

# SECRET CITY

Created by

PHENOMANIA

## OLD STRATHCONA

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*AUDIO TRANSCRIPT*

**Commissioned by Blarney Productions for the 2019 Found Festival**

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## SECRET CITY: OLD STRATHCONA – EPISODE 1

### INSERT CORNY MOVIE QUOTE HERE

Created by Erin Leflar

Based on memories provided by Amanda Brodie

*\*You should now be standing on 109<sup>th</sup> Street in front of Remedy Café*

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*[A sound clip from the film, BE KIND, REWIND]*

I will shoot you and I know robot karate. *[a gun shoots a single bullet]*

*[interrupted by a short burst of static noise]*

*[A sound clip from the film, AMELIE]*

Vous au moins vous ne risquez pas d'être un légume, puisque même un artichaut a du coeur

*[interrupted by a short burst of static noise]*

*[A sound clip from the film, CATWOMAN]*

I am Catwoman. Hear me roar.

*[interrupted by a short burst of static noise]*

*[A sound clip from the film, TITANIC]*

You jump, I jump, right?

*[interrupted by a short burst of static noise]*

*[A sound clip from the film, MOULIN ROUGE]*

♪...The greatest thing... you'll ever know... ♪

*[interrupted by a short burst of static noise]*

*[A woman in her thirties begins to speak]*

I remember walking into the store on 109<sup>th</sup> Street, and taking in the smell of the popcorn, looking around and... this movie store was just so much more interesting and kind of like a more creative place to be than any other video stores I'd ever been in.

The Blockbuster in Red Deer was that corporate blue and yellow, staff in uniform, and while I still enjoyed going there, the Movie Studio here in Edmonton, it had a much more laid back, creative vibe to it. There were movie posters and different art that some of the staff had made on the walls. The way they organized the movies were different, you could get movies by director, you could get movies, ah, that used to be books, you could get – there was an alternative section... that was, uh, very cool, movies a little bit more off the beaten path. You could get classic cinema. It just seemed like there was more... there was more options for... if you were a real film nerd, like I considered myself, to really explore some better movies that I couldn't get anywhere else.

Also, there was always, like, punk and, like, hip-hop, and cool music playing in the store and the staff were watching old movies on silent, and it just felt like a really kind of exciting, kind of like... it's hard to describe, exciting and like a place where the people that worked there were free to be themselves, too, which was very... a very interesting place to be.

I moved here, um, to Edmonton from Innisfail, Alberta in, it was 2005 when I first came here. And I knew hardly anyone in the city. My older sister lived here... and a couple of my friends who were coming up with me from Red Deer College. But other than that, I knew no one here. I didn't have any other ins into the community, um, and it was actually a very lonely time to start with.

When I was hired at the Movie Studio, it felt like, like honestly, it felt like I wasn't cool enough. I felt great about it but, seriously, the other staff members were so much cooler than me. I was this small town kid and they were all like hipsters in bands, and musicians, and they all had weird haircuts. But also as I got to know them, they were 100% genuine. These were, these actually were artists, and people that were being themselves and I totally respect them for that. But I felt that I, maybe, was this little girl from the farm that maybe didn't belong there at first. I was excited to be part of it and... to learn more about film and to learn more about the people who were going to come in that lived in my community.

So, at Movie Studio, you'd come in, be greeted by somebody like me, and... you could have a bag of popcorn while you browsed the racks and picked out your movie. Or you could take a popcorn on your way out, which is what a lot of people did too. Yes, popcorn. Uh, popcorn also... breaks and gets into stuff. When we were cleaning, um, behind the tills we moved the mat that was right in front of the popcorn machine once, and we were shocked to see that... the brownish-mauveish coloured carpet that we had sort of thought was maybe close to what it originally looked like was actually a beautiful bright purple underneath. That popcorn machine that all the oils... having popcorn ground into the carpet for... for however long the Movie Studio was open just, just destroyed it. *[she laughs]* Um, so, so popcorn, while a huge draw to the Movie Studio and delicious, that popcorn was always quite good, a very kind of gross *[she laughs]* substance to work with.

Um, part of, part of working there too, was getting over my own shyness. I was a shy kid, and we had – if anyone remembers Groove Shark, that was our... that was our music that we would play in the store – and getting over my fear of getting my music judged by all these cool people... so I remember like adding my songs to the list being like I hope this is cool enough for them. But... as I worked there it was absolutely fine. And, actually, all of them opened up my experience and exposure to music so much. And they were very welcoming as to what I wanted to put up. But I remember, when I was new, picking songs for this Groove Shark list was a thing that I cared about.

The Movie Studio, I guess, it gave me a sense of belonging in Edmonton, as... as a young girl who wasn't from here. I was approximately 20 years old so I wasn't super young, but fairly young. Coming from a farm, moving to Edmonton, working in this customer service role, to be accepted into not only the community that worked in the store, but also... into getting to know the wider community.

