

UP IN SMOKE

WHEN A LOUD-MOUTHED OUTSIDER SUSPECTED OF DEALING DRUGS IGNITED PRIMITIVE PASSIONS ON AN IDYLIC FISHING ISLAND IN THE BAY OF FUNDY, IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG FOR THE FLAMES TO TURN ON HIM

BY
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Firefighters race in vain to extinguish the blaze that would eventually consume the Grand Manan home of suspected drug dealer Ronnie Ross.

BEFORE THE RIOT,

BEFORE THE GUNFIGHT, BEFORE THE NEIGHBOURHOOD WOMEN UNITE TO PREVENT THE FIRE DEPARTMENT FROM EXTINGUISHING THE SECOND, MORE SERIOUS ARSON, THE NIGHT BEGINS WITH FISTICUFFS.

The setting is a country lane on isolated Grand Manan Island, a triangular-shaped hunk of rock in the Bay of Fundy, where the tides can reach nine metres high and inclement weather often cancels the only link to the outside world, a ninety-minute ferry ride to the New Brunswick mainland. Of the island's 3,000 full-time residents, perhaps a dozen live along this stretch of the inland lane known as Cedar Street, just west of the Castalia convenience store. Thanks to the trees that isolate the curves in the winding road, it's quiet here. Passing cars are rare enough that the neighbours look up to check the driver's identity, to determine whether they should wave to a friend or acquaintance. Most of the time they do.

On this particular July night, Cedar Street's most dilapidated home, number 61, a two-storey, one-bedroom building with a shaggy lawn and a dissolving gravel driveway, is occupied by a man named Ronnie Ross. Ross is forty-two, a fisherman with a wiry build, greying, receding hair, and heavy-lidded eyes. Around midnight, Ross emerges from his home with a loosely armed group of eight people and marches down his driveway. One of his confreres carries a crowbar. The most lethal weapon appears to be a jerry-rigged spear someone's made by duct-taping a butcher's knife to a broomstick.

Once Ross and his group reach the road, their progress is halted by an opposing mob of about forty people, many of them also equipped with makeshift berserker-style tools, albeit less lethal ones. One man clutches a snow shovel. The whole confrontation has a momentary air that's a cross between *Trailer Park Boys* and *Rambo* – absurd, but simultaneously volatile.

First comes the shouting. From the opponents, the most common refrain is directed at Ross. It's simply this: "Get off the island!"

Deployed like a mantra, Ross's rejoinder makes up in passion what it lacks in eloquence: "Get the fuck away!"

Several more Ross epithets, and the absurdity quotient rises. Someone makes a move, and the two groups become a single, brawling organism. Ross's opponent in hand-to-hand combat is Carter Foster, who lives directly across the street from Ross's place. Foster is twenty-four, and although he's only slightly taller than Ross, he outweighs the older man by maybe fifty pounds. In short order, Foster has one hand wrapped up in Ross's T-shirt and the other aiming roundhouse swings toward Ross's forehead. Ross falls. Foster keeps swinging and soon Ross is turtled, on his hands and knees with his head down to keep his face from Foster's fists. At this point in a hockey fight the ref would step in – but there is no ref.

Instead a tall man from the Ross side sprints back into Ross's house. Seconds later he emerges armed with a .32 calibre lever-action Winchester hunting rifle. He aims the gun into the mob and fires. There's a flash, and a sound like a tree limb breaking.

Which is when things get really crazy.

ABOUT A YEAR BEFORE THE FIST FIGHT, in June 2005, Foster and his live-in girlfriend, an Irish-looking, eye-catching young woman with dark hair and a fair complexion, named Sara Wormell, received the first indication that their neighbour across the street was a little . . . odd. The oddness in question went beyond the obvious fact of Ross's background, which was evident as soon as he'd moved into the neighbourhood the previous winter. Grand Mananers tend to catalogue people depending on whether they're islanders, or not. Ross grew up on the mainland in Digby, Nova Scotia, where he had many problems with the law, including a litany of assault charges that ended up putting him into a penitentiary for a two-year sentence (among other instances of time served). The islanders, unsurprisingly, did not consider Ross to be a Grand Mananer.

