

BLACK PANTHER 1966-1969

New Haven, Connecticut

The volatile times of the 60's produced a new generation of Black leadership and organizations battling racism and segregation around the country. The drama swept me up. I wanted to be *Black*, not *Negro*, so I grew an Afro to identify with the movement and with the men and women at the forefront of the struggle for human and civil rights. I attended political rallies and demonstrations, pickets and sit ins. I was awed by the fiery rhetoric and speeches, very impressed by the display of courage to stand up to the man and the corrupt American government.



When the Black Panther Party broke on the scene in 1966, I was immediately captivated by their militancy. Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, armed with high-powered rifles, challenged police brutality in Oakland, California and around the country. Their stand against police violence committed against black people was historic and monumental, unprecedented, reflecting my own experiences with law enforcement.

The black leather jacket, black beret and dark sunglasses worn by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale were the coolest thing I'd ever seen. I embraced the symbolism and political philosophy. I wanted to become a Black Panther.

I purchased a car with money I had saved. I decided against telling anyone where I was going. I headed to the highway, anxious, scared, and full of curiosity. I decided, along the way, to stop over in New Haven. I had read about the New Haven chapter of the Black Panther Party. I wanted to check out the headquarters, perhaps even meet Bobby Seale. The problem, however, was that I had no idea where the Black Panther office was located.

Reaching New Haven's city limits, I found myself passing by Yale University. I marveled at the vastness of the campus. Instinctively, I turned onto Dixwell Avenue and drove west, hoping that I would somehow encounter someone to give me directions. The landscape gradually changed the farther I drove into New Haven. The further I drove

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away from Yale, the more black people I began to see. The architecture dramatically shifted from large, sandblasted buildings to row buildings consisting of various storefront businesses. I was amazed by the clear demarcation separating where white people lived and conducted business from where black people lived and shopped.

I pulled over to the curb and asked a young black man where I could find the Black Panther headquarters. He was wearing a bright colored dashiki. It was cloudy but he was wearing a huge pair of sunglasses that nearly covered the forehead of his little face. He looked like a fly wearing sunglasses. "Orchard Avenue, man," he directed me, pointing a finger. "That's where they are. Are you a Panther?" I was tempted to say yes, but thought twice about identifying myself as a Panther. I had no clue as to who he was. "No, man," I answered him.

I eventually found the Panther's headquarters. I was expecting to find a large, storefront building, but I found that the headquarters was set up in an apartment instead. When I knocked on the door, this tall, lanky, light complexion woman came to the door. "Hi," I said, my voice shaking. "Can I speak with Bobby?"

She moved closer to me, as if to block me from entering the apartment. "Bobby who?" she wanted to know.

"Seale. Bobby Seale." I tried my best to talk slowly without stuttering. I shouldn't have come here. She looked me up and down, studying my face.

"Do you know Bobby?"

"No. I actually don't. I've read about him and thought it would be cool to meet him, you know. He's doing some important work."

She folded arms. "Important work?"

"Yeah. Organizing black people to fight police brutality."

She didn't move, didn't blink an eye, didn't say anything else. The long silence made me feel uncomfortable.

"Well, look, I don't mean to harm anyone. I'm from Philadelphia. I'm on my way to my aunt's house in New London, that's all."

"What is your name?" she asked in a demanding voice.

"Ron," I quickly answered. I was tired of being on the defensive. I decided to throw a few questions of my own at her.

"What's your name?"

"You don't need to know my name."

"I see...well." I couldn't finish the sentence. My patience was waning. "Like I said, I'm just passing through New Haven."

"Are you a member of the Party?" she asked me.

"I want to be?"

"Really?"

"Yes, really! Can I just come in and talk with you?"

"My name is Erica Huggins."

She stepped back and gestured for me to come in. I became a member of the Black Panther Party on that day.

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New London is nestled along the east bank of the Thames River. I got lost and found myself looking at the United States Coast Guard Academy. I was fascinated by the sheer size of the buildings sprawled over massive acres of land. I drove along the bank of the river, preoccupied by my thoughts of the Panther Party. I pictured myself dressed in a black leather jacket, black beret and dark sunglasses. Man, I thought to myself, I would look so hip if I could just get my hands on a black beret. I would get instant respect. People would know that I stand for something, that I am fighting in the revolution, and that I am a member of the most militant organization in the country. I found it hard to believe that I had actually pulled this off. I didn't get to meet Bobby Seale, but I met other members of the Party. Soon I would be attending political science classes in New Haven.

I wanted my piece of the action. Huey Newton was sitting in prison. He had been convicted of voluntary manslaughter of a policeman. He was coming up for an appeals hearing this on May 1, a few weeks from now. Demonstrations were being planned around the country on the steps of federal courthouses. I had been asked me if I could organize a protest in New London. I gave my word, made a solemn promise that I would get the job done.

