

When  
Two  
Feathers  
Fell  
from  
the  
Sky



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Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

Boston New York 2021

# When It Was



*It was long after the buffalo thundered toward a great salt lick in lines, bellowing, snorting, and flicking flies. Long after their path, beaten like a drum, had grown four feet wide and two feet deep and had been there for eons. It was after a civilization of tens of thousands of people settled in a large, fertile basin, built a city near the old buffalo trace, and thrived there for over three hundred years. After they laid their dead in stone box containers stacked in mounds thinly covered by dirt, tucked in clusters in caves or, occasionally, hidden alone in groves. After that entire culture was decimated by a change in the climate. After the rains came again, and seeds scattered by wind grew into oaks, hickories, walnuts, chestnuts, sourwoods, maples, pines, catalpas, and cedars; a forest, thick, wide, and high.*

*It was after the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Shawnee, and Muscogee agreed to share the forest, the creeks, and the salt lick as a common hunting ground for the good of their families. After the braves stalked game every fall and winter, won an occasional scalp in a fray, brought home meat, and enjoyed the fires of their women, played with their children, danced, smoked, and prayed.*

*It was after the white people came, saw the land was better than what they'd previously stolen, and proclaimed it was theirs. Said no Indians lived there, so nobody would, or should, object to their staking it. Said their big God-in-the-Sky in His goodness had reserved it especially for them. After they reinforced that God's goodness with guns and dogs, and spread out all over the basin in fortified stations — French Lick, Freeland's, Barton's, Buchanan's, and Robertson's. It was after John Rains camped on that very spot and, in a single winter, slaughtered thirty-two bears in the knobs eventually named the Overton Hills. After the few bears that managed to survive had scattered.*

*It was after the allied tribes passed through on their way to the stations. After they explained to the whites (again) that this land was held in common and shared. After those Indians were bribed, humored, and shot. After other Indians hid in the trees and cane, killed who they could, and tried starving out the rest. After they stormed the big stockade and the smaller fortifications. After they were attacked by smallpox, canines, better weapons, and a cannon. After the stream of whites became never ending. After the Indians retreated, were cheated, and removed. After the few remaining buffalo were shot for meat, oil, and sport. After their path filled in with weeds and soil.*

*It was after Tennessee became a state, and a great Indian fighter became its first governor. After one of his grandsons-in-law built a lovely home for the governor's granddaughter and started a plantation. After the Northern invaders arrived, the plantation owners fled, and an occupying army took over Nashville. After the Federals freed the slaves and worked hundreds of them to death. It was after General Hood's army retreated from Atlanta, was decimated at Franklin, and, regrouping in and around that lovely home, wrecked it and all of its surrounds. It was after the Battle of Nashville snaked back and forth over that ground. After soldiers of both sides hid in the giant trees, in the cane, and among the mounds of that ancient civilization.*

*It was after the peace brought general poverty, hunger, and humiliation. After some former plantation owners sent their darker children north*

*for educations, and started universities for them right there in Nashville. After one former owner bequeathed his dusky children their fair portion of his land, trying to give them a head start in the new order.*

*It was after a few enterprising entrepreneurs took advantage of the overall destruction, and created new wealth from honest hard work, and from scheming and double-dealing. After they promoted high standards for themselves and, especially, for others. After they developed a new hierarchy, almost identical to the one they replaced. After they invested in railways and electricity, and wanted to make more money by selling rides and wattage by transporting people to places other than work. After trolley parks became that business-problem solution and the new recreational rage in progressive cities all over the country. After the next owner of that formerly lovely home revived and expanded it, and donated two hundred acres of his land to build such a park for Nashville and christened it Glendale. After the laying of the tracks to Glendale was blocked by running into that ancient, pre-historic burial ground, which, aside from being in the way, contained pots, effigies, ear spoons, and whatnots, all worth a lot. After four thousand of the graves were destroyed and robbed, the bones broken and tossed. After the loot enriched several universities, museums, and private collections.*

*It was after Nashville Railway and Light ran electric lines out to Glendale. After lights were strung all over the place and amusement rides were erected. After both children and adults rode horses, zebras, a red goat, and a unicorn around and around and up and down to a calliope's sound. After they spun in the Roulette Wheel's screechy seats and dipped on a wobbly roller coaster that threw their hearts into their throats. After those delights were torn down and replaced with cages even taller than the surviving old trees and used to house a collection of exotic fowl.*

*It was also after a school for young ladies of higher culture was built abutting the park zoo, and provided instruction in Greek, Shakespeare, math, and archery. After it declined due to the death of its patron. After the Great War was fought, killed millions of people, and destroyed the old world order. After the global influenza pandemic killed millions more.*

*It was while buffalo, carrier pigeons, and other species were on their*

way to worldwide extinction, and a few forward-looking people became convinced that locking animals up was better than slaughtering them by the millions. After new pens for monkeys, bears, alligators, sea lions, tortoises, and buffalo were added at Glendale, to exhibit the animals and preserve them from total extermination.

