

Sarita, Little Ricky, and the Deathtraps  
(Sarita and Ricardo Rodriguez)

*I don't know what ever happened to Sarita; the photograph doesn't do her justice. Pat Pigott, who, just like Little Ricky, is a forgotten victim of racing deathtraps, bears a historical footnote. Pat's mother was married to John Alexander McCone, and attending his stepson's funeral almost made the CIA spymaster late to the festering Cuban Missile Crisis.*

My friend and earliest mentor, Gus V. Vignolle, editor and publisher of *Motoracing* a fearless and hated racing tabloid, believed in the benevolence of alcohol. Gus liked to drink and was good at drinking.

The apocalyptic winter of 1962 was a perfect season for drinking.

First there'd been October's Cuban Missile Crisis: civilization for a week teetering on the edge of nuclear annihilation. Then, in November, Gus received a stronger excuse still for tipping over into the liquor: news exploded inside *Motoracing's* tiny office in Los Angeles that the preternatural Ricardo Rodriguez, Little Ricky, Formula 1 racing's first boy toy star, had just killed himself on the Grand Prix Autodrome in Mexico City.

Details of the wreck were appalling. Death was "attributed officially" to "too much speed in an unfamiliar car." And: "Young Rodriguez lost control on the treacherously banked last corner not far from the start-finish line. His machine struck the rail, flipping several times and bursting into flames."

Wikipedia, "The People's Encyclopedia," gives the same explanation.

The details are as untrue now as they were when they were given originally.

But none of them ever got corrected, because everything was swallowed up by the gloom and grisly symbolism of Little Ricky's burial occurring on November 2nd, *Dio de los Muertos*, Mexico's traditional day of the dead. The president of the republic walked in the funeral. Afterward the entire country appeared to dissolve into an agony of prolonged mourning.

Little Ricky was far less mourned by racing's pedants, pundits mythologists, and pseudo historians – the asshole cognoscenti press. Everybody there was pretty much in agreement that Little Ricky never belonged in Formula 1 and probably got what he deserved!

Which wasn't surprising. The big deal of these phonies, basically, was to paint Formula 1 an activity so fiendishly difficult to perform that racing in a Grand Prix was almost the equivalent of performing open-heart or brain surgery.

Little Ricky never found racing difficult at all.

A Formula 1 racingdriver had to be well-bred, cultured, multi-lingual, fearsomely intelligent, and – that great snob word of the cognoscenti – "sensitive."

Little Ricky was a wild little teenager – barely 5-5, 130 pounds – filled with merry hell who, with raw skill and great gusto, was wheeling and dealing factory Ferrari F1s, and sportscars flat out from Monza to Paris to the Bahamas to Sebring.

And at the same time he stayed busy hotting up international racing like nobody since Latin lover Fon Portago, endlessly scoring with dreamy women by the numbers, all of them older and taller than he was.

Little Ricky was eight months younger than I was, and it sure sounded like fun to me.

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Gus wasn't a member of the cognoscenti. Gus loathed the cognoscenti. All that posturing and pretentiousness.

Gus believed – believe deeply – Little Ricky was destined to become the world champion. *Motoracing* duly reported and fiercely argued so.

Gus was Little Ricky's bard.

During a summer vacation to Mexico, his favorite country in the world, Gus had accidentally stumbled upon Little Ricky – a ninth grade schoolchild just up from bicycle and motorcycle competitions – trimming grown men in sportscar matches at Avonero and Torreon.

Later that same summer in southern California, during the grand opening of Riverside International Raceway, a Porsche RS with "Mexico" emblazoned on its flanks effortlessly blew past all its opponent Porsches, Lotuses, and Cooper-Climaxes – raced by some of L.A.'s fastest cowboys – and lapped everything except second, third, and fourth.

Little Ricky!

He came bombing into the winners circle, jumping out of the cockpit a whole 15 years old and looking younger. A tall and especially voluptuous trophy queen bemusedly offered a handshake instead of the traditional kiss – she did not want to be arrested for baby molestation.

Little Ricky bent the startled queen over backwards, and, whooping, climbed all over her like a monkey.

When boy toy champion and tall voluptuous queen came up for air at last, both laughing, the disheveled queen was gushing, "He doesn't kiss like a 15 year old!"

*Que emocion!* Such a to-do. Especially for Gus.

