

D = R x T

by Howard Waldrop

ONE, TWO, BUCKLE MY SHOE

There were two clubhouses behind the abandoned gas station, under the sign that said G.M.H.-M.R.C., which stood for the Greater Mayfield He-Man Racing Club.

One clubhouse was a 10 x 12 thing, the usual shed-roofed cube, made of 1 x 2s, 2 x 4s, pieces of plywood, and old Ralston-Purina feed signs. The whole thing was colored red-orange. The paint had been kyped from the county equipment yard the year before.

Outside the door were usually parked three pedal-cars—a Big Dump Truck from Sears, painted blue with a black bed; a Sears Sleek Sports Car, blue and white with silver trim; and a Gendron Speed Boat, with a yacht watch-bell and a forty-eight star flag, stained cedar on the wood, with silver aluminum trim. On the outside of the bright orange clubhouse had been lettered the words just like in the *Little Lulu* comics.

Thirty feet away, across the driveway, twelve feet up in a big oak tree was the other clubhouse, 8 x 10 with a big doorway facing west and a slider window on the east side. The treehouse was painted dark brown. Parked under the tree usually was a Garton 1949 Mercury Wagon with wooden sides, light green hood, and chrome bumpers. There was a three-piece collapsible ladder leading up from the ground that could be swung up over the doorway when someone was inside. Lettered across the side of the treehouse were the words .

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The Big Dump Truck belonged to Croupie, a short kid with a burr haircut who wheezed like a steam engine when he played hard or got excited, and usually had a fit of low coughs that echoed like he was in a silo, only he wasn't.

The Gendron Speedboat was Beanpole's. He had turned nine years old on April Fool's Day, 1953, and he was already five feet seven-and-a-half inches tall and weighed sixty-four pounds. He hadn't grown an inch or added a pound since he was seven. He had the Speedboat because the front was open, and his knees, up around his ears when he pedaled, didn't bang into the sides of the thing, like with all the other pedal-cars he'd tried.

The Sears Sleek Sports Car, a long low thing, more than forty-two inches front to back, was Sankandank's. That wasn't his real name, but the closest his tittle brother could come to Henry Franklin when he started to talk.

For that matter, none of their names but Dave's were their real ones, but nobody but teachers and their moms' and dads' friends called them by their real names.

The fourth kid's real name was Osbert Sitwell Forbes but everybody knew him as Sticks. He'd had polio when he was five, and had been retrained to walk with braces and two aluminum crutches like some kind of clattering metal spider, and he could do it faster than most kids could run. He didn't have a pedal-car; he rode on the back of Croupie's Big Dump Truck and helped by bringing his crutches down in a sort of two-point lever action, rowing, as it were, against the pavement. They could make some real speed even though there were two of them. Sticks had turned himself into a human gorilla from the waist up in the five years since they'd told his parents he would *never* walk again, even with braces and crutches.

The Garton Mercury Wagon belonged to Dave, the leader of the G.M.H.-M.R.C. He had built the treehouse. He was always dressed in a flight jacket and an aviator's brown leather helmet, a tee-shirt, blue jeans, and boots. The Mercury woodie was his everyday car; he'd saved his quarter weekly allowance for four months to buy it from a kid across town. His real car, which he only took out for races, wasn't a car at all—it was a 1941 Steelcraft Pursuit Plane painted dark green, held back by an uncle from a 1942 scrap-metal drive. It had three wheels—two at the front and one at the rear, and a four-foot wingspan. When you pedaled it, which Dave did with such ferocity that he was the fastest kid in town, the silver-painted propeller on the nose spun.

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There were two girls in the neighborhood.

Sally was one of the boys, but she couldn't go into the regular clubhouse. "What good is it being one of the boys," she'd asked, "if I can't go in there?"

"Because biology is destiny," said Sticks, who'd read his share of thinkers, somewhat apologetically. "Sorry."

