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VILLA MARIA MARCH 15 1977

**HUBERT AQUIN: I am the broken symbol of the Québec revolution, but also its disordered reflection and its suicidal incarnation. Ever since I was fifteen years old, I haven't stopped wishing for a beautiful suicide: under the snow-covered ice of the Lake of the Devil, in the boreal waters of the Saint Lawrence estuary, in a room at the Hôtel Windsor with a woman I have loved, in the car pulverized last winter, in the flask of Beta-Chlor (500 mg), in the bed at the Totem Motel, in the ravines of the Grande-Casse and the Tour d'Ai, in my cell number CG19, in my words learned at school, in my throat choked with emotion, in my elusive jugular gushing blood! to suicide everywhere and without respite, that has been my mission.**

*Prochain épisode 1965*

Soundscape: The jingle-jangle of a phaeton at full trot segues to “Desafinado” softly sung by Astrud Gilberto on a car radio — which suddenly goes dead ... Silence ... Female voices intoning Nonce prayers in French are followed by what sounds like a backfire ... Second silence ... broken by the relentless yip-yap yip-yap of a high-strung dog ... A third silence ... interrupted by the chirp-jabber of birds and harping schoolgirls — trrrwit-Omondieu!!!-trrrwit-Howgross!!!-trrrwit-Quellehorreur!!! — which dies down before the keening of sirens ... that swooo ooo ooon closer and come to a stut ... ut ... tered halt ... A pregnant silence ... And then the tell-tale hump ... ummp ... ummmmmmp of a mainframe computer in frustrated Search mode provokes a final ... Dead Silence.

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It took place Tuesday, March 15 1977, in Montréal. Only three people knew it would happen ...

Except for the hockey news, there was nothing in the morning's headlines to excite the urgent attention of most Montréalers:

# **Washington Responds To Call From Zaire**

## **Jumblatt Slain In Lebanon Ambush**

### **Howard Hughes Was Down To His Last \$168 Million**

#### **Almost One Million Unemployed in Canada**

Lévesque condemns Ottawa's Inertia

PM, Margaret Attend 'Glittering' Kain Ballet

Montréal Canadiens Shatter Hockey Records

Hence we felt free to enjoy the mild weather that was such a relief after another hard winter. By noon that day the temperature reached six degrees Celsius, and the last of the lingering snow began to melt. While an overcast sky cast a slight pall over the city in the morning, by early afternoon the cloud cover thinned and the sun came out intermittently for the rest of the day, much to the delight of the many children and young people who could be seen playing tag on the sidewalks, riding their bikes in the streets, fooling around in the parks.

The Montréal Catholic School Board had helped create this carefree atmosphere by holding study sessions for their teachers that day; hence, the 155,000 students in the city's public elementary and high schools were on holiday.

But that afternoon, at the Villa Maria convent school located in the quiet, comfortable neighbourhood of Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, on the far western slope of Mount Royal, something shattered the spring reveries of Montréal ...

In the 1840s, Villa Maria, then known as Monklands, served as the official residence of Canada's Governor General. In 1849 it became a high-class hotel; and then, in 1854, it was sold to the Soeurs de la Congregation de Notre-Dame to serve as a convent and girl's school. Since Pope Pius IX had recently proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, the Sisters thought it appropriate to dedicate their new acquisition to the Virgin and so named it Villa Maria.

Over the years the nuns added imposing greystone buildings to the original Palladian-style house and transformed much of the Villa's thirty hectares of farmland into parks, playing fields, apple orchards and

tennis courts, which were open for the use and enjoyment of people from the surrounding neighbourhoods.

By 1977, Villa Maria has become one of Québec's most prestigious private high schools for girls, offering education in both French and English. This year it has an enrolment of 500 students, roughly half of them English-speaking, half French-speaking, who range in age from eleven to seventeen.

The Villa students wear two uniforms. The first, worn Tuesdays and Thursdays, comprises a white blouse with a navy blue tunic and pleated plaid skirt; the second, worn Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, consists of a navy blue shirt with white collar and cuffs and a plain navy blue skirt. Both outfits are completed by beige stockings and brown shoes. As for the nuns, a decade before they'd given up their traditional habits in favour of simple street clothes. Now only the large silver cross around their necks, and the gold ring on their left hands, testify to their membership in a religious order.

Though its reputation was based on its teaching of the liberal arts, on this March afternoon Villa Maria is humming with scientific activity, for it is Expo-Science Day at the school and all twenty-two classes are busy preparing projects to be presented that evening to parents and friends.

