

## **BUS CRASH!**

Floyd Miller

No. 9 Third Street in the village of Congers, N.Y., is a neat frame house where Edward and Joan Fitzgerald live with their seven children and his mother. On the morning of March 24, 1972, the household routine was proceeding as usual. At 7:50 a.m., Joan was standing by the kitchen table brushing her six-year-old daughter's hair. The three older children had prepared their own breakfasts and gone off. Now Joan was downstairs to feed the younger ones and dispatch them to school.

There was one thing out of the ordinary in the kitchen this morning; the sink's drainboard was piled high with moulages that Joan had washed the night before and would pack away today. Moulages are artificial wounds – gunshot and stab wounds, burns, abrasions, lacerations – made of plastic in vivid, realistic colors. It looked as though some macabre autopsy had been performed in the Fitzgerald sink.

Joan was a first-aid instructor and a longtime member of the Congers Volunteer Ambulance Corps. Just the night before, she had conducted

a disaster rehearsal for the corps. She had pasted the moulages on volunteer “victims” scattered about the scene of the “disaster”, then sent corps members in to rescue, diagnose and treat them.

Now as she brushed her daughter's hair, Joan thought back on the rehearsal. There had been a few errors, of course. One, concerned 16 year old Stephen Ward, who played the victim of a gunshot. The rescue squad found, diagnosed and correctly treated the bullet-entry wound on his chest – but failed to discover and treat the exit wound in his back. “I'm sorry Stevie” Joan had joked, “but you're dead.”

Perhaps it was preoccupation with the memory that prevented her from performing one small bit of her morning routine. At 7:55 there came the flat, penetrating blast of the horn on a diesel locomotive. This sound always made her look out the window, toward the point some 200 feet away where Gilcrest Road crosses the Penn Central railroad tracks. For whatever reason, on this morning she did not look.

Seconds later there came another sound. A thud, and she thought that perhaps her ten-year-old son, John, had fallen out of bed. Dropping the hairbrush, she started for the stairs then saw John standing in the kitchen doorway. His face was drained of color, a white mask with two enormous eyes burned into it. He said, “A train just hit the school bus.” She turned and looked out the window. What she saw made her stagger, and her lungs empty of air as if a fist had been driven into her stomach. She could only utter a hoarse whisper, “Oh, my God!”

### **Harvesting the Children**

Joseph Larkin was a 35 year-old New York City fireman, living in Rockland County and commuting to work. He had discovered the hard realities of suburban living; it was all but impossible to stretch his fireman's salary far enough to adequately feed, clothe and house a family of four. He needed a second job. In the fall of 1969, he had become a part-time school-bus driver, taking children to the village of Nyack,

where the area high school was located.

On that morning, which had started so routinely in the Fitzgerald household, Larkin drove from his home to the school-bus parking lot in Congers. He entered the big yellow bus, no. 596, checked the brakes and the flashing red warning lights that festooned the vehicle, then headed for the Valley Cottage neighborhood he served.

Minutes later he was weaving his way through streets lined with comfortable homes, picking up clusters of students at designated stops. At the corner of Gateway and Russet stood Barbara Trunz. Barbara had recently tried out for the lead in a school play, and the result would be announced this afternoon. With butterflies in her stomach, she had managed only a glass of orange juice for breakfast. Her mother, a former television actress, understood completely. At the door, as Barbara left she called softly, "Chin up."

Barbara entered the bus and walked toward the rear, taking an aisle seat three rows from the back.

One of the next to board was Stephen Ward, his parents' only child. Always a quiet boy, this year he had come to the decision that he wanted to attend the U.S. Military Academy at West Point,

some 25 miles up the Hudson River from his home. He composed letters to Vice President Agnew and to the two New York Senators, asking that they consider him for an appointment. And he set doggedly to work improving his grades. He had been a borderline student in math, but his marks climbed until this last semester he had made a 92 average. Boarding the bus, he took a window seat on the right side on the sixth row.

The Macaylo brothers, 14-year-old Clifford and 18-year-old Richard, got on soon afterward. Clifford found a seat near the front while his brother continued down the aisle to a vacant place next to Ward. Stephen had told Richard about his dream of attending West Point. Some of his friends might laugh at such an ambition, but not Richard, who was himself an outstanding student. Now as the Macaylo boy joined him, Stephen began to relate his misadventure of the night before when he had been "shot dead" during the ambulance corps's disaster rehearsal.

Coming aboard at the next stop were the Mauterer brothers, 16-year-old David and 14-year-old Robert. David sat near the front, but his younger brother walked back until he found a seat in the middle of the bus,

just in front of Stephen Ward and Richard Macaylo, and across from one of his heroes, James McGuiness. "Muggsy" McGuiness played varsity football, lacrosse and hockey. A stocky boy, he was not a natural athlete, but few were so dedicated. "Muggsy" looks like a walking fireplug, commented one of his coaches. "But he gives 100 percent."

When Teresa McNeely climbed aboard, she walked toward the rear of the bus, where she stood next to Barbara Trunz. She wanted to talk to her friend – but also she wanted to display a new pair of slacks she was wearing.

Teresa's mother and stepfather, Alice and Tom Martin, were old-fashioned in their ideas about dress and, in spite of Teresa's protests, did not approve of jeans or slacks for school wear except in bad weather. Alice Martin was a nurse, a member of the IV (intravenous) staff at nearby Nyack Hospital, and this morning as she was getting ready to go to work, she caught a glimpse of Teresa passing her hall door, clad in slacks. She opened her mouth to call her daughter back but a glance at the clock told her that to do so would make the girl miss her bus. She weighed the priorities of time and duty – and did nothing, resolving only to

speak to Teresa about it later.

Driver Larkin worked his way through Valley Cottage, harvesting children, until the bus was full to overflowing. In all, it contained 48 passengers: 31 boys and 17 girls, seven of them standees.

