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King and Kennedy

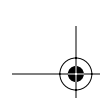


I PUSHED OPEN THE FRONT SCREEN DOOR AND JUMPED UP ON the waist-high brick wall that wrapped around the front porch of my boyhood home on Rucker Place in an elite neighborhood of Alexandria, Virginia. Balancing myself and walking along the top of it until I got to the sunny corner, I hung on to the square pillar and, like always, leaned out as far as possible while looking north toward the city. From that corner of the porch, a providential crevice between the canopies of the trees gave me a good look at the glimmering white dome of the Capitol building several miles away in Washington, D.C. The dome would always redirect my thoughts, and even without books and teachers I knew it was important and special. The corner spot was my own secret observation post, and it was what made my house the best on the block.



That August day I realized I was one month away from starting the sixth grade. So I went back inside and lay down on the wide living room floor to drift into my favorite daydream by tossing my football up toward the ceiling and catching it. I pretended to be a star quarterback when it went up and a great receiver when it came down.





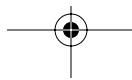
From there I heard the phone ring, and the tone of my mother's voice that followed made it obvious that something was happening.

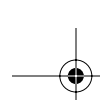
She got my older brother Jeff from our bedroom and me from the floor, and before we could fuss properly about being disturbed, our shirts were changed, our faces were wiped, and our hair was slicked back with butchwax. While rushing us through her two-handed spit shine she gave us instructions, some change, and a kiss and hurried us out of the house to the public bus stop two blocks away on King Street. We barely caught the bus and our breath, crowding together on the hot seat and pulling down the window for some fresh air. The door slapped shut, the air brakes sighed, and the bus pulled away headed for the city.

I HAVE A DREAM

In thirty minutes we were there. Jeff and I had taken the public bus from Alexandria to Washington many times before, but today it was packed with more people than usual, and it took a little longer to get there. When the bus finally stopped we could see the center of Washington, and even though we had been to many downtown events like Redskins games at the stadium, we had never seen a crowd of people like the one forming ahead. A mass of young and old black people streamed down the wide street toward the middle of the capital. Everyone was exiting the bus slowly. I remember the people bending over and staring out the windows at the crowd as they moved to the front, looking hesitant about leaving whatever safety the bus provided.

Jeff and I, following the other riders, got off and started making our way through the somber, determined people who were quietly singing, humming and obviously waiting for something. We didn't know what was going on downtown, but we were both Boy Scouts,



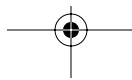
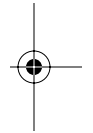


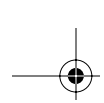
and good Scouts learn to compile their clues and make reasonable assumptions, especially while they're walking.

Carving our way west, we easily solved the small mystery in which we found ourselves: Mom rushing us out the door after the phone call, Dad wanting us at his office immediately, a full bus, too many police, and the large crowd. It could all mean only one thing. Dad's impromptu enthusiasm for learning, history and events in this city provided our lives with a certain cultural electricity, and we concluded that he had learned of some once-in-a-lifetime occurrence that he would be sure to explain to us in detail. His many stories about Washington included the recounting of marches and rallies, and the signs some members of the crowd carried confirmed our deductions. Something special was going to happen in the nation's capital today. The only thing we didn't know was what this gathering was all about and why there were so many black people. Jeff was my leader, and he told me, "We've got to move fast. This crowd will sweep us away if we don't watch out."

Our hurried hike continued. Many times we had traveled the history-lined blocks from the bus terminal in front of the Treasury Department to the building where our father worked on Pennsylvania Avenue. Visiting him in the city was one of our favorite things to do. The attention to civic detail that prompted his excited phone calls also made him ensure that we knew the name and function of all the federal buildings that we passed along the way. He taught us how to find our way to his office from almost anywhere in Washington, and having inherited his adventurous tendencies, we liked knowing that we could do it and that Dad trusted us to get there.

This time, as we walked the familiar territory, I was aware of an unmistakable contrast between the throngs in the streets and the sights that marked our way. Countless black people were traversing the





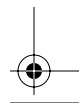
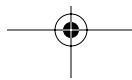
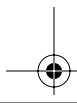
center of the capital, but we saw no black monuments or statues anywhere. People came from all over the world to see Washington's historical buildings, but nothing the tourists came for represented these black men walking around wearing pressed white shirts, skinny black ties and woven porkpie hats.

