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The Deliverer

I FOUND MR. MIHELAKIS GOING over his books. To my surprise, his greeting and welcome were as hearty as ever. After offering me a cigarette, he talked about the 20,000-drachma loan rather casually, only this time he gave me a different story. It was going to be not a personal loan, but a special trust-secured loan, Angelos and I being the signatories. He explained that earlier that morning Angelos had gone to the bank to sign, and that all that was needed now was my signature.

He then drew my attention to a document on top of the desk. As I picked it up, I noticed a grin spreading across his face. It was a neatly typed promissory note stating that Angelos was to provide the necessary company funds with which I would be making the loan payments directly to the bank, Mr. Mihelakis being the sole guarantor of the loan. The note was already dated and neatly signed by Mr. Mihelakis.

“In effect, Mr. Mihelakis,” I remarked, “Angelos’ responsibility and mine with regard to this loan is primarily ethical; yours, financial. Is this the way you see it?”

He nodded. “You might say that.”

Then he advised me that I should have Angelos sign the promissory note as soon as possible and that I should thereafter keep and safeguard it at all times.

The promissory note sounded safe. I could not imagine, however, that Mr. Mihelakis would let the 10,000 drachmas the crafty swindler had embezzled go forgotten or unaccounted for. Something had to be in his mind this promissory note did not reveal. But what?

I folded the note, put it in my pocket, and took a moment to mull things over.

“Well?” said a fidgety Mr. Mihelakis. “Aren’t you going to the bank?”

Our eyes met. I always thought I could get more emotion from a brick wall than from this man’s eyes.

“Mr. Mihelakis,” I said, “since you are the sole guarantor of the entire loan, mightn’t I oblige you to become a cosignatory as well?”

“Oh, certainly. Let’s go!” he replied unhesitatingly, which puzzled me all the more. He got up from his chair, and together we headed for the bank.

“Well, sir,” I said to a preoccupied and silent Mr. Mihelakis on our way, “I’m making another loan payment today. I thought I’d let you know.”

“Oh, yes—that loan. Well, I’ll tell you what, Panos. I’ve thought of a way to make it much easier on you,” he said in an unusually friendly manner. “Why don’t you just stop by my house later this afternoon, but after Angelos has signed the promissory note, and let’s talk about that loan over a drink. Be sure, though—” he stopped a moment to offer me a cigarette, his lowered voice giving the matter added gravity, “—be sure Angelos doesn’t know about it. In fact, no one should know about it. It’s strictly a deal between you and me,” he said, his eyes warily scanning the area to be sure no one had heard him.

His change of plans, shift in mood, secretiveness, unusual invitation, and the note itself—it all stirred my suspicions. Our clandestine rendezvous was bound to be revealing.

After the loan was gotten as agreed, I returned to the office. So that Angelos would not be alarmed, I greeted him with a smile. Seated behind the desk, arms folded, he nodded warily. I produced the promissory note and placed it on the desk. Angelos bent slowly forward, arms still folded, and examined it.

“Oh, man—forget it!” he said in disdain, and eased himself back in his chair. “He can sign anything he wants. It’s enough I signed that damned loan this morning.”

“Very well, then—” I said as I grabbed the promissory note and headed for the door, “—you tell him that!”

IT WAS Thursday, February 4, 1937. I was skeptical about my secret meeting with Mr. Mihelakis at his home that afternoon. As I was about to knock, his wife quickly opened the door and asked me hurriedly in. Standing behind her and smoking a cigarette was Mr. Mihelakis. I felt uneasy.

“He refused to sign,” I said and showed him the promissory note.

“The devil!” growled Mr. Mihelakis. “Leave it over there,” he said nervously, pointing to a table. “I’ll catch him later myself.”

He walked to another room, at the end of which was a low, narrow door. He opened the door and turned a switch on, then beckoned me to follow as he proceeded down a wooden staircase.

From the top of the staircase I could see a half-empty wastebasket near the bottom step. Going down a dozen steps, I found myself in a dank, practically empty basement. A light hung low from the middle of the ceiling right above a small table and a chair. On the table there was a pen and ink.

