

## The Pottawatomie Giant

by Andy Duncan

On the afternoon of November 30, 1915, Jess Willard, for seven months the heavyweight champion of the world, crouched, hands on knees, in his Los Angeles hotel window to watch a small figure swaying like a pendulum against the side of the Times building three blocks away.

"Cripes!" Willard said. "How's he keep from fainting, his head down like that, huh, Lou?"

"He trains, Champ," said his manager, one haunch on the sill. "Same's you."

Training had been a dispute between the two men lately, but Willard let it go. "Cripes!" Willard said again, his mouth dry.

The street below was a solid field of hats, with an occasional parasol like a daisy, and here and there a mounted policeman statue-still and gazing up like everyone. Thousands were yelling, as if sound alone would buoy the upside-down figure writhing 150 feet above the pavement.

"Attaboy, Harry!"

"Five minutes, that's too long! Someone bring him down!"

"Five minutes, hell, I seen him do thirty."

"At least he's not underwater this time."

"At least he ain't in a milk can!"

"Look at him go! The straitjacket's not made that can hold that boy, I tell you."

"You can do it, Harry!"

Willard himself hated crowds, but he had been drawing them all his life. One of the farm hands had caught him at age twelve toting a balky calf beneath one arm, and thereafter he couldn't go into town without people egging him on to lift things—livestock, Mr. Olsburg the banker, the log behind the fancy house. When people started offering cash money, he couldn't well refuse, having seen Mama and Papa re-count their jar at the end of every month, the stacks of old coins dull even in lamplight. So Jess Willard, at thirty-three, knew something about what physical feats earned, and what they cost. He watched this midair struggle, lost in jealousy, in sympathy, in professional admiration.

"God damn, will you look at this pop-eyed city," Lou said. "It's lousy with believers. I tell you, Champ, this fella has set a whole new standard for public miracles. When Jesus Christ Almighty comes back to town, he'll have to work his ass off to get in the newspapers at all." Lou tipped back his head, pursed his lips, and jetted cigar smoke upstairs.

"Do you mind?" asked the woman directly above, one of three crowding a ninth-floor window. She screwed up her face and fanned the air with her hands.

"Settle down, sister, smoke'll cure you soon enough," Lou said. He wedged the cigar back into his mouth and craned his neck to peer around Willard. "Have a heart, will you, Champ? It's like looking past Gibraltar."

"Sorry," Willard said, and withdrew a couple of inches, taking care not to bang his head on the sash. He had already banged his head crossing from the corridor to the parlor, and from the bathroom to the bedroom. Not that it hurt—no, to be hurt, Willard's head had to be hit plenty harder than that. But he'd never forgotten how the other children laughed when he hit his head walking in the door, that day the Pottawatomie County sheriff finally made him go to school. All the children but Hattie. So he took precautions outside the ring, and seethed inside each time he forgot he was six foot seven. This usually happened in hotel suites, all designed for Lou-sized men, or less. Since Havana, Willard had lived mostly in hotel suites.

Leaning from the next-door window on the left was a jowly man in a derby hat. He had been looking at Houdini only half the time, Willard the other half. Now he rasped: "Hey, buddy. Hey. Jess Willard."

Willard dreaded autograph-seekers, but Lou said a champ had to make nice. "You're the champ, now, boy," Lou kept saying, "and a champ has gotta be seen!"

"Yeah, that's me," Willard said.

His neighbor looked startled. Most people were, when they heard Willard's bass rumble for the first time. "I just wanted to say congratulations, Champ, for putting that nigger on the canvas where he belongs."

"I appreciate it," Willard said. He had learned this response from his father, a man too proud to say thanks. He tried to focus again on Houdini. The man seemed to be doing sit-ups in midair, but at a frenzied rate, jackknifing himself repeatedly. The rope above him whipped from side to side. Willard wondered how much of the activity was necessary, how much for effect.

The derby-hatted guy wasn't done. "Twenty-six rounds, damn, you taught Mr. Coon Johnson something about white men, I reckon, hah?"

Ever since Havana. Cripes. Houdini's canvas sleeves, once bound across his chest, were now bound behind him. Somehow he'd worked his arms over his head—was the man double-jointed?

"Say, how come you ain't had nothing but exhibitions since? When you gonna take on Frank Moran, huh? I know that nigger ain't taken the fight out of you. I know you ain't left your balls down in Cuba." He laughed like a bull snorting.

Willard sighed. He'd leave this one to Lou. Lou wouldn't have lasted ten seconds in the ring, but he loved a quarrel better than any boxer Willard knew.

"Balls?" Lou squawked, right on schedule. "Balls? Let me tell you something, fella."

Now Houdini's arms were free, the long canvas strap dangling. The crowd roared.

"When Moran is ready, we'll be ready, you got me?" Lou leaned out to shake his finger and nearly lost his balance. "Whoa," he said, clutching his hat. "Fella, you're, why, you're just lucky there's no ledge here. Yeah. You think he's taking it so easy, well, maybe you want to spar a few rounds with him, huh?"

Now Houdini had looped the canvas strap across the soles of his feet, and was tugging at it like a madman. More and more of his white shirt was visible. Willard resolved that when he started training again—when Lou got tired of parties and banquets and Keys to the City and let Willard go home to the gymnasium, and to Hattie—he would try this upside-down thing, if he could find rope strong enough.

