

On May 12th, 1989, Gordon "Gordy" Paige missed the bus. Gordy missed the bus at least once a week but this particular Friday he missed it on purpose. Instead of rushing to catch the bus at 7:30, Gordy enjoyed an extra bowl of Honey Combs and actually toasted his blueberry Pop Tarts instead of eating them cold straight from the foil packaging. He left his house around 8:30 and walked through his back yard, opened and closed the gate behind him and turned left onto the small gravel alley which ran behind his and the other six houses in the lane. At the end of the alley he squeezed through a large hole in the wooden fence, followed the well-worn trail along the railroad tracks for about 100 yards before passing under the railroad bridge, squeezed through another hole in the chain link fence and arrived at his destination. His timing was perfect; the middle school bus pulled in to the Winocongo Lanes parking lot less than two minutes later. Gordy had missed the bus but had not missed the annual 8th grade bowling alley field trip.

By missing the bus on purpose, Gordy saved himself much more than a 45 minute bus ride. Walking would have taken him 20 minutes tops, but Gordy rarely walked anywhere. (The days he missed the bus, he simply didn't go to school.) Today, missing the bus allowed him to avoid both 40 minutes of homeroom boredom with Mr. Wesley, as well as eternal rounds of head counting and saying "here" before anyone could board the bus. He also missed out hearing the teacher's peppered warnings and threats about "best behavior" and "consequences" which, by law, must accompany any pre-boarding of a school bus before a field trip for it to officially qualify as such.

Gordy put the last bite of his blueberry Pop Tart in his mouth and walked around the back of the bus to wait for his classmates to start getting off the bus. When he saw his friend, Scott Karmonicky holding a paper towel to his nose he joined the line walking into the bowling alley.

"Hey Scott. You ok? What happened?"

"Hey Gordy. Yeah, I'm fine. Bartkiss and HardOn happened. *Again*. I'll tell you later. Hey, heads up they're right behind you. I gotta get another paper towel for my nose. See ya inside."

Gordy knew Barton and Harris wouldn't miss an opportunity to say hello.

“Gordon Percival Paige! Where the hell were you on the bus?” (In the fourth grade someone suggested the full names of students be included in the yearbook. Gordy had strongly disagreed with the idea then and was still suffering from the implement of the idea four years later.)

“Yeah, Gordo. What gives? You didn’t sit with your boyfriend, Karmelicky. He really missed you.”

Gordy waited for Barton’s obvious slap on the back...*there it is...* “Well, good luck bowling today, Gordo. You’re gonna do *great!*”

Once inside, Gordy wasn’t sure how he was going to explain his presence if any teacher asked. The only thing he thought of was telling them he’d been in the bathroom...but no teacher ever asked him anything (*Ha ha! Yeah! Score one for the fat kid!*) so he joined his friends in the shoe line.

“Hey guys. What’s up?”

“Hey Gordy!”

“Gordo!”

“Gordy? Dude, I didn’t see you on the bus. Where you been?”

“I have *no idea what you mean*. I’ve been here this whole time. So...what’d I miss on the bus ride here.”

Of course, in the back of every teacher’s mind is the field trip fantasy that this educational trip will give someone the gentle nudge they need into greatness. That years later, historians will look back at this one eighth grade field trip as the beginning of the path marking a before and after in a young person’s life. A young person who will change the world and inspire other young people to pass the motivational torch of... Not quite.

Scott’s bloody nose gave him the right to give the play by play. “So as soon as I get on the bus, Barton shoves me in the back, I go flying and of course Harris has his knee up waiting for me to

run into it. They both said they were “so sorry” for the “terrible accident” then when no teacher was looking they give each other a high five. But Barton messed up the high five ‘cause he had just given Stacey his breakup note and he was watching her for her reaction. Apparently this time he meant it but Stacey was laughing the whole ride here after reading the note. Then Rick Davis smashed his finger putting up his window and then when the bus is almost here Jim Murphy is mooning all of Winocongo. So Ms. Ramsauer yells ‘Mr. Murphy! Pull your pants up and get your rear end out of the bus window this instant!’

Gordy enjoyed the recap as much as everyone but still had no regrets about missing the short bus ride here. Short, but *dense* with 8th grade drama. He turned around and asked his crew, “So...what’s it say today?” Sam took off the paper sign taped to Gordy’s back and showed him. “WHYDE LODDE” was written in thick red magic marker. He was about to throw it away when Gordy stopped him and re-stuck the note to his back.

“Whatcha doing Gordy?”

“I want everyone to see how the geniuses spelled it.”