They started down Gilcrest Road on the final leg to Nyack High School. Normally the bus did not come this way, but construction work on a new sewer system had forced a detour in recent days. The road here descended gently to the tracks of the Penn Central railroad. There was no gate, no watchman, no electric warning lights or bell. Only a round sign with the traditional X and RR, and above it an octagonal sign bearing the word STOP stood at the track. South of the crossing a stand of trees partially blocked the view, but on this March day the trees were leafless. Through the bare branches, several of the students saw a train coming.

### **A Banshee Howl**

Penn Central, train no. 2653 had been made up in the Weehawken, N.J. marshalling yards the night before. There were three giant diesel locomotives and 73 freight cars. The train crew arrived at 5 a.m., performed routine checks of the brakes, and

then proceeded to North Bergen, where they picked up ten additional freight cars.

The run northward was uneventful until they arrived at control point 22 in West Nyack. Here they discovered a signal malfunction, the light kept turning from yellow to green to yellow. The train stopped and engineer Charles Carpenter radiotelephoned New York to report the condition. The dispatcher assured him the track ahead was clear and told him to proceed. In an upgrade, the three diesels strained and thundered to pick up the speed lost by the stop. At a point just south of Congers, the train, all 4000 tons of it, was moving at 25 m.p.h.

At 7:54 the lead engine came abreast of a whistling post, which meant that a road crossing lay 1500 feet ahead and procedure 14-L was in force. Under this regulation, the engineer sounds two long blasts, a short and another long on the horn. The warning was made.

Just beyond the whistling post the tracks curve to the left, and as the train rounded the bend the three men in the cab – engineer Carpenter, fireman George Gray and brakeman John Carey, had an unobstructed view of the Gilcrest Road crossing. Visibility was good. The

track ahead was straight and clear.

Fireman Gray, seated on the left side of the cab, saw a distant flash of yellow – the bus. It was several hundred feet from the railroad crossing, plenty of space in which to halt. Still, Gray was worried. He always felt uneasy when school buses approached the tracks on which his train was riding. All of the men in the cab of the train had now spotted the bus and all had their eyes fixed on it, expecting it to slow at any moment. Seconds passed and each man tensed his right-leg muscles, as if his own foot was riding that distant brake pedal. Opposite the approaching bus, on the other side of the crossing, a garbage truck, driven by William Muccio, had halted. Muccio, too, watched transfixed as the bus descended the hill. Then instinctively he brought his fist down on the horn. The howl was joined by a banshee cry from the train.

In the caboose, conductor Joseph Libertucci kept a routine watch on the long line of swaying freight cars stretching ahead and, one by one, disappearing behind the stand of trees to the left. Suddenly the radio speaker came alive, and he heard engineer Carpenter's frantic voice from the cab far ahead, cry

out the warning of disaster:  
“Mayday! Mayday!”

At that moment the train was “dumped” as the engineer pulled the emergency brake that locked the wheels. There was a scream of metal, then a clatter as the strungout train began to contract. But the momentum of 4000 tons could not be stopped at once, and the great diesel engine thundered into the crossing.

Fireman Gray, hypnotized with horror, watched the hurtling bus enter the crossing at the same moment. Forever etched on his mind’s eye is a row of faces framed in the bus windows – some with mouths open on silent screams, others with hands extended in pitiful hope of fending off the monster now upon them.

### **“Don’t Panic!”**

The engine caught the bus just behind its center point with the force and the sound of a bomb exploding. Like a giant blade, the locomotive jaggedly sheared off the rear half of the bus and flipped it onto its top near the crossing, spilling passengers and seats in the roadway. The rest of the bus, from row 6 forward, caved in under the impact and wrapped itself, as though made of flimsy foil, around the engine’s blunt nose. Then, ripping and

crumpling, the tangled mass of steel screeched 1000 feet farther down the track, the diesel’s front still firmly encased in the bus.

Along the entire 1000 feet, broken bodies covered the right-of-way. A strange snowstorm filled the air—thousands of bits of paper, torn from texts and notebooks, homework that would never receive a grade—settled slowly over the bodies. At last the train halted and there was silence.

In the kitchen window overlooking this scene were the whitened faces of Joan Fitzgerald, ten-year-old John and six-year-old Eileen. Joan had her arms around her children, but there was no protecting them from this sight. “The bus didn’t stop”. John kept repeating. “The bus didn’t stop.”

The disaster rehearsal Joan had conducted the night before seemed to have little relationship to the reality now before her. The moulages on her drainboard had produced no such feelings of helplessness and outrage as now flooded through her. How could such a thing happen?

She grabbed a phone and dialed the police. “A train has hit a school bus on Gilcrest Road!” she yelled into the receiver. “We’ll need ambulances, a lot of them. And a fire company.”

Then she threw on a topcoat, grabbed a bag of first aid equipment and dashed out of the house. She felt as if lead weights were attached to her feet. She was running as fast as she could yet her progress seemed to be measured in inches.

At last she arrived at the crossing, where the rear half of the bus lay. There had been 21 children in this half and, of that number, two were on their feet. A boy and a girl walked in tight little circles, around and around, their faces totally void of expression.

“Sit down,” Joan said to them. “Sit on the ground and don’t move until I can get to you!” The youngster obeyed.

Her problem was one of priorities. Which child demanded immediate attention and which could be safely postponed? She came upon a boy who had been thrown from the bus with such velocity that his head was half-buried in the ground. She knelt and clawed the dirt away from his face so that he might breathe more easily. She felt for the pulse in his neck, and found it strong. He could wait.

Sprawled nearby was the still form of a boy whose leg had been severed below the knee. She scrambled to him. When she reached his side she discovered that, though the leg was grotesquely

twisted back, with jagged ends of broken bone exposed, the foot and ankle were still attached by some calf muscles and tendons. She applied a tourniquet to stop his blood from draining out.

