

# *Going Home*

Pete Hamill

They were going to Fort Lauderdale—three boys and three girls. When they boarded the bus, they were carrying sandwiches and wine in paper bags, dreaming of golden beaches and sea tides as the gray cold of New York vanished behind them.

As the bus passed through New Jersey, they began to notice Vingo. He sat in front of them, dressed in a plain, ill fitting suit, never moving, his dusty face masking his age. He chewed the inside of his lip, frozen into some personal cocoon of silence.

Deep into the night, outside Washington, the bus pulled into a Howard Johnson's restaurant and everyone got off except Vingo. He sat rooted in his seat, and the young people began to wonder about him, trying to imagine his life situation; perhaps he was a sea captain, a run-away from his wife, an old soldier going home. When they went back to the bus, one of the girls sat beside him and introduced herself.

"We're going to Florida," she said. "I hear it's beautiful there at this time of year."

"Oh, it is," he said quietly, as if remembering something he may have attempted to forget.

"Want some coke?"

He smiled and took one; then thanked her and retreated back into silence. After a while, she went back to the others, and Vingo nodded in sleep.

In the morning, they awoke outside another Howard Johnsons, and this time Vingo went in with the group. The same girl insisted that he join them. He seemed very shy, and ordered black coffee and smoked nervously as the young people chatted about sleeping on beaches. When they returned to the bus, the girl sat with Vingo once again, and after a short time, slowly and painfully, he told his story. He had been in jail in New York for the past four years, and now he was going back home.

"Are you married?"

"I'm not sure."

"You're not sure?"

"Well, I wrote to my wife when I was in the can. I told her that I was going to be away a long time, and that if she couldn't stand it, if the kids kept asking questions—if it hurt too much—well, she could just forget me, that I would understand. Find another and rebuild your life, and forget me. She's a wonderful lady—really something. I told her she would not have to write me. She didn't. Not for three and one half years."

"And you are going home, now...not knowing?"

"Yeah," he said shyly. "Well, last week, when I was sure the parole was coming through, I wrote her again. We used to live in Brunswick, just before Jacksonville. There's a big oak tree just as you come into town. I told her that if she'd take me back, she should put a

yellow handkerchief on the tree, and I'd get off the bus and come home. But if she didn't want me to come home, forget me—no handkerchief, and I'd keep on going.

“Wow,” the girl said, “Wow!”

She told the others, and soon all of them were in it, caught up in the approach to Brunswick, looking at the pictures Vingo showed to them of his wife and three children—the woman, pretty in a plain way the children still uninformed in the cracked, much handled photos.

Now they were 20 miles from Brunswick, and the young people took over window seats the right side, waiting for the approach of the great oak tree. The bus acquired a dark hushed mood, full of the silence of absence and lost years. Vingo stopped looking, tightening his face into the ex-con's mask, as if fortifying himself against still another disappointment.

Then Brunswick was ten miles, and then five. Then, suddenly, all of the young people were up out of their seats, screaming and shouting and crying, doing small dances of exultation. All except Vingo.

Vingo sat there stunned, looking at the oak tree. It was covered with yellow handkerchiefs, twenty of them, thirty of them, probably hundreds—a tree standing as a banner of welcome Billowing in the wind. As the young people shouted, the ex-con rose from his seat and made his way to the front of the bus to go home.

*True? Maybe. But, you know, whether or not the story was actually a real event, or not, we know where true love remains following a crisis of any kind, we might always expect showers of grace to flood over our spirit. One thing I know for sure is this: Our Lord and Savior is ONE WHO will always stand by us when we are repentant.*

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The symbol of a yellow ribbon became widely known in civilian life in the 1970s as a reminder that an absent loved one, either in the military or in jail, would be welcomed home on their return.

The story of a convict who had told his love to tie a ribbon to a tree outside of town is an American folk tale, dating to before 1959.<sup>[3]</sup> In October 1971, newspaper columnist [Pete Hamill](#) wrote a piece for the [New York Post](#) called "Going Home". In it, he told a variant of the story, in which college students on a bus trip to the beaches of [Fort Lauderdale](#) make friends with an ex-convict who is watching for a yellow handkerchief on a roadside oak in [Brunswick, Georgia](#). Hamill claimed to have heard this story in oral tradition.

In June 1972, nine months later, [Reader's Digest](#) reprinted "Going Home". Also in June 1972, ABC-TV aired a dramatized version of it in which [James Earl Jones](#) played the role of the returning ex-con. A month and a half after that, Irwin Levine and L. Russell Brown registered for copyright a song they called "Tie a Yellow Ribbon 'Round the Ole Oak Tree". The authors said they heard the story while serving in the military. Pete Hamill was not convinced and filed suit for infringement.

One factor that may have influenced Hamill's decision to do so was that, in May 1973, "Tie A Yellow Ribbon" sold 3 million records in three weeks. When the dust settled, [BMI](#) calculated that radio stations had played it 3 million times – seventeen continuous years of airplay. Hamill dropped his suit after folklorists working for Levine and Brown turned up archival versions of the story that had been collected before "Going Home" had been written.<sup>[3]</sup>

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