After picking up his shoes he went for a bowling ball. While his lighter classmates struggled with the heft of even the kid size bowling balls, Gordy found the heaviest ball he could find. When his fat fingers fit snugly into the large holes, he held it up above his head and smiled at his buddies who laughed so hard they almost dropped their balls on their socked feet. Gordy never was a sports fan and absolutely *hated* gym class, but *could not wait* to hurl his ball down the lane as hard as he could and make some noise knocking down pins.

After putting on his shoes and just before he figured out how to include everyone’s name on the screen above, Ms. Ramsauer came and handed everyone a piece of paper and a weird blue pencil. One by one the screens above each lane shut off, followed immediately by a groan and an “Aw, Man!” by each pocket of eighth graders sitting underneath. They were going to have to keep score manually. They always get ya, no matter where they take you for a field trip. They get ya. *Every. Single. Time.*

Ms. Ramsauer wasn’t the gym teacher. In fact, she wasn’t a teacher, at all. She was the middle school librarian. Like all librarians she loved books far more than she loved the loud, careless,

uneducated heathens who moved, mishandled, mistreated, disrespected, occasionally read, but more often than not, *lost* them.

In their kindest words, Winocongo Middle School students described Ms. Ramsauer as “crooked.” The description is accurate, so there is no need to share the cruelest descriptions of her. Suffice it to say her left leg was two and a half inches shorter than her right leg but her left shoulder was 4 inches higher than the right making Ms. Ramsauer perfectly straight only in mid-stride in mid-air. The effect of this constant rocking motion wreaked havoc on Ms. Ramsauer’s undergarments; on dozens of occasions her slip could be seen around her ankles. The entire eight grade class was grateful Ms. Ramsauer had chosen pants for today’s bowling outing.

Ms. Ramsauer called everyone over and quickly reviewed how a bowling score is calculated. The week before, in gym class, the students were studying how to do so but until now, there was no way to apply what they had learned, or rather, *not* learned.

Ms. Ramsauer quickly changed her normal shoes for her own bowling shoes that she had brought along with her own bowling ball. Not one of the 8th grade students could tell the difference between either pair of shoes. She then bowled (left handed) a “practice frame” with an explosive strike that left the 8th grade class with their mouths open and added curtly, “Any questions?”

The explosion of sound caused by the impact of heavy ball on heavy pins flipped a switch in Gordy’s head. He was now torn between the desire to make his friends laugh and seeing if he too could make that same sound and make ten pins fall down just like Ms. Ramsauer had done. Having never been interested in sports or keeping score, he was unable to identify this feeling in his gut. It was a strange, electric, gnawing spark. And Gordy Paige liked it.

Back at his own lane, he watched his buddies all try to make the others laugh with their own impressions of Fred Flintstone’s twinkle toes release. He watched three of his buddies throw six consecutive gutter balls. The fourth buddy rolled another gutter ball before he knocked down two pins with his second ball. Gordy was last. It was his turn. He knew his impression would be funnier because of his bulk, but he resisted. He spotted some arrows painted on the

floor half way down the lane and something else clicked in his head. The arrows told him to take a half a step to his left. So, without really understanding why, he did so. He felt the heft of the ball and smiled. *Let's make some noise.*

With a coordination he was unaware he had he took a four step wind up holding the ball high behind him releasing it with a perfect mix of power and grace. As he released the ball and pointed it where to go with his arm following through, his right leg swung behind him as natural as a sail turns to catch the wind. He enjoyed the controlled slide of his shoes on the freshly oiled lane. The ball shot down the lane but strangely looked to Gordy to be in slow motion; the din of the bowling alley switched to a silence only Gordy experienced. The part he enjoyed the most was the split-second before the ball crashed into the head pin. It was going to hit it just a tad off center, but somehow it looked right to Gordy.

It was *right*. With an explosion of pins, everyone in the alley stopped for a split-second to see where that noise had come from. The loll lasted no more than half a second, but Gordy would remember that half second for years to come as when his *entire life* began. Everyone's eyes were on Gordy's lane. There wasn't a pin left standing. At the end of the lane, a massacre of pins lay sprawled out like dead soldiers in a sniper's wake. A few mortally injured pins were still crawling to the gutter to find cover before they died.

The silence, then the crash breaking that silence and the destruction his ball left made Gordy smile. He couldn't wait to do that again. He watched other balls going down their respective lanes and none of them made a crash like his did. None, except Ms. Ramsauer's. She was nearly unrecognizable as she smacked her hands together having just missed one pin on a tricky 7-10 spare. The nearly 70 year old woman looked decades younger with a big heavy ball in her hand. Gordy liked this bowling thing. He liked it a lot.

