

## THE RED BALL

by

O. D. Erickson

The trick, Gina's mother had said, was to bounce the red ball so that it returned to your hand each time. Sometimes Gina nearly succeeded, but never quite. Her mother would have had no trouble bouncing the ball correctly, because her mother did everything correctly, and said that Gina must try to do things correctly too. But Gina could never get the ball to come back exactly to her hand even two times in a row. After the first bounce it would always fly off, and she'd chase it across the sand, trying to keep it away from the edge of the sea. She had turned seven a month ago, but still did not like the wet touch of the sea. Besides, her mother said that the sea was dirty.

Her mother lay on the beach, sunning herself. It seemed to Gina that her mother had been lying in one position for so long that she was in danger of getting more tan on one side of her body than the other, and her mother had always been careful to keep it precisely even on both sides. She lay on her stomach, her ash-blonde hair spread over the side of

of her face. She did not move until the man lay down beside her. Then she turned her head away from Gina, towards him.

That meant that Gina would have to bounce the ball around into her mother's line of sight. She had convinced herself that if she could get the ball to return to her hand just three times, then her mother might sit up and say something nice to her. So far her mother had spoken only once and that was to order Gina, in her flattest voice, to bounce the ball farther away. Her mother disliked having sand on her brown thighs. Sand, she said, belonged on the beach.

The ball was hard to handle. It was large and very bouncy, and the rule Gina had made for herself was that she couldn't just pick it up and carry it anytime she wanted to.. Wherever she went she had to bounce it, trying to get it to return to her hand on each rebound. She concentrated terribly as she passed within a few feet of her mother's head -- one, no-- she had to lurch forward to catch the ball -- one, no-- why did it run away like that always? She stopped the ball and made it sit there on the sand. She felt sure that it was watching her, that it had green eyes somewhere under its red skin, and that it could watch her no matter where she went, rolling its eyes along just under the

eyes along just under the skin. That gave her a furry feeling, and she quickly looked up for her mother. But the man in the blue trunks, with his back to Gina, was propped on his right elbow, blocking her mother's face. By craning on her tip-toes Gina saw that her mother's eyes were open, looking up at the man! So Gina moved a few feet nearer and craned again. The man was talking to her mother. He had some sand in his left hand, and he was letting it fall in a thin spiralling strand onto her mother's arm.

Gina picked up the ball and bounced it. It came back perfectly. She held it there. She bounced it again, hard, and it spun away high and darted off towards the sea. When she reached it it was sitting at the sea's edge no longer looking at her -- it was looking out over the water. Boats of various shapes and colours jumped up and down at their moorings. Some swimmers shouted to one another from among the waves. A snow white gull rose into the air from a blue hollow between waves and glided, following a crest where it curled off into foam. Gina felt that the red ball wanted to be out there, wanted to be bounced up and down by those waves far out.

She snatched up the ball. She pinched its skin hard and twisted it against her chest. Then she

pitched it into the sand. It soared high and bounded away. She caught up to it just as it rolled to the feet of the man who was beside her mother.

The red ball still was not looking at her. It was looking at her mother and the man. Gina lifted the ball; she cradled it; finally, she looked too. Her mother was propped on her left elbow. She had taken the man's left hand in her right one -- she had intertwined her fingers with his. She was speaking to him softly. Gina wanted to cry out, but she stopped herself. Her mother had said that when you were seven you did not act like a baby.

Gina walked away along the beach, It seemed to her that the air was colder and windier. People lay sprawled on the sand like dead things. She was aware of the waves hitting the sand more violently than before. They came in with a crashing sound. She waded into the water. The vital cold of it clawed at her and the ebb and flow of the waves pulled at her legs. When the water began to wet her stomach, she stopped. Gina forced her ball under the water. But it was much stronger than she had expected, and fought its way back up to the air. Determinedly, she tried again. After a few moments it broke free, bobbing crazily on the surface. She must hold it

deep, she must stand on it. But when she tried to it lunged up powerfully. She jumped for it; wetly it eluded her and skittered away over the next drifting wave that broke over Gina's head. Briefly, through the speckled foam, she saw the red ball climbing out of the next trough. It gleamed, incredibly huge against the sky, like the sun.

Gina plunged after her red ball. But a blue wave rose high above her, and she knew that she could not surmount it. It climbed over her, plunging onward. She fought hard in the swirling darkness. The weight of the great wave was bearing her down, roaring within her, becoming her voice. Then she felt something enormous, sun-warm and gentle, fill her arms and lift her lightly upwards. The red ball had returned to her without having to be bounced, not even once. Her mother was wrong - there was no trick to it.