

# CHASING KING'S KILLER

THE HUNT FOR MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.'S ASSASSIN

JAMES L. SWANSON

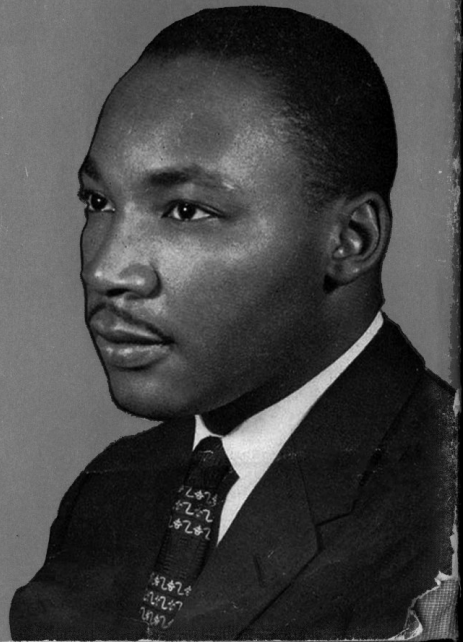


SCHOLASTIC PRESS | NEW YORK

*A leader of his people tells*  
***The Montgomery Story***

**STRIDE  
TOWARD  
FREEDOM**

*By*  
**MARTIN  
LUTHER  
KING,  
Jr.**



Martin Luther King, Jr.'s first book, *Stride Toward Freedom*.

---

## PROLOGUE

---

# “A SNEEZE MEANT DEATH”

In the fall of 1958, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a twenty-nine-year-old minister in Montgomery, Alabama, who had recently risen to national prominence as a civil rights activist, traveled to New York City to promote his first book.

He almost didn't make it out of town alive.

New York was his first stop on a national publicity tour for his book *Stride Toward Freedom*. The memoir was about his involvement in the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott. A local law had said that only whites were allowed to sit in the front of public buses; black passengers had to sit in back. The law also required that when a bus was full, blacks sitting in the back had to give up their seats to white people. To protest this racial discrimination, blacks refused to ride the buses of Montgomery.

King's leadership of the boycott had transformed him from a little-known preacher into an important civil rights leader. He was at the dawn of what promised to be a brilliant career.

Display ads featuring the book cover and King's photograph had already been placed in newspapers across the country. He was excited

to travel to Manhattan, and he expected friendly treatment in the most important city in the North. Many New Yorkers were receptive to his message and hoped to see him in person. And King was eager to meet them.

King arrived in New York City on Monday, September 15, 1958. For several days, there would be book signings, media appearances, and public events. A highlight of the trip was a rally of five thousand people in front of the Hotel Theresa in Harlem on the evening of Friday, September 19. The baseball star Jackie Robinson appeared onstage; the famous musician Duke Ellington and his orchestra played; New York governor Averell Harriman and his opponent in the gubernatorial campaign, Nelson Rockefeller, made political speeches. And of course, King himself also spoke.

A group of twelve picketers struck a rare discordant note, some of them carrying signs that read BUY BLACK. They were led by Lewis Michaux, owner of the renowned National Memorial African Bookstore on West 125th Street, which specialized in black history, literature, and culture. And they were aggrieved that King was scheduled to sign books the next day at the white-owned Blumstein's department store just down the block. Although Michaux was hurt that he had not been asked to host this event, he and his followers staged a respectful demonstration.

Another unhappy person that night who was not so courteous was a strange, well-dressed black woman who stood behind the speaker's platform and heckled the white dignitaries as they addressed the crowd, yelling that she wanted nothing to do with anyone or anything white.

King ignored her.

“Many of you,” he said, “had hoped I would come here to bring you a message of hate against the white man . . . I come here with no such message. Black supremacy is just as bad as white supremacy. I come here with a message of love rather than hate. Don’t let any man make you stoop so low that you have hate. Have love in your hearts to those who would do you wrong.”

These comments provoked the woman even more.

When the meeting was over, one of King’s hosts worriedly suggested that he consider having a bodyguard the next day—his last in New York.

King dismissed the idea.

On Saturday, September 20, a little after 3:00 p.m., King arrived at Blumstein’s department store, on West 125th Street between



Blumstein’s department store on West 125th Street in New York City. On September 20, 1958, Martin Luther King, Jr., held a book signing here to promote his memoir, *Stride Toward Freedom*. It turned out to be a life-threatening event.



