

Reader's digest

MOST READ
MOST TRUSTED
JULY 2014



25 REASONS TO LOVE CANADA NOW

An RD ORIGINAL ... 68

LAC-MÉGANTIC, ONE YEAR LATER

An RD ORIGINAL ... 84

HOW 11 SKYDIVERS CHEATED DEATH

An RD ORIGINAL ... 102

CAN DEPRESSION BE CURED?

From FLARE ... 96

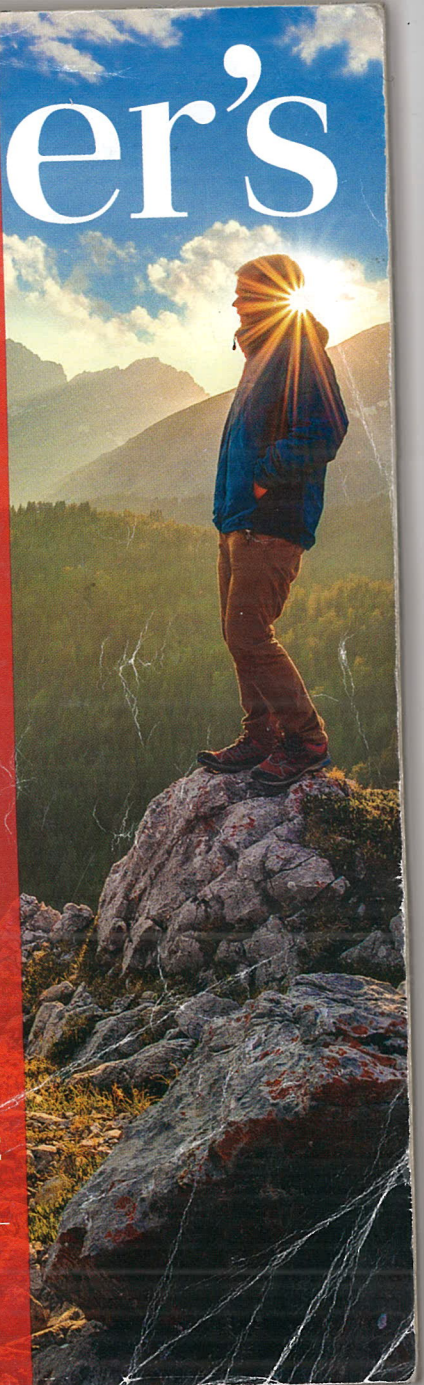
LIFE LESSONS WE LEARN TOO LATE

From PSYCHOLOGY TODAY ... 78

PREVENTING VISION LOSS 65

JOKES: AS KIDS SEE IT 83

BOOST YOUR WORD POWER 141

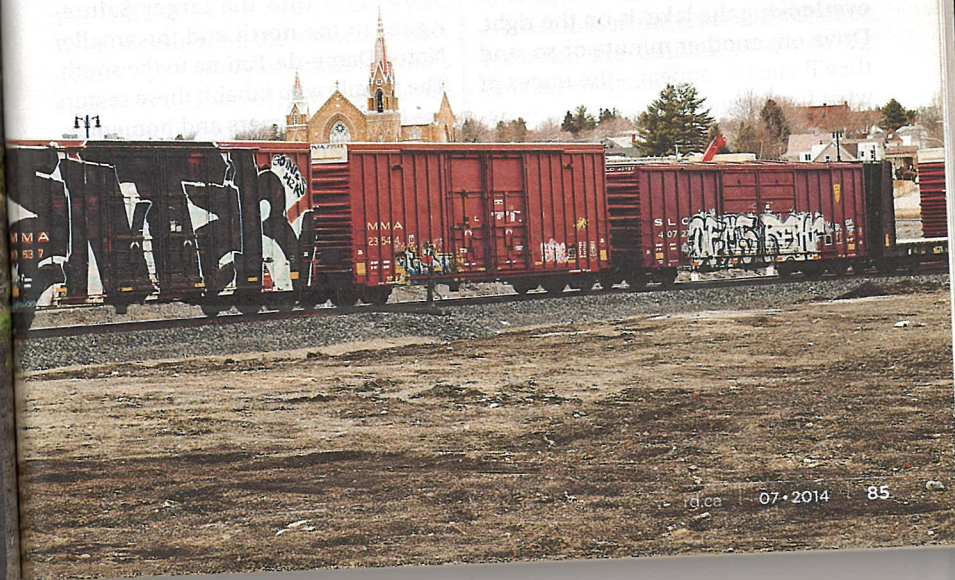


A derailed train, a massive explosion, 47 dead.
One year later, the Quebec town of 6,000 is still
reeling as it negotiates its recovery.

