

Chapter 2: The Front Seat on the Bus (or, who I was...)

If you and I had met in kindergarten, I would have liked you. I know, because I was a sweet little thing. Even if you were a self-described kindergarten-mean-girl, I would have liked you anyway. As if living a scene out of *Forest Gump*, I'd pat the open bus seat next to me and say, "You can sit here" as you'd scan the aisles in search of your other options.

If you were new to the school, you'd sit next to me in the front seat and I'd ask you questions about your brothers and sisters, your pets, and your favorite subject in school. Don't feel badly that, after a little while, you'd probably move back a few seats to sit with some cooler kids. I understand; I tended to be a little bit awkward. A natural introvert, I probably asked you all those questions about your family and pets in a hushed-whisper and, as it turns out, I probably spoke most of the conversation in my head. "I made a new friend today," I'd tell my mom, not realizing that we actually exchanged a total of 9 words.

I sat directly behind the bus driver, Raphael. He'd talk to me in a thick Italian accent, peering up into his rear-view window to make sure I was listening. "You are so preeety! Just-a look at your preeety leetle pig-tails! How-a was your school today?" Even when I didn't understand a word he was saying, I'd smile back into the mirror and nod my head, mostly smiling at myself, admiring how my curly pony-tails bobbed front to back. Raphael would gab on and on while I half-listened, squinting into the mirror, checking my loose tooth, wiggling it with my tongue.

On hot autumn afternoons, when the deceivingly cool morning had inspired me to dress in far too many clothes, I'd hop on the bus and jam my fingers into the slots that released the window until the metal hinges finally budged loose and the window crashed open. I'd sit on my Cabbage Patch Kids lunch box so the wind could flap against my face.

One day, after most of the kids had been dropped off, Raphael

asked me to sing to him. I didn't want to sing to him but I didn't know how to say, "no." After all, he was the bus-driver. I had a holy fear of disrespecting any of my teachers – and the bus driver counted as a teacher. Why else would we give him a carrot cake at Christmas time, all wrapped up nicely in aluminum foil? I told him that I didn't know any songs. Raphael shouted back to my older sister, Ellie, asking her what songs I knew. "She knows "Edelweiss" from *The Sound of Music!*" Ellie replied from the back of the bus, where she sat with the cool kids. She was almost as far back as the eighth graders, who, to a kindergartener, were huge and terrifying.

All of the bus rules were made by two of the most intimidating humans I have ever encountered: Tina Schmatz -- whose Betty Boop t-shirt emphasized the biggest eighth grade boobs this kindergartner had ever seen -- and Todd Foxworthy, who was heart-stoppingly handsome and the Center on the eighth grade basketball team. Ellie and the other middle school kids were risking everything by sitting in the back and they were on constant probation. Every day, to regulate the younger students, Todd would announce, "Three strikes and you're out!" He and Tina consulted each other about what constituted a strike, and they were brutal. By October, the two sixth grade boys who wouldn't stop singing "99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall" were kicked out of the back of the bus for the rest of the year. It wasn't Raphael's Italian bantering that kept me sitting in the front seat day after day; it was sheer terror of the eighth grade dictatorship.

"Sing 'Edelweiss,' then!" Raphael suggested, glancing up into the mirror. I closed my eyes, fidgeted with my backpack strap, and in my airiest kindergarten soprano sang, "Edelweiss, Edelweiss, every morning you greet me... soft and white, clean and bright, you look happy to greet me..." Raphael watched from the mirror and exclaimed, "Bravo!" when I was finished. From that day on, after most of the kids had gotten off of the bus, I'd sing "Edelweiss" to Raphael, the bus-driver.

So, that's the world you would enter if you sat with me in the front seat. Of course, all of this would depend upon where

Shannon Walters was sitting. Shannon was my uber-cool friend who was also in kindergarten but wielded much more power than the typical 5-year old. She'd tantalize those of us in the first five rows by sitting with one and then the other, working on a complex rotation system. We'd never know if it were our lucky day. Shannon was the only kindergartner who curled her hair like Farrah Fawcett, watched horror movies, and wore blush on picture days. I longed for the days when Shannon sat with me, even though every time she sat with me, something scandalous occurred that made its way back to my mother. The time I brought home a note from Shannon that said, "My poltergeist told me that you are in grave danger. Take all precautions. I suggest wearing a bullet proof vest," I ransacked my closet for my thickest vest, wondering if I should also accessorize my outfit with a bike helmet. I didn't mean to be a tattle-tale, but I was scared witless: I didn't know what "poltergeist" meant, but I knew that "bullet proof vest" meant serious trouble. Besides, my mom would have guessed that something was wrong the next day when her kindergartner boarded the bus dressed like an ice-hockey goalie. So, my mom called Shannon's mom, who assured us that her daughter didn't know what a poltergeist was either and must have gotten the idea from some movie.