Seventh and Eighth Avenues. A desk and chair had been set up for him in a roped-off area behind the shoe department on the first floor. He sat down and posed for photographs with several dignitaries, including Arthur Spingarn, the legendary president of the NAACP, and Anna Arnold Hedgeman, a leader in the civil rights movement and assistant to New York City mayor Robert F. Wagner.

A stack of books awaited King's signature. He was not there to give a speech, but just to sit at the desk, chat one-on-one with customers, and autograph the books they bought. He enjoyed this kind of interaction: low-key, personal, and amiable.

King posed for more photographs, including one with an honor guard of young black girls who wore sashes over their right shoulders, emblazoned with the name of their school, Wadleigh Junior High. In the same photo, two smiling white boys stood in front of the desk, shaking hands with King, who beamed at them. It was a photograph that symbolized King's ideals of racial harmony.

King began to sign books, devoting a little time to each guest, exchanging friendly words. When the line had dwindled to about twenty people, a woman suddenly cut to the front. She was tall and dressed in an attractive jacket, white blouse, blue skirt, and heels. She wore earrings and fashionable cat-eye glasses, and she carried a big handbag. No one seemed to realize it was the angry woman from the previous night. Her name was Izola Ware Curry. She was forty-two and divorced, a Georgia native who had moved to New York and had worked as a maid.



The *Amsterdam News* published this photo of King shaking hands with children at his book signing at Blumstein's department store.

She paused in front of the desk. No one stood between her and King. She was much closer to him now than she'd been at the rally.

She faced King and looked into his eyes.

She possessed a loaded .32-caliber semiautomatic pistol that was concealed in her bra. She could have easily reached for it now, but she had another weapon hidden in her handbag, a Japanese letter opener in a bright crimson sheath. This was no ordinary letter opener: It was, according to someone who would soon have cause to examine it closely, an "extremely narrow, rigid, inflexible steel blade 6 to 8 inches in length, which had apparently been sharpened along

its length to the point.” With its wood handle, it resembled a miniature samurai sword and had the penetrating power of an ice pick.

“Are you Martin Luther King?” she asked.

“Yes, I am,” King answered.

Curry shouted, “I’ve been after you for five years! You’ve made enough people suffer. I have to do it! I have to do it!”

For some reason, she had chosen the blade over the pistol, and gripping the letter opener in her hand, she thrust her arm up in the air.

Stunned onlookers—customers, schoolchildren, and others—were helpless to stop her as she swung her arm in a powerful, arcing blow.

King saw the blade bearing down on him and instinctively tried to parry it with his arm. His reaction deflected but did not block the blade’s momentum. It sliced his hand, inflicting a flesh wound. Then Curry buried the letter opener in King’s chest. It punched through his breastbone and lodged two and a quarter inches deep inside him. She had struck him so hard that the handle even broke off.

Anna Hedgeman, the mayor’s assistant, was standing only a few feet away. “It happened so fast it was incredible,” she said.

Photographer Vernoll Coleman was at Blumstein’s doing publicity work for King’s publisher. “I was arranging a [photo] when the whole thing happened,” he said. “I thought the woman had simply swung at him or slapped him. But when I took a second look I saw that thing sticking out of [his] chest.”

Coleman reacted with a newsman’s lightning instinct. He raised his Hasselblad camera and snapped a photograph that would appear



★★★★  
**FINAL**

**SUNDAY NEWS**

NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER ©

**10¢**

Vol. 38, No. 21

Copyright 1956 News Syndicate Co., Inc.

New York 17, N.Y., Sunday, September 21, 1956\*

WEATHER: Rain, mild.

# MARTIN LUTHER KING STABBED



**A Letter Opener in His Chest**, the Rev. Martin Luther King has wounded hand treated by Nettie Carter Jackson, of Brooklyn, at W. 123d St. police station. Leader of bus boycott by Negroes in Montgomery, Ala., was stabbed by woman as he autographed copies of his book in Harlem store. . . . —Story on page 3.

The front page of a New York newspaper ran a photo of Martin Luther King, Jr., taken just after Izola Curry stabbed him. The letter opener is still in his chest, and a bystander is treating his cut hand.

in newspapers around the world: a dazed Martin Luther King, Jr., with a blade sticking out of his chest while a woman bent over him to wipe the blood from his wounded hand.

“Women began screaming,” the photographer recalled, “and the crowd tried to get at this woman.” One witness shouted, “She cut Dr. King!”

King hoped to calm them. “That’s all right!” he said. “That’s all right! Everything’s going to be all right.”

