

A GOOD MAN'S DEATH

The Rev. James J. Reeb

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From *The Martyrs: Sixteen Who Gave Their Lives for Racial Justice* by Jack Mendelsohn, © 1966 by Jack Mendelsohn

FOR JAMES JOSEPH REEB THE ROAD TO SELMA BEGAN YEARS EARLIER in the north section of Casper, Wyoming, where a Boys' Club stretched the muscles and minds of the town's poorest youngsters. Jim Reeb was a junior in Casper's Natrona County Memorial High School, but the inclinations and impulses that were to bring him to martyrdom had already begun to stir. The Rev. Griffith Williams, now pastor of the Lutheran Church of the Master, in a suburb of Minneapolis, remembers how, in 1944, when he had just taken his first pulpit in Casper, a teen-ager came to ask him to help out at the Boys' Club. It was the beginning of a close and lasting friendship between Jim Reeb and the older minister, and the beginning of a life of service.

Jim, the only child of Harry and Mae Reeb, strongly reflected their Presbyterian piety and social concern. Their home was not a wealthy one, but Harry Reeb's salary as an executive of the Western Oil Tool Company provided, beyond security, a comfortable margin for religious and charitable interests, one of which was Jim's volunteer work at the Boys' Club. "It may seem strange that Jim came to me, a Lutheran, for help, though he was a Presbyterian," Williams recalls, "but the only Presbyterian church in the north area was a small one, with a part-time minister and not much of a program. Though Jim was church-minded he was not strongly sectarian or denomination-minded. I was delighted to be asked to help out as a kind of unofficial chaplain, and Jim and I teamed up at the club, working on a sports program and teaching religion, until he graduated from high school and went into the service. Because of what Jim had gotten under way, we were able to continue the program after he left."

Jim was born in Wichita, Kansas, on January 1, 1927. When he was a high school sophomore, his family moved to Casper, where, at Natrona High, Jim earned top grades and quickly rose to the rank of lieutenant-colonel and commanding student officer of the school's ROTC unit. In 1945, as World War II was drawing to a close, he was graduated from Natrona and enlisted in the infantry, spending part of his eighteen months of military duty in Alaska. Once out of uniform he came back to Casper to make a decision about college, and to spend the summer months at his old love, church work. In the process he found a new love, a willowy, golden-haired girl named Marie Helen Deason. A wedding was still three years in the future when, in the fall of 1947, Jim enrolled in college, but there was never any doubt in either of their minds that they would marry. Jim had chosen St. Olaf College, a Lutheran-sponsored school in Northfield, Minnesota, largely on the urging of Griffith Williams, whose school it also was. "Jim Reeb came to us with an enviable reputation and he left in the same fashion," says the dean of men at St. Olaf. Dr. Agnes R. Larson, head of the history department, remembers Jim as one of her best majors: "He was a good, no-nonsense student, whose opinions were worth heeding and carried weight with his fellow students."

Jim completed his undergraduate work in three years, taking advantage of the postwar, speeded-up curriculum, and was graduated *cum laude*. That August, in 1950, he

and Marie were married in Casper, then journeyed eastward to Princeton Theological Seminary, in Princeton, New Jersey, to prepare for the Presbyterian ministry. From the beginning, Jim was an A and B student. A Princeton spokesman says he entered Princeton “very highly rated by his references on such things as religious convictions, intelligence and motivation to be of service to other people.” A student internship program gave him an opportunity he warmly welcomed to translate faith into works in behalf of the sick and underprivileged. The experience as a chaplain-trainee at the Philadelphia General Hospital was so meaningful that he applied and received appointment as the hospital’s salaried Presbyterian chaplain on his graduation from Princeton. He held the post for four years, earning a master’s degree in sacred theology at Temple University’s Conwell School of Theology, at the same time.

Those who were close to Jim’s chaplaincy said of those years: “Jim Reeb was more interested in pastoral work than in preaching. That’s what made him a first-rate chaplain”; “He never went into a patient with the attitude, ‘Well, here I’ve come to pray for you,’ but rather with the approach, ‘What are your needs? Let’s see what we can do about them’”; “He was delightful with patients; mild-mannered, easy, warm. He cared.”

But the more immersed Jim Reeb became in people and their actual problems, the less certain he became of the relevance of Presbyterian theology, the less certain of his own ability to profess honestly the Presbyterian confession of faith. The crisis in the last analysis was one of his own integrity, so in 1957 he sought and found work as Youth Director of the West Branch YMCA in Philadelphia, and began an exploration of religious alternatives which led him to shift his denominational affiliation to Unitarian Universalism. He and Marie attended various Unitarian fellowships and churches in the Philadelphia area, where he met some of the Unitarian clergy and told them of his wish for a Unitarian ministry, preferably in a city. In the spring of 1959, the Rev. Dr. Duncan Howlett, minister of All Souls Church (Unitarian) in Washington, looking for an assistant minister oriented to urban and racial problems, attended a gathering of Unitarian ministers from the Philadelphia-Baltimore-Washington region. There he learned of Jim Reeb. The two later met in Dr. Howlett’s study and soon afterward Dr. Howlett requested a special meeting of his board, proposed Jim’s name, and won approval for his immediate appointment.

Jim’s interest in urban problems was quickly enlisted. He served on the Subcommittee on Minority Housing of the Urban Renewal Council of the District of Columbia, helped to organize and became treasurer of the Chevy Chase Neighborhood Association, a fair housing organization, and became first chairman of the University Neighborhoods Council, sponsored jointly by Howard University and neighborhood organizations in the heart of the District of Columbia. “Jim was singularly dedicated to a high concern for all people from all walks of life,” Dr. Howlett says. “This concern expressed itself among the poor living near the church, most of whom were Negroes. This was a man with fresh ideas, bright intelligence, original, yet with an extraordinary amount of modesty.”

