

## *Letter to a young refugee*

April 1999

On the news last night I saw you amidst a sea of desperate Albanian refugees and afterward I couldn't get the image out of my mind. You with your wide eyes and shy smile, your hand gripping your mother's as if it were a lifesaver, you are repeating my story of a few decades ago.

Listen, even if I know so little about your country's tumultuous history, even if I don't know your name, I think I know what you are going through. When I was eleven, about your age, I too fled from my homeland with my mother and sister and two grandmothers when the communist tanks came rolling into Saigon, Vietnam. We ended up in a refugee camp while our father was left behind.

Back then I couldn't make any sense out of what had happened to me or my family. History, after all, is always baffling to the young. One day I am reading my favorite comic book in my mother's garden, my two dogs sleeping lazily at my feet, and the next day I am running for my life with a small backpack in which I only managed to save my stamp collection. Everything else was burnt—photographs, mementos, books, toys, letters, identifications.

For the first few days in the refugee camp I walked about as if in a kind of trance. I kept thinking I would return home. I kept thinking this was just camping and soon my father would rescue us, would take us home to what I knew and loved. I had no words, no references to what I was experiencing. But now I know: I was dispossessed, an exile.

My young friend, there are so many things I want to tell you, so many experiences I want to share with you, but most of all I want to warn you that the road ahead is a very difficult and treacherous one and you must be brave, strong, and cunning. There are crucial



## *Perfume Dreams*

things you should learn and learn quickly and then there are things you must mull over for the rest of your life.

The immediate thing is to learn to rise as early as possible. The food line is always long, and no matter how early you are, there will always be a line. You must have a hat or a scarf to protect your head from the cold and then from the sun.

When you get to the end of the line, try to act as helpless and as sad as possible. Tell the person in charge of food that your frail grandmother is bedridden and could not wait in line, that you are feeding her. Cry if you can. Try not to feel ashamed. That you never begged before in your life means nothing. Swallow your pride. Another plate will save you or your mother or sister many hours of waiting for the next meal. It will give them time to stand in line for medicine or clothes, if there are any.

Listen carefully, a new reality is upon you and you must rise to it as best you can. It entails a drastic change in your nature, in your thinking. It requires new flexibility and courage. Be aggressive even when you are naturally shy. Be brave even though until recently you still hugged your teddy bear in your own bed going to sleep.

Be fierce. Do not let others take advantage of you. Do not show that you are weak. In the worst circumstances, the weak get left out or beaten and robbed. Arm yourself if you can—a knife, a stone—and guard your family and what possessions you have left like a mad dog, its bone. People can sense that you are willing to fight for what you have and most will back away.

Be alert. Listen to gossip and news. Find out what is coming down the line: food, donated clothes, blankets, tents, medicines. Always get more than you need if you can manage it because what you have extra can be traded with others for something you don't have or can be given away to the elderly and feeble who are not as quick as you. An extra blanket is so helpful on a cold spring night, as you, I'm sure, have already found out.

Be hopeful. Maybe your father has made it somewhere else, to another camp possibly. The same can be said of your aunts and cousins, friends and neighbors. Never give up hope. Soon enough the camp will organize and there'll be a newsletter with information regarding lost relatives looking for each other or there'll be a

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bulletin board with names and agencies that will track displaced loved ones. Go every day to check to see whether your father has sent word. Console your inconsolable mother and sister. Hug them as often as you can.

My young friend, I close my eyes now and cast my mind back to that time spent in the refugee camp and all I hear are the sounds of weeping. I imagine it is not that different from what you are hearing now each morning, each afternoon, each night. Throughout the green tent city that flapped incessantly in the wind was the music of sorrow and grief. A woman who saw her husband shot in front of her wailed until she was hoarse and breathless. A man who left his feeble father behind cried quietly into his blanket. A woman whose teenage son was lost in the escape stared out into the dark as if she had lost her mind. For a while, the sound of weeping was my refugee camp lullaby.

Life in limbo is difficult and humiliating, but you must remember that being robbed of what you loved does not speak to your weakness or frailty. It only speaks of the inhumanity and fear and hatred of those who caused you to flee and endure in this new dispossessed reality.

I implore you, do not give in to their hatred. I know it is very hard, if not impossible, for someone who has just been forced out of his homeland, but you must try. Those who killed and robbed and caused so much pain and suffering to you, your family, and your people are, in fact, trying to make you into their own image, even if they don't realize it yet. They want you to hate just like them. They want you to be consumed with the fire of their hatred.

But don't hate. It will take great strength not to hate. And it will take even greater resilience to not teach hatred to those who come after you. Hatred consumes oppressed and oppressors alike and its terrible expressions—revenge is chief among them—always result in blood and tears and injustice and unspeakable suffering, an endless cycle of grief.

Learn to love what you have instead, learn to love those who suffered along with you, for their suffering and yours are now part of your inheritance.

Perfume Dreams

Above all, don't forget. Commit everything—each blade of grass, each teary-eyed child, each unmarked grave—to memory. Then when you survive and are older, tell your story. Tell it on your bruised knees if you must, tell it at the risk of madness, scream it from the top of your lungs.

For though the story of how you suffered, how you lost your home, your loved ones, and how you triumphed is not new, it must always be told. And it must, by all means, be heard. It is the only light we ever have against the overwhelming darkness.



Farewell to Manzanar

twenty-two

## Ten Thousand Voices

AS I CAME TO UNDERSTAND WHAT MANZANAR had meant, it gradually filled me with shame for being a person guilty of something enormous enough to deserve that kind of treatment. In order to please my accusers, I tried, for the first few years after our release, to become someone acceptable. I both succeeded and failed. By the age of seventeen I knew that *making it*, in the terms I had tried to adopt, was not only unlikely, but false and empty, no more authentic for me than trying to emulate my Great-aunt Toyo. I needed some grounding of my own, such as Woody had found when he went to commune with her and with our ancestors in Ka-ke. It took me another twenty years to accumulate the confidence to deal with what the equivalent experience would have to be for me.



