

past the picket fence

A Memoir for Life in the Messy Middle

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Prologue

Hi, I'm Lauren—and I've written a book for you. Not just any book, but my book. The one that cost me everything.

The months of writing weren't the expensive part, although I definitely paid in shorter nights of sleep and countless cups of coffee. The story itself is what cost it all—and that's what makes it special. I don't want to spend everything on something I have to enjoy alone. Isn't it more fun to laugh and cry with a friend than by yourself? That's why, dear reader, it's truly a joy to share my story with you.

Long before I was Lauren Vallotton, I was Lauren Acsell—and that matters. I'm a context girl, so in the first chapter I'm going to paint the backdrop for you in a way that both honors my mother, who loved every detail, and my husband, who asks me for the shorter version anytime I tell a story. It's somewhere in between.

But the most important thing about the first chapter is this: I want you to fall in love with me. Because if you can love little me—before all the big, bad, hard, and uncomfortable things happened—you can love little you, too. The younger version of yourself. Little You, with your big ol' dreams, needs a lot of love, a lot of compassion, and a lot of hope. Little You has wins to celebrate and losses to grieve, because growing all the way up is no small thing. Life has been... a lot.

You may have felt alone at times. If you're like me, you've wondered if anyone else carries such ghastly questions, dishonorable doubts, and plate-smashing disappointments. Oh, but you haven't been alone. We've been friends for a long time, you and I.

I was there when you wept after the boyfriend you hoped was the one broke your heart and moved on. I knew you when that deal fell through and six months of work went up in smoke. I've seen you sitting on the floor of your

closet after a fight with your husband, wondering if he truly understands the depth of your heart and your need to feel safe with him. I've seen you frozen in the grocery store aisle, a toddler latched to your leg, screaming for candy. I know you.

Our personalities, preferences, and life details may be different, but we're all on the same journey. We're born into this world wide-eyed and vulnerable, carrying a dream-seed deep within our souls—one God Himself placed there before the foundations of the world. We grow, and as we do, the seed grows with us. At some point, we notice it. Or someone else notices it for us. We name it, nurture it, grab hold of it. We long and hope and imagine how it should come to pass.

Our lives take shape. Little You becomes Big You. And before we know it, we're in messy, unmapped territory that looks very little like the destination we once imagined. And that causes us to question everything.

Life requires movement. Those who lie down under its weight don't fare well. Yet in the quiet moments, we wonder if God sees us at all—if we did something wrong, if we killed the dream-seed, if we ruined the plot altogether. But it's often that very brokenness that presses us back against the chest of Jesus, where we're reminded the seed was His long before it was ever ours. In that brokenness, we're invited to reconcile youthful dreams with present realities.

It's here, with feeble faith that we are able to look for meaning in the mess of our lives and become something beautiful.

We're on a journey together - to become all God created us to be. It leads me back to the realization that the Lord is the Great Gardener who planted all the dream-seeds in the soil of my heart in the first place. Putting my hope in the fulfillment of the Word rather than the fulfillment of my plan is how we find true rest and satisfaction. When His nature becomes my focus, and I recognize His ways are better than mine, I give in to the process and delight in the journey, however difficult and unforeseen.

What a relief that Jesus went before us. And what a relief that we don't walk this road alone.

They say misery loves company, but I've never found much help sitting beside someone as miserable as I am in my lowest moments. The best parts of my marriage and closest friendships are built on something better: when one of us is sideways—or completely upside down—the other is usually standing upright. And in that, we have something to offer one another: permission, relatability, encouragement, hope, and laughter.

My prayer is that this book would offer you all of the above.

So now—without further ado—let's see if I can get you to fall in love with me without using too many words. Then I'll get to the good stuff. And you'll see... we've always been friends, you and I.



chapter one

babydolls and big dreams

The Dream

Feet dangling off the kitchen chair, graham crackers and milk tiding me over until dinner, I thumbed through the Toys-R-Us catalogue, circling each interesting item with a ballpoint pen from my mom's desk. List-making began with the first hint of fall. Hot and sweaty from a day at play, but daydreaming of twinkle lights and the scent of pine that would greet me under the tree on Christmas morning, I transferred each circled item to a piece of paper. Dear Santa... And revisions were made for months until the submission deadline.