The Reeb family lived comfortably in Washington. The church bought them a nice home in a pleasant neighborhood; he held a prestigious job; he was a figure in the nation’s capital. He had married a girl who made his absorbing job easier. “Marie was just the right girl for Jim—just the right kind—an ideal marriage,” says Dr. Howlett. “It

was not always easy for her, because Jim's many projects took hold of him totally, but she recognized what he had to give, and she gave to him so that he could give to others."

Yet by January, 1964, Jim had become restless. He told Dr. Howlett frankly that he wanted a post of his own. He had been promoted from assistant to associate minister of one of Washington's greatest churches, but he yearned to be on his own. In the next months, he searched for a job that would fill his own needs. Dr. Howard Thurman, famed Negro preacher and University Minister-at-Large of Boston University, who saw him during this time, recalls: "I met Jim Reeb only once. . . . Dr. Howlett had written me as follows: 'During your visit here can you talk with Jim for an hour or two? He has decided to give his life to the inner city and in particular to working on the problems of integration. He has come to the point where he must have a work of his own if he is to attain his fullest growth and to serve his fellow man as he hopes to be able to do. . . . If you could find an hour or two for him . . . , you'll have the opportunity to guide one of the ablest and most dedicated young men I have ever known.' We talked. We shared. At the end he said that he was surer now than before that he would find a way that would be his way."

Jim found his way quite accidentally. With stubborn perseverance he had been visiting one agency after another in Washington inquiring into their minority-urban programs. One of his calls was at the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC); there was a job available in Boston, and arrangements were made for Jim to visit the organization's international headquarters in Philadelphia. There he met with Barbara Moffett, director of community programs, and returned to Washington with his eyes glowing. The Friends had selected Boston for a concerted experimental attempt to improve the housing situation facing low-income Negro families. Jim Reeb wanted to help. Barbara Moffett wrote to AFSC's New England Regional office to say that Jim was a "very good possibility." She said also:

"He has a sense of mission about work in the inner city and I believe he shares our approach and concern about poor people who need to discover ways in which they can help shape their future. . . . Reeb, I believe, would bring vigor, intellectual curiosity, our kind of concern for *approach* and *people*. I hope this man can be seriously considered for Boston—probably as Director."

On May 30, he applied officially for the post. The first question on the application was: "What do you consider to be the most important values in life?" And Jim wrote this:

People—I consider people to be more important than anything else in life. Therefore, I enjoy working with people more than anything else. Whatever relates to the improvement of the conditions under which people live and therefore creates greater opportunities for fruitful human relationships is of concern to me. Nothing gives me more satisfaction than encouraging the mutual understanding and faith that makes some worthy enterprise possible.

Religion—Religion has been important to me as long as I can remember. By my senior year in High School, I recognized a clear inner 'call' to the ministry. The inner personal subjective experience of God was always very important to me.

"In the course of my development I finally became a humanist. However, I am still oriented around my own inner sense of rightness and seek to follow my own intuition. This is why I feel entirely in sympathy with the Friends' approach to religion even though I consider myself a humanist as I understand some Friends do.

*“Psychiatry—*My interest in psychiatry, developed initially during seminary, was aroused because it opened many doors to my own self-understanding and the genuine acceptance of other people. My interest has continued for these same reasons as well as a desire to broaden my understanding of the psychology of religious experience.

*“Freedom—*I left the Presbyterian ministry because my pursuit of truth and understanding could not be contrived. I wanted to minister to people’s needs but not within the context of an organization that required I sacrifice my integrity.

*“Social Justice—*Since my days as a Hospital Chaplain some of my deepest concerns have related to the problems of Negro people in our society. I would like to have a further opportunity to contribute to the changes that will bring them full equality in American society. But I believe that dream of justice is one of man’s noblest aspiration and one which continues to grow in importance to me.

*“The City—*I think some of our major social problems are in our great urban centers. The problems of these centers are especially intriguing to me. In my work at All Souls I have received much satisfaction from my relationship to the development of a community organization.”

The application form asked for his thinking on Friends’ testimonies of equality, simplicity, and peace, and Jim responded:

“With the testimonies of equality and simplicity and peace I am in deep sympathy. I have never been able to fully accept the pacifist position with regard to the relations between nations, but I think it is very important to seek knowledge and experience in creating understanding and mutual faith where misunderstanding and suspicion mark the relationships between nations. Only if we can make this spirit and technique prevail will we be able to prevent wars.”

Finally, why did he want the job?

“I have been primarily seeking an opportunity where I could continue to help meet the problems of the people of our great urban centers. I think this is a particularly crucial period. Many Negroes are living in . . . wretched conditions. They see few white people that are interested in their welfare.”

On the morning of June 8, Jim flew from Washington to Boston to meet with AFSC officials and to tour Roxbury and the South End, the city’s Negro ghetto. By the time he was ready to board an evening flight home, the executive director of the New England regional office, John A. Sullivan, and the head of the regional community relations committee, Herbert Hillman, were convinced that he was the man they wanted. “We were impressed with his insight, commitment, thoughtful response, and his very obvious interest in people, not as a personal springboard,” Hillman said after his death. “When we asked him if he would feel nostalgia about leaving the ministry, he answered that he would not be leaving the ministry, only practicing it in a different form.”

Jim had several practical problems to consider, and he and Marie reviewed them. There would be \$1,000.00 less salary than he was making at All Souls. They could manage that all right, she thought. Tougher problems were those of housing and schools for the children. The Friends were pleased that Jim wanted to live in the area where he would work, in a changing neighborhood at the edge of the solid ghetto. But the school situation disturbed both Jim and Marie. If they were to identify with low-income families, their own children would not flee to private schools. They decided to enroll their children in Boston’s notoriously demoralized public schools and cope the best they could with

whatever problems arose. In two or three years—or a reasonable time—Jim intended to return to a church ministry.

