

Chapter Ten—The Binds that Tie

Over the next few months, I became very familiar with the do's and don'ts of selling products on eBay. It was a good way to occupy all the free time I had when I wasn't worrying about celebrity neighbors, wondering where Unity was, or learning how to cook traditional Cuban dinners. (The latter, courtesy of Ramona.)

I decided to begin my eBay experience by listing a few low-end items first, just so I could run through the process a few times to see how it worked. And that's how my pristine collection of Wacky Packages made their way to the auction block.

Wacky Packages, for those who don't know, were very popular in the 1970s. They were a series of stickers that were sold in packages like baseball cards. Each sticker had a mock version of a real product on it, like Awful Bits, Ajerx, and Band-Aches. Kids would put the stickers everywhere: on their books, lockers, bikes, jackets, any place that had a surface.

Needless to say, this meant that a lot of the original Wacky Packages were thrown out long ago, still clinging to the items they were stuck to. But for some reason, I never took my stickers off their protective backing. I'm not sure why. I just never had the desire to ruin the sticker by actually using it. I wanted to keep mine forever. Which is sort of how I became a collector, I guess. Or at least how I developed the collector's mentality.

To my delight, the Wacky Packages were very popular, and practically sold themselves. Some of the sets even prompted major bidding wars, and in the last two minutes of the auction would often quadruple in price.

In my first week of selling, I managed to unload five sets of Wacky Packages for upwards of fifty dollars a set. Fifty dollars for five measly stickers. They didn't even get the gum or packaging. It was outrageous. Especially since I had hundreds more of them.

eBay soon became my best friend. When I woke up each morning, the first thing I would do is check the status of my auctions to see what was selling and what wasn't. It gave me a major adrenaline rush to track the progress of the bidding. After checking my auctions, I would spend the rest of the morning writing copy and taking pictures of all the new items I'd be listing.

My ex-boyfriend had once given me a digital camera for my birthday, but I'd never had a reason to use it until now. Especially since he broke up with me shortly thereafter, making the camera somewhat of a consolation prize for being dumped. No wonder I never took it out of the box.

But now that I really needed the camera, all the emotional baggage attached to it was quickly discarded, along with the gift card still attached.

“To Henson, Happy Birthday. Love, The Boyfriend.”

He didn't even sign his name on the card, just his title. *The Boyfriend*. As if he was already distancing himself from the position in case a better opportunity came along. Two weeks later it did, in the form of an exotic dancer named Judas he met at some bar.

Within an hour he was gone. Gone from my life. Gone from my support system. Gonorrhea, which he apparently contracted from Judas shortly thereafter. (A mutual friend told me later.) Thankfully, the only thing I ever contracted from our three-year relationship was the camera.

I loved taking pictures of my auction items. It was fun to arrange all the comic books or stickers or plastic toys. I imagined myself as a product display designer on QVC, and sometimes went overboard to make my products look more appealing.

I soon became caught up in a never-ending cycle of listing items, selling items, packaging items, mailing items. I don't want to say I was obsessed with it, but there wasn't much else I liked to do. Especially since Unity had been Missing-in-Action for over a month now.

As for Unity's exact whereabouts, I still wasn't sure. But I did get a rather odd phone call the week after my first Plainfield RAMBO. Probably due to all the messages I'd been leaving on Unity's answering machine.

The call came from a young woman who identified herself as Unity's secretary, though I never remember Unity mentioning she had one. She explained that Unity was called out of the country on an urgent matter, and would I please accept her apologies for not speaking to me in person. She also wanted to assure me that I would continue receiving my checks during her absence, as Unity knows how much she's inconveniencing me.

Inconveniencing me? How could a woman who completely changed my life ever think she was inconveniencing me? I worshipped the ground she walked on. And how could she expect me to continue collecting a salary when I was clearly doing nothing to earn it?

No, it was time to cut the apron strings and let Unity off the hook. She shouldn't feel obligated to pay for my well-being any longer. So I politely told Unity's secretary that I was earning a nice little income right now, and that Miss Kingsmill needn't trouble herself any longer with paying me a stipend. I would anxiously await her return and would love to talk to her whenever she had a moment.

After telling the secretary this, in what I considered a very dignified manner, I thought I heard a large gulp coming from the other end of the phone. As if the woman was

shocked, and possibly appalled, that I would ever turn down such a generous arrangement.

“Are you...uh, sure you want to do that?” The secretary asked, obviously trying to hold back the anxiety welling up inside her. “Miss Kingsmill specifically requested that you continue to receive your checks.”

“I’ll be fine.” I assured her. “I love Miss Kingsmill, and her generosity is overwhelming. But she’s also taught me to stand on my own. And that’s what I’m doing right now.”

There seemed to be panic in the secretary’s voice.

“Well...um...I’ll let Miss Kingsmill know as soon as I hear from her.”

The secretary hung up before I could ask for a phone number, or a way I could reach Unity myself. I wondered what urgent matter would call Unity away without even saying good-bye. It all seemed very strange.

