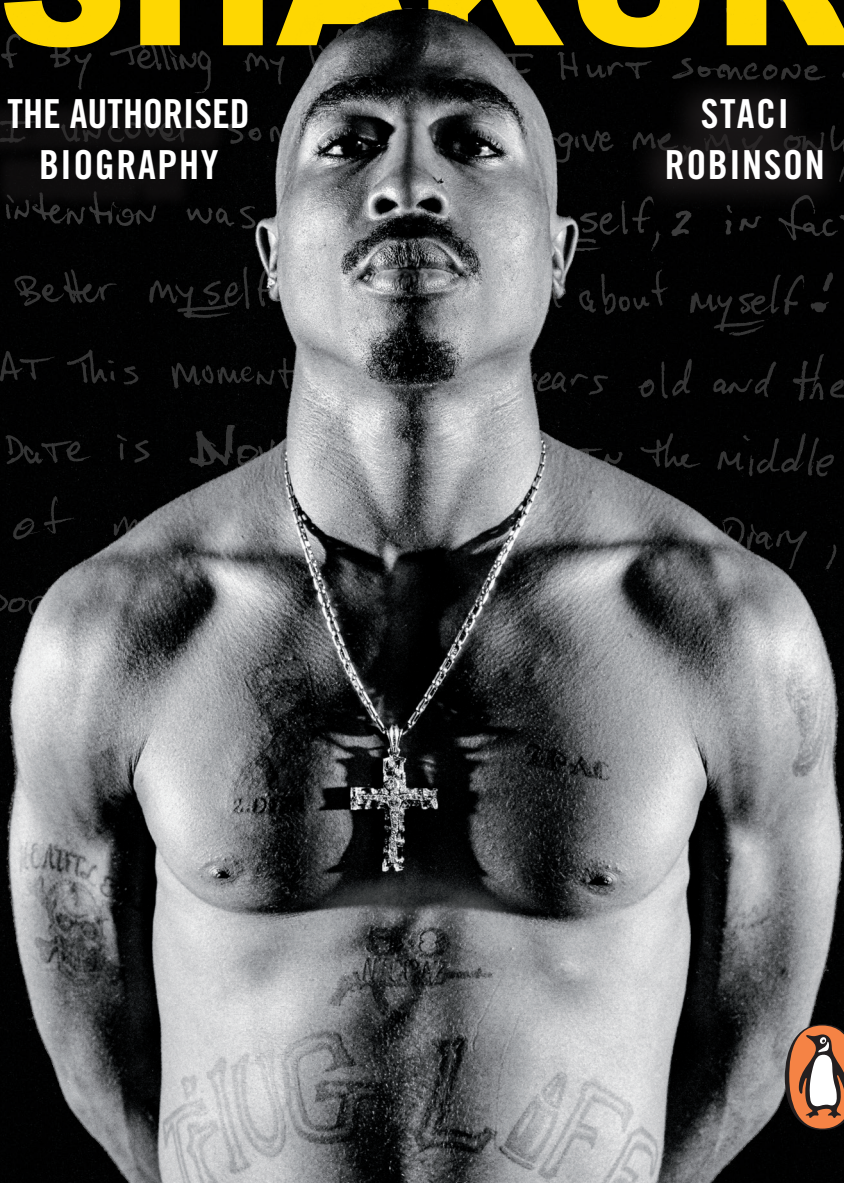


TUPAC SHAKUR

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BIOGRAPHY

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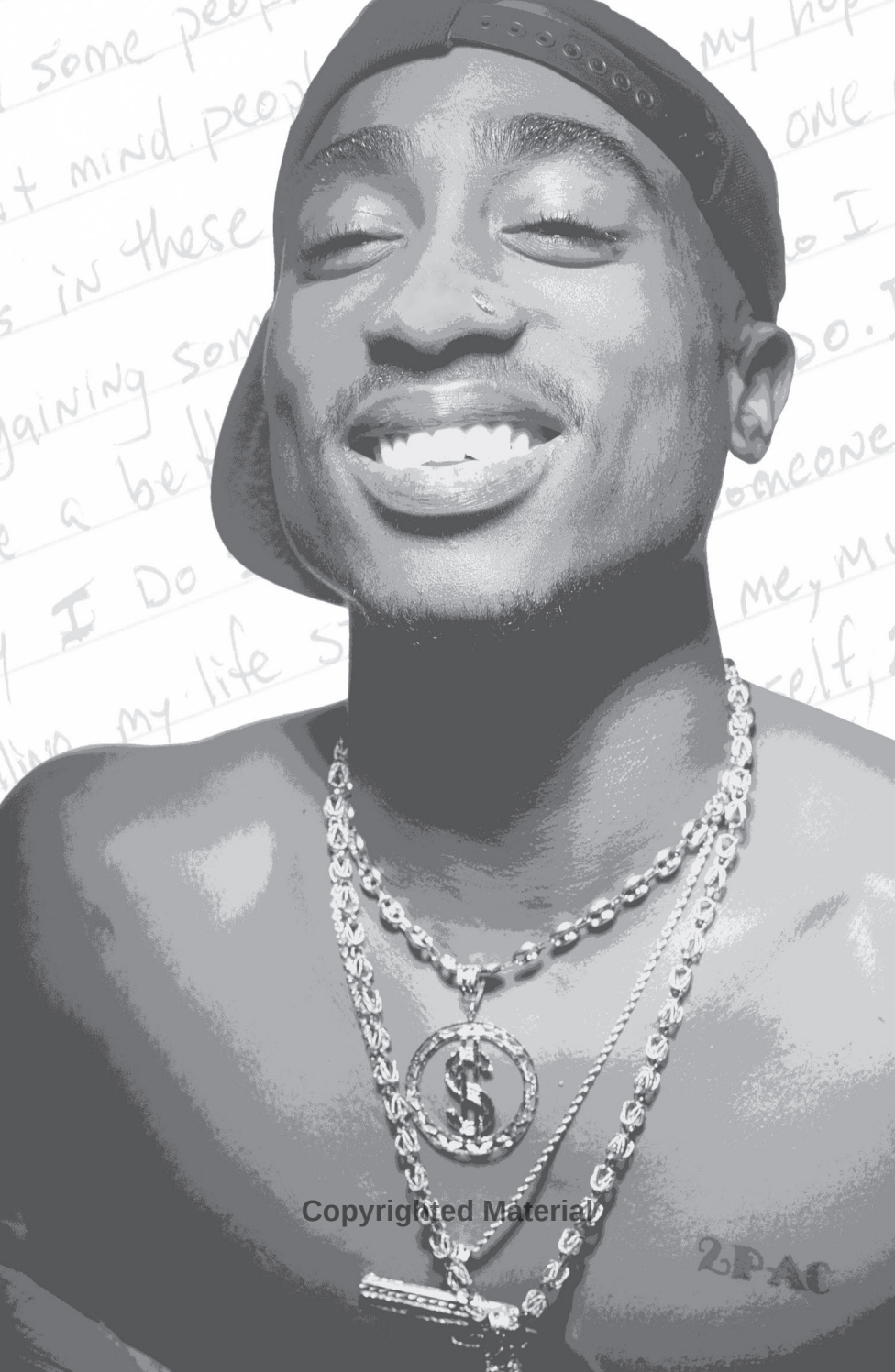
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TUPAC SHAKUR

Staci Robinson is an author and screenwriter.

