

Panther in Training

I stepped from the bus after the two-hour trip from Danville, the smell of diesel fumes and exhaust filling my nostrils, the garment bag with the shotgun slung over my shoulder. After retrieving my small suitcase, I emerged from the bus station overhang into the sun.

No one was there to meet me. The Panthers' phone line was still disconnected, so they did not know the time of my arrival. And, in any case, they had felt that the police might monitor any case, they had felt that the police might monitor any call, and hence might be there to intercept me, a teenager with a concealed weapon. As trepidation tried to peel away at my resolve, I embarked on the two-mile trek to the Panther apartment with a sense of mission borne of adolescent idealism.

My walk from the bus station took me through downtown Winston-Salem, where I looked up at the tall buildings like a tourist. Passing through part of the industrial section, with the gigantic smokestack of the R.J. Reynolds factory, my now-politicized mind began to think of the modern-day slaves who toiled there, processing the legal drug of tobacco. It was Sunday, and the streets were mostly deserted, which suited my idea of myself as a lone soldier; a spy or intelligence agent of some sort, resigned to an isolated life of secrecy for the cause. But I could not help but wonder—and fear—if the FBI had me under surveillance.

My arrival at the Panther pad interrupted their afternoon P.E. class, and I was greeted as if I were a young hero of the revolution, a guerrilla who had crossed a frontier. The entire membership of the North Carolina chapter was there, which included not only the Winston-Salem branch but those who staffed the Party's outpost in the nearby city of High Point, and three community workers all the way from Wilmington, as well.

The fifteen members crowded into the front room of the three-room apartment they called a "shotgun shack." (I was so green I'd never heard the term before my visits to Winston-Salem, hadn't known the description came from the joke. "You can fire a shotgun blast through the front door and it will go straight out the back.") As I took a place in the corner, sitting on the rough hardwood floor (since the few places on the old couch and all of the worn vinyl and metal kitchen chairs were taken). I decided that there was a dark humor involved here, in light of the shotguns in evidence at every window.

The coordinator of the chapter, Larry Little, was taking the group through the catechism of the Ten Point Platform and Program, which all new members were required to learn and be able to recite. “Point number one!” he demanded of Papa Doc, the stuttering, semiliterate brother, called upon first with the easiest question, in order to spare him the embarrassment of not knowing the more difficult points.

“We want f-freedom,” Doc said. “We want the power to d-determine the destiny of our black community.” Then he beamed with relief and pride.

“Point number two, Judge!” said Larry.

“We want housing, fit for the shelter of human beings,” Judge said. He was a large man who wore thick, very dark shades because he was half blind, though he was a gifted artist in charge of putting out posters and leaflets as head of the Ministry of Information for the chapter.

Bernard Patterson, a high school dropout I had recruited in Danville, and who had moved down to Winston a few weeks before to help with refurbishing the new headquarters, was called upon next.

“We want an education which teaches us the true nature...of this...” Bernard paused to gather his thoughts, to try to glean some help from memory, as he had a serious reading disability. “That teaches us the true nature of this de-cadent American society,” he plowed on,” and teaches us our true role in society...”

I looked around at the others in the room. A few of them had given up promising academic careers, but most had diverted their lives from a basic struggle to survive to embrace a new kind of vow of poverty, in order to “serve the people, body and soul,” as the Panther motto put it.

I felt most inspired by the poorer comrades, having taken to hear the Panther dictum that the revolution could be fomented by the segment of society Karl Marx had termed the lumpen proletariat. At the same time, they seemed to prize the intellectual—those who, like Party founder Huey Newton, could interpret Marxist philosophy and turn it into a philosophical tool for the liberation of the oppressed. Having grown up a well-mannered son of the black middle class, wherein one never *dared* oppose the established order in a militant fashion, I looked forward to being able to transform my intellect into a source of power.

Nelson Malloy, the co-coordinator, was called on for the next point: “We want freedom for all black men and women held in federal, state, and local jails and prisons. We want trials for all black men and women by a jury of their peers.” This was a point of the I’d especially come to believe in, after reading about the injustices of the legal system George Jackson had outlined in his books. Black men in prison were seen as the most oppressed

of all, and it was believed that they, being the most *lumpen* of the lumpen proletariat, could be organized to come back into the community and be essential to the Revolution.

“Comrade Derrell, point number ten,” Larry bellowed, snapping me out of my reverie.

