





He Had a Dream—Part 2

TRAGEDY IN MEMPHIS

The Assassination
of Martin Luther King Jr.

by Coretta Scott King

"This is what is going to happen to me also," Martin Luther King Jr. told his wife when news of President Kennedy's murder reached them. In this article, the second of two excerpts from her book My Life With Martin Luther King Jr. (to be published Sept. 25 by Holt Rinehart and Winston), Mrs. King recounts the fulfillment of her husband's prophecy.

Despite Martin's commitment to his work, there was nevertheless a sense of fate closing in on him. We did not let the feeling bow us down—we had lived with it much too long for that. Years before, Martin had said to me, "You know, I probably won't live a long life, but if I die I don't want you to grieve for me. You go on and live a normal life."

But death was not something he was morbid about; he just talked about it as he would of any other experience. As the civil rights struggle went on, he saw the danger clearly. His knowledge of history made him realize that most men who had taken a strong moral position had to pay the price for their convictions. He even used the word "crucified" metaphorically, saying sometimes in his speeches, "I may be crucified for my beliefs and, if I am, you can say, 'He died to make men free.'"

When people urged him to be careful, he said, "You know, I cannot worry about my safety; I cannot live in fear. I have to function. If there is any one fear I have conquered, it is the fear of death." He talked about it in his sermons, quoting the phrase, "If a man has not found something worth giving his life for, he is not fit to live."

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With Ralph Abernathy (right) and H. Ralph Jackson, King led a march in support of striking sanitation workers in Memphis a week before he was shot.

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Yet he was not gloomy about his own fate. Martin accepted the danger as a matter of course and remained exuberant and full of spirit.

In Memphis, Tenn., the Sanitation Workers Union, most of whose members were black, had gone on strike in early 1968. A small and peaceful demonstration march by the union on Feb. 23 had been brutally broken up by police using clubs and Mace, with squad cars as a sort of cavalry. This action had outraged not only black people in Memphis but many whites as well.

What had been a small strike by an obscure local union became a city-wide protest movement in which SCLC's local affiliate took a leading part. Martin, asked to help, agreed to do so. Though he also felt that he should not dissipate his efforts at that moment, he could not turn down the Memphis request. He felt it was important to give public support to this righteous cause.

The strain of all his responsibilities was growing more intense. At the suggestion of his doctor, he decided to go away for a few days' rest. On March 12, just before he was to leave, he called me on the telephone from his office and asked, "Did you get your flowers?"

I told him that none had come, and Martin explained that when he was downtown shopping for some clothing for himself, he had gone next door to a florist and purchased some flowers for me. The proprietor had promised to deliver them right away. I was touched by this gesture. By the time Martin came home to pick up his bag and leave for the airport, the flowers had arrived. They were beautiful red carnations, but when I touched them, I realized they were artificial. In all the years we had been together, Martin had never sent me artificial flowers. I kissed him and thanked him. I said, "They're beautiful and they're artificial."

"Yes," Martin said. "I wanted to give you something that you could always keep."

They were the last flowers I ever got from Martin. Somehow, in some strange way, he

seemed to have known how long those flowers would have to last.

When Martin arrived in Memphis on March 28, a Thursday, he soon realized that the march was not well disciplined—there was never even a proper line formed. "Black Power" placards were being held by some marchers. Martin, though, felt he had no choice but to get in front of the line and start to march. He had gone no more than a few blocks when he heard the sound of crashing glass. Rocks and bottles were being thrown from the back of the line. It has been generally agreed that the trouble was not started by the marchers but by gangs of young men who, using the parade as a cover, hurled rocks through windows and dodged in and out of the ranks to keep their identity unknown.

It turned into a horrible situation. The police moved in on the marchers. Many people were beaten up and one young man was shot in the back and killed. Martin told me later that he felt that the police, after the violence started, were completely unrestrained.

When the trouble broke out, Ralph Abernathy and some others begged Martin to go back to his motel. They were so afraid that he might become the target for violence that Martin finally consented. He was terribly distressed. This was the first time violence had ever occurred in a march he was personally leading. Although he knew he was not responsible, he felt he would be blamed.

