

ONE **SUMMER** IN **VANCOUVER**



**TONY
CORREIA**

It's 1990, and Tom, a teen struggling to understand his sexual identity, flees the suburbs of Toronto for a summer of freedom in Vancouver, where something exciting is about to happen: the Gay Games.

Living with his “out” Uncle Fred, Tom experiences a new world where being gay can be dangerous but being your true self is freeing and fun. It seems like the entire gay world is in Vancouver, living out loud and proud! Tom falls in with Dwayne, a more confident teen, and Gina, a young lesbian who is getting over a relationship with a popular singer-songwriter. The three volunteer or participate in the games that helped usher in a new era of change and activism.

Tom will have many first experiences and make many new friends, but the question arises: should he and will he have to make the return home, back to a closeted life and a father who doesn't understand, or can he forge a new life in Vancouver?

TONY CORREIA is the author of the Lorimer Real Love novels *Prom Kings*, *Same Love*, *True to You*, and *Walk This Way*. His memoir, *Foodsluts at Doll & Penny's Café* was published in 2012. He lives in Vancouver, British Columbia.

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Tony Correia

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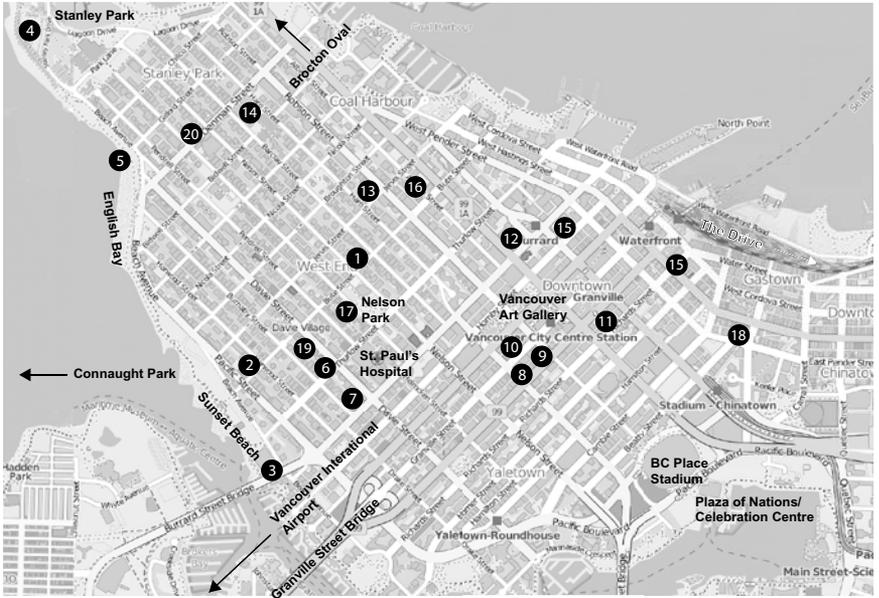
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*For Billeh Nickerson
Because he's a professional.*

“The Games are really not about athletics. They’re about a statement on the quality of our lives.”

Dr. Tom Waddell,
Founder, Gay Games

West End Vancouver



- | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|-------------------------------|
| 1 The Green House on Bute Street | 7 Celebrities Nightclub | 13 Empire Landmark Hotel/ Cloud Nine | 17 Raven's Apartment Building |
| 2 Dwayne's house | 8 Orpheum Theatre | 14 West End Community Centre | 18 The Lotus |
| 3 Vancouver Aquatic Centre | 9 Commodore Ballroom | 15 Simon Fraser University Downtown campus | 19 Ming Court Hotel |
| 4 Second Beach Pool | 10 Fluevog | 16 The Elbow Room | 20 The Grove Inn |
| 5 Bikini Beach | 11 A&B Sound | | |
| 6 Little Sisters Book & Art Emporium | 12 Burrard Skytrain Station | | |

Saturday, July 28, 1990

Bute Street

If anyone asks me, I'll blame it on the Village People. They're the reason I went to the airport instead of my part-time job. I'll blame them and the Greatest Hits cassette Mom left in my car. If it weren't for the Village People, I'd still be home in Mississauga, stocking shelves at Safeway. Instead, I'm standing on a street in a city I've only ever seen on *21 Jump Street*.

