

A Bilagáana Boy among the Navajo

by Jay Jones



My Family in 1963, Casey, Joyce, Don and Jay

Chapter 1

I was just six years old when my father came back from his second Vietnam deployment. The past few years without him had been tough on me, and I thought everything would be okay now that he was back with me and my mom. Boy, was I wrong.

I was fast asleep in bed one night at our apartment in Phoenix. My dad came into my room and shook me awake. “Come on,” he said. “We have to go.”

“Where?” I asked. He wouldn’t tell me but as we walked outside of our apartment to the car, I realized my mother wasn’t there and she wasn’t going with us, wherever that was. “Where’s Mom?” I asked him.

“You’ll see,” he said bitterly. He started our white VW beetle bug and we sped off. I stared at his profile in the dark as the streetlights rolled over us quickly. In the daylight, he was a tall, handsome man with short black hair. Tonight, I hardly recognized him. Finally, we pulled up to a motel parking lot and he parked the bug so we could face the doors of the rooms. My dad turned the car off.

“What’s going on?” I kept pestering him. “Why are we here?” I asked. He wouldn’t answer me, so I got bored and lay down in the back seat, drifting off to sleep while he kept watching and waiting for someone or something to happen.

The next thing I knew, I woke up hours later when my dad opened the door of the car. I realized he had been to the motel office because he had a room key in his hands. “Come on,” he said. I wondered, *Were we going to sleep at this motel tonight?*

He pulled me by the hand as I stumbled in my pajamas up the second-story steps of the motel, groggy from being up so late at night. We found the room he was looking for, and he opened the door with the key. I took a step inside in front of him. The lights immediately came on, and I saw my mom and a strange man in bed together. It was clear they were naked together underneath the covers. I stared in shock.

My dad looked down at me and said, "Take a look at your mother. She's a slut and a whore." Then he raised his arm and pointed with his finger. "Look at her with another man!" he shouted.

Mom jumped out of bed, running naked towards us while screaming at Dad, "What are you doing?! Get the hell out of here! How dare you!"

I started crying, standing just past the doorway between my parents. My mind went numb, and I didn't know what they were saying. I could not wrap my head around why she was here with this other man in the middle of the night. While my parents screamed at each other, I looked over to the man, who was calmly sitting up in the bed with the sheets over his lower body.

Who was he? How could my mother do this to Dad and me? Was I to blame? I was filled with these questions that my father wouldn't answer until we left. In the car on the way home, he said, "She doesn't want to be with us and likes that other man more." When we got home, I couldn't sleep. All I could think about was if I'd ever see my mother again.

I did see my mother again. Although this incident at the motel was seared into my memory to this day, I don't remember much about those days and weeks after, only that I was left with a neighbor while my parents, Casey and Joyce, sorted out what would happen next. They soon got divorced and my father left for a job at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. My mom received all the personal property they acquired during the marriage, along with custody of my older brother Don and me, with visitation rights for Dad.

Only a couple of months after the divorce, Mom ultimately had a reckoning with herself. After years of mental instability, she had a nervous breakdown and was admitted to the VA psychiatric hospital in Phoenix. She had been a rebellious teenager, and her first marriage at age 17 in Maine ended in divorce. Then she married my father soon after joining the Air Force because she was pregnant with Don. In the psychiatric hospital, she had callously referred to Don as “unwanted” and as “Casey’s son.” Joyce had a difficult birth with Don, who became mentally retarded, the common term used back in the day, as a result of a spontaneously arrested case of infant hydrocephalus caused by forceps used on his head during childbirth.

Raising Don had been extraordinarily difficult for my parents. His behavioral issues caused all sorts of problems. After I was born in Japan and we returned to the States, he incessantly teased me to no end. When we moved to Luke Air Force Base near Phoenix, Don was put on various medications to try to control his behavior and hyperactivity, but it didn’t help much. He still needed constant supervision and attention. Before my father left for his first deployment to Vietnam as a special military advisor in 1963, my parents decided to place Don in an institution for disabled children called the Arizona Children’s Colony in Coolidge. Perhaps Joyce’s guilt about Don, her affair, me seeing her in bed with another man, and the divorce pushed her over the edge. She’d already been taking tranquilizers for years to cope.

I said goodbye to my brother in Coolidge and my friends at the private Arizona Language School, where I’d been enrolled for the past two years. I was caught in a whirlwind of tumult between my parents. When I boarded an airplane toting a single suitcase of clothes, bound for Washington, D.C., a stark realization that I was unwanted set in. It all happened so suddenly, and now I was facing a different life without Mom. I didn’t know what to expect, but I looked forward to being with my dad again and seeing his family, who lived on a farm in Pennsylvania. My father

dropped me off there right after I arrived while he looked for an apartment for us in the D.C. area. Those few weeks at the farm with my relatives were a brief return to normalcy.

