

Wayne D. Johnson

Wayne Johnson grew up in Minnesota and lived for many years in the West. In 1990, his novel *The Snake Game* was published. A portion of the book was awarded an O. Henry Prize.

WHAT HAPPENED TO RED DEER

Red Deer turned the ball in his hand.

They were yelling in the bleachers now. "Chief! Go home, Chief!"

The ball fit in his palm like a stone. He caught the stitching with his nails, then raised his eyes to the catcher. The catcher thrust two fingers at the ground.

A slider.

Red Deer nodded, coiled himself back, leg raised, stretching, and hurled the ball. The ball went low, looked like a gutter ball, then rose and smacked into the catcher's mitt. The umpire jerked his hand over his head, thumb up, and the batter shook his head.

"Out!" the umpire shouted.

There was a chorus of booing from the bleachers.

Red Deer watched them out of the corner of his eye.

Since the beginning of the game they had jeered, and when the game had gone into overtime, they began yelling "Chief! Go home, Chief!"

He had ridden on the crest of it, letting it carry him through the game. But something was happening now and he didn't know what it was. It was as if something were dissolving in him, dissolving and going flat.

Darius, the coach, walked to the mound from the dugout.

"How's your arm holding up?" he said.

"Okay," Red Deer offered.

"We'll have her licked if you can hang in there."

Red Deer pulled the bill of his cap down.

"Don't mind those sons-of-bitches. They're just a bunch of drunks. You're

pitching like a pro. Just get back in there and kill 'em." Darius slapped Red Deer on the back, then strode past third, up toward the bleachers.

"What the hell are you waiting for, Chief?" the loudest of the drunks yelled from the stands.

A batter stepped up to the plate. He practiced his swing, dipping in mid-stroke and pulling up. He tapped the bat on his shoes and positioned himself. The umpire and catcher squatted; the catcher pointed to the ground with his index finger. Knuckle. Red Deer turned the ball in his hand, found the stitching with his nails again, drew back like the hammer of a gun and hurled the ball. The ball went straight and fast, right down the pipe. The batter uncoiled, the bat scooped down into the ball, there was a loud crack, and the ball went high, up and back into the bleachers, a foul.

"Whooa, Chief!" the drunks yelled.

Red Deer turned to face the bleachers.

He could see the men who were doing the yelling. They were wearing white shirts and colored ties, and they had brought women with them. Attractive women, who laughed and pushed and when the men yelled laughed into their hands.

"Go home, Chief!" the biggest yelled, standing, a beer in his fist. The woman at his side laughed, pulling at his pants leg.

Red Deer shook his head. He turned to the other side of the field. There his father, Osada, sat with the boy, Bear. A few rows up from them a lot of men from the reservation stood. Red Deer had not asked them to come, and when he had run out onto the playing field, he had been startled to see them. Joe Big Otter had waved and Red Deer had felt something in him sad and old and hurtful.

"Hey! Chief! You missing the Lone Ranger?" There was a cackle of laughter.

The men from the reservation glared across the field.

Red Deer turned the ball in his hand.

He wished the ball were a stone.

He took the sign from the catcher, eyed the batter, drew his body and arm back, and hurled the ball again. The batter swung around, connected, and then it was all moving, Red Deer carried across the field, the ball sizzling by his head, his mitt out, the hard break of the ball against his hand, then opening the mitt and lobbing the ball to first, the baseman reaching, throwing to third, the runner coming on hard, then sliding, the umpire charging, the ball, the baseman, the runner and the umpire all converging there. In the dust, you couldn't see at all.

"Safe!" the umpire yelled, spreading his arms wide at his waist. "Safe!"

An organ broke into a frenzy of scales and the scoreboard flashed. Bottom of the tenth. Six to five, visitor's lead.

Red Deer swung back to the mound.

"Go home, Chief!" the drunks yelled.

The shortstop caught him on the way. The man on third kicked the base, watching the two men.

"Two outs. Anything goes home, okay?"

Red Deer nodded.