I wipe sweat from my eyes. Sunlight reflects off the ocean at the bottom of the hill, so bright I need my aviators to see. My jeans chafe against my sweaty thighs. I'd love to run into the water to cool off.

I'm standing in a forest of concrete apartment buildings. One balcony is playing Madonna's "Vogue." Another plays

“Love Will Never Do Without You” by Janet Jackson. The coconut scent of Hawaiian Tropic suntan lotion sticks to the air like humidity. It’s Mom’s favourite brand. Mom. She’s got to be worried sick about me.

“Are you lost?”

It’s hotter than hell and he’s dressed all in black. Short-sleeved button-down shirt, black denim shorts, dress socks rolled into doughnuts above his Doc Martens, and a hat like Zorro. I think he’s wearing lipstick and eyeliner. The only colour on him is the bright yellow Sony Walkman attached to his hip.

“Pardon?” I say.

“Pardon?” he says sarcastically. “What are you, a Boy Scout?”

“I used to be.”

He examines me like I’m a piece of art. Like he’s trying to figure out what I’m about. I feel naked and strange. He laughs and I don’t feel so awkward.

“You look lost is all I’m saying. You need directions?”

“Do you know where this is?” I show him the page I ripped from the phone book at the airport. I point to my uncle’s address for Zorro to see.

“That’s the green house on Bute Street! My friend’s friend lives there,” he says. “Right street, wrong turn. I can take you there if you want. It’s on my way to work.”

“Do you mind?” I ask. “I have no idea where I’m going.”

“Where are you from?” Zorro asks.

“Ontario. Mississauga.”

“You’re either straight or closeted because you didn’t say Toronto. You here for the Gay Games?”

“Do I look gay to you?”

Zorro backs up, arms raised.

“Hey dude, I’m not accusing you of anything. The Games are literally a week from today. It’s an honest question.”

Crap. I freaked him out.

“Sorry,” I tell him. “Yeah, I’m here for the Gay Games. But not to compete. I only found out about them a few days ago. There were pamphlets at The 519.”

“That the Gay Community Centre in Toronto?”

“Yeah. I was kind of checking it out.” I don’t know why I’m covering my tracks. It’s not like I’m ever going to see this guy again. “I came here sort of last minute.”

“How last minute?” he asks.

“Like six hours ago. My parents don’t know where I am. My uncle has no idea I’m here.”

Zorro looks at me with equal parts wonder and concern. “Wow. Go big or go home, eh?” he says. “I’m Dwayne.”

He holds out his hand for me to shake. I look at it like it’s diseased.

“Tom,” I say, shaking his hand with intention, like Dad taught me.

Dwayne guides me up the hill to my uncle’s house. The street is tree-lined and pretty. I forget that I’m in

another city. And that my parents still have no idea where I am.

Bute Street

Rusty hinges squeak as I push the gate open. The paint on the porch steps is worn off from all the footsteps. It's cooler under the awning. The screen door lets what breeze there is into the house. Joni Mitchell is playing softly from inside. I press the doorbell.

He's a shadow at first, backlit from the sun that's coming through the back door. It's not until he gets closer that my uncle comes into focus. Curly, straw-coloured hair and eyebrows. Freckles and blue eyes. A thinner version of Dad. He's wearing a pair of cutoff khaki shorts and a faded iron-on t-shirt that says, "No, *I'm* the Rhoda."

Uncle Fred leans against the doorframe without opening the screen door.

"Are you who I think you are?" he asks.

"It's me, Uncle Fred, your nephew Tom."

"The nephew who never writes or calls?"

"That's me," I say, like it's a joke. "Is it okay if I stayed here for a bit?"

"No," he says. I see him walk into a room off the hall.

He's joking right? He wouldn't leave me standing here on the porch. I remember the last time I saw him. I was ten and hid behind my mother when he bent down to

say hello. I've only heard from him on birthdays and Christmas since then. He sends a card every year. Each one with a twenty-dollar bill inside. He owes me nothing.

"Come on in," Uncle Fred says, coming back into the hall. "Sorry. I didn't want you thinking I'm a pushover."

I follow my uncle down the hall to the kitchen. He opens the fridge and starts pulling out different kinds of cheeses, pickles, olives, and crackers. He pours me a glass of Perrier.

