

Light and Dark

by James Lynn Smith

I was in the middle of a brush stroke when the phone rang. Putting brush aside, I picked up the phone. “Hello.”

“I’d like to talk to Jeff Thompson.”

The voice was vaguely familiar. “Speaking, how can I help?”

“Jeff, it’s your cousin, Freddy Sills.”

It took a moment to remember him. *No, I don’t need this.* “Freddy, what’s going on?”

“I heard you’re an artist, now. That you’ve got a studio in Dallas and need help selling your work.”

Something inside clutched at my gut. “That info’s a little off, Freddy. I don’t know where you heard that.”

“I have my contacts. Paintings need to move and I could do that for you. A genius like you should be creating, not searching for buyers.”

The flattery bounced off the shield around my mind, especially under present circumstances.

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The problem besetting most artists was upon me. I would be heading for debtor’s prison if they still had one. My paintings were not selling fast enough. Although I owned a section of renovated warehouse in the Deep Ellum section of Dallas, that was an inheritance, not bought with money from sales.

My deceased father left it to me with the stipulation that it would be rented out the first five years, while I finished my education. Previous renters gutted my

section and made it into an art gallery. When their money ran out, I took over and remodeled a portion for my joint studio and residence. Costs consumed most of the prior rental income, but I was ready to earn with my art.

Hope springs eternal, but then reality barges in like King Kong at a tea party. Not only did I have to paint, I had a business to run. There were bills, quarterly taxes and negotiation with galleries to rent their display space or sell on consignment. My eyes were turning red from late night bookwork.

Every newbie needs exposure. It's simple to get local restaurants to hang paintings at no cost, right? Wrong. Even competition to show for free was intense. I needed help so I hired my girlfriend Doris to keep the books, allowing me time to paint and push my art locally. I also wanted to get my work into other cities.

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I held the phone without immediate response. Why would Freddy want to be an agent for me? He knew nothing about the art world. It was sophisticated, loony, back-stabbing, inspirational and disillusioning.

"You want to come out here to be my art agent?" I finally said. "I appreciate the gesture, but Dallas is a whole different scene. It takes a long time to get any action underway, and besides, what do you know about selling art?"

"Jeff, it's not that hard. You may think Gulfport is part of the Redneck Riviera, but I've made contacts who know people with lots of new money and want to own classy stuff. I've sold celebrity clothing, antique furniture and jewelry, all as a freelance agent. It's not a walk-in store type thing. We contact people discreetly and deal with them individually or have private auctions."

"Who is 'we', Freddy?"

"People I know, contact people. They're legit, wealthy and have business smarts."

"I don't know about this."

“Tell you what, Jeff. I’ll come out at no cost to you. Just give me a chance to show what I can do. Okay?”

Though I could not think of a rational reason to refuse, I was uncomfortable. Certain things about Freddy bothered me. “I guess so,” I finally said. “We’ll give it a try. Look for places to stay in either Deep Ellum or Garland.”

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Freddy was the son of an aunt on my dad’s side. His father was Eric Sills, a product of the South’s white underclass. Brute strength and dash made Eric attractive to aunt Myrtle in her youthful naiveté. But afterwards, strife and domestic conflict. My father viewed Freddy with circumspect acceptance, fearing his father’s genetic character would show in him someday. Freddy was two years older than I, and even in his early teens, he had an attractive toothy smile, dark brown eyes and straight, coal black hair.

I remember his taking me into a small patch of woods near his home in Gulfport to show me a skull. Although I was young, I knew the object positioned atop a stake was from a human. The macabre attracted Freddy, so this place must have been for his play with ritual. Later I told my dad, but he was incredulous, thinking it to be the head bones of an animal. But upon following me to the site, he realized it was the skull of a child, with some of the red hair still attached. He went to my aunt and told her.

A year later, Freddy was at a family reunion in my parents’ home in Mississippi. He and I were walking around the neighborhood when he abruptly stopped and raised his voice. “Why did you tell your dad about the skull?”

My throat constricted.

“It took me all night to get that skull back to the graveyard. Did you know taking stuff from a grave is a federal crime?”

I looked sheepish, saying nothing at first. But during the subsequent, halting

conversation I learned that the water table and ground in that area of the Gulf Coast was unstable. Graves, vaults and mausolea would sometimes crack and settle, exposing corpses to the elements. I was thankful when the subject was dropped.

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Freddy came to Dallas as my commission-based sales agent. At first, I gave him the least prized of my work. Supplied with the canvas and a booklet of blank receipts, he disappeared. I feared that neither this work nor its worth might return to me. I called Doris who had not come in yet.

“You what?” She asked. “Why?”

My mind saw her twisting her blond hair about her fingers, as she did when vexed. “For one thing, it’s free. No cost if he doesn’t deliver,” I said.

“I’m just worried, Jeff, that things might get sticky. You could find yourself in a spider’s web if he becomes dependent and goes broke.”

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Next morning, a grinning Freddy came in the front door. “I did it. Like I said, it’s easy—if you know how to get people interested. This lady gallery owner bought your painting. It brought 800 dollars. She plans to sell it for 1500.”

