

HARRIE BLOMMESTEIJN

Hope and Dreams, 2011
Fine art photography, 24 x 36 in



HARRY MARK PETRAKIS

The Hawk

Nick Sperakis had been working as a real estate salesman for Doukas Realty on Chicago's South Side for about a year. He had been hired for the position because his wife's uncle was a close friend of the owner, Cleon Doukas.

The only knowledge of real estate Nick had was from purchasing the bungalow where his wife, Margo, their six-year-old son, Peter, and he lived. Nick had sold insurance, however, and expected that selling experience would help him.

The morning he was to start work at his new position, his wife sought to reassure him.

"You'll do fine, Nicky," Margo said. "You are personable and you get along well with people. Once you gain experience and confidence, I'm sure you'll do very well."

Nick began his sales position in the spring. They were well into summer before he made his first sale of a modest bungalow in Chicago's Woodlawn area. Margo and he celebrated by bringing in a sitter for their son and going to dinner at one of the city's elegant restaurants.

Then the sales drought returned. Nick struggled several additional months without making another sale. The advance against earnings the firm had agreed to pay him for a year had only a couple months to go.

The owner of the realty firm, Cleon Doukas, had a volatile temper and a day did not pass without his unleashing his wrath on a hapless secretary or salesman. Hearing the angry shouting from Doukas's office, employees stared in silence at other employees, grateful they weren't the poor devil getting lashed.

On a Friday afternoon in early September, an office secretary came to tell Nick that Cleon Doukas wanted to see him.

Having expected the summons for weeks, walking to the owner's office, Nick feared he was going to be fired.

Cleon Doukas was short and beefy, with a bald bulldog head that made him resemble Mussolini. His office was permeated with the scent of a pungent male cologne.

"How are you, Nicholas?" Doukas motioned Nick to the chair across from his desk. "How is your good wife, niece of my dear friend?"

"She's fine, Mr. Doukas."

"And if I remember correctly, you have a son. How is he?"

"He's doing well, Mr. Doukas, thank you for asking."

Doukas sat back in his swivel chair. He stared at Nick in silence.

“I like you, Nicholas,” Doukas finally spoke. “You have a pleasing personality. You have it in you to become a good salesman but, as I see it, you aren’t living up to your potential. To put it candidly, you lack the instinct for combat.” He paused. “That may sound melodramatic, Nicholas, but it is true.”

Doukas paused.

“Do you know, Nicholas, what the word *ornithology* means?”

“Something to do with birds,” Nick said.

“That is correct,” Doukas said. “It is that branch of zoology that deals with birds. I find that world fascinating because the behavior of birds resembles in many ways the actions of humans.”

Nick listened intently.

“The bird that most fascinates me is the hawk,” Doukas said. “The hawk preys upon and kills doves and pigeons, chickens, rabbits, even small pigs.” Doukas paused, his voice gaining fervor. “The hawk even attacks dangerous reptiles such as rattlesnakes! The bird glides above the snake, stalking it, and then swoops down and clutches the rattlesnake in its talons. The hawk eats the rattler while it is still alive!”

Doukas paused to draw breath.

“Hawks once hunted only in the country, but they have become bolder, venturing into cities. With prey harder to find, hunger makes them fiercer. I predict the day will come when they attack and feed on humans!” Doukas’s eyes glowed, “God help poor humans when we enter the reign of the hawk!”

Doukas’s voice had grown hoarser and he poured water from a pitcher on his desk into a glass. He took a long swallow as Nick waited tensely for him to resume.

“Do you know how many real estate salesmen are at work in Chicago?” Doukas’s voice grated in Nick’s ears. “Thousands! Yes, thousands, and all of them trying desperately to sell their properties. Don’t delude yourself, Nicholas, to survive in this jungle, you must become as fierce and merciless as a hawk!”

Doukas paused again for breath. When he spoke again, his tone was quieter.

“I’ve spoken about you to Aristotle Brakas,” Doukas said.

“I’ve told him of my great hopes for you as a salesman and asked him to take you under his supervision. Aristotle is a battle-scarred real estate veteran who will show you how our business really works.”

“Thank you, Mr. Doukas.”

Nick rose to leave the office; Doukas called him back.

“Remember what I said,” Doukas spoke somberly. “Do not delude yourself about what you must do to survive. When your spirit wavers, think of your wife and son. Eat or be eaten! Kill or be killed!”

