

Lighting the Way

“Welcome, my friend!” Najat Nalic greeted his new business partner expansively. His lilting near-eastern accent somehow made his words sound poetic. “These last few months must have been terrible for you.”

“That and then some,” Craig replied as he made his way across Najat’s office, careful not to step on any of the engineering clutter scattered on the floor. “But you know, Najat, I wasn’t alone. Dynasty’s problems will come back to haunt America if something’s not done.”

“What do you mean?”

“Retail abuse, particularly the uneven playing field created by international letters of credit.”

“I know all about retail abuse, my friend. We suffer through our share, but how are LCs hurting us?”

“International LCs are insurance policies against abuse. With American suppliers like you guys, retail chains can withhold and delay payment, make unauthorized deductions, and change the rules as they go along. They can’t do that with foreign suppliers. International LCs prohibit it.”

“So the foreign supplier,” Najat realized, “is always paid on time, they’re always paid the full amount they’re owed and guaranteed their profit—while we get abused!”

“Did you ever look at packages in big retail stores like WalMart, Najat? Walk down the toy aisle sometime. Far more say, ‘Made in Taiwan,’ ‘Japan,’ and especially ‘China,’ than say ‘Made in the USA.’ Most people think it’s because labor is cheaper, but the labor component of most products is less than twenty percent of the wholesale cost, right?”

Najat nodded. “The cost of overseas freight, the time value of money, and import duties offset the labor differential.”

“Exactly. Without abuse, they’ve got the capital to invest. American suppliers don’t.” Craig was always pleased when a listener grasped an important concept. “The uneven playing field created by international LCs, not labor, is what’s killing American manufacturing, especially in consumer products.”

“It never occurred to me, but I suppose you’re right.”

The Nalic brothers had already made their mark. They were the embodiment of the American dream. These five brothers had settled in Southern California, worked hard, used their heads, and proceeded to build a manufacturing company they called Lights of America.

“Lights” and Dynasty, though both in the lighting business, had not been competitors. They’d made radically different products, and their market appeal came from opposite ends of the spectrum.

Dynasty, under Winn’s direction, had made beautiful things. Quality and style were their holy grail. Lights of America, on the other hand, used advanced technology to build a better mousetrap. The Nalic brothers used their knowledge of electronics to squeeze

more light out of less juice. But their products looked like they were designed by engineers. They weren't the wrong style, exactly. They just had no style.

Winn and the brothers Nalic came from two different planets. But sometimes, opposites attract. Winn was the possessor of a vast body of knowledge on lighting style, attested by his design patents. He had a track record no one could touch. No lighting company had ever grown so quickly or garnered so much attention. He had numerous manufacturing relationships on both sides of the Pacific.

The Nalics, for their part, had some of the best lighting technology in the world, with patents of their own, and a well-equipped factory. The plan was to have Craig design and build a line of stylish lamps and lighting fixtures using the Nalics' energy-efficient bulbs. Style and substance. A whole new brand was invented for the home décor line: Lighting America. Winn was to share ownership with the Nalics.

Unfortunately, it became evident that the new line would out-class the old one. Recognizing the problem, Craig volunteered to redesign and remarket Lights' current line. He would restyle what he could, create new items where he saw gaps, and delete others. This put the elegant decorative lamps and lighting fixtures he had designed on the back burner, their birth delayed by up to a year. But clearly his new line could not be allowed to upstage the stars that had brought Najat and his brother, Quiel, to the dance. So he agreed, but with a stipulation or two. Or three....

He asked that once the new concept was approved, he would have carte blanche over implementing the plan. "You will get to approve your new logo and the first package," he said. "Everything else will fall into place from there." He also wanted authority to select the design resources, conduct the budget negotiations, and make commitments on the firm's behalf.

Craig presented a long list of items he would produce, ranging from a two-story trade-show booth, to 5,000 copies of each of five catalogs, to 125 new product packages, designs for twenty new products, and a comprehensive sales plan, plus a new logo and corporate identity. "The cost," he said, "will be one million dollars, and the entire project will be finished in time for the August Hardware Show, just four months from now."

The Nalics' soaked it in like men taking a hot shower after spending a month in the desert. The monkey was going to be off their backs.

