

Chapter 11 The Panther Emerges

Several days later 15 to 20 students and others involved in SNCC rented several cars through the BSU. Elmer disconnected the mileage gauge so that we would not be charged for the mileage we were getting ready to rack up. We headed to San Francisco to attend the second annual west coast Black Student Union Conference. Anthony Ware had attended the first West Coast conference in '67 in Los Angeles. He'd told us about the disagreement between two organizations that almost led to bloodshed. One of the organizations was a cultural nationalist organization led by Maulana Ron Karenga; the other, a group called the Black Panthers for Self Defense, led by two brothers named Huey Newton and Bobby Seale.

This was the first time Elmer and I had traveled together without our parents. It was exciting being in San Francisco free of parental constraints. San Francisco was a place that young people from all over the country came to, searching for meaning, looking for their place in a conflicted society. So it was no coincidence that we were here too, searching, looking for some direction in our quest for liberation. After checking in at San Francisco State, registering and getting our housing assignments, we were assigned a driver to show us around and take us to our sleeping quarters.

Our driver was a smooth-skinned, black brother wearing a semi-short, neat afro with jet-black hair. Our car sped through the sometimes-narrow streets, swishing past street cars, past old colorful Victorian homes, and intermittent views of the Pacific Ocean. He took us through the Haight-Ashbury district, where throngs of longhaired

white kids wandered through the street wearing rainbow-colored clothing. Some were hugging each other, looking glassy-eyed. Within minutes we were on Fillmore Street, filled with proud blacks, and black businesses, jazz clubs, blues clubs, barbecue joints, and corner liquor stores. Our driver pointed out significant landmarks, like the Garvey Bookstore and the Black Muslim Mosque.

When we asked if he knew any Panthers, he began to open up more. "Yea, know a lot of the Panthers. Matter a fac' we goin' to raid a Hell's Angels house tonight," as he showed us some bullets. He also pulled out a beret "They're havin' a funeral tomorrow over in Oakland for a Panther killed by the police." Finally he dropped Anthony, Kathy Jones, Gary Owens, Elmer and me off at the black professor's house where we were staying, not far from the college, and said good night.

The next day Elmer, Anthony, and I tried to find some workshops that we were interested in. We even sat in on a couple, but left disappointed. We could not find one that was interesting to us. Or at least, not one that seemed to fill our needs. We decided to drive one of the rented cars to Oakland and check out the funeral of the slain Panther, Bobby Hutton. Larry Gossett and Gary Owens and a few other BSU members went with us. After driving across the Bay Bridge and into west Oakland, we spotted a small church in the distance. As we got closer we could see a group of black men in leather coats and black berets. Earlier, Elmer, Anthony and I had gone out and bought some berets. We pulled them out and put them on. As we got closer we saw Marlon Brando, my mother's favorite actor, dressed in a black leather coat and black beret, standing out in

front of the church talking to a tall black man that we later learned was Bobby Seale, the chairman of the Black Panthers

We got out and quietly entered into the small white church. Inside was dark, packed full of mourners standing, and on both sides of the church were black men dressed in black leather jackets and black pants and powder blue shirt, with black berets. They stood half at attention, their eyes focused toward the front, where a brown casket held the body of the murdered young Panther.

In the center front of the church a group of older, heavysset, black women were bunched together, wailing uncontrollably, reaching for the hand that could not reach back.

We stood there listening to the preacher as he gave his eulogy over the soft cries that sometimes erupted into loud shrieks. The faces of the young men and women in black were unchanged, almost emotionless. We fell into the procession as it wound its way to the front, past the casket. I looked into the casket of the one known as little

He was so young looking, yet he had an oldness about him, his face uneven and almost swollen. The cries of Mrs. Hutton filled my ears, almost blocking out everything else. We quickly left the church and in silence headed back to San Francisco.

On the way back I looked through the Black Panther paper that was being handed out, and read the story of Bobby Hutton. How he had joined this organization at 14 and risen to the position of minister of finance, and how he and the Panthers' minister of information, Eldridge Cleaver, were cornered in an abandoned house by the police and

overcome by tear gas. Bobby Hutton was shot numerous times despite coming out of the house unarmed and with his arms up.

