

The Circus: An Excerpt from the Arrow and the Setting Sun

I saw a circus once, in Denver, on one of our visits to the white man's world.

It was a gaudy, clamoring thing with a great canvas lodge that could be placed over a dozen of our lodges. It was staked to a muddy lot at the edge of town, its pennants snapping in a wind that carried the smell of roasted peanuts and animal dung. Ouray and I had no interest in it, but the men escorting us insisted we take it in, as though it were a gift they were bestowing, a marvel we could not possibly have imagined in our mountain ignorance. Inside, the air was thick with sawdust and sweat and the excited shrieking of children. There were men walking on long poles and women who hung from silk ropes by their wrists and ankles, spinning like the seeds of dandelions caught in an updraft.

There was a bear that “danced” on its hind legs while a man in a red coat cracked a whip near its ears. The bear's eyes were flat and dull, and a chain ran from a collar at its throat to a stake driven into the ground. It shuffled and swayed, and the crowd roared with delight. Sadness came over me as I thought of how that bear had once known mountains, forests and freedom. It had once turned over stones in a cold creek, pulled apart rotting logs for grubs and stood on a ridge with the wind pressing its fur flat against its great body. Now it danced for peanuts in a canvas tent, and the people who watched believed they were seeing a bear.

They were not. They were seeing a performance, curated for their comfort and stripped of everything that made the creature what it was.

I thought of that bear often, especially the morning when the men from the Bureau of Indian Affairs arrived at our hotel with their schedules and their lists, ushering us from one event to the next like handlers leading animals between rings. I thought of it when we were seated on raised platforms in reception halls while men and women in silk and wool file past, studying us with the same bright, consuming curiosity those circus-goers had for the dancing bear. They did not see us. They saw a carefully curated performance of our Indianness, and they found it thrilling.

We were taken to a reception at some manner of civic hall, I had lost track of the names of these places, their marble columns and brass fixtures blurring together into a single edifice of cold, polished indifference. The room was full of Washington people, the kind

who dress as though their clothing were an argument they intended to win. The women wore bustles, high collars and hats adorned with feathers that came from birds they have never seen alive. The men stood with their thumbs hooked in their waistcoat pockets, their whiskers waxed to points, their eyes moving over us with the practiced appraisal of men accustomed to assigning value to things.

I wore my finest doeskin dress, the one with the long fringe and the beadwork my mother taught me, blue and white and red in patterns that tell the story of water flowing over stone. I braided my hair with care. I held myself as I always held myself, straight-backed, chin level, eyes meeting every gaze that dared to meet mine. In my mind I repeated to myself over and over, *I will not shuffle. I will not sway. I will not dance for their peanuts.*

But the weariness of it pressed against me like a hand on my chest.

They came in pairs and small clusters, approaching with their heads tilted slightly, the way one might approach an unfamiliar animal to determine whether it bites. Some of them smiled too broadly, their teeth bared in that peculiar white custom that is meant to convey warmth but so often conveys only the desire to appear warm. They spoke to me slowly and loudly, as though volume might bridge the distance between our worlds. When I answered them in clear, measured English, their eyes widened and they turned to one another with expressions of delighted surprise, as though a songbird had suddenly recited from one of their treasured poets.

"She speaks English!" a woman in green taffeta whispered to her companion, not expecting to be overheard.

"Yes. I speak English," I said aloud. "I also speak Spanish, the language of the Núuchi-u, and the language of the Awa'tehe, our enemies, a people you refer to as Apache." What I did not say, perhaps out of courtesy, was that I understood more of their language than they would ever understand of mine. I smiled the way Ouray had taught me to smile in those rooms, turning the corners of my mouth upward but not baring my teeth, a careful offering that cost me nothing and revealed less.

Ouray stood across the room, surrounded by a knot of men in dark suits. He wore his black broadcloth coat over his buckskin leggings; that deliberate blending of two worlds was both his armor and his declaration. His hair was braided, and the bear-claw

necklace rested against his chest. He held a cup of coffee he had not touched. His face was stone.