It's outside the scope of this book to recount all that happened in the interim. Suffice to say, I was the first member of our family to finish college and the first to marry out of my race. As my husband and I began to raise our family, and as I sought for ways to live agreeably in Anglo-American society, my memories of Manzanar, for many years, lived far below the surface. When we finally started to talk about making a trip to visit the ruins of the camp, something would inevitably get in the way of our plans. Mainly my own doubts, my fears. I half-suspected that the place did not exist. So few people I met in those years had even heard of it, and those who had knew so little about it, sometimes I imagined I had made the whole thing up, dreamed it. Even among my brothers and sisters, we seldom discussed the internment. If we spoke of it at all, we joked.

When I think of how that secret lived in all our lives, I remember the way Kiyo and I responded to a little incident soon after we got out of camp. We were sitting on a bus-stop bench in Long Beach, when an old, embittered woman stopped and said, "Why don't all you dirty Japs go back to Japan!" She spit at us and passed on. We said nothing at the time. After she stalked off down the sidewalk we did not look at each other. We sat there for maybe fifteen minutes with downcast eyes and finally got up and walked home. We couldn't bear to mention it to anyone in the family. And over the years we never spoke of this insult. It stayed alive in our separate memories, but it was too painful to call out into the open.

In 1966 I met a Caucasian woman who had worked for one year as a photographer at Manzanar. I could scarcely speak to her. I desperately wanted to, but all my questions stuck in my throat. This time it was not the pain of memory. It was simply her validation that all those things had taken place. Someone outside the close community of Japanese Americans had actually seen the camp, with its multitude of people and its swarm of buildings on the plain between the mountains. Something inside me opened then. I began to talk about it more and more.

It was April 1972, thirty years almost to the day, that we piled our three kids into the car and headed out there. From where we live now, in the California coast town of Santa Cruz, it's a full day's drive. We started down 101 to Paso Robles, crossed over the hummocky Diablo Range to the central valley, skirted Bakersfield, and climbed through Tehachapi Pass into the desert.

At Mojave we turned north onto the same road our bus had taken out from Los Angeles in April 1942. It is the back road to the Sierras and the main route from southern California to Reno and Lake Tahoe. We joined bikers and backpackers and the skiers heading for Mammoth. The traffic through there is fast, everyone but the bikers making for the high country. As we sped along wide roads at sixty and seventy, with our kids exclaiming at the sights we passed and our car loaded down with camping gear, it seemed even more



incredible to me that a place like Manzanar could have been anywhere within reach of such a highway, such a caravan of pleasure-seeking travelers.

The bikers peeled off at Red Rock Canyon, a gorgeous bulge of pink cliffs and rusty gulches humping out of the flatlands. After that it was lovely desert but nothing much to stop for. In a hundred miles we passed two oases, the first at Olancha, the second around Lone Pine, a small, tree-filled town where a lot of mountain buffs turn off for the Mount Whitney Portal.

A few miles out of Lone Pine we started looking for another stand of trees, some tall elms, and what remains of those gnarled pear orchards. They were easy to spot. Everything else is sagebrush, tumbleweeds, and wind.

At its peak, in the summer of '42, Manzanar was the biggest city between Reno and Los Angeles, a special kind of western boom town that sprang from the sand, flourished, had its day, and now has all but disappeared. The barracks are gone, torn down right after the war. The guard towers are gone, and the mess halls and shower rooms, the hospital, the tea gardens, and the white buildings outside the compound. Even the dust is gone. Spreading brush holds it to the ground. Thirty years earlier, army bulldozers had scraped everything clean to start construction.

What you see from the road are the two gatehouses, each a small empty pillbox of a building faced with flagstones and

topped, like tiny pagodas, with shingled curving roofs. Farther in, you see the elms, most of which were planted by internees, and off to the right a large green building that was once our high school auditorium, now a maintenance depot for the Los Angeles Power and Water District, who leased the land to the government during the war and still owns it.

Past the gatehouses we turned left over a cattle guard and onto a dirt perimeter road that led to the far side of the campsite. About half a mile in we spotted a white obelisk gleaming in the distance and marking a subtle line where the plain begins gradually to slope upward into the alluvial fan that becomes the base of the mountains. It seemed miraculous, as if some block of stone had fallen from the peaks above and landed upright in the brush, chiseled, solitary, twelve feet high.

Near it a dozen graves were outlined in the sand with small stones, and a barbed-wire fence surrounded them to keep back the cattle and the tumbleweed. The black Japanese script cut into the white face of the obelisk read simply, "A Memorial to the Dead."

We were alone out there, too far from the road to hear anything but wind. I thought of Mama, now seven years gone. For a long time I stood gazing at the monument. I couldn't step inside the fence. I believe in ghosts and spirits. I knew I was in the presence of those who had died at Manzanar. I also felt the spiritual presence that always lingers near awesome



wonders like Mount Whitney. Then, as if rising from the ground around us on the valley floor, I began to hear the first whispers, nearly inaudible, from all those thousands who once had lived out here, a wide, windy sound of the ghost of that life. As we began to walk, it grew to a murmur, a thin steady hum.

We turned the kids loose, watched them scamper off ahead of us, and we followed what used to be an asphalt road running from the back side of the camp a mile out to the highway. The obelisk—built in 1943—and the gatehouses are all that have survived intact from internment days. The rest of the place looks devastated by a bombing raid.

The old road was disintegrating, split, weed-sprung. We poked through the remains of hospital foundations, undermined by erosion channels. We found concrete slabs where the latrines and shower rooms stood, and irrigation ditches, and here and there, the small rock arrangements that once decorated many of the entranceways. I had found out that even in North Dakota, when Papa and the other Issei men imprisoned there had free time, they would gather small stones from the plain and spend hours sorting through a dry stream bed looking for the veined or polished rock that somehow pleased the most. It is so characteristically Japanese, the way lives were made more tolerable by gathering loose desert stones and forming with them something enduringly human. These rock gardens had outlived the barracks and the towers and would

surely outlive the asphalt road and rusted pipes and shattered slabs of concrete. Each stone was a mouth, speaking for a family, for some man who had beautified his doorstep.

