

MS. BURNSBEE— LESSONS IN DIVERSITY AND AWARENESS

An original story by Melody Martin-Googoo

Bleeeeeeep! The school rang its low buzzer tone and the boys and girls of room seventeen scurried to take their seats. Mrs. Sweet had given early birth to twins over the weekend. And so, in her place, a tall and lanky substitute teacher stood at the front of the classroom. A few days before, the boys and girls of room seventeen had given a surprise baby shower to Mrs. Sweet and were filled with excitement over the news of the twins. Maggie and Molly gushed over what the babies' names would be. Jesse and Blake laughed at the thought of Mrs. Sweet chasing twins around the school yard.

The chatting and laughing was called to a sudden halt with an abrupt, "SHHHH!" The substitute teacher, with lips carefully pursed into a thin, tight line, narrowed her eyes and scanned the room. Her neck carefully moved from one side to the other, like an owl perched on a branch scanning its prey. She turned and picked up a black marker from the ledge of the whiteboard and in carefully scripted cursive writing wrote the name, Ms. Burnsbee. Her hair was pulled back in a tightly wound bun; she wore a navy blouse with tiny polka dots patterned throughout and a brown wool skirt. Little apple earrings drooped on her earlobes. A heart-shaped pin attached to her collar read: A+ teacher.

"Morning boys and girls," the teacher stated sternly.

You could hear a pin drop. The students sat at attention as Ms. Burnsbee proceeded to take attendance.

"Tyler Crawford?" "Here." "Latisha Dingle?" "Here." "Bethany Fulton?" "H-h-h-here," a soft voice replied. "SPEAK UP," demanded Ms.

Burnsbee.

The little girl froze and took a big gulp. Just as she was about to open her mouth to answer, there was a light tap at the classroom door.

Ms. Burnsbee, annoyed at her disruption, marched toward the door. Her black leather shoes hit the floor with a heavy clunk, clunk, clunk. She opened the door, craned her neck forward, and pursed her lips into a frown.

"Yes?"

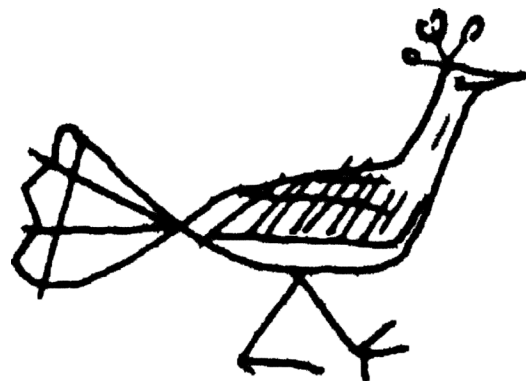
Mr. MacDonald, the school's principal, straightened his glasses and smiled cheerfully.

"Good morning, Ms. Burnsbee!"

The principal stood there proud as a peacock in his brown polyester suit. "So glad you made it in this morning!"

"Hmmmph. It's *always* a pleasure to be called at *six* in the morning to teach the children," she replied sarcastically.

What Ms. Burnsbee didn't know was that Mr. MacDonald had called frantically every single



substitute on his list and none was available. Just as Mr. MacDonald was about to give up, he dusted off an old card he found in his desk. It was printed in 1997 and read:

**Ethel Margaret Burnsbee
Substitute Teacher
Stern, strict, and WILL get the job done**

Mr. MacDonald cleared his throat and gently pushed a boy forward. The boy's long brown hair was pulled back into a loose ponytail. His skin was the colour of light bronze. His almond-shaped eyes were the colour of melted milk chocolate. He wore a pair of blue jeans and a white t-shirt printed with a faded image of a moose.

A small leather pouch wrapped in black string hung from his neck. The boy was a bit shy and embarrassed with so many faces staring at him.

"I would like to introduce our new student to you..."

Before Mr. MacDonald could finish his sentence, Ms. Burnsbee grabbed the folder from the principal's hand. She held it close to her face and read, "Pee-kun..." The boys and girls couldn't hold in their laughter at the idea of a boy's name beginning with *pee*. The boy's face turned a deep shade of red and he felt the heat rising from his cheeks to the tips of his ears. He lowered his head and bit his lip as he looked down at his sneakers.