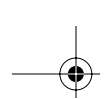
Simplemindedness led me to wonder whether all these visitors were now disappointed or if that was why all the black people were here; they had no statues of their own. That seemed unfortunate in a Washington that was big enough to include them if it wanted to. Maybe that's what Dad meant when he said that things were changing around here. Jeff and I argued about which turn to make as the statues and monuments seemed to come alive pointing the way.

I didn't care if black people had a thousand of their own monuments as long as they didn't make them so big that the view from my front porch was ruined. Dad told us that buildings in the city weren't allowed to be as tall as those in New York and Chicago because nothing could be high enough to hide the Capitol. He enjoyed reiterating that the second greatest reason to come and see him was that when we went to his twelfth floor office in the Pennsylvania Building we got the longest possible elevator ride in all of Washington.

That was okay, but the Howard Johnson's restaurant on the ground floor of his building was the real drawing card. For years it had been all the incentive we needed to pay Dad a visit, and it was far more exciting than all the monuments, pillars and elevators. After looking in the door of our favorite lunch counter and counting the available stools, we would fight over the right to push the buttons that started the long elevator ride to the top floor of the building and walk down the hall to Dad's office.

Sometimes he wasn't done with his work when we got there, so he would give us some quarters and let us go back down to the Howard





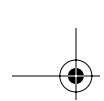
Johnson's for hot dogs, cheeseburgers and orange freezes. Spending our change there was a lot more fun than handing it over to a bus driver, and we always hoped that when we arrived Dad still had plenty of work to do. When we got off the elevator that day, people in the hallway pressed up against the windows looking out at the streets below. Dad was waiting for us in his office with a big smile. The commotion in the halls didn't bother us at all because we saw him reach in his pocket, and that meant it was time for cheeseburgers.

Just as we were finishing our freezes, Dad came and gathered us off our spinning stools and led us outside to walk through the crowd again, this time all together. Using his unique command of words and inflection that always forced us to think and then think again, he explained the large gathering while we walked toward the Lincoln Memorial from 13th Street. He slowly and purposefully weaved us through the crowd until we reached a spot by one of the tall washed marble platforms intermittently placed around the Reflecting Pool.

The pedestal was shoulder high, and Dad boosted Jeff and me up to sit on the empty space on top. Our legs dangled over the sides. He gestured toward the men standing on a stage built in front of the sitting statue of Abraham Lincoln and pointed out one particular man, sharp eyed and eager, seemingly more important than the rest of them standing there. "His name is King," he said. I can still see the snapshot my mind took of that moment: my father pointing in the foreground, Martin Luther King Jr. and history in the background.

Our means of measuring just about everything in life was a football field, and the platform where the speakers gathered was one perfect gridiron away from our sun-scorched pedestal. At that time King was a stranger to us, but we were about to find out who he was. More and more people were squeezing into the packed area, shuffling with expectation, and keenly interested in someone or something that was



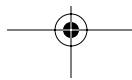


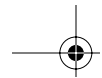
about to happen. Their sweat-glazed faces were intent on somehow finding a future in the midst of a crowd that was big enough to deny one's identity instead of providing it.

It was hot. Dad was still in his suit and was regularly wiping the sweat from his forehead and trying to estimate the size of the crowd. Not even an astute political observer like my father could have foreseen how many millions of searching feet would be trampling across the same soil over the next decade as this plot of ground shook under millions of marchers, liberty seekers and college dropouts. I sometimes long to be granted the ability to see that August gathering through adult eyes. In years to come I wondered if any of the hopeful black participants around me that day were the same ones I saw on television getting scattered by German shepherds in Birmingham and knocked off their feet by water gushing from fire hoses in Montgomery, Alabama.

Dad helped us put on the two-color metal buttons that were distributed to the marchers: a drawing of a black hand shaking a white hand with some words about jobs and union information written underneath. King was introduced, and everybody cheered with fervor that I had only heard out of loyal Redskins fans on Sunday afternoons. He came out to the front of the group and stood behind the microphone, and even though we were still anticipating more information to help us understand, most in the crowd seemed to know who he was already.

After he waved he started to speak. He was wearing a suit like Dad and one of the same black-and-white buttons we had on. He looked right at the people and talked like someone born to speak, a solitary voice inspiring silence from others. Even my young ears knew there was something different and powerful about the words King was saying. "When we let freedom ring from every village and every hamlet,





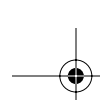
from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the Old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!'"¹

I know the words well now. The speech has been branded on American history and conscience through the combustible blend of the truth in the words and the climate that they were thrown into. What I heard spoken then was not all within my range of interest and understanding, but it was riveting enough to chase away the fidgety habits of young hands and feet.

