasions I came close to asking Mr. Mihelakis to let me audit the company books and check them against mine, particularly after I noticed that Angelos had become noticeably jittery during the counting of collected cash. But I feared that this request might turn out to be a case of unfounded suspicion and mistrust, and thus cost me a relationship—and my job.

One day my taciturn father, the company's willing lackey, who on occasion would happen to be nearby to observe routine cash transactions across Angelos' desk, gave me some advice. "It's no good salesmanship to not examine what you're signing," he said. Knowing my father to be a man of no shallow character and of a keen mind, I readily concurred with his reminder, which but stirred my suspicions of Angelos.

The following day, bent over the desk ready to sign a stack of hand-written documents as usual, I alluded to the fact that we had had some pretty big figures to deal with recently, at which point I paused as if to examine a document. Suddenly I raised my eyes and, not to my surprise, faced a startled Angelos leaning over the desk, his bulging brown eyes gazing fixedly at mine. He was breathing hard and looked alarmed.

"Hey, partner—" he said, "—don't you trust a friend?"

"You've been kind of nervous lately, Angelos," I said. "Something's wrong?"

"Hand that back!" he shouted, as he unsuccessfully tried to grab the paper from my hands.

"Just as I thought," I said and placed the pen back in the ink bottle.

Dumbfounded, Angelos watched me put the paper in my pocket, plus a few more. His face was taut, the corners of his smirk drawn down. I looked at the freshly counted cash lying on the desk, let my eyes fly pityingly to his face, then turned around and walked away.

A short distance down the road I stopped to examine the paper Angelos had tried to grab from me. Everything seemed correct—until I read the bottom two lines:

Amount per customer invoice	166 dr.
Amount to be submitted	166 dr.

I could not believe my eyes! I checked one more paper. The same! I checked a couple more. Correct—no amount to be submitted. “The crafty devil!” I growled. The same figure appeared twice, but the second line read, “Amount to be submitted” rather than “Amount submitted.” Had I attempted to examine one of the other two papers first, he wouldn’t have batted an eye. He knew which one was dynamite!

I was outraged. I didn’t know what was keeping me from going right back and tearing him apart. But I was also angry with myself for allowing him room to cheat. In the end I decided I had better let Mr. Mihelakis himself deal with his “angel.”

On my next business trip two days later, I looked for Mr. Mihelakis in his Athens office, but learned that he had already left for Chania. That gives Angelos at least forty-eight hours to “explain” things to the boss, I thought to myself. Angelos isn’t stupid. He wouldn’t have gone on cheating and embezzling company funds at my expense without having weighed in his mind all possible risks. Now he’ll go to step two of his scheme—probably updating the boss on my “new debt” to the company. But I doubt Mr. Mihelakis will buy Angelos’ story. He knows my integrity. But then, who knows? It’s really my word against his. These two men have done business together for many years and have gained each other’s trust. Mr. Mihelakis might

very well swallow Angelos' story, since that could also explain to him how I was able to pay back about half the loan in a little over a year.

Dark thoughts assailed me as I leaned heavily over the side railing of the ship on my way back to Crete. As I looked into the awful blackness of the vast waters below my feet, I felt a wave of despondency sweeping over me. Shame and guilt engulfed me as the thought of suicide once more came to mind. Once again, it's my head that has brought about another predicament, I kept thinking. I am to blame. If I had acted like a true salesman, I wouldn't have caused Angelos to cheat. He was lured by my own stupidity. My dereliction is the real crime. *I am to blame.*

A COLD welcome awaited me at the office the following day. I found Mr. Mihelakis bent over the company books. He got up from his chair slowly, his eyes averted, eyelids batting rapidly, hands in his pockets. I stretched out my hand for a handshake but he refused. He turned the other way as if I weren't there. He took a few slow, short steps until he reached the back wall of the office, then stopped. He lit a cigarette.

Never in my whole life had I felt more embarrassed in the presence of a man I respected. I was anxious to have him hear my story.