Bernard Lee, a member of Martin's staff, and Ralph Abernathy told me later that Martin held a press conference that night and he was deeply disturbed that it did not go well. However, the next morning another press conference was called, in which Martin was to outline his future plans. At this meeting he was full of fire. He said to the reporters, "Gentlemen, this isn't going to be a regular press conference, it's going to be a press briefing." And he started talking with complete assurance, the words just flowing out of him as they did when he was inspired. Bernard Lee told me that the statement was like a sermon, a message concerning Martin's principles of nonviolence. He was trying to

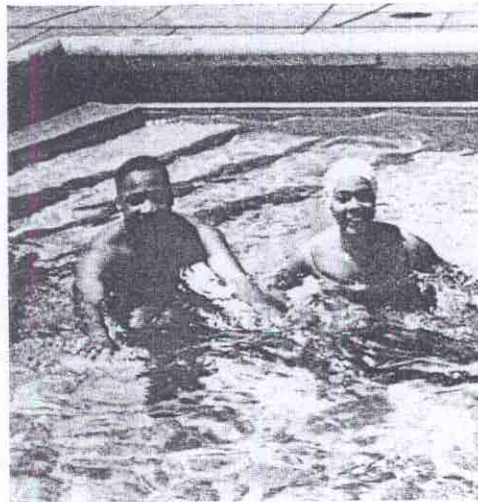
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June 18, 1953: Wedding day at Coretta's home in Marion, Ala.

From Mrs. King's family album, snapshots of happier times

March, 1961: Martin, Coretta, their friend the Reverend





January 15, 1958: A surprise party for Martin's 29th birthday



March, 1959: On a trip to India and Pakistan, Martin boards a camel in Karachi

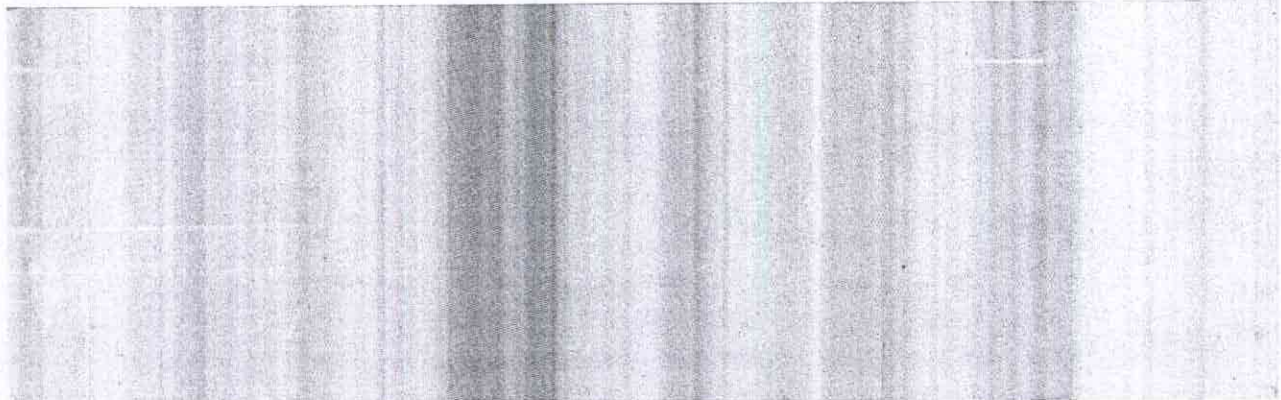
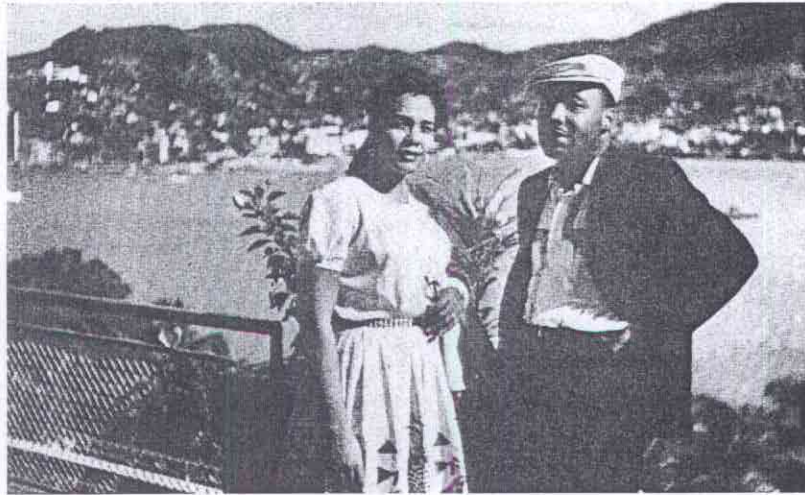