She was their mascot, and an honorary member, and a swell mechanic. She dressed in a pair of cut-down overalls and wore one of those stupid hats with the buttons all over it like Jughead in *Archie's Pals and Gals*, or the Bowery Boys. She kept all the cars in good repair except Dave's Pursuit Plane. He was the only one who worked on it. He kept it in a packing-crate hangar back at his parent's house.

And then there was Therese.

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She was the nine-year-old equivalent of a society dame. Whereas Sally's hair was mousey brown, that of Therese was wheat-blond, almost white. What eyebrows she had were so light that she had to draw others above them. (She already used makeup.) Her eyes were as blue as the paint on a real DeSoto convertible. She was really something.

Her parents had come down a little in the world since the War, but they still lived in the biggest house for miles around, and she still had her rich-girl clothes. She was the first in town to have a poodle-skirt and

cat-eye sunglasses.

When you fell for Therese, you fell hard, and they all did. All except Dave followed her around like baby ducks when she walked through the neighborhood or rode her English Racer bike, the first seen in Mayfield. Dave watched from a distance, but he watched.

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Sometimes Dave and Sally went up into the treehouse and pulled the ladder up behind them. Croupie, Beanpole, Sankandank, and Sticks imagined all sorts of things going on, from their place over in the other clubhouse.

Sometimes Dave and Sally fooled around a little bit; sometimes they kissed till they got bored with it. Mostly they lay around on the cushions and pillows and read *Monster of Frankenstein* and *Airboy* and *Vault of Horror* comic books, or old *Popular Mechanics*. They just used it as a place to get away from everything.

And there always came a time, late in the day, just before everyone left or was called away to supper, when Dave stood in the doorway, silhouetted by the setting sun, with the evening wind in his hair, and, holding his leather helmet in his hand, he would take out a Lucky Stripe® candy cigarette and put it in his mouth and enjoy the last one of the day. He would think on the lost days of his youth, and stub the cigarette out till it broke with a crack, and toss it out onto the pile in the driveway. Then he would unfold the ladder, and help Sally down if she were there, or let himself down, and pedal his way home, if he knew his father wasn't drunk, or go over to Sankandank's house if he knew he was, and either stay there all night or go home when his mom sent word that his dad was already passed out.

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THREE, FOUR, CLOSE THE DOOR

Into every idyll a little *merde* must fall.

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It was summer and it was hot. The days were long and filled with as much ennui as anyone could handle.

Any kid with sense and money was down at the movies, where it was three degrees cooler inside, watching *Phantom From Space* or *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms* or, best of all, the pee-inducing *Invaders From Mars*, the one with the sand opening up at your feet and the big furry green Martians grabbing you from below.

The swimming pools were all closed because of another polio scare.

If you were lucky you had TV (only Beanpole's folks did, and it was a used Dumont with an eleven-inch screen, and Beanpole's dad was always watching *Roller Derby* or *Wrestling From The Jamaica Arena* and stuff.)

What they had at the clubhouse were two radios, one in the regular clubhouse and, via a long cord buried under the driveway and up the back of the tree, another radio up in the treehouse. (They'd found the electricity to the old garage had never been cut off, and they'd run cords from one of the plugs inside to the regular clubhouse.)

Well, music sucked, except when they played something old, like "Sing, Sing, Sing!" by Benny Goodman, or "Big Noise From Winnetka." What was on the radio these days was Patti Page or Guy Mitchell (who *tried*, anyway), stuff like that. Over on the end of the dial was the whiny honky-tonk hillbilly noise.

One morning while Dave was up in the treehouse, he heard sounds like he'd never heard before. He leaned out. "What's *that*?" he yelled.

Croupie stuck his head out the clubhouse window. "Wow!" he said. "870 on the AM dial! Listen to *that!*"

Since the radio in the treehouse only got AM, Dave twisted the Bakelite knob over. It was scratchy, far away, from one of the big cities. There were four or five voices in it, a bass, two or three middles, a high one. The music came in and out on a wave of static, and then a voice—a Negro voice—told him that had been Billy Ward and the Dominoes singing "Sixty-Minute Man." Then they played a whole other song called "Lightning Hit The Poorhouse."