“We want land, bread, clothing, housing, truth,” I said, then went on to recite the preamble of the U.S. Constitution that ended the Panther Platform and Program. “When in the course of human events...government evinces a design for despotism...it becomes necessary to dissolve the bonds which hold that nation in subjugation...it is their right, it is their *duty* to dissolve such a government...” Still patriotic from my Boy Scout days, I felt that I was following in the historical footsteps of the revolutionaries who had formed the nation, and that I was now working to bring the nation back to its founding ideals, in the company of these brothers and sisters.

The P.E. class then dealt with the most recent article by our revered leader, Huey P. Newton, whose title at the time was Chief Theoretician and Servant of the People. (For short, comrades affectionately called him the Servant.) His piece dealt with the movie *Sweet Sweetback’s BaadAsssss Song*, a groundbreaking film by Melvin Van Peebles, who would later be called the father of modern black cinema for his theretofore unheard-of depiction of a black man battling racist white policemen. The intersection of politics and popular film, in order to combat the demeaning images of blacks on screen at that time, was inspiring, as I was beginning to envision myself as a writer who might reach people with a popular message of revolution.

After the P.E. class there was the customary Sunday dinner of fried chicken. It was the homecoming meal at my father’s country church, and I loved the bonhomie of family and togetherness, loved the attention I received as the newest and youngest member—as well as the way some of the comrade sisters seemed to be sizing me up for the communal bedding situations. There were several bottles of Thunderbird available. Laced with grapefruit juice it was used to make a concoction called Bitter Dog, said to be chosen drink of Lil’ Bobby Hutton. (He was the Party’s first martyr, a sixteen-year-old killed in a shoot-out with police in Oakland in 1969.) The drink added to my sense of the moment, though I could handle only a few swallows.

Rapping with the brothers was thrilling, for they talked in such jazzy, urban vernacular. I was still a country boy in many respects, and really wanted to be cool, to take on the devil-may-care attitude that I’d come to believe was the essence of “blackness.” And it was not lost on me that the coolest brothers got the women.

Coon, who had done so much in recruiting me with his visit to my parents, seemed to take me under his wing. When we'd finished eating and drinking, he put his arm around my shoulders, steered me away from the group, and whispered, "Come with me. There's someone I want to introduce you to. Maybe you'll finally get your nuts out of the sand." At Coon's house, I met Charlotte, who was visiting there. After I had a little more wine with her, she and I enjoyed a night of marvelous sex like I'd never known.

Full Party membership had to be earned, so I was considered a Panther in training, or a community worker. Official membership in the party had been closed when Huey Newton was released from prison. He'd been held for three years for the death of an Oakland police officer in 1967, in a shooting incident in which Newton had also been badly wounded. After a nationwide "Free Huey" campaign by black and white radicals nationwide had helped win a reversal of his conviction, he came out to discover that, in addition to the thousand real Party Members, dozens of unofficial chapters had also sprung up, with hundreds of young men and women claiming to be Panthers—many of them creating all sorts of mischief.

My job as community worker began in earnest the day after I arrived. The most pressing task was to liberate the High Point Four—four teens who had been arrested following a shoot-out at the Party's headquarters in High Point some months before. Police had tried to serve an eviction notice during the predawn hours, a practice they'd often used in other cities to provoke a confrontation. A gunfight ensued, and a police officer was seriously wounded, as was Larry Medley, hit by a shotgun slug in the chest.

A rally was planned to take place in a recreational park in High Point, and leaflets had to be mimeographed and distributed, banners and posters prepared. I was assigned to work with Judge, and using my so-called bourgeois skills I helped Jude come up with some rather polished leaflets, posters, and banners.

The July rally was truly inspiring. We gathered some two or three hundred participants, who responded as a chorus with "right on!" to the dynamic rhetoric from speakers who ranged from chapter leader Larry Little to the state leader of the SCLC, along with Mrs. Lee Faye Mack, a Winston-Salem community activist in the mold of Fanie Lou Hamer, and the well-known civil rights lawyer Jerry Paul. I reveled in the moment, remembering how I had journeyed to this park and swimming pool with my church's Sunday school, because there were no such resorts in Virginia open to blacks. Larry Little delivered a powerful speech, declaring that "the power of the

people will free the High Point Four from their repressive incarceration, by *any means necessary*.”

“Right on!” the crowd chanted in response to his incendiary voice, and waved banners and posters emblazoned with large black panthers and FREE THE HIGH POINT FOUR! Meanwhile, I was utilizing new skills to run the public address system. “The power of the people will overcome the man’s technology,” Larry screamed to the assembled. I felt proud to be among this community of black folk, in seeing my people making a stand, and proud of the Party’s role in energizing them. I was at once falling in love with the Party, and more deeply in love with black people.