As a child, those Christmas lists weren't just about toys—they were the first drafts of the life I thought I wanted. Orderly. Predictable. Guaranteed to arrive on time if I asked nicely. I had no idea how much God would one day unravel that certainty in order to form a deeper, more fulfilling existence.

I think we could all learn a lot about each other if we could peek at our childhood Christmas wish lists, don't you? If you wanted to know anything about Little Lauren's values, ideals, or priorities, it'd be scribbled between the lines of my Lisa Frank stationery. I don't think there was a year that didn't include a baby doll of some sort.

Any chance you remember the Baby Alive dolls from the 90s that came with packets of food the dolls could eat with a mechanical mouth before pooping into a tiny diaper? Well, you may *not* remember them because Baby Alive dolls are not timeless, hand-me-down toys. I lived in the Deep South, where the humidity made the air feel like soup, so you can imagine the mold situation inside that doll's digestive tract. But for a while, I was in heaven with my little petri dish plaything.

The older I got, the more real I needed that baby to be, so I started including a qualifying statement at the bottom of my wishlist giving Santa permission

to supersede my listed items if he knew of a better option. I figured Santa had premium access to toys beyond the mail catalogues, and I was in search of the “realest” thing on the market. For a few years I even asked if he could spare an elf, which I thought would be so at home in my dollhouse, providing the ultimate caretaking experience for me. I knew it was a longshot, but it didn’t hurt to ask.

I grew up the oldest of three and the only girl. Think of every classic firstborn daughter trope, tie them in a bow, and there I was—wearing it proudly. As soon as my brother Austin was out of diapers, I campaigned for another sibling. Finally, when I was nearly ten, my parents told me my mom was pregnant, and I’ll never forget the joy that erupted inside me.

I claimed Connor as “my baby” from the moment he arrived, doting on him, attending to his every need, imagining what it would be like to be his real mom. I’d often carry him on my hip through the grocery store, trailing behind our mother, hoping everyone would think he was actually mine. Honestly, the only dream I know I’ve had forever was to have babies of my own.

The Picket Fence

Having children wasn’t my only ambition, of course. Remember—I’m a firstborn daughter, so vast was the landscape of my youthful aspirations. “I shouldn’t waste this talent,” I thought, “so why not also become a National Geographic photographer in the Amazon *and* a heart surgeon *and* a high-heel wearing morning show host?”

I knew a woman like that needed quite an education, so it was never a matter of whether I *would* go to college, but where. And in order to get into a great university I knew I needed a robust resume and an impressive GPA. Self-awareness came quite naturally, and without much insecurity, so I deduced

that with my aptitude for figuring out what the teacher wanted me to say, I estimated I could graduate in the top five percent of my high school class and still have time for extracurriculars like show choir and student government. Because those things matter on college applications of course.

Was I overwhelmed with those sorts of lofty goals?

No! Driven.

And for what? The good life.

The one behind a white picket fence, nestled in a beautiful neighborhood with draping oak trees and friendly neighbors waving from their red 1999 Suburbans. “I think I’ll wear high heels there, too,” I thought, “with at least one baby on each hip, next to a tall blonde husband who makes good money. Yes, that will do nicely.”

My dad often commented that my life seemed charmed. For a long time I truly believed my story would unfold like a fairy tale. I see now that this was largely because I was part of the 1 percent of the world’s population born in 1985 to a middle-class white family in the United States. Those kids ate Kid Cuisine TV dinners on Fridays, played club soccer on Saturdays, and asked for Baby Alive dolls for Christmas. At least, I did. And only the God of the Universe, Himself, could have caused me to switch gears.

Rebel Status

I wondered what it felt like, but I dared not touch the wicker grated screen between my face and the shadowy profile of the priest for fear of having to confess yet *another* wrongdoing. My proximity to the votive candle chapel

offered the scent of reverence, but the clack of kitten heels on the tile floor outside of the confessional room sounded stiff and inauthentic.

I knelt, begrudgingly, to ask forgiveness for my recent absence in mass, which was confusing to me because I'd been away at a Christian camp, and I'd never been more interested in God. But growing up Catholic, absence from mass was a sin that required forgiveness from the priest, and every now and then my mom would require us to true up.