Dave climbed down the ladder and pedaled away in the Mercury woodie wagon. He came back ten minutes later with a hundred-foot roll of eight-gauge wire and made antennae for both radios, so the static came in much clearer at first, and *then* the station. It was their favorite radio station in the whole world. Sankandank had a strong desire to break off the tuning knob once they had the music coming in strong.

That was *all* that happened the first half of the summer of 1953.

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One day Croupie, Beanpole, and Sankandank were going down Paradise Street—Sankandank first in the Sleek Sports Car, Beanpole in his Speedboat, and Croupie in the Big Dump Truck—when something went by with a flash and whir and the zizz of sprockets and made an inertialess turn at the next alley.

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FIVE, SIX, PICK UP STICKS

"There's a New Blur in town," said Sankandank. "Geez!"

"It gleams in the sun," said Croupie. "It's *fast!*"

"It's got a chain drive," said Beanpole.

"Chain drives are for wusses." said Dave, putting out his Lucky Stripe® on the back of his hand and tossing it away. "Guys come, guys go. Fast, not so fast."

"But, Dave," said Sankandank. "He's, I mean, *fast!*"

"There's good and fast," said Dave, "and then there's fast and *stupid*. We'll see."

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Sally was walking up a sloping street with Sticks, who was clattering and pinging his way along in sort of a loose, slow-motion fall uphill. They were on their way to the clubhouse. Usually Croupie always came by to get Sticks earlier, but he hadn't been by this morning.

"You doing all right?" asked Sally.

"Whatever do you mean?" asked Sticks.

"Never mind."

And out of nowhere, in the bright sunny morning, there was a flash and streak, and the skidding sound of brakes locking, and a vision strobed to a stop in front of them.

They stood looking at him, and while they did a B-36 flew over, headed for the North Pole. Aside from its far-away drone, there was no sound at all.

Sally saw that the machine he was on was a Murray Ohio Custom Atomic Missile—it sold for \$28.95 in the Western Auto catalog; the newest and most expensive pedal-car made. It was three-wheeled; unlike Dave's Pursuit Plane, on this the wings and two wheels were in the back. The nose was streamlined like an F-80 Shooting Star, and it had a high tail fin over the back wings. There were jet nacelles on the outer tips of the wings. The nose above the front wheel was tilted upward, the steering wheel was a single molded piece of black plastic, and the pedals and cranks went into a smooth molded casing; there was

probably a six to one chain drive. It was sky-blue and red; it said Supersonic, with a lightning bolt through it on the nose, and on the tail fin was the Atomic Symbol.

The guy wore a Captain Video fishbowl space helmet, with the inflatable collar and the open lower third. Inside the helmet, over his eyes, were a pair of *Bwana Devil* 3-D glasses. He wore an outfit that could only be described as Early Buck Rogers.

"Call me Rocket Boy," he said.

And was gone. Just like that, although he must have taken *some* small space of time to do it.

Sticks just sat down in the middle of the sidewalk. Sally sat down beside him.

They didn't say anything for a while. The world had changed, as if the Lady of Fatima had come to them, or King Kong had leaned around a building to look at them ...

Then they got up and went on to the clubhouse.

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They didn't have long to wait. The next afternoon around two P.M., Dave was in the treehouse listening to the rhythm and blues station. There was a skidding sound and the radio went off.

He went to the doorway and looked down, throwing his *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories* back on the pile. Croupie, Sticks, and Sankandank were leaning out the clubhouse window.

The guy was there. Dave couldn't see his face for the reflection off the globe of the helmet. The machine was as beautiful and overpowering as the others had said.

Rocket Boy looked up at Dave.

"Thrill Hill," he said. "Noon Thursday."

And he took off, leaving a cloud of dust in the air. They heard his chain-drive over on the next block.

