

Sins of the Righteous

Janice DePeel

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

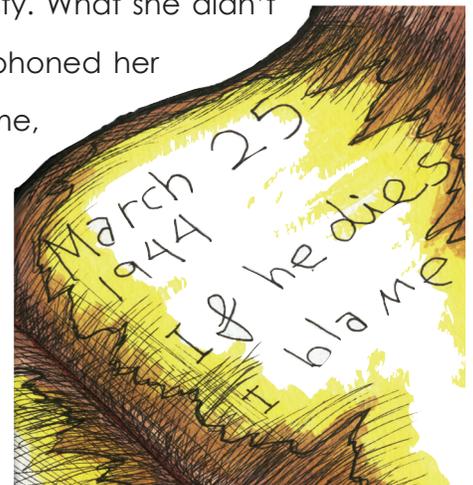
Li Jiyaab, the Devil. Reading this word in my father's diary struck fear in my heart and made me break out in a cold sweat. "*Lii vyeu*"—the Michif Elders—told me about *li Jiyaab* and what I was told wasn't very good. Although I wanted to put the diary down, morbid curiosity made my eyes jump ahead in order immortalize each of my father's words for instant recall at a later date.

March 23, 1944 was the date listed in the handwritten diary entry. I read how a neighbour in the village twelve miles away had been charged with a very bad crime, and how he was sentenced to be hanged. "It's shocking to think that this family could have such a tragedy happen to them since they are such good believers. They were *lii boon Katalic*, good Catholics. They have faith and are not afraid. Now this sin hangs over them, and they hang their heads in disgrace." Indecipherable handwriting follows but then, clear as anything my father writes, "I must see him before he is hanged. There must be a way to commute his execution. More than anyone, I know he is innocent."

March 25, 1944 is the next entry which refers to the man that was to be hanged. "People are saying he is doing the work of the Devil and his minions. Where is their faith in God, the Church? If he dies, I blame the Church!" I threw the diary down as if I had been burned. My father was a good Catholic all of his life. Well, all of my life anyway. I couldn't imagine him writing words such as this, much less thinking them. My father was dead, which is why I was reading his diaries in the first place.

I wanted to find out more about his life prior to my birth. Now I wondered if I even wanted to know anything further. A week later I knew that I was going to continue digging into the past. What exactly had led up to these entries in my father's diary? Who would be able to tell me what I needed to know? There was only one name that came to mind—Sylvia Lépine. She'd worked as a librarian for years, and since her retirement was now the head of the local historical society. What she didn't remember from having lived here, she would likely have on file. I phoned her and made an appointment to see her the next day. At the same time, I told her what I wanted to talk to her about. She asked me to bring my father's diary.

March 26, 1944. My father went to see the man in jail. His visit was very upsetting. One line of my father's ramblings catches my eye: "It is so hard to talk to him and know that my blood courses through his veins too." To my knowledge, this was the first time that