Vegetation gets thickest toward the center of the site, where the judo pavilion once stood and where rows of elms planted as windbreaks have tripled their growth since the forties. In there we came across the remains of a small park. A stone-lined path ran along the base of a broad mound of dirt about five feet high. Stones had been arranged on the mound, and some low trees still shaded it and made an arch above the path. For a moment I was strolling again, finding childish comfort in its incongruous design.

But after ten feet the path ended in tumbleweeds. The trees were dry and stubby, the mound was barren, and my attention was arrested by a water faucet sticking two feet out of the sand, like some subterranean periscope. One of these had provided water for each barracks. They stuck up at intervals in every direction, strangely sharpening the loneliness and desolation, sometimes the only sign of human presence in an acre or two of sand.

My mood had shifted. The murmur turned to wind. For a while I could almost detach myself from the place and its history and take pleasure in it purely as an archeological site. I saw the outlines, patterns this city must have taken. I imagined where the buildings stood, almost as I once did nosing



around old Roman villas in Europe. We saw a low ring of stones built up with cement and wondered who the mason was who knelt there and studied the shapes before fitting them together. We moved around the ring a few feet to find out. This was the old flagpole circle, where the Stars and Stripes were hoisted every morning, and the inscription scratched across the top said, *BUILT BY WADA AND CREW, JUNE 10, 1942 A.D.*

The A.D. made me shiver. I knew that the man who inscribed it had foreseen these ruins and did not want his masonry identified with the wrong era. His words coming out of the stone became a voice that merged with all the others, not a murmur this time, but low voices muttering and chattering all around me. We were crossing what used to be a firebreak, now a sandy field devoid of any growth. The wind was vicious there, with nothing to break it, and the voices grew. The firebreak was where we had talent shows and dances and outdoor movies in the summer, and where the kids played games. I heard the girls' glee club I used to sing in, way off from the other side of camp, their tiny grade-school sopranos singing, "Beautiful dreamer, wake unto me." I closed my eyes and I was ten years old again. Nothing had changed. I heard laughter. It was almost dusk, the wind had dropped, and I saw old men squatting in the dirt, Papa and some of his cronies, muttering and smoking their cigarettes. In the summertime they used to burn orange peels under gallon cans, with holes

punched in the sides, to keep the mosquitoes away. Sometimes they would bring out their boards to play *go* and *hana*. The orange peels would smolder in there, and the men would hunker down around the cans and watch the smoke seep out the holes.

From that firebreak we cut across toward the first row of pear trees, looking for what might remain of Block 28. There wasn't much to guide us but the trees themselves and a view I remembered of the blunt, bulky Inyo Range that bounds the eastern limit of the valley. When we were close enough to smell the trees we stopped. They were stunted, tenacious, tough the way a cactus has to be. The water table in that one area has kept them living through all these years of neglect, and they were ready to bloom at any moment. The heady smell was as odd in that desert setting as the little scrap of park had been, as odd yet just as familiar. We used to picnic there in blossom time, on weekends, if we got a wind-free day.

The wind blew it toward us now—chilled pear nectar—and it blew our kids around a high stand of brush. They came tumbling across the sand, demanding to know what we were going to do out here. Our twins were five years old at the time, a boy and a girl. Our older daughter had just turned eleven. She knew about "the evacuation," but it would be a few more years before she absorbed this part of the family history. For these three the site had been like any wreck or ruin.



They became explorers, rushed around hoping the next clump of dusty trees or chunk of wall might reveal the treasure, the trinket, the exotically rusted hinge. Nothing much had turned up. The shine was wearing off the trip. Their eyes were red and their faces badly chapped. No place for kids.

My husband started walking them back to the car. I stayed behind a moment longer, first watching our eleven-year-old stride ahead, leading her brother and sister. She has long dark hair like mine and was then the same age I had been when the camp closed. It was so simple, watching her, to see why everything that had happened to me since we left camp referred back to it, in one way or another. At that age your body is changing, your imagination is galloping, your mind is in that zone between a child's vision and an adult's. Papa's life ended at Manzanar, though he lived for twelve more years after getting out. Until this trip I had not been able to admit that my own life really began there. The times I thought I had dreamed it were one way of getting rid of it, part of wanting to lose it, part of what you might call a whole Manzanar mentality I had lived with for twenty-five years. Much more than a remembered place, it had become a state of mind. Now, having seen it, I no longer wanted to lose it or to have those years erased. Having found it, I could say what you can only say when you've truly come to know a place: Farewell.

I had nearly outgrown the shame and the guilt and the sense of unworthiness. This visit, this pilgrimage, made com-

prehensible, finally, the traces that remained and would always remain, like a needle. That hollow ache I carried during the early months of internment had shrunk, over the years, to a tiny sliver of suspicion about the very person I was. It had grown so small sometimes I'd forget it was there. Months might pass before something would remind me. When I first read, in the summer of 1972, about the pressure Japan's economy was putting on American business and how a union in New York City had printed up posters of an American flag with MADE IN JAPAN written across it, then that needle began to jab. I heard Mama's soft, weary voice from 1945 say, "It's all starting over." I knew it wouldn't. Yet neither would I have been surprised to find the FBI at my door again. I would resist it much more than my parents did, but deep within me something had been prepared for that. Manzanar would always live in my nervous system, a needle with Mama's voice.

A gust of wind rushed through the orchard, bringing ice off the white slopes, and more blossom scent. It hurt to inhale deeply. I pulled my coat tight, ready to head for the car's warmth, but also wanting to hold this moment a little longer. I might never be back here again. I was poking around brush clumps and foundation chunks looking for something else. One more sign. Anything. I found another collection of stones, off by themselves, but so arranged that they could not have been accidental. Nearby an edge showed through the sand. I uncovered a



single steppingstone, slightly worn, that led nowhere, yet lay as a subtle appendage to the small rock garden. One of these had lain outside our barracks door, a first step below three wooden ones. It could be ours. Perhaps not. Many barracks had such entrances. But this one would serve. I could call it the rock garden Papa put there. Almost the sign I wanted. Not quite. Not quite enough. There was more to all this than the lovely patience of these gathered stones. They were part of it. But there was something else, in the air. A sound. A smell. Just a whiff, hanging on that gust from the orchard, or blown down the ghostly alleyway of what used to be the street we lived on. I was hearing Mama's voice once more, but differently, louder now, right in front of me, and I smelled cork burning. That was one of Papa's remedies when her back knotted up. He would take little coins of cork and place them on the tension nodes and light them, and the cork would burn dark rings into her skin as she hunched on the porch steps groaning with relief.