As she moved among the children, Joan had the impression she was watching a poorly put together movie in which disjointed scenes flashed briefly on the screen. Suddenly a policeman appeared between two of the freight cars. When he saw the carnage, his face drained of color. Hoarsely he shouted to no one in particular, “Don’t panic! Don’t panic!”

William Muccio, whose garbage truck had stopped for the train, appeared beside Joan, tears streaming down his face. “What can I do!” he begged. “What can I do?”

Next she saw two men wearing business suits running toward her. “Cover some of the children with your coats!” she shouted at them. Instantly, they obeyed. About this time her husband arrived. The three men worked along with Joan.

Sirens could be heard now, as several ambulances came up Gilcrest Road from the east and halted by the train. Maggie Kuehne, a volunteer with the Nyack Community Ambulance Corps, climbed between

the freight cars as the policeman had done and jumped from the railroad coupling to the ground. With her arms full of first aid equipment, she landed awkwardly and grimaced with pain. As she would discover later, she had dislocated a vertebra in her neck. Though in great pain, she continued working over the children.

Between the flashing scenes, Joan Fitzgerald moved from child to child, letting her hands bandage and splint automatically, as if by reflex. She knew two of the children but if she saw them, she didn’t recognize them—her senses retreated from the horror of the scene. Nearby lay the crumpled body of Stephen Ward; the boy on whom she had pasted the bullet wound moulages the night before, the boy whom she had jokingly pronounced dead. He was still alive, his pulse was thin and weak.

### **“This Hellish Day”**

As Dr. Saul Freedman, chief of the NYC Hospital Medical Emergency Service, pulled into his parking space, a nurse came running out with the news of the accident. “Get Judy and Lillian and come with me,” Freedman directed.

With three nurses and first aid equipment in his car, he headed for Gilcrest Road, arriving at 8:15.

Dr. Freedman had been a captain in the Navy’s medical corps during World War II, but the thousands of battle casualties he had seen did not affect him quite the way these children did.

“I’ve seen bravery in battle,” he said later, “but none more than here. There was no crying or wailing. Children with smashed pelvises, all but severed limbs, lacerated faces, torn abdomens, concussions, broken backs – they all waited with stoic patience until we could get to them.”

One girl, Mary Jane LiPuma, had been sitting in the sixth row of the bus, opposite the point of impact. “She had a partial amputation of one leg below the knee,” Dr. Freedman recalls, “and she was covered with blood from lacerations. Yet when I knelt beside her she managed to say, ‘I’m all right. Please take care of my friend.’”

Also on the scene was Dr. Frederick Zugibe, the Rockland County medical examiner. In his job he had seen countless accidents, yet what he found here shook him. He remarked, “I have seven children of my own, and it was as if they were sprawled there beside the tracks. It was difficult not to weep.

After the Congers ambulance arrived and she had done as much as she

could for the children on that side of the tracks, Joan Fitzgerald walked to the front of the train, where the forward half of the bus was still impaled on the engine. In the driver's seat sat John Larkin, intermittently incoherent and as yet unattended. From time to time he would ask, "Was anybody hurt?", no one answered him.

It was determined that Larkin had a spinal injury and a "spine board" was ordered brought from one of the ambulances. His limp body was handed down from the wreckage, strapped to the spine board and taken to a waiting ambulance.

Now came a new horror. Between the flattened bus and the diesel locomotive, the rescuers discovered the body of a boy. The mystery of how, in that second of impact, he could have been ejected from the bus and dropped between the bus and train would never be solved. An ambulance corpsman climbed up on the wreckage and worked his way close enough to touch the boy.

"He's alive! He's alive!" he shouted back. What could be done? It was beyond the strength of the men to separate the welded metals of bus and locomotive, and an acetylene torch would ignite spilled gasoline. Miraculously, a tractor backhoe now appeared. A

steel cable was swiftly linked to the body of the bus, and the tractor growled and backed off tightening the cable. The twisted steel of the bus groaned, trembled and, with a metallic cry, came loose. Rescuers stepped into the widening gap and found not one boy but two! Gently they were lifted down, placed in ambulances and rushed to the hospital. Both survived.

By 9:15, the last of the living had been removed. There were, however, two bodies beneath the train. That was how death had come for John McGuinness, the star athlete, and Richard Macaylo, the star student. They were removed by Dr. Zugibe and his assistant, and taken away for autopsies. A third boy, Robert Mauterer, was dead on arrival at the hospital. Three families thus far.

Their jobs done for the moment, Dr. Zugibe and Joan Fitzgerald accepted mugs of coffee brought by neighbors. The doctor studied Joan for a moment, she said, "How do you feel about this bus driver? I noticed that you backed off when he was taken away."

"I couldn't bring myself to help him," Joan confessed. "I'm ashamed of myself, but there it is." "Try to look at it this way," Zugibe advised. "He's a man who made a terrible mistake, but he

will punish himself more than you ever can. He'll live with this hellish day for the rest of his life. So will his wife and children." This dialogue, in essence, would be repeated many times by many people in the days ahead.

### **Boy A and Girl B**

Stunned by the calamity, Nyack and its neighboring towns of Congers and Valley Cottage reacted swiftly, drawing together, pooling resources to meet the common crisis.

At 8:02 a.m., at the Nyack Hospital, the Disaster Plan was put into effect, the first time it had been used for an accident of this magnitude. All department heads were notified, from the director of pathology to the maintenance and food services. All off-duty nurses were summoned, with special emphasis on emergency and intensive care personnel.

A small community hospital such as Nyack's depends heavily on non-paid volunteers. The director of this department was soon on the telephone summoning her Pink Ladies (adults) and Candy Strippers (teenagers) to augment the staff of 35 that would normally report for duty.