"Uhhhh, nnnnnno." Mr. MacDonald chuckled nervously. "Actually, the name is pronounced Bee-goan, not Pee-koon."

"This boy just moved to the city from his Mi'kmaq community. Let's make him feel



comfortable, shall we? **Pi'kun**, take the first seat over there by Bethany."

Pi'kun cautiously moved over to the table, placed his school bag on the floor beside him and took his seat. Bethany shyly tucked her hair behind her ear as she smiled at him.

"Hi, my name is Bethany."

Pi'kun felt reassured by her kind greeting and smiled back at her. He missed deeply his friends and family back home and wished he was with them. Being surrounded by all these eyes staring at him like he was some kind of alien made him feel uncomfortable and sad. Bethany reminded him of his little cousin Angie; he grabbed a hold of the brown leather pouch and smiled.

The boys and girls of room seventeen were filled with excitement. Not only had their teacher, Mrs. Sweet, given birth to twins,

TRANSLATIONS

Pi'kun Feather

but a new student had arrived in class. A Mi'kmaw boy! Curiosity filled the air as the students whispered and giggled to one another. Why was his name **Pi'kun**? Why was his hair so long? Did he live in a tee-pee? What was that thing hanging off his neck? A moose on a t-shirt(!) and so on.

Ms. Burnsbee closed the door and marched back to the front of the room. Clunk, clunk, clunk, clunk. She clapped her hands together; the students sprung back to attention.

"Boys and girls, this is our new student, **Pi'kun** Googoo."

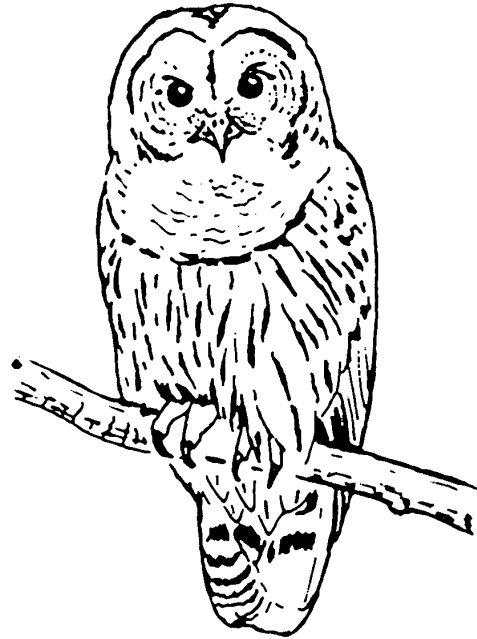
She paused and a questionable look took over her face.

"Goo-goo?"

Once again, the boys and girls giggled. Once again "Shhhhhh!" she demanded.

Pi'kun's heart beat fast and his palms were sweaty. He could feel his face blush a deep crimson red again. **Pi'kun** swallowed and wished that he could stand up and tell the story his **Kiju** had told him about how he got the name feather when he was born, or how his last name means that his family is from the owl clan, **ku'ku'kwes**. But he couldn't. His mouth was dry and he couldn't speak. Bethany looked at him with sadness in her eyes.

Ms. Burnsbee rolled her eyes at the children and turned her back to write on the whiteboard. She was eager to get back to routine as half of the morning has been wasted on "foolishness." After all, it was her job to be strict, stern, and to get the job done! She felt sorry for the boy and really did want to make him feel welcome. Sqqqqqueek! Her black leather shoes made a sound as she twisted around to the class.



ku'ku'kwes (Barred owl)

"Beee-goon," (she tried hard to pronounce the name correctly).

"Let's try some math, shall we?" (**Pi'kun** did not say that he placed very well in the provincial math assessments he wrote at his old school.)

"If you have four birds in a tree and you're out hunting with your grandpa, and you shoot one, how many birds are left?"

Pi'kun thought about the question, he felt good because the answer is simple.

"None," he replied. Laughter and giggles echoed throughout the classroom.

Pi'kun was beginning to get annoyed with all of this laughter. What's so funny? He thought to himself. Man, he couldn't wait to get home. This place was strange. His friends at home didn't laugh at his name and his teachers didn't ask such strange questions.

TRANSLATIONS

Kiju Grandmother

Ms. Burnsbee shook her head and proceeded to ask Maggie for the answer.