It was in a time of a deep national disagreement over whether people were descended from monkeys. And a time when it'd been decided that even the children of Adam and Eve couldn't be trusted to drink spirits, beer, and wine in public (or in private, if caught). It was also an era of dangerous racial and social divide. When men in white hoods expanded their tradition of terrorizing Negroes to include Catholics, Jews, adulterers, and anybody else they didn't particularly like.

But it was also when people were trying to shed their grief and get some relief. When the Shriners built a golf club next to Glendale, and hundreds came to the park zoo every warm weekday, and thousands came on the weekends. When people picnicked in droves, enjoyed concerts and shows, swung tennis rackets and croquet mallets, and ran separate races for fat folks and skinny ones. When they chased tickets dropped from aeroplanes, hunted Easter eggs for pony prizes, and joined civic clubs to socialize, fulfill their duties, and erect monuments to the past as they cared to recall it.

It was also a time of real work for those at Glendale who managed the animals, the people, and the living arrangements. For those who maintained the grounds, handled the horses, mucked the cages, and performed in the shows. When motion pictures were rumored soon to get sound, but vaudeville acts and Wild West shows were hanging around, and diving horses and their riders were still quite thrilling.

It was also when one of the star attractions at Glendale took a terrible fall. When an heir to part of an old plantation embarked on a difficult romance. When the zoo's manager struggled with demons brought home from the Great War. When the patron of the place was trying to outwit his wayward children. And when strange, inexplicable occurrences began intruding upon daily living. It was also when the hippopotamus fell sick. Specifically, it was the summer of 1926.

# The Main Act



Two Feathers looked forty feet down into the pool. The water was peaceful and slightly brown, the color of the canvas containing it. Beneath the canvas was wood. Two looked at each hook securing the lining and at the boards they were nailed into. A few people were already on benches beyond the pool's edges, but Two didn't glance toward them. She was meticulously professional in checking her equipment, and, also, being mysterious.

She stepped back to the middle of the diving tower where the audience couldn't see her, and eased down to the floor to pull off her cowboy boots. She was wearing her swimming costume under her robe, but diving required long socks and clunky shoes she didn't like to be seen in. It required, also, a diving helmet that was hard to get on, and not particularly attractive. Two was on the floor because there were no benches up there. Her mare, Ocher, would come up the ramp alone, usually walking fast, but occasionally running, and sometimes at an angle. A knock into a bench would shake the whole tower, and although it'd never happened, everybody in the horse diving business (which wasn't many people, but

more than you'd expect) worried that someday a horse would run into something and bring an entire structure down. Horse diving was risky business. That's why people liked it so much.

After Two changed into her shoes, she rose, closed her robe, and peeked out at the benches. They were filling, but not enough for her to yet step into the sunlight and wave. She retreated to deeper shade and flexed her fingers and wrists to loosen her joints, limbered her legs by stretching, and visualized Ocher coming up the ramp, hooves slapping the planks. She imagined grabbing hair and harness, swinging her leg. She saw Ocher carrying her to the edge of the platform and stopping abruptly. What was next was harder to gauge. It depended entirely on Ocher's mood. Sometimes the horse liked to snort and prance. Sometimes she wanted it over. Two believed her steed's decisions had to do with the size of the crowd. The bigger and louder, the more prancing around. Horses have pride. And show horses have more than most.

But, eventually, Ocher would dive. Always the extreme plunge, not a safer one. It was the dive both Ocher and the audience preferred, but for Two the most difficult. Ocher would go in headfirst, at a completely vertical angle, and it was easy to be tipped off her into the air. Also Ocher would jerk her head back at their landing to keep water out of her nose. It wasn't uncommon for a diver to get hit in the face as the horse went in. Two would have to dodge, but not so far as to tilt over. The trick was to hang on at an angle while underwater, avoid getting hit or kicked, and come out straight, smiling, and in control. Like she'd done nothing more difficult than ride a bicycle to the end of the street. That illusion had helped make Two a star.

Two wiggled her helmet down over her hair. And she was tucking strands in when she spied Crawford leading Ocher down the path to the ramp. Both children and adults were reaching out to pat. One boy was skipping along close to Crawford, clearly chatting, asking questions. Crawford shook his head, nodded, or, maybe, replied. He was too distant for Two to hear. But she saw Ocher was alert and not overly excited. The ideal mood for a jump.

Two lifted a board in the floor and dropped her robe and cowboy boots straight down into an empty washtub for Crawford to retrieve and have for her after her dive. She walked to the front of the platform, smiled, and waved. The crowd waved back and clapped. Some men put their fingers between their teeth and whistled. Music piped through speakers started up: "I'm Sitting on Top of the World," the current number one on the charts, and the song most often chosen while Two was on the platform. Two waved more. The clapping, whistles, and Al Jolson continued. Then Two turned her back, walked under the roof, and hopped onto a rail with extra padding and a plank that would keep her from falling should she lean back. By the time she was settled and calm, Ocher was at the end of the ramp and the music had stopped. Crawford shouted, "Three." Two cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted, "Three," back.