Cousin Barbara was about the only person on the planet I could trust with my plans. We had always been close. When I revealed my plans for a demonstration in New London, she listened without interruption. I painted a picture of hundreds of students carousing on the steps of the courthouse in New London.

"What you're planning to do might be dangerous," she said after I had talked myself out.

I thought a moment about her warning. "What do you mean?"

"—What do I mean?" She was incredulous. "Haven't you read about how the police are going after the Panthers? A lot of people think that there's a conspiracy to kill every one of them. You better be careful."

"But this is New London!"

"We have cops here, too," she said, wide eyed. "The FBI has an office in New London. "Have you fully investigated what you're getting involved with? Do you know what these people really stand for? Slow down before you find yourself shot up somewhere."

"

I ain't scared."

"You better be."

* * *

I spent the next few days on the steps of the only high school in New London. I passed out Black Panther literature and talked with students as they went to and from classes. No one tried to stop me from openly discussing my plans for a demonstration. As far as I was able to discern, I was not being followed by the police or FBI.

Presenting myself as a Black Panther gave me an identity I desperately needed and allowed me the comfort of forgetting about my troubles in Philadelphia, although I believed that Barbara might be right. I didn't know a heck of a lot about the Black Panthers. Later in the week, I read newspaper accounts of how Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, two Panther organizers in Chicago, had been shot and killed. I began to

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understand the risk and danger of calling oneself a Panther. I could be killed as well. I thought once again about Barbara's warning. I was undaunted.

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With May 1st quickly approaching, I was doing all I could to ensure that the demonstration in New London would have a good turnout. I decided to cease my efforts to recruit young people to join the Black Panther movement and focused more strategically on getting them to attend the demonstration.

Paranoia began to set in. I was beginning to believe that I was being followed. I considered getting a gun. I had a growing suspicion that the students I was talking with might actually be informants. My attitude cooled towards people who seemed too anxious to support what I was doing.

Erica advised me to keep my composure.

Barbara told me to go back to Philly.

* * *

When the big day finally rolled around, I woke up that morning feeling restless, sensing that something terrible was about to happen. As I sat on the edge of the bed, I looked out the window to where my car was parked. I had hid a poster in the trunk. On it was emblazoned two words. Free Huey.

I stood at the window scanning the streets around my car to determine if I was being watched. If only I had a joint to smoke, something I had become accustomed to when I became nervous. I admitted to myself that I was scared. What if Barbara was right. What if cousin Linwood turned out to be a police informant? I was, after all, staying in his house. I thought about calling the whole damn thing off. New London was thousands of miles away from where Huey will be appearing in court today. What impact will my little protest rally actually have?

Loud voices raged within my head. Often, too frequently, I was unable to tell the difference between the voice of reason, the voice of my own fears, or some other voice. I paced around the room. Anxiety churned in my stomach. I've done things in my life that should have killed me. My father could have shot me dead. I could have died in any one of the institutions where I was locked up. I tried to shake off the jitters.

It was nearly 7:30. Things were scheduled to kick off at 9 am. I had at least an hour to think it over and make a final decision of whether to go through with the demonstration or follow Barbara's suggestion to run back to Philly.

Various Party members had given me instructions on how to stage the protest rally. *Why hadn't they offered to come here today?* I would be the only Black Panther out there standing up to the police. Voices exploded in my head. I quickly washed my face and brushed my teeth and went down the steps to the dining room. The aroma of food being cooked made me feel fortunate to be staying with cousin Linwood. He had never asked me for anything except for asking me 'you hungry?'

At the table, I found Linwood reading the morning paper. My Aunt Nanny was in the kitchen cooking. I took my usual seat facing a window. "Good morning," I said to him,

trying to sound pleasant and relaxed. He looked up from the newspaper.

“Oh, good morning,” he said, while continuing to read the newspaper. “I was just reading this here article about a shooting down in New Haven. Seems like some young black kid was mouthing off at the police. So they shot him. We don’t tolerate that nonsense here. The NAACP has ways of handling these things.”

I nodded my head in agreement. Linwood had served as the president of the New London chapter of the NAACP, something that I was now very conscious of.

He folded up the newspaper and turned his head towards the kitchen. “Nanny! Is that food about ready? This boy and I are starving!”

“Don’t rush me, Linwood,” she hollered back at him. “The food is coming now.” Aunt Nanny came to the table with a large plate filled with sausage, eggs and fried potatoes. I ate with a ferocious appetite on this morning, avoiding the usual table small talk. This might be my last meal. I gobbled down my food, excused myself from the table and went out to my car. It was now 8:15. I started up my car for what might be the last time, too. I twisted my neck to look around me, up and down the street. It was quiet. Too quiet. The only sounds I was able to hear came from birds perched high in the trees lining the street. I took one last look at the house. *Did they know?*

Now it was 8:25. The voices raged on within my head. Slowly and patiently I pulled out into the street. I was unable to think of a reason to go on with my plans for the rally. Yet, I was not able to think of a reason not to go. I drove off, reaching the courthouse where I surveyed the street and circled the block several times. Nothing looked unusual. I didn’t see any suspicious looking cars. People were busying themselves going to work, parking their cars, and getting their morning coffee.

