



## Huey Newton Twenty-Five Floors From the Street:

"I Lost  
My Capacity  
to Hate. I Just  
Disagree."

by Tim Findley

**I**t was one of those August days when fog jams along the coast and chokes itself in San Francisco, never reaching across the bay to sweltering Oakland; a day like the one two years ago when stiff-faced young black men in heat-devouring black leather jackets and black berets clicked and stomped in a twisting intimidating rhythm outside the Alameda County Courthouse.

*The revolution has come,  
Time to pick up the gun.*

But now it was 1970, two years later. People were again gathering outside the same squat-square courthouse, as many white faces as black, just as there had been before. But this time the uniformity of costume and rhythm was missing. The mood was anticipatory; eagerness and anxiety on the verge of celebration. A few placards dappled the crowd, worn and faded leftovers saved for this day.

**FREE HURY.**

**THE SKY'S THE LIMIT.**

The crowd swelled over the curb and spilled into the street by the time Newton suddenly came through the awesome double metal doors, smiling and nodding in self-conscious recognition of the hundreds waiting for him. He plunged down the smoothstone steps and into the crowd. The hovering knot of bodyguards around him lost their protective circle to the crush of flesh straining to see and touch as Newton struggled to a Volkswagen.

Some women in the crowd wept; others shrieked and shouted, "Huey! Huey!" Still he moved fast up the cluttered street, out of the courthouse shade and into the sunshine. He climbed up on a

car and pulled his shirt off. His body was lean and muscled from a steady regimen of prison exercise. He cast an imposing, and nearly sensual figure.

But when he spoke, he could barely be heard. He called it a victory for the people in a voice somehow narrow, the syllables high-pitched in the throat, not gut-deep and angry in the Eldridge Cleaver or Bobby Seale style. The words did not whip and crack the hot air with denunciation or threat. He did not say "pig," he said "police," and he cautioned people against blocking the street.

As he said later, Newton came out of the courthouse that day almost reluctantly, as ever uncomfortable—even afraid—of crowds.

"It was hot and I took my shirt off. That felt good. The sun felt good," he said, laughing in that nasal way of his. "People thought it was a grand gesture or something, but it was just hot."

Like the Shadow come from radio to television, Huey Newton could never quite match the vision of him that people had conjured up while he was locked away in state prison on charges of manslaughter in the 1967 killing of an Oakland police officer. The myth eroded a little that day in disappointment. People thrive on expectations and languish in fulfillment; nobody believes that stronger than Newton himself.

He had commented about his release on bail for retrial in a stoic, almost casual way. "I'll be going from maximum security to medium security, that's all," he said. For more than two years, he had lived in self-imposed solitary at a California prison where he refused to work or perform prison tasks unless he was paid a legal minimum wage instead of the usual prison wages of 12 cents an hour. He fought that battle with steely personal determination, until at last the prison authorities and he reached an agreement—they would do nothing for him, not so much as provide library books or toothpaste, and he would do nothing for them, not so much as to show an instance of physical resistance to allow them to vent their frustrations in a beating.

Today, high up in the 25th floor of the poshy Lakeshore Apartments in Oakland, in a stucco and glass perch that commands an eye-flooding view of San Francisco Bay and that looks directly down on the courthouse where his imprisonment began, Newton still serves a sentence, perhaps more solitary now than he was in the state's steel cubicle. The much talked-about penthouse apartment, rented as a tax write-off from various Black Panther enterprises, is like a two-bedroom, two-bath cage in which Newton paces almost constantly, seldom going out, and working long hours analyzing and developing his theories, speaking with a steady schedule of party members and supporters who come to plan and discuss Panther programs, and between that, working on three books simultaneously.

It is a characterless apartment, devoid of clear personality and almost sterile, not unlike an opulent prison cell. The living room squares and angles in black leather couches and a thick glass coffee table on which chessmen stand stiffly. Channel 13 on the boxy console television constantly monitors the street entrance to the building. A long glass-topped square table nude of anything but a heavy ashtray dominates the adjoining dining room. There is a painting of Che Guevara on an easel near the glass doors, and a leafy plant in one corner near a fine stereo that plays often. The music varies widely, from the themes from *El Topo* or *Shaft* to the lilt of Joan Baez, but whatever it is, there

is always a detectable political theme in it somewhere; there is always a message it has to convey. A pair of binoculars with a built-in camera attachment stand on a tripod before the north wall of glass, the lenses trained constantly on the tenth floor jail cell where Newton was held before the north wall of trial. Directly below, oarsmen strain in racing sculls amid the small sailboats that drift on Lake Merritt.

