

1 This story relates an acrimonious divorce appraisal, and how an appraiser may be pressured to
2 produce a result for the client.
3

4 CATS AND DOGS

5 The lawyer called with an urgent request. “My client is in the middle of a contentious
6 divorce. We have a court order allowing him to make an inventory of the disputed contents of
7 his home. Can you meet him tomorrow and do an appraisal at the same time?”

8 There was nothing else on my calendar. “Okay, I’m available.”

9 “My client will be paying you. How much do you think it will cost?”

10 I quoted my regular hourly rate and told him. “I’ll estimate the total once I’ve had a
11 chance to size up the job. There won’t be any obligation if your client doesn’t want me to go
12 ahead with it.”

13 * * *

14 I met the husband in the driveway of a custom house in an upper middle class leafy
15 neighborhood. It looked like a vision of the American success story. An affable airline pilot,
16 still in uniform, was waiting for me to arrive before going in. He grabbed my hand and greeted
17 me like a long lost friend. No one answered the door bell. When he tried the door, it was open.
18 We went through the house with him calling for his wife. As we approached one of the
19 bedrooms she yelled out through the closed door in a thick Spanish accent, “Do what you have to
20 do, and leave me alone.”

21 In those days I would dictate inventories into a small recording machine, and have my
22 assistant transcribe the notes onto a spreadsheet. The pilot was to become a real pain in the ass.
23 He followed behind me hanging on every word and amount. I didn’t want to have him pick up

24 on an amount I might change after doing research, or get into any arguments over my initial
25 opinion. To keep him guessing I would only dictate the first digit of the price. “Five” could
26 mean five cents or five thousand dollars. I wouldn’t be much of an appraiser if I couldn’t fill in
27 the number of zeros called for. It didn’t take long for him to pick up on what I was doing, and it
28 became kind of a game. I figured that I would be spending two or three hours in the house and
29 an equal amount of time in the office, and planned on asking him for a retainer when I finished
30 with the inspection. No one had ever opted to scrub an appraisal after I finished with the
31 inspection and I had no reason to suspect that this job would be different.

32 In a divorce the wife usually ends up with the house and its contents. They are appraised,
33 and the husband — as part of the settlement — gets cash or other property to offset the value of
34 the house and furnishings. It is advantageous to the wife that the value be as low as possible; the
35 husband would usually like it high.

36 * * *

37 The inspection started in the living room. The furnishings were pretty ordinary, no
38 original art, or valuable bric-a-brac. I have been in more interesting Holiday Inns. Typically, I
39 would only itemize things worth over one hundred dollars in the appraisals; lower value items
40 would be lumped together by room as “Furniture and accessories, assorted lot.” It soon became
41 clear that the pilot wanted to make sure I didn’t miss anything, and that the values were as high
42 as possible.

43 If he thought I might have overlooked something his mantra was, “What about this?”
44 Every piece of crap elicited a discussion. It was going to take longer than I planned.

45 * * *

46 We were in the hallway leading to the bedrooms and I stopped to add in a dresser that
47 was outside the bedroom where the wife was holed up.

48 I dictated note of the dresser when the pilot chimed in “Check out the contents of the
49 drawers.”

50 He then went on to open a drawer pull out a lace thong, lamenting . “You wouldn’t
51 believe how much these cost.”

52 “I ordinarily don’t include clothes in the appraisals. They don’t usually have much value
53 and when they do it’s beyond my expertise.”

54 “These are very valuable.”

55 “You’ll have to find someone else to appraise them.”

56 While we were discussing the wife’s bloomers a skinny old tabby cat hobbled by.

57 “Make sure you get the cat too.”

58 Suddenly with no warning the bedroom door burst open. The wife charged out dressed in
59 a frilly pink peignoir brandishing a pistol. When the pilot turned to run away she hit him on the
60 back of the head with the gun. He ran out with her in hot pursuit.

61 She turned to me, “You too. . . . Get the fuck out a here!”

62 The pilot escaped out the front door. I grabbed my bag and ran out the back.

63 We met again in the driveway where we started.

64 As if nothing had happened the pilot offered, “I guess we’ll have to reschedule.”

65 “It’d be better if neither you or your wife were here.”

66 “I’ll call the lawyer and set it up.”

67 “There’s also a question about my fee,” I reminded him.