"Well, how about I spar with you, buddy? Who the hell are you, Mr. Milksop?"

"I'm his manager, that's who I am! And let me tell you another thing ..."

Houdini whipped off the last of the jacket and held the husk out, dangling, for all to see. Then he dropped it and flung both arms out to the side, an upside-down T. Amid the pandemonium, the jacket flew into the crowd and vanished like a ghost. Trash rained from the windows, as people dropped whatever they were holding to applaud. Willard stared as a woman's dress fluttered down to drape a lamppost. It was blue and you could see through it. Even the guy with the derby was cheering, his hands clasped overhead. "Woo hoo!" he said, his quarrel forgotten. "Woo hoo hoo!"

With a smile and a shake of his head, Lou turned his back on it all. "The wizard of ballyhoo," he said. "Too bad they can't string up all the Jews, eh, Champ?" He patted Willard's shoulder and left the window.

As he was winched down, Houdini took inverted bows, and there was much laughter. Willard, who had neither cheered nor applauded, remained motionless at the window, tracking Houdini's descent. Someone's scented handkerchief landed on his head, and he brushed it away. He watched as the little dark-haired man in the ruffled shirt dropped headfirst into the sea that surged forward and engulfed him. His feet went last, bound at the ankles, patent-leather shoes side by side like a soldier's on review. Willard could imagine how they must shine.

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That night, as Willard followed Lou up the curving, ever-narrowing, crimson-carpeted stairs leading to the balconies of the Los Angeles Orpheum, the muffled laughter and applause through the interior wall seemed to jeer Willard's every step, his every clumsy negotiation of a chandelier, his every flustered pause while a giggling and feathered bevy of young women flowed around his waist. Hattie didn't need feathers, being framed, in Willard's mind, by the open sky. These women needed plenty. Those going down gaped at him, chins tipping upward, until they passed; those going up turned at the next landing for a backward and downward look of frank appraisal. "We had a whole box in Sacramento," Lou muttered as he squinted from the numbers on the wall to the crumpled paper in his hand. "Shit. I guess these Los Angeles boxes is for the quality." A woman with a powder-white face puckered her lips at Willard and winked. Grunting in triumph, Lou overshot a cuspidor and threw open a door with a brown grin. "Save one of the redheads for me, willya?" Lou hissed, as Willard ducked past him into darkness.

Willard stopped to get his bearings as a dozen seated silhouettes turned to look at him. Beyond, the arched top of the stage was a tangle of golden vines. The balcony ceiling was too low. Willard shuffled forward, head down, as Lou pushed him two-handed in the small of the back. "Hello," Willard said, too loudly, and someone gasped. Then the others began to murmur hellos in return. "So good to meet you," they murmured amid a dozen outstretched hands, the male shapes half-standing, diamond rings and cufflinks sharp in the light from the stage. Willard was able to shake some hands, squeeze others; some merely stroked or patted him as he passed. "A pleasure," he kept saying. "A God's honest pleasure."

Lou made Willard sit in the middle of the front row next to Mrs. Whoever-She-Was, someone important; Lou said her name too fast. She was plump as a guinea hen and reeked of powder. Willard would have preferred the aisle. Here there was little room for his legs, his feet. Plus the seat, as usual, was too narrow. He jammed his buttocks between the slats that passed for armrests, bowing the wood outward like the sides of a firehose. As his hams sank, his jacket rode up in back. Once seated, he tried to work the jacket down, to no avail. Already his face was burning with the certainty that all eyes in the hall were focused not on the stage but on the newly hunchbacked Jess Willard. "Don't worry, he's just now begun," Mrs. Whoever whispered across Willard, to Lou. "You've hardly missed a thing."

His knees cut off the view of the stage below. He parted his knees just a little. Between them, on the varnished planks of the stage far below, Houdini patted the air to quell another round of applause. He was a short, dark, curly-haired man in a tuxedo. At his feet were a dozen scattered roses.

"Thank you, my friends, thank you," the little man said, though it sounded more like "Tank you"—a German, Willard had heard, this Houdini, or was it Austrian? Seen from this unnatural angle, nearly directly above like this, he looked dwarfish, foreshortened. He had broad shoulders, though, and no sign of a paunch beneath his cummerbund. Lou jabbed Willard in the side, glared at Willard's knees, then his face. Sighing, Willard closed his knees again.

"Ladies and gentlemen—are the ushers ready? Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen, I beg your assistance with the following part of the program. I require the services of a committee of ten. Ten good men and true, from the ranks of the audience, who are willing to join me here upon the stage and to watch closely my next performance, that all my claims be verified as accurate, that its every particular be beyond reproach."

The balcony was uncomfortably hot. Sweat rolled down Willard's torso, his neck. Mrs. Whoever opened her fan and worked up a breeze. A woman across the auditorium was staring at Willard and whispering to her husband. He could imagine. All I can say is, you cannot trust those photographs. Look how they hide that poor man's deformities.

"Ten good men and true. Yes, thank you, sir, your bravery speaks well for our boys in Haiti, and in Mexico." A spatter of applause. "The ushers will direct you. And you, sir, yes, thank you as well. Ladies, perhaps you could help us identify the more modest of the good men among us?" Laughter. "Yes, madam, your young man looks a likely prospect, indeed. A fine selection you have made - as have you, sir! No, madam, I fear your fair sex disqualifies you for this work. The stage can be a dangerous place."