"Just give 'em some of the old Buck stuff," the shortstop said. He spit through his teeth and slapped Red Deer on the back.

"Buck!" he said.

But Red Deer was staring off over the bleachers.

In grade school, when they ran the races on the playground, he never pushed himself and still he could beat them all, even the straining, grunting boys who couldn't stand to lose to an Indian.

It wasn't a hard thing to do.

He loved to run, and he ran to school and back home again and wherever else it was he went. Somehow rather than tiring him, as it did the others, it set him free. He loved the feel of the ground under his feet, the trees flashing by, the pumping of his lungs, the pain he pushed through into a solid rhythm that carried him away from everything. If he wanted he would change the rhythm, his legs working harder, the ground beating up with more power, but always the ground carried him; and he was surprised, when one day at school a man watched him run the circumference of the football field, a watch in his hand.

The man stopped Red Deer back of the goalposts, his face swollen with excitement, his thumb held down on the watch. "Wait! Stop there!" he said.

Red Deer had looked back to see where the others were. They weren't around the field yet.

"I can't believe it," the man said.

Red Deer's teacher came over. "Didn't I tell you he was fast?" he said. "Didn't I tell you?"

"Is that as fast as you can run?"

"No," Red Deer said.

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

The man held out his hand. "I just can't believe it," he said. "Jim Thorpe couldn't have done that at your age."

The others ran by, breathing hard, and Red Deer stepped into the stream of bodies. Halfway around the field he looked back. The two men were still talking, the man with the watch gesturing with his hands.

Red Deer heaved the ball down the baseline to the catcher.

"No!" the shortstop yelled. "Goddammit! Throw it around the horn."

Red Deer turned to face the shortstop.

"I haven't you ever played baseball?" The shortstop pointed to the second baseman with his mitt, then shook his head. "What the hell is he doing out here?"

Red Deer shrugged his shoulders. They had him on first, and he didn't know what plays to make. He didn't like standing around so much, and they were always yelling at him.

"Hey! Chief!" Joe Fossen, the catcher, yelled. He threw the ball and Red Deer caught it, tossed it to second, and then it went around again. 57

It was the first time anyone on the team had called him "Chief." It was the first time *anyone* had called him "Chief." 58

He wasn't sure he liked it. 59

But he wasn't sure he liked playing baseball either. It hadn't been his idea. 60

They had called him down to the principal's office not long after the man with the watch had been on the field, and Red Deer had wondered what they had singled him out for now. After the business with his father and the shooting, it seemed the teachers were afraid of him, or afraid that something would happen to them if they had anything to do with him. And the other Indians didn't know what to make of him, either—he was too big for his age, and there was still a general bad feeling on the reservation about the incident. He had gained notoriety without wanting it in any way. 61

In the office the principal, a short, baldheaded man behind a desk, had asked Red Deer to sit. 62

"Well, we've got it all fixed," he said. 63

"Did I do something?" Red Deer said. His heart was pounding. He felt uncomfortable and crossed his legs and uncrossed them, pressing his feet into the floor so his toes curled under. 64

"We thought you'd want to play baseball," the man said. He adjusted his glasses, then leaned back in his chair. 65

Red Deer crossed his legs again. 66

"Joe Bradley's going to be driving up to Kenora just about every day. We thought you'd like to be playing on the team." 67

Outside the room a typewriter was snapping. 68

Red Deer didn't know what to say, so he stood. The principal stood with him. 69

"So what do you think?" he said. 70

Red Deer pushed his hands into his pockets, then looked over the man's shoulder, through the window. The wind was blowing and the poplars in the schoolyard swayed. 71

"Okay," he said. "Sure." 72

The ball came around the horn again. 73

"Hey Chief!" Sampson, the shortstop, yelled. "For Christ's sake don't just stand there!" 74

Red Deer caught the ball and carefully set it beside the base bag. He covered the distance between first and shortstop and there Joe Sampson stood, his fists tight at his sides. Red Deer hadn't realized how big Joe was until he got right up to him; he was the only boy on the team that could stand head to head with Red Deer. 75

