

## A Friend of Bill Gillen

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For a real estate agent, hell is a silent phone. You sit at your desk pretending to have something to do, while the big producers usher their clients in and out of their private offices and rush off to six figure closings. You're lucky if they ask you to put up a yard sign at one of their new listings or hand out circulars at an open house. And all the time you're thinking what am I going to do when the training period is over and they put me on commission? How long until the credit cards are maxed out, the eviction notice is slipped under the door and Martha's lawyer is after me again for contempt?

I asked Darrell Williams, the agency's biggest producer, the secret of his success. Elegant in blue blazer, white silk shirt, gray slacks and alligator loafers, he was chatting with the secretary by her desk. She had slipped off her shoes and was touching the side of his foot with her toe. Darrell wasn't wearing socks. With two new million dollar plus listings in the paper that morning, he was feeling expansive.

"Come into my office," he said, putting his hand on my shoulder and rolling his eyes at the secretary. "I'll show you my secret weapon."

He had an enormous desk and mahogany paneling covered with plaques for the years he had been a member of the million-dollar roundtable. Smiling, he reached into his bottom desk drawer and pulled out a little plastic statue of a bearded man in a robe and sandals.

"Here," he said. "Know what this is?"

I shook my head.

"It's a statue of Saint Joseph. Bury it upside down in the front yard when you put up the for sale sign," he said. "It guarantees a quick sale."

"What if you don't have any listings?" I asked.

"Then you better find another place to bury it," he said.

He was laughing so hard the other part timers in the telephone room and the secretary looked up as I left his office.

That afternoon I was the only left in the office. All the others were out at showings and closings; even the secretary had gone home early. So I read the listings

again and again, so afraid I'd miss a call that I only left the room to go to the bathroom. Just as I opened the door, I heard the last ring. I ran to my desk, but the message light was dark. Of course it wasn't for me.

If I hadn't been desperate, I would have sat down and just kept hoping, and none of this would have happened. Instead I looked at the secretary's phone. Her message light was dark, too.

The call had to have gone somewhere. I went up and down the aisles in the telephone room. All the phones were dark. So I looked in the manager's office, then the big producers'. Nothing. Last was Darrell Williams'. His phone was on the credenza behind his desk, and his message light was on.

I picked up the phone, pressed "messages", and a voice asked me to enter my password and the pound sign. Password? All I had was the office password, good for the telephone room.

"Sorry. Try again," the voice said.

Beside the phone, mocking me, were pictures of Williams and his huge BMW with his personalized license plate.

"That's it!" I thought, entered "Beamer1" and hit pound.

"You have one message," the voice said.

"This is Kevin Angel. I'm a friend of Bill Gillen," a soft male voice said. "My address is 2750 Brite Drive. Bill said you'd handle everything. There's a key in the mailbox. Leave the listing agreement and you can pick it up tomorrow. Try to get a hundred fifty, but I have to get out of here. Leave a voice mail at 274-5650 when I have to sign something else."

I was clear headed enough to write everything down and erase the message. When the manager returned from depositing a commission check, I told him I had to talk to a guy about a new listing. He looked like he didn't believe me.

2750 Brite Drive was a split-level, brick down, white siding up, in a sixties subdivision a few miles from an aging shopping center. The only thing that distinguished it from its neighbors was the lack of plastic toys in the yard. Sure enough, the key was in the mailbox. I went in to measure the rooms.

A guy like me, I thought. Hardly any furniture except a TV and couch in the living room, a table and three chairs in the dinette, and a bed and another TV in one of the bedrooms. The bathroom hadn't been cleaned in months. So I get someone to cut the grass, a cleaning service for the bathrooms, and it's perfect for the typical American family of four. The only unusual feature was a dead bolt lock on the basement door.

Maybe he keeps pit bulls, I thought, and knocked, half expecting something to rush up the stairs and slam into the door. Silence. I opened the door and went downstairs. There was a fetid smell, as if someone had left cat food out too long. When I turned on the light, however, I forgot all about it. The most elaborate model railroad I had ever seen filled the recreation room. So that's why the rest of the place is so empty, I thought. I left a note about the grass and the cleaning service attached to the listing agreement and went home for my first decent night's sleep in weeks.

A real estate agent's dream is a new listing, sure to sell plus attract other listings in the neighborhood. For the first time, the other agents looked at me like I might be able to do something besides answer the phone and go for sandwiches at lunch. Then the calls started from people and other agents who had seen the ad and wanted to see the house. I finally had something to do.

The Brimleys were the perfect Brite Drive couple. She was a few months pregnant, he was an electrical engineer at a near by plant, and they had met at a model railroad convention.

"What's the smell?" was Mary Jo's only critical question.

"He used to have a cat," I explained.

"Hey, honey" Todd Brimley called from behind the furnace. "There's a crawl space."

I hadn't noticed that. Mary Jo looked at me expectantly.

"Keeps the heat off in summer," I told her.

By the time we caught up with Todd, he was squatting by the water heater, studying its specifications.

"What do you think, honey?" he said, standing.

"Let's go upstairs and talk," she replied.

I told them I expected a contract from another couple that evening, so they'd better move fast. As soon as they were gone I stepped behind the furnace and, sure enough, there was a crawl space. The smell was stronger, as if someone had dropped a bag of fast food in and forgotten about it. I went to the train room for a flashlight.