Two flexed her fingers. Crawford shouted, "Two." Two flexed her neck. She heard "One" and hooves on wood. She turned. Saw nostrils flaring, ears alert, muscles churning. Ocher was coming up fast. Pounding, nearer and nearer. When Two smelled her horse, she reached. Grabbed her mane, then the harness, and threw her leg over her back. She landed square and tightened her knees. Tucked her fingers under the leather. Then Ocher stopped. They were out in the open. The crowd cheered. The water reflected the sun. Drums started up. A bad imitation of an American Indian beat. Two flung her head back. Appeared to be praying to the sun. Really, she was limbering her neck.

Ocher snorted. Then backed up. Went forward. Eyed the crowd. Whinnied and nickered. The audience clapped louder. Ocher tossed her head. Shimmied down her back. But not from fear. Horses that didn't like diving didn't do it. There was no forcing after the initial try; a panicky horse is a danger to itself and its rider. And though a few animal protection activists complained, most folks still believed animals should work for their livings, just like people.

Ocher had been diving for five years before Two got her. She had the plunge down, and wanted to excel and have the pleasure of a jump done



well. But she'd also developed a craving for recognition, a lust for attention, and a taste for the crowd. In short, Ocher was basking in the applause, and Two was becoming slightly impatient. Ocher could keep that up for a while. She didn't have an accurate nose for when an audience was tiring of clapping and wanted to see the jump. And Two sensed this crowd was getting restless. She pressed her heels to Ocher's sides.

Large, alert ears turned back, then forward. Ocher took a step to the edge of the hanging ramp. She inched down slowly; her muscles tensed, she pushed off hard. The crowd leapt to their feet cheering. Two ducked into Ocher's mane, snuggled, and dived in unity and freedom. Two leaned in time to keep from getting knocked by Ocher's head, and the splash was smooth and the water warm. Ocher hit the bottom with her front hooves evenly placed, and she pushed off strong. Two centered herself on Ocher's back, and they rose together, dripping in sunshine, sparkling with water, and to great applause and more drums. Two undid the strap of her helmet, gave it a tug, and pulled it away from her head while Ocher climbed the ramp out of the water.

Two hopped off. Waved, grinned, and clicked her heels. The drums died, the claps grew. Two slung tassels, shed water, and flung drops. She waved more, grinned and glistened; her costume reflected the sun. The audience was eating her up. And Two loved the attention. Radiated in the admiration. And was thankful to have made it out of the tank alive and uninjured after another dive.

Crawford was on the other side of Ocher, holding her harness, gazing over the crowd at the Overton Hills. He'd camped in them as a boy, still rode through them as a man. But his mind wasn't on the knobs, or at the diving tank either. It was on his past Saturday night. He didn't show that. Or move. But Ocher shimmied like Two. She shook her mane, slung water, and sprinkled Crawford. It wasn't an intentional slight. Ocher loved Crawford as much as she loved her rider.

Two moved to Ocher's head, spread her fingers, and firmly grabbed her mane. She nuzzled her horse's muzzle, and kept waving her free hand. The audience had clapped nonstop. And they didn't let up. But

Two never waited until the din abated. She said to Crawford and Ocher, “That’s all,” snatched her robe from a rail, slipped her arms in its sleeves, and picked up her boots. She waved once more. Then she lowered her head and walked off. She gave Ocher the last of the claps.

She stopped just past the ramp to sign autograph books held out in female hands. She also scribbled on newspaper ads where she and Ocher were lauded as “The World’s Most Thrilling and Daring Act.” But many of her fans were men, angling their shoulders to get in the front of the crowd, angling their smiles to get Two’s attention directed on them. She answered questions she heard every day she dived: “Are ya a real Indian?” “Do ya ever get water up your nose?” “Does your horse like diving?” “What are ya doing tonight?” The answers were “Yes,” “Yes,” “Yes,” and, “Working.” Two rarely added details because the questions were simple, white people didn’t expect chatty Indians, and she had no intention of starting a romance.

## Backstage



After Two wiggled away from her fans, she walked a graveled path toward the casino, sat down on the first unoccupied bench, and took her diving shoes off and put on her boots. She felt both exhilarated and relieved. She'd been kicked in the middle of the previous season. A swift underwater accident while she and Ocher were trying to rise to the top, break the surface, and breathe. Coming up occasionally entailed thrashing, and the rectangular tank was only eleven feet deep. Horses have four long, strong appendages. Those kinds of mishaps are bound to happen. Still, the kick had broken Two's ribs and left her unable to work.

She'd returned home to Oklahoma, to the Miller Brothers' One Hundred and One (101) Ranch, on a torturous trip by train, taped so she could hardly breathe. Too bound up to argue, she was relegated to a colored car until she reached St. Louis. For the next leg of the trip, she managed to get a glossy photograph of herself in buckskin and feathers in front of the conductor. She settled in a cleaner, less-crowded car, but the last half of the trip wasn't easy either. When she disembarked at Ponca City, she was so pale from pain and fatigue that she looked like a white.

