

The Expulsion of the Acadians

Edith, a willowy thirteen-year old, cracked open her eyes and let out a huge yawn. The sunshine coming in from the window warmed her face as she crawled out from under her covers and shrugged on her clothes. It was Sunday, so she had to attend mass in about an hour. As an afterthought, she glanced out the window and paused to admire the view. The beautiful land of 1755 Acadia rolled out before her eyes. The sun shone down on the shimmering grass and the sparkling lake. The hills rippled off into the distance. She took a deep breath and felt the cool, morning air fill her lungs and wake her up. She listened to the birds chirp out their greetings and waved to a particularly loud crow who was doing loops in the sky. She inhaled the sweet aroma of the flowers and herbs that grew in neat rows in her family's garden. My, did she sure love spring.

It was shaping out to be a wonderful day, so she couldn't figure out why she felt so uneasy! Her hair was prickling and she felt like she was being watched. She splashed icy water on her face to get rid of the feeling, but immediately whipped around, a tingling on the back of her neck. She stared into the distance and screamed when a hand tapped her shoulder.

"Edith! Calm down! You have to brush your hair, we are going to go soon." Edith whirled in the other direction but found it was only Ma. She mentally shook herself and twirled her hair into a knot before slipping on her bonnet.

After a hurried breakfast, Edith stepped outside and took a moment to appreciate the crisp breeze on her face. She looked again at the gorgeous landscape and reminded herself what a beautiful day it was and that she shouldn't be worried.

Just as her whole family was settled in the buggy, there was a slam of a door. Her neighbour, Mme. Curieux, came rushing up to Edith's family and started shouting.

"Genevieve! Isaac! Que fais-tu? Don't go to mass today! Something is not right! I have been warned! They are coming! We are not safe! Do not go to mass!" Then she ran back into her house and closed the shutters.

Edith stared at her parents and saw their faces surprisingly set.

"Do not heed Mrs. Smith, my children," Ma said, "She has been falsely warned, we are all perfectly safe." Edith released the breath she didn't realise she had been holding. She mentally reprimanded herself, saying that there was still nothing to worry about. However, her thoughts trailed off when she glimpsed her parents in her peripheral vision and caught them exchanging a glance filled with worry and even fear. Edith trembled and yanked her bonnet down over her ears, trying not to acknowledge the rock of worry settling in her stomach. She shivered, the breeze now feeling menacing and sharp.

Edith soon stepped into the church and sank into a pew. She absorbed herself in the words that surrounded her and quickly forgot the worries of the morning. She was feeling refreshed and new by the time mass was over and set out to join her family.

Suddenly, she froze. A chorus of screams was coming from in front of the church and the crowd of people streaming outside reversed and scattered. It was complete mayhem! All Edith could process was terror and an urge to run outside and get into breathable space.

She did and it was a mistake. Soldiers in bright, red uniforms with long, slim rifles were flocking all over the lane, grabbing people and forcing them into a line. Edith was terrified! They had done nothing wrong! What was she going to do now?

Her legs kicked into gear and she burst out of the throng of people and away. But, she didn't get far.

"Hey! Get back here!" A soldier was barking in her face and roughly turning her around. He gripped her arm and she winced with the pain of his nails digging into her skin. She tried to wrench herself out of his grasp, but he only held on tighter and pulled her faster. Edith was dragged, slipping and sliding in the mud, into a line of scared, screaming, dirty people.

As she was marched along, the sky opened and poured out rain in buckets. Thunder boomed and lightning split the sky. Edith frantically searched for her family, but could only catch glimpses of people through the rapidly darkening sky. She tried to yell but her voice was drowned out by the rain and the weeping of her community. She felt as if the storm was trying to suffocate her.

Eventually, she saw a dark shape looming in front of her. She entered it and the rain disappeared, though she could still hear it.

She tripped and tumbled to the ground, smacking her chin on metal. She bit her tongue and tasted blood. She frantically tried to pull herself together but her legs were jelly and a crowd of freshly arrived people were streaming in. They were so frantic they paid her no heed and stumbled over her, tripping on her extended limbs. She winced as heavy boots crushed her fingers.

Finally, she was able to crawl into an empty space. She curled into a tight ball, the cold air swirling around her legs and right into her heart.

She waited and waited in her corner as the storm worsened and people crammed into the no longer empty space until she was squished tight on either side.

After what felt like forever, there was a short barking order from a soldier followed by the creaking of a heavy door. Whatever light Edith had left was extinguished. She was plunged into total darkness, sitting, cramped, in a metal tube of some sort, squashed on either side by strangers. She was also utterly terrified.

A tremulous noise filled the space and the metal tube lurched into movement and started rocking.

“The first ship is off!” a soldier shouted outside and the truth crashed down onto Edith. She was on a ship, and it was sailing.

Edith didn't know what to do. All of the crowded emotions of the past few minutes disappeared until there was nothing except for hopelessness. She was on a ship headed for unknown lands and her family was nowhere in sight.

Despair filled her heart as she recalled the soldier saying that she was on the first ship. What if her family was on another and they were headed to different places?

Edith put her head under her arms, too stunned for tears, and gave into the overwhelming darkness.

She struggled against hazy nightmares until she awoke clutching the air in front of her and her heart split. She felt rigid and hollow. All thoughts left her head; she became like an empty shell.