By late summer the Reebbs had found what they were looking for—a rambling old frame dwelling on Half Moon Street in North Dorchester, with a shrinking number of white neighbors and a swelling number of Negro neighbors. Close by was Blue Hill Avenue, one of the main thoroughfares of the ghetto. After getting acquainted with his two professional staff colleagues, Daniel Richardson and Robert Gustafson, Jim and his colleagues started their search for a program office site. On Blue Hill Avenue, in a former store converted into neat and efficient office space, they began their work. By his desk, Jim placed this prayer:

Grant us peace fearlessly to contend against evil and to make no peace with oppression, and, that we may reverently use our freedom, help us to employ it in the maintenance of justice among men and nations.

Boston had been singled out by the Friends for several reasons. An AFSC survey had reported:

“. . . the problems of minority groups in the Boston area are, in terms of numbers affected, of somewhat less magnitude than in many other metropolitan centers. . . . Nevertheless, this minority [Negroes] as a whole occupies a disproportionate amount of inferior housing for which it pays disproportionately high rents. It is highly concentrated in a ghetto area, known locally as ‘the black boomerang,’ large areas of which are slated for demolition. At the same time, the low-cost housing market in Boston is very tight. . . . Because of the race factor, the non-white is at a particular disadvantage in competing for the scarce housing supply. As urban renewal and rehabilitation programs gain momentum, severe competition for the limited supply of housing by Negro and white families may well lead to racial conflict, when actually the problem is at most only partly racial in cause.”

The report described several hopeful factors: a relatively favorable climate of public opinion, a high level of governmental backing for programs designed to lessen discrimination in housing, and numerous civil rights and housing groups working on the problem of race relations. But it noted also that while “a large reservoir of good will exists, it is mainly inactive or marginally effective and poorly informed. When this good will does manifest itself in effective support, it seems to consist chiefly of middle-class whites assisting middle-class Negroes to overcome the last remaining barriers to equality.”

Boston was ripe for a pilot project to assist low-income families, particularly Negro families, to marshal their own resources. The emphasis was to be on working *with* people—not *on* or *for* them. For its interracial professional staff of three, a program director and two field workers, the AFSC had sought unusual people with these qualifications:

- “1. Openness and sensitivity to others.
- “2. Warmth and deep ability to accept others as they are.
- “3. Maturity and stability.
- “4. Ability to adapt to new situations and relationships.
- “5. Experience in working with different racial and cultural groups.
- “6. Experience in community organization or related work, and, for the director, administrative experience as well.”

In these three young men—one Negro, and two white—it found what it was looking for.

Pursuing a steady routine of personal conferences with officials, agency executives, and residents of the ghetto, Jim rapidly established himself as a personality on Boston's racial scene. He built depth into his relationships, and people who had thought him only personable and easy to like discovered that he was also a complex man with strong feelings about who he was. "Jim was kind, very kind, but there was a point beyond which he could not be pushed," says George Rae, assistant executive secretary of the Service Committee. "He felt a deep sense of outrage at injustice. His approach to his family was beautiful, and Marie gave him complete support. When I asked her how she felt about living in a slum area, she said that she had no qualms, that it was Jim's work. The thoroughness with which Jim explored the situation amazed us—housing, schools, everything. Yet when he made a decision, he moved and moved fast."

Jim kept a running log of his experiences—"log-rolling," he called it. He would write such things:

"Tenants evidence a deep frustration over their feeling of being trapped in inferior housing and at the mercy of landlords."

"Residents of the area express a confirmed distrust of agency efforts based on their past experiences."

"Many residents do not appear to see the relevance of the civil rights movement in their lives."

"City officials believe the job of tenant education is the most difficult of all and that no agency is doing the job. They resent suburban residents who criticize things in the city but do not work to change the rules in their own communities."

"There are constantly shifting tensions and relationships between 'old line' agencies and the activist civil rights groups."

"Street crimes and vandalism may or may not be committed by Negroes, but there is a predisposition to believe that they are."

He listened to an astonishing number of the city's voices, both loud and faint, in his six months, and he touched in its slum people not only the degradations they endured, the psychical and physical wounds they bore, but their hopes and desires as well, the potential they had or could discover in themselves. On one fund-raising mission to the office of a prominent business executive, the man asked if Jim were frustrated by the "hopeless situation." He would have felt so, he said, but he was in a position to try to do something about it. He did not feel hopeless.

On election day, Jim recorded in his log:

"November 3, 1964. I spent the day at Blue Hill Protestant Center helping in the effort to get out the vote. This was most instructive and emotionally a shot in the arm for me."

But there were frequent discouragements. Along with the Reeb's Boston house there had come a weedy lot across the street, adjoining another unused lot owned by the Catholic Church a block away. Jim hoped the two lots could be developed into a playground as a neighborhood project. The constituency of the church was white and steadily dwindling as parishioners deserted in the face of a mounting immigration of

Negroes. The parish priest was “very friendly,” Jim wrote in his log. “We discussed the situation in the neighborhood. In this context, he said he gives no answer to his people when they ask him whether they should stay in the neighborhood. Since the church property and a lot we own are adjacent, I discussed with him the possibility of creating some common plan for the use of the whole area.” But after Jim had the site surveyed by an enthusiastic recreation expert, his hopes and charts were viewed with disinterest by the priest. Nothing could be done.

Then, late in the evening of December 30, a fire broke out in a building located in Roxbury, a five-story tenement. Four Negroes lost their lives. Anna Lou Perry, who jumped from her fifth-floor apartment with her youngest child in her arms, died later of injuries. The bodies of two older children were found in the apartment. The body of a man who lived in a fourth floor apartment was discovered by firemen. The building was gutted, and the families living there were forced out in the cold winter night to find other shelter.

