

The View from the Front of the Bus

by Marlene Nadle

"There's no place for Uncle Tom on this bus, man." The voice of the Negro echoed down the neon-bathed Harlem street as he mounted the steps of Bus 10 ready to start for Washington.

It was 2 a. m. on the morning of August 28. Anticipation hovered quietly over the 24 buses that lined both sides of 125th Street. Cars and cabs stopped more and more frequently to pour forth bundle-laden, sleepy Marchers. Black, white, old, young zigzagged back and forth across the street trying to find their assigned buses. Bus captains marked by yellow ribbons and rumped passenger lists stood guard at the bus doors. Small groups huddled around them.

Voices arose above the general din.

"You've got to switch me to Bus 10. It's a swingin' bus. There's nothin' but old ladies on this crate."

"Hey, is this bus air-conditioned?"

"Where can I get seat reservations?"

"Hey, chick, are you on this bus?"

"Yeah."

"Is your husband on this bus?"

"Yeah."

"That's all right. I'll make love to both of you. I'm compatible."

"Who the hell is on this bus?" cried George Johnson, the exasperated 30-year-old Negro captain of Bus 10 and organizer of New York CORE's 24-bus caravan. "People shouldn't be swapping buses, especially CORE members. It only adds to the

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confusion. Now everybody get in a seat and stay there. You can't save seats. This isn't a cocktail party."

The reaction to George's gruffness was a tongue-in-cheek parody of the Mr. Charlie routine. "Yassir, anything you say, sir." "Don't you fret now, Mr. George." "Don't you go upsetting yourself, boss." "You knows I always listen to you captain sir."

There was a general shuffling of bundles on the bus. Index cards with emergency Washington phone numbers were filled out and kept by everyone. "Sit-In Song Books" were passed back.

Symptomatic Ode

Outside the window of Bus 10 an old Negro was standing with outstretched arms reciting an impromptu ode to the Black Woman. "Black Woman, you are the queen of the universe. I

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would give my life for you." This was less comic than symptomatic. It was just one of many signs of the racial pride which is now surging through the Negro people.

A young Negro in the seat behind me, when asked why he was going on this March, replied, "Because it's like your sweater. It's Black. It's for the cause. If my people are in it, I am going to be in it fighting, even if I get killed."

Outside the window of Bus 10 was also a more extreme reminder of this racial pride. Young members of the Black Muslims, neatly dressed in suits and ties, were hawking copies of Muhammad Speaks. This paper is the official statement of the Black Muslim philosophy: Black is beautiful; Black is best; Black must be separate from white.

I swung off the bus to ask the young Muslim if he was going to Washington. With a faint trace of a smile on his lips, he answered, "No, ma'am. I have to sell papers. You people go to Washington." The implication was clear: he was too busy working for his own cause—separation—to be bothered working for integration.

An older man, converted to a Muslim later in life, was not so emotionally untouched by the March and what it stood for. When I asked him why the Muslims were not participating in the March, he gave all the proper answers. He said: "The Messenger has not spoken. If he says nothing, we sit still. If he says go, we go." But then, asked if as an individual rather than a Muslim he would have gone, he replied: "I would have gone."

'A Mockery'

Moving through the crowd, I encountered a Negro I knew to be a fence-sitter between the Muslim and integrationist philosophies. I asked him why he had decided to come on the March. He said, "It's like St. Patrick's Day to the Irish. I came out of respect for what my people are doing, not because I believe it will do any good. I thought it would do some good at the beginning, but when the March started to get all the official approval from Mastah Kennedy, Mastah Wagner, and Mastah Spellman, and they started setting limits on how we had to march peacefully, I knew that the March was going to be a mockery. That they were giving us something again. They were letting the niggers have their day to get all this nonsense out of their system, and then planning to go back to things as usual. Well, if the white man continues to sleep, continues to ignore the intensity of the black man's feelings and desires, all hell is going to break loose."

Moving back toward the bus I almost crashed into George Johnson. With a certain Hollywood director flourish, he was telling the driver to rev up the engine. George was being interviewed for radio, and they wanted the sound of departure. Followed by interviewers trailing microphone wires, George shouted, "I feel good because the Negroes are on the march and nothing is going to stop us." With that, he boarded the bus, signaled the driver, and we be-

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gan to move. It was 3.40 a. m. The 49 passengers on Bus 10 settled back. Among them were 10 CORE members, including Omar Ahmed and Wayne Kinsler, both typical of Harlem's Angry Young Men. Present also were 10 unemployed workers sent to Washington on money raised by CORE to protest the lack of jobs. Also among the passengers were Jim Peck, author of the book "The Freedom Riders," who took a severe beating as one of the first freedom rides into the Deep South; six members of the Peace Corps who were scheduled to leave for Nigeria; three interviewers from French television, with cameras and sound equipment; and a

slightly jaded reporter and a cameraman from the Herald Tribune, both of whom had seen too many Clark Gable reporter movies.

People began to talk and to question one another. Sue Brookway, a white member of the Peace Corps, was standing in the aisle speaking to George Johnson. She said, "I think the biggest influence of the March will be to create a greater national awareness of the issue and get more people to make a commitment to the cause. Although I agreed with CORE's goals, it never occurred to me to become active before this. But now I would join if I weren't going to Nigeria."