I was speechless and looked at him, trying to discern if he were teasing until he flashed a fist full of bills. “Wow, that’s good luck, Freddy. Maybe you *do* have the knack. Who was the lady?”

“Trade secret. Just enjoy the result. Here’s a copy of the receipt, and I’ll take my 10 percent now.”

I noticed that the receipt line for purchaser listed Fredrick Sills, Agent as the buyer. Underneath was a reference to “Resell No. 1”. I realized he was serious about his trade secrets. “Okay, That’s fair. But you do have transaction details listed in case some legal dispute or insurance issue arises, don’t you?” I saw him nod and thought about Freddy’s disarming smile, good looks and dash with the

opposite sex. He did say the gallery owner was a lady. I watched as he peeled off his 10 percent before handing the rest to me.

“You have another, maybe two you want me to hawk?” He gazed around the studio, crowded with my unmoved works.

Freddy left with three paintings this time. I was uncomfortable with that many since I now learned how valuable my work was. I was almost sure Freddy had beginner’s luck and would return disappointed.

Three days passed before Freddy showed up again. When he walked in the door of my studio, he flashed a smile.

“How’s it going Freddy. Hit any snags out there yet?”

“Some. But it’s to be expected. A few clients were difficult, but I was able to break through. That’s what I do. I sold two paintings for 1000 bucks and another for 1200 if he can raise the cash today.”

“Damn, Freddy. You *are* good. How do you get to people that way? With me, most of them zone out when they don’t recognize my name.”

“I’ve got a good product to push, Jeff. You don’t know how terrific you are. You just need a presenter who can grab people’s attention. Contacts back in Gulfport trained me well. They sent me to seminars and courses in Los Angeles, Chicago and other places. It’s all about drive and technique.”

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During the next two months my paintings were going into galleries up and down the street. I didn’t actually see them there because I was too busy to search, and Freddy told me they didn’t stay long before being purchased. My name would no longer be yawned at, and Freddy’s out-of-town contacts were buying my work too. My naïve hope of being a self-sufficient artist was no pipe dream. Even if Freddy were to leave, I was becoming well known and could soon open my own

gallery for sales.

“How does he do it?” Doris asked one morning, brushing her long, blond hair and peering at me in the dresser mirror. Although she had her own place, she stayed with me frequently.

I threw back the bed covers and put my feet to the floor. “He’s good at sales, knows good work and how to present it. Aren’t you happy for me?”

“Sure, I am, and when I tell people, they say you must be the envy of Deep Ellum. Strange though, it’s only when you or I mention your work that they seem to know. I guess gallery owners are low key on who sells best so other artists don’t get discouraged.”

“Yeah, weird. You’d think they would try to promote reputations so they could raise prices.”

Success inspires. I turned from abstract landscapes to people, places and, best of all, figures. Doris had the sexy, curvy shape that makes nude paintings a thing of beauty. I even tried a self-portrait. I experimented with a variety of media: ink, acrylic, oil, charcoal and collages.

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For several days I didn’t hear from Freddy. He had taken eight paintings to his apartment for temporary holding. I called his cell phone several times with no answer. Becoming concerned, I drove to see him.

When I knocked on the door, I heard scrambling inside. A shadowing of room light coming under the door, indicated someone was probably looking through the peephole. “Freddy, are you there? Are you okay?”

Very slowly, the door opened a little. Freddy looked passively at me. “Hello Cousin. What gets you out of your lair?”

“Haven’t heard anything from you. Can I come in?”

I saw he was reluctant to move, so I pushed my way in. My paintings were

nowhere in sight. “Did you sell them?”

He did not answer.

“Tell me, Freddy.”

“Just leave it to me, Jeff. You know I don’t talk about my dealings. You’d better go, I’m waiting on some phone calls.”

I stood there, confused about what to do.

“Now,” he said, taking my arm and turning me toward the door.

Outside, I puzzled over his manner. My cell phone rang.

It was Doris. “Jeff are you coming back? I need to ask you some questions on this quarterly tax report and then go to my dentist.”

“I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

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The next day I called Freddy on his cell phone again. As before, no answer. Doris could see I was becoming disturbed so she volunteered to go see about Freddy.

“I don’t feel comfortable with your being alone with him.” I said.

“Then I can call the manager. I know her. She’s the one I contacted to get him an apartment in the first place.”

She walked to another room to make the call. I put a blank canvas on my easel and prepared it by brushing on a light coat of gesso. In a few minutes she returned.

“He’s not there. The manager says he left with a couple of suitcases. Afraid he was running off after trashing the place, she used her access key and went into the apartment. He had moved out. There were a few large sheets of thick, brownish paper lying around.”

“That may be backing for my paintings. I don’t usually bother with that, but customers may want it. Did she see any paintings?”

“I asked that and she said no.”

I looked up and saw people come into the lobby. “Who is that out there? A policeman is with them.”

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I had frequently wondered what it was like to be taken to the police station for questioning. Two detectives were drilling me with questions and I didn't know the answers.

“What drugs?” I asked. “Why do you think I know anything about drugs?”

