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# Ignacio Gomez Palacio, With a Note in My Hand (El Pagaro en la Mano)

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# OREGON REVIEW OF INTERNATIONAL LAW

## A Note in My Hand

Ignacio Gómez-Palacio

*To those who care for justice, Directors of the Instituto Mexicano Para la Justicia, A.C., with whom I have worked to this end: Ronald Dickins, Gabriel Navarrete, Javier Pérez Rocha, Roberto Vernon and Jorge Zapata.*

### *Translator's note:*

Ignacio Gómez-Palacio has achieved what many lawyers dream of: he is not only a successful lawyer but also a critically acclaimed writer of fiction. Born in Mexico in 1943, he holds a degree in law from the Universidad Autonoma de Mexico and an LL.M. from the University of Michigan. As a scholar and practitioner, he is the leading legal authority on Mexican law governing foreign investment there and is the author of three books on the subject; in addition, he maintains a private practice devoted to investment matters. He has taught a generation of American students of Mexican law through summer programs run by institutions like the University of Houston and the University of San Diego. He was also a consultant to the United Nations on issues of third-world investment policy and economic development, and practices as a commercial arbitrator and expert on investment law as well as counsel for Mexico's Ministry on Foreign Relations.

In 1989, Lic. Gómez-Palacio began to publish fiction and *belles-lettres*: a volume of short stories, *Raizal* (1989), and three novels, *La Lagrima* (1997), *La arregladera y el panadero sabedor* (2000), and *El dolar y la virgen: dos dioses en conflicto* (2002) In 1997, he was awarded the Mario Vargas Llosa Novel Award for *La arregladera y el panadero sabedor*, which was honored at the University of Murcia, Spain, as the best novel in

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one of the most prestigious international awards in the Spanish language that year.

Lic. Gómez-Palacio has also been active in the movements for law reform, civil society and electoral reform in Mexico. He was the founder and first president of the Instituto Mexicano para la Justicia, a non-governmental organization that advocates reform of court procedures and judicial practice within the Mexican legal system. He is also the author of *Procesos Electorales* (2000), the first scholarly analysis of the historic reforms in Mexican election law and procedure that brought an end to the undemocratic one-party system in that country. He is currently in the process of publishing a book on investment law in Latin America.

Lic. Gómez-Palacio has used his talents as a fiction writer to further the cause of reform in his home country by writing a series of short stories about the law and the legal system as it is today. In his law-related stories, his voice is relentlessly cheerful; reform *is* coming to Mexico, he suggests, and his country *will* join the ranks of modern democratic nations where the rule of law anchors civic life and economic prosperity. Often his narrator adopts the pose of an author of the mid-21<sup>st</sup> Century, looking back on the confusion of the turn of the millennium with relief and a touch of nostalgia. In a story not printed here, Gómez-Palacio depicts a man who is literally unable to believe that the old political system will ever change, and who dies in the year 2030 still insisting that the democratic elections of 2000 are about to be nullified by the old party leaders.

At the same time, however, Lic. Gómez-Palacio shows an affection for the foibles of his fellow Mexicans—particularly those who live by the law—that is reminiscent of Dickens's feeling for the English. Mexicans who live in the brave new world, he seems to suggest, will still be Mexicans, given to extravagant gestures, stubborn family feuds, an intense relationship with personal and national history, and (above all) a

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capacity for lifelong self-torture over the failures of romantic love.

With "A Note in My Hand," the story that follows, Gómez-Palacio shows us Mexican civil procedure as it is, at once evoking and evading our incredulity by viewing it from a far-off time when no one can believe that Mexicans once tolerated judicial corruption, collusive and fictitious procedure, and widespread violence and crime. The outrage at the base of his work is thus transmuted by hope and humor into a testament to the power of law and of the human spirit.

