

Robert and Ellis and the baseball cards of love

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Robert has baseball cards taped all over his apartment walls. Ellis is Robert's friend. Ellis is a lesser version of Robert, a few inches shorter, several pounds lighter, not as handsome, not as smart. Robert groups his baseball cards into teams. Robert is the General Manager. Robert is each team's General Manager. For each different team, for each General Manager, he takes on a different personality. One of his General Manager personalities is shiftily and trades players as if selling used cars. Another is forthright and believes wholeheartedly in the teachings of the Bible. Another is

moody and aggressive but honest. Another is a risk taker for the sake of risk. Another hoards his young prospects. Another is eccentric and wears flashy suits. Another is a raunchy alcoholic with a heart of gold. Another is non-descript and embezzling millions from the team. Another has fifty-seven cats at home. Another's shirt is always stained. Another has a wife half his age and a boat named The Extra Inning. Another is polite and wears bow-ties and says gosh darn it a lot. Another is a comic book aficionado and puts his team together as a graphic storyline. Another is a polygamist. Another is an ex-astronaut. Another is from Harvard. Another never went to high school. It goes like that. Once in a

while one of the General Managers gets fired. This happens when Robert gets tired of the personality he's playing. A new General Manager is hired and Robert gets to invent a brand new personality.

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When Robert makes trades he instructs Ellis to move around the cards of the players traded. This is Ellis' job. Ellis is Assistant General Manager. Ellis has a long thin neck and thinning blond hair. He is young and scrawny and jittery and quiet. Ellis is most comfortable when he is being told what to do. His face is an alien's and inordinately pink. Another word for inordinately pink is pale. Ellis met Robert on a bus.

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Robert as the moody and aggressive hooligan General Manager is unhappy with his latest trade. Robert as the unassuming Bible-thumper General Manager is quite pleased. He acquired two Christians, a short-stop and second-basemen, for the heathen carcass of an aging home run king disgraced after significant traces of performance-enhancing drugs were found in his urine. Robert the moody and aggressive General Manager berates himself by saying I just traded God's double-play combo for the Devil Himself—what was I thinking? Ellis, who has no idea what Robert is thinking, and dares not to hazard a guess, stands meekly with his arms at his side patiently awaiting his next instructions.

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On the bus that day they met it was understood. Their lives had intersected, had come from two separate points, and stopped next to each other. Ellis in fact had stepped on Robert's foot. At that stopping, their separate lives ended and their lives together began. Their relationship was more than older brother and younger brother. But less than father and son. Not exactly mentor and apprentice. And certainly not master and slave. No one however would deny that there were aspects of each of these relationships contained within the fabric and flesh of theirs. They were General Manager and Assistant General Manager. Ellis was not permitted to make trades on his

own. He was permitted, but only on occasion, to make suggestions on trades. It was understood without a word spoken that if Robert ever arrived home to find the cards moved around without express written permission from him, a flogging would take place. Behind the shed, with Ellis bent at the waist, Robert would pummel the posterior of Ellis with an old rowing oar, the oar's flat end causing a thunderous slap of wood on human flesh until Robert deemed the punishment complete. Or worse perhaps, Ellis would be instructed to lay his hands flat on a table, palms to the splintery wood. At that point, Robert, clutching an old brass serving spoon from the 1800s, would wrap the knuckles of Ellis

without mercy. The next day Ellis would arrive with bandages covering his mutilated hands and a new quietness which somehow managed to overwhelm its previous version. But Ellis never made a trade or moved the cards around unless ordered to do so by Robert. Certain implications along the way, a misstep by Ellis here, a wrong word there, followed by a look, just a look, from Robert, had made the consequences, if not specific, then at least clear enough.

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On certain days, with no warning, Dorothy would arrive. Her presence was neither mystery nor expectation. Her presence was accepted, that's all. Her disappearance, at times sudden as

a skittish cat, also caused no disturbance in the ripples of time.

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While Robert and Dorothy retired to the bedroom, Ellis was left to his own devices. Often, he would imitate the muffled noises he heard coming from the bedroom. As if exploring new territory, Ellis' actions were timid at first, innocent however. With studied deliberation, he attempted to copy the noises he heard. His mouth moved slowly. He experimented with different positions for his tongue. Finally he was able to mimic to perfection the noises he heard.

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Once, when Dorothy arrived, Ellis quite innocently mentioned the “uh uh uh room.” You’re going to

ohhhooo maaa goottttt now? When Robert and Dorothy had disappeared into the bedroom, Ellis went back to the wall of baseball cards. He fingered the edges, with gentleness. He pressed a finger to the faces. Often, he whispered to them.

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The next time Dorothy arrived, she brought Mary with her. When Robert and Dorothy went into the bedroom, Mary and Ellis were alone together. Neither spoke for several minutes.

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Ellis fingered gently the edges of the baseball cards. Mary fingered the edges. Ellis pressed a finger to the faces on the baseball cards. Mary pressed a finger. Ellis put his cheek to one baseball card, and seemed in a

state of quiet ecstasy. Mary pressed her cheek to Ellis' cheek. They stayed like that a while. Ellis' cheek to the card, Mary's cheek to Ellis' other cheek. Ellis against the wall, Mary against Ellis, both lost in a quiet ecstasy. Through the bedroom door the noises became angry, urgent, and then they stopped.