Willard retreated to his program, to see which acts he missed because dinner with the mayor ran late. Actually, the dinner, a palm-sized chicken breast with withered greens, had been over quickly; you learned to eat fast on the farm. What took a long time was the mayor's after-dinner speech, in which he argued that athletic conditioning was the salvation of America. Willard bribed a waiter for three thick-cut bologna sandwiches, which he munched at the head table with great enjoyment, ignoring Lou. Now, looking at the Orpheum program, Willard found himself more kindly disposed toward the mayor's speech. It had spared him the "Syncopated Funsters" Bernie & Baker, Adelaide Boothby's "Novelty Songs and Travesties" (with Chas. Everdean at the piano), Selma Braatz the "Renowned Lady Juggler," and Comfort & King in "Coontown Diversions," not to mention a trick rider, a slack-wire routine, a mystery titled "Stan Stanley, The Bouncing Fellow, Assisted by His Relatives," and, most happily missed of all, The Alexander Kids, billed as "Cute, Cunning, Captivating, Clever." And crooked, thought Willard, who once had wasted a nickel on a midget act at the Pottawatomie County Fair.

"Thank you, sir. Welcome. Ladies and gentlemen, these our volunteers have my thanks. Shall they have your thanks as well?"

Without looking up from his program, Willard joined the applause.

"My friends, as I am sure you have noticed, our committee still lacks three men. But if you will indulge me, I have a suggestion. I am told that here in the house with us tonight, we have one man who is easily the equal of any three."

Lou started jabbing Willard again. "G'wan," Willard whispered. "I closed my knees, all right?"

"Knock 'em dead, Champ," Lou hissed, his face shadowed but for his grin.

Willard frowned at him, bewildered. "What?"

"Ladies and gentlemen, will you kindly join me in inviting before the footlights the current heavyweight boxing champion—our champion—Mr. Jess Willard!"

Willard opened his mouth to protest just as a spotlight hit him full in the face, its heat like an opened oven.

Willard turned to Lou amid the applause and said, "You didn't!"

Lou ducked his chin and batted his eyes, like a bright child done with his recitation and due a certificate.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if you are in favor of bringing Mr. Willard onto the stage, please signify with your applause."

Now the cheers and applause were deafening. Willard gaped down at the stage. Houdini stood in a semicircle of frenziedly applauding men, his arms outstretched and welcoming. He stared up at Willard with a tiny smile at the corner of his mouth, almost a smirk, his eyes as bright and shallow as the footlights. Look what I have done for you, he seemed to be saying. Come and adore me.

The hell I will, Willard thought.

No, felt, it was nothing so coherent as thought, it was a gut response to Lou, to the mayor, to Mrs. Whoever pressing herself up against Willard's left side in hopes of claiming a bit of the spotlight too, to Hattie more than a thousand miles away whom he should have written today but didn't, to all these row after row of stupid people, most of whom thought Willard hadn't beaten Jack Johnson at all, that Johnson had simply given up, had floated to the canvas, the word they kept using, floated, cripes, Willard had been standing there, had heard the thump like the first melon dropped into the cart when Johnson's head had bounced against the canvas, bounced, for cripes' sake, spraying sweat and spit and blood, that fat lip flapping as the head went down a second time and stayed, floated, they said, Willard wasn't a real fighter, they said, he had just outlasted Johnson—an hour and forty-four minutes in the Havana sun, a blister on the top of his head like a brand, Hattie still could see the scar when she parted his hair to look—outlasted, the papers said! Beneath the applause, Willard heard a distant crunch as he squeezed the armrest, and was dimly aware of a splinter in his palm as he looked down at Houdini's smirking face and realized, clearly, for the first time: You people don't want me at all, a big shit-kicker from the prairie.

It's Jack Johnson you want.

And you know what? You can't have him. Because I beat him, you hear? I beat him.

"No, thanks!" Willard shouted, and the applause ebbed fast, like the last grain rushing out of the silo. The sudden silence, and Houdini's startled blink, made Willard's resolve falter. "I appreciate it," he added. He was surprised by how effortlessly his voice filled the auditorium. "Go on with your act, please, sir," Willard said, even more loudly. Ignoring Lou's clutching hand, which threatened to splinter Willard's forearm as Willard had splintered the armrest, he attempted comedy: "I got a good seat for it right here." There was nervous laughter, including someone immediately behind Willard—who must have, Willard realized, an even worse view than he did.

Arms still outstretched, no trace of a smile now, Houdini called up: "Mr. Willard, I am afraid your public must insist?"

Willard shook his head and sat back, arms folded.

"Mr. Willard, these other gentlemen join me in solemnly pledging that no harm will come to you."

This comedy was more successful; guffaws broke out all over the theater. Willard wanted to seek out all the laughers and paste them one. "Turn off that spotlight!" he yelled. "It's hot enough to roast a hog."

To Willard's amazement, the spotlight immediately snapped off, and the balcony suddenly seemed a dark, cold place.

"Come down, Mr. Willard," Houdini said, his arms now folded.

"Jesus Christ, kid," Lou hissed. "What's the idea?"