Later that evening we went back to San Francisco State to await the keynote address of Bobby Seale. Those of us who had gone to the funeral were in a somber mood. Looking into the casket of Bobby Hutton was almost like looking into a vision of the movement, and it was not what we had expected. It was not the glory and the victory we had romanticized about.

It began to get dark outside. Bobby Seale was already an hour late. We were wondering if the Panthers were going to show up. Maybe something else had happened. Maybe the police attacked the brothers again. Elmer, Anthony, and I found a corner of the auditorium and stood quietly talking, waiting for the messenger. Finally the doors to the auditorium flung open. In walked Bobby Seale followed by a handful of brothers and sisters. I recognized the tall, light brown sister with the big brown Afro as Kathleen Cleaver, the wife of Eldridge Cleaver. I had seen her picture in the Black Panther paper. She said very little as she almost glided across the room. Next to her was a Panther walking with a limp. I would later learn that his name was Warren Wells, one of the brothers wounded in the shootout. The entourage moved quietly, almost sullen, occasionally whispering among themselves.

The Panthers spread out across the audience as Bobby Seale took the center of the stage after being introduced by Jimmy Johnson, the Black Student Union president at San Francisco State. Bobby Seale looked tired and beleaguered.

“All Power to the People, brothers and sisters.

“We just came from burying our comrade, little Bobby Hutton, who was murdered by a bunch of racist, fascist pigs. The pigs murdered our little Bobby despite the fact that he was unarmed, despite the fact that he had his hands up. The pigs also shot and wounded the minister of information, comrade Eldridge Cleaver, who is locked up in the Alameda County Jail, along with .7 other party members including our national captain, David Hilliard.

“The comrades were transporting supplies in preparation for a rally for Huey P. Newton at DeFremery Park when they were ambushed by a bunch of low-life racist pigs.

“They killed little Bobby because they knew little Bobby was a revolutionary who wasn't afraid of confronting the pig power structure.

“Huey taught us that we have a right to defend ourselves, that we have a right to defend our community. Huey said the pigs occupy our community like a foreign troop occupies foreign territory. The pigs aren't there to protect us. They're there in our community to protect the interest of the pig power structure and the avaricious pig businessman.

“Brother Malcolm didn't take no shit. Brother Malcolm was a revolutionary brother. He understood that racist white America would do whatever it has to do to maintain the power structure. Brother Malcolm also knew that we are in an international struggle for the rights of all people. Whether you be black, brown, red, white, all oppressed people have a right to live decently. Brother Huey understood that. Brother Huey knew we had to go forth and organize the brothers on the block, the brothers that don't have any interest in this racist system.

"Black intellectuals always want to analyze 'The hypothesis for this matter is ' That's a bunch of bullshit We don't need to analyze this shit. We don't need to intellectualize. We need to get serious. We need to organize. We need to pick up some guns.

I looked out at the crowd as the tall, rangy Bobby Seale continued, contorting his face, using his hands to punctuate his ideas and the philosophy of the Panthers. Some in the audience were becoming uncomfortable. Others were mesmerized, just as I was, listening to every word that Mr. Seale had to say.

At one point, he stopped speaking. "Who got something to drink in here?" as he took off his leather jacket and loosened his black tie. I remembered about the vodka I had bought for Mommy and Poppy. I went over to the corner where my belongings were and reached in the bag and pulled out a quart of vodka. handed it to a Panther brother standing next to me. He handed it to Bobby Seale. He opened the bottle and took a long swig. Soon the bottle was going around the room. It came back to me and I followed suit and took a swig of the tasteless alcohol

Bobby Seale was loosening up. He became more animated. His facial expression began to soften. He talked about his being a drummer and a comedian and his stint in the Air Force. He talked about Martin Luther King and the Kennedy brothers, and for a few seconds he portrayed a black man chained up, struggling to be free.

Finally, the speech was over and the lights went on Without thought, without hesitation, found myself moving in a beeline to where Bobby Seale was standing. Elmer and Anthony arrived in front of Bobby Seale at the same time "We want a