A man looking like Jack Webb leaned over the table and stared into my eyes. “The drugs in your paintings. A local entrepreneur went to a dumpster to recover some toner cartridges thrown away by mistake and saw paintings with your signature. In getting them out, one snagged and tore the backing. Underneath it were thin plastic zip-loc bags filled with white powder.” He sneered. “And I'll bet you don't know what that powder is.”

“I'm sure you're going to tell me it's coke or something. I honestly don't know anything about how that got there. My cousin was selling my paintings. I thought he was a good sales agent.”

The other detective was a woman, standing. “There are two possibilities here. You've been a naïve donkey providing drug transport. Or else you are in on it. I'd like to believe the former. But even if you're as dumb as a cow patty, it doesn't make sense that you would have your own signature on the carrier paintings. So help us out here, tell us all about that cousin of yours. Where do you think he is now”

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I was not a great artist after all, merely the pawn in a drug distribution ring. I should have been suspicious about Freddy's mysterious “contacts”. Apparently, he had skipped town, ditching the paintings upon word the law was moving in on him.

He was getting ready to go when I first went to his apartment.

I felt second rate but resumed efforts to push my paintings. I did get two into a gallery rental space and one on consignment. However those weren't sales.

Doris tried to let me down gently about money when she said we had less than a month to keep running. "It looks bad, Jeff, but you're still good. It just takes time to get established. You need a second job."

"Yeah, I know, but what?"

"I have friends in a lighting company. It's called Lumidyne Lightworks. A lot of concerts need lighting effects. Some big groups carry their own lighting people, but not all. And Lumidyne has contracts with groups performing in north Texas."

It was depressing to think of working as a novice in something I knew little about. But Doris was right, I had to bite the bullet.

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I started with Lumidyne as a technician trainee, basically a "grunt". At first I was responsible for connecting power and DMX cables for "the intelligent lights," also called scanners. After a show I had the onus of reorganizing the cables and packing them back in boxes. Often lights would flicker, usually a connector problem. Shorts and broken connections required repair and I became an expert with a soldering gun.

I updated Doris on my progress when we could meet back at my place. "Now I am learning how to use the controllers and dimmer boards. This takes a lot of time."

Doris smiled. "I admire your attitude about all this."

"Thanks, but the manuals are a pain. I had to rewrite a couple because they were lousy translations from Chinese."

"I know what you mean. A lot of instructions are that way now."

“It’s worth it, though. Soon I’ll be moving up to lighting designer, trainee. There’s more money in that.”

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Weeks went by and I sensed potential in moving light as an art in itself, not just support for rock concerts. A lot of this could be scaled down and projected onto a large screen. I set up a lighting workshop in my own studio and became a part-time, light composer. My first creation was a square, frosted, translucent screen, two feet per side, on the front of a black box. Inside the box were lights under colored films and small mirrors. Both moved slowly on motorized mounts. Reflections and filtered light illuminated the screen from inside. Viewed from the front it was captivating: multicolored, cloud-like forms gradually morphed into crisp-edged shapes and appeared to emerge from a deep blue void with star-like points slowly swirling in the background. Excited by the effect, I showed Doris.

“This is great,” she said. “The layering and subtle movement make it look three-dimensional. Much more interesting than still abstract paintings. Project your little light painting on a big screen with music and it would be theater. I have read about an art form called Lumia. I think that’s what you have.”

I watched while she clicked away at the PC keyboard and located internet information.

She scanned pages, condensing the content aloud. ““The art of Lumia was a concert in projected light, brought to the US by Thomas Wilfred in the early 1900s. He called his first instrument a Clavilux.’ Lots of names here. Later it says ‘Christian Sidenius constructed a theater of light in Sandy Hook, Connecticut, and added classical and avant-garde music. This form of art waned in the seventies as computer graphics began to replicate abstract projections and appeared in video format.’”

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I believed this art form could be revitalized and updated. I invited Doris and a few of our friends to my studio one night and told them my ideas. "...That's my thinking. We could expand the studio into that back area and have a complex consisting of studio, office, workshop, theater and gallery. Also maybe a gift shop."

"I'm so glad to see you excited again, Jeff," Doris said. "But have you saved enough money to get this off the ground?"

"Enough to get started. A small admission for the light show in the theater room can help and more can come in from selling novel light paintings. We could still keep traditional paintings, but expand and rent space for other people's work too."

"Question, Jeff." It was Doris's friend Jill, a computer whiz. "Some of the Lumia stuff overlaps the sixties' psychedelic light shows. Computer graphics made that passé. How can this be viable?"

"The beauty of having arts integrated is that we can have lights playing on one scene and project computer graphics on another. We can integrate poetry, readers' theater, music and other things. It's an updated, sane and beautiful improvement of the psychedelic sixties, without LSD and noise."

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Eventually it happened. We called it the Light Media Center. Friends who wanted to display art in my facility helped out with the conversion. Contractors did the rest. Some of the needed money was a bank loan, which I felt we could repay within a year. By the time we opened the doors for curious visitors, I had hired Jill for her PC graphics ability and Tom, another talented friend.

Tom and I built special projectors, installed scanners and devised choreography for light motion and music in our little light theater. Doris taught herself about Internet web sites and set one up for commercial transactions with

Paypal and credit cards. Jill adapted her graphic art to screensavers, which we sold on our web site.

