

## Who Was Gordy?

There was a faint familiarity about him that caught me.

“Who’s that?” I asked while sipping a warm beer.

“Who? Oh. That’s Gordy ...,” answered my friend Jerry. “Aunt Milly’s new B-O-Y friend.”

I offered a brief smirk acknowledging his sarcasm but said nothing. We were at a party, one that I didn’t want to go to. Jerry didn’t either, though the party was for his mother’s 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. It was one of his Aunt Milly’s crusades to prop up the rickety façade of their fractured family. *Forced fraternizing* Jerry called it.

“Winnie will be pissed he’s here,” Jerry whispered. Jerry’s mother’s name was actually Elizabeth but he had called her *Winnie* for as long as I’d known him. Not in her presence though.

*Gordy*. I kept mumbling his name while watching from across the room. His unfiltered excesses drew me in more as I plumbed the depths of my memory. His voice. His actions. Nothing about him was subtle. All resonating with my past. Finally it came to me. It was Gordy!

From what I could see Gordy hadn’t changed much. I would have been about ten at the time. He was still as wiry as he was then. His hair still long, although no longer blonde. It was more grey than blonde and greased back in a vain attempt to hide patches of bare scalp. He was very short. His well-shined cowboy boots made him look like a man trying to appear taller than he was. He had on a garishly loud shirt. It was one of those Hawaiian shirts, not well suited for the cold snap we were experiencing. The top two buttons were undone—his bony chest peeked through the thin fabric like exposed springs from a well-worn car seat. His glasses were the same

as I remembered too—oddly thick, distorting his eyes to twice their size. He looked like an exotic fish peering out from an aquarium in a dentist’s office. A prominent gold necklace with a large cross laid flat on his skinny chest. It was too yellowy to be real gold and the size of it seemed to compete with his diminutive frame, making him look as if he might topple over with its weight. His odd appearance had a remarkable congruence with my memory of him way back then.

Gordy was from my old neighborhood. He had been a trash collector and his route took him on to our street. It was Gordy’s oddness and not his employment that ensured recollection...even after some thirty-odd years. In my mind’s eye I could still see him with his shirtsleeves rolled up high, tightly clinging to his well-tanned sinewy arms—an ever-present package of Camel’s peeking over the brim of his shirt pocket. His coke-bottle thick glasses were held in place with binder twine, tufting his hair on the back making it stick up like the spritely tail of a small dog. A gold filling in his front tooth gave him a pirate-like quality. Ridiculous? Maybe, but when you are ten, the ridiculous can be sublime.

To his fellow workers he must have been an obnoxious buffoon—someone to be endured and not much else. But not to us. To us he was a delightful interlude, briefly suspending the boredom of a sweltering summer day. He had a panache about him that was quite captivating. Gordy would hang precariously off the back of the truck while it lurched from house to house. He would reach way out, latch on to a can with one hand while the truck was still in motion and then use his other arm as a kind of hinge, slinging the can high onto the truck where another man would catch it. These cans, bulging with kitchen waste, could be monstrously heavy and yet he was so small! He was daring too. Instead of stepping off the truck like the other men, he would

execute a perfect front flip, always landing on his feet. No one we knew could do this. We were amazed.

"Watch this kids!" he would boast while performing another flip. "Good eh?" boldly fishing for praise. As rambunctious children, humility was not a quality we understood well so no scorn was directed at him for his lack of social acumen.

Then he would laugh—a laugh much louder than it needed to be...a kind of clown's laugh. There was something hidden behind it...something sad...something untold. Although I had no worldly experience to explain it, I knew enough to know his laughter probably came from a place devoid of humor.

With the party underway I eventually went over to him. He donned a suspicious grin revealing the gold-filled tooth winking back at me from behind tobacco-stained teeth. I had the right guy. Our initial conversation was labored at first as I found him quite guarded. I felt myself having to convince him that my memories contained nothing untoward. Moments of awkwardness sputtered along until the mention of his acrobatics. It was then that a threshold was crossed enabling me to nudge a more spirited response from him. As his enthusiasm mounted I became a bit troubled by the magnitude of it. His reaction did not match the mild praise I was plying. His eyes began to flash with unwarranted excitement. Foolishly I continued to stoke his ego with more child-spawned admiration. Eventually, recognizing that I had come to a tipping point, I retreated and abruptly changed the subject. "So what are you up to now Gordy?" Unfortunately this had no impact. His metamorphosis continued unabated. Clearly he had latched on to his revived identity. Thoughts began to pop up like targets in a shooting gallery. What had I done?

“I still can do that!” referring to his front flip.

He didn't expect me to take his word for it either. That much was obvious.

At this moment, as I looked into his bulging eyes, quite distorted from the thick lenses, I saw my own reflection mirrored back to me. He was seeing me as I am I thought but I, only the distortion. I was looking at a curiosity while he was seeing an admirer. A kind of shamefulness seeped into the moment like smoke under a shut door.

“Watch!” he trumpeted.

He began nudging people aside, pushing chairs closer to the table where the refreshments were. Since no one but me knew the conversation that prompted his movements, puzzled guests looked on with a restrained curiosity. Sitting close to the refreshment table, Milly was encouraging her sister to open the few gifts plainly arranged around the yellow cake. Becoming aware of the distraction, she stopped what she was saying in mid-sentence and locked on to Gordy. Her expression abruptly changed from mild amusement to a white-hot flash of contempt.

“Gordy! Stop! No. Not ...not here!” she pleaded.

Finally recognizing what he was about to attempt, I furiously tried to persuade him differently. With a violent grunt, Gordy launched himself into the air, somersaulting high enough for his head to clear the floor but sadly not enough to have his feet land as they should. There was a moment of suspended animation as Gordy hovered while using his legs to cantilever his body in a hopeless attempt to keep him from falling to the floor. With a fierce urgency he grabbed the nearest chair, desperately trying to break his fall. It held him for a brief moment but eventually it toppled over catapulting the refreshment table a full three feet into the air. Gordy crashed on to the floor with the simultaneous arrival of exploding cake and pulp-filled fruit

punch right onto the shocked faces of both Milly and her sister. A chorus of screams followed and then a sudden silence punctuated the moment. A few reluctant ice cubes slowly lost their grip on the plastic table cloth and fell to the floor with a muted clink. Gordy was groaning. He had hurt himself. How badly? It was not apparent. No one came to his rescue. They let him lay there ... as did I.

The frozen moment allowed people to take stalk. Gordy continued to push out incomprehensible utterances. His glasses were a few feet away. One of his thick lenses had dislodged from its frame. His necklace, now twisted in a half-loop, draped ignominiously over his head. A sticky blob of yellow icing clung to the gold cross.

Milly managed a few nervous giggles but then stopped abruptly. Eventually guests scurried to pick up displaced objects. Milly's daughter went for a mop. I stooped down to prop Gordy up and retrieve his glasses for him. There he squatted in the detritus, hollowed out like the rotting rind of a fallen log, a fading effigy of what once was. His one decaying attribute had abandoned him. A tacit acknowledgement of his tragic circumstances was exchanged between the two of us. Who was he now?