

# “DAS”

*By Eustacia Cutler ©*

They look like any other bright seven year olds. Then after a bit you become conscious of an old fashioned, well -mannered remoteness about them, as if they had escaped from a Victorian ghost yarn dreamed up before there was electricity.

Like the computers they love too much, they're good at memory and logic. They could read by the time they were three, but they still play the level of solitary five year olds. As yet they have no gift for making friends, the relationship they hunger for.

Asa, blond and stout with no muscle tone, was mute his first six months in a special class. He could only communicate with his teacher by acting out charades. Now fluent a year later, he uses elaborate verbal explanations to fend off his anxiety over the lacks in himself that he doesn't understand. Today he is explaining to his teacher, point by logical point, exactly why he does not like to have paint or sand to touch his hands. Talk has become his brand of control.

Arthur is thin and pale with great grey circles under his eyes. He has a problem with things that make him feel sad, so much so he can't even say the word. Instead he says “das” which is “sad’ spelt backward, and then he laughs. Laughter is his brand of control.

Arthur is crazy about racing cars. He loves to watch the races on TV, but recently he was “das” when a famous racing car driver drove his car off the track and was killed. Arthur dug a hole in the garden, buried his cloth “Piglet” and laughed. Arthur's mother said Piglet wasn't dead and helped him dig Piglet up. Asa told Arthur he could explain death to him because he'd read “Charlotte's Web.” But Arthur knew better than both of them. He laughed.

Today Arthur and Asa are playing with Mike who's five and mute. Mike has trouble accepting game rules, he can only careen wildly around the room. So in order to instruct him in the ways of logic, and with the help of a teacher who is guiding all three of them into a partnership of friends, Asa

and Arthur have invented a game called “Chase Mike.” Now Mike races around the room, pretending he’s in a car. Arthur and Asa chase after him. But in the careening, Mike takes a spill. The teacher calls out:

“Help!! Mike’s had an accident! Quick! We must drive him to the hospital!” She makes siren sounds—  
eeeeennnnnnneeeeeooo! Eeeeeennnnnnneeeeeeeooo! Asa and Arthur join in. Everybody gets Mike to the hospital, they stretch him out on the floor.

Mike likes this game, plays it to the hilt and lies stiff as a board. Arthur grabs up two Leggo blocks and plunks them on Mike’s chest. “Kaa-chung!” He makes the heart resuscitator sound and jumps back. “Kaa-chung!” He’s got the emergency routine down pat. He’s learned it from TV.

“That’s it!” says the teacher, “You’re saving Mike, you’re getting his heart going.” Arthur shakes his head.

“No, he’s dead.” He leans over and closes Mike’s eyes, then stands back and laughs. It’s too “das” to bear.

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Arthur understands the ritual of death, the closing of eyes, the burial of a body. These are observable actions. But the idea of that his adored racing car driver is gone. Gone where?

That a beloved someone has suddenly disappeared and there’s a body laid out in a box heaped with flowers can make the best of us, in a state of unbelieving shock, want to go and shake that body awake.

For Arthur death falls into a disappearance he has no way to comprehend. The closest he can come to it is “Das”. “Das” is when reality grows so troubling Arthur has to spell it backwards, as if he could turn the event around and make it un-happen. His other solution is to laugh.

Conceptual thinking is missing from Arthur’s neurology.