Was I scared? Yes. I tried to rationalize the situation as a necessary stepping stone in life. Sitting in a waiting room full of children, crying, yelling, screams coming from behind closed doors. It was during the afternoon, the setting sun was casting long shadows throughout the room. I sat contemplating if I would be brave enough to face the impending shot that would allow me to attend school. Flipping through a stack of magazines that most certainly included the thin yellowed pages of Highlights for Kids somewhere in the pile. I heard my name called and was led through the door by a nurse with my mother and younger brother in tow. The nurse asked if I could get up on the table by myself, I proved to her I could. Then we waited. The screams and crying continuing to reverberate through the halls from behind closed doors. I questioned my mother, a nurse and as far as I was concerned an expert, on what it was like to be given a shot for the twentieth time. How much does it hurt, what does the doctor do, what does he look for, how long does it last? The doctor finally came in the room asked me some generic questions I cannot remember, but I remember focusing on them trying to not look at what he was doing as he readied the needle. Then he asked “are you ready?” I stoically and with all the confidence I could muster responded “yes.” And before I exhaled the rest of my response he had stuck me and was wiping my “wound” with an alcohol swab. I didn’t cry, I was scared, but I held it together because I wanted to go to school. And it was over, I survived.

The family next door to us had a daughter that was a year older. I would wait for her to come back from school and ask her what it was like. My concept of school was based off of cartoons and Saved by the Bell. There was another family up the street with three older daughters. Our fathers worked for the same company so we would have dinner together a lot. I would also ask them about school. Sometimes there would be older kids at their house and I would ask them what school was like compared to Saved by the Bell. I never really understood or comprehended what they said except for the hierarchy of the bus, I don’t remember hearing about buses on Saved by the Bell. I saw the bus at the top of the cul-de-sac on mornings and afternoons, and that was the closest object I had to understanding what school was like, so the hierarchy of the bus was a real world answer to what goes on at school. Having yet stepped foot on a bus, as far I was concerned the hierarchy of the bus was written in stone at the same time Moses came down off Mount Sinai. It was decreed that sixth graders, the oldest kids, ruled the back two rows of the bus, but could sit anywhere, with each grade sitting in the previous two rows all the way towards the front. Kindergartners were only allowed to sit in the first two rows. I wondered why the sixth graders would want to sit in the back of the bus and was told so they could get away with stuff. “Stuff”? I don’t know what “stuff” was, I figured I would learn eventually. I asked what would happen if I sat in the back of the bus? I was told “probably beaten up.” I fully understood “beaten up”, the boys next door would beat me up in the sand box, and that was a lot worse than that prick of a shot. That year was the last year for sixth graders who were moved to the middle school, now fifth graders ruled the back of the bus.

The first day of school was Tuesday the 6th of July, 1993. The school had year round schooling with only a short break during the last week of June and first week of July. The bus came in the late morning because Kindergarten was only half a day. I stood at the top of the cul-de-sac with my father and another kindergartner Chris and his father, they lived up the street. I remember my father talking to Chris’s father and trying to talk to Chris, but couldn’t think of anything. I was concentrating on seeing the bus down the street. Then I finally saw it making a turn onto the street and moving down towards us and finally stopping, my heart was racing. My father asked if I was okay I looked at him, said yes. Without looking back I walked toward the bus, up each giant step staring in awe at the bus driver, a giant man wearing an orange sweat stained shirt. The first two rows were filled with other Kindergartners so I took a seat in the third row on the left. Chris sat down next to me. The bus started moving and I took one last look at my father, and at our house down the street. I turned around in my seat and looked at the back of the bus at the last row of seats. I didn’t measure the back of the bus in rows or feet, but in years. I would have to work my way back there. The bus went down the rest of the street made a right and started heading for school. We were there in less than five minutes. The bus pulled diagonally into its slot and opened the door and we all started filing out.

I don’t remember any adults, although I’m sure they were there shepherding us inside. I followed all the rest of the Kindergartners as we walked towards the open doors and into the hallway. There were lines of kids forming up and teachers asking kids their names, and comparing them against names on a clipboard. One by one the kids in our group were placed into lines and Chris and I were shuttled further and further down the hallway, past all the other kids standing in lines. I began to sense that something was wrong, we hadn’t been put into a line yet and we were almost at the end of the hallway. At the second last door on the right a tall young lady with giant curly hair asked Chris and I our names. She checked her clip board said that we were hers, and to go into the classroom. Her name was Mrs. L. I didn’t know what to expect, it seemed like I was walking into a bright blinding light and the sight that I beheld was forever etched into my mind. I saw a group of boys gathered around a little yellow ramp that belonged to a Little Tikes mountain playset. They were ramping hot wheels and matchbox cars off the ramp into a pile of brightly colored cardboard play build bricks. Some of the cars missed the bricks and slammed into the painted cinder block wall. I don’t remember what I did with my backpack, probably threw it on a table, and immediately joined in examining the ballistic properties of die-cast cars.