By contrast, Foster was about as Grand Manan as it was possible for one to be. His

parents were both island natives, and he was virtually raised on the sea. By the time he was thirteen he was piloting his father's forty-two-foot fishing boat solo out into the Bay of Fundy; by high school he was pulling in \$15,000 on his own in a two-month fishing season. After graduation, a modification Foster helped design for the family's weirs increased their herring catch enough to win the family the title of "highliner," given annually to the island's most productive herring operation. At the age of twenty, Foster was making \$100,000 a year before expenses, enough to let him buy the house on Cedar Street and fill its sheds with the sort of toys coveted by rural males – a snowmobile, an ATV, and about a dozen hunting rifles. His success meant Foster wasn't only a Grand Mananer, but a Grand Mananer with *standing*. In *Trailer Park Boys* terms, Foster was Julian to Ross's Randy.

Still, the islanders were by nature tolerant, and Ross's provenance was only noted in passing in his first months on Cedar Street. Nor did Foster mind when Ross approached him in the winter to purchase some firewood. But that June, while Foster and Wormell were burning vegetation off part of their land, Ross crossed the street to ask his neighbours a question.

"The people in the woods there," he said, clearly agitated. "Can you see them?"

Foster and Wormell peered into the particular trees Ross had indicated. They said no, they couldn't see anyone.

Ross came a little closer and pointed. "There," he said. "They're wearing camouflage. They've been watching me."

"We can't see anybody," Foster told him again. "There's nobody there."

Ross seemed unconvinced. He walked back across the street onto his property and disappeared into his house.

In retrospect, Foster would consider the moment his first odd impression of Ross. And even this might have passed without Foster giving it much thought. Shortly after, however, Foster started hearing the rumours. Everyone on the island was talking about it. Was Ronnie Ross really dealing crack?

ALTHOUGH IT MIGHT SEEM COUNTERINTUITIVE, given the common association of crack cocaine with inner-city slums, Grand Manan was – and but for certain intervening circumstances, still might be – a crack dealer's dream market. High unemployment had recently grown worse thanks to the 2004 closing of a canning factory, which put about 160 people out of work. Sea lice and other problems plagued the island's salmon-farming operations, making



The island brawlers who became known as The Grand Manan Five, from left: Michael Small, Lloyd Bainbridge, Greg Guthrie, Matthew Lambert, and Carter Foster

PHOTOGRAPH BY JARRET BELLIVEAU

aquaculture employment unreliable. Much of the remaining work was open-sea fishing, which could earn islanders \$5,000 a week in the non-stop toil of the spring and autumn seasons; then, especially during the winter, they could be idle for weeks at a time.

The point was, a lot of Grand Mananers had a lot of time on their hands. And for some, drugs helped fill the vacuum. Along with local brews like Alpine and Moosehead, high-quality homegrown marijuana was one of the stalwart intoxicants at any island party. In addition, every so often someone came back from Saint John, New Brunswick, the nearest big city, with a baggie full of OxyContin, ecstasy, or cocaine. One or two islanders even had reputations as crack dealers, although their supply was unreliable. Then, in the summer

of 2005, word spread among the islanders of a new source of crack that was unprecedentedly dependable, apparently coming over in weekly shipments from Saint John.

The new crack supply line was of greater interest – and risk – to Grand Manan's young people than to the adult population. Stuck, through no fault of their own, on an island that in frequent inclement weather was impossible to escape, the teenagers had restricted access to the things many city kids take for granted, such as record shops, movie theatres, or clothing boutiques. Their isolation left them craving urban culture. As destructive as it was by reputation, crack cocaine was attractive to some young people because it symbolized the urban culture they craved. "You have one grocery store, one pharmacy, maybe three or four

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restaurants," says Andrew Jones, a teacher at Grand Manan's only school, which combines elementary and secondary schools in one building. "And you have high-school kids, grade nine kids going to parties and suddenly there's cocaine there. It's like taking cookies

off a plate to get it – how do your kids survive that without getting addicted?”

Whether or not Ross was actually selling crack, he might have gone relatively unnoticed had he not been such a jerk. His abrasive defiance was amply displayed in an incident that took place shortly after Foster heard about Ross’s alleged illicit moonlighting. One day when Ross was in his yard, Foster went over and asked him, one neighbour to another, whether this thing about Ross dealing drugs was true.