My father found an apartment in Alexandria, Virginia. I enrolled at Charles Barrett Elementary, my first public school, in the second grade based on age, not academic level, which was the opposite of the language school in Phoenix where I had already learned to speak, read, and write in English, Spanish, and Russian. Mom had me tested prior to schooling and found I was intellectually gifted with an ability to comprehend material several grade levels above my age, so she enrolled me in private school. Now, second grade at Charles Barrett was likely the right decision since I was academically bright, but I no longer had the direction and discipline the language school provided. Over the course of the school year, I became very shy and was a less-than-average student. I'd spend hours daydreaming and just couldn't focus.

Without question, my poor self-image, self-esteem, and lack of self-confidence that stemmed from circumstances around my parents' divorce impacted my studies. I likely suffered from post-traumatic stress after the motel incident and didn't have any emotional support while Mom and Dad focused on themselves and how their lives might be impacted by their break-up. I was desperate for parental love, security, and encouragement with assurances that everything was going to be okay, but it wasn't there. My insecurity was so deep that once while staying with my aunt, uncle, and cousins when Dad was away, I became unreasonably frightened and distraught that he wouldn't return and had abandoned me to grow up with my aunt and her kids. It was all in my mind, but I was so grief-stricken that he had to get me the next day, cutting short any duty he was on.

I soon became comfortable and content living with my dad in Alexandria. At the end of the school year in 1967 when I was eight years old, I got a telephone call from my mother. She dropped a bomb on me. "I want you to come back to Arizona and live with me and Will," she said.

Will was the man in the hotel room. I knew that they had gotten married recently, but I hadn't realized it would affect me so far away in Virginia. "We just moved to Window Rock for his new job," she explained. Both she and Will had worked at the Bureau of Indian Affairs office in Phoenix, and they had moved to Albuquerque in the meantime.

"Where's Window Rock?" I asked her.

"On the Navajo Reservation," she explained. "In the northeast corner of the state."

I couldn't even comprehend where that was. Or what a reservation was. All I knew was that I didn't want to move. I liked my third-grade classmates, my Cub Scout troop, and hanging out in the bowling alley on Wednesday nights while Dad bowled and socialized in a league. Dad and I were best friends and pals. I idolized him. When he wasn't working, we did everything together: traveling, cooking, cleaning, shopping, and even sleeping in the same bed since having one is cheaper than two. My dad was a terrific single father. To me, he was just like the single dads in popular television shows like *The Andy Griffith Show* and *The Courtship of Eddie's Father*.

I had grown used to the fact that my mom hadn't been part of my life for two years. She never wrote, didn't send gifts, and only called around the holidays or my birthday. She had become a past memory of my earlier life. I couldn't imagine going back to live with her now.

"Why do I have to go?" I asked her on the phone.

"Well, I'm married now," she explained. "It's best for you to live with a mother and a father."

"But Will's not my father," I insisted.

This reasoning didn't matter in the end. My father reluctantly agreed with her that it would be better for me to live with them, and after all, she did have custody of me according to the divorce agreement. Dad reassured me that everything would be fine and that we'd see each other in the summers. I knew that the worst part of this move, aside from missing Dad, was that there would be

no more weekend, holiday, and summer trips to Pennsylvania to visit my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, the only extended family I knew.

We packed Dad's white 1965 Rambler American car that summer to drive to Arizona. We stopped to see Jesse James's hometown in St. Joseph, Missouri, a highlight for me since I remembered hearing about him as a young outlaw from the Wild West who took from the rich and gave to the poor. From there, we traveled south and joined Route 66 in Texas, going west. We talked about a million things, especially my apprehensions about moving to the reservation. He turned to me and promised, "Your mom will do her best."

As we crossed into New Mexico, the Southwest landscape from my childhood became more familiar, but the wide-open spaces, the incredible mountains, and the dazzling sunsets were no comfort to me. I began to cry as we got closer, looking out the window and wondering what my new life would be like. I tried to convince my dad to turn back, but it was too late now.

We crossed the border into Arizona just a few miles from Window Rock. It was desolate here, with hardly any of the trees or cacti I was used to in Phoenix. Finally, we pulled up to what was to be my new house on Circle Hill Drive, a small home built for government employees who work on the reservation. Mom and Will came outside to greet us, but I didn't want to get out of the car. I could only stare at these two people who seemed like strangers to me.

Chapter 2

My mother opened the passenger side door, and as I stepped out, she wrapped me in her arms. “You’re home!” she exclaimed, even though this house and Window Rock had never been my home. She looked pretty much the same as she had before, with her short, dark hair and glasses. There was a new ring on her finger that I had never seen before. She and Will had only been married for six months when I arrived.

I hugged her as I warily eyed Will standing beside her. This was the first time I had seen him with clothes on. He was tall and imposing, and with his balding, salt-and-pepper hair, he clearly looked the eleven years older than my mother that he was.

