

Chochiti Grandmother

Narrative from a scene in Yellow Dirt Screenplay

As Ella leaves the university she notices a gathering of tourist ogling a line of tables set out on a crooked sidewalk in the still sweltering day. The late afternoon sun turns the white tablecloths into dusty pink, as it would later turn the Sandia Mountains into watermelon.

Native Americans, mostly bronzed pueblo women, sit beside each table polishing silver treasures, dusting intricate carvings and wiping sweat from their faces. The women pass fry bread, golden with grease, between them. It's festival time almost every day in New Mexico and simply a way of life and livelihood for these women. Ella was in a hurry but to be polite, she slowed down to browse. When she reaches the table of a weathered Cochiti woman, she stops to examine the intricate beadwork artistically displayed against the white cloth. They speak politely for a few moments until a soft cry interrupts them.

The woman carefully slides the cloth aside. Under the table slumps a tiny child in a cardboard box. He's about 5 and can barely hold his head up. Drool runs down his face. His arms reached out to his grandmother, pleading "ma-ma ma-ma." She picks him up and cradles him like an infant; his skinny body and atrophied legs spill over her abundant lap. Grandmother tears off a small piece of fry bread and places it tenderly in his mouth. She coos to him, puts him back down and gently props his small shoulders against a soft blanket in the box.

Ella is transfixed. She recognizes developmental delay but not this form. "Tell me about your little one."

The grandmother, resigned, turns back to Ella, smiling sadly. "My daughter's boy. Fetal Alcohol Syndrome." Ella nods sympathetically.

Ella's life is devoted to helping people with disabilities, but what could she do to help this broken child? She smiles, embarrassed, picks up two necklaces, pays and walks away.

Even with her education and training, Ella knows little about FAS and the complicated background of the children and families whose lives it destroys. How could she know that the little boy's grandfather worked at the Jackpile Mine a few decades ago. Or that grandfather was sick most of his life and could not hold a job. He started drinking, first contaminated water and later alcohol. He died early but not before he infected his daughter with his despair. She drank with her father and later ran away with a handsome druggie. When she brought her newborn son to her mother for safekeeping, it was too late.