

From King, Thomas. A Short History of Indians in Canada. 2005

## Rendezvous

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On the morning of the first day, the skunks appeared in the garden as Evelyn Doogle was having morning tea under the tree.

"You should have seen it," she told her husband, when he got home that night. "A mother and four babies. Paraded right past me as if they owned the place."

Alistair Doogle wasn't at all sure about skunks parading through the backyard. "Fred and Lucille had skunks under their deck last year," Alistair told Evelyn, "and it took months to get rid of them."

The raccoons showed up that evening, pulled the plastic cap off the roof vent, and settled in the attic. Alistair could hear them scrambling around the rafters as he watched

*Monday Night Football.*

At half-time, Alistair got a broom from the kitchen, and, during the commercials, he banged one end against the ceiling, and barked like a dog. Then he walked over to Durwin Milroy's house.

"I need to borrow your ladder," he told Durwin.

"Fred has it," said Durwin. "He's got raccoons in his attic."

"So do I," said Alistair.

"Now that's weird," said Durwin. "So do I. You want some coffee?"

Alistair and Durwin sat on Durwin's front porch in the dark and watched a coyote chase a cat down the block.

"It's been like this all week," said Durwin. "There are antelope on the golf course."

"Antelope?"

"Didn't you hear?" said Durwin. "They had to close the back nine."

"What the blazes are antelope doing in the city?"

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"Don't know," said Durwin, "but the real problem is the wolf pack in the park."

The next day, deer began appearing on city streets along with badgers, a family of wild pigs, a herd of mountain goats, and several pairs of wood ducks, who took a liking to Judy Melville's swimming pool.

"They're lovely," said Judy. "All those bright colours, but I really can't have them doing their business you know where."

That afternoon, the mayor called a town hall meeting to discuss the problem, and when Alistair and Evelyn arrived he was introducing a dark-haired man in a pin-striped suit.

"This is Mr. Maganese," said the mayor. "From the Department of Natural Resources."

"About time," said Durwin. "This nature thing is getting out of hand!"

"An Indian," Alistair whispered to Evelyn. "Now we're getting somewhere."

The Indian set up a series of graphs and charts on a stand and turned on a slide projector. "We've always lived with animals," he said, "pigeons, seagulls, crows, rabbits, mice,

rats, dogs, cats."

"Oh yeah," said Harry Austin, "well, I have a wolverine in my gazebo."

"Moose," yelled John Wright from the back of the room. "Two cows and a calf."

"For crying out loud," thundered Mabel Massey, who had recently retired from the stage in Toronto and could still fill a room with her voice, "this isn't a contest."

"Quite so," said the Indian, "and it's only going to get worse."

"Worse?" said Harry Austin. "What could be worse than having a wolverine in your gazebo?"

"Moose!" yelled John Wright. "Two cows and a calf!"

Which started another round of comparisons.

"We've been warning you about this for years," said the Indian, and he brought up a new slide.

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Alistair had no idea what he was looking at and from the silence in the hall, neither did anyone else.

"This is the boreal forest surrounding the Churchill River," said the Indian. "Twenty years ago it was a pristine wilderness."

"What are all those lines running through it?" asked Alistair.

"Roads," said the Indian. "Those lines are roads." "And those dark squares," said Alistair.

"What are they?"

"Resorts," said the Indian.

"Stings?" said Alistair.

"Yes," said the Indian.

"Golf?"

"Yes."

"So," said Alistair, "what's the problem?"

Alistair was not in a good mood, as he and Evelyn drove home. "I still don't see what the problem is," he said. "Roads and resorts don't take up much space."

"Do you think he was right?" said Evelyn.

"Of course not," said Alistair. "It's just an aboriginal scare tactic to get us to recycle and use less electricity."

"What about Algonquin Park?" said Evelyn. "Look what happened to Algonquin Park."

Up the block, Alistair could see several owls perched on the street signs, watching a family of rabbits work their way through the flower beds in front of the Peaceable Kingdom Funeral Home.

"Old news," said Alistair. "No sense dwelling on the past."

One of the owls slid off the street sign, pounced on a rabbit, and began ripping it to pieces.

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"Remember that show we saw about how we were destroying the ocean?" said Alistair. "Well, the ocean is still there, isn't it?"

"I don't know," said Evelyn. "We haven't been to the ocean in years."

The next morning, Alistair was awakened by a loud hammering against the side of the house. Evelyn was standing in the driveway with a field guide in her hand.

"What the hell is all the noise?" said Alistair.

"Up there," said Evelyn. "Isn't it beautiful?"

On the side of the house was a huge black and white bird with a flash of red on its head. As Alistair watched, the bird used its beak to hammer a hole in the siding.

