

BELAGANA-BELAZANA

*(Bilagáana-Bilasáana)*

*An Outsider's Quest in the Navajo Nation*

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## Preface

Not just a few outsiders have spent time in the Navajo Nation, researched tribal customs, or both, before finding the hubris to write a story from a Navajo’s point of view. The author of this work does not profess a deep understanding of Navajo culture and is suspicious of non-Navajos who claim that they do. The setting and characterizations here are portrayed from the author’s perspective as a self-described intruder in their land for several years. “Diné” (*Dine’é*) means the Navajo people, and “Belagana” (*Bilagáana*) means the white man—this novel supposes more about the latter than the former.

*Belagana-Belazana* takes place during the second half of the last century and was first drafted two years before the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, made headlines. Not written as a “topical response” to that fiasco, this book demonstrates instead that lead poisoning and other water contamination problems have been long-standing issues in the U.S., especially in low-income communities. The fictional account of lead contamination here is derived from an incident in a school, decades ago. Also, many other scenes are derived from actual circumstances.

Many states, parks, monuments, and some larger cities or towns are referred to by real names. Navajo surnames in the novel such as Benally, Nez, and many others, do not pertain to actual families or their clans. Any similarities between characters and real persons are coincidental. The poems at the beginning of some chapters are revised from the author’s collection, *Belagana*.

## Chapter 1

A long-forgotten Raven Point Boarding School principal had once arranged for Jon Begay, the school maintenance man and custodian for over thirty years, to rig up a one-way buzzer from the dormitory office to the counselor's trailer. My assistant in the dorms, Leonard, told me he hadn't used the buzzer for an emergency since the previous winter.

The first time it went off at night it seemed extra loud, waking me from a sound sleep. Several hours had passed since the end of Wednesday afternoon's festivities, which had included the year's second basketball game followed by a Thanksgiving dinner with our kids and many of their relatives. We wound things up with a movie for the boarding students who hadn't been checked out of the dorm for the holiday weekend.

There was no sense trying to call Leonard on our crappy walkie-talkies, so, moving groggily, I dressed in jeans, T-shirt and an old wool sweater. My keys and flashlight stuffed into my back pockets, I put on my baseball cap and boots, expecting the emergency to be something related to our decrepit facility, maybe frozen pipes in one of the dorm bathrooms, which made me envision mopping up rusty water until dawn. The one bit of good news was that this 1:30 a.m. summons would at least give me a chance to finish the serious conversation I'd started with Leonard earlier that day.

I tossed aside the old bath towel that poorly blocked the draft under my door, pulled the handle, and stepped carefully down the wobbly, icy stairs before zipping and buttoning my navy-blue arctic parka. My mother gave it to me in Tucson before I left for the Navajo Reservation, but I didn't tell her I thought the bulging goose-down coat was overkill. Now I was grateful to have it on a frigid moonless night that would've been perfect for Halloween.

Yawning, I took out my flashlight, flicked it on, and aimed it at the thermometer on the side of the trailer—twenty-two degrees with a light breeze on my face. I wouldn't be outside long enough to need my hood, but I buried my left hand in the parka's pocket and found my gloves. I put one of them on the hand that held the flashlight and walked off, looking up at the sky. The Big Dipper's lip pointed reliably north, but scattered clouds were passing over the polestar.

On an inch or two of well-trampled snow I crunched past the dark playground, the flashlight beam ahead of me. Still drowsy, I took out my wad of keys, crossed the boardwalk to the rec room door, unlocked it, and walked in. As usual, the lights were off for the night, except in the small office, where Leonard blared unintelligibly into the phone as if speaking to Antarctica.

Walking across the stifling rec room, I unbuttoned my parka right away. As I fingered some sleep out of one eye, Marla, a night aide, came out of the boys' dorm and stood in the doorway, directing the boys—in Navajo—to get back to bed. The door at the far end of their dorm was shut, and the sleeping girls beyond were apparently unaware of the excitement as Marla killed the lights over the boys' bunks.

Leonard left the office, speaking in Navajo to Marla and handing her a note. He wore a military-surplus peacoat, showing the collars of three layers of clothes beneath. As I approached him, Leonard lugged a frame pack half as tall as his below-average height. All business, no sign of his usual cheerfulness, he stopped to secure one of the straps, and then looked up at me. "Well, Mr. Noland," he said formally for Marla's benefit, "here we go. Your first runaways." One of his older dogs, half-crippled Marie, waited right beside him, panting eagerly as she watched Marla return to the dorms.

"I was hoping for a busted pipe." I shook off another yawn.

"No such luck. We searched everywhere around here before I buzzed you."

"Were you just calling now for some help?"

"Yeah, nobody's around. I also woke up my sister so they'd know we probably won't make it for Thanksgiving."

"Maybe this won't take that long."

"I doubt it."

"How many are missing?"

"Two, Hawthorne Shepard and—"

"His little brother?" Now fully awake, I was alarmed that Peter Shepard, a second-grader, might be out there in the elements.

"No, it's Billy."

"Good God, that's worse."

[END—Chapter 1]