The people that came into Movie Studio were on their downtime. They were with their families, or with their partners, or even by themselves, picking out something to watch and relax and enjoy. So, I got to meet many of my neighbors when they were at their very best.

If you were a customer there you had to have a password. So, you just had to give your name and phone number, and then your password. There were no cards or anything like that. My own personal password was, when I first started there, was of course my cat's name. My cat was named Nikita. My work friends thought it was a TV reference from the 90s. It was my cat. Um, *[she chuckles]* but yeah, so the passwords were like that. We got, also, a lot of film quotes in the passwords which I got a good kick out of: 'We forgot Kevin', 'We named the dog Indiana'. What else was there... let me think, 'Chewie we're home'. There's a lot of, like, really great one-liners from movies that came forward in the passwords that we like to get a good chuckle out of. Also, people I think like to make fun of themselves or others, or there was just kind of like a little bit dirty of ones that was sometimes pop up. A good friend of mine, his password was 'Three Inch Hammer', which we know that's in relation to, I think. Um, *[she laughs]*... One of our regulars had Dingleberry as theirs, and I just, like, couldn't help but laugh every time they said it. Yeah, the passwords, the passwords were fun, and I think they added, they added some personality to a store that already had a ton of personality.

When you're talking to somebody about a film that you've both watched and you both love it, regardless of who you are, you often will see their eyes light up, and it opens up a shared bond which is why I think art is so important. So I got to talk movies with all these great people that lived in my community and then when I ran into them later, like at the Old Strathcona Farmer's Market, or in the Safeway, or around the campus at the U of A, we'd met. Um, so, the Movie Studio was great for me because, being from Innisfail, not knowing hardly anyone, to coming and working in a, in essentially what was a community hub, it really felt like I was becoming an Edmontonian, I was getting to know people. And I was getting to know them when they were having a great time and I was getting to know things about them that they liked. So that was a really positive experience for me.

Also... I think I, um, I kind of got a little bit thicker of skin working there. Honestly in any customer service job you... run into people that are unhappy. That wasn't often the case at the Movie Studio but it sometimes happened. The Movie Studio was open late. Dealt with drunk people sometimes, and that was just a fact of working in that area, also close to a lot of bars. So learning how to, with the help of your co-workers, ask somebody to leave. And that's a very daunting thing when you're a young girl so I did learn... so kind of toughened me up a little bit. And I learned some skills about dealing with people.

I also had a really weird encounter on the phone once at the Movie Studio. I'd been working a normal shift, it was a busy day, and I got a phone call out of the blue. Well, the phone rang and I answered it. Yeah, it was this guy that I had served. He asked me what I was wearing. And he said are you the girl in the purple sweater? *[she laughs]* And, uh, yeah... *[she lets out a big uncomfortable laugh]* How can I help you? And he said, "oh, you served me. I think we really hit it off. What's your name?" And I was like umm, who are you? And he said to me, "Well, I think we made a connection" and I was like, I don't, I don't have time I have to serve my other customers and then he said, *[she laughs nervously]* "I'm watching you through the window." And... *[she give a small incredulous laugh]*... it was, it was a terrifying, eye opening experience for me, that this individual that I didn't even remember... felt like there was some weird connection and now he was... basically being a creep, looking at me through the window and I couldn't see him. I guess for me, I learned that... *[her breath catches halfway to a laugh]*... I don't know what I learned. I guess that I learned that I had to be careful a little bit. It gave me a little bit of self-awareness that people are watching and that even if something seems inconsequential to me, it's... it's important to be aware of my surroundings, I suppose. And unfortunately there, like I've talked a lot about trust in my community, it also gave me a little shock, a little, um, a little scare, um *[she gives a nervous laugh]* that maybe there was a dangerous element too.

So that happened there. Of course, my colleagues were very supportive of me. When I told them about it, it was kind of like a circle the wagons kind of thing. So, I felt very supported by them but it was a... that was an eye opening experience.

I still sometimes see people that I met while I worked there. Friends of mine have dated employees that have worked there. Employees that have worked there have also worked at other jobs with me. So... they've kind of woven into my social fabric. Yeah, it just, it just taught me that there's good and bad people out there but for the most part that I was working in a good place and this was a neighborhood that was a joy to live in and I was proud to live here.

*[a short burst of static noise]*

*[A male movie announcer's voice says:]* Coming soon, to own on DVD.

*[The woman's voice speaks again]*

This summer, an awkward girl from the country moves to the big city. What will she learn? She'll learn that hipsters don't really care what her tastes in music are. Just be yourself. And work at a cool place. And you'll be fine.

Insert corny movie quote here.

