# THE LONG MARCH TO MONTGOMERY

By

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I was literally cramming my mouth full of pre-exam elixir - fig newtons and hard boiled eggs - when Hannah knocked at the dorm room door. The task of memorizing rock strata for Earth Science was mind-numbing, so I was delighted to take a break. Hannah and I had known each other in high school, and both of us had been accepted at Washington University in St. Louis.

‘There’s a big civil rights march sponsored by the St. Louis Conference on Religion and Race next weekend,’ she announced. ‘I want to go, but my sorority sisters aren’t interested. Would you like to come?’ she asked.

Of course, this was a left-handed compliment. Her sorority sisters had said no first, so I, a lowly independent, was a back-up choice. Still, a civil rights march in 1965 was a unique and interesting proposition for a college freshman just realizing what freedom from parental control was like.

I’d always been an “armchair” activist, watching TV news showing black people being attacked by vicious police dogs, being sprayed by fire hoses. It wasn’t right, I thought in the “black and white” way we used to think. I figured I could learn something if I got off my “tush” and saw up close what really was happening in my country. Besides, I couldn’t believe this was happening. I mean, our parents had taught us that all people should be treated as equals. Segregation and voting rights fraud made no sense to me.

“So, I told Hannah, ‘Sure. I’d love to.’

Two days later she returned, looking somewhat sheepish. ‘I can’t go,’ she said, eyes downcast. ‘’I called my parents for permission, and they said no.’

‘You asked them for permission?’

I couldn’t believe it. I had forged my parents’ signatures. There was no way they would let their precious daughter go off on a march to Montgomery, Alabama.

‘Well, I thought they would understand,’ she explained. ‘My parents are Holocaust survivors. They were forced to march through their town at gunpoint in

Hungary, then they were thrown into an internment camp... No one stood up for them. You know, like that poem, ‘ she shut her eyes to remember...

‘First they came for the communists,

and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Jew...’

‘...and it goes on till the end where it says,’

‘Then they came for me, and by that time

there was no one left to speak up for me.’

‘I thought because of what had happened to them, they would know how important it was to speak up, to do something when another group was being treated inhumanely. Instead,’ her voice lowered in embarrassment, ‘it made them overprotective. I’m so sorry. You might not want to go now.’

I remember feeling sad for about 5 seconds, and wondered if I should just forget about it. Then I remembered those fire hoses and small children being blasted onto the ground as though the firemen wanted to drown them on land. I decided to stop being a voyeur and see for myself what was happening.

I didn’t pack. We would be taking Trailway buses for a 15 hour ride from campus to Montgomery. I dressed in layers - yellow-and-white striped tee shirt, a sweatshirt that could be wrapped around my waist if it was too hot, and tan corduroy pants with white gym shoes.

I skipped my Friday classes and walked to the pick-up site. I didn’t know a soul. Standing in line to board the bus, our handlers warned us to get rid of weapons. Weapons, I thought, who’s bringing weapons? And how much damage could a 5’4” 100 pound weakling like me even do with a weapon? Knives, they said. That was

reasonable. I had brought oranges for snacks to keep the cost of food down, but had planned to peel my orange with my fingers. What our leaders meant, however, and what we all took for granted, was cuticle scissors, nail files and rat tail combs.

Well, I never carried scissors or nail files, but, by God, no one was going to take my rat-tail comb from me. It was an appendage. More important than tooth paste, which I had also squirreled away in my purse along with a tooth brush and about $20, all that I had in spending money. I wasn't going to call my parents and explain why I needed an advance on my allowance. It never occurred to me to ask anyone for a loan. For some irrational reason, I didn't tell anyone else that I was going. I guess I was paranoid about someone calling my parents before I had a chance to leave.

We were on bus number 5832. I remember that because they told us it was extremely important that we get on the same bus at pit stops and coming home - the better to keep track of us. All the rules reminded me more of a school field trip than the seat-of-the-pants mission we were embarking upon.

As we boarded the narrow-aisled bus, they told us to pick a buddy for the trip; don't separate; do whatever you're told by policemen. None of this had much effect on the crowd. We piled in. Since I didn't know anyone, I just took the first seat that was open. It was an aisle seat in the middle of the bus. I remember thinking that it was odd that the seats before and after this one were all filled. And then I looked at the person sitting by the window. A black man. An adult black man. His people were the reason we were all going on this trip, and no one had chosen to be his 'buddy.'"

