

The Accidental Driver

By Ray Elliott

Neither one of them had any sense. Girls are like that sometimes. What happened was that they were out on an afternoon drive. They don't know for sure who thought of it first, but somehow the youngest of the two, a mere 12 years old, got behind the wheel of a smashed-up little Bug.

Maybe it wouldn't have made much difference who was driving, though. The 20-year-old girl (a sister to the other girl) who was sitting on the passenger's side had put many of the marks on the little Bug. And maybe under the same circumstances, she would have ended up in the same place.

Anyway, after trying to drive on a little-traveled road for a few minutes, the girls decided it'd be safer to head for a place where there would be even less traffic and more room. A good decision, no doubt. If they were going to do what they did.

The oldest girl knew of such a place, traded places with her sister and drove there. It was a park of sorts. At the entrance was a wide parking lot and road combined that was some 150 yards long and 25 yards wide. Larger than a football field.

And it was bordered on one side by six-inch concrete forms for cars to come to rest against when they parked and by a grassy area equal to the parking lot and road combination on the other side. The entranceway marked off one end, and a picnic area offset by a crossroads marked off the other end, completing the driving area.

It was an excellent choice of a place to teach a little girl to drive. Everything was going well. The little girl was even shifting gears without much help. For better than a half an hour, the girls zipped around the oval-shaped track they had laid out, laughing, giggling and having a big time.

They were pleased with each other and what they were doing. Then on the second turn where the driver often swung out of the track course and into a little turnoff into the grass and then back onto the course, she missed the turnoff and headed down a straight, tree-lined, semi-paved, potholed-road at 25-30 miles an hour.

A little scared out of the familiar course perhaps, the little girl first veered to the right, then jerked the steering wheel back to the left. The little Bug responded to each motion of the wheel and made a beeline for the biggest tree along the road as though it was drawn there by some giant magnet.

Both girls froze as the young driver steered the little Bug directly at the 100-year-old tree, hitting it head on with the little Bug's left headlight. It gave a little shudder, spun its back wheels in the grass and roadside gravel and died.

The 12-year-old driver was thrown into the door, smashed further into it when her older, heavier sister was thrown into the steering wheel, bending it down around the steering column and fracturing four ribs in her left side.

When they finally came to a rest, the young girl sat slumped behind the bent wheel, and the older girl had careened off the wheel and her sister, sheared off the gear shift somehow and sat on the floor in front of the seat on the passenger's side, her head resting on the seat.

Almost before the car had stopped shuddering the little girl assured her older sister that she was okay. The older girl said she wasn't, and that they needed help. Climbing out over the seat and her sister because her door wouldn't open, the young girl started crying and saying she was sorry.

Her sister tried to remain calm and told her it was okay, but that she needed help, that her sister should go back to the picnic area, where they had seen a few people sitting in the early afternoon sun, and get help. The little girl ran crying towards them.

Then she stopped and ran back to her sister to tell her she was sorry. Probably no more than a few seconds elapsed, but to the girls it seemed like much more. By the time the little girl had gotten to the people, crying to them to help her sister, her sister was crying out for help, too.

Somebody loaded the two girls into a car and took them to a nearby hospital. On the way the little girl told her sister repeatedly that she was sorry. And as her sister lay moaning in the emergency room, the little girl told her again that she was sorry. Then she added that she was glad it wasn't her, though.

It hurt for the older sister to laugh with the fractured ribs, but she tried and told her younger sister it was all right and was glad it wasn't her, too. She later said that the way she hurt and because she heard the doctor talk about operating if the spleen was ruptured, she really thought she was going to die.

But after the little girl had been examined and found to be unhurt, the older sister was admitted to the hospital and placed in the intensive care unit with a partially collapsed lung. They both knew she was going to live and all would be well.

Explaining what happened and why it happened was what was worrying them. Both of them had decided that it hadn't been a real smart thing to do for the little girl to be driving. And they told that to anyone who asked.

"But you should have seen how well she had been driving," the older sister would also say.

"Yeah, I was doing just fine until I hit the tree," the younger sister would say.