“I perform a service to this island, just like the convenience store,” Foster recalls Ross saying. “I sell the best stuff anybody can get.” (For the record, to police and media, Ross has denied ever selling crack.)

Despite Ross’s apparently cavalier attitude towards drug dealing, the truth was that drugs per se didn’t really bother Foster. He was the kind of guy, he said, who believed in live and let live. He wasn’t exactly a saint; for example, when he was nineteen he was convicted of drunk driving, and if someone was passing a joint around he wouldn’t turn it down.

But in retrospect, Ross was unlucky on two counts. The first was timing. His arrival on Grand Manan coincided with an island-wide crime wave. Corporal Ron Smith, the ranking officer in the island’s RCMP detachment, believes the suddenly reliable drug supply was just one of a number of factors that triggered the spree of break-and-enters. Another factor, he says, was Grand Manan’s unemployment problem. In the minds of an increasing number of islanders, though, crack was what caused the burglaries and thefts, and their anger festered each time someone discovered a TV missing, or a chainsaw stolen.

The second unlucky count was, again, Ross’s own personality. He was entirely without class – an all around bad neighbour. Ross’s lack of civility is what seemed to irk Foster the most. Had Ross been a polite guy who just happened to deal crack, Foster would probably have been more than willing to overlook his activities.

But that wasn’t Ross. Every weekend, a handful of disreputable-looking mainlanders came over in a GMC Jimmy, drinking and partying in Ross’s yard from sun-up to long past sundown. The island’s only taxi visited 61 Cedar Street at all hours of the day and night. Rock music blared from Ross’s yard, as did the steady din of drunken conversation and revelry. Most galling to Foster was the way Ross treated the neighbourhood kids. For example, an eleven-year-old boy lived across the street from Foster, just two doors down from Ross’s place. The boy and Foster were good friends; if



“EVEN IF YOU BURN DOWN MY HOUSE,” SPUTTERED RONNIE ROSS (ABOVE), WITHIN CLEAR EARSHOT OF POLICE AND FIREFIGHTERS, “WE’RE GOING TO COME BACK HERE AND WE’RE NOT GOING TO SELL DRUGS TO THE KIDS – WE’RE GOING TO GIVE IT TO THEM!”

Foster was out in his yard, tinkering with his snowmobile, then the boy would turn up and ask Foster questions. As a treat, and under close supervision, Foster sometimes let the boy drive his ATV.

Lately, though, the boy had been coming over less frequently. His mother, a pretty blond woman named Erin Gaskill, worked just down the street at the Castalia convenience store, and one day Foster dropped in and asked about her son – Foster hadn’t seen him lately, he said. Gaskill said she was worried about him. Ross had apparently snarled at the boy as he passed on the street. Ross had even threatened to sic his two dogs on him. Now her son was afraid to pass by Ross’s place on the way into town; he was frightened to go outside, and sometimes he was even reluctant to sleep at home, preferring to spend the night at the house of Gaskill’s mother.

So when the police asked Foster whether they could use his house to conduct surveillance on the Ross home, Foster said yes. Over the fall of 2005, Constable Terry Pomeroy watched the Ross place from a second-storey window in Foster’s home. When a car visited the Ross place, Pomeroy would alert an associate, who would subsequently pull the vehicle over and search it. Using this procedure, police managed to seize some small quantities of crack cocaine.

Then, on the morning of December 6, 2005, RCMP officers executed a search warrant on Ross’s home. Ross wasn’t home. Officers found an unemployed Saint John native, Paul Irvine, in the house with \$1,610 in small bills. They also found a razor blade, baggies, and a large quantity of baking soda (which is boiled in water with cocaine to make crack). To the disappointment of many islanders, they did not find any crack.

The raid, and its timing, frustrated an island already irritated by local law enforcement’s inability to contain the crime wave. December 6, 2005, was a Tuesday. Had the officers searched Ross’s house on a Friday, before the rumoured weekly shipment could be sold, many islanders felt the results would have been far more incriminating. The unfortunate timing of the search warrant generated conspiracy theories among some of the islanders, and contributed to a feeling that the RCMP lacked the resources to deal with what had become known as “the Ronnie Ross problem.”

