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Vancouver, BC

Snuneymuxw (Nanaimo)

14 years old

Ki'et'sa'kun

A great spray of vapour was released into the air in the distance, followed by a tall black fin which quickly disappeared under the waves.

“Never go near those great black fish”, said the chief, his eyes stopping on each child. “They are very powerful, and you would not be able to escape them if they decided to eat you.” He then pointed to a shiny black rock lying among the pebbles on the beach. “And never touch these black rocks, they are linked to the fish, for these rocks are long and black just like them.”

Ki'et'sa'kun watched the chief intently and told himself again and again to not touch the shiny black rock. But one day the tribe decided to make a fire on the beach. While the fire was burning brightly, many people began to smell something terrible. They found that there was some of the shiny black rock burning beneath the logs. The whole tribe became terribly fearful, thinking that the great black fish would come and kill them. So they set sentries all along the shore to keep watch should the fish come to get them.

After many years the great fish had not come to attack them. But one day something much different happened. Some men from Stth'amus came to the Snuneymuxw, and told them that there were white men in great ships who had come to trade. The tribe was very excited, and sent a dozen young men in a canoe down to Stth'amus to talk with the white men. Among them was Ki'et'sa'kun.

When they arrived on the shores of Stth'amus, everything was just as their visitors had described it. There were peculiar houses and towering ships, with white men walking all around in bizarre clothing. As the young men wandered around, Ki'et'sa'kun and his friend Hwe'o'kwen stopped to watch a blacksmith hammering a slab of red hot metal. After they had

watched the blacksmith at the bellows, they returned home with the strange new things they had found.

When Ki'et'sa'kun and the other men came back home to Snuneymuxw, they showed their discoveries to the people, who were awestruck by the strange objects. While everyone was preoccupied by these intriguing new articles, Ki'et'sa'kun pulled Hwe'o'kwen to the side.

"Hwe'o'kwen", he murmured so no one could overhear their conversation. "Do you remember the white man hammering the piece of metal in Stth'amus?"

Hwe'o'kwen nodded. "Yes."

"Did you notice what he was burning in the fire?"

"No. I don't remember. It looked like wood to me."

Ki'et'sa'kun looked at him even more intently now. "It looked like the black rock that belongs to the great black fish. He was using it to make the fire."

Hwe'o'kwen now remembered. "You're right!" he exclaimed.

Ki'et'sa'kun continued, "Remember when there was a fire here and it ended up that they had burned some of the black rock?"

"Yes, yes", Hwe'o'kwen answered. He now saw what Ki'et'sa'kun was suggesting. Together they made a plan to go visit the white men at Stth'amus again.

Some months later, a group of young men planned to travel to Stth'amus to trade with the white men. Ki'et'sa'kun and Hwe'o'kwen volunteered to come with them, as it was the perfect opportunity for their plan. When the men were about to leave, the two friends climbed into the canoe carrying a large blanket between them.

"What do you have under the blanket, Ki'et'sa'kun?" a man next to them asked.

Ki'et'sa'kun and Hwe'o'kwen just shook their heads in reply.

When they arrived in Stth'amus Ki'et'sa'kun and Hwe'o'kwen separated themselves from the group and hauled their blanket over to the blacksmith shop. They walked into the shop, and unfolded their blanket to reveal a pile of black rock. When the blacksmith came into his shop, he was surprised to find the two men sitting next to the bellows with a mound of coal between them.

"Where did you get this coal?" he gasped, an astounded look plastered on his face.

Ki'et'sa'kun and Hwe'o'kwen just looked at each other, confused. They could not understand what this white man was saying. The blacksmith broke off a piece of coal and threw

it into the fire, where it burned intensely. He ran off excitedly, leaving the two friends even more confused than before.

When the blacksmith returned he had another man with him, who apparently could speak in their language.

“Where did you find this black rock?” he inquired. Ki’et’sa’kun and Hwe’o’kwen were relieved that they could understand him.

“In our village on the beach”, Ki’et’sa’kun answered.

“How far is it from here?”

“A two day canoe ride.” Hwe’o’kwen replied this time.

“Come with me”, said the man. “I’m going to take you to Governor Douglas.”

So the two young men got up from the floor and followed the man with their blanket of coal carried between them. They soon arrived at a house similar to the others, only slightly larger. They walked through the door and into Governor Douglas’ office. The Governor turned to see them as they burst into the room.

“These men say they have lots of coal at their village, only two days’ away by canoe”, said the man eagerly. Governor Douglas’ eyes lit up and his demeanor suddenly changed. He looked delighted.

“Which one of you two men had the idea of bringing us the coal”, asked Douglas, which the other man quickly translated into Hul’qumi’num.

“I did”, said Ki’et’sa’kun, unsure of what to expect. Governor Douglas brought out some clothes just like he and the other white men were wearing.

“These are gifts from me to you”, he said. “And I have a new name for you. You will now be known to us as Coal Tyee. We thank you greatly for showing us this black rock.” He then turned to face the translator and said, “Bring this man home, and make sure he is treated like a king. He will do no work while in our hands.” Then he turned to Ki’et’sa’kun again. “Tell your chief that I will come to your village soon, and we can talk about trading this black rock.” He then strode to his desk and began filling out some papers.

“Come with me”, said the translator, and he strolled out the door, with Ki’et’sa’kun and Hwe’o’kwen close behind. They came to the shore where all the canoes of the visitors lay on the sand. The man called over some other young men, handed them paddles, and sat Ki’et’sa’kun down in the middle of the most impressive canoe.

“Take this man and his friend back to their village, and make sure he does not work. This is the wish of Governor Douglas.”

The men nodded understandingly, then pushed the canoe out into the waves. When the canoe was out in the water they jumped in and began to paddle.

Ki’et’sa’kun sat regally in the center of canoe. The men around him were working hard. But he would not paddle. He was Coal Tyee.

Author’s Statement

My story “Ki’et’sa’kun” is based on real events and real people. Ki’et’sa’kun was a real person who was one of the Snuneymuxw people. I am also from the Snuneymuxw band so it made sense to write about an event that they were involved in. He showed Governor Douglas the location of significant stores of coal around what is now Nanaimo on Vancouver Island. This ultimately resulted in the permanent settling of that region by white settlers. The locations used in my story are also real places. Snuneymuxw is now known as Nanaimo, because this is how the settlers pronounced it when told the name of the region. Stth’amus is also a well known city on Vancouver Island. Victoria now occupies the area where Stth’amus once was. This meeting between the First Nations of Snuneymuxw and Governor Douglas was very important because it not only led to permanent settling of Vancouver Island, but it was a main reason the Douglas Treaty for Snuneymuxw was created. This treaty gave Douglas and the white settlers sole ownership of the surrounding land with the exceptions of the village sites and some fields for the children to play in. This was all traded for just 668 blankets. It does not take much thinking to see who got the better side of the deal. And this momentous series of events happened because a young Snuneymuxw man named Ki’et’sa’kun discovered coal in 1849. All in all, the discovery of coal was one of the most important events for First Nations of Vancouver Island and British Columbia.