"The project," Craig told them, "must be coordinated and comprehensive. If you recarpeted your office, you'd immediately recognize the walls need repainting. Then the chairs, which look fine now, will look worn and dated. Replace the chairs and the desk will look out of place, out of character with the rest of the room. Repaint the walls, replace the carpeting, and buy new chairs, and suddenly the curtains will look bad. Gentlemen, as soon as we make one thing right, we're going to need to make everything right, or we'll do more harm than good."

Consistency was always important to Craig. It was central to developing and maintaining trust, whether in image or behavior.

"At the end of the project, if you are pleased with the results, if it remains on time and on budget, and if you guys elect not to go forward with our decorative lighting plans, I want a bonus of \$350,000, equivalent to what I spent making payroll trying to keep Dynasty afloat. I don't want a job, gentlemen. I want a partnership."

Craig fell silent, waiting for their response.

It didn't take long. "The price you've quoted seems impossibly low," Quiel volunteered. "Our quote to build the trade-show booth alone is several hundred thousand. And the timeline seems incredibly short. If it were anybody else saying we could have this much, this fast, and this cheap, we'd say they were crazy."

Najat joined in. "We know you don't need this job, and you're only doing it to facilitate our partnership in decorative lighting. We understand—and accept!"

CRAIG BEGAN THE process in his usual way. He commandeered the large upstairs conference room at Lights and proceeded to display, for his own edification, every scrap of graphic material he could find: packaging, brochures, and ads. He put it all on the big conference room table, a jumbled, inconsistent, discordant collection. It was not a pretty sight.

Frustrated, Craig went downstairs, asking himself why he'd volunteered for this mission. It looked impossible. Walking into Quiel's office, he asked, "What agency did you use to create your, shall we say, colorful array of images?"

Quiel grinned, unsuccessfully trying to hide his amusement. He was clearly enjoying this more than Craig. "It's an agency in Huntington Beach called Power Graphics," Quiel offered. "Ken Power runs it. He's a nice guy, but sometimes he just doesn't get what we're trying to do."

"I'd like to call him. I don't know if we'll be able to use them, but we should talk. It's only fair."

I GOT INTO the studio about nine thirty that Friday morning in April 1994, later than usual. I had gone to Costa Mesa to see a client about their noodle packaging.

I loved this business, the personal contact, the problem-solving aspects. Sure, some graphic designers were running larger outfits, and presumably making more money, but they'd paid a price. They didn't get to do the fun stuff any more, the actual design work. They had become salesmen. Suits. I felt sorry for them.

My assistant, Gloria, had taken the call just before I'd arrived. They wanted me up at Lights. They were by far my largest client, accounting for over a third of my billings. Whenever they called, I dropped whatever I was doing. It was a love-hate relationship: the money was good, but the quality of work I was allowed to do was marginal. Graphically, they were their own worst enemy.

"You're supposed to be there at ten o'clock sharp to see some guy named Craig Winn," Gloria said. "Is he new?"

"Never heard of him. He must be new. He doesn't know it takes forty-five minutes to get there." I grabbed my briefcase and headed for the door.

Forty minutes later, I exchanged smiles with Lights' receptionist. "Hi, Ken. Mr. Winn is waiting for you in the upstairs conference room."

"Who is he?"

"You'll see," she said, grinning from ear to ear.

The psychological trauma of working with Lights of America was about to be taken to the next level. Opening the door, I saw my whole life flash before my eyes. There, on the massive rosewood table, lay everything I'd done for them, plus some things from before my time. Standing at the far end of the table was a fellow in an expensive suit, a decade younger than me, surveying it all.

"Craig Winn, I presume."

"Yes. You must be Ken Power."

He didn't waste any time. "I've been retained by Lights of America to completely revamp their product line and corporate image."

While I was still processing the implications of that remark, he continued. "I understand you're responsible for this rather interesting assortment of packaging and graphic styles. Now as I see it..." Winn embarked on a recitation of the major ills of their marketing materials.

"Yep," I replied when he'd had his say. "You're absolutely right. I've done some of my very worst work for Lights of America."

"You have?" Craig burst out laughing. "I mean, you know you have?" My answer seemed to have taken him aback, something I've since learned doesn't happen very often.

"You've just cataloged the lion's share of my pet peeves. At the risk of sounding like I'm not willing to be held accountable for my work, I want you to know this is not my fault. I'm just the mechanic. I do what I'm told. They put up with me because my stuff is technically flawless. The film runs without a hitch, the boxes fit the cutting dies, that sort of thing."

"This isn't the way you'd do it, if given your head?"