I was still painting, but mostly I was an entrepreneur and concept designer. The important thing was that I was happy. Doris and I discussed permanently moving in together and then tying the knot, but there was no hurry. Tom, Jill, Doris and I were a good team and business income was improving.

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One day Tom walked into my office and said, “Someone to see you.”

I looked up from my desk, and a spike of adrenalin hit my gut.

“Hi Cousin,” Freddy said with a wide grin on his face. “It’s been a long time, huh?” He extended his hand and I reluctantly stood and took it. Then he pulled me closer for a hug and gave my back a hearty pat.

I stiffly returned the gesture. *Manipulator. What does he want?* “Freddy, what brings you back to Dallas? Last I saw you, you were—”

“I was in a hurry. Some of my associates strayed from the straight and narrow and I got caught up in it. But you got paid for your works.”

“Not the last set of paintings. They were only recently released to me. Less the coke between the canvas and backing.”

“That wasn’t my doing. I had a middle man. *He* got into the coke transfer business.

“I’m sorry Freddy, but I can’t go along with your being so innocent. How did you keep from being caught?”

He flashed that smile. “Knowing the right contacts. The Feds did take me in, and our legal defense got ‘em to drop pending charges. You should to get to know some of these people.”

“I’m doing okay as it is. So when are you going back to Gulfport, or wherever you live now?” I sat at my desk again.

He pulled up a chair, uninvited. “That’s the thing. I’m between jobs right now. As willing as they are, my contacts are unable to make a loan because some legal complications are tying up their money. But new contacts here in Dallas have work for me in three weeks. I need to make an investment, however, to get on their team.”

“Did you ever work for an *actual* company? What do these Gulfport contacts call themselves?”

“You wouldn’t know them.”

“Come on, try me.

“Well there’s a variety. One is Gulf Resources Gaming, Inc.”

I knew that wasn’t about video games. “That’s a gambling resource company or a casino. What did you do for them?”

“Okay, I was a blackjack dealer at a Gulf Coast casino. But there were other things too.” He raised his brows. “Don’t go all righteous on me. Casinos generate a lot of tax money for Mississippi. I don’t know if it’s indirect or not, but public schools would be in trouble without them. It’s not a crime; it’s legitimate business that gives pleasure to a lot of customers.”

I stifled the impulse to bash his face with my paperweight. “So what are you going to invest in this job opportunity here in Dallas?”

“Cousin, here’s where you can gain a nice little interest bundle for helping me out. I can get a loan elsewhere, but I wanted you to benefit from this opportunity.”

“So you don’t have money. You’re broke.”

“It’s temporary. You know me. I’m resourceful.”

“How much?”

“A hundred grand would do it.”

“A hundred—?” I stood up. “You’re out of your friggin’ mind. That would

draw me down to the dregs.”

“Okay, maybe I could make it on 75. Please Jeff. I’ve been sending money to my mom, who’s feeble now. You know your dad would want you to help me out. If I can’t do it, she will literally starve. She’s alone and her social security check is a joke.”

I felt a double bind. Damned either way. *Why do I have kin like this?* “What if I just send her a little money from time to time?”

“It would save her from heartbreak to know her *son* was able to help her. Make her proud. But I can’t get this job without the investment. It’s all on the level.”

“What is the company and who is your contact?”

“Ollagav Partners and Mr. Elton Stringer.”

“I’m not saying yes, but I’ll think about it. Right now I’ve got some urgent calls to return. Can you excuse me ‘til later today?”

When Freddy left, I grabbed the phone book to confirm the existence of Ollagav Partners. Then I made a call. Elton Stringer was human resources director and spoke in a cultured, friendly voice. I asked him about Freddy Sills. Stringer confirmed his candidacy for employment and explained that a minimum of 75,000 dollars was required for employment as a partner, with few exceptions. The investment was to ensure the employee had both a vested interest and for company cash flow. He said returns from venture capital were sufficient for monthly payments to recoup the investment within a year with 25 to 30 percent interest. Most employees did very well with their investment return in addition to a salary. Stringer said Fredrick Sills appeared to have the talents they valued.

When I hung up, I felt a lot better. Maybe Freddy had always been *inadvertently* caught up in shady circumstances and was now climbing out of victimhood. I remembered reading about successful people who kept trying and

made it from the gutter to legitimate riches. *If I could get 25% interest in a year's loan payback and Freddy kept 5% plus his salary, we would be okay.*

But when I thought of how much money that was I felt nervous again. I was still in that state when Freddy returned. Seeing my distress, Freddy invited me to take a short drive with him outside the city limits. I didn't want to, but the weight on my mind clouded my judgment and I agreed.

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We took my car. On the way he softened the distress by asking if he could at least stay at my place for a few weeks. Thinking this was a trade with his previous request, I gladly agreed. But later I would find it was actually an increase in what he wanted.

North of Duncanville he spied a dirt road off to the side of the highway, and asked me to pull off. Soon we came to a junky, neglected area and he wanted us to stop. He meandered about and picked up several cans and placed them in a row. Then he pulled out a pistol.

