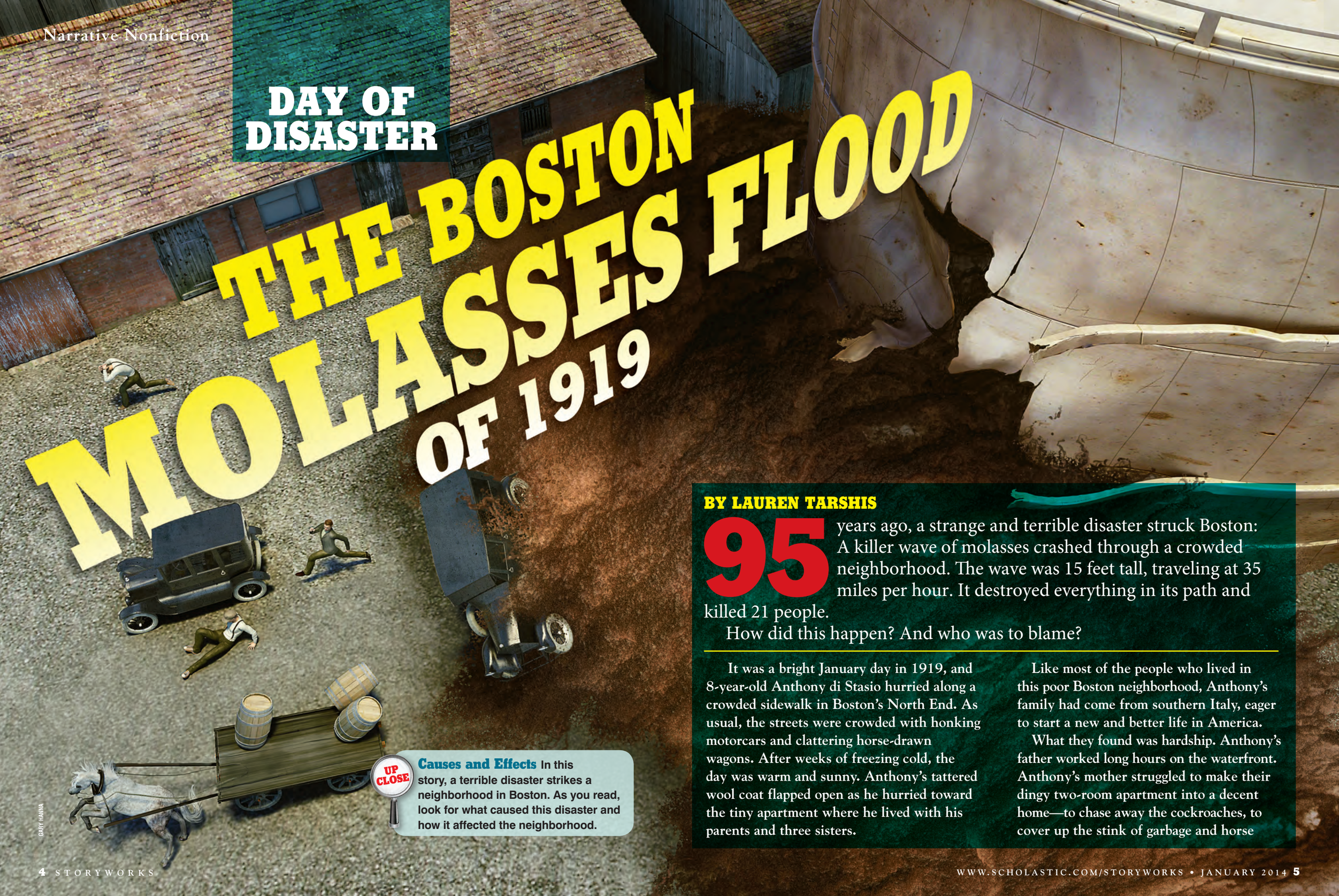
DAY OF DISASTER

THE BOSTON MOLASSES FLOOD OF 1919



GARY HANNA

UP CLOSE **Causes and Effects** In this story, a terrible disaster strikes a neighborhood in Boston. As you read, look for what caused this disaster and how it affected the neighborhood.

BY LAUREN TARSHIS

95 years ago, a strange and terrible disaster struck Boston: A killer wave of molasses crashed through a crowded neighborhood. The wave was 15 feet tall, traveling at 35 miles per hour. It destroyed everything in its path and killed 21 people.

How did this happen? And who was to blame?

