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THE CHILDREN

DAVID
HALBERSTAM

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IT WAS A GREAT VICTORY, JOHN LEWIS THOUGHT, REMEMBERING THE moment when Diane Nash had faced down Ben West on the courthouse steps, although it was only the first step. Thirty-five years later Lewis could remember almost everything about that moment. Diane's performance had been nothing less than brilliant. She had managed to get the mayor to move past his politics to the very core of his humanity. That was the whole purpose of the Lawson ethic, Lewis thought, to make people who were nominally your opponents get outside of their normal vision and see the human dimension wrought by segregation. It was one thing to talk about it in workshops, but Diane, in the most heated confrontation imaginable, had actually done it.

John Lewis liked this new community which he had become a part of; it existed not on the basis of geography—of people living in one town or coming from one particular college—but rather, he believed, on spirituality, of people brought together by a cause and willing to sacrifice all their other, more selfish needs for a common good. Because of it he had a wealth of new friends, and they had become, in the shared purpose and shared dangers of the past few months, more than friends, more like family. If anything the pull of his new life in Nashville was becoming stronger than the pull of his former life in rural Alabama; he was in some way which would be difficult to explain to strangers closer to his new friends in the Movement than he was to most members of his own family. One of the hardest things he had had to do was tell his mother, when she had asked him to withdraw from the sit-ins, that he was going to continue, that he was acting not for himself but for all of them, all of the Lewises and all their neighbors. He understood in some way the change taking place in him, that he was gradually being pulled into a new, different world

which was both exciting and terrifying. He knew, even as they had won the victory on the issue of lunch counters, that he had found a defining purpose in his life, one which combined his deepest religious convictions with a growing political commitment. The very struggle for lunch counter rights was almost miraculous in the way it had transformed him and his sense of self: In rural Pike County he had barely existed as a person, an almost invisible black child of an almost invisible poor black farmer. He had no voting rights, precious few educational rights, and almost no social rights. But because of what they had just done in Nashville, he was now a proud young man, someone to be reckoned with, a full-fledged American citizen capable of standing and fighting not just for his own rights but for those of others. He very much liked being the new John Lewis, a young man who had been set free within himself. But the real battle, he knew better than most as a child of the rural Deep South, had barely begun. The terrible price of winning, he understood, was that you could not stop now; to the victor went the far greater obligation of carrying the struggle into the Deep South and far greater danger.

It would be hard to imagine a purer product of the Deep South than John Lewis in the spring of 1960. He was so country, so simple, so completely unpretentious that it was easy to underestimate the powerful force, and considerable intelligence, which had always guided him. Over the years, a surprising number of people, white and black alike, would make that mistake, would judge John Lewis by his exterior, by the fact that he did not seem to speak well and stumbled over certain words, only to discover much later that they had completely misread him, that he was a person of singular purpose, unshakable in his beliefs, limitless in his faith, and with sufficient intelligence, at each critical junction in his life, to know the difference between right and wrong and between a good man and a bad man. Nothing deterred him from what he believed was right; he was, when the larger purpose of the cause was at stake, fearless.

No one loved being in Nashville more than he did. He still loved his family, but he went back to Alabama less frequently. He had always hated life on the farm. "I was always," he said later of those years when he was supposed to help out his family with the daily chores, "a complaining child. I complained all the time because I did not want to go out and work in the fields, which we all had to do in order to sur-

vive.” Nashville set him free because it set his mind free. John, known to his family as Robert (he became John only when he went off to school in Nashville), was by his own admission the laziest of Buddy and Willie Mae Lewis’s ten children. From the moment when he had been old enough to start accepting responsibility for even the lightest chores, he had complained, claiming that it was too hot out to pick, too hot even to carry water to the others. His mother would try and explain to him how hard it was on all of them, that they were poor and that therefore everyone had to do his or her share, but it seemed not to dent him. “We’re working like slaves out there in the sun. It’s like olden times in the Bible. It’s like slavery,” he would say to his mother, and she would tell him yes, perhaps it seemed like it, but they had no other way of surviving, and they had to eat. They could fast, he answered, and the way he mispronounced the word, it sounded like *feast*.¹

When the picking season conflicted with the school calendar—at cotton picking time, or peanut picking time—and he, like almost all the children of the black rural South, had to be held out of school for a few days, he would try and sneak off to school instead. “Robert,” his mother would say, “you’re going to have to stay home from school tomorrow and help pick the peanuts,” and he would nod his assent; then, in the morning after breakfast, as the others were getting ready to work, he would slip off from them and when he saw the school bus coming, he would run out and get on, knowing he was disobeying family rules but willing to take the risk involved because he so greatly preferred school. His brothers and sisters would try to warn their parents—“Momma and Daddy, he’s got his school clothes on, he’s plannin’ to go to school”—but his parents were curiously tolerant. This child was different, they decided. They never came down that hard on him, and they did not as others might have, drive off to school to bring him back and punish him. The next day they would simply say, “Robert, we really need you today,” and sufficiently chastened, he would return to the fields for the day, though he remained ready to skip the fields on the following day. “Let him go to school,” his older brother Edward said. “He’s no help out in the fields. All he does is fuss. It’s better out there without him.” He was the third child of ten. Edward, who was partially deaf, was always irritated with him. If they were chopping cotton Edward stayed on his case: “Come on, catch up,

Robert, you've got to catch up, you're not pulling your load!" Even on their day off, when the other boys would play baseball, he would be by himself reading or practicing at being a preacher. It was, his sister Ore noted, as if he had always been a grown-up, never a child.²

He did not like the heat or the hard work or the snakes, which turned up all the time when they plowed the fields. His mind was always elsewhere. He lived a fantasy life in which the primary objective was to get out of Pike County. He and a cousin of his had even decided how they would do it. They were going to saw down one of the great pine trees and cut it into pieces and make a wooden bus and drive away to a place they had heard about called California. What saved him in those days were the chickens. He loved raising them and they became his primary responsibility—his family was delighted that he had finally found something he liked to do, and so he became the chicken man when he was about nine years old. He took his chicken responsibilities very seriously. An electric chicken hatcher cost about \$19, as advertised in *The Wish Book*, which was what the members of the Lewis family called the Sears, Roebuck catalog, because it was filled with all the things they dreamed about. John Lewis wished for nothing else so much, no toy or baseball, as an electric chicken hatcher. Without one he was forced to exploit the sitting hens by switching their eggs so they would be more productive. This, of course, exhausted them and caused the hens to lose weight. His other great passion as a boy was his religion. He became something of a boy preacher when he was about five, after he had been given his first Bible. As a little boy he often went to church on Sunday, and then spent the rest of the week repeating what the preacher had said, forcing the younger children to listen to him. He loved the game of church. He often baptized his sisters' dolls. Soon, with the coming of his chicken duties, he began preaching to the chickens, telling them to lead a good life, not to fight among each other. If a chicken died, he would deliver the chicken eulogy, and then he would bury the chicken in the Lewis chicken cemetery.