Skip Brody, the Wincocono Lanes owner and manager, working on an inventory report for the alley's lunch counter didn't see the strike but he *heard* it. *Whoa! Now, that was a strike if I ever heard one! Lane 15, maybe 16? No. Lane 15.* He turned and smiled. *Lane 15, yes!* He was right and he knew it. It was lane 15 where that perfect crash had come from. He could still see two pins spinning on their sides like spooked doves unable to escape on broken wings. He

rolled the unlit cigar from one side of his mouth to the other. He saw a fat kid high-fiving his friends and plopping down into a seat to mark his score and wait for it to be his turn again. The kid looked a lot like he did at that age, but lighter on his feet than he'd been. He returned to his inventory report to get as much work done as he could until it was the fat kid's turn again. He knew exactly how long it would take five beginners to throw two (most likely gutter) balls each and for the fat kid to be up again. *Wonder if he can do that again?*

When Gordy did do it again, exactly the same, Skip smiled at how cruel bowling was. He remembered his first strike and that pursuit of perfection to get ten in a row that is always right there...and always beyond your grasp. Therein lies the beauty, and cruelty, of bowling. There is a perfect score possible...the only catch: it's impossible.

By the time he finished crunching the lunch counter numbers, the 8th grade field trip was winding down. Skip breathed a sigh of relief that last year's episode on Lane 22 had not been repeated. Two kids thought it would be funny to see how high and how far down the lane they could heave their balls before it landed on the hardwood floor. Lane 22 was still damaged and Friday night leaguers refused to bowl it. The 8th grade field trip was over. The next hour or so of his life would be spent pairing the shoes dumped on to the shoe counter back together again. The balls looked to be all back in the racks, but not in the order he liked them. He timed his arrival to the shoe counter to coincide with the fat kids'.

"You had some nice strikes, kid. How long you been bowling?" Skip assumed Gordy was new in town because he had never seen him on Saturday morning youth league, but it was obvious someone had given the kid some pointers.

Gordy was all smiles. "Thanks. Actually, I never bowled before today. Today was my first time!" Brody's jaw tightened around his cigar as he mumbled something about beginner's luck.

"Sorry, what?"

"Nothing, kid. Hope you had fun."

"I sure did. I gotta go, see ya mister." Gordy waved with the flyer in his hand that all 8th grade students get when they turn in their shoes at the Winocongo Lanes field trip each year. It was

good for a free lesson which were rarely ever cashed in. Skip Brody knew he'd see a dozen or more in the parking lot over the next few days. The flyer was also good for something else.

"Keep that flyer, kid. It'll get you a free Coke if you bring it on Saturday mornings."

"Cool, thanks." Brody waved as he rolled his cigar from one side of his mouth to the other and headed behind the lunch counter and into the kitchen. He hoped the manager would be gone for a while. If he was, his plan just might work.

While the 8th graders were putting their street shoes back on, Ms. Ramsauer announced that everyone's bowling scores would be read aloud in five minutes. Teachers might always get ya with something to learn on a field trip but kids never miss an opportunity to get smart back. Reading the scores out loud at the bowling alley is a perfectly logical way for a teacher to end the bowling alley field trip. What could *possibly* go wrong? Students who had already turned in their scores wanted to "double check their work" which is music to any teacher's ears and so Ms. Ramsauer gladly gave the students their score sheet and the weird blue pencil back to do just that.

Reading out the scores would give Gordy time to figure out how he could ride back to school on the bus without messing up the count. Of course he could just get on the bus and let the teachers worry about why the count was different, but the idea of the teachers being happy about having the count right when it was wrong was irresistible. Somehow, Gordy had to get rid of one person. But who? Seeing Barton twist little Stephen Kreider's arm, Gordy knew who. Now for the *how*.

Ms. Ramsauer began reading out the scores. After an impossibly high incidence of one score (69 - followed by a roar of giggles) and after the Bailey twins matching scores of 500 were read aloud, she announced only the top three *actual* scores would be read aloud. There was a pause and then a wave of sarcastic boos which she countered with the timeless classic "If anyone has a problem with that, they can speak to me after school..." A silence punctuated with more giggles and whistles filled the air. Ms. Ramsauer quickly looked through the scores and then cleared her throat to speak louder than any librarian should ever speak. The students could barely hear her.

