



ONE  
Papa's Story

“Étienne?” Jacques Terriot sat bolt upright in bed and stared around the pitch-black loft he shared with his brothers. Straining his ears, he could just make out the soft padding of Étienne’s moccasins as he crept down the ladder. Michel stirred beside him, and Jacques slid back under the covers. He twisted his hands in the rough woollen blanket, forcing himself to lie still. It took all his strength not to fly after his brother and beg him not to go.

The outside door clicked shut.

Jacques buried his head in the straw mattress. At fourteen he was too old to cry, but he couldn’t help the tears that ran down his cheeks. He bit his bottom lip to keep from sobbing out loud. Étienne has to go, he thought fiercely. He can’t stay here with Papa any longer, not after last night.

Jacques shifted restlessly, seeing again Étienne’s face, flushed with anger, as he argued with Papa.

“You’re a coward, Papa,” Étienne said, pushing his chair back from the supper table. “You sit here and do

nothing! The English build their forts and make their laws and you do nothing!" He pounded his fist on the table. "We've been English prisoners for forty-two years! Forty-two years, Papa, since the maudit 1713 Treaty of Utrecht stole our lands and still you do nothing!"

Papa took a deep breath. "That's not true," he said gently. "We made an agreement with the English."

"Agreement?" Étienne spat the word. "You made a coward's deal!"

"We bargained for our freedom." Papa's voice hardened. "The English agreed that we could keep our language and our religion. They accepted our neutrality. Do you call that a coward's deal?"

"Yes!" Étienne's dark eyes flashed. "Because we're still English subjects! We should fight!"

Papa pushed back his chair and stood up. He glared at his son. "I won't have talk of war in this house!" he said.

"But Papa!" Étienne leapt to his feet, towering over his father. His cheeks were bright red. "We have to join the French! We have to fight for our land!"

"No."

"Because you're afraid?" Étienne taunted.

"Because I've seen fighting before." Papa sank back into his chair. "It's not exciting. It's horrible." He covered his eyes.

"But it'd be worth it! We'd be free!"

Papa looked up at him. "Do you think you'd be freer with a French governor than an English one?" he asked.

Étienne curled his lip. "Of course."

"Why?"

"Because we're French!"

“Non, Étienne.” Papa picked up his clay pipe and pressed tobacco into the bowl. “We’re not French. We’re Acadian.”

“What’s the difference?” Étienne grasped the edge of the table as if he wanted to crush it in his big hands. He struggled to keep his voice low. “Your great-grandfather came from France!”

“Yes, he did,” Papa agreed. “He came here because he was a farmer and he wanted to farm. He worked hard, building the dykes, stealing this land from the sea...”

“And then the English stole it from us!” Étienne yelled.

Papa looked up from his pipe. He struggled to keep his voice steady. “And did the French in Louisbourg help us then? Did the soldiers in Québec protect us?” He shook his head. “No! They didn’t care then, and they don’t care now! We’re nothing to them.”

Étienne let go of the table and shoved back against the wooden bench, almost knocking Michel to the floor. “You’re a fool,” he shouted. “A fool and a coward! But I’m not!” He clenched his fists. “I’m not going to put up with it any longer! I’m going to fight!”

Papa’s hands shook as he laid down his pipe. “Étienne,” he pleaded. “I know how you feel. I understand...”

“You understand nothing!” Étienne stormed from the room.

Now Étienne was leaving, and Jacques couldn’t lie still any longer. He climbed out of bed and pulled on his heavy trousers, moccasins and deerskin jacket. He stuffed his long brown hair under his hat, tiptoed down the ladder and slipped outside into the early spring morning.

A thick fog blanketed the fields. Jacques strained to hear Étienne's horse as it galloped towards Grand-Pré, but all he could hear was the dull crash of the waves as they beat against the shore of the Minas Basin.

Jacques placed a log on the chopping block. He picked up the axe and swung it with all his strength. Splinters flew everywhere. He tossed the kindling into a pile and reached for another log. The steady rhythm of the chopping calmed him and soon a pile of wood towered beside him.

"Are you chopping wood for the whole village?" Papa asked from behind him. Jacques stiffened, but did not turn to face his father. "Étienne is gone," he said dully.

"I know."

"Why did you let him go?"

"I couldn't stop him."

Jacques threw the axe on the ground and spun around. His brown eyes blazed. "You could've tried!" he yelled. "You didn't even try."

"I couldn't stop him, Jacques." Papa laid his hand on his son's shoulder. "Étienne wants to fight..."

Jacques pulled away from his father's grasp. "So? What's wrong with that?"

"You too?" Papa asked. "Do you think I am a fool and a coward too?"