He had told his mother early on that he intended to become a preacher, and at first she was a bit skeptical. She told him that people could not just go out and announce that they were going to be preachers, but that God had to call you to be a preacher; but gradually,

watching him, seeing how different he was from his brothers and sisters, how he was always with a book, she decided that in some way the Lord had touched her son.³

The one thing he disliked about being a chicken man was that he could not trust his parents. Because the Lewis family lived constantly on the edge of survival, and under the continual threat of losing their land, they were always short of cash and were always trading his beloved chickens for food. There was a significant difference of opinion in the Lewis family about the chickens: To him they were pets; to his parents, they were food, or barter. So when a chicken disappeared in the middle of the day, traded off by his parents in exchange for sugar or flour to the man who drove the rolling store (an old bus converted into a store), he protested. As far as he was concerned the chickens were his. His parents, in turn, tried to explain that his chickens were not pets, that they were critical to this poor family's food production, and by bartering them they could help bring other kinds of food to the table. There was a ritual to these disagreements. He would come back from school to find one of his chickens gone and would protest at once, and his mother would explain that the family had to eat. He would then refuse to talk to anyone during dinner.

Sometimes, looking back, he was more than a little embarrassed by his behavior in a family which was so poor and in which everyone had to work so hard. His parents were both hardworking people. In 1944, when he was four, they had achieved a singular success by moving up from being sharecroppers by buying the land they worked. They had bought 110 acres for \$300 from a white family named Hickman, who no longer seemed to want or need the land. The buying of the land was a momentous family occasion, and though John was quite young, he could remember the excitement of his parents, their sense of liberation as they moved one step farther from economic servitude on that day. He remembered how his family had packed up all their belongings and moved from the tiny shack they lived in to another home about a mile and a quarter away, to a house which had once been rather stately, a part of a once-grand plantation, with a huge fireplace and high ceilings and a tin roof.

Above all he remembered his father's pride on that day: They were no longer sharecroppers. They were owners now, not tenants. Yet

owning the land, they still lived at the mercy of not merely a hostile white power structure, which made black ownership of land a dangerous venture, but at the mercy of the elements as well. For a drought or too much rain could quickly return them to sharecropping status, even if they worked hard and were careful in their bookkeeping.

The land they bought had not been cared for and they had to clear it. This land was called the New Ground. They raised hogs and cows and chickens, and cotton and peanuts. Willie Mae Lewis was said to pick cotton as fast as most men in Pike County. She could pick one hundred pounds a day easily. But that was not good enough. She and Buddy, her husband, decided that if she could pick 150 or 160 pounds a day, and he could pick 250, then that would give them 400 pounds between them, instead of the 300 which most hardworking black couples were willing to settle for.

In addition to working in the fields, she managed to cook and can food. If she was not cooking or working in the fields, she was sewing for her ten children, whom she raised with endless patience and a constancy of love and warmth. Willie Mae Lewis never complained. When he looked back at her life, John Lewis never understood how she made it through the day. She was a Carter, and there were Carters scattered throughout the region. On the small family table there were photos, which showed, among others, her Grandfather Carter, a man who was virtually white. If you had seen him without the other members of his family in the picture, Lewis thought, you would have thought he *was* a white man. That meant for sure, John Lewis believed, that his mother's great-grandfather had been white. It was a very sensitive subject with her. Though she liked to talk about the past and about her family, it was the one thing about which she remained closed-mouthed. Clearly, he believed, it stirred up all kinds of images of those terrible days on the plantation, when white owners could leverage their way sexually with black women as they wanted.

Willie Mae Lewis was, for her limited station, an invincible person, and a woman of great faith. Her religion was central to her life and the essence of her strength. Once later in her life when one of her ten children had died, her daughter-in-law Lillian Lewis had tried to console her. "All I know how to do," Willie Mae Lewis had told Lillian, "is pray."⁴ That was the source of her strength, praying for a better day,

and believing it was coming. Because of that faith she believed things were going to get better. She talked that way all the time: The children had to work hard and study because things were going to get better, and they had better be prepared for the day when they did. She had always wanted to go on in school herself, but had been forced after the eighth grade to go work the fields, and in addition, she had been responsible for raising her younger brothers and sisters, as often happened in black families. The sign of that longing for more education, John believed, was in her handwriting, which was quite beautiful. As a grown man, when he looked at her handwriting, he saw the person she had longed to be. But she had readily transferred her own dream to him.

She had considerable faith in her religion and a greater belief in the power of prayer than in the workings of the American government. That allowed her to believe in the future, and to work as hard as she did. She believed as strongly as her son did in the idea of a college education, which was surely why she allowed him to sneak off to school instead of working the fields. "Once you learn something, Robert, once you get something inside your head, no one can take it away from you," she liked to say. One of her favorite slogans was "Be particular." That was a phrase which applied to all situations: It meant be careful, and be responsible for yourself, and always be well prepared. (Years later, when her son was a senior member of Congress and taking on his archfoe, the conservative Congressman Newt Gingrich, she would often remind him, now a man in his fifties, "Now, Robert, I want you to be particular with that man." That meant he was to be careful in his criticism of Gingrich; any attack had better be factually accurate.)

His mother, he thought, had a very positive vision of what a black child in America could become, even in rural Alabama in the early fifties. His father's vision was in some ways more narrow. Eddie Lewis, who was known as Buddy, was a good man. Like his wife he was hard-working and he never complained. He was not particularly tall, about five-six, but he was proud, and diligent. The amazing thing about him, John Lewis decided years later, was that he went out every day and worked as hard as he did in such difficult conditions. His life was never going to get better, yet he never became depressed. He never

turned in anger on his own, as did so many black men caught in a hopeless, brutal grind, taking out their frustrations and disappointments on their own families.

The economic realities his father faced, John realized later, were unrelentingly hard. It was never a question of getting ahead. Rather, it was always a question of trying not to fall too far behind. Everything was about survival. The debt was constant, for feed, for fertilizer, for the animals. He needed to borrow constantly to get the things from the Sears catalog which could get them through one more year. Yet John's memories of his father were of his optimism, his belief that he could raise his family successfully, and his unwillingness to complain about his life or the difficulty of being black.

John's lasting memories as he was growing up were of his parents talking together at night, constantly planning what they could do if the crops were good, if they could only get three tons of peanuts that year instead of two and a half. It was the talk of *if*, for they lived in a world bordered by *if*'s rather than constancies. *If* his mother could pick a little more than even her high norm, say two hundred pounds of cotton a day in the next couple of days, perhaps they could buy another mule. *If* he could pick an extra bale of cotton there might be furniture. *If* they picked an extra five hundred pounds of peanuts there might be more clothes for the children. Everything was ticketed, but everything was always possible. But everything also depended on the vagaries of the great *if*. John's mother watched Buddy's shopping like a hawk, worried that he might become too grandiose when he went into town and buy too much feed or even a new wagon.

