

(From Chapter Eight, “Hi-de-Hi”)...

Lucky had packed his old Ford full; three in the front and three in the back, the whole infield except for the catcher Payton, who was visiting his aunt in Anaheim. The boys were in rare form. No sooner had they made it to the highway than Lewis the first baseman dug into his duffle and came out with a flask of gin. Lucky barked something about after the game, but Lewis whined that there wasn't “enough in this li'l ol' bottle to get a bat boy bent.” Lucky growled. Hal didn't partake. No way was he was going to face a PCL team after drinking. Besides, he'd never had a taste for gin.

He didn't mind the other fellows whooping it up. It was a welcome change from Vera and her rag-twisting worry. Timmy Cochran the shortstop started singing “Minnie the Moocher” in a hair-curling falsetto. The boys howled out the chorus—*Hi-de-hi-de-hi-de-hi!* Even Lucky joined in, jerking the wheel back and forth in time. They passed through Camarillo and Thousand Oaks, the hills around ranging from soft, green globes that Cochran swore looked “just like tits,” to jagged rock outcrops. The fields they drove through were crowded with workers in lines, weeding in the furrows and picking bugs off the new leaves. Lucky drove fast. Oxnard businesses liked to advertise that the town was “100 minutes from Hollywood Boulevard.” He'd bet Payton that he could make it to the stadium in less than an hour and a half. Cochran started up another song. Hal joined in. To hell with lizard men. At least for today.

The game was at Wrigley Stadium, right downtown, a gem of a ball field built in imitation of Chicago's Wrigley, both brain-children of the chewing gum king himself. It occupied the corner of 42nd and Avalon like a colossal cathedral, white with a red tile

roof and an office tower, of all things, sticking up at one end, adorned by a giant clock that was visible from the field. There were lights for night games, something Hal had never even heard of. He looked forward to pitching under them someday.

The “kranks” in L.A., as the fans were called, were accustomed to good baseball. They called their beloved Angels the “Yankees of the West,” and stoked desperate rivalries between them and the Hollywood Stars (who also played at Wrigley), and the Seals from up in San Francisco. They had superstar players, ex-major leaguers like first baseman Bunny Brief from St. Louis, and Jigger Statz, their center fielder, who had played for both the Giants and the Cubs. Being on a field with guys like that was as close as Hal ever would get to playing in the Big Show. He was looking forward to it with that special sense of confident terror that pitchers know best.

Wrigley had an actual visitors’ clubhouse behind the first base dugout, where Lucky’s carload met the rest of the team with a couple of hours to kill before game time. The other boys had taken a few snorts too, and Lucky kind of lost his cool for a minute, yelling that he wanted cold showers and hot coffee for everybody pronto. Payton told him not to blow his wig; that they’d all be fine in time for the first pitch. Lucky lit a cigar and stomped off. It was amazing to Hal how quickly they all acted like a pre-game dust-up with the manager in a PCL clubhouse was something that happened every day of the week; how the boys took it in stride, banging open lockers and getting into their uniforms. (Most had brought, not worn them, and Hal felt a little foolish, arriving suited up.) Hal stuffed his duffle in an unlocked locker and went upstairs to look at the park.

It was gorgeous. A double-decker concrete grandstand ran from foul pole to foul pole; seating for twenty thousand, somebody had said, and though Hal hadn’t believed

them then he sure did now. There were no left-field seats, just a towering, unpainted concrete wall with the beginnings of an ivy blanket creeping up it, meandering tendrils of pale, hopeful green. The grass was brilliant emerald, the outfield as flat and flawless as a pool table. There were already a few kids in the right field bleachers waiting for the Angels to take their batting practice, though there was no sign yet of anybody in the home team dugout. The sky was a hypnotic blue, with a few shreds of lazy cloud like tufts teased off a giant cotton ball. Hal felt butterflies deep in his bowels. And there were two hours until game time.

