



Catherine
MacKenzie

Cellars
and
Sauerkraut:

The Halifax
Explosion,
December 1917

Ned's stomach growled. He'd been in a rush to leave home and had neglected to eat breakfast. He looked forward to dinner, for his dear, sweet Maddie had promised his favorite meal of sauerkraut and pork chops.

His lids threatened to close, but he forced himself to stay awake. Thanks to their daughter, Charlotte, neither Maddie nor he had slept the previous night, but who could fault a sick baby?

He stared at his to-do list and glanced at

the calendar: December 6. He had to prepare a report on enrollment for the last three years. Though it was too early to finish the statement for 1917, he could work on the previous years, which necessitated descending to the dungeons of hell, as he referred to the basement, to retrieve data for 1915 and 1916.

"Okay," he muttered. If he sat at his desk much longer, he'd fall asleep for sure.

In the basement, he lingered too long reading documents from numerous boxes.

Boring stuff, most of it, but other information, such as students' backgrounds and from where they'd hailed, interested him. He'd read anything to avoid returning to his desk where sleep would surely befall him.

He sighed. He preferred completing work in a timely fashion rather than procrastinating. He replaced the papers where he'd found them, collected the stack of documents he'd gathered for the report, and headed to the stairs.

Maddie wrapped the blanket around her daughter, Charlotte, who was sick with fever. "Sleep, my baby, sleep."

The four-month-old had been awake most of the night, and Maddie hadn't slept either. With Christmas three weeks away, she needed to complete the ribbing on Ned's socks and the tating on Charlotte's dress. Thankfully, she'd finished the other Christmas gifts while she was pregnant and needed only to wrap them.

Ah, Christmas. Her favorite season. She hated the cold but couldn't change the fact that Christmas was one of the winter months. That's precisely why she made wool garments as gifts for family and friends. Some weren't as appreciative as others of handmade items, but she had deleted those folk from her Christmas lists previously.

She peered out the kitchen window. Where were the signs of red Elsie Evans had predicted? Though the temperature had hit freezing overnight, the early morning was calm and clear, and the sun announced a glorious day. No inkling of red that Maddie could see. She had scanned the sky the prior evening before going to bed. No red then either.

She had conversed with Elsie the previous day while shopping at Lily's Grocery. Elsie, a deeply religious woman full of continual doom and gloom, warned of impending bad weather. The elderly woman had wrung her hands and spouted: "Jesus said, 'When in evening, ye say, it will be fair weather: For the sky is red. And in the morning, it will be foul weather today; for the sky is red and lowering.'"

Though the parishioners of St. Paul's Church, including Maddie, were in awe of Elsie's scripture quoting, many believed the woman was crazy. Who but God could forecast the weather? Elsie was correct fifty percent of the time, but with those odds, anyone could claim to be a weather forecaster.

Maddie turned from the window. She sat in her grandmother's rocking chair with Charlotte on her lap and caressed her baby's forehead. The fever was abating. "Sleep, my little one, sleep," she cooed. She kissed the baby's forehead and rocked contentedly, happy her child was recovering.

Maddie felt bad Ned hadn't slept well the previous night. Though he'd gotten up late, he had ensured the kitchen brimmed with warmth before he left for work. He hadn't had time for breakfast and would welcome pork chops and sauerkraut for dinner. She'd recently made her first batch of sauerkraut, thanks to her mother's instructions. The only proper way to make the dish was to let the shredded raw cabbage and salt ferment in barrels for at least a month. And no peeking, her mother had admonished her. But Maddie couldn't resist sneaking several quick ganders.

She glanced at the clock: two minutes after nine. She eyed the knitting needles and gray yarn in the basket on the floor. Char-

lotte's eyelids fluttered. Maddie thought it safe to move, but when she placed the babe in the cradle, Charlotte's eyes popped open and she wailed.

Maddie sighed and withdrew Charlotte from the cradle. It would be impossible to finish Ned's socks with a fussy baby on her lap.

"Okay, let's get the sauerkraut. You and me." Maddie stood. She'd figure out later how to carry a baby, a light, and a pail of sauerkraut up the stairs, but at the very least, she could check on the mixture. She lit the lantern, scooped up the baby, and headed to the exit off the kitchen. As soon as she opened the door, the cave-like conditions of the cellar lambasted her. Gripping the lantern in one hand and Charlotte in the other, she descended the steep stairs.

