When: Tuesday, May 4, 1971.

Where: 135 mi. north of Quebec, Canada.

The Loss: 31 dead; 38 homes gone. Property damage estimated at $1 million.

The Disaster: Saint-Jean-Vianney, a suburban community of 1,308 people supported by the nearby aluminum plant and paper mill, had its television sets tuned to the Stanley Cup hockey play-off between Montreal and Chicago. It was a typical spring night except for the dogs. Well-behaved pets they were, but on that night no amount of scolding stopped their incessant barking that drowned out the voice of the sportscaster. Booted outside, they scurried about like ants, sniffing the ground and barking even louder. Had the villagers understood dog-talk, they could have saved their lives.

What the villagers didn't know was that their community sat atop the scene of a 5-century-old landslide. At Saint-Jean-Vianney, and other locations in the province of Quebec, there lies beneath the topsoil a 100'-thick bed of unstable clay. Interlaced with pockets of sand that may become saturated with moisture, the clay can dissolve and liquefy to flow like a river.

Before the catastrophe there were signs that went unnoticed: Cracks appeared in the streets and driveways; some house foundations sank 5' to 8'; people heard thumps beneath their homes and the sound of running water; but no one gave these unusual happenings any serious thought.

It rained heavily in April and the water didn't run off, but soaked into the ground to dissolve the sand-pocked clay. On May 4 at 10:45 P.M., the liquefied earth dropped 100' to form a canyon a half mile wide. Then a river of clay flowed through the canyon, westward from Blackbourn Hill toward the Saguenay River.

The lights in the village went out and television screens went black. People looked out their windows into darkness, then realized that houses, normally in view, were gone. One by one, the homes on the east side of town slid into the oozing clay. Almost at the stroke of midnight, the nightmare of terror was over: The river of flowing clay ground to a halt and began to solidify. Exactly 38 homes had disappeared and 31 people went with them.

Aftermath: The Canadian Government declared the entire area unfit for habitation. The survivors, at no cost, were established in a new community at Arvida.

Tomorrow: The curious still visit the spot where a town disappeared. In time the yawning canyon will slowly fill with earth to blot out the telltale signs of tragedy. Tomorrow, however, another town could be built on the scene of a centuries-old landslide, and future historians could then have yet another catastrophe to record.

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