Croupie came out and reconnected the extension cord to the clubhouse where Rocket Boy had unplugged it. The radio came on behind Dave. Muddy Waters was singing "Another Mule Been Kickin' in Your Stall."

Beanpole pedaled into the drive before the dust settled.

"Did I miss anything?" he asked.

"You missed Rocket Boy," said Sankandank.

"When?"

"A minute ago."

"How can that be?" asked Beanpole. "I was gonna tell you guys I just saw him at the store, talking to

Therese."

"When?"

"Just now, the time it takes to get back here."

"Are there *two* of him," asked Sticks, "or is he really just that *fast*?"

They all looked up at Dave.

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SEVEN, EIGHT, YOU'RE TOO LATE

Rocket Boy must be out of his crawfishing mind.

Thrill Hill was where they held the Soap Box Derby every year, and it was a killer, even with the traffic blocked off and the padded barricades. Guys fifteen and sixteen years old couldn't make it up that hill on their ten-speed English Racers without standing up on the pedals. Cars had to come in low gear all the way up. There was no need for the twenty miles per hour sign on *that* side of the road.

On the left side looking down, you had vacant lots, except halfway down there was Mean Old Man Rebers' house. He didn't even like kids walking on that side of the street. On the other you had ten or twelve houses. The hill had three plateaus—one each at Fleagle, Susquehanna, and Niagara Streets. The hill looked like the top third of the State Fair rollercoaster. If you came up on the intersection of Romeo Street—which the hill was on—and Juliette Boulevard—at the top—and looked down too fast, you'd get vertigo and the world would swing and sway.

At the bottom was the yellow and black octagonal stop-sign where Romeo Street dead-ended onto Highway 4, with traffic going by at fifty miles per hour. Across the highway was a pit full of water where they'd dug the gravel to pave Highway 4.

"Put out the word," said Dave. "This is going to take some planning." The G.M.H.-M.R.C. took off in four directions, Sally taking his woodie wagon, while he walked home to go get his 1941 Steelcraft Pursuit Plane and bring it back to the clubhouse.

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Since his dad was out of work and home all the time, Dave had to be quiet.

He unlocked the big generator-crate hangar and opened the double-doors back wide. His pedal-plane

gleamed in the bright sunlight as he rolled it out. Once it had been the shiniest, best-looking pedal-craft in town, and the fastest.

Now it seemed a little duller-looking, and he wasn't so sure about the fast part, either.

When he'd first got it, three years ago after his uncle had given it to him (his cousin had died the year before *that*), he'd restored it to a like-new 1941 condition, and he'd kept it in that shape since. When something went wrong, he'd gone to the White's Auto Store (they still handled Steelcraft, though that had been bought by another company) and got the part on order. (So far that had been one front wheel hubcap that took a whole week to get there.)

His Pursuit Plane had one big disadvantage. In most pedal-cars the pedals were connected to the rear wheels by rods; the pedals went back and forth on cranks connected by the rods to cranks on the rear axles. In Dave's plane, the two front wheels did the work; the pedals were directly on the two big offset-crankes of the front axle, one down, one up, on slip-fastenings. You needed a lot of knee-room, and you had to pedal straight up-and-down, and it was slower to get moving from a standing start.

Rocket Boy, with his chain drive, would get a lead on him before they got to Fleagle Street and the first flat plateau, where Dave could gain some. But he didn't know if he could gain enough. If Rocket Boy were still ahead at Susquehanna, it was all over.

Dave let out a sigh, and pushed the Steelcraft Pursuit out beside the house and for more than a block before he got in it and rode, the propeller a soft wavering blur in front of him, to the clubhouse.

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"The way I see it," said Sticks, helping Dave stack up bricks and then putting old horse blankets over them, and lifting the front end of the plane, crutches braced against his armpits, while Dave took the back and lifted, putting it on top of the bricks and blankets so it wouldn't get scratched, "is that you're the Alan Ladd of the piece. This Rocket Boy guy is Jack Palance. Or—you're Gary Cooper—Marshal Kane, and he's Frank Miller ..." Sticks was a bigger movie fan even than Dave. "I mean—you're minding your own business, and *he* comes along ..."

