

A DISTANT ROAD

Screenplay

by

Jason Paul

BLACK SCREEN

The muffled rumble of an idling bus engine.

FADE IN:

INT. TRANSIT BUS - DAY

JOE (76) - glasses, thinning hair - in an aisle seat. He stares straight ahead, pensive. A hiss and slap as the bus doors close. The engine growls, the bus lurches forward.

EXT. MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA - CITY STREET - DAY

Shiny metal and the words "MONTGOMERY AREA TRANSIT SYSTEM" stream past windows of buildings in a business district.

BACK INSIDE THE BUS (MOVING)

Joe's look shifts left, across the aisle of empty seats next to him. From JOE'S POV, beyond the seats, the cityscape scrolls across the window--

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. GREYHOUND BUS (MOVING) - DAY

FLASHBACK - The bus is now an older model Greyhound, the store signs and marquees of the cityscape from a different street, an earlier era. Two PASSENGERS - black men (30) dressed in suits - occupy seats across the aisle.

YOUNG JOE (21) - fresh face, suit and tie - is in the seat across from the men. His pensive look drifts forward.

SUPER - ALABAMA, 1961

Young Joe's eyes shift to JOHN (21), a black man of similar manner and dress, beside him in the window seat.

John gauges Young Joe. Young Joe nods lightly. The exchange leaves both men reassured, resolved.

EXT. DOWNTOWN BIRMINGHAM - GREYHOUND BUS TERMINAL - DAY

A STATE TROOPER MOTORCYCLE leads the bus from the terminal. A long line of armed STATE TROOPER VEHICLES trails. POLICE OFFICERS and TOWNSPEOPLE line the streets; a huge ordeal.

BACK INSIDE THE BUS

Young Joe looks to his lap. He clasps a handwritten letter and open envelope. Window sunlight flits across the page.

Young Joe's eyes are trained on the letter.

EXT. HIGHWAY 65 - DAY

The caravan of troopers escorts the bus away from town.

A STATE TROOPER HELICOPTER hovers directly above.

A SIGN on the opposite shoulder - "WELCOME TO BIRMINGHAM"

The caravan edges toward the rustic horizon.

BACK INSIDE THE BUS

Young Joe's look falls distant. He recalls the VOICE of his FATHER (50).

JOE'S FATHER (V.O.)

Dear Son: I sit at my writing desk facing another sleepless night, glancing down at the last note you left me before your sudden departure.

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. HOUSE - DAY

Minimal Tudor cottage. Drifting through a jolly Christmas party; decorations of the season, well-dressed adult GUESTS mingle, eat, drink, dance, trim a tree.

UP A STAIRWAY, DOWN A HALLWAY PAST THE LANDING--

INT. YOUNG JOE'S BEDROOM - DAY

Tidy. Atop a dresser, school awards and a framed PHOTO - Young Joe in cap and gown at high school graduation. He stands beside his father, arms over each other's shoulders.

In front of the dresser, Young Joe and Father face off. Father glares, flips through papers - "NASHVILLE EXCHANGE STUDENT SEMESTER", "STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE DEMONSTRATION WORKSHOP", "JOIN THE MOVEMENT".

Father huffs disapproval, Young Joe argues his case. Father slings the papers. They cascade onto the floor.

Young Joe is hurt, angry. He scoops the papers, snatches a suitcase next to the door.

Young Joe storms out of the room, slams the door shut. The photo of father and son rattles, crashes onto the wood floor. Glass shatters.

BACK DOWNSTAIRS

Young Joe blows past confused and shocked PARTY GUESTS.

MOTHER (45) trails behind Young Joe as he blitzes out the front door. She stops short in the living room, near a formal family portrait atop a fireplace mantel.

EXT. HOUSE - DAY

Young Joe stands in the driveway next to a Buick Skylark. He holds a paper note in his hand. A glimpse of the hastily scribbled last line--

"WISH YOU UNDERSTOOD. REGRETFULLY, YOUR SON"

Young Joe folds the note, sets it on the windshield.

A taxicab waits at the end of the driveway. Young Joe grips his suitcase, opens the passenger door, glances back toward a second-story window.

Father stands framed in the window. He shoots a hard look down at Young Joe, walks away.

Young Joe sags. He is torn but must begin his journey.

JOE'S FATHER (V.O.)(CONT.)
Tonight I will pack the note away with
your belongings in the hope that, should
you return, a rational state of mind will
return along with you...

