

FREE AT LAST- Day after Martin Luther King, Jr. died

Written by Reggie
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April 5th 1968 was a strange day. I felt in a fog going along Ocean Parkway to Church Avenue on foot to take the bus to school. The faint memories of trolleys replaced by puffs of diesel smoke; I guess we all have to learn to hold our breath sometimes. My mind rambled at the bus stop, on the bus with images of blurred television news. The assassination of Martin Luther King reminded me of the Kennedy assassination. What was going to happen now to the debate between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., with a Vietnam War escalating to make any kid wonder about our future.

School seemed almost too normal that morning. But before long fire alarms rang out and we were led out of school. Word spread faster than fire, a smoke bomb was found in the ventilation system. We wondered if school would resume, but something unusual occurred. On the same side as the school remained only Black students, all other races, it seemed to me, crossed the street. It was hard to resist; I reluctantly crossed, but yearning to somehow convey my feelings of loss with my friends and football team-mates.

Across the street I found that I did not belong there either. Some racist remarks, half under breath, was all I needed to take off. I diagonally crossed the avenue, giving space to both groups. I found a comfortable car to lean on. My thoughts drifted, think of the nonviolent struggle of Martin Luther King, and I looked up and saw rounding the corner another mass of students were coming in my direction. At first I thought they were from the other side of campus, Bedford Avenue, but too many, six a breast wide, no end in sight as they rounded Church Avenue. The murmurs on the other side of the street stopped. I considered going back across the Avenue, but decided not to move. I was frozen, unsure of what would happen. I was a few yards away from the march, thousands passed. Thankfully it was a wide sidewalk. I saw surprise in many, seeing me there. Finally I noticed BOYS high lettering on some jackets. We played this team from Bedford-Stuyvesant. We got crushed that game to be literal. But it made sense to hold a demonstration at our multiracial school the day after the civil rights leader died.

Thousands passed with no incident, but then one student arched in my direction. I didn't want to resist, to cause anything to happen in the way of violence. But not knowing what to do I closed my eyes. His arm swiped my face as he walked by, my adrenaline pumping too much to feel anything, I slowly opened my eyes, relieved to see him continuing toward the school. Then I jumped, my heart stopped; someone grabbed my arm from my side, a little behind me. I imagined I turned whiter than usual, and was so relieved to see my friend and team-mate, Ken Wright there. He asked what happened, did do anything?" No, I said and before another word he pulled me and said to follow him. I was so thankful for a Black friend in all the chaos, I barely recognized the danger I was in, and as we approached the gates, and the circle closed around us, I had my doubts.

Ken found the guy who hit me. We were face to face, Ken at our sides. I could see the surprise shock, curiosity. After a pause, the silence and tension building, Ken said 'He's an okay dude.' Then we had sustained direct eye contact. I felt so humble and open, and empty. After a bit his eyes brightened, he relaxed, and put out his hand. I slapped him five and a burst of relief came

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as sounds rippling through the enormous amount of students around us. Ken said it would be good if I left. I understood, thanked him and headed home. Nothing violent transposed from what I have heard about that demonstration. The spirit of Martin Luther King, Jr. was with us. Ken Wright graduated that year and the next season his brother, Frank and I were co-captains. It was our best year, too, 6-win 1-loss season, and a coach often saying that what we learned on the football field could benefit our lives.

Recently I learned of another event on the night of 4 April 1968, Robert F. Kennedy addressed a crowd in Indianapolis, Indiana, and said: "My favorite poet was Aeschylus. He wrote: 'In our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.' What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence or lawlessness; but love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or they be black.."