"I can see the fargin' allegory," said Dave. "Please hand me the oil can and the emery cloth."

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Two hours later, he pushed the pedals back and forth like a maniac and had Sankandank time it once he let go. It was one minute and seventeen seconds before the wheels came to a stop.

"Wow!" said Sankandank.

"Not *wow* enough," said Dave. Then he started working on the rear wheel.

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Wednesday evening. Dave had done all he could. Word had been coming in all day—Rocket Boy seen here, Rocket Boy seen there. Somebody said he'd been down at the Rocket to the Moon Ride at the Piggly-Wiggly, with a handful of nickels, training, which Sticks thought was hooley, and so did Croupie.

Somebody else said he'd been seen riding very slowly, talking to Therese as she walked along Paradise Street. Dave didn't think that was hooley.

The sun was going down; everybody else had gone home for supper. It was cooler, but that was no satisfaction. The store had been out of Lucky Stripes®, so he'd had to settle for a Pink Owl Bubblegum Cigar. This one had lost all its flavor; he stubbed it out on his overall leg and threw it onto the chalky pile of broken Luckys.

Earlier today he'd walked down, then up, Thrill Hill. The way he figured it, he'd be fifteen missile-lengths back when they crossed Highway 4. Things were too grim.

He wished, like in *The Day The Earth Stood Still*, there were some words, some phrase that would stop everything, make it right again, put it all back like it was before. He wanted to stand in front of Rocket Boy, hold up his hand, and say magic words that would make everything *status quo ante*.

He turned in the direction of Thrill Hill, a mile away.

He said, "*Klaatu barada nikto.*"

The earth kept turning. Night came on. It was still going to happen.

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Dawn on Thursday.

He was oiling everything for the twentieth time when he heard the slow squeak of wheels he didn't know out on the street.

Sally came around the corner of the garage, pulling her little brother's Western Flyer wagon. It was full of window sash-weights, sheet tin, a blowtorch, and dark goggles.

She pulled it up next to the Pursuit up on the blocks.

She handed him a pack of Lucky Stripes®.

"Where'd you get these?" he asked.

"Havemeyers," she said.

That was all the way across town.

"Thanks," he said, and had the first one of the day.

She didn't say anything.

"What am I supposed to do with *this* stuff?" he asked.

She looked at him.

"You know I've kept the Pursuit like-new," he said. "You know I've never altered anything on it. Me, it, and the world. I won't start *now*."

She put her hands on his shoulders.

"This isn't a movie. This isn't a race, even," she said. "This is murder, plain and simple."

He looked at her a minute, then put on the dark goggles and lit the blowtorch. "Hand me some tin," he said.

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NINE, TEN, THE BIG FAT HEN

The news of what was going to happen had gone through the kids like a hurricane through the Sargasso-summer doldrums.

They were milling around up and down Thrill Hill, but in lumps of five and ten; more were at the tops and bottom.

Officer Handy drove by and knew something was up. He stopped near a bunch on the left side of the road just past the Rebers place.

"What's up, kids?" he asked. "And don't lie to me."

"We're looking for four-leaf clovers!" said a girl named Paula. "Ricky Lee found one here this morning!" All the kids immediately got down on their hands and knees and started crawling around.

"Yeah, right," said Officer Handy. "Make sure you stay out of the road." He drove off.

This was reported up the hill, where Dave and Rocket Boy were out of sight.

"We're ready," said Beanpole, listening to the war-surplus walkie-talkie. Sticks was down at the bottom with the other one.

Dave ran his Pursuit out from the left, Rocket Boy from the right. Standing at the top of the hill was Therese, a red silk kerchief in her hand.

Dave could see, way down at the bottom, kids running around putting plywood over the curbs across from the intersection on the highway. Cars were still turning out from Fleagle and Susquehanna and going downhill. The kids were still off to the sides of the streets.