To these men, he appeared somber, perhaps dour, the stoic chief they had read about in their newspapers. They could not read what I could see. They did not see the tension gathered at the hinges of his jaw, the almost imperceptible forward lean of his body, as though he were a bowstring drawn and held. He did not care about the reception. He did not care about the gawking, the whispered observations or the women who wanted to touch his braids. His mind was already in the meeting rooms, already at the long tables where maps would be unrolled, treaties discussed and the fate of our people weighed against the price of silver and gold. He was anxious to speak. He was desperate for it. Every hour spent in those exhibition halls was an hour stolen from the work that had brought us across the plains in a rattling iron box.

Only I saw those things. Only I knew that beneath the stillness, he was burning to be about his work.

A woman approached me, older, with kind eyes set deep in a face weathered by what I took to be genuine living rather than mere aging. She introduced herself as Mrs. Hensley, the wife of a senator from Vermont. She did not speak loudly or slowly. She asked me about my journey, and I told her about the train, about the strangeness of sleeping in a box that hurtled through the darkness, about how the plains looked from the window, vast and shorn of buffalo.

"And your home," she said. "What is it like?"

I told her about the Uncompahgre, the way the river sounded at dawn when the ice was just beginning to crack, and about the Cochetopa in the summer. I told her about the elk that came down from the high country in autumn, their breath steaming in the cold air, and the way the aspen groves turned to gold so bright it hurt the eyes. I told her about gathering yampa root and chokecherries, about the smell of juniper smoke, about the songs the old women sang while scraping hides. I told her about the children, how they learned to ride almost before they could walk, how they played in the meadows, how their laughter carried across the valley like water over stone.

She listened. She truly listened. And for a moment, the circus tent fell away and I was speaking to another woman, another mother, another keeper of a home, and the chasm between us narrowed to something bearable.

But then her husband appeared at her elbow, steering her away with a murmured apology, the chasm opened wide again, and I was standing alone on a platform in a room full of strangers who saw a performance rather than a person.

Near the end of the evening, a reporter found Ouray. He was a young man with ink-stained fingers and a notebook he clutched like a weapon. He had been circling all evening, working up his nerve, and when he finally approached, carrying the false confidence of a man who believed his pen made him powerful.

As he asked Ouray about the land west of the continental divide, others began to gather in order to hear the response of the Great Chief. He asked about the treaties. He asked about the children and the old ways and whether the Ute people were "adapting to civilization." Ouray answered each question with the patience of a man who had answered the same questions a thousand times, his voice low and even, his English precise.

Then the reporter tilted his head, the way they all did, just before asking the one poignant question he had been saving, the one he believed would make his story.

"Chief, if you are losing your land and your traditions are dying, what hope do you have left?"

By the time the question was asked, the entire room had gone silent, and something shifted in the air around us, a tightening, the way the sky tightens before a storm. Ouray looked directly at the young man. Not through him. Not past him. At him. And the reporter, for all his false confidence, took a half step back.

"Hope, as you call it," Ouray said, his voice quiet but carrying the weight of granite, "is not a garment to be put on or shed." He paused, letting the words settle. "The Núuchi-u have a word. *Wáa-gha*. It does not translate to the English word *hope*, but to the Spanish word, *esperanza*. These words mean to wait. To wait in the way one might hold his breath, waiting for a summer storm to pass or a trout to swim into a trap. In the things that we hope for, we wait for the Creator to provide for us." His eyes did not leave the reporter's face. "*Wáa-gha* is the breath of our people, the Núuchi-u, waiting for the Creator to provide for us."

He let the silence stretch, and in that silence I watched the reporter's pen falter above the page.

"Has the Creator provided you with this hope," Ouray continued, his voice dropping lower still, "through this Manifest Destiny which includes taking from others?"

The reporter's mouth opened, then closed. A flush crawled up his neck, and he scribbled something in his notebook without looking at the page. He muttered a thank you and retreated into the crowd, already composing, I was certain, whatever version of Ouray's words would best serve his editor's expectations.

I watched him go. I knew his story would reduce *wáa-gha* to a curiosity, a quaint native expression, stripped of its weight, printed beside an advertisement for patent medicine or ladies' corsets. Ouray's question, the only question that mattered, would go unanswered, because it was never meant to be answered. It was meant to be heard, and the people around us had not yet learned how to hear.

Ouray turned his eyes toward me. For one unguarded moment, I saw it all, the exhaustion, the frustration, the grief held tight behind his ribs like a fist around a stone. Then the mask returned, smooth and impenetrable, and he was the Arrow again, and I was the only one who knew the fraying of the bowstring.