You know me, in for a penny, in for a pound! I asked, 'Is this seat taken?' He looked at me and shook his head no. I sat down. He said nothing. He was one of three

black people on our bus. Aaron was the group leader. Paul, a pastor, was his partner. The rest of the passengers were members of SNCC, the Student Non-Violent Coordination Committee. In the excitement of the moment I heard all sorts of crazy comments - They better watch out - I've got a rusty nail clipper on me that can do some real harm...Let's get us some red neck for dinner. One idiot with an unruly blond afro threatened to pop him a southern hayseed. As the comments continued hot and heavy, I decided to rename this austere group to SVNCC - student, violent, non-coordinated committee. William, which I later learned was my seat mate's name, sat stoically, staring straight ahead, saying nothing to anyone, though I'm sure he heard everything and gave it no credence.

We drove on and on. It started to rain though that didn't dampen the spirits of the student violent non-coordinated folks who decided that the louder they sang the greater their commitment to the cause. All their ardor accomplished in the wee hours of the night was to keep the rest of us awake as they squeaked out, 'Will you miss me in the cotton fields back home.'

I was very cold. Earlier I had given my blanket to another girl who looked as though she were turning blue. A good deed, but a stupid one, because a few hours later I felt like a living popsicle!

I also needed to use the bathroom, but decided to hold on to all bodily fluids until we reached a pit stop. The thought of using the grungy rest room on the bus was an incentive not to drink any water or eat anything juicy.

We finally pulled up to a rest stop. Against warnings to stay with our 'buddies', I ran straight for the rest rooms, then to the food area to see if I could find something like

fig newtons to snack on, but we were already being called back to the bus. William was still in his seat. I offered him an orange. He said he didn't want one, but then he offered me his blanket, and under its warmth I was able to get some shuteye.

Another driver came on and our handlers held a pow-wow with us. 'This guy is a Southerner,' they whispered. 'Don't spook him. Do not sing your songs, do not talk about beating up crackers, do not antagonize him; leave him alone and keep your comments to yourself.'

The new driver glided in and out of the bus like a wraith at pit stops. I sensed that he wanted to leave earlier than he should have just to make sure some people would be left stranded.

I remember looking out of rain-streaked windows at one point and seeing a truck that had Deep South Milk written on the side. Wow, I thought, the air is the same. I don't feel any different, but all of a sudden this isn't my milk, it's Deep South Milk. I guessed this area of the country must be just a little different, a little more clannish, bound by a common thread that the Civil War was simply misinterpreted, and black people still were second class citizens, the Thirteenth Amendment be damned.

Did you ever sing "The wheels on the bus song' to your kids - the wheels on the bus go round and round, round and round, round and round. The wheels on the bus go round and round all through the town?

Our wheels weren't going through a town. They were barreling through the South. The effect was deadening. And I was sitting next to a ghost. Although William was there in bodily form, he sat still as a statue - a big man, at least 6'4", very contained, like sardines tightly packed in a can. Wearing a skimpy plaid short-sleeved

shirt, he didn't seem cold, though the bus was freezing. He gave up nothing. No utterance  passed his lips. It was as though he were watching a film within his thousand yard stare, and making friends wasn't on his agenda.

Maybe he was thinking about the four little girls who had been burned to death in a church just that past Sunday, or of the three white ministers who were beaten at the Selma march just two weeks previous. One of them died of his injuries.  Maybe he sensed what was to come - the very night of our march, Violet Luizzo, a white woman, was murdered by four Klansmen. Her alleged crime had been to sit next to a black man in her car as she ferried people back to Selma from Montgomery.  I certainly wasn't thinking about any of that. I hadn't connected death and destruction to this march. I believed, just like so many of us, that nothing bad would happen to us. We were the good guys, after all, the white hats. Being killed in some Southern site wasn't a blip on my naive radar.

"The wheels kept going round and round hour after hour. The window wipers going swish, swish, swish in the unrelenting rain.  And I knew that our sour-faced driver would like to yell at all of us - just as the song says, 'move on back, move on back, move on back, all through the town.'

