

"He loved fielding. Really loved it. Loved the suspense of not knowing where the ball would be coming from. Loved turning the work entirely over to his body, trusting his instincts to pull him to the ball. He loved making the throws and watching the ball sail to its intended target..."



Meet Reuven and Avi, pitcher and catcher. Though they're brothers, they don't have a lot in common — but their extraordinary love of baseball binds them together through a difficult season.

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Reuven stomped across the infield, kicking gritty clouds of dust out of his way. He stomped past the puddle-pocked pitcher's mound and past the bases marked with moldy slabs of cardboard.

Reuven didn't see any of that. Not today. Today, Reuven didn't see this quiet neighborhood park that he and Avi and Dad used for Sunday morning practices.

Today, Reuven saw that other baseball diamond, on the other side of town. The one with the perfectly groomed mound and the freshly painted white lines marking the base paths. Today, he smelled that newly mowed grass, and he heard his name echoing down from the loud-speaker system.

And now . . . the starting pitcher for tonight's All-Star game . . . Reuven Silver!

Reuven couldn't help himself. He drew in a deep, sweet

breath and smiled. What a great, fantastic, wonderful, delicious day for baseball!

“Come on, Reuven! Hurry up!”

Avi’s voice pulled Reuven out of his daydream. He was glad he’d had his back turned to Avi and Dad so no one could see him smiling. Baseball was serious. Very serious. And a baseball diamond—even one like this—was a place for work, not for daydreaming and smiling.

They began long toss. Five throws. Avi to Reuven. Reuven to Avi. Then they each took two giant steps backward and started again.

Reuven couldn’t remember when Dad had taught him and Avi to play long toss; it was so long ago. When they were little, it was three-way long toss. But, eventually, Dad just let the two of them play together while he coached.

“How do they know what positions we’re going to play?” Avi asked as he waited for Reuven’s throw.

“It doesn’t work that way.” Reuven flipped the ball in a perfect arc, then set himself for the return. “Spring league isn’t like the teams you’ve played on before. They’ll ask you what positions you want to play, but that doesn’t mean much. In spring league, the coaches decide and you play where they tell you.”

“Is everybody pretty good?”

“You remember my team last year, don’t you? Everybody was good. Almost everybody.”

The boys stopped to take their giant steps backward.

“You going to pitch?” Avi heaved the ball to Reuven. “I mean, do you want to pitch?”

“I might. I might try.”

“Why have you been practicing so much, then, if you don’t want to pitch?”

“I didn’t say I didn’t want to pitch. I said I might try. You have to try out.” Reuven sent the ball back with a little extra spin. “You have to try out for pitcher in this league.”

While the boys worked, Mr. Silver dumped their catcher’s gear on home plate. Most kids didn’t even own catcher’s gear, but the Silvers took their baseball seriously, and Dad insisted on safety first.

“Hey, guys,” he called to the boys. “Move apart some more. Think third to first. That’s going to be an important throw.”

They each backed up four steps this time, and after that, every throw was launched with a grunt. Avi stopped asking questions, and Reuven concentrated on the rhythm of the game.

Dad watched until they’d made about a dozen throws each, then plopped a couple of balls next to the pitcher’s mound and motioned for the boys to come in.

“Registration is in an hour. Let’s skip pop-ups and grounders today and do some pitching. Who’s first?”

“I am.” Reuven stepped up on the mound.

“Why you?” Avi grumbled. “I want to pitch first this time.”

“Come on, guys. Let’s not waste time today.”

Avi shrugged, moved over to home plate, and slipped into the chest protector while Dad helped strap the shin guards around his legs.

Reuven’s pitching form was not a thing of beauty. He knew that. He used a three-quarter sidearm motion that Dad had shown him one year when he was struggling for accuracy. His accuracy was better now, but he had never tried to change his style. It worked for him.

Reuven traded the sliding rhythm of long toss for the staccato beat of pitching. Now each throw had a big exclamation point behind it, and Reuven liked how that felt. He liked the stretched-out tug on his shoulder when he released the ball. He loved the speed of his body plunging down the sloped mound with the air struggling against his sweat-flecked face. He liked hearing the thwack of the ball as it hit Avi’s glove.

“Okay, so step up your speed a little now.”

Reuven stepped up his speed, and the thwacks came faster and louder. Then he got off one pitch that seemed to explode out of his hand. Those pitches always felt so good.

“EE-YOWCH!” Avi yelled, letting the ball bounce out of his catcher’s mitt. He threw off his glove and took a moment to rub the deep red tint from his hand.

“Well, come on.” Reuven backed up to reach for another ball.

“My turn.” Avi flipped off his mask, then bent to

unstrap the shin guards.