It hadn't always been so off-putting. Little Me, dressed in white tulle and patent leather, was so moved by the Christmas story in Luke – that God would send His son to us as a baby boy born to a young girl. On Easter Sunday, I stood before the crucifix draped in purple, enchanted by the old hymns that sang of Christ's sacrifice for us. I remember feeling the substance of faith as we gathered for prayer and liturgy. My childhood faith was steeped in tradition and beauty. I'm grateful now for the foundation it gave me, but as I entered high school, a quiet disdain for the formalities stirred inside of me. Those moments in the confessional became dreaded and dry.

The influence of my friends grew stronger. Before long, I hit a rebellious streak and really gave my parents a run for their money. I started attending the Southern Baptist youth group down the road, and before I knew it, I was in a full-blown affair with the Protestant way and landed myself on a weekend camping trip in the mountains. Scandalous, I know. My mom's reaction made it seem like I'd joined a biker gang and come home with a neck tattoo. It merited confession.

Truthfully, the incense-soaked, dimly-lit confessional room with handbells for background music was more ambient than the fluorescent lights of the high school classroom where we sang "Lord I Lift Your Name on High" over the hum of the projector fan during our Fellowship of Christian Athletes meetings on Wednesdays. I wasn't an athlete, and I wasn't yet a Christian. I was the Catholic

choir girl, but something inside me caught fire as I stood there. And despite the lack of ambiance, I went from knowing *about* God to sensing He could actually be *known*. So I endured the occasional Confession in order to feed the hunger I felt for knowing Jesus in a personal way.

Be it the Catholic background or my own affinity for to-do's, I had a hard time relating to God beyond His rules to live by and, like many, boiled my deepening faith down to a good list:

1. DO read your Bible for at least 15 minutes a day.
2. DON'T have sex with your boyfriend.
3. DO honor your parents. ALSO hate your mother and father if you love God. (Wait. That's confusing.)
4. DON'T continue pursuing a modeling career because the devil himself will eat you alive in that industry, and...

It went on. As someone who naturally thrives on structure, I did well with this version of Christianity—for a while. I clung to the same type of deal I'd made with Santa—if I made the right list and followed the rules, surely God would deliver the life I imagined.

But by the time I left for college, I was tired. Tired of rules, tired of pursuing God while feeling guilty for the distance it created between me and my parents, tired of what still felt stifling and inauthentic. I loved God, but I needed space to figure out what I really believed, who I wanted to be, and how my faith fit into that.

The Big Experiment

College was the most expensive fun I've ever had—football games under stadium lights, costumed sorority mixers, lake days that smelled like sunscreen and gasoline, midnight Waffle House meals. At Clemson, I majored in Mass Media and Communication with minors in Sociology and Advertising, graduated with honors, and remained convinced success was mine for the taking.

But what marked me most wasn't the professors or the parties. It was the people.

There were about eight of us—guys and girls who gravitated toward each other like moths to flame. We loved God, showed up at church on Sundays, even volunteered in campus ministries. But something gnawed at us. If Jesus had called us to a life of reckless abandon, why did ours feel so tame? In our Bible-belt college town, most seemed content with the status quo. We weren't.

One night, we gathered in our apartment, sprawled across secondhand couches with Bibles open. The agenda was simple: figure out what we were missing. We talked, prayed, and circled around each other's doubts. And then Matt, with his Bible already falling apart at the seams, flipped to Acts and jabbed a finger at the page.

“Look,” he said, “our churches talk about the Father and the Son. But the Holy Spirit—one third of the Trinity—we don't know anything about Him.”

That landed like a spark in dry grass. The most daring, otherworldly things in Scripture—the miracles, the boldness, the fire—they were all the Spirit's doing. Maybe that was it. Maybe that's what we hungered for.

We decided to test it. Another meeting, this one secret—just in case something “crazy” happened. All week, we passed each other on campus with little eyebrow raises: *Get ready... Wednesday night.*

By the time we crammed into the guys’ living room—Bibles stacked, nervous laughter bouncing off the walls—we could feel the air thicken with expectation. We read Acts 2, sat in silence, and waited.

