

ANOTHER DAY AT SCHOOL

by

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Gordon Wolfe loved his job. He had been a high school teacher at Jackson High School for only a year, but he knew it was his calling. He loved his school, he loved his fellow teachers, and, most of all, he loved his students.

Class was nearly finishing up. Gordon was wrapping up his lecture on the Trail of Tears when he glanced at the clock. Just a couple of minutes of class left. He brought the subject matter to a close.

“Alright, kids,” he said, “that’ll just about do it for today. We’ll finish the lecture tomorrow. In the meantime, be sure to read chapters six and seven in your book, because Friday is coming soon, and that means test time.”

The storm of moving students began. They quickly began to stash their textbooks and materials into their bags, as a tide of teenage conversation slowly began to arise, in anticipation of the bell. The students were especially excited; the next hour was lunch. This gave Gordon a sense of excitement as well.

Gordon surveyed his students as he returned to his desk. They were all somewhat bright, but he had his challenges. The jocks, who cared little for academics. The slow learners. And then there were those that just didn't care. Gordon was up to the challenge. He wanted them all to succeed.

The bell rang, and the students began to leave.

They all filed past Gordon on their way out of the classroom. He said goodbye to them all. Rex Chipman, the jock who preferred football to history: “Let's ace the test this time, Rex!” Alice Cameron, the beauty queen who was peaking too early, and had little time for academia: “Be sure and read tonight, Alice!” Bjorn Johnston, the overly studious nerd who would probably get into Harvard: “Don't read too far ahead, Bjorn!”, and Jack Hanson, the punk-rocker who actually had a taste for history: “Love the new earrings, Jack!” Last to come out was Dexter Krause.

Gordon felt pity for Dex; he was the outcast of the school, the non-conformist, the one that no one sat to next to at lunch. Dexter's grades reflected this; he was not exactly an excellent student. Gordon knew that life at home was not easy for young Dexter. His parents were on the verge of divorce, and it was apparently an ugly one.

“Dex,” said Gordon, “you doing okay, buddy?”

“Yeah,” mumbled Dexter, not meeting Gordon's eyes, “I'm fine.”

“Alright, well, if you ever need anything, I'm here for you.” Gordon loved all of his students.

Dexter shrugged his shoulders and walked out of the classroom.

Just outside of the school building, Officer James Coulter heard the lunch bell. He was sitting in his patrol car, just finishing up his own brown-bag, when the daily reminder of his schedule sounded. He stashed his lunch bag in the seat well behind him, cracked his neck from side to side, and stepped out of his police car.

The CB crackled. There was plenty of crime for dispatch to report, but James Coulter was removed from this. His charge was keeping these kids out of trouble, and, more importantly, safe. He could not bear the thought of anything happening to them.

Officer Coulter loved his job, as well. He had been a beat cop for almost seven years, and was extremely close to making lieutenant, a detective with a desk job, solving Seattle's most heinous crimes. He had done extremely well with the Seattle Police Department.

Then came that ugly, fateful year. His wife's cancer was aggressive, and she was gone in a matter of months. Officer Coulter had never quite recovered. His Chief, one of his superiors who had encouraged him to make detective, told him to take some time off, to think about things.

Officer Coulter, working through his grief, had other ideas. He took on the role as high-school patrol officer, a job no one else in the department was eager to take. He and his wife had wanted to start a family. They never had the chance. This way, he could at least help make a difference in the lives of young children. He saw each of them as his own, in a way.

Officer Coulter began making his rounds, scouting for truant students trying to sneak off campus, looking for the tough-guy kids sneaking cigarettes, looking out for fights and disturbances. In the main hallway, he passed one of his favorite students, the beautiful child named Irene. She and her seeing eye dog, Kaleb, were on their way to the lunch hall.

"Hey Officer Coulter," said Irene. She could always tell it was him; the scent of his aftershave was always a giveaway to her.

"Hey Irene," replied Officer Coulter, as he bent down to pet Kaleb. "How's the day going?"

"Just fine," Irene replied, as Kaleb licked Officer Coulter's hand. "I figured you'd be inside, looking for Ms. Morgan."

