

Excerpt from Their Names Are on Skyscrapers

Valerie Tillerson had interviewed me by phone from her home in New York City to sell her estate. Thirteen hundred acres nestled in the Blue Ridge with six houses, three barns, two lakes and a fishing cottage. She was throwing in the limousine previously owned by the Colgate family. Mrs. Tillerson turned it into a luxury resort she and her ex-husband, not unsurprisingly, had named The Tillerson. “But it got away from me when I got sick,” she told me.

I should have pried deeper, but the real estate boom was over and I needed this listing. To tell the truth, I was a little nervous. I’d sold high end properties before, but never one with so much land. She said she liked the name of my company, Virginia Fine Estates, and that I handled myself well on the phone. Two hours later the listing agreement was in the mail.

The property manager, Eugene Green, was to meet me at the gates on Mountain Road. I arrived early and they were locked. I got out of my car and looked down into the valley. The spring air was clean and sweet. A gravel lane meandered down the hillside to a rustic farmhouse with an Olympic-sized pool, then climbed up steeply to a three-story chalet entangled in rose brambles. The Peaks of Otter rose in the distance above the mountaintops that ringed the valley like sleeping Titans. It overwhelmed me for a moment with its serenity. It occurred to me suddenly that the word paradise came from ancient Persia and meant a walled garden, and if there is a paradise in this world, this was it. I said to myself, How could anyone ever own this with a scrap of paper?

An old pick-up truck pulled in behind me a minute later and a leather skinned redneck in worn jeans got out.

“It’s been closed for a year,” Eugene said, “since she got sick. Mrs. Tillerson told me to sell the goats. They’re South African. Bred them myself.” He smiled. “In vitro.” So much for first impressions. I had underestimated him.

There were about two hundred goats on the mountainside, and this huge white dog separated from them and trotted over to the fence. Eugene leaned over the rails and rubbed his shoulder. “This is Sam. He’s a Great Pyrenees.” I held out my hand for him to sniff, but he was indifferent and loped back to the herd. “He killed a coyote last winter. Over there by the edge of the pines.”

“I didn’t know there are coyotes around here.”

Eugene kind of laughed. “Oh yeah. Big ones.”

The land was divided into thirds, each with its own double gates, requiring three signs instead of one. I could see the property was unique and would need to be marketed as both residential and commercial. That would cost extra. Showing it was going to be an involved process, but that was the part I liked best. I decided to handle the showings myself. Spread among the buildings were sixty well-appointed bedrooms and fifteen suites, three dining halls, several kitchens, and a bar with a pewter counter from Provence. A half-completed cinder block health spa surrounded a second swimming pool filled with stagnant water. Someone had deep pockets, but not deep enough. You could tell when the well ran dry.

I followed Eugene to the Gilford Lodge, a racehorse stable with an outside riding ring in front. It had been redesigned as a hotel and conference center. To the side of the building was a gravel parking lot that could handle several buses. A double door entranceway with leaded glass transoms opened into a country chic lobby with a reception desk

He unclipped a keyring from his belt and rummaged for the right key. “The doors are babinga wood.”

I wrote that down for the portfolio. “Do you think you could kill the weeds in the parking lot?” I asked. “I want to schedule the photographer for next week.”

Eugene unlocked the door and held it open. “Sure, come on in.”

I noticed the wrinkles on his face. He was at least sixty-five. The floors were coated with dust and the air smelled musty. Eugene showed me the utility room where the circuit breakers were to light the place for showings.

Two dining rooms, an upper and a lower, had a seating capacity of six hundred. We stood beside a grand piano in the downstairs dining area and looked out over the sea of tables. “You must have had quite a staff to serve so many people,” I said. “How many employees worked here?”

He chewed his lip and nodded. “About thirty. And a chef for a while.”

“I’ll need any journals or books you have to show buyers the profitability and operating costs. What kind of income did you generate?”

“Mrs. Tillerson has the records up in New York. You better ask her.” He indicated to follow him down the hall. “Let me show you the bar.” In a tavern-like room with a walk-in fireplace, next to a pewter covered bar, was a stuffed coyote mounted on a stand. “That can’t be a coyote,” I said.

Eugene grinned. “Eighty pounds. I shot it out by the chalet. Mrs. Tillerson had it stuffed to add to the ambience.”

“It’s huge.” I studied the curling lips on the snout. The taxidermist had captured the perfect snarl.

He showed me the rest of the property, which took six hours. At the end of the day we returned to The Gilford and flipped the circuit breakers off. We left through the front lobby and locked the door. The Gilford was the soul of The Tillerson, and it had to look good. “Can you get someone to clean the floors? They’re pretty dusty.”

He looked at me sadly. “Nobody around here will come. It’s just me. I still got to bush hog, fix the roof, paint the shutters, and weed whack five miles of fence. And kill the weeds in the parking lot. Between you and me, I don’t know what I’ll do if this place doesn’t sell. I haven’t been paid for six months.”