LAC-MÉGANTIC RISING

BY STÉPHANIE VERGE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GUILLAUME LAROSE



Driving into town, the first thing that stands out is the forest: pine, spruce and birch. Semis loaded with logs dot the last third of the three-hour trip southeast from Montreal, so there's no escaping the trees. Next are the mountains, part of the Appalachian range that connects to nearby Maine and home to some of the finest stargazing on the continent. Then there's the namesake lake, a 26-square-kilometre body of water that draws bathers, boaters and anglers during the too-short summer months.

Continue south on Laval Street, the main drag in this 6,000-person idyll, past the motels Le Quiet and Le Château, past the high school, the hospital, the Canadian Tire and the Tim Hortons. The Sainte-Agnès cemetery, a sloping parcel of land overlooking the lake, is on the right. Drive on, another minute or so, and they'll start to appear—the traces of what happened.

LAC-MÉGANTIC CAME into the world in a ball of fire at 1:14 a.m. on July 6, 2013. The town had been around for 129 years, but outside Quebec (and even then) few people could find it on a map. By the time the sun set, it would be known across the globe as the place where 47 people died, killed by a runaway train pulling 72 cars of crude oil that derailed

and detonated—an explosion 1/16th the strength of Hiroshima.

The first sign that something has gone wrong here is the dirt. Downtown, it's everywhere. This is not a simple spring thaw situation. If it's not grit being whipped up by the wind, it's mounds of earth populating the landscape, giant anthills bumping up against pockmark craters.

The top steps of Sainte-Agnès, the town's neo-Gothic Roman Catholic church, provide the best vantage point from which to see where 30-odd buildings—approximately half of the downtown core—once spread across three blocks. It's now a devastated zone blocked off by chain-link fence and guarded by security. From there, it's a straight shot to the bridge over the river—the Chaudière, which bisects the town, splitting it into the larger Sainte-Agnès to the north and the smaller Notre-Dame-de-Fatima to the south. The people who inhabit these sectors are business owners and homemakers, teachers and notaries, hunters and farmers—the types who populate small towns across the province and the country. They weren't prepared, logistically or emotionally, for such a catastrophe. Now they have no choice but to face its results.

Whether there was going to be a rail accident of nuclear-scale within North American borders wasn't so much a question of if but of when:



Mayor Colette Roy-Laroche in the Centre Sportif Mégantic, the only major community hub left standing in the town.

transport safety agencies in both the United States and Canada had been highlighting the vulnerabilities of DOT-111 oil tankers like the ones involved in Lac-Mégantic for more than two decades. The federal government recently announced a new safety measure that would necessitate the retrofitting or phasing-out of the old tank cars, but it's too late for this community.

Every crisis needs a manager, and in Lac-Mégantic that manager is Colette Roy-Laroche. The diminutive mayor might look like a kindly grandmother (and she is), but the 70-year-old is as solid as the granite for which

the area is reputed. A former teacher and school-board director, she was elected to lead the town in 2002; three terms in, she announced she would end her mandate in November 2013. All that has changed. Roy-Laroche is now one of the most recognizable political figures in Quebec, no small feat given the preponderance of headline-grabbing municipal and provincial leaders.

Much of Roy-Laroche's appeal lies in her relatability. During her first press conference on the day of the disaster, she spoke as a citizen of Lac-Mégantic. Pale and stricken, she had no idea how many were

dead (by the end of July 6, 1,000 of the 6,000 townspeople were still unaccounted for) or if she had family among them. "I needed to tell everyone what steps were being taken and I needed to reassure them," says Roy-Laroche. "But on another level, I was like everyone else, thinking, This is terrible. What will we do? What will we become?"

