The Red Stockings
Brent A. Johnson

Adam silently sat in his study, pen in hand, with a blank sheet of paper on the oaken desk before him. The same sheet of paper had been staring at him for the last three days, and for the last five weeks. Surrounding the paper were meaningful knick-knacks Jessie had acquired over his career as a writer, father, and person. A crude, wooden bowl his daughter had made for him containing paper clips, some old Indian cents, and a pair of fingernail clippers neighbored an elegant gold and oaken pen set that matched his deeply polished desk. In the front left corner was a miniature Grandfather's clock standing ten inches high. The University where he taught had given him it for winning the Pushcart Prize and for twenty-five years of being on the faculty. The clock had a small pendulum swinging side to side, keeping time. Its white face was marked with black roman numerals, and the delicately constructed black hands partially covered the etched golden moon dial in the top half of its facade. It wasn't a smiling moon like one usually sees. It was simply an ordinary orb surrounded by stars and light clouds. The miniature clock resembled the full-sized Grandfather that stood in the corner next to the bay window overlooking a small stream trickling over rocks below. It made much louder chimes than did the smaller clock. Adam had them set in perfect synchronicity so that he could hear their harmony whenever they struck the hour. On the right edge of his desk sat an old baseball in a custom holder. It was brown and weathered and covered with autographs from the 1945 Cincinnati Reds team. The ball read "July 27, 1945 Red Stockings vs. Dodgers." It was not a special year—no World Series championship, just an ordinary season, but it was the first baseball game that his father had taken him to. The baseball was a tangible piece of a sport that truly captured Adam's heart and symbolized essential Americana for him.

July 27, 1945, was a magical summer day. Adam was nine. His father had seats behind home plate, ten rows up form the fence. Adam's eyes were as wide open as the ballfield itself. The white sunlight shown brightly directly overhead, and cast the shadow of the stars and stripes waving in the light breeze over the green grass below. The seats in the stadium were filled. Ground crew workers were spraying the infield dirt with hoses in preparation for the game's first pitch. Adam excitedly stood up and pointed out to his father that he could see a rainbow in the mist coming from the hose. At the top of their section of seats, a vendor yelled to the crowd: "Peanuts! Peanuts! Get your peanuts! Hot dogs! Hot dogs! Get your hot dogs heeere!"

Tugging at his father's sleeve Adam asked, "Can I get a hot dog with mustard. Can I please, Daddy?"

His father waved the vendor down by holding up three fingers. Adam's mouth began to water in anticipation as the vendor, in a red pin-striped jacket and matching hat walked down the stone steps toward their seats.

"I need three hot dogs with mustard, please."

"Alright, sir. Three with mustard it'll be. Should be a goood ball game today I tell ya!" the man said in a Scottish accent while spreading mustard over the three steaming dogs.

Turned sideways in his hard, slippery seat and sitting on his knees, Adam's mind traveled back and forth quickly between thoughts of the baseball game and the delicious smell of the hot dogs.

"Will ya be needing any peanuts or anything to drink with that today, sir?"

"Yeah!" Adam eagerly offered.

"Then we'll take two large sodas and one bag of peanuts with that too, sir."

"Alright. That'll be $1.10."

"Here's $2.00 and why don't you keep the rest."

"Thank you much, sir, and enjoy the ballgame this afternoon will ya," the vendor said as he brought his right hand to his head, tipping his hat.

With his feet propped up on top of the seat before him Adam sat back, eating his hot dog and admiring his father. The hot dog's bun was soft and hot and smelled like it had just come from the bakery. The cup of soda slipped slightly in Adam's hands because the outside was wet with condensation. Adam looked at his father and smiled. He did not need not to say thanks. His father just smiled back at him and pulled his son's bright-red, felt baseball cap down over his eyes saying, "Let's watch the ballgame."

Adam innocently laughed out loud as he used the top of the cup to fix his hat. They sat together, father and son, and watched as the first batter came to the plate.

Adam stared at the paper. It was the color of old newsprint. Tauntingly, it stared back at him, and
It isn't a Matter of Life and Death

The game is almost over. 
Gripped by fear like a deer who hears a ruffle in 
the leaves, 
Am I afraid of losing? 
It's just a game I played across the street from 
My house when I was young. 
What's so different now? 
The ball floating in the air, mocking me, 
you're going to fail. 
That's it. 
The world is watching. 
But dropping the ball doesn't make me a failure. 
That's what I tell myself. 
Don't take your eye off the ball.

--Dax Gonzalez