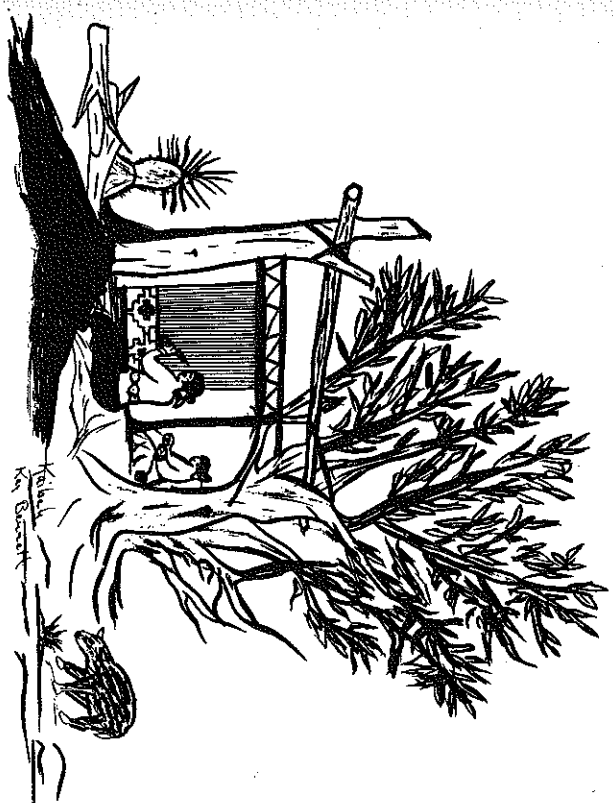


KALIBAH

RECOLLECTION OF A NAVAJO GIRLHOOD

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with chapter illustrations by the author



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carried to their families of what had happened, their parents arrived and removed them from school.

Kaibah became more and more sure of herself as the year passed. She could speak a little English and her quick smile made friends of the teachers and of the other girls. She was stronger and heavier than the other girls of her age and more active in their baseball and volley ball games.

Springtime revived the old longing to be at home, riding across the prairie, or along the well known paths in the wooded mountains. The children's eyes wandered from their desks to the world outside the windows more frequently, and then one day school was over, and it was time to leave.

Kaibah helped get the smaller children ready and on the bus that would pass Cross Hills. She waved goodbye to the teachers and the children who had not yet left, then sat staring out of the window at the now familiar landmarks. There had not been much snowfall that winter, and she noticed that the grass was already brown and much sparser than usual. She thought, "We will have to move to the mountains as soon as possible, and save the grass on the prairie, or there will not be enough left for the sheep this winter."

CHAPTER XXIX



THE DROUGHT

THE family moved to Oak Springs two days after the children arrived home from school. Keedah was worried. He said, "There will not be much for the sheep to eat this winter. It seems that all the families have more sheep than they had a few years ago, and now some of the herds are brought to graze on our land."

A few days after they were settled at Oak Springs Juan and his wife rode over from Toadlena to visit. Mother Chschille said, "Kaibah, pick out a nice sheep and kill it for your brother. Sharpen that big butcher knife I always use, and if you need help, ask Keedah to help you."

Kaibah got the knife from the hogan and sat down to sharpen it on a smooth rock as they sat and talked. The following morning Juan and Keedah caught one of the sheep before the herd was taken out of the corral to graze, tied its feet together and called Kaibah to bring the knife.

"There you are, little sister," said Keedah. "All you have to do is cut his throat."

Kaibah looked at the sheep, and backed away. Mother Chischillie came over, and sat down on the sheep, holding its head back. "Cut right here," she said. "He will die quickly if you cut his throat in the right place." Kaibah stood looking at the sheep. She knew every animal in the herd, and had raised most of them from the day they were born. Finally she moved toward the sheep, cut the ropes from his legs, and moved her mother so that the animal could run away.

Mother Chischillie was angry and puzzled. "What's the matter with you?" she scolded. "You're old enough to butcher sheep. How will you feed your family?"