I started picking up packages and picking them apart. "See this green series? They got on an ecology kick. So I came up with a deep forest green, very sexy, something deep enough to reverse copy out of successfully. But they overruled me, and changed the color to this bilious bright green. Sure, you can see the card from a hundred feet away, but you can't read the copy at two feet!"

"So I see."

"Please understand, I don't design crap like this if I have a choice."

"What kind of crap do you design?" he asked with a grin.

I opened up my briefcase and extracted a brochure I had done, a piece I always carried with me in case of emergencies, like the one this was turning out to be. "This," I said, "should give you an idea of what I can do. It's a brochure for one of the top prepress houses in L.A. I did the whole thing. Designed it, wrote the copy, art-directed the photos, updated their logo. Because this was to be a showpiece for a major film house, it had to be spectacular, the trickier the better, so it has lots of nice touches. Anyway, this is the kind of work I do."

Craig examined the piece, read the copy, ran his fingers over the subtle visual textures, and tipped it toward the light to see the high-gloss spot UV areas come to life. When he finally looked up, he glanced at the mess on the table and back at the brochure. "This is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"It's nice, isn't it?" I said without a trace of modesty.

Refocused, Craig got to the point. "This project is too large, and the time too short, for one firm to tackle alone. I'm interviewing four others, and I'll use two. I'd like you to bid on the first phase. Are you interested?"

“It’s what I do. When do we start?”

“I’ll be at your office at eight o’clock Monday morning. Please do a little homework over the weekend so we’re ready to roll first thing. I’m asking each of the finalists to provide three new logo variations and incorporate the new style into a sample package. I’ll need you to supply a fixed bid on each. The new logo has to scream America. It should be red, blue, and gold, on a white background. Change the product name from Compact Fluorescents to Electronic Lights.”

I scribbled notes quickly as he barked out commands.

“Based upon what you’ve done for these folks, you’re starting out behind the eight ball. But I like working with good people, hands-on folks who know how to get things done. You strike me as that kind of guy.”

That I was, but I already knew that. The question was, who was he, and why had he mired himself in this predicament?

Bill Hunt loved challenges. Judy Hunt thought her husband loved them a little too much. His penchant for moving across the country to tilt at windmills was wearing thin. He had left one company for another, only to become the president of a third. When his last stint hadn’t worked out, Craig had offered him a marketing job at Dynasty, SVP of something or other. At least they were getting to see the country.

Dynasty was already on a collision course with WalMart when Bill arrived in ’92. In another year, it was all over but the shouting. Judy was not amused. She didn’t know whether to laugh or cry when Craig called Bill again just months after Dynasty’s fall. The new job: assisting him in pulling off a colossal redesign and marketing project for Lights of America. Bill needed the work and liked working with Craig. What’s more, they wouldn’t have to move again.

Bill was to be “stationed” at Lights. His primary contact was the head of marketing, Quiel Nalic, but in effect that meant he would be dealing most closely with Quiel’s marketing assistant. Christi Reynolds was in her late twenties, a tall, enthusiastically self-confident woman.

She had known nothing about marketing when she had taken the job but was bright and willing to learn. Every chance Christi got, she talked to Bill and Craig about their experiences, becoming familiar with their history all the way back to the Price Club years. She listened with rapt attention as Craig outlined how retailing goes through revolutions, how the focus shifts, how new channels open in response to the changing needs of the market. Craig’s experiences with Dynasty were fascinating to her, especially what it took to make it live—and why it died. She was interested in how it had shaped his perception of what the future would bring.

Craig told her that the next retail revolution would take place in people’s homes. The store would come to us, and so would the products. She took it all in. As the project progressed, so did her marketing knowledge and ability. By the time the redesign was done, Christi had become in reality what her job designation had claimed.

Craig was waiting in the parking lot when I got to my studio that first Monday morning. He was sitting behind the wheel of a gold Mercedes sports car, the only car in the lot at that early hour.

Power Graphics was a tempest in a teacup. Located in a corner suite of a small office building about half a mile from my home, it was 600 square feet of custom-made desks, light tables, and computers. Every square inch was used for something. It was like working in a sailboat. We had a little conference area, a table and four chairs. A darkroom housed my stat camera, once a gold mine but now seldom used.