Her previous projects and collaborations include the compilation *Tupac Remembered: Bearing Witness to a Life and Legacy*, the novel *Interceptions*, the film *The Bounce Back*, and the FX documentary series *Dear Mama: The Saga of Afeni and Tupac Shakur*. Robinson graduated from UCLA with a degree in history. She currently lives with her family in Northern California.

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Black Seed / Grown Up

THE ROSE THAT GREW FROM CONCRETE

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY BY TUPAC A. SHAKUR

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Black Seed - Grown-Up

Black Seed To Black Oak

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INTRODUCTION

Calling This an autobiography may have mislead some people. IT's more of a Diary that I don't mind people reading. There are personal things in these pages and it is my hope that by gaining some insight on my life one may have a better understanding of who I am and why I Do some of the things I DO. If By Telling my life story, I Hurt someone or I uncover some STONES, Forgive me, my only intention was to express myself, & in fact Better myself By telling all about myself! AT This moment I am 18 years old and the Date is ~~NOVEMBER~~ 26, 1989, IN the middle of my life. Anyway, Here it is my Diary, poems and autobiography wrapped in one.

Peace,
Tupac Amaru
Shakur

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Images on previous spread

The table of contents and introduction to Tupac's autobiography that he started writing in 1989 at the age of eighteen.

INTRO

W

hen I met Tupac, he was only seventeen years old. To me, he was just another friend in our social circle. He and I attended the same high school, Tamalpais High, in the small town of Mill Valley in Northern California, and I'd met him during a trip home from college. In that moment, I would never have guessed I'd just been introduced to someone who would go on to be a cultural icon, a global superstar . . . or that he'd become the legend that he'd become—except for of course when he told us. Even at that young age, he was confident, certain that he would leave an imprint on society. I think more confident than anyone else I knew.

Months later, after I'd gone back to college in Los Angeles and he had decided that high school was a waste of his time, he called my roommates and me, all of us fronted. He asked us if he could stay with us for a while and sleep on our couch. "I need to move," he said. At the time, he was anxiously awaiting news of a recording con-

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tract from his manager. “My career isn’t taking off fast enough,” he explained, “and I think I need to be in L.A.” A few days later, he showed up at our door with a backpack and blue notebook.

Each day, my roommates and I would leave for school or work while he stayed in our apartment alone writing feverishly in that notebook. When we returned in the late afternoon, he’d want to share with us what he’d written that day. Picture a teenage Tupac, sittin’ at our dinner table while we ate our Top Ramen and mac ‘n’ cheese, rapping about the young Black male, his lyrics filled with purpose, pleading for change.

Looking back on that moment, I realize now that *I didn’t know* yet. I listened. I heard him. I appreciated his concerns. But *I didn’t know* that I was in the presence of a young man who was on a fearless path to address the inequities in our society in whatever way he could. *I didn’t know* because, although I hate to admit it, I wasn’t ready to talk about the young Black male and the problems they faced as one of the most vulnerable groups in our population. I wanted to talk about the young Black male in my lecture hall that day and how cute he was. At twenty, I was selfish. At seventeen, Tupac was selfless.

When his manager, Leila Steinberg, found a place for him to stay, he thanked us and was on his way. As he walked out the door that evening, with just his backpack and blue notebook, my roommates and I wished him luck. And it seemed as soon as the door closed behind him, he became a household name.

After I graduated from UCLA, I embarked on my own writing career, writing novels. But I still wasn’t yet writing about the young Black male as Tupac was; I was writing about that same young Black male I had met in the lecture hall and the heartbreak that inevitably occurred years later. During the day, I worked in the sports industry as an assistant to professional athletes, the New York Jets number one draft pick Keyshawn Johnson and NBA star Brian Shaw. At night, I’d write.

While at work, I’d often get phone calls from Tupac’s assistant. “Tupac keeps asking when you’re gonna leave the sports industry and come work for him,” she’d say. One afternoon, the request was more specific: “Tupac is **Copyrighted Material** writing a screenplay and wants you to join.” He had started writing screenplays and was building a team, a group of female writers to ensure that his characters’ voices, perspectives, and

tones were authentic. I was excited to be a part of that group. We set a meeting for Tuesday, September 10, 1996.

Three days before that meeting, Tupac was shot in Las Vegas. He fought for his life, but ultimately lost the battle, passing away on September 13. That meeting and countless other plans that he had in place would never happen. I, and the rest of the world, had lost a friend. A brother. An uncle. A nephew. A cousin. An inspiration. A leader. A soldier. And Tupac's mother, Afeni Shakur, the woman who taught him everything he knew, who spoke as vehemently as he did about hope and change, lost her only son.

A few years later, Afeni asked me to write her son's life story. For me, her request was met with a mix of emotions. Of course, I was honored. But as I pondered this huge undertaking, I was also fearful. I hadn't been an A student at Tamalpais High School, nor at UCLA. I'd *never* been an A student, and, in my mind, those were the people who went on to write biographies about leaders and figures like Tupac Amaru Shakur. The biographers I knew of had extensive experience as staff writers and editors at newspapers such as *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, or contributors for magazines like *The New Yorker*. They were often renowned historians or professors at prestigious institutions. But I was a B student. I wrote stories about love and loss, and screenplays in the silly romantic comedy genre. Why was Afeni asking me?

I learned it was because she trusted me. She believed I could tell her son's life story with integrity and with a fair and balanced perspective. The good and the bad. His struggles and successes. The bloopers and the blemishes. She felt the family would be comfortable sitting down with me to tell stories they had never told before. And most important, just as her son had done, she wanted to give me a chance. Tupac and Afeni were always ones to give a chance to people who might not otherwise get one. Many of Afeni's decisions during those years were made with her son's intentions in mind, and I believe that her asking me to write Tupac's life story was no exception.

So, in 1999, I bought an eMachine personal computer and hunkered down in my apartment in Inglewood with a deadline less than a year away. The first **Copyrighted Material** line of Tupac's life from birth to death. I taped the hundred-plus pages to my wall, transforming my apartment into Tupacland. Then I started interviewing.

