

Myth is fact in the past. Once upon a time, but now it is an exaggerated truth.

A French Canadian Folk Tale

Retold by moHi KonTok

Long ago in a village in Quebec, an old woman named Tante Odette lived with her cat, Shooshoo. Tante Odette was a careful, quiet woman. She never wasted anything. A pot of soup always boiled on her stove, and every day Tante Odette added more water and a few cabbage leaves. In this way she never had to throw the soup away.

On Sundays she baked a loaf of bread, and if by Thursday the bread was stale, she softened it by dipping it into the soup. Shooshoo was okay to live on cabbage soup and crumbs. Every evening after supper, Tante Odette sat down at her loom to weave. Shooshoo lay upon the striped rug at her feet and purred contentedly.

Tante Odette smiled wistfully at Shooshoo. "What a perfect companion you are, Shooshoo, though sometimes I wish you could talk." One evening Tante Odette sat at her loom and Shooshoo lay on his rug. Suddenly they heard a thumping at the door. When Tante Odette opened it, she saw a strange old man wearing a bright red sash around his waist, a red-checkered shirt, and a cap with a black feather tucked in the brim.

"Madame," said the man, bowing slightly, "I am Pierre LeBlanc, and I have come to offer my services to you as a workman. I am too old to trap furs or to work in lumber camps, and I am looking for a job in a nice cozy house like your own." Tante Odette pulled her shawl close. "I don't need any help," she said. "I'm quite able to do all my work by myself. And besides, I have my cat."

She began to close the door in Pierre's face, but he reached out and held it open and looked at Shooshoo. "Ahh, yes," he said, "he looks like a very wise cat. Why don't you ask him if you should take me in? All I ask for my services is shelter."

"Ha!" Tante Odette laughed. "Cats can't talk." But just then, to her surprise, Shooshoo began to speak.

"I can indeed," Shooshoo said. "I simply haven't come upon a serious enough matter until now. This Pierre LaBlanc looks to me like a good, hard worker and an honest man. I think you should take him in."

Pierre LeBlanc's moustache quivered and he smiled slightly. Tante Odette stared at Shooshoo and then at Pierre. After a long silence, she said, "Well, it is so rare for a cat to speak that I am certain I should listen to him when he does."

So Pierre LeBlanc walked inside and shut the door behind him. He looked longingly at the soup bubbling on the stove.

"Offer the man some soup," Shooshoo said. "He looks hungry."

Tante Odette was always careful not to squander anything, and this idea alarmed her. If she fed a stranger, the soup would not last the whole week. She thought for a while, and at last said, "It is rare indeed for a cat to speak, so I suppose I must offer you a bowl." And she did.

After Pierre finished eating, Shooshoo stared at Tante Odette. "Now give him a place to sleep. He looks exhausted."

This time Tante Odette quickly responded. After she had shown Pierre to the loft, she lifted Shooshoo in her arms and looked into his big green eyes. "How amazing," she said, "that after all these years of silence you should begin to talk. What has come over you, dear Shooshoo?"

But Shooshoo simply swirled his tail and curled it around his sleek golden body, and fell fast asleep.

Weeks passed, and Tante Odette decided that Shooshoo's advice had been good. Pierre LaBlanc worked hard. He kept the place in fine order, and he seemed content to sup on cabbage soup and bread. Shooshoo didn't say another word.

Then one night as Pierre ate his soup, Shooshoo spoke again. "Tante Odette," he said, "why do you feed Pierre only cabbage soup and bread? A man who works as hard as he needs meat pies."

"But Shooshoo," Tante Odette said, "meat costs money."

"Money, money, money," Shooshoo said scornfully. "You cannot eat money. You cannot drink money. You cannot wear money, and you cannot burn money for heat. Money is good only if you spend it. Give Pierre some coins, and he will go to town to buy us things we need."

Once again Tante Odette followed Shooshoo's advice, and after that the larder was filled with meats and sweets and other good things to eat.

One day while Pierre was in the forest chopping wood, a stranger came galloping down the road. He too wore a red-checkered shirt and a red sash around his waist and a cap with a black feather tucked in the brim. He stopped at Tante Odette's house and knocked upon the door.

"Madame," he said when Tante Odette opened the door, "can you tell me if Pierre LeBlanc lives here?"

"Indeed he does," said Tante Odette cheerily.

"Of course," the stranger said, "there are many men named Pierre LeBlanc in this world. Does this Pierre LeBlanc wear a bright red sash and checkered shirt like mine? And does this Pierre LeBlanc have a long moustache like mine?"

"That is the man," said Tante Odette.

"And can this Pierre LeBlanc throw his voice?"

Tante Odette looked curiously at the man. "What on the earth do you mean?"

"Only a few have the gift," the man explained. "Only one in thousands. But the Pierre LeBlanc I'm looking for can throw his voice behind trees and into boxes and upon roofs and across rooms, so that when he speaks, it seems as if someone else is speaking."

Tante Odette looked aghast. "I would never have such a man in my house," she cried. "I do not like magic."

And just then Pierre LeBlanc appeared on the path to the house. When Pierre saw the stranger, he ran to him and they embraced.

"Ah Pierre, where have you been all summer long? I want you to come back and trap with me again this winter," the stranger said, and soon they were joking and laughing and talking together at the kitchen table.

Tante Odette looked at Shooshoo. "Dear Shooshoo, what can this mean? I am afraid this Pierre LeBlanc may be evil."

Shooshoo looked up at her and winked one green eye. "Oh, Tante Odette, don't be silly. He is a marvelous man."

"But this man has told me he can throw his voice."

"Ha," said Shooshoo, "I've never heard of such a foolish thing as that. No one can do such a thing."

Tante Odette sighed with relief, and she thought about all the work Pierre had done for her, and how happy she and Shooshoo were living with Pierre LeBlanc.

She went to Pierre's side. "You won't be leaving us, will you?" she asked. "If you stay, I will even pay you coins from time to time."

Pierre smiled and his moustache quivered, and he stood and bowed low to Tante Odette and Shooshoo. "I will be happy to stay with you and your wise cat," he said. "And now I will go outside and unload the wood I have cut, and I will stack it neatly near the door." His red sash

swirled as he went out to finish his chores. Shooshoo lay down on his rug, winked one green eye and fell peacefully asleep.

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