

## CHAPTER TWO

# Jacques

Between them, Captain Murray and Colonel Winslow had crammed over 2,600 villagers into the holds of the transports and sent them to sea. Neither mentioned the final departure in writing, but they must have been relieved to see the Acadians off at long last. Colonel Robert Monckton had already drained the Isthmus of Chignecto and the surrounding communities of their Acadian populations.

The plan was to ply south, out of the Bay of Fundy, and into the Atlantic. They would meet up with Monckton's transports and form a convoy that would call at Annapolis Royal, where three more transports filled by John Handfield—commander of the former French capital once called Port-Royal—should have been waiting. Unlike the other commanders, Handfield hadn't sprung his trap quite so ruthlessly. Those he had to deport were his friends and his family. His wife was Acadian, as were most of his kin. When ships first pulled into the Annapolis Basin that August, most of the men fled into the woods. Charles Lawrence ordered Handfield to use "the most vigorous measures possible" to imprison the heads of households. Handfield disobeyed; he did not burn their houses or "destroy everything." He allowed

the Acadians to gather themselves and prepare to leave. Those kindnesses put Handfield well behind schedule, so that when the convoy passed the Annapolis Basin in late October, Handfield's ships were not ready. They would have to sail later in the winter, when the weather was likely to be worse.

By now loaded aboard a ship, Jacques heard a gale picking up outside. The basin had sat calm and sickly green when he was last above deck, before the crew pulled anchor. Now the hull moaned with wind-slap and wave spray, a contralto voice filling out a chorus of anguish, fear, and the unmistakable sounds of seasickness. Few in the hold had spent any time at sea. None had ever been locked below deck like livestock. The stale air hung low along the floorboards, heavy with the stench of vomit and wet wool. Sheets of hail played a gloomy pizzicato on the iron-bolted hatches above the prisoners' heads. Some lay on their backs or sides. Most sat half upright against the damp posts and boards, their shoulders hunched, backs curled by sharp pains boiling up from their guts. The thin bands of orange light that cut through uneven cracks in the hull faded into the pale blue ink of night at sea.

The wind grew stronger. Jacques's wife, Catherine, was with him, as was his father, François, and his mother, Jeanne. They were spared the fate of many at the docks: they had boarded together. The loading was a frenzy. Children looked back from the landing crafts while their parents stood in the mass on land, still waiting their turn. Husbands scrambled to find their wives, sisters clung to one another, hoping they'd be put aboard together. No one knew where the ships were headed. Some families who were separated at the docks would never see each other again, and the confusion afforded no chance to say goodbye.

Waves shook the bow and flattened against the port side. Jacques knew the area well; these waves must mean the ship had rounded the cape and was headed for open water. Some prayed with craned necks; others lay wretched on their bedrolls and listened to the hail striking the deck above.

The North Atlantic behaves as though it has a temper like no other body of water on Earth. Black shoulders of swell heave. Whip-cracking gusts hurl the water through the air like shards of broken glass. Under the right conditions, wind and waves entangle and grow into massive storm systems that eat ships alive, and—if they make landfall—knock down forests and rip apart buildings. The most dangerous of these oceanic storms are tropical cyclones, commonly known as hurricanes.

These storms begin as a twist of hot sandy air whisking across the vast expanse of the Sahara Desert. Prevailing winds blowing from the east push the dry air toward the coast, where it mixes with cool, wet air curling up from tropical West Africa and the Gulf of Guinea, near Cape Verde. The mixed air draws moisture from the sea and rises high into the sky. Tiny water molecules crystalize and condense. In a flash, the microscopic shards shatter and hang in the air as if on strings: clouds. Cloud formation produces heat. As the air condenses, energy pushes outward. Air pressure drops. Slight high-level winds, common in late summer and early autumn, whisk this less dense air forward and dump it directly in the path of the growing system. As more air is pulled upward into the clouds, a vast region of low pressure develops. Air always moves toward areas of lower pressure. As the air rushes to the newly created void, it picks up speed: wind. As the pressure difference draws this wind back into the centre, the storm slows, starts to spin, and a cyclone is created.