Finally, our bus was silent. The SNCC kids had fallen asleep. Tired from their posing, hoarse from shouting out boasts and songs. All was still. Until it wasn't. Morning broke. Open trucks began to pass us filled with men in steel helmets wearing olive drab. They had rifles. We drove on, and there were more police standing astride their motorcycles, armed with pistols, watching the buses drive by. More than 25,000 of us

were coming in from all directions.  We passed a small grocery store. Little black kids waved and jumped and yelled, ‘Yaay.’

Then we bumped along unpaved roads, lurching from pothole to pothole. On almost every corner there were Red Cross workers, ‘army trucks, MPs. I remember being appalled. ‘This is the United States,’ I thought. ‘We don’t do this here.’ We drove past little cracker box, wooden houses with old-time washing machines on the porches, people sitting on rocking chairs, either shouting epithets or cheering.

It was a poor, hardscrabble place where single blades of grass fought for for their lives. The rutted roads morphed into mud as we turned in to a huge parking area. Thick, muggy air enveloped us as we stepped outside, a Tennessee Williams kind of day. It was so hot that the morning fog looked like steam coming up from the red mud. And the mud reminded me of blood, all the blood shed just to get to this point.

The buses disgorged hundreds upon hundreds of passengers - all kinds of people as far as my eye could see. There were nuns in their habits wearing rain coats, priests, helicopters constantly circling overhead. I saw women dressed to the nines, their heels sinking into the sucking mud. There were old people and young people, Khaki slacks and jeans and flannel shirts. J.C.Penny and Sacks Fifth Avenue sharing the field. Little children were playing on swing sets because it seemed that we were in the back yard of a church. A group of black children played tag for the American flag.

We held  each others’ hands and sang in a thunderous throng. I didn’t know the people on either side of me, and would never see them again, but we gripped each other as though our lives depended upon it. We were one voice singing “We Shall Overcome,” over and over again, so many different verses that I never knew existed. It

was simply overwhelming. But a part of me still looked at all of it from the viewpoint of an observer.

I thought that many of them believed that in this place, Montgomery, they had found freedom. And I was sad for them, because this was not freedom. It was the beginning of yet another hard, long road.

I saw a sign held by a woman saying, 'Hitler Lives Again in an Alabama Cotton Patch.' Group upon group came and swelled our numbers. And I knew that even more would meet us downtown by the capitol.

We started marching. Our handlers yelled over the din. 'Get back here by 4pm. Don't go anywhere except the capitol building, then come right back. It isn't safe...not safe...be careful. Keep the girls in the middle of the line for safety. We're late...speeches have begun. Hurry...hurry." American flags pierced the air. Transistor radios told us that Governor George Wallace would ignore the demonstration. There was, he had announced, no discrimination in Alabama.

More rickety wood-framed houses looking like a good wind would blow them away. More people sitting on their rocking chairs, waving to us and smiling. Front yards were dirt. Here we were in their living room, Montgomery.

As we arrived at the white section, trees were in bloom; the grounds well kept. The mood, however, was distinctively different. No one sat on porches. The streets were lined by white people. Jeering. One of them spit at me. I, of course, had ignored the pleading of our handlers. Why should the women be relegated to the middle of the line? I'm just as good as any man. For some reason, it was the spit that broke down the objective observer in me. I began to realize that people hated us - me - for walking on

their streets, treading on their long held beliefs. And they were just steps away, kept from getting any closer by a few armed guards - nationalized Alabama State troopers who had to follow federal orders from President Lyndon Johnson until 4 pm. Then, like Cinderella, they changed back to State troopers under George Wallace's power.

The capitol building appeared before us. A beautiful white domed building majestic against a bright blue, sunny sky. Thousands of people milled about, sitting, standing, laying down on the grass just happy to be there. Sammy Davis Jr. was singing, 'You gotta jump when the spirit says jump.' Doctors were being called upon to help people who had fainted from the long walk. The speechifying was endless.

Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King stood on the steps sounding more like a college professor than a preacher. I can only imagine the pressure he'd been under in the past few weeks. After Bloody Sunday, when 56 black marchers were attacked by troopers while trying to cross the Pettus bridge from Selma to Montgomery, King led 2,500 marchers across the same bridge. But when they reached the point where Bloody Sunday had taken place, he chose to obey a judicial restraining order and turned the marchers around. Some of his supporters called him a coward. Here he was, trying to lead an uncontrollable movement, like a family with spatting children - SNCC sparring with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), some supporters egging him on, others urging caution; people being beaten and killed.