He always wrote in short hot blasts, sometimes composing while smashed and editing sober, and other times reversing the process. When I was working at *Motoracing* I asked him which process he had followed on this occasion, and, as I suspected, Gus was bombed out of his mind when – beneath the roaring headline RODRIGUEZ STUNS! – he authored the joyous yarn which really started it all:

"One of the greatest sensations in the history of sportscar racing was created here this weekend by an incredible 15 year old Mexican boy...he can't miss as a world champion!"

Fasten your seat belts. Gus was just warming up. For the following six careening years, Gus's verbs and adverbs and adjectives, and *Motoracing's* red headlines and exclamation marks, documented Little Ricky's unprecedented rise from pop-gun Porsches into gore-red works Ferraris racing at the Nurburgring, Spa-Francorchamps, Targa Florio, Le Mans – all of the legendary deathtraps of Europe.

Then Little Ricky had started fulfilling Gus's prediction of a full world championship when, in his first Formula 1 start, he parked on the front row, aged 19.

And suddenly he was barely 20 and dead.

Gus was arguably the most non-sentimental man ever born, but *Motoracing's* Little Ricky obit was the most awful and sentimental thing Gus ever wrote.

The obit was careless, too. It neglected to mention that Ricardo had met his demise in a deathtrap Lotus, the fifth or sixth driver killed that season by that marque of death.

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Little Ricky was the Formula 1 racingdriver whom the cognoscenti considered the most subversive. So it jumped up and down on him the most.

Lotus was the Formula 1 racingcar it liked most to praise. Praise rapturously.

Lotuses were “advanced.” Lotuses were “superior.” Lotuses were “innovative.” Lotuses were “revolutionary.”

Lotuses were stripped-down kayaks on wheels, the fastest, most flyweight, desirable racingcars ever invented.

Lotuses over time won 54 world championship Grands Prix, captured seven seasonal world championships, and conquered the Indianapolis 500.

Lotuses were deathtraps.

To be tedious about it – purposely tedious – here’s what the cognoscenti shamefully never mentioned or noticed about Lotuses – and what foolish racingdrivers including Little Ricky choose to ignore:

When a racingdriver racing a deathtrap Lotus on a deathtrap racing track committed a driving error... or when a deathtrap Lotus sheared off yet another spindly axle shaft or flaked off another brittle piece of suspension...and when the driver and his deathtrap next got violently precipitated into a deathtrap crash wall or deathtrap tree...well, then, all deathtrap Lotuses were going to be traveling far, far faster than other racingcars.

And of course crashing with far, far greater velocity than other racingcars.

Which was the rub. Lotuses were the lightest Formula 1 cars going, hurrah!, but to construct them so lightweight all protective safety equipment had had to be omitted. Unlike rival marques that were heavier, stronger, slower, and of course safer, there was nothing to protect the driver when a fragile deathtrap Lotus crashed and broke like an egg upon impact.

It was terrible for a Lotus driver to discover – too late – that his own body was going to be his only line of defense.

Deathtrap Lotuses killed three world champions, including a world champion of motorcycle racing who’d just quit two wheels because he thought them too dangerous; killed better than half a dozen would-be world champions like Little Ricky, along with would-be Indy 500 winners; and killed a minimum of a dozen prima donnas, hacks, and plain old amateurs such as Lotus’s own Los Angeles distributor. And still I’m missing some

Probably it’s racing’s all-time record for senseless slaughter, although the cognoscenti never mentioned or perhaps noticed it. And the count doesn’t include some of the almost-victim luminaries, mostly American, including A.J. Foyt, Parnelli Jones, and, especially, Mario Andretti. The first time Mario came close to buying it in a Lotus was at Indianapolis, but afterward he shrugged off the experience and a decade later traveled to Europe and won Lotus yet another F1 world championship – in a deathtrap model identical to the one which that same season killed his Swedish teammate.

Lotus deaths were the worst. Some lucky drivers died on impact; the less fortunate got trapped in the wreckage and sometimes bled out or were roasted alive; maybe the most ill fated of all got fatally struck by flying debris off their own Lotuses.

Sorry. I'm giving it too you straight. This was the way things were.

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Little Ricky has been pretty much forgotten; ultimately all dead racingdrivers are. It's racing.

Pretty much forgotten too are deathtrap racingtracks and deathtrap Lotuses.

Right now, as I'm writing this, some of the young guys racing at the new California Speedway are demonstrating how super-safe modern racing is by committing stupid mistakes in their ultra-safe singleseaters and slamming crash walls at 230 mph...scoring G-loadings in the double digits...and blithely walking away afterward with headaches far less severe than the old katzenjammers Gus suffered during extreme hangovers.