*[a long burst of static noise]*

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PLEASE PROCEED TO THE NEXT SECRET CITY LOCATION

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## SECRET CITY: OLD STRATHCONA – EPISODE 2

### THIS GENTLE BUSINESS

Written and performed by Robert Benz

Based on an anonymously provided memory

*\*You should now be standing on the east side of 107<sup>th</sup> Street, just south of 85<sup>th</sup> Avenue*

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*[A man begins to speak, gently, in a baritone voice that sounds like supple leather.]*

I don't know her name.

I don't know anything of her life beyond the facts of a story she once told me, in a moment of stillness, as we sat quietly together. We were waiting for a bus, I think, or maybe we were sharing a table at a busy coffeeshop. Or perhaps it was the happenstance of two strangers beside each other at the theatre, where the anticipation of another story moved her to tell her own.

I like to think there was a reason she chose me, beyond the silent proximity. I like to think she recognized something in me, just as I recognized in her an honesty of spirit, an awareness of other.

I like to think that she recognized in me the spirit of my trade. For I, you see, am a poet, of sorts. And the first, the last, and the most important skill of a poet is to listen.

Her reasons, of course, remain her own.

I will call her Perdita.

Because, for a time, she was lost. Abandoned and alone. But she was not a swaddled child laid down amongst the rocks and bears of the mythical tempest-tossed shores of Bohemia. This Perdita was already a young woman when she stood bereft, here, where there is no sidewalk, on the east side of 107th Street near the corner of 85th Avenue, in a place I will call Strathcona.

Strathcona is a kind of Bohemia: poets and singers, students and artists, theatres cafes clubs camaraderie and fellowship -- a gathering place for youth and promise and protest and vagabonds and the blues -- and also its share of savagery and wild beasts.

Our young hero came here, like so many other young people, to seek her education, to find her place in the world, to begin her life as an adult, to begin her career. And it was here she met her Florizel. And it was here that she lost him.

Love is a magical and mythical adventure, and that first real love of youth is the most magical and mythical of all. Poets and singers have told more tales of love than of any other human mystery. Except, perhaps, of death.

But almost always they tell of the excitement of love, the passion, the struggle, the doubt, the joy, and the pain. They sing of longing, but rarely do they sing of the belonging of love. The quiet awakening,

in the midst of love's many-coloured complexities, of three simple truths:

Refuge. Witness. Hope.

And when love is lost, hope is lost. We are left alone and frightened. Bereft.

A child was born. No, not her own, although perhaps another poet might choose to say so, to make the distress of loss more immediate. But must a child be our own for the agony to be true? For the agony to be necessary? Are we not capable of the same despair at the loss of another's child? Perdita was.

This child was not her own. And Perdita loved this perfect tiny soul with all her being. And this perfect tiny child died.

And when a child is lost.  
And when a love is gone.

No one needs a poet to tell them that grief is a devastation. And a doubled grief...is...  
well.

We do not want to feel it, the enormity of it, the colossal life-changing futility, acute ravaging tearing the emptiness in our belly the fire and the fear of grief.

And so we begin with nothing. Instinctively or intentionally, we begin with numbness. The spirit of deferred pain. Or so we try to pretend.

And so Perdita tried. Tried to ignore the unbearable weight of her grief. Tried to drown out the cacophony of silence within her -- in a raucous saloon with the laughter of friends. Perhaps she drank too much. Perhaps she drank what she needed. The spirits of deferred pain.

But that clamour of camaraderie only served to emphasize, by contrast, the subsequent stillness and isolation as later that night she walked north from Whyte Avenue towards her apartment. Without the breakwater of noise and distraction she was defenceless against the surging floodwaters of emotion that overwhelmed her beer-softened head and heart and body. And so she came to be standing here, on the east side of 107th Street near the corner of 85th Avenue, where there is no sidewalk. And in that terrible darkness every moment of her being was filled with inescapable loneliness.

Unwitnessed. Without refuge. Without hope.

And here, in a starless silence on the edge of emptiness, is where the real magic and simplicity of love appeared to Perdita.

Our lost hero stood weeping into the night without reserve -- a desperately sad and frightfully pathetic and perhaps even, in the safety of retrospect, a slightly comic figure -- when two angelic shepherds appeared.

On the west side of 107th Street near 85th Avenue, in the faded yellow house behind the antique store, lived two of Perdita's truest friends, and at this moment they came out of their door, and they saw her, and they heard her. They crossed the street and they asked neither what nor why, they embraced her

and gathered her up and brought her into their home. They wrapped her in love and a quilt and popped a frozen pizza in the oven and stroked her back while she curled on the couch. They sat with her while she wept, while she wept in safety, and the grief washed through her and they waited and watched and loved and then they ate pizza and sat with her some more in grace and silence.

