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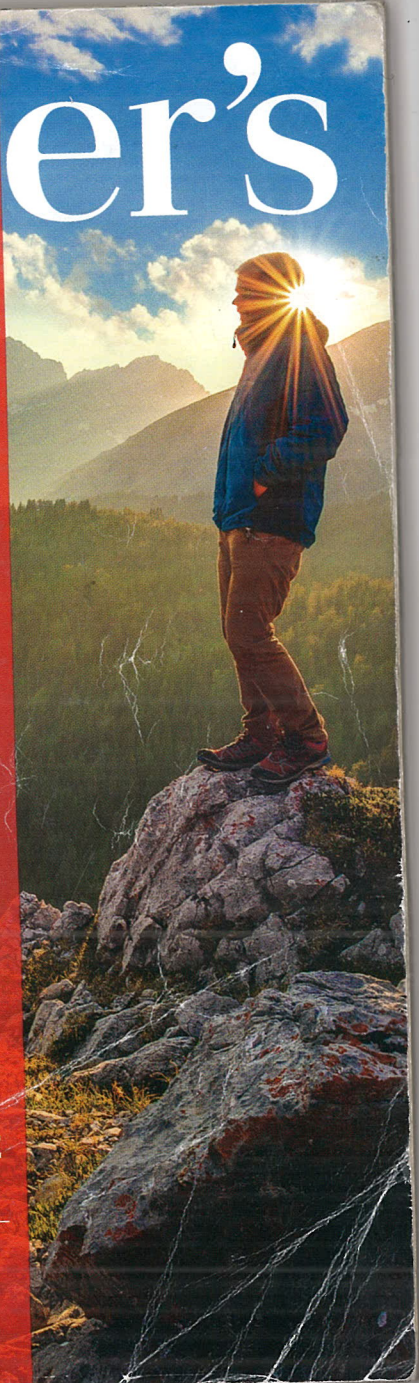
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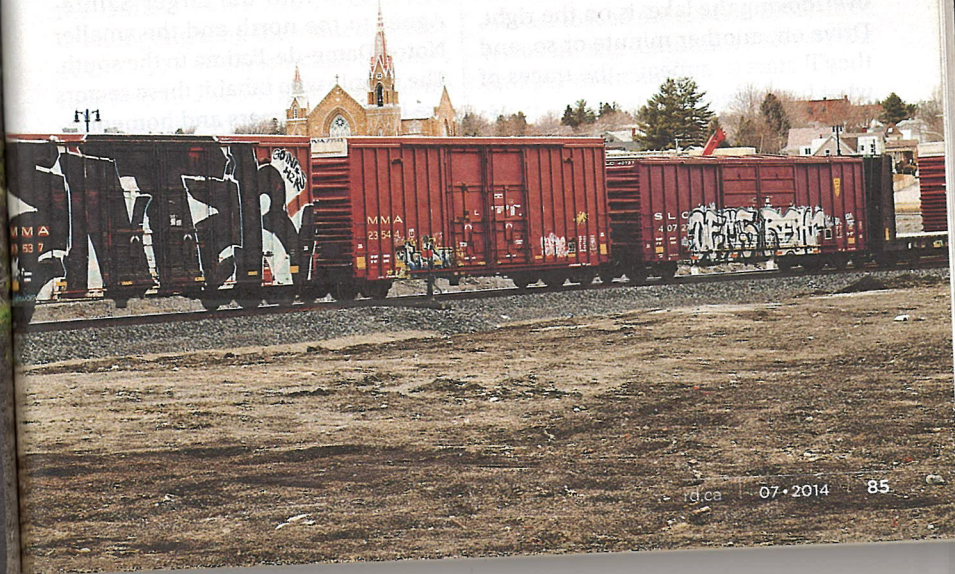


A derailed train, a massive explosion, 47 dead.
One year later, the Quebec town of 6,000 is still
reeling as it negotiates its recovery.

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

(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



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

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



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

