

## THE MARTYRS

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The blood of martyrs soaks the soil of American society. The life given to us by the deaths of a few has altered the course of history and strengthened the heartbeat of justice in our breasts. The willingness to surrender one's life for a righteous cause doesn't come easy. Neither does it keep the depraved men who kill our heroes from believing they are driven by destiny or divinity. But the sacrifice of extraordinary figures has given us a firmer grasp of truth and democracy than their killers ever imagined. John Wilkes Booth may have wished to stop the liberation of enslaved blacks when he murdered Abraham Lincoln, but he strengthened their cause with his fatal shot.

In the nineteen sixties, the deaths of three men changed America and caused us to reckon anew with our ideals. John F. Kennedy made us hope that American ingenuity would triumph over ignorance, that science would defeat superstition. His youthful effort to

tame our cynicism ended tragically in 1963 on a dark day in Dallas. His brother Robert met a similar fate just five years later. Robert had emerged from his brother's shadow to lay claim to a reviving sense of national purpose: to slay the dragons of poverty and to vanquish the demons of insincerity. Between their assassinations was lodged the death of a man who was arguably greater than them both. He held no office nor did he enjoy the privileges of white skin. He sought to cure the American soul of its bigotry against a black people it had snatched from a far continent, a black people that the nation had, for corrupt purposes, fettered in its twisted white imagination. Martin Luther King, Jr., crushed the facade of American decency and called on us to revisit our neglected moral ambition, preaching the gospel of love in a time of withering hate.

Fifty years ago, on April 9, 1968, at 10:30 a.m., 1,300 people filed into Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta for the private funeral of a man who, like his father before him, had once served as its pastor: the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. Attendees included Thurgood Marshall, Wilt Chamberlain, Marlon Brando, Dizzy Gillespie, Stokely Carmichael, and Richard Nixon, who was then running for president. The sitting president, Lyndon Baines Johnson, did not come because he didn't want to drape the service in the controversy of the Vietnam War, a cause to which he had devoted significant resources. The choir, 160

strong, sang sorrowful hymns. King's dear friend and gospel legend Mahalia Jackson delivered a plaintive accounting of the fallen leader's favorite hymn, "Take My Hand, Precious Lord." Ralph David Abernathy, cofounder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and a man whom King described as "the best friend I have in the world," officiated.<sup>1</sup> A lone singer performed a devastating rendition of "My Heavenly Father Watches Over Me."

But the most memorable speaker that morning—a haunting baritone piped out of tinny speakers that left his four children startled—was King himself. "If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral," King pleaded posthumously in a recording from his "Drum Major Instinct" sermon given two months earlier and played at the behest of his widow, Coretta. He didn't get his wish: The service lasted two hours, followed by a public, nationally broadcast funeral held that afternoon at King's alma mater, Morehouse College.

As a nine-year-old kid in the Detroit ghetto, I was drawn to the television screen to view the funeral. I was just beginning to understand my blackness, just learning that it existed, that it was essential in a world where whiteness loomed as an unknowable force. I had never gone to school with white kids, had rarely even interacted with white folk outside of the neighborhood business owners for whom my father, and

eventually I, worked. I didn't know what they liked or how they thought of the world, how they handled their disappointments or whether they, like us, laughed at misery to keep from crying. I was only starting to sense that white folk may have feared us as much as they didn't like us; it seemed vaguely tied to how we refused to bow in the face of suffering and how, despite their doing the worst they could imagine doing to us, we refused to give in.

With King's death, the whiteness that had been shapeless suddenly lunged forward. When King was killed, I felt vulnerable; all that made sense no longer held in place, and it appeared that the cosmos had gotten drunk on its insufficiency, teetered off course, and hurtled madly toward oblivion. How else could it be? Martin Luther King, Jr., was put down like a mangy dog. His breathing and being were seen as such an offense that they had to be stopped at all costs. I was frightened for months. He had been murdered on a balcony, and I could no longer easily wash my hands in our bathroom, which opened onto an upstairs balcony, without fearing that whiteness would kill me too.

Perhaps that was why I paid such close attention to his funeral; I was in search of unspoken solace, of comfort that could only come if I could discern in his services some logic, some possible clue, for why he had to perish, some explanation that might, I felt too guilty to admit, spare me his same fate. My father thought

it was all morbid. He eventually sent me outside to play, but not before I eagerly drank in the mournful cadences of the folk gathered at King's public service. They surely grieved for King and his valiant family, and, yes, for themselves. But their grief had become a ritual that was all too familiar when a leader or an ordinary soul had been silenced by white rage; and by then our rituals could barely contain moments like this, moments for which we had no words.

Yet any writer must have words, especially if he is a witness, even a prophet, though not quite as piercing as the one who lay in his grave.

Make no mistake, James Baldwin had words. He shared with that fallen soul a style forged in the black pulpit. Jimmy attended the funeral too, having wrangled his way through the massive throng outside before he was hoisted atop a car and seated inside the sanctuary. In "Malcolm and Martin," the essay he wrote four years after King's assassination, Baldwin recalled King's funeral—"the most real church service I've ever sat through in my life"—then grappled with the national undoing set loose by his death.<sup>2</sup>

I had just begun reading Baldwin at the time King was murdered. I inhaled his semiautobiographical *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, identifying with the main character, John Grimes, and his intense struggles with the church and the passionate effort to reconcile religion and rationality. Not long afterward I began sampling

Baldwin's legendary essays. Baldwin inspired me to read between the lines and beneath the surface, reading me into black manhood with the wise counsel and steady affection of a big brother or loving father.