And then... He came.

It wasn’t loud. No chaos. Just presence. Suddenly I could feel myself in my own skin in a way I never had before—like I was breathing deeper, seeing clearer—and at the same time, I was aware of a realm I hadn’t known existed. The Presence of God. The power of the Holy Spirit, like He had been waiting all along for us to simply ask.

We were undone. It was the start of our house church, the beginning of a whole new adventure. For a fleeting moment, we honestly wondered if we were the only people on earth who had stumbled into this—*The Holy Spirit?! How had no one mentioned Him before?*

Our paradigms cracked open. Life, as we’d known it, had been unlocked into another dimension.

A New North

That first year of our house church was a total reorientation of life with God. To walk with Him, to hear Him, to feel His nearness—it was as if I’d stepped onto a moving sidewalk, carried into new spaces where my thoughts and intentions

were rooted in a reality I couldn't see but somehow trusted. It was exhilarating, like being pulled so far into Him there was no going back.

He had my yes. Not just a half-hearted, do-good Christian yes, but a full-bodied surrender to a story I didn't yet understand but couldn't resist.

The terrifying part? I had no idea what I was actually saying yes to. I just knew I'd tasted something too real to walk away from now. There was no returning to checklist faith, no slipping back into the illusion that a perfect plan was the same thing as a holy one.

The compass I'd always held was being magnetically pulled somewhere new—less safe, but more sacred. And I think that's what surrender really is. It isn't giving up your dream. It's letting it break open so something truer can be born.

Years later, I heard a prophet and Bible teacher Larry Randolph explain it this way: to be predestined doesn't mean you're forced into a fixed future. It means God set horizons in the landscape of your life—territories of possibility for you to explore.

That was the undercurrent pulling me deeper in those college years: my obsession with destiny. I jumped. Naively, yes. Scared? Absolutely. But beneath the fear was exhilaration—because what if life with Him was more adventurous, more meaningful, more influential than I had ever dared to imagine?

Looking back, it's almost comical how convinced I was that I had life figured out. I had a plan, a vision, a path that made sense. And then God disrupted it—not in cruelty, but in kindness. Gently prying my fingers from the blueprint I had drawn, and placing in my hands something far less predictable, but infinitely better.

I thought I had tasted surrender in that little campus living room. But surrender isn't proven in prayer circles—it's proven in life.

And my first proving ground would be New York City.

The New York Nightmare That Killed My Dream

The sky, heavy and dark as I rode from LaGuardia to the Upper East Side, threatened to complicate my grand entrance into Manhattan. I opted for a taxi instead of the subway—first impressions mattered, and I wasn't about to arrive looking like a drowned rat.

I hauled my suitcases onto the pavement and hurried inside just as the rain began to fall. Following the door numbers down a dim hallway, I knocked politely. The door creaked open, and a cloud of smoke rolled out around a skinny, middle-aged woman in a moo-moo, holding a cat.

“Oh, you're already here. Come on in.”

My eyes darted across the apartment: more cats. She coughed and gestured toward a cot tucked behind a dressing screen. Hardly a room. My stomach sank. I was already planning my escape.

It had all started with a nudge—a desire to step out of my Southern college town to see if what I believed about God worked in the real world. I wanted a mission, a career, a taste of adult life. New York had always been my dream, so I'd landed a public relations internship, convinced my parents to buy me a one-way ticket, and found this room-share on Craigslist.

I had anticipated the best summer of my life. Instead, surviving this horror scene became my primary goal. I smiled and nodded as the should-be landlord rambled on, but in my head, I was rehearsing my getaway. At the first pause, I blurted, “Well, thanks for showing me your place. I need to go now.” She blinked, dazed, but I was already backing into the hallway.

By the time I hit the street, the nervous excitement that carried me off the plane had curdled into panic. Rain poured, mascara streaked, suitcases soaked—I was officially homeless in one of the biggest cities in the world. The dream I’d built with spreadsheets and sparkles was sinking fast.

I fumbled in my purse for a scrap of paper with the phone number of my ex-boyfriend’s sister’s college roommate—the one obscure lifeline I had in case of “an unlikely emergency.” She and her husband took me in with such compassion, and I slept on their floor for the next two weeks: interning by day, scouring the city for housing by night.

