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Riddles, Racers and Roses: A Children's Story

Doug was a boy who liked riddles. Some riddles came from books. These were funny and good. Like, "Why is a cook mean?" And, of course, the answer was, "He beats the eggs." But some riddles — the best ones — seemed to appear out of nowhere. They came at the oddest times. In the strangest places. This riddle began in the supermarket.

"Look out, Mom!" yelled Doug. "Mary Alice has an orange."

She didn't have it long. For a baby, Mary Alice had a good arm. She heaved the orange. Splat! The check-out girl laughed. Doug's mother laughed and picked the orange off the floor.

"Wow! What a tomboy!" said Mom. She moved the oranges where Mary Alice couldn't reach them. "Did you pick out a toy?" she asked Doug.

He smiled and held out a card of jewelry — three gold rings with stones — three shiny bracelets.

"Yuk!" his mother frowned. "Jewelry? Take it back, Doug. Do you want people to call you a sissy? Hurry!"

Doug returned the jewelry to the rack. He chose a small car. It was red and racy. It had a hood that opened and closed. But it was not as shiny and different as the rings and bracelets.

This was a hurry day. They hurried to the car. Sacks in the trunk. Slam! Mary Alice in the car seat in front. Doug stood up in back. Lights blinked. Horns honked. Tires squealed. Mary Alice heaved a rattle on the floor. For a baby, Mary Alice had a good arm. For a boy, Doug had a good riddle.

"Why is it all right for a girl to be a tomboy," he asked, "but not all right for a boy to be a sissy?"

"God only knows," said Mom.

"He didn't tell anyone else?" asked Doug.

"Don't ask me," said his mother.

So Doug asked God . . . silently. God was in a quiet mood. He didn't answer.

Mom jerked the car to a stop in front of their apartment building. She lifted Mary Alice from the car seat and hurried to the door. From the front, the apartments all looked alike. Inside they were different. Many different people lived in Doug's apartment house. Doug was glad. He had many questions. When God was being quiet, and Mom was in a hurry, sometimes different people could answer his questions.

When the groceries were in, Doug went to the garage. He watched Miss Brown fix her car. It was red and racy with a hood that opened and shut.

"Why is it all right for a girl to be a tomboy," he asked, "but not all right for a boy to be a sissy?"

"God only knows," said Miss Brown. "Hand me that wrench, would you please?"

“What is it like under there?” he asked her.

“Come and see,” she said.

He lay on the creeper beside her. Vroom! They rolled under her car. Doug looked up. A light hung on a pipe. Squares and circles. Cylinders and boxes.

“What is that?” he pointed.

“The differential,” she said.

“What does it do?”

“When the car goes around a corner,” she said, “it lets one wheel go faster than the other. It lets one wheel be different.”

She wiped the grease from her hands.

“My mother doesn’t fix our car,” said Doug. “My Dad does.”

“We’re not all alike,” she said. “That’s our differential.”

“I’m glad,” said Doug. He had many questions. It took different people to answer them.

He walked to the gardens behind the building. Mr. Fisher, with his handlebar moustache and shark tooth necklace, was tending his roses.

“Why is it all right for a girl to be a tomboy,” asked Doug, “but not all right for a boy to be a sissy?”

“God only knows,” said Mr. Fisher, picking leaves.

A single dark red blossom sparkled with water drops.

“What is that?” asked Doug.

“Crimson Glory,” said Mr. Fisher.

Another bush held clusters of deep pink.

“These roses grow in a bunch,” said Doug.

“Floribunda,” said Mr. Fisher. “These roses are different. They grow in bunches.” He picked a leaf. “OUCH!” he said. “The blasted thorns grow in bunches, too.”

“My father doesn’t grow roses,” said Doug. “My mother does.”

“Your father doesn’t have a green thumb?”

“I’ve never noticed,” said Doug. “I’ll have to go check and see.”

He went back to the apartment. Dad was in the nursery. On the dressing table, Mary Alice waved her fat legs. The thumbs that fastened her diaper were just the same color as Doug’s — certainly not very green.

“Why is it all right for a girl to be a tomboy,” asked Doug, “But not all right for a boy to be a sissy?”

“God only knows,” said Dad. “Hand me the powder, would you, please?”