* * *

Aristotle Brakas was a small, lean-fleshed man in his sixties who remained a shadowy figure to Nick. He wasn’t an employee, but he was in the office every day, consulting with the veteran salesmen on the buying and selling of properties. Brakas was often in the conference room, joining buyers and sellers in the closings.

When Nick first met Brakas, he felt as if the man’s eyes were scales assessing the importance of the person he was meeting. Nick felt quickly dismissed as being of no use to Brakas.

The morning after the warning from Doukas, Brakas came to Nick’s desk.

“The office just got a new listing, a nine-room, single-family house in Hyde Park,” Brakas said. “The lady who owns the house is Greek and belongs to the Greek church that Doukas attends. She asked for his help in selling her property. Come with me and we’ll take a look.”

Hyde Park was the South Side location of the venerable University of Chicago. In the area surrounding the sprawling campus, students and faculty competed vigorously for housing. Salesmen in the office had told Nick that Hyde Park was choice real estate and sold quickly.

The property Nick and Brakas came to inspect was a large, front-gabled house on Blackstone Avenue, south of 57th Street. While imposing in size, the exterior of the house showed signs of wear and neglect. Sizeable patches of paint on the siding had peeled away, while shutters on the windows had broken slats.

A garden beside the steps leading up to the front door held a cluster of late summer flowers with their petals wilted. A rutted dirt driveway along the side of the house ran to a garage in back.

“Let’s take a look at the garage before we go in,” Brakas said.

They walked the driveway to the garage and entered the side door. In place of a car, the garage was littered with old cans of paint, bundles of tied newspapers, and several pieces of weather-battered lawn furniture.

“We’ll need to lower the price because of the wretched condition of the outside of the house,” Brakas frowned. “And the mess in here is another markdown.”

They walked back to the street and ascended the steps to the front door. Brakas rang the doorbell. Moments later, the door was opened by a small, gray-haired lady in a plain black dress who appeared to be in her late seventies or early eighties. She had fine features and bright eyes, and her pale cheeks were given color by twin pats of rouge.

“Mrs. Langos?” Brakas asked.

“Yes . . .”

“Good morning, my dear lady!” Brakas said, his voice warm and jovial. “My associate Nicholas Sperakis and I, Aristotle Brakas, are here representing Cleon Doukas of Doukas Realty. Mr. Doukas has instructed us to offer you every assistance you require in selling your house.”

“Mr. Doukas told me last Sunday in church that he’d send someone to help me.” Mrs. Langos dabbed at her eyes with a tissue as she stepped back and motioned them inside. “Mr. Doukas is such a devout Christian. He is greatly respected by everyone in our parish.”

“We all feel the same,” Brakas said earnestly. “Those of us fortunate enough to work with Cleon regard the man as we would Jesus Christ!”

Mrs. Langos led them from the hallway into an adjoining parlor that smelled musty and looked unused. The couch had worn flowered cushions, the carpeting was a faded and stained Persian rug, ornate brass lamps on the end tables bore patches of rust. On the mantel above the fireplace were half a dozen framed photographs and a large oval-faced clock that, in the silence, Nick heard ticking.

Mrs. Langos gestured Nick and Brakas to armchairs. She sat in a wooden rocking chair across from them, folding her hands nervously in her lap.

“I am a widow now, you see.” Her tone was plaintive. “I lost my beloved husband, Yiannis, about six months ago. He had what Dr. Sotos called a *megale syncope*, a ‘great

stroke.’ One minute my heart’s companion was alive, in the next minute the Lord had taken him from me.”

“To lose the spouse of a lifetime is a devastating experience,” Brakas said, his voice somber and consoling. “Nicholas and I offer you our heartfelt condolences.”

“Thank you,” Mrs. Langos sighed.

“We ask you that you think of us not merely as salesmen who will sell your property,” Brakas said, “but as supportive and beloved friends who have come to assist you in your time of grief.”

Nick marveled how sympathetic and sincere Brakas sounded. For a flustered moment, he wondered if he was misjudging the man.

“You will want to inspect the house,” Mrs. Langos said. “My caregiver, Jennifer, left a little while ago. She could have shown you around, but she won’t return until this evening.”

“That will not be necessary, dear lady,” Brakas said. “We have seen the exterior and the garage and only need to take a look at the basement. We have sold identical houses in Hyde Park, which is, as you probably know, a highly valued location. Of course the property must be reasonably priced.”