Each evening the pressure mounted. My time in that borrowed space was running out, and I felt swallowed whole. Crying, clutching my cell phone as if it were a life raft, I finally called home. I wanted my parents to match my panic, to buy me a ticket out. Instead, my dad’s calm voice steadied me:

“Honey, things work out for you. Don’t give up.”

It was the gust of wind I needed. Though exhausted and out of ideas, my heart cracked open toward God: *You either led me here or You didn’t. You either provide for me or You don’t.*

The safety net was gone. What I thought was just a scramble for survival became my first steps into a life of trust—a life where my best-made plans broke so His provision could break in.

Sometimes breakthrough comes only after you've hit the pavement, emptied out and scraped thin. That's where I was—the bottom of the barrel—when the tide shifted. On my way to the ATM to get cash for a deposit on another grim room-share, my phone rang. That call rerouted everything.

A little Upper West Side church I'd been attending—Origins back then, now Trinity Grace—became my lifeline. Within days, I moved in with a couple who pastored at the church. Complete strangers, they still welcomed me like family into their small apartment around the corner from the 107th and Central Park West stop.

I settled onto the tiny red futon that became my bed, finally exhaling as tears of relief spilled over. The window opened to nothing more than a brick wall smattered with pigeon droppings, so my imagination worked overtime to pair the sounds of the city with anything resembling a view. Maybe that's why I lay awake so many nights that summer. But to me, that futon might as well have been a king suite at the Ritz. After the uncertainty of those first weeks, it was luxury. It was home.

On weekends, I worked at an upscale Midtown café tucked beside St. Bartholomew's Church, learning how to bring order to chaos and carry cappuccinos like they were communion chalices. During the week, I interned at what I optimistically called a boutique PR firm—which, in reality, was an in-home operation run by a woman who smelled of garlic and old coffee. The clients were small, the hustle relentless, and the whole thing felt more like an off-Broadway rendition of *The Devil Wears Prada* staged out of a walk-up than a career-launching opportunity.

Still, I was piecing myself together—testing what I carried and what I didn't, what I longed for and what I could leave behind. Slowly, I was finding out not just what I wanted to do, but who I wanted to be.

A Hard Left

I packed my suitcases, pausing once to glance back at the little red futon before leaving the city a different girl. Clicking through my photos from the summer, I realized each capture marked a moment God had rewritten my life—my home group, the café, the bar where I celebrated my 21st, even my quirky boss. What I thought was a professional opportunity pulling me closer to the plan I'd made had become an invitation into radical trust—one step at a time.

I had thought I needed clarity. But God was forming faith—the quiet kind that endures in contrast to the city that never sleeps. The kind that grows deep roots and stays, like the giant trees in Central Park standing firm while the skyline around them keeps changing in restless pursuit of new and more.

My dream of a white picket fence didn't vanish, but it shifted. I no longer wanted predictability—I wanted a life that required faith. Where impossibilities became realities. Where risk was part of the deal. The fence remained in my imagination, but now I wanted a gate wide enough for God to lead me in and out.

Like Proverbs 16:9 says, “A man's heart plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps” (NKJV). For the first time, I believed it.

I still dreamed of love and family, but I pictured them differently now—not routine, but adventure. In my mind the plan was simple: follow God wherever He led, and somewhere along the way meet the one who shared my hunger, my passion, my reckless abandon.

New York had awakened something in me: an appetite for adventure, an awareness of how much I still had to grow. So I traveled—short trips, big dreams, little money—but the hunger to go deeper with God always leading.

That's what put Bethel Church in Redding, California on my radar. I thought I was just passing through, soaking up what I could on another adventure. But step by step, it became clear: this was my next unknown, my next leap into the deep end with God.

So in 2008, I packed up my Toyota Corolla and moved to Redding to attend Bethel's School of Ministry. My mom gave me only one instruction: "Under NO circumstances are you to fall in love with some California man."

So, of course—because God has a sense of humor, and maybe because my mom needed a lesson on fear and control—that's exactly when I met Jason Vallotton.