There was one enormous piece of good fortune: a new six-story

wing had just been completed. It added 140 new beds and brought the total of operating rooms to nine. One of these was now in use, but all other surgery was cancelled.

Chief surgeon Dr. Herbert Sperling heard the first news bulletin of the crash on his car radio. He drove immediately to the hospital and gave instructions to summon all physicians in all specialties; cardiology, gastroenterology, hematology, neurosurgery, orthopedics, anesthesiology and plastic surgery. He cancelled all regularly scheduled surgery. Meanwhile, the director of radiology ordered the cancellation of all scheduled work in the eight X-ray rooms.

At 8:30, the first of the injured students arrived at the hospital. As each was admitted, he received a tetanus shot and an intravenous nurse drew a blood sample in case a transfusion would be needed. Then Dr. Sperling made preliminary diagnoses before sending the child to radiology for x-rays or, in extreme cases, direct to surgery.

When the first child arrived, however, a problem of identification developed. Few carried wallets or purses, and those who did had lost them in the maelstrom of the collision. Moreover, most were unconscious or

so disoriented that they could not answer questions. Who were they?

They were identified for the time being, by marking letters of the alphabet on their foreheads, and all the medical records that accompanied them through the hospital carried the anonymous A, B, C label, until parents or schoolmates or someone could give them back their names.

By 8:45 there was a continuous caravan of surgical carts bringing young patients down from emergency to the radiological department, where eight technicians and four radiologists, many of them not scheduled for work that day, were on duty. A General Electric technician who had just completed the installation of one of the machines stayed on to assist in the darkroom.

As each X-ray film was exposed it was rushed off for immediate development. Seated in the viewing room all that morning and reading the films was Dr. Frank Dain, who noted each diagnosis – “loss of teeth...fractured nasal bones...partial amputation left leg below knee...compression of 7-8-9<sup>th</sup> thoracic vertebrae, fractured skull...”

Dain attached each written diagnosis to the film and stuck both on the corridor wall with surgical tape. From there they were

taken by an operating room nurse into surgery, where they were matched with the letters drawn on the foreheads of the still figures stretched out on the operating tables.

At the switchboard, Marge Krupinski watched the incoming lines light up as doctors and nurses throughout the area called to offer their services. Then came ordinary citizens volunteering help. “I’m a grandmother,” said one, “and an experienced baby-sitter. Perhaps I could help some family that has small children at home.” A housewife called, offering to make beds or to “push stretchers.”

The New York press called again and again with increasing impatience. When told that the names of the dead and injured were not yet known, they did not believe it.

Most difficult were the calls from frantic parents. One father called long distance from Maryland wanting to know if his son had been on the bus. Marge Krupinski put his call on hold for 20 minutes while she ran through the offices and corridors searching for someone who might know the answer. At last she was able to report back to the father, his son had been on the bus and was injured. The father took the next plane home.

Telephone operator Fay Smith had a special

relationship with the McGuiness family. One evening a year ago, Fay's older daughter had gone for an auto ride with her best friend, Carol McGuiness, and there had been an accident. Fay's daughter died. The two families, brought together by their pain, had remained close ever since.

Now, Jim McGuiness's familiar voice come on the line asking Fay if there was any news about young Jimmy. "No news has come up yet, Jim. I'll call you back the minute I hear anything" Thirty minutes later Jimmy's mother called: Fay, this is Peggy, I'm sorry to bother you again...." Her voice trailed off.

By now the company had sent a chief operator to relieve the staff, a supervisor to handle any unforeseen problems and a repairman to stand by incase there were mechanical difficulties. The phone company was also installing eight direct dial phones for the free and unlimited use of parents. Fay left the switchboard and sought out a doctor. "Put on a surgical gown and go through the operating rooms," he said. "Maybe you can identify him."

Wearing one of the wrinkled green garments, Fay began a tour of the hospital, peering down into face after face as she repeated, "Jimmy

McGuiness...has anyone seen Jimmy McGuiness?" It became a prayer, but it brought no response. Jimmy McGuiness was not in the hospital. There was only one other place he could be – the morgue.

### **It was awful, Mama!**

Tom Martin, Teresa McNeely's stepfather, owns a real estate appraisal firm and was working on a project for a Rockland County park. At 8:05, at his desk, he heard the alarm summoning volunteer fireman. He paused, pencil poised. He was a volunteer but was not required to answer calls, and the park job was important. He decided not to respond, but even as he made the decision the pencil fell from his fingers and he found himself running.

At the fire station a lieutenant was directing volunteers who were loading all stretchers available onto the equipment truck. "What happened?" Tom asked.

"Train hit a school bus," came the reply. "Bodies all over the place. Gilcrest Road."

That was the route taken by Teresa's bus! The truck roared down the highway while Tom clung desperately to the handrail. It was the wildest ride he had ever experienced. Long before they reached

the accident, they found the highway choked with traffic, so they turned off the road and jolted down the railroad right-of-way.

Tom saw a chaotic scene – 14 emergency vehicles from three fire companies and six ambulance corps were already there, parked helter-skelter on the tracks and the roads and in fields. Bodies of children were being pulled from the wreckage, treated on the ground or loaded into the ambulances. He saw a nurse at work in a blood-drenched uniform.

Within seconds he was propelled into the scene. He distributed stretchers, and helped unload generators that could produce power for metal cutting tools.

Teresa was in the back of his mind, but he could not abandon his job to search for her. Once, when he almost stumbled over the face down body of a girl, his heart rose into his throat. But it was not Teresa. He began to tell himself that Teresa had not been on this bus – and he repeated it, over and over, until it became a litany.

When Teresa's mother arrived at her desk at the hospital, she found a hastily scribbled note: "Alice, go to the emergency room." She hung up her coat and walked briskly to the rear of the building.