Suddenly the door slammed behind me. I stood nervously by the wastebasket, wondering if Mrs. Mihelakis had locked the door from the outside.

Mr. Mihelakis stood by the table. Cigarette between his lips, he reached inside his jacket. A gun! I thought. No—papers. Perhaps the original loan contract? Maybe he wants to change the interest rate on my loan? But that would require Angelos’ signature. So why should he be so secretive about it? Something stinks about this whole thing.

He leaned over the table, placed two pieces of paper on it side by side, and started to examine them.

I was breathing heavily. To hide my nervousness, I took out a cigarette—my last one—and tossed the empty pack into the wastebasket. The sound broke the silence and Mr. Mihelakis turned toward me. He could see I was searching my pockets for a match, but he continued to look at me.

The dim light seemed to enlarge his round glasses, giving his face a ghastly expression. “Why did you do that to me, Panos?” he suddenly said in a low, colorless voice. “Didn’t you feel sorry for my children?”

To be sure what he was alluding to, I stood still and waited to hear the rest.

Dead silence ensued. I wondered if he was intimating that I had been in collusion with Angelos. No, he was probably referring to my carelessness and naïveté in my financial transactions with Angelos, I figured.

“Mr. Mihelakis,” I finally said, “give me a chance to explain—”

He stood straight up and walked away from the table, then turned to face me from the far end of the room. He pointed to the chair and told me to sit.

Slowly, I headed for the table. I felt as though I were playing the role of a victim in a gangster motion picture, only this was too real. I knew he wasn’t going to change his mind about a thing; whatever he was determined to do, he would get on with it. Something was telling me, however, that it wasn’t going to be anything nice. And it didn’t look as though we were going to talk about my loan “over a drink,” either.

Arms folded, eyes obscured, the ghost-like figure watched me as I took the chair. If I could only be certain that he means to harm me, I thought, now would be the time to grab him. But what if I was wrong?

I sat on the chair and bent over the papers. In front of me was a note in his own handwriting, and next to it a blank sheet of paper. As I picked up the note, he told me I was to copy everything on the blank sheet, word for word.

As I started to read the cigarette fell from my mouth. “My God!” I breathed out, “Better dead!”

It was impossible to stop those hands from shaking. I pretended I was still reading so I could think what to do. I’ll ask if I can borrow his matches, I thought. Then I’ll knock him down. I’m sorry to have to do this to Mr. Mihelakis, but he’s practically asking me to commit suicide!

I turned toward him, only to see the hollow of a gun aimed coldly toward me! The blood rushed to my head, and a cold sweat covered my body. A rank darkness flooded my mind as I slowly turned my face the other way. He wouldn’t dare harm me with that gun, I thought. But then, how do I know the degree of his dementia?

Shaking uncontrollably, I dipped the pen in the ink bottle and proceeded to copy the note:

Declaration

I, the undersigned, Panos Zachariou, do declare in knowledge of the consequences in accordance with the law, that the signature of Mr. ___ Mihelakis as our guarantor on the promissory note produced by Mr. Angelos ___ is not his authentic signature. The truth is that I myself placed Mr. Mihelakis’ signature after being coerced by Mr. [Angelos] ___.

Chania, 4 February, 1937 The declarer

The machination of the devil! No wonder that heinous promissory note was typed not on the company’s old typewriter, I thought. And the only fingerprints on it are my own! All the fuss to get Angelos to sign—what a sham!

Still aiming his gun at me, he quickly placed another note and blank paper on the table and ordered me to proceed as before. I couldn’t believe what was happening to me. I hoped I was having a nightmare. Head throbbing, eyes burning, I didn’t even bother to read this time. I just went on copying.

It was a letter, supposedly from me to him, in which I was apologizing for my deliberate intent to incriminate him for no known cause, having done so in full knowledge of

the consequences punishable by law. In the letter I was asking him to forgive me, for my decision to write such a letter was the result of a deeply remorseful condition on my part, as evidenced by the fact that I chose to submit my forged promissory note to him in person!