Days passed in the ship, but Edith noticed nothing except the increasing gnawing in her stomach and her parched throat. All she could do was clutch herself in a vain attempt to conserve body heat and block any thoughts out of her head. She didn't want to focus on anything, especially thoughts of her family. She would wait to get some more perspective into the situation before making a plan or even addressing the issue. When the ship finally stopped abruptly, Edith was thrown onto her side and lay there.

The people around her stood frantically and surged towards the now-open door of the ship. Edith grimaced as people screamed harshly. Her head was pounding and her whole body ached from her cramped position and the uncomfortable surroundings. The crowd of people slowly funnelled out and the soldiers left to harass them. One stayed to survey the ship but ended up walking away.

"These people are beyond help." Edith heard the soldier mutter as he left. She wondered if it was true. That she was beyond help. Was this the end for her? Surrounded by other people who had gone to a better place, she didn't think it sounded too bad. The ship was now quiet; all the sound of laboured breathing and groaning were gone. It was deathly silent, actually, but Edith didn't want to think about that. She figured she could lie down, rest her pounding head and find some peace.

Edith shook her head. She must go on. She couldn't rest without knowing if her family made it. Edith wanted to go and see the sunlight again.

She stood up on wobbly legs and clutched at the wall, finding a crevice. She swallowed, fighting the sudden nausea. She proceeded to slowly creep nearer to the door. The small square of light that it was grew larger and larger until Edith found herself staring directly at the outside world. It reminded her somewhat of home and she

was comforted. Green grass, blue sky, wooden shacks. Then she looked more intently and saw the people around her. Some sights were happy. Families embracing, back together again. Some sights were not. People kneeling over family lying motionless on the ground. The sound of grief was heavy in the air.

Edith's face grew slack, staring at the crowds of people she used to know. She didn't know these people with their hollow cheeks and tear-tracked, dirty faces. Her stomach flipped again and the world took an alarming shift.

She hit the ground hard. Her ears were ringing and the breeze was dancing on her face, reminding her of the day this all started. She closed her eyes and imagined herself lying on a grassy field, her stomach comfortably full. The picture was so real in her mind that she wanted to drift away, back to that place of happiness and comfort.

She relaxed in the grass and closed her eyes. She thought she could hear laughter. Then, her mind sharpened on thoughts of her family. Were they there, where she was going? She wasn't sure! The laughter disappeared, leaving only the ringing. The picture faded away. No! She wanted to leave this world of suffering! But what about her family? She couldn't find them now! But maybe she could! Thoughts spun through Edith's mind. What to do?

A scream pierced the air and Edith's eyes shot open. A new fire sparked within her, giving her strength. The people around were mostly gone. Lights flickered in the windows of shacks near her and she smiled. She struggled to her feet and stumbled along. She knocked on the nearest one and a kind-looking woman opened the door.

"Bonjour, ma'am. I'm sorry to disturb you but I am looking for my family," Edith said.

“There are lots of people wandering around.” The woman responded. “Would you like to stay the night here and continue looking in the morning?”

“Non, merci, but thank you for the offer! I have been through a great ordeal and I really miss my family.”

“I understand. Please come back if you can’t find them! Au revoir!”

Edith closed the door and sighed. She moved one house to the left and knocked. She shivered as the night air bit her legs and arms. She had lost her shawl and bonnet. She continued like this for a little while, never finding her family.

After another unsuccessful house, she crawled back to the ship and huddled just inside the door. At least the wind could not touch her now. The spark that was inside her fizzled and went out. Again, she wanted to curl up in a ball and leave to that place of happiness and warmth. She closed her eyes, tempted.

A drop of water fell from the ship's ceiling and it startled her. She would not give in! Her family was out there, she could feel it! The fire returned and blazed, licking out all of her insecurity and filling her with warmth. She stood on steady legs and strode out of the ship, a new purpose in her step.

She cleared her throat and yelled with all her might.

“Mom! Dad! Evan! Cole! Jamie! Elizabethe! Where are you?” She called until her voice was hoarse and she longed for water. The night seemed to scorn her with its unblinking stars and its ominous black coat. That’s when it happened.

“Edith? Edith, can you hear me?” A voice split the silence.

“Mom? Dad? I’m over here!” Edith’s screams redoubled as she raced towards the direction of her family’s voices. She ran like she had never ran before and the voices got closer.

Finally, she could see shapes through the darkness. The shapes became silhouettes of people which became her family.

“Edith, mon cherie! We thought we had lost you!”

“Are you hurt? Hungry?”

“Where have you been?”

Questions surrounded Edith but she ignored them and sank into her mother’s arms. Tears of joy streamed down her face and she noticed that the moon suddenly peeked out of a cloud in full volume and gave everything a bright, silver sheen.

“Oh, I missed you so much! I thought I would never see you again!”

“Hush, bébé, don’t cry. We are together again!” Ma soothed her.

“Non! We were forced out of our homeland. Why?”

“We don’t know why, amour. But that is not important. We will have a good reason in time. The only thing that matters right now is staying safe and together. We can go find a place to spend the night. It will all be fine. Tomorrow will worry about itself so cast your anxiety away.”

“Alright, Ma.” Edith responded meekly and walked toward the rows of empty houses again. The hopelessness that had been her strong companion was now taken away by the feeling of warmth and love that radiated off her family. He relaxed and took a deep breath. As long as they were together, it was all going to be okay.