On the way another nurse told her about the bus crash. Alice felt a flicker of fear, but she banished it. Coming to work, she had followed the regular route taken by Teresa's bus, and had seen no accident. She did not know that the bus had taken a detour. She walked faster, in spite of herself. As she came down the corridor leading to the emergency room, she saw a long row of empty stretchers, ready for use. Not in the three years that she has worked here had she seen such extensive preparations.

Through the door from the emergency room came a stretcher containing a small, still figure, clad in slacks. Alice began to run.

"Teresa!" her mother called. "Oh, my God, Teresa."

Three members of the ambulance crew were clustered about the stretcher, but Alice swept them aside and leaned over her child. Gravel was embedded in her lacerated face and scalp. Her eyes opened briefly, and a whisper came from blood-caked lips: "Mama." "It's all right, baby. It's all right."

Dr. Sperling examined Teresa, then put his arm around Alice's shoulders. "I doubt there are internal injuries," he said. "We'll send her to X-ray at once. Would you like to go along?"

Alice guided her daughter through the X-ray rooms, then upstairs where she supervised her transfer to bed.

"It was awful, Mama, awful. The train came right down on us" Teresa began to tremble.

"Hush, darling. Try to go to sleep."

The sedatives were beginning to work and the young girl said drowsily, "I'm all right, Mama. Go help the others."

Alice Martin kissed her daughter tenderly on the forehead and left the room. She was more fortunate than the other parents. She had work to do.

### **An Intimacy of Fear**

By 8:45 the hospital's main lobby was teeming with people. The emergency plan had not foreseen an invasion of close to 100 distraught parents, grandparents brothers and sisters. Although kept off surgical and recovery floors, they could not be told to go home; they had a right to be as near their children as possible.

To clear the congestion, hospital administrator Russell Drumm moved them to a large meeting room on the ground floor near the cafeteria and arranged to have them supplied with coffee and sandwiches round-the-clock. Ordinarily used for conferences, the room was

furnished with chairs and tables. It was secluded from the bustle of the lobby and main halls. Here the parents huddled together in the new intimacy of fear.

Nyack priests, ministers and rabbis arrived to offer support and comfort. Father Donald Whelan of St. Ann's Roman Catholic Church had been at breakfast in the rectory when a call came from the hospital switchboard. Living but five blocks away, he was in the emergency room when the first of the injured arrived. To those he knew were Catholic, he gave last rites. To the others, he gave conditional last rites. Then after the last child had passed through the emergency room, he went to the meeting room to join the parents.

For the rest of that morning he was the parents' emissary to the upper floors. As the children were slowly being identified, it was usually Father Whelan who brought the news. When a child left surgery, Father Whelan appeared at the doctor's elbow to beg information for the parents. He is a soft spoken, enduring sort of man. When the news he brought was bad, he didn't unload the full burden of it on the parents but shared the weight with them.

Each time he entered the meeting room, all talk stopped and the parents looked at him with pleading eyes. Many thought they would welcome any news – surely nothing could be worse than the racking suspense of not knowing. But each time he returned they shrank within themselves, protecting their ignorance and their hope.

On one of his trips the priest walked slowly through the crowd to stop, finally, in front of Jean Moran. She blanched, and reached for a friend's arm to steady herself. "I just saw Claudia," the priest said softly. "She's alive."

"Thank God," Jean Moran whispered, and let out a shuddering breath. But her relief lasted only a moment. "How badly is she hurt?"

"Some internal injuries. They're not sure of the extent, but nothing that can't be repaired. You can see her for a few minutes now before she goes into surgery."

The mother started for the door, but after a few steps she paused and looked back. The priest gave her a reassuring smile. "I'll come with you," he said, and took her by the arm.

There was bravery and consideration in that room. No parent asked special attention over the others. And all shared the news,

good and bad. As one later described it: "When a neighbor learned his child had only minor injuries, we all rejoiced. And when one was told his child was on the critical list, we all felt the knife in our hearts. It was as if we all had 45 children of our own."

As news of the accident spread, parents from all over the district began frantically calling the high school to make certain their children were safe in class. Teachers attempted to hold regular classes, but the constant interruptions were not conducive to study. And in each room one or more empty seats grimly attested to the accident.

One boy was summoned to the front office where his father waited; he insisted on meeting his son face to face before he would believe him safe. Upon seeing the boy uninjured, he broke into tears.

The youth returned to class, shaken, "I never saw my dad cry before," he said.

### **Operating Room 5**

Within 38 minutes of the accident all the injured had been removed from the scene. One hour after the first arrival at the hospital, 45 children and one adult had been admitted, examined and were in

beds, radiology or operating rooms. By noon some 300 X-ray pictures had been taken, at least 25 transfusions of blood plasma and fibrinogen (a blood protein) given, and 17 major surgical procedures performed.

Pediatricians assisted anesthesiologists, ophthalmologists sutured for orthopedists, neurologists sutured for urologists, plastic surgeons sponged for dental surgeons. "The doctors were simply wonderful," a parent later remarked. "They not only took care of our children but us too. I don't know exactly what the Hippocratic Oath says, but that day we saw it in action."

In short, they did what had to be done. And sometimes they performed what seemed to be miracles.

In operating room 5 lay a slender, dark-haired youngster of 14 who wore on his forehead the marking 'D. Unconscious'. He has sustained a blow on his head, a fracture of the right collarbone, a broken left leg, and in many parts of his body there was hemorrhaging: But it was his right leg that now concerned a team of surgeons headed by Dr. Eric Rothschild. It was about to be amputated.

His real name was David Fleetham. He had been sitting by the window in row 7, just behind the

point where the bus was cleft in two. In the right leg both major bones had been severed at midshank between knee and ankle, and their jagged ends protruded through the flesh. The upper and lower half of the leg were still attached, but only by a few tendons and a lump of calf muscle. The foot was dead cold, having had no circulation in it for almost an hour.