INT. COLLEGE CAMPUS BUILDING - HALLWAY - DAY

A SIGN above an open door - "STUDENT UNION"

Young Joe - suitcase in hand - crosses the threshold.

INSIDE THE STUDENT UNION ROOM

Young Joe introduces himself to John.

Young Joe is welcomed by two STUDENT UNION MEMBERS - both black - and a black female union leader, DENISE (18).

John and Denise show Young Joe a recruiting flyer with info about SNCC, and a calendar of workshop events.

INT. BAPTIST CHURCH - BASEMENT ROOM - DAY

Young Joe and several STUDENTS - most black, a few white - seated in tight rows; a makeshift classroom. John and Denise instruct the group.

THE GROUP - A NON-VIOLENCE DEMONSTRATION SCENARIO

Three STUDENTS (#1,#2,#3) are seated at a table. Young Joe is an "antagonist"; he yells, uses racial slurs, bumps the students. The students do not resist or fight back.

The roles switch - Young Joe seated, Student #1 insults and slaps him across the head as Young Joe remains calm.

JOE'S FATHER (V.O.)(CONT.)

You've stirred up quite a bit of attention here in town. Our neighbors put on polite faces, but I imagine what they must think after reading the headlines each morning.

THE GROUP - AFTER THE WORKSHOP SCENARIO

John, Young Joe, Denise, workshop students huddle, discuss the results of the practice. They exchange approving nods.

THE GROUP - POST-DISCUSSION

Student#2 leads the seated group in a religious service.

JOE'S FATHER (V.O.) (CONT.)

I can hardly believe that a talented, intelligent young man with a world of opportunity at his feet could be capable of making the choices you have made.

EXT. MOVIE THEATRE - DAY

WHITE PATRONS queue at a ticket booth under the marquee.

IN AN ADJACENT ALLEY

BLACK PATRONS shuffle up a staircase marked "COLORED ENTRANCE".

Young Joe and John walk past the staircase toward the mouth of the alley and the ticket booth.

AT THE TICKET BOOTH

Young Joe gestures to the white BOOTH ATTENDANT for two admissions. John stands in the B.G.

Young Joe walks over to John, offers John a ticket. John accepts. WHITE PATRONS look on, frown.

AT THE LOBBY ENTRANCE

Young Joe and John approach. Young Joe is cold-cocked in the head with a wrench. He drops to the floor, is yanked back up by his jacket collar. Angry WHITE PATRONS pounce.

JOE'S FATHER (V.O.)(CONT.)
Some folks call you "that crazy, messed-
up kid". I wonder if they may be right.

INT. RESTAURANT - DAY

Denise, John, and two BLACK STUDENT DEMONSTRATORS sit at a lunch counter - no plates/cups; no servers attend to them. A stewing mob of WHITE PATRONS stands behind them in wait.

The white patrons attack the demonstrators. They yank collars, shove, punch, stomp. John is dragged onto the counter and pummeled. Denise is pushed around.

POLICE OFFICERS arrive. They quell the violence but gather the demonstrators for their arrest.

EXT. RESTAURANT - DAY

POLICE OFFICERS lead John, Denise, and the other demonstrators into the back of a police van.

Denise stops at the van door, turns toward the restaurant, nods expectantly at Young Joe and a group of BLACK STUDENTS who walk inside, prepared to reoccupy the counter seats.

JOE'S FATHER (V.O.)(CONT.)
I wish you understood how your present
actions will affect your future.

INT. COLLEGE CAMPUS AUDITORIUM - DAY

STUDENT DEMONSTRATORS pack rows of raised seats. Denise stands at the foot of the first row, addresses the group.

Young Joe, John, STUDENTS glance at NEWSPAPER HEADLINES:

"FREEDOM RIDERS MOBBED, BEATEN", "MOB ATTACKS BUS WITH FIRE BOMBS", "POLICE LET HOODLUMS RAGE AT WILL", "VIOLENCE TRAILS CORE ON SWING INTO ALABAMA".

Denise holds up a clipboard with a sheet of paper attached to it - "NASHVILLE STUDENT UNION FREEDOM RIDES" - and a tally of numbers running down the sheet.

She gestures with her raised hand, calls for volunteers.

Several hands shoot up, including Young Joe's and John's.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

Next to a rotary phone atop a bedside chest of drawers, a wallet-size PHOTO: Young Joe and his father at high school graduation; a smaller version of the framed photo that shattered in his bedroom back at home.

