

CARTON 8:21

STRONG IN THE STRUGGLE

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CHAPTER ~~ELEVEN~~: Grace in My Life (ver 1, 7/6/99)

(Sources: 10/27/95; 7/5/99 interview material, plus info in Grace Oliver Brown file folder)

(ca 1949?)

In 1973 I met the person who would mean the most to me for the next twelve or thirteen years. I first met Grace Oliver at the Fairmont Hotel. She was working there as a room cleaner. ^{used to meet} We met in the cafeteria ^{talk} ~~one day and started talking~~. We talked about the work at the hotel, the labor movement. I liked her looks and she seemed to be very intelligent. She was very concerned about trade union activity. She was a member of Local 283, the room cleaners union. I didn't know if she had ever carried the ball for the union but she understood what it was about. We talked a few times and she invited me to come over to her house. Grace used to live on Sharon Street. I was living at 2502 Third Street. She seemed to be a very good woman, and we got into a relationship

Every Christmas Ben Swig, the old man himself, the owner of the Fairmont Hotel, would give a big party at the Fairmont, and we went to it. Grace liked to dance. Not me. I tried to dance but she was doing the Jerk or something. Even Mr. Swig was clapping. She had on a black dance and she looked sharp, brother!

Grace was born in Shreveport, Louisiana but her family came to San Francisco and she grew up here. She had six children -- two girls -- Ruby and Gloria -- and four boys -- Larry, Jerry, Alfred and Luke, Jr. The youngest was still in school. She was separated from her husband, Luke, and later she got divorced. I seen him a couple of times when he came by the house. I helped her with the children. They wasn't no angels, but they respected the way I

treated them and the way I carried myself. She was honest, she made them respect me. I was buying food and helping to pay the rent.

When we got married on January 21, 1976, Grace moved in with me on Third Street. By then the children was on their own. They would come visit on holidays and Grace would prepare a big dinner. Larry was married and he would come and bring his children. Ruby had got married and Gloria was living with her aunt. Like wasn't there and Alfred was locked up. Him and Luke was in trouble a lot.

When Grace and I met this was during the time that Terry Francois was the president of the chapter here of the NAACP. She told me that one time him and Ben Swig was going around asking the room cleaners how they liked the job. That's when Francois call himself fighting discrimination in the hotels. Quite naturally, she wasn't gonna bad mouth the job in front of Swig. She said, yeah, she liked the job, she didn't bad mouth it. But they did have some trouble with racism, and I was telling her that they could do better.

Before I got to know Grace well I remember there was a lady worked there in the linen room named Mrs. Brown. She was a room cleaner, and I was telling her they should have black inspectors. At that time I was on the Local Joint Board for the hotel workers unions up on Market Street. I raised the question in the Joint Board about how if they discharged a room cleaner they didn't have no follow up. The business agent wouldn't take up the case to get them reinstated. I was telling them about that, that there should be a change. To get back to Mrs. Brown and I and the black inspectors, she called Bert, the head of Local 283. During that period you had

separate locals for different hotel workers. The room cleaners, cooks, waiters, waitresses and bartenders was in different locals. We wanted the black room cleaners to be able to advance to inspector. This was like the same thing I had fought for in the South, to upgrade the workers on the docks. When you have an opening it should be open to anyone to apply and upgrade. I told Mrs. Brown to threaten to march on the local if they didn't demand that they put on black inspectors. Bert called Mrs. Bennett, the head housekeeper at the Fairmount, and got them to hire black inspectors 'cause he didn't want the room cleaners marching on the local. Mrs. Brown and I was talking about the march sitting in the cafeteria. They think we was drinking coffee and we was organizing!

Grace got involved in union activities after she left the Fairmont and went to work at the Mark Hopkins Hotel. In the cafeteria the room cleaners was being served precooked food that was left over from the restaurant, and they had to pay for it. I told her that wasn't right. The workers should get the food for free or bring their own. Grace discussed this with her fellow workers and they decided to boycott the ^{Cafeteria} ~~precooked food~~ to protest. She organized them to bring their own lunch from home in a brown bag. The negotiations took a while but finally all the hotels agreed that the room cleaners could eat free in the cafeteria after they had worked so many hours. I give Grace the ball and she run with it. She had the consciousness to become an activist; all she needed was a little guidance in the right direction. If somebody got a little spark and you develop it they will grow. We learned that through the struggle in the trade union movement.

While this struggle was going on the manager of the hotel tried to discharge Grace two, three times, said she was drunk on the job and falling out. The bosses will try to pull anything, and they'll get away with it if you ain't got the strength to fight back. Grace went to the union. The union had a meeting of the grievance committee and Joe ^{Belardi} ~~Pilatti~~, who was head of the local joint board, went and fought for her himself. I knew Joe ^{Belardi} ~~Pilatti~~. He was born in the same town as my mother, Bolton, Mississippi. He got Grace's job reinstated.