Jacques didn't answer. Papa sighed. "Jacques," he said softly. "I know it's hard for young men to understand, but sometimes you have to make compromises." He picked up the axe and leaned it against the stack of wood. "We can't beat the English by fighting—God knows we've tried. There's only one way we can win, by fighting with

our ploughs and our families. Not with guns.”

Jacques snorted.

“And we have won!” Papa continued. “This is our land. Even the English accept that.”

“They’re still our masters!”

“But they don’t interfere. We still speak our language. They call us papists, oui, c’est vrai. But we can still go to Mass and baptize our babies...”

“As long as we behave!”

Papa face flushed. “Who cares?” he shouted. “They leave us alone. Do you really think war is the answer? Do you have any idea what that means?”

“It means freedom from the English!”

Papa lowered his voice with an effort. “It means people dying,” he said. “Men, women, and children. It means cows and sheep and pigs killed. Crops destroyed. For what? So we don’t have to swear allegiance to England?”

“Yes!”

“I’d rather swear the oath.”

Then you are a coward, Jacques thought. He didn’t say it out loud, but his father must have guessed because he nodded. “Ah, Jacques,” he said. “You think I don’t understand, but I do.” He hesitated. “Grab a log and sit down,” he said, waving toward the wood pile. “I want to tell you a story.”

Jacques pulled out a large stump and sat down. The morning sun had burned away most of the fog, and he could see his father’s face clearly as Papa crouched beside him.

“I know what war is really like,” Papa said. “You know I took part in the attack on Colonel Noble eight years ago?”

Jacques nodded.

Papa stared at the ground. “I don’t like to talk about it,” he said. “So I never told you what happened. Maybe that was a mistake.” He hesitated.

“I know the English were here, in Grand-Pré,” Jacques said. “I remember seeing them in the market.”

Papa nodded. “Most of the troops were from New England. Colonel Noble brought them here because of the attacks on Annapolis Royal. Small raiding parties of Mi’kmaq and French troops from Beaubassin kept trying to force the English out.” Papa looked at Jacques and smiled sadly. “See, a lot of us felt then like you do now, so some of our young men joined in the raids.”

“Did you?”

“Not at Annapolis Royal, no. Not until we got word of the French plan to send more reinforcements from Beaubassin. I thought with enough soldiers to support us, we could chase the English out of L’Acadie.” Papa stood up and stretched. He grabbed a stump, dragged it closer to his son and sat down.

“We knew where the English were being billeted,” Papa continued. “Our plan was to creep up on the houses. Most of us were young, hot-blooded Acadians, with a few French soldiers and Mi’kmaq men thrown in.” Papa sighed. “It was February, the middle of winter. We pushed our way through the snow. It was dark and cold and...”

Jacques eyes glowed. “What happened?” he asked.

“Somehow we got there without being seen. God knows how. But we stopped outside one of the houses and waited for the rest of the French troops to arrive.”

“And?”

“One of the Englishmen must have heard a noise.” Papa stared off towards the meadow, but Jacques knew he wasn’t seeing the long salt grass or the gulls soaring above the shore. “I don’t know how he could hear anything. The wind was making an awful racket. But he must have. He opened the door. We all had to drop down and hide our faces in the snow.”

“Did he see you?”

“Not that time. He closed the door and we moved in closer to the house. We got into position and waited.” Papa glanced quickly at Jacques’ face. “We were supposed to get French reinforcements, you see. But they didn’t come. So we waited.” Papa sighed. “Then the door opened again and this time we were spotted. The Englishman sounded the alarm! Soldiers started running all over the place.”

“Did you shoot them?”

Papa stood up slowly, his eyes filling with tears. “Our leader was killed right away. Shot through the head. The noise was deafening; the muskets, the men crying and shouting...” After a long pause, he said, “I couldn’t, I couldn’t...”

Jacques jumped up, knocking the log over, and glared down at his father “You chickened out!”

Papa kept his eyes on the meadow. “The French soldiers came at last. They killed Colonel Noble and more than sixty of his troops. We drove them back to Annapolis Royal.” Papa wiped the tears from his cheeks. “But it was all for nothing.”

“What do you mean? The French won!”

“That battle, oui. But the next month, the English



were back.” Papa studied Jacques’ face. “So many people killed, and for what? It changed nothing in the end.” He turned away and went back into the house.

Jacques’ hands trembled, as he threw the stump back on the woodpile. His eyes stung as he blinked back tears. “He’s a coward,” he muttered, “just like Étienne said. Scared of the noise...” His chest ached. From inside the house he could hear his year-old sister, Marguerite, giggling at Maman’s singing as she set the table. Smoke trickled out of the chimney along with the sweet smell of porridge.

Jacques turned and ran into the field like an escaping prisoner.