Jim had been disturbed about fire-code violations for some time. He had tried unsuccessfully to get Boston’s highest city officials to discuss the matter with him. One asked him on the phone what he wanted to talk about, and Jim replied in astonishment: “Why, I want to talk about obeying the law!” Now Jim and his colleagues familiarized themselves thoroughly with all of the applicable codes, examined the Roxbury building from top to bottom, interviewed separately and at length each of the resident families, made photographs, talked with the landlord, the fire department, the welfare department, the Red Cross, the code enforcement and inspection officials of the city and state, then checked their findings with lawyers and experts. After weeks of quiet, grueling, unpublicized effort, the time came to add up the facts. The result, in Jim’s view, was devastating. It seemed clear to him that the failure of government to enforce codes may have caused the deaths of four human beings in the Roxbury area and perhaps others in the past. Still he did not have in mind an exposé, at least not yet. He made an appointment to see one of the city’s top officials and laid before him the results of the investigation.

One evening during the last week in February, Jim phoned me: “I saw my man today. He was furious. He wants me to pull the teeth out of my report. When I told him I wouldn’t, he kept saying to me, ‘If I find one flaw in that report, just one, I’ll murder you.’ Look Jack, I think I’m sure, but I want to be damned sure. Do you know a real fire expert, one nobody can tear down?”

I told Jim I knew just the man, and gave him the address and phone number of Arthur L. Brown, a friend and parishioner with a national reputation as a fire-protection specialist.

On Thursday, March 4, Brown digested Jim’s material, inspected the property in question and reported that he would write an exhaustive report not only confirming but actually expanding Jim’s analysis.

The following Sunday morning, when Jim brought his children into Sunday school, he told me: “Brown is doing a great job, just great.” But Jim had no further chance to act. On that afternoon in Selma, Alabama, a human drama was unfolding that would touch and transform all of their lives.

The Alabama River is a great brown serpent that inches its way along Selma’s Broad Street and under the Edmund Pettus bridge, site of the drama that was to claim Jim

Reeb's life. With Jimmy Lee Jackson as their martyr, and with the simple, straightforward issue of the right to vote to sustain them, more than five hundred Negroes marched that day to the Edmund Pettus bridge, bent on walking to the state capital, Montgomery. Carrying satchels filled with extra clothing and shoes for their fifty-mile freedom hike, they crossed the bridge and reached the far side, where the long column was halted and ordered to disperse. The Negroes asked if they might pray. In response came a charge by a wedge of Alabama State Troopers armed with billy clubs and gas grenades. Gay Talese wrote in the *New York Times* of "the sounds of plastic helmets and wood crashing into flesh, strange sounds – clack, clup, clock – followed by the cries of Negroes falling to the highway, the cheers of white locals watching on the side of the road, the hoof clicks of nervous horses mounted by a sheriff's posse anxious to get into the act, the ticking of television cameras recording the whole scene, to be spun around the world and come boomeranging back to Selma."

On Monday morning, Dr. Martin Luther King sent telegrams to religious groups across the continent.

"In the vicious maltreatment of defenseless citizens of Selma, where old women and young children were gassed and clubbed . . . we have witnessed and eruption of the disease of racism which seeks to destroy all. . . . It is fitting that all Americans help to bear the burden. I call therefore . . . join me in Selma. . . . In this way all America will testify that the struggle in Selma is for the survival of democracy in our land."

Jim learned of the plea from King about noon. At one he phoned Herbert Hillman, his board chairman, and they talked for a half hour. Jim said he thought he ought to respond to King's urgent appeal, but he wasn't certain; King had asked for help from other clergymen, and he obviously had earned it, but who should go, and who should stay home? Hillman could tell that he was torn. Had he talked with Marie? Yes, Jim answered, he had. She didn't like the idea; she didn't want him to go.

"I know it's academic," Hillman said, "but you could get hurt."

"Yes, I know that," Jim said.

They talked then about responsibilities, and Jim confessed that he wasn't sure about which should come first. The Roxbury fire project was at its most crucial stage, but if he hoped to develop the edge of leadership he needed to do the job in Roxbury perhaps he could not say "No" to King.

Hillman told him to think it over some more and they would talk again later.

In mid-afternoon Jim phoned the AFSC's second-in-command, George Rae, and requested official clearance if he should decide to go to Selma. Rae said he would discuss it by phone with John Sullivan, who was in Vermont on a speaking engagement.

Dan Richardson and Bob Gustafson of Jim's staff returned to the Blue Hill Avenue office at about four-thirty after a day of neighborhood calls. There was a chance he would be leaving for Selma that night, Jim told them. There were meetings that would have to be canceled or covered by others. Gustafson had been South and been arrested, indeed had once almost been killed in Blount County, Tennessee, by a racist who drove straight at him with a pick-up truck. Jim inquired what Bob thought of the danger. It was a real possibility, Gustafson said. The three parted somewhat casually: "If you go, good luck."

In the few minutes it took to drive from the office to his home, Jim made up his mind. Marie still did not want him to go, but she had always supported him in his

decisions of conscience. At six o'clock he phoned George Rae again, asked if he had reached Sullivan, and was annoyed when Rae said he hadn't but would do so right away. Marie got supper on the table and Jim called Eastern Air Lines for a seat on an 11:00 P.M. flight to Atlanta, with a change of planes at Atlanta for Montgomery. He phoned some of his friends to get the names and telephone numbers of SCLC people in Atlanta. After supper he helped tuck the children into bed, read them their stories, then packed a suitcase. Shortly before ten he talked on the phone again with Herbert Hillman, kissed Marie goodbye, and went out to a waiting taxi. At Logan airport he found several Boston clergymen were ticketed on the same flight. One was the Rev. Orloff Miller, who was to accompany him later on his last journey by ambulance to Birmingham.