"Any time you gentlemen are ready," said Beanpole.

"Let's do her," said Dave.

They lined up even with each other, ten feet apart. Therese was just a little downhill, between the two. She lifted the red scarf.

Dave could see kids running everywhere to stand across the three side streets; down at the highway brakes squealed. He couldn't see what was going on. He pulled his goggles down.

Rocket Boy leaned his helmet toward him. "Eat my protons," he said.

Therese dropped the scarf.

They went by her. Then a lot of stuff happened at once, but it started out in very slow motion.

It was like pedaling in molasses the first few feet, there was so much weight in the Pursuit. Rocket Boy moved like a bullet, getting smaller. Then Dave's pedals caught up, began to feel right. But the Pursuit felt wrong, most of the weight was in the middle and back; there wasn't that much in the front, as that was taken up by the pedal-throw and the propeller gearing. The plane pulled to the right.

Rocket Boy's feet blurred on the pedals, and he moved farther ahead, nearing the Fleagle intersection, where kids had linked their arms all the way across the side street.

Rocket Boy's Atomic Missile hit the flat and rose; like a champ, he came down with his pedals still flying.

Dave's Pursuit had started to really begin to move, as fast as he was usually going about fifty feet into a race, and he was already a third of the way down.

He hit Fleagle, rose, came down on the far edge of the flat, still in control of his pedals. The propeller was whining like a banshee.

Rocket Boy was forty feet ahead; Dave could see the kids from Fleagle running into the middle of Romeo behind them to watch.

The whine of the propeller rose higher; it was strobing in the noon sun.

Rocket Boy moved farther away.

And then Dave noticed the whine was getting nearer. He turned his head quickly to the left. Officer Handy was coming down the hill behind them, sirens on, red bubblegum machine lights on top whirling away, flashing red and white. He was waving them over.

Dave pedaled faster than he ever had.

Rocket Boy bent forward and hit Susquehanna, only his nose wheel touching the pavement.

The intersection came up and lifted Dave and the Pursuit over it; it was all he could do to keep his feet on the pedals.

He heard Handy brake, take the hump, and speed up behind and to his left.

The Atomic Missile was shuddering ahead, just before Niagara; it moved left and right and pulled ahead again, taking the intersection two feet off the ground.

The Pursuit was running like a whale sideways to a typhoon, trying to go right from the weight. Niagara came and went; so did the propeller—with a ping it was gone somewhere to the left.

He heard a big pop, and the squeal of Handy's brakes, a slide and a soft bump.

Then he was even with Rocket Boy, whose legs were a round blur, and he saw the instant Rocket Boy lost his pedals—he'd lifted his feet off them to keep his ankles from getting beaten up. As Dave shot past Rocket Boy, he heard the awful sound of a chain leaving a sprocket and getting ground up around the rear axle.

Dave broke the finish line string they were holding at the highway—it was like a cobweb—and shot across the highway, hit the plywood, rose, came down on grass and weeds, broke a wing, turned sideways, and shuddered to a stop.

Just in time to see Rocket Boy go by upside down, three feet in the air, moving away from the upside-down Atomic Missile; they sailed one after the other over the lip of the quarry to make two Edgerton-slow splashes, like twin Royal Crowns of England.

And then people were picking him up, and the Pursuit, and someone was fishing Rocket Boy and his water-filled globe helmet out of the water, and kids were running in every direction but up.

And from Dave's upside-down view he saw an upside-down tiny Officer Handy jumping down-and-up in the middle of the Niagara Street sky, shaking his tiny fists at them all as they disappeared into the bushes and trees.

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Rocket Boy, after being left coughing at Third and Main, was never seen again. Somebody said he'd only been visiting his grandmother for the week anyway.

The Atomic Missile was way at the bottom of the quarry, and stayed there.

Therese came to the clubhouse and invited Dave to her birthday party.

He said, "Maybe."

Then he handed Sally a bucket of orange-red enamel and a brush.

She walked over and painted out the letters.

The End