When she reached the damp dirt floor, she adjusted Charlotte and ambled to the other side of the room. She was halfway to the barrels when a humongous blast boomed overhead. Clatters, bangs, thumps, and a mishmash of indistinguishable noises unlike anything she had ever heard resonated from above.

The lantern slipped from her fingers, the flame extinguishing when it hit the floor. Her arm instinctively tightened around Charlotte, who wailed and squirmed.

"Sssh," she mumbled.

The dark. Oh, the dark.

What happened? Earthquake? Maddie was positive the ground shuddered and the foundation's walls swayed before she dropped the lantern. Would the house collapse?

Debris swirled around her face and settled on her skin. Timbers above rumbled and groaned. She covered Charlotte's head

with her arm and tucked her in close to her breast.

What to do? She couldn't remain in the cellar, but the upstairs might be just as unsafe. Peering through the darkness, she strained to see the stairway.

She stood for several long moments while Charlotte bellowed. The air became thick, and Maddie gasped for breath. With her right hand she groped along the wall, maneuvered around junk, and touched sharp chunks of concrete, hoping to avoid creepy crawlers and spider webs.

She inhaled, needing to breathe but abhorring the intensified odors that invaded her nostrils—mildew, mustiness, mold, and riled-up dust that clogged her air passages and stuck in her throat. She sneezed, unable to cover her mouth as her mother had taught her, but she shrugged off that inane thought.

Her foot hit a solid object. Feeling in the dark with her free hand, she found it to be the stairs. She switched Charlotte to her right shoulder, grasped the railing, and stepped on the bottom tread.

She made it to the top and pushed against the door. When it slid open, the draft and eerie quiet assaulted her. Light from broken windows highlighted floating dust particles.

Pots, pans, and framed photographs had fallen from hooks on the walls. Broken dishes and glassware lay strewn about the room. Worst of all, the china closet had toppled, splintering her late grandmother's rocker and obliterating her workbasket and the baby's cradle.

Her eyes welled. "My goodness!" She gripped Charlotte and lowered her face to her baby, inhaling the still-present newborn

fragrance. "Your cradle. You were just there. So was I."

Carefully stepping over debris, Maddie reached the window. Puffs of white smoke rose in the distance near the harbor.

Her heart skipped a beat.

Ned! She leaned against the wall. She couldn't pass out, not holding Charlotte. She had to remain strong. For her baby.

But Ned!

Ned worked downtown at the Royal Naval College of Canada in the north end of the HMC Dockyard. By the harbor!

Ned stirred and opened his eyes. Indescribable agony wracked his body. He had difficulty swallowing. His mouth felt stuffed with cotton, and his dry tongue touched a gritty film on his lips. His nose itched, but he couldn't move his arms to reach his face.

What happened? Where was he? Help me remember, God. Something. Anything.

He had gone to the basement. For papers. What happened after that?

He stared at joists above him. He was still in the basement. On the floor. Covered in rubble and debris. Rumbling echoed in the distance, and odd noises reverberated throughout the building. He moved his legs, thankful he could wiggle his toes.

Maddie!

He shoved off the wreckage and managed to stand. Shooting pains coursed through his back. Blood dotted his hands. He stumbled over debris, carefully avoiding glass shards, jagged metal, and broken bricks. He had to get outside.

The stairs were intact.

He reached the first floor and gasped. Part of the north wall of the building had crumbled, leaving a gaping hole to the out-



doors. He peeked into his office. Timbers and plaster covered his desk. Papers, bricks, and wood planks riddled the room. He had to get out while he was still alive.

The Germans! They'd finally done it. Hadn't he heard the planes, that faint roar while in the basement? He shook his head; nothing could be heard when in the dungeon—not planes, at least. But what then?

The Great War had raged overseas for three and a half long years. The war had finally hit home, he thought. The Germans had dropped a bomb—or bombs—on the seafaring port of Halifax. He'd feared an attack for months and was surprised it had taken this long. Since the war had started, the harbor bustled with troops and ships, along with shipments of war supplies. Halifax was founded in 1749—Ned fancied historical facts—as a military outpost of the British Empire, and once the city became known as an international port and naval facility, it was placed on the map. This activity left it wide open for a German attack.