"Now, will you kindly explain what you are doing here?" Uncle Fred says, sitting next to me at the kitchen table.

An avalanche of footsteps comes thundering down the stairs. A guy who doesn't look much older than me enters the kitchen, both arms straddling the doorway like he's keeping us there. He's tanned, lean, and muscular, like a model in the Calvin Klein underwear ads. The sleeves of his plaid shirt are cut off at the shoulders. His frayed denim shorts barely cover his crotch. I try not to stare, but I can't stop looking at his arms.

"Gaetan, this is my nephew, Tom. Tom, this is my roommate Gaetan," Uncle Fred says. "Tom was just about to tell me why he's here and not in Mississauga."

"Do you need a reason?" Gaetan says, with a thick French Canadian accent.

Uncle Fred scowls at Gaetan and nods for me to continue.

"I didn't plan to do it. It just happened. I got in my car to go to work. I pressed play on the cassette player, but instead

of “Faith” by George Michael, it was the Village People. “Macho Man.” Mom must have used my car before I woke up and left it in the player. It’s not the first time.”

“That doesn’t explain how you got to the airport,” Uncle Fred says.

“I forgot how fun the songs were — ‘YMCA,’ ‘In the Navy,’” I tell them. “But there was this one song by them I’d never heard before. It spoke to me. Choked me up, like when you hear the national anthem. It had a choir. The lyrics were all about unity and peace and love. It was about the future and possibilities. And it kept telling me to do one thing over and over again.”

“Go West,” Gaetan says, like it’s the answer on a game show.

“You spent hundreds of dollars and flew across Canada without telling anyone because of ‘Go West’ by the Village People?” Uncle Fred asks.

“That’s the short answer,” I tell him.

“You know what that is?” Gaetan says. “That’s the power of disco.”

Granville Street

I have to resist the urge to take Tom by the hand. I can see he’s tired from his flight and the fear of not knowing where he is. We stop in front of a white picket fence, its pointy ends coming up to my nipples, paint peeling in places. It reminds me of the house from *The Waltons*

— two floors with an attic space, a pair of windows popping out of the slanted roof. Each floor has an awning, making the house look tiered, like a wedding cake. The rocking chair on the covered front porch would make the perfect perch for a granny with a gun.

“This is it,” I tell Tom. “I’ve always wondered what it’s like inside.”

“What did you say your name was again?” he asks.

Seriously, dude? I literally just told him, like, two blocks ago.

“Dwayne,” I say. “I should get to work before I’m late. My manager can be a hard ass. He has a total crush on me.”

I dig through the cassettes in my canvas satchel and pull out a copy of *Interview with the Vampire* and a pen. I scribble my number on the back page of the book, rip it out, and hand it to Tom.

“Call me,” I say.

I continue walking down a street acting cool when really I’m shaking in my Doc Martens. I look back and wave goodbye. Tom has already walked through the gate and doesn’t see. I try not to take it personally, but it stings. I still feel like a Good Samaritan even if my motives were selfish. And even if Tom never calls me, he knows I exist. If nothing else, meeting Tom is a distraction from the way my phone call with Warren ended before I left work. Maybe Tom was sent here to replace Warren.

A woman in a tartan jacket with red hair approaches me on Granville Street.

“Excuse me,” she says with an Irish accent.

“Yes?” I say, realizing what’s she’s going to ask as soon as I open my mouth.

“Do you have twenty-five cents?”

“No,” I tell her. I always fall for it — she looks too put together to be a panhandler.

I pause in front of the window in Fluevog. The black Munster platform heels Madonna wore to the premier of *Dick Tracy* are proudly displayed in the window next to a framed photo of her wearing them. Makes me proud to be a Canadian. The shop door swings open.

“You!” the store manager yells. He’s bald and muscular and wearing a gorgeous pair of two-toned shoes I can’t afford. “How many times do I have to tell you to stop fogging up my window?”

“It’s not your window,” I tell him.

“I’m in charge of it!”

“You couldn’t afford those shoes without your employee discount,” I say, attempting shade.

“You couldn’t afford them *with* my discount. Now run along!”

“Why are you so mean to me?” I practically plead with him. “I’m just like you.”

“I am *nothing* like you!” he says and storms back into the store.

What is it about me that makes people think they can be mean to me?

