

The Determination

By Kurt Arehart

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It was good, and bad. A miracle and a tragedy.

Helen piloted the white Ford Fairlane station wagon with faux wood paneling through the congested streets of Frankford, tires clapping over derelict trolley rails embedded in asphalt along with occasional patches of still exposed cobbles. This section of Philadelphia was showing some age, without any historic charm. Just gathering grime, unbridled billboards and too many wires strung overhead.

Helen and Bob had opted for a nice little Cape Cod-style cottage set on a quarter acre of lawn three miles north in Fox Chase, but many ties remained here in Frankford. Helen's parents. Saint James Lutheran Church, where Bob and Helen met back in Frankford High School, and still central to their adult lives. Church-based friends, committees, socials. Favorite shops. Long standing relationships with family physician, dentist, and now for twelve-year-old Kurt, an optician.

As the Fairlane rumbled north through the urban clutter of Frankford, Kurt sat on the passenger side of the bench seat, spinning his head about in rapture, calling out all that he could see. With his first pair of eyeglasses perched on his nose the world presented in a stark clarity unlike anything in his experience. He was giddy as he read off this billboard and that, street signs, shop windows. It was all there! Astonishing.

Helen shared Kurt's joyous revelation, but mostly she silently attacked herself. How could she have missed it? Twelve years she raised this boy, and missed it. Impossible.

Robby was a very difficult infant. He would nurse and vomit and cry. Quite a lot, at all hours. A shattering experience for a first time mother in 1952, nothing like the serene images offered by magazines portraying the American middle class dream. Calming advice and steady support came from family and friends, mother and mother-in-law. Sister-in-law Patricia walked the few blocks from Frankford High to visit and help many afternoons. And so Helen came through the harrowing experience of a collacky first-born.

In 1955 came Kurt. Easy. Easy labor, easy birth, slept through the night right off. Easy.

Helen could compare the contrasting experiences in wonder. And gratitude. She was not sure she could handle another difficult infant while wrangling the rangey, impetuous Robby. A good hearted soul, Robby was deeply curious, and quick about it. Rules were received as dubious

guidelines, and like many intelligent children he pressed hard to find the true limits imposed by Helen and Bob.

Kurt was a different toddler altogether. Quieter, more deliberate. State the rules and he obeyed as best he could. He walked early and read early, drew well and showed strong intelligence while lagging Robby's earlier development curve for things athletic. Where Robby was fast, strong, could hit a pitched ball and pick up a tricky grounder, Kurt lagged.

Rhawnhurst Elementary School was an eight block walk from Bob and Helen's Fuller Street home. By Helen's rule-of-thumb reckoning, eight city blocks was one mile, give or take, but the favored route actually measured six tenths of a mile, which rounds up to one mile, just barely.

Helen knew Kurt to be capable of walking to kindergarten at Rhawnhurst with big brother Robby, who would be entering third grade there. Robby would be a passable guide and guardian, if susceptible to distraction, temptation, dares and whatever else might seem more attractive than another day of fidgeting in a classroom. Sensing this potential, Helen elected to train Kurt in making the walk safely on his own, and if Robby was along, all the better. The fact that she was seven months pregnant made the daily walks less attractive, but she really needed to establish Kurt's independence for the daily commute while she was still able. She had miscarried two years back, but the time of fearing a repeat was past, and all seemed well.

And so walk they did. For Helen, two round trips a day.

At the intersection of Fuller and Eastwood, with a stop sign for Fuller:

Helen: "What do we do here?"

Kurt: "Look both ways before crossing."

Helen: "And who has the stop sign?"

Kurt: "We do."

At the intersection of Rhawn and Bustleton, two major collector streets, with a traffic light:

Helen: "What do we do here?"

Kurt: "Wait for the green light, look both ways until the cars stop, then cross."

So it went for the heavily pregnant Helen. Two round trips, one before and one after school, until Kurt proved capable of handling the journey on his own, including the major street crossings. In all of this, there was never a suggestion that Kurt's vision was lacking. He quickly learned the street names and that was that.

Kurt was taller than average, and generally well behaved, and first grade teacher Miss Everly placed him on the back row. Better to keep her less ruly charges close in the front. She would write important things on the chalkboard and Kurt would squint to see, especially when Miss Everly declared a thing very important. But the squinting and straining had its limits.

Kurt is walking home alone. He thinks fondly of his current first grade crush, Alice. They have on occasion held hands in the school yard at recess. Kurt knows he wants more, but is unclear on what this might be. Several weeks back he had played doctor with a neighborhood girl one year older, so he now has some anatomical detail to work with.

He walks along head down, focused on not stepping on any sidewalk cracks. The concrete panel suddenly hinges away beneath him and he is falling. A steep steel slide gently redirects him and now he is sliding through the dark at high speed with no hope of controlling his descent. He shoots out into a dimly lit room, lands on a well-cushioned surface and tumbles to a halt.

While he is still a bit dazed a robot catches his wrists and ankles in velvet-padded shackles attached to a wall, rendering him helpless. The robot retreats through a low doorway and Kurt now sees in the gloom a figure also shackled to the wall just eight feet away.