They were sitting on the steps like that—Mama hunched, Papa tending the blackening rings—one morning a few days before we left camp. Now that smell and those voices in the wind from the orchard brought with them the sign I was waiting for: the image of a rekindled wildness in Papa's eyes. Twenty-seven years earlier I had carried it with me out of camp only half understanding what it meant. Remembering now, I realized I had never forgotten his final outburst of defiance. But for the first time I saw it clearly, as clearly as the

gathered desert stones, and when I left today for good I would carry that image with me again, as the rest of my inheritance.

It was the day Papa suddenly came back to life and decided to go into Lone Pine and buy a car. Mama had been packing, and that brought the uncertainty of our future to such a sharp point, her back went into spasms. She didn't want to talk. She wanted to concentrate on the rings of heat. She let Papa rant a long time before she reacted.

"That's crazy, Ko," she said.

"Don't call me crazy! You think I'm going to ride that stinking bus all the way to Los Angeles?"

"It's cheaper than buying a car."

"Cheaper! What is it worth—to be packed in there like cattle? You call that cheap?"

"We don't have money to buy a car."

"I know how much money we have!"

He jumped to his feet then, rushed into the house, came out with his hat on and a shirt half-buttoned, and his walking stick and his turtle-neck sweater tied around his neck, and took off striding toward the main gate, leaving Mama with her back full of smoking cork, which had done no good at all, since this new move of his merely bunched her muscles up worse than ever.

It was late afternoon when we heard the horn, still blocks away. Without looking out the door, Mama said, "Here he comes."



As the honks came closer we heard another sound, like a boxer working out on a flabby punching bag. Mama moved to the doorway. We all did—Chizu, May, me—in time to see a blue Nash four-door come around the corner, with its two front tires flat and Papa sitting up straight and proud behind the wheel, his hat cocked, his free hand punching at the horn. Heads were appearing at doorways all up and down the street.

He stopped in front, racing the engine and grinning, while he eyed Mama and fingered the shiny-knobbed dashboard gearshift. On the seat between his legs he held a half-empty quart bottle of whiskey. He yelled, "What do you think, Little Mama?"

She didn't answer. He had not been drinking much at all for about six months. She stood there waiting to see what he was going to do. He laughed and made the engine roar and demanded to know where all his boys were, he wanted to show those *yogots* what a real car looked like. Kiyo was the only son still in camp, and he had gone off to help someone else load furniture. So Papa announced that he would give all his women a ride. Mama protested, said he ought to get those tires fixed if we expected to take this car all the way into Los Angeles. Papa roared back at her, louder than the engine, and with such a terrible samurai's scowl that we all went leaping and piling into the car. Mama last, slamming the back door and climbing into the front seat next to him.

"You think it's a pretty good car?" he said, pleased by this show of power.

Mama said nothing. She sat very stiff, cool, enduring him. Chizu was the placator now, leaning forward from the back to pat him on the shoulder. "It's a fine car, papa."

"You watch!"

He grabbed the gear lever and rammed it into low. The Nash leaped, and we were clopping down the street on those two flats and two good tires, with Papa laughing, sipping from the bottle. At the first corner he said, "You think I can't pick out cars?"

Softly Chizu said, "You did real good, Papa."

He stepped on the gas, hitting maybe thirty, swerving crazy. In the back seat we were all thrown around, flung from door to door like rag dolls, with Mama bouncing in front of us and Papa's hat crunching up against the ceiling.

May cried out, "Not so fast, Papa! You're going to wreck your car!"

"Think the car can't take it?" he yelled back at her. "You watch this!"

His gaiety turned ferocious again. He stomped the pedal, pushing the speedometer up to thirty-five. His right front tire had shredded and it flopped like a mangled arm. It lashed out, upending a garbage can. I started to cry. Chizu, her calm shattered, was yelling at him to slow down, Mama was too, and May was screaming. He wouldn't listen and told us to



hold on, while he swung into the street, careening past emptying barracks where suitcases and duffel bags sat straggled. As we passed people standing by the baggage, Papa swerved from one side to the other, waving. He laughed, growled, made faces. In front of us, a laden family was hiking out toward the main gate. Papa swung wide, honking, and waving.

"Hey! Hey!" he shouted.

They turned, too amazed to wave back.

"Don't miss that bus!" he yelled.

At the next corner he spun off into a deserted section of barracks. These already looked like the ones we'd first moved into, sand piling up against foundation blocks, the clotheslines empty, all signs and markers gone. It made no difference to Papa that no one was out there to witness his performance. He aimed for tumbleweeds lying in the roadbed and shouted with triumph each time he squashed one. Chizu and Mama and May had quit trying to control him. I'd stopped crying. We grabbed for handholds, covered our heads, hoping simply to survive until he hit something hard or ran out of gas.

We came to a firebreak and Papa plunged into it, began to cut a twisty path across its emptiness, shouting "Hyah! Hyah!" gouging ragged tracks through the dusty sand. The way this firebreak lay, there seemed to be nothing in front of us now but sagebrush and open country, rising in the distance south of camp to the range of round, buff-colored hills rumored to be full of rattlesnakes. The few times I'd wished I could walk

in one direction for as long as I wanted, the threat of those rattlesnakes deterred me. And now, farther south, beyond that visible barrier, out in the world I scarcely remembered, there loomed the dark, threatening cloud I'd heard grown-ups talk about. The way we seemed to be heading, I should have been frightened into a coma. But for this once, I was not. Watching Papa bounce and weave and shout in front of me, I was almost ready to laugh with him, with the first bubbly sense of liberation his defiant craziness had brought along with it. I believed in him completely just then, believed in the fierceness flashing in his wild eyes. Somehow that would get us past whatever waited inside the fearful dark cloud, get us past the heat, and the rattlers, and a great deal more.

