

THE TABLE OF BROTHERHOOD

Will had come to Washington to honor his father, but was it worth having to deal with all the trouble?



By Michael P. Spradlin
Illustrations by Mark Elliott

Will's mother was right. He shouldn't have come here. Right off the bus in Washington, D.C., an angry white man was instantly calling him names. "Agitator" and "troublemaker" were about the nicest.

It was Aug. 28, 1963. At the Lincoln Memorial, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was giving a major speech. The whole world would be watching. Sixteen-year-old Will had come to hear it.

For his father. The streets were lined with more angry people. Living in Georgia, Will knew all about America's racial divide. The restaurants he couldn't eat in and water fountains he couldn't drink from. But he never felt so much hate in one place.

Reaching the street, Will put his head down and moved forward. Like his father had taught him. It was hard because the words people used made him so mad. Whenever he told his father how he felt, his father would sit him down.

"Words and hate have power over you only when you allow it. You can choose anger toward the ignorant and unjust. Or let those like Dr. King lift you up. Let those words roll off

"Words and hate have power over you only when you allow it. ... Let those words roll off you, and don't give them power."

you, and don't give them power."

Will always tried to live by his father's admonition, but it was still hard.

Dr. King had called for a "march" on Washington today. Will wished his father could see it. William Washington Sr. was an ardent follower of Dr. King. His father would never allow a bunch of ignorant protesters to faze him. Will swore he would follow his example.

William Sr. died a year ago and would never have a chance to see Dr. King. Will had come carrying something he hoped to show Dr. King after his speech. But he was having doubts. The newspapers said few people would be in Washington today. The newspapers were

wrong. Tens of thousands of people were surging through the streets.

Will walked as rapidly as he could, jostled by the crowd. Desperately he looked around, hoping to find a path free of crazed protestors.

Clutching his small knapsack to his chest, he barreled down a street, not even sure he was headed in the right direction. A glance over his shoulder revealed a small group of men following him.

Will ignored their taunts. No matter how quickly he walked, the men followed. He needed to find a safe place.

He spotted a sign halfway down the block, a neon coffee cup with the word "EAT" inside it, hanging over a glass door. Though he did not see a "Whites Only" sign, he knew he still might not be welcome here. He stepped inside.

A small bell tinkled as he entered the clean, bright restaurant.

"Be right with you," came a voice from the back.

A man emerged from the kitchen. Except for black shoes, he was dressed completely in white. Crisply pressed pants, spotless white apron and shirt, even a little white paper

hat sitting on top of his head.

"Hello!" he said.

Will grew instantly nervous, even though the man hadn't sounded threatening.

"I'm sorry," Will said. "I was hoping for something to eat. I'll be leaving."

He turned toward the door, but the man's voice stopped him.

"Why would you do that? Our food is pretty good."

Will hesitated.

"What's your name, son?" he asked.

"William Frederick Washington Jr., sir. Folks call me Will," he answered.

"My name is Louis. What brings you here, Will?"

"I ... um ... was ..." Will hesitated, not sure what he should say.

"Are you here for the big speech?"

Louis asked.

"Yes, sir," Will said quietly.

"Jules! Come say hello to Will. He's here for the speech!"

A slightly younger version of Louis walked out of the kitchen.

"Howdy," said Jules.

"My brother Jules. We're going ourselves," Louis said. "Closing up early. Have a seat. Pancakes and bacon sound good?" Louis asked.

"OK, I guess," Will said hesitantly. Jules hurried to the kitchen.

Will took a seat, reaching into his knapsack for his wallet. It tipped over and a picture frame clattered out onto the table. Louis picked it up.

"What's this?" he asked.

"A photo of my father. He was a pilot in the war. I ... he died last year. If I get the chance, I want to show it to Dr. King."

"I'm sorry," Louis said, looking hard at the image of Will's father sitting in the cockpit of a fighter plane.

"Hey! Your pops was a Red Tail!" Louis said excitedly.

"I don't know what that is, sir. He never talked about the war. I only just found this picture."

"The 332nd Fighter Group. Red Tails flew missions all over Italy and Europe. They trained at the Tuskegee Army Airfield in Alabama."

From behind the small counter, Louis removed two pictures from the wall, handing them to Will. Small groups of men were posed in front of much bigger planes.

"I'm in the front row here. This is Jules' bomber. He was the tail gunner on a B-24. I was the navigator on mine. Got the brains in the family," he cracked.

Jules returned, setting Will's food on the table.

"Jules, say hello to the son of a hero! Will's father was a Red Tail!" Louis said.

"You're joking!" Jules exclaimed.

"Kid, I can't tell you how many times the Red Tails saved our bacon. No matter how thick the flak or how many enemy aircraft, they always stayed right there with us." He pumped Will's hand up and down.

"It is an honor to meet you, son.

"I have a dream that one day ... the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood."



This year marks the 50th anniversary of King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Listen to it at boyslife.org/links/dreamaudio or read it at boyslife.org/links/dreamtext



Your breakfast is on the house."

"I can pay," Will insisted.

"Not here you can't," Louis said. "Without the Red Tails, we wouldn't be here. Eat up, young man. That's an order."

As Will ate, Louis and Jules regaled him with stories. How the Tuskegee Airmen always performed heroically, mission after mission. Their words made Will feel closer to his father.

Finally, it was time to go. Will stood, glancing through the window. More protestors were gathered outside the diner.

"Things rough out there, kid?" Louis asked.

"Yes, sir."

"How about we walk with you?"

"I'd like that," Will said.

Upon exiting the diner, the protest-

ers surged toward them. Louis and Jules stepped in front of Will, their mouths drawn tight and eyes blazing.

"Back off!" Louis shouted. The mob stopped, uncertain why two white men were interceding on Will's behalf.

"Move it! You make me sick!" Louis hissed.

The small mob shouted more horrible names at them, but soon melted away.

"Let's go, buddy," Louis said.

Will was stunned by the size of the crowd at the mall. He realized he'd never get to meet Dr. King in person.

When Dr. King began speaking, Will immediately understood he might never hear a more powerful

speech. Dr. King told the entire world about his dream.

"I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood."

When it was over, Will thought about Louis and Jules welcoming him into their diner, delighting in telling him his father was a hero.

His father. Change *was* coming, just like Dr. King said.

Maybe it was already here. ♣

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
New York Times bestselling author and Eagle Scout Michael P. Spradlin has written many books for young readers, including the international bestselling *The Youngest Templar* series. boyslife.org/links/spradlin

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