

A Ride Through Chaco Canyon (1984)
by Tanchi

Chaco Canyon was one of James' favorite places.

Chaco Canyon lies in the heart of the checkerboard area of the great and vast desert lands on the east side of the Diné Nation. Long ago, a very ancient people had lived there.

In the way of his father's people, Diné, James was taught to respect it and everything in it. Showing respect meant that when you went through you did not disturb those things that had belonged to those who have already gone--a'teen. James was not certain that all the tourists who came there, or even the park rangers, understood this respect.

This one early morning he and his mom drove in, parked, and unloaded their bicycles. The red sandstone canyon was cool and quiet. They both bicycled in silence. This was unusual for James, who his mother sometimes called a "noisy ole blue jay."

Their little wooly grey dog, Mr. Finnegan, rode behind his mom's bicycle in a red and yellow trailer. They had acquired Mr. Finnegan in Nebraska when his mom had worked on the Pine Ridge Reservation. He was a hero, having once chased a bear up and tree, and he went everywhere with James.

They stopped at each of the ruins, reading the inscriptions. The first ruin, *Una Vida*, was nestled against a backdrop of yellow sandstone bluffs. Desert grasses waved restlessly in the perpetual north wind. After walking through the small, unrestored ruin, James and Mr. Finnegan climbed a trail going ribbon-like along the caramel colored bluff behind the ruin.

James thought it must be an old goat trail and said so to his mom, explaining that he had seen his grandma's goats climb trails like this. James liked explaining things to his mom or to anyone else who liked to listen. His Diné grandma thought him a walking encyclopedia and laughed at his long-winded talks.

Grandma Smiley spoke very little English, mostly Navajo. She lived way back in the mountains west of Chaco Canyon. Her house had no electricity or running water. She, her husband, and her younger children had to haul water in every week. There were all kinds of animals living out there, even wild ones.

James liked all the farm animals, of course, but what he really loved was the wild horses. Sometimes early in the morning, he would steal off by himself looking for them. They ran free with the wind rippling their manes and tails. He liked how their fur changed in the winter and the summer.

At the top of the trail at last, James thought he could see all the way to

his grandma's place. The still young sun lit the sparklers in the canyon walls. Little trails crisscrossed the canyon floor like crow tracks below while a lone fat and sleek crow flew lazily overhead, cawing and riding the wind. James thought Crow was talking to him.

"You should call me Crow instead of Blue Jay," he told his mom. "I like crows better!"

His mom laughed and hugged him close. "I really do like you, you know," she told him.

"I know," James replied matter-of-factly and began running back down the trail. "The first one down gets a quarter," he shouted over his shoulder. This was a variation on the quarter game his mom used to get him to take a nap--"first one who goes to sleep gets a quarter."

His mom came down at a more cautious pace despite the challenge. At the bottom, the morning breeze gently ruffled their hair, easing the growing heat as the sun baked the bare walls and sandy floor.

At the next ruin, *Hungo Pavi*, James walked through low doorways and looked through small windows. He tried to imagine the people who had made these little cities. Diné had made desert colored hogans to represent the interconnectedness and harmony of life. Even today many Dine had hogans for ceremonies, those spiritual activities that helped each of them to find this same balance.

"Look, Mom," he shouted as usual like there was a three alarm fire in progress, "these Anasazi guys were littler than me!"

His mom smiled indulgently. Mr. Finnegan thought he'd wait this one out in the shade, taking a much needed nap under some chamisa. After hiking the trail that went through the ruin, they sat down and shared some water. James tracked a blue-striped lizard as the lizard scurried quickly across a large granite boulder. His mother bent over to gather some bright yellow berries, wondering out loud, "I wonder if these berries have any medicinal uses? I'll have to ask your grandma. Maybe she'll know."

Their next stop brought them to the two largest ruins in the park--*Chetro Ketl* and *Pueblo Bonito*. In the center of Chetro Ketl was a great kiva. James stood on the edge of the rock-lined circular structure built ten feet into the ground and looked back across the plaza. In his mind, he saw the plaza full of corn dancers, weaving their way snake like through the plaza. He heard the singers and the beating of the drums, first from the east. James turned in each of the four cardinal directions. Stairs carved into the rock, leading to the top of the mesa, caught his eye.

"Hey, look, Mom," James shouted and raced toward them.

