

GLORIA DYC

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## The Ceremony

I never pick up hitch-hikers, but I had driven the stretch between Tsaille, where the four story Diné college rose out of the wilderness, down to the entrance of Canyon de Chelly, where I politely asked the well-groomed tourist guide if he had heard of road 24, which my friend had referenced.

I had finally been invited to a *Kinaalda*, a puberty ceremony. Invitations to Navajo ceremonies were not common: I had been to a Blessing Way: all night the medicine man sang as the constellations wheeled above: the timing had to be precise. The guide looked at a map, and pointed out where the area residents resided on the edge of the canyon, but he had never heard of road 24, and turned to the tourists who had arrived, a bit hapless, as they looked at the exhibits of Navajo life.

“It will be easy to find, I’ll put red ribbons on the trees. It’s eight miles from that road from Tsaille to Chinle. Then I’ll put a ribbon on the turn-off to my grandmother’s,” my colleague told me. “Road 24.”

Starting at Tsaille, I looked for ribbons, and yellow cattle guards. I was looking for wide ribbons, possibly with bows. I saw a white ribbon in a tree, an orange net across a cattle guard, and the closer I looked I saw narrow, aged red ribbons which had probably once served the same purpose—markers—for ceremonies. The second pass-through left me more disoriented and confused, and I actually had a hallucination of a red ribbon in front of a hogan—a ghost ribbon.

The man hitchhiking near the Fina gas station, the only business around, looked safe. He wore a wool aviator's cap and pea coat. He was holding an expensive looking leather bag.

"Where are you heading?" I asked.

"Chinle. Then on to Dalkan. Maybe Holbrook if I can make it."

"I'll be happy to drive to Chinle, but I need your help. I'm looking for a *Kinaalda* ceremony, and maybe you can help me."

The prospect of going up to people's compounds without the ability to speak Navajo was daunting.

Gallup was a mixed town, but they would wonder what a *biligaana* in a Suburu would be doing in the area.

"I just got back from Afghanistan. It's strange . . . after five years. I see everything differently."

"Peaceful, here, huh?"

"Yeah. But I had a mission. You know, our rights. Our interests"

He had a yellow tube of plastic over his left eyebrow; perhaps a way to keep the stitches in a wound, but I didn't want to to ask him about it

I gave him the clues: red ribbons in the tree. Eight miles from Tsaille. Could it be marker 24 rather than highway 24. It would have to be: he knew of no other road 24, but he did say that the maps were confusing because their were state numbers and BIA numbers.

"You can't believe what I seen," he shook his head. "I can't really even talk about it."

We drove all the stretch, a downhill ride. "Red ribbons, you say. What is the woman's last name?"

"Begay," I said, and felt suddenly stupid because it was so common.

"Begay. See there are four different Chapter Houses here, so not everyone is going to know."

We passed the overlook for Mummy's Cave, where the Diné had come across the mummified remains of the Anasazi, who had inhabited the canyon first.

"Mummy cave. Not there," I laughed. Navajos would not live in this vicinity.

The hitch-hiker's cell phone rang. "I'm heading for Chinle. I don't know if I'll make it to Holbrook. My money doesn't come into tomorrow. How can I get a room? Three," he said. "I can drink water."

I inferred that he had three dollars, and he was probably talking to his mother.

"The government is changing this whole system of payment. So my money won't be in my account until tomorrow, he explained.

I had almost given up the mission to find the ceremony when I first turned in there. The *Kinaalda* is a ceremony after a adolescent becomes a woman; her female relatives emphasize strength, skill, and nurturing. They even massage the girl's body so she may resemble the perfection of Changing Woman.

We were back in Chinle. It would have been easy enough for him to wish me luck and find another ride, but a few times he had muttered something about "a mission". He pulled into the tourist center and came out with another map with details of the land allotments. The sandstone curves of the canyon were seductive and peaceful; gusts of sand blew from the entrance, where tourists could walk in designated areas

We turned back headed to Tsaille, again; he looked at the odometer, and began to do some calculations.

"Turn in here," he said suddenly. We lurched across the cattle gate and approached several houses.

There was a small shed, and there was a house and a hogan. The vet approached the hogan. Then when he came back to the car, a man came out of a shed. They greeted each other in Navajo, and discussed the situation; they both pointed in different directions. The man shook his head, puzzled.

He told me to look for a red roof, then we'd start with finding the Begay's. Navajo directions: "Turn when you get to the big cottonwood. Look for the remains of an old sheepherder's place." The hitch-hiker had a good sense of humor.

"I thought everyone *knew* everyone else in this area," I said feebly. The hitch-hiker laughed. At times like this, I chastised myself for not learning Navajo; but the opportunity to use it were rare, and it is a difficult language. And the reservation is truly an independent nation, while I live in the border town of Gallup

"No. It's not like that, you know." He was muttering to himself, but I could only pick out the word *mission*. "You have to sit up all night, you know."

"I've done that. I've gone to Native American Church meetings; everyone was waiting for me to see if I could hold up. I did ok; I meditate, so that helps."

When I attended the Blessing Way, a man asked with sarcasm, "Oh, so you want to learn how to be a medicine woman?"

When he saw that I was quiet and unpretentious, the same man said to me, "It's too bad you don't know Navajo. These songs are really beautiful . . ."

We stopped at the first compound which was part of the Begay clan, but no one was home.

"They're probably there at the ceremony," he said.