Meanwhile, the taxis came and went. The burglaries continued. And over the pool tables at Galloways Restaurant, after church services, and in the aisles of the local supermarket, the community began to discuss taking care of the Ross problem themselves.

At some point, someone mentioned arson. After a theft at a local hotel, one of the island’s elders asked RCMP Constable Gerald Bigger what he’d do if he heard the Ross place was on fire. “The first thing I’d do?” the Mountie is reported to have said. “Take a drive to Seal Cove.” Seal Cove is a town at the opposite end of the island from Cedar Street. Most islanders took the Mountie’s reply to mean he wouldn’t do a thing.

SEVEN MONTHS LATER, ON THE SATURDAY night of Canada Day weekend, 2006, Erin Gaskill’s eleven-year-old son walked into her bedroom.

“Mom,” he said. “There’s a truck on fire out there.”

“You’re dreaming,” she said. “Go to sleep.”

Two minutes later, he was back.

“It’s really on fire, Mom,” he said.

“Where?”

“At Ronnie Ross’s house.”

This time, Gaskill followed her son. She saw the otherworldly orange glow even before she got to the window. It looked as though someone had detonated a bomb. In fact, what was burning was the interior of the GMC Jimmy, parked, as it was most weekends, in Ross’s driveway. The SUV belonged to a younger friend of Ross’s from Saint John,

named Terry Irvine (the brother of the man, Paul Irvine, who was apprehended at the Ross place during the December raid).

Gaskill had expected something like this. The arson theme had escalated since the spring, when someone threw the propane tank from Ross’s barbecue through Ross’s living room window – fortunately for Ross, he’d been at a bar at the time. Lately, while Ross was in his front yard, cranking his music and grilling hamburgers, teenagers would cruise past and yell things like “Burn, baby, burn!” from their car windows.

In response, Ross was said to have made a list of people who had offended him. The list was rumoured to have eleven names on it, including Foster’s. Ross told people he was going to get his friends from Saint John to come to the island to deal with the eleven people. Sometimes he threatened his tormentors with machine guns and dynamite. On other occasions he limited himself to promising them arson of his own.

Like the rest of the community, Gaskill knew that the burning of Irvine’s GMC Jimmy was a warning, a heavy-handed suggestion that Ross cease and desist and exit the island. If so, Ross ignored it. Over the next several weeks, he embarked on a juvenile campaign of neighbourhood intimidation that included flinging bottles at passing cars, hurling epithets at police, and threatening area children with his dogs.

Sophomoric as the stunts were, Gaskill, Foster, and other community members were convinced that Ross would eventually make good on one of his more dramatic threats. Their lack of faith in the police was borne out the night after the truck bombing, when Ross and Terry Irvine set a fire at the edge of the Ross property and topped the pyre off with

the same propane tank that had previously been thrown through Ross’s window. Their intention, the intoxicated men announced to anyone within shouting range, was to “burn down the neighbourhood.”

Only after several hours and a half-dozen calls from Foster, Gaskill, and others, did Corporal Smith and Constable Diane Veronneau (another of the few on-duty Mounties on the island) arrive on the scene. They extinguished the fire and confiscated the tank. But by that point the area’s residents had seen their suspicion harden into a reality: They couldn’t count on the Mounties for protection.

EVEN WITH ALL THE BUILDUP, HOWEVER, the riot may not have happened had a woman in Saint John not been redecorating her kitchen. If the crisis on Grand Manan was straight out of *Trailer Park Boys*, the New Brunswick connection was pure *Dukes of Hazzard*. The redecorating woman was Margaret Byers, who belonged to a family of crack dealers. Margaret sold crack. So did her mother. Margaret’s brothers did too, as did her boyfriend.

On November 18, 2005, a penniless, long-time local addict named Harold McCarty dropped by Byers’s place to see if he could beg for some crack. On this particular day McCarty noticed several cans of paint thinner in Byers’s hall, left over from her recent kitchen renovation. McCarty proposed a novel barter: In return for drugs, he would consider burning down a nearby building that was scheduled to become a community police office, aimed largely at cleaning up Saint John’s north end, the Byers’s crack shack included.