"I looked for you in Athens, Mr. Mihelakis. I—I guess I missed you by a few hours."

He turned around slowly, hands clasped behind, cigarette in his mouth, his eyes riveted on blank space.

Breath caught in my lungs, I waited. If he had anything to say, I thought, he would get straight to the point.

A cloud of smoke veiled his face. "Angelos and I cleared the records yesterday," he finally said. He sounded preoccupied and irritable. Then, glaring at me, he added, "We have a deficit of twenty thousand drachmas!"

"Two—uh—twenty thou—! It can't be!"

He walked to the desk, picked up a piece of paper and handed it to me.

I checked the paper—I couldn't believe my eyes! It was a summary of my loan balance, which seemed correct; but it also listed two fictitious debts. It read:

Loan balance plus interest	10,040 dr.
Terpandros' rental fees	2,060 dr.
Collections to be submitted	<u>7,890 dr.</u>
Total	19,990 dr.

Rage consumed me. The scheming, untrustworthy charlatan! I thought. That's how much he embezzled. Ten thousand! Surely he'd like to have me now accuse him of fraud so he could sue me for slander. A hellish trap for me—built by that devil to protect himself!

I reached inside my pocket and produced the handwritten documents, proof in black and white that Angelos was the culprit. I handed one to the boss.

He took a quick look at it, folded it in two and flung it on the desk as if he'd seen it before.

My eyes widened, my mouth dropped. "But, Mr. Mihelakis, I—I don't get it!"

He shrugged his shoulders and took a few short steps away from me.

"For one thing, Mr. Mihelakis, neither you nor Angelos ever mentioned a rental fee for my father's corner," I continued, my voice raised.

He nodded, but his apparent nonchalance perplexed me the more.

"Well, then?" I demanded.

I had always talked to this man with great respect. Even now I didn't want to show him any signs of disrespect. But I was getting desperate—I needed some response, some explanation.

He moved pensively toward the door behind me, his lips tightly pressed together, his eyes batting rapidly. His troubled mind was seeking a solution. At least he knows

I'm clean, I thought to myself. Good to know that this man, who has helped me much, still trusts me. But he must think I let him down by not acting like a true salesman. The very thought kills me. Whatever the problem, I caused it. How dare I now show signs of impatience with him? I should rather stand by and help him solve this problem—my problem!

He finished his cigarette and threw the stub out in the street. "I've arranged for you to get a 20,000-drachma personal loan tomorrow," he said suddenly as he turned around and headed toward the wall again.

"A twenty-thousand-drachma personal loan!" I cried out in disbelief.

I looked at the man. Either he cannot pin Angelos down or he is in collusion with him, or both, I thought. Is it possible that he means to destroy me after all? I know Angelos could hang me by my own signature. But is Mr. Mihelakis thinking the same?

He lit another cigarette. He seemed to hold something back from me.

"Mr. Mihelakis," I said, "am I being charged with the amounts Angelos reported?"

His back turned against me, head nearly touching the wall, he stood motionless. He seemed to have come to a dead end.

"Mr. Mihelakis—"

Absolute silence.

"Mr. Mihelakis!"

"See you tomorrow, Panos!" he rasped.

"Tomorrow? There may not be another tomorrow—" I grumbled as I turned around and left.

WHEN I returned home that afternoon I found Chrysa in tears. She told me that Yiorgos' brother-in-law had just passed away. I told her I needed to go for a walk.

"But dinner is going to get cold," she said, her tearful eyes looking apprehensively into mine.

I didn't know where I was headed or what I was going to do.

After a while, I found myself at a small café bar overlooking Faliro Beach. I drank one glass of wine, then had a second. I felt extremely depressed. "I hate myself," I muttered. "I hate myself for the hell I got me into ..."

I thought of Angelos. A flurry of anger engulfed me. "I am so angry at him," I growled. "He rejected the best I had to offer him—my friendship. He stabbed me in the back. The same with Tony. And now Mr. Mihelakis. They all betrayed me!"