They kept on harassing her at the Mark Hopkins Hotel. One day they discharged her again. Grace did drink, but not so much as to be falling out on no job. Grace got a statement from her doctor saying that she wasn't drunk but that she was suffering with seizures and that she was taking a medication called ~~dolantin~~ ^{Dilantin}. They called her at home and told her she was reinstated and to come back to work. But they continued harassing her. She finally decided that she would quit because she was tired of being harassed.

For a time Grace worked with other women in an organization called the Committee For Jobs. The Committee initiated a struggle for jobs for women on the waterfront. They faced a barrier of male supremacist harassment without much support, but they continued to sit in the hiring hall and to speak out. The Committee didn't really get off the ground, and only later did this struggle gain the visibility and support to break through.

Later she got a job at a small hotel on Turk Street. She worked there close to five or six months. The hotel owner sold out. He had only two black room cleaners there, one of whom was Grace. He

Dilantin used to treat seizures
in brain cancer patients

called the two into the office to give them two weeks' notice and a recommendation and two weeks' pay.

I suggested to Grace that she should get on disability because she was ill. She was still having seizures. She would never tell me what exactly was the problem because she said she didn't want to worry me, but it worried me more that she wouldn't tell me. She stopped drinking but she didn't get any better. I took her to the Social Security Office on Mission Street to apply for disability and social security. She started receiving social security on September 13, 1982, and I was named payee so she wouldn't have to go out to cash the check.

During the time that Grace and I was together I was involved with the Communist Party and the AD NIP party. I was interested in any organization I thought could help black folks. Grace wasn't too interested in the AD NIP party. I think she attended a couple of meetings with me, but that was about all. She didn't have any connection with the Communist Party except what she knew about it from me. She wasn't against the Party and she didn't oppose me being involved with it. Grace would go along with some of the issues, like fighting racism and and working on the job situation. We used to go to the People's World fundraising event every year. But I think her attitude to the party came out one day when I told her the FBI seemed to not be bothering the Party anymore and she said, "Well, that's because you all ain't doing nothing!"

Although she wasn't well Grace still did work in the community. I had to raise hell to get a polling place put in Dog Patch at the bottom of Potrero Hill so old people wouldn't have to

climb up the hill to vote. We worked together on that. Grace worked on registering people to vote, and she worked at the polls. Meantime, I was learning and she was learning; we was learning to work together around issues.

Grace wasn't no Harriet Tubman, but she did the best she could, and I respected and loved her for that. We could work together and she gave me inspiration to move forward. I had faith in her, I had confidence in her, I could trust her. If she was living today she would still be out there.

The only thing was that her drinking was pretty bad sometimes, but we worked on that -- and she finally did stop, two years or so before she died. But she couldn't stop smoking. I used to buy her three, four cartons of cigarets a month. She said she just couldn't stop it.

Towards the end we had a fire at the apartment building where we was living on Third Street. The fire broke ^{out} early one morning. Grace was sleeping in her son's apartment, Number 3, because I had a big Belgian sheph^erd that she was allergⁱc to. A lady passing by saw the fire and warn^ed people. Grace was sick, but she got up out of bed and went into the hallway which was in total darkness. Two other tenants saw her going the wrong way toward the fire and they took her outside of the building. The firemen came and put the fire out before it did too much damage.

The fire started on the back porch. That made me suspicious, because a fire had started there once before. We believed maybe the landlord had started the fire. So I started staying up and watching, and I got a couple of the tenants to act as security at night.

On Monday January 13, 1986, I had to attend two meetings. When I got home the lady at the store told me that Grace had passed. The ambulance came and got her that morning and took her to General Hospital. She had went there once before to get operated on. I didn't have too much faith in General Hospital, but a lot of people said it was a good hospital. I didn't trust those white doctors. Maybe they gave her too much medication. Grace wouldn't tell me what the operation was for; I believed it was cancer.

Grace had started going to the Metropolitan Baptist Church and that's where the funeral service was held. A lot of people attended the service, and I got hundreds of cards and telegrams.

I loved Grace. We had a good relationship, and I had a good sister I could trust. I had a lot of faith in her and she had faith in me. I'm sorry that I couldn't save her.

Grace was very much loved and highly respected in the community. Perhaps one of the finest tributes showing this is demonstrated in the^{is} letter from the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, dated January 23, 1986:

Dear Mr. Brown:

This is to inform you that, upon motion made by Supervisor Doris M. Ward, the Board of Supervisors adjourned its regular meeting of January 21, 1986 out of respect to the memory of the late Grace Oliver Brown.

The members of the Board, with a profound sense of civic and personal loss, are conscious of the many fine qualities of heart and mind which distinguished and brought justifiable appreciation to Mrs. Brown in the community.

The Supervisors realize that mere words can mean so little to you at a time such as this, but they do want you and the members of your family to know of their deep sympathy and heartfelt condolence.

Sincerely,

John L. Taylor

Clerk of the Board