

# Sacrificial Fly Rule

*Cyrus Shafii*

Elisie jumped, and while in the air she pinched her big toe on her right foot, and she hung herself in the air until she heard Angel Lee laugh, a big, kiddish laugh that made the birds watching them from the yard fence scatter. Then she let her toe go and let herself to the ground.

Angel Lee Sabre was the newest member of their foster home. She was six, half of Elisie's age, and absolutely refused to smile for anyone other than Elisie. In turn, Elisie would share her natural talent for floating with her—she couldn't fly. She was human, after all, and humans don't have wings, but she could float.

She kept it to herself, mostly, but for the younger, sourfaced kids in Richard Mittie's Foster Care Home, she would float.

Mr. Mittie loved taking the children to baseball games. He would buy them uniforms, and people with cameras would take pictures of the children standing in front of the players and of the players signing little baseball bats for the children. The halls of Richard Mittie's Foster Care Home were lined with these pictures.

These pictures, in some cases—such as Elisie's—could be used to measure the growth of the children, depending on how long they had been there. These pictures also served as a source of income for the home—people saw the adorable children and would be inspired to fund the baseball teams. The teams, in turn, would pay Mr. Mittie to let them take more pictures with the children. Mr. Mittie would then take the money, and he would buy more uniforms and tickets to take the children to more games.

"I hate baseball," Angel Lee said the afternoon before her third game. Softer, she added, "I miss my old homes." She had been through two other group homes, and had nearly been adopted at one point, Elisie knew, but that had fallen through when her almost-Forever Family got one too many speeding tickets.

Elisie must have accidentally shown some sympathy on her face, because Angel Lee said defensively, "My old homes never made us wear these stupid pants."

Elisie had already pulled her uniform on. "'Least it's not the jerseys soccer players have to wear, kid," she said, schooling her face into a pleasantly neutral smile. "Those look cold." Not that she knew. She had grown up in Richard Mittie's, thus, baseball was the only sport she was truly familiar with.

Angel Lee sat in the dirt of their backyard, which served as a makeshift baseball diamond when the sun didn't bake the grass to the point it would prick through their pants and socks and sting them, or when it wasn't turned to mud by the rain. Elisie preferred keeping her feet bare, so she rarely played in the yard. Instead, she sat on the porch and watched Angel Lee pile dirt onto her new uniform, shake it off, then pile it on again. Elisie could tell that by the time they left and she had to put it on, it would be completely brown.

Elisie frowned, watching her. Some dirt was cute, especially on someone Angel Lee's age, but too much dirt and no one would want to adopt Angel Lee. Granted, children didn't typically get adopted out of Richard Mittie's, anyway—people liked to imagine they were close and that separating their "team" was cruel—but they did sometimes get rotated out to other homes or some baseball fan would see their faces in the paper and fall in love with one of them. So Elisie jumped, pinched her toe, and floated until Angel Lee laughed and felt agreeable enough to put her uniform on.

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Mr. Mittie didn't actually spend a lot of time in Richard Mittie's Foster Care Home. A man perpetually in his sixties, he constantly wore a baseball hat with a weird bird logo on it that Elisie assumed was for some old, long-forgotten team from his childhood. He had spent over half his life providing temporary-to-semi-permanent homes for children and ran four separate homes, each one holding about nine children at a time. Baseball was the only time all the children really interacted, whether watching it or playing it unless they happened to go to the same school.

They poured out of their city-donated vans and nodded at each other as they grouped together in the parking lot. Elisie waved at Ruthie and Caleb, the volunteer drivers. Caleb, a redhead with a face more beard and freckles than not, had actually aged out of one of the other Richard Mittie's Foster Care Homes and seemed to share Mr. Mittie's enthusiasm for the game, going to college on a sports scholarship.

Caleb looked sad for a moment when he recognized her, then walked over and good-naturedly pulled the bills of Elisie and Angel Lee's hats over their heads. Angel Lee glared at the ground.

Pointing over his shoulder, he said, "Ruthie here thinks she saw seven cardinals on the way up. Think it'll be good luck, though heaven knows which team for."

Caleb always asks someone about whether they've seen any birds before games. *Tradition*, Mr. Mittie once called it, or *Ritual*. At Richard Mittie's, traditions and rituals were honored among the kids and volunteers—it wouldn't be baseball without them. Elisie toed an X into the ground before stomping on it with her heel, hard. She had made that her pre-game ritual years ago.

"So, y'all excited for the game?" Caleb asked, laughing. He always asked her that before games—another tradition.

Elisie returned his laugh automatically. "Kid, you have no idea." She took Angel Lee's hand and squeezed it. She thought she felt Angel Lee squeeze back before the kid tore her hand back.

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Years ago, when Caleb was sixteen, he had seen Elisie float. Elisie had only been in the home a year then, and couldn't stay in the air long. Still, Elisie had hoped to make friends with the other Richard Mittie kids.

Caleb had screamed and ran to Mr. Mittie, who had been chatting in the shade with an assistant-volunteer coach—another former Richard Mittie kid.

"You okay, kid?" Mr. Mittie asked.