What was left of his city? More importantly, what about Maddie and Charlotte? His stomach knotted. He flexed his fingers, ready to take on whatever came his way.

The outdoors was shrouded in fog, gray and dull as if he wore dark glasses that obscured color. He rubbed his eyes to clear his vision and regretted it immediately, for gritty bits scratched his eyeballs. He wiped blood-smearred fingers over his sooty pants.

He scanned the carnage from outside the college building. The structure was once the former naval hospital built in 1863 to replace the original hospital that was destroyed in the 1815 fire. It was later refurbished to house the college. The structure would again have to be rebuilt or torn down.

Other than fireballs shooting over the harbor and faint, indistinct echoes in the distance, the area was deserted. Was he the only survivor?

His paternal grandfather had relayed stories of the Crimean War, and the destruction facing Ned was how the younger Ned had envisioned a war-torn city. His ears ached, and he feared he had been deafened in the blast. The city was too silent.

Seconds later his ears buzzed, and unpleasant odors assaulted his nostrils. His nose itched, but he didn't dare touch his face again. He knew without looking that his skin had been lacerated, and drops of blood plopping to his sleeve confirmed his suspicion.

He proceeded away from the harbor toward home, covering his head with his bloody hands as he went, unsure of the streets he encountered. Barrington. Duke.

Duke? The street didn't look like Duke, and neither had Barrington resembled Barrington Street. The farther he walked, the more alive the streets became—no, not alive, less dead. Unrecognizable streets ablaze with bonfires and mayhem confronted him no matter where he turned. Clouds of smoke buffeted into the sky. Trees had been snapped in half, and numerous branches had been tossed about. Crippled metal and white-hot shards of iron littered the ground. Buildings, indistinguishable from their former states, had collapsed.

Individuals shrieked and howled as if they were banshees or were as quiet as spies sworn to secrecy. Men either darted by, heedless of what might be underfoot, or ambled, expressionless, disbelieving of the chaos. Wide-eyed women in torn dresses and missing shoes staggered about senselessly.

He reached Gottingen Street quicker than he had anticipated—at least he assumed it was Gottingen. Yes, there was the School for the Deaf. Other than shattered windows, the building appeared intact. Oh, those poor, petrified children. Perhaps it was a blessing in disguise they couldn't hear; maybe they'd missed the commotion. He listened closely and was positive he detected hollow screams, evidence that confusion had entered the children's dark worlds. He shook his head. No, he couldn't hear them; the massive brick building was silent save for nearby guttural noises.

Several people wandered past aimlessly, stumbling as if blind. The Halifax School for the Blind on Morris Street wasn't in his direction, so he tried to shake the images from his mind. To be unable to see, unable to know what had happened, and unable to fathom what would occur next would be horrible.

Guilt washed over him when he eyed the School for the Deaf again. Or had it viewed him? Could buildings become animate? He should lend assistance—no, he had his own child to think about. His dear, sweet Charlotte.

He scooted by as quickly as he could, pretending he hadn't seen the building looming before him.

And then it hit him. He'd deserted the college. He shouldn't have left before checking on his coworkers and the students. His saving grace—if he had one—was that he'd been in the basement when the attack occurred. Others wouldn't have fared as well. He couldn't have searched all three floors himself. He couldn't save everyone. His family depended upon him.

Suddenly, chilled by the frosty December



weather, he shoved his hands into the pockets of his thin sweater. Structures burned alongside him, and he could have warmed himself by walking closer, but it would be sacrilegious to take comfort from another's loss. He hesitated, watching smoke gush from windows of a once-stately house. Within minutes, the sagging roof plunged and disappeared. His stomach lurched. How had his house fared?

He passed an obese woman with long, deep gashes on her exposed flesh. Heavy breasts drooped to the waistband of her rumpled skirt. Minutes later, he met another woman. Her left eyeball dangled on her cheek, held by a mere filament.

A voice shouted, "What's happening?"

No one answered, or if they did, Ned didn't hear because he continued to walk toward home.

He glimpsed flecks of color amongst the colorless world and thought his eyesight was recovering: bright reds, dull reds, pinks.

Blood, he realized, and then saw bits of blues and greens amid the rubble.

