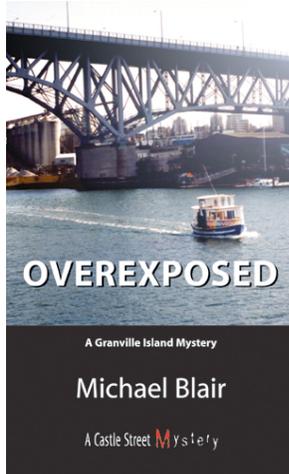


Overexposed

A Granville Island Mystery

by

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I found the dead man on a bright Sunday morning in September, the week after Labour Day. He was slumped in a plastic lawn chair on the roof deck of my house, chin on his chest, fingers linked in his lap, ankles comfortably crossed, looking for all the world as though he had just dozed off. I didn't know he was dead, of course, when I found him, although I suppose he knew. The first thing that occurred to me, standing there in my socks, hung over from the previous night's celebration of the close of the fourth decade of my life, was that some local homeless person, of which there are a few in Vancouver, even on Granville Island, had somehow managed to get onto the roof deck and had fallen asleep there.

On closer examination, however, I realized that he was too well dressed to be homeless, in a blue blazer, yellow polo shirt, grey trousers, and polished black loafers. A friend, then, I thought, left over from the night before, too drunk to drive home — some of my friends are that sensible. I didn't recognize him, though. A friend of a friend, perhaps.

I wasn't in the best of shape myself. The slightest exertion caused me to break into an icy sweat. My mouth seemed to be lined with ferret fur, my head felt as though someone had jabbed sharpened sticks behind my eyeballs, and the coffee, which I'd made far too strong, was making me twitchy and nauseous.

"Hello?" I said to the man in the chair. My voice, roughened from too much drink and talk the night before, was gravelly and unfamiliar in my own ears.

He didn't answer, of course. I stepped closer. He was in his late fifties or early sixties, I guessed, with a full head of iron-grey hair, which appeared to have been recently cut. Clean-shaven, his complexion was fine and pale, but with a slightly waxy appearance.

"Hello," I said again, louder. I grasped his shoulder, shook him gently. "Hey, wake up. Go home. The party's over."

Unsurprising in retrospect, he felt stiff and unresponsive, curiously cool to the touch, even through the material of his jacket, a condition I attributed at the time to spending the night under the stars. I shook him a little harder, whereupon he toppled out of the chair, landing on the deck with an ugly thud. Startled, I jumped

back, spilling coffee on myself and almost tripping over a potted plant. The man lay stiffly on his side, in more or less a sitting position, as though he were made of plaster. Slowly, though, his arms and legs settled into a more comfortable looking attitude.

He wasn't dead drunk, I realized then. He was just dead.

I stumbled downstairs — or below, if you insist; I live in a floating home. Kevin Ferguson, my friend and former boss, was sprawled on the sofa in the living room. Kevin may have looked like death warmed over, but he wasn't dead. Dead men don't make the kind of noise he was making. I shook him awake. He snorted and snuffled and sat up with a startled jerk that made my head hurt.

"What? What is it?" he said, looking around with a panicky expression on his horsy, freckled face.

"There's a dead man on the roof," I said.

"Eh? What?"

"There's a dead man on the roof," I said again.

"So why tell me, for crissake?" he growled. "Call 911." He flopped back down onto the sofa.

I went into the kitchen to use the phone. There were empty wine, beer and liquor bottles everywhere, and glasses and dirty dishes and every piece of cutlery I owned piled in the sink and stacked in the dishwasher. A pair of green plastic garbage bags overflowed with pizza boxes, paper plates, and Chinese take-out containers. A fat fly buzzed around the remnants of a Costco chocolate cake on the kitchen table. Ignoring the mess, I took the phone off the wall, focused as best I could, and managed to dial 911 on the very first try.

"Fiepolisamblans," a female voice said.

"Uh? What?"

"Fire-police-ambulance," she said again. "What is the nature of your emergency?"

"Um, well, there's a dead man on my roof."

"On your roof? What do you mean, on your roof?"

"My roof deck," I amended. "I live in a floating home in False Creek."

"I see. Name and address please."

"My name is Tom McCall," I said. "I live in number six Sea Village, Granville Island."

"Are you certain the man's dead?"

"Pretty certain. I mean, he isn't breathing that I can tell."

"Did you attempt CPR?"

"Uh, no."

"Is he injured?"

"He doesn't appear to be."

“No sign of external trauma?”

“None that I can see.”

“Do you know who he is?”

“No. Look, I’m enjoying playing twenty questions with you, but don’t you think you should send the police or something?”

“The police and paramedics are on their way, sir,” the operator said.

“I think it’s too late for paramedics,” I said.

The paramedics came anyway, waking Kevin again as they lugged their equipment through the house and up the stairs to the second floor and thence the roof deck, where they examined the man lying there and pronounced him dead.

“I could’ve told them that,” I said. “I think I did.”

“Don’t be a smartass, Tom,” Constable Mabel Firth said. “A man’s dead. Show some respect.”

“Sorry.”

“You look like hell, by the way.”

“Thank you.”

Mabel Firth was a big, strapping blond in her early forties. She worked out of the Community Policing office on Granville Island. I’d made her acquaintance professionally a couple of years before and we’d become friends. She and her husband Bill had been at the party, but they’d left early. Bill Firth worked for the city, too, in some capacity involving water treatment. At what stage, I wasn’t sure.

Mabel’s hulking younger partner, whose name tag read “B. Tucker” and whom she called “Baz,” finished searching the dead man’s pockets. Better him than me, I thought. “Nothing,” Baz said.

“And you’ve no idea who he is?” Mabel asked me again.

“Not a clue,” I said.

“You don’t remember seeing him at the party last night,” she said.

“No.”

There was no external access to the roof deck. Beyond scaling the outside wall, landing by parachute, leaping out of a hovering helicopter, or direct descent from the heavens, the only way to get to the roof was through the house. He must have arrived with one of the guests. Or maybe he’d just arrived. Who’d have noticed a stranger in the house? Not me for sure, in the state I’d been in.

Mabel looked at Kevin Ferguson.

He shook his head and winced. “Me either,” he said.

“Someone must’ve seen him,” Mabel said. “I’ll start with the people I know, but we’ll need a guest list.”

“No problem,” I said. “And there were a couple of single-use cameras lying around for people to use. First thing tomorrow, I’ll get the film developed.”

One of the paramedics came over. “No sign of foul play,” he said. “Looks like cardiac arrest or a stroke.”

“Thanks,” Mabel Firth replied. “We’ll let the coroner make that call, I think.”

The paramedic shrugged and he and his partner collected their gear and left. Shortly thereafter a team from the coroner’s office arrived. A squat, balding man in his fifties performed a hands-off in situ examination, dictating in a hushed, self-conscious voice into a tiny tape recorder. Another man took flash pictures with a nice little Nikon digital I would have asked him about had the circumstances been different. All the while a pair of burly attendants stood quietly by with a body bag and a gurney. Although they all had undoubtedly performed this ritual many times, it was done with solemn efficiency and respect. For both the living and the dead.