I attribute Shannon with opening my Edelweiss-loving eyes to the galaxy of sex that first year of school. After all, it was Shannon who plopped down on the bus seat next to me one September day after we took standardized tests.

"D'ya see that word on the test?" she asked mischievously.

"What word?" I asked.

"Sex," Shannon replied matter-of-factly. I quickly scanned my memory for where that strange word had appeared on the test. We had spent most of the day laboriously bubbling in our names on the information sheet. *"Find the first letter of your name. Bubble it in all the way. Then, find the second letter of your name. Bubble it in all the way..."* Ms. Marshall's voice echoed in my mind. *"When you are finished bubbling in your name, move to the next box. Under the word 'Sex,' bubble in the 'M' if you are a boy. Bubble in*

the "F" if you are a girl." There it was! That was the word!

"Yeah, I saw it." I replied, wondering if I was going to play it cool or if my curiosity would get the best of me.

I had no choice.

"You don't know what sex is, do you?" challenged Shannon.

"No..." I answered. With that, Shannon jumped up in her seat, bounced around to face the back of the bus and yelled at the top of her lungs, "HEY Ellie, LAURA DOESN'T KNOW WHAT SEX IS!" Ellie's face turned bright red as she calmly instructed Shannon to turn around and sit down. I couldn't help myself. "WHAT IS IT, Ellie? WHAT'S SEX?" I yelled, joining Shannon on the back of the seat. I could see by the look on Ellie's face that she meant serious business, so when she said, "Laura, sit down and turn around," I obeyed. With a sparkle in her eye, Shannon said, "Okay, I'll tell you what it is." We hunched down in the front seat, out of Raphael's view. In a hushed whisper, Shannon explained, "Sex is when your parents get naked in the kitchen and kiss!"

I sat, slumped down next to her, dumb-founded. I silently reconstructed our kitchen in my mind: the beige mixer, the black stove, the buzzing refrigerator, the cereal cabinet... and my naked parents. Somehow they just didn't seem to fit in with the appliances. Not to mention, I had been in the kitchen plenty of times and, as far as I could remember, everyone had always been fully clothed. I shook my head, fairly confident that if *that* were sex, my parents did *not* do it. I was sure of it... or was I?

When we got home, Ellie burst through the door, announcing to my mom, "Laura wants to know what sex is." My mom gave a knowing look and led me upstairs. She opened the heavy top drawer of her dresser and lifted out a small colorful book. Paper cut-out pictures told the story of how I was growing up and changing and how it was time for me to understand how babies were made. My mom read aloud about how when people make babies, it's kind of like when flowers make new little flowers. The paper cut-outs showed a bright yellow flower sending little dots to a purple flower. Dashed lines represented the yellow flower's

dots entering the purple flower and moving down its special tube. The next page showed how those dots had made a bunch of little yellow and purple flowers that popped out of the ground. Then, my mom read about how dogs are kind of similar. But dogs exchange those little dots by getting so close together that we can't even see the dots moving from one dog to the other. The paper cut-outs showed a picture of two dogs wrestling. The next page showed the little puppies that popped out after the dogs wrestled. My mom paused. She turned the page to reveal paper cut-outs of a man and a woman doing *much more* than exchanging dots and *much more* than kissing in the kitchen. I didn't hear a word she said about that page. I was consumed with one thought alone, "Daddy must HATE that!" I exclaimed, staring at the drawing. "Well, actually, no...." my mom replied, explaining tactfully that God created sex and gave it to Daddy and Mommy as a gift.

Needless-to-say, 99% of the information in that little book flew straight over my head and for the next eight years, I remained blissfully ignorant of most sexual-innuendoes on standardized tests or elsewhere. During my elementary school years, I was too involved in competitive swimming, running, schoolwork, and piano lessons to think about the book with the colorful paper cut-outs.

I scheduled my days around self-inflicted practices and drills. I'd wake up early to train for gym class, running around the perimeter of our property, muttering to myself, "*Faster, now! Pump those arms! Make your feet as light as a panther's!*" (I refuse to ask my family -- for fear that they'll confirm it as true -- but I'm almost certain that, in order to be more aerodynamic, I used to lean over at a 90-degree angle, using my head to break the wind. Even back then, I knew that sometimes a girl just has to sacrifice appearance for speed. I tell myself that it all paid off when our relay won the final event on Field Day.)

