

The Kalif Conspiracy

Executive Summary:

Three weeks ago (when this was written, in late September 2008), executing a vast and complex covert operation, Beate surprised me with the birthday present to end all birthday presents: an unbelievably wonderful new horse, distantly related to Bandit, the apple of my eye, who is now in retirement.

Following the tradecraft motto of “hiding in plain sight,” Kalif (formerly “Excalibur”) had already been standing in our corral for three days, allegedly the property of a neighbor, who supposedly needed to quarantine him temporarily. I was *totally* duped!

The conspiracy which stretched over several months, included, among others: a horse trainer, two vets and their assistants, the local physician, a retired Foreign Service officer, several neighbors, and Beate’s nephew.

The complete story is quite long, but wonderful and charming and deserves to be told in detail and preserved for posterity.



The Full Story

Two years ago, Beate had found [Strider](#) as a replacement for [Bandit](#) (the great equine love of my life), who had colicked and was growing old. By last year Beate realized that while Strider was a great horse, he and I were not a perfect match, and she decided that she would surprise me with a new horse for my 65th birthday which would fill the hole in my heart left by Bandit’s retirement.

She started searching for a black horse on the Net last year and found a horse at Magic Mountain Ranch in Three Forks, where she had bought [Destry](#) two years earlier. They raise Rocky Mountain horses, which is a breed of gaited horses related to Tennessee Walkers. Beate remembered looking at “Noble Excalibur” then, now five years old, who like Bandit was a descendant of the legendary Tennessee Walker “[Pride of Midnight](#).” The ranch had posted a video, and Beate was struck how much Excalibur looked like Bandit. Beate decided to secretly visit Darla Nassif, the trainer at Magic Mountain Ranch and a legend in horse circles when we were back in Montana.

That opportunity arose when Beate’s nephew, Arthur, arrived in August for a four-week visit and was recruited to the plot. Beate and he went on lots of day trips: to Glacier Park, the Bison Range, Helena (the state capitol), fishing, shopping, etc, providing perfect cover for clandestine destinations. In early August, Beate said she and Arthur were going to drive to Helena; Arthur wanted to see the capitol building and the replica of the Cologne Dome. It wasn’t a total lie; they *did* drive through Helena but without stopping, and Beate pointed out the sights as they zipped by. Then they went to Three Forks to look at horses; Beate tutored Arthur on details about Helena if I should ask.

When they arrived at the ranch, Darla showed them all the black horses she had for sale, and Beate was struck again how much Excalibur looked like Bandit. Darla explained that he had not been ridden recently and that she would put some training on him if Beate were interested. After a few days Beate let Darla know that she would like to stop by again and ride Excalibur.

Two weeks later a second cover story was concocted. While allegedly fishing the Madison River, Arthur and Beate drove to Three Forks again, this time to actually ride Excalibur. Beate managed to sneak her gear into the car without me noticing a missing saddle.

When they got to the ranch, Excalibur turned out to be very difficult to handle; he had had only minimal training, but it was also apparent that besides Bandit’s looks, he had the same personality traits. Beate realized that this was the horse she had been looking for, provided he could be trained, and she set the process in motion to buy him. Darla said she would train Excalibur to match my riding style and habits, which Beate described, and Beate should come back in two weeks for a final ride and to get him if everything checked out.

The story almost blew when our friend Larry called, who is an expert and fanatic fly fisher. When I told him that Beate and Arthur had been fishing the Madison, he expressed surprise; why would she drive three hours to the Madison when the local fishing is so much better in August? Beate hastily changed the subject. Larry thought it quite strange: Beate usually loves to talk about fly fishing.

Next, Andy, our vet was recruited, because he had to sign off on the vet check. Excalibur had run into a fence a few years ago and contracted a wire cut on his hind leg; which turned out to be lucky for us, because while the cut was only superficial, it was the reason why potential buyers had routinely rejected him. Beate arranged for a vet from Bozeman to drive up with his X-ray machine and take a complete set of pictures, which were then sent to Andy. While I was dealing with the apparent collapse of the world financial system, Beate was biting her nails that the vet check would show Excalibur healthy and that the conspiracy would hold. All the phone calls dealing with Excalibur had to be made in secret, on her cell phone and away from the house; participants were told *never* to call the house.

Beate made a date with Andy to go over the results of the X-rays. Arthur was told to say they were going on a “shopping trip to Missoula”. If interrogated, he was to claim that he was crazy about Abercrombie & Fitch, and that Beate was taking him for a morning of major shopping there. It took a long time for the X-rays to arrive that morning, and when they got there Andy had some reservations: he saw a shadow on an X-ray that concerned him. Beate fell into despair fearing that the perfect horse wasn’t perfect after all. They arranged for the Bozeman vet to drive back the next day for more X-rays. In the meantime, 30 minutes remained to satisfy the shopping cover story. Beate and Arthur raced to Abercrombie and hurriedly piled enough shirts, etc. into a shopping cart to make it look like hours of shopping.

The next day Beate and Arthur drove to the Bison Range, so that Arthur could see the beasts that once roamed the West, and also so that Beate could make phone calls. She was a nervous wreck until she got the call from our vet: The new X-rays had been e-mailed, Andy gave Excalibur a clean bill of health, and Beate heaved an enormous sigh of relief.

The conspiracy was moving into its final stages, and the circle had to be widened. Beate now included Sharon, our neighbor, who keeps our horses in the winter to make sure she could handle a 6th horse and swore her to secrecy.

The most intricate problem was what to do with Excalibur if he passed the final riding test. Beate intended to give me the horse in early October, but he had to be picked up by the end of August, because Darla was leaving Magic Mountain Ranch, moving to California. Beate recruited what turned out to be the most talented co-conspirators: our neighbors Tanya, who is also a vet, and her husband Alistair, who is the local physician.