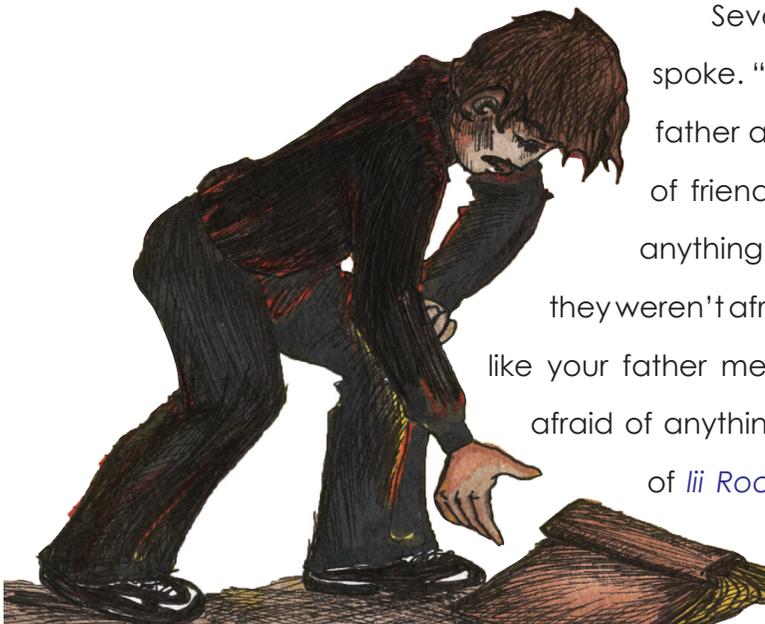


my father had talked of any family other than Mom and me. I hoped Sylvia would be able to tell me more since my father abruptly stopped writing in English. Now all his words were in his own phonetic spelling of Michif, which I couldn't read well enough to translate. At a glance, I noticed that he wrote a lot about *li Jiyaab*, and how there was no greater evil than this before the Catholic Church. And now, possibly because of the Church, a man would die who had done nothing wrong. My head was spinning with all sorts of questions and much confusion. It was my father who had pressured me to become a Catholic priest. It was completely shocking to read these sacrilegious words. If Sylvia Lépine couldn't help me find answers, I would be at a loss as to whether or not I would ever be able to respect my father's memory again.

Sylvia Lépine met me at the local historical society. She spoke with a twinkle in her eye until I mentioned the date in my father's journal. Then her eyes darkened with pain and her face now bore a mask of neutrality.

"I'm not sure I want to go there, young Norman Pelletier," she said as she turned away from me to sit in a chair. She indicated that I should sit as well. "Why don't you tell me what you already know? That will give me a chance to decide if I am going to answer your questions or not." I sat down and considered her conditions. She was the only person I could talk to who would know the answers to my questions, so waste of time or not, I told her about the things I'd read in my father's diary. She was educated, but in her heart she was always a Road Allowance¹ Michif. She knew our history and our ways.

When I was done telling her my brief story, Sylvia's eyes glistened with tears. However, I knew it wasn't from anything that I had told her. Her head was tilted to an angle that told me she was reliving events that had happened over sixty years ago. I contemplated leaving her alone with her thoughts but something told me to remain seated.



Several long, silent minutes passed before she spoke. "My half-brother's name was Daniel Lépine. Your father and Daniel were cousins and they were the best of friends. Actually, they were more like brothers than anything. They liked to drink, they liked to gamble and they weren't afraid of anything. Their families were *lii boon Katalic* like your father mentioned in his diary. That meant they weren't afraid of anything because they had faith. They weren't afraid of *lii Roogaroos*, *lii Whiitigos*, and *lii Paakuks* because *li Boon Jeu*, the Good Lord, would save them. They weren't afraid of death because they

had paid their dues, they said the Rosary, they confessed.

In the end, it was their faith that got them in trouble. Daniel and your father began to reason that since they were *li boon Katalic*, and did what they were supposed to, they

could pay for their sins at the confessional, and live the life they wanted to lead without worrying about Limbo or Hell. They'd buy their way into Heaven. To do that, they'd gamble. They had been



warned so many times, 'don't gamble during Lent.' The Old People told them in Michif, '*Kii wiitamakashoowuk ayka chi li gambliichik daan li Karaym.*'

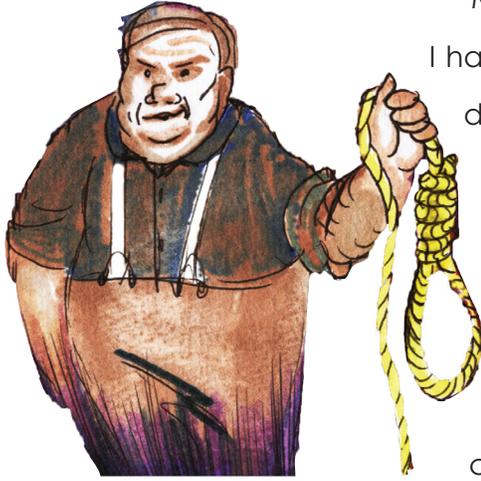
This became the mantra of everyone who knew them. The boys ignored the warnings. It was Lent and they went out overnight, gambling. For three nights in a row they went out drinking and gambling.