"Join me in a little target practice," Freddy said. "It calms the nerves. I always did like target practice. That's the only thing I liked about the marines."

My mind flashed a memory of Dad saying that Freddy was "flushed" out of the marines. He did not know what kind of discharge it was. We heard that he spent time in the brig. I would rather eat a cowboy's boot than be here with Freddy and a loaded gun.

"Here, you go first, he said. This is a 32 caliber Beretta. Semiautomatic with 15 rounds. Pop those cans, Cousin."

I backed off to the spot where he drew a line in the dirt and took aim at the first can. After the loud report it was evident I missed. Again and again the gun discharged, and the cans stayed put.

He laughed. "Hold it with both hands and squeeze slowly."

Still I only hit two cans, before the rounds were gone. Then it was his turn. After he reloaded, over half the cans jumped to oblivion before he finished.

A sad look came over his face. He turned away and I heard what sounded like a brief sob. Turning back, his head was down, and a tear ran down his cheek. Then he grinned widely and looked up, snickering. "I've wondered what it's like to shoot somebody. I feel like your dad always thought I was crazy." He laughed outright. "The Marines' psychologist said I was too independent for the military." When he saw me turning pale, he added, "Don't worry, just weird thoughts of an independent mind."

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We returned to Light Media Center, picked up his suitcase from the lobby and went to the guest room part of my residence area. Leaving him there, I returned to my office where Doris was working.

"He's going to stay with you?" Doris asked.

"It's for a limited time. And he wants to borrow a lot of money. I feel a family obligation because my aunt needs his support. Yet I am never sure of what he's into. The company he's supposed to join is in the phone book, but I need to know if it is legitimate. Could you do some more research? If the company's legitimate, the loan I make could return 25 percent per year. If that's true it would ease the stress I'm feeling. The Center could use that interest money next year."

"But why a loan in the first place? What does it have to do with this new job?"

"It's for a buy-in to a venture capital firm. It invests in franchises and start-ups. It's called Ollagav Partners."

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Doris researched the firm. Not knowing how to go beyond available published information, she visited a corporate lawyer. After a stiff fee, she had the

necessary information. Ollagav Partners was legitimate, and supplied capital to startups in fast food restaurants, title loans and gaming industries. The company was doing well financially.

Despite having the promissory note prepared, I was reluctant to actually write the check for 75 grand. I kept putting it off, and became increasingly irritable when my cousin began coming into my office to sit, read the paper and chat. His way of putting on pressure. One day, when Doris wasn't there, he came in again.

"Freddy, I'm a little busy with work now," I said. "Maybe you would like to get a cab to the library downtown or walk to a bookstore down the street."

"Hey, I'm okay. Especially with the nice, curvy shapes around here. He grinned and ran his tongue across his upper lip. This one you're thick with—man oh man. I'd almost give my left arm for some of that." He snickered. "You'd better watch her close. I know you wouldn't want to lose her."

I felt an electric fist grab my entrails. Memories of the child's skull, the pistol, his time in the brig, dope in my paintings and his mysterious contacts raced through my head. *Is this as a warning? Probably just my imagination, but I want him physically away from us.* I had to finalize my decision about the loan.

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That afternoon, I made the loan. We signed promissory papers in front of a notary and witnesses. Doris arranged an apartment for him just off Greenville Avenue close to the North Dallas office for Ollagav Partners. I recorded the address and his cell phone number and told him I would be in touch.

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In two days my on-line bank account showed the withdrawn funds. I felt scalped and called Freddy, hoping to give myself some assurance he was on the level.

"No need to worry Jeff," Freddy said. "I met with the company this

morning. It went smooth. References from my contacts counted.”

“References, good.” *Yeah, and 75 grand.*

“I’m busy already. The company just got a proposal for funding a startup, and I’m going out with a team tomorrow to look over the site where they want to locate.”

“I’m curious. What is this startup business?”

“I think you are *testing* me. You know we can’t talk about this sort of thing, Jeff. But it concerns retail goods.”

I hung up, took a deep breath and went to my studio. I needed to take a break from the business and inspire myself to paint.

Tom came in. “I just finished the choreography for our new light show. Want to look it over?”

“Go into the office and leave it on my desk. I’m trying to get my mind off Freddy. But now I’m asking myself whether he actually joined that company.”

“You only called his cell phone? Call the company, ask their operator for him.”

“Doris,” I called out. “Could you please call Ollagav Partners and see if their operator has a company number listed for Freddy?” When she acknowledged, I went back to my easel. What had always been empty canvas calling for the magic of my imagination was now simply an empty canvas. There was no calling.

In a few minutes, Doris came in. “You can relax. I told her Fredrick Sills was new. She found it in a list being updated.” Doris gave me the number and left.

I was finally able to begin a new work before the chattering traffic started pouring into the Light Media Center. Soon customer interactions and sales had me feeling good again.

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One month later the mail included Freddy’s monthly payment. I mailed him

a postcard on which I jotted a note of thanks and wished him well. However, the next month's payment did not come. After 10 days I called his number at Ollagav Partners. When he answered, I was relieved.

"This is Freddy Sills, can I help you?"