He loosened up with Parker, the back-up second-baseman, then threw a couple dozen pitches to Payton off the bullpen mound. He was as loose and confident as he could hope to be. His cutter was breaking like a bullwhip tip; so much movement that Payton laughed a few times, and Lucky, standing alongside, just chewed his cigar and shook his head. His knuckle ball, which he threw rarely but with great effect, drew little pictures in the air as it found its demented way to the plate. As for his fastball, his pride and joy, well, even Hal had never seen it so sharp. After his second, Payton screamed “Fuck!” and ran for the dugout amid the jeers of the Sheiks doing their stretches in left field. When he returned he was stuffing his glove with a sock.

“Christ Almighty,” he said, getting back down into his crouch. “I wanna be able to use this hand after today.”

“That’s why God gave you two,” drawled Lucky through his cigar.

Hal threw hard again. Payton yelled “owwh!” every time the ball struck, but he stayed in position. Lucky nodded. Butterflies or not, thought Hal, this is going to be fun.

Tonight the Angels were throwing a new guy named Mosley, a baby-faced right hander with big ears, an ugly sneer and an un-hittable change-up that seemed to start off like heat but arrived at the plate with all the pizzazz of a sick dog on three legs. The Sheik batters looked awful for three innings trying to connect on him. For the next three innings they looked merely pathetic, and finally, as they began to pick up his timing in the seventh, they began to look simply bad, peppering the infield with harmless two-hoppers and old-lady pop flies. Hal fared no better than his teammates, except that in the fourth he did send two foul balls deep into the left field upper deck, stupendous shots that brought even the condescending Angels' crowd to its feet. Then Mosley threw him a change only slightly faster than Vera crossing the kitchen with her cane, and Hal nearly fell over trying to hold up on it. The crowd laughed.

They didn't laugh when he was on the mound. He was not simply sharp; he was a scalpel in flannel. When he threw his heat, Angel batters hardly had their bats off their shoulders before Payton was tossing the ball back and the ump was yelling "STeeeeRIKE!" like a hyped-up drill sergeant. When they caught up to it at all they managed only harmless fouls, or (twice), a can of corn to the outfield, or (once) a dribbler to Cochran at short. Then Hal would toss his cutter and the batters would bail, leaving the box—and more than once their feet—at the prospects of being hit by that demonic white bullet before it snapped away from them, across the plate and into Payton's sock-lined mitt as though guided by a celestial hand. Big-names and no-names alike, it made no difference. Indeed the famous guys, Jigger Statz especially, went down hardest, desperately over-swinging in their fury at being upstaged by this towering unknown from the beet fields.

The game passed quickly. Three up, three down; four up, three down; three up, four, five, three, four...and nary a run on the board. The Sheiks had one base runner in the seventh when Cochran managed a line drive that just nipped the glove of the Angels' leaping shortstop. The home boys had put on only two runners on through the eighth; a seeing-eye single and a hit batsman, the third baseman, who took a ball so hard on the left shin he probably wished he'd struck out instead. Both Mosley and Hal were pitching superbly

Soon the ninth was upon them. The Sheiks sat silent in the dugout while the Angels took the field. Three more outs and the celebration could begin—provided, of course, that somehow, some way, they could manage to put a run up right here. They would be coming up in the bottom of their order; the seven, eight and nine batters. Hal was hitting last not because he didn't have a good stick—it was one of the best on the team—but simply because Lucky slavishly adhered to the tradition of sticking the pitcher in the nine-hole. Gibbs the third baseman and Tompkins the left fielder batted before him. If either they or Hal managed to get on base, Harris, the lead-off right fielder, had a chance to drive somebody home. If not, and Hal could hang in there on the mound, they'd get another chance in the tenth., or the eleventh, or however long he had gas left in the tank. Sure, they had other pitchers who could take over, but no one who stood a chance against the best of the Angels' hitters. How many pitches could Hal throw? Even draft horses need rest. Nobody knew this better than Hal. Sitting by himself at the end of the dugout bench, he was trying to ignore an almost imperceptible tightness in his right shoulder, the first sign of fatigue. He had maybe twenty good throws left in him, he figured; a dozen or so fastballs and whatever else it took to get through the ninth. If they

went into extra innings he'd start to lose his velocity, start missing his spots. He would either have to take his chances then, or let Lucky know he was hurting. He was determined not to have to do either. The Sheiks needed to score. Now.