At the fence he had to turn, sending up a white billow of dust. Where the fence met the highway we cornered again, heading for the bus stop. A crowd waited there, standing idly, sitting around on scattered baggage. They all turned to watch when they heard us coming. Papa tooted the horn and yelled out, "No bus for us! No bus for us!"

The young kids were mystified by this and stood open-eyed, watching. Some of the older folks smiled, waving as we hit a chuck hole and bounced. Papa swung left, and we clattered out onto the wide, empty boulevard that ran the length of the camp, back to where our own baggage waited and the final packing.



# Montgomery BOYCOTT

Coretta Scott King

Of all the facets of segregation in Montgomery, the most **degrading** were the rules of the Montgomery City Bus Lines. This northern-owned corporation outdid the South itself. Although seventy percent of its passengers were black, it treated them like cattle—worse than that, for nobody insults a cow. The first seats on all buses were reserved for whites. Even if they were unoccupied and the rear seats crowded, blacks would have to stand at the back in case some whites might get aboard; and if the front seats happened to be occupied and more white people boarded the bus, black people seated in the rear were forced to get up and give them their seats. Furthermore—and I don't think  
10 northerners ever realized this—blacks had to pay their fares at the front of the bus, get off, and walk to the rear door to board again. Sometimes the bus would drive off without them after they had paid their fare. This would happen to elderly people or pregnant women, in bad weather or good, and was considered a joke by the drivers. Frequently the white bus drivers abused their passengers, calling them . . . black cows, or black apes. Imagine what it was like, for example, for a black man to get on a bus with his son and be subjected to such treatment. **A**

There had been one incident in March 1955, when fifteen-year-old Claudette Colvin refused to give up her seat to a white passenger. The high  
20 school girl was handcuffed and carted off to the police station. At that time Martin served on a committee to protest to the city and bus-company officials. The committee was received politely—and nothing was done.

The fuel that finally made that slow-burning fire blaze up was an almost routine incident. On December 1, 1955, Mrs. Rosa Parks, a forty-two-year-old seamstress whom my husband aptly described as “a charming person with a

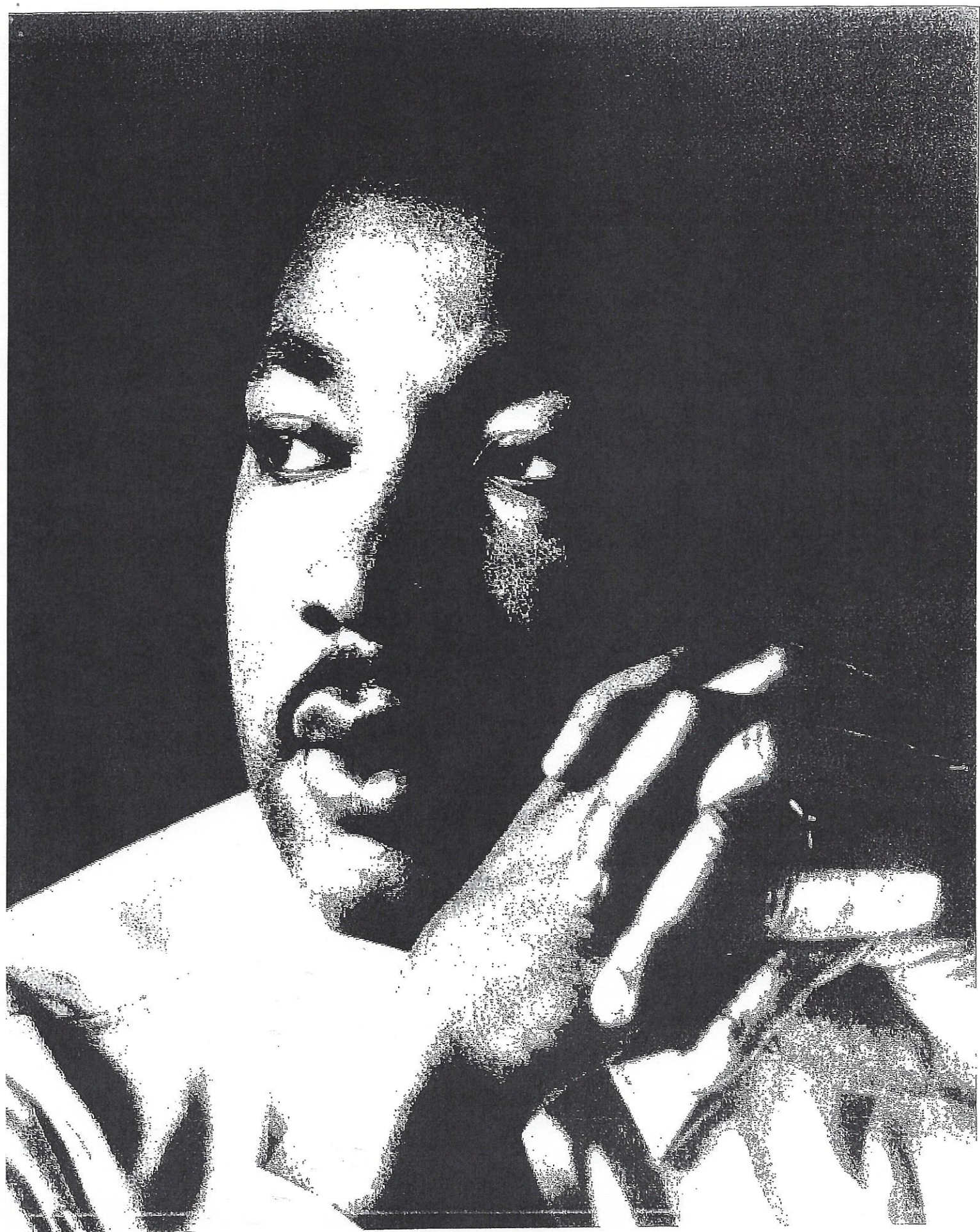
**degrading** (dĭ-grā'dīng)  
*adj.* tending or intended  
to cause dishonor or  
disgrace