"It's a pileated woodpecker," said Evelyn, holding up the guide so Alistair could see the picture. "You normally don't see them in cities."

"What the blazes is it doing?"

"Looking for bugs," said Evelyn.

"We don't have bugs in our siding."

At the town hall meeting, the chief of police gave a talk on public safety and suggested that going for walks in the evening was not a good idea.

"Apparently," he told everyone, "a number of large predators are nocturnal. If you want to go for a walk after dark, it would be best to do it in your car."

"What kind of a walk is that?" said Evelyn.

"Then go for walks in large groups," said the chief of police. "Mountain lions have trouble focusing on individuals moving in a large group."

"Mountain lions?" said Alistair.

"In the parking lot at the mall," said the chief of police. "I just made it back to my car in the nick of time."

"What was a mountain lion doing in the parking lot at the mall?"

"Stalking the buffalo in front of the Old Navy store," said the chief of police.

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"That Indian still around?" said Alstair. "I think we should talk to him again before this thing really gets out of hand."

Everyone sat right where they were and discussed the upcoming home and garden tour while they waited for the police chief to find the Indian. This time he didn't have his graphs or his charts or his slide projector with him.

"He doesn't look happy," said Evelyn.

"He's just being stoic," said Alstair. "I've seen it before."

"The animals are becoming a public nuisance and health hazard," said the mayor. "We need to know how to get them to go to back to the forest."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you," said the Indian. "The forests are gone."

"That's nonsense," said Harry Austin. "We drive through forests every time we go to our cottage."

"No," said the Indian. "That's just a hundred-yard strip along each side of the road that the timber companies were required to leave."

"This is beginning to sound like environmental belly-aching," said Durwin Milroy.

"What we need to know is how to get rid of the animals before someone gets hurt."

"That's right," said the mayor. "Forests or no forests, we can't have wolves annoying our citizens."

Later that evening, Alstair and Evelyn sat in the living room and listened to the wolves and the foxes and the moose and the hawks and crows and magpies and watched as a herd of elk, silhouetted against the setting sun, wandered past their picture window.

"It's a little noisy," said Evelyn, "but having wild animals in the city is rather exciting, don't you think?"

Alstair watched as the elk moved from one lawn to another, churning up the grass with their hooves and plowing through the flower beds. He had to admit that there was a kind of National Geographic feel to the moment, but he knew that it would pass, and, in the end, he

was sure that this new arrangement would never work. Living with the occasional skunk or raccoon was one thing. Living with a herd of elk in your yard, majestic though they might be, was quite another.

The next morning, while he was watching an old rerun of *The Rockford Files*, Alstair realized that he couldn't hear the raccoons in the attic anymore. He turned down the volume and listened for a while. Then he went into the garden.

"Honey," he said to Evelyn. "I think the raccoons are gone."

"That's not all," said Evelyn. "Lucille says her wood ducks have disappeared."

"The coyotes probably ate them," said Alstair.

"Nope," said Evelyn. "They're gone, too. No skunks, either. And I heard on the radio that they've reopened the back nine at the country club."

Just after lunch Durwin Milroy and Harry Austin stopped by.

"How's the wolverine doing?" said Alstair.

"Vanished without a trace," said Harry.

"Crows are gone, too," said Durwin. "So are the hawks and the magpies. Haven't even seen a sparrow."

"Hey," said Alstair, "maybe the pigeons will be next." And everyone had a good laugh.

"I don't know," said Evelyn. "Now that I think of it, I haven't heard a bird all day."

"She's right," said Durwin. "It's real quiet."

"About time," said Alstair. "All that noise was keeping me awake."

"You think they're gone for good?" said Durwin.

"One can only hope," said Alstair.

Bright and early the next morning, Alstair and Evelyn headed up to the cottage, and, when the road began to wind its way through the forest, Evelyn had Alstair pull over.

"I'm just curious," she said.

"Worth a look I guess," said Alistair. "But Indians do tend to exaggerate."

Alistair and Evelyn walked through the trees and came out into an open field of stumps and slag piles for

as far as the eye could see. "I'll be damned," said Alistair. "The Indian was right." "So, what are we going to do?" said Evelyn, as they walked back to the road.

"These things come and go in cycles," said Alistair. "I wouldn't worry about it."

That evening, Alistair and Evelyn sat on the deck overlooking the lake and waited for the loons to begin their haunting serenade. But that night and the next, the lake remained silent.

Not even the mosquitoes came out of the cedar bush to annoy them as they sat in their chairs and watched the sun sink into the water.

And on the morning of the seventh day, they drove back to the city.

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