“Not yet,” Reuven insisted. “I was just getting warmed up. I haven’t even worked on placing the ball, yet.”

Avi groaned, put his mask back on, and crouched in position.

“We have to be fair, Reuven,” Mr. Silver called.

But Reuven knew that Avi would go along, and Dad wouldn’t do anything as long as Avi didn’t complain about it. So he acted like he hadn’t heard his father and got set for his next pitch.

“All right,” Dad sighed. “Maybe, just a little more for you. I’ll tell you where to put the ball. Let’s work on the outside edge. Don’t worry about high or low right now.”

Avi put his glove in position. Reuven focused on it and threw the ball just skimming the outside edge of the plate. Avi would let him throw four or five pitches to one spot before he shifted his glove a little farther out or a little closer in. They both knew the routine so well that they hardly even needed signals.

Dad crouched behind Avi just like a real umpire and called, “Good, Reuven,” when he hit the spot.

Reuven almost always hit the spot, so Dad switched to calling, “That was a little out,” or “That was a little in,” when Reuven occasionally missed.

At first, Reuven threw nice and easy, concentrating on where the ball went. Then he picked up speed. As the ball moved faster, the pop in Avi’s glove grew louder. *Thwack. Thwack.* Reuven imagined that Avi’s glove was a magnet,

tugging faster and harder with every throw.

Thwack. Thwack. THWACK!

That last one was perfect. It felt great—just like he'd launched a missile. But Avi didn't seem to think it had felt so great. He bounced to his feet almost as soon as the ball hit his glove.

"That's it. MY TURN!" Avi threw off the mask, pulled off his chest protector, and bent to untie the shin guards.

"Not yet," Reuven pleaded. "I want to try one curve-ball."

"Nope. I don't want you to do that," Mr. Silver answered in his no-nonsense-don't-even-bother-to-argue tone. "I've told you before. You can ruin your arm forever. You're too young. Just work on speed and placement. That's all you need right now."

"But some kids threw curves last year," Reuven argued.

Avi had stripped off all of the catcher's gear and was already strolling toward the mound. Reuven knew it was too late to beg for any more pitching time. Dad had given in once, and he wouldn't do it again. Reuven sighed, then headed in.

Reuven loved baseball. He loved pitching best, of course, but playing the infield was great, too. He would imagine himself as a coiled spring, ready to pounce the moment the ball left the bat. And the outfield was fun because you got to run races with the ball.

Reuven just plain loved everything about baseball. But the one thing that he didn't love quite as much as the rest

of it was catching. He could almost say that he didn't really like catching. Or even hated it.

There was so much equipment to wear. The face mask was always hot. Even the sharpest wind never quite made it through the bars of the mask to help with the sweat slithering down your face.

But Avi and Dad were waiting. Reuven put the gear on, got down in a crouch, and positioned his glove for Avi's first throw. It sailed twenty feet over Reuven's head and bounced off the backstop.

"Whoops." Avi laughed.

"Not my idea of funny," Reuven grumbled, loping back to get the ball.

"Ahh. I just wasn't ready. Watch my next one."

Reuven flipped the ball back, and the next pitch rocketed over his head, too. It took Avi ten or fifteen pitches to find the strike zone. Once he found it, he threw consistent strikes. Nice and easy, right down the middle.

"You're not throwing fast enough," Reuven called out. "Not for this league."

"He's right," Mr. Silver agreed. "You're throwing strikes and that's good. But we've got to get your speed up. Do you think you can throw a little harder?"

Reuven watched his brother work. Avi had that lanky build that made him look so much more like a pitcher than Reuven's more muscular shape. And he used a smooth overhand motion that started and stopped without an obvious beginning or end.

Reuven wished he looked more like Avi when he was pitching. Wished he had Avi's build. Still, he could throw a lot faster and a lot harder. Avi probably envied him for that. And Reuven kind of liked it that way. That's why he was a little surprised at himself when he took off for the pitcher's mound after snagging another slow, easy pitch.

"Look," he said to his brother. "You need to come farther forward with your right foot." Reuven drew a line across the pitcher's mound with his toe. "Aim for that spot. That's where you want to land."

He moved back into position, and Avi threw a few more pitches, bringing his right foot down on the place that Reuven had marked. Each pitch came with a little more zing.

"See! Told you!"

Then Avi got off a good one. One that really hustled. One that landed with a stinging *thwack*. One that might have been almost as good as one of Reuven's pitches.

Reuven dropped the ball in front of him and stretched to his feet.

"Let's go," he announced. "It's almost time."