Gibbs fanned, swinging through a three-two fastball. But every Sheik on the bench saw something in the pitch sequence that scooted them forward on the bench: Mosley was flagging. His pitches were up in the zone. Falling across at belt height instead of tumbling over the plate at the knees, and they had almost no juice at all. If they could just hang on.

Tompkins got a healthy piece of a pitch, though not quite all of it. The sight of the ball jumping off the bat (and sailing in a perfect arc directly into Jigger Statz' glove) electrified the crowd. They rose as one man with a roar, and then a gasp, a mixture of relief, disappointment, excitement and sheer love of the drama as Statz tossed the ball in and Tompkins walked back to the dugout shaking his head. They stayed on their feet as Hal walked over from the on deck circle. Sure, he'd struck out a few times. But he'd had eight innings to get his timing down. Mosley was struggling with his location, and the kranks knew it as well as the players did.

Had Hal not gotten Mosely's first offering off the end of the bat, rather than the sweet spot, it may well have left not only the yard but the stadium. As it was he hit a rope the other way, down the first base line into the right field corner, where it rattled around like a Ballyhoo pin ball before the Stars' right fielder got it back to the first baseman, by which time Hal was standing on third. Mosley stepped off the mound, circled it twice, returned to the rubber and tossed a fat one to Harris, who promptly ripped

into the left field gap, scoring Hal. Cochran flied out, but it didn't matter. The Sheiks were up, 1-0. The game was all but in the bag.

Hal took the mound. The crowd was still standing, dumb with excitement. The only sound he could hear was the plaintive wail of a vendor from the upper deck, and it was cut off abruptly, as though the guy realized in mid-cry that this was a moment for pitching, not peanuts. He glanced up at the tower. Three o'clock on the nose. He took a breath, rubbed the ball on his pants and licked his lips. It was time to win a ballgame.

With the first pitch he realized, to his profound relief, that he still had his stuff. The thrill of the triple and the score had not dulled his focus. His shoulder, though sore, would hold up. Unfortunately the same could not be said of the Sheiks' defense. One measly run had gone to their heads. The first Angel batter hit an 0-2 fly ball to left field, where Tompkins dropped it, claiming later to have "lost it in the sun," a neat trick as the sun was behind him. One runner on. Hal was disgusted. He struck out Bunny Brief on three pitches, the last of which was a nasty curve that Payton couldn't handle. It hit the dirt in front of his mitt and scooted all the way to the wall. Bunny made it to first without a throw. Two easy should've-been outs, but two runners on instead.

Hal knew they would bunt. The batter was Joey Josephs, the Angels' third baseman. He squared off as Hal went into his windup and laid down a beaut, right back towards the mound. The runners were off like jackrabbits. There was nothing Hal could do but charge the ball and try to nail the runner at first.

Barehanding. That was the key. Some guys would get all flustered on a dribbler like this, scooping with their mitt a ball that was practically laying still. Then they'd have to transfer to their throwing hand, and the extra second that took could make the

difference between an out and another runner on. Hal picked the ball off the grass at the same time that he set himself in throwing position, weight back on his right foot, shoulder toward Lewis at first, Josephs only halfway down the line and dead to rights, unless disaster struck.

It did.

Baseball wisdom has it that a pitcher's throw to first is a lot trickier than it looks. Here you have a guy whose job is to fire screaming nasties into a fat catcher's mitt at a fixed and reliable distance from a mound, a job that's all about repetition and mechanics and finesse, and then you take that same guy off the hill and suddenly his job is to lob a ball gently, on the run, in another direction, and in a big fat hurry. The adrenalin kicks in, the angle looks all wrong, the urgency is unfamiliar, the arm itself wants to throw hard even as the mind says *easy, boy*. The arm won this time. Hal's throw sailed about eight feet over Lewis's head at more or less ninety miles an hour, well past the first base coach, over the fence, all the way to the seventh row above the visitor's dugout, where it hit a man directly on the nose. The man dropped like a stone. The crowd screamed; a collective, horrified yelp, then went silent. Hal, frozen in his follow-through, counted his own audible heartbeats: one, two, three, four, five. A man's voice rang out like a bugle:

"He's dead!"...