

19

The Murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

On April 4, 1968, a single rifle bullet struck and killed Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as he stood with aides on a balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. King was not yet forty years old, yet he had become the most powerful black leader of this century. Twelve years earlier he had launched, against fierce opposition, a year-long boycott of the public transportation system of Montgomery, Alabama, which led to a U.S. Supreme Court decision banning segregation on buses. This in turn effectively ended segregation in other areas. In the years that followed, King was at the forefront of vast protest marches by American blacks demanding civil rights denied them for a century. An advocate of nonviolence, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, King, like his model, Gandhi, died by violence. And in the wake of his murder, in a fury of grief and despair, blacks rioted and cities burned.

Within minutes of the shooting, Memphis police had cordoned off the district and begun a house-to-house search for the killer. He escaped. But beside a dingy rooming house opposite the motel, they found a rifle with a telescopic sight, a pair of binoculars, and a portable radio, all bundled hastily into a blanket. They decided the shot had been fired from the window of a washroom in the house by the man records showed to be the owner of the rifle: James Earl Ray, an escaped felon from the Missouri State Penitentiary. Ray had also owned a two-year-old white Mustang automobile. An all-points bulletin was broadcast for the car and its driver to all law-enforcement agencies in the surrounding states. But Ray slipped past them—first into Canada, then all the way to London.

The FBI joined in the search, bringing in its own investigators. Dr. King's lieutenants, shocked and grieved, accused the Memphis police of deliberately having pulled off security teams supposedly assigned to protect their leader. The police claimed that King and his staff had not wanted protection and had insisted the police back off. The federal agencies upset the local forces, who felt that they had done a thorough job on the case and resented Washington's interference. And while they all bickered, James Earl Ray made his way out of the country and the continent.

When he was finally caught in England and returned to Memphis for trial, Ray was represented by topflight attorneys, until he pleaded guilty and was sentenced to prison for ninety-nine years. A few days later, he went back on his confession, claiming he'd been coerced into it by threats that his father and brother were about to be arrested as his accomplices. The court refused to order a new hearing or a new trial, but Ray wasn't ready to give up. He began a long fight to gain the right to let a jury decide his guilt or innocence. Finally he got a new attorney, Mark Lane, well known for his research into and books on the Kennedy assassination.

It was Jack Anderson, the nationally syndicated columnist, who called me in to polygraph James Earl Ray. He wanted to present the results of my examination on a new television series he was developing with producer Ralph Andrews in California. Ray had been polygraphed earlier—by Douglas Wicklander of the John Reid firm in Chicago. Wicklander had determined that Ray was lying when he denied killing King, and that he was lying about a number of other

aspects of the case. Mark Lane had not been Ray's lawyer at the time of this test and felt it might not have been conducted under proper conditions. Lane was also disturbed by the tone of an extensive interview with Ray published in *Playboy* magazine. He thought the questions had been slanted and that the piece showed Ray in an unfavorable light. For these reasons he welcomed my entry into the case.

I spent every moment I could find in the next days reading anything and everything on the tragedy of April 4, 1968, and on James Earl Ray. The Hollywood Library, not far from my offices, had bulging files of clippings. I boarded a flight for Tennessee on a cold night in late December 1977. A taxi took me to a Memphis hotel, where I met Mark Lane and members of Ralph Andrews' television production staff. I liked Lane at once. I'd read about his probing of the Kennedy assassination and found him a thorough, competent, intelligent lawyer, and a first-rate interrogator. His keen, inquisitive mind showed up at once in our talk, and I knew that if Ray were ever given the chance at a new trial, Lane would present an outstanding defense.

"Ray has been used as a political football," Lane said. "That's why there's got to be a new trial. His side of the story never even got told. The case wasn't decided on the evidence. It was decided in the papers."

I met James Earl Ray in a small room in the Brushy Mountain Tennessee State Prison. He wore drab prison garb, he was thin, and his face was rather sallow. Though plainly tired, his eyes were clear. I closed the door and told him to sit down. I had a tape recorder with me, but I thought it best not to use it until I was sure Ray had accepted me as objective and disinterested. I set it on the floor and didn't move to take off the lid.