I downed a third glass of wine. I gave him too much rope, I kept thinking. The rope of my pride. Pride! What prevented me from putting an end to my life has now become my undoing.

I drank one more glass, then gulped a fifth and stood up to walk. I did not feel dizzy. I asked for another glass—I wanted to get drunk. I wanted to drown my pain and escape the haunting fear of hopelessness. (Four glasses usually made me lean against the wall, five would lay me flat out on the floor.) When I had downed my sixth, I paid a dumbfounded bartender and walked out.

I went and sat on a large, smooth rock fixed near the claw-like tip of a steep cliff that overlooked the jagged rocks and fierce waves of the sea below. A monument of death, that rock had taken away the last breath of many desperate souls that had gone one short step beyond its cold, rounded hump. Seated on the hump, I waited for the wine to take effect so I could jump to my death. But I was not getting dizzy.

I half-rose from the rock, leaned over the edge of the cliff, and looked down into the abyss below my feet. "One step," I muttered. "No guns, no ropes. Just one damned step!"

My life balanced on the very edge, I waited. Death snarled below my feet, spewing froth, baring his teeth. Like the vicious jaws of a raging beast, the jagged rocks below awaited their feast—vanishing, then resurfacing with every

crashing wave, gushing through the foam, promising me death.

Death had one sure thing to offer. The end of bitter tears and haunting fears. No more guilt or shame, no more mortal pain.

For one last time I raised my eyes as if to give life one last chance to challenge death's promises before I could cast the decisive vote.

Just then I saw a glimpse of the sun as it was setting beyond the peninsula, its enormous fiery disc spreading a veil of an iridescent rose's-petal-pink that spanned the earth's dome. And when the last reflection of the sky's glorious crown had danced atop a thousand ruffles in the gulf, I found myself standing in awe before the breathtaking splendor and majesty of the heavens. There was a perfectly harmonious blending of bright and soft nuances of exquisite pink and blue and turquoise hues that brushed a gentle stretch of clouds, the glorious masterpiece of no earthly artist!

A desire swept over me to reach into the celestial heights of that matchless beauty and catch a fleeting hold of its purity and peace, and for a moment let my heart become its dwelling place.

A new realization then dawned in me that what I was seeking was a way to get rid not of my life itself, but of its filth. My head and eyes raised high, I began to shake like a leaf and wished my tears could purge my soul.

"God!" I cried out, "Do you exist? And do you care for a wretched, hopeless mortal like me?"

Looking once more down below, I saw the epitome of my hopelessness and guilt. A mortifying fear overtook me. What if there is an afterlife? I thought. What if all this majesty and grandeur bespeak of the purity and majesty in the beyond? Then I am certainly doomed, for I am unclean.

As if prompted by a volition other than my own, my footsteps slowly led me away from the cliff's edge, my heart being driven by a compelling desire to preserve my

life, and a consciousness that someone was watching over me. Filled with awe and wonder, I tremblingly whispered, "God, you do exist? And you do care?"

A short distance down the road I looked back and a shuddering chill crept down my spine. I saw the cliff's edge pointed down like the sharp tip of a sickle, as if death's claw were still threatening to harpoon my soul.

"Never again!" I cried out aloud as I lifted my eyes above and tears cascaded down my face. "Never again will I allow my mind to think of suicide. I will not kill myself. And I shall make amends for my wretched life!"

Still astounded by what I had experienced, I headed home thinking of my wife and my two sons. I missed them terribly. Chrysa, I thought to myself, she's the one I can trust. How selfish have I been! How blind!

AS I reached my home that evening, I heard loud cries coming from inside. Women were wailing and moaning, and I surmised it was because of the recent death of Yiorgos' brother-in-law. As I entered, I saw the shocked faces of a dozen relatives surrounding my wife. Then Chrysa, her eyes wide, countenance filled with fear, looked at me and let out an awful scream as if she had seen a ghost.

"It's him! It's Panos!" they all shouted.