Surgeons do not lightly remove a leg and at some point during the preparations the doctors gathered around the operating table and changed their minds. There was still a chance the leg might be saved, they decided. So they found themselves undertaking the long and difficult task of setting the jagged bone ends, then suturing together muscles, tendons, nerves and arteries. This finally done, a cast was put on the leg and the patient wheeled to the intensive care unit.

In the days hence, infection would set in. But it would be defeated and David's leg would be saved.

Sometimes no miracles on earth could suffice. At 9:10 a.m. 17-year-old Joan Ferrara lay on a stretcher in the corridor. She was in traumatic shock, pale and shivering, her pulse rapid and thready, her blood pressure 80/20. She had severe lacerations of the

face, her cheek was laid open to reveal a bloodied jaw and missing teeth. Her eyes had been jolted out of alignment, causing double vision. But as with Boy D, it was her right leg that gave the doctors greatest concern. The foot and lower leg were crushed, the muscles macerated. This grotesquerie was attached to the rest of the leg by a half-inch strip of flesh.

When wheeled into the operating room, specialists surrounded her. Headed by Nyack chief orthopedic surgeon Dr. Edward Leahey, the team included a neurosurgeon, dental surgeon, plastic surgeon, urologist and ophthalmologist. They went to work on her broken body, and in a series of operations (extending over a number of weeks) they did some truly miraculous things. Her cheek and jaw were repaired, from inside her mouth so no scars would show. But there was no saving her right foot; truly it was no longer a foot. The bit of connecting flesh was snipped.

### **The Healing Process**

Nyack and Valley Cottage awoke on Saturday morning, the 25<sup>th</sup>, with an emotional hangover, feeling drugged. Parents, relatives and friends, hospital staff and volunteers – all had been

carried through the first day by a natural response to disaster, and by a sense of unreality in the face of its enormity. On this bleak dawn the tragedy became real. Richard Macaylo, James McGuinness and Robert Mauterer were dead; Joan Ferrara had lost a leg and later Mary Jane LiPuma would lose one too. Eight children remained on the critical list.

On Sunday there was an inter-faith memorial service in Valley Cottage's All Saints Episcopal Church. Some 500 mourners filled the church and spilled onto the lawn outside. Many were strangers. One woman from New Jersey explained, "When I heard the news I thanked God that my children were not involved. But then I found that I couldn't turn aside. These boys were in some way a part of me. I had to come here."

The following day, Terrence Cardinal Cooke came from New York to conduct a requiem mass for the three dead boys at St. Paul's Roman Catholic Church in Congers. The pallbearers were teen-age friend and classmates. That same Monday morning, 14-year-old Tom Grosse died at the hospital. He had been standing in the aisle of the bus at the point of impact. He never regained consciousness. A service for him was held

Wednesday evening at the Germonds Presbyterian Church. This, too was attended by many parents of the injured and dead, all members of a new family created and held together by the bonds of loss and sorrow.

Nor was this the end of the pain. On April 12, the critical list was again reduced, when Stephen Ward died.

After six days in the hospital Joseph Larkin, the bus driver was to be discharged. His safety had been a constant concern. Twice the security men had moved him to keep the location of his room a secret. Perhaps the precautions were excessive, but a number of threatening letters addressed to "Killer Larkin" had arrived at the hospital. Even the floor nurses had initially felt hostility towards Larkin, but their attitude soon changed. One of the nurses explained, "He never rang for help of any kind. He had a fractured collarbone with some displacement and he must have been in pain, but one would never have known it. Whenever a nurse entered his room she would find him staring out the window, his face a mask. He answered any question put to him, but otherwise was mute."

On March 30, Larkin was instructed to dress and remain in his room until someone came for him. He

obeyed, sitting there staring out at the landscape he had studied so intently for six days. Finally the door opened and a nurse came in, guiding a wheelchair. Without a word he sat in it and was pushed into the thronged hall.

The safest, least conspicuous way to remove him was to act as if he were an ordinary patient being discharged in a routine manner. Guards had been placed at strategic points along his route through the halls, but they were careful to pretend no interest in the man wheeled past them.

As Larkin entered the lobby, several people turned to study him. Over their faces played the light of recognition, swiftly dimmed by uncertainty. His picture had appeared in a local paper but the photograph, taken at a happier time, bore but fleeting resemblance to the haggard man in the wheelchair. Larkin had aged markedly during his stay in the hospital. He was 35 when he entered; he looked 45 when he left. At last he was through the front door and into a waiting car.

On Friday, March 31, a giant two-motored Marine helicopter flew north from the U.S. Marine base in New River, N.C., hovered briefly over the athletic field of Nyack High School, then with a fierce

beating of the air settled to the earth. Out stepped LT. Vladimir Oksevski, the pilot Capt. William Holls and 24 enlisted men that had flown here to donate blood to the accident victims.

Lt. Oksevski, a refugee from Yugoslavia, had once lived in Congers. "When I heard about the crash," he said, "I knew I had to do something to help those people from my hometown."

Then the Marines marched across the street to the hospital, where they gave their blood and visited the injured.

The desire to help, to be a part of the healing process, ran through all segments of the community. Children from the Monsey Jewish Center began canvassing door to door to collect money for the victims and their families. Nyack and Congers high school students and a Catholic Youth Organization group did the same. Merchants and local government offices set up "donation jars" on their premises. Athletic contests were held, with proceeds going to the families. Many sent contributions direct to the hospital - \$3000 arrived the first weekend.

As the press and television spread news of the growing fund, checks began to come in from all over the nation. One envelope contained a brief

but touching note, along with some crumpled bills that added up to \$50. It was from a prisoner in a southern jail.

