

Attack of the Roogaroos!

Janice DePeel

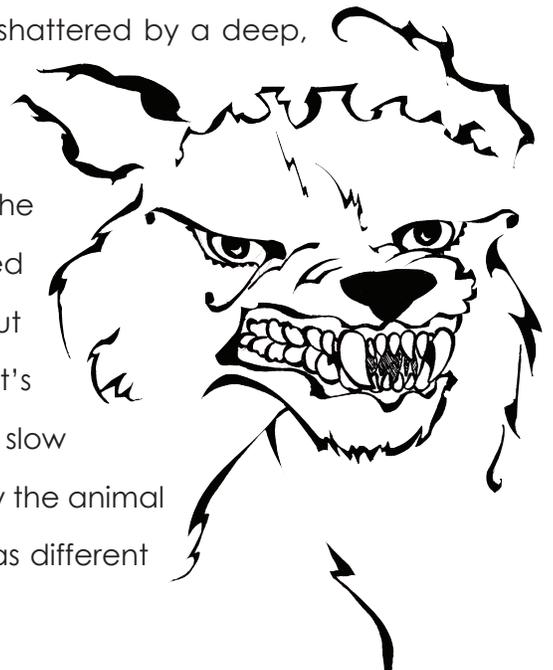
(Based on stories by Joe and Norma Welsh and interview by Sherry Farrell Racette)

It had been a long day for Virginia Lavallée. She and Irma Morin had been out most of the day berry picking. Virginia had fresh bannock and jam in her deer-hide satchel, and was on her way to Irma's house for coal oil, refreshment, and a visit. She'd left a note on the kitchen table for Earl, her husband of twenty-three years. Although he knew if she wasn't at home she was likely somewhere with Irma, she still didn't want to worry him needlessly. Besides, without a note he wasn't likely to look in the oven where a plate of food was staying warm for him. She smiled at the thought of her scatter-brained husband warming up canned soup instead of feasting on *lii beignes* and *lii boulettes*¹ which she'd prepared in the slow cooker.

The road she travelled was as familiar to her as the back of her hand. She knew the land, the forest and the people equally well. She knew the respect and affection she felt for them was reciprocated. If she took care of them, they'd take care of her, her family, and her community. As she breathed the sweet night air, she felt grateful for her life and her culture.

Above her, a nearly full moon lit her path. To the north, *lii Chiraan*, the Northern Lights, danced in the sky. Legend said these were the ancestors, which is why they were colourful and active on this night. Virginia recalled the story that her *Kokum* had told her about the Northern Lights. That if she whistled, the lights would come down and dance. If she called the lights down to the earth, they'd steal her voice, so that her song would be with them forever. She shook her head at the idea and smiled thinking she would share the same story with her own grandchildren someday.

Just then all thoughts of the pleasant evening were shattered by a deep, throaty growl emanating from behind the bush. Turning, Virginia saw an animal crouched, ready to leap. Virginia yelled and waved her arms, trying to appear larger than she was. The animal didn't even cower. She looked at it and tried to remember everything that her father had taught her about wolves and rabid dogs: don't look the animal in the eye. That's too confrontational. While backing away face the animal in slow steady movements. Yet, even as she did these things she saw the animal was not a wolf. Nor was it a coyote or a dog. The shape was different from any other canines that she'd ever seen.



"Roogaroo!" her mind screamed. She didn't have time to think because the animal was flying through the air, lunging at her with its open fangs, ready to rip whatever flesh it could grasp. Virginia put her deer-skin bag between herself and the animal. It wouldn't hurt the beast but it would buy her precious seconds until she figured out what to do. The animal sunk its powerful jaws into the bag and shook with all of its might. The bag was ripped from her shoulder and torn to pieces.

Then Virginia saw a long thick tree branch, similar to a baseball bat and just as long lying on the path. She picked it up and crouched low. This time when the animal attacked, she'd be ready. Having decimated the deer-skin bag, the animal once again turned its attention to Virginia. For a moment she wished she'd run but there wasn't time. She wouldn't become the animal's prey. Once again, its deep growling could be heard.

