

MNJA'SI DANTE! — A LESSON IN FORGIVENESS AND HEALING

An original story by Melody Martin-Googoo

Thump! Thump! Thump!

At first the sound seemed to echo in his dream. Dante slowly pulled the covers up over his head. His body was heavy, tired and aching to fall back asleep. Sleep, didn't he just fall asleep? Dante pulled the covers back down and glanced at the clock. The numbers were garbled and blurry. He rubbed his eyes and stretched his arms up over his head; he let them fall to the side with a thud. Dante managed to open one eye and then another. He looked around the room. It had been over a year since he moved in with his grandfather, but still the room felt strange. It wasn't his. Dante's eyes caught the sight of an old poster taped to the wall, New Kids on the Block. He thought of his mom, her warm smile and soft laugh. He missed her. He missed her a lot. Thump! Thump! Thump!

"**Mnja'si!**" a male's muffled voice came through the door. It was **Etue'l**, Dante's grandfather. Dante imagined his grandfather standing behind the door—slightly stooped, leaning on his carved wooden cane, dressed and ready for the day. His grey hair neatly combed and oiled. "**Mnja'si** Dante..." Dante didn't respond. He lay there, still and silent. He waited. And then the sound of Grandfather's moccasins shuffled down the hallway. Dante rolled over, pulled the quilt up over his head, and closed his eyes. He figured he could squeeze in just a few minutes of sleep before it was time to get up for school.

A couple of hours later, Dante walked into the kitchen, grabbed his book bag and rummaged

through it. His head was pounding and he needed a fix. Grandfather sat at the kitchen table, a cup of tea and a newspaper out in front of him. Fresh wood shavings littered the paper. The radio played softly in the background. He put down his carving knife and the wooden figure he was whittling on. He reached up onto the shelf behind him and picked out a jar of liquid the colour of steeped tea. An old piece of masking tape was draped across the front and in careful cursive writing read the Mi'kmaw word, **tupsi**. **Etue'l** held the jar of liquid out to his grandson, "**Na kwis...**" Dante looked up from his book bag, shook his head and held up the small plastic bottle of Tylenol. He opened the cap, tossed a couple in his mouth and washed it down with a swig from his bottle of Pepsi. The carbonated soft drink quenched his thirst and burned as it passed through his throat, down his esophagus and into his empty stomach. Dante sighed with relief as he thought to himself, there's nothing like a hearty breakfast of carbonated soft drink to start off your day!

Dante arrived late for school, just in time for his third period class. He enjoyed third period because he didn't mind the teacher. She was nice—a little odd, but nice. Mrs. Bee was the type of teacher who didn't roll her eyes when you explained that you'd miss the test scheduled for Treaty Day. In fact, Mrs. Bee wasn't a teacher TO SCHEDULE a test on Treaty Day. Mrs. Bee was the type of teacher who wore chunky bracelets handmade by kids in a developing country. She was the type of teacher who showed up at the reserve powwows and ate Indian tacos and smiled proudly while

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Etue'l	Edward	Mnja'si	Wake up	Tupsi	Alder tree
Ko'jua	a dance	Na, kwis	Here, son (kwis is a term of affection for a boy)		



Image courtesy of Gerald R. Gloade.

awkwardly attempting the “**ko’jua**” in her Birkenstocks. Today was no different, as Dante walked into Mrs. Bee’s classroom, he noticed an assortment of muffins freshly purchased from Costco set out on a tray in the middle of the room. Plastic cups of apple juice were set out beside them. A small handmade sign was taped to the front of the table, it read: **Pjila’si** Ida! Welcome Ida! A trio of three balloons, the color of red, yellow and white hung to the side.

“Ah man!” (Dante then mouthed the words no person younger than the age of eighteen should read.) He had forgotten all about Mrs. Bee’s guest speaker today. Poor Mrs. Bee, she was so excited, it was all she talked about for the past few weeks in school. He felt like a jerk. It was bad enough he never

remembered his homework and now he had forgotten about this. For homework, the class was assigned questions to prepare for Ida, an Indian residential school survivor. The class had been researching and learning about the Indian residential school and Mrs. Bee was kind enough to credit Dante with an overdue assignment. His assignment was due months ago and without it, he probably wouldn’t get enough credit to pass. But being Mrs. Bee, she gave Dante a chance. He had to prepare an introduction or rather a welcoming speech for Ida. He was not only late for class, but he forgot his assignment. Dante walked over to his seat, slumped into his chair, hung his head and tried desperately to avoid eye contact with Mrs. Bee.

Surprisingly, Mrs. Bee didn’t mention anything

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Pjila’si Welcome

to Dante. This left Dante feeling a bit puzzled, but he sat up in his chair a little anyway. Everyone took their places and Mrs. Bee introduced Ida. Dante didn't really know Ida, but he had seen her on the reserve quite a bit. She was always being asked to do the opening prayer at community feasts and things like that.

