

The Tower

By Kurt Arehart - 2023

Three white pipes. They ran vertically up a steel column, one of fourteen, that formed the support for the massive structure painted white. Between these legs ran a web of horizontal struts and diagonal bracing rods. At the center of the peripheral legs rose the wet riser, reaching more than one hundred feet to the enormous elliptical water tank above.

But this leg was special. These three conduit pipes, braced securely one inch from the leg surface, led to a steel ladder that began ten feet above the gravel surface of the tower site. This design would stop all but the most adventurous teens from climbing the open ladder one-hundred feet to the steel grid balcony that circled the tank.

Clearing the eight-foot chain link fence topped with barbed wire that guarded the tower was easy. A gate provided breaks in the wire and gate posts topped with rounded steel caps offered ample hand support as Kurt had swung his legs over, one at a time. A lot like the pommel horse in gym class. Bill, Sean and Kurt cleared the fence in turn, dropping to the gravel surface of the tower's base.

Now the real climb began. The vertical conduit pipes made fine hand holds as each member of the team relied mostly on arm strength and a little toe-smear to hoist themselves hand-over-hand to the bottom rung of the ladder, ten feet off the gravel.

Kurt was second, and a bit awkward as he transferred his hands from vertical pipe to horizontal rung, then more hand-over-hand load until finally his foot found the bottom rung. His arms were screaming for rest and he paused for a few breaths.

Sean was moving up the ladder above him, disappearing into the shadows. Bill stood on the gravel below, waiting for a clear shot at the bottom rung. Kurt began his ladder ascent, with sharp focus on each rung before his eyes. He insisted on deliberately wrapping his fingers solidly around a rung before releasing the one below. And being certain of his foot placement before that. In less than thirty seconds he passed a fatal height and would look down no more.

Immediately upon afternoon dismissal, nine-year-olds circled each other in the school yard, fists up and ready. They circled and circled, neither wishing to begin. They did this within a larger circle formed by classmates eager to watch a fight. After a long two minutes a school janitor came out and broke up the scene with never a punch ventured.

Earlier that day Kurt had accused Bill of cheating in a reading test, and Bill's honor demanded this fight. Right after school. Kurt agreed, but neither really wanted it. Relieved by the janitor's intervention, the onlookers dispersed and Kurt and Bill started to know one another based on grudging respect.

Bill's Fox Chase neighborhood was packed with Roman Catholic families and that meant loads of children and a vibrant after-school and weekend social scene. Many of these children attended Saint Cecilia, the parish school, but others went to the public Fox Chase Elementary, where Bill and Kurt circled each other that afternoon in 1964. Kurt lived on the opposite side of Fox Chase but often walked the mile to hang with Bill's friends. Within a year Kurt and Bill were best friends, spending most afternoons and weekends together in Bill's neighborhood. They walked and talked long and often as they found their way through adolescence.

Woodrow Wilson Junior High School saw Kurt and Bill in the same strong academic class, mostly composed of bright, earnest Jewish students. Kurt fit in pretty well with newly acquired horn-rimmed eyeglasses, dark hair and a generous nose. Bill, with his red hair and contagious Irish giggle, did not. Kurt got invited to spin-the-bottle parties hosted by the Jewish girls who controlled the social scene at school. Bill did not.

Michael Fine was a big lumbering boy in eighth grade, the largest of the Jewish boys in their class. Sitting behind Bill in American History, Michael took to poking at Bill, tormenting him while Mr. Sanders chalked the board. Bill had been growing, with his over-large hands suggesting far more growing would come, yet remained quick and agile. Bill reached his boiling point and spun with a speedy and well-aimed backhand that caught Michael full in the face, completely by surprise. Mr. Sanders turned to the class with the sound of impact and found a tearful and enraged Michael, and no explanation forthcoming.

And so Bill circled another opponent in another school yard, surrounded by another set of onlookers. The slow and massive Michael would send big punches easily seen and avoided by Bill, who had learned something of boxing by age thirteen. He moved in quickly, landed a punch or two on Michael's face, and danced away as another of Michael's ill-timed and arcing punches found nothing but air. Bill grew confident and stayed in a bit longer, landing combinations of blows, none of them decisive. Michael's round-house fist gained considerable force before it found the side of Bill's head, and down he went. Michael stood over a bloody and gasping Bill, and it was over.

In high school Bill lifted weights to put muscle on his six foot frame that had indeed grown up to his hands. Kurt topped out at seventy inches and showed less interest in weight training, but both were coming into their adult bodies and strength. Gymnastic aims in gym class went from impossible to possible to easy. Bill got into distance running while Kurt showed less interest in the pain investment required. Both remained strong students, setting them apart from most of the neighborhood teens on the corner. Bill's growing physical confidence saw him stepping in and confronting high school bullies, often backing them off with an aggressive charge and a slap or two. And through these years Bill and Kurt walked and talked long into many a night. They remained the best of friends.

Adjacent to Bill's childhood neighborhood is Burholme Park, a high point of land donated to the City of Philadelphia by the Ryerss estate. At the very top of the rise, facing south over a grassy slope to the city skyline is the old Ryerss mansion, now a sleepy little museum and library filled with themeless artifacts of the old family's leisure travel collecting.

The old manse, darkened at night, gave a creepy mystery to the surrounding woods of the park in Bill and Kurt's teen years, and made those woods a perfect place for a bit of under-age drinking and general carousing.