And still later that same long night, in the new-washed tender stillness that follows a good and necessary cry, Perdita said her soft goodnight and crossed the street to the quietness of her own apartment, and the emptiness of her own bed. Over the coming weeks she would continue to find her way through the unmapped territory of grief.

She and her friends never talked of that night, but for Perdita it was the beginning of never feeling alone in this neighbourhood, of always knowing that a friend or a listening ear or a caring arm was just around the corner. And whenever she passes here, she remembers her gratitude that they found her when they did.

That they gave her refuge, and witness, and hope.

We forget. We remember, and then we forget again.

We forget that we are not alone. We are born into a family. We set out to create other families. And each is as it is.

We remember, we forget, and then we remember again.

We remember that we have all been lost, and will be again. We have all been found, and will be again.

We forget that some of us are deeply, truly, alone. Without refuge, unseen, without hope.

And then we remember the pure and simple gift that will begin to lift the immensity of that slate-coloured shroud.

To see, and be seen. To listen, and be heard.

And, perhaps, who knows? We might share a story.

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PLEASE PROCEED TO THE NEXT SECRET CITY LOCATION

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## SECRET CITY: OLD STRATHCONA – EPISODE 3

### PARADE

Written and performed by Darrin Hagen  
Based on a personal memory

*\*You should now be standing on the south side of 83<sup>rd</sup> Avenue, between 106<sup>th</sup> and 105<sup>th</sup> Streets.*

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*[Subtle noises of a city can be heard. A breeze is blowing. Birds chirp.]*

*[A man in his fifties begins to speak.]*

If a parade rolls down a street and no one waves, is it still a parade?

I strolled slowly and quietly beside my partner. We were not the type for public displays of affection, even when in a safe place like the gay bar we both worked in. And so, we weren't holding hands, even though I could feel that the moment called for it.

The parade pulled off Whyte Avenue. It had only been on the main drag for four blocks – there were very few people watching it pass by. And then this quiet parade turned onto this quiet street.

*[The ambient city noise suddenly stops. All is quiet. The birds still sing]*

The sudden shade was a nice change. Edmonton always did such a beautiful job of pruning the elms so they created a perfect canopy, the branches of the north side of 83<sup>rd</sup> avenue reaching out to the south side, so close to touching. The avenue was dappled in shade. And rising three or four stories on both sides, the brick walkups lined up like soldiers behind careful but casual square green lawns and perfectly straight sidewalks; stacks of apartments gazing in disinterest at this new traffic intrusion. Every suite had a balcony, and because it was June and prairie hot, and these marvels of 60's architecture had neither air conditioning nor cross breezes, residents were on the balconies, awaiting the relief of even the gentlest breeze.

It's 1993. I had heard that the first Pride parade in Edmonton – a mere two years earlier – infamously consisted of people wearing paper bags and masks over their faces to keep from being recognized, to protect their jobs, their reputations, their safety. Wrapped in my own selfish youth, I hadn't attended that march. I probably hadn't even heard of it until it was over.

But since then, I had met queers that had changed the way I viewed the world. My partner was one of them. The parade had changed from something I'd make it to "if I had enough time", to something essential and necessary.

Our own chatter seemed suddenly too loud on this quiet street. A cloud of hush fell over the assembly as we made our way east in a tidy line, under the dappled shade, heading back to Gazebo Park where we had launched our short round-trip journey – four blocks on Whyte Avenue, then four blocks of 83<sup>rd</sup>. Someone turned down the loudspeaker on the flatbed of the only float because the music bounced and echoed off the three-story faces of the walkups.

They noticed me before I noticed them.

Eye contact was something young, queer men learned to avoid while growing up. Similar to avoiding eye contact with a wild animal that could attack if it felt provoked.

I grew up in Alberta's Bible Belt. A half-hour south of my hometown was a foothills location where the Aryan nations used to have a farm and training compound. A half-hour east on Highway 11 was the rural high school where Jim Keegstra taught students that the Holocaust was a hoax. As a teenager, I was terrified of the boys that attended that school. They were the ones that showed up at bush parties near my hometown, spoiling for fights. The boy I was sleeping with had a mom who taught there. In my last year of high school, I was hired to play piano at their graduation ceremony. When their valedictorian stepped up to the podium, we locked eyes.

The panic of recognition in his gaze, the split-second of recognition, was a potentially deadly gesture in his school. In the Bible Belt, in cowboy country, all effeminate men learned how to recognize each other; that was how we were able to stay away from the pain of a life too much like our own.

Eye contact became a tool of survival when I moved to Edmonton. It immediately identified the reciprocal gaze as friend or foe. The interested glance could inspire an erotic encounter in the many secret spaces all over the city where gay men could furtively connect, collide and collapse into each other. A stare of defiance and danger was a warning to back off, lock your hetero pretense in place, and quickly move on.