“Hiya, Buddy,” he said to me as I shook his hand. I was annoyed that he was acting like we were best buds already when we didn’t even know each other. “I’ll get your suitcases,” he said. My father opened up the trunk for him, and he took them inside while my parents awkwardly stood there.

Finally, my dad said, “Well, I should get a move-on. It’s getting late and it’s a long drive to see Don in Coolidge.” My eyes started filling with tears at the realization that this was really it; he was truly leaving me here. I had no idea when I would see him again. I looked around at this barren place, feeling abandoned already.

“Don’t go, Dad,” I pleaded with him as he hugged me goodbye. “Take me with you,” I begged.

“You know I can’t do that,” he said, wiping tears of mine away. “You’re going to be fine. You’ll love it here, I’m sure. You’re back in the West now!” He gave me one last hug and pat on the shoulder, and then got back into his Rambler.

As he backed it down the driveway, I walked after the car and then ran after him down Circle Hill Drive. “Dad!” I yelled. When I saw him turn the corner, I knew he was really gone. I stood there for a while, not wanting to walk back up to whatever was waiting for me.

By the time I walked back up the hill, my mother was sitting on the front stoop smoking a cigarette. Her eyes looked like she had been crying from witnessing the affection I had for my dad. Maybe she was second-guessing if she’d made the right decision separating us. She opened her arms again and hugged me. “I’m so happy you’re here,” she said. “I know it will take some time to get adjusted. You’re going to love it here.”

“Do you love it here?” I asked her. She didn’t answer but just stood up and opened the door.

“Let me show you around,” she said as we walked inside. The house was an adobe style with viga architecture constructed of large cut solid sandstones mortared and stacked like huge bricks. The inside walls had a little over an inch of uneven plaster pasted over the stones. It had a grassy sideyard with a long double line clothesline and board fence painted white. The home was likely built sometime in the ‘30s or ‘40s when the BIA brought in white employees to staff many of its offices on the Navajo Reservation. Large viga logs went through the ceiling about three feet apart and protruded outside the house. Right away, I noticed that it was cooler inside the house. But there was no air conditioning, even though it was becoming more and more common throughout Arizona.

Mom took me into the kitchen and pointed out where the glasses and plates were so I could help myself later. It had those 1960s harvest gold appliances and Formica countertops with little boomerangs on them. To complement the gold kitchen was a matching gold rotary dial telephone hanging on the wall with an extra-long telephone cord so one could move around while talking. She

handed me a chocolate chip cookie that she had baked earlier that day in anticipation of my arrival. They tasted the same to me as the ones she made in Phoenix.

After she showed me the large pantry and laundry room, we walked through the dining room, and she pointed out the hi-fi cabinet and record radio player combo with speakers on each side that I remembered well. It was a sofa-sized behemoth piece of furniture and the same one she and Dad brought back from Japan. Mom had a pretty large assortment of 33 LP record albums of crooner singers she liked listening to.

I saw that the living and dining rooms were open to each other, and the furniture was the same set my parents had before their divorce with the addition of a black leather recliner. The living room had a fireplace that I didn't realize yet we'd be using for heating every day in the winter. There was no carpet anywhere. Instead, all the floors throughout were nice hardwood pine.

She led me through a short hallway to a small room. "Your very own bedroom. Same bed," she said, pointing. It was the same bunk bed that Don and I used in Phoenix, but now it had its legs cut down to where the bottom bed slid underneath the top bed that I slept on. The same upright dresser was there too.

I never had my own bedroom before. I walked over to the window by the bed and looked out, leaning on the radiator below it. I saw that I had a good view looking west for ten or so miles. The land was relatively flat, then gradually sloped up to juniper and cedar tree-lined hills in the distance. About twenty-five yards away from my window was an old pinon tree. "Isn't that a lovely view?" she asked me, putting her hand on my shoulder.

"I guess," I said. I didn't want to admit to her that it was a pretty nice view.

My suitcases were waiting for me by the bed, and together, Mom and I began to unpack and put my clothes and other things away. She remarked on the new clothes I had that she hadn't seen yet. I wondered where Will was, but I was glad he was making himself scarce right now.

“Let’s see the rest of the house and outside,” Mom said. She showed me the one bathroom and pointed to their bedroom, where Will was taking a nap. That was it for the house, all 1200 square feet of it. She took me out to the front, and we walked next to the gravel driveway where their two cars were parked. In front of the cars was a large white shed where garden tools were stored. Mom showed me the lawnmower, which I would use on the yard as one of my chores. I’d also be stacking the woodpile that had just arrived for when it got cold later. Another one of my chores would be to bring the wood inside every day in the fall and winter, she explained. *Great*, I thought. This is why they wanted me here: free labor. “And this is where we burn the trash,” she said, pointing to two rusting barrels at the edge of the driveway. “That will be your job,” she said.

