

*Can Marie's knowledge of geology solve a mystery and get her big brother out of trouble?*

## The Thieving Rain

by

Anne E. Johnson



"Here comes the bus," grumbled my brother, Anton, on a pretty Saturday in October. Mamá said grumbling was how teens always talked.

Being only twelve, I was still a normal human. "I'd better go stir the posole," I said

in my normal human voice. It was my job to stir the corn stew when tourists visited the pueblo.

“So lame,” Anton grumbled with a snort, which is how Mamá said all teens laughed. “I’m not working today.”

I stopped cold. Everybody in my pueblo worked when the tour buses came. “How can you get out of working?” I asked him, impressed by his bravery.

“I’ll just stay out of sight. It gets so busy, nobody will notice.”

“Ha ha! Good plan,” I laughed. It was fun to imagine how much trouble he’d be in when he got caught.

I stopped laughing when he put his nose right up to mine and growled, “They won’t notice unless you tell them.” Then he stalked away.

“Bus is coming!” Will Sanchez shouted. Mr. Sanchez made good money selling the stone animals he carved, so he looked forward to the tourists. My neighbors and relatives began scurrying around, getting ready. Mamá and Nanna laid out blankets woven with brightly colored yarn they’d spun from alpaca hair. The tourists loved those blankets. Mr. and Mrs. Littlebird spread out silver

jewelry studded with polished turquoise and jasper stones.

I watched the charter bus climb the road up to the mesa where our pueblo was. "I wonder what it's like to see this place for the first time," I said to my aunt Paula. "Do they think it's pretty, the sloping rock with all those places where the mud slides down when it rains? I wonder if they'll like the pueblo."

"I wonder what happens to a pot of posole if nobody stirs it." She pointed fiercely at the cooking station where lunch would be served.

"Okay," I groaned.

I loved the smell of steaming posole. But stirring it with a big spoon was tiring. Only slightly less annoying was my other duty, ladling it into paper bowls for the tourists.

On the other side of the mesa, I could see my father strengthening a low wooden fence. "Tía Paula, why can't I help Papá with the fence?" I asked. "At least let me help Tía Vera press tortillas for a change." My little sister Linda

poked her head over the edge of the serving table, which gave me an idea. "Linda can learn to stir posole today."

Linda nodded eagerly. "Yes! I want to stir."

Tía Paula sighed. "The bus is parking. There's no time to switch you around." She looked at the sky. "And those clouds! Gonna be a bad storm." To one of my cousins she called, "Bring out a box of rain ponchos!" She turned her attention back to me. "Where's your brother?"

"How should I know?" I tried to look innocent.

The morning was normal. While Linda and I did exciting chores like setting out napkins and plastic forks, we watched our visitors like they were a TV show. "That lady has lots of kids," Linda said about a woman wrangling five tots. "And that girl has the longest hair ever."

Suddenly Linda tugged at my sleeve, hissing, "Oh, my gosh, Marie, that man is so rich." A man Papá's age sat at a picnic table. "Is that money?" Linda asked.

"I think so." My eyes were glued to the wad of green bills he pulled from a gold clip. He set the empty clip on the

table. Then he put the money into a silver clip with a turquoise stone. It started to make sense. "He bought a new clip from the Littlebirds," I guessed.

"So much money," gasped Linda. "Is he a pirate?"

"No. Pirates sail on the ocean. Maybe this man owns a bank." We both gazed at the silver clip, the gold clip, and the wad of cash.

I was trying to figure how many stuffed animals I could buy with all that money when Tía Paula and some of my cousins began bustling around. "The rain's starting," she panted. "Help me put up the tarps."

The clouds opened up, raining like we were under a thousand faucets. The awning over the food stand collapsed. With piles of tortillas and paper plates in our arms, we all rushed toward the nearest shelter.

Fat raindrops hit the dry ground so hard that they bounced back up, stinging my lower legs. I squinted through the rain. Three dozen soaked visitors struggled with plastic ponchos while they stumbled toward the bus.

"They might as well not bother," laughed my uncle.

Tía Paula gave him a withering look. "This is not funny, Miguel. Those people will not buy our wet merchandise. And some of our lunch food got rained on, so we can't sell it."

"Well, don't snarl at me," said my uncle. "I didn't make the rain, and I can't make it stop."

As if his words had scared it away, the rain suddenly stopped. Linda started to giggle.

A woman tourist, shaking out her poncho, said, "That was weirdest rain ever."

"It's usually like that here," the tour guide explained. "It comes and it goes, in and out." He pointed at the sky.

"Look—the sun's already coming out."

"You'll dry off soon," I said to a tourist girl about my age. She fussed over the drenched skirt of her pretty blue dress. "Just stand in the sun for a few minutes," I suggested. Smiling shyly, she moved closer to her parents.

I was just carrying the tortillas back to the lunch station when a whole different type of storm hit the mesa.

“Someone stole it,” an angry man’s voice declared. Tía Paula and I peeked around the corner of the adobe Visitors Center to view the picnic tables. The person shouting was the rich man with two money clips. “It was right here, and now it’s gone!”

“What’s the problem, sir?” asked Mr. Moya, one of our community leaders.

“Someone stole my gold money clip!” the man yelled. They could probably hear him in Arizona. “It was lying on this table.”

Mr. Moya’s patient, gentle manner made him great with tourists. “I’m sure no one stole it, sir.”

“My name is Denner,” the irate man barked. “Alex Denner.”

“Well, Mr. Denner, the rain probably swept your clip onto the ground. We’ll help you look for it.” He held out his arms to indicate all of us pueblo residents.

A few of my neighbors started searching under tables. "Let's look," Linda whispered to me, tugging at my sleeve.