Officer Coulter was glad that Irene could not see him blushing. Ms. Morgan was the new math teacher, fresh from the UW, on her first teaching assignment, and many of the male staff members were quite taken with her.

"Ah, no," replied Officer Coulter, "Just gonna make my rounds. You and Kaleb have a good day, now."

"Okay, Officer Coulter. But she'll probably be in the teacher's lounge." Irene and Kaleb made their way to the lunch hall. Officer Coulter continued his patrol.

It did not take him long to scout the usual trouble spots. Things were quiet today. None of the usual trouble kids were making any mischief, and so Officer Coulter decided to check out the lunch hall.

As he entered the hall, he exchanged greetings with many of the passing students. He was well liked at the school, and he loved these kids. Boisterous high-fives and pats on the back were exchanged. Officer Coulter loved these children.

The lunch hall seemed typical. Rambunctious teenage males, full of testosterone, were whooping it up, while the young girls giggled at them. Another typical lunch. Well, thought Officer Coulter, maybe I will check out the teacher's lounge.

Gordon Wolfe quickly stashed his materials in his desk, opened the bottom drawer, and pulled out his brown bag. He wanted to get to the teacher's lounge as quickly as he could. Gordon had found himself quite smitten with the new math teacher, Theresa Morgan, but barely had the courage to strike up a conversation. He was a young, single man, and her mere appearance made his heart flutter. He knew how his students must feel, hormones raging.

Gordon dashed down the hall to the teacher's lounge, and opened the door. There she was, talking to Principal Bergensen. Okay, thought Gordon, you got this. Just walk on up and join the conversation. You can do this. He felt his hands sweating, and he gripped his brown bag tighter.

“Gordon!” Aw, crap. Brent Chadley, the shop teacher. “Come and join me, you young pup!”

Gordon did not exactly dislike Brent, he was just the opposite of everything that Gordon ever was. A Republican. A gun nut. A hunter. About the only thing they could ever talk about, the only thing they could find to discuss in common, was the Seahawks.

Gordon turned and smiled at Brent, who gestured Gordon over to the seat opposite him. Gordon looked over at Theresa and Principal Bergensen, who were still locked in dialogue. Oh well, thought Gordon. Maybe another time. He sat down opposite Brent, and began the dull conversation about how great Russell Wilson was.

The lunch hour was nearly over. The students were filing down the halls, some stopping at their lockers, some clustered in small groups of conversation. Officer Coulter passed the entrance to the teacher's lounge.

Theresa Morgan and Principal Bergensen stepped out, finishing a conversation. Principal Bergensen started down the hall, while Theresa turned to face Officer Coulter.

“Officer Coulter,” she began, “how is the day going for you?”

“Please,” he replied, “call me James.” She was strikingly gorgeous. Officer Coulter felt his heart beating faster.

“Yes, James, of course,” Theresa responded. “Any trouble out there today?”

“Well, no,” he smiled, “But the day is young! Gotta keep an eye on these little ruffians!”

“Of course,” Theresa smiled back. The bell sounded. “Well, James,” she said, “back to work!”

“Alright, Miss Morgan, you have a good day, now.” He watched as she departed, making her way to her classroom. Stupid, he thought, what a stupid line. The day is young. Little ruffians. What an ass he had made of himself.

A pang of sadness crept into Officer Coulter's heart. His wife had been gone for three years now, and although he missed her terribly, he knew that she would want him to be happy. If only he could find the courage to get to know Theresa more, but he was too constrained by his own insecurities, too saddled with the sad memories of his wife's passing. He shook his head, and continued his rounds.

That evening, Gordon Wolfe sat alone in his small apartment, going over the lesson plan for the next day. However, he was having trouble concentrating. He could not keep his mind off of Theresa Morgan. Not only was she a beautiful woman, not only was she extremely intelligent, not only was she great with the students, but she possessed a personality as pleasant as any Gordon had ever known.

He laughed at himself. He didn't know this! He was just smitten! Dammit, Gordon, he thought, you're a grown man! Settle down. Just ask her out, already. He took another sip of his glass of Merlot.

