

How Michif Was Lost

Janice DePeel

(Based on story by Jeanne Pelletier and interview by Maria Campbell)

One day the forest was alive with excitement. Mother Nature, or "*lii lway di la terr*" or "*Pimachiwin*" as she was also known, was having a party and her guest list didn't exclude anyone. Everyone wanted to look their best for Mother Nature and her guests. The birds busily spruced up their nests so they were extra clean and looked their best. The trees were busy shaking dust from their leaves and rustling the kinks out of their branches so they could stand tall and proud when Mother Nature walked past. Even the berries on the bushes did their part, plumping themselves as large as their skins would allow in



case Mother Nature should become hungry or parched. Their juicy flesh would provide both nourishment and quench her thirst at the same time. News of the party spread once the babbling brook found out. Before long, all of the forest buzzed with news of three special guests who had been invited. They were the cousins, *Chi-Jean*, *Nanabush* and *Wiisakaychak*. All three were clever tricksters, or *Chakapesh*, and all three had a way with Mother Nature. They used their creative talent to entertain her.

Mother Nature enjoyed *Chi-Jean*'s company because of his great dancing ability. Those two could dance like no other dance partners before or since. *Chi-Jean* always practiced his dancing skills. He never removed his dancing shoes, and everywhere he went he danced.

Mother Nature relished spending time with *Wiisakaychak* because he was a wonderful fiddle player. No one could lift Mother Nature's heart more than *Wiisakaychak*. Although Mother Nature adored *Wiisakaychak* he irritated her too. Wherever he went, *Wiisakaychak* ran. He just couldn't stand and play. Still, Mother Nature enjoyed his company and appreciated his talent even more.

Mother Nature loved *Nanabush*'s company because of his wonderful singing voice. He was a very good singer, and was always on key. His voice was so full of emotion that he could make a dried-up old water well cry. The problem with *Nanabush* was that he was either running so fast that he was flying, or he was walking so slowly that it took all his strength to drag his feet to propel himself forward. Still, he had a lovely voice and Mother Nature enjoyed his friendship. Also, since the three cousins' talents complemented each other so well, Mother Nature couldn't resist inviting all three to her party. In all truth, without any one of them, her party wouldn't be a party at all.

The three cousins agreed to meet at a crossroad on the way to the forest Mother Nature called home. *Wiisakaychak* was the first to arrive since he always ran. *Wiisakaychak* was always early because

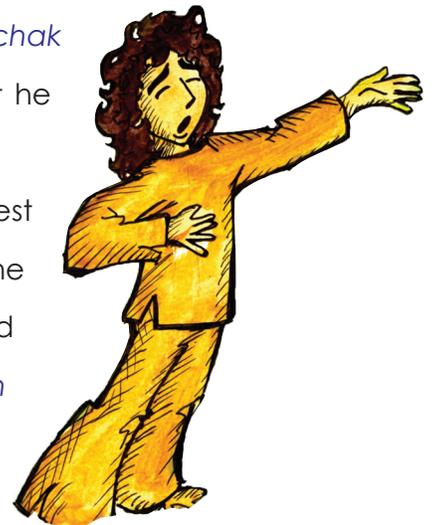
he ran around so much. However, this constant running around also made him impatient. He had only just arrived when he said, "Oh, I wonder where my little cousins are?" He didn't see *Nanabush* or *Chi-Jean* coming from any direction so he decided he should try to speed them along. "Oh, they'll be coming but to make sure they know I'm here. I'll whistle." Putting his fingers to his lips, *Wiisakaychak* blew a loud, piercing whistle which cut through the quiet air, "*Shwi shwho.*" *Wiisakaychak* did this twice. Then he listened. Nobody heard him so he tried again. Still no one heard him. He waited a moment then whistled a third time. This time when he listened, he heard someone whistle back, "*shhh shhh tick shhh shhh tick.*" In reply, *Wiisakaychak* whistled again, "*shhh shoo, shhh shooo.*" He waited and then heard "*shhh shhh tick shwi show*" which told *Wiisakaychak* that *Chi-Jean* was coming. Before too long, *Wiisakaychak* looked and saw *Chi-Jean* dancing his way toward him. Together they waited for *Nanabush* to arrive.

They had only been together a few minutes when the two heard a sound "*shhh shhh shhh*" coming toward them. It was *Nanabush* flying to meet them, and he now had something to tell them.

"I'm not going to Mother Nature's party," *Nanabush* told his cousins. "She tells stories about us and I don't want to go there. Besides, she'll ask me to sing and I don't know that I'm in a singing kind of mood." "Don't go?" said *Chi-Jean*, "Don't be ridiculous *Nanabush*, of course you'll go! Come and stay with us." Turning to his cousin, *Chi-Jean* said, "Convince him to join us, *Wiisakaychak.*" *Wiisakaychak* knew just what to say so he whistled to *Nanabush* and said, "Think of the wonderful food Mother Nature will serve." This appealed to *Nanabush's* stomach. *Nanabush* agreed that Mother Nature was a good cook and he liked eating. Boy did he like eating!