The women in her family were accustomed to nursing cracked ribs. They knew there wasn't much to be done except to avoid exertion, laughing out loud, and coughing. So Two had minded her nieces and done the mending. Lifting the wash was too heavy. Even lifting a skillet hurt. But just when you think they never will, ribs heal. They get better all of a sudden. Two spent her winter at the 101 doing her normal chores, riding a horse, practicing her shooting, and sparking with the first serious male suitor she'd ever made time for.

Come March, she'd headed back toward Nashville, again through St. Louis, where she laid over a night and indulged one of her favorite vanities, the buying of scarves. All cowgirl performers — white ones, Indians, Mexicans, and the single Negro performer ("Rope 'em" Sherry) — crafted their individual styles with a few basic pieces of clothing. And none were more important than scarves, which proclaimed their femininity when their other attire was so practical it looked and felt masculine. For daily wear, Two sported cotton bandanas, bought in the ranch commissary. They were red or blue, but came in a variety of patterns. Two preferred paisley, but also liked flowers or, when she could get them, feathered fans. But for the arena, courting, or just dolling up, Two wore silk scarves she purchased in St. Louis or Tulsa. They could be ordered from catalogues, but she didn't like buying things she couldn't touch with her fingers. And, besides, St. Louis's Famous-Barr department store was one of her special places. Clothes that weren't daily or costume she often bought there, and on her way to Glendale that year (and the last) she spent her day in St. Louis on the different floors of that store, deciding on scarves and supplementing her homespun lingerie with apparel she didn't wear around her parents and brothers.

There on the bench after her dive, she was still in her swimming costume, but she did have a scarf in her robe's pocket, and after she got her second boot on, she pulled it out and tied it around her neck. It was one of her cotton ones, as she didn't want her silk ones getting wet. After that, she continued toward the casino, a large building encircled by verandas and sporting corner cupolas capped with red bonnets sprouting flagpoles

doubling as lightning rods. In spite of the building's name, there was, officially, no gambling inside. But there were lots of dances, concerts, and shows.

There were also dressing rooms for performers. They were never private, but were segregated; men to the left, women to the right, coloreds over there. Two Feathers, though not white, headed to the women's, opened the door, and found, as she'd expected, the Juggling Juggernauts.

The tall Juggernaut, Marty Montgomery, said, "How'd it go?" as soon as Two came in the door.

Two said, "Smooth as silk, except for those drums." She went directly to the other side of the screen the women used for undressing.

Franny, the short Juggernaut, said, "They're still playing 'Sweet Georgia Brown' for us."

"I like that," Two said, while removing a boot with a jack.

"You wouldn't if you were from New York and heard it twice a day for a month." The Montgomerys had grown up performing on the East Coast and in the Catskills and spoke with Northern accents. But, except for the repetitive songs, they liked Glendale because it was clean, the people there more polite than in the North, and they could stay the whole season.

Marty said, "A kid came around here looking for you. A boy." She was seated at a mirror, putting clasps in her hair. She and her sister were bottle blondes.

"What'd he want?" Two had both boots off and was working on a bathing costume strap.

"Don't know. I shooed him off. He probably just wanted a peek in the women's dressing room. Franny wasn't dressed."

Franny snorted. "Not that he'd see much." She was swinging her arms, limbering them up, but was, Two knew, referring to her chest. Both Montgomerys were flat-chested, and Franny often joked that "naught" was the accented syllable in the second word of their act. However, flat, at the time, was fashionable. And on the Juggernauts, big breasts would've been a bother. In addition to needing straight arms and straight aims, toss-

ing rubber balls, batons, and dishes doesn't tolerate impediments. Fortunately, straight noses are not a requirement. Both their noses had been broken multiple times. Their cheeks once apiece. Their faces, really, were rather uneven. But not enough to mar their appeal. Just enough, in Two Feathers' estimation, to look, upon close inspection, slightly beat-up. A professional hazard. She recalled her broken ribs, and rightly reckoned a rubber ball to the bridge of a nose was survivable, whereas a horse's kick to the head sometimes was not.

Marty and Franny left for their act, and Two came out of the dressing room and the casino with her bathing costume slung over her shoulder, swinging her diving helmet and shoes. She again walked gravel paths bound by red fences, blooming flowers, and old trees. She passed women with children, couples holding hands, boys running races, sulphur fountains, the concession stand, and six-story-high bird cages in the near distance. She passed, too, peacocks and cranes walking free, screaming as they pleased. And cages of foxes and coyotes, the former hidden from view; the latter, sitting like dogs, inspecting visitors, licking a chop or two.

