

"Your hair is not red like a rose," he told me. "It is not so flat. I haven't seen this red, in books or in gardens."

"You think I'm cute," I said. He doesn't know how to flirt, he probably never will.

"You're not as pretty as some of the women in pictures and movies," he told me, "but you are more pleasing to look at. I am satisfied when I look at you. I would prefer to look at you."

"So you prefer my face, to other women's."

"I prefer your face," he said, "to all other faces."

There aren't many androids in the country, but we'll keep to ourselves. I have a garden planned—radish, squash, okra, corn and tomatoes of course. My first Lawrence grew up on a farm. We'd go to Vermont, every fall, to get a pumpkin and see the leaves turn. I think I've found our home. It's a great big old saltbox smack in the middle of the woods. It needs a few repairs. We'll replace the shingles, re-do the kitchen. I want a nice kitchen. I like cooking for us.

GEORGE GARRETT

Feeling Good, Feeling Fine

A BOY AND A man in the park. Between them an old wooden bat, a battered and dirty baseball and one leather glove, well tended and cared for, oiled and supple, but old, too, its pocket as thin as paper.

The boy and the man are sweating in the late afternoon light. Lazy end of a long summer day. The park (no more than a rough grass field, really) is empty now except for the two of them. Somewhere not far away a car horn toots, a dog barks, a woman calls her children in for supper.

"Come on," the man shouts. "Knock it to me!"

The boy carefully, all concentration, tosses the ball up and swings the bat to loft it high above the man. Who, skinny and raggedy as a scarecrow, moves gracefully back and away and underneath the high fly ball. Spears it deftly with the glove. Then throws it high and easy back toward the boy. The ball rolls dead, an easy reach from his feet.

"Let's quit and go home," the boy calls.

The tall thin man shakes his head and moves back deeper.

"One more," he hollers. "Just one more."

Crack of the bat on the ball and this is the best one yet. A homerun ball high in the fading light, almost lost in the last blue of the sky. The man shading his eyes as he runs smoothly and swiftly back and back until he's there where he has to be to snag it. Snags it.

Then comes running in toward the boy, hugely grinning, a loping fielder who has made the final catch of an inning.

You might think the boy would be pleased to have swung his bat (the glove and the bat and the ball are his) that well and knocked the ball so high and far. But truth is the boy hates baseball. "It's my least favorite sport," he will tell anyone who asks. Anyone except the man running toward him, his uncle, his mother's brother, who has recently come to live with them after several years at the state hospital.

Uncle Jack, he's had a hard time of it. First time he went crazy, his wife ran off with their two daughters, the boy's cousins, to California or some place like that and disappeared for keeps. Boy doesn't know it, can't comprehend it even if he could imagine it, but he won't ever see that woman and his two cousins again. Uncle Jack is living with them for the time being, "until he has a chance to get things straightened out," the boy's father explains. When the boy complains about the hours spent—wasted as far as he's concerned—knocking fungoes and chasing flys and grounders with Uncle Jack, his father simply says: "Humor him, boy. He's good at it. Let him be."

He ain't that good, the boy sometimes thinks but doesn't say.

Said it once, though, and his father corrected him.

"Listen, boy, he's rusty and he hasn't been well. But believe me, I'm here to tell you, he was some kind of a baseball player. A real pleasure to watch."

Minor league," the boy said scornfully. Who can't imagine anyone settling for anything less than the top of the heap. If he liked baseball enough to want to play at it, he would be in the majors or nothing. He sure enough wouldn't be happy with some old photographs in an album and some frail, yellowing newspaper clippings.

And if he was a crazy old man back from the state hospital and had a nephew who was required to humor him, the boy would never pretend, let alone believe for one minute that he was getting himself back in shape so he could join the New York Yankees or the Washington Senators or somebody like that.

Shit, Uncle Jack couldn't even play for the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Uncle Jack now has the bat in one hand and the other arm around the boy's shoulders (the boy carries the glove and the ball) as the two of them slowly head for home in the twilight.

"You hit that last one just a helluva good lick," Uncle Jack says. "You could be a real hitter if you put your mind to it. It's all in the coordination and you have got that, all you could ever need."

Why, if he hates baseball, does the boy relish and rejoice in the man's words? Why, if his Uncle Jack is some kind of crazy person and is fooling himself and everybody else, too, about what a great ballplayer he was and thinks he still is, why does the boy automatically accept and enjoy his uncle's judgment? Why, if his uncle is mostly embarrassment and trouble, someone to be ashamed of, does the boy at this very instant, altogether in spite of himself, wish more than anything that the tall, thin, raggedy, graceful man was and is everything he ought to be or could have been?