On the third night, they were walking home and they heard a horse coming up behind them. They stopped walking and so did the horse. They'd been drinking and they were young and stupid. So they grabbed the horse and got on it. The horse then took them home. The next night the same thing happened. Their *Mooshum* was very concerned by the boys' behaviour. He spoke to them on the third day before they went out for the evening. During the course of the conversation, the story of the horse was revealed. *Mooshum* was furious: he immediately called for the priest to come. He insisted that the boys be blessed with *lood binit*, Holy Water, so *li Jiyaab* would leave them alone. *Mooshum* told the boys that the horse was the Devil, and if they got on the horse that night *li Jiyaab* wouldn't stop and he'd take them all the way home. Straight to hell they'd go." Sylvia drew a shaky breath and remained silent for a long time again.

"That night your father and Daniel went out, and they didn't come back until the next day. They made their own way home, one without the other. Daniel was arrested and accused of spooking the bewitched horse that was following him home. The horse went wild, running and bucking all over the road. Avis Henry came along in his motor car from the opposite direction and wouldn't you know it, he hit the horse and killed it. But that's not all. Avis had been driving his sick toddler son to the doctor. The boy died along the way and Daniel was blamed. Avis thought Daniel was someone he could blame for the tragedy of losing his son. And he almost got away with it."

"What happened?" I asked, sensing she was hesitant to continue her story.

"Oh, look at you," she said. "You're a servant of God, as best as you know how to be. Who am I to sully the image you have of *li Boon Jeu, not Kriicaatuer*² and your father? It might be best to leave well enough alone, son."



“Mrs. Lépine, right now I don’t know what I feel toward my father. I have, I had only love and respect for him up until I read his diaries. I don’t know if I can resign myself to the fact that he might have been a hypocrite, telling me to pursue goals within the Church as if he was paying for past sins by sacrificing his son to God. Do you understand what I mean? And why I need to know the rest of the story?” Sylvia gave me a long hard look, as if she was weighing my character by my speech. I am not a weak man even if I am a man of the cloth. I knew that if she didn’t answer my questions at some point, I

would forgive my father for his mistakes because that’s what love does. Sylvia nodded her head once. She poured tea from a lukewarm pot, and took a sip of the tepid liquid. Then she continued speaking, once more transported to the past as if it had just happened.

“The local authorities put Daniel in jail for his own protection. The law said it was an accident with the horse, and that Avis Henry was responsible for hitting the horse. The law also said it was likely that Henry’s car spooked the horse in the first place. However, Henry and his cronies, all the other big shots with money, had gotten together and wanted to lynch Daniel. They decided the next time that they saw him they were going to string him up from the nearest tree. So, he was placed in jail and people started to talk. They called him the “Devil’s hired-help” because he’d had such a good run of luck gambling during Lent. It was awful.

Finally, they decided to trick him. Knowing that he didn’t know how to fiddle, they decided to give him a fiddle, and they told him that they would be back in four days. If he could play a tune on the fiddle they would let him go. If he couldn’t then they were going to ignore the authorities and take the law into their own hands. Daniel didn’t feel that he had a choice. He accepted the challenge. Daniel never played a tuned note on the fiddle in his life but for the next three days he did nothing but play. The fourth day he woke up and he didn’t touch the fiddle at all. His fingers hurt. He had blisters and calluses on top of blisters and calluses. Although he’d tried his best, he’d failed. He resigned himself to the fact that when Henry and his lynching mob returned to the jail, he would die.

The men came. They made a big deal about taking Daniel out into the public square so that everyone could see him. By now, it was obvious they were more interested in publicly humiliating Daniel than they were in killing him but they brought a brand new rope tied with a hangman’s noose anyway. The rope was all for show. Henry had also lost some of his bravado due to your father and a group of men who had banded together to fight Henry and his cronies. They were also at the square and they vowed to ensure that justice would be done whether Henry liked it or not.

