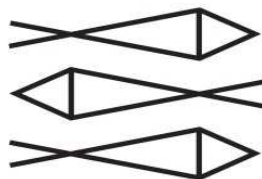


KING

A L I F E

JONATHAN EIG



KING

A LIFE



JONATHAN EIG



Farrar, Straus and Giroux
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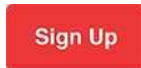
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FOR JEFFERY

*They said to one another,
Behold, this dreamer cometh ...
Let us slay him ...
And we shall see what will become of his dreams.*

—Genesis 37:19–21 (King James Version)

Prologue

ON DECEMBER 5, 1955, a young Black man became one of America's founding fathers. He was twenty-six years old and knew the role he was taking carried a potential death penalty. The place was Montgomery, Alabama, former capital of Alabama's slave trade.

On this day—four generations since the Civil War ended slavery—Montgomery remained a fortress of white supremacy. It was a bastion of the Ku Klux Klan, whose members had endorsed and participated in Alabama's 360 lynchings since Reconstruction.

A nervous crowd of five thousand gathered, filling a big Baptist church and spilling onto the streets. Angry and frightened, they were bracing to challenge an America where Black people were at risk of murder for a casual glance, where the legacy and reality of racial subordination pervaded the land, as proven from lunch counters to oak trees.

As the young Black man prepared to speak, his purpose remained unclear to the protesters, and to him. Would he urge them to stand down, as others had done, or stand up and resist?

His voice lacked the fire of a call to arms: "We are here this evening for serious business."

Until it didn't:

"We are not wrong in what we are doing!"

"If we are wrong, the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong!"

"If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong!"

"If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong!"

For most of the five thousand, it was the first time they had heard the voice of Martin Luther King Jr.

Before King, the promises contained in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution had been hollow. King and the other leaders of the twentieth-century civil rights movement, along with millions of ordinary protesters, demanded that America live up to its stated ideals. They fought without muskets, without money, and without political power. They built their revolution on Christian love, on nonviolence, and on faith in humankind.

This book tells the story of the man who, in a career that spanned a mere thirteen years, brought the nation closer than it had ever been to reckoning with the reality of having treated people as property and secondary citizens. That he failed to fully achieve his goal should not diminish his heroism any more than the failure of the original founding fathers diminishes theirs.

To help readers better understand King's struggle, this book seeks to recover the real man from the gray mist of hagiography. In the process of canonizing King, we've defanged him, replacing his complicated politics and philosophy with catchphrases that suit one ideology or another. We've heard the recording of his "I Have a Dream" speech so many times we don't really hear it anymore; we no longer register its cry for America to recognize the "unspeakable horrors of police brutality" or its petition for economic reparations. We don't appreciate that King was making demands, not wishes. "In a sense, we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check," he said that summer day in 1963 as he stood at the foot of Abraham Lincoln's statue. We've mistaken King's nonviolence for passivity. We've forgotten that his approach was more aggressive than anything the country had seen—that he used peaceful protest as a lever to force those in power to give up many of the privileges they'd hoarded. We've failed to recall that King was one of the most brutally divisive figures in American history—attacked not only by segregationists in the South but also by his own government, by more militant Black activists, and by white northern liberals. He was deliberately mischaracterized in his lifetime, and he remains so today.

King was a man, not a saint, not a symbol. He chewed his fingernails. He shouted at the TV during quiz shows. He hid his cigarettes from his children. He had a little white dog named Topsy. He bore a scar on his chest where, in 1958, surgeons extricated an ivory-handled letter opener lodged beside his

aorta. He had skin so sensitive he couldn't use a razor. He slept poorly but napped well. He ran chronically late for meetings. As an adolescent, he twice attempted suicide, although perhaps halfheartedly. As an adult, he was hospitalized repeatedly for what he called exhaustion and others described as depression. He possessed a wicked sense of humor, improved by the knowledge that certain jokes were funnier coming from a Baptist minister. He depended on his wife, Coretta, in ways few people understood at the time. He also cheated on her, continually, even when he knew the FBI was tapping his phones and bugging his hotel rooms, trying to destroy his marriage and reputation. He maintained one intimate relationship for so long that friends referred to the woman as his second wife.