"Hey!" the coach yelled. 76

"Don't call me that," Red Deer said. 77

"Make me," the boy said. He leaned toward Red Deer, so that Red Deer could smell his breath. 78

The coach headed across the field, then was running. 79

"Make me, *Chief!*" the boy said. 80

It made Red Deer think of his father, Osada, and how the men he had been a guide for had called him "Chief." Sometimes, when Red Deer had been out in the boat with him, he could see Osada was enraged when it happened, and other times he didn't seem to care at all. Sometimes, with the men who had had a sense of humor, he even seemed to like it. 81

"Break it up!" the coach yelled. He was nearly across the field now. 82

"Tonto," the boy said. 83

The word worked like a key in Red Deer's brain, and then as with a stone he hammered at the boy's face, and even when the boy was on the ground and bleeding Red Deer couldn't stop hitting him. 84

They called him "Buck" after that, and they were all a little afraid of him. He got bigger, his shoulders broadening, his legs getting longer. The boy he had beaten didn't come back; his jaw had been broken and one of his eyes damaged. No one said anything about it, but Red Deer felt badly. 85

Somehow they all seemed to feel bad. 86

They drank a good deal and had girl friends and every now and then as they got older a boy would disappear from the team. 87

"Where's Freddie?" Red Deer had asked one afternoon at practice. Freddie had become a friend of his, though a silent one. 88

"Didn't you hear?" 89

"No." 90

"He's not playing anymore. They got him down at the supermarket in Fort Francis." 91

"What the hell's he doing down there?" 92

"Gettin' married, I guess," the boy said, a wry grin on his face. 93

It puzzled Red Deer. And not long after, when he was down in Fort Francis to see Osada, he stopped by the new supermarket to see if Freddie was there. It really was super. Huge. A long, low, cinderblock building with a giant red and blue sign in front. Red Deer stepped through the doors and it was cold inside and smelled of floor wax, like when they had had dances at the old school. The lights were bluish and buzzed and there were three women in yellow dresses at the registers. 94

"Is there a Fred Levine who works here?" 95

The women looked at him suspiciously. 96

"You mean a young guy? Eighteen or so?" the biggest said, tossing her head back. 97

A door opened off to one side and Freddie came out. He was wearing a green apron and had his hair slicked back. 98

"Hey! Freddie!" Red Deer said.	99
Freddie's eye puckered and his eyebrows drew down and then he smiled, too broadly.	100
"Come on back," he said.	101
Red Deer went up the aisle. There were all kinds of beans on the shelves, beans he had never even heard of.	102
"How's it goin'?" Freddie said.	103
He seemed nervous and stood on one leg and then on the other.	104
"How's the team? I heard you guys wupped shit out Fond Du Lac."	105
"Nine to three," Red Deer said.	106
"I heard you were pitchin', too. Is that right?"	107
Red Deer nodded. Something was wrong. Freddie was the one guy who'd gotten the others to lay off the "Chief" stuff, and they had been friends in the way a pitcher and first baseman can be friends if they are both good at it.	108
"So what's this all about, Freddie?" Red Deer said. He was so tall now his head was even with the top shelf.	109
Freddie looked up the aisle one way and down it the other.	110
"You heard, didn't you?" he said.	111
"You're getting married."	112
"That's it," he said.	113
Red Deer braced himself against the aisle divider. "So what about all that other stuff? Chicago and that school down there?"	114
"I'm just makin' some money now. See? Then I can go later."	115
He dusted the shelf Red Deer leaned on, rearranging the cans.	116
"So," Red Deer said.	117
The girls laughed up at the registers.	118
Freddie carefully straightened the cans, his hands shaking. He reminded Red Deer of a squirrel caught in a snare, his eyes wild.	119
"You don't have to get married, you know," Red Deer said.	120
Freddie looked up the aisle again and back.	121
"Look, I gotta go, Buck. I can't just stand around here talking. . . ."	122
A heavy-set man with shiny black shoes stepped around the end of the aisle.	123
"Can I help you?" he said.	124
"Just a minute," Freddie said.	125
"Freddie," the man said.	126
Freddie's face had reddened. "Just let me explain," he said. "It's not what you think. . . ."	127
"It's okay," Red Deer said. Though it was not okay.	128
"Hang on. Just wait a—"	129
The manager was coming up the aisle now. Red Deer could not stand to see Freddie this way.	130
"See you around, Freddie," he said.	131