It was a bright January day in 1919, and 8-year-old Anthony di Stasio hurried along a crowded sidewalk in Boston's North End. As usual, the streets were crowded with honking motorcars and clattering horse-drawn wagons. After weeks of freezing cold, the day was warm and sunny. Anthony's tattered wool coat flapped open as he hurried toward the tiny apartment where he lived with his parents and three sisters.

Like most of the people who lived in this poor Boston neighborhood, Anthony's family had come from southern Italy, eager to start a new and better life in America.

What they found was hardship. Anthony's father worked long hours on the waterfront. Anthony's mother struggled to make their dingy two-room apartment into a decent home—to chase away the cockroaches, to cover up the stink of garbage and horse

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manure that wafted up from the streets. Life was tough for the people of the North End. And the past two years had been especially challenging—not only for them, but for most Americans.

World War I had been raging in Europe. Five million American soldiers had joined the brutal fight to defeat Germany. In the war's final months, another horror hit the world: the influenza **epidemic** of 1918. Fifty million people died, including more than 600,000 Americans.

But now the war and the epidemic were over. Anthony might have even sensed a mood of hopefulness on that bright January day. The residents of Boston's North End had every reason to believe that better times were just ahead.

They were wrong.

A shocking disaster was about to strike Anthony's neighborhood. In fact, a deadly threat had been looming over the North End for years. It was not a German bomb or a deadly disease.

It was a giant steel tank filled with molasses.

From Pies to Bombs

Molasses is a thick, brown syrup that was once the most popular sweetener in America. Like white sugar, molasses comes from the sugarcane plant, which grows in the Caribbean and other hot and humid regions. Until the late 1800s, white sugar was so expensive that only rich people could afford it. Molasses was cheap. So despite its bitter taste, it was molasses that sweetened early America's tasty treats, like pumpkin pie and Indian pudding.

By the 1900s, sugar prices had dropped, and most Americans no longer needed to sweeten their foods with molasses. The sticky brown syrup was being put to a new and perhaps surprising use: to make bombs. Heated up in a process called distillation, molasses can be turned into a liquid called industrial alcohol. In this form, molasses became a key ingredient in the **explosives** used in the war against Germany.

All during World War I, ships loaded with millions of gallons of molasses arrived at Boston's ports. Trains would then take the gooey **cargo** to distilleries, where the molasses was turned into industrial alcohol.

In 1914, the leaders of one molasses company, United States Industrial Alcohol (USIA), decided to build an enormous molasses storage tank near Boston Harbor. The tank was constructed very quickly, and it was huge—bigger than any tank ever built in Boston. As if the North End weren't already **grim** enough, now a three-story steel tank towered over the neighborhood, blotting out the sun and blocking the view of the harbor.

But it wasn't only the tank's ugliness that upset the residents of the North End.

Just hours after it was first filled with molasses, brown syrup was leaking from the seams of the tank, oozing like blood from invisible wounds. When the tank was filled, it rumbled and groaned, as though the steel walls were crying out in pain. Some people living near the tank worried it was unsafe. But what could they do about it? USIA was a big company, and the people in the North End were poor and powerless. It was a time when many Americans viewed immigrants with deep suspicion and **prejudice**. Even a person bold enough to complain about the dangerous tank would have had a hard time finding anyone willing to listen and help.

And so the years passed. The molasses kept leaking from the tank. The noises of the straining steel grew louder—until the moment on that bright January day in 1919, when Anthony di Stasio was making his way home.

Violent Swirl

The first sign of disaster was a strange sound:

Rat, tat, tat, tat,
Rat, tat, tat, tat,
Rat, tat, tat, tat.

It was the sound of the thousands of steel rivets that held the molasses tank together popping out of place. After years of strain, the tank was breaking apart.

People froze in their tracks. And then came a thundering explosion.

"Run!" a man screamed. "It's the tank!"

Anthony looked up just as the molasses tank seemed to crack apart like a massive egg, **unleashing** 2.7 million gallons of thick, sticky molasses. The molasses formed a gigantic brown wave—15 feet high, 160 feet wide, and traveling at a staggering 35 miles per hour. The sticky syrup was far heavier and more destructive than a wave of ocean water, and it moved with incredible speed and power. Within seconds, it crushed wooden houses and flattened a three-story fire station. It swept away motorcars and snapped electrical poles. Anthony and dozens of others were caught in the violent swirl.