Kaibah turned and walked away, saying, "I will never kill a sheep. I do not care what you or my brothers say. Someone else will have to kill and butcher." She was ashamed as she walked to the spring to wash her face. She thought, "I should have killed the sheep. All the women and girls I know kill and butcher for their families, but I can't help feeling sorry for the poor animals. I can't take their life away from them."

When she returned her mother had butchered another sheep, and Kaibah sat down with the family to eat.

Juan said, "How can you eat the meat if you don't want the sheep to be killed?"

"I know the sheep must be killed, but I can't kill one," Kaibah answered.

"I am afraid Kaibah will never have the courage to kill a sheep," said Mother Chischillie. "I was much younger than she is when my mother taught me how to cut a throat and butcher an animal."

Juan changed the subject by saying, "There is to be a chicken pull at Naschitti trading post in two days. We will stay here and go with you, my mother. One of the head men from Window Rock is to speak to the people about our sheep and horses. There has been much talk that Washington wants to take all of our sheep and horses. They want us to ride in black cars instead of on horseback."

"Yes," said Mother Chischillie, "I have heard that Washington wants our land. Where do they want us to live, my son?"

"I don't know," said Juan. "Maybe the man from Window Rock will tell us."

"I wish Washington would leave us alone," groaned Mother Chischillie. "We are happy here. Our sheep and horses are increasing, and the tribe is growing large and prosperous again. We don't tell Washington how to raise *their* sheep. Why should they tell us how to live? Ever since the 'Jong walk,' Washington has tried to make life hard for us, but we have grown in numbers and wealth in spite of them. Very well, we will go to Naschitti and hear what the man has to say."

"We must take our best horses," said Juan. "There will be racing at the meeting."

Juan and the boys rode up the mountain to get the horses they would take to the chicken pull, and when they returned, Kaibah got White Lightning. All the animals were fat and wild. There were four wild mules with the herd, lending their raucous voices to the shrill neighing of the horses.

"Look at those mules, mother," said Kaibah. "They act like they want to be the leaders."

"Yes," said Mother Chischillie, "we must get them away from the herd. They will make a good team for the wagon. Mules should never be kept around new colts, as they take them away from their mothers and the colts starve. We will start training them to pull the old wagon when we return from the chicken pull. Now let's get ready. We'll spend the night at our Cross Hills farm. There has been no rain for a month, and I hear the sun and wind is burning up all the crops on the prairie.

The wagon was loaded, and Mother Chischillie, with Juan and his wife, prepared to climb into it. Juan tied two riding horses to the tailboard. Keedah and Kaibah mounted their horses, and sat waiting. Kaibah shouted, "I bet I win the women's race."

Diswood laughed as he yelled back, "What do you know about racing? If you race, you'll probably come in last."

Mother Chischillie said, "Boys, take good care of the sheep. Glenbah will cook for you. We will be back tomorrow night." She climbed into the wagon, Juan slapped the reins on the horses' backs, and they drove off. Everyone felt proud to be taking a shining new wagon, and such fine looking horses, to the meeting. Juan sang riding songs as they rolled along.

Kaibah and Keedah raced their horses back and forth along the trail in order to get used to their mounts again before they reached Naschitti. When they arrived at their field on the prairie. Mother Chischillie's fears were confirmed. The half-grown corn was withered and brown, and the small melons were burned orange by the hot sun and the wind. As she walked through the field, she touched the dry corn stalks gently, as though she

felt she might comfort the dying plants. "I must ask a good medicine man to pray for rain," she said. "Perhaps we may save some of the crop. If our leaders and medicine men would pray as they should, this would not happen. They spend too much time going to town to drink wine. When they forget to live as our gods taught us to live we are all punished. Maybe they want to live like the white men, and pray to the white man's god."