Young Joe - phone receiver to his ear - listens, shakes his head in disagreement, awaits his turn to speak.

Young Joe pleads, emphasizes his position.

He is cut off mid-sentence by a click and dial tone, pulls the receiver from his ear, stares at it, crestfallen.

AT A WRITING DESK

A blank Mother's Day card rests on the desk next to a pen. Young Joe reaches toward it but grabs only the pen and a fresh sheet of paper, scratches his feelings onto the page.

"DEAR MOTHER AND FATHER", "STILL HOPING YOU CAN UNDERSTAND", "THE POWER OF MANY IS FAR GREATER", "THE RIGHT THING FOR ME TO DO", "IN THE EVENT OF MY DEATH".

JOE'S FATHER (V.O.)(CONT.)

I've tried in every manner possible to help you understand.

Young Joe's eyes sweep over his written words. He peels the sheet away from atop a pile of paperwork in his hands.

The page now in front of him - "LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT". Young Joe's signature at the bottom.

Young Joe looks to a section of newspaper on his desk, stares at its PHOTO - a Freedom Ride bus shrouded in smoke and flames. Young Joe's eyes drift from the photo, his look distant as he tries to make sense of everything.

YOUNG JOE SITTING ON A BED - LATER

He reads passages from a Bible.

He kneels bedside, prays.

JOE'S FATHER (V.O.)(CONT.)

I can only conclude that, as a parent, I have been a miserable failure.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - DAY

Golden morning sunlight stabs through the windows. Young Joe - in suit and tie - stands before a mirror, totes a suitcase. He tenses; thoughts of events that might await.

EXT. BIRMINGHAM GREYHOUND BUS TERMINAL - DAY

Young Joe, John, and the group of FREEDOM RIDERS - most black, some white - wait amongst other PASSENGERS as they prepare to board a bus. WHITE TOWNSPEOPLE loom around the terminal; some show support, many sear in disgust.

POLICE OFFICERS dot the street - in vehicles, on motorcycles, on horses.

Young Joe, John, and the other riders board the bus.

JOE'S FATHER (V.O.)(CONT.)
At first I was angry. Now I am mostly
heartbroken.

INSIDE THE BUS (IDLE)

The DRIVER motions for John to vacate a seat near the front. John shakes his head, comfortable where he is. The driver eyes Young Joe - is he sure he wants to sit next to John? Young Joe nods, comfortable where he is.

MOMENTS LATER - A NEWS REPORTER holds a mic in Young Joe's face. Young Joe declares the riders to be soldiers in a non-violent army.

BACK TO SCENE - "YOUNG JOE ABOARD THE BUS STUDIES HIS FATHER'S LETTER"

One last lingering look, and Young Joe tucks the letter inside his coat. John eyes Young Joe, concerned. Young Joe's eyes veer toward the window.

JOE'S FATHER (V.O.)(CONT.)
Clearly you have chosen a distant road -
one that trails far away from anything I
had hoped for you... from anything I had
hoped you would become.

John follows Young Joe's look. Both young men lock on something just outside--

A SIGN ON THE HIGHWAY SHOULDER - "MONTGOMERY CITY LIMITS"

Young Joe and John hold on the action outside the window.

The state trooper motorcycle peels off from its lead escort position and juts onto a perpendicular intersection at the city limits. The bus continues its course forward.

Young Joe and John look to the windows across the aisle.

Armed state trooper vehicles systematically slow down, peel away from escort position.

Young Joe and John lean closer to the window, look skyward.

The state trooper helicopter breaks from its course, chops far away from the bus route.

Young Joe and John look forward, scan the road ahead.

No signs of a welcoming police presence as they approach--

EXT. DOWNTOWN MONTGOMERY STREET - DAY

The unescorted bus pushes past local businesses on a main thoroughfare. WHITE CITIZENS perch along the sidewalks - arms crossed, frowns, faces that foretell the fate of the bus riders. The aura is chilling.

BACK INSIDE THE BUS (MOVING)

Young Joe and John look to each other for courage, for inner strength.

JOE'S FATHER (V.O.)(CONT.)

For now I have lost you, but I continue to hope for the day that you will recognize the error of your path.

EXT. DOWNTOWN MONTGOMERY - GREYHOUND BUS TERMINAL - DAY

The bus rolls into an eerily quiet terminal, halts near a waiting room entrance.