He was a man who announced at an early age that God had called him to act. He lived his life accordingly. And he was willing to die.

★ ★ ★

Martin Luther King Jr. has been the subject of excellent biographies and exhaustive scholarship, but even now the literature remains incomplete. This book is based on thousands of recently released FBI documents and tens of thousands of other new items—including personal letters, business records, White House telephone recordings, oral histories, unaired television footage, and unpublished biographies and autobiographies of people close to King. This is the first biography to make use of thousands of pages of materials that belonged to the man who served as the SCLC's official historian, L. D. Reddick, as well as the first to benefit from the discovery of audiotapes recorded by Coretta King in the months after her husband's death, and an unpublished memoir written by King's father. This book is also built on hundreds of interviews with people who knew King, including family members and close friends, many of them willing to speak more openly than ever thanks to the passage of time.

The book represents an attempt to observe King's life as it was lived—and through that life to better understand his times and our own.

The portrait that emerges here may trouble some people. But those closest to King saw his flaws all along and understood that his power grew from his ability to grapple with contradiction, to wrestle with doubt just as his

biblical heroes did. “Great men ... have not been boasters and buffoons,” wrote Emerson, “but perceivers of the terror of life, and have manned themselves to face it.”

King faced it, and challenged his followers to face it, too. He asked his supporters to love Birmingham lawman Theophilus Eugene “Bull” Connor, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, and others who enforced the laws and customs of white supremacy. King understood that President Lyndon B. Johnson could be one of his greatest allies and one of his most dangerous enemies. He pushed white liberals to confront their own racist behaviors, even as it cost him their support. King felt despair. He felt misunderstood. But when pressure against him grew and he might have backed down, he stepped up, time after time, despite the obvious risk. He warned that materialism undermined our moral values, that nationalism threatened to crush all hope of universal brotherhood, that militarism bred cynicism and distrust. He saw a moral rot at the core of American life and worried that racism had blinded many of us to it.

He called himself “a victim of deferred dreams, of blasted hope.”

He also insisted that “we must never lose infinite hope.”

He never did.

PART I

1

The Kings of Stockbridge

TAKE THIS BUCKET of milk to the neighbors, Delia King told her son Michael one day.

Delia and her husband, Jim King, lived with their growing brood of children in a tiny wooden sharecroppers' shack in Stockbridge, Georgia, about twenty miles southeast of Atlanta. The shack and the land around it belonged to a white man. The white man kept most of the money from the crops, but it was the King family, one generation removed from slavery, that cleared the soil stone by stone, planted and picked the cotton, and went hungry when the scorching sun rendered the earth no more fertile than a rutted road. Yet when Delia heard that her neighbor had a sick cow that wouldn't give milk, she acted without hesitation.

"She was a very devout Christian," recalled Michael, who would go on to change his name to Martin Luther King Sr. "I remember, as a small boy, my mother was a woman who shared what she had with others," he said in a newly discovered set of audiotaped interviews he made for an unpublished autobiography.

Michael was about twelve years old when his mother sent him on his mission that bright summer day around 1910. As he carried his bucket, he paused in front of a sawmill where he watched burly men and oxen at work, hauling timber. A voice snapped him to attention. It was the white mill owner: "Say, boy, run get a bucket of water for my men from down at the stream."

Apologizing, Michael told the mill owner he was on an errand. He

needed to go. The mill owner grabbed Michael by his shirt and kicked over his bucket of milk. As Michael bent to pick up the bucket, the white man's boot connected with the boy's ear. He tumbled. He tried to rise, but a fist smashed his face. Blood poured from his mouth. Everything went hazy.

Michael got up, ran home, and spotted his mother in the yard, washing clothes in an iron tub set over a fire. Delia scanned her son's blood-crusting face and torn shirt.

"Who did this to you, Michael?" she asked, voice low and tight.

The boy didn't answer.

"*Michael!*" Delia screamed. "*Who did this?*"

Delia marched to the mill, squeezing her son's wrist as she tugged him along. She found the owner.

"Did you do this to my child?" She locked eyes with the man.

"Woman! You lost your mind? Get the hell outta here before I—"

Delia screamed: "Did you do this to my child?"

"Yeah..."