There hadn't been much of an audience for the Whyte Avenue part of the parade. These were the days before crowds of rainbow-festooned families headed to Pride to line the streets and cheer.

Pride started as a protest, yes. And then it became a march for life in a decade of plague death. This parade – my first – was, for me, a memorial for the friends I had already lost, and the ones that had moved away, waiting to die in a different city. I knew how their stories would end... I was just waiting for the phone call to confirm it. I carried memories of their funerals with me that day. And I wondered secretly – like every one of us did back then – if I would be next.

They noticed me before I noticed them.

*[The birds are still chirping]*

The parade floated slowly embraced by the quiet Saturday heat. The lower balconies on the apartments were almost at eye level. The apartment dwellers that sat in their lawn chairs on these lower balconies were not looking down onto the procession, but directly at it.

No one clapped. No one waved.

I'm a drag queen. I've been in a few parades since then. More than the average person. There's an instinct to wave at anyone watching. And so, when I looked across the street, I saw a man sitting in his eye-level balcony. I thought he was looking at me. He was certainly looking in my direction. I saw his stare as a bemused support of our cause, or at least a mild amusement at what was crossing his field of vision.

And so I waved.

*[the birds have stopped chirping]*

His eyes locked with mine. And he sneered. *[a single, slow, deep bass drum beat booms]* And stood up, and walked back into his apartment, and slammed the door.

*[a single note of tension begins to build]*

I know that look.

It was the look on my grade 10 physics teacher's face when he told me to get the hell out of his classroom and never come back.

It was the look on the face of the grade 12 boys as they exited the school bus after deciding I was to get "The Treatment" – a lineup of huge farm boys each sucker-punching the younger kid that pissed them off just by being different.

I had seen that look every time I walked past a certain part of the high school hallway, where dickheads gathered and taunted the girls and threatened the fags.

I know that look from some of the men in my family. Some of my male teachers. The bullies in my hometown. And I would see it again from a woman on a Toronto city bus as she stared at the spectacle of me in a showgirl outfit on a float at Toronto's Pride Parade. I would see it again in a later Edmonton Pride Parade, a much larger and more celebratory one, as a lone protestor stood watching us while holding a sign demanding equal time for a straight pride parade.

*[the single note of tension fades away]*

The more public my gayness became, the more I would see that look.

If I could have seen into the future from my first Pride Parade, I would have understood the importance of something as simple as walking with my people, naming what we were, owning the term and embracing the reaction. But in that moment, when I saw that look, I did what I had been conditioned to do for the first two decades of my life: I buried it. I buried the moment.

My partner of a few years, who is still by my side 35 years later, was by my side then. Maybe he noticed the darkening of my mood. Or maybe I was so good at protecting him from that moment, like I had protected my mother and my friends from the darkness that I endured daily, that he noticed nothing. I didn't point the man out to him. I didn't share what had just happened. It was a private moment between that man and I. It may have been unique in his life. It certainly wasn't unique in mine.

It's Pride Month as I write this. And this year there was no parade. It was cancelled this year.... not because of homophobia, and not because the new right-wing government is flexing its anti-gay muscle. It was cancelled because we – my queer family – couldn't find that consensus we needed in order to move forward. Having slowly transformed into a rainbow-festooned corporate march of banks, radio

stations, businesses, and political opportunism, it had become more divisive than unifying. Whyte Avenue didn't have to block the streets this year. It was business as usual.

Except it wasn't. Because in the absence of the glittering media frenzy that was the old Pride Parade, something new manifested.

*[a heavy rain begins to fall]*

On the cloudy rainy Saturday afternoon, a couple of hundred people did what queers in Edmonton did decades ago: they marched. With no floats, no fanfare, no publicity, and just a few signs and rainbows, and with no sanction from the city, they chose a street and quietly, humbly, *defiantly* marched.

I'm sure that some people that lived on that street, not realizing they were living on a parade route, looked out their windows and wondered what the small crowd on the sidewalk was all about.

*[The rain continues to fall and then slowly fades away.]*

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PLEASE PROCEED TO THE NEXT SECRET CITY LOCATION

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## SECRET CITY: OLD STRATHCONA – EPISODE 4

### HONEY, I LOVE YOU

Written by Mac Brock

Based on an anonymously provided memory

Performed by Ellen Chorley and Sydney LaRose

Music by Captain Tractor

*\*You should now be standing in front of 10549 82<sup>nd</sup> Avenue, the former site of Rebar night club*

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*[A young girl speaks, coyly.]*

Honey, I love you. *[she giggles]* Won't you please, please smile?

*[a guitar begins to play rock n' roll chords]*

Honey! I love you. Won't you pleaseplease smile?

Honeeey. *[she giggles]* I loooove yooou. *[she giggles]* Won't you please, please smiiii-le.