Willard shook him off and stood, jabbing one thick index finger at the stage. "Pay me what you're paying them, and I'll come down!"

Gasps and murmurs throughout the crowd. Willard was aware of some commotion behind him, movement toward the exit, the balcony door slamming closed. Fine. Let them run, the cowards.

In indignation, Houdini seemed to have swollen to twice his previous thickness. Must come in handy when you're straitjacketed, Willard thought.

"Mister Willard," Houdini retorted, "I am pleased to pay you what I am paying these gentlemen—precisely nothing. They are here of their own free will and good sportsmanship. Will you not, upon the same terms, join them?"

"No!" Willard shouted. "I'm leaving." He turned to find his way blocked by Lou, whose slick face gleamed.

"Please, Champ, don't do this to us," Lou whispered, reaching up with both hands in what might have been an attempted embrace. Willard grabbed Lou's wrists, too tightly, and yanked his arms down. "Ah," Lou gasped.

Houdini's drone continued as he paced the stage, his eyes never leaving the balcony. "I see, ladies and gentlemen, that the champ is attempting to retreat to his corner. Mr. Willard, the bell has rung. Will you not answer? Will you not meet the challenge? For challenge it is, Mr. Willard—I, and the good people of this house, challenge you to come forward, and stand before us, like a champion. As Mr. Johnson would have."

Willard froze.

"Or would you have us, sir, doubt the authenticity of your title? Would you have us believe that our champion is unmanned by fear?"

Willard turned and leaned so far over the rail that he nearly fell. "I'll do my job in the ring, you do your job onstage," he yelled. "Go on with your act, your trickery, you faker, you four-flusher!" The audience howled. He shouted louder. "Make it look good, you fake. That's all they want—talk!" He felt his voice breaking. "Tricks and snappy dialogue! Go on, then, give 'em what they want. Talk your worthless talk! Do your lousy fake tricks!" People were standing up and yelling at him all over the theater, but he could see nothing but the little strutting figure on the stage.

"Mr. Willard."

Willard, though committed, now felt himself running out of material. "Everybody knows it's fake!"

"Mr. Willard!"

"Four-flusher!"

"Look here, Mister Jess Willard," Houdini intoned, his broad face impassive, silencing Willard with a pointed index finger. "I don't care what your title is or how big you are or what your reputation is or how many men you've beaten to get it. I did you a favor by asking you onto this stage, I paid you a compliment, and so has everyone in the Orpheum." The theater was silent but for the magician. Willard and those in the balcony around him were frozen. "You have the right, sir, to refuse us, to turn your back on your audience, but you have no right, sir, no right whatsoever, to slur my reputation, a reputation, I might add, that will long outlive yours." In the ensuing silence, Houdini seemed to notice his pointed finger for the first time. He blinked, lowered his arm, and straightened his cummerbund as he continued: "If you believe nothing else I do or say on this stage today, Mr. Willard, believe this, for there is no need for

special powers of strength or magic when I tell you that I can foresee your future. Yes, sir."

Now his tone was almost conversational as he strolled toward center stage, picked up a rose, snapped its stem, and worked at affixing it to his lapel. "Believe me when I say to you that one day soon you no longer will be the heavyweight champion of the world." Satisfied by the rose, he looked up at Willard again.

"And when your name, Mr. Millard, I'm sorry, Mr. Willard, has become a mere footnote in the centuries-long history of the ring, everyone—everyone—even those who never set foot in a theater—will know my name and know that I never turned my back to my audience, or failed to accomplish every task, every feat, they set before me. And that, sir, is why champions come and champions go, while I will remain, now and forever, the one and only Harry Houdini!" He flung his arms out and threw his head back a half second before the pandemonium.

There had been twenty-five thousand people in that square in Havana, Willard had been told. He had tried not to look at them, not to think about them—that sea of snarling, squinting, sun-peeled, hateful, ugly faces. But at least all those people had been on his side.

"Go to hell, Willard!"

"Willard, you bum!"

"Willard's a willow!"

"Go to hell!"

Something hit Willard a glancing blow on the temple: a paper sack, which exploded as he snatched at it, showering the balcony with peanut shells. Willard felt he was moving slowly, as if underwater. As he registered that Mrs. Whoever, way down there somewhere, was pummeling him with her parasol—shrieking amid the din, "You bad man! You bad, bad man!"—Willard saw a gentleman's silver-handled cane spiraling lazily through the air toward his head. He ducked as the cane clattered into the far corner. Someone yelped. With one final glance at the mob, Willard turned his back on the too-inviting open space and dashed—but oh, so slowly it seemed—toward the door. People got in his way; roaring, he swept them aside, reached the door, fumbled at it. His fingers had become too slow and clumsy—numb, almost paralyzed. Bellowing something, he didn't know what, he kicked the door, which

flew into the corridor in a shower of splinters. Roaring wordlessly now, Willard staggered down the staircase. He cracked his forehead on a chandelier, and yanked it one-handed out of the ceiling with a snarl, flinging it aside in a spasm of plaster and dust. His feet slipped on the lobby's marble floor, and he flailed before righting himself in front of an open-mouthed hat-check girl. Beyond the closed auditorium doors Willard could hear the crowd beginning to chant Houdini's name. Willard kicked a cuspidor as hard as he could; it sailed into a potted palm, spraying juice across the marble floor. Already feeling the first pangs of remorse, Willard staggered onto the sidewalk, into the reek of horseshit and automobiles. The doorman stepped back, eyes wide. "I ain't done nothing, Mister," he said. "I ain't done nothing." Willard growled and turned away, only to blunder into someone small and soft just behind him, nearly knocking her down. It was the hat-check girl, who yelped and clutched at his arms for balance.