I can't really remember his speech, but he owned the crowd. He spoke in a preacher's cadence that built to a crescendo. 'We are on the move now,' he said, 'burning our churches will not deter us...bombing our homes will not dissuade

us...beating and killing our clergymen and young people will not divert us. We are on the move now...' And people were yelling, 'Yes sir, yes sir, after every sentence. It was as though his words were doves soaring straight up to the sky - We are on the move now,' Can you imagine!

There was an old woman nearby - what am I saying, she was probably my age now. She kept repeating, 'Lord, we are here,' over and over. And I said to myself, 'Lady, here is nowhere yet. Nothing has changed here yet.'

I was wrong, of course. The Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965, so our march did help push Congress to make a change. Still, that day at the capitol, among the thousands of people, we had no idea what we were really accomplishing. I only knew three things for sure... I was thirsty. And tired. And I had to pee.

Now these were certainly understandable needs, but goals not easily attained. I walked into a gas station and asked for the washroom key. There were a few white men standing around. Some wearing baseball caps and farmer overalls. No one said anything. They just stared at me. The cashier said, 'The washroom isn't working.' It never occurred to me to question him. The realization came when I asked for a Coke, and he said the cash register wasn't working either. There was something like a group sneer when I made an about face and got the hell out of there. I don't know what would have happened if they had let me use the washroom. They could have barricaded the door and kept me there until the buses left, or worse"

And then it got weird. The crowd had thinned, and I saw Steve, that obnoxious blonde SNCC kid from the bus, and William, my seat mate. We decided to walk together

and find our bus. We stopped in a drug store to get a Coke, and someone told us that the buses had been moved to another location.

After the gas station experience, we weren't inclined to believe anyone, so we walked back to the place where we'd gotten off. But our bus wasn't there. Drivers told us we had to go to Crampton Bowl. We didn't panic. We recognized lots of kids from St. Louis going in that direction, so we figured our bus would be nearby.

When we finally arrived, our bus wasn't there. Hundreds of people were stranded, milling around. We didn't want to stay. It was getting close to 4 pm, the time when Alabama state police would be 'denationalized' and could do whatever Governor Wallace wanted them to do. We didn't want to be around for that.

I began to get this feeling like little ants scurrying up and down under my skin. You know, that feeling where the hair on the back of your neck stands up and you're in fight or flight mode? We had been in gigantic crowds before, during the march, and through the speeches, as well as in large, amorphous groups when we dispersed. But now, we were stragglers in a hostile town. The three of us decided upon a plan of action. I stayed where we were, in a residential area with pleasant white houses. Steve ran down to another location trying to find anyone we would know. William had already left our little threesome to call an emergency number and check on the buses in back of the courthouse. I didn't want him to go. Of the three of us, he obviously was the one at greatest risk, but you tell a 6'4" fullback of a man to stay when he wants to go.

As I waited, a blue-hued white haired little lady cruised past in a huge pastel car. As she stuck her head out of the window, I thought she was going to ask if she could help. Instead, 'You dirty little white bitch,' exploded from her bright red lipsticked lips.

Steve finally returned. He thought he knew where our bus was. We hoped we'd see William back behind the courthouse. A small group of boys joined us. I was the only female and felt slightly out of place. By this point, those manic ants were running up and down my skin double-time. I was sure that our bus had left without us and didn't know what we'd do, how we'd get home. I didn't have enough money for a bus or train ticket, had no food, had finished my Coke a long time ago, and still had to pee! I decided to get by with fake confidence and walking fast. Until we encountered the troops.

Remember when I said that there were Alabama state police who had been nationalized until 4pm? It was close to that time. We still hadn't located our buses, and we didn't know what Governor Wallace was going to do. We passed troops as we walked - stone-faced, peach-fuzzed boys in uniforms with their rifles, muttering as I walked by. This was by the capitol. Troops lined the right hand side curb. To the left were long, state government buildings so no one could run through alleyways if someone started firing.

We tried to walk down one particular block because we saw buses at the end of it. The first soldier, noticing that we were beginning to turn toward him, stopped us. There we were, facing the prospect of going down a long street with troops lined up shoulder to shoulder. It was a sobering sight. He wouldn't let us pass. 'Why?' I asked. 'You just can't,' he answered, and that was that. He said, 'Go on down the next street.'

