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## The Yellow Ribbon

Pete Hamill

### Preview

When America is involved in overseas military actions, U.S. communities often display yellow ribbons to symbolize the hope that their sons and daughters will return home safely. That practice was probably inspired by this story, which first appeared as a column in the *New York Post*. Read it to learn what message a yellow handkerchief conveyed to a worried, lonely man.

### Words to Watch

*cocoon* (2): protective covering

*bluntness* (13): abruptness

*parole* (19): the early release of a prisoner on certain conditions

*solitude* (21): the state of being alone

*exaltation* (22): joy

They were going to Fort Lauderdale, the girl remembered later. There were six of them, three boys and three girls, and they picked up the bus at the old terminal on 34th Street, carrying sandwiches and wine in paper bags, dreaming of golden beaches and the tides of the sea as the gray cold spring of New York vanished behind them. Vingo was on board from the beginning.

As the bus passed through Jersey and into Philly, they began to notice that Vingo never moved. He sat in front of the young people, his dusty face masking his age, dressed in a plain brown ill-fitting suit. His fingers were stained from cigarettes and he chewed the inside of his lip a lot, frozen into some personal cocoon° of silence.

Somewhere outside of Washington, deep into the night, the bus pulled into a Howard Johnson's, and everybody got off except Vingo. He sat rooted in his seat, and the young people began to wonder about him, trying to imagine his life: Perhaps he was a sea captain, maybe he had run away from his wife, he could be an old soldier going home. When they went back to the bus, the girl sat beside him and introduced herself.

"We're going to Florida," the girl said brightly. "You going that far?"

"I don't know," Vingo said.

"I've never been there," she said. "I hear it's beautiful."

"It is," he said quietly, as if remembering something he had tried to forget.

"You live there?"

"I did some time there in the Navy. Jacksonville."

"Want some wine?" she said. He smiled and took the bottle of Chianti and took a swig. He thanked her and retreated again into his silence. After a while, she went back to the others, as Vingo nodded in sleep.

In the morning they awoke outside another Howard Johnson's, and this time Vingo went in. The girl insisted that he join them. He seemed very shy and ordered black coffee and smoked nervously, as the young people chattered about sleeping on the beaches. When they went back on the bus, the girl sat with Vingo again, and after a while, slowly and painfully and with great hesitation, he began to tell his story. He had been in jail in New York for the last four years, and now he was going home.

"Four years!" the girl said. "What did you do?"

"It doesn't matter," he said with quiet bluntness°. "I did it and I went to jail. If you can't do the time, don't do the crime. That's what they say and they're right."

"Are you married?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?" she said.

"Well, when I was in the can I wrote to my wife," he said. "I told her, I said, Martha, I understand if you can't stay married to me. I told her that. I said I was gonna be away a long time, and that if she couldn't stand it, if the kids kept askin' questions, if it hurt her too much, well, she could just forget me. Get a new guy—she's a wonderful woman, really something—and forget about me. I told her she didn't have to write me or nothing. And she didn't. Not for three and a half years."

"And you're going home now, not knowing?" 18

"Yeah," he said shyly. "Well, last week, when I was sure the parole° 19  
was coming through I wrote her. I told her that if she had a new guy, I  
understood. But if she didn't, if she would take me back, she should let me  
know. We used to live in this town, Brunswick, just before Jacksonville,  
and there's a great big oak tree just as you come into town, a very famous  
tree, huge. I told her if she would take me back, she should put a yellow  
handkerchief on the tree, and I would get off and come home. If she didn't  
want me, forget it, no handkerchief, and I'd keep going on through."

"Wow," the girl said. "Wow." 20

She told the others, and soon all of them were in it, caught up in the 21  
approach of Brunswick, looking at the pictures Vingo showed them of his  
wife and three children, the woman handsome in a plain way, the children  
still unformed in a cracked, much-handled snapshot. Now they were  
twenty miles from Brunswick and the young people took over window  
seats on the right side, waiting for the approach of the great oak tree. Vingo  
stopped looking, tightening his face into the ex-con's mask, as if fortifying  
himself against still another disappointment. Then it was ten miles, and  
then five and the bus acquired a dark hushed mood, full of silence, of  
absence, of lost years, of the woman's plain face, of the sudden letter on  
the breakfast table, of the wonder of children, of the iron bars of solitude°. 22

Then suddenly all of the young people were up out of their seats, 22  
screaming and shouting and crying, doing small dances, shaking clenched  
fists in triumph and exaltation°. All except Vingo.