"What the hell!" he said.

She righted herself, cleared her throat, and, lips pursed with determination, held out a claim ticket and a stubby pencil. "Wouldja please, huh, Mr. Willard? It won't take a sec. My grandpa says you're his favorite white man since Robert E. Lee."

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Jess Willard lost the heavyweight title to Jack Dempsey on July 4, 1919, and retired from boxing soon after. When the fight money dried up, the Willards packed up Zella, Frances, Jess Junior, Enid, and Alan, left Kansas for good and settled in Los Angeles, where Willard opened a produce market at Hollywood and Afton. By day he dickered with farmers, weighed oranges, shooed flies, and swept up. Nights, he made extra money as a referee at wrestling matches. He continued to listen to boxing on the radio, and eventually to watch it on television, once the screens grew large enough to decently hold two grown men fighting. He read all the boxing news he could find in the papers, too, until holding the paper too long made his arms tremble like he was punchy, and spreading it out on the kitchen table didn't work so good either because the small print gave him a headache, and there weren't any real boxers left anyway, and thereafter it fell to his grandchildren, or his great-grandchildren, or his neighbors, or anyone else who had the time to spare, to read the sports pages aloud to him. Sometimes he listened quietly, eyes closed but huge behind his eyeglasses, his big mottled fingers drumming the antimacassar at one-second intervals, as if taking a count. Other times he was prompted to laugh, or to make a disgusted sound in the back of his throat, or to sit forward abruptly—which never failed to startle his youngest and, to his mind, prettiest great-granddaughter, whom he called "the Sprout," so that despite herself she always gasped and drew back a little, her beads clattering, her pedicured toes clenching the edge of her platform sandals—and begin telling a story of the old days, which his visitors sometimes paid attention to, and sometimes didn't, though the Sprout paid closer attention than you'd think.

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One day in 1968, the Sprout read Jess Willard the latest indignant Times sports column about the disputed heavyweight title. Was the champ Jimmy Ellis, who had beaten Jerry Quarry on points, or was it Joe Frazier, who had knocked out Buster Mathis, or was it rightfully Muhammad Ali, who had been stripped of the title for refusing the draft, and now was banned from boxing anywhere in the United States? The columnist offered no answer to the question, but used his space to lament that boxing suddenly had become so political.

"Disputes, hell. I disputed a loss once," Willard told the Sprout. "To Joe Cox in Springfield Moe in 1911. The referee stopped the fight, then claimed I wouldn't fight, give the match to Cox. Said he hadn't stopped nothing. I disputed it, but didn't nothing come of it. Hell. You can't win a fight by disputing."

"I thought a fight was a dispute," said the Sprout, whose name was Jennifer. Taking advantage of her great-granddad's near-blindness, she had lifted the hem of her mini to examine the pear-shaped peace symbol her boyfriend had drunkenly drawn on her thigh the night before. She wondered how long it would take to wash off. "Boyfriend" was really the wrong word for Cliff, though he was cute, in a scraggly dirty hippie sort of way, and it wasn't like she had a parade of suitors to choose from. The only guy who seemed interested at the coffeehouse last week was some Negro, couldn't you just die, and of course she told him to buzz off. She hoped Jess never found out she'd even said so much as "buzz off" to a Negro boy—God knows, Jess was a nut on that subject. Nigger this and nigger that, and don't even bring up what's his name, that Negro boxer, Johnson? But you couldn't expect better from the old guy. After all, what had they called Jess, back when—the White Hope?

"No, no, honey," Willard said, shifting his buttocks to get comfortable. He fidgeted all the time, even in his specially made chair, since he lost so much weight. "A fight in the ring, it ain't nothing personal."

"You're funny, Jess," Jennifer said. The old man's first name still felt awkward in her mouth, though she was determined to use it—it made her feel quite hip and adult, whereas "Popsy" made her feel three years old.

"You're funny, too," Willard said, sitting back. "Letting boys write on your leg like you was a Blue Horse tablet. Read me some more, if you ain't got nothing else to do."

"I don't," Jennifer lied.

Jess Willard died in his Los Angeles home December 15, 1968—was in that very custom-made chair, as a matter of fact, when he finally closed his eyes. He opened them to find himself in a far more uncomfortable chair, in a balcony at the Los Angeles Orpheum, in the middle of Harry Houdini's opening-night performance, November 30, 1915.

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"Where you been, Champ?" Lou asked. "We ain't keeping you up, are we?"

"Ladies and gentlemen, these our volunteers have my thanks. Shall they have your thanks as well?"

Amid the applause, Lou went on: "You ought to act interested, at least."

"Sorry, Lou," Willard said, sitting up straight and shaking his head. Cripes, he must have nodded off. He had that nagging waking sensation of clutching to the shreds of a rich and involving dream, but no, too late, it was all gone. "I'm just tired from traveling, is all."