Byers, who later testified in court that she “never thought he would do it,” let McCarty take the turpentine. McCarty toted the flamm-

able liquid to the soon-to-be cop shop, did some splashing, lit a match, and succeeded in his goal – he burned the construction site to the ground. For McCarty’s trouble, Byers gave him \$50 worth of crack and an equal amount in cash. After McCarty bragged about the incident to an undercover officer, police arrested him for the arson, and on July 19, 2006, McCarty pleaded guilty. (A judge subsequently sentenced him to ten years in prison.)

Two days later, on Friday July 21, news of the story and McCarty’s guilty plea reached a man named Larry Marshall on Grand Manan. Marshall had lived on the island for ten years and made his living harvesting dulse, a seaweed-like plant that washed up on the shores of Grand Manan’s Dark Harbour. (Maritimers eat dulse like potato chips, as a snack food.) Larry Marshall had a brother named Harold, who had recently moved to Grand Manan from the mainland. Harold and Larry had almost opposite personalities. Larry was peace-loving; Harold had an extensive criminal record. In fact, Harold had moved to Grand Manan to try to kick his crack habit. Shortly after Ross moved to Cedar Street, Harold returned to his old ways, smoking crack and, allegedly, becoming Ross’s bodyguard.

It was Harold who told his brother Larry about the list he and Ross had come up with: the legendary list of targets Ross wanted to hurt – including, besides Carter Foster, Foster’s father, Jeff, and a local prayer-group leader named Michael Brown, whom Ross suspected of burning the SUV. Larry, gentle dulse picker, liked Carter Foster. And when Larry read the newspaper story about the crack-addicted McCarty burning down a police station, he became spooked about what his brother, also an addict, would do. When Foster happened to



The view across Cedar Street from Ronnie Ross’s burnt-out home. Carter Foster’s place can be seen on the extreme right.

ROSS: PHOTOGRAPH BY CHUCK BROWN/TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL

drop by the dulse yards later that same day, Larry approached him and told him about the list.

“My brother’s a bag of trouble with a capital T,” Larry told Foster, with a certain inconsistency of metaphor. “And he doesn’t just talk through his nose. I just wanted you to know.”

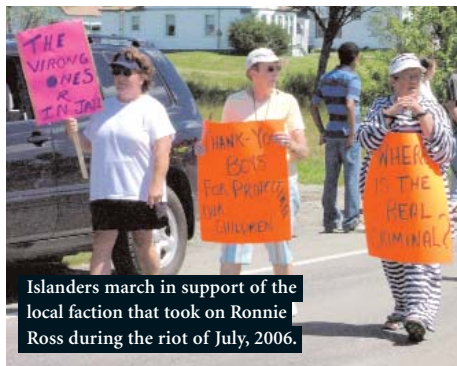
Later that afternoon, Ross dispatched a warning of his own. He saw Michael Brown’s brother Bruce at the Castalia convenience store. “You tell your brother,” said Ross, “I’m pretty sure he burnt the truck in my driveway. He’s going to be next – and sooner than he thinks.”

That evening, a car the islanders had never seen before, a 2001 model GMC Yukon SUV, arrived at 61 Cedar Street. In fact, the SUV belonged to Terry Irvine who, despite his continuing unemployment, had managed to buy the \$30,000 vehicle to replace the SUV that had been destroyed two weeks before. Word spread, and Foster’s concerned friends and family began gathering at the Foster place around 9 p.m. An hour before midnight, forty people were gathered on Foster’s side of the road. After eighteen months, something was finally going to happen.

NO ONE KNOWS FOR SURE WHO SHOT Ross’s Winchester rifle into the crowd outside his home that night. Whoever it was, though, shot a total of seven times, which was enough to shock the combatants first into paralysis and then hyperactivity. Foster stopped beating Ross long enough to fling him toward a roadside ditch, then sprinted toward home. From behind Foster came the sound of rifle shots. People dove for shelter. “Return fire!” he recalls one of his father’s friends shouting.

It took Foster about five seconds to reach his house. Once there he retrieved one of his own guns and scaled a ladder up to his roof, throwing himself flat on the rear side of the peak. Below him gunfire was coming from both sides, now; his friends had found his open gun case. One of them put a bullet through Ross’s living room window.