Vingo sat there stunned, looking at the oak tree. It was covered with 23  
yellow handkerchiefs, twenty of them, thirty of them, maybe hundreds, a  
tree that stood like a banner of welcome blowing and billowing in the  
wind, turned into a gorgeous yellow blur by the passing bus. As the young  
people shouted, the old con slowly rose from his seat, holding himself  
tightly, and made his way to the front of the bus to go home.

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Freewrite for ten minutes on one of the following.

1. Did you enjoy reading this selection? Why or why not?
2. Have you ever gotten into an interesting conversation with a stranger?  
What did you learn about him or her?
3. Why do you think the young people were so excited when they saw  
the tree? What did it mean to them? If you had been on the bus, how  
would you have reacted?

## VOCABULARY CHECK

A. Circle the letter of the word or phrase that best completes each of the following four items.

1. In the sentence below, the word *retreated* means
  - a. became talkative.
  - b. began a new activity.
  - c. drew back.
  - d. was ungrateful.

"He thanked her and retreated again into silence." (Paragraph 10)

2. In the sentence below, the word *fortifying* means
  - a. strengthening.
  - b. watching.
  - c. hurrying.
  - d. losing.

"Vingo stopped looking, tightening his face into the ex-con's mask, as if fortifying himself against still another disappointment." (Paragraph 21)

3. In the sentence below, the word *acquired* means
  - a. needed.
  - b. took on.
  - c. stopped.
  - d. lost.

"Then it was ten miles, and then five and the bus acquired a dark hushed mood. . . ." (Paragraph 21)

4. In the sentence below, the word *hushed* means
  - a. quiet.
  - b. evil.
  - c. surprising.
  - d. pleasant.

"[T]he bus acquired a dark hushed mood, full of silence, of absence, of lost years, of the woman's plain face, of the sudden letter on the breakfast table. . . ." (Paragraph 21)

**B.** Circle the letter of the answer that best completes each of the following four items. Each item uses a word (or form of a word) from "Words to Watch."

5. "In response to today's harsh, fast-paced world," said the newspaper article, "more and more young couples report that they spend their weekends *cocooning*. They define 'cocooning' as
  - a. spending time quietly within the privacy of their homes."
  - b. going out to parties and dances."
  - c. becoming involved in charitable causes."
6. A *blunt*-spoken man is one who
  - a. speaks in beautiful, poetic phrases.
  - b. talks too much.
  - c. says what he means in very few words.
7. A *parolee* is someone
  - a. who has escaped from prison and is being hunted by authorities.
  - b. who is a prison guard responsible for keeping count of prisoners.
  - c. who has been released from prison, but must check in with authorities regularly.
8. If a friend a year ahead of you in school reported that the English course she had taken had filled her with *exaltation*, you would probably
  - a. sign up for that course.
  - b. ask her what about the course had confused her.
  - c. avoid that course by any means necessary.

## READING CHECK

### *Central Point and Main Ideas*

1. Which sentence best expresses the central point of the entire selection?
  - a. Prison sentences can ruin marriages.
  - b. If you commit a crime, you must pay for it.
  - c. Vingo did not know what to expect.
  - d. Vingo returned from prison to find that his wife still loved him.
2. Which sentence best expresses the main idea of paragraph 3?
  - a. The bus stopped at a Howard Johnson's.
  - b. The young people began to be curious about Vingo.
  - c. Vingo might have been a sea captain.
  - d. Everyone got off the bus except Vingo.

3. Which sentence best expresses the main idea of paragraph 21?
- The young people watched out the window more than Vingo did as the bus neared Brunswick.
  - Vingo showed the young people photographs of his wife and children.
  - Vingo tightened his face as if to prepare himself for a disappointment.
  - The suspense built as the bus neared Brunswick and the oak tree.

### *Key Supporting Details*

4. When the young girl asks what he was in prison for, Vingo answers that
- it is none of her business.
  - it doesn't matter.
  - he is too ashamed to tell her.
  - he was imprisoned for a crime he didn't commit.
5. Vingo describes his wife as
- not much of a letter writer.
  - a wonderful woman.
  - an ex-convict like himself.
  - very beautiful.