"My friends, as I am sure you have noticed, our committee still lacks three men. But if you will indulge me, I have a suggestion. I am told that here in the house with us tonight, we have one man who is easily the equal of any three."

Lou jabbed Willard in the side. "Knock 'em dead, Champ," he said, grinning.

For an instant, Willard didn't understand. Then he remembered. Oh yeah, an onstage appearance with Houdini—like Jack London had done in Oakland, and President Wilson in Washington. Willard leaned forward to see the stage, the magician, the committee, the scatter of roses. Lou jabbed him again and mouthed the word, "Surprise." What did he mean, surprise? They had talked about this. Hadn't they?

"And so, ladies and gentlemen, will you kindly join me in inviting before the footlights the current heavyweight boxing champion—our champion—Mr. Jess Willard!"

In the sudden broil of the spotlight, amid a gratifying burst of cheers and applause, Willard unhesitatingly stood—remembering, just in time, the low ceiling. Grinning, he leaned over the edge and waved to the crowd, first with the right arm, then both arms. Cheered by a capacity crowd, at the biggest Orpheum theater on the West Coast—two dollars a seat, Lou had said! Hattie never would believe this. He bet Jack Johnson never got such a reception. But he wouldn't think of Johnson just now. This was Jess Willard's night. He clasped his hands together and shook them above his head.

Laughing above the cacophony, Houdini waved and cried, "Mr. Willard, please, come down!"

"On my way," Willard called, and was out the balcony door in a flash. He loped down the stairs two at a time. Sprinting through the lobby, he winked and blew a kiss at the hat-check girl, who squealed. The doors of the auditorium opened inward before him, and he entered the arena without slowing down, into the midst of a standing ovation, hundreds of faces turned to him as he ran down the central aisle toward the stage where Houdini waited.

"Mind the stairs in the pit, Mr. Willard," Houdini said. "I don't think they were made for feet your size." Newly energized by the audience's laughter, Willard made a show of capering stiff-legged up the steps, then fairly bounded onto the stage to shake the hand of the magician—who really was a small man, my goodness—and then shake the hands of all the other committee members. The applause continued, but the audience began to resettle itself, and Houdini waved his hands for order.

"Please, ladies and gentlemen! Please! Your attention! Thank you. Mr. Willard, gentlemen, if you will please step back, to make room for—The Wall of Mystery!"

The audience oohed as a curtain across the back of the stage lifted to reveal an ordinary brick wall,

approximately twenty feet long and ten high. As Willard watched, the wall began to turn. It was built, he saw, on a circular platform flush with the stage. The disc revolved until the wall was perpendicular to the footlights.

"The Wall of Mystery, ladies and gentlemen, is not mysterious whatsoever in its construction. Perhaps from where you are sitting you can smell the mortar freshly laid, as this wall was completed only today, by twenty veteran members, personally selected and hired at double wages by the management of this theater, of Bricklayers' Union Number Thirty-Four. Gentlemen, please take a bow!"

On cue, a half dozen graying, potbellied men in denim work clothes walked into view stage left, to bow and wave their caps and grin. Willard applauded as loudly as anyone, even put both fingers in his mouth to whistle, before the bricklayers shuffled back into their workingmen's obscurity.

"Mr. Willard, gentlemen, please approach the wall and examine it at your leisure, until each of you is fully satisfied that the wall is solid and genuine in every particular."

The committee fanned out, first approaching the wall tentatively, as if some part of it might open and swallow them. Gradually they got into the spirit of the act, pushing and kicking the wall, slamming their shoulders into it, running laps around it to make sure it began and ended where it seemed to. To the audience's delight, Willard, by far the tallest of the men, took a running jump and grabbed the top of the wall, then lifted himself so that he could peer over to the other side. The audience cheered. Willard dropped down to join his fellow committeemen, all of whom took the opportunity to shake Willard's hand again.

During all this activity, Houdini's comely attendants had rolled onstage two six-foot circular screens, one from backstage left, one from backstage right. They rolled the screens to center stage, one screen stage left of the wall, one screen stage right. Just before stepping inside the left screen, Houdini said: "Now, gentlemen, please arrange yourselves around the wall so that no part of it escapes your scrutiny." Guessing what was going to happen, Willard trotted to the other side of the wall and stood, arms folded, between the wall and the stage-right screen; he could no longer see Houdini for the wall. The other men found their own positions. Willard heard a whoosh that he took to be Houdini dramatically closing the screen around him. "I raise my hands above the screen like so," Houdini called, "to prove I am here. But now—I am gone!" There was another whoosh—the attendants opening the screen? The audience gasped and murmured. Empty, Willard presumed. The attendants trotted downstage into Willard's view, professionally balanced on their high heels, carrying between them the folded screen. At that moment the screen behind Willard went whoosh, and he turned to see Houdini stepping out of it, one hand on his hip, the other raised above his head in a flourish.

Surprised and elated despite himself, Willard joined in the crescendo of bravos and huzzahs.

Amid the din, Houdini trotted over to Willard, gestured for him to stoop, and whispered into his ear:

"Your turn."

