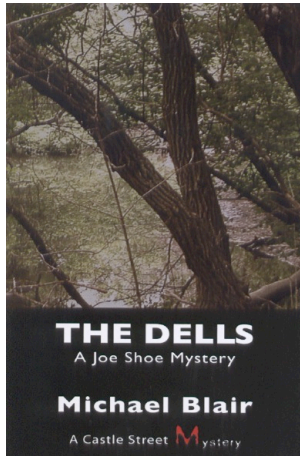


The Dells: A Joe Shoe Mystery

by
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There were things Joe Shoe missed about Toronto; August was not one of them. The moment he stepped out of the refrigerated interior of Terminal 1 of Lester B. Pearson International Airport, the heat and the humidity hit him like a fist. There was not the slightest hint of a breeze, and the air hanging over the airport, trapped by the invisible bowl of a temperature inversion, was the colour of thin chicken broth. It tasted bitter on the back of his tongue, and he imagined he could feel it eating away at the lining of his lungs.

“Welcome to the Big Stink,” muttered a man who had been on the same flight, to no one in particular.

Shoe removed his jacket and slung it through the shoulder strap of his carry-on. Despite the stench of engine exhaust, hot rubber, and sun-baked concrete, he caught the faint, delicate aroma of Muriel’s scent, still clinging to the material. Five hours earlier, as he and Muriel Yee had stood outside the security gate in the departure concourse of Vancouver International Airport, she'd put her arms around him as she'd raised herself up onto her toes to kiss him.

“Have a safe flight,” she’d murmured against his mouth. “And have a nice visit with your family. I will miss you, you know. A bunch.”

Shoe wasn’t convinced she would miss him at all. She wouldn’t have time. Since Patrick O’Neill’s and Bill Hammond’s deaths the previous December, Muriel had become Hammond Industries’ Vice President of Corporate Development. The job kept her busy and she loved every minute of it. They had tried living together for a while, but had kept getting in each other’s way; both had lived alone for far too long to adjust easily to cohabitation. They spoke every day, tried to see each other at least once during the week, and Muriel usually spent weekends at Shoe’s ramshackle old house in Kitsilano, when she wasn’t working, or when he wasn’t. They both pretended the arrangement suited them.

To his left a car horn blared. Shoe turned, expecting to see his older brother Hal. A woman with pale blond hair yahooped shrilly over the roof of a dusty black Volvo. She wasn’t yahooping at him, but at the man standing next to him. Shaking

his head and smiling self-consciously, the man grasped the handle of his wheeled suitcase and dragged it toward the Volvo.

“Taxi, sir?” asked a dishevelled, turbaned attendant, beads of perspiration on his bearded cheeks. “I’m sure I got one big enough,” he added, looking up at Shoe’s lanky six-foot-six.

“Not yet, thanks,” Shoe replied. He’d give Hal another ten minutes.

He’d told his brother on the phone the week before that it would not be necessary to pick him up, but Hal had insisted. “There’s something I need to talk to you about,” he’d said.

“We’re all having dinner together the day I arrive,” Shoe had said. “Can’t it wait till then?”

“Not really,” Hal had said impatiently. “I want to talk to you before Rae does.” Rae was their younger sister, Rachel. A long pause, then: “She hasn’t called you, has she?”

She’d called a few days before, but all they’d talked about had been their parents and Shoe’s impending visit home, the first in five years. “What’s this about, Hal?” Shoe had asked his brother. “Is everything all right?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Just asking, Hal.”

“I don’t really want to go into it on the phone,” Hal had replied. “I’ll see you at the airport.” Then he’d hung up.

Shoe gave Hal fifteen minutes before signalling the attendant to get him a cab. Forty minutes later, the cab deposited him in front of his parents’ house on Ravine Road in the northern Toronto suburb of Downsview. As the cab pulled away, Shoe stood for a moment at the foot of the driveway, one of the few on the block that was still unpaved. A bright yellow Volkswagen New Beetle was parked in front of the garage. Rachel’s car, he assumed. Since getting her first VW at eighteen, she’d driven nothing but: the original Beetle, a Karmann Ghia convertible, a Rabbit, and two Golfs. She’d owned more cars in twenty-five years than Shoe had owned suits.

He looked at the house in which his parents had lived for most of their married life. It was an unassuming three-bedroom bungalow, with an attached single-car garage, a red brick facade, white wood trim, and aging grey-green asphalt shingles, patched here and there with newer ones. At one time it had been virtually identical to every fourth or fifth house on the street. Over the years, many of the other houses, those that hadn’t been replaced altogether, had acquired new facades, bigger garages, covered verandas, even second stories and dormer windows, but Shoe’s parents’ house had hardly changed at all in the forty years since his father had enclosed the exterior porch to create a larger vestibule.

The front yard was surrounded by an old barberry hedge, badly in need of a trim. It was a nasty, spiny thing, Shoe recalled, from having fallen into it on more than one occasion while growing up. Many municipalities had banned them, which likely explained why his father, ever the curmudgeon, hadn't long since uprooted it. The lawn hadn't been cut in some time, and was thick with bright dandelions and pale clover. While he was visiting he could make himself useful and cut the grass.

Slinging his carry-on over his shoulder, he made his way past Rachel's yellow Beetle and followed the uneven flagstone walk between his parents' garage and the house next door to the back yard. Larger and even more raggedly unkempt than the front, it sloped down into the thickly wooded ravines in which Shoe had played as a boy. The yards on either side were surrounded by hideous chain-link "Lundy" fences, cutting them off from the neighbours and the woods, but his parents' yard was still open to the woods. A post at the bottom of the yard marked the start of the footpath into the woods. The path crossed a shallow drainage ditch via a narrow bridge of greying two-by-ten boards, then ran for fifty metres or so alongside the crumbling fieldstone wall that partly surrounded what was left of the old Braithwaite estate, out of which the subdivision had largely been carved.