His mom waited patiently while he satisfied his curiosity before she

shouted. "Time for lunch."

They headed back to the paved road that was maintained for the benefit of the thousands of tourists who came every year. This loop through the bottom of the canyon was the only section that was paved. The two roads coming in, one from the north and the other through Thoreau, remained unpaved, sandy when dry and slippery when wet. They ate in some shade and watched the tour buses unload their passengers pale in the bright sunlight and dressed in Bermuda shorts and walking shoes.

Mr. Finnegan wolfed down his sandwich and drank a full cup of water before lying down for another nap. James and his mom carefully gathered their trash and packed it so that they wouldn't litter the canyon. It was one way that they could should respect.

Pueblo Bonito, the largest of the ruins, was built around 1100 AD, about the time that Beowulf was completed in Old English for the Danish King ruling part of England, and it was four stories high, about the size of a medieval castle.

At its zenith, it had been the cultural and technological center for the entire canyon and had contained hundreds of rooms and dozens of kivas. Thousands of voices echo silently among its walls, and a great sadness fills its empty rooms.

James liked to walk through its low doors into small, cool rooms. It was now mid-day and the heat shimmered across the canyon floor and began creeping to the east side of the canyon walls, slithering like some great serpent. James sat against one of the walls with his eyes closed. He wished he was Mr. Finnegan and could take a nap.

Maybe he did fall asleep for just a little bit because he thought he saw a small woman kneeling and grinding corn. Next to her a fat baby played, picking up the broken pieces of corn with his chubby fingers and popping them in his mouth. The little woman laughed but no sound came out.

"James," he heard his mom call. He opened his eyes, grinning. Reluctantly, he got up and walked back into the dry, dusty heat. Now the park was swarming with tourists. James told his mom, "I like this place better when we're alone. Then you can hear the wind singing and the crows calling."

"Me, too." His mother said and gave him a hug.

They woke Mr. Finnegan and rode across the arroyo to *Casa Rinconada*. Here they walked past small pueblos to a trail that led to the mesa top. Mr. Finnegan led the way, following a big crow who circled lazily overhead. Only the steady breeze kept them from roasting in the desert sun. Once on top, they hiked a red sandy trail through scrubby sage, chamisa, and piñon.

At *Tsin Kletsin*, they walked barefoot through the warmed sand to rest their tired feet. From the walls, they looked west into the next canyon. They were alone, so they sat in the shade of one of the outer walls and told jokes. By the time they climbed back down, most of the tourists had gone. They tied James' bike to the back of the trailer and his mom pedaled all of them back to their campsite. On the way, James and Mr. Finnegan fell asleep.

That evening, James' older brother Matthew and his Aunt Gloria brought fry bread and mutton stew.

James greeted his Aunt Gloria in Navajo, "Yaa'aa'tééh," he said proudly. He was learning the language of the people, and he wanted to use it whenever he could. They ate and told "Grandfather stories" of how the world began. This day, sitting here among his family and in this special place, James felt in harmony with everything. He sat in Matthew's lap until he fell asleep. That night James slept so soundly that he did not even hear coyote calling across the windy mesas.

The next morning, they piled into their truck and drove down a dirt road at the north end of the canyon to a ruin called *Kin Kletso*. From there, they climbed a steep, narrow trail through two big rocks. From the top, they could see the entire canyon and the tops of mesas on the other side. The wind made little dust devils on the canyon floor. From there they hiked across the mesa top to *Pueblo Alto*. The sunlight reflected off the mesa top like it was a concrete street.

Aunt Gloria and Matthew told jokes to keep everyone's mind off the heat. James tried to catch the miniature shimmering green and blue Chinese dragons that hide in the shady grass-filled crevices of large boulders. The trail wound around the edge of the mesa. From one point, they saw the 900-year-old fields of the Anasazi, tucked away in a small canyon off the main one. Pueblo Alto stood knee-deep in stiff mounds of desert grasses. Here too the sadness sang to them in the wind.

Back on the canyon floor, hot and tired, they had some ice-cold watermelon under the willows that grow along the arroyo. James and Mr. Finnegan fell asleep in the shade, listening to grasshoppers jumping and fiddling in the dry heat. When they awoke, a cool breeze flew through from the north, warning them of approaching night. The sun cast long westerly shadows across everything. One lone crow circled, cawing lazily in the wind.

"Hagónéé," James said quietly as they left the canyon.