**A HISTORICAL EVENTS**  
What information in lines  
1–17 helps you understand  
the motivation for the  
boycott?

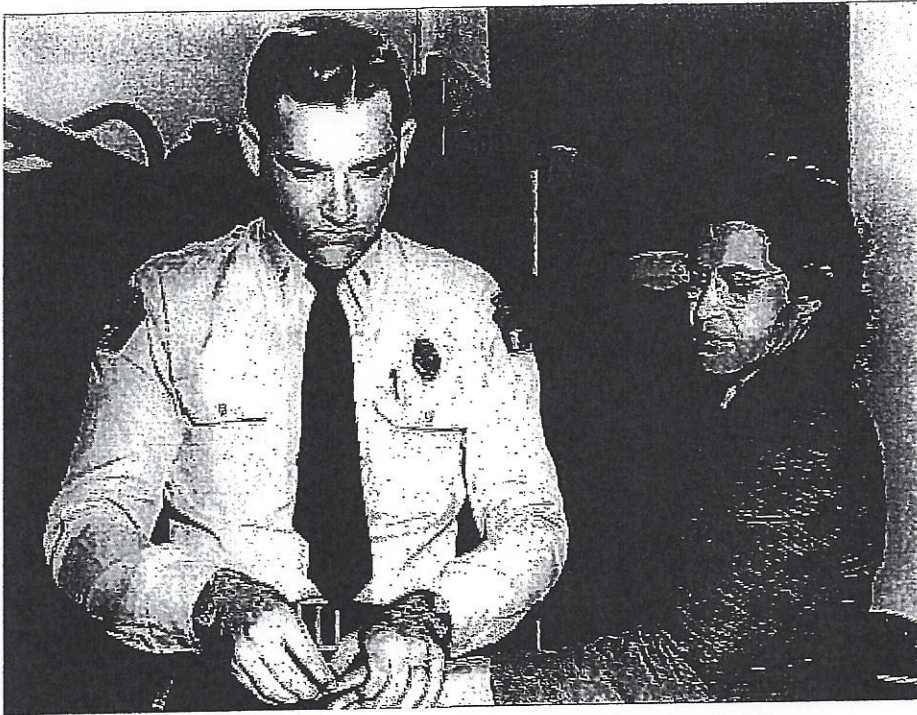
## Analyze Visuals ►

What impression of Dr.  
Martin Luther King, Jr.,  
do you get from this  
photograph?









Rosa Parks being fingerprinted by a Montgomery sheriff after she refused to give up her seat on a bus

radiant personality,” boarded a bus to go home after a long day working and shopping. The bus was crowded, and Mrs. Parks found a seat at the beginning of the black section. At the next stop more whites got on. The driver ordered Mrs. Parks to give her seat to a white man who boarded; this meant that she would have to stand all the way home. Rosa Parks was not in a revolutionary  
 30 frame of mind. She had not planned to do what she did. Her cup had run over. As she said later, “I was just plain tired, and my feet hurt.” So she sat there, refusing to get up. The driver called a policeman, who arrested her and took her to the courthouse. From there Mrs. Parks called E. D. Nixon, who came down and signed a bail bond for her.

Mr. Nixon was a fiery Alabamian. He was a Pullman porter who had been active in A. Philip Randolph’s Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters,<sup>1</sup> and in civil rights activities. Suddenly he also had had enough; suddenly, it seemed, almost every African American in Montgomery had had enough. It was  
 40 spontaneous combustion.<sup>2</sup> Phones began ringing all over the black section of the city. The Women’s Political Council suggested a one-day **boycott** of the buses as a protest. E. D. Nixon courageously agreed to organize it. **B**

**boycott** (boi’kōt’) *n.* a form of protest in which a group stops using a specific service or product in order to force a change

**B DISTINGUISH FACT FROM OPINION**

Which details in lines 36–42 are factual, and which ones are opinion?

1. Pullman . . . Sleeping Car Porters: Pullman porters were railroad employees who served passengers on Pullman sleeping cars, which had seats that could be converted into beds. The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was the first successful black labor union.
2. spontaneous combustion (spōn-tā’nē-əs kəm-būs’chən): literally, the situation that occurs when something bursts into flames on its own, without the addition of heat from an outside source.



The first we knew about it was when Mr. Nixon called my husband early in the morning of Friday, December 2. He had already talked to Ralph Abernathy.<sup>3</sup> After describing the incident, Mr. Nixon said, "We have taken this type of thing too long. I feel the time has come to boycott the buses. It's the only way to make the white folks see that we will not take this sort of thing any longer."

Martin agreed with him and offered the Dexter Avenue Church as a meeting place. After much telephoning, a meeting of black ministers and civic leaders  
50 was arranged for that evening. Martin said later that as he approached his church Friday evening, he was nervously wondering how many leaders would really turn up. To his delight, Martin found over forty people, representing every segment of African-American life, crowded into the large meeting room at Dexter. There were doctors, lawyers, businessmen, federal-government employees, union leaders, and a great many ministers. The latter were particularly welcome, not only because of their influence, but because it meant that they were beginning to accept Martin's view that "religion deals with both heaven and earth. . . . Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls  
60 of men and is not concerned with the slums that doom them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them, is dry-as-dust religion." From that very first step, the Christian ministry provided the leadership of our struggle, as Christian ideals were its source. ©

Martin told me after he got home that the meeting was almost wrecked because questions or suggestions from the floor were cut off. However, after a stormy session, one thing was clear: however much they differed on details, everyone was unanimously for a boycott. It was set for Monday, December 5. Committees were organized; all the ministers present promised to urge their congregations to take part. Several thousand leaflets were printed on the church mimeograph machine, describing the reasons for the boycott and urging all  
70 blacks not to ride buses "to work, to town, to school, or anyplace on Monday, December 5." Everyone was asked to come to a mass meeting at the Holt Street Baptist Church on Monday evening for further instructions. The Reverend A. W. Wilson had offered his church because it was larger than Dexter and more convenient, being in the center of the black district.