Whoah there, tiger, he caught himself thinking. First things first. Let's just try and get to know each other. You can do this. Yes, you can do this. Tomorrow. I'll start with coffee. We'll talk at lunch. Then, but only if it feels right, I'll ask her out.

Officer Coulter sat in the deep chair of the police department's psychotherapist's office. He had been visiting the doctor ever since the loss of his wife, and he felt that it was doing him some good. He had done a lot of crying, and a lot of laughing, in that office. But this evening, he was telling the good doctor about the new math teacher.

“It's been three years, James,” said the doctor. “I think this is healthy. Your wife would want you to be happy.”

“I know, doc,” replied Officer Coulter, “but I've been alone for so long, and whenever I try and talk to her, hell, whenever I see her, I just get all mentally disheveled. She does something to me.”

“Well,” said the doctor, “that's quite normal. Even grown men can get shy around someone they like. But I think it would be a healthy step for you, to try and get to know this woman.”

Officer Coulter looked up at the doctor: “You think?”

“Yes,” replied the doctor, “I really do.”

Officer Coulter thought about it for a moment. "Okay then, tomorrow. Tomorrow I'll ask her out."

The next morning, Gordon Wolfe got to work just a little bit earlier than usual. He was parked in the school lot, watching the incoming cars, weaving their way past the school buses. He chuckled to himself. Jesus, what am I, a stalker?

On the passenger seat next to him were two Starbucks lattes, in a cardboard drink container. Gordon figured it would be a great way to break the ice. Everybody loves coffee.

There she was. Theresa was pulling up in her Honda Civic. Feeling like a teenager again, Gordon picked up the tray of beverages, and stepped out of his car. He had to make it look natural.

His heart was pounding. He attempted to speak, but was caught by phlegm in his throat. Dammit. Theresa was gathering her bag and shutting her car door. Doubt overcame Gordon as he quietly cleared his throat. Come on, a little voice inside of him said. You can do this.

"Hey Theresa," he said. Theresa turned around, and saw Gordon making his way towards her.

"Well, hey, Gordon," she said. "Good morning."

Gordon stood next to her, trying not to smile too hard. "Hey, good morning to you!"

Theresa stared at him. She was expecting him to say something else.

Gordon, he thought to himself, get your act together.

"Hey, Theresa," he finally said, "the barista at Starbucks this morning gave me an extra latte," he managed, lying like a rug. He continued his ruse: "I just saw you pull up, and thought you might like the extra one. It's all yours, if you like."

"Aw, Gordon," Theresa said, "that's very nice of you, but I don't drink coffee."

"Right," said Gordon, "you don't drink coffee." Crap, he thought, what the hell do I do now?

"I'll take it!" Crud. Brent Chadley. Before Gordon could say anything, Brent had grabbed the extra latte from the rack. "Starbucks," the shop teacher said, "damned fine mud!"

"Well, there you go, Gordon, problem solved," said Theresa. She steadied the strap of her bag on her shoulder. "I gotta get to class. You two gentlemen have a fine day." She smiled at them. Good lord, thought Gordon, that smile is so beautiful.

"Well, old buddy," said Brent, "You think the Seahawks will pull it off this Sunday?"

Gordon just stood there, alone with the shop teacher, a cardboard drink holder, with a single latte in his hand. Dammit.

Okay, thought Officer Coulter, you got this. He was doing his best to look as casual as he could, standing in the hallway. Just outside of Theresa Morgan's classroom door.

Irene and Kaleb walked by. "Hello Officer Coulter," said Irene. "Are you waiting for Ms. Morgan?"

"Uh, no," Officer Coulter lied. "Just keeping an eye out, is all."

"Okay, Officer Coulter," said Irene, walking on, seeing through his lie.

The classroom door opened. Students filed out. Officer Coulter felt his heart rising to his chest. At last, Theresa Morgan came out.

"James," she said, "how are you?"

"Well," he started, "I'm fine, just real fine."

"Well, that's good," said Theresa. "Nice day today."