He didn't toss up the tuft of Freddie's hair the way he always had, and walking across the parking lot in the bright sun, the new gravel sharp under his feet, Red Deer felt a hollow in his chest. 132

It seemed to Red Deer that they were all liars. And he had become a liar, too, though he lied in a different way. He said nothing, or as little as possible. It wasn't that there wasn't anything to say, but to say it would have torn up the fabric of all the lies and Red Deer knew none of them would stand for it. So he pretended he didn't feel the discomfort of the whites around him, or the hatred and bad feeling of the other Indians. It got so the only place he could escape the lies was playing baseball, and for that reason he came to love the game. On the field the ball moved, and they played. He could walk out onto the field, the mitt snug on his hand, and win or lose, he would pitch his best and whether his teammates hated him or not, they needed him up there on the mound. Slider. Curveball. Greaseball. Knuckleball. Fast pitch. He could get his fingers on the fine stitching of the ball and it fit into his palm like a planet. Or a shooting star. It was all a game and he saw the line he wanted the ball to take, up to and past the batter. He got to know the boys on the other teams, how they batted, how they ran. 133

There seemed to be no end to it. It happened so fast he could only do a little at a time, test what his hand could do to the line. But he came along fast, and people knew him. 134

"Let him have it, Buck!" they'd yell from the stands. "Give it to 'im, Buck!" 135

But after the games he went home. If he was near the reservation he stayed at his mother's, even though he didn't like his stepfather. He liked playing with the boy, though. Bear was like a little animal, only smarter, and faster, and they'd tumble in the dirt in the yard and the boy loved to play catch. On hot summer afternoons they listened to Minnesota Twins games on the radio, drinking root beer—Red Deer would buy cases of it—and when the Hamm's commercials came on, sung as though by Indians, with a drum pounding in the background, Red Deer and Bear burst out laughing. 136

It was on one of those afternoons that Red Deer and his stepfather, Joe Big Otter, got to fighting. They were sitting outside the house, drinking under the shade of an umbrella Joe had bought at the supermarket in Fort Francis. 137

"You see a guy there with slicked back hair?" Red Deer said. "Big nose?" 138

"No," Joe said. 139

Red Deer looked up into the umbrella. The umbrella had been on sale. On it Huey, Louie, and Dewey marched with sand buckets, pink, yellow, and candy blue. 140

The Twins were on the radio. 141

- "I want to hear a story," Bear said. 142
- "Shhh," Martha Blue Feather said. She reached under Bear's armpit and 143
tickled him.
- "What kind of story do you want to hear?" Red Deer said. 144
- "I want to hear a story about cowboys," the boy said. 145
- It made Red Deer sad to hear him say this, and he looked up into the 146
umbrella again and took a sip of his beer.
- "Why don't you tell him the one about Litani?" Joe said. 147
- Litani had been shot in the altercation with the marshals, when Osada 148
had gotten the men to take their boys out of the new school. Litani had been
Joe's younger brother.
- Red Deer did not answer. It was hot and he could tell nothing good 149
would come of this. He noticed how whoever it was who had drawn the
ducks on the umbrella had put smiles on their bills. They looked funny hold-
ing the pails.
- "Tell him that one," Joe Big Otter said. "There's a *cowboy* story." 150
- Red Deer looked across the table. Joe smiled. Martha put her hand on 151
Joe's forearm, gripped him around the wrist.
- "You see," Joe said, his drunken eyes on the boy, "there was this proud 152
man—"
- "Shut up," Red Deer said. 153
- "He should hear it," Joe said. 154
- "Not the way you're telling it," Red Deer said. He set his beer on the 155
table. He was hoping this would just pass.
- Martha pulled at the bottle in Joe's hand. "You've had enough," she 156
said.
- "Don't," he said. 157
- "You've had too much. Let go." 158
- "Tell it," Joe said. 159
- Red Deer looked away. He didn't want to tell Bear the story, and he 160
didn't want Joe to tell it either.
- "Coward," Joe said. 161
- "Not as big a coward as you with your bottle," Red Deer replied. 162
- Joe stood. The boy's eyes widened. The boy could not understand what 163
they were saying, and when they began to yell, he crawled under the table.
- Joe punched Red Deer in the mouth and then Red Deer had Joe by his 164
ponytail and slammed his face into the picnic table. Blood ran down Joe's
nose and Red Deer, trying to pull away, got hit in the mouth again. He tried
to pin Joe down but Joe was hollering now.
- "Your goddamned cowboy—" 165
- Red Deer hit him in the mouth. He felt the teeth give way under his 166
knuckles. Martha's eyes were wide and Joe stumbled back from the table.
Martha held her hand to her mouth, and Joe ran inside. Bear was crying
under the table. Then Joe swung by the kitchen window with his rifle, and

