

Helen Takes The Trolley

Kurt Arehart - 2020

The baby dropped. Helen had been through it before and read everything she could find at the public library about birthing. So any day now. She packed a bag for herself and one for her first born, three-year-old Robby.

Bob had gone off to work as usual, and he too was on alert. Any day now.

Bob and Helen were in the swell of that great post-war middle-class wave, earning the electrical engineering degree on the G.I. Bill, getting that solid professional job, then buying that first little twin home on Fuller Street. They even acquired their first car, a 1952 Hudson Wasp 5B from Will Broom, Bob's bachelor boss, who was fully committed to the new-car-every-two-years American dream.

In 1955, when your wife was about to go into labor at any moment, you dutifully went in to work with an ear cocked for any news. And so Bob suited-up, slid his vinyl pocket protector crammed with pens and pencils into his shirt pocket, placed his ivory-veneered hardwood slide rule in his briefcase, climbed in his Hudson, drove to the Fox Chase station and took the train into downtown Philadelphia, then walked the six blocks to his office at 8th and Walnut.

Helen walked tentatively through the little home, adjusting to the fact of her dropping, yet another shift in her center of gravity, picking up after Robby a bit. She was still adjusting to her second run at being a stay-at-home mom.

With the birth of Robby in 1952, Bob and Helen planned for her to switch to full time homemaker, leaving behind the manic-paced work at Curtis Publishing. Helen loved the rhythm, variety and constant engagement at Curtis, and her meager wage kept the young couple afloat in a tiny apartment while Bob finished his electrical engineering degree at Drexel. She roamed the public relations department handling subscriber inquiries and putting out the occasional fire. An irked advertiser to be mollified. A subscriber writing to inquire about the vase in the background of a photo on page 52 of the Saturday Evening Post. Another reader claiming Norman Rockwell had used her likeness in an illustration without license. Helen fielded it all, and artfully. Her role grew beyond any original clerical description and she cheerfully contributed far more than her title and pay would suggest. She loved it.

But then there was Robby, and home she would stay. That is, until Curtis Publishing reached out in desperation. Helen's leaving had left a big hole that gaped still, after a string of replacements had come up short. They offered a raise. A bigger job. They begged. Helen missed the pace, the purpose and engagement, and also the daily society of adults, so decided to answer the call and come back. This was far from conventional in 1953, but Helen was never much for accepting the limitations pressed upon women at any point in her life.

In the spring of 1955, six months into her second pregnancy, her love affair with the world of publishing in downtown Philadelphia as a working mom became too difficult and she again joined the ranks of the middle class homemaker, merely reading the Saturday Evening Post rather than daily defending its honor.

Helen's water broke with a gush and her plan swung into motion. A call to Bob. "Sorry, he is out inspecting a power station, but we'll let him know the minute he calls in or gets back."

She took up Robby, his bag and her bag, locked the house and set out for the trackless trolley stop on Roosevelt Boulevard at Rhawn Street, a four block walk. Aged three, Robby could walk some, but was slowing things down too much and so Helen scooped him up and carried him.

After ten minutes on the bench the trolley door folded open with a clatter and Helen lugged herself, Robby and the two bags up the front steps, deposited her transit fare token and found a seat. Labor pains began pressing in, but she held them in check because she absolutely had to. Robby must be delivered to her parent's home in Frankford before she could head for the hospital, and there was just no help for it.

A second trackless trolley bus had her southbound on Frankford Avenue, with the shadows from the light-rail Elevated flicking across her window as familiar store-fronts lumbered by. So many stops, each with the squeal of brakes, the hiss of doors and clatter of tokens, then the rising whine as the tired old electric motor spun up yet again. Labor pains grew more frequent and insistent, seeming to respond to the rise and fall of the motor's whir and whine. She and Robby dismounted for the one block walk to Grandpa & Grandma's on Griscom Street, with a molasses cookie the shining goal for the three-year-old boy.

Helen had the plan well laid and had called ahead, so parents John and Myrtle promptly accepted Robby and his bag, whisked him into the kitchen, and then asked Helen how she fared. With yet another burst of courage and independence, Helen assured her father that she could make the one block walk to Frankford Hospital unaided and check herself in. And so she did.

She walked through the hospital door at noon on July 8, 1955, and I was born at 1:00pm.

We do what we must in this life.

Not long after, Helen learned to drive.