Donations soon reached \$70,000 and the fund became an official charity, registering with New York State. An “Instant Help Committee” was appointed and authorized to disperse money to the parents upon the presentation of any accident related bills, including the hiring of baby-sitters, housekeepers and tutors. Whatever problems these families faced, worry about immediate medical bills would not be among them.

### **Reason Why**

As the first shock waves that swept over the country began to subside, there arose some angry questions. How could such a thing happen? What had gone wrong? The community had always believed that the big yellow school buses represented the safest possible transportation for its’ children. Yet the unthinkable has happened. Why?

Out of the various hearings and inquests emerged some appalling facts and figures. For one thing, the crossing at Gilcrest Road had no gates, no warning lights, no bell, only the RR and stop sign. A year before, a petition had been

circulated in the neighborhood asking the railroad to install at least a flashing light and bell that would be activated by an approaching train. But nothing happened. The Penn Central declared that warning lights or gates were unnecessary on a “single railroad track where trains can approach from only one direction at a time.”

The grim truth was that, as of last summer, there were 2400 crossings in New York State without gates or electrical warning signals of any kind. The Penn Central and the state are currently installing signals at the rate of 30 a year, which means the job will be completed by 2052.

In 1971 in New York State, there were 906 school bus accidents, resulting in eight deaths and 402 injuries. Nationwide, there were 47,000 school bus accidents with 170 deaths and 5600 injuries. Unless drastic steps are taken, this toll can only mount. In 1971, 290,000 buses carried 20 million students a day. Each year sees another 500,000 students loaded into buses.

The big yellow buses are simply not as safe as they may appear. While passenger-car design has been frequently changed over the past few years in an effort to provide more safety for the occupants, comparable concern has

not been shown for school children. Equipment failure and poor design are contributing factors in many school bus injuries.

In January 1972, the New Jersey Department of Education sponsored a symposium on Safety I School Buses, to which many experts came. It reported: Tests revealed severe safety deficiencies in present passenger seating. School bus seats improperly anchored, tend to rip out of the floor during an accident. Seat backs are of insufficient height, causing whiplash injuries during a collision from the rear, and severe head and torso damage occurs when passengers are flung ahead in a front-end collision. Padding of seat backs, bars and other exposed objects – long required in automobiles – is ignored in school buses. Nor are the buses equipped with seat belts.

Part of the carnage at Gilcrest Road resulted from the bodies of students slamming against seat backs, bars and stanchions. Many of the seats ripped loose from the floor to become deadly flying projectiles.

Emergency exits are all but useless in many accidents. Consider the bus that rolls over on its left side. The front door and right windows are high in the air, out of reach. The rear emergency exit has a complicated friction lock,

is heavy and must be pushed up against the force of gravity. It is simply beyond the capacity of children to operate it. A solution would be to place an emergency escape hatch in the roof of the bus. This has not been done because there are no laws requiring it.

The National Transportation Safety Board has issued a report critical of the structural defects in most school buses. For example, experts report that a school bus is held together by fewer rivets than a commercial bus of comparable size. In crashes the rivets give way, exposing sharp sheet metal edges that slash children. Such shortcuts in manufacturing are explained by the fact that automakers must contend with budget conscious school boards.

Whatever the structural shortcomings of school buses, the sad fact is that half or more of these accidents could have been prevented by the driver. A 1972 Indiana study revealed that in 495 accidents, the drivers were at fault in 240 – or 48%. A 1972 Nebraska study concluded that 66 % of that state's bus accidents could have been avoided by alert, healthy, trained drivers.

Since the driver's job is usually part-time and pays poorly, most of the drivers

are moonlighting. Many of them are full-time policemen or firemen. In some states, men and women as old as 70, with heart conditions, impaired eyesight or partial deafness, drive school buses.

Even youngsters aged 17, statistically a dangerous age for motorists, are driving buses.

Obviously, fatigue and the pressure of other jobs can make a driver accident-prone. But even without outside pressures, there are plenty of distractions inside the bus that can reduce driver efficiency – specifically, the problem of discipline. A bus provides the only period of the school day when there is no direct, full-time supervision of students, yet it is the most hazardous time of all. Each time a quarrel erupts, or even innocent horseplay, the driver's attention is distracted from the road. The New Jersey Department of Education symposium recommended providing trained driver's assistants "to safely cross these young children as they load and unload the bus, conduct evacuation drills, maintain discipline."

Safety regulations are inconsistent. The Clarkston school district had bus-route guidelines that prohibited travel over the dangerous Gilcrest Road crossing; neighboring

Nyack had no such rule. There are generally rules against standees in the bus, but in Nyack they were not strictly enforced. Special screening and licensing of bus drivers also is a "sometimes" thing. In May 1971 the New Jersey Division of Motor Vehicles found that 230 school-bus drivers had been given "Special Licenses" for their jobs without ever having possessed a regular driver's license. In Rockland County one driver was found to have a record of arrests for child molestation. Alcoholism occasionally surfaces; one driver kept a pint in the first-aid kit.

Whatever rules are ultimately established, there must be enforcement. At present there exists but the vaguest sort of regulation, much of it left to the carriers themselves. The public often believes the buses are owned and operated by the schools. Frequently, as in the Nyack school district, this is not the case, for economic reasons. In Nyack, cost of the buses alone would have been \$331,000, so the district contracted for the service with a private carrier. The minimum requirement would therefore appear to be a stiff safety code for all carriers, enforced by state inspections.

## Recovery

Twenty-five days after the accident, on April 18, Joseph Larkin broke his self-imposed silence. In a petition served on the Rockland district attorney, he said, “No one is more sorry than I for the tragedy of March 24, 1972. It will be part of me for the rest of my life. But it was an accident, not a crime.”

Nonetheless, on April 27, Larkin was called before a carefully guarded grand jury sitting in the county courthouse in New City. Reporters and television crews gathered on the front steps to record his arrival, but he was smuggled into the building through a back door. He came out two hours later, his shoulders slumped, his face haggard.