Red Deer was over the garden fence, out across the field, and he didn't stop running until he was miles out of the reservation.

He didn't tell them where he was staying. He'd made himself a lean-to down by the fish hatchery, and at night he'd swim and catch brown trout, and bake them in the hillside behind the lean-to. He knew he couldn't do this very long, but he also knew something would come up. They were playing a game down in Fort Francis, against a Toronto team, and some big name scouts were supposed to be there. 167

"They're waiting for you," the coach had said. 168

The morning of the game with Toronto Red Deer got up early. He swam in the clean, bitter cold water, then knocked down the lean-to. The fishery people were getting wise to him anyway, and he'd have to find someplace else. He walked into town, spent his last dollar on a plate of eggs and hash browns and coffee. At two he met the others at the school, and then everything was all right. 169

The basement was cool, and they suited up, the others snapping each other with their towels and joking. 170

"Hey! Buckeroo!" one of the boys said, thumping him on the back. 171

Red Deer took his uniform from his locker, set his clothes out as he always did. He dressed quickly, his hands sure, finally pulling the laces of his tennis shoes tight. He reached into his locker for his cleats and swung them over his shoulder. If he could keep it out of his mind, he thought, everything would be fine. 172

The game went terribly. The new first baseman was slow, and Red Deer wished Freddie were there. He missed him now, though it didn't occur to him why. He pitched badly, and he watched the scouts in the bleachers. The two men wore wide-brimmed hats and pointed, nodded, and scribbled on note pads. 173

It seemed it was all coming to a grinding end. 174

They forced their way through a miserable third inning and headed for the dugout. 175

"What the hell is wrong with you?" the coach said. Everyone else in the dugout looked the other way. "Huh? What's going on?" 176

Red Deer stared out across the field. Meyers was up to bat. He swung in short choppy strokes. 177

"Are you listening to me?" the coach said. 178

"I don't know," Red Deer said. 179

The coach slapped his hand on his knees. "Well, you goddamned well better know. Do you have any idea how important this game is?" He lowered his voice. "It's your goddamned baby. They didn't come out here to see Hodges." 180

Beside him Hodges stiffened. 181

Red Deer felt badly that he had heard. He wasn't a good first baseman and he knew it. 182

There was a crack of a bat, and everyone in the dugout stood. Red Deer sat on the bench. 183

"Get up," the coach yelled, but Red Deer wasn't about to. Not like that. 184

On the mound again he couldn't force the ball down the line, and the game had all gone away somewhere. He was tired, dirty, and hungry. He had lost something, and a deep sadness was setting in. It wasn't this damn game, he thought. It was Bear. He'd lost Bear, and he figured he'd lost his mother, too, only now he could see he'd never really had her, and maybe that hurt the worst. 185

A big kid named Donnelly got up to bat, kicking his cleats into the dirt like a rooster. They were leading nine / five into the sixth inning and now their batters were all getting cocky. 186