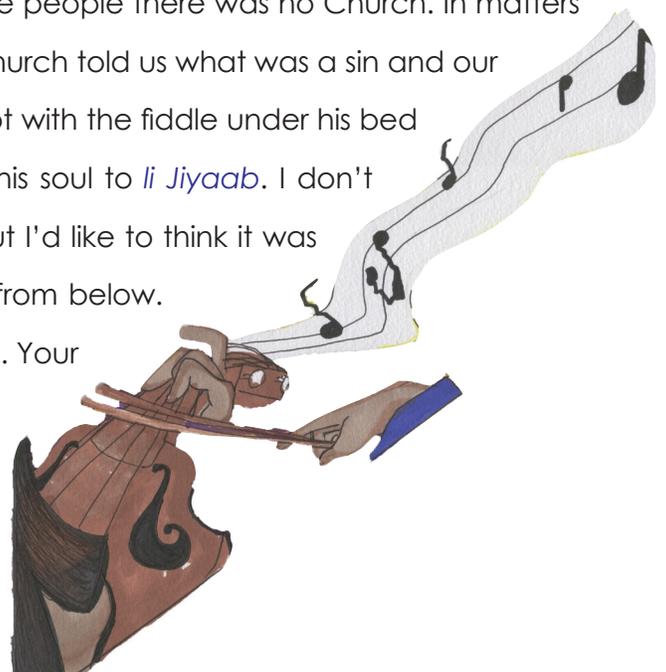
Daniel was given the fiddle and bow and told to play. Daniel carefully placed the fiddle under his chin and adjusted the instrument until it felt comfortable. Then he ran the bow over the strings once. It made such a squawk most of the crowd laughed and Henry and his men crowed with delighted laughter. Then Daniel closed his eyes and applied more pressure to the bow. The notes came out slow and haltingly at first, but each note was clear and pure. With each note, Daniel became a little bolder, and his hand moved a little quicker. Finally, he was playing with confidence and the people stared at him. No one said a word. Daniel played louder and faster, the hairs on the bow snapped and broke but Daniel played on. The last note of the tune finally rang out and still, the crowd was silent. Your father stepped forward and took the fiddle and bow from Daniel's fingers. 'I think Daniel fulfilled his part of the bargain Henry. Now everyone, go home.' Your father took Daniel's arm and began leading him through the crowd.

'What was that tune you played?' Henry asked Daniel, 'What was the name of the song?' He asked a second time. 'I'll tell you,' the local priest stepped forward, 'it was the Devil's Reel. Daniel sold his soul to the Devil so that today he wouldn't have to die. Daniel you're going to burn in Hell. You and everyone like you!' Your father got Daniel out of there just as the crowd began to mob behind the priest and started shouting insults and death threats.

Daniel and your father were lucky to get out of there alive that day. Daniel left for parts unknown, and your father never spoke of the event ever again."

Sylvia returned to the present, and I knew my face showed how unhappy I was with how the events in my father's past had played out. "You have to understand, the Catholic Church was still becoming established back then among our people. Most Métis people were Catholic while others were Protestant. For the Church, the people were everything. Without the people there was no Church. In matters of religion, the Church had great control over us. The Church told us what was a sin and our imagination did the rest. Some believed that Daniel slept with the fiddle under his bed for three nights, and he played well because he sold his soul to *li Jiyaab*. I don't know how he was able to play the song that he did but I'd like to think it was a higher power guiding his fingers and not the power from below. The Church's indoctrination put great fear in our people. Your father always said 'I was afraid for half my life and for the rest of it I felt guilty.' Your father was *aen boon Katalic*. And he was so very proud of you."

I left Sylvia Lépine that day with a humble heart. Despite all my studying, and practicing my faith, my



father was still a better Catholic than I was. He died unafraid, strong in his faith in God and in God's love. I saw how much I still had to learn from my father, and I felt blessed to have been raised by such a good man. Today, I wonder what ever happened to Daniel after he left the community and his home. Wherever he was, I hoped he had made peace with God the way my father had. Some people say you can only be sure of two things in life, death and taxes. I would argue that point. I would say you can be sure of three things: death, taxes, and God's eternal love. If not for that love, *li Jiyaab* would conquer our hearts and claim our souls. I felt a renewed sense of urgency in sharing God's love with others, in much the same way my father had done. It's not just about saying the Rosary, going to Confession, and having faith. It's about living the life every day so that you can look *li Jiyaab* in the eye and say "My soul is not yours!" It's about having faith without fear, listening to God as He motivates our hearts, and it's about listening to the answer even when we haven't yet asked the question. Faith saved Daniel. Faith in my father saved me too.

1 After the 1885 Resistance, many Métis did not have title to the lands. Many squatted on the approaches to rural roads or "road allowances" throughout the three Prairie Provinces. Hence, the Métis were often called the "Road Allowance People."

2 "Our Creator" in Michif.