

Travel Time

by Jeffrey S. Callico

There is a ball. It is a red ball. It is bouncing across the freeway. I try to avoid it but don't know why. What would a ball do to my car, why should I avoid a ball that is bouncing across a freeway, am I afraid I will damage it, am I afraid it will damage me, my car, what am I afraid of, I should not avoid it, I should just hit it and make it bounce all the more. But I don't. I swerve to avoid hitting the ball and in doing so strike another car which in turn strikes a third car and soon a pile-up is on the freeway because of some stupid ball.

The cop asks me what happened and I start to tell him, but before I do I contemplate whether I should. I see again the red ball in my mind, bouncing in my direction and the thought I had of not avoiding it and hitting it instead. But the cop is one of those arrogant impatient types and he's waiting for me to tell him what happened, holding his aluminum pad and a black pen.

"Well, officer," I begin, but then someone pipes up and says something behind me.

"It was his fault," some guy in a brown leather jacket says, pointing at me.

The cop looks down at the pad and writes something. It's upside down and angled away so I can't make out what he's writing.

"Shut up," I tell the guy in leather.

"What?"

"You heard me, I said shut up."

"Hey," he says.

"Hey," the cop says. "Go away."

The guy shrugs and walks off, evidently back to his beat-up car.

I turn back to the cop, who is now looking at me.

"As I was saying, officer," I begin again, but then the thought of not telling him what really happened flares up in my mind. I decide I am not going to make myself into some sort of fool by explaining that some ball bounced across the road and in trying to avoid it I caused a ten-car crash. That would make a really great sound bite for everyone but me.

"I was driving along," I say to the cop, "and all of a sudden I had this vision that the car in front of me was going in reverse, you know, driving backwards, and that I was so stunned by it that my arms jerked and caused the steering wheel to turn sharply and then I hit the car on my right, which hit another car and so on and so on, and now here we are, and that's...that's what happened."

I can't believe, once I speak the last word, what I have said. It is worse than telling the truth, that a bouncing ball caused me to jerk to the right. I am going to be more of a laughingstock than I thought. And it is all my doing.

The cop stares at me for a moment, then looks to his left, toward the setting sun over a broad curve in the freeway a half-mile distant.

"That's your statement?" he asks, gazing at what I assume to be the sun.

I take a moment, wondering if it's appropriate to change my story. "Yes," I tell him, "that's it. That's what happened."

"Okay," the cop says, closing the pad and placing the pen in his shirt pocket. "You can return to your car and wait for further instructions."

I return to my car and await further instructions, but none come. Wreckers come instead. The freeway is cleared and there is no sign of the bouncing ball.

That night, as I lie awake staring at the ceiling, I can see the ball again, bouncing from left periphery. I wonder from where it had come and what would have happened had I hit it. It would have bounced off another car, I think out loud, then bounced off another, over and over. It would maybe have bounced around on that freeway, like at an outdoor music festival, and if no one had been afraid of it like I was it would have caused no harm to anyone. The ball was just a ball and was doing what a ball does: bounce. It was I who was at fault, but no one knew it, no one but me.

I roll over and fall asleep and dream that a ball with a face is driving a car in reverse and no one is there to stop it.