We did, and that soldier told us the same thing. They wouldn't let us pass. We kept up this little dance for another block. Then I decided to stop the music. I turned down the street, heading our little band, and no one detained us. It was the same scenery, government buildings on the left, us in the middle, and a seemingly endless

line of troops on the right. But there was one important difference. Every rifle was raised and pointed at us. And I may have heard them being cocked, but even if not, it was a very effective threat.

If something's going to happen, it'll be now, I thought. 'Whore,' I remember hearing. 'bitch, cunt,' and a host of other attractive and archaic epithets. But no bullets.

Unfortunately, the buses were not at the end of the block. They were further to the right. We'd passed so many one-way-walking streets that we had "over-walked" the bus area, but two priests ran up and brought us back to good old 5832. Clearly they were very happy to see us, explaining that the driver was going to leave without us...it certainly was lucky that we got back...

You might think that's the end of the story. But life is never neat. Now we come to the part where I always say I showed my true colors - as a coward.

William wasn't back. Steve and I made it, but William hadn't come back to the corner where we said we'd wait until the three of us were together again. We left without him because it was getting so late. And back by the bus there was all sorts of confusion, noise, and that damn driver insisting we had to go; he was way behind schedule, he said. So one black man was left behind. I keep thinking, what would have happened if William had been a white college student. Would we have been so quick to leave? Wouldn't we have demanded that the bus stay and try everything in our power to find that student? It was our fault, Steve's and mine. We let William down. Someone put a can of pork and beans with two spoons in my hand. Steve began digging in, not having eaten since the previous night. 'Eat hearty,' he said. But I had no appetite. I couldn't eat when I knew William was in danger.

Aaron, our bus leader, left to look for William. We chipped in to give him money to buy two train tickets. God help both of them, I prayed. I wanted to cry. One of the pastors who had brought us to the bus said he was going to notify other clergy in the area to watch out for William - get him to shelter if they saw him. He wished us good luck. Consider this, the pastor wished us good luck as he went back out in that hostile city...Old 5832 was down three men, and all three of them were black.

Through the years, I've gone back to that day. Now, almost 50 years later, I have some objectivity. Remember, I was 17 at the time. Until then, the most serious thing in my life was conjugating French verbs. The group leader, as well as William and the priest were at least 25 years old. The leader and the pastor were both older than I, and more experienced in things like protests and marches, at least more experienced than I was. If I had stayed, I wouldn't have had any idea of what to do for William. Logically, I understand that, though it took decades for me to emotionally process the concept.

Back at the dorm, after we returned, I called a divinity student I met on the bus. He told me that William was found, safe. The preacher had come back the next day by train. Aaron was OK. Everything was all right. Except for me. My guilt.

And the fact that from that day, Hannah always managed to avoid me. I never really understood until I saw her again at our 50th high school reunion. She was ashamed, she explained, that she hadn't had the strength to defy her parents' decision. So,she admitted, she simply had stopped talking to me, and she had felt guilty for 50 years.

What a waste of perfectly good angst, I was able to tell her. If I had not had that special experience, my life might have been totally different. Because of what I had

seen and felt, I taught black children on Chicago's blighted west side. Right after Martin Luther King's assassination, I was there, watching businesses and homes go up into flames in my rear view mirror. And later, I became an editorial writer, trying to right society's wrongs in 20 lines or less...

Hannah's decision had sent her down another road. She delved more deeply into Judaism. What was it about the religion that stimulated so much hate? She wrote books on Jewish morality - then read studies explaining how being the child of survivors affected one's psyche. She learned, after decades, that by choosing not to go on that march was not because she was a 'mama's girl.' It was a typical decision for the child of a Holocaust survivor. The children, she noted, want their parents to live a better life through their offspring, a life of less pain and happier memories.

After all those years, Hannah looked me straight in the eye and said, 'I understand now. I couldn't go on that march simply because I am who I am.'

I was able to look at her, smile, and respond, 'And I had to go because I am who I am.'

Trite to say, we settled our unspoken estrangement with a hug. From time to time we even share emails.

Still, 50 years later, those days are very much with me. A march. People walking against injustice. As millions watched, this country began to change for the better; yet, at the same time, it also stayed the same.