

The manager of Le Centre de l'Estrie, Roch Laurin, arrived at the stable every morning at 7:45 a.m. almost to the minute, six days a week. Mondays, the staff's day off and a rest day for the performance horses, he arrived at 8:30 a.m. and spent the day on administrative backlogs and telephone calls.

Today, a Friday in May 1992, he arrived at the usual time, and as always, entered by the stable door in the back. He then performed the invariable routine of which he was by now quite unconscious. Pausing in the passageway linking the round barn to the main corridor, he stood motionless for a few seconds and appraised his domain.

During this time his senses were alert to the environment. His ears heard automatic water dispensers at work and the gentle whoosh of the fan. His nose told him the air was clean and smoke-free. He saw that the barn looked as it always did, with nothing out of place, no stall doors open. From where he stood he could see into the little round barn office; all was tidy and clean there. The bulletin board announced the day's lesson assignments, blacksmith roster, instructors' schedules and the "order of go" for schooling of the performance horses. It was all as he had arranged it yesterday.

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He also took in the quiet, rhythmic munching of hundreds of blunt teeth on moistened hay, the first course of the morning feed. It was Jocelyne, his son Michel's groom, who was on morning rounds today. The hay was tossed in — one "flake" each — over the chest-high door of each stall. For the second part, 15 minutes later, when digestive systems were well prepped for the grain, the server would open each stall door to dump the oats into the triangular corner feed bin, at which point any untoward signs of change in the horse's demeanour or behaviour would be noticed.

As Roch walked down the main aisle he automatically removed the keys for the admin corridor passdoor and his office from his pocket. He didn't check these main barn horses individually, although his peripheral vision was always tuned in for the unusual. He had no premonition today that any of the horses was in trouble.

But he knew something was wrong when he slipped the key into the passdoor and felt that it was already unlocked. His heart jumped fractionally. He hurried down the corridor and realized before reaching his office that its door was already wide open. He ran the last three steps to the threshold and, pausing there, took in the incomprehensible scene.

She — or he — Roch could not make out in the first instant of perception — stood, short, heavy, corduroy-clad legs spread slightly apart in a posture of stolid occupation, a large, mannish hand clutching a spray paint canister. She — he had unconsciously decoded her — had been looking into the inner office, but turned to face him, revealing a square freckled face curtained to shoe-button bright eyes with stick-straight brown bangs, framed by a chin-length Buster Brown bob, and dominated by the biggest, roundest glasses he had ever seen.

"Well, don't look at me like that, mister," she asserted truculently, "I had nothing to do with all this. Shit, I don't even speak French!"

By "this" she meant the chaotic scene around her, both in Marie-France's anteroom and in his own office beyond. Roch could not attach his shocked initial impressions to any coherent understanding of what had happened. The most arresting feature was the walls, every one covered with roller-coasting graffiti: "VENDUS ... T'ES QUEBECOIS OU T'ES RIEN . CENTRE AUX QUEBECOIS."

Papers were strewn everywhere and office furniture — chairs, end tables, desk lamps and bookcases — were overturned. The word processor was upended on a desk. The telephone was off its hook, receiver dangling off the edge of the bureau.

A large, gilt-framed photograph of a proudly smiling Roch standing with the Queen of England, taken at the closing ceremonies of the 1976 Olympics, hung askew on the wall, its glass crazed with spray paint blacking out his and her face. Just as pointedly, across the room, another picture of Roch and the original 1969 Hunt Club, a group of laughing men on horseback surrounded by a pack of Jack Russell terriers, was serenely untouched inside a symbolic oasis of clean wall.

Coffee cups, paper clips, pens, notepads, brochures, everything was everywhere in a welter of orchestrated malice and confusion.

In a daze, heart pumping, flooded with adrenaline, Roch whipped back to the strange-looking creature who was peering at him with cautious sympathy. Hoarsely he barked, “Who the hell are you? How did you get in here?”

“Sue Parker. That door,” indicating with a jerk of her head the main entrance around the corner, “and it was unlocked, in case you’re wondering,” she added hastily. Then, registering his absolute lack of recognition, she went on, “Sue Parker. Journalist. Here to do a backgrounder for the show documentary? Young Riders?”

Roch nodded absently. Some dim recollection had filtered through his amazement, which was rapidly turning to wrath. “Open? Not forced?” he demanded.

