

Until Justice

Rolls Down

by Frank Sikora

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THE VICTIMS:

Addie Mae Collins	Cynthia Wesley
Carole Robertson	Denise McNair

Sunday, September 15, 1963. Birmingham, Alabama

When they had first started walking to church that day, their behavior had been proper, befitting young girls on their way to praise the Lord. Addie Mae Collins, age fourteen, often walked the sixteen blocks to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church with her older sister, Janie, and younger sister, Sarah. But this time, before they had gone more than two blocks, they began playing football, using Addie's purse as the football and giggling and laughing as they ran for passes and dodged about. The route to church was along streets lined with dogwood, oak, and mimosa; the near northwest side of the city was a lower-middle-class, mostly black, neighborhood, where frame houses mingled with small stores and other businesses. A number of girls at the church, including Addie, were to be ushers that day. All were wearing white dresses.

At her house, fourteen-year-old Cynthia Wesley was ready to go out the door with her father, Claude, when she was stopped by her mother. "Young lady, your slip is hanging below your dress," said Gertrude Wesley. "You just

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don't put your clothes on any way when you're going to church, because you never know how you're coming back." Cynthia had hurriedly made the necessary adjustments before running out the door. She and Mr. Wesley would arrive before the start of Sunday school, 9:30 A.M. Her mother would never see her again.

Meanwhile, Cynthia's closest friend, Carole Robertson, also fourteen, had already arrived at church, driven by her father, Alvin C. Robertson.

The last of the four to arrive was eleven-year-old Carol Denise McNair, who was known to her family and friends as Denise. The day before, Denise, a friend from across the street, Barbara Nunn, and some other children had been playing kickball and a game they called four-square. "It was just a game we made up, I guess," Miss Nunn would say in later times. "Denise was just a kid, just a girl who liked to have fun and play, like all kids. She had a dog she called Whitey. She really loved that dog."

On that Sunday morning Denise was going to go to church early and planned to ride with her father, Chris McNair, a photographer. But he was a member of another church and was running late that morning. So she had told him, "That's okay, Daddy, go ahead." She waited and rode with her mother, saying goodbye to her dog before leaving. After the hot summer, the day was refreshingly cool, with morning temperatures in the low sixties. Behind a cloud bank, the sun was a silver blur as it edged up above the hump of high hills along the eastern edge of this industrial city of 340,000.

The year 1963 had not been kind to Birmingham; racial discord had projected the city onto the front pages of newspapers around the world, as well as in the eye of TV cameras. City authorities had used dogs and fire hoses to disperse crowds of blacks, and the homes of some black leaders had been bombed.

Martin Luther King, Jr., had announced early in the year that he had selected Birmingham as a target of the South-

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ern Christian Leadership Conference's effort to overcome racial barriers. He called it the most segregated city in the South.

Birmingham had undergone political upheaval in late 1962 and early 1963, changing its form of government from a three-member commission—one of the commissioners had been Eugene "Bull" Connor—to a mayor-council system. Connor, a hard-line segregationist, had fought the change, but after he failed to block it he entered the race to be the city's new mayor. The election was held March 5; Connor and another candidate, Albert Boutwell, got the most votes but neither received a majority. They faced each other in a runoff on April 2. Boutwell, a soft-spoken racial moderate, won the runoff by more than eight thousand votes, but Connor refused to leave office, filing a court challenge.

Against this backdrop, King came to town. "He was not welcome," recalled *The Birmingham News*, in a commemorative story twenty years later. *The News* had blasted Connor's police department in 1961 for its mishandling of the Freedom Riders who were beaten by klansmen, and in 1963 it also blasted King in an editorial: "His very presence will be upsetting to whites familiar with his Albany [Georgial] record. King has made shocking statements in the past, of personal unwillingness to say in advance whether he would accept court orders—even though he expects whites to do so. His 'non-violent' policy is violated every time he promotes demonstrations or turmoil not related to achievement of justice under the law.... He should stay out of Birmingham."