"Yes, Freddy, this is Jeff. Why the delay in the monthly payment on the loan? I really need that coming in."

He tried to sound cheerful. "Cousin, good to hear from you. Hey, what's a few days? I'll get it to you."

"We had an understanding. This is strictly business."

"Well, things come up. It's no big deal."

"It *is* a big deal. What do you mean?"

"Some of my contacts needed some quick cash. It'll be paid back. Honest."

"Freddy, you may have been legally liberated from your past, but that doesn't give you the right to take money due me and lend it to others. The note stipulates the loan was for Ollagav Partners, and you pay *me* back as specified."

"I can't help it, Jeff. It's not just a loan. It's a payback to one of my contacts. I'm in real trouble if I don't take care of this. My contacts are *very* unforgiving people."

"You're sending *my* money to crooks for your debts. I can't believe it."

"It's a tough world, Cousin. You'll just have to take what you can get." His voice became gritty. "If you value your little enterprise in Deep Ellum and that cutie you snuggle up to at night, then *back off*. There's more than one way debts can be eliminated."

Stunned, I could only hear my throbbing pulse until he abruptly hung up. Images of arson, pistols and dark figures in an alley flitted through my head.

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I didn't relish telling Doris, but my innards would grind themselves to mince

meat if I didn't.

She paled upon hearing of my conversation with Freddy. "My God, Jeff, talk to those police detectives that questioned you a couple of years ago when Freddy went on the lam."

"My concern is the threat is not provable. Mostly it takes committed crimes to justify subsequent protection, if any. Then it's too late and maybe no way to know who commits it. Freddy didn't specifically say *he* would carry out the threat. We may rattle the cage of serious mobsters by going to police. I think I ought to call Freddy back after I've had a chance to think about my alternatives. If I get the same story I *will* call the detectives, in spite of his threats."

*

The next three nights, I didn't sleep well. I fretted about explaining the situation to Ollagav Partners, but that would probably get Freddy fired and make matters worse. Needing advice on law enforcement and legal rights but having a lack of funds, I would have to find it on the internet. I collected phone numbers, URLs and read pages of blogs, becoming angrier by the hour.

The third day I picked up the phone to call Freddy. I was not at ease, but decided to be straightforward and see what he said. I called his business phone. It rang several times and then transferred to the operator.

"Ollagav Partners. To whom shall I direct your call?"

"I'm trying to call Fredrick Sills."

"Mr. Sills has not come in for the last three days.

"Has he called in personal leave?"

"No sir, he left no notice with me. Would you like to talk to someone else?"

"No, thank you. I'll try his residence." I hung up and dialed his cell phone. If he were home, his cell phone would be his only contact. All I got was voice mail. After the beep, an electronic voice announced the mail box was full. Slamming the

phone receiver down, I vented expletives and turned toward Doris. “What is the number for Freddy’s apartment complex? I need to call his apartment manager and see if he can find him for me.”

When Doris delivered the number I dialed it. I claimed that Freddy’s mother had been in an accident and we needed to locate him.

The response was unexpectedly immediate. “Mr. Sills left without paying his monthly rent. I don’t know where he is. I wish I did.”

I slapped my forehead. “Scammed again. Sure, he needs job income for his poor mom. Bullshit, he probably never sent her anything.”

*

The next day I worked with Doris to determine our debt and income situation. We still had a remodeling loan to pay back and four salaries, including mine. And now we didn’t have Freddy’s loan payments to count on.

Doris said “We don’t have enough cash flow to make it, even if we reduced salaries 10 percent. We’re going to have to cut way back somehow.”

“Oh great. Somehow I need to find out how much money Freddy actually invested in Ollagav Partners, and whether they can be legally obligated to return benefit to me. But I doubt if I can afford to hire a lawyer.”

“I’m sorry, Jeff. I know this is tough.”

“I *am* going to talk to those detectives. Maybe file charges on Freddy and the company he represented. Perhaps they can steer me about my options. If they don’t put me in jail for aiding and abetting.”

“You never heard that he was actually charged with anything did you? You thought his contacts had legal clout and he was exonerated, right?”

“I guess I can play that card.”

*

I found the business cards for the detectives and called the police

department. They met with me in a small office. The guy that looked like Jack Webb was disinterested and glanced at his partner, detective Susan Freed.

She knitted her brows. “We could enter it into the record as an unsolved drug case and see what we can find. Not promising anything, since this may be a DEA issue. But I may be able to get a little *quid pro quo* with some of those people I know. We can’t advise on seeing a lawyer, but if your cousin were officially charged, and you could prove where the investment money came from, you could probably get the courts to require some kind of relief from Ollagav Partners.”

“But that could take a year or so?” I said.

“Afraid so. Sorry.”

I left the police station feeling sure I was going under. A few months ago, I felt like a king. But there is nothing more useless than a *fallen* king.

*

When I walked into Light Media Center, Tom and Jill met me in the lobby. This wasn’t just tough on me. They expressed sympathies and I thanked them.

“Should we put out resumes now?” Tom asked.

“Please hold off a week. I’ll pay you what I can. I pointed to visitors coming in. “See about them, I am going to talk to Doris.” When I walked into the office, Doris was hanging up the phone.

