

*Alice Weiss*  
**Legitimate Business**

I was in my office when Demon (pronounced deMAAN) Ghost, the pimp, came slinking around the parlor door. My office was on Broad Street catty-corner to the criminal courthouse on Tulane. Wood shotgun houses followed one another up Broad. Usually they were built right up to the sidewalk, but ours had a patch of scrubby ground and a surprisingly full oleander bush in front. The flowers were a thick-petaled saturated pink and they were poisonous.

New Orleanians call the front room in a shotgun house the parlor, and that room with its 12 foot high ceilings and enormous old cypress pocket doors, was my workspace. I shared the rest of the office with three other scrappy solo practitioners and a secretary, none of whom was back yet from court runs. Ghost was my client. I wouldn't say he had me on retainer, but he and his girls had so many troubles with the cops, and the DA's office of child support payments, he might as well have.

With a black guy, a Jewish guy, and a guy in a wheelchair, our office resembled an affirmative action fantasy. That didn't stop them from feeling very generous to allow a woman to share space with them. Collectively, the criminal defense bar tends to be a rough place: guys who see themselves at a real bar throwing down a beer with a bourbon chaser. In fact, the four of us honed our competitive skills with an ongoing game of scrabble. They all hated that I had a pimp for a client.

I better be tough, they'd imply, if I was going to play with the big boys. On the other hand did I understand what I was doing. Nobody likes a pimp, they'd say. In prison, ya know, pimps only one step up from child molesters. Listen guys, Ghost doesn't beat up his girls. He runs a phone-in escort service. He only sends them to the streets during Mardi Gras and Jazz Fest when the money is too good not to (not entirely true but I don't say that).

I liked Ghost. I still do and it's been years since he fired me. His name, for one. Demon Ghost. It doesn't matter that it was pronounced the French way, I know a demon when I see one, and the truth is he was your adolescent rebellion, like Santa Claus, all dressed up. First time he comes in my office, he says, "My name is Ghost, but don't try sticking your finger through me, I floor you, man I take you down. I'm not wispy stuff. Another thing, I be lightskinned. Don't try calling me pinky."

And he was pretty: slinky, legs long as door posts, a full length leather coat he swung out wide when he walked, so his leather pants and cowboy boots showed. No matter how hot it was. This day, it was Spring and the oleander was blooming. "Well, hello, Ghost, you've got a new 'do." He had a jerry curl 'do, the one they grease up so it always looks wet.

"Ms. Attorney," he said, "I need to make an appointment."

"One of your girls in central lock-up?"

"This special," he said, sitting himself down with a swish of his coat across my client chair, crossing one leg over the other in case I missed his cowboy boots. "I could have an appointment now?"

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"Well I was busy but sure, why not. was there ever a woman who resisted you?"

"You don't believe that but it be true."

"Sorry, Demon, I'm just crabby today. What can I do for you."

He put a black attaché case on my desk, opened it and took out a bunch of manilla folders. He opened one of the folders. "This, my house deed for the Harahan house. This, my application for a business checking account at Hibernia.

"This, my contracts with South Central Bell and the bills for my phone lines and this page, this, from the phone company. See the little yellow cut outs show my listings and this letter. They asking me to approve the proofs. Here."

And he put the proofs in my hands. I read out loud, "AAA Adorable Creole Ladies...299-2669. AAA Absolutely Incredible Angels. . .299-2569, AAA A Touch of Class...299-2469. They are out of alphabetical order, you should tell them to correct that. But Demon. . ." and I began to laugh.

"What's funny?" He said, grumpy.

"It's your roll-over numbers, all, you know, 69. How'd you get the phone company to do that?"

He said, "I put a hundred under the table. I knows how to do business." He leaned back in the chair. "You know how Martin say he's got a dream." I did not know Ghost was aware there had been a civil rights movement. I nodded and waited.

"I got me a dream. I be a C.E.O. Supply white table cloth dinner dates, make deals with other CEO's, like me, corporate suites in the superdome. I want you, Ms Attorney Jacobs, to put together a corporation for me." He said it like he was bestowing an award.

I sat back up in my big chair, and I thought about how gray it was the day he first come and asked me to handle his cases, long about the time that the Civil Rights cases began to dry up and I had to take cruddy no-win criminal cases, neighborhood Mawmaws whose cousins been fired from a job at Popeye's Chicken and who *never* pocketed the money; aunts who can turn a car accident into an opportunity to pay the rent. And the rain was drizzling and the oleander was bare. And Ghost come in, magnetic and full of light and made me laugh.

So I didn't laugh this time. I said, "Ghost, you want legit, you need a balance sheet. Assets and liabilities, income, outflow." And I pulled out my own ledger and showed him. "Daily take, expenses, what the house costs, food for the girls, phones."

And he said, "Ms. Attorney, I wants a corporation not a ledger."

"It might not be in your interest to form a corporation with shares and stuff. It might be more in your interest to form a subchapter S so you won't have to pay double taxes."

"Taxes," I saw his eyes begin to tear. Breathing loud, gulping air. "Taxes?" He spat out.

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Patiently, I said something to the effect of Yes, of course. That's what people who run businesses do. You have to get a number from the IRS before Hibernia will let you have a business account. You may not have to pay if your expenses exceed income, I mean, we can depreciate the Cadillac. I'm just talking to talk. "Ghost?" He set up wailing like a man in a gospel choir picking out the high notes, while the chorus goes Wah-wah behind him. Then he drew a deep breath. This time, at least he had words. "For true! I got to pay taxes? I go legit and I got to pay them money *My* girls earned. I file they documents, I go along with they laws and I got to pay *taxes*." Slowly he calmed his breathing, slow, slow, piled his documents neatly and slipped them in the briefcase. Stood up carefully straightening out his leathers, and closing his coat, slid the pocket door open and, as he stepped through, he said, "We don't mention this no more."