

On The Bus Or Off The Bus

Anyone who has read the Tom Wolfe account of the Merry Pranksters trip across America in the sixties (Electric Acid Kool-Aid Test) is familiar with the phrase that I appropriated for the title of this story. It was an oft repeated mantra referring to whether a particular prankster was synched in with the group or not. If not, they found themselves, in the *actual* literal sense, off the bus. But this story is about an incident that occurred in the early 70s at a small commune that I lived at in northeast Iowa.

The ramshackle house sat on a one hundred eighty-acre, former farm nestled in a valley that drained directly into the Mississippi river located a couple of miles to the east. The surrounding hills were huge and magnificent, covered in a delicious mix of hardwoods and conifers. It was a unique set-up and it was owned by a man named Jim who was paralyzed from the neck down. Everyone who lived there did their part to help with the care of Jim, which was considerable. And he paid the bills.

Jim was an older hippie who still tried to maintain the lifestyle as much as possible, that being a lot more than most anyone else in his condition could. He decided that he wanted to make a run to Mexico. He invited everyone living at the commune to join him on his dime. My first-born child was on the way and I was making plans to buy my own place, so I took a pass, as did most of the resident communards. Plus, it sounded like a pretty crazy idea to me (and that was saying something). But he fearlessly went forward and bought an old school bus and then started piecing together a crew from old friends and new to outfit the bus, go with him, and provide for his care.

One of the folks he offered a seat on the bus to was my former girlfriend, Jean. Jean was a blond-haired, blue-eyed beauty that was fun to be around but a tad indecisive. When we were living together, I had noticed that trait in her. We would go to one of our favorite fast-food chains where we both knew the menu well. I would step directly to the counter and order my usual. She would stare intently at the menu, that she had stared at intently many times before, until a slight look of consternation started creeping across her comely face. My order would come up, I would pay, leave a few bucks for whatever she decided on, and sit down. I would

often be finished eating before she decided on the same thing she had ordered on our last visit. Now she had to decide whether or not to venture into the wilds of Mexico, in an exhausted school bus, with a bunch of hippies she didn't know, and being partially responsible for taking care of a quadriplegic man with a myriad of medical and hygienic needs. *Big* decision, that.

The preparation of the bus was scheduled to take a long time with the departure date scheduled for some time in the distant spring. It was after all a dilapidated old bus that needed to be completely gutted and transformed into a rolling medical care center by a bunch of disorganized hippies. You do the math.

Every couple of weeks Jean would visit the commune and sit with Jim for a beer and a smoke. The conversation would inevitably work its way around to whether Jean had decided if she would be joining the trip. And Jean would inevitably reply that she hadn't and ask some more questions designed to help her decide. Wash, rinse, repeat.

Jim was very patient as he knew he was going on the trip with or without Jean. But she was very pretty and a lot of fun to be around so it was probably worth waiting for her to decide. And it was a bunch of hippies. The more the merrier.

As the departure date approached, Jean was becoming noticeably anxious about not being able to come to a decision. Jim did his best to calm her with limited results. Finally, with only a week to go, Jean once again arrived at Jim's bedside. She popped the question. "When is the very last minute that I have to decide whether or not I am going with you?" Jim replied "when the bus is pulling away, down the road, faster than you can run alongside". I thought the image was hilarious and a great metaphor of decision-making deadlines. In the end the bus pulled away without her (she was off the bus before she ever got on). No word on how far she ran alongside before she decided to take a pass.