

Chi-Jean and the Red Willows

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(Based on stories by Gilbert Pelletier and Norman Fleury, and interview by Sherry Farrell Racette)

"Please, Mom, can I listen to some more stories?" Ralph begged. At this point, his aunties and uncles, cousins and his *Kokum*¹ and *Mooshum*² focused their attention on Ralph and his mom. The family had gathered at Canoe Lake for their annual reunion for berry-picking, fishing, and storytelling—a tradition that happened year after year since before Ralph was born. His Mom smiled indulgently at him before giving in to his request. "One more," she said as she ran her fingers through his hair and down his cheek. Then she grabbed his chin in her gentle, firm grip and said "then it is time for bed, Ralph, and no arguments."

"Alright!" he said with excitement, turning all of his attention to *Mooshum*. He sat on a stool in front of the fireplace which they imagined was an outdoor fire. As he told stories, the fire would die down and every once in a while he threw a short stick on it to keep it burning. With every stick he added, another story seemed to be inspired from the flames. Ralph couldn't get enough of *Mooshum*'s stories, told in a thick Michif accent. For him, this time around the fire was the best part of the yearly family gatherings.

"Since this is your last story, Ralph, you choose." *Mooshum* said.

"Oh!" Ralph breathed in excitement, "The Red Willows. That's my favourite!" *Mooshum* smiled. It was the first story he'd ever told Ralph when they had first come to Canoe Lake together. He was pleased that the boy remembered. "*Chi-Jean* it is." As he began telling the story he spoke in English but soon, the language changed to Michif, which is part Cree and part French, but all the same Métis. Not everyone understood the words but *Mooshum* made sure they understood the story by miming the actions of *Chi-Jean* as he spoke.

"*Chi-Jean* can do anything," *Mooshum* told his assembled family, "and there are many legends about him. There are so many stories about him. So many, that almost every culture knows who he is. We Michifs call him '*Nanabush*,' '*Wiisakaychak*' or '*Chakapesh*'—the trickster. I call him *Chi-Jean*. *Chi-Jean*, he is a smart guy. He is also a very stupid guy. He can change his face, his body, his voice, his language—he can do anything. In fact, right now, he might be sitting next to you!" *Mooshum* jumped forward from the rock onto his feet, startling everyone, so they too jumped. Everyone gasped in surprise, and then they all laughed.





“*Chi-Jean* helped create the earth, did you know that?” *Mooshum* asked the group but he didn't wait for them to answer. “Well he did. And because he helped create the earth, he could change the way things looked. That's how he changed the look of the Red Willow.” *Mooshum* walked toward the low-burning flames of the fire, “You see how low the fire burns and the dark red near the coals? That used to be the colour of the Red Willow; just that plain colour. One day *Chi-Jean*, well, he was bored.” *Mooshum* paused and didn't say anything for a long moment, as if he had forgotten the story. Ralph knew his *Mooshum*; he wanted to know who was listening.

“How bored was he, *Mooshum*?” The old man looked at Ralph and smiled “I'm glad you asked.” He turned to the group, and continued telling the story.

“*Chi-Jean* was so bored that he decided to go and dance with *lii fezaan di prayrii* or what you call prairie chickens. He figured that he would challenge them to a contest, and since they have little legs, he would win.” *Mooshum* began dancing around the fire, and flapped his arms like a prairie chicken. “As *Chi-Jean* danced, the prairie chickens watched him and they begin dancing too. Since they have such short legs, they moved very quickly. *Chi-jean* worked extra hard to dance as quickly as the chickens, and before too long, he stopped dancing. He collapsed onto the ground, and the chickens danced around him, drummed their feet, and rustled their feathers in victory.

Chi-Jean was mad at the prairie chickens because he lost. He was also hungry, though. So, he stood up and he said to the prairie chickens, ‘I challenge you again but this time, while you dance, you must close your eyes.’ *Lii fezaan di prayrii* were so happy that they beat *Chi-Jean* at dancing that they didn't even think. They just closed their eyes, and continued drumming their feet. *Chi-Jean* couldn't believe how stupid the prairie chickens were as one-by-one he grabbed each bird, killing them.” *Mooshum* continued dancing but as he did, he twisted his hands together pretending to wring the necks of the prairie chickens. He grabbed a stick, and threw it on the fire causing sparks to fly up and burn in the dark night sky. *Mooshum*'s face was illuminated in the fire's flames, and Ralph could almost imagine that it wasn't his *Mooshum* who stood telling this story. He could feel the power of *Chi-Jean* and the hair on his arms stood at attention as he watched his *Mooshum*. He listened.