It is not a place of Newton's choosing. The decision for him to live there was made by the Panther Central Committee. It is supremely secure from an unexpected raid or attack. Less important, it serves as a virtual Panther flag in the very midst of some of Oakland's most established and establishment citizens who live below Newton on other floors of the high rise. For all its impressive view and doorman service, the apartment is still constructed like a hasty tract home in cheap interior stucco and metal. It is as far from where Newton's mind is as was the prison 200 miles to the south.

### A Stucco & Glass Cell

We stood on the balcony overlooking the lake at twilight, the first dim yellow bulbs going on across the mall in the tenth floor jail cells. There would be a night of good Portuguese wine and popcorn, Newton answering questions in long, complicated responses, sometimes seeming to wrestle with intricate explanations and free them from esoteric intellect to understanding.

"You never weary of it?" I said. "You never look out at the lake and just wish you were there?"

"Oh yeah," Newton said without hesitating. "I've become very lonely and very tired—frustrated. But that's my own immaturity. Sometimes I wish I was still on Sacramento Avenue and stuff like that, but I had problems then, like people who are unconscious have problems—overwhelming problems, you know? Probably more agony than I have right now." His pace slowed momentarily, as if the answer were finished, and then suddenly picked up again, pursuing the thought. "But then they have a sort of . . . a certain amount of happiness that I don't experience now. Now it's like I sacrifice that for more joy at the point where it will really be worthwhile. You see? Then I got joy out of very insignificant things—a lot of things, mad things. Like, I used to have fun at a good fist fight. It's petty, but at that point I did, and as you become more conscious of what's significant and what's insignificant, a lot is lost. It's like peeling an onion, you know, and you start wondering where is the joy, what is it really going to be? If you don't accept anything in the system, what is it really like?"

"I don't know what it's like, but I can't stand the way it is and . . ." His voice trailed off, ending an answer with an inevitable question.

If he is sometimes hard to follow, even if he has seemed a disappointment to some who expected this son of a Louisiana preacher to lead them like distant thunder, it is largely because Newton cannot resist taking one more peel off the onion—probing it deeper and deeper, looking for a satisfaction he knows religiously he will never find.

"Sometimes," he said, "sometimes I feel like I'm suspended in a kind of void . . . those feelings come. I put those feelings down when I get enthused about some of our survival programs and I see the people's joy. I know too that that joy, when we accomplish it, carries the seeds of reaction. That's

what we have to watch, that everytime we make a new level or make new gains, that we always run the risk that we'll try to hold it there, and that's what reaction is about. Then a new force will come and question us, and we will be the reactionaries."

During its first five years of existence, the Black Panther Party was defined to the media public of America by people like J. Edgar Hoover, who in 1968 declared that the Panthers were the number one threat to the internal security of the nation, and then set out to devastate them in a series of sudden raids. Hoover never undertook to define Newton as anything more than the leader of a bunch of black communists, nor, for that matter, was Newton seen as much more than a one-dimensional prisoner with radical and even bizarre politics during his nationally-publicized trial in 1968. The Panthers emerged through the press in those days as a group of armed blacks with militant attitudes and loaded guns—something only slightly more sophisticated than a street gang. The description of policemen as "pigs" entered American slang direct from the Panthers. "Right on" went from a curious-sounding assent at Panther press conferences to a gimmick for television commercials. Always lost, always skipped somehow or summarized for lack of space was the Panther ten-point program and platform—both part of a calculated strategy for survival in ghetto America and eventual revolution.

There was one best understood image of Huey Newton at that time which appeared everywhere in posters and buttons—Newton seated rigidly in the wicker chair of African kings, his beret drawn down over one eye, one hand gripping a shotgun and the other a spear.

It was a photo posed by then-Panther Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver. Newton disliked it and even before he left prison ordered it discontinued.

The seething image of black revenge stuck, however, portraying Newton as an angry successor to Malcolm X—the street gang leader come to politics.

And in a way, that was true too. Newton and the Panthers learned from Malcolm, just as they learned from Martin Luther King Jr. and from Franz Fanon. But the primary text was always in the streets, and what made Newton and the Panthers different from other black organizations of the time was that the theory put to practice always remained in the streets. The Panthers offered no means of escape from the system, they demanded people confront it.

## Peeling the Onion

Newton was born in Monroe, Louisiana, one of seven children of a struggling sharecropper and part-time Baptist preacher. Huey's light caramel skin bore evidence of an almost-forgotten Jewish ancestor. Walter Newton named his newest son in honor of Huey Long, the bitterly hated yet wildly loved governor of Louisiana. When Huey was still a child, the Newtons moved north to the "promised land."

Newton has always found it difficult to talk about himself, much less about his family. When he does, it is only to provide another bit of understanding—to peel back another layer in discovering how he personally came to the awareness he has today.

