The TV played a security footage of a girl assaulted by a man in an empty bus, pinned to a corner, struggling to break free. Her squeals rang in my head a thousand times. I was 6 at the time.

A decade later, I found myself standing at a bus station for the first time. The bus arrived, the doors slid open. I anxiously gazed to a corner, still haunted by the footage. I hesitantly stepped in and made my way to a single seat in the bus, trying to avoid any form of contact. I began settling down, until I noticed a man approaching my way. His appearance reminded me of the man from the footage. I noticed both his hands in his pockets. Wild imaginations came into mind; was he holding a knife, looking to rob? I put my guard up. “Hello.” His voice reminded me of a villain I saw in a movie. Sharp and dark. He continued, asking very personal questions of where I lived and where I was going. I answered obscurely, hoping to disinterest him. His next question stunned me. “So, what do you think about the bus? Fun?” I froze up. Why did he say “fun”? Was he looking to loosen me up to catch me off guard? I kept silent.

He continued with a story. He told me the hard work he went through juggling family life with three kids and having to go a long distance to work daily. He told me about the tough choices, especially regarding transport options since he only had a Yamaha, he had to make, each one having its own brutal sacrifice. Following his story, I looked up at the people around me: teachers, workers, doctors. These were hardworking people, a huge contrast to what the media portrayed. Growing interested, I started listening at this point, my guard lowered. He ended with inspiring and encouraging stories about his bus encounters. My heart was touched and my eyes were opened up.

Hearing this man's story had me reassess my prejudice of him as a criminal. My shallow judgement based on media bias was slammed to the ground after I heard his genuine voice. I could sense the amount of passion he had towards taking care of his family. It pains me to realize how the media and stigmas surrounding the bus painted hard working men like him as a criminal and it pains me even more that I judged him before seeing his true colors.

The bus quickly became my primary transport option. Twenty bus rides later, the bus was no longer just a place to meet new people. It has become a reminder for me to not let stigmas and other's thoughts define mine. To instead see the world from my own lens and be the author of my own story.

Alternative 1:

A few months later, I sat holding a copy of my finished book, “Two Friends, No Words”. Seeing the yellow cover took me back to the first time I read a book. Growing in a country with low literacy, along with being labeled a nerd by my closest friends, reading was at the bottom of my list. But the encounter at the bus kept pushing me to at least try it, to not let others’ opinions about me write my story. 10 books later, I was the one to write a book. It’s crazy how all of this started with a bus ride.

Alternative 2:

A few days later, in the classroom, as the only muslim, I was really nervous to ask my teacher for permission to do my Friday prayers. To my surprise, before I got to raise my hand, the teacher asked me if I had to go. Stunned, my mind immediately went back to the times my family discouraged me of moving to a catholic school; to the bad things they said would happen to me as the only muslim. In reality, they had accepted me as their own. The bus ride kept going to my mind reminding me how I shouldn’t let others write my story and be the author of my own book.