—Garrett Epps

### A Note in My Hand

Ignacio Gómez-Palacio

*"When the system allows it, man seeks justice within it. When this path is closed, he takes it into his own hands."*

—Brenton Lacantinerie

Nephew, you may not believe what I am going to tell you. You may think I am exaggerating. Trust me, Nacho. Have I ever lied to you? I'm too old to start now, and what would it get me? Just realize that back then, Mexico was an unbelievable place, and it is important for you to know what things were like back then, now that you've decided to study law.

What I am about to tell you happened to me back in the year 2000. It was the change of the millennium; a full thirty years ago. Longer ago, in fact, than you have been alive. Thirty years that seems like two centuries. We had just begun to think of justice as something society couldn't do without. You've heard how things were. People had no idea of respect for judges. In fact, judges hid in their offices and nobody even knew who they were. Besides which, all proceedings took place

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secretly, in writing. You could rent your witnesses at the courthouse door. The courts met in shabby, crowded buildings, and inside each of them sat Ali Baba and all forty of his thieves.

People back then were so scared they hardly dared to venture out at night. In those days, thieves didn't just rob houses; they held up trucks and taxis and raided crowded events like restaurants, even weddings. Don't stare at me as though I were crazy. This all happened, I promise you. Thieves would march into parties and demand jewels and money, or anything they could find. Those were the days of the kidnappings—some for millions of pesos and some for just a handful. Once they got hold of someone, they'd cut off their ears and send them to their families to persuade them to pay the ransom. We didn't have the electronic IDs and the locator system. The police actually chased crooks around in the streets—on foot, in cars, on bicycles, even in helicopters. It was the time of the narco-politician. The first years of the collapse of the PRI, the old official party was part of it. As they taught you in school, that outfit held onto power more than 70 years, and everyone knows no group can hang on that long without going bad.

Poor Mexico back then! And poor me for that matter, because it was then that I happened to lend 250,000 pesos—almost \$25,000 dollars—to Pablo Guevara. You met him; we'd been friends since university. He was desperate. His daughter needed a kidney transplant operation in Houston. It was a matter of life or death. Pablo came to me with his tongue dripping honey. I thought I knew him well, and took comfort in our long friendship. So, I let him have more than half of our life's savings. But as luck would have it, the girl's body rejected the transplant. She died a month later.

Imagine how upset and angry I was when he made no move to repay me and I had to go to him and ask for my money back. Then, after dishing out a few insults, he told me that the money I had given him must have been stolen—that it was *my* fault his daughter had died. You know how important friendship is to me. Having him doubt me like that hit me

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harder than losing the money. And not only that, he said this at the top of his voice, in his own living room, on a Sunday afternoon when his whole family had come together to watch the football finals. The son of a bitch!

That night, I felt a stench in my nostrils like dirty water—really, I swear, like piss. I was so mad I could feel myself turning as red as hot pepper. I couldn't understand this kind of betrayal by a friend, or, for that matter, his aggressiveness, his nastiness. Just a few months before, I had stopped renting and moved into a large apartment. I had to save money. We were all just barely making ends meet. The presidential election had split the country, and business was pretty much at a standstill.

I talked to your aunt about the whole sorry business. It was her idea that I should get a lawyer and just go after Pablo without waiting a day. She had never trusted him or liked him, for that matter. She was the one who'd insisted that I at least make him sign a promissory note before I gave him the money.

"What a mess!" she said. "Remember you said 'we don't need anything in writing'? That friendship was security enough and that he would pay us back in a couple of weeks!" She showed me the paper bearing his promise to pay. "With this you can levy against him and take his computers. Let's see what he has to work with then! That snotty bastard is going to have to apologize to you, and beyond that, he'll have to pay interest, and plenty of it. You don't deserve to be treated this way. See if we ever offer him our friendship, or our money, again!"

"You're right, sweetheart," I said.

"From now on we need to learn not to lend money, but beyond that not to trust people, no matter who they are; either they sign a note or we walk away from them. Documents don't lie; and with this little paper we are going to teach him not to screw around with us."

"Yes, dear!"