Two was headed toward Chambliss Hall, a dormitory left over from a defunct women's college. And her dorm was, by comparison to Glendale, relatively peaceful. The old Buford College stood far enough away from the park's bandstand and casino that only the most animated tunes floated over. Even the crane and peacock screams were muted. But the grounds had grown a tad ragged since the school's demise. In its heyday, sheep had grazed its twenty-five-acre central campus. Neat creatures, careful eaters. Now those acres were chawed by cows. Spotty clumps of weeds too briary or bitter to eat stood like green gophers surveying the landscape. So did clumps grown around patties. But, still, the old-growth magnolias, maples, and oak spread majestic branches, squirrels scampered, and songbirds tweeted.

The building itself was uncommon, two stories high and peaked with an attic dotted by single square windows on the front and the back. Both floors below sported long windows every four feet. Those provided for the circulation of air and generous views of the vistas. Even more unusual,

the entire building was ringed by wide verandas on both floors that totaled a half mile in length. Those shaded porches were used by the residents as extra living space. During the days, they provided a gracious, high-minded retreat. On hot nights, the women hauled their quilts and pillows outside and slept on their planks.

As soon as Two hit the front door, she was greeted by Helen Hampton, the dorm's mother, who often sat at the desk at the entrance. Out of twin intentions, Two stopped to chat. She knew she made Mrs. Hampton uncomfortable, and she got a little pleasure from that. But she was also trying to educate the older woman out of her bigotry. She remarked on the weather.

Helen replied, "We've been lucky. I've seen far worse Mays."

Two, who didn't think people in Tennessee had ever actually seen hot weather, said, "I'm sure ya have. Ya seem to be getting a little breeze here today."

Helen looked out over the lawn. She didn't feel like she could get as familiar with Two as she could with the other residents. The Indians had been run out of middle Tennessee long before the Negroes were freed. The only ones Mrs. Hampton had ever seen were in the Wild West shows that toured the country and had come to town when her husband was still living. Those Indians were quite thrilling. They chased buffalo around fairgrounds, attacked wagon trains, beat drums, and performed war dances. Mrs. Hampton, who knew Two was on loan from the 101, the last Wild West show in existence, assumed that she was a Wild Indian and Two Feathers was her real name. But she didn't know if Two should be treated like a white or a Negro. And that was important. Standards had to be maintained. The mixing of races was the subject of a national, heated debate that had, in the past few years, grown rather nasty.

But Mrs. Hampton was literally a daughter of the Confederacy, so her views weren't quite as new as those of people in the North who'd only recently given race much thought (except when it came to Greeks, Italians, and Jews). She'd settled on treating Two like a mulatto. Which is to say, she treated her like a house Negro, to whom one once, not that long

in the past, could actually bond with affection (as long as she kept her place). She'd assigned Two a room to herself the previous year and gave her the same one when she returned because she didn't know if any other woman would want to room with her. She said, "If you left your windows open, your room should be quite pleasant."

Two understood Mrs. Hampton was reminding her that she had a prized corner room with two windows to herself. She felt that as a specialty act, a dangerous one at that, her status alone should have ensured that. It would have, had she been white. But Mrs. Hampton's motivation for her room assignment wasn't a mystery to Two. She'd faced plenty of prejudice on the road, and even some on the ranch. She just didn't complain on the rare occasion when it gave her a privilege. Although, to be accurate, Mrs. Hampton was wrong about her heritage, and Two Feathers was a stage name. Two's real name was Nancy Benge, a combination of common Cherokee monikers not colorful enough to be helpful in shows.

Two said, "I hope so. But I'm starving. I didn't buy anything in the park. What was dinner like?"

"Light. Just sandwiches. But we're having spaghetti and meatballs for supper." Helen knew Two couldn't eat supper before her evening dive, but it was something to say, and she prided herself on ensuring good meals for her residents.

Two's stomach growled. She hoped Mrs. Hampton didn't hear it, and hoped there was at least one leftover sandwich in the refrigerator. She said, "Has the mail run?"

It had. And Helen knew there was a letter for Two. She wished she'd thought to get it out when she'd seen her walking toward the dormitory. She liked handing out mail. Most of the residents were hungry for news from loved ones, and when she got to deliver it herself, she felt like some of the happy feelings it produced floated over and landed on her shoulders. Helen had had more unhappiness than she should have at her (middle) age, and did get genuine pleasure in producing it in others and feeling some of the residue. She said, "I believe your mother has written



to you.” She picked out mail from a pigeonhole on the wall behind her, and thumbed through it, squinting, because she had developed a need for glasses she hadn’t quite yet come to terms with. She said, “Here!” and handed over a letter addressed to “Two Feathers.”

Two smiled, thanked Helen, told her she would see her later, and rushed off toward the kitchen, still carrying her diving shoes and swimming costume. She did find two ham sandwiches in the refrigerator, and she doctored them with mayonnaise and mustard, and took them on a plate to the dining room, where she’d left her diving paraphernalia and letter. She ate an entire half of a sandwich just looking at the envelope and chuckling to herself.