And typing. And interviewing. And typing. And interviewing some more. I flew cross-country and spent days in the Georgia home Tupac purchased for Afeni. I sat in her kitchen while she cooked fried chicken, one of Tupac's favorite meals, as we spent hours talking about his life. At night, we sat on her porch while she chain-smoked, alternating between Newports and weed, talking about *her* life. The more we talked, the more I understood how similar the two of them were. And just as with Tupac, the more I got to know Afeni, the more my admiration grew.

To research the book, I spent hours on the phone with and in the living rooms of Tupac's family members. I shared endless laughter with cousin Jamala, asking her a thousand questions while she jumped on her bed and blasted her favorite music through our chatter. I recorded childhood stories over Italian pastries at Emporio Rulli in Larkspur and laughed with his friends at Pinky's Pizza in San Rafael while listening to the adventures of Tupac learning to drive. I tracked down his teachers, his colleagues, and those he loved. After eight months, endless hours of interviews, and too many late-night editing sessions to count, I turned in the manuscript.

A few weeks later, I was informed that the project would be put "on hold for now." I was disappointed, but when I thought about all the people I'd met and the stories I'd heard, I felt overwhelming gratitude to have been given this once-in-a-lifetime experience. Through my interviews, I had discovered the most intricate and personal details of the life of a friend, one who had come from a rich and honorable family lineage. I knew, if given the chance, I wanted to be any part of the team that would do the work to carry on his legacy. From that moment, I excitedly accepted every opportunity Afeni presented to me.

One day, a few years later, Afeni invited me to come to her houseboat in Sausalito, California. She heard I'd published a novel and she wanted to congratulate me. When I arrived, she handed me a gift, a biography of the great Harlem Renaissance writer Zora Neale Hurston. "Thank you, Afeni," I said, "but I'm a little embarrassed. Because here I am writing about the silliness of love and heartbreak when the Shakers wrote about the important things in life." Her response was one that anyone who knew Afeni would expect. She told me that it didn't matter *what* I was writing about. "Just write!"

Even during the years that there were no Tupac projects for me to help with, I remained close with Afeni and various members of her family. And when I became a mother, Afeni and her sister, Glo, were there cheering me on from the sidelines. I was grateful that in the final years of her incredible life, she and I ended up living only a few miles apart.

Over the years, I didn't give the manuscript much thought. But in 2017, the lead archivist working on an estate-sanctioned documentary found my name on some of the past projects and asked if I could be hired to assist in story development. Soon after, the Shakur estate embarked on yet another project I was asked to join, a museum exhibit to honor Tupac and his life's work. Two years into the museum project, everything came full circle: I was asked to return to the manuscript I had written so long ago.

As I sit here today, more than two decades later, finishing this book for the second time, with added interviews, new stories, and many, many revisions, I can't help but reflect on what Tuesday, September 10, 1996—the date Tupac had set for our first writers' meeting—might have been like, with all of us getting bossed around by him at his Wilshire House condo. If I close my eyes and think back to those months I spent writing the first draft of this book, I can see Tupacland, those pages of his life events filling the wall in my apartment. I think of that day in 2006 on Afeni's houseboat, when I was questioning my own path, and how I felt empowered as I heard Afeni's voice, filled with conviction, her eyes squinted as she looked at me to say, "It doesn't matter what you write. *Just write!*"

When Afeni Shakur tells you to do something, you better do it.

—STACI ROBINSON, 2023

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PART I

NEW YORK

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CRADLE TO THE GRAVE

1970-1971

June 16, 1971, Mama gave birth to a hell raisin' heavenly son.

—TUPAC SHAKUR

In the predawn hour of April 2, 1969, Afeni Shakur and her husband, Lumumba, lay asleep in their apartment on 112 West 117th Street in Harlem. A hard, almost violent pounding on the front door woke them. Five cops, including Detective Francis Dalton from the New York Police Department, stood outside. Dalton, armed and strapped in a bulletproof vest, lit a rag on fire.

The officers yelled, "Fire! Open the door! Get out! Fire, Fire!"

Afeni, with her petite frame, smooth brown skin, and tiny, neat afro, woke to the noise. Still groggy, she followed Lumumba through the darkness and warily stumbled toward the front door. She looked through the peephole and saw smoke. As section leaders for the New York branch of the Black Panther Party, an organization that had for the past two years been under siege by the U.S. government, they were alarmed but also highly suspicious. They feared it was a setup.

Lumumba unlocked and cracked the door, Afeni close by his side.

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Quickly, the door swung in on them. Visions of men with guns flashed before their eyes. One gun shoved to Afeni's stomach, another to Lumumba's forehead.

"Police! If you move, I'll blow your fuckin' brains open!"

Afeni and Lumumba surrendered. Handcuffed, they were hustled outside to the waiting police car and taken to the District Attorney's Office, where they were booked and processed. As more members of the Black Panthers arrived at the office, handcuffed and perplexed, Afeni tried to make sense of what was happening. She soon learned that men she had trusted, who had stood beside her as Black Panther comrades and taken oaths of solidarity, vowing to fight for social justice, were actually undercover cops and instrumental in the arrests. One man in particular, Yedwa Sutan, whom she had questioned and tried to warn her fellow Panthers about, she learned was police officer Detective Ralph White, validating Afeni's suspicions and marking the beginning of what would become a lifelong "trust nobody" mentality.

White and the other arresting officers were the NYPD's Bureau of Special Services and Investigations Unit, known as BOSSI, a decades-old undercover intelligence operation that worked in conjunction with FBI director J. Edgar Hoover's Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO). The program was a clandestine effort to spy on and infiltrate "disruptors" of American society. Hoover considered the Black Panther Party a "subversive" group, publicly declaring them "the greatest threat to the internal security of the United States of America" and claiming they would be extinguished by the end of that year. He released aggressive directives that included the use of informants to work undercover operations and neutralize Panther leaders in order to prevent the spread of their "radical" teachings. He vowed to break up all efforts at solidarity with regard to the ideologies of Black nationalism, to prevent the rise of a "Black Messiah who could unify and electrify," and to prevent Black leaders "from gaining respectability by discrediting them." By 1969, hundreds of Black Panther members across the country had been targeted and arrested.

Out of the twenty-one Panthers targeted in this particular raid, Afeni, Lumumba, and ten others (plus two who were already in jail and four who were arrested later) were booked and indicted on charges of conspiracy to blow up a commuter railroad's right-of-way,

When I was arrested it took a while before I fully realized the situation/trouble I was in. At first I thought there was a misunderstanding and soon it would be sorted out and I would be charged with something not so serious and I'd take my medicine and move along. I did not know what a conspiracy was but I knew I didn't

the Bronx Botanical Gardens, and five department stores: Abercrombie & Fitch, Macy's, Alexander's, Korvette's, and Bloomingdale's. All were New York landmarks and symbols of American capitalism. That afternoon the Panthers were shuffled off to eight different jails in New York and neighboring states, where they would await one of the most significant trials in African American legal history: *The People of the State of New York v. Lumumba Shakur et al.*, which became widely known as the Trial of the Panther 21.