Ida sat down and opened up a small leather sack. She took out a pouch of tobacco, some cedar, sage, and a braid of sweet grass. She placed each in a large abalone shell, then took out her lighter. As she lit the sacred medicines, the students all sat quietly and watched as she carefully whispered to herself, "**Kisu'lk, ke'apoqnmui kulaman kisi-apoqnuates ula nutqo'ltite'wk kepmite'tmnew ta'n teli-mi'kmawimk.**" Dante, along with a number of Mi'kmaw students wished they could understand the sacred words coming from the Elder's mouth. The syllables were familiar to Dante. But, Dante's only understanding had come from watching his grandfather's actions as he spoke the language so familiar yet foreign to Dante.

Ida smudged the classroom and the sweet smelling smoke filled the room. Mrs. Bee was the first to step forward to smudge herself, she closed her eyes and used her hands to draw the smoke into her and brushed it over her body. Some of the students were a bit reluctant and shy, but they stepped forward and did the same.

Ida sat in her chair, her eyes drawn toward her tanned hands, wrinkled with age. She twisted the tissue around in her fingers and looked up to the ceiling when she spoke. She shared the history of the Indian Residential School: how it opened in 1929; how children

as young as four years old were sent to the Indian residential schools, sometimes seeing their parents only a few times out of the year; how children were forbidden to speak their language; how they were taught to be ashamed of their traditions, beliefs and way of life; and how they were taught to be embarrassed and guilty for being Mi'kmaq. Ida shared stories of abuse, stories of tragedy and despair. When the bell rang for lunch, no one moved. It was quiet and the mood was still, almost mournful as if speaking would have disrespected the memories of the past. The voices of students going off to the cafeteria and to lunch echoed through the door. Mrs. Bee stood up and presented Ida with a gift that the class had made. Ida was happy and the two women hugged each other. As the students lined up and took turns thanking Ida, Dante felt compelled to stay. He sat at his desk reflecting on the stories that Ida has shared. He thought about what Ida said about the negative consequences and how the effects were still being felt today...wow.

Everyone was gone and Mrs. Bee helped Ida pack up her things. Ida looked over to Dante, the Elder and young man caught each others' eyes. Ida's eyes were warm and inviting. He thought of his grandmother. Dante somehow felt disrespectful to Ida and looked away. Ida took a seat close to Dante. Then, she took out some pictures and laid them on the table. Dante picked up the photos and looked through them. Ida asked Dante questions, "**Taluisin?**" Dante was embarrassed. He didn't understand what she was saying, but he guessed that she was asking for his name. Ida smiled when he replied with his name. "Where are you from? Who are your parents? Oh! I know who your grandfather is!" The Elder and the young man bonded over con-

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Kisu'lk, ke'apoqnmui kulaman kisi-apoqnuates ula nutqo'ltite'wk kepmite'tmnew ta'n teli-mi'kmawimk.

Taluisin? What is your name?

O Great Spirit, please help me, so that I can help these youth understand the hardships of our many people.

versation, while Mrs. Bee tidied the muffin crumbs and spilled apple juice.

Ida pulled out a picture and handed it to Dante. Dante looked at the picture and examined it closely. It was a group photo with a large number of children sitting or standing in rows. They sat around a large man, who Dante guessed to be the principal or priest. Ida pointed to a little boy in the third row. There in the third row was a little boy with a dull smile on his face. His dark eyes were piercing. They looked...sad. Dante's heart skipped a beat and a small gasp escaped his lips. He thought to himself, could it be? The room spun and he shook his head—he wanted to focus, he wanted to know the truth. Dante brought the small photograph closer to his face and he examined it again. The boy in the photo appeared to be about six or seven years old, and although he was surrounded by other boys and girls, he looked scared and alone. Dante's mind swam with questions and he was flooded with emotion. Where was the boy's mom? Did he cry for her when she was gone? Was he afraid? Did he get hurt? Did anyone hug him and let him know that it would be alright? Where was his dad? His grandmother? His grandfather? Who tucked him into bed at night? Who told him stories of the stars and how the universe came to be? Who made him feel loved and secure and special? Perhaps nobody...

Dante dropped his hand with a heavy thud and he released a deep sigh. Ida's weathered hand reached out for Dante's and Dante looked up at Ida. Their eyes met and no words needed to be exchanged to describe what Dante knew. She didn't need to explain. She didn't need to talk. Dante knew. And then more revelations came to Dante. He understood so much! He understood the pain he saw in his grandfather's eyes everyday. He thought of his grandmother's quiet moments. He knew why his mom was gone. He thought of his grandfather quietly carving axe handles, making baskets; of Dante ignoring Grandfather's invitation to learn, "**Kekkam kwis...**" Dante thought of his grandfather reaching for the jars of Indian medicine, all of the stories he told, the language he shared. He had been trying to make up for all that he didn't teach his own daughter. So, he tried to teach his grandson. After all of the years of Dante choosing to hold on to the anger and bitterness, suddenly he felt a release. He took a deep breath and let it out. He didn't fight the tears that rolled down his cheeks. Dante pushed the photographs aside and hugged Ida. Ida hugged him back and didn't let go. He thought of his grandmother and his heart filled with love and kindness and compassion. And then he thought of Grandfather **Etue'l**. He thought of the five year old boy in the picture and he wanted to hug him, he wanted to tell him that it was okay, and that he loved him. He wanted to make peace.



TRANSLATIONS

Kekkam kwis Look! Kwis