King talked about the shadow of Abraham Lincoln and Negroes that were still not free. He talked about Mississippi and New York, and he talked about voting. He talked about white children and black children living together as neighbors and he talked about justice and freedom. The voices around me responded with "that's right" and "ummhumm" and "amen" while he was talking. King sounded like a zealous football coach to me at the time, but the people acted like they were in church. Dad wasn't wiping his sweat anymore. He was just listening, and like everybody else seemed happy right where he was. Even though we almost broke our necks to get there, King was not in a hurry, and no one was rushing to get anywhere now.

It seemed as if a few minutes after he started, it was over, and King was waving goodbye. My father got us down from our perch, and we started to walk through the people again, not talking as much during the walk back to his office as when we came. He did ask some questions about what we heard, and he talked about things that were not as they should be. Some of his gentle explanations and words passed over me as King's did, but the sobriety that seemed to grip adults whenever they discussed equality hinted at the depth of it all. I knew





it was okay that I did not understand because Dad made it sound as if no one else really did either.

What I did hear clearly was a simple truth that seemed to be the whole point of the conversation with my father and King's speech: America was founded on certain truths and rights, but now it was time to wrestle with them. Weighty words that had been applied to paper and not society would someday have to be either lived out or erased. Ideas that were supposed to be self-evident remained veiled and undiscovered.

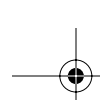
Dad said that we would probably see King again, and he told us we should watch television that night and save the buttons on our chest. I did. It remains one of my prized possessions today.

JFK

Just a few days after I saw King, I entered the sixth grade at Matthew Fontaine Maury Elementary School, three blocks away from our house near the corner of Masonic View and King Street in Alexandria. The only positions that were important to me were on the football and basketball teams and in the next level of Boy Scouts; but in the third week of school, class leaders were picked, and I was chosen as the new chairman of the school social work committee.

There were no write-in ballots for young renegades like me, so my father's job as a Commerce Department patent attorney and my habit of asking what the teachers called unanswerable questions probably got me selected. I didn't have much of an opinion about the committee, and I didn't know if I would like being a part of it or not. We met at school and learned the meaning of words like *sociology*, *society*, and *poverty*, and we made plans to do things outside the shelter of our school building. After our initial attempt at a local canned food drive, school faculty told me that President John F. Kennedy would be host-



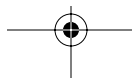


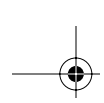
ing a special luncheon at the White House to personally honor all the school-based social-work committees in the Washington area. They told me that as chairman I would be representing the committee and our school at the lunch in the second week of November. I knew I would like that.

The weeks went quickly, and the day arrived when I was on my way to have lunch with the President. The Capitol dome sparkled in the morning sun, and my heart beat a little faster as the White House came into view. As it turned out it was even more than my parents said it would be. Even a young middle-school student could discern the pervasive sense of history on those grounds. It was startling to realize that when I looked at all of the windows, trees, steps and lights—at anything—I was looking at things that great presidents and world leaders had also laid eyes on.

Kennedy was walking around on the most pristine, beautiful lawn that I had ever seen with a small entourage of important-looking people. He waved to the students, and a White House employee who was our event chaperone said the President would be speaking with us after our lunch. Long tables were prepared and decorated just for us, a gathering of elementary school students who had been told we had a future in social work. Our young activism and small accomplishments were only recent occurrences, and none of us knew each other. Yet for some reason being at the White House that day made us all act as if we did.

It was probably one of the best lunches I've ever eaten, but I have no idea what we were served, and I wasn't the only kid not paying attention to it. We were there to see and hear John F. Kennedy, the leader of the free world. Soon after our dessert was cleared, the tense, formal chaperone told us to stand up. A less fretful President came right over to our tables and immediately asked us to sit back down. Understandably, he was instantly heroic to me, and he never really



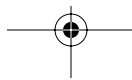
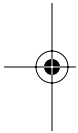


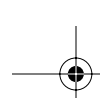
had to earn it. In later years, I attempted to separate the flattering image of Kennedy inspired by my youthful awe from the pragmatic and reasonably critical view of people and politics that comes from the perspective of time and reading newspapers.