Arriving into the tumult of a postwar America still suffering under Jim Crow, Afeni, born Alice Faye Williams, was ushered into the world on January 10, 1947. That year would see the dawn of the Cold War and the establishment of the CIA. It also saw the unveiling of America's first Polaroid camera. Tupperware was invented, and a loaf of bread cost twelve cents. And even as Jackie Robinson took the field as a Brooklyn Dodger, becoming the first African American to step onto a professional baseball field, the Ku Klux Klan ruled much of the Southern landscape. Delivered at home with the help of a midwife, Afeni was welcomed by her mother, Rosa Belle; father, Walter Williams, Jr.; and two-year-old sister, Gloria Jean, who mostly went by her middle name.

By the time Alice Faye was a mere six years old, life had already handed down to her the fundamental lessons of being Black in America. Alice and her sister walked to school each morning, down the dusty roads of Lumberton, North Carolina, enduring name-calling from white men driving by, slowing down long enough to bark hate-filled words at them. Some days it was "monkey." Some days it was "bald-headed, skinny tar baby." But most days it was "nigger." Morning after morning, these words shot straight into young Alice's psyche like daggers, proving that the effects of hate can cut deeper than a bullet or a knife.

In 1954, when Alice was seven years old, the Supreme Court landmark ruling *Brown v. Board of Education* swept through America like a quiet storm. Another step toward equality, but the world knew Black Americans—**Copyrighted Material** and more specifically Black students—would be met with violent backlash. In North Carolina, the Ku Klux Klan responded by rallying their forces around their message of hate. They

sought to terrorize both Black and indigenous communities in the South, posting flyers, burning crosses, and lynching innocent people to discourage race mixing and to intimidate Blacks and Native tribes against continuing their quest for civil rights.

As the years passed, the Klan's terrorist threats moved closer to the Williams home. In January 1958, news reached Lumberton that a Klan rally was planned in the nearby town of Maxton. The organization's grand dragon, James W. "Catfish" Cole, was leading the charge, making it known that his primary goal was to "put Indians in their place and to end race-mixing" once and for all.

The night of January 18, over five hundred Lumbee warriors showed up in Maxton with guns and rifles, ready to defend themselves, overwhelming the fifty or so Klansmen who came for the rally. Shots were fired into the darkness, local police showed up, and the Ku Klux Klan bolted away into the dark night.

They never returned to Lumberton or Maxton again. Even before Alice Faye Williams was a Shakur, resistance and bold defiance was no abstraction to the Williams family.

But what came to be known as the Battle of Hayes Pond may very well have been the life event that shifted Alice into a new consciousness. The news sparked Alice's emotions and allowed her to see that you didn't always have to lie down in the face of attempted oppression. Through the Lumbee warriors' victory, she learned at eleven years old that it was possible to say no—to stand up against unfair treatment. "That was my first taste of *resistance*," she would recall forty-five years later. "Resistance is what I felt. *Resist*. A sense of 'don't let that happen to you.'"

Alice also saw her mother resist after suffering years of domestic violence. "When I used to come home from school, first and second grade, I would look under the bed to make sure [my father] hadn't killed my mother and stuffed her body under there," she recalled. But in 1959, Rosa Belle left her husband and moved her girls "up the road" to New York City. In doing so, they took part—along with 6 million other African Americans over the course of a sixty-year time span—in what came to be known as the Great Migration, a search for a life away from the rampant social terror that plagued the lives of Black Americans in Southern states. Lured by the promise of a society that might offer a path to truly equal eco-

conomic opportunity, Rosa Belle was hopeful. She found a room for the three of them to share in a white woman's apartment on Brook Avenue in the Bronx.

But Alice Faye quickly discovered that the North wasn't what she had hoped for. From the moment she stepped foot onto her new school campus, the name-calling resumed. When one schoolmate said she looked like something from outer space, she *resisted* in the way she knew how. "I kicked his ass," she recalled. "All I wanted to do is fight. Fight back . . . I thought fighting was the way to compensate for my inadequacies."

She showed promise when in the eighth grade, she was encouraged by her school counselor to apply to New York's premier High School of Performing Arts School, informally known as PA. She got in, but her experience at PA established the hard reality that some people had more access to opportunity than others, simply because of the color of their skin. "A lot of the kids that went to PA were coming out of private schools," she recalled. "They came to school in limos, and I hated them with a passion. I'd get high off Thunderbird wine before school even started just to deal with my hatred of them."

The unfairness fueled her anger, but she had no outlet for it. Her short fuse paved the way to drinking and drug use as she fought her way through New York. She fought boys and girls alike. Ultimately, Alice dropped out of PA and soon after joined the Disciple Debs, an offshoot of the notorious New York Disciples boys' gang. It was a way to belong, to channel her overwhelming feelings of inadequacy.

But there was a light ahead. In the midst of bloody knife fights with rival girl gangs, Alice stumbled upon the teachings of the West African Yoruba culture, a set of practices with a high value system, one that threads morality, integrity, and wisdom into their way of living. With these new beliefs, she found something she never experienced before, a place where she might learn to redirect her intensity and find peace. She spent Saturdays at bembés, musical get-togethers where she developed a love for the sounds of African drumming, an art form that stayed close to her heart her entire life. It was her Yoruba teacher who suggested she change her name to one that was more representative of her depth and love for the world and its people. The name Afeni was presented to her. It meant "Dear One" and

“Lover of People.” And so Alice Faye Williams became known as Afeni.

With a new name and a changing outlook, Afeni, at twenty-one, began to form meaningful bonds. She met a man named Shaheem, a smooth brown-skinned brotha with an untrimmed beard and an afro. Shaheem was a Muslim who closely followed the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, the founder of the Nation of Islam and an early mentor to Malcolm X. He caught Afeni’s attention with his wisdom and knowledge. Most important, he was the first person to tell her that Black was beautiful. The two often smoked weed together, talked about the importance of Black history, and discussed the symbolic nature of the color black—that it was a symbol of strength, not weakness. Through these conversations, Afeni gradually began to see that the color of her dark brown skin was not a hindrance but a symbol of self-love and Black pride.

Shaheem framed these late-night conversations around the concept of “the Struggle”—a term Afeni had not heard before. For the first time in her life, her mind was sparked. She was hungry for any information that Shaheem would share. He explained to her that *all Black people*, together, were in a fight to survive and that she, too, was a part of it. She belonged to this club, this common group of people who were weakened by the oppressive forces of an imperialistic society.