In early March, she was in D.C., lobbying Washington for stricter rail safety regulations. Montreal Maine and Atlantic Railway, the now-defunct company behind the crash, was American-owned, and criminal



Propping up flagging spirits and convincing citizens to remain patient can be a Sisyphean task.

charges were recently laid against three of its Canadian employees. Now Roy-Laroche is home, attempting to find a middle ground between moving on too quickly and not moving quickly enough.

A citizen-engagement program called *Reinventer la ville* (Reinventing the city) has been set up to get Méganticois involved in the creation of the new expanded downtown. At the inaugural public information session on March 26, the crowd of 400 was—in a typical schism—split: while some attendees hailed the initiatives

(14 projects, including the planned relocation of the main grocery store, pharmacy and liquor commission to the Fatima sector), others criticized the lack of transparency in the decision-making process. The carless residents of Fatima were beyond desperate: they had been cut off from Sainte-Agnès, where almost all business is done, since July. Still in the grip of a hard, seemingly never-ending winter, many people were on edge.

Propping up flagging spirits and convincing citizens to remain patient can be a Sisyphean task. But patience is not a virtue everyone can

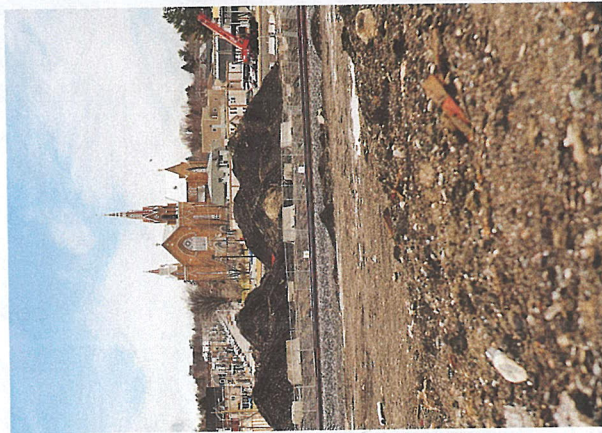
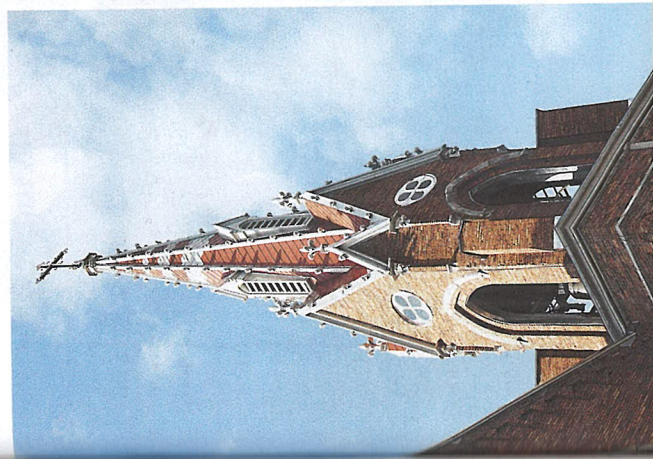
afford. It's now April, and 100 or so people who lost jobs in the blast are set to cash their final employment insurance cheques. If the Canadian government doesn't grant a temporary reprieve, they will have to put in around 700 hours of work to be eligible again—a tough goal to meet when a critical mass of local businesses are still shuttered.

THE SECOND SIGN that something has gone wrong in Lac-Mégantic is the sound. The tooth-aching clank of a pile driver building the base of a

READER'S DIGEST



Clockwise from top left: The "red zone," epicentre of the train explosion; memorial wall in the Centre Sportif Mégalantic; downtown core under construction; spire of century-old Sainte-Agnès church.



bridge adjoining Sainte-Agnès and Fatima can be heard on either shore of the Chaudière River. The new crossing is scheduled to open by October, "if all goes well" — a phrase uttered with frequency in these parts.

