Foreword

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As I began reading the pages that follow—Lewis V. Baldwin's meticulous depiction of a fully human Martin Luther King, Jr.—I found myself remembering the moment when I first saw Dr. King in person. It was April 12, 1963, Good Friday morning, and two white policemen were shoving him along a Birmingham sidewalk. They came within three feet of where I was standing, a white teenager on a high school field trip, only dimly aware of events in that citadel of southern segregation. Already, the fire hoses and dogs had been unleashed, and as the protests lagged in uncertainty and fear, King, Jr. decided that he must go to jail himself. Whatever the risks, it was time, he thought, for a personal demonstration of resolve.

As for myself, I had simply stumbled upon the scene, oblivious to history, but deeply moved by the drama of the moment. The policemen, to me, were the embodiment of malice, one grasping the collar of King, Jr.'s denim shirt, and the other pushing him roughly from behind. But it was King, Jr. himself that I'll never forget. I'm not quite sure what I expected—perhaps some flash of anger or defiance, or maybe the fear I was feeling myself. What I saw, instead, in his large, dark eyes was a stoicism that seemed to shade into sadness, a face that

was difficult to read, but clearly, not immune to the meanness on such conspicuous display.

That was the memory seared in my mind, and I later learned what happened next—how King, Jr. was taken away to jail and locked in a claustrophobic cell. There, in the gloom of solitary confinement, he brooded over newspaper accounts of eight white ministers in Birmingham—all of them known as racial moderates—who had publicly criticized his movement. They called his demonstrations "ill-timed" and his nonviolent philosophy a fraud, for his purpose, they said, was to provoke a violent response from racists, and to use the publicity to build support for civil rights. King, Jr. was troubled by the critique, and he set out to respond, scribbling notes in newspaper margins that were smuggled from his cell and pieced together by his staff. The result was his "Letter from the Birmingham City Jail"—another elegant demonstration of his ability to frame the public debate.

"I guess it is easy," King, Jr. wrote, "for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, 'Wait'." He went on to write: "But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; . . . when you have to concoct an answer to your five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos: 'Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?'; . . . when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tip-toe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next. . . ; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of 'nobodiness,' then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait."

For me, the transcendent power of King, Jr.'s message was forever linked to the vulnerability I saw in his face, and I discovered that others had similar perceptions. One day in 1977, I met King, Jr.'s oldest daughter, Yolanda, on a movie set in Macon, Georgia. Yolanda, now deceased, was an actress, playing the part of Rosa Parks in a made-for-television movie about her father. I was working on a magazine article

about the movie when Yolanda and I sat down to talk at the Georgia motel where she was staying. After a while, the conversation turned to Birmingham, which had been a place for such tragedy and drama, and she recounted a day when she was not yet eight and the telephone rang at the King home in Atlanta, bringing a horrifying piece of news.

On this particular Sunday morning, September 15, 1963, a bomb had exploded at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, killing four young girls, and Yolanda remembered her father's very human response. "I had never seen him so depressed," she said. For several hours, Yolanda remembered, King, Jr. seemed almost catatonic, sitting alone in his office, head in his hands, brooding in silence. This was segregation stripped bare, revealing the violence that lay at its heart—and, in a sense, the white ministers who had questioned King, Jr.'s tactics were right. King, Jr. *had* intended to expose that ugly stain, to put it on full and hideous display for all the world to see more clearly. But he had never imagined that this would be the cost—four girls barely older than his daughter killed, precisely because of his movement.

Eventually, Yolanda explained, her father pulled himself together, for he knew he must, and he traveled to Birmingham to preach the eulogy for the girls. "History has proven over and over again," King, Jr. declared, "that unmerited suffering is redemptive. So in spite of the darkness of this hour, we must not despair. We must not become bitter, nor must we harbor the desire to retaliate with violence. We must not lose faith in our white brothers. Somehow we must believe that even the most misguided among them can learn to respect the dignity and worth of all human personalities." Once again, the sheer depth of his human spirit proved indomitable.