One afternoon while walking through Harlem, Afeni heard loud activity and voices bursting from speakers. By then, any sign of a protest had become sweet sounds to her. She knew that Marcus Garvey of the Universal Negro Improvement Association had spoken at this very same corner years before. She knew Malcolm X had also spoken here before he was assassinated. She approached the speaker with curiosity, ready to listen, ready to be inspired. “I was walking down the street one day and this guy was standing on the corner,” Afeni remembered. “There was this rally on 125th Street and Seventh Avenue. There was always a rally. . . . There was this little guy and he had all these people standing beside him like it was this small army, and he was just talking. The thing that made me stop and listen was that he was just saying we controlled the police, who were in our community, occupying our community. And it was really hittin’. And after that somehow I found out more about the

person and it was Bobby Seale”—one of the young founders of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California.

Seale's speech opened a new world for Afeni. "As a Black woman in this country, born with short hair and Negroid features and a strong personality, if it hadn't been for the Black Panther Party, I don't know where I'd be today. They saved me because they armed me. They celebrated me."

Within months of joining the Black Panther Party, Afeni met and married the Harlem chapter's deputy minister of defense, Lumumba Shakur. Lumumba was the son of Saladin Shakur, a Garveyite and an associate of Malcolm X. As Saladin's prominence as a revolutionary nationalist and community leader grew throughout the 1960s, the name began to garner a respect that attracted people in the movement who weren't related to change their last name to Shakur. Besides fathering his own children, Saladin became a surrogate father and mentor to many young people, including Jeral Williams and JoAnne Byron, who would take the names Mutulu and Assata Shakur, respectively. Mutulu would go on to play an important role in Afeni's life. Afeni explains Saladin's legacy, noting that he "was the man who was the father for all the young boys who had no fathers."

Lumumba Shakur, already married but living under the tenets of Islamic law, was able to have more than one wife. Afeni, young and open to trying new things, thought she would be able to tolerate such an arrangement. And she did—at least, for a time.

In the aftermath of their arrests, Afeni and Lumumba stood together in the face of legal trouble, miles apart in different jails, waiting to make bail. News about the "Panther 21" hit newspapers across the country, and soon protesters rallied outside the prisons. Supporters held fundraisers to raise bail money and legal fees at venues such as St. Mark's Church in Manhattan, and money was ultimately "provided by five Presbyterian and Episcopal churches and four ministers." Composer Leonard Bernstein held a private fundraiser at his home. Actors Angie Dickinson, Jane Fonda, and Donald Sutherland all lent their support to the party's legal fund.

Afeni found herself locked inside the walls of the Women's House of Detention, a facility marked by the most inhumane living condi-

tions. The space was cramped, housing up to six hundred female prisoners in an area designed to hold four hundred. Prisoners often reported finding worms and cockroaches in their food and dead mice in the showers. There Afeni remained for the rest of 1969. And on December 4, when Afeni and her codefendants heard the news about the brutal, heinous killing of the Panthers' Illinois chapter chairman, Fred Hampton, whom the Chicago Police Department shot dead in his very own home, she and the others became restless.

But on January 31, 1970, after ten months of eating slop and sleeping in filth, Afeni was released on bail. "The Panthers who were in jail had a meeting to decide who would be released first," she recalled. "Because I was articulate, they felt that I would be able to help get them out if I got out first." Afeni's efforts on behalf of her codefendants earned her the title of communications secretary for the Ministry of Information of the Harlem sector of the Black Panthers. Years later, a teenage Tupac would speak proudly about this title in one of his early interviews: "I think that my mother . . . like Fred Hampton, Mark Clark, Harriet Tubman, they felt they were laying the tracks for the generation to come."

When it came time for the Panther 21 to select legal counsel, Afeni boldly made the decision, perhaps the decision of her life, to defend herself. She didn't have a law degree, not even a high school diploma. She knew, however, that she would work harder for her freedom than any attorney who might be brought in for her. Her sister, Jean, remembered how natural the decision seemed to her. "Afeni had always, since we were little, been independent and willing to take on any challenge that was put in front of her," Jean said. "I wasn't surprised at all when she chose to do this."

Lumumba, on the other hand, considered it to be an irrational decision and tried his best to talk her out of it. "You're gonna fuck everything up," he told Afeni. This decision, in Lumumba's eyes, was the real liability. And not only to himself but to the other Panthers who would be tried alongside them. He believed that a solid, experienced legal team would provide a cohesive and strong courtroom fight and would be critical in securing their freedom, and that Afeni could be the weak link in the chain of defense and her codefendants to be convicted. Lumumba pleaded with her: "You're not educated. You're not qualified. And you're too emotional." Afeni stood her

ground. Her decision was final. She declined the help of hired counsel and showed up on the first day of court ready to take on the prosecution.

The trial officially commenced on February 2, 1970. The ongoing Panther rallies along 100 Centre Street in Manhattan created a ready-to-snap tension as protesters shared the sidewalk with an intimidating police presence. Black supporters and Panther members marched alongside white protesters holding signs reading SMASH RACIST COURTS—FREE THE PANTHER 21! and END THE RACIST FRAME-UP OF THE BLACK PANTHERS—YOUTH AGAINST WAR AND FASCISM. Charges were delayed or dropped against eight of the twenty-one Panthers initially detained, due to some having to fight dual cases, being too ill, or being too young, but the remaining thirteen would stand trial.

Lumumba led the defendants as they filed inside the courtroom, his fist shyly raised, mumbling “Power to the People” to his comrades and to supporters seated in the courtroom. Finally, Afeni, the only Panther who had been released on bail, walked confidently down the courtroom aisle and into the bay of the court. As she walked past Joseph A. Phillips, the chief prosecutor representing the State of New York, her smile was almost smug. She was ready to fight for her freedom.

The court clerk announced, “All rise!”

White haired, Harvard-educated New York State Supreme Court Justice John M. Murtagh took his seat in front of a full courtroom: a pair of state prosecutors, a team of six defense attorneys, thirteen defendants, a lineup of potential jurors, L-shaped tables of reporters, and many court marshals. Security was tight. “There were thirteen of us on trial,” Afeni said. “And there was a guard behind each one of our seats.” Packed in the gallery, a gaggle of Panther sympathizers stood by, ready and willing to hold the American justice system accountable by their presence. The atmosphere in the courtroom was volatile.

The first order of business was jury selection. Afeni stood alongside the defense team’s two lead attorneys, Gerald Lefcourt and Charles McKinney. The three posed a line of aggressive questioning to the potential jurors.

“What did you think of the death of Martin Luther King?” Afeni questioned Charles Fuller, a Black juror candidate.

Fuller responded, "I think it was unfortunate that it had to happen." She asked, "Do you think Black people have a right to be angry?" "In what sense?" "Just . . . *angry*?" she asked, again. Her tone was gentle but direct. "No."

With that, Afeni released him with a peremptory challenge.