Upstairs the Brimleys were talking excitedly like a young couple making love. When you've made the sale, shut up, all the pros say. So I stood on tiptoes and shined the light into the crawl space. My stomach froze. Sticking out of the dirt at the back was a human foot.

"Hey, Art!" Todd called down from the kitchen. "We're ready!"

I couldn't move. My first listing, my first sale, and my career was ruined. For the rest of my life I'd be the guy who showed houses with bodies in the basement. And if I didn't sell that house, I was looking at thirty days in jail for contempt of my divorce decree.

"Art? What are you doing? Playing with the trains?" Todd called again.

"I'm coming," I said, returning the flashlight to the train room and going upstairs. Mary Jo hugged me, and they signed a contract for the asking price. I left Kevin Angel a note to sign the contract and clean the place up, especially the basement, before the closing.

I don't know how I got through the next two weeks. When Mary Jo called to ask if she could show the house to her mother, I nearly panicked.

"I'll ask the owner," I said.

It's all over now, I thought. No one is more critical than the buyer's mother. She'll smell the body, look in the crawl space and call the police. I called Kevin Angel's number and left a message that the buyer and her mother wanted to see the house again, and he'd better get it cleaned up fast.

"And for God's sake, do something about that smell!" I pleaded.

It was the longest afternoon of my life. Every time the phone rang, I thought it was Kevin. There was a call from a woman on Brite Drive thinking about divorcing her husband and wanting to know how much they could get for the house.

"A hundred seventy-five for sure," I said. "My last listing there went in two days."

Ten minutes later, the soon to be ex husband called. He couldn't believe a hundred seventy-five thousand. While I was telling him I had sold the house three doors down for the asking price, the phone chirped and the message light went on. I couldn't get the guy off the line. In my experience, a rising real estate market has broken up more marriages than adultery. Finally, after I promised to come out that night with a listing agreement, he hung up. Chest tightening, I hit my voice mail button.

"Thanks for all you're doing for me," Kevin Angel's voice said. "Bill was right about you. You can take Mary Jo and mother to the house tomorrow afternoon. They'll love the basement."

They did love the basement. Everywhere, even behind the furnace, was the smell of lemon cleanser. The bathrooms were clean, and the soap scum had vanished from the chrome strips in the tile. While Mary Jo and mother were admiring the electric trains, I took the flashlight and peered into the crawl space. All I could see was freshly smoothed dirt.

Kevin Angel arrived late at the closing, complaining of his short lunch hour at the library. Pale, pudgy, in khaki wash and wears with a partially untucked blue shirt and polyester tie, he watched happily as the woman from the bank passed paper after paper to the Brimleys. When it was time for him to sign the deed, he took a deep breath. Then the woman from the bank handed us our checks, we shook hands with the Brimleys, and they left the conference room holding hands. I had never had so much money before in my life.

"Bill sure was right about you," my client said, after the woman from the bank had bundled up her papers and departed. "Would you like to get together for a drink? I get off at five."

"Love to, but I have a showing down the street from your old place," I excused myself.

"Too bad. I wanted to get to know you better."

We left the bank in opposite directions. In our brief time together, we did not shake hands. On the way to the parking garage, I dropped off a certified check for back alimony to Martha's lawyer. For the first time since I met her, I was free. I never saw Kevin Angel again.

I did, however, hear from other friends of Bill Gillen. Sometimes they wanted to talk about a house before I showed it, but usually they preferred the anonymity of a key in the mailbox. Kevin was the only one I ever had to tell to clean his place up. All the other houses smelled of lemon cleanser when I first arrived, although I sometimes caught a whiff of cat food in unvented spaces.

When I was elected to the million-dollar round table, I tried to call Bill Gillen. I wanted him to attend the awards dinner as my guest. He must have had an unlisted number, and I didn't want to ask any of his referrals. Sometimes the best way to service a big client is to just do the job and let the golf games go. I change the password on my voicemail twice a week to keep others from disturbing our relationship.

Our agency moved into a larger space, so I could have an office bigger than Darrell Williams', and my own secretary. I don't trust voice mail. I have a Mercedes Benz Maibach bigger than his Beamer, too. Best of all, Martha and her lawyer are eating their hearts out, because my five hundred-dollar an hour lawyer got the judge to cut her alimony in half. She just wasn't trying hard enough to find a job, the court ruled.

Now I read the second section of the newspaper, where they report the daily killings in the inner city and disappearances in the suburbs, as eagerly as I read the new listings. Can there really be a group, who bury their victims in their basements and gardens, and use the same real estate agent when the plot is full? According to the paper, there aren't many missing bodies. The only delay is when they have to drag the river. Who, then, do Kevin Angel and his colleagues bury in their crawl spaces? And if nobody misses them, does it really matter that they are dead? Is death as unreal as the sound of a tree falling in the forest, when there is no one to hear it?

These are the questions I ask myself, when I have an empty moment between phone calls and closings, or when I wake up in the middle of the night or the sleeping pills don't work. Once at the office Christmas party, I almost asked Darrell Williams. His production was off and he looked so unhappy I just left him with the scotch and tortilla chips. Besides, the secretary was after me for some more champagne.

So Bill Gillen remains a mystery, like the statues of Saint Joseph. I've never had anyone say they don't work. Whatever he may be to others, Bill has always been magic for me.