This activity is in marked contrast to the tranquillity in the yellow-brick, modern buildings of the École Saint-Luc, situated along the northern boundary of the Villa grounds. Since Saint-Luc is a public secondary school, its 1,128 pupils are on holiday while their teachers hold study sessions.

In the early afternoon, the Villa grounds adjoining the École Saint-Luc are strangely still. There isn't a soul to be seen on or near the asphalt laneway that curves from the main building of the Villa Maria down a slight grade to the avenue Côte-Saint-Luc some 200 metres to the west. Bordered by elms, maples and oak trees, the laneway is a cul-de-sac, closed off from the avenue Côte-Saint-Luc by a chain-link fence, though there's a small gate in the fence for pedestrians to come and go. It is just inside this gate, on the laneway, that in a few moments it will happen.

Shortly after 2 p.m. Jacques David, fourteen, a pupil at the École Saint-Luc, is walking on the grounds of the Villa Maria with his girlfriend Louise Kearns and his dog Boubnov, a Saint Bernard named after the cap-maker in Maxim Gorki's play *The Lower Depths*.

Meanwhile, Sister Aldéa Billette is walking back to the convent from a trip to the nearby branch of the Bank of Montréal. A native of the town of Victoriaville, Sister Billette helps keep the convent's accounts.

Tall, solidly built, with a vigour that belies her fifty-odd years, she moves with determined step up the wide roadway that stretches some 300 metres from avenue Notre-Dame-de-Grâce to the main entrance to the school — the same route once used by the Governor General when returning to his residence by phaeton from the centre of town.

As she nears the convent's main entrance, Sister Billette moves to the right side of the road to get out of the way of a car — "a red car, very clean. The driver was not tall and he had a sad face. I thought he was the parent of one of our pupils — he had greying hair — coming to pick up his daughter at recess, which occurs at quarter after two. He hesitated, apparently undecided which way to go. Then he stepped on the gas and drove straight ahead."

With a final glance at the red car as it heads down the laneway that slopes towards the avenue Côte-Saint-Luc, Sister Billette walks up the Villa's front steps, passes under the statue of Mary that surmounts the main entrance, and disappears into the building.

At the rear of the northern wing of the convent in a squat cement-block building that houses the Villa's oil-fired furnaces, two men are passing the time of day. One of them is Joseph Goyette, a short, broad-shouldered man with a happy-go-lucky air. He is a groundskeeper who started work at the Villa in 1929, which makes him the oldest resident of the convent. The other man is Romeo Viau, tall, handsome, and middle-aged; he's the Villa's superintendent. The two men talk loudly to make themselves heard over the muffled roar of the furnaces.

William Arsenault, a heavy-set man of fifty-six who's in charge of the furnace room, has stepped outside the building to repair a defective valve ... All of a sudden he hears a loud noise. As an ex-navy man, he immediately identifies it as a gunshot. He checks his watch: 2:10 p.m. He glances around, sees nothing unusual — and turns back to the valve.

In the apple orchard, Jacques David and his girlfriend Louise Kearns also hear a noise; they think (surprised) that it's a big firecracker going off — and continue walking slowly towards the convent. Arriving at the asphalt laneway that leads from the convent down to the avenue Côte-Saint-Luc, Jacques glances to the left and sees a red car parked on the laneway about hundred metres away. Flanked by Boubnov, Jacques and Louise turn away from the car and saunter up the laneway toward the convent.

Meanwhile, Sherry Monahan is approaching the red car from the avenue Côte-Saint-Luc. A warm, forthright woman of thirty-five, Sherry was born in Vancouver of Irish Catholic parents. In 1974, she came to Montréal to continue her nursing career while taking courses in marketing at Concordia

University. Although she has studied French, she doesn't speak it fluently. Nor has she dated French-Canadian men.

At noon Sherry had taken Mandy, a Tibetan terrier named after a Barry Manilow song, for her weekly grooming at a dog-care centre located opposite the École Saint-Luc. Just after 2 p.m., with a freshly washed and brushed Mandy pulling on the leash, Sherry starts walking back to her apartment, located in the Château Renaissance eight blocks south of the Villa Maria. Since the most direct route is through the Villa's grounds, Sherry and Mandy turn off the avenue Côte-Saint-Luc, pass through the gate in the chain-link fence, and start up the laneway leading towards the convent. And then Sherry stops dead in her tracks ...

