

Dead Bird on a Wire

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Last column I reminisced about Vancouver Island, describing with nostalgia how beautiful my childhood home is.

But after my recent vacation there something, besides ferry traffic, struck me as ugly about the island. Everyone's lawn was dead.

Watering restrictions were in effect and homeowners had the front hay fields to prove it. Along with white straw where green grass should be, the heat wave also brought a ban on campfires.

Camping isn't the same minus the outdoor weenie roast.

But we should be grateful the appropriate authorities put such bans in place in order to protect people and the environment.

The same can't be said of Abu Dhabi, capital of the United Arab Emirates, where you can build a bonfire in 45-degree heat if you want to.

Of course out in the desert this isn't really a problem. There's nothing but sand for kilometers and other than your tent, not much can go up in flames.

Not so with our living quarters, the Corniche Towers. Constructed of concrete, you might think such high rises wouldn't easily combust, but the fire demon dares to go where few beasts have gone before, including our neighbor's walk-in closet.

Our story begins when a desperate housemaid decided to pull an Endless Love prank in attempt to win favor with her Canadian employer. Perhaps you've never seen that old movie starring a teenage Brooke Shields, but as the first R-rated movie I attended, the plot line became—how shall we say—emblazoned upon my memory.

My mom was horrified she'd taken her little girl to what she thought would be an innocent love story but which turned out to be a bit of a twisted, tiny bit of a bare naked kind of flick, in which the young man in love with Brooke burns down her house.

Scheming to be the first one on site to save the day by fanning the flames and rescuing the family, thereby winning parental favor and Brooke's deeper endearment, the young man ends up destroying his life—not to mention Brooke's home.

But back to the Emirates, where our housemaid thought she'd start a little fire in the apartment she was charged with cleaning while its occupants were on vacation.

The idea was that while she ran for help, her husband would run in, steal

some cash stashed in the bedroom safe, and disappear before his wife returned, saving the day, but sadly discovering someone had robbed the place in her panicked absence. The fire wasn't supposed to rage out of control and she and hubby were supposed to emerge rich.

But the best laid plans of housemaids and men often go astray.

Calling in the Abu Dhabi fire authority was the pair's first mistake. Putting the pet bird in the freezer to escape the heat was the second.

Evacuated from our apartments, we stood around watching the gong show that unfolded before us. When the fire department pulled up and firefighters scrambled from their trucks, the chief stood watch at the apartment entrance, yelling to his crew to move, while he—had a smoke. Then they all took the elevators up to the 12th floor.

With hundreds of spectators and stranded apartment dwellers crowded below, one firefighter took the butt end of his axe and smashed the bedroom window out, so that huge shards of deadly sharp glass flew like spears, targeting the bystanders below.

People screamed and sprinted, shock ensued, but somehow no one was hurt. Miraculously the glass fell, smashing into smithereens on the sidewalk below without smashing in someone's head.

Days after we had returned to our smoky, smelly abodes, the truth came out.

Apparently the pyrocleaniacs who started the inferno solidified their own guilt when the cleanup began and along with torched clothing and scorched jewellery, it was discovered that the pet parakeet met an untimely death.

The bird was discovered when someone went to clean out the freezer and found that birdie boy had met his maker in an ironic twist of fate.

I'm sure in his way he tried to be free, but the freezer door got in the way. Amidst a flaming inferno, bird wasn't baked but rather, frozen.

Of course we felt terribly for our neighbors, coming home to loss on so many levels. Maybe we can't imagine the level of the housemaid's despair that led her to such insanity.

But the whole mess led us to buy escape ladders. While firefighters tried to salvage the place, we noted that the trucks' ladders went as high as 15 stories—and we lived on the 16th floor.



Photo by Paul Linden