"Come on, Chief, throw me a fast one," he said. 187

Red Deer looked into the stands, then at the boy. 188

"Come on, Chief," he said. 189

Red Deer tightened his grip on the ball. 190

"Put her right here, Chief," the boy said, tapping the base with his bat. 191

Red Deer found the stitches on the ball, gripped it in his hand. He got a kind of tunnel vision, and when Steadman, the catcher, signalled for him to throw a curve, he shook his head. He knew what to do with this one. He settled onto his legs, then stretched as if to break himself, and when he threw the ball it hissed out of his hand, went low, then broke into the catcher's mitt with a dusty thud. The batter's mouth dropped open. 192

"Steecrike!" the umpire called. 193

Red Deer caught the ball, tossed it around the horn. 194

No one said anything. 195

When it was over, and they had won by two runs, Red Deer dropped the ball on the mound and walked to the dugout. 196

"Jesus Christ!" the coach said. "That was really something." 197

Red Deer wiped his face with a towel. He never wanted to play another game like that. He had wanted to kill the boy Donnelly, and had prodded himself along with him, remembering his face and what he had said. And when the boy was up to bat again, and he sensed something dangerous in Red Deer, Red Deer imagined him saying the things he had said over again. 198

He wasn't happy now—he was drained, and felt ugly. 199

The two scouts came down to the dugout. 200

"Hell of a game you pitched." 201

Red Deer nodded. 202

They had turned the lights off on the field and now the dugout was dark but for the light coming in from the parking lot. The bigger man's glasses shone in the dark. 203

"Anything you'd like to say?"

All he wanted now was to be alone.

"I've pitched better," he said. It was what he was supposed to say. And it was true, only now he wished they would leave.

"We'll be getting in touch," the bigger of the two men said.

Red Deer watched them cross the parking lot to the car. The lights came on, and the car crackled out of the lot with the others, dust billowing behind them. Red Deer settled down onto the dirt floor, the cement cool against his sides, the dugout just long enough to hold him. It was all he wanted now.

The rest was easy. It was like falling. A small league team picked him up as a relief pitcher, and then he was playing, and had some jack in his pocket. He traveled a lot, and he forgot about what happened. He learned to forget a lot of things, and he learned how to fight too.

"Hey, Chief," someone would say.

It was like a button they pushed.

He learned to hit first, and hit hard, and it wasn't until later that he got into fights with men bigger than he was. He had his nose broken three times and lost a tooth, a canine, so when he smiled it gave him the look of someone who would take the caps off beer bottles with his teeth for fun.

And on the mound he felt it get bigger in him, like a stone, and he held on to it tighter. He learned to focus it, and he thought of it as being like a train or a bulldozer. All he had to think of was that boy, and it started again.

"Chief," he'd think to himself.

He got to love it, and it was precious.

He found it had all kinds of uses.

On nights when things were going badly, when he felt a slugging in his desire to throw the ball, he could pump himself up with it. It got to be such a thing with him he was afraid he would lose it, and then he nursed it when he wasn't on the field, and soon after he was thrown in jail for nearly killing a man in a bar.

"Don't mess with him," they said.

Red Deer thought it was funny. He was just playing the game. But something had happened, and one night, when he came in from a drunk, he had looked in the mirror in the bathroom of his hotel room and had seen somebody he didn't know staring out at him—a big, fierce-looking Indian with a crooked nose and hard eyes. It scared him so badly that he covered all the mirrors in his room with towels and lay on his bed, his arms pulled tight over his chest.

The morning after, Harvey, his first baseman, had spoken to him in the dugout. It was a hot day at the end of August and Red Deer was tying the laces of his cleats.

His hands shook on the laces.

"You'd better slow down on the sauce," Harvey said.

It occurred to Red Deer to knock Harvey's teeth out, but the look on his face was so concerned that he laughed instead.

"Nothing that doesn't grease the old joints," Red Deer said. 224

Harvey brushed the dirt off his glove. He shook his head. "I'll tell you 225 something," he said. "Just between the two of us."