John Lewis had been given a Bible when he was five and he had begun preaching to his younger siblings and cousins, lining them up in the family's homemade chairs. All over America other children were playing cowboys and Indians, but John Lewis and his siblings and cousins were playing preacher and congregation. Soon everyone in the family, grown-ups and children, started calling him Preacher. When he was sixteen he preached his first formal sermon. It was at the Macedonia Baptist Church, a Sunday evening sermon after an earlier, morning sermon by the local minister. John wore his best clothes, a dark blue suit, a white shirt, and a blue tie. His mother was nervous. "Are you prepared, Robert?" she kept asking. Everyone in the whole community knew that Robert, this most serious child, Buddy and

Willie Mae's boy, was going to preach a trial sermon. As he stood there preaching from the Old Testament, from Samuel, about a mother praying for a son, he could look out and recognize almost everyone in the congregation. Afterward he was more convinced than ever that this was the right course.

The religion he had grown up with was old-fashioned and literal, and the more emotional the congregation became on a Sunday, the more successful the sermon was judged to be. But even as a teenager his view of the ministry was broadening. In his junior year in high school John Lewis had turned on the radio one Sunday to WRMA, which was the black soul station, to hear the guest sermon. On that particular Sunday the speaker was Martin Luther King, about whom John Lewis had heard so much, but whom he had never heard preach. King's sermon that day was on Paul's letter to the Corinthians. But Martin King was not talking about a letter written thousands of years ago; his was a modern letter, one that could have been written yesterday, about segregation in modern America. John Lewis found the sermon thrilling, and he realized for the first time that religion could be applied toward the cause of social justice. On that day it was as if Dr. King was talking to him alone. With that he began to save clippings about King from the newspapers.

He had been all too aware, of course, of the burden of being black and poor in the South, that the students at the white schools had new books, and the black schools had, at best, old, hand-me-down books if they had any books at all. He knew that white children went to good schools and were driven there in new buses over good roads, and that black children went to poor schools in old, worn-out buses which always seemed to break down, in no small part because they were traveling on unpaved roads. He knew that children at the white schools played sports, and black schools were almost completely without athletic facilities.

He knew all too well the symbols of segregation and racism in nearby Troy: the monument in the courthouse square to Confederate soldiers who died fighting for slavery; the soda fountain, where white children could drink at the counter, and where blacks could order, but had to carry their drinks outside; and the local movie theater, where the whites could sit downstairs, but the blacks had to go upstairs to their small, segregated section. He did not as a boy like going to

movies, and even as a grown man that wariness remained, and he instinctively rejected movies as a form of entertainment.

He was by his own account a curious child, “a very nosy child,” and he liked listening to the grown-ups talking when they thought there were no children present. Much of that secret talk was about race. Clearly they did not like to tell their worst stories about racism in front of the children. Most of the other children were quite content to accept that rule, but John Lewis was different. He was fascinated by these stories, and he would sneak in and hide under a chair and listen. Sometimes they caught him: “Boy, I see you there—now you get in the other room. We’re talking grown-up stuff here.” Then they would make him leave the room, but he would continue to listen with his ear to the door. It was only then that they spoke of the pain and danger of the past and the present, and of the bad days of the Klan and the night riders. He had a sense that his father had never witnessed a lynching, but that he had felt the fear of the Klan during his own boyhood. Later, after John had grown up, he realized that in some way he had been preparing for the teaching he had found at American Baptist and for his role in the sit-ins long before he had arrived in Nashville. A commitment on racial issues, he decided, had always been in his heart. Having been a part of the sit-in movement, he had no intention of turning back.

That December in 1960 when he went home for Christmas, John Lewis took his personal protest of segregation a step farther, this time into the Deep South. He and his friend Bernard Lafayette decided to test segregation once more, this time virtually on their own, with a small, highly personal protest, unannounced, and extremely dangerous. For the Supreme Court had just ruled in the *Boynton v. Virginia* case banning segregation in interstate travel. Lewis was still angry over the first bus trip he had made from Troy to Nashville when he had arrived at American Baptist. It should have been one of pure pleasure and optimism about the new and better life he was about to lead, but it had soured when he was forced to ride in the back of the bus. The *Boynton* decision meant bus travel, including the bus terminals and waiting rooms and restaurants and rest rooms, could no longer be segregated. It was to prove an important decision, for in a few months it would open the way to a far more audacious challenge to the mores of

the Deep South. These two young men volunteered to do their own test of this new decision.

As they prepared to go home for the holidays Lewis and Bernard Lafayette decided to take the same bus and, more important, to ride in the front. They did not sit together. Lafayette got on first and sat right behind the driver, a man not at all pleased by his presence. The driver asked Lafayette to go to the back of the bus. Lafayette just looked straight ahead and said nothing. Now spotting Lewis as well, the driver asked him to go to the back. Lewis did not budge. The driver, his anger obvious, got off the bus as if to get the police. He came back a few minutes later, without the police, apparently rebuffed by them, and all the angrier for his failure. In a moment of rage, the driver released his own seat and slammed it back as far as it could go, as if to nail Lafayette. If it hit my legs, Lafayette thought, it would have broken them. Instead, the driver had merely driven a hole in Lafayette's suitcase.

For both students it was a journey into fear. They were traveling at night and there was no support system behind them, no one back in Nashville monitoring what they were doing. They were very much on their own, testing what might as well have been a law decreed by an invisible governmental institution back in Washington. The bus made what seemed like an interminable number of stops in the small towns lining the route, and at each of them the driver went inside for a few minutes, something no driver had ever done before on any of their previous trips. Both Lafayette and Lewis were sure that he was tipping off the Klan. Each of them was scared for the other. John Lewis had to get off first, and the driver dropped him off on the highway outside of Troy, with no one else in sight. "You watch it now, brother," Lafayette had told him as he got off. "People can disappear out here and never be seen again." But Lewis had already alerted his family to what he was doing, and they picked him up almost immediately.

Bernard Lafayette remembered watching John Lewis's small, stoic figure standing by the roadside as the bus pulled away, and being frightened for his friend, and then being frightened for himself, alone on a bus which was going to stop in all those small Alabama and Florida towns, where the Klan had surely been alerted. He knew what might happen, and his imagination began to run wild. He did not

allow himself to fall asleep that night. Every time the bus pulled into a small town and stopped and a white person walked toward the bus, his fears would escalate again. It was so much harder to do this, he realized, when you were alone, as opposed to when you did it with your colleagues. It was, they both decided when it was over, the first Freedom Ride of the post-*Brown* era, though neither of them had thought of it that way at the time. They had just done it.