Kennedy said that he was proud of us and thankful that Washington and America had kids like us to count on. He told us that what we were doing in our schools and our communities made America the best country in the whole world. He had goals that he wanted to accomplish, he said, and he could not achieve them without citizens like us. Kennedy smiled a lot, and he made the White House seem less like a monument and more like a house. I wondered if the President and Dr. King were friends, since both of them were important and liked being outside in Washington talking to people.

When it was time for Kennedy to shake our hands everyone got excited, and the nice straight rank that the chaperone put us in got a little sloppy. The President had to adjust to our eagerness. He cheerfully tried to shake every small hand thrust in his direction, crossing his arms left over right and right over left as he walked down the line shaking and smiling. Every now and then a kid would get skipped by his method, and I was one of them. I might have been disappointed, but he only missed my hand because he looked me in the eyes. His suit jacket brushed up against mine too, so it didn't matter that my hand wasn't shaken.

After he passed by I looked down and saw that Kennedy's oxford had made a clean fresh imprint in the plush grass right in front of me. I didn't want to walk away from that spot because I knew that his footprint must be significant. All I could do was stare at it. While looking down I remembered all the footprints in the grass around the Reflecting Pool in August and was reminded of a story my dad told me more than once.





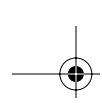
When my dad was seven years old my grandfather took him on a visit to Calumet Farms, the renowned horse-breeding ranch in Kentucky. While they were exploring the barns, a muscular horse was walked by, and my granddad asked the man holding the reins if that was the famous Man O' War. The man said yes, and my grandfather explained to my dad how important Man O' War was. His words must have been inspiring, because my dad reacted to the information by reaching down and grabbing a handful of grass from the middle of Man O' War's hoof print. He placed that grass in a small vial, and it has remained in our family as a keepsake ever since.

That recollection gave me more to do than just wonder. I quickly reached down, grabbed a tuft of grass from the Kennedy footprint, and put it in my jacket pocket. President Kennedy's tracks may not have been as deep as Man O' War's, but there was no doubt that they were better. I couldn't wait to show my Dad, and I resolved to refuse the trade if he offered to swap his keepsake for mine.

Our White House luncheon included the music and marching of the Black Watch Band from Scotland, invited to play for the President before he was to leave Washington on a trip to Dallas, Texas.² After Kennedy addressed us about serving our country through the work we were doing and encouraged us that we too might become presidents, he disappeared to a second-floor balcony to sit with his family.

The band came out soon after in their striking red and black uniforms and got in ranks that were much straighter than our handshaking line. When they raised their instruments, their music pierced the cheerful mood on the lawn. I recognized the haunting sounds from home, where the bagpipes and flutes of my father's recordings were accompanied by subdued lighting and the smell of pipe tobacco almost always leading to a proud storytelling session about his Scottish heritage. The music belonged in that setting at home, but at the



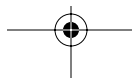


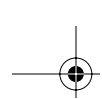
White House it sounded like it was straining to serve the sunny day and the smiling President. Looking back, the stark contrast between the ominous music and the bright setting was almost prophetic. Since talking was temporarily suspended, I just reached in my pocket and felt the grass, knowing that, bagpipes or not, I would never forget this day.

School was a lot more important to me after that. With fresh enthusiasm I looked forward to doing the things that Kennedy said meant so much to him and to America. By November I was not only the head of the social-work committee at Maury Elementary but also a patrol boy complete with badge and patrol belt. When the small rotation brought my turn, I would guide pedestrian students and help direct traffic around the school during the day.

Most of the time not much happened while I was waving kids and cars around, but one week after my lunch at the White House two police cars with flashing lights appeared right near the spot where I usually stood for patrol. I remember their car doors being swung wide open and a loud, static-distorted voice coming from the radios inside. The police officers looked odd. Their hats were off, and they were slouching against their cars, rubbing their heads, and listening intently to whatever was coming over the radio.

I approached them, and they looked over at me as I walked toward my regular spot. I'm not sure why I had the will to approach them and ask what was wrong. They straightened their backs but not their faces, and they told me that the President had been shot in Dallas, Texas. One of them said that things didn't look real good for him. They told me to concentrate on my duty and that my mother and father would tell me more about it that evening. I walked away from them and stood in my spot, ready to be alert and give good signals as if I had not heard the disturbing news. But I didn't understand how





a shooting like that could happen. I spent the rest of my time out on the street noticing how few cars were driving around, peering at the mortified officers, and pondering another mystery: *Why weren't all of those police and safety officers who were always surrounding the President able to prevent this tragedy?*

After I finished my patrol I went into the school building and found the halls full of crying teachers and dazed students. We did no class work the rest of the day. I wanted to get out of there and go home so I could talk to my mom and dad about what had happened. My parents did talk to me more about it that night, but it only made things worse. I had never seen them both so sad and unable to say something funny to make me and them feel better. They said there was nothing to say that could change the fact that President Kennedy was coming back to Washington in a casket.