"We don't have to use this yet," I said.

He looked relieved. He was edgy and unsure of me. "I didn't like my last brush with a lie detector," he said. "I was in lousy physical shape."

"How do you feel now?" I said. "I don't want to examine you if you feel ill."

"I'm all right," he said.

He didn't give his words any tone. He kept a barrier between us.

He'd been conned by this authority and that. So Mark Lane had told me. So I'd read. It wasn't much of a surprise, then, that he distrusted me. But he wasn't the only nervous man in that room. If he was tense, my own blood pressure was high and my pulse rate was faster than the normal seventy-two beats a minute. I was sweating and he noticed it. I had to break through his reserve.

"Look," I said, "I don't have any preconceived ideas about you or what you did or did not do that got you here. I'm not concerned about the escape attempt you made. I know what the police are saying but I'm an old hand and I don't let anything anybody says influence me. A polygraph examination is going to clear up any questions I have. And all that examination is going to be about is the Martin Luther King matter. You want to tell me about it.

Ray made a false start, stopped, cleared his throat, started again. With a lot of hesitations, he told me what he'd done after his escape from the Missouri prison, and before the death of King. He'd traveled to Canada, then to Mexico. He'd moved around the U.S. under a variety of assumed names.

"How did you make a living?" I asked.

"Smuggling. From the States into Canada."

"Smuggling what?" I asked.

"I don't know." He shrugged his shoulders. "I didn't look in the packages. Maybe drugs, narcotics. I don't know."

"You didn't do anything else?" I asked. "In the States?"

He didn't answer.

"The FBI claims you committed armed robberies to support yourself," I said. "Are they right?"

Again he didn't answer. I let the matter go for the time being and took another tack. I didn't want to get tangled up in details of his past, but I needed control questions to use in his tests, questions that would prompt lies I could identify as lies. He stopped me.

"I know what you're doing," he said. "I read up on the polygraph after that last fellow from Reid's gave me my test. He called me a liar, and I wanted to make sure I knew something about the polygraph before I took your test."

That surprised me. "Well," I told him, "I don't know what you've read, or how much you learned from your research, but I

have to tell you, I have my own technique that I've used for many years. Don't worry about how the instrument works. Don't try to use it. Just cooperate with me and what we'll come out with is an objective examination. If you are telling the truth, I'll know it, and so will the whole world."

Again he didn't use words. He looked at me with his small, piercing eyes, and nodded. It was a quick nod. Just as quickly, he looked away. He waited for my next question.

"A little bit of knowledge," I warned him, "could just create certain physiological problems that could distort the examination. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes. Sorry. I'll cooperate in every way, Mr. Gugas."

"Right," I said. "Now, let's go back to Canada, where you met this man, Raoul. You said he told you to leave Canada and go to Birmingham, Alabama, and buy a rifle. What was his purpose in asking you to get the rifle?"

"It was him I'd been doing the smuggling for—drugs or whatever. He paid me well. I had no reason to question him. He asked me to get the rifle because he wanted to check it out and see if it was the kind he could sell on a quantity basis to—interested persons."

"What was Raoul's last name?"

"I've already told everybody I don't know that. I never asked him. I doubt very much that even Raoul was his real name. In our business, you're always using other names to protect yourself from the law. Asking questions is out of line. Asking for his last name or asking to see identification or any of that would be the last thing I'd do."

"Describe him for me," I said.

Ray only repeated the description of Raoul he'd many times given his attorneys and the press. I'd just read the printed accounts—over and over again—and it was as if he'd memorized them. I kept looking him straight in the eyes. When I touched a subject he didn't like, he turned his eyes away from mine.

"Just when was it Raoul asked you to buy the rifle?"