It was their first Freedom Ride, and others would soon follow. That winter John Lewis had received a letter suggesting that he might want to join a racially integrated group of people who were going to take a prolonged bus trip through the South in the spring of 1961, testing facilities in a variety of cities. The trip was being sponsored by CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality. These rides would test segregation, not just on the buses, but in the public accommodations themselves—the restaurants and the rest rooms in the terminals. Freedom Rides, they were going to be called. They would start innocuously enough in states like Virginia and North Carolina, but the venues would become increasingly less innocent, going on to South Carolina, Alabama, and Mississippi, and ending in New Orleans on May 17, 1961, an auspicious date since it would mark the seventh anniversary of the *Brown* decision and would show therefore both what had been done and what had not been accomplished in the intervening years. They seemed like the logical next step for the Movement, coming after the sit-ins. The letter said the rides might be dangerous. Well, he had already dealt with a good deal of danger, and so he filled out the application.

Bernard Lafayette also saw the CORE letter and immediately wanted to go along. But Bernard was a little younger than John, and according to the CORE rules, anyone younger than twenty-one had to have parental approval. The Lafayette family of Tampa, Florida, was not about to send its only male child up to South Carolina and Alabama and Mississippi to sample previously all-white men's rooms. Bernard Lafayette, Sr., refused to sign the release. "Boy, you're asking me to sign your death warrant," he had told his son. They had three daughters, he reminded him, and only one son, and he did not want the Lafayette name to die in some unknown Southern bus terminal. Bernard was disappointed, sure he was going to miss the greatest opportunity of his life. No one looking at the two of them could tell whether John was older than he was, he liked to say. But the small for-

mality of parental permission did not bother a young man who became a good friend of both Lewis and Lafayette that summer, Hank Thomas.

Hank Thomas of St. Augustine, Florida, was the product of a dreadfully deprived background in rural Georgia; his blood father had disappeared even before he was born, and as a boy he had watched his stepfather, beaten down by his job at a nearby sawmill, take out his anger in alcohol and then systematically abuse his mother before eventually deserting his family. Years later when he watched the movie *The Color Purple*, Thomas felt he was watching the story of his own life. In the St. Augustine school system he had been a good student, and a good high school football player, and a number of colleges had competed for his athletic talents until in his senior year he had keeled over from sunstroke and his athletic career had come to an end. But he had set his mind on college and had managed to win a scholarship to Howard, where he had always felt like something of an outsider, being neither rich nor connected. Money and status were obviously quite important there. When the Howard gentry sat around talking about what their fathers did, he would answer that his father was in business, which might or might not be true since he had no earthly idea what his father did, never having seen him.

Hank Thomas had been largely without purpose, social or intellectual, at Howard until the sit-ins had broken out, and though in no way until then could he have been considered a student leader, with the coming of the sit-ins he had begun to find an outlet for some of the stored-up resentments he had long harbored. He had enjoyed leading a number of sit-ins in the greater Washington area, and as he did, he began to feel for the first time part of something that mattered.

Hank Thomas had heard of the CORE Freedom Rides from his roommate at Howard, a young man named John Moody, who had been accepted; when John Moody became sick at the last minute, Hank Thomas had simply gone in his place. Unlike Bernard Lafayette, he had no father to block his way, and he simply forged his mother's name and sent in the form. He was tall and he looked older than his nineteen years. He was pleased when he showed up for the four-day training and found that John Lewis, who was one of his heroes, a leader of the famed Nashville group, was one of the other students who was aboard, though in truth he would have been a great

deal happier if it had been Diane Nash whom he had met at the Raleigh meeting the year before. John Lewis for his part liked Hank Thomas immediately. He was glad that someone his own age was on the trip, and he was pleased by the fact that Thomas's presence showed that what had happened in Nashville was spreading to other colleges.

They had all arrived in Washington at the end of April. They were to undergo four days of training on the use of nonviolence in social protest. The group was an odd mixture of people, some young, some old, some white, some black, some Quakers, some ministers, plus two rabbis. John Lewis, as a graduate of Jim Lawson's rather demanding seminars, thought the Washington training simplistic, lacking in discipline and rigor. To him the most memorable part of the Washington tour was the dinner they had on their final night. Someone thought it would be a good idea if they all went out to eat together at a local Chinese restaurant. John Lewis of Pike County, who had never been in a Chinese restaurant before, was quite awed. They had sat down at a huge circular table. Then a large number of Chinese waiters had rushed back and forth bringing what seemed like an endless array of dishes. The food was the most exotic he had ever eaten but he was even more impressed by the setting itself—he had never seen so many silver bowls and platters before. At the start of the dinner one of his fellow riders had said, "We better eat well because this may be our last supper."

The Freedom Rides were, for the forces which had been gradually gathering, wanting to challenge the virtual totality of segregation in the Deep South, like stumbling into combat. That they marked the beginning of the long-awaited assault upon the bastions of segregation, however, surprised everyone. CORE was on a comparative scale one of the least-known and seemingly smallest of the different groups pledged to end segregation, and there had been remarkably little pre-ride publicity. Although CORE had put out a small publicity sheet listing the various cities to be visited and tested, the event had barely dented the mind-set of the editors of most national publications. As such the national media at first seemed disinclined to give the rides much publicity. The only reporter assigned to the rides was Simeon Booker, a black reporter for *Ebony*, the black version of *Life*. The same press release had ended up at the Justice Department, where a

few people had taken note of the stops in Alabama and Mississippi, and where there was a preliminary sense of trouble in the making.

Almost no one sensed that the rides were to be the beginning of something larger; that their legacy would grow and set a pattern for the next five years; that the forces of integration would now go into the most dangerous part of the country, determined to force the American government to move forward on this issue by raising the issue as prominently as possible and making ordinary Americans aware of what was at stake. In retrospect it is easy to understand the volatility of the ingredients: The forces pledged to integrate had moved forward during the sit-ins with considerable success, and their victories at the lunch counters had served only to convince them, first, that integration could be achieved and that they had the courage to do it, and second, how much farther they still had to go. At the same time, the forces of segregation, already angered by various developments in the past seven years, the increasing access of the integrationists to the national media, and what seemed to them the mounting arrogance of the black leadership, particularly Martin Luther King, were already on a hair trigger, just itching for a fight, particularly, as now was promised, on their own, sacred terrain.

The battle, therefore, was about to be joined, without any participation of the U.S. government, which was at that moment passive and, on the surface at least, largely disinterested. If there was one overriding objective of the varying people about to rally together, in SNCC, the SCLC, and CORE, the three groups which favored activist demonstrations, it was to move events forward in a way which prodded the United States government into active participation.