"Thank God I was stubborn enough to insist on getting it—am I right? If it had been up to you, you'd just have handed

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over the check, but now you see, we have a signed note and so we've got him where we want him. All we need now is a good lawyer."

"I'm going to break his balls sure enough," I said, "but I want to show my good faith with him and be above board. Nobody is going to say that I did anything that wasn't by the book. I'll give him a chance to pay before I turn the dogs loose on him. I'm also going to talk to some people we know, so that they understand what's really going on. The fact is that I'm the injured party here. Lawyers are bastards and they cost plenty. Pablo's going to have to pay damages and take care of the legal bills. It'll be hard on him, but he's acted pretty badly. Not just like a pig, but like a swine."

"Kick his butt," she said. "This guy screwed us over and he's got to pay."

"I agree, dear. But there's no reason for us to act like jerks too. We should give him one last chance."

"You're too soft. If it was up to me, I'd go straight to the lawyer right now."

"I understand. But remember, we've got him where it hurts. I have his signed note in my hand. I want to give him a way out. If he doesn't take it, fine—I'll come down on him like a ton of bricks."

Three or four weeks went by, during which I enlisted mutual friends and relations in an effort to get him to pay up. But it was all for nothing. Pablo wasn't paying and that was that. Once that was clear, I went to the lawyer. I took Pablo's note with me, nice and warm, for the lawyer to use on him.

So I found myself in the office of a short little guy, less than thirty years old, wearing a four-button suit that looked like a little soldier's uniform. That kind of thing was stylish back then. A coffee-colored shirt. His bar association badge stuck in his lapel, and in his hand his trusty Montblanc, the kind of pen that was considered top-of-the-line back then.

"Very prudent of you to get a signed note, sir," he said.

"Well, certainly, I wasn't born yesterday."

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"It's really too bad you didn't get a co-signature as well." He looked at me with his sharp little face, a cigar clenched between his teeth and his eyebrows wiggling up and down. Back then, a lot of young people had taken up tobacco. He was smoking a blunt, fat torpedo—just the right size to fit in his handkerchief pocket. Incredible how many changes of fashion I've seen!

I replied, "I really couldn't ask him to get it cosigned. Think about it—it was urgent. I did insist on a signature—thanks to my wife."

"Yes, certainly—I was just saying—well, what property does he have?" He looked at me again with that inquisitive bland little face.

"Everything he has in his house."

"What about the house itself?"

"No, that's rented."

"Hmm."

"But he has about ten computers he uses in his work. He has a refrigerator, a TV, even a car."

"Well, yes, that's not so bad, sir. That sounds pretty good." His expression changed to that of a well-fed little cat. He took out his pen and scrawled a few notes. This lawyer had been recommended to me by a businessman I knew who used him to collect overdue accounts receivable. He got paid by keeping a portion of what he collected. My business wasn't substantial enough to bother one of the big prestigious firms with. Other lawyers, no older than this one, shared the office in clean little cubicles in the middle-class suburb of Ciudad Satelite. I had decided to hire this one when I found out he was the son of a member of Congress. If anything got in his way, he could get his old man to help him out. As a matter of fact, a little of that kind of leverage sounded pretty good to me. His father was active in a political party called the PRD. The old man had actually run for his party's nomination for mayor of Mexico City just the year before. He was known for having switched over from the PRI because of a fight he'd had with the

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Ruiz Massieus, a family from down in Acapulco who had many troubles at the time.

"Fine, then, let me have a look at the note."

I felt a certain diffidence, a reluctance to give up my comforting little paper. "I have it right here," I said, taking it out of an envelope that I had been carrying around inside a small plastic bag to keep it from the cold.

"Hmm," he said. "Let's see. Let's see. Yes, everything seems to be in order."

"All right, then."

"Yes, I think so. Very well, I'll be in touch with you."

But I couldn't take my eyes off the document. Noticing my agitation, he continued, "Don't worry. I'll just keep this with me for now. I need to attach it to the complaint."

