"Papa and the Steam Rifle"

Suzanne Church and Stephen Kotowych

Papa promised to design and build me a steam rifle for my eleventh birthday. One that would fire straighter and farther than the gunpowder rifles my friends received for their eleventh birthdays.

"You will carry the best possible weapon in your hands."

I smiled up at him. "Merci, Papa."

"My Georges deserves the best, the moment he becomes a man, *oui*?"

"*Oui*, Papa."

"Since the English attacked us over the Montréal Question, all able men must be prepared."

I nodded, but kept my fears to myself. I was less enthusiastic than my older brother, Rollan, to go to war. News of the Question had spread to our corner of Quebec. The airship factories in Quebec's largest city had joined the underground revolution, secretly shipping parts to the United Kingdom's great enemy, the German-Boer Alliance.

While the Anglos in Canada welcomed the United Kingdom's fight against the Alliance, we Quebecois felt only sympathy for them in their struggle against Queen Victoria and the forces of her empire. Once the Dominion of Canada's answer to the Montréal Question became clear—our troops massed on the Ontario border, Her Majesty's Navy blockading *le Fleuve Saint-Laurent* and staged troops in New Brunswick for invasion—partisan groups soon sprang up to defend us, declaring alliance with the German-Boers, and demanding a Quebec free from the self-centered English-speaking conservatives.

The Anglos in Montréal fled west to Ottawa, or south to Vermont as refugees, fearing reprisals and the inevitable bombardment by the Royal Navy.

The previous Saturday afternoon, I witnessed Papa's first test of my rifle. The bullet shot out of the barrel in a spectacular explosion of steam and lead. I stood with my mouth open and Papa took the Lord's name in vain. In a good way, of course, he dared not incur Maman's wrath.

The re-charge cycle took slightly more than two seconds, but I could fire up to twelve times before the pressure dropped too low for the gun to function. So many rabbits and foxes would come home as meat because of the quality of my weapon. Like Papa, I would bring food to our table. My steam rifle would keep us fed, as men were meant to do.

"*Venez ici*," Maman shouted from the front porch. "Dinner, Georges." Then she coughed. And coughed.

I wished that she wouldn't yell. Too many times she struggled to find her breath afterwards.

"*Oui*, Maman," I shouted, hurrying to her side, and offering my handkerchief. She smiled and waved her own, which was always stained with her blood, no matter how many times she washed it in the large pot on the stove.

"Papa?" she managed to ask between coughs.

"He's almost done for today. The rifle is nearly finished."

She shook her head, but said no more. So many women scoffed at guns, as though men treated them as toys rather than tools. How else did she expect our family to eat?

Papa washed up, sat at the table, and Maman spoke her thanks to God.

We all looked up, and Papa said, "I've a mind to make a steam hand-pistol as well."

"No!" Maman's eyes blazed. "The boy is too young for such nonsense."

"Not for Georges." Papa devoured a huge mouthful of stew before he continued. "For Rollan. The design is nearly identical, save for the barrel's length."

Maman made the sign of the cross. "Rollan, bless his soul, must have no more excuses to die."

"The British rushed to land their ships in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick," said Papa. "They made a huge error. If our forces don't dispatch them by Christmas, then *les patriotes* will bring airships from Montréal to finish them before Rollan is truly in peril."

"Unless the Americans choose a side." Maman coughed again and said no more.

I stared at Rollan's empty chair, amazed at the changes to our dinner table since he'd left us.

Rollan wouldn't be eighteen for three more weeks, but that was old enough for *les patriotes*, who enrolled him in basic instruction without a second thought. That way, he could join his compatriots on the train to New Brunswick on his birthday.

Maman noticed me staring at Rollan's place, and said, "We all miss your brother. But God will watch over him." She made the sign of the cross again and whispered a prayer.