The stink of burning flesh permeated his nostrils. He'd never smelled such an odor. He had heard that once a person smelled death, they never got over the stench. He held his breath and tried to not breathe deeply—at least not until he passed the atrocities, when he might inhale a great gulp of fresh air. But when he thought he could take an unspoiled breath, none surfaced.

Nothing but ugliness, heinousness, and dehumanization faced him.

A frantic young man, his face blackened and clothes tattered, gripped Ned's shoulders. Ned fought off the creature.

"Calm down," the stranger muttered. "Just trying to help."

Ned extricated himself from the strong hands and moved away. He didn't need help. He was fine. "I'm not like the rest of you," he screamed.

Minutes later, yearning to talk to someone—anyone—he latched onto an older man's arm. "Germans," Ned said despite the stranger's vacant eyes. "The Germans have attacked."

But where were the planes he had heard?

Maddie! Charlotte! He'd dawdled too long. He must keep going.

In his rush, he narrowly missed tramping over a headless body, and when he looked up, he saw two individuals draped over telegraph wires. More dead hung from smashed windows. They appeared as if they'd been curious about what happened and stretched as far as they could to peer down the street before giving up. Others stood silent, vacantly staring from blackened windows and door frames. He assumed many others were trapped in homes, for he had passed entire blocks caught up in infernos.

Bile rose, and he bent to release it. With the edge of his sleeve, he wiped his face. He glimpsed an individual in stark contrast to previous impaired women: heavily made-up, flowing gown, high heels. A lady of the night? Though appearing unharmed, she mumbled and moaned. Mental, he figured. She'd gone crazy. But hadn't he too? The world had gone crazy.

His entire body felt numb as if he floated through space. Was he immersed in a dream? He had to be. None of this could be real. Only his quivering legs worked, moving him forward. Germans, their burnished helmets perched on top of their heads, could appear at any moment from around a burning building or out of a wreckage heap.

Had he missed them—the Germans? He'd averted his eyes more than once, even walking with his head down at times so he wouldn't know what lay on either side of him. He watched only where he placed his next step.

But no, the enemy would have made its move, would have announced its presence with gunshots or more bombs. He admonished himself to be more aware... unless... had he been mistaken? But if not the Germans, who? Was there another evil force at work? His cynical father had proclaimed the world's demise many times. Had that time arrived?

He shuddered and almost stepped on a rotten log. He shuddered, his body convulsing. No, a leg. Charred. Other limbs and bodies burnt beyond recognition presented themselves. He could not identify them and knew not if one belonged to a friend. At one point, he clamored over several mangled bodies to avoid burning rubble. There was nowhere else to go. He didn't want to veer from the road. The Germans might be waiting.

He reached Northwood Street. A figure appeared out of nowhere and walked toward him.

"Harbor's on fire!" the man shouted. "Ships exploded."

Ned gripped his arm. "Slow down. What you say?"

The distraught man wriggled from his grasp and pointed behind him. "Fire. In the harbor."

"Germans." Ned remembered when a German U-boat had torpedoed the Canadian hospital ship HMHS *Llandoverly Castle* in June. Despite the incident taking place off southern Ireland, it was one of the worst atrocities to hit Canada. And now this!

"No, not Germans. Two ships," the man said. "Collided. The *Mont-Blanc*."

The *Mont-Blanc*? Ned had walked along the harbor the previous morning when the French cargo ship, on her way to France from New York, steamed in. His eyes widened. "The *Mont-Blanc*? Not the Germans?"

"The Mont-Blanc, yes."

The ship carried military explosives, and Ned realized the seriousness of the situation and how lucky he had fared. He could see, move his arms, walk. He mouthed a prayer. Please, God, save us.

Minutes later, he encountered Elsie Evans standing at what used to be the corner of Parker and Norward. "Elsie, you okay?"

Her dark eyes bore into his. "Told ya so. I warned Maddie yesterday. Did she tell ya? It'll be stormy tomorrow, I tells her. And see it today?" She pointed to the sky. "The sky's red and threatening." Weariness emanated from her as if she'd given up.

You're one of the lucky ones, he wanted to say. You and I. We're alive. But he didn't want to rehash the horrors if she questioned him, didn't want to waste time explaining about the ships. And what did he know, anyhow?