Nanabush then whistled to let them know that they should all continue on to Mother Nature's house as they had planned. Relieved, *Wiisakaychak* and *Chi-Jean* left for Mother Nature's home. *Nanabush* decided that he would take a short cut, and beat his cousins to Mother Nature's home.

A very tall hill stood between *Nanabush* and Mother Nature's forest so he decided to climb the hill. He climbed halfway up the hill when he became tired and stopped to rest for a minute. That's when he realized that he wasn't climbing a hill; he was climbing a mountain! *Nanabush* realized that he must have become confused when he was flying. He'd been coming from the west to meet his cousins so he now knew that he was over what the White people called the "Rocky Mountains."



He decided he would make the stones dance with a song but he couldn't decide on a tune. Finally, he chose a song his White brothers taught him when they came from Europe. *Nanabush* sang "Yo do lady hoo." A few pebbles fell and *Nanabush* was not satisfied with his song. "Yo do lady hoo," he sang a little louder. "Odalady, odalady, odalady," he sang with big, bold words as loud as he could sing. The words echoed off the mountains and back to *Nanabush*'s own ears. They sounded really good. He looked to see if the stones would dance. From behind, he heard a big noise. Turning around, *Nanabush* saw a huge rock coming toward him. Then he saw many rocks coming toward him, all falling at once and all toward him.

Nanabush quickly flew up into the air, using his arms like wings. He could hear his cousins whistling, they were saying "sing again." *Wiisakaychak* was sitting on the ground whistling to his cousin, unable to see that a huge rock was barrelling down the mountain towards him. *Nanabush* whistled urgently and *Wiisakaychak* moved just in the nick of time. *Nanabush* landed on the ground and grabbed a big stick. He then walked around the bend in the road dragging both his feet and the stick.

When *Nanabush* reached his cousins, *Wiisakaychak* was huffing and puffing, having only just missed being hit by the huge rock. *Chi-Jean* also realized the danger they had just avoided and was upset as well. After all of the excitement, *Nanabush* was quite tired and he needed to rest so he came up with a plan. He hugged his cousins. As they hugged him back he said, "Oh, I hurt my back. A big stone fell on me. That's why I'm dragging my feet. I'm sore. I'm just so sore." *Nanabush* saw that *Wiisakaychak* had a bag on his back. Inside the bag, *Wiisakaychak* carried his fiddle. "Oh, how am I going to walk?" *Nanabush* asked as he dragged himself in the direction of Mother Nature's house. *Wiisakaychak* and *Chi-Jean* looked at one another. "Okay, jump in," *Wiisakaychak* told *Nanabush*. Without a second thought, *Nanabush* jumped into the air as *Chi-Jean* opened the bag on *Wiisakaychak*'s back. *Nanabush* transformed himself into a tiny little person and enjoyed his ride to Mother Nature's house. *Chi-Jean* and *Wiisakaychak* felt sorry for *Nanabush*, so they didn't say anything when they heard "chhhh chhh chhh chhhh chhh chhh" and then "chhh chhh tick chhh chhh tick" and "errrr errrr" coming from the bag. Even when *Chi-Jean* and *Wiisakaychak* neared Mother Nature's house, they didn't wake him and tease him about falling asleep and snoring, after all, he hurt his back.

When they arrived at Mother Nature's house she invited them into her home and welcomed them. Her conversation was pleasant and soft as she spoke in Michif. "*Oh mes cousins, mes cousins, mes cousins,*" a happy Mother Nature exclaimed. She called these dear friends her "cousins." She asked *Wiisakaychak*, "Did you bring your fiddle?"

"Yes, I did" he replied as he removed it from his bag. Mother Nature turned her attention to *Chi-*

Jean, "Did you bring your dancing shoes?"

"Oh yes, I even have new jigging steps I'll dance," *Chi-Jean* told Mother Nature. His words brought a happy smile to her lips. Just then *Nanabush* crawled out of *Wiisakaychak*'s bag and transformed himself to his normal size.

"Well, sleeping beauty, welcome at last!" Mother Nature laughed when she saw her friend, "and what will you be doing this evening?" *Nanabush* was irritated that she called him "sleeping beauty" but he didn't say anything.

"I'll sing," *Nanabush* told Mother Nature. She looked at him for a long moment before she answered back.

"Okay," she said. "Maybe you should rest a while before you come and eat." *Nanabush* felt insulted again. Mother Nature knew he loved to eat. She continued speaking to everyone in the room, "I've been cooking in anticipation of your arrival. I cooked *lii boulettes*, *lii patates*, *lii gallettes*, and *après*, *lii beignes*¹ and fried chokecherries. They are all ready." Mother Nature and each of her guests got a plate, and they had their meal together. They drank tea and they filled their dishes some more. There were lots of people at the party and *Wiisakaychak* said, "My meal is too hot and my soup is too hot. I will let it cool off and I'll play some music." He got his fiddle, and he started to play. It was really good fiddle music. *Chi-Jean* heard the music and he couldn't stop his feet from moving even if he wanted to.