*[She says it again and again, her voice overlapping with itself]*

Smile. Honey, I love you won't you Please. Honey. Please. Smile? I love you. Honey, I love you won't you please, please smile? Honey, I LOVE you won't you please, please smiiii-le?

*[Drums and a bass guitar join the guitar. A man's voice sings.]*

♪ Voices caaalliiiiing

♪ me home where I belong

♪ and I'm loooongiiiiing

♪ to maaake myself that strooong

*[a door opens]*

♪ and I come to yooooooooou and

*[The door slams shut. The woman who just stepped out of the door speaks.]*

Fuck.

*The music that was blaring is now dim. We are outside a bar. The band plays on inside. The city is quietly alive with enthusiastic night owls, cars and busses, and the occasional police siren and garbage truck.]*

No. I'm okay. Thanks though.

Can I... borrow a smoke?

Actually, never mind, that's... the last thing I need. Haven't smoked since my 20s, don't need to start again now.

Christ, it's freezing out here. Better than melting in there, I guess.

I like your uh... yeah, sorry.

I don't mean to be a chatter, I'm usually not a chatter, I just...

Having a night, you know? Saw someone I haven't seen in a while.

CHRIS...

There's a guy in there... Maybe you saw him. Headbanger? Hair down to here?

...Built. He's uh – I guess he's, hot, or... God, I sound like a twenty-something. I mean...last I saw him, he was a kid. I was, too, I mean... yeah.

When I get here, it's still pretty dead. My girlfriend brought me along and she's out for... blood. I'm just... out of the house, I guess. Haven't worn this for a while, leather jackets aren't my usual these days.

I look around the bar, and I... ugh... I don't come to places like this much anymore, mostly because I don't... recognize myself anywhere in the room. Does that make sense?

But then I see HIM, and he's... it's uh... WOW, I mean, it's fuck. There's electricity in my... bones, my... FUUUCK.

He asks me if I'm here with anyone, and I... I just say I'm here with a friend. Which is true. It's true. And he starts telling me about his... he owns a restaurant. Some nice little place downtown. He never married. Isn't dating anyone. Never... settled down.

He got bigger. But in the... good way, or, not the good way, he... has been working out. A lot. And he... knows how to dress to... show it off, or...

When he's talking to me, there's a... spark, or a... more like an electrical fire. It's like we left a pot on the stove a couple decades ago and now it's... fucking boiling, it's... He's hunting tonight. And I... think I am too.

He asks me what my life is right now, and the words almost leap out of my throat, "I'm just hanging around, no attachments," but I manage to choke them back and I... I show him pictures of the kids, of... my husband, and... He looked at 'em... smiled, but he was gone at the first out.

I used to be fucking wild. I grabbed life by the balls, you know. Men too. Every boy, every man I've ever been with has been... mine. Yeah, I mean. My friends always called me an instigator, or... some other bullshit, but... I took power by taking over. I was ruthless.

But, since I met my... husband, I'm just... I'm... happy. I think. This is what it's supposed to be, what I'm supposed to be. I have a sense of duty. To my kids, to... To my family. I just didn't think it would feel like a... job.

We got into this fight tonight, bigger than... usual, I guess. I stormed out like some bored teenager to come here. And, of course, Chris shows up like some cosmic “fuck you” from the universe to remind of what I gave up.

Gave up, listen to me, it's so... silly. I'm a good wife, a good mom, I'm... I'm trying, you know.

I feel like a lion in a zoo. Like I could rip that man in there to shreds with my... with my teeth, my hands, but... my... animal instinct is, not for me anymore, it's, it's...

Every morning I have to choose, I have to choose not to walk straight out the door and not look back. That choice is in front of me every day. And it should be an easy choice, right? I... hit the fucking jackpot, right? So why does it feel so hard to choose... this?

I'm trying to think of any good reason not to storm right back in there and give him... everything.

But I'm not some character in a Harlequin book, am I? I don't get to run away with a gorgeous punk, I get to go home and... commit.

I swore to... I swore I'd... be there. Be... good. I swore I'd be good. If I could walk away from this. I can. He's my one who got away and I'd like to think that maybe I'll be his. If I can walk away from this then... there's nothing that's going to change my mind, right?

Sorry. You... didn't want to hear any of that, I'm just gonna... I've got... someone waiting up for me, I think. Someone... good.

*[the young girl speaks]*

Honey, I love you, won't you please, please smile?

*[the woman answers]*

Honey, I love you, but I just... can't smile.