The cacophony points to something else: recovery. Lac-Mégantic is heading into its second year in a new world. The multi-million-dollar cleanup efforts are massive and ongoing: six million litres of oil had gushed from the ruptured tankers, with hundreds of thousands of litres spilling into the town's sewer system, river and lake; and soil decontamination is focused

Vigilance is paramount and has taken creative forms. In the weeks following the disaster, psycho-social support workers walked through the streets wearing white vests. Easy to identify and always available to talk, they were dubbed "the white angels." The angels have largely moved on, but reinforcements have stepped in. The Red Cross and the Health and Social Services Centre are jointly equipping "partners"—in this case, hairstylists, bartenders, servers and taxi drivers—who come in regular contact with citizens to encourage those in need to seek

Not everyone in Lac-Mégantic has lost someone, but no one escaped the tragedy.

on a 31-hectare site downtown. The environmental impact hasn't yet been fully assessed, let alone dealt with.

Addressing the town's psychic scars is also of vital importance. The impact of July 6 continues to reverberate. Jérôme Boulanger, the chief of paramedics, regularly fields calls from citizens in emotional distress. Vicky Orichefsky, the director of programs and services at the area's Health and Social Services Centre, attends to the mental health needs of a community whose coping mechanisms are worn through.

support. "Many people were in crisis mode for months. At some point, exhaustion sets in, and it becomes difficult to deal with daily life," says Orichefsky. "There are many aspects to mourning, and many reasons to mourn. The physical division of the town, for example, has had a major impact." Not everyone lost someone, but no one escaped the tragedy.

Yannick Gagné has been vacillating between succumbing and recovering for nine months. This isn't immediately obvious: at six-foot-four, he's a barrel-chested monolith.

Yannick Gagné stands inside the foundation of the new Musi-Café.

But his voice runs low and fast, the level rising whenever he talks about money troubles, or the bar—his bar—that was once the rollicking heart of this community. On July 6, 30 people died at Musi-Café, the most popular hangout in town, and 17 more in the surrounding apartments and houses.

Since then, he's kept busy, focusing on projects like the Musi-Café d'été, a temporary show-bar that attracted, last August and September, popular Quebec acts such as Vincent Vallières and Fred Pellerin. Gagné is currently absorbed in a more per-

the pressures of beginning again, and beyond that, the stress of losing people close to us. We say hello and we can see it in each other's eyes. If only we didn't have to worry about money on top of that."

Another reminder of that loss is back—keening whistles once again pierce the sky. On December 18, the first train returned to pick up a shipment from the furniture manufacturer Tafisa, a major employer in the area. Repaired tracks run right by the Musi-Café's new location: a few metres away sits a red railway car, covered in spray-paint tags.



For some the ribbon is a physical never-forget; for others, a symbol of solidarity and hope.

manent venture: the new Musi-Café, slated to open this summer.

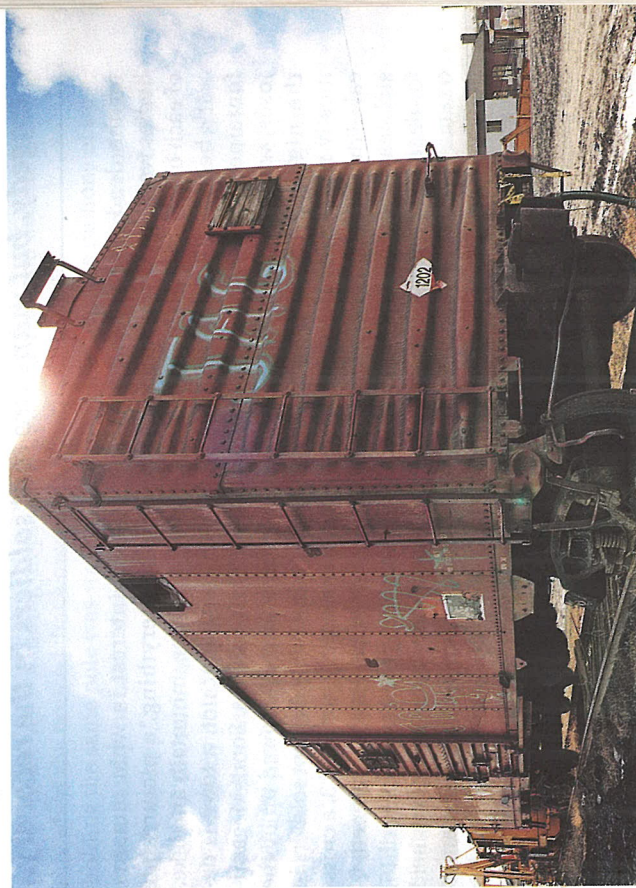
Gagné feels trapped, both by his misfortune and by his opportunity. He had finished extensive renovations on Musi-Café 24 hours before the bar exploded and hadn't yet adjusted his insurance policy. He's on the hook for that money and currently supports a family of six—his wife, mother-in-law and three kids—on the \$300 a week the Red Cross provides. Failure is not an option. "I've sometimes thought of giving up, but I'm stuck here," says the 35-year-old. "So many of us are facing