Red Deer busied himself with his shoes. He didn't want to hear it. 226

"I got an ulcer the size of a half-dollar in my gut," Harvey said, "and if 227 it gets any worse they say they're gonna have to cut some out and sew me up. Now I thought that was pretty funny, until they said it might kill me, see." He put his face down by Red Deer's. "Do you see what I'm saying?"

Red Deer grunted, double-tying his laces, pulling on them. He could 228 hardly control his hands now.

"Hey, do you hear what—" 229

"Shut up, Harve," Red Deer said. There was a buzzing in his brain. He 230 shot to his feet and grabbed Harvey by his shirt and twisted it. "Shut up before I knock out your teeth."

The season ended well enough, and Red Deer got himself a job in a 231 meat packing plant in Ohio, where he had played his last game. He hated the noises and smells at first. He hated the gray walls and the fluorescent lights. He hated his foreman and he hated Vinny, the boy he worked with.

But as with everything else, he learned to shut it out. 232

"Don't you just love it?" Vinny said. They were cutting the heads off 233 pigs. A fine line of blood squirted up Vinny's rubber smock while he cut with the saw.

Vinny smiled. 234

He had a few teeth missing, and Red Deer saw himself in the mirror for 235 a second.

"Cut that shit out, Vinny," he said. 236

But then it was baseball season again, the job and the winter shucked 237 off. He took the train down to Tampa and the tryouts started. The weather was warm and there were birds all over and it was hard to pitch at first.

But it always happened. 238

"Chief," someone said "Tonto." 239

And he was throwing hot again. His arm swollen and hard. He built it 240 up slowly, added Vinny to it, but there were so many now it didn't matter. He didn't even have to think of any specific one, it just came to him in a knotted, hard bundle. A bundle he would spit out his arm and over the bag.

"Jesus," they said. "He throws a real killer-ball." 241

He was throwing like that in his fifth pick-up game. Hurling himself 242 into it, when a scout for the Cleveland Aces spotted him. He'd never been hotter, and like that, a month later he was in Chicago for an exhibition game against the Cubs, and somehow, someone had found out on the reservation and there they were, Osada and Bear and Joe Big Otter and his friends.

The lights burned. 243

A brown bottle sailed up over the netting, turning end over end, flash- 244

ing, and landed on the field. One of the men in the white shirts and colored ties stood.

"Chief! Go home, Chief!" he shouted.

A bat boy ran out to the bottle.

Darius marched to the mound from the dugout, and the umpires came up from the bases.

"What the hell is going on?" Darius said.

Red Deer glanced up into the lights. Everything seemed so bright now, the field an electric green.

"We got a goddamned game goin' on here. You can't just stand the fuck out here and pick your nose. What the hell is wrong with you? Are you on the sauce or what?"

Red Deer kicked at the mound with his cleats.

"Answer me!"

"I don't know," Red Deer said.

"I'm going to put our relief in if you don't get your ass in gear."

Red Deer turned to Darius, looked down into his eyes.

Darius could tell something was wrong.

"I'm not on the sauce," Red Deer lied.

But it didn't matter now. There was no stopping what was opening. It was just a matter of finishing now. He had to finish it.

"I got it," Red Deer said.

"Well, you better have it," Darius said.

He crossed the field to the dugout and climbed down.

Red Deer pushed his mitt on his hand. He remembered what the man with the watch had said:

"Jim Thorpe couldn't have done that at your age."

Red Deer positioned himself on the mound. Now they had done it to him, too.

"Come on, goddammit!" Darius yelled from the dugout.

"Chief! Hey, you! You old lady, Chief!" the man in the stands yelled.

Red Deer felt the anger flare in him.

The batter was holding his hands up and looking into the sky.

The catcher gave him the sign again, and Red Deer jabbed himself with his anger. Now it hardly moved him at all. It was alternately terrifying, and a relief. And when the anger came again, he gripped the ball, stared down the pipe, got his nails on the stitching of the ball, and heaved the ball down the line as hard as he could. The ball floated, dipped, then slammed into the catcher's mitt and the batter coiled around.