There was not a dashiki, a black beret, a leather jacket or a Black face on the courthouse steps. The courthouse steps were empty. I was the first demonstrator to arrive, which was what I didn’t want. I needed someone to talk with, someone to help calm my fledgling nerves.. *Maybe no one will show*, A voice in my head told me that I wouldn’t be that lucky today.

Eight forty-five came and I still hadn’t parked my car. I Finally, with reservations tying a knot in my gut, parked my car around the corner from the courthouse. I walked around my car to the trunk where I did something that I was unaccustomed to. I prayed. I asked God to protect me. I opened the trunk and lifted out the Huey Newton poster. The words jumped up at me. Free Huey! *Am I about to lend my life to a man that might be guilty of murder?*

I sucked in my breath and exhaled to the point that I nearly fainted. I barely managed to shut the trunk. I decided at that moment that I was going through with it. Voices cheered in my head. When I walked around the corner, on the side of the street where the courthouse stood, I looked as far down the street as I could see. I saw one person standing on the steps. He spotted me and waved. There was no way for me to turn back now. I walked up to the courthouse steps and casually said good morning to the guy.

“You ready, man?” he asked me. The guy’s question was spirited. He was ready to go
“Yeah, I’m ready.” I answered back. This kid showed heart. If only I could have his

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confidence. “Let’s do our thing,” I said. I held up the poster. “*Free Huey!*” I screamed at the top of my voice. I turned the two words into a chant. “*Free Huey! Free Huey! Free Huey!*” He joined in with me. Together, we chanted the reprise several more times, stopping only to catch our breath. Three more students arrived up and picked up the refrain. Then two other students showed up and we song with the force and presence of a choir. Passersby stopped, looked on curiously, and moved on. A police car circled the block, but no one interfered with the rally. I was still nervous.

I ended the rally after about forty five minutes of chanting. I was still in one piece. I counted my blessings. I thanked the students in behalf of Huey Newton and the Black Panther Party. I hurriedly went to my car, threw the poster on the backseat, and roared off down the street headed back to Aunt Nanny’s house.

* * *

I felt rested the next morning and at more ease with having gotten the burden of the protest rally off my back. I went down to the table as I usually did. Once I sat down, Cousin Linwood leaned forward over the table, so directly in my face I could smell the eggs on his breath.

“Boy, is you crazy? Do you know what’s in the paper this morning!”

“No I don’t.” I said innocently. “I haven’t read the paper.”

“—You are in the paper that’s who! Why didn’t you tell me you are some sort of Black Panther?” Aunt Nanny looked on in disbelief, nearly dropping the tray of food. The tone in Linwood’s voice told me that he was really mad at me. I thought for a moment about apologizing to him, but decided to stand my ground instead. He was doing his thing with the NAACP. I was only doing my thing with the Panthers. What’s the problem?

“I called your father this morning. He’s on his way up here to straighten this mess out.”

That’s when I became concerned. “Straighten what out?”

“You! Do you think I need this kind of publicity against the NAACP? Do you know who I am?”

“Yeah, I do.” I’m stunned to learn that my father is coming to New London. He might really shoot me this time. “Why’s he coming?”

“—To get you! You’re nothing but a troublemaker. What you’re doing is going to be linked to me because you live in my house! All the work I’ve done to make a difference in the lives of black people in New London and you bring this Panther madness up here. What if the police come to my house looking for you?”

Please, I thought to myself, get to the bottom line. “What is he going to do when he gets here?”

“Apologize—that’s what! Might beat your butt too. I’m going to have him go down to the paper and issue a statement in behalf of the family. Do you know that your picture is in the paper?”

“What page?” I asked, surprised and smiling at him.

“This ain’t no joke, boy. You have done something very serious here.”

“I’m leaving,” I told him, having already made up my mind that I wasn’t going to hang

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around and witness the spectacle of my father apologizing to the city.

“You know what you did was wrong? Your father is gonna want to talk with you when he gets here, boy!”

Voices converged on me again, scrambling my thoughts, drowning out my voice. I struggled to lock my mind onto a single thought. I needed clarity to decide where I should go. I politely excused myself from the table and went up to my room. I packed up my suitcase, wishing that I could pack the voices in my head into the suitcase too, deciding, with finality, that I was leaving New London.

I left the house without attempting another word. I didn't say goodbye to Aunt Nanny or Barbara. Once again, I was on the run without a clue of where I could go, other than back to Philly.

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