The next day, some men from the security company dropped by to hook up my alarm system. As they were doing some kind of wiring in the basement, I heard one of them refer to the house’s antique furnace as a “death trap waiting to happen.” Not exactly comforting. But not surprising either.

On the day Unity gave me the house, she and Paul both told me the furnace was one of the major “issues,” and would probably need to be replaced. The decaying cast-iron exterior looked like something out of a horror film. *Frankenstein*. Or *House of Wax*. Or anything starring Pauly Shore.

This is another reason I completely immersed myself in eBay. I had to earn enough money to start paying for some major home improvements.

And this is also how I became such good friends with Patty at the Post Office. (And you thought I’d forgotten about her, didn’t you?) My daily auctions meant frequent trips to the Post Office to mail out packages. Thankfully, a local branch was within walking distance so I didn’t have to rely on a taxi or friends to get me there. And I enjoyed the hike. It took me past a very beautiful local park.

On my first trip to the post office, I noticed a large group of people huddled around a picnic table at the far end of the park. They all appeared to be dressed completely in black, and I believe one of them was playing the guitar. It reminded me of the gaggles of Goth that would assemble in Washington Square Park, showing off their new tongue rings or Belly piercings. Personally, I never understood the whole body mutilation thing. I had enough physical flaws as it was, so paying for someone to create another one just didn’t make sense to me.

When I arrived at the post office, I was surprised to find a rather long line at the service window. There was only one teller on duty, a large African-American woman with a perky attitude and a flashy smile. Patty.

I knew I liked Patty immediately when she lovingly berated a particularly slow customer for not being prepared.

“I’m sorry, ma’am.” Patty said with mock attitude. “You need to have all your forms and paperwork completed before you come to the window. See all those people standing in line behind you? They don’t have time for you to finish writing Aunt Mary’s address down. They have places to go, people to see. They are busy, busy, busy. So please step aside while you complete your forms and let me help the next person, okay? Thank you kindly.”

The customer, a rather daft woman in her thirties, did as she was told.

When it was finally my turn at the window, Patty was visually ecstatic about my prep work. I had filled out all my labels, completed all the paperwork, and even arranged my packages by geographic region. I was a model customer.

“You get a gold star, Sweetie,” Patty announced, after rifling through my paperwork. “You must work for the post office, am I right?”

“No, but I’ve played a lot of Post Office, so I guess I picked up a few things.”

“I’ll bet you did.” She said, before letting out the biggest bellow of laughter I’d ever heard. The entire post office seemed to shake in agreement.

And though I was really making a very innocent comment about how I’d built myself a pretend post office as a kid (literally), Patty infused my statement with all the sexual innuendo she could muster. From that day forward, we were the best of friends.

After a few months of daily visits to the post office, I decided to confide in Patty about some of the strange occurrences I’d experienced of late. Since there was no one else in the post office at the time, it seemed like the perfect opportunity.

Patty listened intently as I told her about the mysterious house across the street, though I neglected to mention any of the celebrities who might be living there. I didn’t want her to think I was totally insane. I also mentioned the men in the van who were watching my house, the garbage that had been stolen from my driveway, and finally about my relationship with Unity Kingsmill.

When I was finished, Patty let out a huge sigh and squinted up her eyes.

“You are very blessed,” she finally said. “From what you’ve said, this Kingsmill woman is an angel. Unfortunately, when you have such a powerful angel like her helping you, there’s bound to be an equally powerful devil lurking around as well.”

“You can’t be serious,” I protested, not liking the morbid tone in her voice.

“I’m very serious. You have to be careful with these type of things. There is a natural law of balance that must be maintained. Nothing comes without a price, as harsh as that may sound.”

“Pretty harsh. I feel like I’ve just been reviewed by John Simon. (*Referring to the New York theater critic known for his scathingly vicious commentary.*) You think the guys in the van are the devil?”

“No. But they might be accomplices of the devil. Your job is to find out who they are and why they’re watching your house.”

“Isn’t that what the police are for?”

“You think the police are going to help you with this?” Patty folded her arms over her chest, in a stance of defiance. “What are you going to tell them? That you saw some men watching your house? That your neighbors across the street shut their curtains when you’re watching them? What are they supposed to do with that kind of information? Make an arrest?”

“Don’t forget about the trash incident. Someone stole three bags of my garbage.”

“Honey, please. Most people would be grateful if their trash was stolen. You’re not going to get anywhere until you know WHO these men are and WHY they’re watching your house. When you know that information, then you have something tangible to give the police. But right now, they’d just laugh you up one side and down the other. Trust me. My cousin is a cop.”

So there it was. Without evidence or any sort of crime, I really didn’t have much to complain about. At my next cooking lesson with Ramona, I brought the subject up again.

“I haven’t seen the van lately,” Ramona confessed. “Or anyone watching your house.”

“Maybe the guys were real estate agents,” I offered. “Or part of the Plainfield Historical Society, and they were checking out my house for possible landmark status.”

