

GEPETTO'S DILEMMA

1 The 1980's saw the height of the drug wars in Miami. I never desired any involvement
2 other than occasional recreational consumption. It was inconceivable to me that even appraisers
3 could be drawn into the front lines.

4 As my appraisal practice grew, I went from working out of a spare bedroom to a small
5 rented office. Still one room with a desk and a computer workstation in a building, it had little
6 more to offer than a good location off of Brickell Avenue. In a previous life it served as part of a
7 garden apartments complex.

8 I hired Sheila as my assistant. She was young, pretty, and from a traditional East Indian
9 family that immigrated to the USA via Jamaica. She transcribed inventories that, in those days, I
10 dictated into a miniature tape recorder. When business was slow, she entered artists' names and
11 information into a data base I was compiling to search for partially legible signatures. I kept her
12 pretty busy. Her parents and boyfriend liked the job more than she did. They hoped it would
13 protect her from the temptations of Miami. She was bored.

14 I returned from a property inspection one day to find her entertaining a good looking,
15 clean-cut, young man.

16 "Hi, Harris, this is Greg." Flush with the break in her routine, sporting a big smile and
17 obviously flirting with Greg, "He's an agent from the DEA!"

18 I just about shit.

19 Standing and reaching his hand out, "Mr. Samuels glad to meet you."

20 The only thing I could think of was is there any dope in the office? I took his hand and
21 asked, "How can I help you?"

22 "We need an appraisal of the furniture and equipment in a shoe factory. Can you do it?"

23 With some relief — and despite never having appraised a shoe factory before — I readily
24 said, “Sure.”

25 “We arrested a guy who wants to put up the furniture and equipment of a friend’s shoe
26 factory as bail. There is a question as to whether or not it’s worth \$200,000. There’ll be a
27 hearing and you’ll have to testify. We hope he won’t make bail.”

28 “Where is the place? Who is my contact there?”

29 He gave me an address, and the name and phone number of the proprietor.

30 “How do I contact you?”

31 “I gave my number to Sheila.”

32 “The hearing is next Wednesday,” followed by a big smile and a *see-you-later* wave.

33 Before I could respond, he was gone.

34 “Sheila, let me have his contact information.”

35 She handed me a handwritten note on a scrap of paper with simply “Greg” and a phone
36 number.

37 “What’s his last name?”

38 “He didn’t give it.”

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41 I called Mr. Geppetto to make an appointment to examine the contents of his factory. He
42 answered the call on the first ring. Minimally responsive, he spoke in a thick accent and
43 carefully chose his words. It was obvious that he was uncomfortable with my coming over.

44 The so-called “factory” was a bare bones little warehouse in Hialeah in a line with other
45 identical ones. There wasn’t so much as a sign to distinguish it. Mr. Geppetto was the sole
46 proprietor of a one-man operation that I could immediately sympathize with. His equipment

47 consisted of some heavy duty sewing machines, presses and machines for cutting and dyeing
48 leather, and an old fashioned cobbler's bench. Along one wall stood a rack of one-off pairs of
49 shoes in various stages of manufacture. A display of finished sample boots and shoes in exotic
50 animal hides sat opposite the counter by the door. In the back were rolls of leather and fabric.
51 The place smelled great.

52 Geppetto was a custom shoemaker and the factory was no more than his rudimentary
53 workshop. As I went around it with him by my side, he went into excruciating detail about the
54 shortcomings of each machine. He clearly wanted the appraisal as low as possible. Geppetto
55 didn't have much to worry about. I thought less of the stuff than even he made out. It looked
56 like everyone involved wanted the perp to stay in jail.

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59 The following Monday, two days before the hearing, I called Greg with the results of my
60 appraisal. "There really wasn't much there. The total came to \$19,500 and even that is a stretch.
61 How would you like the report made out?"

62 "Great. Won't need a written report. Wednesday I'll send over a car to bring you to the
63 courthouse."

64 "You don't have to. I am close enough to walk."