"Well, we'd gone to Atlanta. He asked me to buy a big-bore rifle, a deer rifle, with a telescopic sight, so he could show it to some people who were interested in buying rifles, new and used ones. I had identification showing that I was from Alabama, so I

drove over to Birmingham. Raoul met me there and we found out that the Aeromarine Supply Company had a lot of guns for sale. Raoul gave me about seven hundred and fifty dollars and told me to get a deer rifle."

"Did you get it?" I asked.

"Not the one he wanted. When I got back to the motel, he didn't like the rifle. He said for me to take it back and get the one he'd picked out of a catalogue. He was taking off for Memphis. I was supposed to meet him at the Rebel Motel there on April third and bring the rifle with me. I said I would exchange the rifle and get the one he wanted and then drive to Memphis."

"Why was the first rifle you picked the wrong kind?" I asked. "Did Raoul explain that to you?"

"I didn't ask. He just told me it wasn't the right one and I didn't press for why. He'd said he had this buyer who wanted a whole bunch of guns, and I didn't figure it was any of my business to ask him what it was all about. When you operate outside the law, you keep your mouth shut and your eyes open."

"What happened when you arrived in Memphis?"

"I got to the Rebel Motel sometime in the early evening on April third. Raoul was there and I gave him the rifle. He was satisfied with it. Then he sent me to get a pair of infrared binoculars. The store wasn't far off. I think it was called the York Arms. I couldn't get the infrared type there. They didn't have them. So I got another pair."

"Did you take them to him?"

"No, I took them to a room I'd rented at 422½ South Main Street. He'd told me he'd meet me there around four in the afternoon. This was April fourth, now."

"When did you rent the room?"

"Earlier that day. Under the name George Willard. I was in and out of that room at least a dozen times. Raoul had me going to the drugstore, the gun shop, a couple of bars, and a gas station to get air for my tires. I didn't spend a lot of time in the room, really, because of all the running around I did."

"Did he meet you at four as he said he would?"

"Yeah. I gave him the binoculars."

“Where were you when Dr. King was shot?”

“To be perfectly honest with you, I don’t really remember. I think I’d just left the gas station and I was heading back toward the rooming house on Main when I heard sirens all over the place and I saw the police had blocked off the whole area. They were everywhere. I didn’t know what had happened, but I knew I had to get out of there right away, because I was a fugitive and I didn’t want to get caught by the cops.”

“Where did you decide to go?” I asked.

“I was really shaken up. I thought about going to New Orleans, because I knew I could meet up with Raoul there after all this King confusion. I heard King had been shot at a place called the Lorraine Hotel. It turned out to be right near my rooming house. I swear I didn’t even know that, didn’t know where the place was. The news came over my car radio about seven o’clock. It was evening by now, right? And the news said that the suspect was driving a white Mustang. That didn’t make me feel any better. With my record and being in that rooming house, if I got caught they’d be sure to blame King’s death on me. I wondered if Raoul had set me up. Maybe Raoul and his friends were trying to get rid of me. I was really in a tight mess.”

“Do you think Raoul killed Dr. King?”

“It would only be conjecture on my part. I don’t know, but I suspect he had something to do with it.”

“What about the stuff found in the blanket beside the rooming house—the rifle, the binoculars, the radio? How did it get left behind? It was your stuff. All of it was identifiable as yours.”

Ray shifted on his chair and looked away from me. I asked the same question again. He said impatiently:

“All I can tell you is that either Raoul left it there or someone who was with him in my room. How do I know who dumped it there? I wasn’t anywhere near that rooming house when King was shot. I suspect Raoul could fill in that puzzle but I can’t.”

“Was there a conspiracy to kill Dr. King?”

“I can’t be sure, but if it was Raoul who set the whole thing up to kill King, then I was an unsuspecting accomplice, that’s all. I don’t know if Raoul was mixed up in the killing. But I guess if he

did it, then I was an unwitting part of the deal. I know I didn't kill King, and I know I didn't have any prior knowledge that he was going to be killed."

My own nerves were well under control by now, but Ray had begun to sweat. I didn't want him upset. I changed the subject. "Where did you get the money to travel around the country after you left Canada?"