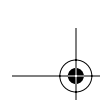
A heavy sadness now mingled with my memories of him looking at me and brushing up against me and of saving grass from the White House lawn. My parents wore the same expression I had seen all afternoon in school. They were getting from the television the same thing that we got from the teachers at school, lots of words but no real explanations or answers. I was tired and confused, so I went to bed.

Years later, while I was reading the speech President Kennedy was to deliver in Dallas, God's sovereignty and providence stood out.

We in this country, in this generation, are by destiny rather than choice the watchman on the walls of world freedom. . . . And that we may achieve in our time and for all time the ancient vision of peace on earth, good will toward men. That must always be our goal. . . . For as it was written long ago, *except the Lord keep the city, the watchmen waketh but in vain.*³

Those three months between August and November left me with



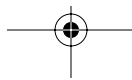


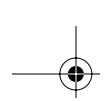
feelings that could not fit on a football field, and I had no idea where the next first down marker was. Kids my age and breed didn't have transparent discussions with each other, so I didn't know how many kids felt the way I did. I bet a lot of them did. Life had been nothing but sports, scouting, and fun, but during that time even a sixth grader could see that for many people life offered hardship and burden.

Children who feel safe only because the adults look secure need only wait awhile to see those expressions change. There was another world wrapped all around the one I lived in, and the fracture that had occurred between them was letting the sadness and the reality of that world creep in and the carefree spirit of mine slip out.

Just as the Capitol dome found its way to my front porch through a gap between the trees, a new darker realm had squirmed uninvited into my life. The sources of joy that I had known were still there, but they were forced now to share space with my new awareness of the troubles that were a defining part of life. There were black people who knew too much scorn and too little freedom, children who needed other children to deliver canned green beans for them to have dinner, haunting bagpipe music, and men who kill presidents in the world.

My young view of that world from a hill in Alexandria was changing. My father was right when he said that things would be different and that the world changes in one way and people in another. Not even my elementary school, a bastion of optimism and excitement, was spared from the effects of America's tensions and troubles. From the morning arrival until afternoon dismissal an injured, questioning mentality walked the halls with the teachers and students, cooling any efforts at happiness with reminders that calamity can show up anywhere at any time.

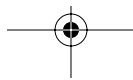


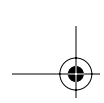


The reciting of the pledge of allegiance was still one of my favorite parts of the day, but it now sounded more like wishful thinking than a patriotic dedication. We used to ignore the serious yellow and black signs on the walls that told us where to go if Russia fired her missiles at Washington, but now we memorized every word and regularly practiced hiding in the school basement. I wondered if the Redskins would ever be able to play well again, and if next year's football cards would show the players' faces wearing the same strained look everyone else wore—a gaze that said tomorrow was not to be trusted. The white Capitol dome could still be seen from my porch, but it had lost some of its luster. I had discovered that for many people, *America* was a painful word.

It was the first time that I remember wanting to talk to God, the Almighty who was revered in our scouting pledges and who was bigger than the sky. He was wise and good and willing to show those attributes to small people like me. He could tell me if I wasn't ready for the sixth grade or if I would just have to be. Although my age offered me much joy I recognized that my heart was grabbing for responses to my own unanswerable questions. *What providence placed me in a neighborhood close enough to Washington to view the Capitol dome? What should I be learning, seeing, thinking?*

King and Kennedy seemed larger than life at first, but when I saw them next to the harsh realities of my world, they were also vulnerable. To me they went from being virtually unknown to being big and then back to small again, the same mental reduction that happened to Superman when I found out about kryptonite. *What kind of hero has to depend on reasoning with people about freedom or gets shot down in the street? What kind of hero changes people with words and then dies unjustly in broad daylight? Does God want heroes to suffer that kind of transformation in the minds of others, and is he the only one unshaken*





by what was happening in Washington? If so, *he* could help me understand why I was pulled out of my own afternoon daydreams to go and listen to a black man tell me about his—and why some part of me was stirred by my encounter with a President who was laid to rest three weeks later.

