

Rumble On The PTC - by Kurt Arehart, 2019

For days now it had been getting progressively worse. A handful of large, rough and loutish brutes grew ever bolder, piling outrage upon outrage as they came to terrorize students sitting in the back half of the Philadelphia Transit Company bus.

First the fledgling gang was forcing small, bookish, mostly jewish junior high school students to give up their seats by threat of violence. When that bit of domination lost its thrill they grew into relentless taunting, then spitting in faces, then vicious slaps to the face, always with antisemitic slurs uttered in withering contempt. Just yesterday the two largest, the leaders, took to seizing students' books and loose leaf binders and hurling them out the window of the moving bus. Still, none of the small students could be provoked to fight. They had been raised on tales of persecution and its survival.

But this Gandhian non-aggression strategy was not yet working. The toughs only grew more bold. Each sought to raise the bar and gain status with his fellows. Dangerous. Something had to be done.

Kevin watched all this at a safe remove. While also a devoted student and well acquainted with some of the victims here, he was of medium weight and build for his fourteen years and had not yet been singled out. And now he endured yet another twenty-five cent afternoon bus ride on the PTC and the pack of thugs was starting up again, maybe taking it all still further.

Neil Armstrong had recently walked on the moon and come home a global hero, but here on the PTC heroes were in short supply and little Mark Servetnick was to be the day's prey.

Kevin could sit and watch no longer. He stood up.

Kevin enjoyed a pleasant enough childhood in a quiet home and relatively safe neighborhood. He walked a half mile to Fox Chase elementary school in northeast Philadelphia and had little occasion to fight. Somebody in the neighborhood owned two pairs of boxing gloves and so Kevin learned to take a beating and maybe land the odd punch without being seriously threatened. That aside, he was no fighter.

Kevin was a student, and a good one, which was fortunate since he had little ability to hit a pitched ball or catch one coming in. His older brother was the athlete, so Kevin's niche in the family would be as top student.

As one of the taller students in his sixth grade class, and not a behavior problem, Kevin found himself assigned a back row seat. He had just enough confidence to ask to step up to the front after a lesson to see the board and copy down key notes. Dear Mrs. Gouse seemed alarmed

by this and suggested that he have his eyesight checked, but Kevin was resistant. Attractive eyewear for children was many years in the future and he had no appetite for a new reason to be targeted for neighborhood and school yard bullying.

Even with this handicap, as yet unrevealed, confidence built upon confidence and Kevin enjoyed a strong sixth grade, a big fish in the small pool of Fox Chase Elementary School. While still no athlete, he had hand-holding schoolyard girl friends and when Mrs. Gouse said he could be anything he wanted in life, Kevin believed her.

It was in the summer between his triumphant sixth grade and the frightening step up into Woodrow Wilson Junior High School, that Kevin got caught out. He stepped into a vision testing booth at a local carnival event, wisps of cotton candy floating on the breeze, and got slammed with the news that he was badly nearsighted. Defective. Still resistant to this most unwelcome news, Kevin was brought by his mother for more formalized testing and the findings were confirmed. The frames available for children were built for durability rather than flattery, and Kevin joined the ranks of the often taunted "four eyes" types.

Ah, but to be able to really see clearly for the first time! The drive home with his new glasses was a time of wonder and astonishment. Kevin excitedly called out all the road signs and billboards that he could now see, oblivious to the fact that his mother must have been silently attacking herself for missing the vision problem for so long. Boys of twelve are rarely gifted with well developed empathy, and Kevin had no sense of what his mother was feeling. He was awash in dazzling visual acuity.

The other miracle was athletics. Now Kevin could see that ball well. Hit it. Catch it. While he came in for some cruel attention for the glasses, he also started drifting up from last-pick in any school yard game to an early pick. Sometimes first pick. Viewed purely through the lens of social standing, this was a fine trade. Among his academian fellows, Kevin was suddenly a top athlete.

The eyeglasses made academic attention span much better, lifted Kevin away from being a miserable bench-sitter, and, quite unexpectedly, caused him to blend rather convincingly into the surrounding jewish community. This was a time when hard lines were quickly drawn between those marked for college preparation and those destined for the factory floor, and no subtlety about it. The strong test-takers were all gathered into two homerooms of thirty, 7-1 and 7-2, separated only by the elected pursuit of French or Spanish language study. It was socio-economic determination made clear by the numbers. Sections 1 and 2 were academic elites, sections 9 and 10 were headed for the under-class if not prison. 7-1 and 7-2 were dominated by jewish students, with a sprinkling of gentiles who were lucky enough to also have homes strongly in support of education coupled with the capacity to perform well in the classroom and the desire to do so.