She hadn't been well these past weeks, so she'd missed the honor of sewing Madame Moussa's party dress for the November festival. It was strange, seeing her at the dinner table without her stitching an arm's length away. Madame had engaged the services of Maman's rival seamstress, Agathe Travail, instead. We would miss the pennies. And our thin stew tonight spoke the truth of our misfortune.

Agathe's son, François, was in my grade, his birthday the same day as my own. His father had already purchased a gunpowder rifle for François, and he'd brought it to the schoolhouse, two days before, hidden inside his long wool coat, to show it off behind the coal shed before our teacher rang the morning bell.

Francois's rifle fired true, but the calibration was a little off and he was forced to repeatedly re-adjust his targeting. I would spend more time picking up the rabbits I'd hit than I would adjusting my aim. After Papa finished tinkering with the trigger action, of course. He didn't want me blowing off a finger because the design had been rushed.

"My steam rifle is more precise," I'd boasted to Francois that morning.

My friend had shaken his head, and said, "The tanks for steam guns are noisy and heavy."

"But the weapons are more accurate."

"They're cumbersome and unreliable."

"No, they aren't."

"Then why don't *les patriotes* use them? Such weapons could give us the edge against the British Empire and their Anglo supporters here."

Such questions had been debated in our household many an evening before Rollan left. The smoke from the tiny steam engine could give away one's location, if one was trying to hide from attack, Rollan argued. Yes, but the engine need only be engaged once the steam reservoir emptied, my father would counter. The whistling was loud but so was the explosion from any gunpowder rifle, I offered once, earning a smile and tousle of my hair from Papa.

So many times, I'd wished I'd paid more attention to Papa's explanations about his steam micro-engine's design. It seemed near impossible to produce steam in such a tiny chamber, and store it under enough pressure to shoot a bullet out the barrel. And yet Papa could manipulate the tiny parts, assembling them in the right fashion with care and love.

Perhaps his love was the underlying reason why the guns could not be produced in large numbers. Too many men would rush the job, and then, of course, fingers would be lost. Or worse.

My papa was a genius. I licked the stew drippings from my plate, wiped my mouth, and defended his work. "Both Rollan and I will be invincible with our new weapons at hand."

"Unstoppable, at best," Maman corrected. "None of us are invincible. We all die, don't we?" She coughed after that, so hard and for so long that her handkerchief was soaked with her blood.

"Rest, Maman," I told her, nudging at her elbow in the manner that made her smile. I relished her joy, especially as her health deteriorated. The thought of losing my mother made my throat close and my heart ache.

I felt close to crying, but men didn't cry. I had only days until I became one.

Maman's cough would never improve. One of her last wishes was for the town elders to hurry and build a Catholic Church in Mégantic, so she might be put to rest in consecrated soil. Our small town, south of Québec City, had only been founded fifteen years previously, when the CP and QC Railway junctions were completed, connecting us to Montréal and Saint John.

Maman coughed once more, bringing my attention back to our table. Papa was staring at her with more worry than he normally displayed.

He said, "Georges, your steam rifle will be ready on Sunday for your birthday."

"No." Maman spoke the word quietly but with such intensity that Papa and I bit our lips. "No gun worship in the house on the Sabbath." Again she made the sign of the cross, but said no more.

"Saturday evening, then," said Papa. "I'll take you to the woods myself and we'll catch Sunday's dinner."

Maman smiled at the promise. Papa and I tried to contain our enthusiasm.

Dinner was turnip and squirrel pie, so light on the squirrel that it tasted sour. Or perhaps it was the flour that Maman had used to fashion the crust. Rats had gnawed and soiled our last sack of flour, down in the cellar where Papa kept Grand-Père's locker and Maman stored her baubles for church, if she was ever able to attend a proper Mass again and resume taking regular communion.

I finished my serving and asked for seconds, knowing we might not eat again until I caught a meal. Maman showed no pleasure at my eagerness to eat, no doubt dreading my upcoming gift.

