

## What I've Learned From Not Learning

*Whoooosh.* The positively delightful odor of car exhaust flooded my senses as I approached the lumbering oaf kneeling in front of me. I stumbled into its gaping mouth that seemed determined to chew me out and swallow me whole- but then would later seem to think better of it and spit me back out. I nearly toppled over into someone's lap as the bus lurched forward so fast, one would think that the driver actually *cared* about the passengers. Brandishing a hopeful outlook for a smooth ride, I was met by an eyesore of detached and bored expressions. After becoming accustomed to the lull of the bus tires' traction against the gravelly road, I started as the easy silence was punctuated by the heart wrenching wails of a young woman sitting behind me.

Reluctantly, I became privy to the unfortunate circumstances of this shrieking woman's life. A weary, overworked nurse who had just finished her late shift somehow had the strength to incentivize this woman to fix her life as a childless, bipolar crack addict with her fallopian tubes recently tied. However, the thing is, that discomfort ended for me when the bus arrived, no *slammed*, into the grimy, cigarette-littered curb that was my stop. That poor woman, paralyzed by the fear of taking a good, hard look at herself, couldn't simply disrobe her unluckiness. She didn't have the freedom to escape lucidity and reassume the blissful ignorance she had under the muffling anesthetics she was given during her operation. Therefore, this baptismal moment of when I finally gained appreciation of my life marks an epiphany, an enlightenment for me.

Now, it may very well turn out that I'm preaching to the choir. However, riding the Q46 bus along Union Turnpike was a largely defining moment in my life, even though it might seem like something that really shouldn't bear any sort of significance on anyone's life. So, I'll rewind.

When I was planning to shadow Ph.D. candidates at a pharmacy lab in a local university, it became clear that my commute would consist of taking the public Q46 bus via Union Turnpike from a nearby hospital (hopefully with my entrails intact). When I was informed of this, I naturally witnessed my entire life reel before my very eyes. You know, that vision movie characters always say they see right before their gruesome death? I immediately thought that

using public transportation was apocalyptic. For gosh sake, I could be abducted or raped! I didn't want my hideous school photo to be featured on channel 12! This was downright betrayal. How could my parents knowingly do this? After 'practicing' boarding the right bus and exiting at the right stop with my mother, my shiny Metrocard seemed to solidify my condemnation.

Contrary to what one might believe, it's not like the experience became better with time. Much to my chagrin, I can attribute my many experiences of discomfort and humiliation this past summer to the bus. Now that I think about it, practically breathing on the neck of the bus driver and sporting a backpack that was larger than me probably pinned me as a rookie and thus easy target. Moreover, around mid-afternoon, the buses are usually packed like cans of sardines, and one gets to see a wide, ahem, *variety* of people. Normally, I sat in one of the single seats and gazed out the window to avert my eyes from other passengers. I would pretend to revel in the scenery that only the Queens borough could offer- graffitied overpasses, ethnic mom-and-pop stores, popular fast-food chains, and gentrified neighborhoods. I have seen necks protruding tumors that I was convinced were contagious, been severely frightened by mentally handicapped adults wearing baseball caps and jovially waving at me, and been glared at by people lugging grocery carts with God-knows-what in them. I would go home and say to my sister, "Oh my god. This world is just *teeming* with wackos and nutcases." My sister would rightfully respond with, "Where've you been? Welcome to the *real* world." Little did I know, these people were all *normal*. I live in such a bubble that these people seemed foreign to me, and so I cruelly perpetuated these stigmas.

After performing extensive online research on 'mastering' the bus and rehearsing the right amount of aggression to maintain while riding it, I sincerely felt ready. But one time, the bus was relatively uncrowded, and I sat in one of the double seats by myself. The instant I sat down, a short, balding Italian man painstakingly walked over from the *back* of the bus and casually asked if he could sit next to me. Being the stupid, unassuming person that I am, I assented and made room for him by moving in from the aisle seat. Despite my obvious discomfort, my fellow passengers seemed unaware that this unhinged man incessantly asked me questions about my identity, my opinion on his hair, or lack thereof, and insisted on me

high-fiving and fistbumping him. A bad omen? I probably should have taken these cosmic hints and stopped taking the bus altogether, but my parents didn't raise a quitter.

