

I talked to the old man, the old scholar. He wrinkled his brow and studied the itinerary and said, uh, 'well son, I think you'll be alright going through Virginia and probably North Carolina, maybe even South Carolina, possibly Georgia. But 'Bama, he said they are certain to take a potshot at you. I hope they miss. Said I don't think you'll reach Mississippi, if you do you'll think Alabama is purgatory and Mississippi is hell. It'll be much worse. But I feel certain you won't arrive in New Orleans. I wish you wouldn't go, but I know you will and I pray that you survive it. And he asked if he could keep the itinerary and I said certainly. We shook hands and hugged and I left. Uh, that evening, I took the other uh, thirteen Freedom Riders out to dinner at a Chinese restaurant in Washington and we had tables put together so that was a long table. I sat at the end of it, [laughs] inevitably, someone referred to that occasion as 'the Last Supper'. Well, I, I told them uh, no one had to go, no one was locked in to going on this journey except me. I had to go because it was my project. I'd call it. But they didn't have to go; they could change their mind and there would be no recriminations, no blame, no fault. They could uh, go home now, CORE would pay their way back home. Those who were members of CORE would remain perfectly good and respected members of CORE. They didn't have to decide that now, they could uh sleep on it and make the decision in the morning or they didn't have to tell me then, they could just fail to show up at Greyhound or Trailways to uh, whichever they'd been assigned. Then one of the Freedom Riders, a young minister led, led em, led all of us in prayer. And we parted and went to our respective abodes for the evening. The next morning, everybody showed up at Greyhound or Trailways and we boarded the buses, we had our interstate tickets. I presumed that everybody was as frightened as I was; I was scared to death. Had no idea what would happen, but I was certain it was gonna be bad. We went through Virginia and nothing happened there really. Um, the signs for colored and for white had come down in the terminals

the previous day. We'd been told that they had been taken down yesterday. They knew we were coming and baked a cake. Um, we spent the first night at uh in Petersburg at Virginia State University, had a mass meeting at a Baptist church in Petersburg, had a caravan, auto caravan from Virginia State to that church. And Freedom Riders folk and ministers folk and then back to Virginia State where we slept and got a early start on the buses in the morning. Uh, went through North Carolina without any difficulty. The signs were still up but were not enforced. South Carolina, signs were up, did not appear to be enforced until we reached um, what was the name of the town um, it slips me at the moment but it will come to me shortly, I'm sure. Uh, small town and John Lewis, who was a Freedom Rider; he was then a student at um uh Tennessee Bible Training Institute in Nashville. He is now a Congressman-elect, well he's won the Democratic primary in Atlanta and that's tantamount to election um, before that he was a city councilman in Atlanta. But uh, he was a student in 1961 and was a Freedom Rider. Uh, John tried to enter the white waiting room and there were two young whites, two young thugs standing there leaning against the doorjamb, the leather jacket, ducktail haircut crew. There, the, those ducktail haircuts are very popular in those days. As John approached, this is Rock Hill South Carolina, ah yes [laughs]. I knew it would come to me! Rock Hill, Rock Hill, um John approached them, one of them said get to the other side boy, where the niggers go. John, with his great ministerial dignity said I have perfect right to go in here on grounds of the Supreme Court decision in the Boynton case. Now those two guys didn't know who Boynton was, I doubt if they knew who the Supreme Court was. But uh, John tried to walk, uh, between them into the white waiting room and one of them hit him, knocked him down and both of them started stomping and kicking him. One of the white Freedom Riders, Al Bigelow from Cos Cob, Connecticut, tried to protect John by stepping between John, who was on the ground and his assailants. Uh, Bigelow