He turned to go and check the front door, then they both froze at the sound of a prolonged, high-pitched scream coming from the main barn. They stared at each other in stupefaction. Then Roch was racing down the hall as Jocelyne’s wailing voice cried out, “O non, non, non” and Sue Parker, flinging down the canister, was right behind him.

Jocelyne had not yet moved since her first scream. One hand clapped over her mouth to stifle the sounds she wanted to make, but knew would frighten the horse, she used the other to steady herself against the end wall. Roch found her thus transfixed by what she was staring at, hidden from him by the still partially closed stall door. Swiftly but quietly he edged her aside, looked in, and drew a sharp breath of horror and disgust.

Calisse!

The stallion stood, swaying slightly as if in shock or drugged, his head hanging drunkenly close to the shavings. Thick gouty blood dripped from his open mouth. His long white socks were sluiced with brilliant streaks of crimson. The cedar shavings under his front hooves were wet, clumped and blackened. Oats had spilled on the floor in front of him where Jocelyne had dropped the scoop. Roch’s glance fastened immediately amongst the grains, nausea rising in him, on a rubbery triangular wad of pulpy flesh — a good half of the horse’s tongue — and a bloody length of very thin wire.

Fighting back the urge to vomit, he sank to one knee, swearing and fighting for strength. He heard sobbing behind him — Jocelyne, and the stranger’s loudly barked “holy shit!” as she peered over his shoulder. The horse flinched at the sound. That lent him the surge of energy he needed.

Whirling and rising in a single fluid motion, he had the woman by the wrist in a vise of angry fingers, pressing hard, as he whispered, “Out of here, you. Now. Wait in the office.”

She winced and tried to free her hand, but his grip tightened. She seemed about to protest, but took a good look at the rising fury in his icy blue eyes, muttered “sorry,” shrank away rubbing her wrist and disappeared along the corridor toward the office.

“Easy, boy, easy,” Roch crooned softly before laying a tender hand on the horse’s shoulder. The ears twitched slightly at the familiar voice, the eyes rolled in puzzlement and a slight tremor passed along his flanks. In a few seconds Roch had ascertained that the animal was not in real shock. He was sweating just a bit, but his heartbeat was close to normal. Gently Roch passed sensitive fingers all over the horse’s body, under the belly, up and down the legs, searching for other wounds, but there was nothing. Now he turned to Jocelyne who was calm and awaiting instructions.

“Ça va? I need you to do things.”

“Oui. I’m okay. What first?” She was pale but marginally more collected.

“Get a cotton scrim and a light cooler. And a halter. Not his. The big one from the warmbloods. Get me a thermometer. Then call Guy. Tell him to bring everything, tell him he’ll need an I-V unit. If Bridget answers, don’t tell her. Make sure you speak to Guy only in French, and tell him not to say anything yet. She’ll get here anyway later on, and by then he won’t look like this. You got all that?”

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She nodded and did what he asked. With infinite patience and a good deal of soothing encouragement, Roch fitted the netted sweatshirt and light wool cover over the length of the horse’s back. He shifted restlessly but accepted the handling without overt tension. Jocelyne returned from the little office.

“Guy’s on his way,” she said. “Bridget doesn’t know yet.”

“Okay, I’ll stay here with him until he comes. Meanwhile, finish giving the grain to the others” — he had been conscious for moments of the throaty half-whinnies and stamps of frustration emanating from the stalls further along Jocelyne’s interrupted route — “and get a bucket of clean water and a new sponge. And — yeah — get Liam.”

Roch carefully inserted the thermometer in the rectum, clipping the attached string to the tail, then came back to examine the wound as well as he could. It was coagulating, that was a good sign, and the horse, although clearly tired and woozy, was in no danger of going down. It didn’t look like a panic situation, merely a horrible one.

An act of vengeance like this was a complete anomaly even in Roch’s lifetime of experience in horse sport. He had seen and dealt with severely injured horses, colicky horses, tied-up horses: all of these were upsetting, heartbreaking even, but were accepted as part of the risks of competition. He had seen many horses destroyed for one reason or another. None of it had prepared him for the dark thrill of disgust in seeing an injury so cold-bloodedly inflicted on a beautiful creature like this stallion. His mind whirled with possibilities and even, reluctantly, some probabilities.

National post

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