Unfortunately, no number of Wiki articles could have prepared me for what was to come. Another time, an elderly Bangladeshi gentleman cornered me. I was eventually able to ward him off, but only after he questioned me on my marital status, preached Koranic scripture, and suggested that he come to my residence so I could help him find a job using my computer. After having been through all of this, I felt like I knew how to rein in these situations. Therefore, when an older Eastern European woman had approached me on the bus and waved a slip of paper in my face with a phone number scrawled across it, I generously smiled at her and looked straight ahead in spite of her pointed stare. I thought to myself, "*Victory!*" Later, I was admonished by my mother for my cruelty, being that she was a woman that could have just as easily been my very own grandmother. All in all, I felt like He was plotting to ensure that I always had a story to tell when I arrived home. It's almost like I was predisposed to these kinds of scenarios, like it was written in my very DNA, or I was branded with a tattoo on my forehead that said "*I'M someone you can pick on!*" I felt like I could never win. If anything, the confrontations were gaining momentum.

Just when I felt like the straw had broken the camel's back, one small instance actualized my independence for me and marked my transition into adulthood. I had clung to it like it was my life preserver, which in hindsight, probably was. When the wrong bus had once made out as if to stop in front of me, I offhandedly motioned for the bus driver to continue driving and he had nodded in acknowledgement- making me feel like a true, seasoned New Yorker, a 'regular'. It was this keepsake that proved my newfound independence and mastery of public transportation- akin to receiving an A-plus in one of your hardest courses.

These isolated situations may seem pretty ordinary or random, but in combination, they have subliminally catalyzed a transformation in my, a quintessential suburban teenager's, reckoning. The exposure to all of this unfamiliarity has proven to make several life lessons osmotic. I feel like I myself have vicariously been through all walks of life after witnessing such a ragtag bunch that wasn't blessed with the same affluence and opportunities that I have been afforded. *They* are not the ones who are disadvantaged, for I now know *we* are shortchanged due

to our gross misunderstanding of the harsh realities and struggles of the world. Those transient, millisecond connections with people I previously thought were utter freaks were actually embedded into my conscience, my amygdala like resilient, elastic gum on the sole of a sneaker. Riding the bus had rendered me a fish out of water, since it forced me to descend to earth from the appealing, stratospheric existence that suburbia offers. I now don't harbor any resentment or bitterness for having to take the bus. I actually *thank* my parents for forcing me to- even though it pains me like a root canal to admit it. It may sound like heresy to my contemporaries, but I have arrived at the novel conclusion that there is a kind of homogeneity and thus monotony in my life. I have also learned to be *thankful* that I have the ability to say all of this, that I'm 'bored' of such a privileged life.

Don't get me wrong, it's not like I will be able to change the fact that I am one of those stereotypical millennials that fetishize the latest smartphone, pore over the newest issue of Seventeen fashion magazine, or whose worst problem is whether they have enough allowance to download their favorite chart-topper. Rather, I believe that these luxuries shouldn't be mutually exclusive with the latent life lessons needed to scaffold teenagers, so they don't experience this rattling culture shock when they find themselves out in the workforce and reality (hard to believe, I know). You can take my word for it, seeing that my sentiments are shared by famous American rapper Big Sean, who says, "Blessings on blessings on blessings. Look at my life, man, that's lessons on lessons on lessons." Furthermore, all those pesky, minute preoccupations will seem to fall by the wayside and one can become grateful for the seemingly humdrum, 'little' things that may not arrive as easily to others.

But who would've thought that crossing counties could be so transformative, that this kind of clarity could be attained in such a sooty, polluted city? For those who are looking to find themselves in the world, they don't have to embark on some exhaustive soul search filled with plane tickets or therapist bills. Take me, for example. I've learned the toll that not learning about the importance of what *really* matters in life has taken on my conscience, my mindset, and my personality. It's proven to be as simple as taking an exit off a highway.