

Chapter Five—A Twist of Faint

At this point, many of you may be wondering whatever happened to poor Officer Hernandez and the Navy Blue PT Cruiser parked in front of my house. And while I assure you that I'll eventually get back to that particular incident, there's much more you need to know first.

For you see, before I moved to Plainfield, I lived a pretty normal life. For a gay man, I was particularly uninteresting. I didn't go to clubs. I didn't hang out at bars. I didn't exfoliate. And if there was a gay community in NYC, it must have been a gated one because I was certainly never granted entrance.

I was more like one of the many Gay Extras lending credibility to the environment. But never a leading role. Or even a supporting role. I was more like a breakfast roll. White, doughy, plain. Better with butter, but ultimately unsatisfying.

My social life was limited, but consistent, thanks to a few friends I'd collected over the years. Married couples mostly. And a few co-workers. We'd get together after work sometimes at the local bar and commiserate about how creatively stifling our jobs were. Not what you'd call a terribly positive or motivating support group, but it was all I had.

My only real artistic outlet was the daily blog I wrote known as "Henson's Hell." Every morning I would get up and write whatever thoughts came to mind, and then send them out on the worldwide web for anyone and everyone to see. Sometimes I'd include a short story I'd written, or I'd scan in a piece of art I'd done. But mostly, it was just my thoughts on the world.

Not that it mattered, because my blog rarely got hits. But that was okay with me. I was happy just writing down my thoughts and sending them out into the world each day. It was like my contribution to collective thinking. And a great way to pass time while I waited for something better to come along. Something more exciting. Anything. The day I met Unity Kingsmill, my wish was granted.

Accepting the job as Unity's illustrator was easy. Though it soon became clear that my artistic skills were not all she was interested in. Over the next several months, I would ride out to Unity's house on the train two or three times a week, and we would sit and talk. Talk about everything. Her life, my life. My dreams, my ambitions. I wasn't sure how any of our conversations would help me put pencil to paper and do some sketching, but it didn't seem to bother Unity. She loved paying me for what she called my "creative consulting."

"This is all preparation for the book," She would explain to me whenever I picked up my sketchpad to begin doodling. "You need to surround yourself with the story before you

can write it. Or in your case, draw it. Don't be so anxious to do the work before you grasp the reason behind it."

"But what's the book about?" I would ask. "Is it a fantasy or an adventure?"

"All in good time, Henson." Unity would say, winking at me. "You know what they say-- Somewhere between experience and imagination is a really good story."

So it went on like that for several more weeks. I would visit, we would talk, I would go home. And once a week, she would hand me a check for a ridiculous amount of money. Not that I'm complaining. It wasn't as if I had other options at the moment. And being with Unity was quite enjoyable. She had such a charming, magical quality about her.

One day, during our typical morning conversation, Unity brought up the subject of real estate.

"You know, Henson. I was thinking about buying another house in Plainfield."

"What? And move from here?" I asked, almost heart-broken. In the past few months, I'd grown quite fond of this English fantasy cottage with its tragic past.

"No. Not to move into. As an investment. It's a beautiful old house near the Van Wyck section. Of course it needs some work, but all these old homes do."

"So you'd fix it up and then sell it?" I asked, not really sure why she was telling me all this.

"Yes. Perhaps. Would you like to see it?"

Unity beamed like a young child with a secret. She reached into a drawer and pulled out a manila folder filled with realtor materials and snapshots of the house. Many, many snapshots actually. Of every room, nook and cranny. But these photos weren't just snapshots, they were art pieces. The angles, the lighting, the frame of each picture were all carefully considered.

"Wow. Whoever your realtor is, he has a great eye for composition. These pictures are fantastic."

"Oh, those aren't from the realtor. I had my friend Annie take them for me. She's got a great eye, don't you think?"

"Amazing, I would say. She must have a little background in photography to capture pictures like these."

"Yes, a little." Unity said with a huge smile.

I couldn't imagine what Unity found so amusing. But I'd stopped trying to figure her out weeks ago. Particularly when she seemed to know how all of my stories would end as soon as I began telling them. Which of course, she couldn't. I'm very careful not to repeat myself. (Or did I tell you that already?)

"So...what do you think? Is it worth investing in?" Unity asked me with obvious restraint.

The house was a beautiful two story colonial, with a huge living room, three bedrooms, a large master bathroom, a fireplace, an enclosed sideporch, and a finished basement. True, it looked like it needed some repair work and some updating of fixtures. But otherwise, it definitely appeared like a good sound investment. This, of course, from someone who knows absolutely nothing about real estate or owning property.

"It's amazing," I said. "It has everything you could want in a house, and more. So yes, I think it's worth considering."

"I was hoping you'd say that. Because I already bought it." She blurted out, bubbling over like a bread mix with too much yeast. "We must go and see it this afternoon."

And that's exactly what we did. After lunch, we piled into Unity's Mercedes and drove over to Fern Willow Lane to see her latest acquisition. I drove, while Unity fidgeted in the passenger seat.

When we arrived at the house, I was shocked to see how badly the property needed work. The front lawn was an atrocious combination of overgrown weeds, trees and plants. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason to where anything was placed. As if the landscaper had taken a big bowl of seeds, thrown it up in the air, and let the foliage fall wherever it may.

