

Secondhand Secrets

The Fairbanks Farmer's Market was abuzz with the usual fanfare. Fresh fruits and vegetables colored the stalls nearest the entrance with vibrant red and greens. The smell of fried dough drifted through the air as it crackled in oil in the food truck. A thrift store was trying to clear out their stock with 'Sale' signs directing people inside with promises of air conditioning to beat the summer warmth. A man in a bowler hat sat on a stool selling "Fresh Poems" for a quarter a piece, his fingers tapping over the keys of his antique typewriter after someone dropped a quarter into the jar to his left. Mindy drifted from stall to stall, until she found a simple tent offering 'Secondhand Secrets'.

The man behind the stall looked almost bored as he flipped through the pages of a dark-colored tome. Jars of different colored smoke filled the table, stacked up in chaotic pyramids. There was no real rhythm to their movement and Mindy wasn't sure how they maintained their ethereal nature, but she still approached the stall with a healthy curiosity.

"Secondhand Secrets?"

"Mmm," the man behind the table shrugged. "Not the most exciting offerings, but they were cluttering my pantry something fiercely. It's quite easy to get a permit at these markets if you grease the right palms."

"So, what are they?"

"Secrets. When people can't bear the weight of their secrets any longer, they pay me to take them. And, after a time, I try to sell them again to those looking for something unique."

"Who did they belong to?"

"I don't know," the man shrugged. "I don't exactly catalog them after they come into my collection and I don't keep names on record. Besides, these are secondhand secrets, not secondhand memories."

"What's the difference?"

"Secrets are strictly for the secret holder. I take the secrets and seal them up in jars for

the next buyer. It could be an unrequited childhood crush or maybe someone cheated on an important test. Who could say for sure? Half the allure is the surprise of what you get.”

“But you can’t just...sell fake smoke and call it a secret can you?”

“Two dollars a piece,” the man shrugged. “You get to keep the jar, should you release the secret.”

“Two bucks?” Mindy asked. She looked at the various shapes and sizes of the jars spread around them. She picked up a large mason jar with a brass lid. A soft violet-colored smoke filled the inside of the glass, drifting in lazy patterns with no discernible source. “Even this one?”

“Sure,” the man nodded. “Two bucks and it’s all yours. Like I said, I’m just trying to clear out my pantry. I’m releasing them all at the end of the day anyway.”

Mindy scoffed and took out her wallet. After rummaging for a few minutes, she found two dollars in spare quarters. It would be the cheapest thing she would buy today and the jar was pretty nice. With the transaction completed, the seller didn’t intervene as Mindy unscrewed the lid of the jar to peer inside.

The smoke rushed towards Mindy and poured into her mouth. She coughed on it for a minute and bit back a sneeze as she shook her head. The base of her skull tingled and the sensation crept up into the bridge of her nose like carbonation. Mindy blinked firmly to clear up her vision and saw the rainy night she’d been driving home.

The man had come out of nowhere. Mindy had taken the turn too fast—the road was so slick she was drifting around the corners like she’d seen in action movies. The man wore a dark raincoat and had his face down to avoid the downpour as the wind pushed it sideways. His body struck the front of her car and Mindy felt the impact surge up through the steering wheel. Her foot slammed on the brakes too late and she felt the stuttering of the wheels looking for traction on the too-wet road. The man slid off the front of her car as the car finished skidding. The pop song on the radio played as though nothing had changed.

Rain pounded on her windshield as Mindy's grip on the steering wheel turned her knuckles white. After a minute, all she could do was break the uncomfortable silence with a stream of expletives. When she finally got her sense of movement back, she realized the man still hadn't gotten up.

Stepping out of her car, Mindy saw the man spread out on the asphalt. His dark raincoat covered his face, but blood poured out from under the hood. She hesitantly pushed the body's shoulder with the toe of her shoe. The man didn't move. Cursing again, Mindy rushed back to her car, slammed the door shut, reversed her car, and pulled away from the body in the road. She cursed the entire way home, not looking back. She could never look back.

Mindy opened her eyes with a gasp and nearly dropped the jar. She panted for a minute and stared at the man behind the stall. He looked unimpressed, almost bored. When he finally spoke, it was dry and unmoved. "Must have been a doozy."

"That wasn't me! I didn't—"

"Shh..." the man ordered, raising a finger to his lips. "It's a secret, not a story to share."

Mindy couldn't find the words. She knew what she wanted to say, but it sat in her throat like a sticky blob of phlegm. It coated her tongue and she had to swallow before she could breathe. "I felt like I was there, but--whose memory was that?"

"I'm afraid I don't know," the man shrugged. "I don't even know what that memory was."

"I want to give it back," Mindy said. "Keep the money, but I don't want it!"

"I sell secondhand secrets. Third, fourth, or fifth time around? That gets too messy and no one wants to buy a sloppy secret."

"But I didn't do anything! I didn't do...that! I can't say who did it. It feels like I—"

"Secrets belong to those who keep them..." the man said. "It's yours now."

"You can't get rid of it?"

“I take secrets, not memories...”

“You didn’t tell me it would do that!”

“It’s a secondhand secret,” the man said, keeping calm in a way that only made Mindy’s blood boil. “I didn’t even know it would do that. Buyer beware...”

“What do I do?” Mindy breathed, her stomach dropping.

“Keep it...or confess. You paid two dollars. Is that what you think that secret is worth?”

Appalled, Mindy took her things and rushed off. Everything reminded her of that night. A dark raincoat hung in a thrift stall and the crackle of cooking oil sounded like rain. Each face stared at her as she passed, seeking her new secret.