Saturday was a busy day for Martin and the other members of the committee. They hustled around town talking with other leaders, arranging with the black-owned taxi companies for special bulk fares and with the owners of private automobiles to get the people to and from work. I could do little to help because Yoki<sup>4</sup> was only two weeks old, and my physician, Dr. W.  
80 D. Pettus, who was very careful, advised me to stay in for a month. However, I was kept busy answering the telephone, which rang continuously, and coordinating from that central point the many messages and arrangements.

Our greatest concern was how we were going to reach the fifty thousand black people of Montgomery, no matter how hard we worked. The white press,

### © HISTORICAL EVENTS

What disagreement within the African-American community did King need to overcome in order to build an effective movement?

3. Ralph Abernathy (1926–1990): a minister who became a close colleague of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, and an important civil rights leader.

4. Yoki: nickname of the Kings' daughter Yolanda.



in an outraged exposé, spread the word for us in a way that would have been impossible with only our own resources.

As it happened, a white woman found one of our leaflets, which her black maid had left in the kitchen. The irate woman immediately telephoned the newspapers to let the white community know what the blacks were up to. We  
90 laughed a lot about this, and Martin later said that we owed them a great debt.

On Sunday morning, from their pulpits, almost every African-American minister in town urged people to honor the boycott.

Martin came home late Sunday night and began to read the morning paper. The long articles about the proposed boycott accused the NAACP<sup>5</sup> of planting Mrs. Parks on the bus—she had been a volunteer secretary for the Montgomery chapter—and likened the boycott to the **tactics** of the White Citizens Councils.<sup>6</sup> This upset Martin. That awesome conscience of his began to gnaw at him, and he wondered if he was doing the right thing. Alone in his study, he struggled with the question of whether the boycott method was basically unchristian.  
100 Certainly it could be used for unethical ends. But, as he said, “We were using it to give birth to freedom . . . and to urge men to comply with the law of the land. Our concern was not to put the bus company out of business, but to put justice in business.” He recalled Thoreau’s<sup>7</sup> words, “We can no longer lend our cooperation to an evil system,” and he thought, “He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it.” Later Martin wrote, “From this moment on I conceived of our movement as an act of massive noncooperation. From then on I rarely used the word ‘boycott.’”

Serene after his inner struggle, Martin joined me in our sitting room. We wanted to get to bed early, but Yoki began crying and the telephone kept  
110 ringing. Between interruptions we sat together talking about the prospects for the success of the protest. We were both filled with doubt. Attempted boycotts had failed in Montgomery and other cities. Because of changing times and tempers, this one seemed to have a better chance, but it was still a slender hope. We finally decided that if the boycott was sixty percent effective we would be doing all right, and we would be satisfied to have made a good start.

A little after midnight we finally went to bed, but at five-thirty the next morning we were up and dressed again. The first bus was due at six o’clock at the bus stop just outside our house. We had coffee and toast in the kitchen; then I went into the living room to watch. Right on time, the bus came,  
120 headlights blazing through the December darkness, all lit up inside. I shouted, “Martin! Martin, come quickly!” He ran in and stood beside me; his face lit with excitement. There was not one person on that usually crowded bus!

We stood together waiting for the next bus. It was empty too, and this was

**tactic** (tăk’tīk) *n.* a planned action or maneuver to reach a certain goal

5. NAACP: the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, a prominent civil rights organization.

6. White Citizens Councils: groups that formed, first in Mississippi and then throughout the South, to resist the 1954 Supreme Court decision to desegregate the schools.

7. Thoreau (thē-rō): Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), American writer whose famous essay “Civil Disobedience” helped inspire the ideas of nonviolent resistance used in the civil rights movement.





African Americans walking to work during the third month of the bus boycott

the most heavily traveled line in the whole city. Bus after empty bus paused at the stop and moved on. We were so excited we could hardly speak coherently. Finally Martin said, "I'm going to take the car and see what's happening other places in the city."

He picked up Ralph Abernathy and they cruised together around the city. Martin told me about it when he got home. Everywhere it was the same—a few  
 130 white people and maybe one or two blacks in otherwise empty buses. Martin and Ralph saw extraordinary sights—the sidewalks crowded with men and women trudging to work; the students of Alabama State College walking or thumbing rides; taxicabs with people clustered in them. Some of our people rode mules; others went in horse-drawn buggies. But most of them were walking, some making a round-trip of as much as twelve miles. Martin later wrote, "As I watched them I knew that there is nothing more majestic than the determined courage of individuals willing to suffer and sacrifice for their freedom and dignity."

Martin rushed off again at nine o'clock that morning to attend the trial of Mrs. Parks. She was convicted of disobeying the city's segregation ordinance  
 140 and fined ten dollars and costs. Her young attorney, Fred D. Gray, filed an appeal. It was one of the first clear-cut cases of an African American being convicted of disobeying the segregation laws—usually the charge was disorderly conduct or some such thing.

The leaders of the Movement called a meeting for three o'clock in the afternoon to organize the mass meeting to be held that night. Martin was a bit late, and as he entered the hall, people said to him, "Martin, we have elected you to be our president. Will you accept?"

Fear was an invisible presence at the meeting, along with courage and hope. Proposals were voiced to make the organization, which the leaders decided to  
 150 call the Montgomery Improvement Association, or MIA, a sort of secret society, because if no names were mentioned it would be safer for the leaders. E. D. Nixon opposed that idea. "We're acting like little boys," he said. "Somebody's name will be known, and if we're afraid, we might just as well fold up right now."

### ▲ Analyze Visuals

What do the facial expressions in the photograph suggest to you?

COMMON CORE RI.4

### Language Coach

**Informal Language** In her memoir, King often uses informal language to narrate events. Reread lines 128–143 and note examples of King's informal language. How does King's choice of words affect the **tone** of the memoir?



The white folks are eventually going to find out anyway. We'd better decide now if we are going to be fearless men or scared little boys." ❷

That settled that question. It was also decided that the protest would continue until certain demands were met. Ralph Abernathy was made chairman of the committee to draw up the demands.

Martin came home at six o'clock. He said later that he was nervous about  
160 telling me he had accepted the presidency of the protest movement, but he need not have worried, because I sincerely meant what I said when I told him that night: "You know that whatever you do, you have my backing."

