

**“EVERY WORD
HELPED YOU.”**

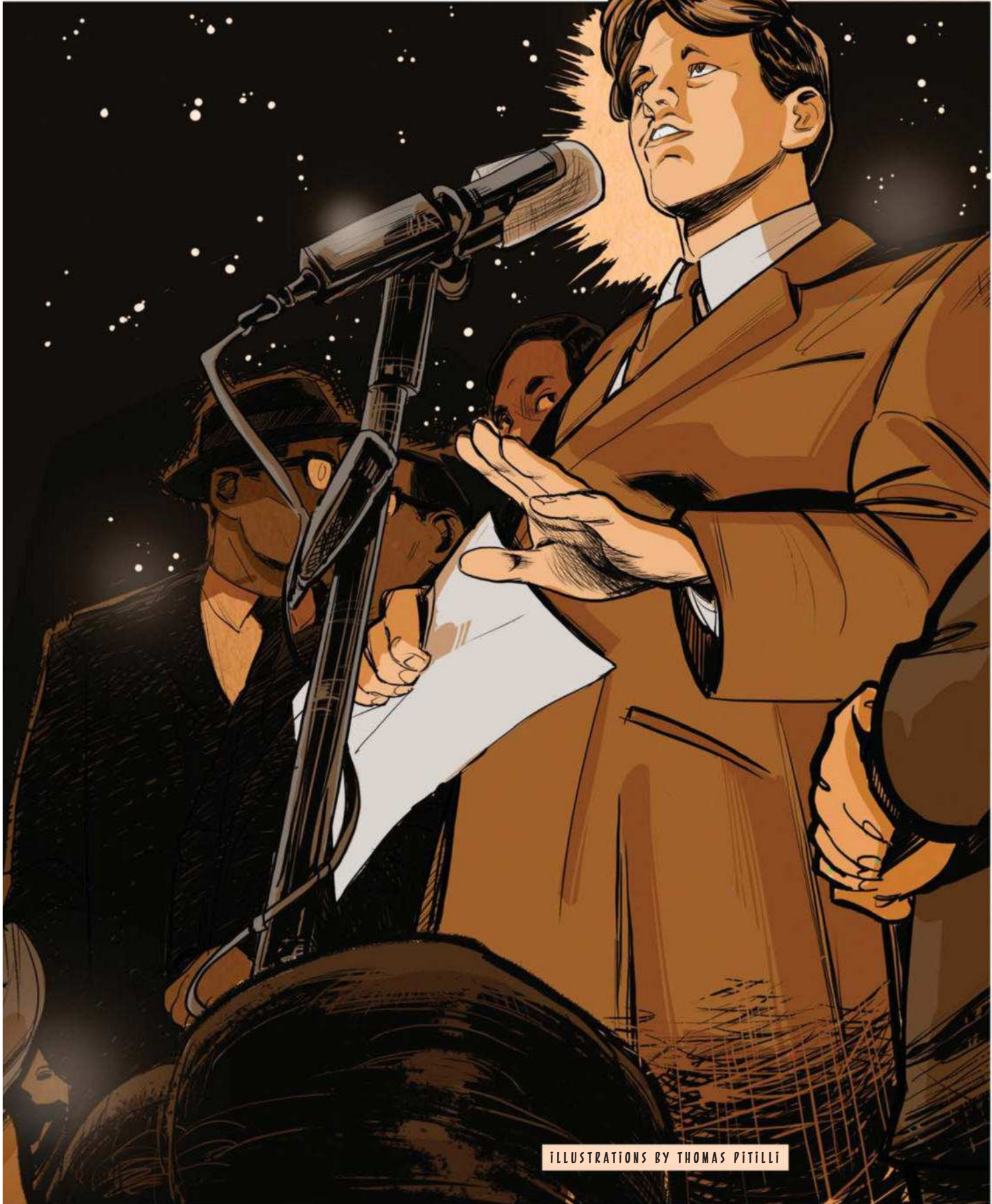


ROBERT F. KENNEDY'S SIX-MINUTE SPEECH, DELIVERED FROM A FLATBED TRUCK, HELPED CHANGE THE COURSE OF INDIANAPOLIS'S HISTORY. WE REVISIT THAT NIGHT, 50 YEARS LATER, THROUGH THE WORDS OF THOSE WHO LIVED IT.

BY ALYSSA
KONERMANN

We're receiving
reports that
Dr. Martin Luther King
has been shot...





ILLUSTRATIONS BY THOMAS PITILLI

PROLOGUE

On April 4, 1968, Robert F. Kennedy was on the campaign trail for the Democratic nomination for president with his back against the wall. He had to win the Indiana primary on May 7, or chances for a White House run were dim. As *Newsweek* put it, “He swept into Indiana with a lean and hungry look—a Kennedy in search of a convincing candidacy.”