* * *

I see the purple exterior of A&B Sound as I round the corner onto Seymour Street. I still pinch myself every time I walk through the glass door with its brown metal bars, past the high-end stereos, and into the popular music section. Working in a record store was always my dream job. Working at A&B Sound was beyond my wildest expectations.

“Dwayne! What did I say about being late?”

It’s my manager, Justice. So much for living the fantasy.

“I got delayed giving a tourist directions,” I say.

“Baloney. You got into a fight with the manager at Fluevog again,” Justice says.

“Lies! How dare you!”

Justice is a Goth. He tones it down at work but I ran into him that one time I snuck into the Luvaffair and he was full on Robert Smith from The Cure. He bosses me around as an excuse to talk to me. He’s still nicer to me than most people. And I do owe him my job.

Every “cool” kid at school applied expecting to get hired like it was owed to them. What they didn’t expect was Justice. There were two parts to the job interview. First, I had to name the album and artist based on

a cryptic description, snippets of melodies, music videos, and album covers. Then I had to make music recommendations based on another album. I'd been preparing for this interview my entire life without even knowing it. There was a method to Justice's madness. All I do all shift long is tell people the albums they're describing or suggest an album based on something they already like.

"Get punched in," Justice says. "The floor needs restocking."

I run up the stairs to the Classical, Jazz, and Country sections. I see my friend Raven's pompadour and tattoos as she flips through the cassettes. Raven DJs at the Lotus and Ms. Ts. I always sneak her promotional copies of albums. She's, like, the coolest person that comes into this place.

"Hey, Raven. What are you doing in Country?"

"Replacing Gina's copy of *Absolute Torch and Twang* for her birthday," she says, holding up the tape. "Hers is so stretched, it sounds like Wagner."

"Isn't that album, like, a year old now?"

"As long as it's not 'Closer to Fine,'" Raven sighs. "If one more person requests that song..."

"Come with me to the back. There's a new album I think you'll like," I tell her.

I go into the storeroom and return with an album stamped "Promotional Copy." The cover is

psychedelic-looking. Three people, two guys and girl, are posing in a field of stars with seventies-style daisies on the edges. The woman's wearing Fluevogs.

"They're the B-52's but funkier," I tell her. "Track nine is going to be the song of the summer."

"Deee-Lite. I've heard of them," Raven says, staring at the sleeve. "Are you sure you don't mind giving this to me?"

"The cassette is in my Walkman as we speak."

"I need to get a cake for Gina and drop it off at Fred's," Raven says. "We're having a birthday party for her later. You should drop by after work if you're not busy."

"At the green house on Bute?"

"That's the one."

Bute Street

Uncle Fred's room is painted white. I'm wrapped in white sheets. The sun against the white curtains reminds me of light projected onto a movie screen. There's not a thing out of place. The furniture looks handmade by Quakers except for a red trunk decorated with flowers like the tickle trunk on *Mr. Dressup*.

I rub the sleep from my eyes and plant my bare feet on the hardwood floor. I go to the dresser and look at the framed photos. Fred and a woman with an Elvis haircut posing with hand puppets. Fred naked on a beach, smiling, his arm draped over the shoulder of

another naked man with a moustache. A woman with long blonde hair and a guitar performing at a bar. Funny. The woman could pass for my aunt if I had one. There's not a single photo of our family. Like we don't exist.

At the top of the stairs, I hear my uncle and Gaetan talking in the living room over the whoosh-whoosh of fans.

"That doesn't mean a thing," Uncle Fred says.

"How many straight guys fly across the country because of the Village People?" Gaetan asks him.

"My brother likes the Village People and he's the straightest guy I know," Fred says.

"If your nephew's not gay, he's questioning," Gaetan says.

"THAT'S IT!" I shout. I run down the stairs and into the living room. "Questioning! That's exactly what I am!"

Gaetan is sprawled on the couch in front of a large square fan. Fred is reclining in a La-Z-Boy chair, another fan pointed up his shorts.

"Were you listening in on our conversation?" Uncle Fred asks. "Because that's not an attractive way to repay your host."

"Not on purpose," I say. "Gaetan hit it perfectly on the nose. I never heard it described like that."

"Because they don't teach it in school," Gaetan says.

"Now that we have that resolved," Uncle Fred says. "I spoke with your parents while you were asleep."

