

# “My Mom Always Says, ‘Never Trust a White Person’”

Excerpt from *Beyond the Four Corners of the World*; reprinted with permission from the author.

By Emily Benedek

Ella pushes back her dinette chair and walks across the kitchen to the Mr. Coffee machine, scoops a few tablespoonfuls from a red bag marked “Gourmet Coffee” into a paper filter, slides the filter mechanism into the machine and flips the switch. She stands in the kitchen of the trailer in Tuba City in which she and her husband and three children live, a few minutes’ drive from the cornfield, twenty minutes from her parents’ place.

Ella returns to the table and sits down. She is forty years old, short, about five feet two, and walks with a slight limp as the result of a congenital hip displacement. Her face is wide, with high cheekbones, brilliant white teeth, and movie-star eyes. Her skin is light brown, her lips gracefully sculpted and the color of berries. She wears white pants, a white and pastel short-sleeved blouse, a snowflake pendant at her throat, and ruby-red pumps. Her hair is cut short and permed into waves. Ella’s eyes are by turns watchful and merry.

Outside, row after row of white trailers sit on cul-de-sacs that are sprinkled with basketball hoops and small gardens. Tuba City is one of a handful of urban areas on the Navajo reservation where people live in modern houses on suburban-looking streets, or in trailer parks, with electricity, running water, and TV. The town, the center of commerce and administration for the reservation’s western half, lies sixty miles south of the Glen Canyon Dam and the southern tip of Lake Powell, and eighty miles north of Flagstaff. It boasts gas stations and supermarkets, schools, a bank, movie theater, restaurants, and a post office.

“I brought my mom some of this coffee,” Ella says, “and I made it in her old enamel pot. The first time my mom tasted it, she spit

it out on the ground. She thought the coffee had gone bad. Then I told her it was *gourmet* coffee. I saw her a few minutes later pouring herself another cup, and tasting it, kind of tentative-like. Later on, I heard her tell a friend of hers she was drinking *gourmet coffee*.” Ella laughs.

Ella’s trailer development is set up on the top of a hill overlooking the center of town, the old Bureau of Indian Affairs compound. Nearby is the original BIA boarding school, a massive, forbidding red brick edifice, now abandoned, in which Ella received her first, unhappy introductions to the ways of white people. The school was built along a street now shaded by large cottonwood trees and lined with red brick Victorian houses sporting white painted porches. Driving into the BIA compound is like passing into a town from Kansas that has been dropped, intact, by a strong tornado, in the middle of the desert. It feels like a back lot on a movie set, so different are its buildings from the rest of those in Tuba City, so different is its landscaping, for nowhere else in town are there seeded lawns and mature trees. Now the compound includes a primary day school, a hospital, housing for the doctors and teachers, and tribal legal offices.

Ella’s windowsill is covered with small ceramic and metal animal figures. The Navajos place a great value on animals, in part because of their importance in the Creation myths. The figures are rounded and serene, different from the Zuni fetishes they resemble, also carved models of animals, but more artistic, symbolic, often decorated with bits of coral or jet or crystal. The fetishes are believed to carry powers characteristic of the species they depict. A mountain lion, for example, set up high, will protect you from your enemies.

On the kitchen walls Ella has hung traditional Navajo domestic utensils: a thick bunch of stiff grasses from the broom plant, tied in the middle, which makes up a traditional Navajo hairbrush, and stirring sticks, for corn mush, made from twigs of the black greasewood tree. Navajo legends maintain that hunger won’t enter a home that has stirring sticks; the hunger is afraid of the sticks, which it perceives as arrows that can kill it.

“My mom always says, ‘Never trust a white person,’” comments

Ella. “She says when you go to school the white man teaches you to think with your head, and then you eventually forget how to think with your heart. And when that comes about, that’s when you start losing your identity as an Indian, and you start feeling ashamed of your people and ashamed to speak your own language. That’s when the damage has been done, when you really start thinking with your head instead of your heart.

“But then my dad says, ‘There are a lot of white people who have deep hearts, and they know how to think with their hearts.’

“My mom always says, ‘Well, I never trusted a white person because it seems like no matter how hard I try, I’ve always found something I didn’t like in them. There was always something that they wanted to take from me. And they never gave me anything back.’”