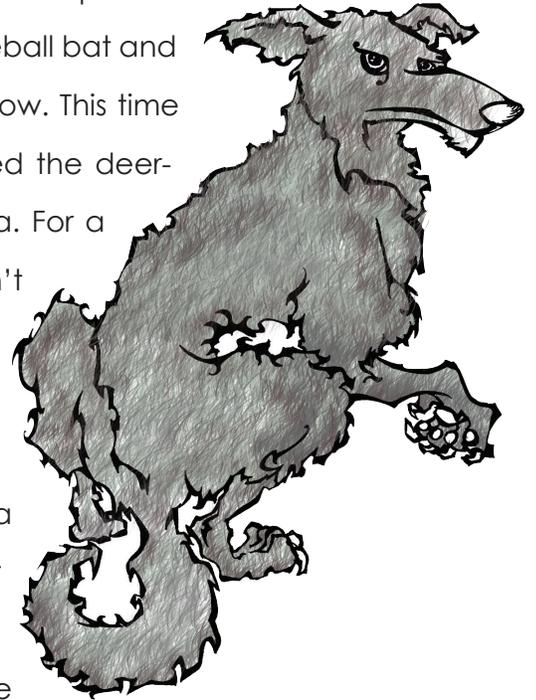
Virginia disobeyed her father's advice and looked the animal in the eyes. What a shock! With sickening clarity, Virginia knew the eyes were human. She now knew more than ever that this was a fight for her life. Blindly, with all her might, she drew back the stick, and as the black dog lunged forth she hit it on the head. She heard the powerful jaws click shut and cloth tearing. Her arms stung as the strength of the clubbing reverberated in her hands. The animal landed partially on its side but picked itself up and ran. As it left, it looked at Virginia. She could see that it carried cloth in its mouth. Not waiting to see if she was injured, she quickly hurried to Irma's house which was just around the next stand of trees.

"Irma! Irma phone Constable Jack, quick!" Virginia cried as she flung herself through the door. Still out of breath, the shock beginning to wear off.

"For heavens sake Virginia! Whatever is the matter with you?" Then Irma looked at her friend's ashen face and torn clothing. In her hands she held a club. "Virginia, was it a bear?" "No!" Virginia whispered, allowing herself to be led to the kitchen table. "It was worse. Phone Jack! His people are Michif, he'll understand."

Twenty minutes later Constable Jack Pelletier listened to the story for the second time. He'd already sent two men up the path with flashlights and other equipment to see if they could find anything. He knew Virginia Lavallée his whole life. She wouldn't make something up like this. She was a pillar of the Métis community.

"Just look at her apron!" Irma insisted as Jack put down his small notepad, "that chunk of material missing isn't from brushing up too close to a tree. Something is out there and it's time the police did



something about it.”

Jack could see the jagged round hole in the cloth of the apron. Something pretty big had shaken Virginia up enough that she couldn't quite pull herself together. As a retired nurse and midwife, she'd seen many sights in her day. Whatever she'd encountered on the trail that night, Jack knew that her memory of this event would be with her the rest of her life. “I don't think much more will happen tonight, Virginia. How about I give you a ride home? I'll just contact my men and let them know where I'll be.”

The drive to the Lavallée's was quick and uneventful. That evening was the most eventful since teenagers threw a rowdy graduation party at the park last June. It felt good to be out on a case and away from the desk for the evening, even if nothing was ever likely going to come of it. Jack knew about this place's legends. It was the same in every Métis community. Just as every city has its urban legends, this community, which is mainly Michif, was no different. Although Jack had no doubt something had scared Virginia, he was sure it was simply a matter of nature and a human crossing paths, spooking one another in the process.

“I'll stop by tomorrow, Virginia,” Jack promised before she turned to walk into her house. He made sure she was safely inside before he pulled away. Returning to the road he'd just come from, he quickly found the men who were searching for clues and asked for a report.