"Maybe we'll get a reward," I agreed.

While Mr. Denner stood with his eyebrows furrowed and his arms crossed, we hunted under picnic tables on our hands and knees. Even right after the rain, it wasn't muddy. When rain fell so fast on such hard ground, it didn't soak in. Instead, it just rolled right off the side of the mesa and onto the plains below. Up on top, the sun quickly evaporated what little dampness was left.

With all of us stooping and crawling, it was like an Easter egg hunt. But nobody found a money clip. I glanced up to see how Mr. Denner was taking the sad news.

The look on his face gave me goose bumps. Pure suspicion. He focused that gaze at someone in the shadow of the tour bus. "That punk stole my money clip," Mr. Denner roared, pointing straight at my brother, Anton.

Believe me, Anton is incredibly annoying. He's lazy and girl-obsessed and sometimes a little mean to me. But he



is not a thief. "My brother didn't steal your stupid gold thing," I shouted. Everyone turned toward me. I wished another flash storm would wash me away.

"That boy has been lurking around," growled Mr. Denner. Anton could take grumpy lessons from him. "I noticed him spying on the lunch area earlier. He was deciding what to steal. Grab that boy and bring him here."

Want to see Mamá get mad? Accuse one of her kids of a crime. "Don't you touch him," she screeched at the tourists. My relatives and neighbors rallied around her. Two of my more muscular cousins clenched their fists.

"Whoa! Easy, now," begged the tour guide.

"Hin'a heem'e. Okay, that's enough," Mr. Moya agreed, translating his words from his native Keres language so the tourists would understand. "Let's everyone calm down," He approached my brother. "Anton, did you take Mr. Denner's money clip?"

"No! I didn't take anything."

The tour guide turned to the rich guy. "Mister Denner, might you have left your clip on the bus? Have you double-checked your pockets?"

"It was right here." Mr. Denner slammed his hand onto the picnic table. "Then that crazy rain started and we all ran for cover. When I got back the money clip was gone. We know it's not on the ground. I saw this boy lurking nearby. You do the math. If the rain didn't wash it onto the ground, then where is it?"

All of a sudden, I knew what happened to Mr. Denner's money clip. "It's in the alluvial fan!" I announced in my playground voice. Everyone looked at me like I was a few kernels short of an ear of corn.

Even my brother, the jerk I was trying to save, thought I was nuts. "What fan?" he demanded. "There's no fan out here."

I should mention another of Anton's faults: he doesn't listen in science class.

"Seriously, we should check the alluvial fan," I insisted.

A sea of puzzled faces stared at me. I realized that almost nobody paid attention in science class. "An alluvial fan," I recited, "is the place where all the sediment is dumped when a fast-running stream slows down."

"Do you see a stream around here, genius?" Practically under arrest, and Anton was still giving me a hard time.

"I wasn't finished," I told him. Enjoying the chance to know more than anyone else, I grinned. "When we get a flash rain like today, where do you think all that water goes?" With a flock of curious people behind me, I headed to the western edge of the mesa, right next to the picnic area. "See the way the ground is worn away?"

"Like a little riverbed, but dry," said a woman in a yellow sweatshirt. "It's a spout, isn't it?" She teetered crazy-close to the edge and looked down. "And the rain water flows down there?"

Standing next to her, I pointed at the triangle-shaped raised area at the foot of the mesa. "Yeah. And that's the alluvial fan, where the rushing water slows down and dumps whatever it scooped up."

“Your money clip could definitely be down there, Mr. Denner,” said the tour guide. “It’s not a bad theory.”

I felt a hand on top of my head. It was Papá, standing behind me and nodding with approval. He never said much, but he had ways of telling us how he felt about things. From his pocket he pulled the key to his old pick-up truck. He held the key up for Mamá to see, and she caught his meaning.

“My husband will drive Mr. Moya and Mr. Denner down there,” she explained.

The tour guide went, too. Linda and I sat on the ground overlooking the alluvial fan. Soon we saw the glint of Papá’s Ford rolling along the county highway. “They’re parking,” I announced.

Linda had charmed a pair of binoculars off a tourist. “They’re getting out,” she said while everyone waited breathlessly for her next report. “They’re on the Luve fan.”

“Alluvial fan,” I corrected her.

It didn't take long before Mr. Moya stuck his arm straight up in the air triumphantly. Snatching the binoculars, I took a peek. "It's yellow and shiny," I told the excited crowd. "And Mr. Denner is nodding, like they found the clip all right." Everyone whooped and clapped. I was hugged and congratulated like a hero.

Overall, the adventure didn't turn out so badly. When Mr. Denner came back up to the pueblo, he was so embarrassed that he bought a ton of blankets, pots, stone animals, and jewelry. He even bought the binoculars off the other tourist so Linda and I could keep them. Pretty cool!

As for Anton, I decided he owed me for saving his hide.

"What did you have in mind?" he asked.

With an evil grin, I handed him a large wooden spoon. "I bet you'd love stirring the posole." He backed away, but I pushed the spoon toward him. "There's three tour buses coming tomorrow," I laughed, "and I need a day off."



**Anne E. Johnson** lives in Brooklyn. Dozens of her short stories for young readers can be found in publications such as *Jack & Jill*, *FrostFire World*, *Spaceports & Spidersilk*, *Red Squirrel*, *Knowonder*, *Rainbow Rumpus*, and the upcoming *Young Explorer's Adventure Guide*. Her middle-grade paranormal novel, *Ebenezer's Locker*, was published by MuseltUp. She also writes novels and short stories for adults. Learn more about Anne at her website, <http://AnneEJohnson.com>.

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