Ramona smiled, half-heartedly. She didn’t seem convinced. And frankly, neither was I. But we didn’t speak about it again.

“Today I’m going to teach you how to prepare another traditional Cuban dish,” Ramona began, as she switched into her cooking show mode. “It’s called *Ropa Vieja*.”

“Oh, that sounds interesting,” I said, trying to be optimistic. “What does *Ropa Vieja* translate to in English?”

“*Old clothes*,” Ramona answered, somewhat deflated. “Don’t ask me why, but that’s the English translation. Look it up on Google if you don’t believe me.”

Though it wasn’t the most appetizing of descriptions, the finished product actually looked and smelled amazing. Thinly shredded flank steak prepared in a tomato and wine sauce. It was a little early for me to actually eat something like that, so Ramona put my portion in the same covered dish I’d just brought back to her. I was on my way out the back door, when Ramona suddenly yelled:

“When did you know you were gay?”

The question was blurted out so loudly and with such intensity, that I actually had to come back inside the house to answer. I wasn’t about to yell my reply through a screen door.

“Did you always like boys?” Ramona continued, before I could respond to her first question. “Or did you have a bad experience with a girl and that’s what changed you?”

“I’ve had many bad experiences with girls, but not because I was gay. Because I was awkward.”

I was trying to make a joke, but Ramona was in no mood for humor.

“This is what I don’t understand,” Ramona said very seriously. “My brother dated women for years. He almost got married. So what made him suddenly switch to liking men? When did that happen?”

“In my experience,” I began again. “There was never a switch. I mean, I always knew I was different. I just didn’t know what that meant. It wasn’t until college, when I met this guy and... Well, for the first time, everything fell into place. So for me, there was never a switch or a change. It was more like acceptance.”

Tears were welling up in Ramona’s eyes. Perhaps she was thinking about her brother. Perhaps not. It didn’t matter. We all share a common story. Gay. Straight. We all have a journey to go on, a path to finding ourselves.

Without a word, Ramona got out of her seat and came over to hug me. A big, loving hug that squeezed the life out of me. It was also the type of hug that could make a husband suspicious, which is exactly what happened when Luis suddenly marched into the room.

“And what is going on here?” Luis jokingly demanded. “My wife in the arms of another man?”

“Oh Luis, be quiet.” Ramona scolded. “You know Henson is gay, so don’t pretend you’re jealous. I was hugging him because I felt his pain. My brother’s pain.”

“Ahhh.” Luis responded, with an obvious understanding that I found extremely touching.

I really liked my Cuban neighbors. Luis was the quiet masculine type with what appeared to be the biggest, most understanding heart in the world. And Ramona was his feisty counterpart, daring to ask and say anything she pleased. I hoped that one day I would find someone that would balance me as well as Luis balanced Ramona. And vice versa.

As I left their house with my *Ropa Vieja* in tow, I heard one more chorus of “This would never happen in Cuba.” I wondered what Ramona was referring to this time. In the few months I’d known her, she’d used that phrase with such frequency that I began to wonder why anyone would ever want to live in Cuba, since apparently nothing ever happened there.

Once inside my house, I started debating what house project I should throw myself into today. It was a Saturday, the perfect day to lounge about. But I didn’t have time to relax with so many pressing chores to attend to. Well, maybe a quick cup of coffee while I contemplated my choices.

I sat out on the side porch, sipping the strong hot liquid, when I noticed the beautiful black Mercedes in front of the house across the street. At closer examination, I noticed there was a driver sitting in the front seat, and the motor was running. So someone was obviously being picked up. But who?

At that moment, the front door opened and a tall good-looking man in a baseball cap and sunglasses came out with a woman, who was also wearing dark sunglasses. These were people I’d never seen at the house before, and yet very familiar. There was something about them.

The driver of the limo quickly got out and opened the car door. The woman smiled at him as she got in, a big toothy smile. The man said something to the driver and they both began to laugh. That laugh seemed familiar as well.

Later that evening, as I was watching TV, it suddenly hit me who the two people reminded me of. Ben Affleck and Jennifer Garner. But of course it couldn’t have been them. Why would they be in a house across the street from me? Unless of course they were visiting Sandra Bullock and George Clooney, who apparently resided there also.

I must be going crazy, imaging celebrities all around me. Maybe it was just my way of adjusting to a new environment. By imaging myself in the midst of famous, glamorous people, I’d somehow feel more comfortable living in a new town. Or maybe the house across the street was home to a family of celebrity impersonators, and that’s why they all looked like movie stars.

I knew there had to be some kind of reasonable explanation for my sightings, because over the next several weeks I also caught glimpses of Sarah Jessica Parker, Matthew Broderick, Nicole Kidman, Queen Latifah, Jennifer Lopez, Marc Anthony and John Travolta. Though not all at the same time.

At this rate, by the end of the year, I was certain the entire SAG membership would eventually find its way to the house across the street. Why they'd want to come here, I didn't know. But I certainly intended to find out.

Next Episode: Another RAMBO, Another Faux Pas