

7th Inning Stretch

“Sometimes, you know, it all just seems to go so fast.”

“Lots of ground ball outs,” she promptly replied. “Johnson’s had his slider low and outside all day...couple of 5 pitch innings.”

I smiled, watching her sip ice cold beer out of a frosty mug on this warm (hot, actually, if you were in the sun) September day; the sky a clear blue, the sticky thick August humidity gone from the early fall air. After all our years together, still yet she could amaze me; but, really, what would you expect, she grew up in St. Louis...Cardinals baseball country, where the whole city, from the bus driver to the Chuck Berry wannabe’s, pulls extra duty as Assistant General Manager!

It’s not exactly a religion here in St. Louis, Cardinal baseball, more of an obsession, a delightful distraction from the constant running of the rat race.

“I know American League out of towners like me aren’t supposed to ever question any local traditions,” I began, “but, you know, I really do wish they would quit with this 7th Inning Stretch “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” group sing thing. How boring...back in Boston-”

“Uh, huh, mister,” she interrupted. “Baseball is tradition...besides, you’ve lived here long enough, you know you don’t give two hoots about the Red Sox anyway.” Turning, she looked at me, pinning me with her best prosecutorial penetrating stare. “I suppose, Mister Non-Traditional, you’re also tired of Jingle Bells, White Christmas and Rudolph!”

“Actually,” I said, assuming my most public defender innocent of expressions, “I could go a year without hearing “Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer” ...at least, I’m pretty sure I could. Trust me, our “traditional” consumer consumption holiday would survive with a little less-”

The announcer’s metallic voice interrupted my rant. Probably for the best, I thought. No need to ruin a perfectly good backyard afternoon debating social culture. Besides, to paraphrase Emerson, one man’s tradition is another’s hobgoblin.

“That’s it for the Cubs in the 7th,” he announced. “No hits, no runs, no errors, nobody left. Your hometown Cards are up 3-2. Time now for the 7th Inning Stretch and a refreshing ice-cold Busch!”

“I bet you’d keep that tradition,” she said and turned, handing me our bag of peanuts, her red hair reflecting the afternoon sun’s rays.

“You are always so right.” I said, taking a handful of peanuts, no longer listening to the noise of the game, the crowd, just enjoying the moment. We rarely had time alone, what between work, children, the yard, the house, etc. Sighing softly, I relaxed into our cushioned swing.

“Nothing better than a September sweep of the Cubbies.” I said.

“Well...” she replied slowly, edging closer, pressing her hand on mine, our wedding rings laying side by side, as we have for over 20 years now, “maybe, one or two things...”

The “baseball” song over, the announcer came to life, “Maxwell in, pinch hitting for Johnson.” The crowd grew loud. Maxwell’s our best pinch hitter! Here we are with a one run lead, bottom of the seventh, Cubs vs. Cards, September and I’m having trouble concentrating on the game.

"Another run would be good," I said, looking at her intently.

"Almost always," she replied softly.

"I have a talent for stating the obvious."

"I know."

Casually, I sipped my beer. Maxwell walks on 6 pitches, none of them close.

"Humph..." I grunted, frowning. "Setting up the double play?"

"Most likely," she said, giving my hand an extra squeeze, then putting her arm around my shoulders. "Maxwell's gotten slower over the years."

Reaching over, I patted her leg, bare below her shorts, feeling the firmness.

"Those ellipticals...your legs are really something, babe." I remarked, trying to stay casual, the game quickly fading.

"Richard's up..." she said, sotto voce, pressing closer. "Bet he's thinking home run."

I kissed her lightly.

"No bunt down the first base line?"

She laughed playfully, fingers toying with my hair.

Richards bunted; we no longer cared.

She stood, turning to lean over directly in front of me, lightly pushing our lawn swing back and forth. "We've got about an hour before the kids get home."

"Sending them to the movies was one of your better ideas."

"I've got another one."

One click and the radio was off. We headed for the house, walking arm in arm.

"Now then," she said, as she kissed my neck. "How about something sweet?"

"Crackerjacks?" I said.

She laughed.

"We'll check the score later."