Two Feathers was a Wild Indian name her mother would write on letters but didn’t like using. On the ranch, they lived and worked with the Ponca, Osage, Otoe, Kaw, Kiowa, Pawnee, Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho. Cherokees were rather rare on the 101, even though the ranch was on the old Cherokee Outlet, which had been conceded by force in the Treaty of 1866, chopped to pieces by the U.S. Government, and given to other Indian tribes and to whites. That treaty had put distance between the Cherokees and the rest of the 101 Indians, and so did cultural differences and historic hostilities. So her family didn’t like her Wild Indian stage name, and didn’t call her by it at home, but realized she had to make a living, and went along.

When Two opened the letter, it was filled with news. Her Aunt Sis, who was a cashier in the ranch’s general store, had caught a guest stealing beef jerky by concealing it in his hat. He’d made the mistake of tipping the hat to her, and the jerky had flown out and dropped to the counter and floor. The customer had tried to explain that he was carrying the jerky in his hat because he hadn’t picked up a bag when he’d come in the store and he hadn’t intended to buy the jerky. It’d just reached out and overtook him. They’d all gotten a big laugh about that.

In a more serious paragraph, there had been a storm on the ranch. Her father, both of her grandfathers, and one of her brothers, all cowboys, had been on the range at the time. They’d escaped uninjured by

riding hard to cover, but every woman in the family agreed they were idiots, who didn't have sense enough to watch the sky, and could have just as easily been killed. Two's mother didn't elaborate on that, but Two's imagination filled in the spaces. The men would've tried to get some sympathy, and would've been given silence. Then they would have asked for food. They would have been given that, but the plates would have been set down hard on the tables.

Probably her Uncle Steak would have broken the silence in one of the two houses they occupied. He was white and gregarious, and fond of his father-in-law. Two could picture him filling the quiet in her maternal grandparents' house by talking about their employers, the Millers. Individual Poncas were suing the brothers for stealing Indian land. Talk about those lawsuits was constant in both houses, and everybody agreed on the subject.

Two wished her mother had written about those developments. Maybe there were none, but more likely there were and her mother had left them out of her letter. She didn't entirely trust white mail, and the family's whole livelihood depended on the ranch. They all lived in ranch housing built for Indians who preferred square rooms and plumbing to tipis, wigwams, and huts. Her mother managed the ranch cannery. Her maternal grandmother tended a flock of two thousand chickens; her paternal one cooked in the mess hall. Her Uncle Steak was a mechanic at the Marland Oil service station on the ranch. Rooster, her brother who wasn't a cowboy, was a butcher in the meat processing plant. Two's older sister, Sally, pregnant with her third child, was married to the manager of the ranch's dairy. Her younger sister, the baby of the family, was still in school. That was on the ranch, too. The families aired their true feelings about the Millers only around their own kitchen tables.

So, except for the storm, Two's mother's worries didn't come through in the letter. But they all knew the era of the 101 was coming to an end. They just didn't know when. Nor did they know what they would do when it did. They hadn't held on to the allotments of land the Government had given them (and the rest of the Cherokees) when they'd broken

their treaties (again) and created the state of Oklahoma. And it was clear to the whole family that cars would replace horses, buggies, and wagons. Those vehicles already had done so everywhere, except in the West. But only Steak knew anything about motors.

When Two finished her sandwiches, she tucked her letter into a pocket in her robe, returned her dish to the kitchen, and drank a big glass of water. After that, she retrieved her shoes, socks, and bathing costume, and climbed the stairway to her room. As soon as she got in there, she raised both windows higher. Out one was an old hen house, a covered cistern, crumbling tennis and croquet courts, and a virgin forest. The other window overlooked another hall, Burgess, which was still very much in use. It also caught the late afternoon sun and faced the southwest. Two was especially glad to have that window. Raised in Oklahoma, she knew the direction most tornadoes come from.

That same window also framed an ancient, twisted, and damaged catalpa tree. Its trunk was hollow, and its top had been sawed off long before Two had arrived, maybe before she was born. The tree had survived by the luck of a limb sending down a smaller bough that grew into the ground and became a new second trunk. It fed the damaged old tree and formed, with the mother limb, a bridge with the original trunk. The tree had captured Two's imagination; she'd often wondered how it had gotten into its peculiar situation. The year before, she'd decided that lightning was the most likely explanation. But that gave her the creeps. She didn't know an Indian of any tribe who entirely trusted a lightning-struck tree, and as many times as she'd looked at that one, she'd never touched its bark. While dressing, she glanced at the tree, and recalled her mother's letter. Range cattle go blindly wild in lightning and rain. Cowboys are killed by them all the time. She felt a little anger at the men in her family, and actually said out loud, "Idiots."