I exhaled slowly. “Why do you stay on, Eugene? Why don’t you quit?”

“If I quit, I won’t get my back pay. Besides, I got more than just that invested in this place.”

“Is that why the locals won’t come?”

“She owes everybody around here money.”

I looked at the sun setting on the Peaks of Otter and thought about my commission. I let out a sigh. “I’ll come back tomorrow and take care of it. Hell, I’ll buff up the tables, too. A little shineola never hurts.”

She said she wanted thirteen million, but she would take ten and agreed to a six percent commission. I was stoked up to get started. My marketing team put it in three different MLSs and took out ads in *The Wall Street Journal* and several luxury property magazines.

Immediately there were interested parties, though the price was high. The first was a couple who wanted to turn it into an orphanage. The husband owned a media company and told me, before I even asked, that he was selling off some TV stations. He seemed to have the means to make the purchase. They fell in love with the place on the initial showing and came back a few days later for another. After I had given them the second full tour, Mrs. Tillerson came down from New York City and we all met together in the office of The Gilford. The wife was deeply committed to their

mission and broke into tears after explaining they wanted to make an offer for the sake of the children.

“How many children?” I asked.

She pulled a Kleenex from her purse and blew her nose. “About twenty girls in the beginning. We’ll finish the spa and teach them to be beauticians.” I glanced nervously at Valerie. She knew how to wear a poker face.

“Many institutions receive grants from benefactors,” said her husband. “Perhaps Mrs. Tillerson could finance us, and we could pay her back over a ten-year term.” The meeting ended quickly.

After the orphanage couple, I showed The Tillerson to a builder, then two days later to someone who wanted to turn it into a wedding resort. They were interested but the price was out of their reach and she wasn’t willing to come down on hers. Then I got a call from a Larry Williams. He had found the property on-line and looked at the on-line portfolio. We spoke for twenty minutes and he explained he wanted to start a business college that taught Objectivist principles. He had to drive up from North Carolina, so the next afternoon would work best for him to see it.

When selling high end property, I try to eliminate curiosity seekers and the financially unqualified. A background check revealed little more than that he taught at NCU. His name was mentioned on an Ayn Rand blog as a contributor to an objectivist publication. Replies to his commentary often ended in, be selfish, Larry. *Was he a little fish in a big pool?* Real Estate would be a great business if it wasn’t for the customers.

He was tall with unkempt rust colored hair and asked a lot of questions about who was on the county board of supervisors. After I took him through, I could tell he was interested. The bones were there to start a small college and board three hundred students. It actually made sense. I asked him if he had investors he was working with.

He glared at me angrily. “I have backers and I want you to show it to them. Can you be here next Wednesday morning?”

“Absolutely.” I tried to pick his brain. “If they’re coming a long way, I’m sure I can have Mrs. Tillerson let them stay in The Gilford. The view of the valley from there is beautiful.”

“That’s a great idea.”

“Let me know who is coming and I’ll have the rooms made up for them. Could you email me their names? Mrs. Tillerson will need to register them.”

I felt his hackles rising. He could tell where I was going. “I can’t give them to you without their permission. You already know their names, they’re on skyscrapers.”

I tried not to laugh. “Like John Galt?”

He didn’t think it was funny.

On Wednesday Larry arrived with his wife and daughter in a Jaguar sedan. His wife was a beautiful woman half his age. His daughter was a quiet girl of twelve years. Eugene pulled up in his pickup and I introduced him and myself to them. Larry started walking to The Gilford without saying hello. I looked in the Jaguar and it was empty. “Larry, where are your backers?” I shouted after him.

“They want to come Monday,” he said without stopping. He pulled on the lobby door and turned to face us, shrugging his shoulders.

“It’s locked. Hold on,” I said, running over with Eugene at my heels. Larry’s daughter stood behind him as Eugene fumbled for the keys. When the lock clicked, Larry yanked the door open. It slammed into her head and she stumbled backward.

“Jesus, she’s going to have a lump!” his wife cried.

Larry stood there frowning. "She'll be okay."

"I'll get some ice," said Eugene. He returned a few moments later with a bowl of ice from the downstairs kitchen. I wrapped a couple of cubes in a towel from the restaurant linen closet and handed it to Mrs. Williams. She sat down beside her daughter on the couch by the registration desk and held it on her forehead. I felt sorry for both of them. Her daughter hadn't said a word.

Larry went ahead by himself to the upstairs dining room. Eugene and I followed a minute later and stopped in the doorway. Larry was sitting on a table rubbing his ass back and forth across the top. He looked at us and hopped back to the floor.

"He's stamping it with his scent," I whispered to Eugene.

Eugene's eyebrows raised an inch. "Never seen nothing like that."

"Neither have I, but I know when somebody wants to buy." I gave Eugene a shoulder bump. "He's going to make an offer."

End of sample