"Mark my words." She waved her arms like a madwoman. "Blizzard a-comin'."

"Keep safe, Elsie."

Finally, Albion Row was in his sight. Home! At first glance, the street appeared unscathed, but as he neared, cracked and smashed windows confronted him. Several doors had been blown from door frames, and trees bordering the street had been splintered. The brick buildings looked intact, but outward appearances could be deceiving.

Syd, his and Maddie's landlord, sat on the stoop at number 89 Albion. Slivers of glass

protruded from his face. One eye was bloodied. Ned comforted the old gent, who spoke incoherently.

“You’ll be okay,” Ned said, rubbing the elderly man’s arm. “Sit tight. I’ll be back. I have to get Maddie.”

Ned and Maddie’s home was number 87; Syd lived in the attached building. If Syd looked like that...

The sight of blood had never bothered Ned, but he’d seen too much. The group of

At one point, she brought their daughter into their bed, each of them gaining comfort from the other, but once the child had settled, she laid her in a makeshift cradle by their bed. Maddie didn’t want Charlotte out of her sight.

Ned and Maddie knew they should get up, but the horrors of the previous day assaulted them again. Each was aware of the other’s thoughts. In a matter of minutes, their once content world had changed.

Out of tremendous tragedy comes compassion and contribution and change.

frenzied, bloodied children who had raced with flailed arms flashed before him. Would Charlotte reach their age? He gagged several times, needing to rid himself of the horrific scourges he’d viewed and ingested, as well as the every-man-for-himself attitude he’d adopted. How selfish of him!

But then Maddie, cradling Charlotte in her arms, appeared at the doorway, and everything was forgotten.

“Maddie,” he screeched, and they raced toward each other.

The next day, Ned and Maddie awoke to frigid December temperatures. They huddled in bed, legs entwined, arms gripping each other, glad to be alive. Neither had slept more than an hour. Ned had been up stoking the fire. Maddie had attended to sick Charlotte.

Both jumped at Charlotte’s sudden wail. Maddie leaned over the bed. “Hush, little one.”

Ned kissed his wife. “I need to go to town. See if I can lend a hand.”

She scanned his face. “Please be careful.”

Ned slogged down the street. Due to the heavy snow and harsh wind, he was forced to pause every few seconds to catch his breath. He could barely see his neighborhood.

He stopped at Syd’s house, but he wasn’t there.

He rapped on the Doucette’s door, finally giving up when no one answered, and entered.

“Oh, my word, come in, come in,” Mrs. Doucette said.

“And you’re safe?” Ned glanced about the home. Shaken, as was his house.

“It’s a miracle we survived.” Mrs. Doucette’s eyes glistened. “I heard what happened to some of those poor souls.”

Ned nodded. “Yes, I saw enough to last me a lifetime.”

“Tom was up all night. He left early this morning.”

“I must get to town too. See if I can help.”

“Bless you, Ned. Be safe,” Mr. Doucette warned.

“I fear we’re the lucky ones,” Ned replied.

their ship was about to explode but couldn’t be heard above the din.

Approximately twenty minutes later, at 9:04:35 a.m., the *Mont-Blanc* exploded, scattering fragments of its ship for kilometers. Over 12,000 buildings within a 2.6-kilometer (1.6-mile) radius of the harbor were destroyed or damaged. Along with over 2,000 dead, an estimated 9,000 were injured. Six thousand people were left homeless, 25,000 with insufficient shelter. Widespread damage also occurred across the harbor in Dartmouth, and a tsunami resulting from the blast wiped out the community of the Mi’kmaq First Nation who had lived in the Tufts Cove area for generations.

Despite the blizzard the following day, which brought forty-one centimeters (sixteen inches) of heavy snow, relief efforts began. Surviving inhabitants, policemen, railway workers, firefighters, and military personnel helped out. Anyone with a working vehicle collected the injured. Royal Navy cruisers, merchant cruisers, and other in-port ships took aboard the wounded. Ships at sea joined in the aid, and rescue trains arrived from across Atlantic Canada and the northeastern United States.

The morning of the disaster, a mortuary committee was formed, and the Chebucto Road School in Halifax’s west end became the central morgue. At around noon, leading citizens banded together to form the Halifax Relief Commission, which provided medical relief, transportation, food, and shelter, and eventually paid the medical and funeral costs for victims.