"My life experience, the place I'm from, the make up of my family," he explained. "Louisiana and then coming north to the promised land that wasn't



The Panthers' old look, before Huey was locked up: black leather, spit polish, a program everybody ignored. Below: brother Melvin, whom highschool senior Huey asked for reading lessons

a promised land. My father working three jobs all his life—a very responsible citizen, you know? And all those things he thought he was working for fading and he not understanding until this late date. My mother and my father have been married 50 years, and he's just started to understand that something's wrong with the system. He accepted the whole thing, you see. Yet this industrious kind of engagement didn't bring him the success, according to American terms, that he wanted. I was probably affected by this very much. In fact, I know I was. I would try to find reasons why, and I would become angry when I was young and then later on I would understand and become less angry and more determined in making a new kind of order.

"I guess the basis of the anger was that he would put so much into just trying to provide, you see? His success would be being able to survive three jobs. All of his life he wanted this—all his life he was unable to get this. I thought it was unfair then, and I think it's unfair now. The paying of the bills. I was always connected to that in my family. Going around, you know, my father didn't trust check books, he wanted them to stamp the receipt book. So he worked all the time and one of my sisters or brothers would have to go around with the bills, and then I early learned how much the carrying charges and the interest amounted to. A lot of times we could pay only the interest and no principle and I would wonder, where is the interest going to? And I would go to the people he'd owe and ask them about it. I started to get on an unconscious level—sort of an emotional reaction—the same thing I feel now. Except that after you become conscious of the way things work, you become less emotionally charged and more rational and direct in your dislikes. And then at some point you become less concerned even about your dislikes and more concerned about finding or contributing to the new thing what will come about as more and more people become dissatisfied.

"It was a long time before I realized what really drove me. Many times, years ago, you would ask me—'why you in particular?'—and then it would upset me, but only because I couldn't answer it. It worried me because maybe I wasn't... Maybe I was holding something back. But I can understand it better now, because it's part of me understanding me."

He grew up in the deepening black ghetto of West Oakland, a handsome street kid with large fluid eyes that



could rivet you on the spot and search your mind without threatening you. In school, his grades were bad. He was pushed along in an assembly-line urban school, passed with Ds to get him processed, programmed, and back to the streets.

"It was a good thing to happen really," Newton said. "I didn't get trained by the school system like other kids, and when I did concentrate on learning, my mind was cluttered and locked by the programming of the system."

He was 17 and about to graduate from high school when he asked his older brother, Melvin, to teach him to read.

"He couldn't believe I'd gone all the way through the system and still couldn't read even simple things. He said that, and I got mad, so I just began to teach myself."

He used records at first, picking recordings of Shakespeare and struggling along in the script to pick up the words. "The first book I ever really read was Plato's *Republic*," Newton laughed "and then I had to go over that five times or something."

Despite the twittering doubts of his high school teachers, Newton decided for himself that he was going to college. At the time, Merritt College was a scruffy-looking jumble of buildings just behind a freeway in West Oakland. In its own way it was segregated as black colleges in the South. Maybe its biggest advantage was the easy accessibility of a social field laboratory all around it

in the streets and nearby pool halls, taverns and liquor stores. It was the times as much as anything else that brought Newton into politics. The first years of the Sixties were already pulsing with social dissent, non-violent protest and civil disobedience. Newton associated himself first with the Muslims and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee and eventually the Afro-American Association at Merritt, run by an intellectually-aggressive young man named Don Warden. But by 1965, Newton was becoming frustrated with the academic nature of the organization.

"It was a very intellectual black movement at the time," he remembered. "I always had one foot in the school and one still in the community, on the block in the so-called rough sections of Berkeley and Oakland along Sacramento Avenue and down by Ashby. Guys hang around on the corner, in pool halls and so forth, and as soon as I got out of class, I would go over there. In these groups I was in, the organization would always talk about the people on the streets and the more militant they got or the more conscious they got, the more the organizations would talk about how it's necessary to really be viable—to really relate to the community. But they were even afraid to go down there. It was sort of hypocritical, not in a mean way, because a lot of guys from college were from different—bourgeois—backgrounds. Even me. They wouldn't let me join RAM [Revolutionary Action Movement] at the time because they said I was surely a member of the bourgeoisie." Newton laughed. "The guy who said it had a father who was a dentist and an uncle who was a medical doctor. I always tried to tell them my father was a sharecropper, but they never believed it."

Bobby Seale wrote later that at that time he too had become disillusioned with the "cultural nationalism" of RAM and was searching for new partners. He and Newton shared an affinity with the problems of the streets. Seale, and Newton, along with three others who never became Panthers, formed the Soul Students Advisory Council at Merritt. But within a year, both Newton and Seale had resigned after a rift over whether that group could succeed in taking itself out of intangible discussions into serious work in the streets. Newton had already concluded from his readings of Malcolm X and other revolutionaries that it was time for black men to arm themselves in self defense. The Black Panther Party for Self Defense was formed by Newton and Seale

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