The federal government in the spring of 1961 had not committed itself in any sense to the side of integration. Not only had Dwight Eisenhower failed to say anything supportive of the Supreme Court's *Brown* decision almost seven years previous, but he had privately signaled his sympathy to the Southern traditionalists, and had referred to his appointment of Earl Warren to head the Court as the biggest damn fool mistake he had made as president. That reflected both generational prejudice and political opportunism, for his White House political operatives were wary of losing the first inroads which the Republican party had made in the South in generations. In addition the FBI, headed by J. Edgar Hoover, was a bulwark of opposition to

black progress. Hoover, by generational political instinct, was anti-black. He hated activists like King, tended to see any aspect of social activism as Communist inspired, and more than anything else was skilled at playing to the powerful and extremely conservative Democratic committee chairmen who ran the Congress and determined his handsome budget. Throughout the South, Hoover had implanted a generation of FBI men with Southern roots, men who had been told that their principal job was to get along with the local police officials, who were, of course, often the leaders of the local white resistance. It would be four years before the FBI—acting then only in the most reluctant way—would be much help to those trying to break the alliance of white Southern hate groups and local white police authorities.

As for the Congress of the United States, it was extremely conservative on most social issues (particularly those concerning race), far more so than the country itself. It reflected the darker side of the New Deal coalition, that of diverse ethnic groups and big-city machines in the North married up for combined political benefit to conservative Democrats from one-party states in the South. The Democratic party's congressional face favored the South more than the North, it had a stranglehold on any number of important committees, and the men who held that stranglehold, like Judge Howard Smith of Virginia, were a geriatric sampling who reflected the America of the twenties more than they reflected the forces now at play in the post-war America of the late fifties and early sixties. To the degree that the congressional leaders were aware of these new forces, they were more often than not devoted to slowing them down. They made it clear early on to the new, young president of the United States, John Kennedy, elected as he had been on the narrowest of margins, and far more interested in America's destiny in foreign affairs than in domestic ones, that they would tax him dearly—indeed Pyrrhically—for any changes he might even think of trying to make in terms of bringing integration to the South.

That appeared to be all right with the young president himself. Kennedy as a candidate had not seemed particularly interested in civil rights. It was not an issue which had touched him deeply as a young man; if he did not actually distance himself from it as he began to run in 1959, he did not seem to commit himself to the full nature of what it meant, and of the powerful stirrings of change which had begun to

surface during the Montgomery bus boycott. Like a great many people of that era, he felt that as long as he was not an active racist himself, then he was on the right side of the issue, and that black people would understand the essential goodness of his heart. In truth, civil rights activists, those rare white Americans in that era who had committed themselves to working for progress on this issue, made him uneasy, and he thought of them as do-gooders and zealots. To the degree that Kennedy was aware of the new forces at play, he saw them as something to be handled, lest they get in his way and cause unwanted problems. He had not wanted to be the candidate who went to the convention in 1960 unable to hold the Southern Democrats in line, he had had no interest in accepting the nomination of a divided party; one of the reasons he had chosen Lyndon Johnson as his vice-presidential running mate was because he wanted to keep the South in line, and it was Johnson's designated responsibility that fall to work the South and keep it Democratic.

As a professional politician John Kennedy was cool in all things, and that was particularly true of the race issue. The challenge for the black groups restless with the pace of racial change in the spring of 1961 was to focus enough moral and political heat on Kennedy to separate him from his coolness. Not surprisingly, blacks saw him as being distant and uninvolved in their plight; he was in 1961, as far as most of their leaders were concerned, one more indifferent American politician.

More, while he had welcomed men like Harris Wofford who were truly committed on race into his campaign, in no small part to help subvert opponents like Hubert Humphrey during the primary fight for the nomination, he remained wary of them. They were not cool and might even bring with them too much of an ideological tilt; Wofford, after all, had been the first white law student at Howard, which in the early days of the Kennedy administration was not considered an admirable credential. Given a major confrontation between the interests of black people and the interests of Kennedy, men like Wofford might prove too committed to the equities of the issue rather than to John Kennedy. Kennedy did not want Wofford in what would have been the most logical spot for him, assistant attorney general for civil rights—he might, in the current phrase, be too soft. Instead Wofford became a White House staff man assigned to deal with racial issues,

somewhat isolated because of his lack of rapport with his immediate superiors. But when the blacks began to push ever harder for their rights, Kennedy, with some irritation, would refer to them to Wofford as “your constituents.”⁵

Not surprisingly John Kennedy had been irritated from the start with the Freedom Riders. As far as he was concerned there was no upside politically. The rides could only cause him problems—and force the federal government into situations into which he had no desire to move. In addition, he believed, the international publicity would surely help the Communists, who were always trying to exploit domestic American racial problems. Even as the Freedom Rides had started and tensions between riders and local segregationists mounted, he was preparing to go to Europe and meet with Khrushchev; thus he saw what these young black people were doing through the prism of his own interests—potentially a major embarrassment to him—rather than through the prism of their interests, their belated attempt to win long-denied rights. The Freedom Riders were, in his words, a pain in the ass.⁶

As for the American people, those ordinary people who lived outside the South, they were at that moment sitting on the fence. Americans liked to think of themselves as being above prejudice, and believing in both simple justice and elemental fair play. They had been delighted more than a decade earlier when Jackie Robinson had made his successful debut in baseball, thereby proving that the American dream worked across the board. But how deep that commitment to justice went in other aspects of life was still in question. Shown specific instances of injustice and brutality, the American people tended to sympathize with the victim. There was no doubt that Martin Luther King, during the Montgomery bus strike, had touched a resonant nerve nationally. But could that feeling be sustained—could those who were leading the Movement affect the national conscience in a way that would move the American political process forward on so broad a scale as to create a committed majority vision? That was the great question. Otherwise it was not an enviable political equation—10 percent of the population wanting to gain full citizenship, in a system run by geriatric reactionaries. That made the job of the activists both simple and dangerous—they had to lure the beast of segregation to the surface and show to ordinary Americans just exactly how it was

that the leadership of the South maintained segregation, not as that leadership constantly claimed, by a genteel partnership with its black citizens, but by the exercise of raw and brutal police powers.

That was the political landscape as the Freedom Rides began: Their force was small and their activism unwanted; almost the entire U. S. government was indifferent, except for those parts, like the FBI, which were openly hostile. The Freedom Rides began on May 4, 1961, some four months after *Boynton*. Two buses were used, one from Trailways and one from Greyhound. At first things did not go badly. Some of the towns no longer had their white-only signs at the rest rooms. In Fredericksburg, Virginia, the signs still existed, but when the Freedom Riders challenged the tradition, with a white rider going into the black men's room and a black rider going into the white men's room, there was no incident. The first bit of real resistance came in Charlottesville, Virginia, when one of the black riders, Charles Person, tried to have his shoes shined at the shoe-shine stand and was refused service. He did not leave the stand and a few minutes later was arrested. A day later the Virginia attorney general dropped the charges, deciding that Person was within his rights under the *Boynton* decision.