“I don’t really want to leave my home,” Mrs. Langos said, “but it has gotten too difficult for me to live here even with my caregiver. I’ve fallen three times in the last four months. After my husband’s death, before a caregiver joined me, I lay on the floor once for eight hours before a neighbor heard my cries and came to help me. My son, Alexander, who lives with his family in Vermont, is distraught. He writes and phones several times a week insisting I come live with them. My son married a Swedish girl, a nice girl, and they have a darling child, my granddaughter. But to tell the truth, Mr. Brakas, I don’t feel comfortable in their house. The food Ingrid cooks is different, and she doesn’t observe our Orthodox faith. Of course, I would have preferred my son marry a nice Greek girl.”

“I feel exactly as you do, Mrs. Langos,” Brakas said fervently. “My son, Dimitri, married a lovely girl, a fine wife. But, she is of the Jewish persuasion. However good she is, she will always be a *xeni*, a stranger outside our heritage and faith.” Brakas paused, his voice somber. “Someday, a day I fear not too far-off, when I can no longer live alone, I may face what you are facing now.”

“Thank you, Mr. Brakas,” Mrs. Langos said. “Your sympathy and understanding heart touch me deeply.” She paused. “But I’m being a dreadful hostess. Forgive me for not asking sooner. Would you have a cup of tea and a sweet?”

“Please, don’t bother,” Brakas said.

“I have baklava that I made last night.”

“My dear lady!” Brakas said fervently. “I haven’t the courage to ever refuse baklava!”

Mrs. Langos rose and walked from the room.

Brakas leaned toward Nick and spoke in a whisper.

“We’ll give the house a selling value around \$45,000,” he said.

“I think it would bring quite a bit more,” Nick said. “Last month, Frank Briggs in our office sold a house similar to this one a few blocks from here for \$65,000.”

“Do as I say!” Brakas spoke sharply. “If she objects, remind her the garage holds space only for one car, that the exterior of the house needs new shingles and painting. Tell her the furnace shows signs of ruptured hoses and leakage.”

“We haven’t even seen the basement yet.”

“It doesn’t make any difference!” Brakas said impatiently. “Tell her we’ve seen leakage running below the basement door and that the furnace and water heater will have to be replaced.”

Mrs. Langos returned carrying a tray with two cups of tea and two small platters holding pieces of baklava. They sipped the tea and ate the baklava, which Brakas praised effusively, calling it “delicious” and the “best baklava I’ve ever tasted!”

When they spoke about the selling of the house, Nick told Mrs. Langos the price her home should be listed for was \$45,000. Mrs. Langos expressed dismay.

“I was hoping it would bring considerably more than that,” Mrs. Langos said. “My neighbor, Sophia Reckas, sold her house farther up the street, just as large and in much worse shape than mine, for \$60,000.” She paused. “My husband and I lived frugally on our Social Security checks. Our house is all the estate we had. I hoped not to go to my son as a pauper, but able to pay my own way.”

Once again, she dabbed the tissue at her eyes.

“Dear lady,” Brakas said. “I wish we could get double that amount for you! But we are at the mercy of the housing market. Is that not so, Nicholas?”

Nick averted his eyes from Mrs. Langos as he lied.

“As Mr. Brakas indicated, the market is a little weak right now,” he said. “There are other problems, Mrs. Langos. A house this large should have a two-car garage. There are drainage marks outside the cellar door indicating that a number of times, the basement has flooded.”

“I had that flooding problem fixed!” Mrs. Langos cried. “I paid more than a thousand dollars!”

“Basement flooding can never really be fixed,” Brakas said. “In time the flooding returns until the water heater and furnace are corroded and damaged and need to be replaced.” He paused. “Now if you wanted to wait a year or two, we’re expecting a stronger market. Your lovely home would bring a much better price.”

“My son won’t let me wait,” Mrs. Langos said woefully.

“Rest assured, dear Mrs. Langos, we’ll sell your house quickly for the best price we can, so you can begin a new life with your beloved family.” Brakas drew a folded contract from his jacket pocket. “Now if you’d be good enough to sign this agreement, which merely says that you are authorizing Doukas Realty to act as sole agent for the sale of your fine property, Nicholas and I will be on our way.”

Brakas placed the contract on a coffee table beside Mrs. Langos. He handed her his pen and held the page for her as she signed.