The wave pulled Anthony under. Molasses gushed into his mouth. He was carried for several blocks until he crashed into a metal lamppost. The blow knocked him out. A firefighter saw Anthony pinned against the

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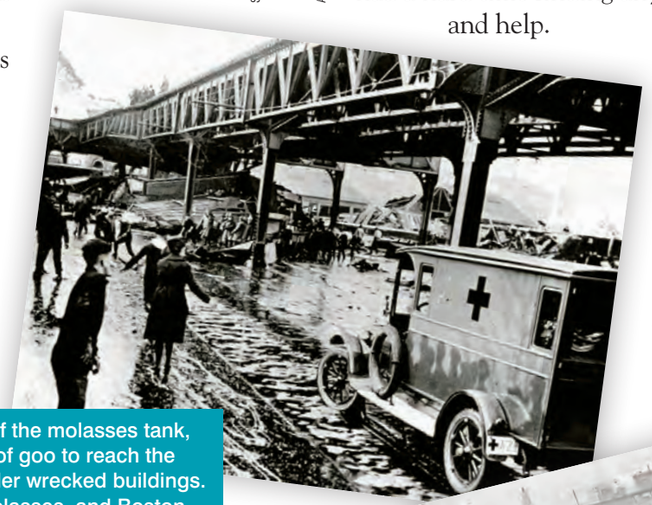

In the hours after the collapse of the molasses tank, rescuers waded through rivers of goo to reach the injured. Many were trapped under wrecked buildings. For months, Boston stank of molasses, and Boston Harbor was stained brown.

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The Boston Daily Globe EXTRA

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MOLASSES TANK EXPLOSION INJURES 50 AND KILLS 11

SCENE OF RUIN AND DESOLATION IN NORTH END AFTER DESTRUCTION OF PURITY DISTILLING COMPANY TANK AND NEARBY STRUCTURES

Death and Devastation In Wake of North

lamppost. Rushing through waist-deep molasses, the man grabbed Anthony just before he was swept away.

The firefighter held Anthony's limp body and looked at his molasses-coated face. The poor boy, the firefighter believed, had not survived.

By the time the wave lost its power, half a mile of the North End was flooded with molasses. Hundreds of firefighters, police officers, nurses, and sailors from docked ships rushed to the scene. They freed people trapped under collapsed buildings and tangled in molasses-soaked **debris**. Plain water did little to wash the thick, syrupy molasses away. Instead, firefighters used salt water to scour the hardening goo from the streets. In the end, 21 people were killed, and 150 were injured.

Molasses and sugar come from the same plant: sugarcane (top).

The Strangest Disaster

Within hours of the disaster, leaders of USIA were insisting that the disaster was not their fault. Their tank, they claimed, had been bombed by "criminals." But few believed this explanation. In the weeks following the disaster, experts sifted through the wreckage, inspecting the remains of the tank. They spoke to residents who had seen the leaks and heard the strange noises echoing from the tank. The experts' conclusion: The tank had been **shoddily** built, and the leaders at USIA had known it.

USIA refused to take responsibility, and at first it seemed the company would not be punished. But the victims demanded justice. The trial dragged on for years, but finally USIA was forced to pay $1 million (equal to about $7 million today). For the poor immigrants of the North End, it was a big victory.

It took years for the North End to rebuild after the flood. Even today, on hot days, some claim that the sweet scent of molasses rises up, like a ghost.

But somehow this disaster has been largely forgotten. Indeed, few have ever heard of the Molasses Flood of 1919 and the incredible stories from that day—like the story of Anthony di Stasio.

Anthony's limp, molasses-soaked body was taken to a large building that was being used to store bodies of those who had died. His body was covered with a sheet. But Anthony wasn't dead, only **unconscious**. Hours later, he woke up to the sound of his mother's voice calling him. Anthony tried to answer. But his mouth was filled with molasses.

Suddenly, he sat up. And soon he was surrounded by his family, a lucky survivor of one of the strangest disasters in American history.

WRITE TO WIN

Write a newspaper article reporting the results of the USIA trial. In your article, include the causes and effects of the molasses flood. Send your article to "Molasses Contest" by February 15, 2014. Ten winners will each receive a copy of *The Great Molasses Flood* by Deborah Kops. See page 2 for details.

FIND AN ACTIVITY ONLINE!

FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: SHUTTERSTOCK (2); ©RUE DES ARCHIVES/PVDE/GETTY IMAGES; ANA CASANOVA/FLICKR RF/GETTY IMAGES