"Do you really need the note itself? Let's not play around!" I said.

"There's no other way to do it. Please don't worry. It's put in the safe at the clerk's office. It will be perfectly safe there."

"What if something happens to it?"

"Nothing will happen. Please, just relax." I left his office with my empty little plastic bag, leaving the note abandoned and defenseless in the lawyer's office. I decided not to mention this part of it to your aunt. I didn't want her to worry, and I didn't want her to scold me either. And so it was done. I put the envelope and the little bag back in my wardrobe, where she knew I kept it.

Less than a week had passed when I got a call from the lawyer.

"I'm calling to let you know that I served the complaint. I hope to carry out the attachment in ten days or so. Rather, I had hoped to. Unfortunately, sir, I have some bad news."

"What kind of bad news, counselor?"

"I have learned through some contacts that your debtor, Sr. Guevara, has unfortunately decided to attach himself. Apparently he's going to do it this afternoon."

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"He's going to what?"

"As I said."

"What are you talking about? He doesn't owe money to anybody else."

"Well, just so. He's attaching himself."

"What in the world does that mean?"

"You're not familiar with this procedure?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, listen, Sr. Guevara must have signed another note to a friend or some member of his family, in order to show that he owes this person a large sum of money. He did it so that his friend can file a complaint with the court and attach his property before we do. Between us, it's just done to protect Sr. Guevara from our attachment, but unfortunately it does stand in our way."

"Oh, God damn it!"

"It's a fraud on the court. If we can prove it, we can put Sr. Guevara in jail—his lawyer, too. But that kind of proceeding is expensive and time-consuming."

"Damn it again!"

"So that's the way things are. Unfortunately, we can't get hold of property that has already been attached, except by a subsequent attachment. But that, of course, would have to be discounted by the amount that the prior creditor has demanded, which is bound to be in itself greater than the value of the goods in question. Their levy won't leave enough for a cup of coffee, or they wouldn't have bothered with it."

"Well, what about the property? I mean the computers, the TV, the car—what happens to that?"

"Well, they could leave them in the custody of Sr. Guevara, or they could have them taken elsewhere. That's really up to them, because the creditor has the right to name the receiver who will be responsible for conserving the property."

For me, this was the turning point. The whole thing just took a second or two. Imagine—your aunt warning me to get a note, thinking she was so smart. Me taking such good care of

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my little paper. What a pair of suckers! Me going to see the lawyer—and after all that, having the system refuse to give us justice. They were robbing us of our life's savings!

With my blood boiling in my ears, I all but shouted at the tiny lawyer:

"Well, if they take them somewhere, we can stop them in the street and grab the stuff then!"

"You don't really believe that, do you?"

"Of course I believe it!"

"I'm afraid that would be robbery, sir."

"Well, counselor, you know as well as well as I do that a thief who robs a thief gets a hundred years off his sentence."

"Well, perhaps, but the two of us could still end up in jail."

"I can't believe that!"

"Why not?"

"Well, we're in the right!"

"What difference does that make? The law doesn't allow us to take justice into our own hands."

"Well, then, to hell with the law!"

"Alas, sir, we can't do that."

"Are you telling me that Pablo can twist the law but we can't? Is that the way things work—the creditor gets screwed and the debtor gets off scot-free?"

"What can I tell you, sir? The law is the law and I can't change it."

"Well, as far as I'm concerned, that's not the end of it. Let's think what to do next. There's no way we're just going to sit here holding our stiff little note without being able to cash it in—just sit down with arms folded and egg all over our faces."

"Indeed, sir?"

"You bet, counselor. Get yourself ready. We'll take the stuff to a storage facility I know. I'll tell them right now to be ready for us."

What do you think, nephew—pretty ballsy, no? Let me tell you, Nachito, back then we just had to play things that way.

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We had to make it up as we went along. We had to take risks. A lot of the time you had to keep a blackjack in your pocket and a smile on your face. You offered them a kiss so you could bite them on the neck.