The following Wednesday, he was indicted on five counts of criminally negligent homicide – one for each of the five boys who died. It was the first time in New York State history that such indictments had resulted from a school-bus accident. “Criminally negligent homicide” means that the defendant’s actions “constitute a gross deviation from the standard of care that a reasonable person would observe in the situation.”

The indictments charged that “he failed to stop said school bus at a distance not less than 15 feet nor more than 50 feet

before such (railroad) crossing, that he failed to shift into low gear; that he failed to stop for a clearly marked stop sign, and failed to have the bus under proper and adequate control...that he failed to open the bus door to look and listen, as required by the rules; and as a result of which he drove said school bus upon said tracks into the path of a Penn Central freight train, which sounded an audible signal within 1000 feet as it approached the crossing with Gilcrest Road.”

Larkins’ wife stood close beside him during the reading of the indictment. At the completion, she silently wept. Her husband was led away to be photographed and fingerprinted; then he was released on his own recognizance. By this time, 17 patients had been discharged from the hospital, and the remainder would be going home within the next 30 days. Among them was David Fleethan, Boy D, his leg still intact, and Barbara Trunz, the aspiring actress. Barbara won the female lead in the school play. A local newspaper critic wrote of her; “She has an impressive way of delivering a song. One factor that makes Miss Trunz’ performance even more remarkable is that she performs on crutches. She moved with amazing grace.”

The heaviest burden of recovery fell on the amputees. To lose a leg – at the youthful age of proms, athletics and budding romance – was a cruel blow.

One afternoon, shortly before she was to be discharged, amputee Joan Ferrara had a visitor – a stranger, an attractive young woman not much older than herself- who simply walked in and announced that she was a friend of Dr. Leahey, the doctor overseeing Joan’s case. She sat down and began to chat.

Did she stare at the bed sheet, poked up by the one foot underneath, but smooth and flat where the other one should have been? Joan was convinced that she did, convinced that everyone who entered her room did so.

In return, Joan stared back with bitterness and envy at the visitor’s two shapely legs, and thought, *Easy enough for her to be animated and happy; she is not half a woman. But* these dark thoughts were interrupted by an unbelievable scene. The visitor suddenly reached up under her skirt, unsnapped a couple of buckles and removed her right leg. Then she reached up a second time and removed her left leg. She, too, had been involved in a train accident, and she had lost both legs, just below the knees.

She matter-of-factly described how the artificial legs worked. They were made of a new plastic material, soft to the touch. They slipped on over the stumps like a stocking, and attached to a sort of garter belt. They looked completely natural. After the visitor had put them back on, Joan found it difficult to believe what she had seen.

Before leaving, the young woman took Joan's hand in hers and said, "I'm getting married in June. Would you come to my wedding?"

### **Most Precious Possession**

No matter what disaster befalls a community, there are still the unchanging rituals that mark the passage of time. In Nyack, on the evening of June 24, it was the hour for graduation. At eight o'clock, family groups began arriving at the school's football field, and by 8:30 the stands were full.

At the 50-yard line was a row of chairs for faculty, honored guests and student leaders. Centered was a podium, and on the left a cluster of music stands for the school orchestra. Behind was an eight-foot backdrop made of evergreen branches. The floodlights were focused here, leaving the goalposts distant and shadowy. Across the street to the

west, was the hospital, its lighted windows partly obscured by the trees that line Midland Avenue, but its presence strongly felt.

The class of 1972 emerged from the school, and in procession moved across the field to occupy the 235 chairs awaiting them. The boys wore black gowns and mortarboards, the girls, white. "At last," muttered one parent, "you can tell the boys from the girls."

When it came time for the presentation of diplomas, the students walked up to the podium in alphabetical order. First was Steven Abernathy, the last would be Nazira Zada. Halfway through were the M's, and as the names sounded, a hush settled on the stands. Finally, the words, "Richard Macaylo, with honor." Applause erupted on all sides, and continued steadily while a friend of the dead youth came forward to receive the diploma for the family.

At 10:30 the ceremonies ended and the stands emptied onto the field, where each graduate attracted a cluster of relatives. But these many islands were not isolated from each other; they were linked by the shared experience of tragedy. The young people had known loss, but also something gained – a discovery of their own human concern for each other. And in this they had found themselves

buttressed by the adults of Nyack and the surrounding villages. The generation gap had dramatically narrowed, for they discovered they were loved.

After the congratulations, the handshakes and kisses, the groups slowly dissolved, some of them off to attend parties, others to return home. Soon the field, the goalposts, the stands and the assembled chairs were only shadows in the bright lights of the hospital across the way.

Three months later, on September 16, another ceremony took place; the dedication of a new children's park half a mile up the road from the railroad crossing. A bronze tablet embedded in a large stone was to be unveiled, and the audience included most of the surviving crash victims and their families. Some were still wearing casts, a few were on crutches, and one was in a wheelchair.

At the far edge of the crowd, a man and his wife stood quietly, withdrawn. The man was Joseph Larkin, the bus driver. Though his arrival had not been noticed, an awareness of his presence soon ran through the crowd. A few glanced in his direction, then quickly looked away. No one reached out to comfort him; it was perhaps too much to expect of these grieving parents.

But neither did they now reproach him or add to his torment. They realized that, whatever Larkin had done or failed to do, at this moment they were in the presence of courage.

Music was provided by the Nyack High School band, four of whose members were survivors of the accident. Then Cardinal Cooke gave a short address.

The plaque was undraped. It bore the date of the dedication, the names of those who had died, and these words”

### **The Children’s Memorial**

In memory of our town’s most precious possessions – five of our youth. Their promises, as a result of tragedy, were unfilled. May all who pause to share this land realize each generation carries all our hopes and our heritage.

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