He turned away again. I repeated the question.

"Raoul had paid me plenty of money for the smuggling. I had enough to get around."

"You didn't commit those robberies the FBI says you did to get travel money?"

"I'm not going to talk about those bank robberies," Ray said. "I don't want to get in any more trouble than I'm in right now."

I switched subjects right away. I knew I'd turned up the kind of control question I'd been looking for. He'd be almost sure to have a strong reaction about the bank robberies when I gave him his polygraph test.

"We can skip the bank stuff," I said, "because it doesn't have anything to do with what I'm here to examine you about—Dr. King's murder. Anyway, the statute of limitations has run out. They couldn't prosecute you now."

Later, I was to wonder why Ray had become so shaken up about those bank robberies. James Earl Ray is no dummy. He's been around and knows the laws and the statutes of limitations. Why, then, did the color leave his face and his eyes shun mine? I don't suppose I'll ever know the answer, and at the time I wasn't really concerned with it. I needed more answers, and I began a new approach.

"What about the allegation that your brother Jerry was involved with you in a conspiracy to kill Dr. King?"

"That's a lot of baloney. My brother and I had nothing to do with King's killing. Jerry was in Chicago, working, when King was shot. That's been proved."

"Your father's also been mentioned," I said.

"That's all phony," he answered. "The government was pushing to have him and Jerry arrested, and that was why I decided to plead guilty—to protect my family. No, I wasn't guilty, but they

weren't guilty either. And Percy Foreman said they'd be out of trouble if I just pleaded guilty. He said all I'd get would be a prison term. That was better than being barbecued, he said. He gave me every reason you could think of why I should plead guilty to King's murder. So I finally agreed. But it was against my better judgment."

"He was your defense attorney," I said.

"He'd told me to start with that my case would be easy to win. Now he was telling me I didn't have a chance because the press was against me, public opinion was against me. All that stuff about the good defense he was going to put up for me? He never even contacted witnesses who could prove that the State's big witness against me was dead drunk in bed. He could never have identified the person running away from the bathroom where they said the shot was fired from."

I was deeply disturbed by all I'd read and gathered from other sources about the trial. I could sympathize with Ray when he asked me how he could trust anyone again.

"I know investigation techniques," I said. "And Mark Lane has done an outstanding job for you."

"Yes. He's been a true friend and an honest attorney. I only wish I'd met up with him sooner. I probably wouldn't be in this mess now. I sure hope he can get me a trial. He says, 'There is the truth, and there is the legal truth.' And he's right. The evidence they have against me won't stand up in any objective court. I sure hope he makes out for me."

"He's doing all he can," I said.

Ray seemed a little less edgy. I wondered if we could start testing. The prison hospital ward was just down the hall. I sent for a medical technician to check Ray's blood pressure. I'd been mistaken. He was still uptight. The meter read one-thirty over a hundred. His pulse was racing, a hundred and twenty-five beats per minute. He was in no shape to face a polygraph test. Not yet.

"You need to relax," I said. "Have some lunch and lie down for half an hour." He had a sandwich, washed down with two little cartons of milk. He ate and drank quickly. He lay down in the hospital ward for twenty-five minutes. But he didn't wind down. His blood pressure still checked out above normal. So did his pulse.

I wondered if anxiety about getting started on the tests was keeping him stressed. Maybe he'd settle down once the polygraph attachments were made and the test was underway.

"Sit here," I said. "Let's give the instrument a try." He took the chair and I fastened on the tube, cuff, and electrodes. "Try to relax. You're still keyed up."

"I want to get the tests done," he said, "so Mark will know I've been telling him the truth."

"Your blood pressure's too high," I said, and unfastened the cuff. "It's important that you feel well, that you feel up to the test."

"I'm all right. Put that thing back on. Don't you understand? I flunked the last test, the one the Reid guy gave me. I have to take this. I have to pass it. Look, I know I'm a little nervous, but the book on lie detectors I read says that's normal."