You're starting to believe me, am I right? I'm glad. I assure you things really used to go like that. Wipe that look off your face; I'll tell you what happened next. My lawyer didn't want to bother his father; the amount wasn't worth it. In fact, he must not have had many clients at all to be willing to jump into this. Or maybe he just wanted to show the old man that his son was man enough to handle things himself sometimes. Anyway, I took the lead and he fell into line. I put on a hat and sunglasses so no one would recognize me, even though I wasn't getting out of the car. For his part, my lawyer planted himself outside the court official's house, whose job it was to serve attachments and eviction orders. In those days it was usual for lawyers to line up outside the court official's house waiting for him to choose which one he would work with first. The official would pick the lucky lawyer and jump into his car, and others would chase after them like shysters after an ambulance. The fourth stop, at about seven that night, was the levy against the Guevara household. They were waiting for their lawyer, for the auto-attachment to take place. He arrived with the official. We were following.

Everything started off quietly. The official came walking along in a shiny green suit, one of those flashy jobs like in a gangster movie. The other plaintiff's lawyer, with his soda-bottle eyeglasses, pointed out the distrained items while the official made detailed notes. As soon as an item was entered in the records, men carried it to a truck waiting outside. The receiver was a plump lady of a certain age, who sat there comfortably, smirking and laughing. She was waiting too. A couple of lawyers who were just hanging around to watch told my lawyer what was going on.

Everything looked genuine. Pablo's lawyer had set it up well. In order to be sure no one would suspect him of fraud, he had arranged to have the goods actually taken away, even if it

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were only for a few days. They even hauled out a ramp and drove Pablo's car into the truck.

As it pulled out, we followed at a safe distance. After the truck had gone a short ways, we had a talk with the driver, initially reluctant but open to wise solutions, such as a few banknotes that convinced him to take the things to an address we gave him. From there, we loaded them into another truck with another driver, to the storage space I'd rented. Nobody—not Pablo or anybody else—knew where it was.

Things quieted down. We waited two or three days. On the fourth day, a couple of court police showed up at my lawyer's office with a summons. This document indicated a time, date, and place where he was to report for interrogation on a charge of robbery. My lawyer found out that the damned driver had double-crossed us. The following day a summons came for me, on the same charge.

That poor baby lawyer. Poor me, for that matter. I remember how scared we were —really shitting in our socks. We went together to see his father. There, while I was standing by, he explained the situation with tears in his eyes. He told the old man that he was in over his head. He told him he had just been following my lead. It wasn't fair that my wife and I were being robbed of our savings. There was no justice in this country. And it was his obligation as a lawyer, his duty to his oath of office, to make sure that honest clients like us got what they deserved. He ended by saying that he wore his family name with pride. Like his father, he wanted to fight for justice.

The Congressman was wearing a magnificent three-piece suit, with darts in the sides of the jacket. His face showed disbelief, and he screwed his moustache into a grimace. He was looking out the window as if searching for an answer to the cold water just poured on him. Finally he turned his head toward us, like an owl settling its feathers.

"You stupid little jerk!" he said. "Why didn't you come see me before? Aren't you a lawyer, for God's sake? Do you

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really think you can go around robbing people just because you feel like it?"

"I wasn't trying to rob anybody, Papa—I told you ..."

"I heard what you told me. But get it through your head that you committed—both of you," and here he turned on me with a savage look—"a robbery, and you know it as well as I do."

"But, Papa—"

"There is no 'but.' It's not your client's fault. He can suggest anything he wants, son. But are you really telling me that you decided to commit a crime just because some client asked you to?"

"We were in the right."

"Did your mother and I name you Robin Hood? Being in the right only matters in movies. Out here we are in the jungle, and we need to figure out what to do now. I need to figure out some way to help you out."

"Thank you, Papa."

"Don't thank me just yet."

"No, Papa."

