

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/4

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Cloud Thieves

We're up to no good, a pair of cloud thieves. He—the cloud splitter with 3-mile rocket launches and me—the husky, freckle-faced accomplice with occasional lucky catches to line the pocket of my ragtag fielder's mitt.

"Turned your head. Another."

Thwack. Lift off.

With each miss, there's instruction. With the few catches, there are brief nods. It seems like Uncle Frank can do this all day. And so can I.

But guys are showing up. Players ten years older than me.

"What's up, Case?" says the wide-shouldered redhead, looking toward the street. "You finally got that old heap running?"

Uncle Frank, ever-composed, picks up a stray ball and glances at his banged-up, 10-year-old '48 Buick.

"On four flat tires she can make it down the first baseline faster than a certain lug I know who waddles like he's got sandbags caught in his spikes."

Two guys let out a low "Ooooh," and Red laughs. "Save it for today's game, Casey. We'll see who can run."

"You? Running?" Then, winking at me, "I should have brought the Sunday paper."

I hide a grin behind my glove.

They stick me in right field next to my uncle in center. Whenever someone reaches base, he quizzes me. "One out, runner on first. There's a one-hop liner hit to you. Where's your throw?"

"Second base?"

"Always throw two bases ahead of where the runner starts," he says. "Where do you throw it?"

"Third base," I say.

Uncle Frank nods.

There's a new outfield quiz every inning. Then, in the 7th, Red lofts a towering fly toward me. At first, I freeze and cannot move my chubby legs. I watch the ball soar and finally convince my feet to backpedal. The ball arcs and torpedoes downward. Everyone is yelling, "Back, back..." But my circus clown feet betray me, and I hit the grass like a dropped lunch tray at school.

In a flash, my uncle scoops the ball and rifles it to third to nail Red, who shakes his head in disbelief. Uncle Frank helps me up and tells me to shake it off. He looks at Red and, with a smirk, says, "Sandbags."

It's our team's turn to bat and while the hitters take their practice swings, Uncle Frank takes me aside.

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"My fault for not giving you a heads-up about moving back. Let's try this."

He positions me so that I can easily move backward on a deep fly. We practice it several times.

"Baseball is a game of good sense and readiness," he says. "The readiness part will come."

As we walk toward the bench, I ask him, "What about the good sense part?"

"Baseball, and I guess clouds, too," he says, with the hint of a smile, "are in our blood."



On the first pitch of the next inning, the ball disappears into the heavens above a kid in right field, *the cloud thief*, ready for a catch that will be anything but lucky.