December, 1964: Close harmony in Oslo, before Nobel award

Ralph Abernathy enjoy a swim



Summer, 1958: On a brief vacation trip to Mexico, Coretta and Martin take the sun on a balcony of their Acapulco hotel





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Career extremes: Arrested in Alabama, awarded a Nobel Prize in Oslo

King CONTINUED

help the press understand what had gone wrong in Memphis. He spoke of the frustrations suffered by the black people there and how they could not be blamed. Afterward one of the newsmen came up to Martin and asked, "Dr. King, what has happened to you since last night? Have you talked with someone?"

And Martin said, "No. I haven't talked with anyone. I have only talked with God."

The next day Martin came home to Atlanta from Memphis. I was at home alone, having canceled a dinner engagement when I heard he would be arriving. We ate dinner together, and Martin talked about what had happened in Memphis. He was still sorrowful and disturbed. Afterward, when I thought back on that evening, I was very glad that we had shared it quietly together.

On the morning of Wednesday, April 3, very early, Ralph Abernathy came by the house to pick up Martin. They were returning to Memphis. Neither Ralph nor Martin ate anything. They even refused coffee and juice. I followed Martin to the door, kissed him goodbye and wished him well. The children were still asleep, and they did not see him off. It was an ordinary goodbye, like thousands of others. Martin said he would call me that evening.

He had been criticized in Memphis for staying at the Holiday Inn, which was considered too "fancy." The staff felt that it was the safest place for him, since it was away from where the demonstration would be held. However, sensitive to crit-

icism, Martin had this time reserved rooms in the Negro-owned and operated Lorraine Motel on Mulberry Street.

He telephoned me that evening as he had promised. Things were going very well, he said. Bayard Rustin was arranging to bring a lot of people into Memphis from other cities, but Mayor Henry Loeb had obtained a federal injunction against "nonresidents" marching or demonstrating in Memphis. Nevertheless, Martin said he was going to lead the march on Monday, April 8.

Then he asked me if I had listened to the 6 o'clock news, because he was concerned about the Vietnam peace talks the President had called for and wondered if there had been any new developments. I told him I had not had a chance to watch the news. He answered, "That's all right. I'll catch the 11 o'clock news. I have to go and speak at the mass meeting, but I'll be back in time to watch the news. Don't worry about it." Then Martin said, "I'll call you tomorrow night."

He almost didn't go to the meeting because a violent rainstorm came up and Ralph Abernathy felt that not many people would come. Martin needed rest, and Ralph volunteered to go and speak for him.

However, when Ralph got to Clayborn Temple, he found that about 2,000 people had turned out. They applauded him politely, but he knew they were disappointed. Ralph left the platform and telephoned Martin, urging him to come to address the waiting crowd. Martin put on his raincoat and went di-

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rectly to the meeting. Ralph said later, "I knew this was not my crowd. They wanted to hear Martin."

As always, no matter how Martin had felt beforehand, the enthusiasm of the people inspired him. That night, completely spontaneously, he gave one of his greatest speeches. First, he told the people he was heart and soul with them, that their cause was just, and that he and his organization would fight for them. He said that even if the federal injunction was not lifted, he would lead the march on Monday. He had the audience roaring with excitement.

Then the mantle of prophecy seemed to descend upon him. He told the people that his plane from Atlanta had been delayed that morning because "Dr. Martin Luther King is aboard," and there had been a search for a possible bomb. He told of how, when he got to Memphis, there were threats and rumors of an attack on him.

Then Martin added, "I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days

ahead. But it really doesn't matter to me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. . . . And I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised Land. . . . Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. . . ."

So intense was the audience's emotional response to Martin's words, so high was his own exaltation responding to their excitement, the action and reaction of one to the other, that he was overcome; he broke off there. I believe that he intended to finish the quotation—"His truth is marching on." But he could not.