King and the local leader of the Birmingham drive, the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, who headed the Alabama Christian Movement, waited until April 3, the day after the runoff, to begin their challenge to the city's laws and customs embracing segregation. On that bright, warm Wednesday, *The News* carried a story on the front page that captured the mood of the day for many people: "This, happily, is a new day for Birmingham. There's a new feeling

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in the air. There's a new spirit of optimism." The story was signed by the mayor-elect, Albert Boutwell.

On that same day, King and Shuttleworth sent a group of blacks to obtain service at Britling's Restaurant; fourteen were arrested. Simultaneously, other groups went to lunch counters at some of the city's larger department stores—Pizitz, Loveman's, Kress, and Woolworth's. The blacks found "Closed" signs at each of them, but Birmingham's new day had begun.

This was a city where blacks found little in the way of steady employment, other than cleaning up offices or homes, cooking in restaurants, or toiling in the iron and steel foundries; most black professionals were teachers or preachers. There were no black store clerks, secretaries, police officers, librarians, or firefighters. This was the Birmingham that still posted "White only" signs over water fountains and restrooms; black people could not sit at lunch counters or in the main sections of theaters.

King brought his Southern Christian Leadership Conference to Birmingham to marshal a challenge to legal segregation. Although he held rallies at several churches in the black community, the chief rallying spot was the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, chosen for its size, its history, and its location. The church, a yellow-brown structure built in the Byzantine style, had a membership of more than four hundred, including many prominent black citizens: lawyers, teachers, dentists. It sat cater-corner from Kelly Ingram Park, a one-square-block area of trees and grass that was an ideal place to mobilize an army of marchers and send them down Fifth Avenue to the downtown, just four blocks away. At the church King preached harmony, his words captured by Folkways Records: "I don't like the way Mr. Bull Connor acts, but I love him, because Jesus said love is greater than hate." It was here in Birmingham that the civil rights movement adopted its anthem, "We Shall Overcome."

Marches began in April and resulted in thousands of

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arrests. "Never have so many gone to jail in the cause of freedom," said King. Fire hoses and snarling police dogs were used against large groups of spectators who gathered to watch the marches.

On May 9 King and his top aides, Shuttleworth and Ralph Abernathy, reached an agreement with Birmingham business leaders to desegregate lunch counters, drinking fountains, and restrooms, and to begin hiring blacks as sales clerks. King hailed it as "the most significant victory for justice that we have seen in the Deep South." The agreement was announced on May 10, and on the next day Bull Connor angrily denounced it as King's "lyingest, face-saving" act. That night bombs exploded at the black-owned Gaston Motel and at the home of King's brother, A. D. King. The bombings triggered a riot by twenty-five hundred blacks; fifty persons were injured. President John F. Kennedy sent federal troops to Alabama, staging them at Fort McClellan, near Anniston, and at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery. But the troops never moved into Birmingham, and a strained calm settled over the city. On May 20 Bull Connor, having lost his court challenges of the elections, left office.

The church rallies began to dwindle, and blacks and whites alike tried to return to a more normal life. Then, as autumn approached, the city was again jolted by racial turmoil. Federal judges in Alabama had ordered twenty-four blacks enroll at previously all-white schools. Five of those black students were in Birmingham. Alabama Governor George C. Wallace, who had made his stand in the schoolhouse door at The University of Alabama in June, vowed to fight the desegregation of the state's public schools.

On the night of August 20, 1963, the home of black attorney Arthur Shores was bombed, but no one was hurt. Shores had been involved in the desegregation of The University of Alabama and in efforts to invalidate Birmingham's ordinances maintaining residential segregation. As the opening day of school neared, white resistance

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mounted. Crowds of whites waving Confederate flags protested desegregation orders and rode motorcades through the city. On the night of September 4 another bomb exploded at Shores's home, this time slightly injuring his wife, Theodora. Blacks reacted in anger, boiling out into Center Street near the Shores home, in the city's near west side. Police hurried to the scene; shots were fired. A black man was shot and killed as he reportedly ran from a house firing a gun. That night, twenty-one persons were injured, including some officers who were struck by bricks, rocks, and bottles.