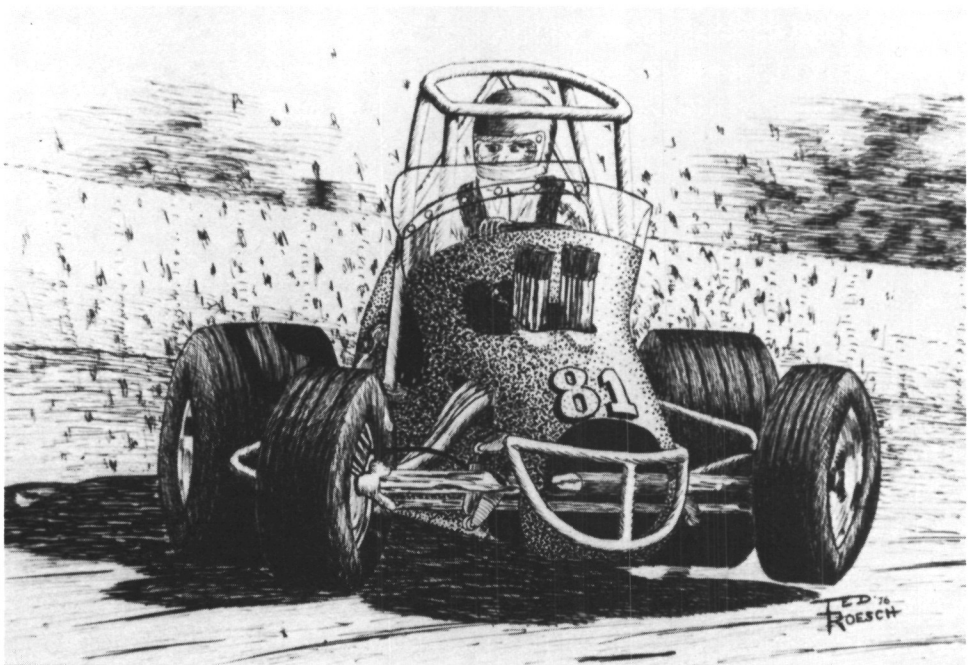
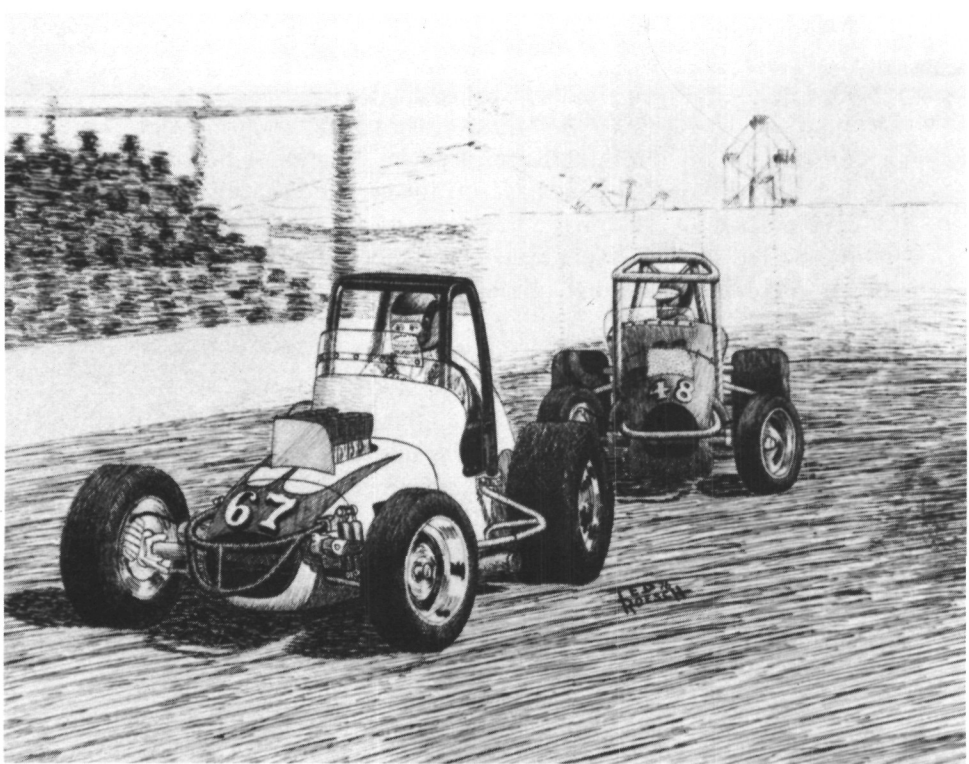
Doug handed the can to his Dad.

“Why are you dressing Mary Alice?” he asked.

“You’re going to the college with me,” said Dad. “Your mother had to go out of town on business.”

“I hope Mary Alice doesn’t cry a lot,” said Doug.

“Me too,” said his father. “We have a lot of work to do. Sometimes she cries just to get attention. That’s not the kind of crying we need. We don’t want her to be a sissy, do we?”



“Nobody wants to be called a sissy, do they?” asked Doug. “Not even girls.”

“Does that solve your riddle?” asked his father.

“I think so,” said Doug. “Being a sissy isn’t a matter of rings or bracelets or cars or the color of your thumbs. It isn’t even a matter of girls or boys. It’s simply a matter of howling your head off for no good reason.”

“Very profound,” said his father.

Doug picked up the diaper bag. His father carried Mary Alice. They climbed into the car. His father turned on the key. Rumm! Rumm! The car would not start.

“Now what’s the matter with the car?” said Dad.

“It’s probably the floribunda differential,” said Doug.

“That could be,” said his father, “but I think we’re out of gas. Look! The gas tank is empty!” He scowled. “Why doesn’t your mother ever fill the gas tank when she has the car?”

“God only knows,” said Doug, “but if you ask around he may have spread the word.”

“Very profound,” said Dad. “Let’s go see if Miss Brown has a spare bit of gas.”