"I see a parked car that's headed in the direction of the Côte-Saint-Luc and I could see a set of man's feet beside the car. The Villa's a funny place: it's not unusual to find kids lying on the grass and other goings on, so my immediate reaction was, 'Well, this *is* the Villa.' And then I thought, 'No, no, he's lying beside the car *on the road* ... — *there's something wrong here.*' So I took a closer look at his feet, and my eyes moved up and — I froze, because I could see the rifle — he was on his back — sitting in his lap, and then I knew what it was and I couldn't look anymore ... I went on the other side of the car and leaned against it to get hold of myself and I thought, 'I have to call the police. But I have to make sure he's not breathing,' and I came just past the trunk of the car and then I looked back at him and ... It really is about the most *nauseating* sight I've ever encountered ...

— Did you take his pulse?

— No, I didn't even touch him. There was brain tissue on the trunk of the car, and his head was so ... *deformed*. I have no picture of his face at all. I think it must have been so *grossly* ... It's certainly his head that sticks out in my mind as far as the mess of it all. I did look at his chest for a split second and saw no movement, and that was enough to confirm the fact that he wasn't ... Oh, I was really *horrified* by the whole thing ... I noticed kids near the tennis courts in front of the Villa but nobody was looking around, and I thought, 'Wouldn't that make an *awful noise*?' Then I had visions of the kids being let out of school pretty soon and that was a real concern of mine.

— How long did you stay there?

— I must have spent ah ... five seconds. And then I went up to the convent. I walked quickly. And the nuns don't like dogs there eh, so I'm standing at the convent door with Mandy behind my back, ringing the bell ..."

Mademoiselle Lucie Jutras, a gentle, grey-haired spinster of sixty-eight, has been the receptionist at Villa Maria for four years. At 2:15 that afternoon, the insistent ringing of the front door bell interrupts the usual quiet of her day on duty in the entrance hall. When Mademoiselle Jutras opens the door she is confronted by a very agitated woman, with a dog behind her tugging at his leash. The woman can barely speak; she gasps:

— *The man is dead! ... Call the police!*

— Where are you coming from?" asks Mademoiselle Jutras, amazed.

The woman points outside and repeats:

— *Police! Police!*

"I kept telling her," says Sherry Monahan, "there was a dead man down in the driveway. And she asked me two things: Was I sure he was on the Villa's property? And I said, Yes, I was quite sure he was on their property. And was I sure he was dead? And I said, 'Yes, I'm sure he's dead.' I also made some gestures to indicate there was a gunshot. And I said, 'You don't want your students going down there when they get out of school'. And then I said I wanted to use the phone to call the police. She showed me where the phone booth was and I gave her Mandy to hold while I went to call."

Holding tightly on to Mandy, Mademoiselle Jutras uses the in-house phone to call the Villa's treasurer, Sister Marie-Anne Bérubé, who is working in her office on the floor above.

Meanwhile, Sherry Monahan is "shaking so much I couldn't find the phone book, so I called the operator and said:

— Get me the police!

When I finally got through to the police, I told him there was a man who had killed himself in the Villa schoolyard, so he said:

— Can I have the address?

And I said:

— Well everybody knows where the Villa Maria is. If you come up Monkland Avenue —

He said:

— Lady, I need the address!

— *I don't know the address!*

— *Well you're gonna hafta tell me! ...*

I finally found someone in the hall who gave me the school's address and I gave it to the policeman. And then he wanted the phone number and there was no phone number on the phone and I said:

— Gee, it's not right here on the dial.

And he said:

— *Lady, it must be there!*"

While Sherry Monahan is on the phone dealing with the police, Sister Marie-Anne Bérubé arrives in the entrance hall. The first thing she sees is Mademoiselle Jutras holding Mandy. Dogs are not allowed in the Villa buildings. "*Mais qu'est-ce qui se passe!?*" cries Sister Bérubé. "*What exactly is going on here?*" Mlle Jutras explains that a man is dead and that the dog's owner has gone to call the police ...

Chastened and concerned, Sister Bérubé hastens to the furnace room where she tells Monsieur Viau and Monsieur Goyette about the dead man and asks them to call the police.

Sceptical, Monsieur Goyette goes outside to verify whether there really is a dead man out there, while Monsieur Viau heads for the phone to call the police. As he's about to make his call, Monsieur Viau notices a blue and white patrol car parked behind the furnace room, a favourite spot for the police from nearby Station 15 when they want to take time out for a smoke. Monsieur Viau runs out and tells the two constables in the car there's a dead man down the laneway. Then Monsieur Viau rejoins Sister Bérubé and goes with her back to the Villa's main entrance where they meet Sherry Monahan, who has just finished her phone call. Monsieur Viau asks Sherry to take him to the dead man and Sherry agrees.

Meanwhile, Monsieur Arsenault, who's been unaware of all this activity, has been thinking about the loud noise he figures was a gunshot, and finally decides to have a look around.