Reassured, Martin went to his study. He was to make the main speech at the mass meeting that night. It was now six-thirty and—this was the way it was usually to be—he had only twenty minutes to prepare what he thought might be the most decisive speech of his life. He said afterward that thinking about the responsibility and the reporters and television cameras, he almost panicked. Five minutes wasted and only fifteen minutes left. At that moment he turned to prayer. He asked God "to restore my balance and be with me in a time  
170 when I need Your guidance more than ever."

How could he make his speech militant enough to rouse people to action and yet devoid of hate and resentment? He was determined to do both.

Martin and Ralph went together to the meeting. When they got within four blocks of the Holt Street Baptist Church, there was an enormous traffic jam. Five thousand people stood outside the church listening to loudspeakers and singing hymns. Inside it was so crowded, Martin told me, the people had to lift Ralph and him above the crowd and pass them from hand to hand over their heads to the platform. The crowd and the singing inspired Martin, and God answered his prayer. Later Martin said, "That night I understood what the older preachers  
180 meant when they said, 'Open your mouth and God will speak for you.'"

First the people sang "Onward, Christian Soldiers" in a tremendous wave of five thousand voices. This was followed by a prayer and a reading of the Scriptures. Martin was introduced. People applauded; television lights beat upon him. Without any notes at all he began to speak. Once again he told the story of Mrs. Parks, and rehearsed some of the wrongs black people were suffering. Then he said,

*But there comes a time when people get tired. We are here this evening to say to those who have mistreated us so long, that we are tired. Tired of being segregated and humiliated; tired of being kicked about by the brutal feet of oppression.*

The audience cheered wildly, and Martin said,

190 *We have no alternative but to protest. We have been amazingly patient . . . but we come here tonight to be saved from that patience that makes us patient with anything less than freedom and justice.*

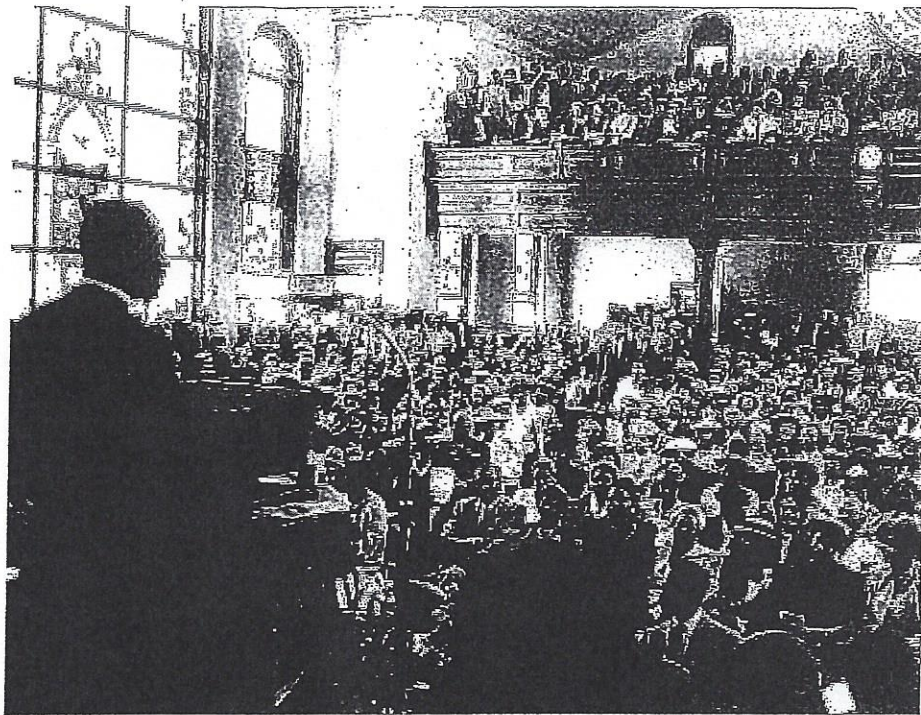
Taking up the challenging newspaper comparison with the White Citizens Councils and the Klan,<sup>8</sup> Martin said,

❷ **DISTINGUISH FACT FROM OPINION**  
What factual evidence supports the statement of opinion in line 148?

**militant** (mīl'ĭ-tənt) *adj.*  
aggressive or combative

8. Klan: the Ku Klux Klan, a secret society trying to establish white power and authority by unlawful and violent methods directed against African Americans and other minority groups.





Martin Luther King, Jr., speaking at a church in Montgomery

### ◀ Analyze Visuals

How does the photograph reflect the author's description of King's speaking ability?

*They are protesting for the perpetuation of injustice in the community; we're protesting for the birth of justice . . . their methods lead to violence and lawlessness. But in our protest there will be no cross-burnings, no white person will be taken from his home by a hooded Negro mob and brutally murdered . . . We will be guided by the highest principles of law and order.*

**perpetuation**  
(per-pěch'ōō-ā'shen) *n.*  
the act of continuing or prolonging something

200 Having roused the audience for militant action, Martin now set limits upon it. His study of nonviolence and his love of Christ informed his words. He said,

*No one must be intimidated to keep them from riding the buses. Our method must be persuasion, not coercion. We will only say to the people, "Let your conscience be your guide." . . . Our actions must be guided by the deepest principles of the Christian faith. . . . Once again we must hear the words of Jesus, "Love your enemies. Bless them that curse you. Pray for them that despitefully use you." If we fail to do this, our protest will end up as a meaningless drama on the stage of history and its memory will be shrouded in the ugly garments of shame. . . . We must not become bitter and end up by*  
210 *hating our white brothers. As Booker T. Washington<sup>9</sup> said, "Let no man pull you so low as to make you hate him."*

**coercion** (kō-ūr'zhən) *n.*  
the act of compelling by force or authority

Finally, Martin said,

*If you will protest courageously, and yet with dignity and Christian love, future historians will say, "There lived a great people—a black people—who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization." This is our challenge and our overwhelming responsibility.*

As Martin finished speaking, the audience rose cheering in exaltation. And in that speech my husband set the keynote and the tempo of the Movement he was to lead, from Montgomery onward. ∞

9. Booker T. Washington (1856–1915): an African-American educator and writer.