“Jeff, I have an uncle who’s on the Gulf Coast near Biloxi for a meeting. His name is George Shapiro. He’s been living in Chicago for years. He’s made lots of connections and has influence all over the country. I just talked to him. He said he would help if he could. I also told him about the threat and asked him if he could find Freddy down there. I gave him his name and told him where his mom lived.”

“What does he do for a living?”

“I don’t have the slightest idea. He and my dad had some kind of feud or love-hate thing. Dad would never talk about what my uncle did. Just said he was a

‘dubious fat cat.’”

I looked away. *Oh great, another underworld character. Why me?* “And what else did you tell him?”

I told him about the Center we developed here and how we were on the fringe of closing without funds. He seemed interested and asked a lot of questions. He was probably just being nice.”

“Yeah, probably.” *Freddy was nice too, at first.*

*

A week later I called my mother to check up on her. She lived in Mississippi. Her syrupy drawl was music to my ears. It made me feel that, if all fails, I could always go home to live. Doris was nearby and smiled as she overheard us on speakerphone. Mom and I talked about ordinary things like weather, her yard flowers and which neighbors were in the hospital. And then it got interesting.

“Oh, you know your cousin Freddy, from Gulfport?” she asked.

“Yeah, we don’t know where he is now.”

“His mother Myrtle called. She said he was out deer huntin’ and got shot through both legs. Seems like Freddy had a crush on the girlfriend of the man that shot him. But this man said he thought it was a deer in the bushes. Freddy nearly bled to death. Pieces of bone still working out of his wounds.

I felt several emotions vying for dominance. We talked a little more and said our goodbyes.

Afterwards I thought about what I learned. *What is going on? Freddy disappears and then gets shot because he looks like a deer in the bushes.* Either jealousy or accident *could* explain it. But this happened very soon after Doris’s talk with her uncle from Chicago. The one with unknown connections and influence. *Could this be a hit gone bad?* I felt a little like someone caught in a turf war

between feuding forces. *Does everybody have evil DNA in their family gene pool?*

*

I stepped outside to use my cell phone so Doris couldn't hear. Detective Susan Freed answered. After reminding her who I was, I explained my concern about Doris' uncle from Chicago. His name was George Shapiro and he was visiting the Gulf Coast. Also I covered Freddy's threats and the timing of his being shot that made me suspicious.

Anything about Shapiro that suggested underworld involvement would be helpful to me. My hopes abated when I heard her say it was not connected to an open case so she wouldn't promise anything, but agreed to think about it if time allowed. *Fat chance I'll hear back from her.*

*

I went back into to my office, thinking my concern with Uncle Shapiro was done for a while. That was not so.

Doris turned toward me. "My uncle called me this morning. He said there may be a way he can help. He could arrange an indefinite loan if..." In a lower voice she rushed the words. "If I become part owner of the Center."

I had never considered that. The Center was in my name, technically, not even incorporated yet. But Doris and I would probably tie the knot soon, and what was mine was hers. But co-owner? That was okay too.

Or was it? *What is her uncle's angle? Why offer help with that stipulation?* Fear of having the shadowy underworld reach into my precious Center gripped me. They would use Doris as their conduit. I loved her dearly, but abhorred the notion of becoming a front for illicit activity in a back room. Spying cops, rival gangs and rubbing shoulders with thugs was a real possibility. Needing time to ponder, I waffled. "I hear you Doris, and I'll give it some thought. But now I need to help Tom set up the theater. We have a poetry group coming as part of our multimedia

presentation tonight.”

*

For the next few days, I carried on as usual, appealing to Tom and Jill to give me a little more time before they jumped ship. Doris continued calls to her uncle. I tried to plan new works and help Doris find money for the costs. Visitors to the center left impressed, but their expenditures were minimal.

My Center needed to grow for us to survive. The internet business began to pick up a little, but more time was needed to get a larger, sustainable traffic level. Again I considered who I might call upon for employment when we went under. Then a scary thing happened. I saw that bright smile on Doris’ face.

“Uncle George is coming to visit us, Jeff. He wants to see what we do at the Center and talk about needed funds.”

If I were still that naïve donkey, I would be dancing for joy. But I expected strings to be attached. “When is he coming?”

“Tomorrow night, Tuesday. Can we free up time Wednesday?”

I hesitated but there was really no choice. “That’ll be fine. Let’s start at 9:00 AM, then lunch at Ellum Deli and finish show-and-tell by early afternoon.”

*

Wednesday morning I noticed a sleek, black limo pull up to the curb in front of the Center. *I see he travels with an entourage. Bodyguards, no doubt.* I called toward the office. “Doris, I think your uncle has arrived.”

The driver opened the back door and a man in a black overcoat got out. He took off the overcoat and handed it to someone inside. The driver and another man from the limo stood by the car. Perhaps in his mid-fifties, Shapiro appeared physically fit beneath his expensive, dark suit. Doris and I went outside to meet him.

“Mr. Shapiro,” I said, extending my hand.

