

SHORT STORY

BY ERIN BERNARD

On the Bus

PART ONE

"Attention, Greyhound customers," the static voice booms. "Bus number 36445, service to San Francisco, California is now boarding. Please line up at door number one."

I practically have to peel my legs off of the plastic bench to stand up. Hot and tired, I gather my belongings and stretch, moving my stiff joints. I take my place in line behind a couple arguing loudly in Spanish and lean against the wall, closing my eyes. It's going to be a long 12 hours.

We board the bus at a dead-end pace, everyone fumbling for tickets and with luggage. I take a window seat near the back and pray that I'll have it to myself.

I recheck my ticket stub for the thousandth time and rummage through my bag, trying not to think about what I'm doing or what will happen to me when I actually get to California. It's too late for that, and besides, I'm going to be a star. My guitar sits reassuringly on the seat next to me, reminding me of everything that I'm not sure I'm ready to think about.

Mom cried when I told her I was leaving. Dad looked serious and asked what about college. But hell, it's the seventies, now. I'm an adult. I've got to be free, to do what I want. And what I want is to be someone.

So here I am, on a hot bus full of crying babies and overheated adults, ready to begin again. With

a rumble and a roar, the bus comes to life. My heart pounds. My palms sweat. I stare out the window at the gray of the loading station as we pull away, picking up speed, leaving my old world further and further behind.

We're scheduled to arrive in San Francisco at 8:00 that evening. An old friend, Mary, is picking me up. She left a year ago to join what everyone's calling "The Revolution" and says I can stay with her till I get on my feet. She says macramé is huge down in California and that she'll teach me to make these hanging plant holders. It seems like a good plan.

I begin to doze, thinking about all the crazy stories I've heard about Haight-Ashbury and Acid Tests and how things will be for me. I don't remember falling asleep, but apparently, I do, because the next thing I know, a bony hand is shaking my shoulder.

"What?" I mumble, eyes still closed.

"There's no more seats left. Can you move your guitar?"

Annoyed, I grab the handle of the leather case and shove it to

the other side of me. Now there's practically no room for my legs so I curl them up underneath me and sulk. Looking out the window, I see we're at another bus station.

The girl sits down next to me and I'm overpowered by the smell of patchouli and God knows what else. She looks little more than fifteen, with the longest, whitest hair and a pale blue dress. She's skinny, skinnier than anyone I've ever seen and I have to keep myself from staring. But she seems friendly, so I smile.

"I'm Maribelle," she announces and sticks her hand out in a formal gesture of hello. I shake it awkwardly and introduce myself.

"So you play guitar, huh?" She asks. "My boyfriend plays. He's in a band called 'The Gypsies'. Ever heard of them?"

I shake my head.

"They're pretty good. Should have played at Woodstock."

I can't think of anything to say so I just sort of nod lamely. The radio crackles and hums a Janis Joplin song. The air conditioner wheezes and spits, emitting more hot than cold. My stomach churns

in that excited, nervous sort of way. I close my eyes, taking deep breaths and trying to reach some sort of calm. I wish I had something interesting or funny to say, anything to stop the whirl of thoughts in my head.

"So, why are you headed to San Francisco?" I ask.

Maribelle studies me for a minute, then begins, "Well, Mark, that's my boyfriend, left two months ago and we've just been waiting for him to get a pad and a solid job before I followed. He says the work is good down there. Even found a room for rent down on Belvedere, in the Haight-Ashbury district. We have to share it with two other guys, but it's cool." She gets a dreamy look in her eyes and says, "Things are really gonna start happening, now, with Vietnam and all. We can really get the movement going, y'know?"

I smile.

"What about you?"

I feel embarrassed but I say, "I'm going to be the next Joan Baez."

And, even though it sounds a little foolish to me, Maribelle smiles as if she understands perfectly and I feel better, safer.

"Actually," she tells me, "I'm stopping off in Salt Lake City to stay with friends a few weeks, but maybe when I get to San Francisco, Mark can get you a gig somewhere."

We talk more about my music and my parents and what she calls

"The Revolution" and before I know it, an hour has passed and we pull into another station. Maribelle announces that we've reached her stop. Something in me shrinks when I hear this.

"But come have a smoke, okay?"

I follow Maribelle up the aisle and out the door. We rest on a bench a few feet from the bus and I just sit silently as she searches through her handbag. She pulls out a baggie of handrolling tobacco and some papers and begins to roll a cigarette. I screw my courage and ask, "How old are you? I mean, you look so young and I just wondered why...oh, well, nevermind." My face burns. She's silent for a moment, then says, "It's the cliché. My mom's dead, my dad's a loser and I couldn't pass 10th grade. I had to cut out. You know." We smoke in silence.

And I don't know, but I just nod because it seems appropriate. It seems strangely ironic that things I'm leaving behind are still a thousand times better than the things Maribelle is moving towards. And it makes me sad in a way, like I just need to be still and quiet for a while. We say goodbye and exchange numbers. I watch from my window as she carries her bags into the station and out of my sight.

Then I feel a tapping on my shoulder. "Excuse me, is this seat taken?"

To be continued next week...

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