Hank Thomas felt his fears evaporating at first. They had hit Richmond, Virginia, which was supposed to be a tough town, with the passions of the Old Confederacy still alive, but Richmond had gone well, there had been a large mass meeting and a good many reporters present. This was turning out to be fun. Richmond had been followed by Charlotte, North Carolina, and Charlotte had been easy. A cakewalk, he had thought to himself. Jim Farmer, the leader of CORE, was on Thomas's bus and he kept saying things were going to get a lot tougher. Well, maybe, Hank Thomas thought, maybe. But he was young and full of the adventure, by far the most talkative of the group, eager to make friends with every other rider. John Lewis, he decided, was almost taciturn by comparison, a young man who was thoughtful, and often seemed to be within himself.

They reached Rock Hill, South Carolina, which was no more than twenty miles from Charlotte, but it was South Carolina, and that was something new for all of them—their first stop in the Deep South. It was John Lewis's turn to do the testing when they got to Rock Hill. Years later it was said of John Lewis, who was probably arrested more

than any of the other students, some forty-five times by his own (probably incomplete) account, that he was a magnet for the hatred of white racists, and the joke was that the white mobs would wait until he showed up before they unleashed their violence. When Lewis and an older white man named Albert Bigelow stepped off the bus in Rock Hill, they were immediately beaten.

It was all very quick, Lewis remembered. There had been a group of young white men waiting at the station, and perhaps twenty or thirty of them surged at him. He went down instantly, and felt them swinging at and kicking him very hard. He knew he was bleeding, and he felt a stab of pain in his side, and then suddenly they were gone. Even as he lay on the ground, stunned by the quickness and the ferocity of the attack, he realized that the game was different now and that the protections offered in a border-state city like Nashville were gone; they had now graduated to the real struggle, which was in the Deep South. This was a journey into the unknown and there were no longer any legal or judicial or moral restraints on the people who opposed them. They were going into the valley of the shadow of death, he thought.

Hank Thomas watched the assault upon Lewis with disbelief. He saw the mob gathered and poised to strike, and he watched John Lewis prepare to descend, and he saw the mob start to come at Lewis. Even as Lewis saw it approach, he had continued, absolutely without hesitation, to walk right into the surging mob. That was courage, Thomas remembered thinking, that was what it took to be a real leader in this struggle. John had gone forward without fear as if to accept his fate, the fate of being badly beaten and perhaps killed, the price to be paid for wanting his full rights. The good martyr, Thomas thought, and wondered if he had that same kind of courage. He wondered if he even had the courage to leave the bus, and then it struck him that sometimes you are more afraid *not* to do the things that you are afraid of than of actually doing them. In that moment, as he was supposed to get off the bus, Hank Thomas balanced his two fears and found that his fear of cowardice was even greater than his fear of being beaten. He steadied himself and got off the bus. By that time the local cops had intervened, and the white youths had, as if by some prearranged signal, quickly moved on.

Hank Thomas walked inside the bus terminal, where it was his assignment to test the white men's room. A cop told him he was under arrest. "Can I finish what I'm doing?" Thomas asked. The cop let him finish.

John Lewis was lying in the fetal position in front of the terminal, more stunned by the quickness of the assault than anything else. Someone from Friendship Junior College had come and picked him up, and taken him to the college. There he found a message saying he had been chosen to be a finalist by the American Friends Service Committee for a grant which would send him to Tanganyika (later to be amalgamated with Zanzibar and called Tanzania) for two years. It was something he had rather casually applied for earlier, when some time spent in Africa had seemed unusually attractive, and before he realized how compelling his role in the Movement was becoming. No longer sure that this was still the course he wanted to follow, Lewis flew to Philadelphia, thinking that he would eventually rejoin the riders in Montgomery, Alabama.

Hank Thomas had been arrested and taken to the local jail, where he was kept by himself. He was completely alone—as far as he could tell no one else had been arrested, and the bus with his friends had gone on. He was in jail for several hours, becoming more and more nervous all the time. Then around midnight two cops showed up and let him out of the cell, and ordered him into their car. He was very frightened by then. Images of late-night rides taken by blacks who were never heard from again were much in his mind. "Where are we going?" he asked them. "Well, you wanted to go to the bus station to get out of town, didn't you?" one of them said. "So we're taking you there."

The cops seemed very pleased with themselves; the happier they were, the edgier he became. The bus station itself looked dark, but there was just enough light so that he could see a mob of white youths waiting in the lot. Real good old boys, he thought, waiting there for me. None of this was happening by accident, he knew. "Is the bus station waiting room open?" Thomas asked. No, one of the cops said. Thomas was not sure he wanted to get out, and the cop realized it and tapped his gun—the choice seemed to be the mob or the gun, and so Hank Thomas got out of the car, ready to face the mob. The cops, he

remembered, burned rubber getting out of there, and he knew that some kind of deal had been arranged; it was a game and he was the prize.

Just then a car driven by a black man pulled up and the black man yelled to him, "Get in, boy!" He jumped in. The driver was the local head of the NAACP, and he had been alerted by the CORE team the moment Thomas was arrested, and been told to watch both the jail and the bus station. The man drove him to Columbia, South Carolina, where he stayed with friendly blacks. The next day he was driven to Atlanta, where he rejoined the team. The others on the Freedom Ride noticed that he was more somber now, less ebullient. The young man who had been so eager to talk to everyone now seemed to be alone, lost in his thoughts, much older in just one day.

There had been a rally for them in Atlanta. There was more media coverage now because of the assault on Lewis in Rock Hill. More coverage usually meant more protection, but it also meant, the riders all realized, that the Klan and Citizens Council members in the Deep South cities along the route had more time to plan their own receptions. Hank Thomas became even more quiet on the next leg of the ride from Atlanta to Anniston, Alabama. They were going due west from Atlanta, and they were for the first time crossing into the most feared part of the South, Alabama and Mississippi. Anniston was said to be a tough town, a Klan town. They were on the Greyhound bus that day, and Hank remembered that one of the riders had joked that Anniston was so scary that even the greyhound painted on the outside of the bus as a logo was going to get inside when they reached Anniston. There were two FBI agents aboard the bus, but they did not seem very friendly; if anything they seemed wary of the Freedom Riders, who in turn were wary of them. The belief among the Freedom Riders was that given the prurient interests of J. Edgar Hoover, the principal assignment of the agents aboard was to find out if there was even the slightest hint of interracial sex taking place.

They were right not to count on the FBI, which had ample information that they were about to be beaten on arrival in Anniston but did absolutely nothing to protect them. When the Freedom Riders had stopped in Atlanta their leaders had had dinner with Martin Luther King and his top aides. (Jim Farmer later complained quite publicly that King and his aides had taken them to a rather fancy black restau-

rant in Atlanta, where they had all dined well, and then King and his people had left them with the check.) At the dinner King had taken aside Simeon Booker, the black reporter for *Ebony*, and warned him of the increasingly hostile mood in Alabama. "You will never make it through Alabama," King had told Booker. Booker had tried to respond by laughing at the warning—he would stay close to the rather portly Jim Farmer, because he was sure he could outrun Farmer.⁷ King and his people, including King's quite conservative father, knew from their sources in Alabama, which were excellent, that the Klan planned a violent reception for the riders there. If Martin King were aboard the bus, these sources warned, he would be killed.