Although Afeni stood strong in court each day, the year in jail and the pressure of being a revolutionary fighting for her life wore on her. Over the course of the trial, her marriage to Lumumba began to wither. The rules of a polygamous marriage brought frustration and tension between her and Lumumba's first wife, Sayeeda. "He'd sleep with me sometimes. He'd sleep with her. She took care of the kids and the house. Stuff I was not interested in anyway. I was never very domestic," Afeni would explain in her memoir. "And me and Lumumba did our thing with the party. I didn't have no conflict. But it was killing Sayeeda inside." Eventually, Afeni began to separate herself from the marriage and sought solace and affirmation in other men.

The fall of 1970, she met a Panther from Jersey City named Billy Garland at a strategy officers meeting. "Billy was the person from the Jersey chapter of the Black Panther Party that worked in distribution," Afeni recalled, "which were the people that picked up the newspapers and distributed them across the city. So he had access to a van." And in that van, Billy drove Afeni to court each morning. She couldn't help but notice his chiseled cheekbones and thick eyebrows. The physical attraction the two felt for each other grew quickly, but after a quick consummation of the relationship, their bond dissolved in a matter of a few short days. Eddie "Jamal" Joseph, the youngest member of the Panther 21, remembered the radical, stressful climate in which Afeni lived as one that was unusually hard for the youth of urban America. "You had healthy young women having miscarriages," he said. "You had eighteen- and nineteen-year-old men with bleeding ulcers. This is the kind of stress that people lived with. Living in that day, the point of human comfort might come one night with someone you would never see again sharing a moment 'cause everybody thought that tomorrow will be the day that I'm going to get killed or

I'm going to jail for the rest of my life. So even the idea of intimacy was the intimacy of war. So Tupac was conceived in this whirlwind. That's the energy that brought him."

Press coverage of the trial quickly turned Afeni into a local celebrity. Her new status caught the attention and admiration of some of Harlem's leading gangsters, who came to know her through articles in the local newspapers. When she wasn't in court fighting for herself, she was out soliciting contributions from businesses for the Panther 21 legal defense fund. She spent evenings socializing and fund-raising at Sterling's Den, a busy restaurant and bar on the corner of Boston Road and 169th in the Bronx. While there, she met a man named Kenneth "Legs" Saunders. Handsome but hard, Legs was a lieutenant of the famed drug lord Nicky Barnes, and he got his name from his long legs and deep pockets. After the short romance with Billy Garland, Afeni welcomed Legs into her life and the possibility of developing something long-term. But their relationship, too, was cut short. Plucked from the streets on a parole violation, Legs was sent away to prison, leaving Afeni with a brief but lasting memory.

Afeni had not told Lumumba about her decision to see other men outside their marital arrangement, but he soon learned about it. His pride wounded, he lashed out at her and told her she was no longer a Shakur. Divorce under Islamic Law, by *talaq*, could be achieved with a basic verbal demand. With a witness standing beside them, Lumumba recited, "I divorce thee. I divorce thee. I divorce thee." In an instant, they were no longer bound by marriage.

Afeni completely disregarded Lumumba's request to strike "Shakur" from her name. She'd confidently grown into becoming Afeni Shakur, and she valued the notable status she achieved under it. She had become part of something bigger than herself. It was *her* name now. Her journey. Her desire to keep the Shakur name was about her own identity. There was no way she was going back to being Afeni Williams. She requested a meeting with Lumumba's father, Saladin, with hopes that he'd override Lumumba's demand. Without hesitation, despite the failed marriage of her and his son, Saladin Shakur continued to hold Afeni in the highest regard, thus giving her his blessing and permission to keep her name.

In November of 1970, Afeni learned she was pregnant. "I had to tell Lumumba as he sat next to me in court," Afeni recalled. "And

that wasn't a pleasant experience. That was an event in and of itself." Each day she silently rehearsed what she would say about the child inside her. Although their marriage was over, she was still concerned about his reaction to the news. Adding to her confusion was the fact that she did not know whether the father was Billy Garland or Legs Saunders. Afeni wanted this child more than anything. But for the time being, she pushed all thoughts of telling Lumumba from her mind while she fought for her freedom. Her baby, still an embryo, became the guiding light in her plan to carve a path of integrity and revolutionary spirit for her child to follow, no matter the trial's outcome.

Afeni was diligent in her legal preparations, especially for her cross-examination of the prosecution's star witness, the undercover informer Detective Ralph White, whom Afeni had known as Yedwa. She had never trusted him. The very day he had walked into the Harlem Black Panther offices, she had emphatically warned her co-Panthers that he was a cop. The woman who never backed down from a teenage street fight now faced a new battle. She was about to step into the ring with a Black man who had deceived her, within a judicial system that was not designed to provide fairness for Black Americans.

Afeni spent nights at her sister Jean's apartment, across town at 1240 Woodycrest Avenue in the Bronx, assembling questions for her cross-examination. When the day came, she was brilliant. She asked the detective about his perspective on her involvement in the party, whether he saw it as more political or more militaristic.

"As far as you're talking to . . . about what we had to do in the streets, I thought it was good you know," said White. "But as far as your involvement, I thought you were more military than political."

Afeni stood tall and confident as she proceeded. "What *involvement*?" she asked.

"Things you say, things I saw you doing," White answered. "You would go into a thing about pigs, and offing pigs and different things about offing pigs, and this pig is this and this pig is that; and, if you find a pig, deal with him and everything."

Afeni tightened her questioning. "I understand that. But you said there were things you *saw* me doing, I just want to hear one thing."

White replied: "I remember a meeting at the Panther office . . .

you went into a thing about icing the pigs, along with that military thing, and [you were] very emotional. I remember that, plus other things I can't remember offhand."

What came through in the questioning was that White had not seen Afeni commit any crime.

As Afeni continued, she emphasized her charitable efforts in connection with the Panthers. She would make White tell the jury what he *had* seen her do. "Did you ever see me at Lincoln Hospital?

"Yes, I have," Detective White answered.

"Did you ever see me at the schools working?"

"Yes, I have."

"Ever see me in the street working?"

"Yes, I have."

"Are these some of the things that led you to think I was military-minded?"

"No, it was not."

"You don't remember the other things."

"At the time I remembered them, then. I remember . . ." Detective White paused. "You reminded me of the good things you were doing. If you reminded me of some of the things you said, I could answer that."

"Yes, I guess so," she said snidely. After she asked for a brief recess, she returned and said firmly, "No further questions."

Afeni sat down. It was clear to everyone in the courtroom, including the prosecution's lead attorney, Joseph Phillips, that in this moment Afeni had emerged as an astute litigator. "In those twenty minutes she had made Mr. Phillips' witness her own," wrote journalist Murray Kempton, who later won a National Book Award for his book about the trial, "and in their coupling, she had rescued herself and all the others."