“You are now in our competent and loving hands, dear lady,” Brakas said and he gave Mrs. Langos a courtly bow.

* * *

For several days after the visit to Mrs. Langos, Nick felt depressed and upset at how he and Brakas had been duplicitous in appraising the house’s worth.

Several times Margo asked him what was wrong. He considered telling her what had happened but shame kept him silent.

For the following weeks, he watched the office purchase and sale listings. On Monday of the third week, once again going through the listings, Nick recognized the Hyde Park address and read that the Langos house had been sold to Midwest Investments for \$42,000.

Nick was shocked at the ridiculous amount. He considered confronting Brakas, but instead spoke to Frank Holmes, one of the senior salesmen, about the sale.

“Don’t tell anyone I told you and get me in trouble,” Frank said. “Midwest Investments is owned by Aristotle Brakas.”

Nick had suspected some kind of deception and he was outraged at having been deceived.

“Will the house be offered for sale through our office?” Nick asked.

“Midwest sells its own properties,” Frank said, “so don’t expect to see the transaction listed in our office records and don’t be surprised if it sells for a good deal more than Midwest paid. This is the way Brakas operates.” He paused. “I’ve got a friend working in the Midwest office. I’ll get in touch with him and find out when it sells.”

Less than a week after their conversation, late one afternoon with most of the office staff gone and Doukas’s office dark, Frank came to Nick’s desk.

“That Hyde Park house we spoke about,” he said, “my friend told me it has just sold.”

Nick waited to hear the price.

“Seventy thousand,” Frank said.

Nick was stunned. He had expected the house would sell for more than the price they had given Mrs. Langos but he hadn’t anticipated that wide a range. Thinking about the nearly \$30,000 they had stolen from the widow, Nick was swept by shame.

That evening Margo asked Nick why he seemed so depressed. He was tempted to tell her everything but decided not to reveal the sordid transaction. He’d think about it and take some action. If he did nothing else, he’d tell Brakas that it was the last time he would participate in such a deception.

The following morning, Nick had an early showing of a property and arrived in the office in midmorning. A secretary brought him a sealed legal envelope bearing his name.

“Mr. Brakas was in earlier and said to give this to you,” Myrna said.

“Thanks.”

Nick stuck the envelope in his jacket pocket and rose, walking to the small restroom in the rear of the office. He locked the door and sat down on the closed lid of the toilet. He opened the envelope and found inside five crisp, new thousand-dollar bills.

His first reaction was awe at holding that much money in his hands. Then he felt anger at Brakas for making him part of such a deception. Finally, he wondered what he should do.

For a little while Nick sat there, pondering and assessing. There wasn’t any way to conceal the truth that what he and Brakas had done was dishonest. There was no way to make amends. Without stopping his part in the scam at the beginning, trying to give the money back now would probably cost him his job and might even get him arrested.

On the other hand, Margo and he could certainly use the money, more than he’d earned in the previous three months. He was certain many other salesmen were practicing similar deceptions. If Brakas and he hadn’t been the ones to deceive the widow, another salesman would have done so. Doukas had told him real estate was no place for mercy.

Even as he felt outraged at being deceived, he understood such a transaction wouldn’t be the last. He lacked the courage to return to the role of victim. He would lament his failure to do his job honestly and then do what Brakas and others like him were doing. He had a family to feed, clothe, and house. His first responsibility was to them. However wretched he might feel about the deception and abuse of others, his family came first.

Someone knocked on the door. Nick did not answer. When they knocked a second time, he called out, “In a minute.”

He had to leave the restroom. But his legs felt as if they were burdened by weights. He struggled to rise, got to his feet, reached for the knob of the door.

He caught a final glimpse of himself in the restroom mirror. Startled, he noticed the mirror wasn’t reflecting his face but the face of Cleon Doukas, a beaming smile smeared across the owner’s florid cheeks.

Harry Mark Petrakis is a novelist and short story writer with twenty-four published books. He has been nominated twice for the National Book Award in fiction. In addition to writing, Petrakis has long been a teacher and storyteller, in the old bardic tradition, appearing at colleges and clubs to read his stories. Now in his mid-nineties, and still writing stories, Petrakis and his wife, Diana, have been married seventy-three years. They have three sons, four grandchildren, and a great-granddaughter. Full info can be found at www.harrymarkpetrakis.com.