In the middle of the ocean these storms are relatively harmless. Throughout winter, spring, and summer, they usually blow themselves out, disbanding into distinct thunderheads and rainstorms. In September and October, however, the African Easterly Jet arrives, its strong stream of wind three kilometres above the earth's surface. In January, it blows just five degrees north of the equator. By August, it has climbed into the thirteenth parallel and picked up speed. Gusting at an average of fifty kilometres per hour, the jet swallows up the storms that grow off Cape Verde and flings them deep into the tropical Atlantic. Once over warm ocean waters, these smaller storms strengthen and grow into gigantic systems of swirling clouds and fierce winds. Unlucky crews suffer these mid-ocean storms as nasty squalls. Near land, they grow into the largest storms on Earth.

If water temperatures stay above 26°C, these cyclones can strengthen into weather systems nearly eight hundred kilometres wide with sustained wind speeds over three hundred kilometres per hour. These autumnal systems usually slam first into the outer islands of the Caribbean, but slight changes in current direction or water temperature can push them up the coast to Florida or into the Gulf of Mexico. Sometimes, they head north.

This is what lay in store for Jacques LeBlanc, who knew nothing of oceanic storms, walls of black water, or winds that could suck the air out of your lungs. As he lay in the dark hold, his ears served as his only reference to what was growing outside. As storms approach ships at sea, those aboard often experience an unusually beautiful calm right before the first bands of wind hit. But the Acadian prisoners, trapped below, had no idea what they were about to sail into.

Five weeks before Jacques was crammed aboard the ship, while he and his father were still imprisoned at Fort Edward, one of the worst hurricanes in history grazed Pisiguit, signalling that this year on the North Atlantic would be especially harsh. It made landfall first in Virginia, far to the south of the colony of Nova Scotia. The *Virginia Gazette* reported on the damage days after it passed. “Most of the mill-dams are broke, the corn is almost laid level with the ground; many ships and other vessels drove ashore and damaged.” Those in Les Mines experienced the storm as a heavy rain. Neither Murray nor Winslow felt compelled to record any observations about the weather. But St. John’s, Newfoundland, “received a very severe stroke from the violence of a storm of wind,” Robert Duff, the commodore governor, wrote. “A considerable number of boats, with their crews, have been totally lost.” Nearly four thousand perished, mainly English and Irish sailors. The hurricane created a storm surge that raised the level of the harbour twenty feet above its normal height. Ships were tossed onto the hard rocks that flanked the harbour on all sides. It was the worst hurricane to ever hit the island and one of the deadliest Atlantic hurricanes on record.

In its wake, another storm was growing, and the Acadians were headed straight into its path. As Jacques and the rest of the prisoners rounded Cap Baptiste (known then to the English as Cape Porcupine, and now as Cape Blomidon), they felt the waves pounding the ship’s sides.

The British did not record what occurred next. What happened to the fleet on the journey was of little concern to those safely on land. Once the ships left the Minas Basin, the prisoners became the responsibility of the New England governors who

would receive them. But many years later, one nameless survivor of the trip would recount the fateful day of departure to Andrew Brown, a Presbyterian pastor living in Halifax. Brown's incomplete history of Nova Scotia—written some time during his stay in the colony between 1787 and 1795 and purportedly compiled in part from Acadian oral tradition—describes a poetic fall day of rusty skies and strong gales as the ships left the basin. “The reflections from the sky suddenly gave place to others from the land, that flitted as fast and which changed as they flitted from the bloody red to the sickly orange & the funeral black of the pine forest.” Other survivors would mention the horrible trip in petitions to governors and town councils, written from the squalor of their new homes: conditions were cramped, food was scarce, the air was suffocating and stale, and fear gripped the prisoners.

Jacques and the convoy met a strong storm somewhere between the entrance to the Bay of Fundy, near where the town of Digby, Nova Scotia, sits today, and the entrance to Boston Harbour. The gale the transport ships met on their first night at sea, as recorded by Reverend Andrew Brown, was most likely an outer band of the storm. “During the night, this breeze freshened into a strong gale,” he wrote, “& on reaching Cape Porcupine the waves rolled into mountains.” When the ships finally made it to Boston ten days later, one captain reported it was the worst storm he had ever faced at sea. What he didn't know then was that he had also survived one of the largest earthquakes ever recorded.