By the time I got to his essay on Malcolm and Martin, I'd grown out of my racial innocence, a process that began with the '67 rebellion in Detroit. Just as police brutality vexes black life today, an act of police aggression sparked what was then the deadliest riot in the nation's history. We lived in the perilous shadow of relentless surveillance and intimidation by law enforcement. One night, at an illegal after-hours joint where black folk were celebrating the return of two Vietnam veterans to the Motor City, police hostility made it clear that it was often easier to survive the Viet Cong than the vicious cops. My fellow Detroiters had had enough of being pushed around and hammered with heedless agitation. The city exploded in fiery violence.

I already believed that America could only purge its hateful bigotry if it confronted its past with the same energy it embraced its founding fathers and celebrated the myth of American individualism. I had begun speaking in public at age twelve, and James Baldwin could always be relied on to inspire such an enterprise with his withering indictment of white innocence and his ceaseless effort to tell the truth.

Baldwin knew that America could only survive if it underwent an extraordinary social transformation—

equality for all, hatred for none—that echoed the most noble ideals set out by our founding fathers. (That is, when they set aside their blinding prejudice.) But he also knew that King’s death, and Malcolm X’s in 1965, were portents of the nation’s refusal to acknowledge that the key to its salvation was held by those very people whom it had enslaved. The former quickly embraced pacifism; the latter was an advocate for black freedom at any cost. But the daily battles took a toll on both men, and their views had begun to converge—Malcolm mellowed; Martin grew more radical—so that, as Baldwin writes, “by the time each met his death there was practically no difference between them.”<sup>3</sup> Not that the country much cared about the particulars; the American experiment had once again failed to trust that its redemption would come through black moral genius and paid the price for its disbelief.

America, Baldwin believed, was split in two—not between North and South but between the powerful and the disenfranchised. Racism, that scourge that beclouded our democracy, remained—remains—the nation’s greatest peril. But the powerful maintained the status quo by sowing discord among the disenfranchised. Poor white folk, rather than uniting with their socioeconomically oppressed brothers and sisters against the rich, trained their ire on poor black folk. They channeled their anxieties into a vengeance against blackness.

In this way, Baldwin predicted the forces that would one day lead to the return of xenophobic white nationalism, to the rise of Donald Trump. But to say Baldwin was ahead of his time is to miss his point: America will always need a martyr, a prophet—a Malcolm, a Martin. The powerful will always seek to silence that prophet, trying to achieve the nation's redemption on the cheap—not through self-correction, but through crimson-stained violence that sacrifices the Other, whether black or brown or queer or immigrant. Fifty years after one lone prophet who didn't make it to forty gave up the ghost on a bland balcony in Memphis, King's legacy, and Baldwin's words, are as urgent as ever.

So too is the legacy of Robert F. Kennedy, who was at King's funeral and who would meet his own end less than two months later. When Robert Kennedy was assassinated, it left a far bigger impression on me than did the brutal death of his brother, President John F. Kennedy in 1963. I was too young to know how much black folk loved John Kennedy, though he sometimes dragged his feet on racial progress, equivocating on civil rights legislation. But by the time Robert Kennedy perished, I had a keener sense of how much his efforts to bring racial justice to the land resonated among black folk. Bobby Kennedy was the first white person I believed cared for black folk, and the sorrow



and grief his death evoked in black America made me realize I wasn't alone.

Bobby Kennedy was widely viewed as a white man of means who was willing to lay it all on the line to help the vulnerable in our nation. As a politician, he seemed to spurn small talk for big ideas; he could be blunt, sometimes angry, in the pursuit of his goals, but he was willing to learn by listening. First as attorney general, then as a senator, and later as a presidential candidate, Bobby was eager to engage folk, to come face-to-face with people who might have interesting and helpful points of view.

Bobby's eagerness to engage occasionally got him more than he'd bargained for, and that was never truer than when he had an encounter that felt as if he had stepped onto a fast-moving train of rage and grief. When he invited James Baldwin to assemble an intimate gathering of friends to discuss race in May 1963, he had no idea that he was setting himself up for a colossal failure. He didn't anticipate the sober lesson ahead: even elite Negroes, no matter their station, feel the pain of their less fortunate brothers and sisters; they remain in touch with their people, and indeed, with their very humanity.

The meeting intrigues me because it teamed Bobby and Jimmy, and, though he was absent, Martin Luther King, Jr., as moral touchstone and racial

reference. I heard over the years how explosive it was, how it brought together other folk I had admired, including Harry Belafonte. The gathering pitted an earnest if defensive white liberal against a raging phalanx of thinkers, activists, and entertainers who were out for blood. I've always wanted to read a book about that historic moment, and, more important, about its meaning for us today as we struggle with many of the same issues America confronted 50 years ago.

Each of the groups that participated in that bitter clash—the politicians, the artists, the intellectuals, the activists—is vital if we are to continue the conversation on race that began that day. Fifty-five years after Baldwin and Kennedy met and matched wits, we are in dire need of more talk, more insight, more wisdom, and, yes, more productive conflict, if we are to learn from our past in order to move forward in the present. Everything that hampered them hampers us; everything that hangs on the horizon of hope can be usefully exploited now, including the willingness to talk to one another across the crushing chasm of color. We desperately need to return to that room to wrestle our way to an uplifting resolution to seemingly intractable problems. And if hope led people, despite their differences, to that room more than 50 years ago, hope will still be our guide in continuing that conversation today.