King's information turned out to be surprisingly exact. The Klan had been waiting for that day in Anniston, and had been given permission by the local law enforcement officials to strike against the Freedom Riders without any fear of arrest. Years later, through various sources—lawsuits against the government, a tell-all book by a paid Klan informer for the FBI—an increasing amount of information was revealed about the activities of the Klan and its connections to Alabama law officers in those days. It became clear that there had been a conspiracy on the part of some local law enforcement officials to let the Klan attack the Freedom Riders. Nor did the FBI, which knew in considerable detail what was going to happen, do anything to protect the riders or to stop their assailants.

Alabama was known at the time among civil rights activists as a Klan state. No one was quite sure why the Klan was so much more active and powerful there than elsewhere—among other things, an organic part, it seemed, of a number of the state's larger police forces. Perhaps part of the reason came from the large number of blue-collar steel workers in the Bessemer-Birmingham area; there the combination of traditional blue-collar class resentments and racial tensions had turned into an unusually ugly mix. Mississippi, by contrast, distinctly less industrialized, was not a Klan state, at least not at that moment. It was a White Citizens Council state, a place where the white establishment figures, top to bottom—judges, politicians, lawyers, ministers, and editors—joined the councils. There, the pressure and fear of economic, political, and above all social ostracism managed to keep the ruling elite, statewide and community by community, in line on the issue of segregation. The difference between the

two states seemed to be one of class: The Citizens Council members were white collar—the good people of the state, as they liked to think of themselves—but the Klan members were blue collar, made up, as the Citizens Council people liked to say, of rednecks and peckerwoods, and potentially far more violent in any confrontation.

Sunday, May 14, 1961, was not a date widely celebrated in the civil rights movement, unlike the date on which the *Brown* case had been handed down, and unlike December 1, 1955, which was the day Rosa Parks refused to go to the back of the bus because her feet hurt. But it was an important day as well. It was the day on which the orbital thrust of the Freedom Rides, so innocently conceived a few months earlier, took these vulnerable men and women to Alabama, and the great violent confrontation between integrationists and the angry white mobs in the Deep South that everyone had been expecting for so long finally took place. Therefore it was the day that the Rubicon was crossed. No one had plotted it that way. If anything the Freedom Ride architects themselves seemed to have little sense of how much they had upped the stakes. This was no minor, little venture into sampling hamburgers in different bus stations. This, instead, was a frontal assault on the very nature of the beast of segregation, in the place where it was most powerful.

Later asked by reporters why there had been so little protection of the Freedom Riders in both Anniston and Birmingham on that day, Eugene (Bull) Connor, the Birmingham public safety commissioner, had answered that he did not have enough police available because it was Mother's Day. So it was, though that was hardly the reason. As they crossed into Alabama the Freedom Riders knew something was up: The warnings from King and his people could not have been more serious. The closer they got to Anniston, the quieter the bus became.

As they drove into the city limits, the town too was eerily quiet. No one seemed to be about. The streets were deserted. It reminded Hank Thomas of Western movies he had seen where a showdown was about to take place between the good guys and the bad guys, and where most of the local people were staying home watching from behind closed windows with drawn shades. As the Greyhound pulled into the bus station, Hank Thomas, seated two seats from the front, saw his first signs of life—a mob of people waiting with clubs and iron pipes

and baseball bats. There were perhaps 150 people, perhaps two hundred. He did not have time to count.

Thomas was very scared. Two days earlier when he had sat with John Lewis on the bus, John had spoken in the simplest way imaginable of the fact that they had to be ready to die on this trip. He had spoken without emotion or bravado, as if the two of them, the youngest members of the group, should not be on this ride unless they had already arrived at that knowledge and that willingness to sacrifice. Listening to him that day, a young man his own age, Thomas had been deeply impressed, not just by what Lewis said, but the calm, understated manner in which he said it. John Lewis, Hank Thomas had learned, simply did not posture. He made his decision, he chose his course, he accepted the consequences of his decision because he had decided on a greater purpose for his life. That was his great strength. It was impossible to separate religion from politics in his philosophy. If they did not accept the idea of death, then they could not move ahead. Hank Thomas had no doubts about John's commitment, but he had plenty of doubts about his own. For a moment he envied this stolid young man, who seemed to have no need at all to impress other people. On occasion he had felt envy for those who were more talented than he or better looking, but this was something different—the envy of an inner spirituality which turned an ordinary man into a person of unwavering faith. Hank Thomas on that day wondered whether he even believed in nonviolence. Looking at the mob, he was not sure that he could go through with it. But he also knew that he could not back out on the others. This mission, he was aware, might be the last thing he ever did. Why am I here? he had thought. How foolish to be risking your life at nineteen. He thought that he had signed on with a certain false bravado, a boy trying to act like a man.

He remembered the driver yelling to the mob outside with a certain heartiness and pleasure: "Well, boys, here they are. I brought you some niggers and nigger-lovers." Then the mob surged at the bus and started beating on it, trying to smash the windows and slashing the tires. A quick decision was made not to let passengers out in downtown Anniston, and the bus started up, as if to go on to Birmingham. As it pulled out of the station, Thomas watched a bunch of pickup trucks roar ahead of it and another group of trucks and cars follow

it—they were caught in a redneck sandwich, he decided, and it was unlikely they would escape. He remembered the absolute fear in the bus and the pleasure of the bus driver, chortling, laughing aloud at what was going to happen. It was all taking place as if in slow motion now. The mob, mobilized in its pickup trucks and cars, would not let the bus go faster than fifteen miles an hour. Five miles outside of Anniston the bus stopped. The tires had been so badly slashed that they were gone. We are not going to die in Anniston, Thomas thought, we are going to die on its outskirts.

The driver pulled over to the side, where the crowd had already gathered around the bus. It was a strange sight, for these white people were surprisingly well dressed, Thomas remembered, wearing jackets and ties, as if they had all just come from church. It struck him that it was both a lynching and a picnic—people in their best clothes, men with their little children perched on their shoulders so they could get a better view, something for the children to remember when they got older. They all looked so nice and ordinary; later, he learned that most of them were Klan members and they had been waiting for a moment like this for several years. But pleasantly dressed or not, there was no doubt of their intention: Hank Thomas looked at them and knew that he was doing nothing less than watching the end of his life.

At first it seemed that the mob wanted to get on the bus and pull the Freedom Riders off. Some of the whites charged forward toward the bus, wielding their clubs, and then started rocking the bus, as if trying to turn it over. When that happened the Freedom Riders decided to lock the door and keep the mob out. Then someone threw a firebomb inside. Almost instantaneously the smoke inside the bus was thick and terrible. Because the upholstery was made of some kind of artificial material, it burned with a dreadful, toxic smell. “Let’s roast the niggers!” someone shouted, and others took up the cry. “Roast them!” “Burn them alive!” “Fry the goddamn niggers!” The mob, which only a moment earlier had been trying to get inside the bus, was now determined to keep *them* inside.