The next day, Thursday, April 4, Martin seemed almost happy, despite his worry about the march. His brother A.D. told me that it was the same way it had been when they were young. That afternoon they kidded each other and wrestled together boisterously, like boys. At one point Martin decided they should telephone their mother. That was a little strange because he almost never called her when he was on a trip. They had a long, lively con-

versation with Mamma King, in which A.D. and Martin fooled her for a while, disguising their voices, each pretending to be the other. She was so happy because she seldom talked to both her sons at the same time.

Martin spent the afternoon at the Lorraine Motel and soon it was time to get ready to go out to dinner. After Martin was dressed, he went out on the little balcony facing the street and a decaying rooming house 200 feet away. Ben Branch, who was to play at the meeting later that night, was standing below the balcony. Martin called down to him, "Be sure to sing *Precious Lord, Take My Hand* for me tonight, Ben. Sing it real pretty."

Laughing, Branch said he would.

Solomon Jones, who was to drive the car that evening, called out, "It's getting chilly, Dr. King. Better take an overcoat."

Martin said, "O.K., I will."

It was almost time to go. Ralph Abernathy rushed into his room to put on some shaving lotion.

At that moment came the shot. They told me it sounded like a firecracker. . . .

It was Jesse Jackson who called me in Atlanta to say, "Coretta, Doc just got shot."

It hit me hard—not surprise, but shock—that the call I seemed subconsciously to have been waiting for all my life had come. I asked for details and Jesse, trying to spare me, said, "He was shot in the shoulder."

I sensed that it was quite serious, and I wanted to ask how seriously hurt Martin was, but I was afraid. I said, "I'll check the next flight."

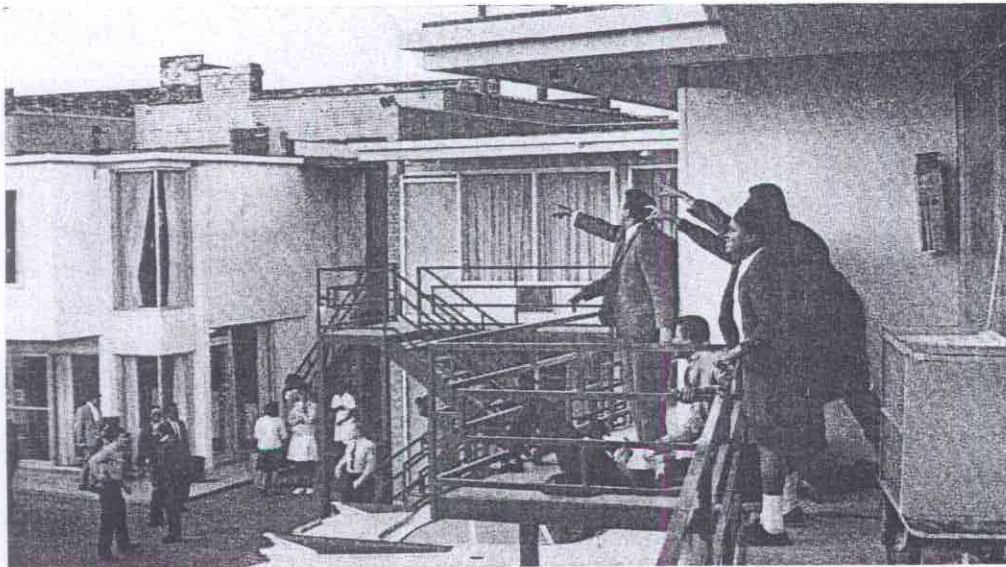
I turned on the television. They were talking about Martin, reporting what I already knew. By that time the children had come into the room and, although I tried to turn the TV down, they had already heard enough to know that something had happened to their father.

They asked, "What is it?"

Yoki, 12 years old, said, "Don't tell me!" and ran crying from the room.