Sure enough, Papa finished his meal, excused himself, and headed out to his work shed. When he returned, he held my steam rifle in his hands, cradled inside a soft, brown cloth.

"Here she is. *Joyeux anniversaire*, Georges."

"*Beaucoup de joie, sincère*," said Maman.

I reached out and with my heart pounding, took the steam rifle and the cleaning cloth into my hands, stroking the cloth along the barrel. "*Merci beaucoup!*" I could hardly contain my eagerness as I added, "Can we head out to the woods, Papa?"

He said, "Now? In the dark?"

I nodded. "We could take our packs, sleep outside. My first hunting trip. So that we might celebrate from the earliest moment of my birthday."

Papa looked to Maman and they exchanged glances I couldn't decipher. Finally Papa smiled and said, "*Oui*. A hunting expedition. But we're to return as soon as we have enough meat for our feast. I don't want to leave Maman for too long."

Before either parent could change their mind, I hurried to my bed-corner to pack a roll with supplies for a night in the woods. The air felt damp with rain, and the ground was still a mixture of the green of fall grasses and the oranges, reds, and browns of autumn's fallen leaves.

"We'll head to the shores of Lac Mégantic," Papa told us both. Then I heard him whisper words to Maman. Hiding in the shadows, I watched them embrace. In our small home, privacy was difficult to find, but I gave my parents what I could.

When Papa and I were ready, we headed out the door, him with his gunpowder rifle and me with my new steam one.

The moon was low and about half-to-full, giving us enough light to walk with. My roll was heavy and burdensome, but I barely noticed, so excited to be on the cusp of my transition to adulthood. I wondered if Rollan had felt this way when he and Papa had celebrated his eleventh birthday. Rollan possessed Maman's pious disposition and tended to keep his feelings close to his chest. I wondered what he and his fellow partisans-in-training were doing this night.

Was he holding his own rifle tight to his chest like a lover? Did soldiers sleep outdoors or only in their hideaways? He had only sent us one letter so far and the details had been frustratingly brief:

> *October 20, 1899.*
>
> *Soon, the New Brunswick front. I'm healthy, perhaps more than I've been since the summer I worked at the mill with you, Papa. They push us all hard, through the days and sometimes the nights as well. Soldiering requires a fit body and mind. Although there has been no mention of the health of our souls, Maman. I pray for you all each night.*
>
> *Love and prayers,*
>
> *Rollan.*

I wondered if there would still be a war when I turned eighteen. But such ponderings were dangerous, taunting the darkness of hell with the un-Christian allure of battle.

Papa reminded me of the hunting rules as we walked. We must wait until we were safely beyond town limits, stick to lands without fences, and always say a *Hail Mary* before pulling the trigger so the soul of the animal was welcomed into His kingdom. The last rule was a sign of Papa's love for Maman and her devotion. Papa's parents had been more grounded, the first of their families to work at the mill and not count on farming to feed their kin.

Grand-Père, like Papa, had been so smart-minded that he tinkered and experimented when he could make the time. All of his best inventions, though, had been of little use in a logging town

like Mégantic, so they remained in his trunk in our cellar.

My mind could not stop racing, from rule to rule, story to story, Rollan to Maman to Grand-Père and back to Papa. Then my nose caught the smell of open water.

"We're close?" I asked quietly.

Papa nodded. "We must stop speaking now, Georges. So as not to scare our prey."

I nodded, hoisting my rifle a little higher in my grip.

We moved through a heavily forested patch, the brambles catching at our trousers, and then Papa held me back, pointing at his lips to shush me.

Up ahead, we could hear activity. A great deal more commotion than a herd of deer or warren of rabbits could produce. Papa motioned for me to crouch down, so I did, following his movements until we came close to the lake's shoreline.

Soldiers! Hundreds of them.

I scanned their camp, eager to find a sign of Rollan, in case we'd stumbled upon one of his training exercises.