Young Joe, John, other RIDERS scan their surroundings; they are trained and ready for this, but nobody ever truly is.

Out of nowhere, a MOB of WHITE MEN slink all around the bus. More and more men fan out from behind the originals, gripping bats, pipes, chains, hammers.

Young Joe and John - brave faces - rise from their seats. They step into the aisle and toward the front of the bus.

JOE'S FATHER (V.O.)(CONT.)

I hope that one day, you truly will understand.

The bus doors hiss open. Young Joe and John are first to step out. They stop in front of the bus doors, stand together side-by-side in front of the mob.

A CAMERAMAN aims a news camera lens at Young Joe and John.

A REPORTER inches closer, pans the crowd with his boom mic.

Men in the mob stand shoulder-to-shoulder, weapons of choice pulsing; burning stares toward Young Joe and John.

WHITE WOMEN look on, snarl; some are holding babies.

Young Joe and John swallow lumps in their throats, hold steadfast in spite of the realization of what is coming.

A HEAVYSET WHITE MAN wrestles the mic from the reporter.

An ATTACKING WHITE MAN swats the news camera to the blacktop; the cue for the rest of the mob.

The wave of riley armed men bulldozes forward toward the bus, toward Young Joe and John.

The two young men stand stoic. Young Joe closes his eyes gently, bows his head in prayer.

The mob - blunt weapons raised in front of menacing faces - storms closer. Criss-crossing sets of hands grab Young Joe and John by their collars, yank them forward into the hungry melee. Bodies twist and fall, fists and feet fly.

THE LETTER FROM JOE'S FATHER

glides to the pavement amongst the violent scrum. Young Joe's quivering hand reaches for the letter.

CUT TO BLACK

FADE IN:

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Young Joe and John stand side-by-side, marked with horrid bruises, welts, scrapes on their bandaged faces.

Young Joe alternates his eye line between slightly offscreen - for an INTERVIEWER - and INTO CAMERA, which functions as a NEWS CAMERA. He is exhausted but determined.

YOUNG JOE

We are dedicated to ending segregation.
We'll face jail, beatings, even death.
The Freedom Riders will continue until we
can travel anywhere in the South with the
same privileges and rights that are
guaranteed for every citizen in America.

BACK TO THE PRESENT

INT. TRANSIT BUS (MOVING) - DAY

THE LETTER FROM JOE'S FATHER

in Joe's hands. Faded and wrinkled, a spot of blood mars the page.

Joe's look shifts toward OLDER JOHN - also 76 - in the window seat beside him.

The men give each other a knowing nod; thoughts of where their long road has brought them. Joe's and Older John's eyes pan around the bus--

PASSENGERS - MEN, WOMEN, young and old, some black, some white, carry on with daily routines - reading, listening to music, light conversation - nary a thought of what it took for all of this to even be possible.

Joe and Older John exchange a look of modest contentment.

Joe stuffs the letter back into the envelope. He shuffles the envelope, then pulls out the wallet-size graduation photo - Young Joe and father posing happily.

Joe shifts the photo. Behind it, a wallet-size photo of Joe - a sitting portrait in a graduation gown, a banner: "SCHOOL OF DENTISTRY 1967".

Joe shifts the photo. Behind it, a wallet-size photo - Joe in a white dentist smock, x-ray chart over his shoulder. Standing next to Joe, his father - accepting of his son once again. Joe eyes the photo, at peace.

EXT. MONTGOMERY CITY STREET - DAY

The bus pulls away from a stop on a corner. Joe and Older John stand at the corner, look directly across the street toward--

AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AUDITORIUM

A banner across the entrance - "WELCOME, FREEDOM RIDERS". Joe and Older John walk toward the banner.

INT. ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AUDITORIUM - DAY

Applause. Joe and Older John shuffle to centerstage. Their eyes fall on admiring faces of STUDENTS and TEACHERS of various races. Both men stand proudly.

FADE TO BLACK:

TITLE CARD - IN THE SUMMER OF 1961, HUNDREDS OF "FREEDOM RIDERS" PARTICIPATED IN DEMONSTRATIONS AT BUS STATIONS, TRAIN STATIONS, AND AIRPORTS IN THE SOUTH.

FADE TO BLACK:

TITLE CARD - BY THE END OF THE SUMMER, THE INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION ISSUED REGULATIONS PROHIBITING SEGREGATION IN INTERSTATE TRANSIT TERMINALS NATIONWIDE.

FADE OUT