Foster’s gun was a .22/250 calibre Savage, a high-powered hunting rifle with a scope and a biped support by the muzzle for extra stability; with it, he could pick off targets at 250 metres. But he wasn’t concerned about hitting anyone at the moment, just with covering the flight of his friends. Rather than aim at the dark figures still scurrying for cover on Ross’s yard, Foster directed his rifle toward what he considered the symbol of drug-revenue excess, the GMC Yukon in Ross’s driveway. He aimed first at the gas tank, then the hood, then the front tires, and then at a lightbulb on the house’s front porch – at which point a figure scurried



THE ISLANDERS’ RELIEF TURNED TO FRUSTRATION WHEN THEY LEARNED THAT THE MOUNTIES INTENDED TO PURSUE CHARGES AGAINST FOSTER AND THE REST OF THE “BOYS”

directly into his line of fire. Foster realized with horror that he had almost hit a human being.

By then, the gunfire from the Ross side had stopped. Foster climbed back down the ladder and convened with the rest of the anti-crack faction behind his house. They tried to defuse the surreality of the moment with reason. Ross and his friends, they argued, had demonstrated their willingness to use weapons. If Foster and his friends allowed Ross to stay on the island now, there was no telling what form his retaliation would take. Their only choice was to get Ross off the island, and the surest way of doing that was to deprive him of a place to live. Which meant – what else? – arson.

Someone shot two flares toward the Ross place. One landed on the porch and ignited some boxes piled by the far corner. The other hit somebody in the leg – Ross, they’d discover later. While Ross and his friends were busy with the porch fire, Foster’s buddy Mike Small and Small’s brother-in-law, Lloyd Bainbridge, crossed the street and snuck through the woods in a flanking manoeuvre with a jerry can of gasoline and a box of matches. Once they were behind Ross’s house, Bainbridge splashed gasoline over junk piled up against the rear exterior wall. Small tossed a match toward the gas puddle. There was a whoomp, and Ross’s home – which had at least six occupants inside at the time, Ross included – was burning.

WHEN THE FIRE TRUCKS ARRIVED, NONE OF Foster’s contingent was particularly happy to see them. They had hoped the authorities might take their time, which would have allowed the

Ross home to burn. While some onlookers chanted “Let it burn! Let it burn!”, others attempted to prevent water from reaching the Ross house by standing on the hose. Foster slipped past the firefighters to the rear of the tanker truck, which held the water supply. He’d heard from friends in the department about the “dump valve,” which would drain the tank’s contents if pulled. His hand was on the valve when he was spotted by Russell Ingalls, a firefighter friend of the Foster family. “This is not what you want to do,” called Ingalls. “Back off and leave us alone and let us do our job.”

“You don’t know what we’ve been dealing with here,” Foster said. “You should see how young some of the kids are who’re hanging out over there. None of the neighbours can sleep at night. They’re afraid Ross will burn [down] our homes. And you know what? If we don’t burn him out, that’s what he’s going to do.”

Another volunteer firefighter appeared, this one a teacher who had taught Foster in high school.

“Just take your hand off the valve,” the teacher said, echoing Ingalls. “Walk away.”

At this point Foster realized the choice left him: pull the valve, and become no better than Ross, or leave. He chose to walk away, stepping off the tanker’s bumper and directly into the path of Ross.

“Even if you burn down my house,” sputtered Ross, within plain earshot of numerous police and firefighters, “we’re going to come back here, we’re going to set up tents, and we’re not going to *sell* drugs to the kids – we’re going to *give* it to them!”

It was an insane threat, simultaneously pathetic and grand. It had the predictable result. Foster hit him. There was a flurry of blows, and once again Foster was punching down at the smaller man. But this time all of Ross’s cronies had scattered. There was no one to protect him, with gunfire or anything else.

To make matters more explosive, Foster had been joined now by other members of *his* crew. And now Foster punched with an animal violence. It might have been the sleepless nights. It might have been the months of impotence in the face of his inability to do anything about the Ross situation. Whatever it was, Foster and friends were on the verge of murdering Ross when Constable Bigger pulled them away.

Ross crumpled, blood welling from his eye, his nose, his mouth, from pretty much every part of his face that *could* bleed. The constable hustled Ross into a cruiser and offered to take him to the hospital. Ross roused himself enough to refuse. Instead he accepted a ride from Constable Veronneau to his girlfriend’s

mother’s house, where he would hide, in safety, until he could catch a ferry off the island.