Following the speakers, there was music, with singing by the Mack family: Lee Faye Mack with her older daughters, Party members Hazel and Clara, and her younger daughters, Bunchy and Ruth. Wearing African headdresses, they represented black womanhood to me. The fifteen-year-old Ruth especially caught my eye, and I resolved to learn more about her at my earliest opportunity.

After the rally, the pressing task was to get the new headquarters renovated, with the goal of opening by the end of the summer so that the breakfast program could begin. I worked with the other comrades to clean up the old house that had been purchased by Mrs. Mack, who was, in a sense, with her standing in the community and position with various poverty programs in the city, the queen mother of the Party. For the first time I enjoyed physical labor, painting and hammering and lending to the communal effort to get the two-story building in shape.

Panther chapters were organized into various ministries, with smaller units called cadres. There was the Ministry of Education which coordinated the P.E. classes and Liberation School (a sort of after-school program for the youth). There was the Ministry of Information to handle “the dissemination of propaganda to the masses.” (The word *propaganda* was explained as not a bad thing, but simply getting one’s view out into the world. “The Oppressor had his propaganda, and we have ours.”) And then there was Distribution, which handled the sale of the Party newspaper. The newspaper was the primary source of income for most chapters, augmented by donations from sympathetic businesses to the Free Breakfast for Schoolchildren and other Survival Programs—the programs that were part of the Party’s new focus on serving the community, so that “we might survive until revolution comes.”

I was assigned to work with Russell, who was head of Distribution. Each week I’d ride with him to the airport to pick up the boxes of papers

shipped from Oakland, and then we'd organize their sale across the state and region. I even went back to Danville on occasion, since our work when I was there had established a market for the paper. These visits also gave me a chance to see my family, let them know I was okay, and maintain my bond with them.

Because there were only the two shotgun-shack apartments for comrades to live in, I usually stayed at the new headquarters with Russell, who was also the chief of security, due to his ROTC training when he attended A&T State University, in Greensboro. We slept on mattresses on the floor of a back room, and someone was always required to be awake "pulling security." Russell was a splendid example of a man at twenty-three, muscular at six-foot-four with a face like a lion cub with a thick, untrimmed mustache. He explained to me the necessity of staying on guard: "The pigs firebombed our last headquarters, and attacked the one in High Point in the middle of the night. That won't happen again.

"Party mandate number one rules that no one can breach the security of our doors,' he said, describing attacks on other headquarters around the country, particularly the infamous predawn attack in Chicago that killed famed Panther leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in December 1969. "If we are attacked by police forces, we are to defend our dwellings with all the firepower at our command," he said, presenting me with an M-1 carbine. I took this role of militant defender to heart, taking the extra magazine he gave me "in case the shooting got hot," and taping it upside-down to the magazine in the carbine's breech, in the fashion I'd seen in war movies.

I felt that I was indeed now part of a war, and I would drill with my weapon as I walked from the back of the building to the front, peering out from the side of makeshift curtains to make sure to police or white vigilantes were lurking in the shadows. Sometimes I'd take the rounds out of the M-1 so that I could dry-fire at imaginary targets.

Russell, being a real military buff, had numerous books about urban guerrilla warfare, and used them to instruct me about the dedication of the communist insurgent. "Check out these writings by Kim Il Sung, the leader of North Korea," he said. "He teaches about the art of *juche*— using what you have to fashion the weapons you need. The North Korean revolutionaries are so dedicated," he added, "that they have vowed to do without sex until they liberate the southern part of their country." He also had me read from "The Mini-manual of the Urban Guerrilla," a South American pamphlet that described, among other things, how to make a mortar out of a shotgun, a broom handle, and a Molotov cocktail.

Russell told me how Huey and other Party leaders had recently visited China and North Korea, and that the Black Panther Party was the vanguard of world revolution by virtue of its position in the belly of the beast—the monolith of U.S. imperialism. The Party also taught that whites and people of color were all brothers and sisters, that the divisions in the world were based upon class, not color, and that color and race were used by the oligarchies—the families who historically owned and controlled most of the wealth of the world—to divide the working classes who actually produced the goods and services.

With Russell's Marxist teachings I became engaged by the concept of worldwide revolution, loving all the history and idealistic philosophy, and loving the words with which the Panther Party defined the world. It gave me a way to understand things like the ongoing war in Vietnam, and how black people had come to be enslaved, how we were still subjugated by the mental bonds ensuing from their enforced cultural and educational ignorance. These ideas fed into my desire to be at the forefront of universal change: We would save the world by organizing the black community to rise up and destroy the racist power structure in America.

