

Chapter 11 – Sauclières

(Sauclières stadium)

Along the Paul Riquet Alleys, she can be seen calling out to passers-by and then, politely expressing regret. She is still looking everywhere for her Claude. So, she walks all over without any real logic, murmuring his name as if in a prayer. For several months she has been revisiting all the neighbourhoods: from Saint Jacques to Saint Aphrodise, from the Canal-du-Midi to the Poet's Park. Frequently, she thinks she sees him. But then, disappointment catches up. Claude has finally disappeared.

At home, she continues to talk to him with intense emotion. The usual questions. How was rugby training today? Ready for the next match? And bread, did you think to buy it? Sometimes she closes her eyes and thinks she can hear his footsteps and feel his movements. She relives his tenderness, his kisses on her neck, his caressing gaze, and then, and then, you can hear her screaming!

Their most beautiful memories were there, between the river Orb and the Canal-du-Midi, worn and scored in this Biterroise¹ land, in the heart of the mythical area: the Sauclières Stadium. For them, rugby was more than a sport, and it was a family, a culture. The blue and red colours were their nappies and their language was Rugby. They followed their fathers' footsteps. A week consisted of only two days: training and matches, and a year: a single season. Later, Claude served his Club as a volunteer throughout its great era. Almost twenty years. In 1984, ASB team won the Brennus Shield for the eleventh time. The Biterrois rarely failed at home. Sauclières impressed their opponents. Surrounded by water, this peninsula, now the temple of Brennus, seemed impregnable. Changing rooms without real windows and a famous tunnel, a narrow corridor of concrete steps where the cleats resounded loudly. This tunnel plunged underground from the changing rooms, then spun and released players

¹ Other name for Béziers

in a voluptuous string at the foot of the stands. To the crowd's applause, gladiators in the arena were given a standing ovation in an agreed-upon position. These circus-like performances fascinated spectators and shook the opponents.

Claude and his wife have known all the victories with the giants of this great era. Those of the blue and red pack: Estève, Vaquerin or Palmié. And then after front pack: Danos, Astre and Cantoni, all internationals. And then others: Martin, Buonomo, Saïssset. Rugby was more than a game; it was a way of life. She and Claude devoted everything to them: weekends with travel, the match and the after-match. Victories blew a steady happiness wind over them. And during week, Claude always felt stronger to train youngsters and juniors, his natural children. And she too was fed by this warm strength. The other passion they shared was Japanese culture. They loved food, with sushi and sashimi, udon and soba noodles, dishes with teriyaki sauce, as well as tōfu and nattō. They never forgot the little soup with macerated vegetables as a side dish. Among the Nipponese, Claude loathed chopsticks at mealtimes and absence of rugby in sports, but he loved everything else: martial arts, sumo wrestling, swords, manga, prints, cartoons by Hayao Miyazaki, films by Kurosawa, Miike, Fukasaku, and even haiku, those extremely brief little poems that aim to express the evanescence of things. Sometimes he practiced poetry. She preferred tea ceremonies and Japanese gardens. At home, she maintained a magnificent bonsai tree and sometimes composed ikebanas or kusamonos, floral arrangements based on three main points symbolizing heaven, earth and humanity. Claude's big dream was a trip to Japan.

And then, in a short time, everything changed. ASB champions retired and their club, blinded by its success, did not ensure their succession. Presidents and coaches came in and went out at an excessive pace. French rugby also underwent a profound change towards a more evolved and structured game. Players were transformed into high-level athletes with muscles and performance. Doping products became less discreet. The Biterrois suffered failure after failure. Then, the Toulouse team took over. Claude, like other supporters, was disillusioned

and no longer believed in that game. So, he began to desert fields by repeated absences from matches. More seriously, he ended up missing youngsters training sessions.

Transition to professionalism would have been the remedy, but for time being, this subject remained taboo. Economic crisis weighed on the club, and there were no funds to recruit new talent.

And then, the last fatal blow for Claude, in 1989, a new Mediterranean Stadium was built, with more than 18,000 seats, an immense shell with a balloon appearance. They were ripped out of the Sauclières stadium like a bad vine that had given so much. And with this greatest misfortune, the "Grand Béziers" home was replaced by football.

So, Claude stopped training. At a few rare matches, his idle silhouette could be seen in the stands.

One sinister day, Claude suddenly disappeared... And his princess, who usually followed him body and soul, was still waits for him. The long walks in town, the loneliness and the despair disfigure her.

She took refuge in what seemed to her to be an enchanted kingdom: the Poet's Park in Béziers.

That afternoon, she still recites the eternal refrain to Victor Hugo: "Tomorrow at dawn, at a time when the countryside whitens, I shall leave. You see, I know you expect me. I shall go through the forest; I shall cross the mountain. I cannot stay away from you any longer."

A few hundred metres away, at the news stand on Paul Riquet Alley, one could read the front page of Rugby Magazine: "World Cup: how Japanese team managed to beat South Africa with the help of Eddie Jones, its coach, and an unknown French coach called Claude".

That same day, she receives a poem, a letter, origami in a rose shape. Once unfolded, she reads.

*Pardonne mes désirs,
Qui t'ont fait souffrir,
La brèche est lueur,
Que guérisses ton cœur,
Je reviens ce jour,
Que vive notre amour !*

Your Claude

*Forgive my hunger
That made you suffer
Now the rift is lit up
So may your heart be healed up
I come back this morning
May our love recovering!*

Your Claude