*[the music and the city fade away]*

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PLEASE PROCEED TO THE NEXT SECRET CITY LOCATION

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## SECRET CITY: OLD STRATHCONA – EPISODE 5

### THE TASTE OF DREAM TEA HOUSE

Written and performed by Nisha Patel

Based on a personal memory

Music by Musmaster

*\*You should now be standing in front of Dream Tea House, in the Old Strathcona Shopping Plaza*

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*[♪ A simple, gentle, yet optimistic piano melody begins to play. Its rolling theme underscores the following:*

*A woman begins to speak. It is clear that there is a soft smile on her lips.]*

For approximately \$6,  
I can tell you what hope tastes like.  
It is somewhere between the last memory you have  
of that first piece of Halloween candy,  
and the third golden foil of a Christmas Ferrero Rocher.  
If Dream Tea House's half-sweet chocolate bubble tea were a season,  
it would fall somewhere between the hands of October and December  
and contain the unique ability to bring me home  
to the one hundred and thirteenth parallel that is Edmonton.

On rainy days,  
it's hard to justify why anyone would want to drink something this cold.  
Made of the same ice that I'm trying to avoid,  
crystalizing before the windshield of my eyes like old memories or repressed songs.  
Old Strathcona is something like this paradox:  
new and old mashed beneath road tire,  
falling from the sky and draining past cobblestone,  
young teens running from high schools towards bus stops on Whyte,  
residents pruning bushes and planting flowers  
beside trees that were once grown without thought of the sidewalk maintenance they would disrupt.  
I dream of being like this:  
weathered and immovable despite all the boys that carve themselves into me.

At Dream Tea  
when an order is called, it is good practice to hold it in both hands.  
Feel the weight of it.  
There is a warmth that can only be brought to fingertips when an icy grip is loosened,  
a rush that comes from putting something heavy down.  
This is a type of love.  
The plastic at the top is tight across the seal,  
melted down with a specialized heat-machine shipped here from Asia  
and pierced only by the angled edge of a uniquely wide bubble tea straw.

The tapioca is reticent and suspicious  
like the first connoisseurs might have been at the mention of a chewable drink.  
If you came here in 2007,  
you could have stopped to admire the sometimes depressing comics  
about love and loneliness that were once printed across the top.  
They would probably speak too loudly now.

A clean, swift stabbing through the top will do.  
If one doesn't poke through the plastic covering fast enough,  
the pressure from the straw will cause the bubble tea to spill out the opening  
like water in a pool that you've jumped into.  
If you go too fast and too hard, on the other hand, you will tear the opening too wide,  
risking the real estate of dry hands, and clothes, and table.

This shop is an igloo in the winter,  
a place of surprising warmth and streaking windows that cloud over with all the captured heat  
during months where most people with better reasoning might stay home.  
In the summertime, you'll be lucky to see a line that doesn't go past the doorway,  
or find a table on a crowded Saturday afternoon  
when the breweries and beer-scented patios offer no solace from the sun.  
I have seen entire families lounging here after church,  
sticky-fingered children with cups larger than their face,  
Asian mothers with impeccable handbags,  
slouchy college kids taking a break,  
and millennials like me,  
waiting alone for what is yet another first date.

The first time I came to Dream Tea House,  
it was full of bare tables and straight-backed chairs loosely scattered around the shop.  
There was a single lone, sinking black couch in the corner crowded behind a low table,  
the kind where knees and elbows were bound to touch,  
and for a fifteen-year-old without thought of how to start and end her own body,  
this was a nightmare.  
Sometimes when I walk into this place,  
I feel like a teenager.  
It's 2007 and I remember choosing to awkwardly lean over to play UNO,  
a game that has the potential to break fledging friendships in seconds.  
I remember that I,  
on first taste,  
could not stomach the slick, round deviousness of the tapioca,  
choosing to throw them out in a napkin.  
There is still,  
I know for certain,  
no classy way to hate tapioca.

Tapioca pearls are made by combining tapioca starch,  
extracted from cassava root, cultivated and eaten in tropical regions, with boiling water.  
The starch is gluten-free, so the dough can be worked into balls easily.

These are then added to sugar-water, and cooked.  
Later, they are soaked in cool syrup, made with either white or brown sugar.  
They are then combined with the traditional mixture of milk and tea.  
To hate tapioca is to hate the labour of love that goes into the heart of bubble tea itself.

By the time I was seventeen,  
Dream Tea House became  
my favourite place to spend time and money,  
both of which were in limited supply.  
At the beginning, the plain blue walls were painted with sponged-on clouds,  
like a children's nursery.  
I felt young and vulnerable here,  
listening to music I couldn't understand with friends I would one day lose.  
the first time I am asked out,  
is on a dare from a group of nervous university students,  
and I can barely hold back the laughter that leaves my body.  
I spend afternoons here with boys who do not fall in love with me.  
I grow accustomed to this sense of longing as the afternoons at Dream blend into one another  
the want to be wanted  
and the want to spend time with friends that doesn't end in anyone going home alone.