His breath reeked of mint. Startled, Willard straightened up. The audience continued to cheer. Houdini winked, nodded almost imperceptibly toward the open screen he just had exited. Following Houdini's glance, Willard saw the secret of the trick, was both disappointed and delighted at its simplicity, and saw that he could do it, too. Yet he knew that to accept Houdini's offer, to walk through the wall himself, was something he neither wanted nor needed to do. He was Jess Willard, heavyweight champion of the world, if only for a season, and that was enough. He was content. He'd leave walking through walls to the professionals. He clapped one hand onto Houdini's shoulder, engulfing it, smiled, and shook his head. Again almost imperceptibly, Houdini nodded, then turned to the audience, took a deep bow. Standing behind him now, feeling suddenly weary—surely the show wouldn't last much longer—Willard lifted his hands and joined the applause. Backstage to left and right, and in the catwalks directly above, he saw a cobweb of cables and pulleys against stark white brick—ugly, really, but completely invisible from the auditorium. On the highest catwalk two niggers in coveralls stood motionless, not applauding. Looking about, gaping, he was sure, like a hick, Willard told himself: Well, Jess, now you've had a taste of how it feels to be Harry Houdini. The afterthought came unbidden, as a jolt: And Jack Johnson, too. Disconcerted, Willard turned to stare at the stage-right screen, as two of the women folded it up and carted it away.

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Jennifer barely remembered her Grandma Hattie, but she felt as if she sort of knew her by now, seeing the care she had lavished for decades on these scrapbooks, and reading the neat captions Hattie had typed and placed alongside each item:

FORT WAYNE, 1912—WORKING THE BAG—KO'd J. Young in 6th on May 23 (Go JESS!)

The captions were yellowed and brittle now, tended to flutter out in bits like confetti when the albums

were opened too roughly.

"I'm a good typist, Jess," Jennifer said. "I could make you some new ones."

"No, thanks," Jess said. "I like these fine."

"Where's the Johnson book?"

"Hold your horses, it's right here. There you go. I knew you'd want that one."

Jennifer was less interested in Jack Johnson per se than in the fact that one of Hattie's scrapbooks was devoted to one of her husband's most famous opponents, a man whom Jess had beaten for the title and never met again. Jennifer suspected this scrapbook alone was as much the work of Jess as of Hattie—and the aging Jess at that, since it began with Johnson's obituaries in 1946. Hence the appeal of the Johnson scrapbook; this mysterious and aging Jess, after all, was the only one she knew. The last third of the book had no typewritten captions, and clippings that were crooked beneath their plastic. The last few pages were blank. Stuck into the back were a few torn out and clumsily folded newspaper clippings about Muhammad Ali.

"Johnson was cool," she said, turning the brittle pages with care. "It is so cool that you got to fight him, Jess. And that you won! You must have been proud."

"I was proud," Willard said, reaching for another pillow to slide beneath his bony buttocks. "Still am," he added. "But I wish I had known him, too. He was an interesting man."

"He died in a car wreck, didn't he?"

"Yep."

"That's so sad." Jennifer knew about the car wreck, of course; it was all over the front of the scrapbook. She was just stalling, making noise with her mouth, while pondering whether now was the time to get Jess

talking about Johnson's three wives, all of them white women, all of them blonde white women. Jennifer was very interested to know Jess's thoughts about that.

"You fought him in Havana because, what? You weren't allowed to fight in the United States, or something?" She asked this with great casualness, knowing Johnson was a fugitive from U.S. justice at the time, convicted of violating the Mann Act, i.e. transporting women across state lines for "immoral purposes," i.e., white slavery, i.e., sex with a white woman.

"Yeah, something like that," Jess said. He examined the ragged hem of his sweater, obviously uninclined to pursue the conversation further. God, getting an eighty-seven-year-old man to talk about sex was hard.

"I was trying to tell Carl about it, but I, uh, forgot the uh, details." She kept talking, inanely, flushed with horror. Massive slip-up. She never had mentioned Carl in front of Jess before, certainly not by name. Carl was three years older than she was, and worse yet, a dropout. He was also black. Not Negro, he politely insisted: black. He wanted to meet Jess, and Jennifer wanted that to happen, too—but she would have to be careful about how she brought it up. Not this way! Sure, Jess might admire Jack Johnson as a fighter, but would he want his teenage great-granddaughter to date him?

"There was some rule against it, I think," Jess said, oblivious, and she closed her eyes for a second in relief. "I be doggoned but this sweater wasn't worth bringing home from the store." He glanced up. "You didn't give me this sweater, did you, Sprout?"

"No, Jess," Jennifer said. She closed the Johnson scrapbook, elated to avoid that conversation one more day.

"I wouldn't hurt you for nothing, you know," Jess said. "Wouldn't let no one else hurt you, neither."

She grinned, charmed. "Would you stand up for me, Jess?"

"I sure would, baby. Anybody bothers you, I'll clean his clock." He slowly punched the air with mottled fists, his eyes huge and swimming behind his glasses, and grinned a denture-taut grin. On impulse, Jennifer kissed his forehead. Resettling herself on the floor, she opened one of the safer scrapbooks. Here was her favorite photo of Jess at the produce market, hair gray beneath his paper hat. He held up to the light a Grade A white egg that he smiled at in satisfaction. Grandma Hattie had typed beneath the photo:

## TWO GOOD EGGS.

"One hundred and thirteen fights," Jess said. Something in his voice made Jennifer glance up. He looked suddenly morose, gazing at nothing, and Jennifer worried that she had said something to upset him; he was so moody, sometimes. "That's how many Johnson fought. More than Tunney, more than Louis. Twice as many as Marciano. Four times as many as Jeffries, as Fitzsimmons, as Gentleman Jim Corbett. And forty-four of them knockouts." He sighed and repeated, almost inaudibly, "Forty-four."