65 "That's okay, my guys will pick you up at ten-thirty." With that he hung up.

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68 Ten-thirty on the dot, two burly young guys in suits knocked at the office door. From their
69 appearance they could have been professional football halfbacks. It was obvious they were
70 wearing body armor. There were more bulges under their clothes than I could account for with a
71 flak jacket and an assortment of weapons. They escorted me to an obviously government issue

72 Ford Fairlane 500 loosely disguised with ordinary plates, but belied by black-wall tires and the
73 most basic trim. The inside smelled like a locker room. One got in the front to drive and the
74 other squeezed in beside me on the cheap vinyl seats in the back. The trip to the Federal
75 courthouse could not have seemed longer if they dragged me.

76 The guy by my side turned to talk. I was hoping for some idle chit chat to ease the mood.
77 "The perp is really a bad guy. No one wants him out on the streets. If he walks, people are likely
78 to die."

79 Suddenly, the consequences of the appraisal were looming even larger than the possibility
80 of the narcs finding a baggie of grass in my office.

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83 I had never entered the Federal Courthouse before. It was an oversized stone edifice left
84 over from the great depression, festooned with columns, and in a style best described as neo-
85 classical oppressive. My large companions with bulges kept close enough to make sure I wasn't
86 going anywhere but to the courtroom, a cavernous auditorium with quasi-theatrical lighting. In
87 the middle of an elevated stage, behind the bench, sat Alcee Hastings illuminated as if a god. He
88 was a hero of the civil rights movement, and the first black judge to be appointed to the Federal
89 bench in Florida. The proceedings were already in progress when I was seated between my
90 escorts, in the dark, in the last row of the auditorium.

91 A lawyer on the stage began to address the judge. "The prosecution would like to call a
92 witness as to the value of the property being put up for bail. Our witness is in the back of the
93 courtroom. Would it be okay if he testified from there?"

94 "Proceed," intoned Judge Hastings from the bench without hesitation, apparently used to
95 hidden witnesses in drug trials.

96 With that, as if practiced, my companions grabbed me by the elbows and stood me up.

97 The state's attorney looked into the gloom of the gallery and asked, "Mr. Samuels what
98 are your qualifications for appraising machinery and equipment?"

99 In what must have seemed like a disembodied voice to the judge and lawyers, I rattled off
100 a synopsis of my resume.

101 "Mr. Samuels, do you have an opinion on the value of the contents of Mr. Geppetto's
102 factory?"

103 "Yes, it is my opinion that the fair market value of the property is \$19,500."

104 "Thank you."

105 Judge Hastings looked over to the defense attorney. "Do you have any questions for the
106 witness?"

107 "None your honor."

108 Judge Hastings, peered vacantly into the gloom, "You are dismissed."

109 After a few minutes of ruminating, Judge Hastings looked up, "Twenty thousand, two
110 hundred thousand, its all the same thing. The defendant is free to go."

111 At this point I'm worried about how I'll get back to the office. I never noticed that my
112 escorts vanished while Judge Hastings had my full attention. If the one mile drive to the
113 courthouse was long, the walk back was even longer.

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116 The next day I phoned Greg. "How shall I make out the bill for my services?"

117 "What does it come to?"

118 I pulled a number out of the air, inflated to allow for the stress of the job, "\$750."

119 "I'll be over in a few minutes."

120 True to his word he was at our door in ten minutes. In front of Sheila he counted out
121 \$750 in crisp bills, thanked me, and left.

122 For Sheila, the job became a little less boring.

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125 Alcee Hastings had a somewhat checkered career. He was the only Federal judge to be
126 impeached from the bench for bribery without having been convicted of a crime. That couldn't
127 keep him down. He has been the representing Florida's Twentieth District in Congress since
128 1993.

129 In the next story the subject buddha also has a checkered past. Stolen at some point from
130 Southeast Asia it surfaces in Miami Beach. Its real value goes unrecognized for years, changes
131 hands within a family and sells for an extraordinary amount.