(Years and years later, when this boy is a grandfather him-

self, for reasons he won't understand then any more than he does now, he will tell his grandchildren, and anyone else who will bother to listen to him, all about his Uncle Jack who was, briefly—but is not all beauty and great achievement as brief as the flare of a struck match?—a wonderful athlete, a baseball player much admired and envied by his peers, someone who, except for a piece or two of bad luck, would have been named and honored among the very best of them. Someone to be proud of. Someone who once tried to teach him how to play the game.)

They are close to home now. They have left the raw wide field behind and are coming under a dark canopy of shade. Houses with green crisp lawns, dark earth and, here and there, a sprinkler pulsing bright water. Can see the lights of the boy's house being switched on downstairs. Can hear briefly, before his father's voice calls out a crisp command, music playing loudly on the radio. That will be his sister or his little brother fooling around. Upstairs probably. They are almost close enough to see through the lighted windows of the dining room his mother and Hattie, the maid, who works late and long for them in this Great Depression, setting the supper table with flat silver, napkins and water glasses. For a little time, the short walk, more of a stroll into the gradual dark, he has been almost perfectly content. Weary, sweated out, but feeling good, feeling fine, soothed by his uncle's complimentary words. Suddenly confident that whatever he does from here and now to the end of his life will go well. Even more: that he will be able not only to enjoy this feeling of satisfaction, of joy, really, but will be able to share it with others less fortunate than himself.

What he cannot know, even as he and his uncle come across the lawn and into the house and shut the front door

behind him, what he can't know and will not choose even to remember years and years later when he bitterly rakes the ashes of his life searching for even one remaining glowing coal, is what happens next.

At the table his father (who includes the whole family, even Hattie, in almost everything) will tell them about the long-distance telephone call he received at his office this same afternoon from a doctor at the state hospital in Chattahoochee. The doctor has told him that there is a new kind of an operation on the brain that might, just might, cure Uncle Jack for good and all. No more coming and going, no more breakdowns and slow recoveries. It is a new thing. There can be no promises or guarantees, of course. And, as in any operation, there is always danger, there are always risks. But . . .

Everybody listens intently. (Except Hattie, who elects to go back into the kitchen quietly.) Everybody listens. And then before Jack or anyone can say anything, his mother bursts into tears. Sobs at the table, trying to hide her face with her hands, her shoulders shaking.

Later that evening the boy will see his father, for the first and probably the only time, slap his mother full across her soft face, making her sob again and more as they quarrel about what may be the best thing for her brother to do. His uncle will settle the quarrel by freely and cheerfully choosing to return to the hospital to undergo this operation. And—the boy and man would warn them then and now, if there were some way, any way, if only he could—it went badly, as badly as can be, leaving his uncle no more than half alive, a vegetable, really, in that hospital for the rest of his life. The boy will live to be an old man, will go to war and live through it, will learn all the lessons—of love and death, of gain and loss, of pride and of regret—a long life can teach.

But none of this has happened yet. Man and boy have spent a long afternoon in the park together and, at the end of it, have come home. They come in the front door. Jack grabs his sister, the boy's mother, and gives her a bear hug, lifts her in the air. The boy goes to put the bat and the ball and the glove in the hall closet. Over his shoulder he hears his sister and brother coming down the stairs like a pair of wild ponies. Looking up, turning, he sees his father, smiling in shirtsleeves, coming out of the living room with the evening paper in his hands.

"Here they are," he says. "Here come our baseball players just in time for supper."

LESLIE PIETRZYK

Pompeii

HE SUNLIGHT THROUGH the bedroom window had already slid halfway across the Persian carpet by the time they woke up. Phil was first, opening his eyes slowly, squinting before focusing on Beth's dark hair draped across her face. He wanted to draw it back—how could she breathe with that curtain of hair over her mouth?—and let it slip through his fingers, but he kept still, afraid he'd wake her. They'd stayed up too late, his fault.

She lay on her side, her head resting in the hollow of his shoulder, just under his collarbone, exactly where she'd snuggled in when they'd gone to sleep, though she must've rolled away at some point in the night. He was becoming more awake now, listening to her breathing, enjoying the tickle against his skin as she exhaled until he worried that her breath was too quick, too shallow; maybe she was dreaming about running? Running was one of their shared passions, and that was how they'd met, sort of. He'd seen her across the patio at a friend-of-a-friend's party; without realizing what she was