"Look, I want to make it crystal clear to you that if you want to help fight injustice, then try to get the laws changed. Go into politics the way I have, write for the newspapers, but don't break the law, and for God's sake don't take chances with going to prison. Keep your eyes open, son, and let this mess teach you a lesson."

"As for you sir," he said, turning to me, stepping carefully in my direction. "I am very proud of my son, he was an outstanding student. But life is a bitch, things go wrong, and when you're out in the real world mistakes can be expensive. There are some rough waters out there, and a little fish like my son, if he makes one mistake, he gets swept down the rapids where the sharks are waiting."

"Papa loves fishing," the son shyly explained to me.

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"Excuse me, sir," said the father to me. "Look, son, I'm not talking right now as a sportsman. Try to follow what I'm saying."

"Okay, Papa, sorry, go ahead."

"All right then, let me look into things. And stay calm. If you lose your nerve, you're lost. We'll see what I can do."

The upshot of it was that when the day set for the interrogation arrived, we didn't show up. The Congressman had a heart-to-heart talk with prosecutor, who back then was called the Public Ministry. He used some fast talking and a few banknotes to make clear to the official that we were only trying to block a self-attachment, a fraud against the law, and that the real criminals were the accusers, not his son and I.

While all this was going on, of course, we had the goods and nobody knew where they were. We knew better than to tell their truck driver where we were going with them, and we had switched trucks before taking them to the warehouse. So we felt pretty safe.

Given the way matters sat, and just to cover all bases, my lawyer took the precaution of attaching goods anyway. It's unbelievable but they never thought we'd turn up. All in all, we were able to get hold of another television and two more computers, which I stored at my brother's house. I almost began to feel bad for Pablo, but he really had asked for it.

Meanwhile, I kept asking the lawyer to give me back Pablo's note. He told me again about how he had deposited it in the courthouse safe. I often thought of it sitting there on the shelf, neatly folded, all by itself, with its tidy printed lettering and the signature, which was what mattered most.

Some days went by and we actually began to hope that Pablo might really decide to pay us. But nothing. Nothing happened at all. We began to worry that he was going to make some move against us, that he would drop a bomb on us, as we used to say back then—what you would probably call a laser. The fact is we started to get pretty nervous. The poor guy,

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having lost his daughter, now had no computers to work with and not even a car to drive.

Your aunt began to worry that they would steal back the promissory note. She thought it was still in my wardrobe. So I told her it was at the courthouse. At first this upset her. She asked me why I had kept the empty envelope and bag. After a while, though, she brightened up. There, with the judge, in the safe—that was where it belonged! We had faith in our little note, even though it made us a little nervous to think of it out there in the world, naked and cold, without its envelope or its plastic bag.

The pressure began to wear on us. We stopped going out at night. We started hearing noises in empty rooms, jumping at shadows. We cross-examined anyone who knocked before we would even open the door. Afterwards we found out that Pablo was spending whole days without getting out of his pajamas. He never went out of the house. He didn't even shave. He went around shabby and unkempt and talked about suicide. And all of this was our fault.

What a screwed-up situation! We had been his best friends, the only ones who would lend him the money he needed to save his little girl's life. He had taken us in his arms that night when we had decided that we could make the loan. A night when we were all drunk with emotions, when we had stood together cursing the government for allowing corruption and favoritism in the organ transplant system, which was why Guevara had to go to Houston—to shell out for foreign medical care.

Some nights your aunt and I talked about giving everything back and just writing off the whole business. Speaking for myself, I was at the end of my rope. I hadn't collected a cent; instead I was living with fear every day. On the other hand, I couldn't bring myself to sell the car and the computers on the black market without title documents. They were gathering dust in the warehouse; each week they were worth less in cash. With all this, we found ourselves trapped in

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a kind of oppressive silence, heavy, thick, like the moment before the storm begins when you realize there's nothing you can do. Your aunt, of course, was absolutely opposed to our canceling the debt. And the little lawyer insisted that all we could do was wait.