After Fred Hampton was killed, diverging philosophies between Black Panthers co-founder Huey Newton and Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver created tension, and the party started to implode. Afeni never suspected that some of the defendants to fear for their lives and devise plans to jump bail without consulting her and Joan Bird, the only other female codefendant. But on Monday

morning, February 8, 1971, when Afeni and Joan rode up the courthouse elevator together and entered the courtroom, there was a heavy feeling in the air that Afeni couldn't quite place. Something wasn't right. As she looked around she immediately knew. Richard Moore and Michael Tabor, two of the thirteen codefendants, hadn't arrived. It took Afeni an instant to realize they were no-shows. They had jumped bail. She was stunned. They had the audacity to throw away the loyalty and camaraderie that came with joining the Black Panther Party. The weight of being betrayed by someone she trusted consumed her, a pernicious festering that chipped away at her heart for the rest of her life. As Afeni remembered, "We had an agreement amongst ourselves to tell each other. It wasn't about the jumping 'cause everybody had the right to, but we were respectful of each [other]." When Moore and Tabor left they broke that trust.

Justice Murtagh reacted harshly to Moore and Tabor's decision to flee. He informed the court that the illegal actions of the two men subsequently made Afeni and Joan serious flight risks. Two men were gone. Afeni and Joan would pay. Murtagh remanded their bail and sent them back to the horror of the Women's House of Detention.

By then, almost six months pregnant, Afeni requested that Murtagh reverse his decision. She stood next to Lumumba, who was still quite angry about her pregnancy, and spoke with pride, as if "she were bearing a prince." "I would like to bring to the attention of the court what I am sure the court doesn't know about," she said, "and that's the situation that exists with Miss Bird and myself and for the other women that are being held in the House of Detention. The boilers are broken there. There is no hot water. The conditions are not just abominable, as they were before; they are inhuman. The food that the women eat is cooked in one night. Like today's dinner was cooked last night and is sitting on the table waiting to be served to-night. There is no toilet paper. The facilities are not bad anymore; they are ridiculous. Women should not be put in there."

The judge was skeptical about Afeni's statement and her request for improved conditions, suspecting that her interest was "in making a statement for the press."

"The interest, Mr. Murtagh," she replied, "is in assuring the life of my child."

The judge threw her back in jail. When Afeni returned to the

women's prison that afternoon, they told her to undress and spread her legs so they could administer a strip search. If she refused, she'd be put in solitary confinement. She didn't hesitate to choose solitary. "I slept through the rats, the isolation, the Spam, the fake white bread, and all that," she later wrote.

Days later, as the Black Panther Party continued to splinter, Lumumba's brother, Zayd, came to visit Afeni. When he asked her whose side was she going to be on, her response was simple. "The only side I'm on is the side of my child." She remembers, "They started pressuring me to pick sides even though I was fighting for my life at the time, and I was five months pregnant! They didn't ask me how I was doing or if I needed anything. It was always about the party and which side I was on." For the first time, she stood alone and on her own. She felt triple crossed—by the court system, by the NYPD officers who had infiltrated the Black Panthers, and now by her fellow Panther brothers. But in spite of the betrayal, she had found a new and deeper dedication: her child.

Staunch supporters and fellow Panthers continued to picket outside both the courtroom and the Women's House of Detention, their presence increasing when the court denied Afeni's request of one egg and one glass of milk per day to nourish her unborn child. Fortunately, the prison cooks were Afeni's admirers; they secretly delivered a relatively nutritious meal to her each night. "Tupac always belonged to everybody," Afeni recalled of that time. "When I was pregnant in jail . . . the brothers that worked in the kitchen, when they brought our food down, they brought me real food. They took care of us."

As the trial wore on, a number of courtroom spectators, many of whom were strangers, never missed a day. Frankie Zipp was one of them. Each day, at the end of the court session, Zipp raised his "Power to the People" fist at Afeni. He wanted her to know that no matter what happened, she had friends. "None of us knew him," Afeni recalls. "But he came to court every day without fail dressed in a suit. By the end of the trial, Afeni introduced herself one afternoon after the judge granted a quick recess. She recalled of Frankie, "He had been a dope fiend all his life, but by now he was off the needle. His arms were scars, abscessed and swollen, and his hands were as big as basketballs. He made his money from the street, but there was nothing dirty about him."

But even with all the support from friends and strangers, as Afeni

lay down in her cell each night, she relied mainly on her own spiritual strength to combat the inadequate nutrition her baby received. She turned her spiritual energy into poetry and stories. One night, as she sat uncomfortably on the cold, hard bench of her cell, she scribbled a verse she titled “From the Pig Pen” onto a tattered piece of paper. When she finished the poem she read it softly to her belly:

*What are these bars that intrude
upon my sight?
These shivering lines that test my
physical might!
Do they not know who I am or
from where I came? . . .
For I have a revolutionary story
that I must tell
And my hands refuse to be beaten
by this tormented cell
There is a force in here a whole
new Black community
a motivating force—ready to make
liberation a living reality!*

In jail, Afeni avoided the issue of Tupac’s paternity. Instead, she thought about the life she and her child would have together. She feared a guilty verdict, and she dreaded the possibility of not being able to raise her baby. These feelings inspired her to write a letter to “the unborn baby within my womb,” both an apology for her own life and a mandate for her child’s. “I suppose one day you’re going to wonder about all this mess that’s been going on now and I just had to make sure you understood a few things,” it began.

I’ve learned a lot in two years about being a woman and it’s for this reason that I want to talk to you. . . . I’ve discovered what I should have known a long time ago—that change has to begin within ourselves—whether there is a revolution today or tomorrow—we still must face the problem of bringing ourselves out of the larceny that we have all inherited. I hope we do not pass it on to you because you are our only hope. You must weigh our actions and decide for your-

selves what was good and what was bad. It is obvious that somewhere we failed but I know it will not—it cannot end here.

In preparation for her closing statement in court, Afeni read everything she could get her hands on. She studied Fidel Castro's 1953 speech "History Will Absolve Me," drawing inspiration from his manifesto of self-defense. She would prepare a final appeal to convince the jurors that she was not the criminal that chief prosecutor Phillips set out to prove she was.

When the day arrived, Afeni was eight months pregnant. She slowly walked into the courtroom, her protruding belly tucked gracefully beneath her plaid maternity dress. Gone were the knee-high suede boots and fashion-forward outfits she'd worn to court while out on bail. Resilient, Afeni and her ten remaining codefendants filed into the courtroom, still under security fit to handle an angry mob. Afeni stood face-to-face with a justice system that imprisoned her and threatened to take her baby away from her, and that for the last twenty-two months had tried to brand her a terrorist. She looked at the jury, Murray Kempton remembered, "as though suppliant before some king at whose feet she had arrived across snows and through thorns, past guards and through mocking courtiers."

"I don't know what I'm supposed to say," she began.

