

BREAKFAST, AND THE BLACK PANTHERS PARTY PAYS

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It was late fall of 1968, and I was at my grandmother's Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) apartment on the city's West Side. The cold autumn winds howled through the window panes and into her kitchen. She stood at the stove, preparing breakfast at five o'clock in the morning, near dawn, before she left for work. I was ten years old, a slender kid with caramel brown skin and kinky black hair that she was always reminding me to brush one more time. As we often did, I read the newspaper while she prepared the day's lunch and assigned me chores for the day.

"Remember to sweep the hallway," she instructed.

"But it's outside the apartment!" I commented. It was more of a spoken thought than a protest.

"You use those stairs every day, so you can help keep them clean," she observed, and turned to give me a whole apple that she had sliced.

As I munched on the fruit and scanned the paper, my eyes caught a picture of two young men passing bowls to kids no older than myself. "Black Panther Party launches breakfast program for youth," the caption read. It went on to say that under Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, several new programs would be started to enhance life in the community. At ten years old, I knew that there were plenty of kids who didn't get enough

to eat each day. Heck, I would occasionally be one of them if my grandmother was not around to help my young mother and her just-turned-twenty son, my father. But I still asked her why these guys felt the need to do something like this. Feeding so many of other people's children? She replied that it was because so many children had no one at home to get them breakfast, and no one to ask for help for them.

I read the article out loud and it said many words I didn't understand, like "radicals," "agitators," and "political novices." But I did understand when the reporter said that the Black Panther Party was considered dangerous by the US government and was under investigation by various federal, state, and local law enforcement groups, including the Chicago Police Department. Just those words alone brought a chill to me. I often saw how the police would treat young black men they met on the streets. I was not permitted to even leave the front of our porch, for fear of what would they would do to a youngster they caught alone and deemed "too uppity." I slid out of my chair and moved closer to my grandmother, who looked down at me, a bit puzzled since I was not known as an overly affectionate child. She rubbed my head and said that they were doing what the Lord had planned for them to do, and no one could stop that.

I looked again at the two young men in the foreground of the picture. They appeared to be in their late teens or early twenties, not much different than my father's younger brothers who gave me rides on their motorcycles, taught me to shoot free throws on the basketball court, or just made me laugh about life at a time when, for many people in our neighborhood, life didn't seem very fun at all. Of course, Fred Hampton had an Afro

hairstyle that was all the rage at that time, but my hair never seemed to grow as long. The kids in the background were smiling and crowding next to each other as they received the food, and trying to get in the picture without being obvious, which of course they were anyway. The picture showed the community's youth. Its future. I guessed the Black Panthers were just trying to help. That couldn't be a bad thing, could it? The thought lingered as I turned the page to the funnies.