Two set her shoes and helmet on the porch outside her southwest window to dry, and set her bathing suit and socks on a towel on a radiator to get some sun. Like all cowgirls, she made her own costumes and many of her everyday clothes. Aside from the bandana she'd kept

on, she'd changed to a homemade blouse and a pair of men's jeans she'd bought in the ranch commissary and altered to fit. Riding for the 101, she wore split leather skirts or twill pants. But the women's trousers in stores pooched out in the thighs and had generous rear ends. And, as Two Feathers was as flat in back as the Montgomery sisters were in the front, the extra cloth in those slacks fit her derriere like an empty sack. Jeans were uncommon in the East, even for men, but they suited Two's temperament. And clearly not white, she could get away with sartorial choices paler women could not.

She spent the next half hour at her desk writing a response to her letter that would be passed around at home. She envisioned her mother reading it silently first. Then again aloud to her father, who didn't read much, and certainly not when he could have anything read to him. The letter would then be read by her grandmothers, probably together in the evening, as they were great friends, and in some way distant cousins. Her grandfathers would get summaries, as would her aunt and uncle. So would her brothers, Lefty and Rooster. (Really, Martin and Grant.) They could read well, but didn't. Her sisters, Sally and Liz, would read the letters, and Sally would write back. Also maybe Liz, whose heart was set on being a teacher if she could save enough money to get to Tahlequah to college.

Two was sending money home every two weeks to help Liz's goal. And she missed her whole family, and often fell homesick between dives, particularly when she got a letter. But Two was glad she had the showbiz bug. By the time she was six, she could ride better than the Wild Indian children. And she knew early on that she didn't want to tend chickens, stand over boiling water canning vegetables, or cook for people. She wanted to ride horses and shoot guns. Like the men in her family. And like Lucille Mulhall, Fox Hastings, Leasey McFarlin, Ruth Roach, and Juanita and Ethyle Parry. All women she knew and admired growing up. Women who could ride Roman style, or standing up in a saddle, or standing on their heads (at least Ruth Roach could), or rope anything, or shoot anything, and get money and applause in return.

Unfortunately for Two's ambitions, the Wild West shows had waned with the Great War and the movies. But the Millers (Joe, Zack, and George) had kept theirs alive longer than had W. F. "Doc" Carver, Buffalo Bill Cody, Pawnee Bill, and the rest. And when the show left the road in 1918, they continued to perform on the ranch. After a few years of that, Two, who'd already been given her stage name by "Colonel" Joe, got into diving horses, a fad Doc Carver had started after his Wild West show had closed. Two had been raised swimming like a fish in the Salt Fork River, along with her brothers, sisters, parents, friends, and assorted horses and cows. She was a natural.

She liked excitement, and was addicted to danger, crowds, and clapping. Also to horses and diving. Too, she was good with a rope and a gun. She could lasso anything running. She'd also developed a specialty of shooting a rifle backwards over her shoulder by using a mirror. But among cowgirls, the competition in trick shooting and lassoing was stiff. Horse diving won out when Carver came to the ranch, saw how well she could swim, took her under his wing, and taught her how the diving was done.

It demanded fearlessness she'd already developed or had been born with. But that courage didn't extend to all areas of Two's life. She was leery of white people she didn't know. Of some men on the ranch who were a little too rough and ready. And of anything dead. That last fear was a natural Cherokee reaction, as was the first one. But many of the girls on the ranch preferred men's men or goofy Indians. Not Two. She was attracted to males who had some education and showed a little refinement. There weren't many of those on the 101, and the first one she had fallen for had scorched her badly.

Two's letter to her mother talked about the size of her crowds, how well Ocher was diving, and not much else. There wasn't much else to tell. Two was really rather lonely, and didn't want her mother to know that. She got up and retrieved from her trunk a five-dollar bill she'd tucked away for Liz's education, and she'd already stuffed it in the envelope and licked that when Marty Montgomery appeared in her doorway. Marty

said, "For you," and handed an envelope to Two. She plopped down on the end of the bed and said, "Franny dropped another plate."

"How many this week?" Two sliced the envelope using an opener Ruth Roach had brought her from the 1914 trip when the show had been trapped in London.

"One this week. And one last. Four already this season."

Two was reading. Said, "Hum. That's a lot. Who gave you this?" She sat down at the head of the bed, propped up on a pillow.

"A kid."

"Boy or girl?"

"Boy. I think he was the same one who knocked on the dressing room door."

"No grownup with him, I guess."

"No. Why?"

"Someone wants to meet at the bear pit."

"Who?"

"Strong-Red-Wolf." Two grimaced.

"That some sorta Indian name?"

"A baloney Indian name."

Marty tucked a strand of hair behind an ear. "Men always want to meet at a pen or a cage."

"Maybe that's because we work in a zoo. What're ya gonna do about Franny?"

The conversation flipped to the slippage of dishes. It was becoming an issue. And not like Franny, who'd been throwing objects from the time she could walk. The Montgomery sisters had grown up in vaudeville and had the same show business values as Two. Theirs had been acquired on grubby stages in the East rather than in sunbaked squares in the West, but none of the three fit in anywhere normal. Certainly not in the South or around Southern women. But they all felt thankful to have settled at Glendale. It was an idyllic park engineered for joy, recreation, and relaxation. And it provided steady work while the other streams of employment for vaudeville and Wild West performers continued drying up.