“Now with the fire burning, *Chi-Jean* cooked the prairie chickens, and feasted until his belly was so full he couldn't possibly eat another bite.” *Mooshum* inched his belly forward so much so that a button burst from his shirt and flew into the darkness. They all laughed as *Mooshum* rubbed his belly just like *Chi-*

Jean must have done on that day so long ago. "*Chi-Jean* was happy. He was full and he was warm. Now he was ready for some sleep, after all it's not everyday he dances with prairie chickens! He didn't want the meat to get too cold, so he stoked the fire just enough to ensure that the flame wouldn't be too high. There were still a lot of hot coals. He put the chickens over top so that they would stay nice and warm while he had a nap." *Mooshum* paused again and he looked at each of us in turn.

"How do you wake up in the morning, with the sun? Do you use an alarm clock? Does somebody wake you up?" He had a question for each of them, and they either nodded or shook their heads "yes" or "no" to answer. None of them wanted to break the spell that *Mooshum* had cast over them. All of them could see *Chi-Jean*, and their imaginations were running rampant. They wanted to know what would happen next.

"*Chi-Jean* arranged for a wakeup call for himself," *Mooshum* said. "Only he didn't have a telephone for someone to phone him, and he couldn't go find someone to wake him up so he talked to himself, a particular part of himself." *Mooshum* began to twist and look over his shoulder, keeping his eyes down toward the small of his back. "*Chi-Jean* said, 'Hey you!'" *Mooshum* explained that *Chi-Jean* was talking to his rear end as he slapped the cheek of his own arse. "'You wake me up'. Remember, *Chi-Jean* could talk to anything so he said to his rear end, 'You wake me up when somebody comes to steal my chicken. I'll scare them away, and then I'll have something to eat when I wake up.' So *Chi-Jean* fell asleep.



When he woke up, the fire was just a few embers intermixed with blackened chicken bones. *Chi-Jean* picked up a bone, and there was no meat. He picked up another bone, and there was no meat there either. He was really, really angry. He was stomping around his camp, and he yelled at his arse, "'I told you to wake me up if anyone came to steal my meat. You didn't listen to me and now I am going to teach you a lesson!' *Chi-Jean* was hungry so he would have to find more food, but first he had to teach his arse a lesson." *Mooshum* moved like *Chi-Jean* must have on that fateful day, his steps were quick and angry. His face was twisted and mad. Finally, *Mooshum* got near the fire, and in one quick movement he pretended to sit on it then gave a whoop of pain. He threw both hands over his arse, and ran in chaotic confusion while continuing with the story.

"*Chi-Jean* taught his rear end a lesson for not listening to him. He found a rock that was red, red hot from standing so close to the fire, and he sat on it. When he did, he burned his whole arse, and then he walked quickly through the forest searching for food. *Chi-Jean* walked by the Red Willows, and he moved so quickly that the scabs fall off of his arse. The scabs bounced off of *Chi-Jean*'s feet as

he moved and they jumped up onto the Red Willows. And so now, today, when you look at the Red Willows they look like scabs. This was how *Chi-Jean* changed the way they looked and made them as beautiful as they are today." *Mooshum* sat back down on his rock, and shook his head with a laugh.

"That *Chi-Jean*, he was a smart one but oh! He was stupid too, eh Ralph?" *Mooshum* beckoned his grandson over with his hand.

"Yes, *Mooshum*," Ralph agreed as he hugged his *Mooshum*. "Thank you for the story, *Mooshum*."

"Ah, don't thank me!" *Mooshum's* eyes twinkled, "Thank *Chi-Jean*!" *Marsi Chakapesh!*³

1 Michif/Cree for "grandmother."

2 Michif/Cree for "grandfather."

3 Michif for "thank you trickster!"

