

## Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

*Kevin Tosca*  
**Pop**

**T**hree days ago at Christmas dinner Klay reluctantly announced to his mother and father that they would soon be grandparents. Immediately after the announcement a heavy, even more melancholy, silence overtook the table. Irma, Klay's new wife, tried not to smile which was difficult considering her smile was promiscuous and damn near involuntary. She tried because she was, indeed, a remarkable woman, one who respected the mournful air of this place Klay did not want to be in, had not wanted to introduce her to. She had insisted.

What he wanted, all Klay wanted, was to get back to bed, get back into his wife's arms and make the minutes and the hours disappear so he could get back home to Seattle, to his new life, but his mother, through her own sad, silent fog, managed to ask if they knew the sex, and when he said a boy something odd happened to his father's face. Some kind of spark returned. Some semblance of joy. Were new plans hatched? That thought sent a shiver through Klay.

The next morning, apropos of nothing, Frank Neerbom told his son that he wanted to play a game of catch. Out front, he said, out in the street, like they used to.

Klay remained silent, bewildered.

"What," his old man said derisively as he finished his third screwdriver, "you forget how?"

"I haven't thrown in years, Pop."

"And I have? Humor me. I'll get the gloves."

There were witnesses. Both Irma and his mother, who were getting set to go shopping for baby clothes, had heard that it was Frank's idea.

In his father's garage Klay watched as Frank unwrapped the rubber bands, took the baseballs out. They were not hard to find, these gloves, and that surprised Klay. His father handed him his own and Klay brought it to his nose. He saw his father do the same. The smell. Nothing like it. Leather, oil, use. Klay took a deep whiff, then put his hand inside where the memories lived. He felt them. Saw them. He saw his father, like he was in the tape, the same horse-face, the stubble, the wild eyebrows, the cheek swollen with tobacco, the kick and force. A still hungry animal. A tyrant. Not this broken, gray, flabby man in front of him.

Klay walked down the driveway thinking how he hadn't thrown a baseball in six years, remembering that last game and the mess that preceded and followed it. He pushed those memories away and thought of the fantasies he had had that if he did pick up a baseball again he'd be able to throw it harder than ever, eclipse that ninety-mile-per-hour mark he couldn't eclipse when he pitched for the Rattlesnakes. He could make it. Even now. Be called up. Get further, further than his father had, too. But who was he kidding? Baseball had almost killed him and he didn't even watch the game on television anymore, didn't even glance at the box scores in the paper. He was a man, a grateful man, who loved a woman

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who confused the teams, a woman who thought the Mariners played basketball, who thought the Braves—well, she didn't know anything about Georgia. He punched the glove's pocket and looked up at the sky.

Quiet. Everything was quiet. It was day after Christmas quiet and blue and mild like December can be in southern Georgia, mild enough to wear a T-shirt if you felt like it, mild and beautiful like the day on the tape.

They started close together, lobbing the ball to one another, warming up, and though Klay could see a rare smile on his father's face, a pallid face that looked ghastly and obscene in the winter's light, he could tell the old man was struggling with coordination and depth.

They moved further apart, like they used to do, everything done without words as it had always been done between them, Klay throwing harder and the smile on Frank's face growing bigger. The ball felt smaller than Klay remembered. Lighter. The seams more raised and perfect. When Klay was young, five or six, his father would rocket the ball at him. Without mercy. But the bruises healed fast back then and Klay learned to catch everything his father threw his way. He learned how to throw it all back, too, how to respect and hate each batter he faced, how to save his hate for them, the batters, and the mound.

In the street it was as if his arm was re-awakening to something, for something. The glove, the ball in his fingertips, his wife, somewhere far, but close, like Seattle, like real homes. Not a sweeter sound than that of a baseball smacking the leather of two men's gloved hands.

His father's breath came heavy, but he was still throwing, still catching, still smiling. Klay's arm moved beyond memory and pleasure to something like divinity. It and he felt capable of anything and when the predictable cycle of catch started winding down, when the two men, father and son, started moving closer together in that period of the game when you're supposed to decrease the force, Klay knew what he was going to do. Frank knew it too. He must have. It was that smile, that knowing, smug, and sad smile. Sad yes, but not to Klay. There was no tenderness, no charity, between these two men. No, his father's smile never disappeared, but the old man would tell his wife and his daughter-in-law and the medics otherwise. It did look like an accident.

They continued to approach one another and Klay, as if he had trained and developed his arm and his fastball for one reason, for *this* reason and for *this* day, shot the ball at his father.

Pop!