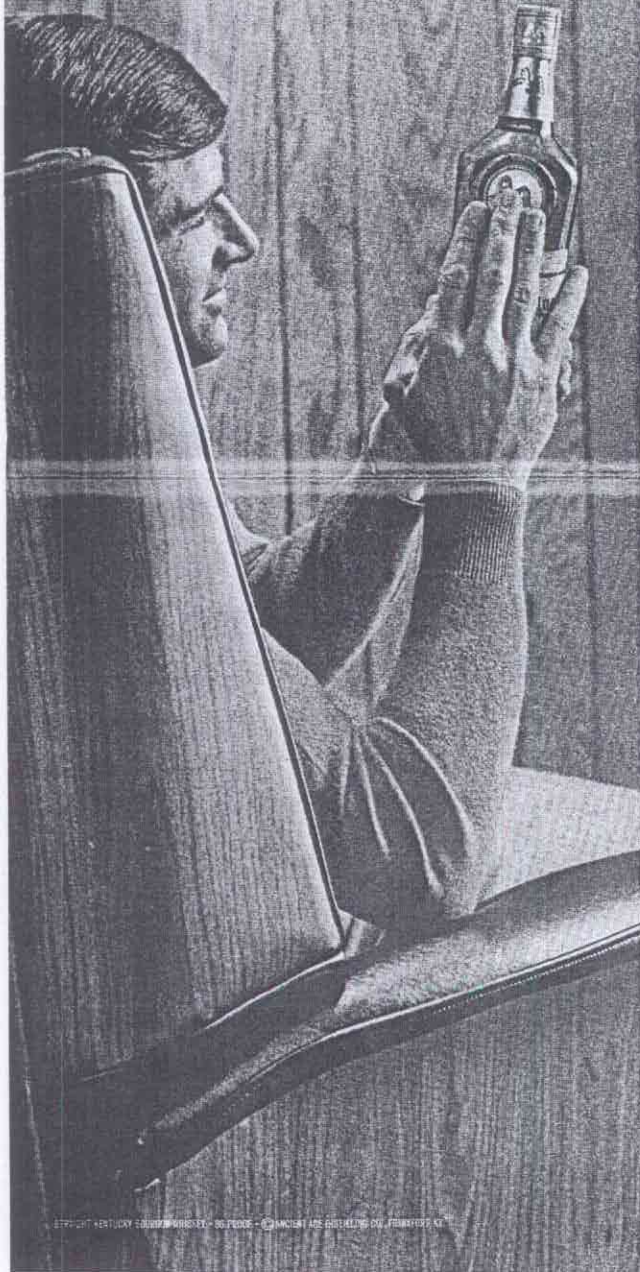
But she soon came back. I said to her, "I'm getting ready to go to Memphis because your daddy has been shot." All the children were in the room, and Yoki started to help me pack. It was the first time that she

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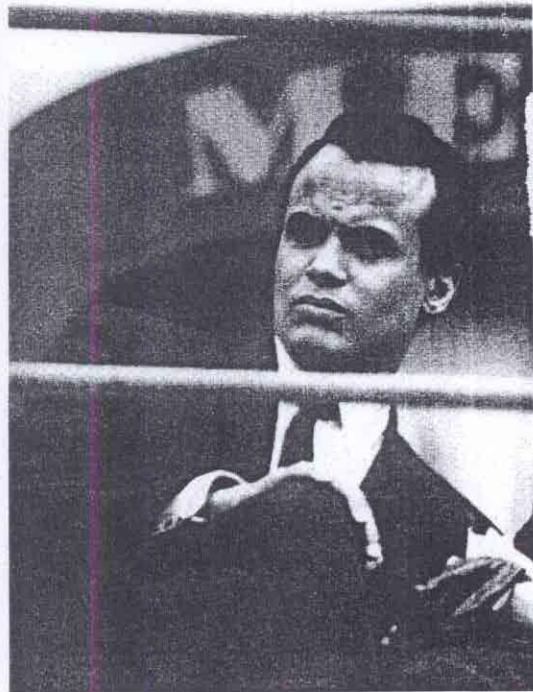


As King lies mortally wounded on a balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, friends with whom he had been chatting only a few seconds earlier show police where the assassin's bullet came from.

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After leading a civil rights march, a mourning Mrs. King, accompanied

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had ever offered to do this.

At the Atlanta airport I heard my name echoing over the public address system. I had a strange, cold feeling, for I knew it was word from Memphis and that the word was bad. By this time, we had reached the gate to board the plane. I asked Mayor Ivan Allen, who with his wife had accompanied me to the airport, to have someone check the page for me.

A few minutes later I saw my husband's devoted secretary, Dora McDonald, walking toward me very fast, and I noticed the expression on her face. She said, "Come on, Mrs. King. We need a room where we can sit down."

I knew Martin was dead.

Mayor Allen went to try to get definite confirmation. Soon he came back, looking grave and white. Very formally he said, "Mrs. King, I have been asked to tell you that Dr. King is dead."