Years later,  
it could be said that my first kiss tastes like lychee, full sugar, with lychee jelly.  
I sit across a table with a spoon in a plate of condensed milk and shaved ice,  
and watch as a future-physicist explains why gravity  
has nothing to do with falling in love.  
When I accidentally order tapioca, I sip it out of embarrassment and find,  
to my surprise,  
that I have grown to like it.  
My taste for it does not wane through the next three years,  
even as we continue to argue over the purpose of mathematics  
and extractingly  
fall out of love.

The first time I come to Dream Tea House alone,  
I order taro with coconut jelly.  
I have heard that this is a favourite.  
I comfort myself  
with this small, shared experience I now have with the crowds of happy people around me.  
I grow into my mid-twenties with the scent of red bean on my fingertips,  
and an empty chair across the table.  
My next lovers are not fans of either tapioca or learning to love slowly.  
We fall out of each other as quickly as we once gravitated.  
The seat remains cold.

By 2018, I am long past arguing over love songs and their metaphysical purpose  
with boys who have yet to grow into men.  
Now I drink coffee and caramel milk tea, ask for half the sugar but all the ice,

savour the silence and strange ennui of Chinese ballads as they play in the background.  
I sit across from an engineer too afraid of the forces of propulsion  
and watch as he leaves knowing that I will never see him again.  
I sit across from an accountant who thinks \$6 is a waste of money.  
I arrive in tears after being shrugged off on Whyte Ave,  
forget to grab straws.  
I arrive with a smile on my face.  
I arrive.  
I sit across a Bollywood buff and try to explain  
that it's been ten years since I watched an Amir Khan movie.  
I sit across my best friend on a Tuesday over and over again,  
and lament the dreadful state of affairs that is my love life.  
I sip  
and chew  
and wonder if it is the tea,  
swirling black and brown into a cloud of milky fog,  
that distracts me from falling in love  
with people instead of places,  
fragile bubbles that burst.  
But when my phone vibrates with a new name  
or a prologue to a story I haven't read,  
I feel that familiar tingling in my chest.  
Something like possibility.  
I type out the closest thing I have to a confession:  
*let's meet off Whyte.*  
*Dream Tea?*

And it's not the boys, or the music, or the taste of a Lucky Star that brings me here.  
It's the way the stacks of Oreo boxes next to clean cups and a rainbow of straws  
have hardly changed in twelve years,  
a backbone to my bending spine of memories that bring me back.

And now—  
now I find that my latest obsession  
isn't a condensed milk coffee with tapioca or a mango black tea.  
It's a musician,  
and the way he holds his cup with both hands.  
Waits patiently for me to explain the shaking.  
Gets his straw in on first try.  
This one likes it sweet,  
so sweet that I'm back in a dentist's chair at twenty-one just watching.  
He tells me he doesn't mind it,  
prefers it even,  
so I watch as he tastes.  
Lychee, full sugar, with lychee jelly.  
A drink I thought I outgrew several boys ago,  
a drink I would not, in any sober state, order again  
in this body that is waiting for me to cherish it.

And as I watch,  
I smile.  
Because even my memories deserve a new beginning.

Dream Tea House is haunted the way my body is haunted,  
weighed heavy with summer rainstorms and laboring winter footfalls,  
frozen cars and sweating leather seats,  
all the times I have run  
and walked  
and stumbled  
through these glass doors for some sort of relief.  
When I am tired and Whyte Ave makes me weary,  
I have found refuge at a crammed corner seat  
as couples and loud, noisy groups of friends expel their own troubles across brown tabletops,  
making memories and reminiscing all at once.  
And perhaps this is a type of love.

I have wrapped my hands around a warm red date and longan tea.  
I have sipped at chrysanthemum and honey with a blank notebook,  
waiting for anything close to the opposite of a love poem  
to swim to the surface of the page at my pen's teasing.  
I have wondered if I was being stood up as I placed an order,  
afraid that my date would enter, get a look at me, and turn heel before I could notice.

As I get older, I am here alone more often than not.  
I bring my laptop and my manuscript and stay until closing,  
knowing that a sleeping city is my best sounding board.  
A cup of bubble tea is my favourite kind of lonely.  
It is a song with an ending that I can put to bed and sleep through the night,  
and it leaves me without an aftertaste.  
Dream Tea House now is a noisy place.  
There are simultaneously too many voices and too few sad people.  
I am always in and out.

There's one drink I've never tried.  
The 1-4-3-7 is named after a couple separated by an ocean of distance.  
The man buys a passion fruit bubble tea and freezes it to take to his fiancé,  
all the way in London.  
Inspired,  
the staff at Dream Tea bring forth a new flavour  
and name it after the number of letters in each of the words I've never said out loud:  
I Love You, Forever.  
I have heard  
that it tastes  
a little bit like hope.

*[A few gentle notes of the piano melody continue to play. The music ends.]*

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THANK YOU FOR LISTENING TO SECRET CITY: OLD STRATHCONA!

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