“Nothing, Jack. This is a needle in a haystack. There are a lot of animal prints and we can see where the scuffle occurred but nothing else. No blood...no hair...nothing.” Jim Bird shined his flashlight on some indentations in the dirt as he spoke, confirming what he'd already said. Earlier in the evening there'd been a light rain that made the ground soft. If not for the rain, there would've been nothing on the hard, dry path to indicate anyone or anything had walked there half an hour before.



"Give it another hour," Jack instructed the men, "then return to headquarters. If nothing else, at least you'll now have some paperwork to file." Jack's shift was over and he was looking forward to a hot shower, a cold beer, and a sandwich, not necessarily in that order.

No sooner had he pulled off his boots and grabbed a sandwich than the phone rang. "Yeah?" he asked. "What?" As he listened he put his unopened pack of beer in the fridge and put his boots back on. "No, you did the right thing calling me. I'm on my way. And don't touch anything."

Jack started the engine and flipped on the lights. In no time at all he was at the Lavallée house. He walked through the front door without knocking. Now was not the time for manners. He followed the noise coming from upstairs. A noise pierced the air and made Jack's hackles stand at attention. Making his way into the bedroom, he quickly saw that Virginia was fine. Earl wasn't. His hand was clamped over the left side of his head and blood trickled between his fingers. On his forehead he wore an ugly purple goose egg.

"It was him!" Virginia announced upon seeing Jack. "He's the *Roogaroo!*"

"You're crazy!" Earl hollered, "I want her charged, Jack! I don't care if she is my wife!"

"Calm down, Earl. Let me see what's happened here. Then I'll get a full statement from both of you." Jack tried to placate Earl but his words only further angered him.

"You want to see what happened?" Earl asked indignantly, removing his hand from the side of his head. "The woman tried to murder me in my sleep!" As Earl removed his hand from his head, something fell to the bed beside him. Everyone in the room stopped talking and stared at the white bed linens. Lying beside Earl was his left ear. The only sound in the room was a choked gasp, and then Earl lay beside his ear, passed out from the sight of it.

"Why aren't the paramedics here yet? See what's keeping them." Jack ordered abruptly. As he turned to the other police officers, he barked another order: "Slow the blood flow by putting a compress against the wound." Turning to Virginia he asked, "Do you have ice?" "Yes, it's in the freezer part of the fridge." Once again he gave his attention to one of his men, "there's a cooler out in the truck. Fill it with ice and pack the ear inside. With any luck a plastic surgeon will be able to reattach it if we act fast." The officer left and returned immediately.

Once the ear was safely in the cooler the other police officer asked: "Do we arrest this woman, Jack?" Jack looked at Virginia and recalled the events of the evening thus far. Her imagination and nerves had just gotten the best of her. She wasn't going anywhere. She certainly wasn't a flight risk. "No." He looked at the officer who was under his command. He hadn't been with this detachment long, and he still didn't know the ways of the community. "Go outside and make sure the paramedics get here already. I'll get her statement."

Virginia couldn't take her eyes off of her husband. "I can't believe it, Jack." She whispered. "Earl is a *Roogaroo*! He's a werewolf!"

"That's a bold statement, Virginia. Maybe you'd better start at the beginning. What happened after I dropped you off?"

"Earl was already home. He'd tracked dirt into the house, as usual. So I swept it up and tidied up the kitchen. I found him sleeping on the bed upstairs. He looked so peaceful, so I covered him with a light blanket, and then that's when I saw something in his hand. It was a piece of material. When I took it from his hand I could identify it." She walked over to the nightstand and retrieved the cloth. "Look" she said, comparing the cloth to the apron that had been damaged in the earlier attack. "The hole matches perfectly." Jack knew better than to say anything. In this line of work nothing was ever really what it seemed.

