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30 YEARS LATER

THE ASSASSIN

Regretting life of crime, ailing Ray is at peace, but wants trial

By DAVE SALTONSTALL

NEARLY 30 YEARS after he confessed to killing the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., only to recant days later, James Earl Ray rose up like a ghost from his prison hospital bed last week to say he was a man at peace with himself.

But in a voice reduced to a near-whisper by age and the onslaught of severe liver disease, the 70-year-old Ray did not utter one lingering regret. "I shouldn't have ever got involved in a life of crime," he told the Daily News last week in a rare interview. "But there is no use crying about it now. It's been over with, you know? Just a lack of self-discipline on my part."

Ray always has admitted to a certain amount of crime — fraud, gun-running, burglary. Five times in his life, he attempted to break out of prison — twice successfully, including once when he stuffed himself inside a box being loaded onto a truck.

But as quickly as he acknowledges that part of his past, inmate No. 65477 at the Lois DeBerry Special Needs Facility in Nashville continues to insist there is one crime he did not commit.

"I definitely didn't kill Martin Luther King," he said in a suddenly forceful voice.

Ray has been issuing the same angry denial since 1969, when he tried to take back a three-day-old confession stating that he shot King in Memphis on April 4, 1968. He has been fighting for a trial ever since, a forum so far denied him by eight courts.

But as Ray enters his seventh decade, it is clear that his legal maneuverings have taken a backseat to his health concerns. In short, Ray needs a new liver, say doctors, who last summer gave him three months to live.

"That's the only thing that can save me — a transplant," said Ray, who slipped into what many assumed would be his last coma on March 11, only to awaken days later.

His thoughts today are clearly those of a dying man. Two weeks ago, he drew up a



DYING WITH DOUBTS: James Earl Ray, incarcerated while hospitalized in Nashville last year. Below, a healthier Ray, in 1992 at Nashville's Riverbend maximum-security prison.

will, he said. He has specified his wish to be cremated and have his ashes spread over "Europe or Ireland or somewhere."

"I don't want to be dug up every six months to see if it is really me," he said. He defers when asked if he believes in God or an afterlife.

"I don't like to talk about religion or politics. I got enough problems without doing that," he said, chuckling.

Today, Ray spends most of his days alone in a cell that is really a hybrid hospital room. Instead of bars, he is kept be-

hind a heavy, sliding-glass wall with a slot for pushing food through. The lone window is 6 inches wide.

His book collection includes "Killing the Dream: James Earl Ray and the Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.," a new book Ray received last week from author Gerald Posner. The book concludes that Ray killed King, probably

with the expectation that he would be financially rewarded by powerful white Southerners eager to see the civil rights leader dead.

What little money Ray has today he earns by selling signed copies of a limited edition print he made titled, "The Legion in the Battle for Dien Bienphu, Vietnam." It is, as far as anyone knows, the only painting he ever made, of a battle he never fought in.

But like many very ill people, Ray seems incapable of thinking beyond the present. When asked, for instance, if there was

anything he dreamed of doing on the outside — travel, visit friends — he said, "I just want to get my health back if I can, and I can't do that in here."

Many believe, of course, that Ray does not deserve to ever see the outside of his cell.

To this day, Ray admits being in Memphis when King was killed. He admits buying the gun and renting the room from which investigators believe the fatal shot was fired. He admits fleeing the U.S. shortly after the killing and leading investigators on a 52-day international manhunt.

Ray has long explained these actions by claiming that while he may have bought and delivered the gun to the boarding house, he had no knowledge of any assassination. He was just a low-level gun-runner, taking orders from a mysterious man named "Raoul." He was a patsy.

It's a story that Ray is not about to deviate from today, although there have been significant variations over the years.

"I was there [in Memphis] under the guise of a gun-running deal," Ray said last week. "I had been involved in that before, so I thought it was just an extension of that."

For many observers, the more compelling mystery is how much support Ray has built up among some of Dr. King's closest friends and

family members.

Just last week, for instance, Coretta Scott King called for a new investigation into her husband's death, saying, "It is morally wrong to make Mr. Ray the scapegoat."

With her stood her two sons, Dexter and Martin 3rd, and former UN Ambassador Andrew Young.