Again and again through the years, when I had occasion to write about King, Jr. and his movement, those who knew him best would tell stories juxtaposing his humanity—his frailties, doubts, and vulnerabilities, *and* his delights in the ordinariness of life—with his extraordinary gifts as a leader. R. D. Nesbitt, a deacon at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, would remember a visit to

Atlanta in the fall of 1953. Nesbitt had been sent by his own congregation to gauge King, Jr.'s interest in becoming the new minister at Dexter Avenue, and when he arrived at two in the afternoon, he found King, Jr. eating a plate of pork chops. King, Jr. was polite as they talked about the job in Montgomery, but to Nesbitt, at least, he seemed more interested in the food. Nesbitt remembered being puzzled by that, perhaps even a little put off, but on a January Sunday in 1954, King, Jr. came to preach a guest sermon at the church, and the effect was electric. The deacons offered him the job immediately, and King, Jr. accepted for a salary of $5,000 a year.

Later, in Birmingham, a movement foot soldier named Lola Hendricks recounted her impressions when King, Jr. came to town. She would see him sometimes, despite the stream of threats on his life, walking to lunch at the Fraternal Restaurant, locally famous for its fried chicken and greens, its cornbread and pies. "He seemed so small," Mrs. Hendricks said, "just walking down that street by himself. So ordinary, really. He would talk to anyone who came along." But there was also the day, September 28, 1962, that seemed so remarkable to Lola Hendricks that she had trouble believing it was real. She was one of several hundred people in the audience when King, Jr. was speaking in Birmingham, and early in his talk, as he was going through a list of routine announcements, a white man began walking toward the stage. Nobody thought much of it at first, but then, the man, a Nazi sympathizer named Roy James, rushed the podium and began hitting Dr. King in the face. Several of King, Jr.'s lieutenants leapt to his defense, ready, it seemed, to tear James to pieces, until King, Jr. gently cradled the attacker in his arms. Mrs. Hendricks was astonished as James began to weep, and others did too, at this startling, unrehearsed display of nonviolence. "Dr. King was something special," she remarked.

But, for me, personally, the most poignant memory of all came from Andrew Young, King, Jr.'s lieutenant for so many years, who was with him in Memphis in 1968. On the night of April 3, King, Jr. had delivered his "Promised Land" speech—in the opinion of many civil rights

scholars, one of the three or four greatest of his career. "I may not get there with you," he proclaimed in that moment of epiphany. "But I have seen the Promised Land." Exhausted at the end of his emotional address, and depressed, some said, about the future of nonviolence in a nation that clearly was becoming angrier daily, King, Jr. had retreated to the Lorraine Motel, and was waiting there the following afternoon for Young to return from a federal court hearing. Young was late, and King, Jr. was worried about an injunction, and when Young finally came in, King, Jr. in mock exasperation threw him down on the motel bed and began to pound him with a pillow. For a few minutes, they were like a group of school kids—King, Jr., Young, Ralph Abernathy, and the others—tussling and flailing away with the pillows until all of them finally collapsed in laughter. Then, it was time for them to go to dinner, and when they stepped to the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, a shot rang out from a nearby building. The bullet tore through Dr. King's neck, leaving the country with yet another martyr, a man who always seemed larger than life, even to those who witnessed his humanity.

Now comes Lewis V. Baldwin to put the pieces together—the vulnerability and the greatness, the heroism and the feet of clay, and Baldwin is uniquely equipped to do it. He has spent much of his distinguished career as a scholar writing about Dr. King—his philosophy, his faith, his culture, his gifts as a leader—and, as an author, he has always tried to keep it real, so to speak. One reason for that may be his own introduction to King, which came in 1965, when Baldwin, too, was an Alabama teenager wandering onto the fringes of history. King, Jr. had come to rural Wilcox County, where Baldwin lived, trying to get black people registered to vote. Baldwin was on the edge of the crowd, as King, Jr. faced off with Sheriff Lummie Jenkins, a white man who had long been a fearsome, intimidating presence. Baldwin noticed how small King, Jr. seemed, barely five-foot-seven, but there was the sheriff shaking King, Jr.'s hand, as the two of them addressed each other politely.

Soon enough, Baldwin came to understand that this seemingly

ordinary moment was a part of the triumph, for King, Jr. and the movement he led so well had confronted segregation's tyranny of fear. To Baldwin, I think, there was never a sharp distinction between the fully human man at the heart of this achievement and a martyr's role on the great stage of history. Thus, does Baldwin understand, more clearly than most, that King has been oddly dehumanized in memory, lionized, his legacy sanitized into stick-figure greatness. In the pages of this book, Baldwin sets out to reclaim the humanity of a flesh-and-blood King, Jr., portraying in clean and graceful prose, with a scholar's unflagging attention to detail, the man who lived at the heart of the myth.

This is an important piece of work that helps give a face to a history more human than most of us know.