To that end, an all-out blitz began with a rally in South Bend, then continued in Muncie at Ball State, where nearly 10,000 crowded the campus to hear his optimistic message. Kennedy’s last stop: Indianapolis, where he would hold an evening rally at 17th and Broadway. But, as RFK hopped across the Hoosier State that day, the evening took an awful turn.

When Kennedy and his small entourage landed in Indianapolis at 8:40 p.m., they were met with shocking news: Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated in Memphis.

In that instant—before Kennedy had time to even process what had happened or grieve—he became the torchbearer of a movement, the man seen as the last best hope to unite a divided America. He began in an abandoned lot in front of a mostly black crowd.

JOHN LEWIS, *Civil Rights icon and long-serving U.S. Representative of Georgia*: I admired him. There was something about his sense of commitment, his energy, and his ability to speak up and speak out. He had traveled to the inner city, to rural parts of the Midwest, to the far West, to speak to low-income whites and blacks and to the Hispanic population. He visited Native American reservations. He went to the Delta of Mississippi and visited poor people, spent time with Cesar Chavez. In my estimation, he was trying to do some of the things that we were doing [in the Civil Rights movement]. I thought he was just the person that could bring America together.

JEFF GREENFIELD, *TV journalist and author*: I began working for RFK right out of Yale Law School in the summer of 1967. I was a junior staffer, but because the staff was so overworked,

I was assigned to write speeches very quickly—like a week or so after I started. RFK was looking at the details, the specifics. He didn’t like broad, gauzy rhetoric, but was interested in facts, what the conditions were he was talking about.

BILLIE BREAUX, *Civil Rights activist, local educator, and former Indiana state senator*: This was during the midst of a lot of unrest in the community. Something had to happen, there had to be some change. It seemed to be every time you turned on the TV, someone was getting kicked or shot.

ABIE ROBINSON, *program manager at Martin Luther King Jr. Park*: I’d gotten out of the Navy in ’67 and came back home. I was 24. It was bad at first. Bad to see where the country was going. I found out the things that were happening—the bombings. I didn’t know the people in Alabama had killed five kids, didn’t realize the dogs and all of that. It infuriated me. You leave the military and come back to your country and find out that’s what was happening.

TERESA LUBBERS, *Indiana Commissioner for Higher Education and former Indiana state senator*: I was 16, a junior at Warren Central. The unrest that you felt in the country—it was a year later that I started off to college, the time of Kent State. There was a lot going on in terms of, in some cases racial tension, some cases racial reconciliation. Those two things were happening side by side.

BILLIE BREAUX: Bobby Kennedy seemed to have

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a special sensitivity to some of the problems that we were having, especially as far as poverty was concerned. I felt if we were able to get someone into office with that kind of caring, then we would be moving in the right direction.

MICHAEL RILEY, *political activist and attorney*: Originally, Robert Kennedy wasn't going to run. Then he entered the primary race after Eugene McCarthy did, I believe in New Hampshire. I had been the president of the Indiana State Young Democrats, and because [Lyndon] Johnson was president, none of the party people—the governor, the state chairman—would be for Robert Kennedy. But Ted Kennedy called me, asked me if I'd be for his brother.

JOHN LEWIS: When he announced in '68 that he would be a candidate for the Democratic nomination for president, I sent him a telegram and I told him that I wanted to help. "What could I do?" I asked. He got back in touch through his staff and suggested that I go to Indiana and work and organize to try to turn out people during the primary for him. So I went to Indianapolis, and one of my first responsibilities was to try to help put together the rally where he spoke.

LEWIS TURNER, *maintenance worker, Indiana Interchurch Center*: We lived right there—just across the street on College. Everybody in that neighborhood was crazy about the Kennedys. They were for everybody, the Kennedys were. They were just good people. When the president got killed, that was a real big hurt to us.

MICHAEL RILEY: Campaign volunteers would go out and knock on doors. In the African-American community, you'd see, on their wall or their TV, there would be pictures of John Kennedy and there would be pictures of Martin Luther King.



“IT WAS THE AUTHENTICITY OF BOTH HIS CONTENT AND HIS STYLE. HE WASN'T MAKING THINGS UP TO SCORE POLITICAL POINTS. HE WAS SPEAKING FROM HIS HEART.”

THE ARRIVAL

By 9:30 p.m., word of King's death was just beginning to reach the public. Though the news hadn't come into full focus for the crowd that had packed shoulder-to-shoulder into a vacant lot to hear Kennedy, on the drive to the would-be rally, the candidate was reflective. The senator was mostly silent, occasionally jotting down words on a scrap of paper.