It's Alice, clad in not much, a bit of sheer gauziness, designed to tease rather than conceal. Who has done this? What to do? Kurt's wrist is thin in the shackle, and with effort and pain he is able to reach around and release the catch pin. He frees himself and then Alice. They hug fiercely without reserve.

"...and so that is your homework assignment for tonight. Any questions?", asked Miss Everly. Kurt snapped to attention, then sagged in disappointment. Again he had missed the entire lesson, along with the related homework assignment. He did not know what question to start with, and certainly did not want to appear stupid to his classmates. Again. And so, again, he must approach Miss Everly after the final bell and admit that he needed help.

Mrs. Quimbleby, Rhawnhurst's principal, came to visit Miss Everly's classroom one morning in October. "Kurt, you get a chance to visit another classroom. Pack your things into your cigar box and we'll go see Mrs. Porter's first grade class, just across the hall."

This did not seem like good attention, but a change of scene might be interesting and fun. Mrs. Everly had been taking the class through the alphabet, and the letter T was being considered, both as a block letter and in cursive, upper and lower case. Earlier in the morning the problem of two plus two was unveiled. Demanding stuff, but Kurt had been hanging on.

Kurt gazed up in surprise, locked in on Mrs. Quimblely's light mustache and neck wattles, then jerked into motion and packed his box while she stood over him. Pencils, crayons, ruler, Elmer's Glue, tape dispenser. Children craned around and watched, but otherwise held perfectly still and quiet. He was aware of the smell of white paste and nearby George's stale musk as he followed the principal out into the hall.

"My new teacher Mrs. Porter is really nice, and she put me right in the front row. I think I like it.", pronounced Kurt.

Helen: "Well, this is all a surprise to me, but I am glad you like it. What was Mrs. Porter teaching you today?"

"Colors! It's really easy!"

"Ah! And how about your letters? Where are you with that?"

"I don't know. Maybe we'll start on that soon. She seems really nice."

"And any math from Mrs. Porter?"

"Not yet. Today was about yellow, and I think maybe green for tomorrow. For homework we color the squares red, the triangles blue, and the circles yellow."

"I appreciate the care and attention you are taking with Kurt, trying to decide where he fits best, and I know he can be hard to read.", Helen offered from the visitor's chair in Mrs. Quimbley's office.

"Yes, well, Miss Everly has taken plenty of extra time with Kurt, often after class, trying to help him to keep up, but it is an ongoing problem, and probably quite stressful for the poor boy."

"I am mystified, because at home he seems so quick. I've always read to him, and he was reading to me pretty well when he started kindergarten last year. Now he reads on his own. And when I cut an apple into four quarters, he is very clear on the idea that four quarters make a whole. And four eighths make a half. These things seem to come easily to him."

"Good to know! Why then is he always behind?"

"Kurt can be a world-class daydreamer. Maybe he is drifting off too often?"

“Let me check with Mrs. Porter, get her early evaluation of Kurt, maybe pull him in for some testing, and we’ll see.”

Mrs. Quimblely entered Mrs. Porter’s classroom and stepped to Kurt’s front row desk.

“Kurt, I hope you enjoyed your visit with Mrs. Porter. Now it’s time to come back to your classmates with Miss Everly. Pack up your box.”

Again lost briefly in Mrs. Quimblely’s wattles, Kurt caught himself, translated her sounds into meaning, and opened his desktop.

Back across the hall, Miss Everly, juggled her seating chart and put Kurt in the first row. Alerted to his tendency to daydream, along with his aptitude scores, Miss Everly took pains to frequently check Kurt’s eyes and bring him back whenever she found him beginning to gaze into the middle distance. This proved far easier than repeating entire lessons to Kurt after the final bell.

And frankly, this now happened very little. Maybe his placement in the first row was helpful all by itself. He certainly caught up fine after his two weeks across the hall with Porter’s slow class.

“Kurt, have you ever had your eyesight checked? Any chance you maybe need glasses, honey?”

This again!, Kurt thought, horrified. He saw first-hand what happened to kids with glasses at recess. Constant bullying. Glasses taken, often for a cruel game of keep-away. Tears and broken eyewear, and sometimes worse.

“I see fine. I don’t need glasses.”

Kurt managed to dance away from the dread eyeglasses through his entire elementary school career and never again got shunted off to the slow class. He often asked his beloved sixth grade teacher Mrs. Gouse if he could step up from his back row seat to better see the board, and she would suggest he have his eyes checked. Again he would defer, even though by age eleven he could not read the board at all from thirty feet back.

The eyeglasses would come that summer and a four-eyed Kurt began his time at Woodrow Wilson Junior High School, with this new social liability offset by a life-changing view of the world.

And how close a thing it had been. The first grade fast class fed into the next year's fast class and beyond, then academic track with superior instructors, then college prep. The slow class also kept to its channel with far lower challenge and expectation, fed into shop classes, home economics and the road to the factory floor or clerical pool, with few if anyone escaping to college. And all based upon categoric assessments made at the age of five, in kindergarten.

Smart kids, dumb kids. These labels too often a self-fulfilling determination.

Kurt had Helen in his corner. Too many did not.