

The Project

by Kurt Arehart - January, 2020

The beige wall phone with its coiled fifteen foot cord rang repeatedly and my mother quickly dried her hands, stepped from the kitchen to the tiny hallway and answered it. "Oh yes, Kurt is here." And she motioned me to come.

In 1973 cordless phones, never mind personal cell phones, were far in the future. In this time our little Cape Cod style home in northeast Philadelphia had just the one phone, mounted at head-height and central to the first floor, convenient to kitchen, living room and dining room, all just steps away. A practical arrangement, but one that offered no privacy.

A senior at Northeast High School, my afternoon homework was sprawled across the dining room table, more often the 'everything' table. Rising, in three steps I accepted the receiver from my mother.

"Hi! This is Audrey. Audrey Cohen. From school. Ruettenberg's class." Audrey had time for this string of prompts because I had lost my tongue. Of course I knew who she was. But never had we spoken by phone. Rarely had we spoken at all. And now she calls.

In this time northeast Philadelphia was heavily settled with jewish communities and the higher academic classes at Northeast High were heavily weighted with earnest jewish students piling up prime GPAs with a clear-eyed view toward admission to top universities. Audrey was one. And yet she resisted category, running against norms of the day. Her's was a quiet confidence, easily overlooked. She wore little or no make-up and dressed with simple modesty, moving with quiet athletic grace in low-heeled shoes. No high-platformed heels to teeter on. No short-short hot pants or low-cut tops to wrench boy's heads around. No hip-swaying prominades along the school halls to drive all thoughts of Algebra II from the male brain. She offered a simple, quiet beauty. Large dark doe eyes arranged on an elvin-shaped face with fine clear olive skin. Lustrous fine dark hair worn long and straight. A cute little nose over a small, straight mouth. Her appearance and bearing made her more the indian princess than academic jewess on the rise.

I should have been drawn to her authenticity and quiet strength. I ought to have sought her friendship and maybe more. But I was still wrapping-up my awkward adolescence, dazzled by the unattainable brass and swaying hips of others, and in a cloud of insecurity and self-doubt did none of these things.

And now, out of the clear blue, Audrey had called.

Completely off balance, standing at the hall phone with my mother preparing dinner six paces away, I offered little and allowed Audrey to lead the conversation.

“What are you doing Saturday night?” This in an alluring tone.

“Nothing”. A new layer of confusion. Alluring? Quiet little Audrey?

“Well how about a double date with Jeanna and Steve, me and you?”

“OK.” I managed without allowing my voice to break.

“So, Jeanna can get her parent’s car, and we are thinking maybe we pick up Steve, then get you. That OK?”

“OK.” I was finding my rhythm.

“So then we’d head across to Jersey, pick up some rum and hit a drive-in movie. It’s a really big car. That sound OK?” Her tone had upgraded to sultry, her meaning unmistakable. My shock and confusion brought me to a zombie state.

“OK.” I was nothing if not consistent.

“Well, great. We’ll get you around seven and head for the bridge.” Her tone came back down to normal as we agreed to these practical logistic details.

“OK bye!” And she rang off.

“Who was that, honey?”, my mother called from the kitchen sink as she peeled carrots for the pressure cooker.

“Audrey from school.”

“Oh, that’s nice.”

I sat back down to my homework, but no homework was happening anytime soon. How very odd! In 1973 gender roles were far more rigid. Girls did not ask boys out. Girls did not obtain cars and pick boys up. Girls were not the sexual aggressors. And yet here Audrey was, coming after me with absolutely no prelude suggesting an alcohol-eased tumble in the back seat of a large car.

I had always thought highly of Audrey but never considered asking her out. She just did not seem the type to play the game. And many of the jewish girls were strongly discouraged from seeing a ‘goy-boy’ like me. While I certainly looked jewish enough, she knew I was raised Lutheran, if not destined to a life of devotion there.

The idea of a first sexual encounter was much on my adolescent mind and the possibility that this was rushing straight at me and with someone I kind-of liked was intoxicating. I did not examine these deep incongruities. My primitive lizard-brain silenced all such high-order thinking. “Here is a new reality, and we are going with it.”, commanded the reptile within. The garden of delights was coming for me at long last and I was fine with that. After all, I was nearly a man of eighteen!

All this took place on a Tuesday, so Saturday was several school-days off. Dr. Ruettenberg ran a very tight ship in his honors english class, and when Audrey slid into her seat on the far side of the room right at the bell, there was no speaking with her before class. I had some witty remarks scripted out, something cool, but still enthusiastic, but when fifty minutes later the end bell came Audrey was up and gone before I could gather my books.

Vanished. Very odd, but my lizard-brain was still firmly at the controls and would brook no doubts. She probably had a long haul to her next class, I imagined.

The next day it was the same. Script loaded and ready. Audrey appears at the last. Audrey vanishes like a ghost before I can have one word. Still my lizard-brain proclaimed all was well.

Thursday evening had me back at the dining room table hacking away at still more homework when the phone rang. This time I leapt up and got there first.

“Hello?” A clear note of anticipation from me. Not cool!

After a beat of silence, “Hi, this is Audry.” Sadness, pain in her voice! What is this?

“I am so sorry. I feel terrible.”

“What? Why?”, I manage, master of letters that I was.

“Well, I’m in this Honors Psychology class and the term project is to take some strong social norm, turn it upside-down and then observe and analyze reactions. Jeanna and I decided to flip the whole dating drive-in thing. We would ask boys out. We would get a car and pick you up. We would suggest rum and a drive-in. We would act like we were taking total control and watch what happens. But it all went wrong.”

“What went wrong?” I had managed a three word sentence.

“It’s you! You did everything wrong!” This with near-wailing regret.

“What.” I was back to monosyllables, and fairly toneless in my confusion.

“For one thing, I like you too much to manipulate you this way.”

Silence from me.

“And you were supposed to push back. To insist that you drive, that you pick me up and so take control of the date.”

More silence from me.

“Boys, men, are supposed to take control, to insist on being the aggressor. But you didn’t do any of that.”

Still I was speechless, could only listen.

“I am so sorry. I just can’t play this out and treat you like a fool. It’s just wrong and I feel horrible.”

“OK.” I finally managed. She said “sorry” one last time and broke the line.

A list of things Kurt should have done:

- I should have recognized her pain, and the high virtue driving it, and immediately moved to ease her suffering, tell her I was fine, and assure her it was her act of honesty in the face of difficulty that most mattered and truly registered with me.
- Failing that, after a few moment’s reflection I should have called her back and done the same.
- Following my best attempt to let her off the hook and return her to a sense of comfort and self respect, I should have told her that I had always held her in high esteem, always

found her strength and grace attractive, apologized for never finding the courage to tell her so, and ask if we might hit the reset button and try a no-risk, no-commitment evening out, dinner and a movie or some such. In all likelihood her parents would eventually object to her seeing a non-jew, but it would have been pleasant while it lasted, possibly to the enduring benefit of both of us.

- Failing that, I should have at least approached her at school within a day or two, commending her courage in coming clean and at least expressing my admiration.

But I was seventeen, so I hadn't the wisdom or courage to do any of these things, instead choosing to wall off the experience as if it never happened.

And Audrey, she recovered her dignity in her own time, so that she was able to write a lovely note in my senior yearbook, allowing me to understand only then, walking away from high school, what a beautiful gem I had overlooked.