She lowered her shoulder and rammed the mill owner in his chest, knocking him into the side of a shed. She forced him to the ground and hammered at his face with hands and arms hardened by a lifetime of manual labor. When one of the mill workers tried to pull her away, Delia punched him, too. The others backed off.

"You can kill me! But if you put a hand on a child of mine, you'll answer."

Delia balled her fists, ready for more, but the mill owner wanted none of it.

Back home, Delia cleaned her son's face. She warned him not to tell his father what had happened. A Black woman might get away with beating a white man, but a Black *man* would likely pay with his life.

Soon, though, Jim King heard about the mill owner's attack on his son. As Delia had feared, Jim grabbed a rifle and went to the mill bent on revenge. The owner wasn't there. That night, a mob of white men on horseback rode to the Kings' shack. Jim King knew the law offered no protection, so he did the only thing he could think of to save himself and his family: he ran. He took off into the woods and stayed away through the summer and into the

fall. Delia became sick. The cotton crop suffered, and the vegetables got picked too late. The family struggled to survive the winter.

Months later, Michael heard from a friend that the mill owner was no longer angry. Things could go back to normal, the friend said. Jim King came home, but normal was not an option. “I’m gonna blow one of these crackers’ heads off,” he told his son. Jim drank heavily and argued forcefully with Delia. When he left the house, he went alone, and took his rifle. He tried to shoot something his family could eat, but he was often too drunk to see a rabbit, much less hit one.

“I just wondered what was normal for us,” Michael recalled, “and how long we could expect it to last.”



Michael King’s parents were born in the so-called Reconstruction years immediately following the Civil War. Men and women recently released from slavery purchased land, started churches, and built communities. They voted, too, electing more than two thousand Black public officials, including a governor in Louisiana, ten Black members of the U.S. House of Representatives, and two U.S. senators. The historian Eric Foner described Reconstruction as “a radical experiment in interracial democracy,” during which formerly enslaved laborers became free laborers.

But the experiment failed. As W. E. B. Du Bois wrote, “The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery.”

The white backlash to Black people’s gains was immediate—and vicious.

The U.S. government permitted white elected officials in the South to address the so-called Negro problem as they liked. Racial animosity metastasized. A system of land rental, known as sharecropping, forced Black farmers into a relationship with white landowners that was deeply exploitative. Factory owners and financiers in the North went along, for the most part, silenced by the profits generated by cheap labor. White officials in the South concluded that Black people were not only inferior, and therefore unfit to be treated as equal citizens, but also a threat to their physical safety.

Southern lawmakers passed codes to establish systems of peonage not far removed from slavery. By the start of the twentieth century, every state in the South had laws designed to divide the races and subordinate Black people. The segregation rules—commonly known as Jim Crow laws—mandated separation of the races: in schools, trains, theaters, churches, hotels, hospitals, barbershops, restrooms, orphanages, prisons, funeral homes, cemeteries, and elsewhere. Jim Crow laws prohibited Black and white people from playing checkers, dominos, and card games together in their own homes. Marriage between races was forbidden, too. For many in the white community, the greatest fear of all was miscegenation, which would blur the line they had worked so hard to create and enforce. For others, the greatest fear was a reordering of power.

Supporters viewed the Jim Crow laws as a system of controls, like dams and dikes, designed to preserve the natural order as they perceived it. In 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court gave legal sanction to segregation in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, creating a standard of “separate but equal” that was anything but equal.

Atlanta became the unofficial capital of the booming, divided South. It was in Atlanta, in 1895, that the Black educator Booker T. Washington proposed his famous compromise, saying Black people would at least for the upcoming future accept separation of the races if the white community, in return, took responsibility for improving the skills and social conditions of Black people. But Washington’s critics feared that such a compromise would leave Black people permanently subservient. Georgia, as W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in 1903, became “the centre of the Negro problem,—the centre of those nine million men who are America’s dark heritage from slavery and the slave-trade.”

Jim King—born the year before the abolition of chattel slavery—personified the crushing frustrations of Black life in the South. He never learned to read or write. He never voted. He never owned property. Instead, he lived in a perpetual state of debt to the white men for whom he farmed. He grew lean, edgy, and angry. America hadn’t given Jim King much, and then, bit by bit, it took away what little he had managed to accumulate, leaving frustration, travail, and rage. That’s how his son Michael described it. The

American dream, built on promises written into the nation's founding documents, lost all meaning. Jim King drank until he had "a look of very quiet but very serious fire in his eyes," wrote his son, until he no longer cared, "not about living, not about pain, not about his anger or anything else."