We all stood there stunned and weeping. Mayor Allen took my hand and said, "Mrs. King,

what do you want to do? Do you want to go on to Memphis, or do you want to go back home?"

I said, "I should go back home and see about the children. And then decide about going to Memphis."

I began to think of what I was going to tell my children. I was afraid that by this time they must have heard—without me beside them. But when I got home, Dexter, 8, and Bunny, 5, had been put to bed, and Bunny was asleep. Yoki was sitting calmly in the foyer talking on the telephone. Marty, 10, was still up, but Yoki followed me to my bedroom, and she said to me, "Mommy, I'm not going to cry! I'm just not going to cry, because my daddy's not really dead. He may be physically dead, but his spirit will never die, and I'm going to see him again in heaven."

All this time she was insisting that she was not going to cry, tears were running down her soft cheeks. Then she said, "Mommy, should I hate the man who killed my daddy?"

I said, "No, darling, your dad-



by Harry Belafonte, attends the ceremonies at Memphis city hall

dy wouldn't want you to do that."

Yoki had stopped crying even before she finished talking. I put my arms around her and said, "But you have been so wonderful and so brave yourself. I'm proud of you, and your daddy would have been so proud of you, too."

Marty and Dexter were waiting for me in their room. Marty seemed a little confused; he wanted to talk, but he didn't know what to say. Dexter said, "Mommy, when is Daddy coming home?"

My heart was breaking but, keeping calm, I said, "Dexter, do you know your daddy was shot?"

He said, "Yes." I went on. "He was hurt very badly. You go to sleep. I'll tell you about it in the morning."

He said, "All right," and he seemed to go calmly to sleep.

That was only the beginning of a nightmare night. Though people were wonderful to me, nothing could really help during those terrible hours. President

Johnson called and said, "I want you to know how deeply Mrs. Johnson and I feel for you and your family."

Senator Robert Kennedy also called to express his distress and sympathy. "I'll help in any way I can," he said.

I told him, "I'm planning to go to Memphis in the morning to bring back Martin's body," and he said, "Let me fly you there. I'll get a plane down there. I'll be glad to do that."

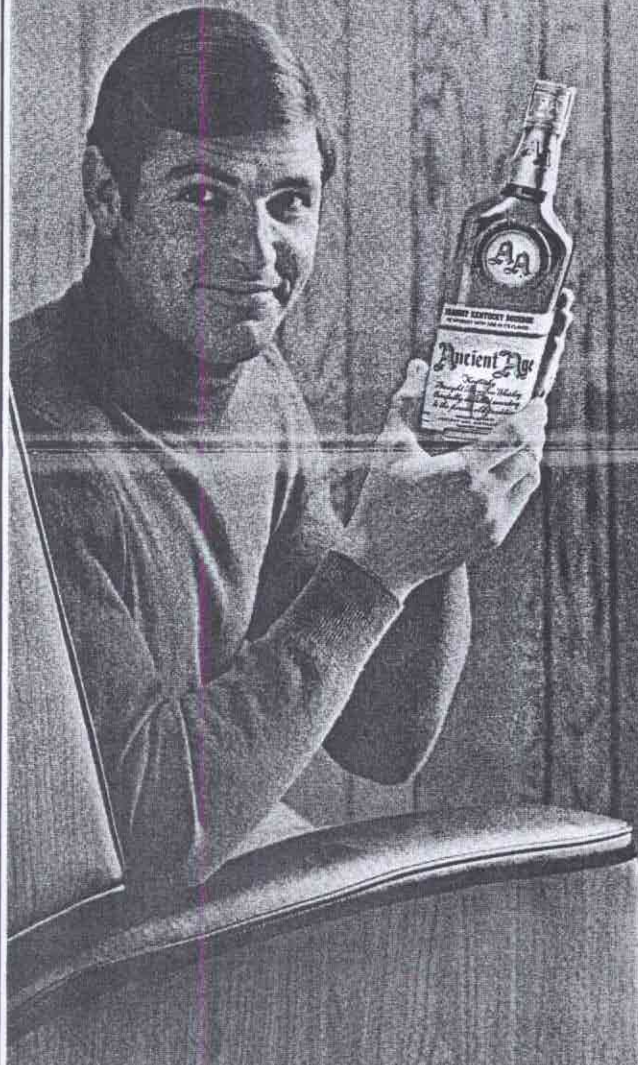
Then, knowing the large number of telephone calls that would be coming into the house, Senator Kennedy had three more telephones installed in my house that same night.

