

Rubber-Band Requiem

by Dean West

I watched a young child skipping down the sidewalk bouncing a rubber ball on a wooden paddle. She was very good so I moved to the side, stepped onto the manicured grass so as not to disturb her concentration. She sang a song in a child's warbling voice.

“Now we lay you in your grave
There was no way you could be saved
You hate our lord Jesus and he can tell
Which is why you will burn in hell.”

She paused in front of me for only a moment, keeping the ball synchronized as she started to count.

“One for Jesus
Two for the Devil
Three for me.
Four for the whore
And five for thee.”

I watched the red ball climb into the air and return to its place on the paddle, and fly upward again. Then I saw the rubber band attached to the ball and I understood the mystery. I winked at her, letting her know I was willing to keep the secret but she ignored me and continued skipping.

Weary from the rubber band epiphany, I sat on the lawn to rest my legs. But the sprinklers, perhaps sensing my exhaustion, turned on and forced me into the street. A pickup, full of lawnmowers and rakes, missed my hip by inches. I spun and as I spun, I watched the horror unfolding as the little girl, oblivious of the danger, started into the intersection.

I screamed, "Stop!" The child obeyed instantly and the truck sped by, leaving in its wake only a trace of blue smoke.

The rubber ball hung limp from the paddle and the girl's face turned red. I thought she might cry and I was willing to hold and comfort her but she gathered herself and turned toward me.

"Now, I'll have to start over and it's nobodies fault but yours," she said.

"I'm sorry," and the sprinklers, perhaps sensing I wasn't a threat after all, turned off and I walked on, singing the tune now firmly in my head.

"Now we lay you in your grave
There was no way you could be... "

"Stop!" she screamed. I turned and watched her walk toward me, the rubber ball dragging behind her on the sidewalk. "Who do you think you are, singing my song?" she asked.

Shocked at her anger, I answered "Nobody." I backed up to maintain the narrowing distance between us.

Don't you know that fibbing is a sin? You're not nobody."

"What did I do wrong?" I asked.

"You butted in. That's what."

"I'm sorry." Jumbo jets screamed overhead as dogs barked like demons in the backyards.

"So, Mr. Nobody... if that's your real name, what are you doing in my neighborhood dressed in rags like that? You're filthy. I may just

scream and when my parents come, I'll tell them you tried to touch me. They'll take you away to a deep dark place and you'll never see the light again.

I felt the sun on my back, the warmth working its way into my sore muscles and I pleaded, "Please don't. I've just returned."

"Did I ask you to come back?"

"Many have."

"That's their problem."

Then, she lost interest in me and begin to bounce the ball again.

After a while, her rhythm settled and she ask, "So why did you wink at me?"

"I saw your secret, the rubber band and was only admiring the trick."

"It's not a trick. It's a miracle. A trick would be feeding thousands with a loaf of bread and a jug of wine. The miracle is that the ball returns each time... or did until you came along and interfered."

I winced from the accusation.

"Why did you yell at me? Tell me to stop?" She asked.

I was saving you, that's all. Isn't that enough?"

"Did I ask you to save me?"

With that, she continued to count.

Six for the prophets
Seven for Baby Jesus
Eight for the wise men
And nine for thee.

She stopped counting and the red rubber ball froze in mid-air,
hanging as the earth stood still.

I stared, amazed until, with a flip of her hand, she dismissed me.
“You can go now but don't come back. Don't interfere again.”