It's as if deathtrap racingtracks and deathtrap Lotuses never existed.

But don't be fooled...all the old deathtrap racingtracks still would be slaughtering...Colin Chapman, twisted genius and creator of the Lotus -- if he hadn't died prematurely -- still would be inventing kayak-on-wheels deathtraps...doomed racingdrivers like Little Ricky still would still be tripping over themselves for the privilege of getting to drive one...the cognoscenti still would be myth-making -- had not something else happened.

It's called the lawsuit. The mega-buck lawsuit.

It had never happened before, but certain families and widows of dead racingdrivers -- and not just deathtrap Lotus widows -- who were lost and in mourning maybe for the rest of their lives, started the tradition of having hired-gun barristers drop ruinous financial claims on everybody their could think of

This changed racing totally.

Once the legal claims started multiplying, and started causing terrific financial pain to the parties being sued, deathtrap racingcars and deathtrap racingtracks disappeared and safety after almost a century, finally arrived in racing.

Safety is great, but turning racing over to the lawyers will yet prove to be a mistake.

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I got to have dinner with Little Ricky once. A major deal for me.

Our brief dinner occurred during the middle of a heat wave in Los Angeles, only a year or so before Little Ricky's fatal rendezvous with a deathtrap Lotus on Mexico City's deathtrap Autodrome.

Little Ricky was in L.A. en route to the place where, four years before, everything had started for him, Riverside Raceway.

Ferrari had entrusted him with an outdated front engine sportscar to race in Riverside's annual L.A. *Times* Grand Prix.

Gus told me that if on Wednesday night I made myself presentable at the Grand Prix Restaurant, on Beverly Boulevard, he would introduce me to Little Ricky.

I arrived early, and, as always happened at the Grand Prix, purposely parked my Corvair Chevy with its garish chrome wheels far down the block so that none of the insider habitués ever knew I toiled around in so juvenile a sled.

I was as nervous as I was when I was still in high school preparing for my very first racing driver interview, when Dan Gurney let me grill him.

Then Gus walked into the Grand Prix with the two of them.

I say two of them because in the past year Little Ricky had taken on a trophy bride, Sarita. With all the damsels of the globe to choose from, he had picked a honey from his own bailiwick, upscale Mexico City. Wisely. Sarita was the most exotic chick I had ever seen.

After working up my nerve, I arrived at their table. Gus handled the introductions. Little Ricky, this is Joe. Sarita, this is Joe.

Teen husband or teen wife, I didn't know which to scope out the hardest.

Little Ricky asked, "*Jose, ese es tu Chevrolet Corvair que esta parqueado afuera?*"

Gus translated.

"Little Ricky asked if that's your Corvair parked outside."

I froze.

I didn't know what to say. Little Ricky surely did his own commuting via Berlinetta Ferrari. I did mine in a Corvair. One wearing chrome wheels left over from high school.

I shamefully confessed

Little Ricky set off another burst of Spanish.

"*Me gustan las trapaderas de cromo.*"

Gus translated.

"Little Ricky likes the chrome wheels. "

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Riverside was where it had all started for him, but at the *Times* Grand Prix, Little Ricky hadn't a chance.

Notwithstanding all its V12 cylinders, and banshee caterwauling, his Ferrari was too outdated to keep up with the L.A. cowboys and their eyesore backyard bomb V8s and cackling Maserati Birdcages.

Little Ricky didn't yet know it, but the vengeful cowboys were plotting his ambush.

Many of them still burned from the memory of his first humiliating visit to Riverside, when the little *mujado* had lapped most of them, then rubbed it in by ravishing their trophy queen.

Everybody dropped clutches and took off.

In just one lap, the cowboys, in their hulking backyard bombs and Birdcages, had Little Ricky's Ferrari running a poor sixth, suckin' wind, and already bearing collision scars. By four laps, Little Ricky was all done. His explanation to Gus: "*El Maserati Birdcage blanco numero 21 me pego entrando la primera curva; pero, no fue la culpa de el, micoche no manejaba bien.*" ("The white Maserati Birdcage number 21 hit me at the first turn; but, it was not his fault, my car was not handling right.")

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A few months later, I was at Sebring, covering my second 12 hours for *Motoracing*. It was the last time I got to see Little Ricky race. He was paired with his older scion Pedro – himself later killed on the Norrising, in Germany – in a Ferrari 2.5 rear-engine, a tiny but very hot car.

With seven hours to go, the brothers jammed it into the lead. But it broke.