In the airport at Atlanta, at four in the morning, Jim curled up on a sofa opposite a car rental counter and went to sleep. He and the others arrived in Montgomery at about eight. SCLC cars were waiting. By nine or a little after, Jim was in Selma, one among scores of clergymen from the far corners of the country who had hurried to the stricken town.

Sunday's bloody events had precipitated a confrontation between militants and moderates within the Selma civil rights forces. One of the first to be clubbed on Sunday at the far end of the Edmund Pettus bridge was John Lewis of SNCC, but Dr. King had made an agonizing decision not to march that day. He would surely have been beaten and possibly killed and none but the wildest zealots could fault him for staying away, but he faulted himself. All through Monday, SNCC workers made it clear that there was going to be another march, whether or not King and SCLC went along, and the SCLC was divided within its own command. King, meanwhile, in Atlanta wrestled with the federal government. He had instructed his lieutenants to seek a federal court injunction barring Governor Wallace from interfering with a Tuesday march, but the judge denied an immediate injunction and scheduled a hearing later in the week. Federal officials put pressure on King to agree informally to await the hearing before he marched again on the bridge.

By Monday night, when King returned to Selma, the all-Negro housing project, staging area for the civil rights forces, was teeming with so many white clergymen it resembled a session of the Ecumenical Council. Hundreds more were on the way, eager, committed, determined to march. As many as could crowded into Browns Chapel Methodist Church along with SNCC's jeans-clad militants and a few hundred of the Selma Negroes who had been striving for two years to win their voting rights. Speaker after speaker stood behind the dark walnut pulpit to call for action. James Luther Bevel, an SCLC colleague of King's who shared the militant approach, berated President Johnson for "overreacting in the Congo and Vietnam, and underreacting in Selma," and brought the crowd to its feet with the words: "There are two million white savages here in Alabama. . . . Let's tell Johnson, don't play it cheap, because if things get bad we'll walk to see him, too."

It was nearly midnight before King made his way from his rooms at the Torch Motel to Browns Chapel, and he could sense as we walked in that it would be impossible to keep these people off the bridge the next day. He spoke in a restrained and unusually personal way, making little effort to hide the painful struggle within himself. "The only way we can achieve freedom is to conquer the fear of death," he said. "Man dies when he refuses to stand up for what is right, for what is just, for what is true." He quoted the lines

of Langston Hughes: "Life for me ain't been no crystal stair." In spite of his earlier agreement to wait, he had decided to march.

At about the time the next morning Jim Reeb was arriving in Selma, Judge Frank Johnson in Montgomery completely reversed the intent of King's original petition. Rather than enjoining the state from interfering with the march, he temporarily prohibited the march itself. Dr. King closeted himself in his motel and awaited a visit from LeRoy Collins, head of the Federal Community Relations Service and John Doar of the Justice Department. Their twofold assignment was to persuade King to postpone the march and Sheriff Jim Clark to tone down his harsh treatment of demonstrators.

By noon it was evident to King, Collins, and Doar that the crucial decision had passed from their hands to the throngs of milling civil rights "foot soldiers" on Sylvan Street. Collins worked feverishly at an informal agreement with Dr. King, Sheriff Clark, and Colonel Al Lingo on plans for action when the column of marchers reached the bridge. At one o'clock King entered Browns Chapel through a hand-clapping "freedom chorus" singing: "I'm going to keep on a-walking, keep on a-talking, marching up to freedom land." King's voice carried traces of anguish: "I have no alternative today. It was a painful decision. There comes a time when a man must decide. I've made my choice this afternoon. I've got to march. I'd rather have them kill me on the highway than butcher me in my conscience."

To Jim Reeb and hundreds like him all the backstage maneuvering and agonizing was unknown. Now he and the others were about to do what they had come to do. A column two thousand strong, led by King, Methodist Bishop John Wesley Lord, James Farmer of CORE, and SNCC's James Forman, moved down Sylvan Street, turned right onto Water Street, and headed for the Edmund Pettus bridge. Jim Reeb, back in the ranks, linked arms with another clergyman and a Selma Negro. At the Selma side of the bridge, the marchers were met by Alabama's chief deputy marshall who read excerpts from Judge Johnson's injunction. King answered calmly that he would proceed in what he considered to be the lawful exercise of his constitutional rights. The marshall said that he would not interfere and he stepped aside. The column continued over the bridge toward a double line of State Troopers at the far end. Major John Cloud, Lingo's deputy, said that they could advance no further. Could they pray and sing? King asked. Cloud, who two days before had ordered the charge of Troopers, now agreed. Prayers were spoken, and for nearly ten minutes 2,000 white and Negro voices blended, and 2,000 whites and Negroes swayed to the stirring civil rights hymn. Suddenly it was over. The script painstakingly worked out by LeRoy Collins called for the State Troopers to stand aside. The leaders of the march instructed their followers to return to Browns Chapel.

Jim Reeb stood beside the Rev. Gilbert Caldwell, a Boston Negro Methodist minister, to hear King's somewhat defensive explanation of what had happened: "We decided we had to stand and confront the State Troopers who committed the brutality Sunday. We did march and we did reach the point of the brutality Sunday. We did march and we did reach the point of the brutality and we had a prayer service and a freedom rally. And we will go to Montgomery next week in numbers no man can number."