Three days after the transport ships pulled anchor, just before ten in the morning, approximately 125 miles off the southernmost tip of Portugal, the sea floor cracked and rose. A

vast column of water surged up and outward in wide concentric bands. The seismic energy rattled the Portuguese mainland, southern Spain, and the Atlantic coast of Morocco. Lisbon collapsed in a dusty gasp. Tens of thousands of people across two continents died under falling rubble, fire, and a massive storm surge. At sea, the ripple grew into a wall of water.

It hit Ireland less than two hours later. Kinsale's harbour filled and water flooded into the marketplace. Part of Galway's Spanish Arch, a section of the old city's wall, fell into the sea. Scotland's Loch Lomond suddenly rose about three feet above its banks before dropping to normal levels. Racing westward, the wave hit North America by mid-afternoon. The *Nancy*, a mid-size frigate, was somewhere off the island of St. Lucia when it felt the wave. The hull shuddered and groaned as if it had come aground hard. The crew, shaken and confused, threw a sounding line, only to find they were many leagues above the sea floor.

Nearby, off the island of St. Vincent, a crew reported themselves suspended sideways in the air for a few seconds, several feet above the deck. Their anchors, lashed and stowed, bounced heavily as the water dropped suddenly under the hull. The ship plummeted hard into the waves below, nearly sinking. The crew reported their sounding line turned yellow and smelled of sulphur shortly after. The tsunami entered the waters southwest of Nova Scotia as the fleet carrying Jacques and Bénoni plied the open blue Atlantic under stiff winds.

Rain, suspended in bands by seafoam-heavy air too thick to breathe, raked across the ceiling. Jacques heard the mast mount creak and twist under strain, producing eerie high-pitched noises like a thousand mice squeaking. Wave spray pummelled

the hull-boards. The gale that had met the ships the evening they left had not blown itself out. Jacques didn't know how much time had passed, but steadily the weather outside the prison walls grew worse. The ship climbed the waves, seemed to hang in mid-air for just a second, and then crashed heavily into the flat water below. Everything went silent, like the ship was holding its breath. Jacques held his, too.

Sailors caught in storms like this often report strange and impossible-sounding events. One captain caught in a storm off the Caribbean on the same day as the Portuguese earthquake reported that the sky turned to copper and the ocean seemed to drop many feet out of nowhere. His ship spun in a wild direction, and before his cabin window three shards of green rock appeared in the sea, only to disappear minutes later when he fought his way to the deck. The ship survived. When conditions get like this, captains have three options: run, hold, or fight. Running pits both the ship and the savvy of its crew against nature's strongest weapon. Sailors need to carefully manage their sails to catch enough wind to outrun the storm without grabbing the full attention of the gust and capsizing. But masts can snap like matchsticks, sails can shred like tissue paper, and rigging can whip through the air like steel wire. Losing a mast, or two or three, in hurricane conditions is a death sentence.

Another option is to heave to: to halt forward movement by balancing rudder direction and sail catch. Steering hard into the wind while letting a small sail—usually a storm jib or a close substitute—catch toward the leeward side can hold a ship almost in stasis, even in strong weather. Then the crew can try to wait out the storm below deck. In a hurricane, this is a risky operation.

If running and holding aren't options, sailors must fight. In hurricane-force winds, sails—designed to catch as much wind as possible—turn against their ships.

The sloops carrying the Acadian prisoners likely furled their mainsails and confronted the storm with an empty spar. The ships heaved and lurched through valleys of water with little control over their direction. To take a wave broadside is catastrophic, but rudders do not work without forward motion. With tight management of wind catch—utilizing a forward jib or storm sail—keen directional steering, and luck, ships can stay facing the waves and keep above water.

When the convoy hit the open water south of the colony of Nova Scotia, they engaged in a battle that may have lasted days. Over and over again the ships climbed walls of water while their occupants—prisoners and crew alike—feared that the next ridge would be too high and send them over backwards, plunging them beneath the waves. This is called pitch-poling, and if a crew can avoid it, floundering by pounding cross-waves, or suffering a fatal leak, they may survive the squall.