“How’d it go?” I ask.

“I preferred it when all we talked about was the weather,” Fred says. “I called them at the right time. They were just starting to get worried.”

“Was Dad angry?”

“Your dad doesn’t get angry, he gets quiet,” Uncle Fred says.

“Sorry Uncle Fred.”

“It wasn’t nearly as bad as the time I scored on myself in soccer the summer of ’76,” Fred says, waving the conversation away. “I convinced him to let you stay here until you’re ready to go home on the condition you call them first thing in the morning.”

“I promise.”

“There’s something I need to tell you. Vancouver is hosting the Gay Games in a week. We’re billeting an athlete, so you’ll be sleeping with me in my room a bit longer. I should warn you, it’s going to be all gay all the time around here.”

“I know about the Gay Games,” I tell him.

“You do?”

“I took a pamphlet when I went to the Youth Drop-In at The 519.”

“You’ve went to the gay community centre in Toronto?” Uncle Fred gets out of his recliner and hugs me. “I thought you were getting back at your dad for something. You really are questioning.”

“Yeah. I am.”

“Lucky you. For eight days you’re going to experience what it would be like if gays ran the world.”

“That reminds me,” Gaetan says. “I need to stock up on condoms before they run out at Shoppers Drug Mart on Davie.”

“What time is it?” I ask. “How long have I been asleep?”

“A few hours,” Uncle Fred says. “Company is coming.”

* * *

“Hey Fred!” a voice calls out from the front door.

“We’re back here!” Uncle Fred shouts through the open back door. He’s stretched out on a lawn chair enjoying the orange sky. Gaetan is lying on a blanket next to him.

The woman from the photo, the one with the Elvis haircut and tattoos, comes outside. She’s brought a friend. A younger woman, about my age. Her hair is tied back with a red bandana. She looks like she could be a mechanic.

“Hey Raven, I’d like you to meet my nephew Tom,” Fred says. “The Village People sent him here from Mississauga.”

“The Goddess works in mysterious ways,” Raven says, planting her palm into mine. “Tom, this is Gina.”

“Hey,” Gina says, raising two fingers in the peace sign.

I don't know who Gina is, but she's already the coolest girl I've ever met.

"We were in the hood and thought we'd drop by," Raven says.

"We weren't anywhere near here," Gina corrects.

"I'm going to go to the gym," Gaetan says. "I need to perk up my tits before my shift at the bar."

"Mind if I grab a beer from the fridge?" Raven asks.

"Go for it. I'll go inside with you," says Fred. "I want to put some aloe on my skin."

Everyone goes back into the house except Gina. Why do I get the feeling the adults left us alone so the two of us can "rap" like a very special episode of *Facts of Life*?

"So how does Raven know my uncle?" I ask her.

Gina's face lights up.

"Crazy story," she says. "They used to be puppeteers together."

"What? *She* was a puppeteer? For kids?"

"I know! It's crazy, right? They used to travel all over the country working for this Christian couple. They had a TV show in Alberta and everything. It's like they were in some sort of cult."

Gina takes a seat next to me in Uncle Fred's lawn chair. I feel like I've passed some sort of test.

"You close to your uncle?" she asks.

"Not really," I say. "Not at all. My family almost never talks about him."

“Too bad for them. Even the dykes on The Drive like Fred. Most of them don’t even like each other. How long does it take to get a beer?”

The back door opens. We both look, expecting Fred and Raven. A lanky guy dressed in black steps outside. It’s Dwayne. The guy who gave me directions this afternoon.

“Hey Dwayne!” Gina says.

“You know Dwayne?” I ask.

“He’s Raven’s inside man at A&B Sound.”

“Hey Gina,” Dwayne says. “I hope you don’t mind that I dropped by for your birthday party. Raven said I should come by after work.”

“What birthday party?” Gina asks.

The back door opens. Raven is holding a cake glowing with candles. Raven, Fred, and Gaetan start singing “Happy Birthday.” Gina looks over at me as I sing along as well.

“Did you know about this?” she asks me. I nod my head yes.

“Make a wish and blow out the candles,” Fred says. “But don’t tell us what you wish for.”

Gina takes a deep breath and blows out eighteen candles in one breath. I don’t know what she wished for, but I wish that every day could feel like this.