Two and Marty chewed on what could be causing Franny's misses. Unsteadiness related to her cycle? Boredom with the same tricks? They chewed quite a bit. But as much as she really did care, Two's mind wasn't solely on Franny and dishes. Part of it was on the letter, now wadded up and thrown in a basket. All female entertainers got notes. Most expressed admiration; a few asked to meet. They were sometimes handed in person, sometimes slipped under the dressing room door, or often, as this one, delivered by a child who'd been sent. That wasn't unusual.

But this note felt different. It wasn't the rendezvous point. The pit was a romantic destination for couples. Everyone loved the bears. Zerle and Zana, Zip and Zora, and especially Tom Noddy, the cinnamon juvenile, brought from the Cincinnati Zoo and adopted by Zana, his biological grandmother. The bears were behind bars — but not entirely. The pit was actually the mouth of a cave below a limestone outcropping of rock that was slippery with the slow drip of a spring. A giant oak grew up in the middle of the enclosure. Except for a curve of bars in front of the cave, the pen looked natural. A place where bears would live if they could choose. A place wild bears did actually hibernate, before they were killed and turned into oil, hats, and coats.

Two bit her bottom lip. That made-up Indian name bothered her. It was a lame way to get attention. Not a strategy that would win her affection. An outright deception. And Two had been deceived all winter. By the 101's new botanist, who'd come from California to improve the ranch's fruit trees and vineyards. She'd kept company with him on long twilight rides through orchards. Been romantic beneath naked branches of apple trees reaching like webs to gray skies and night ones. Horses tied, they'd walked under arches of arbors so thick they'd seemed lost in a maze. He'd sworn she was the woman for him, the one he'd waited for. Until she found out that he was romancing a fourteen-year-old Osage who lived in Pawhuska.

In a fury, she'd told her mother. Her mother had told her father. And her father had set out to beat him up. Her brothers prevented that. Said things like, "Daddy, settle down. He ain't worth it," and, "Ya can't risk

busting yer fists.” They whipped him themselves. Two hadn’t seen the fight. But others had. Lefty hooked him without warning and spun him around. Rooster uppercut him in the ribs. They both piled on as soon as he hit the ground. Thrashed him to unconsciousness before bets could be taken. Then Rooster jerked the cad’s saddle off his horse. Threw it on his chest as he was struggling up. Lefty spit in his face. Told him, “Ya got ’til sundown ’fore we kill ya.”

George Miller had been a little peeved. He was serious about the 101’s fruit trees. Had thousands of acres in apples, peaches, and figs, and thousands more in grapes, and he wasn’t as prone to fighting as his brother Zack. In fact, George tried to discourage pugnacity at every opportunity. But he liked Two, and would’ve done the same for his own sister if he’d needed to. So he took the side of her family, wrote the botanist off, and called Luther Burbank for another hire.

However, Two had yelled at her brothers for their behavior. And had sulked for three days. But that was from a broken heart and embarrassment, not from real anger at Lefty and Rooster. She was thankful for their protection. Thankful for blood-kin men upon whom she could depend. She wound up apologizing to each of them separately, and endured their lectures with only a slump in her shoulders and a promise to be more careful in the future. It was her Aunt Sis who’d asked if they needed to start sewing a new quilt. Two turned crimson, told her she didn’t think so, and slunk away thankful her mother hadn’t asked that. Turned out Two was right. She and the botanist had been careful. He was, after all, an expert in propagation.

Marty brought Two’s mind back to the conversation with a nudge to her leg. Two suggested trying a new routine. Maybe with different objects—like tomahawks? Marty frowned. Like lighted sticks? Put a little danger in it. Keep Franny’s attention.

Marty said, “Easy for you to say. You just dive twice a day. There’re over two hundred throws in a routine. Besides, it could be her mind’s on a man.”

“Who?”



"I don't know. But she's been hanging around the band some. Two or three of them aren't married."

Two's mind went to the musicians. She didn't know which of them were hitched. Thought only one was a cutie. But not that cute. Two knew the sisters well enough not to suggest Marty ask Franny if she had her eye on a band member. The siblings got along. Shared parents, memories, and looks. But they also worked together and shared a room. They could rub each other raw with familiarity and get into spats. Two asked about that: "Y'all getting along?"

"Same as usual. I don't tell her anything. And she doesn't tell me anything. Works pretty well. Still, she's my sister. And we've got the act. I can't trade her for a new horse."

Two toe-tapped Marty. "I've never dived on any horse except Ocher. Never will."

"I know. I meant horse trading in general."

After that, they stopped talking about Franny. She'd be back soon. And they needed to get on with the grooming and costuming which occupied their late afternoons and readied them for their evening shows. Two did that thinking only once again about the note wadded at the bottom of her wastebasket. She had no intention of meeting a mystery fan at the bear pit, sea lion pool, buffalo pen, or hippopotamus den.