

newspapers cranked up stories that a deal was possible, Sirhan said no. "I'd rather die than spend the rest of my life in jail," he said—and it seemed equally clear that he would rather risk death than lose the chance to tell his story.

So, with Sirhan glowering and muttering that this or that peripheral point was "not correct," silvery-haired Assistant D.A. David N. Fitts opened for the state—a toneless, 65-minute narrative that pictured Sirhan, "alone and not in concert with anyone else, hunting Kennedy down to the fatal encounter in an Ambassador Hotel serving pantry last June 5. Fitts's Sirhan was a nerveless plotter who bought shells for his .22-caliber pistol on June 1, went target-shooting twice in the days that followed and casually told a fellow marksman that he had the gun for "hunting . . . It could kill a dog." The state, Fitts said, would show that Sirhan had turned up at a Kennedy reception on June 2—the day after his first outing on a pistol range and three days before the shooting. And he promised evidence that Sirhan was lurking in the Ambassador for at least two hours before he murdered Kennedy—a fatal hit (out of three) from a muzzle range of 1 inch.

**'I Will Explain':** Fitts started to talk about the journals in which Sirhan is said to have written that Kennedy must die before the June 5 anniversary of the six-day Arab-Israeli war of 1967. The judge cut him off; the journals are still in dispute as evidence. But Fitts did manage to quote Sirhan in a series of replies to people who, in the tragic aftermath of the shooting, asked him why he did it. To a Los Angeles cop: "You think I'm crazy? So you can use it in evidence against me?" To California Democratic leader Jesse Unruh: "I did it for my country." To Kennedy's black athlete friend Rafer Johnson: "I will explain."

Yet Sirhan's explanation seemed likely to be one thing, his three-man defense team's quite another. With no chance for an outright acquittal, the defense hopes

to save Sirhan's life by showing him to be mentally ill. While the defendant frantically shook his head and rose half out of his seat in an angry gesture of protest, his lawyer, Emile Zola Berman, called him a "sick, obsessed" youth who was "in a trance" when he killed Kennedy.

**'Mystic':** Berman promised to produce a Sirhan memo—written shortly before the six-day war—in which he hoped "to be recorded by history as the man who triggered off the last world war." He "admired and loved" Kennedy, said Berman—until Kennedy's endorsement of the proposed delivery of 50 Phantom jets to Israel set him off. "Sirhan will tell you himself from this witness stand that he never thought and never had a thought to kill Kennedy," the lawyer went on, "but through his mystic mind power he could fantasize about it and relieve that feeling of emptiness inside him . . . At the

actual moment of the shooting he was out of contact with reality . . ."

And then the state's first witnesses recreated the whole terrible scene again and again: Sirhan snaking through the crowd, the shots, the screams, the senator spread-eagled on the pantry floor. Sirhan wore "a smirk—a sub-smile or semi-smile," part-time waiter Vincent Di Piero testified. Di Piero watched him slip forward in a semi-crouch, fire—and then, suddenly, "I had blood on my glasses . . . blood all over my face." Busboy Juan Romero, 18, was so close that powder burns scorched his cheek. He knelt beside Kennedy. "Is everybody OK?" the senator asked. "It's all right, senator," Romero told him. "You can make it, you can make it." And assistant maitre d'hôtel Karl Uecker recounted how he grabbed Sirhan, slammed him against a serving table, got him in a headlock and clutched at his gun hand. But Uecker couldn't break Sirhan's grip, and he "kept on shooting . . . kept on shooting."

None of the recital seemed to diminish Sirhan's satisfaction at having his day in court at last—none of it except when

Romero, asked to identify the killer, peered at Sirhan and suddenly lost his memory. Said Romero mildly: "I don't believe that's him."

"What did he say?" Sirhan asked defense investigator Mike McCowan.

"He said it wasn't you."

"Oh, you're kidding," said Sirhan Bishara Sirhan.

## The Defiant Defendant

In another courtroom, 1,700 miles from New Orleans, the trial for the murder of John F. Kennedy's brother was getting down to business at last. After six weeks of preliminaries in a tightly guarded Los Angeles courtroom, the prosecution began laboriously making the case not just that Sirhan Bishara Sirhan shot Robert Kennedy—no one disputes that—but that he stalked him in cool malice for days before. The defense countered by painting the 24-year-old Jordanian Arab as a youth so possessed by demons that he couldn't control his actions. His life may well depend on which view prevails—yet it was hard to tell which version displeased him more.

So eager was he to give his act meaning, indeed, that he put a stop to last-minute negotiations for a deal: a plea of guilty to first-degree murder in exchange for a prosecution pledge not to press for the death penalty. Even as