"Oh, I know what you're thinking, Jack. You're thinking this doesn't prove anything. Well, I wasn't convinced about Earl being *aen Roogaroo* either, until I pulled back his hair and had a look at his head. You see that nasty looking bump? I gave it to him when he attacked me...while he was *aen Roogaroo*! As soon as I saw it, I knew I had to try and cure him. You know, like the Old People said to do. That's the traditional way. I got Earl's hunting knife, and I was going to cut him on the left ear and draw blood from him. Just as I was about to do it, he woke up. He let out a gawd-almighty scream, and the next thing I knew his ear was hanging from his head. We tried to stop the bleeding then I phoned the paramedics and they must have phoned you."

"I'm not a *Roogaroo*!" Earl said from his bed.

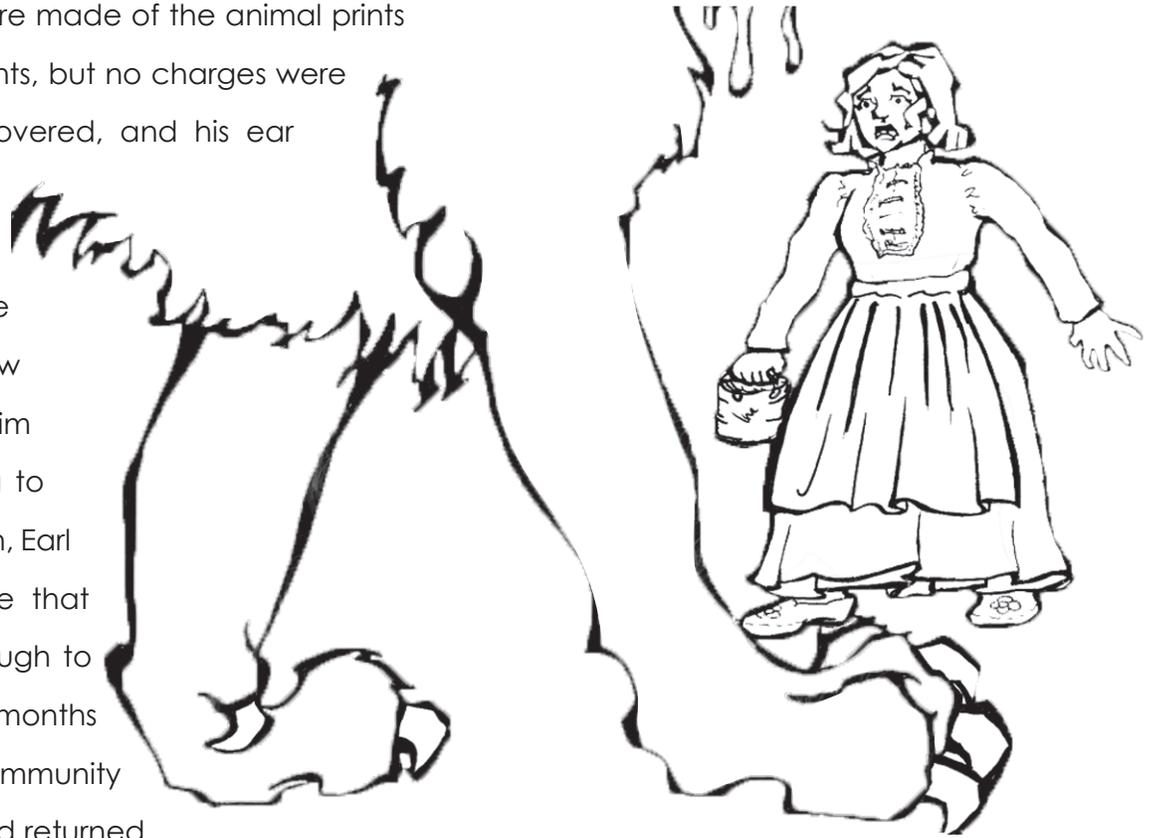
"Not anymore, you're not!" Virginia answered quickly, "where did you get this from, Earl?" she asked holding up the piece of cloth from her apron. Before he could answer there was a commotion outside the room.

