

MY LONG WALKTHROUGH HOME WITH GERTRUDE THE PORN DIRECTOR

It was the kind of hot reserved for scenes of chain gangs in vintage prison movies. Sweltering, middle of the day, and I was sporting a penal jumpsuit of my own—a threadbare Men's Warehouse contraption of maximum uncomfortableness—miles away from my usual Hollywood locale. As its name suggests, Sunland is a basin of blistering temperatures located at the foot of Angeles National Forest. And if the traffic is reasonable, about a forty-five-minute drive north of downtown Los Angeles. Winters there can be bad enough, but the summer heat is nothing short of disrespectful. This particular day was beyond cruel, and the unforgiving sun had permeated every shoddy fiber of that cheap suit, pelting my aching body as I dug a fresh grave for the dog of an aged-out porn star. Hmm, perhaps you'd like me to back up a bit?

I never wanted to be a realtor. In fact, all I ever wanted to be was a successful real estate investor, so procuring a license in said field seemed like an appropriate place to start. That's exactly what I did. But before all that subsequent investing could take place, skills would need to be honed, which meant first sharpening my craft as a real estate agent. A few potential buyers here, a few crappy listings there, and suddenly I'm in the thick of a burgeoning career as a Keller Williams professional, vacuuming up all forms of RE knowledge. Throw in some fiendish levels of networking, and it wasn't long before a truly juicy referral came my way. And though this potential client lived nowhere near my desired realty radius, the potential commission check would find me happily adding extra miles to my Honda's odometer again and again if need be.

Her story was fascinating, really. Most notably that she had been an actress in adult themed films when VHS was still a thing. Petite, blonde, alluring, and clearly a big fan of silicone, an advanced age now found her behind a camera rather than in front of one. Success as a director and producer of pornography had afforded Gertrude (not her real name) and her husband an opportunity to move away from the hectic city and into a beautiful community specific to equestrian life. As in, the gated development boasted about fifty luxurious homes, and all of them surrounded by miles of horse trails perfect for riding. Unfortunately, this blissful life was to be short lived, as her husband contracted cancer and passed away soon after. Her goal now was to sell the house and move back to the faster paced parts of Los Angeles immediately.

The property itself was both charming and spasmodically eclectic all at once. At least, that was my first impression upon pulling into the compound. The rustic edge to the place had you thinking cowboy boots and a southern drawl, but the outside color schemes conveyed more of a preschool vibe than that of a grandiose Wyoming ranch. Strange to the nth I tell you. Still, I could quickly see that a three thousand square foot house in the distance had incredible mountainous views, and that the entire lot sat on nearly two acres of land. Promising. Also, much of that acreage employed stables, barns, a hot walker, extra storage units, and a few guest houses we'll be discussing in a moment. The saltwater swimming pool smack in the middle of the front yard was luxurious, but any real semblance of landscaping around the rest of the lot was nonexistent. Downright chewed up is a better description of all that wasted land. There were also dozens of animals.

Horses, goats, sheep, pigs, chickens, and dogs. A solid pack of ten dogs. That's who first greeted me shortly after I turned off my ignition. They surrounded my car in formation, barking and yipping like mad, wanting to know who the intruder surveying their abode from his muffler-

impaired '98 Honda Civic was. Big ones, little ones, fierce ones, cute ones, but all working together, like any protective family should. Gertrude called her pups off, enthusiastically shook my hand, and led me inside where the air conditioning had thankfully already been cranking hours before my arrival.

I'm just going to say it; the guts of the main house were disappointingly horrid. Sure, boxes had been checked by a developer at one time—kitchen, bedrooms, bathrooms—enough windows to exploit the view, but the Midcentury look she had chosen was underwhelming in the worst possible ways. Think gruesomely cheap “Brady Bunch” way more than ornate “Dynasty.” Plus, most of the appliances, paneling, and hideous crown moldings would find themselves in a landfill somewhere soon enough. The work that needed to be done was well beyond a little paint and carpeting, and my ideal listing price for the joint was going down by the minute. Then she walked me into one of the back bedrooms.

I had never seen so much pornography adorned in such a small space, and I lived in a fraternity house for three years. Every inch of every wall was plastered with nudity. And not just any random nudity mind you, most of the erotic pictures were of my affable hostess from her time as an actress. These pictures were further accompanied by a bevy of other pictures, posters, and graphic artwork from all sides of the porno industry. No one would ever accuse me of being prude, but yeah, the orgiastic paraphernalia was a tad much. Even for me. Realtors often advise their clients to closet personal photos so as not to cloud a buyer's judgment, but this? How do you even begin to suggest hiding pics like these? At least it was cloaking that repellent paneling. Besides, the bedroom was obviously being used as Gertrude's office, and her business was, well, her business. I acted like this was all normal and gave nothing away in my expression. She seemed pleased with that. Appreciative almost. We pressed on.

Next stop were the ramshackle guest units off to the side of the house. The main house may have needed a facelift, but whatever the hell these casitas were would have been torn down before someone contracted a life-threatening disease. Especially since it became abundantly clear this is where a few, if not all ten dogs liked to spend their time defecating. Ah, yes, the dogs. It was right around this point I thought we'd be wrapping up our tour, pour a couple of iced teas on the back patio, discuss my employ, and ultimately get down to numbers regarding price. Alas, no, instead she invited me to take the pups for a walk. All ten. Off leash.