By this point it was almost 2 a.m. The fire department was just about done mopping up. But an hour later, the fire chief found himself calling his men back to Cedar Street. Someone had set fire to the Ross place a second time. As the volunteer firefighters drove again up the lane, they found themselves blocked by an impromptu obstacle course of vehicles.

The first was a green truck belonging to Gaskill’s boyfriend, who had locked his doors and refused to move off the road. Corporal Smith broke one of the truck’s windows, pulled Green from the cab and got the truck over to the road shoulder. At that point a quartet of female neighbours formed a human chain to once again block the road. Some men joined them.

While the police and firefighters tried to figure out what to do about *that*, they were interrupted by a triumphant shout from the crowd around Ross’s home. It was too late to fight fires now; the house was consumed in flames. With onlookers cheering, the structure collapsed in on itself. For the moment, so far as the islanders were concerned, the good guys had won.

OR HAD THEY? DESPITE APPROXIMATELY forty shots fired during the riot of Grand Manan, no one who participated in the events of July 21 was killed, or even wounded, by gunfire. But in the aftermath, the island quickly grew to resemble an armed camp. After months of inaction, the RCMP called in reinforcements from across the province, swelling the island’s four-officer contingent to about seventy men and women. Many welcomed the show of force. But the islanders’ relief turned to frustration with the RCMP when they learned that the Mounties intended to pursue charges against Foster and the rest of the “boys.”

In contrast to their tepid pursuit of Ross, the RCMP spared no expense in investigating the men that most of the island regarded as heroes. A team of investigators interrogated each member of the Foster side for hours at a time. The sessions were psychologically brutal; Sara Wormell vomited after hers. Hardened fishermen left the police station in tears. During an interview videotaped by police, Foster at first tried to exercise his right to silence, then broke down and confessed to firing his hunting rifle toward Ross’s side of the road. Soon after, police charged him with possession of a weapon for dangerous use and – unlike the height of irrelevance – improper storage of a firearm.

In the end, Foster’s friends Matt Lambert

and Greg Guthrie also confessed to firing weapons toward the Ross place. Lambert was charged with two counts of dangerous use of a firearm, Guthrie with one. Bainbridge, a diver who frequently worked for the Fosters repairing herring weirs, confessed to pouring gasoline along the rear of the Ross place before the first fire; Bainbridge’s brother-in-law, Michael Small, confessed to tossing the lit match. Both men were charged with arson. Who committed the second, successful arson remains a mystery.

Islanders took up a collection and hired a well-known New Brunswick lawyer, David Lutz, to represent the group that became known as the Grand Manan Five. After a two-and-a-half-week trial in November, both Small and Bainbridge were convicted of arson; each received a year of house arrest, allowing them to work but not much else. They also were required to pay restitution of \$5,000 each to compensate Ross for the damage the first fire did to his home. Lambert was convicted on one count of dangerous use of a firearm and sentenced to six months house arrest. Foster was given six months of probation for his lesser charge, improper storage. On all other charges the men were found not guilty. Contacted after the sentencing hearing, Foster said he regretted the inconvenience the police response had caused him and his friends. However, he did not regret forcing Ross from the island.

And Ross himself? Apparently he did not have insurance on his Cedar Street home. He claims that the fire has financially ruined him, and currently lives with his father in a rural home outside of Digby, Nova Scotia. Ross was the only person on his side charged in connection with the events of July 21, 2006. His trial, for one count of possession of a weapon for dangerous use, is scheduled for April 2, 2007; that day, he’ll also be tried on three counts of uttering threats, charges the RCMP pressed only after they began their investigation into the July 21 riot.

The last laugh may yet be Ross’s. He intends to pursue a civil suit against Foster, the Mounties, or both. With a savvy lawyer, he could recoup more than \$100,000. He stands significantly less chance of success in another of his riot-related goals. Ross declined an interview for this article because, he said, he hoped to sell his story for “around \$150,000” to an American media outlet. Someone like Oprah.

A last note: Among all the legal remedies arising from the riot, there was one thing neither Ross, nor anyone else, was charged with: Selling drugs. ■

Christopher Shulgan is a Toro writer-at-large.