Jack has spent much of his life working with whites. He recently retired from the Navajo Power Plant in Page, Arizona, where he earned \$24,000 a year as a custodian. That salary put his income at three or four times that of the Navajo median, and he appreciated the benefits that contact with whites brought him and his family. He even likes TV, says Ella, especially boxing and wrestling, and animal cartoons, because it reminds him of the Creation stories.

Bessie does not like the TV. She believes it causes nightmares and sleepwalking in children. She thinks that watching soap operas leads to divorce because people pattern their lives on the meaningless interactions they see on the screen. When Bessie is at Ella’s house, she will sometimes watch nature shows on the PBS station, but if she should later become sick, she’ll likely blame the television for having shown her a picture of an animal that is taboo for Navajos. Bessie’s world is dominated by the myths and stories and beliefs she was brought up with, and this way of looking at the world insulates her somewhat from the ways of the white man. Her very language prevents her from understanding certain concepts (primarily those applying to business, law, or technology).

Bessie has had less contact with whites than Jack, yet she bears a lasting distrust. She won’t even go to the Indian Health Service Hospital in Tuba City, where the Navajos get free health care. She thinks the doctors make you sicker. Ella says that the only reason

Bessie gave birth to her babies in the hospital is that Jack packed her up and drove her there.

Bessie does not like the education her children are getting in the white man's schools. Ella says, "She said, 'Why do you want to learn about the white man's history? Why do you want to know about the wars the white man has? The white man's afraid to teach history the way it should be taught. The way he is, even today, he is trying to get rid of the Indian person because the Indian person has always been on this land.'"

Ella says, "Sometimes I wonder, how does she know all these things? How does she know these things are being taught in school? And I asked her that, and she said, 'I hear you talk about it. When the children bring their homework home, and just by looking through the pages, I see, and I ask them, 'What is this?' And they'll respond and say, 'That was a certain war and that happened here in the U.S.' And my mom tells me, 'I see the things the white man teaches in you, a lot of the things they do and the way they are, I see it in you, so that's how I know.'"

Although pieces of the modern world impinge on them every day through the televisions in their children's homes, the magazines stacked in stores, news on the Navajo Nation's radio station, their grandchildren's homework, in the end these things affect Jack and Bessie very little. They are not interested in the modern world; they prefer to keep their distance from it.

"I once asked my mom, 'What is a human being?'" says Ella. "And she said, 'A human being is a person that thinks with his heart, that thinks [of] good all the time, that has respect for life around him, that has respect for even the smallest rock. A human being is a person that thinks that the rock will talk to him and teach him a lesson—the smallest thing that Mother Nature has made available for us. A human being must understand why we are here on earth, why the plants are growing, why we have the four seasons, why we have the heavens. That is a human being, somebody that understands nature, somebody that thinks he's not any better than anybody else, that thinks that everybody is equal no matter what color they are or what language they speak. That is a human being.'"

Bessie also told Ella that since she is a teacher, she should focus

on teaching white people how to be human beings.

“Maybe the white man’s way of teaching is not for the Indian people,” she told Ella. “Maybe you can start a school where you teach white children how to be Indian children. When you start teaching white children how to think like Indians, maybe we’ll have human beings again. Then maybe your children and the white children will learn how to get along in this world. Maybe their world will be better than the way things are today. Seems like human beings—five-fingered people—are fighting among each other. In our legends that wasn’t supposed to be. It is one of our prophecies: when these things get started, there’s going to be an end to life.”

Ella goes on: “My mom says, ‘I don’t want life to end. I want my children to grow and reproduce. And I want my children to be able to get along with the white children, to be able to live like human beings and learn how to share and get along.’”



Although Bessie says she has never met a white person who hasn’t tried to take something from her, she is the not-infrequent recipient of charity from various groups, whose members send food clothes, and other supplies to the reservation. Bessie recently received boxes of supplies from a group of women in Salt Lake City, Utah, who are interested in helping out the Navajo elderly. The sponsoring groups tried to find out what Bessie and others needed, but communication is sometimes difficult. In one package, they sent her Vicks Vapo-Rub, aspirin, Band-Aids, Noxzema, and panty hose. Bessie has no need for panty hose—she wears socks and sturdy shoes. But, waste not, want not: she used the nylons to tie up the sheep.