She cleared her throat, determined, and said loudly: "Hey, you want to write another letter?" About once a month, Jess dictated to her a letter to the editor, saying Ali was the champ fair and square whether people liked it or not, same as Jack Johnson had been, same as Jess Willard had been, and if people didn't like it then let them take Ali on in the ring like men. The Times had stopped printing the letters after the third one, but she hadn't told Jess that.

He didn't seem to have heard her. After a few seconds, though, his face brightened. "Hey," he said. "Did I ever tell you about the time I got the chance to walk through a wall?"

Relieved, she screwed up her face in mock concentration. "Well, let's see, about a hundred million billion times, but you can tell me again if you want. Do you ever wish you'd done it?"

"Nah," Jess said, leaning into the scrapbook to peer at the two good eggs. "I probably misunderstood him in the first place. He never let anybody else get in on the act, that I heard of. He was too big a star for that." He sat back, settled into the armchair with a sigh. "I must have misunderstood him. Anyway." He was quiet again, but smiling. "Too late now, huh?"

"I guess so," Jennifer said, slowly turning the pages, absently stroking her beads so that the strands clicked together. Beside her Jess began, gently, to snore. She suppressed a laugh: Could you believe it? Just like that, down for the count. Without realizing it, she had turned to a clipping from the Times, dated December 1, 1915.

## TWO CHAMPIONS MEET

### RING ARTIST, ESCAPE ARTIST SHAKE ON ORPHEUM STAGE

Young Jess looked pretty spiffy in his evening wear, Jennifer thought. Spiffy, she knew from reading the

scrapbooks, had been one of Grandma Hattie's favorite words. Jess was crouched to fit into the photograph, which must have been taken from the front row. The two men looked down at the camera; at their feet a couple of footlights were visible. At the bottom edge of the photo was the blurred top of a man's head. Someone had penciled a shaky arrow from this blur and written, "Lou." The background was murky, but Jennifer could imagine a vaulted plaster ceiling, a chandelier, a curtain embroidered with intricate Oriental designs. Beneath the clipping, Grandma Hattie had typed: JESS MEETS EHRICH WEISS a.k.a. HARRY HOUDINI (1874–1926). On the facing page, Houdini's faded signature staggered across a theater program.

Even as a kid, Jennifer had been intrigued by Houdini's eyes. Although the clipping was yellowed and the photo blurred to begin with, Houdini always seemed to look right at her, into her. It was the same in the other photos, in the Houdini books she kept checking out of the library. He wasn't Jennifer's type, but he had great eyes.

As she looked at the clipping, she began to daydream. She was on stage, wearing a tuxedo and a top hat and tights cut up to there, and she pulled back a screen to reveal—who? Hmm. She wasn't sure. Maybe Carl; maybe not. Daydreaming was a sign, said the goateed guy who taught her comp class, of sensitivity, of creativity. Yeah, right. Sometimes when she was home alone—she told no one this—she put on gym shorts and went out back and boxed the air, for an hour or more at a time, until she was completely out of breath. Why, she couldn't say. Being a pacifist, she couldn't imagine hitting a person, no, but she sure beat hell out of the air. She really wanted to be neither a boxer nor a magician. She was a political science major, and had her heart set on the Peace Corps. And yet, when Carl had walked into the coffeehouse that night alone, fidgeting in the doorway with an out-of-place look, considering, maybe, ducking back outside again, what did she say to him? She walked right up to Carl, bold as brass (that was another of Grandma Hattie's, BOLD as BRASS), stuck out her chin and stuck out her hand and said, "Hi, my name is Jennifer Schumacher, and I'm the great-granddaughter of the ex-heavyweight champion of the world." Carl shook her hand and looked solemn and said, "Ali?" and people stared at them, they laughed so hard, and if I ever get a chance to walk through a wall, she vowed to herself as she closed the scrapbook, I'm taking it—so there.

The End

Afterword

"The Pottawatomie Giant," while mostly my own invention, has a few facts in it. Jess Willard was indeed the "Great White Hope," long anticipated by racists nationwide, who finally felled the great black fighter Jack Johnson on April 5, 1915, thus reclaiming the heavyweight title for the white race. The bout was

held in Havana because Johnson was a fugitive from U.S. "justice" at the time. Willard and illusionist Harry Houdini did indeed have an unpleasant quarrel in front of a packed house at the Los Angeles Orpheum the night of November 30, 1915. The whole incident, complete with the near-riot that sent Willard fleeing in ignominy, unfolded pretty much as I have described it. I got to thinking about Willard while reading Kenneth Silverman's fine 1996 biography of Houdini. How poignant, I thought, that this man, who once was world-famous, who must have had his own hopes and dreams and loves, is known to me only as a bit player, practically a stock villain, in the lives of Johnson and Houdini, two figures to whom history has been kinder: I wondered, in short, what the real Jess Willard, the one lost to history, was like. And so I wrote "The Pottawatomie Giant" about a fictional Jess Willard, who addresses some of my lingering questions about the real one.