JOHN LEWIS: I had been working and talking to as many people as I could, mostly religious leaders. One of the people that I got to know there was Andrew Brown, a minister. His son was very active in the South within the Civil Rights movement. When Dr. King was traveling to Indianapolis, he would speak at Reverend Brown's church, and so I got to know quite a few young people there when I was working on the campaign. [Before the rally], I had been among that group and there was some discussion that Dr. King had been shot, but we didn't yet know his condition.

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KEITH TURNER, maintenance worker, Indiana Interchurch Center, Lewis's son:

I was 10 years old. My brother Jeffrey was eight. They announced in school that [King] had got shot. They let us out early. Stuff started on the way home, there was violence. Just people's emotional reactions, people fighting and calling people names.

JIM TRULOCK, UAW member and campaign manager:

My friend Ben's wife, JoMarva Bell, came running over—they lived next door. "Dr. King's been shot, Dr. King's been shot!" she said. There was no indication that he'd been killed. Not very long after that, she came back over and said, "Dr. King has died." A pall fell over all of us. *Now what?* I wondered.

MICHAEL RILEY: I had organized this speech as a campaign rally. The mayor, Dick Lugar, was calling me, saying, "You know I don't want him to do this. Get word to him, tell him not to do it." I called Fred Dutton, a lawyer who was a confidant and policy guy for Kennedy, about what Lugar wanted me to do. He said, "I'll call you back after I talk to Robert again." And [Kennedy] said, "No, we are going to do it." So I called Lugar back and I tell him [Kennedy] is going to speak. He said, "You know, I really think this is going to be harmful. There are reports that we might have riots all over the country, I think it's highly dangerous, I don't think that we can provide enough protection to the senator." Lugar said if [Kennedy] did speak, he was going to call the fire department to put fire hoses across the street so no one would cross them, because it was a crime. I called back and gave them that message. Kennedy said he was still coming.

JOHN LEWIS: There were some people saying maybe he shouldn't come to speak because it may be dangerous or something to that effect. And I took the position that he had to come, he had to speak to the people. I think he felt that

the audience had been there and that he had an obligation to say *something*.

LEWIS TURNER: It was dark when we got over there. My wife was kind of skeptical about me taking the boys over, because there was an attitude that there might be a riot.

JIM TRULOCK: It was packed in tight. It was all the way through. Some people were already grieving, already pissed off and angry. And some people, they had come for a campaign rally. There were several campaign signs, almost all of them were handmade.

LEWIS TURNER: He was late coming in. That's where everybody was getting itchy-like. And then they kind of quieted down when he came up because they wanted to hear what he had to say.

JIM TRULOCK: I was standing near one of the corners of the trailer. The car pulled up; he and his entourage of about three or four people got out and got up on the trailer.

KEITH TURNER: My father kind of eased us up close to the front, and I remember vividly, I was looking at Robert—and the shirt he had on, it was kind of dirty. And I always thought the Kennedys was rich, and to see that dirt on his shirt ...

THE SPEECH

Kennedy climbed atop a flat-bed trailer. He adjusted the mic, then pulled a tattered piece of paper from his jacket, which was an overcoat that had belonged to his brother John. After surveying the crowd, he asked an aide if they knew about King. "We thought we'd leave that up to you," the aide explained. Kennedy nodded, then asked the crowd to lower their signs.

"I have some very sad news for all of you, sad news for all of our fellow citizens, and people who love peace all over the world, and that is that Martin Luther King was shot and was killed tonight in Memphis, Tennessee. Martin Luther King dedicated

"SOMETHING HAD TO HAPPEN, THERE HAD TO BE SOME CHANGE. IT SEEMED TO BE EVERY TIME YOU TURNED ON THE TV, SOMEONE WAS SHOT."

his life to love and to justice between fellow human beings, and he died in the cause of that effort."

KEITH TURNER: That took the air out of everything. Like, *shhwoo*.

ABIE ROBINSON: We didn't have smartphones; there was no breaking news then. I found out that night.

BILLIE BREAUX: I heard it on the radio, but it did not connect. I heard something, but was not really sure that it was true or not until I got to 17th and Broadway and heard it from Bobby Kennedy.

JIM TRULOCK: I could hear a kind of dull hush come over the crowd.

JOHN LEWIS: I was standing at the edge of the crowd. And I bowed my head, and I cried. It was shocking. I said to myself, *We still have Bobby, we still have Bobby*. I think that evening something died in all of us who knew, loved, and admired Dr. King, something died in me, and maybe something died in America.