They commandeered a second 2.5, one with a slipping clutch. Four different drivers hadn't been able to get it going. They'd damaged it trying to. But the Rodriguez siblings had it in second place before the earlier damage turned terminal.

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Predicting Little Ricky's early death, one of the biggest prima donnas of Formula 1 had warned, "If he continues racing the way he does, and lives, I'll be surprised."

The prima donna was wrong as usual.

Of course the boy raced harder and faster than the prima donna did, or was capable of, but Little Ricky wasn't a crasher. Once he turned turtle in a Porsche RSK out in the U.S. midwest at Meadowdale, but that didn't count. Everybody was always wearing those skittish RSKs.

Mexico City was the one deathtrap racingtrack where Little Ricky ever crashed, and the only place he ever raced a deathtrap Lotus.

Things started well for him, or had seemed to.

Mexico City's wasn't a world points Grand Prix, Ferrari wasn't sending an F1 car for him, so, rideless, Little Ricky undoubtedly jumped at the opportunity to jockey a Lotus.

But there were forebodings. This Lotus fatefully belonged to Rob Walker's team.

Earlier that spring, in England, another Walker Lotus, raced and crashed by Stirling Moss, had so rattled Sir Stirling's brains that Moss never was able to race again. Which was as bad as death to him.

And for the rest of that fatal season the fast and flimsy deathtraps had continued to annihilate but were also winning and kicking butt on everything, including Little Ricky's own Ferraris.

Little Ricky, however, wasn't quite blind to what was going on with Lotuses. He was aware that at top speeds thin-gauge axles might well snap, underweight suspensions chunk, and that deathtrap crashwalls lay in wait.

Ominously, Mexico City was a little less than a month after Pat Pigott's death, and Pat's had been the most gruesome Lotus wreck so far. Crashing into a deathtrap crash wall and trapped for 45 minutes in the disintegration of his Lotus and the welter of the wall, Pat had slowly bled to death because the deathtrap racingtrack – Riverside – had had no bolt cutters to get him out.

Little Ricky, then, seemed to face two choices in Mexico City, neither pleasant: face certain death should the Walker Lotus break and clobber a deathtrap crashwall; or, face a less certain end racing without seat belts and possibly getting hurled clear.

Little Ricky eschewed seat belts.

It killed him.

When a right rear suspension predictably collapsed, and the Walker Lotus impacted one of Mexico City's many deathtrap crash walls, Little Ricky wasn't going fast. He hit the wall traveling only 80 mph. Even a deathtrap Lotus could survive a wallop like that and not violently break up, and so Little Ricky's Rob Walker Lotus did.

But 80 was fast enough to fling the boy out of the cockpit.

There were no flips. There was no fire. Little Ricky's helmet struck the deathtrap guardrail, and Little Ricky died instantly.

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Don Pedro Rodriguez was Little Ricky's rich poppa. He was spending all his pesos keeping his son in fast pop-gun Porsches, faster Ferraris, and, at the end, Rob Walker's deathtrap Lotus.

Nobody outside of Mexico knew much about Don Pedro,

He was a mysterious little man – as short as Little Ricky – who wore sunglasses indoors while functioning as a highly secretive financial tycoon in one of the world's poorest countries. Not even Gus ever got a serious handle on where Don Pedro's pesos came from, but there were three rumors, all juicy:

Don Pedro was 1) the ex-daredevil motorbiker from a thrill show who had become strong man of the Mexico City police department's crack crotch-rocket squadron 2) no, scratch that, Don Pedro was the locomotive engineer of the government train of *el jefe* Cardenas, Mexico's reform president of the 1930s, who later used his well-placed connections within the administration to make insider real estate buys in Mexico City and Acapulco that made him a fortune; and 3) the one I hoped was true, because it scandalized the sissy cognoscenti – Don Pedro was a bordello godfather running a string of Mexico City's most fancy houses of ill repute.

Whatever Don Pedro was or wasn't, after Little Ricky was killed, I think he did something courageous.

When the cognoscenti no longer could suppress them, and the real, outrageous, details of Little Ricky's passing surfaced – too late for anybody to read – Don Pedro, bereft, went public with them himself.

His brutal expose – the first and only time somebody had the guts to blast the ongoing bloody scandal of deathtrap racingcars being allowed to race on deathtrap racingtracks – would have saved lives – future deader champions of the world Jimmy Clark and Jochen Rindt would still be with us – had not all the cognoscenti publications declined to print

Don Pedro could have taken it to Gus, I suppose, but *Motoracing* was too small and too hated.