Placing the pen back on the table felt like surrendering to the enemy in utter defeat. I wanted to tear those papers to pieces, but my hands would not obey. I thought of the deadly effects of forgery. A living death—imprisoned for life! My God!

At that moment the door opened and someone came down the steps. I was hoping it was someone I knew who could witness what was happening to me. It was a little old woman. I didn't know her. He walked to her, gun in his hand, and whispered something in her ear—I couldn't make out what. He made the sign of the cross three times. Praying? I thought to myself. This maniac has just forced me to become a victim of forgery at gunpoint and now he's praying in front of an old woman? Praying for what? Forgiveness in advance of the murder he's contemplating?

I started to pray, too. My God! Here I am, dealing with a mad man! If you are truly the one who saved me from death the other day, deliver me now from this hell, and protect me from the deadly penalty for forgery. Then I'll believe in you. I'll believe what the Bible says about you. Please, God!

I couldn't figure out what the little old woman had come to do, but she left just as suddenly as she had come in.

Mr. Mihelakis then told me that we were going to have a drink. Pacing back and forth and keeping his distance from me, he told me that he couldn't trust Angelos and that he wouldn't use the promissory note or the letter unless he had to, and so on.

When he was done with his speech, he approached the table with great caution, gun aimed straight at me, and told me to lean back and not try anything bold. He picked up all the papers and walked to the wastebasket. Sorting out

everything, he folded my copies and put them in his pocket, then tore up the rest into pieces. He bent over the wastebasket, hesitated a moment, then picked up the empty cigarette pack I'd thrown into it. He stuffed the empty pack with the torn pieces of paper, then tossed it back into the wastebasket.

Right then his wife came downstairs carrying two drinks. After handing him the one, she slowly walked toward me and warily placed the other glass near the edge of the table, then turned around and left.

Her husband resumed his speech about this and that, but I wasn't paying much attention. I was thinking how I could grab the gun from his hand.

Suddenly he suggested a second drink and went up the stairs.

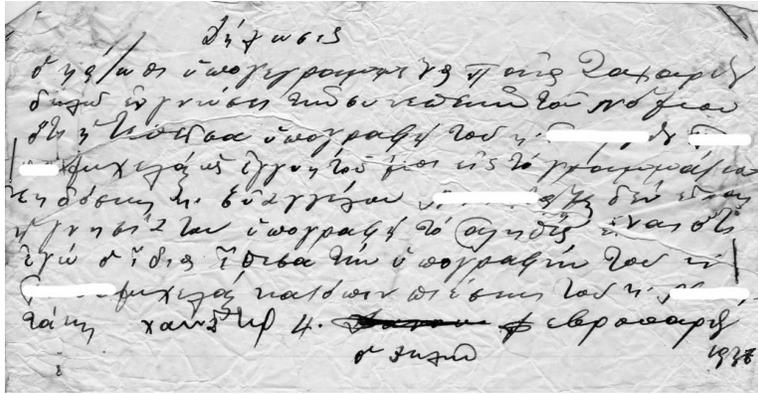
Wasting no time, I jumped to my feet and dashed to the wastebasket. I quickly picked up the stuffed cigarette pack, emptied part of its contents into my pocket, and replaced it as I had found it.

I heard him coming—there was no time for me to go back and sit on the chair. I jumped toward the table and swung my body around to make it appear as though I had just gotten up from the chair and was slowly heading for the exit.

He came down the steps holding two drinks, one in each hand. We met at the bottom step, nose to nose. After handing me the one drink, which I gulped down fast, he told me I was free to go.