"Mom...dad?" They heard their daughter's voice and both thought the same thing. Together Earl and Virginia cried out "Isabella, don't come in here!" It was too late, their daughter rushed into the room. She saw her father's disfigured face and blood on her mother's hands. She gave a cry of distress, and then her own hands flew onto her swollen abdomen, where her baby kicked violently inside. The paramedics arrived just then. One of the cops also rushed into the room.

"Jack, we found something." He gave Jack a Polaroid and two recently-developed images. In the pictures, Jack clearly saw two sets of footprints. One belonged to an animal and the other to a human. One frame showed both sets of tracks, which looked like the transformation of animal to human. Earl was on a gurney, ready for transport when Jack stopped the medics. Taking a swab from Earl's feet, he measured his feet, and took pictures of them as well. Then he let the medics continue with their job.

Clay casts were made of the animal prints and the human prints, but no charges were ever laid. Earl recovered, and his ear was restored to its natural place.

Virginia made sure her husband knew that she loved him and was not trying to kill him and, in return, Earl expressed gratitude that his wife cared enough to cure him. In the months that passed the community let the story die, and returned



to living their daily lives. Isabella, then with child, and her husband Harold welcomed a son into their family and peace returned to the community for thirteen years.

"Jack," Jim Bird strode into his office, a small dog in his arms, "Marsha Fiddler brought her dog in. She claims an animal came out of nowhere and attacked her dog. Its shots are up to date and its wounds aren't severe. The vet has checked over the dog and put in some stitches. I just wanted you to have a look."

Jack took a look at the dog. It shivered pathetically and whimpered, traumatized from its experience Jack guessed. He could see where the vet had shaved the dog's torso, bite marks lined the dog's hind quarters and a gash had been stitched closed. "Okay, get a statement from Marsha and tell her we're looking into it."

"Do you think...?" Jack held up his hand, and stopped Jim from asking what was on his mind. He'd heard enough about the legend: he knew what he had to do. "Tell her we're looking into it." Jim nodded and left the room.

Lately, people had reported finding carcasses of small animals. It was obvious the animals had been attacked but by what no one was sure. Now, Jack had a hunch and he knew that he should get over to Isabella and Harold Morin's place to check that hunch out.

Any hesitation Jack felt about approaching the Morins disappeared when he arrived at their door. He squatted down and looked closely at what he saw. Inside he could hear Harold and Isabella

moving about so he knocked on the door. Harold answered, somewhat surprised to see Jack. "Is everything okay?" he asked as he held open the door. "We're tying up loose ends with the Lavallée case," Jack answered, remaining outside the door. Isabella joined her husband at the door. "Mom isn't going to be charged after all this time, is she? I mean, dad isn't pressing charges or anything." Isabella's brows wrinkled in a frown of concern. Jack shook his head and her face relaxed into a warm smile with his words, "No charges are being laid. It was a domestic dispute and your father refused to press charges. We see no reason to pursue it. Our final report indicated it was considered an isolated incident." Jack paused for a second, letting the couple absorb the information before redirecting their attention elsewhere. "Have you seen or heard any unusual activity lately? Harold, I know you are on the road a lot with business and Isabella, you're in town quite a bit yourself."

"You mean the dead animals?" Harold asked

"Why are the police wasting their time on that?" Isabella asked, "Let nature take care of itself. As if you didn't have real police work to do!" she laughed at how ridiculous it sounded to have trained police looking for a rabbit killer.

"We've heard about it, Jack, but it's not something anyone is taking seriously" Harold added.

"Marsha Fiddler is taking it all pretty seriously—her dog was attacked earlier today. She was able to chase the animal away but she can't identify what kind of animal it was." "What?" Isabella squawked. "Marsha Fiddler has been a trapper for over thirty years! She knows every kind of animal in the North. How could she not know what attacked her dog?" Jack could only shrug. Marsha had been trapping her whole life. She and her father still used the same traplines that her grandfather and great-grandfather had used. It was hard to believe Marsha couldn't identify an animal in these parts.