Except that my brother was miles and miles away.

Papa grabbed my arm tightly, pulling me back the way we'd come. When we'd reached the thick woods once more, we dodged this way, and that, always staying low.

Then Papa found an overhang of granite that created a small cave-like enclosure from the elements. He gestured for me to wait while he checked for trouble within. When he returned, he pulled me inside, signaled for me to set down my pack, and then spoke in hushed tones.

"Americans," he said.

"How do you know?"

"Their uniforms. The symbols on their sleeves are not Dominion or of the Empire."

"How could they be here?" I asked. "So far from the New Brunswick border?"

"I think the Americans have finally chosen sides, and I fear it makes them more foe than friend. War has come to our doorstep."

My eyes opened wide with shock. Our townsmen would be caught in the middle and our soldiers were too far away to help us.

Papa said, "Did you see their airship?"

I shook my head.

"It was well hidden; the air-sacks partly packed away so that they looked like mounds of cloth. But the gondola was too distinctive to miss."

Papa reached out his hands, and gestured for my steam rifle. "Its range and aim is superior to my own," he explained. "I will only fire if I must. You have my word, Georges."

"Can I come?"

"No. It's too dangerous. You wait here."

"I don't want to wait."

"Young men listen to their fathers. They don't squabble like immature boys. And you're a young man now, Georges."

Understanding my responsibility for the first time, I nodded.

Papa patted my head and said, "I'll learn more and then come back for you." He kissed both my cheeks, in the same manner he'd used to say goodbye to Rollan on his soldiering journey.

I waited in that small cavern, holding the gunpowder rifle close to me, wondering if I would ever see my brother or Papa again. The thought of their deaths was too much to bear.

Thrusting my bedroll over my shoulder, I hurried out of the cave. The mud held Papa's footprints well and with the assistance of the half-moon's light I was able to pick and find my way.

Up ahead I heard grunts and a commotion. Abandoning caution, I raced through the woods and caught sight of Papa and a soldier battling to take control of my steam rifle. The soldier knocked Papa to the ground and grabbed hold of the steam rifle, but before the frightful man took two steps I dove at him, my whittling knife in hand. With a desperate slash I raked the back of his leg, cutting through his pants and into flesh.

The man screamed and turned, but Papa was quick. He shoved the man to the dirt, covered the soldier's mouth to keep him quiet, and then said, "Georges. Look away."

I had already defied my father once and could not do so again. I turned my back and listened to the sound of the struggle.

Papa said, "It's safe now, Georges."

I turned and looked at the man. His slashed throat oozed his red lifeblood, painting red-brown into the fallen leaves and mud. I reached for the steam rifle but Papa snatched it first.

"We must hurry," he said. "Before this scout is missed." Blood stained Papa's left sleeve and dripped from his fingers.

"You're hurt," I said.

"It's not bad. Maman will sew it later."

"I'm scared, Papa."

"*Moi, aussi*."

We hurried back toward Mégantic, taking a different route, closer to the railroad tracks. Papa explained that we should watch for trains. Make sure one of them wasn't full of the enemy, ready to overrun our town.

Mégantic was so small. A fraction of the size of places like Québec City or Montréal. What could our community's men do to ward off an advancing army?

Papa and I said little on our hurried trek. No trains came and soon we were back in Mégantic, close to the station and the local inn.

I followed Papa inside and listened while he told the drinking men about what he'd seen. Too many of the patrons had not seemed surprised, as though they'd also stumbled across the troops at the lake. Many hurried out to take up arms against the enemy. The ones who remained lifted their tankards and laughed. Men like them—hard-muscled lumberjacks and rail-men—mistrusted the words of thinkers like Papa.

Finished with our warning, we rushed home. I flew through the front door, shouting for Maman, words streaming out of me about the soldiers, the airship, and my heroism in the face of danger. I wondered why she wasn't sewing at the table.

