

***“I’m Going to Get Me Some  
Big Words. . . .”***

**Y***ou are as good as anyone.* Martin Luther King, Jr., never forgot those words. How could he—when he saw his own father bring them to life so often?

Daddy King, as most people called him, was a fighter. The first thing he fought was poverty. He was a sharecropper’s son. His family never owned anything at all. The tumbledown shack they lived in, the land they farmed, even the mule that pulled the plow—everything belonged to a white farmer down the road.




*Martin (on the right) was 10 years old when he posed with his older sister and younger brother in this family portrait. He was born on January 15, 1929.*



Martin loved to hear his father talk about the mule. "Every morning I had to brush that animal," Daddy King remembered. "Well, I'm here to tell you that mules smell. Of course that smell just naturally rubbed off on me. So my friends began to tease me about that old mule smell. They were only joking, but finally I got mad. 'I may *smell* like a mule,' I told them one day, 'but I don't *think* like a mule!'"

No, Daddy King was smart. He knew he had to leave the land that would never belong to his family. When he was only fifteen he went to Atlanta. For many years he worked hard by day and studied hard by night. It was slow going. But now he was the Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr.—head of Ebenezer Baptist Church. Ebenezer was one of the biggest black churches in the city of Atlanta, Georgia.

Daddy King fought for an education. He fought for a good life for himself and for his family. He also fought for what he thought was right. And he wasn't afraid of anyone.

One day he and Martin were driving around in the family car. A white policeman signaled for him to pull over. "Show me your license, boy," the policeman said. This was the way white people often spoke to Negro men. It was another way they had of keeping black people in their place. 

Daddy King looked at him hard. Then he pointed to Martin. "Do you see this child here?" he said in a quiet but very firm voice. "That is a *boy*. I am a *man*."

Not long after, he and Martin took a walk and happened to pass a big shoe store. Martin needed shoes, so they went inside and sat down in some seats near the door.

Suddenly a clerk was standing in front of them. "What do you think you're doing? You know you can't sit here," he said.

"There's nothing wrong with these seats," Daddy King answered. "They're quite comfortable, in fact."

The clerk's face grew red. "You know that Negroes have to sit in the back of the



store. That's the rule. So you might as well stop being high and mighty and take it like the rest!"

Now Daddy King got angry. "We'll buy shoes sitting here, or we won't buy shoes at all!" Then he grabbed Martin's hand and stamped out of the store.

His anger frightened Martin a little. Finally he tugged on his father's hand. "I don't understand," he said in a small voice. "The front and the back of the store looked the same to me."

Daddy King took a couple of deep breaths. "It's just another example of segregation, Martin," he said more calmly. "Just another way of keeping us down." Then suddenly his voice rose in anger again. "I will never accept this stupid, cruel system," he said. "I'll fight it until the day I die!"

Martin looked up at his father. "If you are against it, so am I," he said. At that moment he was very glad that he'd been named after his father.

As a minister's son Martin spent many hours each week in church. "Ebenezer was like a second home to me," he always said. How he loved to hear his father preach. The Reverend King's deep voice filled the church like organ music. And the words he spoke made Martin very proud. They sounded so fine and fancy. "You just wait," he whispered to his mother one day. "I'm going to get *me* some big words, too."

And he did. Learning was always easy for Martin. "I like to get in over my head, and then puzzle things out," he said. No wonder he was usually at the head of his class. Except for one subject, that is—spelling. He was never a very good speller. "I was horrible at it then, and I'm horrible at it now," he admitted—even after he was grown and had written several books.

Martin's two closest playmates were his older sister Chris, and his little brother A.D. But he had many other friends. Most of them called him M.L.

He and his friends roller-skated down the rough sidewalks in front of their homes, and swooped through the streets on their bikes. They made model airplanes and flew kites high in the sky.

They played baseball or football in an empty field behind the King house. Martin was small for his age, but he was tough. "He just wouldn't quit," a friend said. "He ran right over anybody who got in the way." So he was always one of the first to be picked for any team.

Martin was tough, but he didn't like to get into fights. "It makes me feel bad inside," he explained. So he found another way to handle trouble. He talked his way out of it.

One of his playmates spoke about his way with words. "That M.L.—even when he was just a bitty boy, he could talk you into or out of *anything*."