"Uh, yeah, sure is!" Hoo-boy. Officer Coulter's brain felt like a cotton candy machine.

"Well, good to see you, James." Theresa turned to leave.

"Wait, I mean, uh, Theresa..." Officer Coulter was fumbling the ball here.

"Yes, what is it James?" she said.

"I was wondering if you would... if you would, uh..." He was going down in flames.

"Is there something on your mind, James?" Theresa asked.

"Well," he said, "It's just that I, uh..."

There was a series of loud bangs, like firecrackers. Theresa Morgan's head exploded into a fine red mist, covering Officer Coulter with blood, tissue and brain matter. Officer Coulter reached for his side arm and turned his head to his left, just in time to see Dexter Krause, carrying what looked like an AR15 rifle, fire several rounds in his direction. Each bullet struck Officer Coulter's arm, ripping it to shreds. He collapsed to the ground, and saw Dexter methodically making his way down the hallway, indiscriminately shooting at fleeing students. Many fell. The pain in Officer Coulter's arm was too much. He saw Irene take a burst of bullets to the chest before he passed out from the pain.

Gordon Wolfe heard the shots. He instantly knew what it was. Oh dear God, no, he thought. A school shooting. Here at Jackson. No. Not this.

He looked at his students, all of them with panicked looks on their faces. He noticed Dexter Krause was missing.

“Alright, all of you!” he yelled. “Back into the corner! Huddle yourselves together and surround yourselves with desks! Fucking do it! Move!”

Gordon propped a chair against the door handle, and stood beside it, ready to pounce. He pulled the fire alarm. He had no idea what he was doing.

Officer Coulter quickly came to. He noticed immediately that his left arm was all but gone. He was bleeding profusely. Next to him, Theresa Morgan lay there, headless. He shifted himself on the ground, and saw the body of Irene, Kaleb laying next to her, whining.

The shots kept ringing out. Slowly, painfully, Officer Coulter climbed to his feet. He steadied his pistol. The fire alarm was ringing stridently. He was losing a lot of blood, and the shots kept ringing out. He followed them.

The hallways were littered with bodies and crying students, many of them wounded. Officer Coulter followed the direction of the gunfire, helped along by the trail of dead and injured.

Dexter Krause stopped just outside of Gordon Wolfe's classroom. Gordon heard him reloading. “Dex!” he cried out. “Dex! You don't have to do this! Please, Dex, just stop!”

A hail of bullets blew the door open. Several rounds struck Gordon, piercing his leg, torso and neck. He fell over, convulsing, dying. Dexter Krause entered the room.

The children huddled in the corner began crying and praying. “Dex!” shouted Rex Chipman, “Please don't kill us!”

The pleas were unheeded. Dexter Krause unleashed the weapon upon the huddled students. Nearly all of them; Rex Chipman, Alice Cameron, Bjorn Johnston, Jack Hanson, dead.

Officer Coulter had collapsed, but crawled his way to the doorway of Gordon Wolfe's classroom. He could see the body of Gordon, and he could see Dexter Krause, firing at the back of the room. Officer Coulter raised his pistol, and, through incredible pain, fired a single shot.

The bullet struck Dexter Krause perfectly, right in the head. He dropped to the floor.

Officer Coulter collapsed his head to the ground. He had lost a lot of blood. He would later die at the hospital.

It was the one of the worst mass school shootings in United States history. After all was said and done, thirty-seven students were dead, with many more wounded.

As a man of eighteen years of age, Dexter Krause had legally purchased the AR15 rifle. The bump stock, still legal under pending legislation by the Washington State Legislature, was taken from Dexter Krause's garage. The school counselor had noticed several disturbing postings on Dexter Krause's social media platforms, and had notified Principal Bergensen, but these warnings went unheeded. Likewise, Gordon Wolfe had notified the school counselor, the Principal and the school board of Dexter Krause's behavior, but, although these concerns were noticed, the movement to mitigate them moved too slowly. Officer Coulter, too, noticed the strange behavior of the aloof young man, and had contacted his superiors at the Seattle Police Department. No detective had enough time to look into it. It was just another school shooting, another day in America, another day at school.