

# ASSASSINATION

## April 3rd, 1968

It was before dawn when the Reverend Ralph Abernathy brought his old Ford to a stop in front of the modest, pleasant home of Coretta and Martin Luther King, Jr., in Atlanta, Georgia. Abernathy half expected to see King waiting patiently on the stoop, a black valise at his side.

But this morning King was running late. When Coretta answered the door, her husband was just getting up.

King mumbled an apology for oversleeping and hurried into the bathroom to shave. Abernathy, after declining Coretta's offer of breakfast, kept a close watch on the time. He and King had to catch an early flight for Memphis, Tennessee.

King was ready in nothing flat. As always, he wore a somber business suit, its well-tailored lines flattering his broad shoulders and subtly concealing his expanding waistline. He gave Coretta a quick good-bye kiss and said he would call her from Memphis. Once in the car, he reminded Abernathy that he wanted to stop by his office on the way to the airport.

When they reached the office on Auburn Avenue, King let himself in with his latchkey and swiftly gathered up some papers he would need in Memphis. In the early morning shadows, an outsider might have taken the place for the office of a law firm or real estate business and King for a young attorney or salesman. Nothing could have been further from the truth.

The office on Auburn Avenue was home to one of the most significant organizations in American history—the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC)—and Martin Luther King, Jr., the man in the dark suit, white shirt, and carefully knotted tie, was its founder and leader. And he had led a revolution.

The revolution of Martin Luther King was the struggle of black Americans for equality and civil rights.

For a dozen years, this charismatic Baptist minister and his legion of followers had confronted the humiliating system of segregation that had kept black American second-class citizens.

In doing this, he and his disciples had faced a raging storm of white abuse. They had been beaten, arrested, jailed, and spat upon. They had had their homes and churches burned, their families threatened, their friends and allies murdered. They had felt the pain of police billy clubs, high-pressure water hoses, and snarling attack dogs.

Yet they kept on. They marched; they staged boycotts and sit-ins; they broke unjust laws; and, in the end, they awakened the nation and the world to the shame of American racial persecution.

Through it all, no matter how badly provoked, no matter how brutal their foes, they had never turned to violence, because with every ounce of his being Martin Luther King believed in nonviolence.

In accepting one of the world's highest honors, the Nobel Peace Prize, he said,



King, flanked by his aides Jesse Jackson (left) and Ralph Abernathy, stands on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel shortly after arriving in Memphis, Tenn., on April 3, 1968. Later in the day, King gave what turned out to be his last public address on civil rights.

"Nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral questions of our time—the need for man to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to violence and oppression."

During the heroic years of the civil rights movement, Ralph Abernathy had been at King's side, just as he was this morning as they dashed to the Atlanta airport.

Others in the movement snickered at the way Abernathy fell asleep during meetings and elbowed his way next to King whenever photographers were around. One associate lamented, "What a burden Ralph was to Martin." Yet King trusted Abernathy absolutely, loved him as a brother, and, despite considerable opposition, had designated him as his eventual successor at the helm of the SCLC.

Abernathy was worried about his loyal friend. A few months before, he had returned from a trip to Europe and had found King dejected and melancholic. "He was just a different person," Abernathy said.

"He was sad and depressed." Worst of all, King seemed obsessed by the subject of death and persisted in talking and speculating about his own end.

Those close to King knew he had every reason in the world to be preoccupied with death. As the man who symbolized black America's determination for justice and equality, he magnetically attracted the hatred of violent racists.

Over the years, he had received nearly every kind of twisted, anonymous threat of death, and once in New York, a decade before, a deranged woman had stabbed him in the chest as he autographed books in a department store.

The latest reminder of the danger in which King lived took place at the Atlanta airport on this April morning. The scheduled time of departure for Memphis passed, and their plane did not budge. King and Abernathy shifted impatiently in their seats.

Finally, the pilot's voice crackled over the public address system: "Ladies and gentlemen, I want to apologize for the delay. But today we have on board Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and we have to be very careful—we had the plane guarded all night—and we have been checking people's luggage. Now that everything's clear, we are preparing for takeoff."

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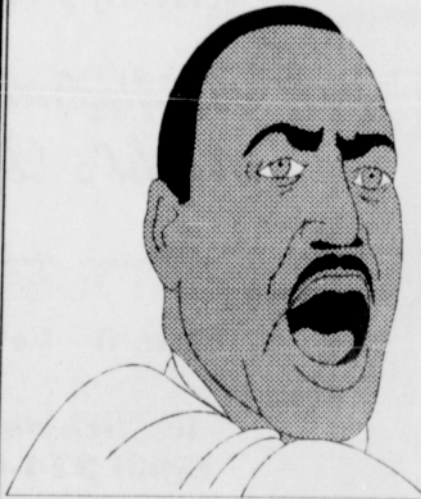
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-Martin Luther King Jr.