On top of the front landing, a pair of old planters filled with cobwebs and dirt guarded the stairs like two crippled lions, long past their prime yet still on watch duty. It was a sad sight, because the house itself looked like it had so much potential.

Unity didn't even stop to view the yard. She was already out of the car and into the house before I'd even removed my seatbelt. For a tiny older woman, she could really move.

Once inside, as Unity gave me a tour of the rooms, I was struck by how familiar everything seemed. Before we'd turned a corner, I somehow sensed what we would find. It wasn't creepy like I thought I'd been there before. It was just comfortable and familiar, like a new friend you feel immediate kinship with. You can't explain why you suddenly click, you just do.

Another thing that was familiar about this house was the distant sound of whispered voices. The same whispered voices I experienced on every visit to Unity's English cottage. Once, I even asked Unity about the voices, but she didn't seem to know what I

was talking about. So if she didn't hear them, maybe they were just a figment of my imagination. Or maybe this was caused by something else. Like on that episode of "The Partridge Family" when Laurie gets braces. Maybe my generous collection of dental fillings was somehow picking up a local radio talk show. It could happen.

When we finally concluded our tour of the house, Unity led us out to the sideporch and sat down on an old swing. She padded the area next to her, indicating that I should sit down as well.

"I grew up in a house like this," she began. "It's a nice solid house. Good breeding, I'd say. The prior owners let her fall apart, but she's still got a lot of life in her. She just needs some tender loving care."

Unity's comments struck me as odd.

"You think the house is a *she*?" I asked.

"Most certainly," Unity said, raising her eyebrow. "Don't you?"

"I've never attached a gender to a house before. What are the criteria?"

"I'll leave that for you to figure out."

Unity was about to say something else, but was suddenly interrupted by the sound of a male voice coming from the front door.

"Hello? Hello? Ms. Kingsmill? Are you here?"

Unity smiled at me and got up from the swing.

"That's my realtor, Paul." She said, reaching for my hand. "Come along."

Paul was a tall, good-looking man in his mid thirties. A little too smooth and manicured for my tastes, but definitely attractive.

"Hello, Ms. Kingsmill," he began, his deep voice commanding attention. "I'm happy to see you again. Do you still love her?"

Even Paul referred to the house as a she. Apparently I had some research to do on home gendering and the guidelines for determining a building's sex. Was it the shape? The contours? Or was it the absence of a giant phallic symbol jutting out the front door? I didn't know, but I made a mental note to Google it later.

"And this is Henson Ray." Unity said, stepping aside to allow Paul to shake my hand.

"Nice to meet you, Henson." Paul said, smiling. "You're a very lucky man."

Did he just call me a lucky man? What did he mean by that?

“He doesn’t know yet,” Unity said awkwardly.

“Oh.” Paul flinched, obviously embarrassed. “I guess I came by too soon.”

“No, it’s alright.” Unity began. “I’m glad you’re here.”

This was the first time I’d ever seen Unity look uncomfortable and it made me nervous. Up until now Unity Kingsmill seemed like the Rock of Gibraltar. Despite her tiny frame, she always appeared as a force to be reckoned with. But now she was beginning to look a little scared.

The awkwardness of the moment gave me an awful feeling in my stomach, like I was about to get fired or something. Instead, Unity turned to me and said, very simply:

“I bought you this house, Henson. I want you to live here and fix her up and make her the castle you’ve always wanted for yourself. I am giving you the gift of shelter.”

HOLY CRAP!

I wish I could say I knew for certain what happened next. But unfortunately my world began to spin out of control, my legs suddenly losing their ability to hold me up. Down, down, down I went, like Alice falling down the hole to Wonderland. It wasn’t the first time I’d ever fainted in my life, but it certainly was the first time I’d ever been given a house.

The strange thing about fainting is that for a while you’re both aware and not aware of what’s going on around you. You can still think, you can still hear, you just can’t move. Some of what you hear makes sense, and some of it is imagined. So I’m not really sure who was actually speaking as I lay there half-conscious on the floor. But I’m pretty sure the dialogue went something like this:

“Do you think he’ll accept it?”

“He has to. He just has to. Otherwise...”

“Otherwise?”

“Never mind. For now, we just stick to the plan.”

And with that, everything went black.

When I regained consciousness several minutes later, the first face I saw was the realtor Paul. He must have been leaning over me to see if I was still breathing. Or maybe he was trying to kiss me, I'm not sure. His breath smelled like fresh Listerine and his cologne had a piercing scent that shot into my nasal cavity like a hot pin. Better than any smelling salt, the cologne caused me to start coughing, which immediately woke me from my unconscious state.

"Are you all right?" Paul asked from above, as he wiped some of my spittle from his face. "I hope you didn't hurt yourself."

"What happened?" I asked, still a little disoriented from the fall.

"I'd say you fainted. Is this how you always react to good news?"

"I don't remember. I haven't had much experience with it."

Paul laughed. A big hearty laugh that seemed a little forced.

"Unity's in the dining room signing papers," he said between strained chuckles. "She asked me to look after you."