Delia, ten years younger than her husband, held the family together. Born Delia Linsey in Ellenwood, Georgia, she, too, had grown up on a white-owned farm. Her father, Jim Long, had been used in slavery to sire children, to build up the owner's supply of enslaved laborers and boost the owner's return on investment in human property. Enslaved women were the victims of these forced sexual encounters. Delia's mother, Jane Linsey, born in 1853, gave birth to her first child at the age of sixteen and went on to have four more, without marrying. By 1880, the federal census reported that Jane was twenty-seven, the mother of five, single, not widowed or divorced, with no occupation other than "keeping home." Jim Long appears on the next page of the census, living nearby at the age of thirty-six, married to a woman named Francis, with ten more children.

Delia Linsey married Jim King in Henry County on August 20, 1895. On the marriage license, Delia's maiden name was spelled Lindsey. Five years later, the Kings were living in Ellenwood, where Jim worked as a day laborer and Delia took care of their daughter Woodie and their son Michael. Another son, Lucius, died at some point during infancy. In addition to farming, Jim King worked part-time at a rock quarry until an accident in the quarry took one of his fingers and made further work there impossible. By 1910, the Kings were farming cotton in Stockbridge and raising seven children.

Federal census reports show that Delia King didn't know how to read or write in 1900 or 1910. But by 1920, at age forty-five, she had learned, most likely by reading the Bible. When she wasn't giving birth, feeding children, cooking for her family, sewing, washing, planting vegetables, or picking cotton, Delia cleaned and ironed clothes for white families. When it rained, the roof leaked. When ice-cold wind blew through the cracks in the flimsy walls, the family crowded around the fireplace, Michael recalled, "while our backs shivered." They had no running water and no indoor toilet. "But Mama was at peace with herself," Michael wrote, "because of her abiding faith." No matter what misfortune befell her, Delia King would never "close her eyes so

tight in sorrow or rage that she did not see God's hand reaching out to her."

Every Sunday, Delia and the children walked to church, carrying their shoes so as not to wear them out. They alternated between Methodist and Baptist churches. Jim King did not attend either one. "He didn't care anything about church," Michael recalled. "He wouldn't go to church ... My daddy would work all week and at the end of the week he would get drunk and then scrap with my mother ... I got to where I hated Saturdays and Sundays for what my father was going to do and how he was going to act up." But as long as Delia and the children were in church, they were safe from Jim King's anger.

Black Baptists outnumbered white Baptists in Georgia. Black culture and Black political activism rose from the pews and pulpits of the Black church. For many, religion offered release from the pain of ordinary life. Black Baptist preachers frequently imparted the radical message that *all* people were free and equal under God's laws, that the rules and regulations handed down by white men were wrong, that the racial hierarchies invented by men to justify slavery were false and craven, that the savagery of the Ku Klux Klan and the segregation laws of the South were abominations in the eyes of God, and that God would never love one group of people more than another based on the color of their skin. Prayers and hymns eased Delia King's suffering. They offered hope that her children and grandchildren might live to see a better day. Faith in God also helped create a sense of community. Hog-killing time, for example, brought a festive sense of community and a living reminder of the spirit of Jesus's love. As Michael King would recall years later, those who owned animals big enough to slaughter shared meat with those in need, knowing they would be repaid in kind one day. "That kind of sharing was to me Christianity in action," he said.

Martin Luther King Jr., Delia's grandson, would often remark on the role Christianity played in the lives of the enslaved and indentured. The land they farmed was not their own. The crops they planted and sowed were not their own. Their bodies were not entirely their own. But their souls, he said, would *never* belong to a plantation owner, a landlord, a hooded Klansman, a prison warden, a sheriff, a senator, or anybody else; their souls would always be free.

“So many things stood there to discourage them,” Martin Luther King Jr. said, “but the old preacher would come up with his broken language. He would look out to them and said, ‘Friends, you ain’t no nigger. You ain’t no slave, but you God’s chillun.’”