But he was in shock and he stayed seated. The dazed look on his face suggested that he did not fully comprehend what had just happened or how seriously he had been wounded. Blood oozed from the wound, staining his crisp white cotton dress shirt.

“I’ve been after him for years!” Curry screamed again. “I’m glad I done it!”

Then she tried to run away. The women in King’s entourage chased her. Waving their umbrellas like clubs, they shouted: “Catch her, don’t let her go!” Walter Pettiford, an advertising executive for the *Amsterdam News*, New York City’s leading black newspaper, grabbed her by the left arm and spun her around. Harry Dixon, the store’s floor manager, raised his hands and pleaded, “Please don’t harm her.”

Curry kept shouting: “Dr. King has ruined my life. He is no good . . . I’ve been after him for years. I finally was able to get him now.”

A security guard named Clifford Jackson detained Curry, and he and a police officer hustled her out of the store and into a cab, bound for a nearby police station.



Izola Curry, in police custody, being escorted to the police station after stabbing Martin Luther King, Jr.

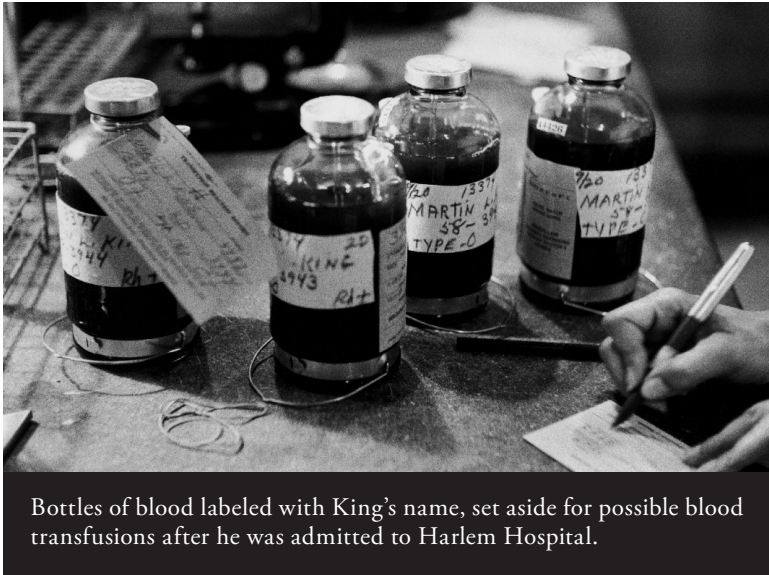
Someone approached King and reached for the letter opener, yielding to the irresistible temptation to yank the blade out, but a voice shouted: “Don’t pull it out. You’ll kill him.” Removing the blade might allow blood to pour out of the wound like a cork being pulled out of a bottle.

No one on the scene knew it, but the blade was so close to King’s aorta that any sudden expansion of his chest, from coughing or sneezing, could have pushed the main artery of the heart directly into the point of the blade. If that artery was punctured, King would bleed to death before he arrived at a hospital.

A dispatcher at Harlem Hospital received the first phone call. A voice on the other end said that there had been a stabbing at Blumstein’s and asked for help. One minute later, an ambulance and its crew of driver Ronald Adams and nurse Russie Lee went racing down Seventh Avenue from the hospital to the department store. They did not know who had been attacked. Upon arriving and finding King with the blade in his chest, Lee ordered him not to stand up. Next she told Adams to bring the ambulance around to the back door of the store, on 124th Street. Then a police officer and Adams carried King, still sitting in the chair, to the ambulance, where Lee made sure that they laid their patient down gently on his back. Adams got behind the wheel, and the nurse climbed into the back to sit near King. “He was conscious, and I told him not to touch the letter opener,” she recalled. “He didn’t speak, but his eyes told me he knew what I meant.”

A little after 4:00 p.m., almost a half hour after the attack, King, still conscious, was brought into the Harlem Hospital Emergency

Room. Doctors and nurses rushed to his side. Then he looked up and, startled, came face-to-face with a woman he recognized. It was Izola Curry! But she had not escaped from custody or tracked him to the hospital to kill him. Police officers had brought her there for King to identify her as his assailant.



Bottles of blood labeled with King's name, set aside for possible blood transfusions after he was admitted to Harlem Hospital.

After this unnerving encounter, doctors decided that it was too risky to remove the weapon without surgery, so they hurriedly prepared King for the operation and placed him under anesthesia. He drifted off to sleep in the operating room, not knowing if he would reawaken.

But he did. A few hours later he opened his eyes.

He was still alive.

---