Caleb pointed over his shoulder at Elisie. "That—that girl was *flyin'*!"

Elisie hunched her shoulders. She hadn't been trying to do anything wrong. She just wanted to be liked in her new home. Would Mr. Mittie abandon her like her old family?

Instead, Mr. Mittie laughed. "Who's flying? Elisa MacFly? Caleb Runner, kid, birds fly, bugs fly, balls fly, but *humans*?" He shook his head in amusement. "Mr. Runner, kid, humans don't have wings."

At the time, Elisie had been surprised that Mr. Mittie had known her name.

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Elisie and some of the other older children would do their homework during the game. They had to hide their papers and books behind their bags and look like they were having fun, in case the camera turned to them, so they often sat in the second row, letting the younger children sit in the front.

This time, Angel Lee said she wanted to lay down and rest, so Elisie sat in front and let her take the back. Truthfully, Elisie thought Angel Lee just wanted to avoid the cameras—apparently, her old homes never had cameras turned towards the kids, so she found media attention of any kind weird.

Elisie had no choice but to pay attention to the game for once. It was actually pretty fun, even if the teams playing weren't that good—one team kept flinching from the ball when in the outfield and the other seemed primarily made up of nearsighted people that all collectively forgot their glasses and contacts at home.

One of the batters, possibly intending to hit a sacrifice bunt, hit the ball poorly, sending it flying up and behind him. Right towards them.

Right towards the second row of them, judging from the angle.

She looked behind her. No one else was paying much attention. The ball would likely hit someone in the face.

Possibly Angel Lee.

She kicked off her right shoe and jumped, pinching her toe through the sock. She caught the ball in the newly signed glove she had been given. She hung herself in the air a moment, then dropped herself back into her seat.

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All those years ago, Caleb had pulled her aside after the friendly game between the homes.

"You flew," he said.

"I float," she corrected.

"You *freaked me the hell out*, excuse the language. You ain't very good at baseball, ya know."

She nodded, not entirely following his train of thought.

"Do ya want to spend your life at Richard Mittie's? 'Cause it ain't gonna be much fun if you don't like baseball."

"I do like it," she said.

Caleb shook his head and pressed his palm into his eye. "I don't like baseball, myself," he said. "I love it, and at this point, there ain't nobody clamorin' to take me home with them, so I might as well go on lovin' it. Tell me honestly, do you love it?"

Hesitantly, she shook her head apologetically.

"Then don't go around doing—*that!* Because if you scare off any potential fosters, ain't nobody's gonna want to take you home, either!"

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The newspaper, printed the day after the game, was titled, "HOMETOWN HERO CATCHES BALL." It showed a picture of Elisie holding up the baseball she had caught, Mr. Mittie's proud hand on her shoulder, Angel Lee perched on his shoulders and looking off to the side so you couldn't quite make out her disgruntled look. The article misidentified them as "Lisa SacFly" and "Angela Saber" in the photo caption, joked that Elisie should try out for *basketball* with that jump, and promised that, if nothing else, local baseball fans would flock to donate money to Richard Mittie's Foster Care Homes.

Elisie really hoped someone reading it would take interest in Angel Lee. At six, she was already on the verge of being too old to adopt for most people, and she didn't seem like she would come to love baseball anytime soon.

Elisie and Angel Lee sat on the porch together, still wearing their dirt-covered uniforms—Angel Lee had torn her real clothes while dirtying it, so Elisie had agreed to wear hers out of solidarity—looking over the article. They heard the back door open and Mr. Mittie walked up to them, baseball in hand.

"Kids," he grinned. Then, to Elisie, "You flew earlier?"

She shook her head automatically. "Humans can't fly."

He adjusted the brim of his hat, scratched the back of his head, pulled a large, white feather out from his collar, and looked at it with disinterest before pocketing it. "That's right, Miss. MacFly." He laughed and held out the baseball, "Here," he dropped it into her hand, "got this signed for you, kid. You should have seen that catch on the big screen—looked like they played it in slow motion for everybody!"

She nodded.

Mr. Mittie turned to leave, then said, "You're a smart kid, aren't you, Miss. SacFly?" He didn't wait for her answer. "You've got talent, kid, real talent—especially with the younger kids. But remember there's a *time* and a *place* for talent from now on."

She nodded.

Mr. Mittie smiled one last time, said, "I see myself in you, kid," and walked away. For a moment—just a moment—Elisie gripped the baseball tightly and imagined chucking it at the back of Mr. Mittie's head, to try and knock his stupid cap off his head. Just to see what he had to say about her pitch.

But that wouldn't be setting a very good example for Angel Lee, would it?

When he re-entered the house, Elisie turned away.

After a moment, Angel Lee asked, "Why are you still *here*, Elisie?"

Elisie rolled the ball around in her hands before placing it by her feet. She thought about what Caleb had said to her all those years ago. "Tell me, kid, do you like baseba—"

"No. Duh."

"Well," Elisie thought of all the other sourfaced kids she had shared her talent with before they had been moved, rotated out, or in some cases, taken to real forever homes, "you gotta like something if you're gonna be here."