Reuven knew they could have stayed a little longer, and he knew he'd gotten more pitching time than Avi. But that last pitch of Avi's had been a little too good. It had left Reuven's hand stinging and his stomach churning.

They gathered up the gear and made the short drive to a gymnasium a few blocks away. Tables lined one end of the room, and the front of each table had a bright red banner

hanging down showing a team name. Every few minutes, a loudspeaker system buzzed and squeaked boys' names and teams' names.

Avi joined the back of the line leading up to the table marked "Tigers." Reuven hung at the back of the room, listened until the whole list had been read twice, then slipped into the line behind his brother.

"Think this is the right line?" he asked Avi.

"Sure. Tigers. That's what they said for both of us."

"I thought that, too. It's hard to hear. Maybe Dad could ask someone. . . ."

"It was Tigers. They'll tell us if we're in the wrong line."

That was exactly what Reuven didn't want. He didn't want to be in the wrong place, and he didn't want someone telling him he was doing the wrong thing, and he didn't want to be embarrassed. Reuven hated being embarrassed. He hated, even more, having a kid brother who was always so much more confident than he was—a kid brother who wasn't afraid of doing things wrong, wasn't afraid of asking for help, and never got embarrassed.

Reuven scooted in a little closer to Avi when another boy joined the line, then twisted sideways to look over the room. He spotted a table at the far end of the room that had this year's All-Star trophies, standing in neat lines. They seemed bigger than last year's trophies and shinier.

One boy was ahead of Avi, and now a couple more had joined the line behind Reuven.

“I wonder how many want to pitch,” Reuven whispered close to Avi’s ear.

Avi shrugged, then tapped the boy in front of him on the shoulder.

“What positions do you want to play?”

“I dunno. Some place in the infield. What about you?”

“Catcher, I guess. My brother”—Avi motioned behind him—“wants to pitch.”

The boy looked over Avi’s shoulder and nodded at Reuven, then stepped up to register. As soon as the boy’s back was turned, Reuven leaned in close to Avi.

“Why’d you say that?” he hissed through clenched teeth.

“Why not?”

Avi twisted around to look at Reuven, pausing as his glance settled on the trophy table. Reuven shifted a little to block his view.

“Because we might both want the same thing. I mean, you just don’t tell everybody. And what if I don’t pitch? Or don’t get picked?”

It was Avi’s turn now to register, so he stepped forward without bothering to answer.

“Name?”

“Avi Silver.”

“Grade?”

“Eighth.”

“Uh-huh.” The man at the desk skimmed down his list, then made check marks as he asked more questions. “And

what positions do you want to play?"

"Catcher. Shortstop. I can pitch."

Reuven shook his head. Avi wasn't ready to pitch. How could he even dare to say that out loud? Reuven never asked to pitch last year and this year . . . well, this year he deserved it after working so hard all winter. How could Avi think he could waltz in and declare himself a pitcher? Just like that. Oh, well, his little brother would just have to figure out the hard way what it took to be great at baseball. Especially in this league.

While the man was fishing around in a box of uniforms for Avi's size, Reuven took a quick look around the room. Only a few of the boys standing in lines all around him were taller than his recently achieved five feet seven inches. Not that height was everything. Upper body strength counted for a lot, too. Most of the boys were wearing loose-fitting T-shirts, making it hard for Reuven to guess which of them, other than himself, had spent all winter lifting weights.

Finally, the man pushed a large mound of papers and a crisp, new uniform toward Avi, and it was Reuven's turn. He delivered his answers without even bothering to wait for the questions.

"Silver. Reuven. Ninth grade. Third base, mostly."

"You guys are brothers?" The man looked up and smiled. "I've got a great coach lined up for the Tigers. You'll like him. Here you go."

He shoved Reuven's pile of papers and uniform across

the table, then looked toward the next boy in line.

“I’ll try pitching, too,” Reuven added.

“Hmmm?” the man turned back to look at him. “Oh, sure. Pitcher. Always need another pitcher.” He made another check mark on his list, as Reuven backed away.

Across the room, Avi was reaching for one of those shiny trophies. Reuven hustled over.

“What are these for?” Avi asked.

Reuven jerked at his shirtsleeve. “We’ve gotta go. I have homework,” he announced, pulling Avi toward Dad who was waiting at the door.

“That can wait a few more minutes, can’t it?” Avi insisted.

“Yeah, you would think that. But I *do* my homework. Not like you.” And Reuven headed toward Dad, confident that Avi would follow.

On the way home, Avi sifted through the pile of materials—rules, practice schedules, game dates, and postseason plans.

“Hey! Did you see this?” Avi shoved one sheet toward Reuven.

But Reuven had seen it all before. He didn’t need to look.