For that brief moment, when he was absolutely sure that he was going to die, Hank Thomas tried to decide which way he would rather die, whether he would leave the bus and let the mob beat him to death, or whether he would stay inside and be burned to death. In one quick flash of desperation, he decided to commit suicide, believing

that somehow it would mean a less painful death, and for a moment he breathed as deeply as he could of the toxic fumes in order to exchange one terrible form of death for another. But just then one of the gas tanks on the bus exploded, driving the mob back and scattering it. The explosion, it was later decided, probably saved the lives of all the Freedom Riders. It also made up his mind for him, and even as the mob was scattering, he was reacting in the same way. He stumbled off the bus.

Hank Thomas, who had so much wanted to be like the Nashville kids, staggered off the bus and became as much by accident as anything else the first of the young black student protesters on the Freedom Ride to sample the full fury of the two most dreaded states, Alabama and Mississippi. As he landed on the ground, reeling from the fumes, a white man came up to him and asked, "Are you all okay?" He asked this solicitously, and Thomas, relieved to be outside, sensing for the first time someone who might help him, said that he was all right, at which point the man took a baseball bat, which was hidden behind him, and swung at Thomas as hard as he could. Thomas went down immediately. He had a vague sense of the other riders spilling out of the bus and crawling on the ground around him, they like he retching and gasping for air. The heat from the fire in the bus was terrible, but it was keeping the mob at bay. Later, he was not exactly sure of the sequence of events: He heard another explosion, probably, another gas tank blowing, and there was a shower of broken glass, and that drove the mob back farther.

He and the others were saved at that moment by of all people a plainclothes official of the Alabama state police named E. L. Cowling. Ell Cowling had been covertly planted on the bus by Floyd Mann, the Alabama director of public safety, for a variety of reasons: because Mann wanted information on the Freedom Riders, and needed to monitor what they were doing, and because Mann did not trust the local Alabama police authorities because of their ties to the Klan. What was happening was just what Floyd Mann had feared, and at this critical moment Cowling, gun in hand, had stepped forward, shed his disguise, and had driven the mob back. (Little was made of Cowling's rescue at the time; there were no points to be gained in Alabama politics for saving the lives of Freedom Riders.) The trooper positioned himself between the Freedom Riders, who were lying on the

ground gasping for air, and the mob. Gradually the mob, still angry, moved back, and eventually an ambulance pulled up. It was a white ambulance and the driver said he would not take black people in it, and so the white Freedom Riders who had already boarded it got off and said they would not go without their black partners. Finally the ambulance was integrated, perhaps, Hank Thomas later thought, a first in Alabama history, and they were taken to a hospital in Anniston.

The people running the hospital offered little respite. They said they would not treat the Freedom Riders, which was in keeping with what Governor John Patterson had said over the radio, that no medical help would be given to outside agitators. But for the first time one of the FBI men proved to be helpful; he told the hospital authorities that they had to give some kind of medical aid to these people. Even as they waited inside the hospital, a mob began to gather outside, its leaders telling the hospital authorities that they would have to turn over the Freedom Riders, or else they would burn the hospital down. Thomas was appalled by the behavior of the hospital authorities. Here were a bunch of patients, some of them elderly and in some form of shock, and the hospital authorities seemed more an extension of the mob than they were of a medical profession which was supposed to treat all needy people. Once again Hank Thomas was sure that he was going to die, be evicted from the hospital and turned over to the mob.

But then the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth arrived. He was the leading black activist minister in Birmingham, a man legendary for his physical courage, and he had heard what had happened—indeed he was the man who had warned Martin King of the waiting violence in Alabama—and he had organized a caravan of his deacons and of other ministers and driven through the mob to rescue them. Shuttlesworth had told those who were coming with him he had only one simple rule—no one could carry a weapon. If you felt you needed a weapon you could not come. The drive by Shuttlesworth, thought Hank Thomas, was one of the bravest things one man could do for another.

Later that same day, the second bus, this one from Trailways, arrived in Anniston; its passengers were beaten and then, when the bus went on to Birmingham, another mob, which had been waiting for a few hours, attacked them. Jim Peck, one of the CORE leaders, was knocked unconscious, and needed fifty-three stitches to close his

wounds. In Birmingham, the original Freedom Riders from both buses now gathered. They were in terrible condition, both physically and emotionally, almost paralyzed by these terrifying events. Some of them were treated at a hospital in Birmingham. After they got out of the hospital, they reassembled and tried to board buses for the continuation of the journey on to Montgomery and the other stops. But no one would drive them. Frustrated, exhausted, unsure of what the federal government was going to do and whether they would be given any protection, they decided to abort the rest of the trip and to fly to New Orleans in time for the final rally, which had been scheduled for May 17.

John Lewis was in Philadelphia completing his interviews for his fellowship to Tanganyika when he heard about what had happened in Anniston and Birmingham. The Philadelphia paper had a dramatic photo of Hank Thomas escaping from the burning bus. Lewis felt an immediate pang of guilt that he had not been there and a sense that he had let his friends down. Interrupting the Freedom Ride to come to Philadelphia had been a mistake, he thought. He feared the Freedom Rides would now end, that these pleasant, gentle people, most of them older and not, he thought, terribly well prepared for the ordeal, would not continue. Lewis was suspicious of the federal government; the Kennedys, he knew, while paying lip service to supporting civil rights, were most decidedly unenthusiastic about the Freedom Rides. They did not want a bunch of integrationists going through the Deep South, causing what was for them political trouble, and forcing John Kennedy to choose between his more liberal and humane impulses and the hard reality of a Democratic party still dependent on the all-white political machinery in the South. What the federal government had wanted in the case of the Freedom Rides was first, for them not to happen, and now that they had happened, for the riders to back off.

Lewis and a number of the other young people in the Nashville group of SNCC immediately decided that this was a critical moment in the Movement. The one thing which they could not do was to allow the violence of the mob to defeat the nonviolence of the protesters. If they had done well so far, then it was a mere beginning. Winning the right to eat at a lunch counter in Nashville was the most limited kind of victory. If they stopped now, their enemies would be even more audacious and dangerous. To stop now would also mean that John

Lewis and his young colleagues did not have the courage of their convictions. More, if they backed off now, so would the federal government.

John Lewis immediately called Diane Nash on the phone, and was delighted to find that if anything, she felt even more strongly that this was a fateful moment, one from which they would either go forward or might, like generations before them, be crushed by the system. The two of them had decided on the phone that the Freedom Rides had to go on. They would at the very least use Nashville students to reinforce the original CORE volunteers. And if the CORE people were going to back off, then the Nashville students would take over. In the meantime Lewis flew back to Nashville.