“Three,” Maggie replied. She was proud and her friend Molly patted her on the back sarcastically. **Pi’kun** was confused. He remembered all of the times his grandfather took him hunting. **Pi’kun** thought to himself, Man, if I shot a bird and there were four birds in the nest, they would all fly away. There would be no birds left!

The rest of the morning went by really slowly. The class read a novel that **Pi’kun** had already read at his old school, so the work he completed was quick and easy. At lunch, he sat with Bethany and shared the tea biscuits his **Kiju** had packed in his lunch bag.

The two were chomping away on their tea biscuits when Bethany asked a question, “Umm, what’s that brown leather thing hanging around your neck?”

Pi’kun wasn’t surprised with Bethany’s question; some of his friends back home asked the same thing.

“Well, this here is called a medicine pouch. It’s filled with bits of sweet grass, sage, tobacco

and cedar. These things are sacred to my people and my **Kiju** made this for me when I moved to the city.”

“But, what’s it for?”

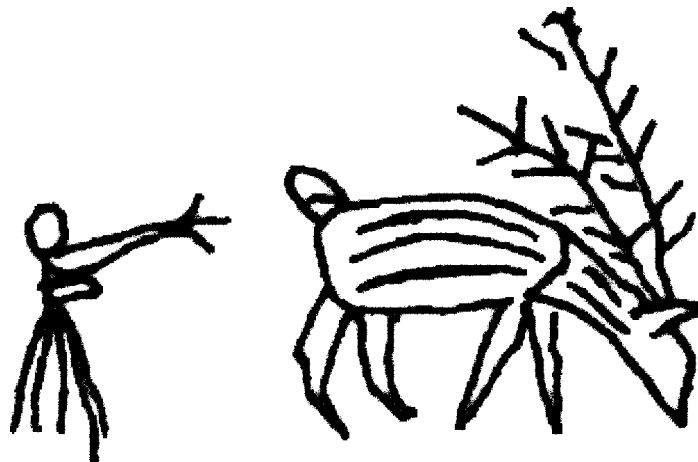
“Oh! Well, it’s for protection. The tobacco, sweet grass, sage and cedar will help good spirits guide me.”

“Spirits?!” Bethany got scared. “Won’t you be afraid?” **Pi’kun** laughed. Bethany asked lots of questions and she sure did remind him of his little cousin Angie.

“No, Bethany! Not those kinds of spirits!”

Bleeeep! The lunch bell rang and the two picked up their lunch bags and head to class.

The afternoon went by rather quickly. The boys and girls in room seventeen had a spelling bee, finished up some math, and worked on some new cards for Mrs. Sweet. The bell rang and the students went home. Ms. Burnsbee on the other hand, was exhausted. The classroom was quiet as she walked around the room, erasing the whiteboard, picking up paper off the floor and removing gum from the chairs. She dabbed a bit of glue to her panty hose to stop a snag



from running. She packed her bag and headed to her little Honda Civic.

A box of Kleenex sat on the back window sill. A tiny quilted cat dangled from her rearview mirror. She unlocked the door, sat down, smoothed out her skirt and started the ignition. As she drove along the back roads to her apartment building, she thought of her day. She thought of herself dressed and drinking her hot cup of tea at the breakfast table, her cat purring on her lap. She thought of how she was secretly happy to suddenly get “the call” at 6am this morning. She thought of the little boy standing in the doorway early that morning. She thought of the boys and girls laughing at the question she had asked him. But mostly she thought about the warmth and knowledge she saw in the boy’s almond-shaped eyes.

At a stop light, Ms. Burnsbee (Ethel after school hours), looked into the mirror and saw a faint twinkle in her green eyes. She rolled down her window to breathe in the warm spring air. Suddenly! Her car back fired with a loud BANG! A flock of birds in a nearby tree frantically flew away. Ethel was startled and her heart beat faster. Suddenly it all came to her, she got it. She gasped with joy and strained to stick her head out of the open window. “None!” She said aloud. “None!” she shouted again. She felt the wind blowing on her face and the sun shining in her eyes. The light turned green, she curled her lips into a deep toothy grin. A car honked its horn at her. She giggled and thought to herself, hmmm, I think I just might wear my hair down tomorrow...