"That's true," I said. "But you're overanxious. Don't be in a hurry. There are several things we have to do before I can begin the actual examination. If you read the book right, you know we have to review all the questions in detail, so you'll know and understand each question I ask and there won't be any chance of error."

"Okay." He nodded, but he didn't relax and he wasn't about to. I took a deep breath and began reviewing the questions with him. This was the first series. I'm giving here the answers he later gave when the polygraph was activated and the graph paper moving.

"Is your name James Earl Ray?"

"Yes."

"Did you have breakfast this morning?"

"Yes."

"Do you know who shot Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.?"

"No."

"Did you have any soft drink today?"

"Yes."

"Did you shoot Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.?"

"No."

Now here came the first control question: "Between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, did you ever think about causing any physical harm to any person?"

"No."

"Were you born in Alton, Illinois?"

“Yes.”

“Between 1960 and April fourth, 1968, do you recall telling any person in the United States that you were going to shoot or harm Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.?”

During the preliminary run-through of the questions, Ray stopped me here. He wanted this question reworded so that it included the United States only, and not Canada.

“I might have said something negative about King when I was in Canada.”

I changed the wording. His answer on the test was “No.”

“Did you fire any rifle at any person in Memphis in April 1968?”

“No.”

Now came the second control question: “Were there others involved in planning your escape from Brushy Mountain Penitentiary?”

“No.”

There were four questions about the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Ray’s possible association with it, in that first series. As I’ve said before in this book, that’s about the limit for a successful polygraph examination. But there were more questions to be asked, and they formed a second series. Again, I’m listing them here with Ray’s responses given during the actual running of the test.

“Do you wear glasses?”

“Yes.”

“Were you involved with any other person or persons in a conspiracy to shoot Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.?”

“No.”

“Do you have three brothers?”

“Yes.”

“Did you know Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was going to be shot?”

“No.”

Next came the third control question: “Did you ever think about harming Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.?”

Ray answered “No.”

I asked, “Were you ever legally married?”

"No," Ray said.

"Did you ever have any rifle or pistol with you in the rooming house at 422½ South Main Street on April fourth, 1968?"

"No."

"Did you point any weapon toward Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on April fourth, 1968?"

"No."

I wound up the second set of questions in the same way as the first, with a control question: "Between the ages of eighteen and forty, did you ever lie to any government official?"

"No," Ray said.

I ran several charts on both series of questions, watching Ray closely all the time. He kept applying pressure to his left arm, the one that held the blood-pressure cuff. When this happens, it causes a pen deflection on the chart, a deflection easy to notice. As the tests were repeated, I saw that Ray applied this pressure only at certain questions. His purpose fascinated me. He meant the chart to show an increase in blood pressure that would tell the examiner on evaluating the charts that at these points the subject was lying. And the questions he picked out were the control questions—the ones I'd used with some certainty that the physiological responses would contradict the spoken ones. Ray's forced overresponses were so dramatic on these control questions, I thought he was attempting to beat the polygraph. I removed the attachments and had his blood pressure checked again. It was higher than ever, one forty-five over a hundred now. His heartbeat had dropped to a hundred per minute before the test; now it was back to a hundred twenty-four. When the technician had left, Ray asked me:

"Well, how did it come out?"

"James," I said, "did any of the questions I asked you disturb you in any way?"

He tried to look puzzled. "No, not a bit."

"Well, in a couple of areas, there were definite responses after your answers."

"I can't understand that," he said. "I didn't feel anything different."

I looked straight into his eyes and he turned away. He mumbled, "I was tired, I was nervous."

I gave my head a regretful shake. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'm sorry your charts aren't as clear as they should be. But you do show the same significant reactions on most of the critical questions, chart after chart. If none of the questions troubled you, why did this happen? Why did you show disturbance on the same ones time after time?"

"I don't know," he said. "Nerves, I guess."

"Did you understand all of the questions?"

"Oh, sure." He muttered it. He didn't look at me.

"Do you think I was objective and thorough in our pre-test interviews?"

"Yes." He still didn't look at me.