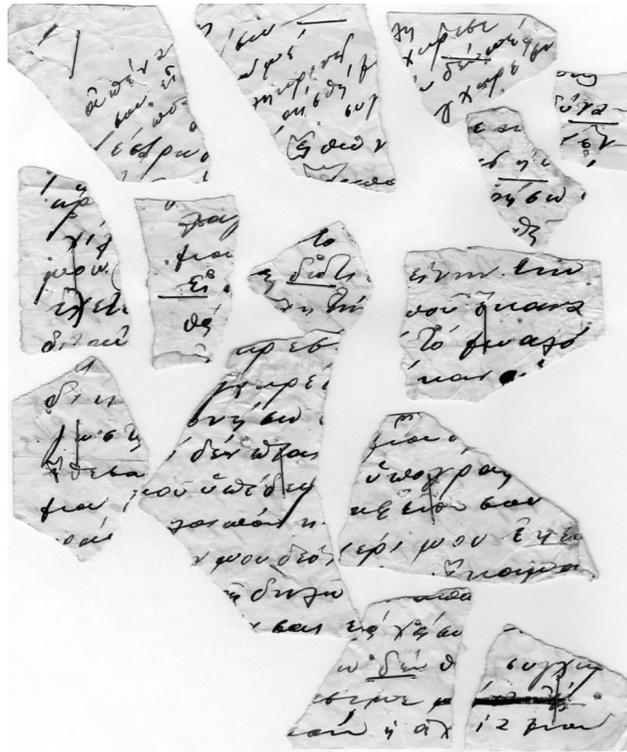
Less than a block down the street, I anxiously sorted through the pieces of paper I had at the risk of my life retrieved. My breath caught in my lungs, I directed my eyes skyward.

“God!” I shouted at the release of my soul. “Oh, my Go-o-o-d!” In my hands I had the original declaration note in its entirety, only torn in half! And I had enough pieces of the letter as well! A miracle of my God! The very thought—the thought that God should intervene on my behalf and save my life again—overwhelmed me!



Above: torn only in half is the entire original declaration note handwritten by Panos' boss and which Panos was forced to copy at gunpoint. Erasures are intentional. Translation on p. 64.

Below: pieces of the "apology" letter Panos was forced to copy.



In the next couple of days a nervous, frustrated Mr. Mihelakis would snap his finger at me and order me around as never before. I didn't mind making his barber appointments, buying his groceries, or running all sorts of new errands. And I didn't quite mind his erratic demands—even in public—for bigger loan payments or longer work hours. What I did mind was that he now acted as though he had the power to control every breath I took. I couldn't trust him at all. My picture of him had changed from that of a benevolent man to that of a dangerous criminal.

THERE was a lot of turmoil that weekend between Mr. Mihelakis and the other partners over the firing of Angelos. As the conflict mounted, Mr. Mihelakis became extremely irritable. Doubtless, I was going to be his scapegoat in the end.

The following Monday morning I questioned what he was about to have me sign and insisted that I first examine the documents. He glared at me and snarled, "Listen, you! You could very well be in prison right now, and you know it!"

"How can you be so sure?" I said provokingly.

"You want to bet?" he barked.

We exchanged a burning stare.

"If I had to choose between throwing you in jail and beating you up," I shot back, "I would gladly beat your brains out!"

"You!" he fumed vehemently, "—you will spend the rest of your miserable days in prison!"

"Brace yourself, mister, for it's not I who will wind up in prison. It's you!"

"And how might that be? You wanna to give it a try?"

"Any time, sir, any time. You show the court the copies, I show them the originals. A deal?"

He gasped, his eyes ready to pop out of their sockets. "I don't believe you!" he said, his face turning pale. "You—you would have done something about it by now. Your tales don't scare me!"

“No tales, sir. Facts. Real facts. So start digging your own grave now.”

Frozen in his shoes, face drained of color, he kept glaring at me.

“And let me tell you one thing more, buster,” I went on. “You can take your stinking business all into your hands and go to hell with it and your angel. I am through with you. I quit!”

And having said that, I walked away from the bondage of that miserable extortionist and his conniving consort.

As I headed home, my mind kept going back to my desperate plea and the vow I had made to God as I stared into that gun. There was no doubt in my mind that my deliverance from Mihelakis and my present freedom were somehow related to my first encounter with the Bible.

