

THE LUCKY RED BALL

William sits on the bench at the bus stop and tightens the collar of his trench coat against the cool May breeze. Spring is so unpredictable; yesterday he carried his coat home.

He gazes across the street at the elementary school, watching the colourful children dart about the tarmac like random atoms, their laughter ricocheting off the cement. A little girl, behind the chain-link fence, is running towards him in that loopy, uncoordinated way of a child. She's chasing a ball, but it doesn't stop at the steel fence, it rolls through a tear in the link towards the sidewalk. Reaching the fence, her curly white-blonde hair is whipped back by a gust of wind. She looks up at him in open-mouthed dismay and disbelief, her pudgy fingers wiggling through the diamond cutouts.

He looks around to confirm her imploring eyes were meant for him, and checks the empty residential street for signs of his bus. He leaves his briefcase on the bench and crosses the road in quick, long strides, his eyes on the small red ball meandering along the edge of the sidewalk.

Stooping to pick it up, he hears the swoosh of air brakes as Number 8 approaches the intersection. Heck. It skipped his stop because no one was getting off, and he clearly wasn't getting on. William waves, trying to make eye contact with bus driver waiting for the light to change, but the man stares straight ahead, arms wrapped comfortably around the horizontal steering wheel.

William turns back to the girl, raising the ball over his head in a show of success, but she's not there. He scans the school field, but the fair-haired girl is nowhere to be seen. He pockets the hard ball and lopes back to the bus stop. He will return it to her Monday.

That evening, like most, he sits in his arm chair, dinner plate on his lap, watching the local news. He leans forward when the newscaster reports a freakish bus accident, which occurred this afternoon around half past four, involving bus 8, just two stops after his.

"In a bizarre series of events," the female co-anchor continues, "a bus full of passengers was struck by an out-of-control, white, 4x4, pickup truck, propelling it into the glass bus shelter

where a woman and girl were waiting." The bus driver and several passengers standing at the front in the aisle were taken to hospital and later released with minor injuries, reports her colleague. The woman remains in hospital in serious condition, and the little girl, her identity withheld, did not survive. Charges are pending for the driver of the truck, who was not injured.

It occurs to William, as he takes his dishes to the sink and turns on the tap, that if he hadn't gone after that ball for the little girl, he would have been wedged upright against other tired passengers, and likely among those injured.

His colleague Joyce, an accountant about 10 years younger, is a free-spirited mother who gives staff psychic readings over lunch from the deck of Tarot cards she keeps in her drawer. She believes that we are all connected at the subconscious level through our energy vibrations. There are no coincidences, he's heard her say, and we shouldn't be so quick to write-off what we can't explain with expressions like 'it was just blind luck', or 'it's just one of those freaky things'.

William believes it was just blind luck he missed his transfer, and it was just bad luck for the passengers on Number 8. If the bus had to pull over to the curb to let him on, he reasoned, it would have missed the green light, and those minutes spent getting back into traffic and waiting at the red light could have prevented it from being hit by the pickup truck. But he cautions, as he dries the cutlery pieces to prevent water marks: the woman and child in the shelter would still be in the wrong place, at the wrong time, because the pickup would have likely collided with another oncoming vehicle, propelling it into the shelter.

He returns to his arm chair and picks up the unfinished Sudoku puzzle. He enjoys this brain exercise more than crossword puzzles because it's based on the logic placement of numbers, not words. Words are subjective, while numbers mean the same thing to everyone.

When he tells his staff on Monday morning about the little girl's ball and the bus accident, Joyce jokes: "Saved by the ball!" After work, he watches for the little girl at the bus stop, the ball heavy in his coat pocket. He goes over the events in his mind again as he sits on the

bench. She could see he was fetching the ball for her, couldn't she? Perhaps she was called away by a teacher on schoolyard duty, alert to suspicious-looking men in trench coats loitering around school fences. Or maybe she saw her mother's SUV and ran back. William isn't superstitious, but he somehow feels that returning the ball was his way of thanking her for losing it, and saving him from the trauma (and injury most surely) of the truck-to-bus-to-bus-shelter collision.

By Wednesday William starts to wonder what to do with the ball he's been carrying. Throw it back over the fence? Return it to the school's lost and found? He pulls the Indian rubber ball from his side pocket and tosses it from hand to hand. This is the kind of ball they used to play with when he went to school, batting it with their hand against the school wall. Or bouncing it hard on the cement in front of the wall to see whose ball went the highest.

A young schoolboy approaches, drawn over by the red ball popping in a grown man's lap. "Where'd you get that ball?" the boy asks, pulling William out of his reverie. The boy's short dark hair is gelled upright and looks as stiff and prickly as the bristles on a wire brush. His hands are jammed into his jacket pocket, and padded shoulder straps indicate a knapsack rests on his back.

"Not mine, it belongs to a little girl at this school," he nods towards the school grounds across the street. "It rolled through the fence and I picked it up for her, but she ran away before I could give it back."

"That's Daisy's ball. How'd you get it?"

William turns to look at the boy who's staring straight at him as if trying to decide whether or not a tall stranger tossing a red ball could be a bad man. William thinks the boy is about the same age as the girl, or maybe a year older. "I told you ... she was chasing it..."

"Daisy's dead," the boy blurts out. "She was kilt by a bus riding her new bike to school. My Mom cried. She says I can't ride my bike to school anymore," he pulls out his school bus card from his pocket in proof. "She says riding a bus is safer than riding a bike. I cried too," he adds, although William doesn't know if he cried because he couldn't ride his bike to school anymore or because his friend Daisy died.

The boy plops down onto the bench and looks up at him expectantly. Was he still waiting for an explanation? He clearly didn't believe she lost this ball last Friday if she's dead. "I'm not supposed to talk to strangers, but you have Daisy's ball."

William looks at the ball as if willing it to explain how a dead girl's ball got into his possession. Yesterday, Joyce tapped on his open office door to tell him, in private thank goodness, she thought the white-blond child was one God's little guardian angels sent down to protect him from harm by luring him away from the bus with a runaway ball. So Daisy's either a friendly ghost or a guardian angel. Heck. He just can't bring himself to tell her he doesn't believe in this kind of stuff.

"I'm sorry about your friend," was the best William could manage, and he hoped he didn't sound as evasive as he felt. The boy's eyes were like dark saucers, protected by unusually long, thick eyelashes. William didn't want those beautiful eyes spilling tears if he suggests the ball, *if* it was the same, now belonged to someone else.

He shifts on the bench and crosses his long legs. Children can be so unpredictable - one minute they're rolling on the floor laughing and the next they're crying because their peas touched their mashed potatoes.

Number 8 screeches along the roadside grit to the curb. He glances down at the boy, who is swinging his short legs while eyeing the ball still cupped in his hand. Should he offer the ball to the boy as a keepsake? Or should he keep the ball that kept him safe? A keepsafe.

His grandfather kept a little statue of the Virgin Mary in his pocket when he fought in WWI, and believed to his death at 91 that it protected him from the German's deadly chlorine gas and artillery fire for four muddy, bloody years in the trenches of France and Belgium.

William stands up, pockets the ball, and boards the bus.