In addition, there is the Rev. James Lawson, who organized the sanitation workers' strike that brought King to Memphis in 1968. Lawson now heads something called The Martin Luther King Truth and Justice Fund, the sole purpose of which is to raise money for a liver transplant for Ray.

Ray is applying for a medical furlough that would allow him to seek a new liver at an outside hospital. Prison officials denied a similar request last year.

But Tennessee prosecutor John Campbell recently said authorities might look at Ray's request differently this time if he "would admit the obvious ... and quit spinning these crazy stories."

A tantalizing offer, requiring that Ray simply admit to a crime he has already confessed to once. But Ray isn't about to bite.

"No, I'm not givin' that stuff," he said last week when asked if he was pondering any deathbed confessions. "I have told everything I know."

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Sensei Mike Gabriel
1526 Jones Ave.
Nashville, TN 37207

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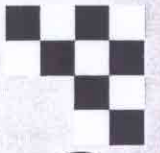
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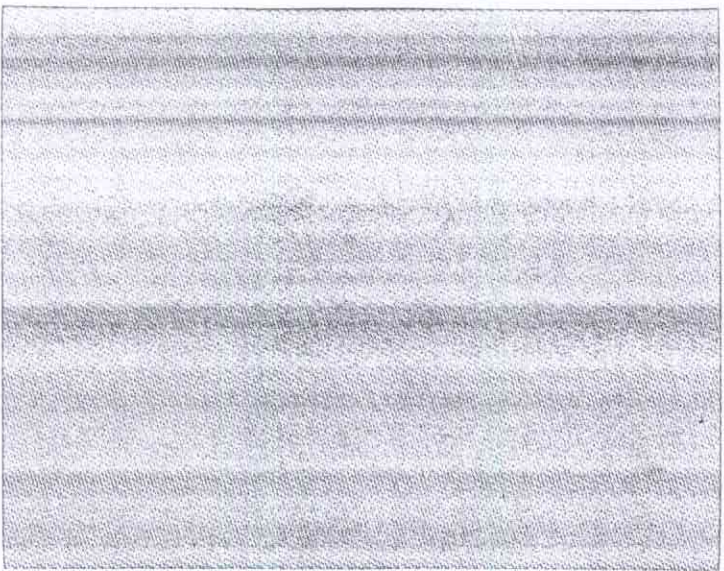
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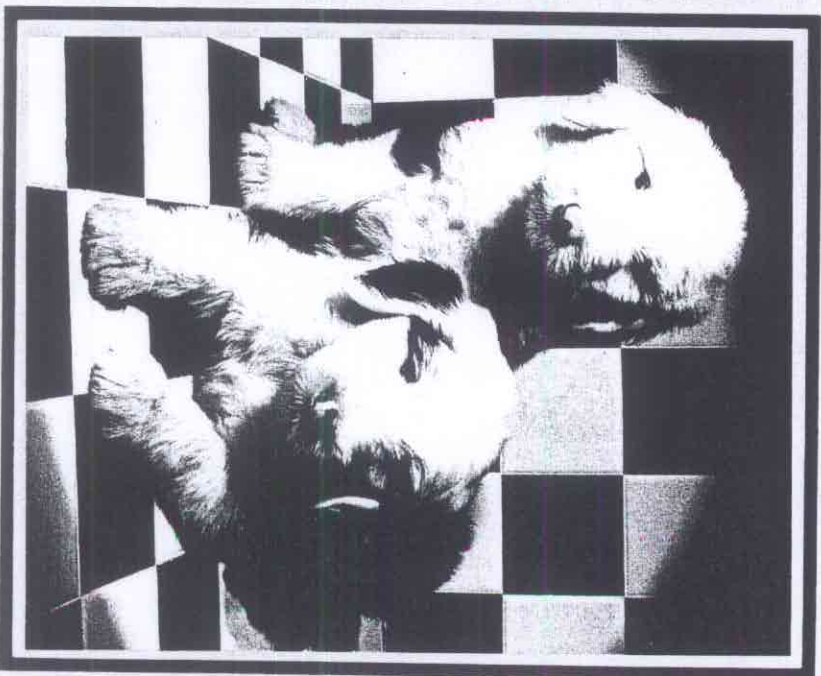
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 That they'll add, in some small way,
 To the happy celebration
 Of this very special day!



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