Beate told me that Tanya and her husband were bringing in a horse from Canada who needed to be in two-week quarantine, by law, and that Tanya’s corrals were full. Would I mind if she temporarily stored the horse in our empty corral? I was thrilled to be able to do a favor for a neighbor. People around here had been helping us so much over the years that I jumped at the opportunity to reciprocate.

Now Beate needed to solve a number of tricky logistical problems to bring Excalibur home: She needed (1) a cover story for another day away from our ranch, (2) she needed to take our horse trailer, (3) she had to sneak out her saddle again, and (4) she had to explain why Tanya’s horse was arriving in *our* horse trailer.

Beate told me that she and our friend MaryAnna from the Rich Ranch across our meadow were going to a day spa near Helena, and that they had to leave very early because they couldn’t book any massages for later in the day. She even bought a bathing suit the day before and modeled it for me; it was those little touches that made the whole story totally credible.

Beate solved the trailer problem this way: fortunately for her, we had blown a tire on the trailer a couple of days ago, and she took the trailer to Missoula to get the tires changed. She then drove the trailer back to Woodworth Meadow (where our ranch is) and parked it at MaryAnna’s, praying I wouldn’t drive by; *that* would have blown the story. She explained to me that the trailer had to stay in Missoula overnight for the tire change. That seemed a little strange to me, but when I asked she quickly added that they were also checking the electrical wiring.

The next morning she and MaryAnna drove to Three Forks for a final ride and MaryAnna’s stamp of approval. MaryAnna grew up with horses, had been on many pack trips with Bandit and me, and knows how I ride. This time Excalibur was beautifully finished, and MaryAnna agreed that he was exactly the right horse for me. They loaded him in our trailer, agreed on the specifics of their supposed spa experience (“really funky, nothing like the brochure”) and drove off with him.

On the way home, Beate called me and said this: Did Tanya reach me? Allegedly Tanya had called Beate and said she would be bringing her new horse over late that night from Missoula Livestock, where he had just arrived from Canada. Would we mind? And then, as if the thought had just struck her, Beate said: “You know what? MaryAnna and I are going through Missoula because I have to pick up our horse trailer; why don’t I just get Tanya’s horse while I’m there?” I thought that was a great idea, another favor for a neighbor!

Three hours later I hear a commotion outside, look out of the window, and there is “Tanya’s horse” in our corral, and the first thought that strikes me is “My God, he looks just like Bandit!” I decide that I am going out to pet him and give him treats, because I know he’s traumatized from a long trip, torn from his old environment. I grab some pellets and go into the corral. He really *does* look like Bandit! I feed him the pellets, pet him and talk to him gently to reassure him. It’s then that I decide that I won’t go into the corral again while he’s here; I’ll just feed him the occasional pellet through the fence. It would be too painful; I *really, really* like this horse!! That evening Tanya came with her stethoscope to check on “her horse.” She later said: “People will believe anything if you’re wearing a stethoscope.” The next day Alastair brought hay and grain to feed “their horse.”

We had planned a dinner that night; it included most of the main conspirators: Tanya and her husband Alastair, MaryAnna, and our friend George, the retired Foreign Service officer. Beate had not let him in on the secret; he and I are close friends, and she was afraid of leaks and kept it on a “need to know” basis. But the morning before the dinner, George had an appointment with Alastair, who told him: “We’ll see you at dinner tonight, and you won’t believe the plot Beate cooked up,” telling him the whole story.

There were six people for dinner that night, all except me in on the secret, although Beate didn’t know that George knew. I was very intrigued with the horse, and asked Tanya and Alastair: “What’s his name? Where did you get him? How old is he? What breed is he?” Beate held her breath; she had briefed them on a few facts, but nothing like what I was asking. Alastair didn’t blink. He went into a long story, full of details, of how he was a partner in the horse, it was a Rocky Mountain horse, a buddy of his in Canada owned the other half, etc. etc. He had done some homework on Rocky Mountain horses that morning, expecting questions. George later said that he had rarely seen such accomplished on-the-spot lying, and he could put them in touch with a certain government agency where the ability to lie ad-lib convincingly is highly valued.

Throughout the dinner, Beate and our guests (including George) could barely contain themselves from bursting out laughing, they told me afterwards. At one point Beate went outside to check on the grill, even though there was nothing *on* the grill, because she was about to erupt.

Originally, Beate had planned to lift the veil on my birthday, which would have been another month. She decided she did not want to keep the secret any longer; besides, her friends had convinced her that it would not be right to let the horse just stand in the corral when I could have been riding him for a month.

So two days later, Beate announced that she was going to give me my birthday present early. She presented me with a letter which explained that she had found and bought the perfect, gaited black horse for me, trained for my riding style, a relative of Bandit and a worthy successor to Bandit. I was overwhelmed and moved beyond description. “So where *is* this horse?” I asked. I still hadn’t got it. Beate said: “He’s right in the corral outside; it’s Excalibur.” I was speechless; I had already fallen in love with him at first sight.

That day I [worked him in the round pen](#), and then we went on our first ride. It was incredible! Words fail me. He felt so right. I was thrown back in time: suddenly I was riding Bandit again 15 years ago. I was (and still am) in Heaven!!

It took us three days to come up with a name. “Excalibur” is too long; they used to call him “Calib” where he came from. We decided that “Kalif” [ka-LEEF] sounded close to what he was used to. And the name fits. “Kalif” is the German word for caliph, an Arabic word for the spiritual successor of the prophet, and Kalif is the spiritual successor of Bandit.