was a tall, strapping fellow, he had been a Navy captain in combat in World War II. He'd pledged himself to nonviolence on the Freedom Rides. He stepped between John's fallen body and John's assailants, and the two young whites had to hit him quite a few times before they dropped him and he went down to one knee finally. It was only when Bigelow went down to the ground that uh, city policemen who had been watching the whole thing then said something. He walked up and said to the two young whites. Said alright boys, y'all done bout enough now why dontcha all go on home. Well we picked John up and put bandaids on him, patched him up and the Freedom Ride went on, no more trouble in South Carolina, no trouble in Georgia, we stayed overnight in Sumter, South Carolina by the way. No trouble in Georgia, we got to Atlanta where we were gonna spend the night. I called uh, Dr. King and he invited us to have dinner with him at uh, a black restaurant in town and we did. He congratulated us upon the Freedom Ride, the CORE project, and uh thought it was a very exciting idea and a good demonstration of nonviolence and how it should work and offered his help in any way possible and all we had to do was to call him. We thanked him of course. Uh, after dinner we went back to uh, Atlanta University where we were spending the night and um, went to bed. The next morning about 3 o'clock, I got a phone call from home. My mother called to tell me that my father had died and I must return to Washington and bury him. I woke the other Freedom Riders up and told them this news and left uh, Jim Peck, who was a white Freedom Rider from New York in charge of the testing going through Alabama. That was a role I had reserved for myself, to test the uh terminals in Alabama. Peck accepted the responsibility. Well, my mother believed and really continued to believe until her death 5 or 6 years later that my father had willed the timing of his death, so as to bring me home from the Freedom Ride before that crucial trip across Alabama. She said, uh, frequently he would pick up my itinerary pull on his reading glasses and study it. He was, she

said, clinging to a thin thread of life and consciousness. And he would study the itinerary, say let's see where he [James] is now, oh he's in North Carolina, that's not too bad. But when he picked up the itinerary and saw that I was preparing to go through Alabama, then he gave up and died. She said he was apparently, he was keeping himself alive by will until that point and then turned loose. I don't know whether that's true or not; it was her belief. But at any rate, I had to return to bury him. This however, is what happened to the bus, the first bus that went across Alabama. They kept in constant phone touch with me at home. They uh, crossed the boundary into Alabama, state boundary. The driver pulled off the road and picked up 6 or 7 young white men, once again the leather jacket crew, who had uh, weapons in their hands, chains, blackjacks, pistols stuck in their belts. They boarded the bus. The driver drove on a few miles and pulled off the road again and said, I ain't movin this bus another inch until the niggers get up out of the front seats and get into the back of this bus where they belong. Now I go through all this, telling you this story, which is almost a horror story, so you get some sense if you do not already have that sense of where our country has come from. Then we can have a better appreciation of who we are now and what we are; better appreciana, ciation of our country today and thus, a greater sense of what it can be tomorrow. This was 1961 and I'm not exaggerating. 'I ain't movin this bus another inch. Til the niggers get up out of the front seats and get into the back where they belong'. Nobody moved. When the young man who had just boarded the bus a few miles back, leather jacket bunch, got up, walked over to the blacks that were seated in front and began beating them with their weapons over their head. Pistol whipping them with their pistols, hitting them with their blackjacks and clubs and chains. The white Freedom Riders tried to intervene; Jim Peck, who was a thin fellow, weighing 120 pounds, 130, said 'here stop that! These men haven't done anything to you! Leave em alone, they have a right to sit there'" and I am told that

Peck was hit with an uppercut that lifted him up off the floor and deposited him unconscious in the aisle. Walter Bergman, the 61 or 62 year old professor from Michigan tried to intervene and he was knocked down and kicked badly around the head, so badly indeed that he had a stroke, a cerebral hemorrhage. He has been confined to a wheelchair, paralyzed ever since. He's now up in his 80s. His wife told me about it on the phone; I taped her conversation, it's that tape is somewhere in my attic; I wish I could've found it, my eyesight would not permit. She said 'they used my husband's head for a football'. When the blacks were bloodied, badly bloodied, beaten, they were bodily thrown into the back of the bus. They did not respond with violence through all this. Then the driver drove on. Uh, one woman on the bus who was not a Freedom Rider was heard to exclaim 'Doggone, looks like there's been a hog killin on this bus [imitates her laughter]'. And the bus stopped to Anniston, Alabama, there was a crowd of men outside, a mob, waiting. The Freedom Riders made the decision, the proper decision indeed that discretion was the better part of that, the decision lots would test at Anniston. To have tested would have been suicide. The driver started up the bus, shifted gears before he could move on some members of the mob, and by the way there were policemen, local policemen mingling with members of the mob, fraternizing with them, laughing and joking. Members of the mob had slashed the tires of the bus with their sharp edged weapons. The bus moved on but the tires blew out on the outskirts of town. The mob had loaded cars and pursued the bus, now they surrounded the disabled bus, held the door shut and threw a firebomb through a window, breaking the window. The bus filled with smoke and burst into flames. People would've died on that bus had Al Bigelow, the ex-Navy captain, not been there. He was cool under fire and he uh, stood up, took charge and began barking orders and got people out of there. He got the emergency exit open, began evacuating people in orderly fashion, single file, deciding it was better to face the mob outside than certain

