

It was 1973. Even though I was five years old, and in kindergarten, I had a pretty good handle on the way things were run. It was as simple as: the teacher lays out the rules, you follow those rules, and everything works out pretty good.

The dismissal rule was that the teacher, Miss Riley, would write the bus numbers on the chalkboard along with the word “Walker” for those who didn’t ride the bus. Students lined up, single file, under their bus number.

We lived in the neighborhood behind the school, down the street, around the corner. My older brother was tasked with walking me down to our friend’s house, halfway to school, where we’d pick up Sean. The three of us then would walk to the gate at the far end behind the school, up the path, across the field, through the playground and into the back of the school. At the end of every day we did the same routine in reverse. And that is why every single day I lined up under “Walker” written on the board.

One day Miss Riley said, “Jenean. Get under your bus number.”

“I’m a walker.” I innocently said, thinking that was the end of that.

“Jenean Roth! Get under your bus number now.”

In my five-year-old estimate, Miss Riley was about 138 years old. I didn’t argue with adults, much less tiny, frail, old teachers.

“Um Miss Riley, which bus number do I get under then?”

“YOUR bus number! Now everyone, go on. Get to your bus” she rang out to her class as the bell rang out in the hall.

I sidestepped to the row next to me. Bus number seventy-one looked as good as any other so I decided that was my number. I was at the end of the line, so I just followed everyone else who I thought decided that was their bus number too. Off I went to my supposed bus. I was pretty happy about it ~ I was getting a ride home after all.

And a nice ride it was. I’d never been on a bus before. I could get used to this. A lot of my friends were there, the seats were really big and bouncy, and the bus driver seemed so nice. That is until towards the end of the ride.

Everyone was gone, they had all gotten off at their stops. As I just sat there all alone, perfectly content, the bus driver turned around, looked right at me, and started throwing questions out faster than I could answer.

Who was I?

“Jenean”

Why was I on her bus?

“Miss Riley told me to get on a bus.”

What bus was I supposed to be on?

“I’m a walker. I don’t ride the bus.”

Why haven't I gotten off yet?

“Because you haven’t stopped at my house yet.”

Which house was mine?

“The white one.”

Which white house? Where did I live?

“On the corner.”

What’s my address?

“I don’t know.”

Exasperated, she told me to look out the window and let me know when we passed my house.

As we toured around who-knows-where, a car started honking like crazy behind us. Quite flustered, the driver said, “What the hell is that?!” (a new phrase I learned that day).

“Oh that’s my Mom. She’s following us.”

“Well why didn’t you say so?”

*Jeez this lady wasn’t very smart*, I thought. First she doesn’t even know where I live and now this. “Because you told me to tell you when I saw my house, not my Mom.”

I don't know if the big whooshing sound was from the air doors opening up, the relief of the bus driver, or from the wake of Mom running up to hug me.

I also don't know who was happier: Mom for finding me, or the bus driver to be rid of me. Me? I was along for the ride. I was happy too, just to have a little adventure that technically wasn't my fault.

I figured my Mom loved me. But everyday life of me being an oblivious kid, and of her working full time and raising four kids alone, life just drones on. For her to not wait for me to turn up somewhere, with no help from the school or bus garage, leave work and go find me herself, is the second best thing to proving she loved me. The first best thing was the hug she gave me when she did find me ~ I can still feel it over fifty years later.