They all felt depressed as they looked down the valley at the dry fields. They stared across the prairie at the blowing dust. There seemed to be more patches of sand, and less grass for the sheep, than there had been in the past. "Well," said Mother Chischillie, "we can do nothing here. We will go to Naschitti, and hear what Washington has to say, then we will see about having a ceremony to bring back the rain. On our way back to Oak Springs we will stop here and haul some water in barrels from the waterhole. Maybe we can bring some plants back to life."

The following morning they left early, in order to arrive at the Naschitti trading post before noon. Juan drove along the highway. Keedah and Kaibah galloped along, waving at an occasional car that passed them. Soon they had outdistanced the wagon and, while Keedah rode in to join the crowd, Kaibah stopped on a nearby hill to wait for her mother. Below her, around the trading post, a large crowd had gathered. Smoke from their fires was rising straight into the air until it met the wind from the prairie, which carried it toward the mountains. Other families were arriving along the highway, and from the trails which led to the mountains. At the center of the crowd were several black cars from

the Indian Affairs office at Window Rock. Many horses were in the corral, waiting to be ridden in the afternoon games and races. Groups of men were standing around talking and waving their arms. Finally Juan drove up, and Kaibah followed the wagon into the crowd.

They found a space to park the wagon, and Juan unhitched the team and gave them some hay. Mother Chis-chille took some wood from the wagon, started a fire, and was soon cooking lunch. Hosteen Nez's daughter came over to see Kaibah, and the two girls rode off to discuss the afternoon women's race.

"I hear they are going to give ten dollars to the winner," she told her friend. "We will ride out together. Let's go eat lunch now."

They returned to the wagon, and received coffee and fried bread.

As they ate, a white official rose and started talking. He paused frequently to let his Navajo interpreter relay his message to the people. "I have come all the way from Window Rock," he said, "to bring you a message from Washington." He paused, then continued in a louder voice: "Washington wants John Collier to show you a better way to live. He wants you to sell some of your sheep and horses."

Navajo men stood up here and there in the crowd, and started talking loudly. Soon many others joined them. Everyone talked, and no one listened.

"Quiet, quiet," yelled the officials and their interpreters. Finally most of the speakers sat down and the official continued. "John Collier says the Navajos have too many sheep and horses, and unless you sell some of them to Washington you will have to pay taxes on your

land and on every sheep and horse. Washington wants you to be self-supporting. Washington does not want to continue supporting the Navajo people. John Collier wants you to vote. You will mark an 'O' if you want to support yourself, and pay taxes on your land and your sheep, or you will vote 'X' if you want to sell some of your sheep and horses to Washington and not pay any taxes."

Soon all was confusion. Men were standing everywhere, waving their arms, and yelling at the people around them. No one wanted to sell their animals. Most families had increased their herds. The grass had been plentiful until this year, and the people were richer than they had been since the time of the long walk. They did not realize that the land was becoming overgrazed, and only looked forward to ever-increasing wealth in sheep and horses.

Hosteen Yazzie stood up and shouted, "No one must decide now. Let us start the chicken pull. Someone please plant the chicken."

One of the men got a chicken, tied in a gunny sack, out of his wagon, and rode over to a flat area to bury the fowl, leaving only its head sticking out above the ground. The men who were to take part in this game took off their jewelry, tied their hair back, put on old clothes, and rode over to the starting line. A man at the starting line yelled instructions. "Start when I fire my gun. Whoever pulls the chicken out of the ground, as he rides past, wins." He fired his gun, and the men were off in a cloud of dust. Everyone tried to see what was going on, but there was too much dust. Finally the men rode

back, and the one who carried the chicken's head, went to collect his prize.

After a few men's races the women were told to line up for their race. Juan had saddled White Lightning, making sure the cinch was tight. Mother Chischillie had tied Kaibah's skirts to her legs on each side so they would not get in the way. Kaibah rode over to join Hosteen Nez's daughter, and the two of them rode over to the starting line and joined the other women. The starter yelled instructions, fired his gun, and they were off. It was a ragged start, as the horses were not used to this sort of racing. White Lightning shied at the sound of the gun, and several other horses were ahead of him by the time they settled down to a gallop. Some of the women were having trouble with their skirts, and holding their horses back as they tried to adjust them. White Lightning passed the leader just before they reached the finish line, followed closely by Hosteen Nez's daughter.