Word was passed to the fifty or more Unitarian Universalist clergymen in Selma to meet at the side of the Browns Chapel at five o'clock. There Dr. Homer A. Jack, director of the Department of Social Responsibility of the Unitarian Universalist Association announced the death from cancer of Mrs. Mary Blanshard, wife of author

Paul Blanshard and longtime executive of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship for Social Justice. Mrs. Blanshard had been a friend of Jim's in Washington and the news of her death was distressing to him. Jim took his suitcase from the Browns Chapel parsonage and put it into the car of the Rev. Clifford Hoffman, who had offered to drive him that evening to Hoffman's home city of Atlanta to get a plane connection for Boston. Just then the Rev. John Wells of the Unitarian Church of Alexandria, Virginia, and an old friend, asked if Jim would not stay another day. Jim was easily enough persuaded and took his suitcase back to the parsonage. He would have no use for it again.

About a dozen Unitarian Universalist ministers fell into step to walk to downtown Selma for supper. Jim was with two young men, the Rev. Orloff W. Miller, director of the office of college centers of the Unitarian Universalist Association, and the Rev. Clark Olsen, minister of the Berkeley (California) Unitarian Fellowship. The three walked first to the building on Franklin Street which houses on the first floor the SCLC headquarters and the insurance office of Negro broker and civil rights leader Mrs. Amelia Boynton, and on the second floor the medical offices of Dr. William Dinkins, the Negro physician who had treated Jimmy Lee Jackson and was soon to treat Jim Reeb as well. There they inquired of a tall Negro about a place to eat. "Would you prefer a place of your own?" he asked. Miller said "No," so the man suggested "Eddie's Place," around the corner and half way up the block. A woman's voice came from the back room: "The sign is a Coca-Cola sign that says Walker's Café."

Jim lingered behind to talk more with the Negro, then caught up with the others and said: "He asked us to come back after we eat and have a talk with him." The three found the café crowded with civil rights marchers, clerical and otherwise, among them Mario Savio, leader of the student demonstrations at the University of California. It was several minutes before a table was available. By the time they finished eating, the crowd had thinned considerably. Miller bought a cigar and walked outside to light it. Jim went to the phone to call Marie to tell her that he would stay another day.

It was seven-thirty and dark when the three left Walker's Café and walked up the deserted sidewalk toward the Blue Moon (all-white) Café at the corner. Almost directly across the street from Walker's Café was the C. & C. Novelty Company (one of the C's stands for Elmer Cook, among those soon to be arrested for the assault of the three clergymen). Reeb walked on the outside of the pavement, near the curb, Miller in the middle, and Olsen on the inside as they strode toward the corner. Four white men moved toward them from in front of the novelty store shouting: "Hey niggers, hey you niggers!" Olsen mumbled: "Oh, oh, here's trouble," and the three quickened their pace. Olsen looked around just in time to see one of the whites swing a three-foot club or pipe at Jim's head just above the left ear. "It was a two-handed swing in the style of a left-handed batter," Olsen recalls, "and the man's face was intense and vicious." At that moment both Olsen and Miller were set upon by flailing fists. Miller dropped to the ground in the fetal fashion taught to civil rights demonstrators, and Olsen went down from the blows on his head and chest, his spectacles flying. Jim toppled over backward. Olsen remembers his attackers saying: "Here's how it feels to be a nigger down here." After a few wild kicks at their prone victims, they scattered. There was not a soul on the street.

Olsen pulled himself to his feet first, then he and Miller hoisted Jim; his eyes were glazed and his speech incoherent. Jim leaned against the wall for a few minutes and

seemed to regain an awareness of what had happened. "My head hurts," he said, but he insisted that he could walk to Mrs. Boynton's. When they reached the insurance office, James Bevel's wife, Diana, was there, and she and Miller dashed out to get a driver and a Negro-owned vehicle which doubled as ambulance and hearse; then Mrs. Bevel alerted the Burwell Infirmary, a small Selma Negro hospital, by phone. As she hung up, she heard Jim moan. He was more comfortable sitting up than lying down, he said. The ambulance came and drove toward the infirmary, followed by an unknown car. Disturbed by the trailing car, Miller and Olsen asked if their car should go instead to Browns Chapel, but the driver said the police had surrounded the housing project area and they probably could not get through. They parked at Burwell, and the ominous car pulled by and drove away.

From Orloff Miller's diary:

"Doctor called immediately for Jim. I am given cold towel. Jim goes incoherent. Blood pressure taken (Jim's and mine). Dr. Dinkins arrives, arranges transfer to Birmingham University Hospital. I get ice and aspirin. Meanwhile local police arrive and begin questioning. Clark and I respond with full details. Police seem somewhat sympathetic and indicate that they do not condone this business. Doctor calls ambulance, wife, . . . I call Browns Chapel and talk with Homer Jack. Clark and I agree to go with Jim (now unconscious)."

From an interview with Clark Olsen:

"At the infirmary, Jim sat on an examination table while they looked at the cut on his skull, an inch or two above his ear. It looked superficial enough, but Jim's head was hurting him more and more, and he began to act as if he knew something was seriously wrong; his face showed great anxiety and worry. When the doctor came, Jim took hold of my hand with both hands and squeezed as if to keep in contact with the world he knew. Dr. Dinkins looked at Jim's eyes and seemed to know that it was very serious. He called the Birmingham hospital immediately and asked for a neurosurgeon, then he ordered one of the infirmary nurses to report the attack to the police. Dinkins was told by the Birmingham hospital that as a matter of procedure they would have to have a \$150 entrance fee. None of us had that much. Jim lost consciousness."

From Orloff Miller's diary:

"We depart in doctor's car for Boynton's to pick up check. Jim in ambulance. We lock Dr. Dinkins' car and leave it in front of Boynton's. Diana writes check for \$150 (payable to Univ. Hosp.) and gives to me. Ambulance (with Jim) arrives. So does VW bus with Homer Jack, Jack Taylor, Dick Norsworthy, et al. We climb aboard with local police following a few blocks. Siren in use—we run several lights—very nearly crash into Cadillac—slow a bit—ten minutes from Selma we get right rear flat. 9:30 P.M.