Nor did she hurry from her bed to meet me by the hearth.

"Maman?" I called.

No answer.

I considered rushing to the shed, but she would never venture out there when Papa wasn't home.

"Maman?"

I ran to her room, and then my bed-corner but she was nowhere inside our home.

Then I saw blood droplets. Near the front door and on the handle.

I ran outside and found another trail of blood, this one leading towards the privé. Papa must've seen it, too, because I could hear his voice coming from that direction.

"Papa?"

He emerged into the light from the house, Maman limp in his arms.

"Clear the table, Georges."

I hurried to do as he asked. Papa gently placed her on the hard table's surface, rolling his coat and placing it under her head. I reached for her hand and found it cold.

Frigid.

I yanked my hand away. Tears filled my eyes and I managed to ask, "Papa?"

"She's strong. *Très forte*." He pressed his face to hers, kissed her lips, and said, "I can't lose you, my love."

But I knew. Her hand was too cold. Maman was already lost to heaven. Like my mother and brother so often did, I made the sign of the cross and began to faintly murmur a *Hail Mary* for her. Then a second.

Papa did not join my litany. Instead, he wept and shrieked, kissing her cold body and begging her to come back to him. His behavior frightened me.

For hours we mourned Maman in our own ways. I snuck into their bedroom to touch a few of her trinkets—her hairbrush and mirror. Papa would not stop crying and touching her body. I wanted to shout at him to leave the flesh alone, that the heat of the fire had caused her to begin to smell. But even I could not admit that Maman's body could spoil so.

At dawn, the sounds of airship fans and gunfire drowned out Papa's wailing, distracting us from our sorrow.

Battles that occur in towns the size of Mégantic don't last long. We were soon under the control of the American Army, bolstered by men from the New England militia. Papa did not return from the mill on Tuesday, and I was forced to live with François and his family.

Smart men like Papa could create more technology, better ships and weapons to spread the invasion deeper into Quebec, like Maman's blood turning her handkerchiefs brown.

The British and Canadians had expected a fight against poorly trained partisans, not a battle against professional soldiers. They were totally unprepared. After a month of fierce fighting between the American invaders and the Dominion and British troops, much of Quebec and the whole of the Maritimes fell to the Americans.

They had come to restore stability, claimed the new military governor of Québec. They had come to protect life and liberty from the British invaders, he explained from amid the still-smoldering ruins of Montréal.

But the Americans showed no sign that they would leave us to our own devices.

The British would be back, the Americans said; the situation was too unstable for them to leave. The military bases they began to build were for our protection, as was the call for martial law.

Everyone I knew whispered how the Americans had pounced on our rebellion as an excuse to gain control of the St. Lawrence and perhaps to finally annex the whole Dominion of Canada.

A package arrived at school one day, addressed to me. Rollan had been killed along the New Brunswick front and someone had sent me his personal items. The most precious was the crucifix mother had given him, so that their God might protect him from a bullet. I wore his crucifix from that day forward. Not because I had suddenly grown closer to Maman and Rollan's God, but because I loved and missed them both so much.

I poured all my faith into my clever and resourceful father. He would make more steam rifles. And pistols. Whatever uses he could think up for steam that seemed to help the invaders. But I knew him. He would build falsities that would cut off fingers or blind men with backfires.

My faith was firmly enmeshed in my belief that one day, one of Papa's steam inventions would allow him to escape and find his way back to me. In the meantime, I shall devote my attention to my studies so I might create a steam masterpiece of my own.

Between them, **Suzanne Church** and **Stephen Kotowych** have a Writers of the Future grand prize win, Spain's Ictineu Prize, and an Aurora Award for short fiction, Canada's top SF prize. As individuals they have published dozens of stories in venues like *Clarkesworld*, *Interzone*, *OnSpec*, *Intergalactic Medicine Show*, numerous anthologies, and had work translated into a dozen languages. They both live in Canada.