Most intriguing though, was the water tower. Standing two hundred yards northwest of the mansion and sited in a slight hollow on Jeanes Hospital grounds, it rose to a height sufficient to regulate water pressure to the sprawling hospital campus. Painted white and lit to advantage, the tower dominated the scene and had for many years captured the boys' imaginations. Bill and Kurt and four or five others would sip on cheap wine and talk about one day scaling the fence and climbing the tower, with its enormous tank shaped like a curling stone. As they grew into adult size and strength and the confidence that came with it, this went beyond idle talk.

Most of the group balked, fearing the height, the police or the risk of death, for if you fell from the high tower you would surely die. They could see that the ladder was completely open, with no safety cage except immediately below the balcony that surrounded the tank.

The night came when Bill, Kurt and Sean found the right combination of confidence and boredom and they made for the fence.

Sean and Bill had a long history of climbing about on any local construction site that might present itself. They'd scramble up scaffolds, pipes, any possible purchase to gain access to adventure and novelty close to home. With them it was never about vandalism, but just the thrill of climbing into places few others could.

So it was no surprise that Sean and Bill would be up for the water tower assault. Out of character was Kurt's participation. He liked a bit of adventure, but the tower carried far more exposure than he normally accepted.

The rest of the teens went home, wanting nothing to do with the enterprise and any tragedy that might follow.

Kurt continued his steady climb, sharply focused on each rung as he carefully wrapped his fingers before trusting his grip.

From above came the rapid rhythm of Sean's climb. He treated the long steel ladder with the same casual disregard as the porch steps at home or an eight foot scaffold at a building site.

Either his confidence was truly that supreme, or he valued his life less than Kurt or Bill did theirs. Perhaps a bit of both.

Time lost its shape as Kurt's world became nothing but wrap, step up, release. Repeat. Look straight ahead. Wrap, step-up, release.

Below, Bill had gained the ladder and made the same careful progress, with deep focus on each rung as he wrapped his fingers onto it. Bill had been a little surprised at Kurt's willingness to climb. He wondered if he had somehow forced the issue and felt a pang of responsibility. So he climbed last, thinking he might offer Kurt support should he freeze-up on the ladder. But for now, it was all about each rung.

And then Kurt had the safety cage behind him. And then his head rose above the balcony deck. Sean welcomed him as he carefully stepped from the ladder onto the sturdy steel grid of the balcony deck. In another minute Bill arrived and gained the deck.

Taking a firm grip of the waist-high steel balcony railing, Kurt allowed himself his first look down, and then out. Down, the white columns, struts and braces disappeared into darkness. Out and to the south was a spectacular view of the Philadelphia skyline, bright and glittering, and all the brighter for how they had earned it. For they were a team. Together they had risked this, and together they were drinking in their reward.

For Kurt and Bill, this was enough. They had ventured, taken a reasonable risk, and they had won. After a time they would carefully descend and have this memory of thrill and triumph forever. And it was enough.

But not for Sean. Despite his casual exterior, the climb brought the greatest focus and thrill of this life, and this was intoxicating. It was good and he wanted more. More sensation, higher highs.

Sean: "I'm going up top."

Bill: "No, man. Don't do it. It's another open ladder."

Fifty paces around the curve of the tank, a steel ladder rose up the vertical tank wall and disappeared from sight as it curved up the shallow dome to the center beacon, which flashed slowly as a warning to aircraft on all but the foggiest nights.

Sean: "I'm going."

Bill and Kurt knew from long experience that Sean would not be deterred. His energy and thrill-seeking could reach manic levels, and often did, and he would not be reasoned with. They watched grimly as Sean rambled up the ladder with the same careless ease, moving out of sight as it traversed the dome.

A long five minutes later he was back down.

“That was the coolest thing ever.” This with shiny-eyed enthusiasm, but somehow without encouragement or invitation. The beacon visit, the true summit, he would keep for himself.

And then Sean was up on the railing, swinging his legs over. Before Kurt or Bill could understand and protest, he was hanging from the rail, with his legs in open space, one hundred feet to the gravel below. They stared down into Sean’s face in shock and confusion. What was he doing?! Was this suicide?

Kurt’s gut tied in a knot at the imagined scene of Sean letting go, disappearing into the darkness and falling to his death.

Sean was merely surviving high school, locked into a curriculum of self-fulfilling low expectations. Unlike Bill and Kurt, Sean had no realistic plans for college. No girl friend. Few meaningful friends at all. No one at home telling him he could or should reach high. He faced into a gray unknown with little hope of a good life. Big problems for a boy of seventeen. But was he really going to take a flyer?

They dared not try to grab at him for fear of knocking him off his grip. Sean’s gaze was inward as he tested his hand strength and let this new wave of adrenaline wash over him. He released one hand. For an eternal five seconds he hung by the one remaining hand without a word, death just a slip away.

Then he formed a small grin and his eyes sparkled. With smooth ease he brought his free hand back to the rail and hauled himself up and over to stand beside Bill and Kurt.

Sean let loose a cackle of triumph as the adrenaline continued to course through him.

Bill: “What the FUCK man! What was THAT shit?? Don’t ever do that to me again!”

Kurt: “Yeah, shit, man. No more of that. Ever.”

But Sean was Sean. He found he liked the rush and intensity of focus that came with facing death, and on future visits he would do still more. Bill and Kurt had seen enough, felt enough, and would not climb with him again.

They started down.