Wiping her eyes, Chrysa dashed forward and threw her arms around my neck. "Thank God you're alive!" You're back!" she cried out, and collapsed in my arms.

A piece of paper fell from her hands. My brother picked it up and handed it to me.

"Oh, my God!" I wailed. It was the old suicide note I had written two years earlier and which I had placed between the pages of my diaries. Chrysa, seeing earlier in the day that I was feeling unusually low, had taken my diaries out of the drawer, and that's when the note fell out of my diary pages. The note had not been dated.

When everyone had regained composure, I apologized to Chrysa—for the first time ever—and assured everyone

that I had already dealt with the ignominious idea of suicide once and for all, revealing nothing, however, about my experience by the cliff. Tears began to flow afresh.

“My son—” my mother said painfully, tears streaming down from her eyes, “I’ve prayed to God for you. We all know what you’ve gone through. We all know of your disappointments in life. You have tried everything. Why not try this, too?” And having said that, she placed a book in my hands. “Go on,” she said. “Take it. It will bring you protection.”

I looked at the book. Engraved in its front leather cover, right above a large cross, was its title:

THE HOLY WRIT

“It’s a Bible!” I said in astonishment. I didn’t know what to make of my mother’s remarkable gesture. Why, of all things, has she chosen to give me a Bible? I wondered. The book of the priests! Does she know of my secret visits to St. Nikolaos? Had she wanted me to become a priest? It wouldn’t be a bad idea for someone whose life is clean. Priests and monks seek to attain spiritual perfection early in life. But that’s a state I could not hope to attain at the age of thirty-one.

Suddenly it occurred to me—I shuddered at the thought—that my mother had brought the holy book in order to place it on my casket!

THAT night, weak and spent, head throbbing, eyes swollen, I sank heavily into my bed. As I lay there, my mind kept turning back to my brush with death, my stomach now lurching at the thought. I could not believe that earlier in the day I had left home with no intention to commit suicide, yet I had come closer to taking my life than ever before. Had a miracle of God stopped me from jumping to my death? I wondered. But what else could have prevented six glasses of wine from taking effect?

I thought of the longing I had experienced by the cliff of ridding myself of all my life's filth, and how it had rekindled the faded desire within me to find hope for tomorrow and a reason for my existence. Had God as a result heard me and intervened? For my sake? Why?

As I turned around in my bed, I looked at the flickering flame of the kerosene lamp being teased by the cool ocean breeze. The Bible was on my pillow, where I had laid it for good luck. Its engraved cross appeared very deep and wide. My eyelids were heavy and my body lay inert as my fingers crawled toward the leather-bound holy book and laid its front cover open. Summoning my last ounce of energy, I raised my head over the first page of the Bible and read its first lines.

Suddenly my whole being froze. My life became trapped in my lungs, and I lay as still as dead. Then a charge of energy streaked up my spine, releasing my breath and conquering my inertia. I marveled as I heard my own lips tremblingly speak the words that had me spellbound for a long moment:

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

The words seemed to be the embodiment of all the power and majesty and of the dazzling beauty my eyes had beheld only hours earlier, the purity and peace of which I had so undeservedly wished to make mine.

Fingers clamped on the Bible, I went on to read that God had created everything on the earth, and also man; and that he had created everything on the earth for man.

The timely discovery overwhelmed me, filling me with curiosity, hope, and awe. It seemed to impart to me a sense of self-worth and of belonging in this world, for I lived in a place made by God.

Shaking from excitement, I did not realize how engrossed I was until Chrysa walked in. She knew I had never held a Bible in my hands before, but she knew as well that my eyes spoke of an unusual experience.

THOSE circles around my eyes the next morning had been caused by an extraordinary dissipation. I had stayed up most of the night reading, of all things, the Bible! If what the Bible says about God and his creation is true, I reasoned on my way to work, then it may also say something about the very purpose of life on earth and perhaps even a life in the hereafter. But wouldn't the priests know about those things? And wouldn't they have told everyone? No one ever talks about God and religion, though. I wonder why.