"Turned around, followed by Nash Metropolitan, attempted radio contact—variety of channels, 'emergency'—no response! Pulled in at local radio station (carries Lowell Thomas, sign out front says), called second ambulance. Several cars pulled in and gave us once-over. Metropolitan returned. Clark suggested escort. Dr. Dinkins sent back from his car. Second ambulance arrived, followed by Selma police. No trouble. Transferred Jim. More cars come and go, giving once-over. Dallas county police (sheriff) car arrives. They surround ambulance and flash lights into it on Jim's face and ours. One opens right rear door and asks name of patient and circumstances. Clark and I respond. Clark requests police escort—refused ('We'll radio ahead—that's all you'll need'). They left.

Sat and waited for Dr. Dinkins' car to arrive (and act as escort). Metropolitan driver began helping (?) with siren wires; unable to repair (even after borrowing my knife). Doctor's car arrives. He drives it and we depart, Clark and I holding stretcher in place (brackets do not hold) around curves. 60-70 mph except bad curves. Get police escort for several twisting miles—to interstate highway. 80 mph. Then more twists and turns. . . .

“Arrive Birmingham University Hospital 11 P.M. Jim's personal effects turned over to hospital and recorded. Blue Cross card found. Tracheostomy. Evaluate brain damage. Martin Luther King gave prayer for Jim (all of us). 12:30 A.M. Wednesday. Massive skull fracture. Very large clot. 15th floor room reserved for Mrs. Reeb to stay in hospital. 7:30 A.M., cardiac arrest. Mayo surgeon in constant attention. 9:30 A.M., ‘We have lost a patient.’ Machine is breathing for him and beating his heart for him. Recounting story to Marie (Reeb) and Mr. Reeb (Jim's father), 9:30 P.M. ‘Marie, thank you for sharing Jim with us.’ 12:15 P.M., Thursday, decision to cease adding artificial gadgetry to keep Jim alive. Massive brain damage. ‘It has been announced by a University Hospital spokesman that the Rev. James J. Reeb expired at 6:55 P.M. (C.S.T.). The cause of death was not immediately available.’”

During the last six months of his life, Jim Reeb was a parishioner of mine. It was my sad task to tell Marie that her husband had been struck down in the streets of Selma. The news had been relayed to me by telephone in the hope that I could reach Marie before she heard it on radio or television; I was able to do this after abruptly ending an evening meeting of the executive committee of the Massachusetts Committee on Discrimination in Housing, of which I was chairman; Jim Reeb had been a member. Minutes before the telephone rang, we had discussed Jim's sudden departure for Selma the previous night.

I drove to the Reeb's home and sat with Marie through the night absorbing the steadily more discouraging bulletins from University Hospital. The next morning, before the children were up, Marie left for Birmingham by plane, and I found myself carrying out her wish that only their oldest child, thirteen-year-old John, should be told of the seriousness of Jim's injury. She wanted to be the one who spoke first of death to the three younger children. So it was I who took John into the kitchen and told him everything I knew, including the word from the hospital that there was no hope for his father's recovery. I will never forget the bewilderment, pain, pride, and courage that mingled in constantly changing patterns on his handsome, adolescent face as we talked. After that we sat together for a long time while he cried, and when he stood up and squared his shoulders it was as one of the adults in the house who would do everything possible to protect the other children from an awful knowledge their mother wanted them to hear from her.

People all over the country, and in many other parts of the world, saw news pictures of tall, blond Marie Reeb as she alighted from President Johnson's plane at Boston's Logan airport after Jim's death. Her face was pale with fatigue and worn with grief, but there was evidence of an inner strength and dignity that reminded some viewers of the deportment of another young widow after her President-husband was assassinated. Marie was on her way home. I met her there and together we took three small children on our laps—Steven, three, Anne, five, and Karen, seven—and tried to help them comprehend the sudden loss of a daddy who, only a few evenings before, in his usual animated way had read them their bedtime story.

By Wednesday evening, Selma's police chief, Wilson Baker, who is an avowed segregationist but a professional police officer first, had arrested four Selma men and locked them in the city jail on charges of assaulting the three ministers with intent to murder. They were William S. Hoggle, thirty-seven, his brother, Namon O'Neal Hoggle, thirty, Elmer L. Cook, forty-two, and R. B. Kelly, thirty. Selma's city attorney secured their release in a few hours on modest bail over Baker's vehement objection. Jim's death on Thursday changed the state of Alabama's charge to murder, but the four men walked the streets of Selma as free men until April 13, when a Dallas County grand jury indicted three of them for murder. Kelly, who had given a statement to police, was not indicted. The grand jury deliberated four hours after presiding Circuit Court Judge James Hare delivered a fifty-minute speech, forty-three of which were devoted to blaming civil rights groups and the Departments of Justice and Defense for the racial turmoil of Selma.

Once again the three men were arrested, and once again released on modest bail. On December 7, 1965, in Selma, the three men charged with causing Jim Reeb's death went on trial. Circuit Solicitor Blanchard McLeod, the prosecutor, told newsmen prior to the trial: "I don't have a very strong case." He asked the jurors, not singly, but as a group, if prejudice would hamper their hearing of the evidence. All but three stood mute. Judge L. S. Moore ruled, and the Solicitor accepted, the finding that silence was tantamount to a negative answer. Among the jurors was one who was a brother of a crucial defense witness. The prosecution did not move for a mistrial.

One of the prosecution's "material" witnesses did not appear, apparently having moved to Mississippi. A second reported witness to the attack was disqualified by the Judge, before testifying, on the grounds of mental incompetence.