The death toll could have been worse had it not been for Patrick Vincent (Vince) Coleman, an Intercolonial Railway dispatcher working at the railyard near the explosion.

Author’s Notes

December 6, 2022, will mark the 105th anniversary of the Halifax Explosion, the largest manmade explosion before the development of nuclear weapons.

On December 6, 1917, the Norwegian vessel *SS Imo* collided with *SS Mont-Blanc*, a French cargo ship carrying explosives, in the strait connecting the upper Halifax Harbor to the Bedford Basin in Nova Scotia, Canada. The *Mont-Blanc* was traveling from New York City via Halifax to Bordeaux, France, while the *Imo* was picking up a cargo of relief supplies in New York. The *Mont-Blanc* arrived in Halifax on December 3 but awaited refueling supplies.

The fire on the *Mont-Blanc* resulting from the collision quickly grew out of control, and Halifax citizens gathered on the street or stood at windows of homes or businesses to watch the spectacular fire. The frantic crew of the *Mont-Blanc* shouted from lifeboats that

Just as he and a co-worker were fleeing, he remembered a passenger train from Saint John, New Brunswick, was due to arrive. He raced back to his post and sent telegraph messages to alert the train. Thanks to his bravery, other incoming trains came to a halt too. One such train carried approximately three hundred passengers. Coleman lost his life.

Many of the wounds from the blast permanently maimed people. Thousands of unsuspecting people watched the ship burn in the harbor, many from inside buildings, which put them in the path of glass fragments from shattered windows. Roughly 5,900 eye injuries were reported, and 41 people lost their sight. The eye injuries resulting from the disaster led to physicians' better understanding of how to care for damaged eyes, and after the Canadian National Institute for the Blind was formed, Halifax became internationally known as a center for the care of the blind.

The Canadian Red Cross, which had no previous experience with major civic disasters, broadened its mandate in 1919 to include peacetime disaster response and medical emergencies. In addition, a series of health reforms in areas such as public sanitation, maternity care, and pediatric surgery were also developed. Many safety-related changes were implemented, including new rules for the storage of hazardous materials and harbor navigation.

Canada's prime minister at the time, Robert Borden, pledged the government would cooperate "in every way to reconstruct the Port of Halifax." Captain Symington of the USS *Tacoma* speculated the port would not be operational for months, but dockyard operations resumed before Christmas.

Richmond, Halifax's north end, bore the

brunt of the explosion. In 1917, Richmond was a working-class neighborhood with few paved roads. After the explosion, the area was improved and today is an upscale neighborhood and shopping district called the Hydrostone.

There was about \$35 million in damages (about \$569 Canadian today). Financial aid was raised from various sources, including the Canadian Federal government, the British government, and the state of Massachusetts.

In 1918, Halifax sent a Christmas tree to Boston, a gesture of thanks for the help provided by the Boston Red Cross and the Massachusetts Public Safety Committee. In 1971, the tradition of sending a tree to Boston became an annual occurrence.

This fictional story of Ned and Maddie was inspired by a true story told by my third cousin, Elizabeth Cardoza Taylor, who states:

"My mother and grandmother were at home on Princess Place (just off the Common). My mother was sitting in a small wooden rocker in front of the china cabinet. My grandmother decided she needed sauerkraut from the barrel in the basement for the meal she was preparing for my grandfather; he was on military duty on McNabb's Island (I believe) but would be home later. My grandmother scooped up my mother and took her with her to retrieve the sauerkraut. The explosion happened while they were in the basement. When they eventually returned to the kitchen, the china cabinet had fallen over and crushed the chair my mother was sitting in. She always said her life was saved by sauerkraut, and that's why she loved it. The house had broken windows, but I don't think there was ma-



image info

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 jor damage. It was half of a double. A relative who lived in the other half had opened the sliding door into the parlor to clean. She was blown through the opening by the explosive force and would have been injured had she not opened the door earlier. The sauerkraut barrel in question was, I believe, in the basement of the other half of the house."

Sadly, no one really talked to me about those times, particularly my grandfather who, I am sure, saw more than he wanted to remember. Some of the houses on Princess Place still exist—with historic plaques of some sort—but theirs does not. ❖



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