“Revolution in our lifetime” was Russell's favorite Party slogan, and the force of arms would one day provide the means for achievement full liberation, he said. More than thirty Panthers have lost their lives,” he said, “and we must all know that someday we, too, might have to make the supreme sacrifice for the people.”

As I dutifully stood watch against nocturnal attack, Russell's words would ring in my mind, and I felt the possibility of death as a constant. But being part of an army of young men and women who were also standing guard against aggression gave me comfort, and I felt the spirit of comrades wounded or slain in such battles during my solitary vigils.

Being on the road with Russell was exciting. We were distributing the truth to the masses, in areas that had never seen black men and women daring to tell the truth regarding oppression. Because our chapter had only one basic vehicle—a run-down Volkswagen van donated by Quakers—Russell and I usually caught the bus to various cities and college campuses in North Carolina, with a box or two of Panther papers in tow. We then hitchhiked back to Winston-Salem, to save the hard-earned quarters we had collected from hawking our papers.

Greensboro was our closest target, while Durham, Raleigh, and Chapel Hill—with the North Carolina Triangle universities of Duke, N.C.

State, and the University of North Carolina——were more favored cities. Often, on weekends when the trips required staying overnight, supporters in the community, or even in the college dormitories, would put us up for the night. It was a beautiful sign of acceptance and trust.

The growing metropolis of Charlotte, North Carolina, seemed to be the most productive place for selling the papers, and I honed my street-corner techniques there. I practiced my quick line as one might the Peter Piper tongue twister in a speech class: “Would you like to buy a Panther paper——learn the real news——only twenty-five cents——help out the Black Panther Party survival programs——get the real news here and now.”

One trip to Charlotte coincided with a parade through town by Richard Nixon. Catching sight of the relatively unprotected President, I imagined his chest in the crosshairs of a telescopic sight. I was thinking of the writings of George Jackson in his second book, *Blood in My Eye*, which he envisioned his younger brother Jonathan taking aim on the President with an antitank weapon. “Why don’t we just declare war on the power structure,” I asked Russell, “and go ahead and show we can kill these people at will?”

I was surprised at Russell’s answer, as he was the chapter’s most militant member. “Look around you, little brother. He’s the fuckin’ President. He’s got all sorts of protection you can’t even see. Don’t you know that the FBI is watching us, even now?”

I looked around and saw only the sidewalks lined with flag-waving supporters of the war, and people just enjoying the sight of a living president. “You’ve got to remember,” Russell said over the din of cheers and the occasional heckle of war protesters, “that a lot of our rhetoric is to inspire folk to believe that resistance *is possible*.”

He paused for moment then, looked around at the scene before us, and evidently decided to bring some semblance of reality to my adolescent mind. “In reality.” He said, “they’ve got a hundred stronger, future warrior class to emerge. And no matter what we say, we have to be ready for years, if not decades of struggle, before the people are ready to rise up against the power structure.”

He then added, “We are like the Irish Republican Army, creating what they call ‘a terrible beauty’ of resistance, for future generations to remember.”

However, Russell’s militancy seemed at odds with the current thrust of the Party, and the emphasis of “serving the people, body and soul” through the survival programs. “Revolution is a process,” Huey Newton wrote after his release from prison, “a process of moving from A to Z. The

people have to be educated and prepared for the struggle ahead.” This reflected the division in the party that had occurred in 1971, when the New York chapter broke away to follow the ultramilitant positions of Eldridge Cleaver. An offshoot of that Party faction, the underground Black Liberation Army, was said to be carrying out armed attacks against police in New York and other places during this time.

Though I considered myself a warrior preparing for such revolutionary conflict, my heart was with the idea of community service through the Party’s survival programs: Free Breakfast for Schoolchildren, Free Food, Free Clothing, Free Health Clinics, and others. I believed that these programs were set in an ideal not unlike the Christian ethos of my youth, though I was now embracing a new religiosity: that of socialist ideology, which Panther doctrine taught was rooted in the communal spirit of early African civilization.

I related the militancy of bringing about radical change through force in my “sermon” in church, which spoke of how Christ used force to expel the moneylenders from the temple. The Party was attempting to do the same thing, on a broader scale; expel the capitalist oligarchy from control over the lives of the masses. And while I had come to believe that the idea of God was used to keep the people in subjugation, by having them dream of a pie in the sky by and by, I still felt that the ideals of Christian justice were enduring. They needed only to be related to the secular world to bring about a communal utopia on earth, to ring “All Power to the People” —the Party’s chief slogan, repeated as a salutation whenever members met, as well as replacement for *goodbye* at every departure.

