The Ball

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780 words

In your world the story is always the same. The girl tells the boy that he can kick the football but pulls it away at the last moment. The boy falls for it over and over again, forever finding some reason to believe that this time will be different.

But that is your world, and there are many others. In one, the boy knows the girl will pull the ball away but has internalized everything that people have said about him and believes repeated disappointment is all he deserves. In others, the boy knows he is a fictional character. Here, even a single wry chuckle from a reader is enough to bring him back to the field. There, he believes the artist who created him is a god, and that being fooled by the girl is his divine purpose. It is not for him to ask why he must humiliate himself, any more than it is your place to ask why children starve while the sinful prosper.

Look: in this world the girl sits alone in a field, cold worms of panic beginning to slither in her gut as she realizes that the boy isn't going to show up this time or ever again. Next to it is one where the boy who stands alone and bereft because she repented or grew bored. (There as here, it can sometimes be hard to tell the two apart.)

At midnight, the neighborhood children gather in the field to watch in silence as the girl counts one, two, three and then jerks the ball into the air. The boy is not there—his body was never found. This world is not a happy one, but many are worse. Strike a deal at a crossroads and yes, you get to kick the ball, but that's all, that's all forever, over and over and over and over until the boy would give anything and everything just to scream except there's nobody left to write that for him and all he can see is the wicked red glint behind the girl's eyes as she pulls the ball away.

There are better worlds, of course. Reenactment societies are surprisingly common, and popular enough that local politicians line up for the chance to kick the ball (or pull it away, depending on their party). These events have also been incorporated into several stage plays, many of which treat the moment sympathetically rather than highlighting the girl's cruelty or mocking the boy's naïvete.

*There is no world where the girl tries to kick the ball and the boy pulls it away. Even we do not know why not.*

This world is empty. A plague, a solar flare, or maybe the boy and the girl both lost interest. The ball remains, though. Why doesn't anyone ever ask how *it* feels about its part in this?

This world *isn't* empty, and is all the colder for it. Androids re-enact the scene every hour on the hour. They were not programmed to notice when people stopped coming to watch, and even if they had been, they wouldn't care.

And somewhere the boy stands at the edge of the field, unnoticed, as someone he has never met runs down the field, kicks, misses, and falls to the ground. Laughing, the other boy scrambles back to his feet, pulls the girl to hers, and kisses her. *The* boy—our boy—wipes his sleeve across his face and walks away, already knowing that he will torture himself with this memory for the rest of his life.

There are only a handful of worlds in which she never pulls the ball away—she is, after all, who she is—but many in which she lets him kick it on his second or third try. There are even more in which her heart is in her throat as his foot connects with the ball. As he dances around, shouting "Woo hoo, I did it! I did it!" she glances at the bushes on the edge of the field. The boy's dog nods at her curtly. Relief washes over her. She will live another day.

And here, finally, is the best world of all. In it, the boy is just waiting for the girl to ask, "Why do you keep trying?" so that he can say, "Because I love you and want to be here when you ready to move on to another game." His friends think he is foolish and the artist is perplexed, but the boy doesn't care. He just cares that when she hugs the ball to her chest and says, "But I don't know any other games," he will be there to say, "We can make one up together."