It had to have been ten degrees hotter now than when I had first shown up, and it was astoundingly hot then. Pervasively hot. Too hot to be walking ten dogs ten yards in the suit I was wearing, let alone a solid mile hike around the entire development. Did I also mention I was sporting wing tips? Because I was. So, either my affable hostess was now testing me to see how much abuse I'd take to be her listing agent of choice, was completely oblivious to anyone but those excitable dogs, or a solid hybrid of the two. Also, most of our journey so far had been downhill, which meant the inevitable walk back was going to be a billion times as daunting. Sure, our conversation we were having about the community was pleasant enough, but I was more than eager to see this expedition end. No such luck. The footslog home would have to wait.

The scream Gertrude let out is what sticks with me the most. A piercing wail like any other I've ever heard before or since. Combine the caterwauls from every Hitchcock movie with Yoko Ono's performance art and whatever scream you are envisioning still wouldn't come close. No, a howl like that must come from a fresh event of pain, and shock, and horror. As we passed a particularly baroque property on our tour of the neighborhood, one of the dogs, her favorite dog, was unable to avoid the oversized tires of a workman's cargo van as he backed out of the

driveway. He was ill prepared to evade ten off leash dogs, just as we were all ill prepared for the aftermath of the accident. The poor little pup never had a chance.

For a good half hour my potential client cradled her beloved, inconsolable, and really, it was neither my place nor the worker's place to even attempt to console her. So, we sat with her at a distance, giving her space to grieve. No one else was around. Not the homeowner where the incident occurred, nor any neighbors, nor had even another car passed by during that time. That's how remote a community we were in. Inevitably, the sobbing lightened to a whimper, and she called someone. We went back to waiting, she went back to mourning, and the remaining nine dogs went back to running circles around their fallen comrade.

A hulking figure appeared in the distance. A towering man with bulging biceps and a height well over six feet. I had not seen such a person back at the compound, but apparently this young man lived in one of the dilapidated guest units where the dogs did their business. I did not fully understand the relationship between him and my hostess, and I did not ask, but I was damn glad to he had arrived, nonetheless. Except, upon seeing the deceased dog and pain upon his landlord's face, this heroic figure himself quickly turned to mush.

Los Angeles may be known for its inauthentic drama, but this was no show they were putting on. Both Hulk and Gertrude sat crying together, holding the dog and moaning in unison. This went on another half hour or so. The worker had mumbled his apologies and left by then, but where was I to go? There was no way I would have made it back to the compound without their guidance, as we had twisted a confusing path on our earlier walk to the very spot where the unfortunate mishap occurred. Mercifully, they pulled themselves together, he scooped the dog into his arms, and the three of us trekked back towards the compound with the remaining dogs in

tow. The heat was suffocating by now, none of us had taken a drink of water in hours, and the rubber of my wing tips were essentially sticking to the pavement with each grueling step uphill.

Expecting to offer my sincerest condolences and leave them to their lamentation, I hovered near my Japanese chariot, prepared to abscond after we said our goodbyes. This is not what happened. What happened was that without a word, Gertrude opened a shed near one of the barns and procured both a pickaxe and a shovel. She then made her way to a very particular spot on the land and began pathetically poking at the earth with the pickaxe. And did the brawny figure who could have been cast as a boxer in any number of films make a move to help her? He did not. He simply sat down and watched her, dog in hand and tears streaked across his cheeks.

Having seen enough, I relieved her of her duties and took over the workload, ushering her to sit with Hulk and the dog. The earth here wasn't the most pliable, and I'd be remiss to leave out how many other animal bones kept popping up as I dug deeper. Too many to count, really. But I just kept on digging. I dug until that hole was enough for burial and every ounce of sweat in me was good and depleted. The wheels of that truck had their say, the heat had its say, the day definitely had its say, and now it was time for Hulk and Gertrude to have their say.

I'd like to tell you that I remembered the eulogy. Or at least some incredibly inspiring portion of it, but I don't. I just remember that it was short and sweet, and filled with a torrent of woe. However, the bright shiny cross Gertrude planted on top of the grave site when I was finished refilling all the dirt? That I remember. I also remember thinking how well a burial site in the front yard was going to look on the MLS listing pictures. Probably about as well as all that pornography adorning the walls of a certain guest bedroom. Sure, think me unfeeling if you will, but yes, I was absolutely expecting to be rewarded with a listing contract after all of this.

She thanked me. Curtly. Even after what I had been through with them. Although, it quickly became clear that she blamed me for what had happened. After all, a walk with her potential agent is what had triggered the accident, and I am not devoid of empathy. I understood. If she needed an object of derision to deflect the pain she was feeling, I was the most likely target. I took the fall. We said our goodbyes and I kissed that juicy commission check sayonara.

She called me. Maybe a week later. Her tone was much different than last we spoke. Cheerier. Appreciative. Some might even call it bright. She invited me back up to her compound, suggesting I bring a listing agreement with me. Surprised and excited, I obliged. I dressed much more casually this time, and we toasted our newly formed contract with some of that sought after iced tea out on the back porch, overlooking the expansive view on another sweltering day.

I listed the house in summer of 2011, complete with tasteful professional pictures. Okay, so we shot around the dilapidated guest units, erotica-addled walls, and animal graveyard, but they remained on display in person for any buyer to see had I gotten a bite. I didn't. At least not a legitimate one near our asking price. And though I pleaded with Gertrude to lower the value at some point to drive more foot traffic, she resisted, and our agreement ran its course. She remained there and waited out the market another four years before another, luckier agent sold it for just about the same price I had listed it for. I often wonder how many other of Gertrude's animals said realtor had to bury in 108-degree heat to win that contract. I'm going with none. Then I find myself wondering what that realtor did with all that commission from the sale. I like to imagine they blew it on an invigorating and temperate roundtrip cruise. Perhaps to Antarctica.