incineration inside. And the Freedom Riders stumbled off the bus, falling on the ground, coughing from smoke inhalation. At that point, one of the policemen who was in the mob fired one shot in the air with his service revolver, and as if by signal, the mob pulled away from the bus, allowing the front door to open. Well Fred Shuttlesworth who was an, an associate of Martin King's uh, got a call, someone was able to call him in Birmingham and he and some men from his church got their cars and came over and picked up the Freedom Riders, got them to a hospital for treatment for smoke inhalation. When they were released from the hospital, they tried to go on with the Freedom Ride. They got to uh, Birmingham and Peck tried to carry on with the assignment I'd given him, lead the testing, get it first and he was grabbed by a mob and hustled with his feet barely touching the ground, right into the alley where they clubbed him. There is a picture, a photograph, some photographer got the picture of him being beaten by that mob with clubs. He's down on the ground and the mob left him for dead, unconscious in a pool of his own blood. Uh, once again Shuttlesworth managed to get there in his car and uh get Peck to the hospital where he had 56 or 57 stitches taken in his head; he survived. Well at this point the Freedom, these thirteen Freedom Riders could not go on. The smoke inhalation, lung damage um, head, head bandaged up, Bergman, stroke. They had been chewed up too badly. My father's funeral was the next day. I was watching it, it was now headlined. The picture, the photograph of that burning Greyhound bus was, I think, on the front page of every newspaper in the world. Our clipping service at CORE headquarters in New York brought us in baskets and baskets and baskets full, not only from every city, town and hamlet in this country but from Europe, Asia, and Africa. Here was a Greyhound bus with flames engulfing it, eating it up. I saw it on the front page of the Post; I called my staff in New York and instructed them to get a, that picture and have it superimposed on a photograph of the Statue of Liberty. So here would be the lady, Miss

Liberty, holding her torch and in the flame of that torch of freedom would be the burning Greyhound bus and use that composite photograph as the symbol of the Freedom Ride from that point on and that was done; that became the symbol of the Freedom Ride. And our posters, our leaflets, our everything was sent out. Well we were trying to decide what to do at this point. I got a call then from Diane Nash, one of the unsung heroines of the movement, a young SNCC leader from Nashville. She called my office in New York, they'd referred her to my home in Washington, my parent's home, and she said 'Jim, would you object if I send in some young SNCC students to pick up that Freedom Ride in Birmingham, where your group of thirteen has left off.' We had that kind of relationship with SNCC and with SCLC too um, it was kind of a dividing up of the turf and agreement that neither organization would barge in on the other's project without getting permission; so that we wouldn't have a situation where one has a project and another comes in to try to get headlines, trying to raise money on the basis of that kind of thing. For example, oh, after Selma broke in 1965, before I went down, I called Dr. King, said that I was in Africa when I first heard of Selma, I'm back here now, I would like to join you in the march, would you object if I come down. He said of course I wouldn't object Jim, please do come down tomorrow and join me in the front row and so I did, but only after clearing with him. So Diane Nash of SNCC called me from Nashville and said would you object if I send some young SNCC people in to pick up the Freedom Ride where your first group of thirteen left off. I said, "Diane, it may be suicide". She said "of course we realize that, we're not stupid but we can't let them stop you with violence. If we do, the movement is dead. Anytime we start something all they have to do then is bring the violence and we will roll over and play dead". She said, "for heaven's sake Jim, let me send in fresh runners to pick up that baton and run with it." I said, "alright Diane send the SNCC people in and I will call my CORE chapter in New Orleans

