

The Ray caper



By HARRIET VAN HORNE

It all sounded like an over-plotted film script. The convicted assassin of a national leader escapes a maximum security prison. His escape follows unprecedented appearance on television and interviews with a Congressional committee investigating the murder he now claims he did not commit.

While bloodhounds tracked a 25-mile area surrounding the prison, helicopters with infrared cameras flew low over the rough, snake-infested terrain. It was B-movie stuff. But what gave the suspense a knife edge was the sense of a vast and terrible conspiracy about to triumph—or about to come undone in a shattering scandal.

During the past year public opinion has been leaning away from the theory that James Earl Ray, a small-time crook on the run, shot the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King from the bathroom window of a sleazy Memphis rooming house.

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Ray's story is shot through with inconsistencies, official lies, hints of collusion among law enforcement agencies.

The police work following Dr. King's murder is now generally regarded as atrocious. Unexamined clues, conflicting testimony, unexplored leads all suggest that the Memphis police were aware—if only by intuition—that the shooting had been directed by somebody "very high up," as Memphis citizens now put it.

As information about James Earl Ray has accumulated, the case against him has grown more conjectural. Had he gone through proper trial procedure instead of pleading guilty much of the state's evidence might have been refuted by his defense attorneys. We now hear of considerable evidence favorable to Ray.

For example: it has been reported in numerous magazine articles and in Mark Lane's book, "Code Name Zorro," that the state never proved that the fingerprints in Room 5 of that Memphis boarding house were Ray's. Nor was the palm print in the bathroom—supposed source of the shots—established as his.

Moreover, the owner of the rooming house consistently refused to identify Ray as the man to whom she rented the room. At Ray's so-called trial, the prosecution contended that she had.

We remarked recently in this space on the curious conduct of the Memphis police chief on the day of Dr. King's murder. The detail protecting the civil rights leader was reduced from ten to two. Why?

A respected black detective, Ed Redditt, whose pride and joy was guarding Dr. King was suddenly called to headquarters and told that there was a "contract" out on his life.

In "Code Name Zorro," Redditt vividly describes the scene of this announcement. Again, the scene is pure Late Show. But something in the character of this black policeman compels belief.

"It was like a meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In this room, just before Dr. King was murdered, were the heads and the seconds in command of, I guess, every law enforcement operation in this area . . . I had never seen anything like it before. The Sheriff, the highway patrol, Army Intelligence, the National Guard. You name it, it was in the room."

The police chief who had summoned Redditt—one Frank Holloman, now retired—introduced him to a man in civilian clothes, saying, "This gentleman is from the U. S. Secret Service in Washington, D.C."

It was the Secret Serviceman who had brought news of the plot to murder an obscure black policeman in Memphis, Tenn. "The whole thing didn't make any sense," said

redditt in a taped interview.

For Redditt's protection, he was told, he would be placed under guard at a nearby motel. Redditt refused because his mother-in-law was terminally ill.

"All right," said Chief Holloman. "You just go home and stay there. That's an order."

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And that is why Detective Redditt wasn't guarding Dr. King that April day. He is still bitter about it. So are the two black firemen inexplicably removed from duty at the firehouse opposite the Lorraine Motel where Dr. King was shot. Chief Holloman was in charge of both the police and fire departments.

Today, we read, Chief Holloman is vague about the events of that April day. One point is not vague, however. And that is Holloman's devotion to the FBI. He worked there for 25 years, a member of J. Edgar Hoover's personal staff.

As in the John Kennedy assassination, there is a theory that the fatal bullet came from another gun, another site.

A man named Harold Carter told a private investigator for Ray's first attorney, Arthur Hanes, that he had been sitting on the embankment near the motel when the fatal shot was fired. He said it came from a clump of bushes nearby. He also saw a man running. A man in a dark suit with a high-necked white sweater.

Did Carter tell the police? "They called me a damn liar," he said. Then there was the woman in the rooming house, named Grace Stephens who saw a man definitely not Ray run from the rooming house after the shooting. She described him carefully to the press, whereupon the Memphis police took her into custody and had her committed to a mental home. She is still there.

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