But on this Sunday morning of September 15, 1963, the din of the desegregation effort had been stilled. At the church, the lesson for the day was "A Love That Forgives."

At 9:10 A.M. church members William and Mamie Grier, both schoolteachers, neared the church in their new blue and white Buick Electra. About two blocks from the church Mrs. Grier pointed at another car and said, "Look at that." What had caught her attention was the Confederate flag that fluttered from the car's radio antenna. Mrs. Grier would later tell the FBI that the car appeared to be a 1955 Chevrolet, greenish in color. It had been driven by a lone white man, she said. Confederate flags had been common on cars during the early 1960s, and many blacks viewed them as a symbol of racial segregation and white supremacy. The Griers had followed the car; it turned on Sixteenth Street, it passed the church, then continued on. They watched until it passed from view. Then they turned into the church parking lot. There had been some anxiety among church members because of the rash of bombings in Birmingham in recent weeks, and only the Sunday before, the church secretary, Mary Buys, had received a phone call from a man who said, "This is the KKK. Your church will be bombed tonight." It had turned out to be a hoax.

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As the Collins sisters had strolled along playing football, Bennie H. Wilson, deacon in charge of custodial services, was walking up the concrete steps leading to the side entrance of the church. Had he looked under the steps he would have seen it—a box packed with thick sticks of dynamite, each of them wrapped in brownish-green paper. The box had been placed there during the night. But Wilson didn't look, and neither did anyone else. At least a dozen church members would walk up the steps that morning.

Most of the adults gathered upstairs in the main sanctuary, while the children and teenagers went downstairs to the assembly area, a large room with light brown walls that had served the church as a sanctuary until the upstairs was completed in 1911. Some of the Sunday school classes were held in the assembly area, but others were housed in the small rooms that fringed it. In the northeast corner of the basement, almost directly behind the side steps, was the women's lounge.

Ella C. Demand began her class at 9:30; after a discussion of the lesson, some of the teenage girls began talking about their duties as ushers. At about 10:10, Cynthia Wesley and Carole Robertson asked permission to go to the lounge so they could freshen up for the service. They would have to be upstairs by 10:30.

Also at about 10:10 A.M. Maxine McNair and her daughter,

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ter Denise arrived. Mrs. McNair went to the adult class on the main floor, while Denise hurried down to the small basement room where Mrs. Clevon Phillips was conducting class. A few minutes after she entered the room, Denise raised her hand and asked permission to go to the lounge. The teacher nodded. Out in the assembly area, Denise paused. To her right, about forty feet away, she saw Rosetta Young, one of the sponsors of the youth ushers. Denise ran across the room to her.

"My, don't you look pretty," said Mrs. Young. The girl smiled. "Thank you, ma'am."

She whirled then, and went to the lounge. Her words to Mrs. Young were probably her last.

In the meantime, the Collins girls were giggling their way along, throwing Addie's purse about and running so hard that they began to perspire.

"This is the best time we've ever had coming to church," said Janie, the oldest at sixteen. Sarah, thirteen, was the youngest, Addie at fourteen. When they finally arrived at the church it was well past 10 A.M. and the Sunday school classes were about over.

"Now come on, y'all," chided Janie. "We can't go into church looking like this. We got all messed up. Come on, we're going down to the lounge to straighten up." They went to the women's lounge in the basement. In a few minutes Janie was ready. "Now y'all hurry and come on up," she called as she left the lounge and went upstairs.

Denise McNair entered the lounge where the other girls were freshening up for the service. A twelve-year-old girl named Marsha Stollenwerck had just left. Still in the room were Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, Addie Mae, and Sarah Collins.

There was little being said. The girls were checking themselves out in the mirror, straightening dresses, running hands over their hair. Sarah had just turned on the water to wash her hands and glanced to her right, watching her sister Addie fussing with the sash of Denise's dress, which had come undone; she was retying the bow on it.