It was one afternoon about then—it must have been right around six—that I heard a knock at the door. I couldn't imagine what anyone would want. I had gotten home early from work. I was suspicious because whoever it was hadn't rung the street door. Of course, that happened all the time—visitors slipped in with somebody else who had a key. Then they would walk up to the sixth floor and knock on the apartment door.

When he heard me shoot the double-bolt, the old deputy, my lawyer's father, slipped his card under the door. Incredible! I never imagined that such a personage, someone so famous, would actually come to visit us at home.

I opened the door and there he was. By himself. With his briefcase. He was wearing the same kind of beige suit his son had worn, but with a blue shirt. I could see that he had changed. He looked as if he had come down in the world. He was wearing those old-fashioned loafers, which you almost never see any more. In fact, you may not believe it, but this time he was wearing a carnation in his buttonhole. I invited him in, and we seated ourselves in the living room.

He told me that he was in a hurry, so he would come straight to the point. I didn't even have a chance to offer him a cup of that Macchu Pichu-style coffee your aunt loved so much.

He told us that his son had gone to live in Baja California, to work for a hotel chain there. So now he was in charge of his son's affairs. He was a lawyer too. He was still in Congress, but close to leaving office. In those days many politicians used to shoot with two guns, lawyering and holding public office, like legit siblings. He looked to me as if all that infighting had pretty much taken it out of him.

Well, to make a long story short, he told us that we had a "legal interest" in the items described in the records that the

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clerk had recorded during Pablo's self-attachment. He asked us to give him a power of attorney, and we did. He wanted to denounce the abuse of trust committed by that fat, middle-aged woman who had sat there snickering as the receiver. She was the one who had taken responsibility for the items. Clearly, she didn't have them and could face formal charges. She might even go to jail. Nacho, you know how these things are. You've been to school; your teachers and your books tell about similar cases. They show you how to find innocent little birds in lion's cages.

Well, a week later the lady had paid us everything we were owed, and interest beside, including a legal fee for the deputy. In turn, she got the promissory note, which had been living alone in the courthouse safe. I endorsed it, but I left the payee open. That was the only condition she asked for. It didn't matter to me; we'd been paid in full. As I signed it, I felt the little sheet warming up again, as if getting ready for action. We sent Pablo an anonymous note to let him know where his things were; we placed them where he could find them and he started working.

It was some years later that our children fell in love. You see how things go? Suddenly we were family, and we even spent two or three Christmases together before we started to die off one by one. We're Mexicans. We don't act like Montagues and Capulets. That's O.K. for the Italians and their vendettas. Here we bend sooner. Anger dies before it kills the angry.

I saw that fat lady again, at Pablo's funeral, very shrunken and old. People in the crowd told me that she had been his lover. Who really knows? But what I can tell you is that right there in front of everybody, as they were burying Pablo, she threw that promissory note onto the casket. I recognized it at once. For heaven's sake, your aunt and I had bought it at the stationery store and filled in the blanks ourselves! I could tell it had stayed nice and warm since I handed it over to her. She'd been holding onto it since then. It was hers, and who knows how hard she'd milked it during those years, how much she'd made Pablo squirm, and how much she'd

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made him pay. I was awestruck. I had never thought I'd see my little paper again. The gravediggers stopped their work. They didn't know what to do. They stared at the widow. She exchanged glances with the fat woman. One second. Two—at the most. Then she screwed up her mouth, and signaled to keep shoveling. Can you picture it? The note was soon completely covered with dirt and mud. It was the rainy season. Now, that little paper must really be cold! Call it cold, cold.

Of the Guevaras and our family, I am the only one left. I don't have long to live. Even today, death can't be avoided. I take comfort though, that thanks to God and a lot of suffering by people of my generation, we have achieved more justice. What happened to us then is there to tell your professors and your fellow students. Something to write in the legal history textbooks.

For my part, nephew, I have to say that I learned my lesson. I don't loan money. No, by God, even if someone puts a note in my hand.

—Translated by Garrett Epps