Being situated in 7-2 and looking every bit the devoted jewish student with his horn-rimmed glasses, Kevin got invited to spin-the-bottle kissing parties, then dance parties, all thrown by

jewish girls firmly in control of the social scene, and even the odd bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah. He was immersed in a very different culture and tradition and was learning much.

Another lesson in the jewish experience is that of persecution. In eighth grade, the pinnacle of adolescent cruelty, Kevin came in for a bit of taunting from the local louts, but not so much as the truly undersized among his jewish friends.

In Philadelphia students rode public city buses to Woodrow Wilson Junior High School, and nasty predator youths ruled from the middle of the bus on back. At the height of their recklessness these thugs would start kicking out windows, causing the bus driver to divert to the local police station. The teens responsible would leap out the now wide open window at the next traffic stop, and no vandals were to be found when the police came on board. These same teens took delight in preying upon the weak, and small jewish students were a favorite target. Books were seized and thrown out windows. Students were spat upon and kicked.

After witnessing several iterations of this, a day came when a nasty lad no larger than Kevin was seeking to make his bones with the rest of his bully crew. He selected a small student that Kevin knew vaguely and started the now standard treatment of books out the window, spitting and kicking.

Kevin had seen too much of this, and his preservation instinct, backed by a very rational fear, was suddenly cast aside and he found himself standing in the aisle confronting this vile punk. Kevin said nothing, but his thunderous countenance, bolt-upright posture and threatening proximity carried the clear challenge.

The thug spit in Kevin's face. Kevin was unprepared for this outrage, completely new to his experience. Time slowed and he viewed the scene through a reddish film. Some primitive, visceral self took instant control. New experiences, all.

Kevin returned fire, spitting in the face of the thug. He responded immediately with a rising punch to the jaw that Kevin never saw coming. But the aisle was crowded and the boy had no room to step into his swing so the punch lacked weight and Kevin did not go down. Now Kevin was all instinctive fury and he bull-rushed the boy, knocking him to the floor of the bus aisle.

This wretch then astonished Kevin by going into a cowering fetal position, covering his head with his hands. The bully revealed. Kevin's fury was unchecked as his primitive self was off the leash. He kicked the boy savagely in the ribs several times then fell upon him, raining well aimed and devastating blows upon his head, the boy's covering hands useless against the power of the attack. Next Kevin felt himself being pulled up off his victim, but with deference, and a measure of respect.

So went the fantasy.

In the following days Kevin would play out something of this sort in his mind, altering his conquest, sometimes continuing until the contemptible bully was fully unconscious, other times pulling up short, but always issuing a sound beating at a minimum. And then there would be the doe-eyed girl, heretofore admired from afar, but now giving herself to him, the conquering hero, without reservation. Theirs would be a golden and eternal love.

The reality ran like this: Kevin received the incoming sucker punch but did not go down, and was all instinctive fury as he bull-rushed the boy, and did indeed knock him to the floor of the bus aisle. The boy curled up into a protective fetal position. All true so far. The bully was indeed revealed.

As quickly as Kevin's fury had risen, it left him, and he stood over this boy uncertain what to do next. With many eyes upon him, he quietly stepped away without delivering a blow.

For days he both fantasized about delivering the heavy beating or at least squaring the score with one decent punch or kick, and worried that his failure to do so would be seen as weakness and cause him to come in for more trouble from the bigger, scarier members of the bully tribe.

Not so. Apparently Kevin went on the list of Jewish boys who would fight back, was held in some grudging respect, and so was left alone. The wretch he had left cowering on the floor of the bus sought to reverse his loss by calling Kevin out for a proper after-school fight some days later, but when he agreed the bully-coward again lost his nerve and deferred.

Kevin counted himself lucky and hoped that was the end of it.

Some weeks later he learned that the story of the bus battle had spread through the school a bit, particularly in the high academic home rooms, 8-1 and his 8-2, and he was viewed as some kind of minor hero among the elite students for coming to the aid of someone smaller, weaker. Being celebrated for bravery, for taking a risk and coming to the aid of another, and then showing mercy and restraint, was completely new. It felt good.

While it did not come with the doe-eyed girl and love everlasting, the experience was still heady, subject to later enhancement in a benevolent memory, and quite possibly defining.

Kevin had set an important brick in the foundation of the man he would become.