So Don Pedro went to *Paris-Match*, one of the biggest magazines in Europe, which published the expose complete with photography of the remains of the Rob Walker Lotus. It was only modestly damaged, and mostly intact, except for the telltale right rear suspension -- broken and dangling. And except for the steering wheel, pathetically bent, where Little Ricky had been desperately unsuccessfully trying to hold on.

Nobody in racing paid any attention to the expose. Maybe never noticed it. Except Rob Walker.

Who read it and became incensed.

Little Ricky's Mexico City racing team owner took the expose as an unfair attack not on deathtrap racingtracks, or deathtrap Lotuses, but as a personal, bitter, assault on *himself*.

Lots of pride and status were on the line. Walker was the Red Label whiskey heir.

He never sued Don Pedro for libel, as he'd surely have done today, but Walker never accepted responsibility for Little Ricky's demise. And he refused to park his team's remaining deathtrap Lotuses out of possible remorse. But he severed all contact with Don Pedro and bided his time, waiting to libel him in return.

Walker eventually wrote a book about his own life in racing, and in the book surely evens the score. Taking Don Pedro off at the knees, Walker's book claims that the death of Little Ricky unhinged the senior Rodriguez utterly, turning him into psychopath; and that one of the old man's psychotic acts had been to arbitrarily banish the stricken Sarita from the Rodriguez household bag and baggage – literally pitching her out onto the bricks on her beautiful bottom.

For years afterward, Little Ricky's exotic widow apparently sub-existed in harsh conditions bordering on extreme poverty.

Walker's book carries no footnotes, so I don't know the provenance of his claim. But Don Pedro certainly played the arch-villain with Gus.

Not long after Ricardo's end, Gus sold *Motoracing* for a pittance – minus his guidance, the tabloid folded immediately – and retired to a hermit's existence in rural Mexico. But Gus was unlucky. One dark midnight when he was boozing in the cantina of a hotel in Mexico City, Don Pedro, still grieving but now bitterly angry as well, tracked Gus down.

Reproaching Gus with a tirade, Don Pedro maintained that it wasn't a deathtrap Lotus or a deathtrap racingtrack that had killed Little Ricky after all: it was Gus and *Motoracing*! All the headlines in red, all the exclamation marks, and Gus's verbs and adverbs and adjectives, had gone to the child's head.

That was mean of Don Pedro. Little Ricky couldn't even read English. Until the day he died, Gus was crushed.

Today the old Mexico City Autodrome that destroyed Little Rickey when it was a deathtrap is named after himself and Pedro. Perfect irony.

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My own memories of Little Ricky are fading fast and pretty amount to two stunning nights.

The first is at Sebring, the very first Sebring I covered for *Motoracing*.

Little Ricky is busy shaking up the cautious older veterans of the Ferrari team with an old front-engine, identical to the one he unsuccessfully brought to Riverside – he's just ridden it into a lead of two laps and is on the verge of making it three

Then he loses the three laps, plus many additional laps, on account of a long, long pit stop.

I'm suspicious that the factory forces the long stop on him to deliberately allow its team veterans to overtake and pass him; Little Ricky hadn't been supposed to race so fast.

But everything nearly backfires. Now stuck in the caboose, Little Ricky jams back into the 12 hours going really fast all over again.

Darkness is falling. Sebring, as ever, is littered with slow cars driven by crawling amateurs.

But here comes Little Ricky, from the very back, headlamps blazing and flashing maniacally, booming up into everybody's rear view mirrors without warning at great speed.

Zounds, the sounds. Plus the pyrotechnics.

Up and downshifting a screeching big V12 without the clutch is tricky to do without blowing it up. Little Ricky is out there throwing hundreds – thousands – of them. Just from his rolling thunder reverberating and riffing across five miles of Sebring, I can tell when he has the Ferrari over in the Esses, or deep down in Websters.

And all those accompanying bright orange exhaust bursts and bolts of crackling Ferrari flame lighting up the night! Wonderful.

Little Ricky is grabbing back lost laps so fast that the nervous factory team may be cooking up a second bogus stop to slow him down all over again, but the checkered flag comes out first.

The 12 hours ends with Ferrari's shaken veterans winning as scheduled.

Little Ricky comes in a raging – but maybe disillusioned – third.

The night at the Grand Prix Restaurant when Sarita's exotic brown beauty so distracts me that I forget to eat my dinner, is the second. (1998)

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