and ask them to send in some young, college age CORE people from New Orleans to join the SNCC people, to carry on the Freedom Ride. And right after the funeral tomorrow, I will double back and join you, the SNCC people, and the CORE people wherever you are in Alabama. Keep in touch with me so I'll know where you are", and she agreed. After the funeral they were in Montgomery. The SNCC people went into Birmingham and they were chased by the Klan. The Klan brutalized them. There were pictures of the SNCC people running and the Klan chasing them with clubs and chains and one girl was being chased and several Klansmen caught her, had her down, John Seigenthaler, who was assistant Attorney General had been sent down by Bobby Kennedy, when he saw that scene, he ran over there and grabbed the Klansmen throwing them off of her and then a half dozen of the Klansmen grabbed him and beat him, beat the assistant Attorney General. Well they finally got to Montgomery. There were pictures of Bobby Kennedy on the phone, tellin em get that bus moving to Montgomery. They said, but we can't find a driver; nobody wants to drive the bus now, nobody wants to drive the bus, it's too dangerous with the Freedom Riders on it. He said 'well can't you drive a bus or what' "ahh, I'm not gonna drive a bus. I'm not gonna drive that bus'. Well where's Mr. Greyhound, can't he drive the bus. [laughs] Well nobody'll drive the bus. Finally they got the bus, got somebody to drive the bus and the SNCC people went on to Montgomery, the CORE people then joined them, I was doubling back then, was on a plane going down to Montgomery. Uh, Shuttlesworth again, King associate, met me at the airport. Shuttlesworth then said 'Jim, we have to get you to the church, Martin has flown in, meaning Dr. King, has flown in from Atlanta it's at uh, Fred, uh Ralph Abernathy's church, Baptist and the Freedom Riders are there, Diane Nash is there and they're waiting for you, they want to have a rally, and you're gonna speak and King'll speak and Abernathy, he'll speak and um, various Freedom Riders will speak. Said, we may have trouble



getting there because there's a riot in town and um, there are hundreds, maybe thousands of white men rioting in the streets, beating up any black they find. Said, we may have trouble getting to that church but we'll try. As we approached the church, uh we were blocked by the mob and they began rocking the car preparatory for turning it over I guess. But he had enough traction to get it in reverse and back out of their hands. Tried another approach to the church with the same result. Then he circled around, back of a graveyard, parked the car; we walked through the graveyard, thinking we could go in to a back entrance of the church, if the mob had not covered that entrance. We um, got through the graveyard but the mob was there; they had blocked that entrance. Shuttlesworth was a small fellow, short, thin has more physical courage than anybody I've ever seen. I don't think he knows what fear is, maybe he has no imagination, I don't know [laughs]. He says, well Jim, I've gotta get you in that church, so come on, we're gonna have to walk through that mob. I said, we're gonna do what? He said we're gonna walk through that mob, come on, follow me. Well I'll be darned if he didn't walk through the mob. And uh, the white mob and he said, out of the way, step aside, let me through. He looked at them and they stepped aside and let him through. I told him later if you will pardon this expression, and they may want to cut it out of this tape uh, that uh he, this was what we called the quote 'Crazy Nigger Syndrome' unquote. You know, that nigger's crazy, don't mess with him. But any rate, here was big me trying to hide behind small Fred Shuttlesworth as we went through the mob and we got to the back door of the church, knocked on it and they opened it and let us in. uh, I then huddled with uh, um, Ralph Abernathy and Martin Luther King and Diane Nash, uh Bobby Kennedy had sent in US Marshalls and Kennedy asked uh, King, he called King and asked King to try to persuade me to halt the Freedom Ride and have a cooling off period. This was war, it was like war, it was war, but nonviolent war on our part. Halt the Freedom Ride and have a

cooling off period. I talked with Diane and she agreed with the answer I was going to give. The answer was that I regret that I cannot comply with the request. We've been cooling off for 350 years. If we cool off anymore, we'll be in a deep freeze. The Freedom Ride must go on.