"In first place, Jimmy Lefew with 227. Well done, Mr. Lefew. In second place, Winifred Ramsauer, that's me, 210 my personal best by the way, and in third place...Gordon Paige with a 209. Well done, Mr. Paige." The flame in Gordy's gut had grown. It was burning good. Third place. Not bad. Both Ms. Ramsauer and Jimmy had been bowling in leagues for years: Jimmy for 4 years; Ms. Ramsauer for...oh say....call it...40. With a little practice, he could probably beat both of those scores. Funny, he never cared about scores or places or winning until he had almost won. Bowling just might be something he could be good at. Someone joked that Gordy's score matched his weight which Gordy thought was pretty funny and, milking the moment, raised his hands in victory making his buddies (and even those outside of his group) laugh.

As his friends circled around again, Gordy could see Barton near the restrooms trying to steal from the candy vending machines. "Guys, quick! Let me have you coupons. Follow my lead." His crew were onboard immediately.

Approaching the candy machines Gordy spoke in a louder voice. "Man, sure wish we had more of these coupons. The guy at the counter said with 8 coupons you get a free burger combo. But we've only got six. Oh well." Gordy placed his and the five other coupons on a bench near the bathrooms and walked away.

Barton took the bait coke, fries and burger. He scooped up the six tickets. As Kreider passed by he threatened him to hand over his coupon, or else. Kreider immediately did so disbelieving how cheap this latest Barton toll had been. Gordy shook his head. *Kreider really should have developed better Barton radar by now.* Barton now had 7 tickets plus his own made 8. He counted the tickets twice then strutted over to the food counter and plopped into the seat closest to the cash register. No one was at the food counter. Barton tapped the tickets on the counter. He didn't mind waiting. He had all the time in the world.

Meanwhile, Gordy and his friends were "very helpful" getting the rest of their classmates in line and back on the bus.

"Thank you, Mr. Paige. That was a big help."

"My pleasure Ms. Ramsauer."

Mr. Brown was counting each student as they entered the bus. Gordy was the last student to climb the three steps.

"...and Mr. Paige makes 37," Mr. Brown was extremely happy the count was correct and on the first try. He nodded to the bus driver to close the door. "Mr. Dvorak, we are all set. You can return us to the school now, please." Mr. Dvorak turned the key and the old school bus reluctantly coughed alive.

Gordy and his crew were just about to burst but knew they had to keep it together for just a few more seconds. *Come on, come on. Let's go. Bartkiss wants his free combo but surely he must realize we've all left. Come on...Move the bus!*

A thought crossed Gordy's mind. *Harris.* If Harris asks where's Barton it's game over. He looked for Harris. He was always in the back of the bus, but he didn't see him. *Where'd he go...?*

Spotting Harris near the front of the bus, a sneaky grin snuck across Gordy's face. *Guess he's not worried about his friend.* Harris was sitting next to Stacy Barnett. Since Barton had made it clear he wanted *nothing* to do with her, Harris had wasted no time letting her know he wanted everything to do with her. He agreed with every bad thing she said about his best friend.

Mr. Dvorak revved the engine struggling to get the crabby old bus in gear. Gordy's crew called him to the back of the bus where they had saved him a spot. He was almost to the back seat when he spotted Barton running out of the bowling alley. Mr. Dvorak finally got the bus in gear and lurched forward, pushing Gordy into the back door of the bus. Regaining his balance, Gordy pushed forward. He knew what he had to do. He was halfway to the front of the bus and called out.

"Ms. Ramsauer! Ms. Ramsauer! Is there a book in the library about bowling or famous bowlers 'cause I really am interested."

"Mr. Paige, Please go back to your seat! The bus is moving now! And, yes I know just the book for you when we get back to school."

"Ok, great! Thank you, Ms. Ramsauer!"

Gordy turned and began his slow and cautious return to the back of the bus, making sure his bulk blocked Mr. Dvorak's entire view of the bus' back window. Gordy was enjoying his uninterrupted view of Barton waving his arms and screaming. With infectious school spirit, Gordy began singing the Winocongo Middle School fight song. The rest of the bus and even Mr. Brown and Ms. Ramsauer immediately caught the fever. Still, he was worried Mr. Dvorak might spot Barton in the side mirrors but Barton was running directly behind the bus where Mr. Dvorak couldn't see him. When Gordy was just a step or two from the back of the bus, Mr. Dvorak yanked the bus into second gear. Taking full advantage of the lurch with perfect timing, Gordy turned and gracefully allowed his bulk to tilt and come to rest on the bus' back door and window. He made sure the center of his back was perfectly centered in the back window. Gordy smiled, closed his eyes and spread his arms along the bus' back wall relishing in his friends' applause and laughter. The last thing Barton saw before the bus left the parking lot was the "WHYDE LODDE" sign still stuck on Gordy's back.