When we had a full class we were told to put our backpacks up. The boys were told to put their pack backs under the blue bear and the girls to put their back packs on the other side of the wall under the red bear. My favorite color was red and I remember wanting to put my backpack under the red bear, but turned and put my backpack up under the blue bear as directed and sat down at a table. I don’t remember what happened until the end of the day. We had art class with Mrs. W. We all went outside and she had a cart of dixie cups filled with water and paint brushes. She told us to paint on the walls of the recess area or the building. I started painting on the brick wall, I needed a giant canvas for my liquid masterpiece. I realized that water streaks with a paintbrush don’t show up very well on dark brick that is in the shadows. One of the girls was painting on the lighter colored concrete walls of the recess area and the water showed up just fine. I started painting next to her. I recall Mrs. W saying all the painting we were doing with water was going to make it rain. I looked up at the sky, it was clear blue with some big fluffy clouds in the distance. What was she thinking? It’s going to rain? The sky is blue, and there are some fluffy clouds, what’s this lady talking about? After art class we went back inside for snacks and milk. I said I wanted chocolate milk and realized I had made the correct decision. A few kids ordered regular milk, and were ridiculed. I sat back and observed this interaction, glad I had chocolate milk; I always ordered chocolate milk to avoid the ire of elementary society.

After snacks there was a rumble and we looked outside, the sky was black and rain was streaking down the windows. I stared in stunned amazement, how did Mrs. W know? We sure didn’t cause it to rain, I knew that much, but it was sunny just a little bit ago. When it was time to go home it was still raining. We formed a line and Mrs. L walked us down the hall, I was happy to be in a line this time and taken care on this trip down the hallway. We walked outside to the buses and soon the line broke up in the swirling mass of hundreds of kids trying to get on the buses. I watched in silent horror as some of our class was lost, being swept away by other lines. I noticed that I was no longer with our line, but Chris had stayed by my side. We stayed together walked through the throngs of kids trying to get on their busses. Not knowing which bus was ours, not knowing what numbers were, and not having an adult to put us on the right bus, and being too scared to ask an adult, Chris and I reached the last row of busses and I couldn’t tell one bus from another. We started back down the opposite way and I looked behind to make sure Chris was still with me and saw the bus driver with the orange sweat stained shirt. I told Chris this was our bus and we got on. Was it our bus? I had no idea, but it was the same man, and that was good enough for me. We boarded the bus and looked down the aisle. Every seat was taken, Chris managed to wedge himself into a seat with three other kindergartners in the second row. I tried to do the same in the third row, but the kids were bigger and I think I only had a pocket on the seat. I was somehow standing in a sitting position.

The bus driver turned around and looked at me in the middle of the aisle and told me to get to the back of the bus. He looked directly at me and he knew I heard him, but I didn’t move. The hierarchy of the bus as it was written told I would be beaten up if I sat in the back of the bus before my time. The bus driver told me more forcibly this time to move to the back of the bus, I hesitated, but slowly rose up and started walking towards the back turning my head to look at the bus driver so that he would know it would be his fault if I was beaten up. I did not know that the rules of the bus driver overrode the laws of elementary society. I got to the second to last seat and the bus driver yelled at me to sit there on the right side of the bus. Next to a giant kid, sweating profusely in the humidity with stringy dark hair and a black Grave Digger monster truck shirt. I sat as little as I could on the seat making sure not to disturb the giant and evoke the wrath of the fifth graders and most certainly be beaten up. My silent fear must have been noticeable on my face because the girl across the aisle from me told me to relax, I don’t think I ever did. The bus backed out of the parking space and we waited in line with the other buses waiting to depart and the school. The ride back was short and I noticed the bus was making all the right turns and then reached my stop. The older kids on the street started getting off and I stood up and walked as quickly as I could to get off the bus before the bus driver drove away, Chris was way ahead of me. I stuck close to an older girl who was our neighbor as we walked the however many steps out in front of the bus and then across the street. The rain had lessened to a drizzle. Chris walked away towards his house, we didn’t say goodbye, and I walked down the street with the older girl, and she walked into her house without a word. I walked through the front door of the house and threw my backpack on the ground and stood for a moment by the door with the cold air conditioning blasting from the floor, savoring the momentous occasion that I had just finished my first day of school and that I had sat in the back of the bus on my very first day. I walked into the kitchen to find my mother and father sitting at the table. For the first time in my life I heard the words, “how was school?” I let loose with everything I could remember in an incoherent mess. The chocolate milk, ramping cars into walls, the rain, my teacher, painting walls, the teacher being clairvoyant with the weather, not knowing which bus to get on. I didn’t tell them about the back seat of the bus, that was my private accomplishment. My parents asked questions and I answered with all the authority that I had gained from one day in public school. My mother asked “are you excited to go back to school tomorrow?” I looked at her and insightfully considered the question and responded with a smile and a confident “yes!” Then my father asked “so, do you have a girlfriend?” I didn’t even know that was something I was supposed to do, and looked at him quizzically. I think my mom playfully hit him and said “oh stop.” As far as I was concerned I had mastered getting to school, being at school, getting home from school, and sitting in the back of the bus; that was half a decade ahead of schedule. I guess tomorrow I should get a girlfriend, so I did.