Some of the most harrowing stories of survival at sea come from the Irish diaspora. A century later but in very similar conditions to Jacques and the rest of the Acadian prisoners, Irish emigrants traversed the Atlantic from Ireland to North America, fleeing the great famine of the 1840s and 1850s. Many had no choice but to take passage on ramshackle “coffin ships”—sloops and schooners and brigs so heavily over-insured they were worth more to their owners if they sank than if they made it to the New World. Well over capacity, the coffin ships set out into the murderous seas of the North Atlantic regardless of weather. Many sank, losing all hands. Others barely survived

mid-sea encounters with massive storms. Letters home and journals reveal stories of survival that best depict the experience of a storm at sea as a passenger on a wooden sailing ship.

Thomas Reilly, a young man from Dublin, was one of the lucky ones—barely. He left Dublin on February 19, 1848, and hoped for a swift passage to America. He transferred ships in Liverpool and, after a delay, finally hit the open ocean on March 1. He endured a series of storms throughout the journey before he eventually arrived, forlorn and weary, in New York, with a warning for future émigrés. In a letter home to his friend John M. Kelly, Reilly vividly recounts his crossing.

Well I set sail and our ship, the *Patrick Henry*, was resolved to bring us to the South Sea Islands instead of to New York. We had the first two days very fair and rounded the Irish coast like a sea gull, the wind followed in our wake for three days on the Atlantic.

The forth day the Monsters of the deep showed their heads, the Captain said we would have a storm, and truly Boreas spent his rage on us that night. We were tumbled out of our berths, the hold was two feet full of water, a leak was gaining an inch a minute on us, our topsails were carried away, the most of male passengers were all night relieving each other at the pump and in the morning I left my hammock at seven o'clock to look at the terrible sea. . . .

At five o'clock p.m. all hands were turned up to close reef sail, not a stitch of canvass to be seen

spread, six o'clock wind right ahead, the vessel lying to a rolling from side to side like a heavy log as she was, the passengers quaking with fear.

Ten o'clock, the scene below no light, the hatches nailed down, some praying, some crying some cursing and singing, the wife jawing the husband for bringing her into such danger, everything topsy turvy—barrels, boxes, cans, berths, children rolling about with the swaying vessel, now and again might be heard the groan of a dying creature, and continually the deep moaning of the tempest.

The scene above, bare poles, thunder and lightning, the ship almost capsized, lying on her beam, sheets of water drenching her decks, the sea swelling far above her masts, engulfing her around, and huge billows striking her bows and sides with the force and noise of a thousand sledge hammers upon so many anvils.

The ship receding with every wave, sometimes standing perpendicularly on her stern and shaking like a palsied man and then plunging decks and masts under water and raising to renew the same process. She would screech with every stroke of the waves, every bolt in her quaked, every timber writhed, the smallest nail had a cry of its own.

One o'clock in the morning, not a soul on the deck, standing upright, oh mercy one of our masts has gone over the side, bulwarks stoved in,

30 tons of water washing the decks from stern to stern. The Captain is panic struck. Tom Reilly is waiting on the quarter deck to get into her life boat.

The captain speaks, carpenters cut away the broken spars, look out for the next spar, here it comes, The Mizzen top is carried away. The ship lurched on her side and lay in a state of distress until day light.

Reilly, at least, was allowed above deck; he was not a prisoner locked in a dank hold. He could see what was coming, even if he was powerless to control what happened next.

If passenger manifests were taken for the ships, they haven't survived. Jacques and Catherine, their children, and their parents, were most likely aboard the *Seaflower*. The small sloop registered at eighty-one tonnes, but it could handle storms and was only eighteen passengers over its limit. Originally sent to load prisoners from Grand Pré, the *Seaflower* was instead filled with overflow passengers who had boarded in Pisiguit. If they were among those transferred from the four vessels that loaded below Fort Edward in late October—the *Neptune*, *Three Friends*, *Dolphin*, and the *Ranger*—they were among the lucky ones.