He stopped at another house and no one would answer the door. Some children appeared in the windows. He asked where the elders were and they said. "They went to a ceremony."

"Where?" he asked, but they giggled and hid.

The vet's cell phone rang again. "I'm still near Chinle. Well, it was really windy and dusty and I don't know if I can make it to Holbrook. I'm helping an individual out. In Navajo he explained that I was looking for the *Kinaalda*. Ok. I'm trying. I love you too." He sighed; he was getting frustrated. He mumbled again about the "mission". I assumed he had been talking to his girlfriend.

We pulled in front of another house. A lady was outside and she had a new child's bike that was wrapped in yellow paper. She looked at me. They spoke in Navajo. She looked at me warily.

My guide came back shaking his head in exasperation. "If you went to the army, what are you doing here, why did you come back?"

My hope was waning. "Do you think we'll have to go back to Afghanistan?" I asked to make conversation.

"We'll have to do what we have to do," he said flatly. "I'm looking for a fire, smoke. I think I see smoke over that way. The sun was going down, and the chances of finding the ceremony were diminishing. "Right now, they would be ready to put the cake in the earth," he said. A large blue corn cake batter would be poured into a hole lined with corn husked and baked all night.

The cell rang again. He spoke in Navajo; then in exasperation he said in English, "Because *she wants the blessings*." He reached into a little bag of sunflower seeds he had and ate a few. "I'm trying to help this lady. I'll be ok. I'll be in Holbrook tomorrow."

We pulled up to another compound with several structures: a mobile home, a shed, and a hogan.

The vet walked up to the hogan, but it was locked. "Drive that way," he said.

"I feel demoralized."

"I'm not going to abandon you, don't worry."

The roads were deeply rutted, but my Suburu could handle the red clay. We drove down a mile and then came across an intersection of two roads. There was a fence, but it was locked. The vet looked for the smoke he had seen on the horizon, but the sky was becoming hazy.

"Use your skills," the vet mumbled.

The vet got down on all fours to examine the earth. Then he walked back to the car.

“Are you looking for scat,” I said as a joke. A jolt of fear had passed through my heart. *What was I doing? I was in the middle of nowhere, at the intersection of two roads. I was totally vulnerable. It had been twenty years since I had been assaulted in my own house, by a relative of my boyfriend. I can’t even talk about it. Sexual Assault and Attempted Murder: 20 years, a nickel on dime, maybe.*

“I’m on a mission. I’m looking to see how recently the tire tracks were made. We were taught to do that. Then I’m looking at the footprints. The girl has to run East each morning, so I’m looking for moccasin prints. All I see is shoe prints. “I could imagine the girl in her woven blanket dress, running toward the sun, a strong, resourceful woman. My friend had said she had run each morning with her daughter over the first three days of the ceremony. I wanted to run, too. When I first had a period, I was so ashamed I hid it, by putting toilet paper in my underpants. My mother finally caught on, and while she was reading the newspaper, she said, “There is kotex in the bottom drawer of my dresser. We’ll get you a belt.” I felt shame.

“Clues. This is a mission. Sometimes they would send us to a location. They wouldn’t tell us anything.

Especially when we were in Iraq. They would say, ‘Go to this building and be prepared.’ Then we’d get there and it would be empty. We didn’t know what we were doing. At least in Afghanistan we knew we were fighting the Taliban.”

“I’m a determined person. I hate to give up, you know what I mean.”

He nodded. He ate a few sunflower seeds. “I don’t have anything to eat,” he admitted.

“Look,” I said, “I’d be glad to buy you a meal. I need gas. I have to eat because my blood sugar is low.”

“There’s nothing around here except that Fina station. They have sandwiches, hamburgers.”

We drove to the station. Under a hot light there was petrified pizza and corn dogs; I wouldn’t be able to get that down. The word “food desert” took on a new reality to me. I ordered a hamburger, and the vet took a subway sandwich from the refrigerator, along with two energy drinks. I filled the tank, and then we pulled over to eat.

“So, what is your name,” he asked. We had been together for hours, riding the road between Chinle and Tsaille and hadn’t exchanged names.

“My name is Troy,” he said. Then he introduced himself formerly in Navajo, sharing his clans. “I have an Indian name. I was born up North, and I was a few years old before we came back here, to our Four Sacred Mountains. When I saw my

people, I started laughing. I wouldn't stop laughing. So they named me 'Boy Who Laughed When He Met His People.'"

I felt honored, special. It was rare for a native to share their secret name.

"I can stay at Diné College for \$8 because the students are on break. Before he got out of the car, he asked, "Could you give me a twenty, so I can get the room and some breakfast?"

"Sure," I said.

Troy shook my hand firmly.

I headed back down the dark highway that would lead me past Wheatfields, and then on to Window Rock, and finally east of Gallup where I lived in a modest house on four acres. I was smiling: *The Boy Who Laughed When He Met His People*.

The ceremony was complete.



**GLORIA DYC** serves as the Regents' Professor of English at the University of New Mexico-Gallup. Gallup has been dubbed "The Most Patriotic Small Town in America" due, in part, to the participation of Native Americans in the military. Dyc's recent publications include *BRICK/Rhetoric* (on-line) 2013, *betweenthelines* (on-line) 2014, *GARGOYLE* 59, and *200 NEW MEXICO POEMS*, University of New Mexico Press, 2014. *EAST, WEST AND BEYOND*, a collection of poetry (2007) is available on Amazon.com.