"I feel a little silly," I said, trying to get up. "I've only fainted a couple times in my life. But never in front of anyone."

"It's okay," Paul grabbed my arm and helped me to my feet. "Under the circumstances, it's understandable."

"Did I hear Unity correctly? She said she's giving me this house?"

"Yup. All paid for. No mortgage, no taxes. It's all been set up in a trust for you."

"But why? Why would she do that? I'm nobody to her."

"You're not a nobody, Henson." Paul corrected me. "Unity likes you. She believes in you. And she's comfortable enough in life to be able to give you something very, very special. Don't question it. Just accept it. I think she would be hurt if you didn't."

"Yes, but a house? That's crazy. Who buys someone a house? A nice watch, maybe. Or even a car, perhaps. But a house? What am I going to do with a house?"

"Live in it?" Paul said, stating the obvious. He appeared to be quite amused with my confusion.

"Yes, but...are you sure this isn't some kind of game show where all of a sudden you're going to show me a camera and tell me I've just been Punk'd or something?"

Paul looked at me for a moment, his expression turning serious. He seemed to be searching my face for something. But then, just as quickly, he relaxed his features and smiled again.

“This is real, Henson. Not a joke. I have all the paperwork for you to sign. Your only responsibility here is to fix up this house any way you see fit.”

“And how am I supposed to do that? I have an apartment I’m still paying for back in the city, and a whole life back there. How can I possibly leave all that behind to move out here?”

As I looked at Paul for an answer, it suddenly dawned on me what I was saying. I didn’t care about my apartment in the city. Why was I defending a glorified closet? Especially when I had the opportunity to gain a whole house? And as for my so-called “life” back in the city... What could I possibly have been referring to with that comment? I had no life, in the city or otherwise.

The truth of the matter was, I wouldn’t be giving anything up to move out to Plainfield and work on a house. In fact, I might actually be taking a step to make my life better. And when Unity finally moved forward with her book, I’d have a creative outlet as well.

“You’ll like it out here.” Paul assured me. “I don’t know if Unity told you, but there’s a whole gay community that lives in this area.”

“Oh?” I asked, with a gulp in my throat. I never thought of the suburbs as a place gay people liked to dwell, and even more surprising in a town called Plainfield. It seemed contrary to our nature.

“Yes. There are about 500 couples. And there’s also a whole group of single guys as well. We have a monthly roving party at someone’s house, so everyone can meet and mingle. It’s a good group of people. I’m sure you’ll make new friends in no time.”

I’m not sure if this was a selling point or not, but suddenly Plainfield wasn’t looking so Plain anymore.

“Do you have a boyfriend or partner?” Paul asked, though he seemed to already know the answer.

“No,” I replied simply. “I’m in transition.”

I’d always heard when you’re unemployed or looking for a job, you should never tell people you’re unemployed. You should rather say you’re “in transition.” It sounds better. So I figured this was a good way to answer the boyfriend question as well. “In transition” sounds a little less desperate than “currently looking.”

“Let’s go find Unity,” Paul said, changing the subject.

Though everything about my “arrangement” with Unity was a little strange, I never felt like she had an ulterior motive. I believed she was a genuinely nice person with a propensity for philanthropic gestures. Who was I to question why she chose me?

“I have so much,” Unity would tell me later. “So when I find someone worthy of my help, I give what I can. I hope this house will begin a new life for you. A change from what you’ve experienced in the past. Plus, you’ll be nearby once we start on the book.”

And while part of me felt extremely guilty accepting such a generous offer, the other part decided to throw caution to the winds and dive in head-first. In a rare moment of spontaneity, I said yes to something without question. And it was so easy, too. Once you surrender to the idea, the rest is quite painless. Everyone should be given a house.

The rest of the afternoon was spent signing papers and thanking Unity, who seemed far more interested in discussing what colors I might like to paint the living room. Or which of the three bedrooms I was going to use for the Master Suite.

There was so much to think about, in fact, that I didn’t know where to begin. So instead, I turned my attention to something I *could* make a decision about-- my “situation” in New York. If I was going to be starting a new life, I needed to wrap up some “loose strings” first. Like breaking the lease on my apartment, which proved surprisingly easy to do. Once my Landlord started smelling all the money he could charge with a new tenant and a hike in rent, he practically kicked me out the door.

And thus began a fresh chapter in my life. A week after Unity gave me “the gift of shelter,” I wrote my last blog entry from NYC, packed up my small collection of furniture and possessions, rented a van, and drove through the Lincoln Tunnel to my new life and my new home in New Jersey.

What surprised me most was how excited and happy I was. I’d always imagined it would be hard to leave New York. But suddenly I felt more alive than I’d felt in years, as if a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. The weight of trying “to make it there” so I could eventually “make it anywhere.” Don’t get me wrong, I love New York. There’s no other city like it. Unfortunately, New York didn’t always love me back.

So like a spurned lover, I cut the apron strings and moved on. On to my new life of adventures in Plainfield, New Jersey. What I didn’t realize at that moment was just how big an adventure my new life would actually become.

Next Week’s Episode: Neighborly Curiosity