Though Orloff Miller and Clark Olsen positively identified Elmer Cook as one of the assailants, the jury was not impressed. The defense denied that the men charged were at the scene of the attack and, further, that the injuries inflicted on Reeb as noted at the Selma hospital would have been sufficient to cause death. A verdict of not guilty was returned after ninety minutes amidst courtroom applause. Apparently no question was raised about the propriety of Sheriff Jim Clark's visit to the jury room during the ninety-minute deliberation.

The martyrdom of Jim Reeb produced the most widespread reaction against the doctrine of white supremacy in all the turbulent history of the civil rights movement. Here was a patently good man who had died, as Martin Luther King put it, "for doing good." And what was crucially important, he was a white man, a family man, a sober and industrious man, a religious man. The combination was overwhelming in its impact on white consciences, and for the first time, seemingly, many whites could see a simple, crystal-clear issue—the right to vote—and could indentify, through the death of a white man, with the Negro cause. As a surge of conviction swept the nation, President Johnson moved to give it shape and direction. On Monday evening, March 15—four days after Jim Reeb's death—Johnson went before a televised joint session of Congress, and spoke with unmistakable depth of commitment in the plainest possible words:

"It is wrong—deadly wrong—to deny any of your fellow Americans the right to vote. . . . we have already waited one hundred years and more, and the time for waiting is gone. . . . *We shall overcome!*"

It was mid-summer before the Congress completed its work on a bill, but when it did, it approved the strongest and most sweeping voting rights legislation in the nation's history.

The week after Jim's death, there were prayer vigils, marches, and services across the country. There was a funeral service at All Souls Church (Unitarian) in Washington where he had served. Vice President Hubert Humphrey and Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts came. The Arlington Street Church in Boston, Jim's church during the last six months of his life, was filled to overflowing with those who came to honor him at a memorial service; his family, friends, and colleagues were there, as were John Volpe, Governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, John Collins, Mayor of Boston, and Senator Leverett Saltonstall. The eulogy, given by Jim's "boss," John A. Sullivan, was rich with the meanings of Jim Reeb's life and death.

"We are united today by grief and by hope. Some of us grieve for a husband, or a father, a son, a friend, a colleague, or more distantly, for a symbol of honor, righteousness and sacrifice. All of us grieve for a good man with rich potential, cut off too soon.

"We are united by hope . . . that this death . . . will be a prelude to victory for the voteless and that it will not be mocked by our forgetfulness, by our readiness to be justifiably emotional . . . without translating that honest sentiment into involvement and commitment to a struggle . . . that can be won *by* us but, since it is a struggle that has to do with democracy, cannot be won *for* us by someone else. . . .

"What sort of man was James Reeb? He was a gentle but strong man. He was a good husband and father, a faithful minister. . . .

"He was a direct man. If he was going to work with the people of Roxbury, Dorchester or the South End, he was going to live with them. His children were going to their schools. When the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People decided to bring suit against the Boston School Committee over de facto segregation, Jim said: 'I'm one of the parents whose children go to these schools; I want the NAACP to represent *me* against the School Committee.'

"He was a man who trusted experience. He wanted to be in the middle of things. He knew that when one lives through an experience, he really understands it and will not fall prey to his own rationalizations.

"He was a law-abiding man. It wasn't that he just obeyed the laws. He believed in them and wanted them to be right and he made a study of new legislation dealing with housing in this city and this commonwealth.

"He was an intelligent man. He had a flow of ideas which constantly stimulated and challenged those with whom he planned and worked.

"He was a good man. When some small child walked in the door of our Blue Hill Avenue program office, Jim welcomed him as if he had been the most eagerly awaited visitor. . . .

"To what had this exceptional man given his last six months of life in Boston? Many of us who worked with him toured the wracked and broken streets of Roxbury and Dorchester with him, gazed at the houses with broken windows, peeling paint, falling porches, and, invisible from the outside, the lack of heat, or hot water, of rubbish removal, of decent sanitation and who knows how many infractions of the codes. We met the bruised and damaged people, Negro and white, who lived in these places. Jim did not

want to be elected to office by them. And he did not want to provide some magic new place for them to live by some stroke of genius. What he wanted to do was to find the way through complex social and psychological relationships to the discovery of how to help these people, by working with them, to become their own leaders, their own representatives, their own problem-solvers. He believed . . . that the solutions that Negroes of low and lowest income find and are helped to find to deal with their housing problems would be solutions that would have value for the whites of low and lowest income and that when these poor, so invisible to so many of us, found their voices and their stature, new ways would be learned in Boston to make housing fit for people instead of the other way around. . . . This is the potential that was cut off so wantonly in Alabama.

“The final act in his life was characteristically generous and outgoing. He need not have gone to Selma. He had home and family here and much work. But we agreed with him when he said he had to go. . . . Then the embodiment of hate encountered on a dark and brooding street the embodiment of love and James Reeb was struck down in all his promise. . . .

“If Jim Reeb were writing these words, I think he might now say: ‘Well, what’s the next step?’

“Once again, his life can speak to us. It says: come in out of the suburbs and revive the dying city. It says: don’t flee from the sinking schools—get in them and work on them. It says: don’t settle for nice houses in the suburbs and rotten houses in the ghetto—change it through every appropriate way: community organization, legislation, code enforcement, and I think he might say, if he were here: There is a killer in the dark and racist streets of the South. But there is a killer in the North too, one which strikes Negro and white in the bright light of the day, every day; and the killer’s name is non-involvement; it is apathy and lack of interest; it is self-concern. This is the killer James Reeb was stalking and when he found him, he was going to wrap him around with righteousness and justice and love.

“There is now an awakening in our nation. Let it be a real awakening and let there be an end to complacent sleep.”