Bessie let the women know she would like some socks, and they sent her woolen socks which Bessie put in the clothes washer and dryer at the laundromat in town. They shrank to children’s size, so Bessie undid them and used the yarn for her weaving.

Navajo skirts are layered and flounced, and require quite a bit of material. When Ella told the Utah women that each skirt requires about six yards, they were flabbergasted and wanted to know what the skirts looked like. The Navajo women wear blouses made of

velveteen, which require two yards. Ella wrote to the Utah women to let them know her mother's favorite colors: blue, turquoise, brown, and purple. To help out, Ella makes a lot of her mother's clothing with her electric sewing machine.

The women sent the packages UPS, which doesn't deliver to the remote campsites of the reservation, so the packages were routed to Flagstaff, a ninety-minute drive, where Ella and her husband Dennis tried to track them down, but failed to find them. The packages were eventually returned to the senders. This generated a few telephone calls, during which the Utah women tried to find out more about the Navajos.

They want to know what kind of shoes Bessie wore.

Recalls Ella, "I told them my mom prefers tennis shoes, black tennis shoes. And the lady was surprised; she said, 'Well, what does she wear when she goes out?' And I said tennis shoes!" Ella laughs. "And she said, 'What about leather shoes?' and I said, 'She prefers tennis shoes, the kind you buy for \$2.99 or \$3.99 at K Mart.'"

The women seemed to have no idea of Bessie's way of life, or of the fact that her feet seldom touched anything that was not blown with red dust. They told Ella they had been to Sears and found some nice pumps on sale. Wouldn't she like a pair of pumps for a special occasion? All Ella could do was laugh.

"They asked what kind of hair stuff does she use. And I said, 'Send her a skein of white yarn from the store, the real thin kind, or you can send her a skein of beige. She uses that to tie her hair.' I said, 'You can send her rubber bands too, 'cause the grandkids, they tie their hair with rubber bands and [use] a steel brush, like the kind you find at animal stores, that's the kind they use.' Bessie uses yucca to wash her hair, and sometimes shampoo, if she showers at Ella's place. The Navajo women used to use Borax, the laundry detergent, which caused many of them to lose hair on the tops of their heads.

"Oh, they wanted to know what kind of stationery she liked too.

"I said, 'My mom don't read and write.' I said, 'If you send her stationery, she'll probably use it to light the fire.'" Ella laughs again. "The woman just laughed on the other line.

"Oh, they wanted to know what kind of scent she likes—per-

fume. And I said the only time she uses perfume is when it's really hot and there are a lot of mosquitoes and she has to herd sheep. She puts perfume on when she goes out so the mosquitoes don't bother her. Or, I said, she puts it on the dogs and the cats so the mosquitoes won't bother them. The lady was really laughing then.

"Then she asked what kind of china would she like. And I told her she like the plated kind, the enamel kind, cast-iron dishes."

Finally, boxes did arrive, in care of some Mormon college students driving this way. The women had also sent along water jugs and coolers, which Ella had informed them were much prized by the Navajos for keeping water and soda pop cool for a few hours. Ella was surprised to see that they sent Coleman ice chests and water jugs, very expensive, good-quality items.

"I told my mom, 'You have to really be careful of these; they're real expensive stuff. They're really expensive, you have to really take care of them.'" So Bessie put them in her closet, with her other treasured possessions. Bessie has a trunk into which she places special items. In it she has some china cups sent by an acquaintance, some small animal models, and a copy of *The Color Purple*, signed by its author, Alice Walker, who gave Bessie the book after buying a rug from her.

Some food items sent by the Utah ladies met with great suspicion from Bessie, as does most unfamiliar food. Pasta went immediately to Ella, who brought it to work as art supplies for her students. (Ella disapproves of the kids using corn for art, because corn should be treated with respect and not wasted.) "These people don't eat pasta," she said about the traditional people like her mother. But Ella likes trying new food, and she boiled up some of the noodles her students didn't spray-paint. They were greenish.

"It tasted awful. I think they were natural foods or something," she said.

The Utah women also sent dried peas and beans, some of which went to the sheep. They also sent bulk flour that wasn't otherwise identified. Bessie mixed some of it with their regular Blue Bird white flour. The rest they gave to their Hopi friend Rita, who lives in the nearby Hopi village of Moencopi. "We gave it to Rita to figure out," said Ella.