Harry Belafonte called next, and said, "Coretta, I want to come down tomorrow to be with you and the children." Harry did come down on Friday and was there when I got back from Memphis. He was a tremendous help throughout this period.

During those days of sorrow, many well-known people came to Atlanta to pay their respects and offer their sympathy or to attend the funeral. Among them

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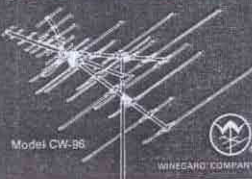
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At the King home in Atlanta, Ethel Kennedy expresses her sympathy

King CONTINUED

were Robert, Ethel and Jacqueline Kennedy, and Richard Nixon. Mrs. Eugene McCarthy came and offered her services in the house. Others made the trip to Atlanta just to come to the house and say, "I don't want to disturb Mrs. King. I just came to let her know that I was thinking about her."

Perhaps the most touching incident of this sort was the arrival of Bill Cosby and Robert Culp, the television stars. They did not even ask to see me, but spent most of the afternoon at the house playing with my boys, because they felt that this was the best contribution they could make.

In addition, thousands came whom I did not know and who had never met my husband. Their presence was deeply meaningful to me.

On Friday morning, I flew to Memphis in the plane Senator Kennedy had provided. I waited inside while Martin's body was brought onto the plane and then traveled home with him to Atlanta.

The march in Memphis was still scheduled to be held the following Monday, as Martin had planned it and as he would have

wished. Saturday morning Harry Belafonte said to me, "Coretta, I want to talk to you about something that has been on my mind. You don't have to agree, but please think about it. I think you should go to Memphis and march on Monday, if it isn't too much for you. It would mean a great deal to people throughout the nation, for you just to be there."

Immediately I replied, "I agree. I think Martin would have wanted me to go. I had not thought about it before, but now that you raise the question, I would really like to go. I may even take the children."

So on Monday I flew to Memphis with Harry and my three oldest children in a plane Harry provided. There was no difficulty in Memphis. In the shock and sorrow of Martin's death, the federal injunction against the march was either forgotten or rescinded; there was hardly a person in America who would have dared or even wanted to enforce it. We were rushed from the airport to the head of the line, and we marched about a mile to city hall, Ralph Abernathy and the children walking beside me. There were 25,000, perhaps 50,000, people

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Heath Lumber Co.
1560 N. Olden Ave.
Union
Reisen Lumber & Millwork Co.
1070 Morris Ave.
Union City
Mastro Lumber & Millwork Co.
127 43 St.
Verona
Charles Bahr & Son
49 Zuerhle St.
Vineland
Cumberland Lumber & Supply Co.
846 S. Gettes Drive
Westfield
J. S. Irving Co.
500 S. Ave. W.
WASHINGTON, D.C.
W. T. Gallihar & Bros., Inc.
30th & K Sts., N.W.

King CONTINUED

marching some of whom had come to Memphis from all parts of the country. Dense crowds of people along the route stood silent in tribute to Martin's memory. My children, too, seemed to sense the sympathy and compassion those people felt for us.

The three children sat on the platform with me at city hall. There were several speeches, whose theme was the many things Martin Luther King Jr. had accomplished, his greatness and his simplicity. I know that Yoki and Marty and even little Dexter were comforted to hear these good things said about their father.

When it was my turn to speak, Harry Belafonte introduced me. I talked about Martin's qualities as a leader and as a husband and father. I talked about his

work, his great hope for social and economic justice for all. I explained Martin's concept of redemptive suffering and pointed out that he had been prepared to give his life to the cause in which he believed.

But I also asked: "How many men must die before we can really have a free and true and peaceful society? How long will it take? If we can catch the spirit and the true meaning of this experience, I believe that this nation can be transformed into a society of love, of justice, peace, and brotherhood where all men can really be brothers."

And, speaking of the Movement that had always been my husband's greatest concern, I said: "We must carry on, because this is the way he would have wanted it to have been. . . . We are going to continue his work, to make all people truly free. . . ." ◀

On her return to Atlanta with Dr. King's body, Mrs. King is met at the plane by their children: (from left) Bunny, Dexter, Yoki and Marty.

