

DEMOCRAZY

During the fall of 1969, I was hanging out a lot at Loop City College, later renamed Harold Washington for Chicago's first black mayor.

I wasn't auditing classes at Loop. I was there because that's where the Panthers held a lot of meetings: planning sessions for walkouts, boycotts, rallies, and assorted other movement work, organized by, among others, the matchless Fred Hampton.

Fred had been evincing some serious leadership skills for years by the time I met him, as head of Maywood's NAACP Youth Council and founder and chairman of Black Panther Party's Illinois chapter, headquartered on Chicago's South Side.

Setting up food pantries and a health clinic, organizing recreational programs for children and political education classes (for all comers), negotiating truces between gangs working to transform thugs into heroes—Fred delivered so much more than rhetoric.

I remember wondering if Fred ever had a good belly laugh, ever cut up and clowned around. For all I know, perhaps he did in private. But whenever I saw him, he was in “movement mode.” He was like an army sergeant. Not that I ever saw him be cruel to anyone. He might put a friendly arm around your shoulder by way of encouragement—“Hello, Sister Chaka”—but he wasn't about a lot of chit-chat. Fred was all about “the struggle.”

And I was so down with BPP Ten-Point Program back then: “We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black Community....We want full employment for our people.... We want decent housing, fit for the shelter of human beings....We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American Society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society....We want an immediate end to police brutality and murder of black people.”

It all sounded so righteous, so strong and so what-the-hell-have-we-got-to-lose! It was half-past time for us to be bold, I believed.

Those were desperate, angry times. We had lived through years of civil-rights-movement fatalities, with the slayings of Evers, Malcolm, and King at the tope of the litany. By the late 1960s, many of us, especially those

of us living Up South, had serious doubts that we would overcome the police brutality and all the other nigger treatment by moral suasion.

Even though I was only two when one of Chicago's native sons was brutalized in Money, Mississippi, I mourned Emmett Till. His murder was one of those never-forget incidents. I don't know too many black people of my generation who, as children, weren't told what had happened to Emmett and who weren't shown that gruesome photo that first appeared in *Jet*. He was a teenager when they did that to him. As a teenager, I wasn't convinced the same shit couldn't happen to me or Bonnie, or one of our friends. And so there I was selling *The Black Panther* on street corners. I was also heading up a free-breakfast program for children in an old South Side church. And one day I was in possession of a gun.

It wasn't a Panther's gun. It belonged to a security guard at Loop, where some BPP comrades and I had gone to watch (for the millionth time) Potecorvo's *Battle of Algiers*—getting schooled on another people's fight to throw off colonial rule. It was an “unauthorized” activity in a classroom that someone had found empty.

We didn't get to the end of the film because suddenly the lights came on, and in strode Mr. Guard, everything coming out of his mouth all wrong, all obnoxious, barking at us to “Get out!”

He got jumped for his troubles. In the ruckus, I ended up with his gun: a .38 long-nosed Colt.

I kept that gun for months, toying with the idea of doing something radical, daring myself to—*Chaka, this is your chance to step up to bat!* Offing a pig perhaps? Some random whitey? I even did a little target practice at a rifle range.

I told no one I had the gun, not even Bonnie. But my secret slowly made me sick to my stomach. I wondered if I was getting an ulcer. And was I violating one of the BPP's Three Main Rules of Discipline: “Turn in everything captured from the attacking enemy”?

Is that security guard the enemy?

I began to wonder what offing a pig would accomplish. I flashed back to summers before, to the days of flames, the riots. Violence, violence, violence, in Newark, Watts, Harlem, Chicago. And there was the chaos and rage of April 1968 after word spread that King had been slain. Then, two months later, Bobby Kennedy was shot. Two months after that, the Chicago air was full of tear gas, mingled with screams, crashing glass, and burning things, as antiwar warriors and cops went at it during Daley's Freudian slip: “The policeman isn't there to create disorder; the policemen is there to preserve disorder.”

Violence. Nonviolence led to violence. Violence led to violence. I was sick of violence.

All the clenched fists, rallies, speeches, marches, protests—I couldn't say that nothing had changed, but I was starting to have my doubts that the BPP approach could maintain. I started to see that “The Power,” “The Man” grew strong on our anger, on chaos, on divisions—black/white, men/women, old/young. What could my one gun do against that?

“You can kill a revolutionary, but you cannot kill a revolution” was one of Fred's most famous sayings. By late 1969, I was not such a true believer. I realized, too, I wasn't being true to myself. Yeah, a lot of white folks pissed me off, but I wasn't really anti-white. I loved Connie. I had white friends while I was with the BPP. The idea that being pro-black equals being anti-white did not compute for me.

I was thinking that maybe I just needed to finish high school and figure out what to do with my life. As for the gun, I hurled that sucker into the University of Chicago's Botany Pond. Immediately, I felt free.

Not long after that, on December 4, 1969, I got a call from a BPP comrade: Fred Hampton was dead.

Suspecting the Panthers had some big-ass stash of weapons, a crowd of cops had descended on Hampton's apartment. When they knocked on the door, Panthers immediately started shooting—or so went the official version of events. I didn't buy it! Nobody I knew bought it, including Aunt Barbara.

She had been decorating her door when she heard the news. Life so many of us, she sped over to 2337 West Monroe, to stare in absolute horror at the bullet-riddled place cordoned off by yellow crime-scene tape. WE stood in the bitter cold, in shock and disbelief. I think I cried most of that day, and I kept thinking of the day Fred came to check out my breakfast program with about eight other Panthers, all in uniform—black leather jackets, black berets, black everything. How proud I felt when, without spending a whole lot of words, he let me know I had passed inspection.

When Aunt Barbara returned home from staring at the scene of the shooting, she yanked Santa Claus from her front door, removed all the Christmas decorations from inside her home, and decided she would never again merry up her place for the holidays or send out Christmas cards.

That bleak December, Aunt Barbara was among the hundreds who wrote letters—to the mayor, to the governor, to the newspapers—and who spoke out on local television and radio shows. “Some justice has to be done,” she proclaimed, while the authorities stuck to their script, until

ballistics evidence eventually proved it bogus.

“Execution”...”assassination,” some called it then, some call it still.

William O’Neal, Fred’s bodyguard and chief of security, a car thief—turned—FBI informant, had provided the cops with the floor plan and slipped Fred a sedative. So Fred was out cold when the cops raided his home a little after 4 A.M., shooting up the place. Twenty-two-year-old Mark Clark dead from a shot to the chest. Twenty-one-year-old Fred, from four shots to the head.

Among the wounded, Fred’s wife, who was eight months pregnant with their son. Some one hundred shots were fired in all. Only one came from a Panther’s gun.

I was among the five thousand at the services, with Ralph Abernathy among the mourners, when Jesse Jackson said, “When Fred was shot in Chicago, black people in particular, and decent people in general, bled everywhere.”

My brother was with me, and maybe he shouldn’t have been. Mark was just nine and didn’t understand. Then again, neither did I.

To this day, I remember looking into the casket at the sickening sight of Fred’s lifeless face.

Outside, speakers blared Diana Ross and Supremes’ big hit of the year, “Someday We’ll Be Together.” Nothing made sense to me, except that my days as a radical were over. I didn’t put it past the cops to do to me what they’d done to Fred. Yeah, I was shaken up, to put it mildly. I was also thinking I wasn’t ready to die.

I was gong to try hard to get out of high school and figure out how to get into the Art Institute. In the meantime, I threw myself into the one thing I knew I could do that would earn me a little change.