They were not educated, King said, “but they knew God.” They knew that the God they worshipped would not punish some of his children and exalt others. “And, so,” he continued, “although they knew that some days they had to go out into the field in their bare feet, that didn’t stop them. And they could sing in their broken language:

*I got shoes, you got shoes,
All of God’s chillun got shoes.
When I get to heaven gonna put on my shoes
And just walk all over God’s heaven.”*

★ ★ ★

Much of the King family’s history can’t be traced back before the Civil War. Owners prevented the enslaved from learning to read and write. Births and deaths often went unrecorded. Tax collectors and census takers treated Black people as property, their names not worth noting. In the first census after the Civil War, taken in 1870, Jim King appears to be recorded as a five-year-old named James Branham of Eatonton, Georgia, in Putnam County. Jim’s age and the ages of his parents—listed as Nathan and Malinda Branham—match the ages of King’s ancestors, suggesting perhaps that the family chose to drop the Branham name, which was a vestige of enslavement, and become Kings in freedom.

Tax records show that Jim and Delia King worked on a farm owned by a white man named William B. Martin, on land in Stockbridge partially occupied today by a Walmart Supercenter.

★ ★ ★

Michael King, father of Martin Luther King Jr., was born in 1897, the second child of Jim and Delia. “My mother was way over on the Indian side, and my father was a mixture of Negro, Irish, and Indian,” he once said. “I never knew

where my father was born or who his parents were.” Jim and Delia eventually had ten children. They heated water for bathing and cooking on a “two-eyed kitchen stove” and made their underclothes from flour sacks, as Michael later recalled. The demands of farmwork, combined with impoverished schools, meant the children went to school “two or three months a year in poorly equipped rural, one-room schools manned by semi-literate teachers only slightly better prepared than the children entrusted to them,” he wrote. No amount of labor would make tenant farming profitable for the Kings.

After Delia’s attack on the mill owner and Jim’s flight from the white mob, the family never again felt secure, Michael recalled. Jim King’s drinking destabilized everything. “He forgot things he was supposed to do,” his son wrote, “broke up tools when he got mad, and stayed away from the little shack we had moved into. He’d be gone for days at a time. When he came back he’d be yelling and ordering everybody around with threats.” One day he came home “full of whiskey,” his eyes half shut, jaw slackened. As the children watched, Jim slapped Delia in the face.

“Don’t you hit my mama,” Michael said as he wrestled his father to the floor in his mother’s defense.

“I’ll kill you,” the father screamed at his son. “I’ll do it, damn you...!”

Michael took the threat seriously and fled to the woods. But he didn’t disappear for long, and he didn’t turn to alcohol or violence. He turned to God.

“I needed help,” he wrote, “and at least I knew that.”

He prayed and went home.

Soon after, while everyone slept, Michael King slipped past his brothers and sisters, snuck out of the house, and headed down the road. He walked barefoot, his shoes slung over his shoulder on a string. The year was 1912. He was fourteen years old and bound for Atlanta.

2

Martin Luther

MICHAEL KING LIED about his age and landed a job shoveling coal for a railroad company in Atlanta. He slept on a pallet in a toolshed in the railyard. He was big for his years, and rugged, too. He could read but couldn't write. He impressed his bosses and earned promotion to the dangerous job of fireman, firing coal for steam engines.

“Pretty soon they thought of me as a young bull who could make steam and be a good nigger, too,” he said, the latter meaning that he knew how to show obedience.

But Michael King wanted to preach. He shuttled between Atlanta and Stockbridge. While he helped with chores on the family farm, he practiced delivering eulogies for dead chickens, praising each for a life well lived and “assuring survivors and the congregation that its soul was safe in the bosom of the Almighty.” By December 1917, he had made up his mind that the Christian ministry would be his life's work. He had once heard a Methodist bishop talk to his parishioners “as if they were dogs,” he recalled, and he “wanted no part of that kind of tyranny.” In the Baptist church, he said, “I found the most freedom and the greatest potential for growth and service.”

On September 12, 1918, when he was twenty years old, he registered for the draft, describing himself as a farmer still working for a white landowner in Stockbridge. But he was a man in transition. By 1920, he had settled in Atlanta and begun working steadily as a preacher. Soon, he was renting a comfortable room in a boardinghouse and driving a used Model T Ford purchased for him by his mother following the sale of a cow. He found work