Omar Ahmed, who had overheard the word Nigeria, turned around in his seat and said, "The Negro on this March has to be very glad of the existence of the Soviet Union. This government is so worried about wobbling the African and Asian mind that it may even give the Negro what he wants."

"I don't think the Civil Rights Bill will get through," commented George Johnson from his seat across the aisle. "I have no faith in the white man. Even Kennedy & Kennedy Inc. isn't doing this for humanitarian reasons, but

for political ones." After a moment he continued: "CORE has been criticized for its new tactics of civil disobedience. Well, as far as I'm concerned, anything done to get our rights is O. K. It's remarkable that the Negro has taken it this long."

"A New Negro" The whites in the group were startled at the vehemence in George's statement. Omar, noting their expressions, attempted to explain. "The white power structure has bred a New Negro," he said, "and he is angry and impatient. It's not just the Black Muslims. It's the man on the street. Come down to Harlem some night and listen to what's being said on the street corners. The cops go through and you can see fear on their faces. This isn't Birmingham. If anyone starts anything, we won't be passive."

The kids in the four adjacent seats were twisted around in their chairs listening. Heads pressed together, they formed a roundtable, minus the table. In to this group came Wayne Kinsler, a 19-year-old Negro. He perched on one of the seat arms. Some crumbled cookies and overripe fruit were passed around.

The discussion turned to the Peace Corps. Frank Harman was asked why, since he was white, he wanted to go to Nigeria. He replied, "I want to go to help these people because they are human beings."

Suddenly Wayne shouted, "If this thing comes to violence, yours will be the first throat we slit. We don't need your kind. Get out of our organization."

Completely baffled by the outburst, Frank kept repeating the questions, "What's he talking about? What did I say?"

Wayne, straining forward tensely, screamed, "We don't need any white liberals to patronize us!"

Other Negroes joined in. "We don't trust you." "We don't believe you're sincere." "You'll have to prove yourself."

Frank shouted back, "I don't have to prove myself to anyone except myself."

"We've been stabbed in the back too many times." "The reason white girls come down to civil rights meetings is because they've heard of the black man's reputation of sex."

"The reason white guys come down is because they want to rebel against their parents."

"I'll tell you this, proving that he is sincere when he is working in the civil rights groups is the last chance the white man has got to keep this thing from exploding."

Little Comprehension

The other passengers were urging us to stop the argument. Eventually we did. In the lull that followed, the reactions of the whites were mixed. The most widespread one was complete lack of understanding as to why this had all started. There was little comprehension of the effect words like "help you" or "work for you," with all their connotations of the Great-White-Father attitude, could have on the bristling-black pride. Another attitude was one of revulsion at the ugliness which had been exhibited. Still others saw the argument as a sign that the walls between the races were beginning to come down; that people were really beginning to communicate instead of hiding behind masks of politeness. They felt that with a greater knowledge of one another's sensitivi-

ties, lack of understanding, and desires, it would be easier for the white liberal and the black man to work together.

People began to relax and joke again. Gradually they drifted off into an exhausted-sleep. Bus 10 rolled on in silence.

With the coming of dawn, the French TV men started blinding everyone with their lights and interviewing those people who could speak French. Being Gallic, they made sure to get shots of the romantic duos pitted against one another. Not to be left out, the Herald Tribune's cameraman picked up his light meter and cord and started doing a mock interview of the interviewers.

Someone cheerfully yelled, "Everybody sing."

He was quickly put down by a voice from the lower depths: "You're nuts! At seven o'clock some people don't even talk."

On we went—sleeping, talking, anticipating. We passed other buses full of heads covered with caps printed with their organizations' names. On our right was a beat-up old cab with six people in it and March on Washington posters plastered on all its doors.

At 10.30—Washington. The city seemed strangely quiet and deserted except for a few groups of Negro children on corners. They stared curiously at the unending caravan of buses. Police and MPs were everywhere. Traffic moved swiftly. We parked at 117th and Independence, and the people of Bus 10 merged with the crowd moving up the street. The March was on.

The day was full of TV cameras, spontaneous singing, speeches, clapping, the green and white striped news tent, the P. A. system blasting "We Shall Not Be Moved," the ominous Red Cross symbol on a medical tent, March marshals with bright yellow arm bands and little white Nehru hats, the Freedom Walkers in faded blue overalls, Catholic priests in solemn black, posters proclaiming Freedom Now, feet soaking in the reflecting pool, portable drinking fountains, varicolored pennants and hats, warm Pepsi-Cola, the blanket of humanity sprawled in undignified dignity, a Nigerian student with his head bent in prayer, and the echo of Martin Luther-King's phrase: "I have a dream..."

It was over. The bus moved out slowly. This time there were Negroes on every doorstep. As we passed, they raised their fingers in the victory sign. They clasped their hands over their heads in the prizefighter's traditional gesture. They clapped. They cheered. They smiled and the smile was reflected back from the buses.

On Bus 10 there was no one sitting at the back of the bus." All the seats were in the front. "We'll be back," said George Johnson. "If this doesn't work, we'll bring 800,000. And if that doesn't work, we'll bring all-20 million."

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