"For those of you who are black and are tempted to be filled with hatred and distrust of the injustice of such an act, against all white people, I would only say that I can also feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a white man. But we have to make an effort in the United States, we have to make an effort to understand, to go beyond these rather difficult times."

ABIE ROBINSON: What I first felt, when I first heard it, was anger. We've got to get somebody. Somebody's got to pay for this. But then within a matter of seconds, minutes, the pendulum of emotion began to swing. I thought, *Wait a minute, how could we do something violent against the principles of Dr. King?*

JIM TRULOCK: Listening to it a hundred times since, the point at which I think he became one with that crowd was when he says, "I do know how you feel, because I had a member of my family killed by a white man, too." And in some way, that caused the audience, mostly black, to relate, to take him in.

LEWIS TURNER: That just sort of shocked the crowd.

KEITH TURNER: I thought, *So he kind of does know what we feel.* That stuck with me. For a white man to say that another white man killed his brother? That just kind of stunned me, especially at that time, because you're talking about 1968. To stand up there with all those black people out there and say that? That was bold to me, even at 10 years old. You could tell he was hurting because of his brother, and we was hurting because of Martin Luther King.

MICHAEL RILEY: That was the first time he ever [publicly] made any reference to his brother being assassinated.

ABIE ROBINSON: [Kennedy] caught me wondering how you can go from here to here. He picked up on it and put it into words and was pragmatic: *You can either do this or you can do this.* Then he further clarified it: *What America needs is not this, but this.* If you had any connection to what Martin Luther King was talking

about, then you realized he's absolutely right. That he's getting back to the man. That tied everything in for me.

JIM TRULOCK: Instead of shock-anger-grief, I think it went shock-grief. Not that [King's assassination] didn't make all of us angry. But here was Robert Kennedy saying, "I do know what you're going through."

JEFF GREENFIELD: There was no decision process about the speech he gave in Indianapolis. Whatever was said that night came strictly from him.

ABIE ROBINSON: I was standing up close enough to know that what Kennedy had in his hand was a little piece of paper folded over and over. He occasionally looked at it, but it wasn't like he was reading it. I'm sure that he made notes to reference things that he would say, but to me, he was believable—as much with the words as he was with the empathy that he delivered them.

TERESA LUBBERS: It was the authenticity of both his content and his style. He wasn't making things up to score political points. He was speaking from his heart.

"My favorite poet was Aeschylus. He once wrote,"—Kennedy paused and mouthed the words to himself—"Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."

BILLIE BREAU: He seemed to speak to us as human beings and not as people in the ghetto. His sincerity just came through loud and clear. He talked about his brother been killed and it was very, I don't want to say warming, but it was heartfelt. It gave you something to think about and propel yourself as you drove home later. It was so meaningful to me, because how many people would come to the ghetto and quote poetry?

MICHAEL RILEY: His speech was very powerful to the people in the community—that and the fact that he was there to talk to them. Because he could have ducked it real easily.

TERESA LUBBERS: Every word held you. I don't think a long 30- or 45-minute speech would have had the same dignity

or would have been as compelling. I don't know which one of his words didn't have meaning.

JIM TRULOCK: There wasn't any bullshit there.

"Let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world. Let us dedicate ourselves to that, and say a prayer for our country and for our people."

BILLIE BREAU: I think he was trying to reach out to us and let us know that though we were hurting, that he had been hurt also. And I guess that this was also a part of living, the good and the bad, and what we do with it is what matters. We have choices to make.

MOVING FORWARD

Six minutes. That's all that had passed. Kennedy's words were extemporaneous, unpolished—he stumbled, repeated himself. It was not a man delivering a speech for the ages; it was a man, himself no stranger to the deepest grief, offering his most intimate condolences. Toward the end, at multiple points, almost incomprehensibly given the context, cheers erupted. Kennedy shook some hands, and everyone headed home. Riots were breaking out in other major cities, but Indianapolis remained calm.

BILLIE BREAU: I remember the crowd as a whole, just sort of orderly, leaving, each of us trying to deal with what we had just heard and figure out what our next steps would be.

JIM TRULOCK: I can remember going back to my car in this mass of grieving people, me included. We were almost marching in some kind of unison of grief. I'm a white guy in a sea of black folks, walking back to my car, which was about a block-and-a-half away. I still know exactly where it was parked. And I honestly did not feel threatened or afraid of anything. It was a sad sev-

"WHAT HAS AMERICA DONE? THEY'VE MURDERED MAYBE THE GREATEST BLACK LEADER OF ALL TIME."

utes. I was just appalled that America had done this. What has America done? They've murdered maybe the greatest black leader of all time.