"So, you've not seen anything then?" Jack asked.

"I don't stop to inspect the dead animals on the road, Jack. People always talk of course but, like I said...we just don't take it for anything more than talk." Harold propped himself up against the doorframe as he spoke and Jack stepped to the side filling the doorway with his lanky body.

Jack nodded to Isabella and looked at both of them as he spoke, "After the incident with your parents I

did some research. You know about the traditions and legends of our people." Jack didn't need to remind them of the Old Peoples' stories. It was part of their culture. The Old People told stories or *lii zistwayr* about things that appeared to be legends but to them were very real. "I found some interesting information. Lebret, QU'Appelle, Gabriel's Crossing near Batoche, and a mining camp outside of La Ronge all had *Roogaroo* sightings. The camp was attacked by a *Roogaroo*, and a man was severely hurt."

"A *Roogaroo*!" Harold gasped and Isabella was equally as stunned.

"Is that what the official report says?" she asked.

"No, no." Jack answered "the official report says it was a wolf attack. A *Roogaroo* is a werewolf. I'm not telling you this to alarm you. You need to be aware for your own safety and peace of mind. Isabella, when you came into your parents' bedroom that day I saw your reaction, you clutched your belly."

"Yes, it was such a shock seeing my dad like that. And to think that mom could have done what she did!" Isabella shuddered, "I still get goose bumps thinking about it." "The legend of the *Roogaroo* is that pregnant women should avoid anything that looked ugly or frightening or their baby would be born that way."

"Yes, I know." Isabella's eyebrow creased into a frown of confusion, "What does this have to do with my parents and us?"

"You were pregnant, and saw something very frightening, very ugly." Jack said gently.

"Oh come on, Jack!" Harold bellowed, "I can see where you're going with this. There's nothing's a matter with our child. He's perfectly healthy and completely normal. He's hardly changing into some shapeshifter and attacking people."

"No, not yet," Jack answered.

"Jack!" Isabella's distressed voice filled the room, "No! I'd know. A mother always knows if there is something wrong with her child."

"I think it's time you leave, Jack!" Harold stood up straight and tall, ready to close the door on him, "You aren't welcome here anymore."

"A *Roogaroo* begins by hunting small game. And then it's drawn to people. Your dad..."

"My dad was not a *Roogaroo*!" Isabella interrupted, "My mother had a terrible shock that night and misunderstood what she saw."

"Your father was told some oral history by his auntie." Jack spoke softly, "Your great-aunt Ida told your father that your *Kokum* saw a woman in the community attacked by a wild back dog. A few weeks later she found out she was pregnant with your father."

"No!" Isabella insisted. "It's not true of our son."

Again Harold attempted to close the door but Jack's words stopped him, "You've heard the reports of animals being attacked and killed. Think about it. An animal only kills when it's hungry. It eats what it kills. These animals are being killed as trophies. In a few years it's going to be a dead child. A few years later it will be an adult from this community."

"If that happens...Jack...it won't be our son doing it. He's not a *Roogaroo*." Harold clamped his lips shut into a tight line. "Leave now, Jack, and I won't tell your superiors we've had this conversation."

"Harold, Isabella! You know there's truth in what I am saying. Think about it. Your father, now your son! If you don't believe me then have a look. Look at what I found on your door step when I came here this evening." Jack stepped aside so they could see the large mangled rabbit lying on their doorstep. Part of its head was missing but the rest of it was still there. Something had chewed on it, played with it before finally killing it. "You know how fast a rabbit is?" Jack said as the couple looked at the dead animal. "What animal has speed so great that it can catch and release a rabbit over and over again before killing it? I can't think of one. I know what the legends say, and I know a *Roogaroo* could do it." Isabella and Harold looked at the rabbit, then at each other.