“Really?” I asked. Up until that point, I had not been allowed to do anything with fire. We burned the trash at my grandparents’ home in Pennsylvania, but the fact that I would get to burn the trash without supervision appealed to me, like it would to any 8-year-old boy. At least I’d have one chore I might enjoy.

Will came outside to join us. “Your mother told you that you’d be burning the trash?” he asked. I nodded. Then he gave me some basic instructions and said I shouldn’t play with the fire once it got going inside the trash barrels. I already knew the horrible effects of fire, and most of what he told me wasn’t new. A year earlier, I’d seen a two-story apartment almost burn down a half block from our apartment in Alexandria and walked through the ruins the following day. I never forgot it. He said, “Also don’t put your mother’s empty hair spray or our Lysol aerosol cans in the fire because they will explode.”

That sounds pretty cool! I’ll have to see what that’s like sometime, I thought to myself. I nodded to him and promised, “I will always be careful.”

Will was about to show me the lawnmower when Mom changed the subject. “You can play out here all you want,” she said pointing to the yard and beyond, which was wide open everywhere.

“I have looked out here every day since we got here, thinking about what fun it would be for you to climb those rocks and play in the hills.”

She wasn’t wrong. There were huge sandstone formations all around our place. I was itching to go explore out there.

“Can I go look around?” I asked her. Even though it was warm, I didn’t want to go back inside yet.

Will started to say no, but Mom cut him off. “Of course,” she said. “Don’t be gone for long. We’re eating dinner soon.” I ran across the hillside towards the rocks, scratching my legs on the thorny bushes. When I got to them, I scanned them over, looking for the easiest way to climb up. I found a foothold and got up on the first sandstone formation. I kept climbing higher, hoping to get to the top to see the view. I stumbled and almost fell several times but caught hold of the rough sandstone with my feet and hands. Soon I was filthy, tired, and very thirsty. I finally got to the top and sat down to look over the buildings below and Window Rock itself, a better view than from our house. I knew I wanted to climb up on it soon.

I didn’t know what time it was because I didn’t have a watch yet. Maybe I should have headed back then, but I wanted to keep going. I went down the rocks on the other side, sliding down on my butt at some very steep points, to where the ground flattened out. I saw more rocks further east, which I knew from the map my dad had in the car was probably over the New Mexico border. I wanted to explore those too, but it would have to be another time.

I made it back to the house as it was getting dark. “Where have you been?” Will asked me as I walked inside, his eyes narrowing. “Do you know what time it is? Your mother was very worried about you!” He got up from his chair and started to approach me.

Mom grabbed his arm. “He probably just got lost,” she said.

“Yes,” I said, even though it wasn’t true. I had known where I was the whole time. “I got lost out there,” I said directly to Will. “I don’t know where anything is here.” I don’t know if he believed me, but at least he backed off and sat back down.

After dinner, Mom and Will went to the living room to smoke. Mom hadn’t quit her cigarette smoking habit since she was fourteen or fifteen, even when she was pregnant with Don and me. She still smoked two packs a day of Marlboro reds, the flip-top box promoted by the Marlboro man. Will smoked a stinky cigar, but also had about a dozen tobacco pipes on a stand near his black lounge chair he could choose from.

I sat on the sofa with Mom, and they spoke to me, laying out the rules of the house. It wasn’t the most welcoming of conversations. I would get a weekly allowance of fifty cents, paid only if my chores were done to expectation. Everything Will said that night reinforced my disdain for him and the fact that I didn’t want to be here. He was a homewrecker in my eyes, but my fate was sealed with him as my stepfather.

As we said goodnight, Mom said we would travel to Gallup the next day for groceries and things she needed at the Rexall drugstore. I hoped that meant just the two of us. That first night on the reservation, I laid in bed with tears in my eyes, wondering where Dad was and if he made it to Coolidge to see Don yet. I missed him so much already. Soon I fell asleep to my silent sobs.

I was in a deep sleep when immediately I sat straight up in my bed as an air raid siren wailed. I yelled for my mom who was still up watching TV.

“What’s that? What’s happening? Mom, where are you?” I called out.

She entered my dark room and said, “It’s okay, it’s okay. I thought you might be alarmed. It’s the ten p.m. curfew siren. I’m sorry, I forgot to tell you before bed,” she said.

Alarmed! I thought. *A siren needs to be that loud? Shit, it scared me so much I wondered if the world was coming to an end.*

“It’s on the large sandstone formation across from our yard and it goes off every night at ten and during the day at noon as a test for the fire department,” she went on. “You can go back to sleep now.”

I laid back down and began thinking of my dad again as tears began to flow. *I hate it here*, I concluded. *Why? Why do I have to live here?*