

The Company Is Not Responsible

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THERE was a girl named Margie, a girl named Ann, a honeymoon couple, a man named George, the girl called Blondie, and me; a middle-aged woman, a drunken sailor, four Harvard boys, a machinist's mate (first class), the driver—called Mac, though that was not his name—and several supernumerary passengers, among them noticeably a soldier with a pipe. It was Wednesday night of the week before Easter; it was raining; the bus we were waiting for had broken down at Sagamore—now it would be ten, anyway, before the Provincetown passengers got home to dinner. We sat in our own bus and smoked and complained to the driver, who had swivelled around in his seat and faced us, like a teacher, grinning, as though he sympathized with us and at the same time took no stock in the seriousness of our predicament. He was a young boy in a blue sweater—only the old bus drivers wore uniforms now—yet his smile was one of antique patience, the patience of the public servant who has been through it all before and knows that nobody, nobody in the world, really has to get anywhere on time.

“Jesus, Mac, it's eight thirty-five!” the sailor said. Being drunk, he could achieve perfectly, without inhibition, that note of incredulity, outrage, and wry despair that was the pitch of our combined feelings. Every five minutes, with considerable difficulty, he would pull a dollar watch out of his pocket and focus bloodshot, astonished eyes on it.

“Jesus, Mac,” he repeated desperately, “it's eight thirty-five!” “Eight thirty-four,” put in the Harvard boy with the glasses, the voice of science which had regularly, ever since our wait had begun, been correcting the sailor's enthusiastic approximations.

“This is WAR!” thundered George, the bus kidder, in a rather creditable imitation of Mr. Roosevelt.

We all laughed happily, irresponsibly, and waited for the sailor to continue, knowing what would come next, since we had just heard it five minutes before. “Jesus, Mac, let's get going!” A pause. “Jesus, Mac, let *me* drive that bus! I'll take a short cut.” The bus driver merely smiled. “You know what I'm

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going to do when I get to Provincetown?" said the sailor, picking up another theme. "I'm going to a phone booth and call up my mother, and I'm going to say, 'Hello, Ma, this is the apple of your eye.'"

"Shame on you," said the girl named Margie, in a husky, kidding tone. "You ought to go and see her."

"Hell no," said the sailor. "I'm going to *celebrate*. That's the trouble with me," he added soberly. "I'm my mother's darling." Everybody laughed. The middle-aged woman beside me shook the seat with mirth. The Harvard boys' laughter trickled out quickly, however; they looked around to see whether any of us were thinking, "And you, what about you?"

It was strange, I thought; each of us had his favorite section of the sailor's routine. I liked the part where the bus driver would try to punch his ticket and the sailor would not let him see it, saying, "Not till you set me down in Provincetown, Mac," and continuing audibly, as the bus driver passed down the aisle, "I've got him fooled. He doesn't know whether I've got a ticket or not." But nobody else particularly cared for it.

"Hello, Blondie," said the sailor now, to a girl who was knitting across the aisle from him. The passengers in the front section swung around to watch. "You going to Provincetown, Blondie?"

"Yes!" the girl said in mock exasperation, for she had already acknowledged this a dozen times.

"He doesn't believe you, Blondie," said the man named George. "He thinks you're going to fade out at Eastham."

"Look," said the girl. "Here is my *ticket!*" She waved a long paper at the sailor.

"Oh boy," said the sailor. "You and me, Blondie. You a jitterbug, Blondie?"

She shook her head, smiling. It was clear to everyone but the sailor that he was not getting anywhere. Blondie's good-natured serenity could only mean that she was being met in Provincetown. "You and me, Blondie," said the sailor ecstatically. "I'll take you to the Atlantic House and introduce you to my mother." Blondie laughed; we all laughed. At that moment everybody on the bus loved her; she was our darling; she was handling it all so well; it was as if her sureness, her simplicity (she was a very fair girl in a blue dress and silly black hat) made up to us for the uncertainty of the schedule, for the uncertainty

of the times, for our lost dinners, for the guns at Camp Edwards, and the Coast Guards in fur-lined glasses patrolling the dark beaches in the rain.