In the afternoons, I'd review my schoolwork by lining up my dolls and teaching them the interesting facts that I learned in school that day. They were the smartest dolls on the east coast. When my parents would offer us rewards at the end of the school year for

stellar report cards, Ellie would choose a stuffed animal; I'd choose a set of Weekly Reader Workbooks, divvying up the pages to last throughout the summer. Each day after swim practice, I'd relish in my quota of workbook pages, learning about euglena, volcanoes, and ancient Indian tribes, teaching my yarn-haired Cabbage Patch Kid the deep truths of the universe.

But more than any of these things, I was most passionate about spiritual matters. There was just *something* about the way the trees moved and the clouds disappeared and the sun rose, that stirred my heart. I'd sit in church, mesmerized by the preacher's sermon, my stomach turning with excitement and fear when I'd hear something that I just *knew* was true but didn't know how I knew it. At night, I'd read my fire-truck red Children's Bible and highlight the words in pink, yellow, orange, and blue that made my heart race.

I thought about God all of the time -- whenever a crisp wind blew across my face, when I'd play "Fur Elise" on the piano so fast that even the Chipmunks couldn't keep up, when I won a race, when my mom read to us at night, and when I lay in bed stroking my satin blanket, sucking my thumb, and thinking about the world and how it worked.

My mom tells a story about me as a toddler, waking up one morning and sitting on the steps in the kitchen singing an old hymn, "Since Jesus Came into My Heart." She asked me why I was singing that song and how her two-and-a-half-year-old baby girl learned it so well. I confidently explained, "Last night, in my bed, I asked Jesus into my heart!" Some people question this story, claiming that I was too young to understand the complex doctrines of systematic theology. But, I wasn't too young to understand love...and the beauty of free gifts. I'm convinced that I truly did decide to believe in Jesus Christ at that moment because ever since I can remember, I've *known* Him. Better than any scientifically proven theories or quantifiably deduced mathematics, I've always believed that Jesus Christ really *is* the divine son of God who looked humanity in the face to say, "I love you" as He conquered sin and death for us.

My mom constantly reminds me that all of this is a gift... even to a cute messy-haired toddler sitting on the kitchen steps in her footsie pajamas. Throughout my childhood, I was vividly aware that my belief in Jesus Christ made me somehow quite different than I had been before; as if all of this hope and grace and love was transforming me from being a self-loving flesh-and-blood human into someone... new. Yet, even now when I read scripture like Colossians 3, I can barely grasp the concept that my sinful nature -- or *me without God* -- is "dead" and my spirit is being made "new" through Jesus Christ -- or *me with God*. Most of the time, I only understand enough to make me deeply grateful for this transformation that I could never perform on my own. No amount of my rigorous early-morning training could redeem the dark intricacies of my heart. Nor would my workouts earn me peace with the God of the universe. Even as a little girl, this gift of a new life thrilled me.

And it was this newness that fueled my passion for God. When missionaries would come to our church encouraging us to dedicate our lives to mission work, I'd long to run down the aisle to the altar, repeating the prophet Isaiah's words, "Here am I, Lord, send me!" Ellie could tell when a message would be getting to my heart. I suppose it wasn't difficult since I sat on the edge of the pew and gasped as my heart thumped heavily inside my chest. A couple of times, she'd practically sit on me to prevent me from running up the aisle. "You're only supposed to go forward if you're getting saved or making a huge life decision," she advised me knowingly. Sometimes though, the pull was so strong that nothing could hold me back.

One year during Missions Week, I walked down the aisle and cried my eyes out on the shoulder of our pastor's wife. She seemed to think I was upset because of the pictures of the poor and starving children that the missionaries showed on their slideshows. She patted my head and said sweet things like, "We'll make sure those little children get something to eat, honey. That's why we're sending food -- cans of soup and Chef Boyardee --

-- at the end of the week. Don't worry, now." I shook my head. I couldn't get the words out. I wanted to tell her that I ran down the aisle because I was so in love with God and I wanted to make Him happy. I didn't admit it at the time, but I hadn't even really thought about the cans of Chef Boyardee. All I knew was that my desire to please God burned so hard it made me cry.

That's why, 12 years later, driving home from the gynecologist's with my mom, I couldn't speak about the tears that fell out of regret, shame, and confusion. How could I ever explain that her sweet little girl had distanced herself from God, chosen a distrustful summer companion, and experienced a definition of "sex" that was far less beautiful than the one in the paper cut-out book? I no longer felt like a "new" person who was redeemed by Jesus Christ: instead, I felt like a lonely flesh-and-blood human with no hope.

Get your hands on

"Edelweiss" from *The Sound of Music*

Samuel Barber's "Adagio for Strings"

Sarah Groves' "Add to the Beauty"

"This is My Father's World" traditional hymn

Big Daddy Weave's "What I Was Made For"

Bob Dylan's "Shelter from the Storm"