

I Remember Walking

Chad Erickstad

I remember walking home as a six-year-old along the side of a narrow, icy highway. Well, *almost* home. For miles I walked, alone in the midst of a frigid North Dakota winter.

I missed the bus. Well, I missed the *second* bus. At the end of every school day I got on a bus at Minnie H Elementary (named after a steamboat that operated on the weedy local lake from 1883 to 1908) and rode it to the high school, where I transferred to a second bus that took me to my home located approximately five miles from the edge of town. I did this as a first grader.

I was confused as I walked along the long line of buses idling bumper to bumper outside the front of the high school. The buses were waiting for children, waiting to bring them to their homes. The buses grumbled as clouds of exhaust drifted up between them, as games of tic-tac-toe were etched into the insides of their frosty windows by tiny fingers. I remember not seeing the second bus, the one with the big black 12 (or 34 or 17 or 26). I didn't know what to do.

I remember that this happened in 1976. A small child managing a bus transfer without assistance was a nonissue then. Children had freer rein, less supervision in 1976. Young children roamed the town as strays or in packs.

1976 was the United States' bicentennial year, 200 years old. I was told this was very important. Many television commercials used this anniversary as a way to stir patriotic fervor to sell products. I remember the Fourth of July celebration at my grandparents' house on the lake. I was allowed to stay up later than usual. Grownups were drinking and smoking and laughing. I watched kaleidoscopic fireworks burst open like expanding universes across the dusk-darkened sky from a boat in the middle of a bay. I watched golden embers float down from the sky. I heard the sizzle as they touched the lake and were extinguished.

I was the oldest of two boys. My parents were very young. My mother was barely out of high school, still 18 years old when I was born. I remember doing the math to see if I was conceived while she was still in high school. She had graduated before this, but just barely. It never occurred to my green parents that I would ever miss my bus. I had not been prepared for such an event.

My father worked as an electrician for my mother's father's electrical business in 1976. Later, he would own a separate electrical business alongside my mother's sister's husband. He was at work every weekday until early evening. My mother worked nights as an aid at a nursing home in 1976. Many more women were entering the workforce. Later, she would become an RN and work for decades at the town's only hospital, working days and nights at two-week intervals during the early part of her career.

My mother was at home the day I missed the second bus, waiting.

I remember seeing Bill. He had also missed the second bus. Bill was older. He was Black and he had an intellectual disability. I don't remember thinking he was different. He was Bill, and he rode my bus, and he also missed it that day. I asked him what he intended to do. I don't remember using those exact words. I don't remember how I worded the question. I don't even remember asking the question. I infer that I asked the question because I remember what Bill told me. He told me he was going to walk home.

I don't remember Bill after that.

I do remember talking to Bill and walking carefully along the highway, but nothing between. Cars that passed on my left side slowed down and veered widely, giving me space, a fine spray of slush spattering from each tire. Heads floating above headrests turned to look back at me as

they passed.

I remember that. And I remember a guy in a pickup truck stopping, asking if I wanted a ride, talking to me through the rolled-down passenger window from behind the steering wheel. This occurred just past the airport, which is located approximately two miles from town, three miles from my home. I don't remember what he looked like, what the pickup truck looked like. I don't remember turning him down, but I did, because I remember where he stopped to talk to me, just past the airport, and I remember walking along the highway farther past the airport and just past Scott Senger's house.

I remember Scott Senger. He played goalie on the hockey team, and he blinked a lot. He also occasionally blinked hard, in a kind of spasm. He was an aggressive blinker. Scott Senger was two years younger than me, my little brother's age. Scott Senger's house was the last in a line of six or eight houses that skirted the far side of the highway. I couldn't have known Scott Senger then, he would have only been four years old. Actually, I never knew Scott Senger. I just remember him. He played goalie, he blinked a lot, and he lived in a house that was past the spot where I didn't get into a pickup truck when I was six years old.

Another vehicle stopped to offer me a ride after the pickup truck. This happened just past Scott Senger's house. There was a family in the vehicle. There were two older kids, maybe three, in the vehicle. I think this made me more comfortable, more willing to get in. But I don't quite remember. I don't remember what the family looked like or what the vehicle looked like either, but I remember getting in and that it was warm and that there was a family: a dad, a mom, and some kids, older than me. The dad was driving, and I got in the backseat with the kids. I think there were two kids, but I don't quite remember.

I don't remember telling the dad where to drive, the final mile-and-a-half between where I got in the vehicle and home, but I do remember arriving home. The garage door was open. I walked into the garage through the open garage door and entered the house.

I remember Mom being loud. Not in a bad way, in a relieved way. Mom talked loudly to someone, the other mom or the dad. I don't remember which, maybe both. And I remember that Mom was much louder than she, he, or they were.

I don't remember anything after that.

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My mother remembers that day differently.

My mother remembers waiting for her seven-year-old to arrive home from school on a mild autumn day. For some time she waited, feeling shaken, then irate, then helpless.

My mother watched from the kitchen window as the school bus passed her house without stopping, the bus that should have dropped off her oldest child. She was confused. She called Prairie View Elementary, the school her oldest child attended in the second grade, the school she moved her oldest child to after first grade to be closer to a day care he could walk to, when needed, after school. She remembers talking to Lyle Hoff, the school district's transportation director, after the bus passed her house without stopping.

My mother remembers Lyle Hoff. He was the father of Jeff Hoff, whom she also remembers. Jeff Hoff was a year younger than her oldest child. She watched Jeff Hoff play hockey with her oldest child. Jeff Hoff was short and solid and physical on the ice. During his senior year in high school, her oldest child played on the team's first line and Jeff Hoff played on the team's second.

My mother yelled at Lyle Hoff the day the school bus passed her house without stopping, without dropping off her oldest child.

My mother was told by Lyle Hoff that the buses were delayed that day at Prairie View. That was why her oldest child missed the second bus. The first bus ran late, causing him to miss the second bus. My mother felt panic. She was afraid to leave the house.

My mother remembers that this happened in 1977. A small child managing a bus transfer without assistance was a nonissue then. Children had freer rein, less supervision in 1977. Young children roamed the town as strays or in packs.

1977 was the year *Star Wars* was released into theaters. Many television commercials used the movie's action sequences to stir fervor in children, provoking them to beg for action figures and toys molded to resemble the movie's characters, vehicles, and accessories. My mother went to the movie at the downtown theater with my father and her two small children. She stayed up later than usual. She saw people devouring popcorn by fistfuls and sucking on sodas from long straws. She heard the jibber-jabbering thrum of children and adolescents in the lobby before the movie. She bought *Star Wars* action figures and toys for her sons'

birthdays and Christmases for several more years following that night.

My mother doesn't remember if she tried calling my father after the school bus passed her house without stopping. She remembers talking to Lyle Hoff and she remembers when her missing child arrived home. She doesn't remember anything between. A vehicle slowly turned into the driveway and crawled up the gravel slope to the garage. Seconds later her missing child entered the house.

My mother remembers the relief she felt. She wished the family had come into the house with her oldest son so she could have thanked them.

My mother doesn't remember anything after that.

I remember talking to my mother about this incident, many years later. We were amused by the differences in our memories of that day, how my memory of the icy highway and frosty bus windows contrasts with her memory of the mild weather: "I remember there were leaves on the ground," she told me. "I don't remember being worried about the cold."

It was an enjoyable conversation, a good way to catch up on things. We laughed a lot, as I remember. I wonder how she remembers it.

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