The judge rode over and gave Kaibah ten silver dollars. He said, "That's a fine horse." Then he gave Hosteen Nez's daughter five dollars. The girls were very happy, as they rode over to the trading post to spend some of their winnings. Kaibah thought how rich she would be when she returned to school that fall.

There was much talk of the races on their way back to Oak Springs. They had stayed overnight at Cross Hills in order to water their field, without much hope of saving any of the crop unless rain came soon. Mother Chischillie's mind was busy trying to recall what had been said about the voting. Was Washington going to take all the sheep and horses and issue rations as she had heard

they did when she was a child? Her parents had spoken often of the days after they had returned from the concentration camp at Fort Sumner, when army rations failed to come, and they would have starved if they had not stolen sheep from the pueblos and the white peoples' ranches. Washington had not kept faith with the Navajos in the old days, and might let them starve now. Without her sheep she would have no security. If she kept her sheep, Washington might take all the money she received for her rugs and wool at the trading post. "The Navajos are like a mouse caught by a cat," she thought. "Washington put us in a cage and then let us out, but he only lets us run a little way before he pounces on us again. Maybe he will change his mind before it is time to vote."

The weeks passed, and too soon it was time to leave the mountains and return to their home on the prairie. Soon it would be time to vote, and rumors of what would happen if the vote was "O" or "X" were heard whenever two families met.

The boys rounded up the horses, and early one morning they loaded the wagon and started the herd down the mountain. Mother Chischillie and Keedah went ahead in the wagon, arriving at the winter hogan early in the afternoon. The horses and sheep were driven more slowly, and the sun had set behind the Turquoise Mountains by the time the sheep were turned into the corral. The wagon team and riding horses were taken into the corral, and the rest of them turned loose to find their own way back to the White Rock waterhole.

The hogan needed reinking with mud to keep out the wind and cold. Keedah was told to herd the sheep,

while Diswood, Chico, Kaibah and Glenbah patched the hogan. Mother Chischillie started the boys on one side, and the girls on the other. "I'm going to visit the Yellow Hill woman and play the stick game," she said. "I will be gone all day, and I want you to finish the hogan while I am gone."

All went well until the boys had finished their buckets of mud. "Mix me some more, Kaibah," Diswood ordered.

"Mix your own," she retorted.

"Grandna said you would mix the mud for us," he said. One word led to another, until Diswood picked up a handful of mud and smeared Kaibah's face. Soon they were all covered with mud, and the hogan was a mess. They sat down exhausted, with their backs to the wall.

"We had better clean up this mess before Grandna comes back," said Glenbah.

"Yes, we'd better finish quickly, and get cleaned up, before she returns," Kaibah agreed. They mixed more mud and went to work.

It did not take long, and when they had finished, they swept around the hogan. Then they ran to the waterhole to wash their clothes and hair. Keedah was watering the sheep when they arrived.

"What happened?" he asked. "I couldn't recognize you."

"Nothing," they answered. "We were just patching the hogan, and then came here to wash, and to help you bring the sheep back."

Mother Chischillie was at the hogan when they returned. "The hogan looks very nice," she said.

Finally the day arrived when the yellow school bus

stopped on the highway to take the children back to school. Kaibah and the other children, dressed in their school clothes, climbed aboard, and were soon out of sight. Keedah left with the wagon to get a load of wood from the mountains. All was quiet again around the hogan. Mother Chischillie sat with Maybah in front of her hogan, tears rolling down her cheeks as she spun wool.

The hot dry summer had destroyed the corn and melons at Cross Hills, but a good crop was harvested from the mountain farm. The summer had left the grass on the prairie dry and sparse, and strong winds were destroying more of the grass as it blew sand around the clumps that were left. The sheep were constantly on the move searching for something to eat.