Shoe saw movement in the woods, figures atop the rise where the footpath from his parents' yard merged with the wider path that skirted the far side of the Braithwaite property, dappled by the afternoon sun through the trees. They looked like uniformed police, half a dozen or more, and two men—Shoe assumed they were men—in suits, standing off to one side. As he watched, other figures appeared from the far side of the rise, ghost-like, clad head-to-toe in pale blue disposable coveralls. Just beyond the crest of the rise Shoe could see what appeared to be the peak of a large white tent. A camera strobe flashed, flashed again, then a third time, lighting up the interior of the tent.

He turned at the sound of approaching footsteps. Two uniformed police officers emerged from between the garage and the house next door.

"Sir," said the older of the two, a greying senior constable whose name-tag read "R. Smith." There was a sheen of perspiration on his upper lip, and beneath the lightweight Kevlar vest, the underarms of his blue shirt were sweat-stained. "We'd like to ask you some questions, if you don't mind."

"Certainly, officer," Shoe replied.

"Can I have your name, please, sir?"

"Joseph Schumacher," Shoe replied.

"Do you live here, Mr. Schumacher?" he asked, eyeing Shoe's carry-on. "I mean, in this house?"

"No. It's my parents' house. I live in Vancouver."

Without waiting to be asked, Shoe took his Vancouver boarding pass from the side pocket of his carry-on and handed it to the constable. The constable examined it, then handed it back.

“I guess I don’t have to ask where you were last night between midnight and two a.m.,” Constable Smith said. “For the report, sir, would you mind giving me your home address and contact information?” Shoe did. The constable scribbled in his notebook, then looked up. “We’ll need to speak with your parents, if that’s all right.”

“Does this have to do with the crime scene in the woods?” Shoe asked.

“Yes, sir,” Constable Smith said, his bushy, greying eyebrows twitching. “The body of a man was found early this morning by a woman walking her dog. We’re canvassing the neighbourhood to see if anyone saw or heard anything suspicious. If we could speak with your parents...”

The back door was unlocked. It opened onto a small landing from which a half-flight of stairs led up to the kitchen. Another short stairway led down to the basement, from which there came a muted mechanical thumping. His parents’ old washing machine, perhaps, Shoe thought, as he preceded the constables up the stairs.

His parents were sitting at the kitchen table with their backs to the door. Shoe’s father was reading a fat, large-print paperback. He wore hearing aids behind both ears. Shoe’s mother had a pair of lightweight headphones clamped to her head and was listening to something on a portable CD player while she snapped green beans with her fingers. Neither heard Shoe and the two police officers as they entered the kitchen.

“Dad,” Shoe said, gently touching his father’s shoulder.

Howard Schumacher turned with a start. “Jesus Christ, son. Are you trying to give me a goddamned heart attack?” Howard Schumacher touched his wife’s hand. “Mother.” Vera Schumacher took off her headphones and raised her head. Her eyes were sharp and clear but unfocused; damage to the occipital region of her brain as a result of a fall eight years before had rendered her almost completely blind. “Joe’s here,” her husband said. “And some policemen.” He stood. Shoe’s mother slid her fingers over the controls of the CD player, and pressed the stop button.

Howard Schumacher was not quite as tall as Shoe. Lean and rangy, he was still straight despite his eighty-four years. His hair, thick and in need of a trim, was startlingly white and he hadn’t shaved recently. Sticking out a big, knobby hand to Shoe, he said, “Hello, son.”

“Hello, Dad,” Shoe said, shaking his father’s hand. The old man’s grip was strong.

“Joe?” Shoe’s mother said, turning toward the sound of his voice, reaching out to him from her chair.

“Yes, Mum,” Shoe said, taking his mother’s hand and bending to kiss her pale, lined cheek. Her flesh was soft and warm against his lips. She smelled of lavender soap and talcum powder.

“Dad,” Shoe said, “the police would like to ask you and Mum some questions.”

“Sorry for the intrusion,” Constable Smith said. “Did either of you notice anything unusual going on in the woods behind your house last night, or someone in your yard, say between ten in the evening and two in the morning?”

“You’ll have to speak up, son,” Shoe’s father said. “My hearing aids aren’t doing much good these days. What was that again?”

Constable Smith repeated the question, speaking clearly and slowly and loudly.

Shoe’s father shook his head. “We were both in bed by ten. Weren’t we, Mother?” Vera Schumacher nodded. “What’s this all about, officer?”

Constable Smith repeated what he’d told Shoe.

“Oh, goodness,” Shoe’s mother said. “I hope it wasn’t someone we know.”

“Have you identified the victim?” Shoe asked.

Constable Smith looked at his partner, who was younger, probably not much older than Shoe had been when he’d joined the Toronto police force. His name-tag read “P. Pappas.” He was sweating even more profusely than his partner. Consulting his notebook, he said, “His name was Marvin Cartwright.”

“Oh, dear,” Shoe’s mother said.

“Eh? What was that?” Shoe’s father said.

“He said, ‘Marvin Cartwright,’ dear.”

“Marvin?”

“Do you know him?” Senior Constable Smith asked.

“He used to live in the neighbourhood,” Shoe’s father said. “Four doors down. But he hasn’t lived here for thirty-five years. Must be in his seventies now. I’ll be damned,” he added. “Marvin the Martian.”

“Howard,” his wife scolded.

“I think the detectives are going to want to talk to you,” Senior Constable Smith said. He unclipped the radio microphone from his shoulder tab and spoke into it.