"Steeeeeerike!" the umpire called.

The crowd roared.

The tribesmen stood, and when the others took their seats again, they remained standing. Someone started the others banging their feet on the stands, and the booming got louder, a harsh, crushing banging.

With the tribesmen standing, Red Deer could not see Osada, and he wondered whether he was sitting back there or if he had gone.

"Go home, Chief!" the drunk yelled.

274

Red Deer felt the ball in his hand.

275

The batter swung around, practicing. He stepped up to the plate, and the catcher gave Red Deer two fingers. It pushed out of him now, and he saw the batter grinning there. "Come on, Chief," the batter was saying. "Come on, Chief."

276

Red Deer gripped the ball, a stone.

277

In a flash that burned him, Red Deer saw that he might really do it this time. He saw the ball, hurling down the pipe, no curve, no spin, just hurling, the batter's skull shattering. He could kill him now, and he could call it an accident. It had come to this. And he knew, with absolute certainty, when he stepped onto the mound that he was going to kill the batter. He was going to throw the ball through the side of his head. He would crush him with his hatred, and it would be gone, he would be free maybe, and when he got the signal from the catcher the batter said it again, and Red Deer felt everything in him screaming toward that pitch, the crowd roaring, the blood in his head pounding, and sharper than ever, he saw the line the ball would take, the point where the ball would contact the batter's head, above and back of the ear—it was like tunnel vision, and there was only in front of him the ear and the hair over the man's temple, the ball in his hand, the tremendous power that moved his limbs like iron, threatening to burst him, the crowd roaring like steam and the mound pushing up beneath him. He drew his arm back, then farther, the weight of his rage there compressed, and in an explosion the ball arced around, hard, heavy, and as it shot from his hand, Red Deer caught the stitching with his thumb, and the ball, as though it were on a track, swung wide across the field and smacked square into the batter's startled face.

278

The umpire burst out from behind the catcher.

279

The field came alive, the crowd roaring, and Darius scrambled from the dugout. The batter kicked on the ground, and the umpire tried to hold him down.

280

Red Deer turned his back to it, and tugging at his mitt, walked to the mound. He stared up into the bleachers, at the big man with the bright blue tie, the one who had started it all. The man raised his fist, opened his mouth to shout. Something settled home in Red Deer's chest, found bottom, and he held his eyes on the big man until he turned away. He remembered his father's scream when Litani had been shot, and what the officers had said after the commotion died down.

281

"It was a *terrible mistake*. We're sorry," the man Harris had said.

282

Red Deer drew back the bill of his cap. Without the cover for his eyes the stadium lights were blinding.

283

They were coming up behind him now, he could hear their feet on the dry grass.

284

He remembered his father's face, how when he had screamed it was as

285

though something had shattered in him, and when the noise had stopped and his mouth had closed, something had gone away.

"Buck!" Darius said.

Red Deer turned to face him. He puffed along, swinging his arms, two press men behind him with cameras.

Darius reached out, grasped Red Deer's forearm. "Buck," he said. "Buck, just tell them—"

Red Deer bent low, and as if to confide in Darius, pulled him closer. He could smell the oil in Darius' hair, his aftershave.

"Buck, you gotta—"

"Let go," Red Deer said, his voice quiet and sure as death now. "Let go of my arm, Darie," he said.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. This story uses a *flashback*—that is, it shifts the scene back in time and then comes forward—rather than the more usual form of **EXPOSITION** in which the past is suggested or filled in. How does this affect the usual ordering of the **STRUCTURE** (rising action, climax, falling action, conclusion) of the story?
2. Who is Litani? How do we learn what happened to him? How is the piecemeal presentation of that story related to the story of Red Deer? How is the Litani story relevant to the final episode in the story? What is the meaning of the final sentence of the story?
3. Alcoholism is part of the **STEREOTYPE** of the Native American. How is it used in this story?
4. Red Deer is full of anger. How much seems due to the oppression of Native Americans? to racism? What is the nature of his encounters with whites? Is Red Deer a racist—that is, does he hate whites?