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Suddenly, there was a sharp blast, and Sarah saw the outside wall crumbling. She caught just a glimpse of it—bricks and mortar and glass and wire gauge flying through the air. The exterior wall of the church was thirty inches thick, composed of stone and brick. The force of the blast blew out the section under the window and fragmented the stone and brick, as well as the limestone sills of the double window. A huge gaping hole appeared.

But Sarah didn't see that. She had already fallen blinded and bleeding and was screaming hysterically for her sister: "Addie! Addie! Addie!"

But there was no sound from Addie . . . or from Carole or Cynthia or Denise.

Upstairs, in the sanctuary, the sound of the blast brought a moment of stunned silence. Then: "We've been bombed!" someone screamed. The clock in the sanctuary stopped at 10:22.

To some it had sounded like a loud crack of thunder, almost ear-splitting. To others it seemed like a dull thud, like someone thumping a big washtub. And to some there was no sound at all, just things flying and falling wildly through the air, glass breaking, doors flipping open—a sudden wave of heat riding silently through their church.

Marsha Stollenwerck, who had been in the lounge until a few minutes before the blast, told the FBI that she had heard "a big noise" and had tried to run out the back door of the church—but she was pushed back, she had said, as if by some invisible force. Then she ran to the main entrance, located on the Sixth Avenue side, and went out.

Mrs. Young, who had moments before been talking with Denise McNair, was talking to some other children when the explosion occurred. She grabbed those nearby and fell to the floor. In the moment of panic that followed, she saw smoke billowing from the lounge area and feared the worst. She took the hands of the children near her and led them up the stairs and out the Sixth Avenue entrance. As they departed, they shot hasty glances about the church interior. Most of the large, stained-glass windows were broken;

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in one, the body of Jesus on the cross remained intact, but the head had been blown away.

Mamie Grier, the teacher who had been suspicious of the green Chevy with the Confederate flag on it, was conducting an adult Sunday school class in the choir loft. Attending were Earline Tankersley, Ida Freeman, Maggie Webb, and Maxine McNair, Denise's mother, who was the last to arrive. The class was ending when the bomb went off, the sound seemed to come from the basement, on the Sixteenth Street side. Maxine McNair began to scream, on the jumped up and ran out and circled behind the church, running up the alley to the Sixth Avenue side of the church, the main entrance. Mrs. Tankersley followed, later recalling that she was in such shock she couldn't remember exactly what had happened, only that they were outside, running.

In Ella Demand's classroom, from which Carole and Cynthia had been excused so they could go to the lounge, the explosion was not heard at all, said the instructor. She was suddenly aware of glass breaking and felt a surge of air move through the room. Then she saw smoke billowing in the hallways and heard screams.

In Mrs. Clevon Phillips's class, the four girls who remained there after Denise left for the ladies' lounge were unhurt. Their teacher led them up the stairs to the main sanctuary, then out the Sixth Avenue door.

In the lounge area, which had taken the brunt of the explosion, girls were screaming and crying, groping their way through the dust and smoke. The Reverend John Cross, the pastor, appeared in the hallway to help search for victims; he was bleeding from the head. As the adult church members began calling out names, it became clear that there were people who had been in the part of the building that was now reduced to rubble.

By then medical rescue units were on the scene, and police urged church members and bystanders to back away. Someone spotted a shoe, and a woman cried out that it belonged to Denise McNair. Her sobs mingled with the endless wail of ambulances.

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One by one, the girls were pulled from the debris. Three were apparently dead on the spot, witnesses said. One man told the FBI later that although he heard one girl moan he felt she was near death. A fifth girl, badly injured and later identified as Sarah Collins, was alive, and an ambulance driver said he heard her mutter something. According to him, the girl said, "I saw two white men run through and then the wall fell down. I thought they were reporters. God will save me."

The weeks of threats and hoaxes had finally crashed down upon the church and its people, taking the lives of four innocent victims, girls who had not directly taken part in the civil rights marches or the attempt to desegregate the schools.

They had come to praise the Lord. Now they were dead.