At ninety tonnes, the *Ranger* was one of the larger sloops in the fleet. In haste, Murray put 263 prisoners below deck, eighty-one above capacity. Conditions must have been particularly cramped and uncomfortable as prisoners sat face to face, even lying on one another. At least they made it to their destination. Not all of the ships did. The *Union*, packed with 392 prisoners at Chignecto in October, departed for Pennsylvania. It was never

seen or heard from again. The sloop *Boscawen*, also loaded at Chignecto with 190 exiles and also expected to land at Pennsylvania, never arrived. Both ships presumably sank, killing everyone aboard.

The same storm that had hit Jacques's ship blew off course two larger ships: the brigantine *Experiment* and the snow *Edward*. They made landfall on the island of Antigua in the Caribbean some six weeks after leaving Nova Scotia, according to a March 1, 1756, report in the *New York Mercury*. Both ships resupplied and then set sail for their original destinations, eventually reaching Connecticut and New York, respectively, in mid-May. But of the 260 originally put aboard the *Edward*, approximately 150 survived the journey. The rest are reported to have died in an on-board outbreak of malaria.

Crammed together in such close quarters, the prisoners were particularly susceptible to ship-bound disease epidemics. Dysentery, malaria, and other common infections and viruses were prevalent. But one malady was more feared than any other, and it was perfectly at home in the holds' cramped and sordid conditions: smallpox.

The sores first showed inside the mouth and on the tongue. With the small red dots came fever and lethargy. The rash spread next to the face and neck, gradually consuming the entire body. The boils billowed and filled with opaque pus and hardened as they aged. Scabs formed and the skin began to flake. High fever and powerful aches racked the body. Death followed for some; survivors were left pebbled with pockmarks. Smallpox wasn't common in Acadia, so most of the prisoners had no immunity to the virus. Perhaps the soldiers who came from New England for the deportation brought the virus with

them. Thirty years earlier, the disease had swept across Boston, infecting nearly six thousand (almost half the population of the fledgling city) and killing nearly nine hundred.

Viruses cannot reproduce on their own. Virions—tiny particles of virus without a host cell, a tenth of the size of a single cell of bacteria—are not organisms. They are strands of nucleic acid in a protective protein shell. Drifting through air and water, these particles seek out host cells. Once inside a living organism, they attack healthy cells and replicate themselves using the cell's own reproductive system. The new, identical viral particles are released from the original host cell, and further infect the body. One host infects another, and soon an outbreak occurs. In the musty air of a ship's hold, air worsened by the unseasonably warm weather the storm system had brought up from the Caribbean, the virus spread easily. An unguarded sneeze or a muffled cough would send virions into the air. With little circulation, nearby mouths would swallow the particles and regurgitate them back into the space. Cough. Sneeze. Spread.

Smallpox ripped through the lower decks of the transport convoy. Those already weak from months of imprisonment, rotten food, and bad water died quickly. The crew piled up the bodies on the decks. The *Ranger* lost 58; the *Endeavour* lost 51. The *Cornwallis*, filled with villagers from Chignecto, fared the worst, losing 210. By the time the ships made it to their destinations, over 1,000 prisoners in total would be dead, killed by disease, weather, or distress.

The storm that had battered the convoy gradually abated. The wind finally dropped. Slowly the shuddering in the hulls ceased. Jacques was relieved. The dead lay tangled among the living, but all his family members had survived. Some of the

ships seized the opportunity to change course and pointed their bows toward Boston. The *Seaflower* was not among them. Perhaps blown off course by the weather, or delayed for repairs or another extenuating circumstance, the *Seaflower* did not arrive in Boston until November 15, nearly three weeks after the ship pulled anchor in the Minas Basin.

The portion of the fleet that headed for Boston after the storm passed did so only for repairs and supplies. The prisoners below their decks, including Bénoni and his family, were destined for colonies further south. If their ships were still in the harbour when the *Seaflower* finally arrived, it would have been the last time most of the family would be in the same place at the same time.

Anchored in the broad calm of Boston Harbour, Jacques did not feel relief. Although they had survived the storm, perhaps he sensed that what awaited them was merely a new form of horror.