Frank didn't so much as catch the ball as stop it, just in front of his heart where his gloved hand had rested open. Klay had put it there, a perfect strike. Control he had always had. And when he saw the grimace of pain on his father's face a new power introduced itself, a force he hadn't had.

They moved closer.

Thirty feet.

Twenty-five.

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Twenty, taking slow, calculated steps. Frank could've kept the ball, taken off the glove then and there as was his right in this game, to end it. He could have lit a cigarette and used the cutting motion one or the other had always used to say Done, but that's not what happened. He threw the ball back, a gentle toss, and smiled that weird, incongruous, infuriating smile, and as his full-grown son wound up, at short range, he let his arms fall limp by his sides.

Klay saw the arms fall, but he didn't stop himself. If he had ever eclipsed ninety-miles-per-hour, if he had ever erased that frustrating mark and border of his skill and his failure, he had done so now.

Pop! The hard ball exploded on his father's face. And Frank Neerbom crumpled peacefully to the ground.

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Back in his old bedroom, on his old floor, watching the tape of him and his father fifteen years ago on his old high school's mound two days after having done what he did, his sick Christmas gift that everyone insisted on calling an accident, Klay studied his younger self, focusing on the eyes, the mouth. It wasn't the face of a kid being abused or tortured. It wasn't an angry, beaten face. It was determined. It was the face of someone who wanted to do something, become something extraordinary. Life got away from him, became confused and confusing. He had, in the terms of his father's world and dreams and life, failed, and he had become an alcoholic and a bitter man, just like his father had, but now there was Irma and new life and the other day. Yes, everything seemed to lead to that other day and that last game of catch. Klay wasn't happy about what he had done, but he felt no regret, either.

Out of his memories he heard someone yelling. His mother. His name, he finally realized.

"Klay," she called. "Klay?"

Klay shut off the video, ejected it, and dropped the tape into the bedroom's trashcan before going out to the living room.

"Can you make your father a drink?" she asked. "My back's killing me."

He looked outside, saw Irma on a lounge chair, reading one of her fat novels.

"Sure, Mom. What's he drinking?"

His mother almost smiled. "The usual," she said.

The usual, now, was Seagram's Whiskey, about four shots of it with a splash of soda. He poured the booze from the 1.75 liter jug, didn't ask if his mother needed a refill, then went into his father's bedroom.

It was dark, humid, and dusty in there. It stunk of cigarettes and sour laundry. Sticky glasses, next to an overflowing ashtray, sat on his father's night table. Klay knew that, under usual circumstances, his mother slept in his brother's old room.

Klay set the drink down, then emptied the butts into a full and foul

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can in the bathroom. The television's sound was low, but on it were skilled, grown men in uniforms playing the only game there ever was to be played. It was a Classic Sports channel, and this game pre-dated Klay. Early seventies, it looked like.

"Nolan Ryan," his father muttered. "Son of a bitch could bring it."

Frank's face was shattered and it was hard for him to talk. His nose was smashed, his eyes black and swollen, his mouth missing a couple more teeth. Klay could see the seams of the baseball on his father's skin, rolling up the cheek.

"Grab a beer," his father said, "if you want."

There was a mini-fridge near the closet, and Klay went over and got one, then walked around to the other side of the bed, flipped off his boots, and got in next to his father. Doing so Klay remembered something else, a fond memory, one of the best. He had to have been six or seven and he had had an excruciating earache. At the time his mother waited tables nights for extra money. Klay remembered coming to the bedroom's door, standing there, timid. "Hurts, doesn't it?" his father had said, amazingly not telling him to suck it up and get the fuck out. He was probably drunk, but not too. Klay couldn't gauge such things so well back then. "Come on," his father had said, patting the bed, "we got a good one on tonight." Klay didn't hesitate. He crawled in the bed next to his father, waiting for the usual fury to rise, but when it didn't he put his head in the crux of his father's arm, the armpit, and he tried to watch the game, tried to stay up—he desperately wanted to stay up and make this last—but the pain had worn him out and he slept peacefully, and hard, next to the familiar, comforting smells of his old man, next to his Pop.

"Smoke?" his father asked, holding out the pack.

Klay looked at him through the darkness and the now of things, saw the small man in the white sleeveless shirt, the pot-belly, the boxer shorts, the pale thin hairless legs, the man with all the similar features and flaws, and though he hadn't smoked a cigarette in six months he reached out and took one from the pack.

"Sure," he said.

And there they sat, father and son, in bed together, smoking and drinking and watching that old game both had played and loved and lost to, both of them propped up against the pillows and the headboard and the past, neither of them needing to say another word.