MICHAEL RILEY: When the audience departed, there was this quietness about them. At that time, I was sort of surprised there weren't more saying "those goddamn white assassins" kind of things. I did not see any anger or hear any anger. It was a moment that could have gone either way.

ABIE ROBINSON: I don't even remember the walk home. It's like I must have been thinking about something else other than home, because I don't remember it. The speech itself, the words that he said, the pragmatism of the message—this is what happened, what we don't need, this is what happened to me, I understand how you must feel, but this is what Dr. King stood for. Okay. So let's go home, let's pray. Paint the picture of the world with the visions of Dr. King. That's what it was for me. Specific details of that night all fade in comparison to the memory of what the message was to me. And I think to most people.

JOHN LEWIS: What Bobby Kennedy said that night, he inspired me, he lifted me. When he had finished speaking, we went to his hotel room. And he just started talking about how we had to go on. I believed it then, and I believe it now more than ever before, that his speaking had a major impact on the very psyche of the people there and people who heard or read the speech.

JEFF GREENFIELD: When RFK came back from the speech, he was reflective. First and only time I ever heard him mention Dallas, when he said to me, "That fellow Oswald"—he was groping for the full name—"he set something loose in this country."

THE AFTERMATH

Thanks to four weeks of intense campaigning—during which Kennedy cracked a tooth, enlisted the aid of family members like his mother and brother Ted, and spent nearly \$1 million while traveling up and down the state—the New

York senator defeated Eugene McCarthy and Indiana Governor Roger Branigin. A month after his win in Indiana, on June 4, Kennedy captured the California primary as well. That night, after addressing supporters outside the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, he was gunned down in the hotel kitchen by Sirhan Sirhan, a Palestinian immigrant.

JOHN LEWIS: I was in L.A. campaigning with him. They had me team up with Cesar Chavez. We went all over L.A. County, knocking on doors in these very wealthy neighborhoods, predominantly white. The two of us were trying to get people to vote for Kennedy rather than [Hubert] Humphrey or Eugene McCarthy. We ended up, the day of the vote, carrying a motorcade through the city, through greater L.A. We rode in an open convertible and two athletes who were with us held onto Bobby so people wouldn't pull him out of the car.

When the polls closed, he invited us to come to his hotel suite. His sister was there along with a few other people. He came into the big room and he said to me, "John, you let me down today—more Mexican-Americans turned out to vote than Negroes." He was really teasing me. I said something like, "You're going to win tonight." He said, "I think we're going to do it."

[While Kennedy left to address his supporters], we were just sitting around watching the returns on television. He made his victory speech and then a few moments later, they announced that he had been shot. I just fell to the floor, put my head in my lap, and I lost it. When the hotel was cleared, I walked to my hotel and packed my bag. I just wanted to get on a flight back home. I just put my head against the window and I cried all the way from L.A. to Atlanta.

JIM TRULOCK: I was watching television that night, and it was pretty clear he had won in California, so I turned it off and went to bed. A friend of mine from the UAW called me and said, "Did you hear the news?" And I said, "Yeah, Kennedy won!" And then: "No, no. He's been shot!" So I got back up and turned on the TV. I was appalled. Now what? Now what?

"I JUST WANTED TO GET ON A FLIGHT BACK HOME. I JUST PUT MY HEAD AGAINST THE WINDOW AND I CRIED ALL THE WAY FROM L.A. TO ATLANTA."

JOHN LEWIS: His family asked me to ride on the funeral train. You saw people all along the way between New York City and Washington, D.C., mothers and fathers holding up their little children. It's all people waving, handmade signs that say "We Love You Bobby," "Goodbye Bobby." And young Joe Kennedy, he was 14 or 15 years old, he walked that entire train thanking people for being there. As we got closer to Washington, I knew we had to stop there and take Bobby's body over to the cemetery to be buried. But in my own mind, I just had the sense that I didn't want the train to stop, I wanted to keep going. I knew we had to bury his body and say goodbye to him. It was painful. It was so painful.

BILLIE BREAU: Back then, it really seemed to me like the world was topsyturvy. Between the Civil Rights movement and [the assassinations of] John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Bobby Kennedy—it felt that we were really just dangling in the world, nothing really to hang on to.

KEITH TURNER: It didn't put too much face on goodness in this country. As a little kid, I was thinking, *When is it ever going to end?* My mother just cried and cried and cried. Because what they was doing was so hopeful. And then all this violence.

JOHN LEWIS: I often think that if Bobby had lived, he would have been elected president and our country would be a much better country. I'm not so sure we will be so blessed or so lucky to see the likes of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. again. ■