### *Inferences*

6. We can infer that the young people were going to Florida
- on business.
  - to visit relatives.
  - on vacation.
  - to get married.
7. The author implies that Vingo thought
- he would someday be in prison again.
  - there might be no yellow handkerchief on the tree.
  - his wife was wrong for not writing to him in prison.
  - his wife was sure to want him back.
8. By writing, "[Vingo] slowly rose from his seat, holding himself tightly" (paragraph 23), the author implies that Vingo
- has suffered a physical injury.
  - does not want to get off the bus.
  - is trying to control his emotions.
  - is angry about something.

9. By telling us that the picture of Vingo's family was a "cracked, much-handled snapshot," the author implies that
  - a. Vingo didn't know how to take good care of photos.
  - b. the pictures were not really of Vingo's family.
  - c. Vingo had looked at the snapshot a great deal while in jail.
  - d. the photo was relatively new.

### *The Writer's Craft*

10. The introductory paragraph indicates that Hamill
  - a. was one of the young people on the bus.
  - b. heard the story from Vingo years later.
  - c. interviewed one of the young girls who had been on the bus.
  - d. knew Vingo personally.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. According to the information in the selection, what is Vingo's attitude toward his wife? What else do you learn about her at the conclusion of the story?
2. Why do you think the young people first became interested in Vingo? How do you think their attitude about him changed after they'd learned his story?
3. While there is much we don't learn about Vingo in this very short narrative, Hamill does provide us with clues to some important aspects of his personality. What evidence is there that he is a decent man, a person who we could feel deserves a second chance?
4. Many people are thrilled, some even to tears, by this story. How did you and your classmates react when you first read it? Why do you think "The Yellow Ribbon" has such a powerful effect on readers?

## PARAGRAPH ASSIGNMENTS

1. In "The Yellow Ribbon," Hamill suggests strongly that although Vingo has been in jail, he is still a decent man. Such clues are found in Vingo's attitude towards his fellow passengers, in what he says about his past and his family, and in his behavior as the bus nears his hometown. Write a paragraph that begins with this topic sentence: "Details in 'The Yellow Ribbon' suggest that Vingo is a good man who deserves to be welcomed home by his family." Find and include specific evidence from the story to back up that statement.
2. For some reason, it is not unusual for fellow passengers in a bus, train, or airplane to enter into quite personal conversations. The same thing sometimes happens in public waiting spaces, like a doctor's office. Perhaps it is because people feel free to confide in someone they do not expect to ever see again. Write a paragraph about a personal conversation you have had with a stranger. As Hamill does, include details that make your reader able to picture where you were, how you started talking with the person, and what your first impression was of him or her. Then narrate the conversation that occurred. Include non-verbal information, such as body language, to paint the most vivid word picture that you can.

## ESSAY ASSIGNMENTS

1. Most people like to "people watch." It can be fascinating to watch strangers, notice their appearance, observe their characteristics, and overhear bits of their conversations. The young people on the bus are doing such people-watching when they first notice Vingo. They study his appearance and characteristics, then imagine who he is and where he is going.

Taking a notebook along, go to a public place, such as a park, coffee shop, mall, or ball game. Pick out a stranger who catches your interest—someone whom you can observe for at least ten or fifteen minutes. Trying not to be too obvious about it (pretend you're doing ordinary homework!), jot down notes about that person. Your notes should cover not only physical characteristics (such as the person's features, build, hair color and style, clothing), but also anything you notice about his or her nervous habits, gestures, tone of voice, way of moving, mood, and so on.

Once you are back home with your notes, write a descriptive essay about this person. In it, give as rich and detailed a description as you can of him or her. Describe not only what the person looked like, but what your observations suggested about his or her personality. End your essay by telling your reader what you imagine about this person. Let your imagination run wild! You might imagine what the person does for a living, what his or her home life is like, or what he or she was thinking during the time you were watching.

In your thesis statement, you could mention the overall impression the person made on you, like this:

- The heavy-set man eating scrambled eggs in Mel's Diner caught my attention because he looked so deeply unhappy.
  - The young woman sitting on the park bench, reading a paperback novel, looked to me like a person without a problem in the world.
2. Vingo had to wait in suspense to discover something important about his future. When have you had the experience of waiting a long time (or what seemed like a long time) to find out something important? Such situations might have involved a grade for a project or a class, an award for which you were in the running, a part in a play, a question concerning your (or a loved one's) health, or an acceptance or rejection by a college or another important program. Write an essay about the situation. Tell the story a little at a time, as Hamill does, in order to keep the reader in suspense until the end. Begin by explaining what you were waiting for and why it was important. Continue by describing the wait and the emotions you experienced as time went by. Finish by telling how the wait finally ended and how you felt once it was over.