The policemen alerted by Monsieur Viau — Constables P. Léonard and C. de Montigny in patrol car 15-4 — are the first to arrive on the scene. They are soon joined by Monsieur Goyette and Monsieur Arsenault. All four men are aghast at what they see: ...

In the lee of a bare rowan tree,

on the right side of the laneway,

forty metres from the avenue Côte-Saint-Luc,

on soggy, leaf-cluttered ground,

beside a crimson 1976 Ford Granada two-door sports coupe

bearing Québec licence plate 217 R 177,

lies a man on his back.

The soles of his scuffed brown Oxford shoes face the avenue.

His right arm is flung out towards

the wooded embankment that girdles the laneway,

the fingers of his right hand curled to a claw

that is suspended

a few centimetres off the ground.

The mahogany stock of a shotgun rests

on his right shoe;

the single barrel — which lies across his slightly splayed left leg,

and then across his left arm —

is pointing at the car's right rear tire.

The jacket of the man's navy-blue pin-striped suit

has fallen open,

revealing a navy-blue satin lining,

a navy-blue vest,

a red-striped navy-blue tie,

and an embroidered pale-blue shirt,

all immaculate,

though half his head is missing,

and blood and bits of bone and brain are scattered

behind the body

in a ragged ... glistening ... arc —

on the trunk of the car ...

on the steep slope of the embankment ...

even on the trunks of the old elms eight metres away,

as if they too had been mortally wounded ...

Wisps of steam issue from the broken head.

Monsieur Arsenault, who saw similar sights in the navy, says that the man has shot himself through the jaw or in the mouth. Monsieur Goyette and the two policemen stare in horror and dumbly nod in agreement.

Sherry Monahan and Monsieur Viau arrive on the scene. Recovering their aplomb, the constables pull a tarpaulin from the trunk of their patrol car and cover the body. Then they call the Québec Provincial Police, who must be notified in cases of violent death.

Passers-by begin to come off the avenue Côte-Saint-Luc to see what's up. Monsieur Viau herds them back behind the fence and closes the gate.

Siren sounding, red lights flashing, Sergeant Robert Fortil of the Québec Provincial Police arrives in his patrol car, followed shortly by a wailing ambulance.

Having finished their study sessions, teachers in the École Saint-Luc gather at the windows overlooking the laneway and wonder what's going on.

Sister Bérubé wasn't able to warn all the Villa's teachers in time, so some of the Villa girls who've come outside for recess run to investigate the commotion down the laneway. They are met by Monsieur Viau, who keeps them at a sensible distance. Wide-eyed, the girls cup hands to ears and mouths, chattering in whispers.

The girls are soon joined by people who were strolling by or playing on the Villa grounds and have been drawn by the sirens and the stream of arriving police cars. Jacques David and Louise Kearns and Boubnov are there. So is Giovanni Facciolo, the Villa's resident carpenter. Beside him, an unidentified young boy says, "I saw him from over there. He got out of the car real quick, he put the rifle in front of him, he pulled the trigger — and his head flew everywhere."

The police open the door of the Ford Granada. Half folded on the right front seat is a dark grey overcoat. On the floor behind the driver's seat are road maps of the United States in a plastic bag. And on the driver's seat is a torn sheet of lined yellow notepad paper on which is written, half in red ink, half in blue:

*Please inform*

*my wife Andrée*

*at 486-4001.*

*MERCI*

*HA*

*Please put Granada car 217 R 177*

*back in front of 3776 Vendôme. / keys near*

*the pedals.*

Prière de prévenir  
ma femme André  
à 486.4001

MERCI

HA  
Remettre cette bonnote 21/3/1977  
à M. G. 3776 Vandôme SVP <sup>clés</sup> <sub>pour les photos</sub>

Note left in car at Villa Maria on March 15 1977

The police find the car keys lying beside the accelerator.

Sergeant Fortil contacts Québec Provincial Police headquarters and asks for the identity of the owner of the red Granada. But the police computer, a Univac 1100-2, doesn't have the information because the red Granada still has a 1976 registration and the computer has only the new 1977 registrations in current memory. The police then search the clothes of the dead man for identification. They find 99 cents in the left outside jacket pocket, a red felt-tipped pen clipped to the upper-right inside jacket pocket, and in the left-hand inside jacket pocket, wrapped in plastic, a Canadian passport issued in Ottawa the 22nd of January 1974:



Sex: M  
Height: 1 metre 78  
Hair: brown  
Eyes: blue  
Birthdate: October 24 1929  
Birthplace: Montréal  
Name: Hubert Aquin