THE THIRD SIGN that something has gone wrong in Lac-Mégantic is the ribbon. Blue and green with a small red heart on its left edge and a "Support Lac-Mégantic" to the right, it can be found in sticker form on shop windows and car bumpers. For some it's a physical never-forget; for others, a symbol of solidarity and hope.

Christian Lafontaine doesn't need a ribbon to remember. He's been missing his brother for months. The last memory the 47-year-old has of his younger sibling is of Gaétan in the Musi-Café, rushing to find the mother



(Left) Explosion survivors Christian Lafontaine and Mélanie Guérard. (Above) One of the ubiquitous "Support Lac-Mégantic" ribbons. (Below) Lone railway car near the construction site of the new Musi-Café.



of his two little girls, Joanie Turnel. As the train hit, Lafontaine and his wife, Mélanie Guérard, ran out the front door, past their friends and family. "They were like mummies, frozen in panic," says Lafontaine. "Now, of course, I ask myself 'How could I possibly not have screamed at everyone else to get out?' It all happened so fast." Immediately following the explosion, the family's excavation company—Lafontaine & Fils Inc.—committed equipment and manpower to containing the oil, then to combing the downtown's remains

covers his arm and is his concession to the past. "We have to drop the term 'victim.' It's time to be visionaries, to invest in our community in order for it to be reborn."

Rebirth will mean different things to different people, but one thing is certain: the Méganticois and the trains are forever linked. Forged by industry and cemented by tragedy, the relationship with railway transportation provides Lac-Mégantic with much of its economy. There is, however, talk of focusing on tourism, capitalizing on the outside world's

Some Méganticois have been swallowed up by the tragedy, but many are foot soldiers in the recovery.

for the dead. Gaétan and Joanie's bodies were discovered within sight of each other.

It's been a difficult road for Lafontaine's family. While his sister Josée, who celebrated her birthday the night of the explosion, has mostly recovered, his brother Pascal—who lost his wife Karine—is on sick leave. Their parents, married for decades, are struggling with the trauma and its impact on their relationship. But Lafontaine is looking ahead. A tattoo—which includes a blazing downtown, watched over by the towering Sainte-Agnès church—

sudden interest in what remains, despite everything, a picturesque layering of tree, mountain and lake.

Picturesque or not, a town is defined by its citizens. Some Méganticois have been swallowed up by the tragedy, but many are foot soldiers in the slow recovery. On April 3, a cross-river pedestrian path was opened, finally reuniting the town. On April 15, a groundbreaking ceremony was held for a housing co-op in Fatima, named after Gaétan and Joanie. And on May 15, Lafontaine and his wife welcomed Lac-Mégantic's newest resident—a baby girl named Élodie. **R**

Laughter

THE BEST MEDICINE



MY MOTHER WAS standing on the bus when she noticed that a man holding the same pole was staring at her. Finally, he said, "Excuse me, this is my stop."

"Well," she said, "go ahead."

"This is my pole," he said.

My mother was confused until he added, "I just bought it to hold up my shower curtain."

From gcfl.net

SHERLOCK HOLMES and Dr. Watson arrived at the campgrounds, pitched their tent and fell asleep. Later that night, Watson was awakened by Holmes.

"Watson, look up at the sky," said Holmes. "What do you see?"

"Millions of stars."

"And what do you deduce from that?"

"That if there are millions of stars, and even a few of them are orbited by planets, there might also be intelligent life out there."

"No, you idiot. It means that somebody stole our tent."

From jokebuddha.com

IN HIGH SCHOOL, my sister went out with the captain of the chess team. My parents loved him. They figured that any guy who took hours to make a move was okay with them.

Comedian **BRIAN KILEY**

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DAVE WHAMOND