He looked at Doris instead and opened his arms. “Ah my little niece is all grown up,” he said in as kind a manner as his gruff voice allowed. “And this must be the boyfriend guy who owns this place?” He looked at me and finally extended his hand.

Doris laughed. “Come in Uncle George. Do your friends want to join us?”

“Nah,” he said and turned toward the men. “You guys put something in the meter and get lost for a while. There must be a deli around where you can stuff your face.”

“Down the street that way,” I said. “Ellum Deli.”

George took a deep breath and flashed a brief smile at Doris. “Well, I’m ready to start.”

We entered the lobby and I noticed that George had straight, black hair, a slightly pocked face with a scar on one side of his forehead. Expression on that face soon became somber.

We started by showing traditional paintings by me and other artists. Then we moved to paintings inspired by fascination with light. They included such things as light from village windows at twilight, fireflies at dusk and sunsets. Next we touched on abstracts. Finally I led us to the techno arts: light paintings with translucent screens that had moving lights or reflecting fixtures hidden behind. I explained this was similar to works by Thomas Wilfred once displayed at MOMA in New York.

The three of us went to Ellum Deli for a quick lunch. It was so crowded that I had to sit a few seats away from Doris and her Uncle. I could see Doris intently listening to George. After eating, we returned to the Center.

When we walked into the theater room, Tom had our large translucent screen back-lighted by analog lamps and reflectors. The screen appeared to convey moving clouds against a starry night. I explained the platform in front of the screen

was for live performers who might recite poetry, read a story or engage in artful movement, like dance for a small space. We had intelligent LED scanners for projecting illumination on both performer and screen mounted in the ceiling of the audience area, all managed by a controller at the back of the room.

Jill demonstrated graphic art animation on her PC and showed her screensavers.

Then we entered the gift shop area. Visitors could buy DVDs, gift cards, calendars and small kinetic light platforms all touching upon the theme of light in motion.

Throughout the whole show-and-tell, I noticed that Doris' uncle nodded politely but his face was stony. No doubt he never let feelings show when assessing the value of an enterprise.

Finally he turned to me. "I'm impressed with your little start-up effort here. But I'm not here for entertainment. Let's talk business."

To me it was more than a little start-up, but I didn't know what he considered an enterprise. "We can go to my office."

After we perked some middle grade coffee, got our cups and settled around the conference table, George looked directly at me. "Here's the first thing. You need to incorporate, see. You should already be an LLC. Some fake-injury clown could claim damages that would ruin you. Somebody may squawk invention or copyright infringement and lawyers' fees alone would sink you. Right now, your personal stuff and business are not separate."

"I've been so busy I put it off, and merely registered with a 'doing business as' and paid the merchant's license fees."

His face remained stony. "The next thing is this. You need to specify owners. You own most of this stuff, so you are a shareholder. If Doris invests money, she owns a part. Then you are both shareholders. Also you may have

stakeholders, people on the outside who loan money or have an interest in how things are run. When you get this settled, you need officers: president, secretary and so on. You'll have meetings and file reports."

I had mixed feelings. The stakeholders were certain to be his unspecified "connections" who would loan money through Doris, to make her a shareholder. That would be the channel of manipulation. *But what choice do I have?* I felt my function as an artist morphing into a cog in dark underworld machinery. It sent a shiver of dread through me. I couldn't allow it.

"Hey, we're on the same page here?" George said, more command than question.

Doris looked at me with her tense, hopeful look.

This was the most difficult thing I could imagine. I didn't want to disappoint the one central person in my life but—

A phone rang in the lobby. Tom stuck his head in the door. "It's for you, Jeff. A detective Susan Freed."

"I'll take it in the lobby, excuse me George." I went to the lobby and took the receiver. "Detective?"

"Okay, believe it or not I had some time and I've got some information for you."

"Yes, go on."

"First of all, your cousin Fredrick Sills was found dead in a motel in Biloxi. A serious drug overdose, probably started with pain meds for his legs. I don't know how you feel about that, but he's no longer a threat to anyone."

Lack of threat was a relief, but I still felt sadness for his painfully misguided life. I knew my aunt would be devastated. I made a note to write her.

"And I found out something about this George Shapiro from Chicago."

I braced myself.

“Shapiro *is* a wheeler-dealer. He’s head of George Knox Shapiro Foundation for Arts in Chicago. It helps museums and artists find grant money, like from the National Endowment for the Arts. Also they do mentoring in gallery entrepreneurship. He’s clean, no crime sheet on him. An aide I phoned says everybody there loves their job. Shapiro’s become quite wealthy and helped a lot of other people do it.”

I felt as if my brain were bobbing atop a vat of Jell-O. “I can’t believe it.”

“Believe it. I’m *usually* looking at perp-sheets that cause somnolence or nausea. But this research shows there’s *good* out there and that gives me a buzz. Gotta go now.”

After placing the receiver down I walked back into the office.

Doris looked up at me, still hopeful.

Turning toward her uncle, I said it. “George, I think we *are* on the same page here.”

Doris stood and cheered with two thumbs up. For the first time since he came inside, I saw her Uncle smile. Doris and I sat again, eager to proceed. Our Center would not be linking light and dark forces after all. Even our coffee tasted better now.

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