A thin wail could then be heard coming from inside the house. Then the sound changed and became something different. The sound came from the house and from the forest, from the heavens and from the ground. It was now a low throaty rumble, a growl that kept building. The three looked at each other, the two men with confusion and Isabella with complete comprehension.

"What's that?" Harold asked, looking outside for the source of the noise while Jack looked inside the house. Isabella looked at both of them, as if she had known all along she told her husband what she herself didn't want to admit. "Harold, it's our son," she said as she picked up the fussy baby boy, whose cheeks were flushed with teething pain. "Oh no, I don't mean the baby! It's Drew, our thirteen-year old!" She explained to her husband why babies couldn't be *Roogaroos*: "The Old People told me that all babies are born innocent. They don't have time to sin or to think about sinning. You have to make a choice to become a *Roogaroo*. Drew's made that choice! For most of the time that I was carrying Drew, my dad was a *Roogaroo*. Then I witnessed my mom confront him about it. That meant Drew was predisposed to become a *Roogaroo*. He made the choice to become *aen Roogaroo*!"

"What?" Harold yelled, rejecting the idea as soon as he heard it. "No way, Isabella, you've gone too far!" Harold continued and then stepped outside beside Jack. "You haven't supported Drew for months now—as far as you're concerned he can't do anything right! This is superstitious thinking!"

Isabella kept her voice calm as she rocked the now slumbering child in her arms, "I've been asking you for your help, but you refuse to see what I'm telling you. Harold, there is something wrong with our son. He's withdrawn. He's distant, and he's even stopped going to church. He told mom that he

doesn't even believe in God! And the boys that he calls friends are a gang as far as I'm concerned. Two of them have already been charged with petty crimes—how long before it's our son?"

"You just can't relate to our boy." Harold said, ignoring his wife's concerns, "Drew's acting like any other boy. If I told you some of the things I did when I was his age..." Harold shook his head and laughed.

"Harold, that's not it—I really think Drew needs our help, and ignoring the problem doesn't make it go away!" Harold turned his back to his wife and shook his head. Jack cleared his throat reminding the couple that he was still there.

"The reason why I came tonight was that I thought you might be targets for pranksters. Then I just found this by your doorstep." Jack stepped aside revealing the dead carcass of a once healthy calf. The couple looked on, but was shocked into silence. They each began thinking their own thoughts.

Jack continued speaking, "I don't know what to tell you about Drew, but what I can tell you is there are forces at work that may be influencing him. We can't comprehend these things. However, they're part of our Michif heritage. Isabella, your family can help him through this, they've lived it."

Harold looked at the carcass for a long time. They all stood silently letting the night wrap around them. Quietly, Harold put his arm around his wife, and hugged her to his side. He whispered to her in Michif: <<*Dimaen ka itistahan Drew chi kiwkawayakoohk li vyeu.*>> Harold repeated what he said in Michif in English in case Jack missed his meaning: "Tomorrow, we will take Drew to the Old People." Isabella nodded her head in gratitude and understanding, knowing this was difficult for her husband to accept, just as it had once been for her. "I really believe if we reconnect with our traditions, we'll help Drew," Isabella said, as she leaned into her husband's embrace. "We'll help ourselves, and our community will benefit since we are keeping the traditions of our people alive."



Jack left the couple and took the calf carcass back to dispatch. He'd leave a report that the animals were killed by wild dogs or coyote, or by a cougar attack, knowing that perhaps the local conspiracy theorist Bill Delorme would blame the government or aliens for the cattle mutilation. He thought it best to leave the truth buried. Moreover, he had a feeling that there wouldn't be anymore mysterious killings if Harold and Isabella were committed to keeping their word. He also knew that this case which involved generations of one family would always stand out as the highlight of his career. By working with the Lavallées and Pelletiers during this past thirteen years he learned more about himself and his culture than he ever could investigating animal mutilations.

1 Michif/French for donuts and meatballs.