The voices grew lower. Hilarity had temporarily exhausted itself. Somewhere behind me George and Margie were talking about a girl named Halcyon. Was it possible, I asked myself, that I had heard it right? Could there be, anywhere, even in Provincetown, where there is a house called Delight, Delight, Delight, a girl with such a heavenly name? I leaned my head back on the white tidy of the dirty plush seat, reflecting on the good-naturedness of Americans, wondering whether it was the war or simply the new inconvenience of travel that made people so accessible to each other. Everything, I thought, is turned into a lark: the missed connections, the long lines of people waiting in the diner, the hotels that have no accommodations, the standing-room-only on the trains. And yet there is always the detestable person, the woman in the Japanese mink coat who pushes to the front of the line, the obnoxious drunk, the man who sends the lamb chop back a second and a third time, the family party, complete with redcap, that preëmpts somebody else's taxi in the ramp at Grand Central. But on this bus there was nothing like that, no trouble, though once or twice, for an instant, I had heard the old alarm sound in my brain: "Now it is going to begin again, the disagreeableness, the bad part." An obscure quarrel had got under way between the sailor and the machinist's mate—some caste rivalry—and then the question had arisen: which had seen more action? The sailor (unbelievable, now, in this warm, smoky bus) had been torpedoed twice. And again, the sailor, telling Margie about his experiences training at Hanover, New Hampshire, had been interrupted jeeringly by the Harvard boys: "That boys' school in Hanover—you don't mean Dartmouth, by any chance?" But on both occasions it had passed off. The snobbery of rank, the snobbery of heroism, the snobbery of class had no place here; in our situation we could not afford them. We were together, in amity.

"Listen, Mac," said the sailor. "If you don't start this bus, I'm going to tell the story about the sailor and the parrot." The bus driver grinned, we all laughed; nevertheless, we were apprehensive. "Once upon a time," said the sailor, teasing, "there was a sailor who had been on a long voyage . . ." He did not go on.

At last the relief bus appeared; we saw its headlights far off in the darkness. Everybody began to clap. "Three cheers for the driver," said George when—the new passengers installed, the tickets (except the sailor's) punched—our bus lurched forward into the road. Everyone yelled "Hooray!"

Now the lights were out, the jokes ceased to pop, the passengers one by one fell silent, like candles extinguished by an altar boy. It was quiet. The Harvard boys began to sing softly in unison; one could hardly catch the words. Somewhere near Dennis one of them started "Die Lorelei." I listened in vexation, for he had the tune all wrong. He had carried it over from their last selection; it was "My mother sells snow to the snowbirds" that he was putting Heine's words to. Out of the blackness across the aisle, Blondie's voice came. "It goes this way," she said, and very clearly, without embarrassment, sang them the first stanza. Will someone object? I thought; is this where the trouble will come? I held my breath, but no patriot censor intervened. The Harvard boys were singing again now and they went on together through the second stanza and hung, undecided, for a moment. They could not remember the third. "*Die schönste Jungfrau sitzt*," I said aloud in an atrocious accent, my voice trembling.

*Die schönste Jungfrau sitzt
Dort oben wunderbar,
Ihr goldnes Geschmeide blitzet,
Sie kämmt ihr goldenes Haar.*

Sie kämmt es mit goldenem Kamme . . .

Our voices soared in a paean as we all took up the fourth stanza and went on to the end. "Heine wrote many beautiful poems," said Blondie when it was finished. Nobody said anything in reply. I glanced at the woman beside me; her face was set in docile folds of enjoyment. "Pretty," she murmured finally. I need have felt no alarm.

At Eastham the Harvard boys got out. Their leave-taking was formal. "Good night, Blondie, good night, Margie, good night, Ann, good night, George, good night, sailor, good night, Mac." I felt a slight stab of envious regret that they did not know my name.

When I pulled the cord to get out at Wellfleet, the driver flashed the lights on. Blondie took advantage of the opportunity to comb out her long fair hair. She did this with an air of seriousness and preoccupation, taking prolonged, methodical strokes, as if she were alone with her mirror. The bright strands fell smooth and gleaming to her shoulders. But the comb was black.

Coming into my lighted house, I found that the bus trip was already fading from me. I could not explain what it was that had made me so happy. By Easter Sunday, when it was time for me to go back, I no longer believed in those people; it seemed to me that I had made it all up. The bus that afternoon was very crowded. People were packed solid down the aisle. The passengers already in occupancy glared at me as I climbed on, just as I too would glare at the next comers. I edged my way in near the door, thinking gloomily of the long trip, saying to myself angrily, "Why don't they run another section?" The bus started. "A sardine would blush," said a voice. I did not have to turn around to know that it was George. And suddenly everything was all right. George was real. I had found him again. And when I did turn I saw Margie's little red pillbox hat. Blondie, however, was gone.