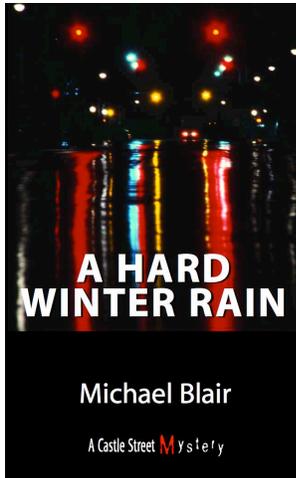


# A Hard Winter Rails

## (A Joe Shoe Mystery)

by  
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Shoe stood under the awning of a Chinese pastry shop on Cordova, coat collar up and hat brim down, watching the front of the dry cleaning store across the street. Despite the rain, the sidewalks were busy, but at six-foot-six he had no trouble seeing over the heads of the majority of pedestrians, most of whom were Asian this close to Chinatown and Japan Town both. A few held surgical masks to their faces as they hurried along on whatever urgent business occupied them this day.

Through the misted window of the dry cleaning store Shoe could see the woman behind the counter. She was talking to a hirsute, pigeon-breasted man wearing a sleeveless undershirt. From their body language, it seemed to Shoe that they were arguing about something. The hairy man's name was Seropian and, according to the sign above the storefront window, he was the proprietor. The woman's name was Barbara Reese. She worked in the store from seven in the morning to three in the afternoon, Monday through Friday. She also held down a second job: from four to midnight, every day but Sunday, she waited on tables in the lounge at the North Burnaby Inn on Hastings, east of Boundary Road, a forty-minute bus ride from the dry cleaning store. It was almost three-thirty, though, and even if she left this minute, she was going to be late.

Rain drummed on the awning over Shoe's head and the late afternoon traffic crept through the gloom, brake lights flashing, tailpipes smoking. His breath steamed and condensed on the tips of his coat collar. A few degrees colder and the rain would turn to snow. The smell of coffee from a nearby coffee shop was almost irresistible.

It was 3:45 when the woman finally emerged from the dry cleaning store. The rain had let up, but it was getting colder. Shoe watched as she ran to catch the trolley bus that had pulled up to the stop at the corner, holding her red beret on her head with one hand and waving her long black umbrella with the other. The bus left without her.

Abandoning the shelter of the awning, Shoe crossed the street to where the woman waited at the bus stop. The rain began again and she opened her umbrella.

Two ribs were broken and it sagged asymmetrically. Shoe's umbrella was in his car, parked around the corner. The woman smiled tentatively at him as he approached, as if she thought she might know him, but her eyes were wary.

Although middle-aged, she was still very attractive, Shoe thought, although in a bruised, shopworn kind of way. She had high cheekbones, a full mouth, and a long, straight nose. Her eyes, though, were her most striking feature. Nested in web of fine, spidery wrinkles, they were a clear, luminous blue and almost rectangular. With a jolt that squeezed his heart like a fist, he realized that she looked a lot like he imagined Sara would have looked now, had she lived.

"Excuse me," he said. "Ms. Reese?"

"Yes?" She held her umbrella higher, to look up at him. Moisture beaded in her thick dark hair where it curled from under her beret. There was a thin, almost invisible furrow of old scar tissue under her left eye, another slightly longer one on the edge of her jaw. Sara, too, had had a scar, he recalled, the result of a training injury, half hidden by her right eyebrow.

"My name is Joseph Schumacher," he said, giving his full name. "I wonder if I could have a word with you."

"Do I know you?" she asked.

"No," he said.

Her eyes narrowed. "Are — are you a policeman?"

"No," he said again. Once upon a time, though, many years ago, after graduating from the University of Toronto with a liberal arts degree and no marketable skills to speak of, he'd for a short while been a member of the Toronto Police Service. He didn't think it still showed. "I knew your husband," he said.

"My husband?" she said, eyes widening now. "Were you a friend of his?"

"Not exactly. An acquaintance."

"He's dead, you know," she said.

"Yes, I know. That's what I'd like to talk to you about."

"But that was twenty years ago," she said.

The rain intensified. It ran from the rim of his hat onto the shoulders of his coat. The seams of her misshapen umbrella leaked and water dripped from the ribs and trickled down the handle, soaking her glove. The next bus wasn't due for another few minutes.

"May I offer you a ride?" Shoe said. "My car is just around the corner."

"You're sure I don't know you?" she said, peering up at him. "You look familiar."

"We've never met," he said. "Perhaps you've seen me in the neighbourhood."

"I guess that's it," she said.

He repeated his offer of a ride. She looked at him for a long time before answering. He knew from the look in her eyes, however, what her answer would be.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I don’t think so. Thank you, though.”

This wasn’t working out quite the way he’d hoped. “Perhaps we could meet later?” he said. She had a half-hour break at eight, took it in the Starbucks up the block from the North Burnaby Inn. “I really would like to talk to you,” he said. He became aware that the other people waiting at the bus stop were looking warily in his direction.

“I don’t know,” she said.

The bus came, slowing to a stop with a hiss of tires and a whine of worn brake linings. The doors opened and the people at the stop began to board.

“I have to go,” she said. Without looking at him, she closed her umbrella and climbed aboard the bus.

Shoe watched the bus grind away, trolley poles popping and sparking on the overhead wires. He then crossed the street and went into the coffee shop, where he bought a black coffee to go and carried it around the corner to his car, an aging grey Mercedes. He unlocked, got in, and started the engine. Turning the heater up high, he put a tape in the cassette player. The coffee had smelled better than it tasted, but it was hot, so he drank it anyway, sipping slowly as he listened to David Helfgott playing Rachmaninoff’s C Sharp Minor Prelude. He felt detached and vaguely depressed. The shortest day of the year was a few days away. Then Christmas. Shortly after that, his fiftieth birthday. What did he have to be depressed about?

The first fat flakes of snow began to fall.