One night as they sat before the fire, Mother Chischillie asked, "Shall we sell some of the sheep and hide our money before Washington takes them away from us?"

"I don't know," said Keedah. "We could sell some of the old ewes that have worn out their teeth, and keep the ones that are still strong."

"Very well," said his mother. "We will pick out the ones to sell in the morning, and take them to the trading post."

Mother Chischillie and Keedah picked out thirty old ewes to sell the next morning. "I wonder if we are wise to sell them?" said Keedah. "They would all have lambs next spring."

"If we don't sell them now, Washington will take them, and pay us nothing," said Mother Chischillie.

They drove the ewes to the trading post and put them

in the corral. The trader asked why they had brought them. "Our corn and melons were burned this summer," said Mother Chischillie. "We must buy more food for the winter."

"Very well," said the trader, "but these sheep are old and thin. They're not worth much. I can only pay two dollars apiece for them." After some argument the trader agreed to give her fifty dollars in trade, and twenty-two dollars in cash. Mother Chischillie and Keedah were very disappointed. They had only received half of what they had expected, but it was too late to turn back. The bargain had been made.

Word was sent around the area that everyone was to be at the trading post to vote, and that everyone must bring his or her tribal census number. Families started arriving early in the morning, as they always did for public gatherings. The men gathered in groups to discuss the voting, and what they were voting for. Everyone had a different idea, but all agreed on one thing, that the voting concerned the reduction of their herds of sheep and horses. How much of a reduction no one knew.

Finally the black car from Window Rock arrived, with a white man, and his interpreter. They took a box of ballots into the trading post, and placed it behind the counter. After a while they came out and shouted for the people to come and listen to what they had to say. The white man started talking about how the grass was disappearing from the prairie. He said there were too many horses and sheep and goats, and that they would soon eat up all the grass, and then starve to death. He said John Collier wanted to save their sheep, but as there

was not enough grass, they would have to get rid of some of them. At this point a Navajo man arose and said there has always been plenty of grass. That this year the sun and the wind had burned it up, but next year it would be better. The rain would come, as it always had, and the grass would again be plentiful. Other Navajo men stood up and repeated what the first man had said. There had been drought before, but the grass always came back.

The white man explained that there had never been so many sheep before, and, even if there was more rain, there would not be enough grass. There was not enough now, and would not be half enough after the sheep lambled in the spring. They must stop increasing their herds now. Every family would be given a permit for the number of sheep they could raise, and they must not raise any more until the grass was better.

Now they must vote so John Collier would know if they agreed to reduce their herds. If they did not agree, the sheep would all die, and they would have to live on rations from Washington. If they wanted to save the sheep they must mark "X" on the paper, and if they wanted the sheep to die they must mark "O" on the paper. The men and women talked, but still did not understand. Finally they were told to come into the trading post and mark their ballot. And so slowly they fled past the counter, giving the man their census number, and marking an "O" or an "X" on the paper put before them.

When everyone had voted, the box of ballots was put in the black car, and taken back to Window Rock. The

families loaded what they needed from the trading post, and quietly left for their homes.



CHAPTER XXX

THE REDUCTION OF THE SHEEP

AT SCHOOL the reduction of the sheep was not discussed. The children were quick to return to their families to help in case of sickness, but gave little thought to what went on outside the school, unless they were sent for. Now their minds were on their lessons, their school duties, or an occasional picnic or party. Some Saturdays they would take their lunch and march to the nearby mountains, where it was fun to climb around on the rocks. In the home economics class Kaibah learned to operate a sewing machine, and made a bright yellow dress to wear to her first dance.

Kaibah was a good student, and Mrs. Taylor rewarded her efforts by assigning her work of cleaning up and washing dishes at the employeess' club. This club was a place for the unmarried teachers and maintenance employeess to live. Employeess with families were furnished houses. Nancy was also assigned to duty at the