I missed the old days, when you'd had to have some degree of skill just to get an image into print. Now, anyone with a Macintosh could do it. The computer was king now. Art boards, the medium that had borne information from idea to printed reality for the last eighty years, had been eclipsed by computer files. I had made the jump from art boards to computer media as soon as the better prepress houses were able to produce printing film more efficiently from data than from artwork. I'd watched as designers who were slow to adapt to the new methods withered and died.

I was principally a packaging designer. But restricting my business would have been restricting my income. So I took on any assignment I could get, in any print medium: litho, flexo, roto, serigraphy, designing brochures, composing ads, and creating point-of-sale displays. I did my best to master many design disciplines, becoming an illustrator, a typographer, a wordsmith, a production coordinator, and a salesman of sorts. I developed a wide range of skills on the theory that anything I didn't have to farm out was money in my pocket.

For the first time in my twenty-year career, I was about to need every shred of knowledge and experience I had accumulated. I was about to work with Craig Winn. He announced that we were going to be joined at the hip during the design process, a scary description that proved all too true. Craig pulled up a drafting stool beside my workstation and we proceeded to operate.

"The first order of business," he announced, "is the logo."

I opened a file with the five logos I'd developed over the weekend.

"Great start. They look good, especially that one!" Craig said, pointing to one of the five logo styles on my screen.

"It shouts America, just like you asked."

"You're on the right track, Ken. Give me a few polished versions of this design, and I'll pick one. We'll go from there."

That we did. The brothers Nalic loved it too, so we were off and running. We moved from logo to corporate stationery, packaging, brochures, displays, and ads.

We had hundreds of photographs in our files, but most didn't meet Craig's expectations, so he added hundreds more, photographed in his own elegant Palos Verdes home. Katharine didn't care for the mess, especially since the shooting took the better part of two weeks. But she was a good sport about it, although she did extract a promise from her husband that he would never do that to her house again. It would prove to be one of the few promises he broke.

A promise was kept, a contract was fulfilled, period. But Craig's more pessimistic predictions weren't quite so reliable. He had intended to use Power Graphics for half the project, and had told me as much. Early in the game, he turned over a small part to another agency, one he had used in the past. The job was simple, but they managed to

screw it up. I bailed them out with some timely technical assistance, but he had been burned, and he wasn't about to be burned again. Power Graphics ended up doing the entire humongous job.

Being joined at the hip, as he put it, for four or five months, ten to twelve hours a day, we got to know each other very well. It turned out we were both Christians, so we shared a great deal in common. We spent many pleasant lunch hours (though never as long as that) discussing the finer points of theology in a local park under the warm Huntington Beach sun.

Craig fell in love with my odd family. You couldn't blame him. My wife, Gayle, was Mother of the Century as far as I was concerned. Of our eleven children, nine were adopted. Seven of them were from other countries, and most of them had serious problems ranging from early childhood abuse or neglect to profound mental retardation. Three of them were in wheelchairs. Two of them would die before another year had passed.

My new friend also saw something he liked in me. I liked getting my hands dirty, actually doing the job. He had seen many of his valued design sources reach, as the Peter Principle put it, their level of incompetence; gifted designers had become mere "front men," hiring lesser talents to do the labor.

It was late summer when we finished the project. When it was all over, I marveled that we had finished it all in so short a time—and for so little money. Craig was easily the best manager—and the best negotiator—I'd ever met.

He realized by then that there wasn't going to be a business partnership with the Nalic brothers. He loved and respected them but recognized they could never bring themselves to partner with anyone not named Nalic. It was a pity. Craig showed me the color renderings of products he had designed for them. Unlike anything I'd ever seen, they were stunning, radically innovative, yet quietly elegant.

Craig's two boys, Ryan and Blake, were growing up too fast, and he was missing it. So he decided to take some time off, coach Little League, do a little writing, some volunteer work, and maybe take his family on a long vacation—go back east, see historic America. Breathe.

Bill Hunt was asked to stay on at Lights, so we got to see a lot of him. A project of that magnitude is never really done.

Christi Reynolds left Lights shortly after the redesign project was completed. She went to work for Thermador, a manufacturer of ultra-high-end kitchen appliances.

At Power Graphics, life returned to normal. With the Lights project at an end, I never expected to see Craig Winn again. Pity. He was interesting, driven, and creative, even if working with him was a little like working in a hurricane with the windows open. After the pressure of the last half a year, a normal workload seemed like we were coasting.

But things were not back to normal, not really. This was only the calm before the storm.