"My soup is too hot as well. I'll just wait and I'll dance a bit," *Chi-Jean* said. *Chi-Jean* danced to *Wiisakaychak*'s fiddle tune. It was very good. *Nanabush* came to the table where *Wiisakaychak*'s and *Chi-Jean*'s food cooled. He took a bit of *Wiisakaychak*'s soup and he pushed it away. "Oh!" he said. "It is too salty!" Then he tried *Chi-Jean*'s soup. "Oh! Too much pepper!" So he took both plates and he ate the food. The only thing he didn't touch was the fried chokecherries. Then *Nanabush* went and got his own plate of food but still, he didn't try the chokecherries. He ate and ate some more. Finally, *Nanabush* had a full stomach and he felt satisfied and happy. "Ha," he said, "Now I shall go and sing."



Nanabush joined his cousins and he sang, *Wiisakaychak* played fiddle and *Chi-Jean* danced for a long time. Soon they were going so hard and so fast that *Wiisakaychak* broke the neck of the fiddle, and the all the hair had gone off of his bow. When the music stopped, *Chi-Jean* stopped dancing. When he looked at his feet, there was smoke rising off of them—he had been dancing so hard and so fast. Now *Wiisakaychak* and *Chi-Jean* decided they would eat, which gave *Chi-Jean* a chance to rest his feet. *Wiisakaychak* could then fix his fiddle using a flour paste. *Nanabush* kept singing different kinds

of songs, some fast and some slow. Then he remembered the song he'd sung on the mountain earlier that day.

"This is a song I learned from my White brothers, way over there when they came by boat over a big, big lake" *Nanabush* explained. "They showed me how to sing this." *Nanabush* sang, "Yo do lady hoo yo da lady hoo." He was a really good singer and an even better yodeller. As *Nanabush* sang *Chi-Jean* and *Wiisakaychak* saw their plates were empty. They asked Mother Nature if their plates had been set aside. The plates couldn't be found and no one had moved them. *Nanabush* stopped singing when he heard his cousins' raised voices.

"What's the matter, cousins?" *Nanabush* asked as he made his way over to them.

"What happened to our food?" *Wiisakaychak* asked Mother Nature as *Nanabush* approached. All eyes turned to *Nanabush*. "You ate it," *Wiisakaychak* said. *Chi-Jean* looked at *Nanabush* and accused him of eating all the food: "You ate it, you ate our food!"

"No, I didn't," *Nanabush* explained to *Wiisakaychak*, "You were playing your fiddle so hard you didn't know what you were doing. You were eating at the same time as you were playing." "And you were jigging so hard, you didn't notice you were eating. I didn't eat your food," he told *Chi-Jean*. Mother Nature knew what *Nanabush* had done with his cousin's food but she didn't say anything.

Nanabush knew his cousins were angry at him. He couldn't stand there with them not speaking to him so he said, "I'm getting really tired of singing but I'll sing one more song. Maybe this time I'll even get to finish it." *Nanabush* began to sing, "Odalady odalady odalady hoo!" He was singing louder and louder. Mother Nature looked at *Nanabush* and began to get very angry. She thought he was calling her an old lady. She ran to *Nanabush* and grabbed him by the neck.

"You're a bad cousin!" She told him, "You're not supposed to call anyone names, especially me. I did everything nice for you. I like your singing, but not this song," she said. "You take this song back where you got it from and don't sing it here anymore." Everyone was silent when Mother Nature finished speaking. That was okay because the party had ended and it was time for people to go.

Chi-Jean was the first cousin to leave. He said goodbye to Mother Nature and to *Wiisakaychak* and to *Nanabush*. When *Wiisakaychak* left he said goodbye to Mother Nature and to *Nanabush*.

Nanabush was the last one to leave. After he hugged his cousin, he hugged Mother Nature so hard he tied his arms around her. She began to choke and gasp for air. He let her go after a long hug.

"That's for saying that I ate my cousin's food. I heard the words you spoke in Michif to them. I didn't touch their food after I tasted it, and I didn't touch their fried chokecherries. You told them I ate all their food. You told a lie." He looked at Mother Nature long and hard. He then choked her so she couldn't



talk. She had spoken to them all evening in Michif and now she couldn't talk at all. *Nanabush* looked Mother Nature straight in the eyes and continued speaking, "You'll never talk your language, but someday you'll remember it."

Nanabush let go of Mother Nature's throat, and they stared at each other. Tears glistened in her eyes but they never spoke another word to one another. *Nanabush* took off flying, using his arms. To this day, Mother Nature has never spoken Michif. She speaks English. Now her Michif is starting to slowly come back, but she barely remembers it. Some of her Métis people have lost the Michif language. <<***Kii wanitanaan nutr laanginaan li Michif kaycatch ki waanitanaan nutr laanginaan.***>> We have to keep telling our grandchildren this story so maybe they will remember why Michif was lost and maybe they will help us find it again.

¹ Michif/French for "meatballs, potatoes, bannock, and afterwards donuts."