I didn't tell him that I'd noticed him forcing some of his responses. He was too intelligent ever to admit it. I told him I would review his charts carefully and make a final determination about the tests as soon as I could. He nodded, still keeping his face and eyes turned away. It didn't cheer me up. I was convinced he'd not been truthful during his tests and that he'd tried to manipulate the process so that I couldn't make any determination from the charts. I was disappointed for Mark Lane, who'd been patiently waiting, hour after hour, downstairs, hoping for good news from me. I told him I needed time to recheck carefully all of the charts. I'd give him an answer that evening at the motel.

Ray was interviewed by Jack Anderson about an hour after my examination, with cameras and microphones. He told Anderson he had not shot Dr. King and that he knew nothing about the assassination. Anderson asked me for my opinion, based on the polygraph tests I'd given Ray. I told him I thought Ray had lied about not shooting Dr. King, but had told the truth when he said there was no conspiracy. I said this meant to me that Ray had acted on his own. The broadcast would not take place for a while. If the intensive study I wanted to give Ray's charts left any doubts, my own part in the Anderson show could be filmed again. But as I examined the charts closely throughout the rest of the afternoon in my motel room, it simply became more and more apparent that Ray had lied on the vital questions.

Heavyhearted, I picked up the telephone. Mark Lane came to my motel unit and I gave him the bad news. Pain was written in his

face, but he said nothing. I told him I meant to have other qualified examiners review my findings and offer a final opinion but that I doubted the outcome would be any different. He thanked me and left. I needn't have felt sorry for him. He wasn't going to let one setback stop his effort to get James Earl Ray a new trial.

The next day I went with him to Memphis, where he had located a taxi driver named James McCraw who could be very important to Ray's defense. McCraw insisted that the State's one and only witness, Charles Q. Stephens, had been inaccurate in claiming to have seen Ray leave the washroom at 422½ South Main Street just after the bullet had been fired from there that killed Dr. King. He told Mark Lane and me:

"I saw Charlie Stephens lying on his bed stone drunk about five forty-five P.M. on April fourth, 1968. I'd received a call from the dispatcher to pick up a fare at the Main Street place. Stephens was living there with Grace, his common-law wife. She was there. When I saw what condition Charlie was in, I wasn't about to take him in my cab."

"You call him Charlie," I said.

"I've known him for more than twenty years," McCraw answered. "He was dead drunk."

"This man is a polygraph expert," Mark Lane told McCraw. "A lie-detector man. Would you be willing to let him test you to see if you're telling the truth?"

"I'm telling the truth," McCraw said. "Why not?"

McCraw passed my tests without a hitch. Lane asked me if I would give polygraph examinations to Charles Q. Stephens' common-law wife. It turned out that she'd been committed to a state hospital for alcoholism, but she had previously told Lane that McCraw's account of Stephens' condition at the time he claimed to have seen James Earl Ray leave the rooming house washroom was correct—that Stephens had been drunk and unconscious at the time of the shooting.

"She won't make a satisfactory subject," I said. "I'm sorry. Treatment, confinement, medication—all those things can work against a successful polygraph examination."

"I'm going to get her out of there," Lane said.

"If you can," I said, "and if she recovers from the experience, just let me know, and I'll be happy to test her for you."

Grace Stephens is now in a California rehabilitation center. She is getting along well in her new surroundings. Maybe, in time, Mark Lane will send for me again in the James Earl Ray case. For if it can be established that Grace is telling the truth about Charles Stephens' condition, she can be a most important witness should a new trial be arranged for Ray.

The charts from those tests I gave him at Brushy Mountain Penitentiary make me absolutely certain that James Earl Ray fired the shot that killed Martin Luther King, Jr., and that he acted not as part of any conspiracy but solely on his own. The John Reid polygraph experts in Chicago agree with me. And I'm certain of another thing: Should James Earl Ray not receive a new trial, he will attempt another prison escape. It's his pattern. He's even been known to make it sometimes. But whether he does or does not, one thing is sure. Controversy will continue to swirl about his name for many years to come.