Our new headquarters was slated to open with a grand celebration. I helped Judge put out leaflets and posters welcoming folk to attend the opening. The day before, we put the last touches on a large sign in front of the new office, painted in the Panther colors of powder blue and black, as was the building. A large panther was emblazoned on the sign, along with the motto SERVING THE PEOPLE, BODY AND SOUL. The finishing touch was a new layer of cement for sidewalk leading to the new office, and Judge gave me the honor of inscribing, in the fresh cement, three lines taken from the “Warrior’s Oath” of Panther folklore:

If ever I break my stride
Or falter at my comrade’s side...

THIS OATH WILL SURELY KILL ME!

The next day, the grand opening of the office was a tremendous success, attended by more than five hundred people—evidence of the popularity of work done by the Party at previous offices. As part of our food program, everyone received a free bag of groceries. The office was replete with posters: Huey Newton sitting in an African wicker chair with a spear in one hand and a shotgun in the other; Chairman Bobby Seale speaking to a throng of folk in Chicago as part of the Days of Rage against the Vietnam War; and the most popular poster of all, Angela Davis, a hero of the Movement in general, and the Party in particular, for the BPP had been instrumental in galvanizing the support that had recently won her freedom. In the middle of the hallway was a poster of Fred Hampton, the Panther lead and martyr who was slain in a midnight raid by Chicago police in 1969, emblazoned with the words HE CAME FROM THE MOUNTAINTOP, DOWN TO THE VALLEY. I really related to this idea, for it spoke to how Fred had come from a middle-class family like mine, yet he'd chosen to throw in his lot with the masses. And then there was the poster of George Jackson, my beloved hero.

After the crowd had gone, we gathered for a celebratory Sunday dinner. With our group being so large, a few sat in the kitchen where the former schoolteacher, Mary, stood at the stove, frying the rest of the chicken. Others of us were in the hallway, including the tall, fiery Larry; Nelson, the diminutive organizer with the supersmooth manner; and Hazel, the groups secretary, who was several months pregnant at the time. We were high on the events of the day, laughing and joking (“This chicken will never fly again,” said Nelson, after reducing the bird on his paper plate to mere bones), and I reveled in the earthy humor. I was given compliments for my contributions to the information surrounding the event, which was credited with our having had such a large turnout. “Just give the job to Can-Do-Derrell,” Hazel said, “and you can be sure it will get done.”

Then the discussion turned to George Jackson and his international bestseller, *Soledad Brother*. Given an interminable sentence of one-year-to-life for robbery of a California gas station when he was seventeen, he was at that time under indictment for the murder of three militants by guards at Soledad Prison. Jackson had just been named Field Marshal of the Party by Huey Newton. “Comrade George is truly the greatest writer of us all,” said Nelson, a comrade I'd become especially close to, as he always found time to talk to me, like an older brother of sorts. He was echoing what Newton had written about Jackson in his endorsement of his book.

Somehow, perhaps due to the Bitter Dog we were drinking along with our dinner, I had the nerve to comment, "Well you got to look at all that time he has to read and study while in prison. If I had all of that time to write, I probably would become a great writer, too."

They looked at me with some astonishment, that I would display such arrogance as to even *insinuate* that I could become a writer on the level of the great George Jackson. And while most comrades there would forget about that moment, seeing the remark as merely adolescent hubris, others would one day recall the day and tell me that I had been foreshadowing my future, as desire.

Weeks later on August 21, the chapter received word: George Jackson had been shot and killed by guards at San Quentin Prison during a purported escape attempt. Three inmates and three guards were also slain.

We were all devastated by the news, and none more than I. In the immediate aftermath of his death, a grand memorial service, attended by a thousand people, was held in Oakland. Then a week later prisoners at Attica State Prison in upstate New York staged rebellion, taking several guards hostage, largely in response to the killing of George Jackson. Identified with these men, so I was crushed to learn on September 13 that New York State police had quashed the rebellion, and that thirty-one inmates and guards had lost their lives.

The next day, when news that the guards and prisoners had been killed by gunfire from the state troopers, I said to my comrades, "Their deaths will not be in vain." A few days later we received a package of posters with our weekly shipment of papers. I looked at the visage of my smiling hero, and, fighting back tears of sadness and rage, I set off alone to tack up the posters all around Winston-Salem. They proclaimed **GEORGE JACKSON LIVES!**

I felt compelled to make sure that he would, indeed, continue to live. I would carry on Jackson's work as a writer, and soon after I began sending articles to the Black Panther Party newspaper in Oakland. I would now become the writer George could no longer be.