I don't know how I'm supposed to justify the charges that Mr. Phillips has brought before the court against me. But I do know that none of these charges have been proven and I'm not talking about proven beyond a reasonable doubt. I'm saying that none of the charges have been proven, period. That nothing has been proven in this courtroom, that I, or any of the defendants did any of these things that Mr. Phillips insists that we did do.

So why are we here? Why are any of us here? I don't know. But I would appreciate it if you would end this nightmare, because I'm tired of it and I can't justify it to my mind. There's no logical reason for us to have gone through the last two years as we have, to be threatened with imprisonment because somebody somewhere is watching you and thinking that you're being a spy. So do what you have to do. But please don't forget what you saw and heard in this courtroom. . . . Let history record you as a jury who

would not kneel to the outrageous bidding of the state. Justify our faith in you. Show us that we were not wrong in assuming that you would judge us fairly. And remember that that's all we're asking of you. All we ask of you is that you judge us fairly. Please judge us according to the way that you want to be judged.

The power of Afeni's speech led to one of Justice Murtagh's most unexpected announcements. On May 3, he informed the court that he had decided to parole Afeni for the remainder of the trial. Even the defense attorneys were completely caught off guard. Murtagh asked Afeni, "Will you promise to continue being present in court when able?" She nodded. Justice Murtagh ended his announcement, stating that he was, in fact, interested in the rights of the child and of Afeni. She would be free until the verdict came down.

Afeni was incredulous. She burst into tears. Afterward, in the hallway, reporters gathered around her to ask questions. Still in shock, practically speechless, she told them all that she was happy to be heading home with her sister, Jean.

Ten days later, on Thursday, May 13, 1971, the final day of what was then the longest and costliest legal trial in the history of the Supreme Court of New York, the jury began deliberation. It took less than ninety minutes to reach a verdict.

When the jury returned to the courtroom, Judge Murtagh asked the jury foreman, James "Ingram" Fox, to rise. The clerk asked, "Members of the jury, have you agreed upon a verdict?"

"Yes," Fox answered.

The clerk spoke. "As to the defendant, Lumumba Shakur, on the first count charging the crime of conspiracy of murder in the first degree, how do you find sir, guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty."

Mumbles in the courtroom increased in a crescendo as Fox continued with eleven more verdicts: all not guilty. The spectators raised their fists high. "Right on!" they cried. "Power to the People!" "Power to the Jury." A roar of excitement and glee filled the room as Fox continued to read the jury's verdict, rolling through the long list of charges against the Panthers in an almost delirious "Not guilty" 156 more times. Not guilty of arson, not guilty of conspiracy to blow up buildings, not guilty of attempted murder.

All Afeni could do was stand silent. Tears of relief streamed down her face. Lumumba could only shout. And then they locked in a celebratory embrace.

They were free.

"My mother was pregnant with me while she was in prison," Tupac would explain years later. "She was her own attorney. Never been to law school. She was facing three hundred some-odd years. One black woman—pregnant—beat the case. That just goes to show you the strength of a Black woman and the strength of the oppressed."

Only hours later, the jurors, the defense lawyers, Afeni, Jean, and many of the other codefendants met at the law offices of Lefcourt and Crain for a moment of celebratory closure. They sipped Champagne and reminisced about the past twenty-two months. Everyone was smiling. Benjamin Giles, juror number nine, was there. He asked Afeni where she'd learned to perform like "that."

"Fear, Mr. Giles, plain fear," she replied.

Thirty-four days later, on June 16, Afeni sat on her sister's couch, scanning the pages of *The New York Times*. She resented the anti-Panther propaganda that littered its pages, and she expected to see her name sprinkled through the articles. Her sister washed the afternoon dishes, peered out the kitchen window, and absently watched a family of rats scurry across the abandoned parking lot. Both women were lost in their thoughts, absorbed by the quiet air between them.

The first contraction rolled through Afeni like soft thunder. Jean glanced at her from across the room and watched her pick up the phone. A few minutes later, new friend Frankie Zipp swooped his brand-new 1971 white convertible Cadillac curbside in front of the apartment and quickly helped Afeni into the car. From a back seat upholstered in red leather, Afeni and Jean stared at the steering wheel and Frankie's swollen, almost deformed hands, permanently damaged during his ravaging days of heroin addiction. They rode in silence, waiting for the hospital to appear.

Hours after Afeni arrived at New York Flower-Fifth Avenue Hospital, Tupac Amaru Shakur was born. But the boy bred into Afeni by the Panthers and by her time in prison had only grown since the end of the trial. In order to deter the government from marking her son as a

Panther baby and thus flagging him as a “threat” to society, she decided to write the name Parish Lesane Crooks on the birth certificate, named after Carol Jean Crooks, aka “Crooksie,” Afeni’s ex-cellmate turned dear friend. “Lesane” was her sister Jean’s last name. “I picked any name. I picked a combination of all the names,” Afeni says. “I let the gay, lesbian woman (Crooksie), who was my friend, name him Parish. Lesane was for my sister’s family at the time. And Crooks also, for the Crooks crew. That’s right. That’s what was on the paper. But Tupac was always his name. Tupac Amaru Shakur. He was always in my mind a soldier in exile from the beginning. That’s how I saw it.”

Tupac means “royal” or “shining,” and Amaru means “serpent.” The name belonged originally to a line of honored Peruvian Incan chiefs. It was Afeni’s wish for Tupac to embody not only the spirit of Africa but also the spirit of all the world’s indigenous people. “What I wanted to do was to name my child not after an African but after an indigenous person that was not African,” she later explained. “Because I needed for him to know that we had the same identity with every indigenous person in the world. We were from a generation that believed that the names were the foundation for the child. So I wanted him to stand on [a broad] foundation. Rather than having a blind affiliation with color, I wanted him to find the deeper meaning of why we fight. Not just because we’re Black, but because like other indigenous people in the world, we have our common struggle. That’s what I wanted for him was for him to have that. And that’s why his name, Tupac Amaru, was beautiful to hear.”

When the doctor wrapped baby Tupac in a blanket and carried him out of the delivery room, Afeni grew nervous. Even though the doctor assured her that her son would be safe, Afeni feared that someone would intentionally switch, harm, or steal her baby while he was out of her sight. She asked Jean to stay close, to confirm the baby’s identification before he was taken to the nursery. Jean waited anxiously in the hallway, finally to be met by the doctor and her newborn nephew. The doctor held the little baby in front of Jean, just as he’d promised. She smiled at her nephew’s tiny body wrapped tightly in a blanket. “Okay, Darlin’ Dear, there you are, I know you now, ain’t nothin’ gonna happen to ya, right?” She said this to make sure of that.” These were her very first words to Tupac. She was to deliver on this promise many times in the years to come.

02

DEAR MAMA

1971-1974

I finally understand for a woman it ain't easy trying to raise a man.

You always was committed, a poor single mother on welfare,
tell me how you did it.

—TUPAC SHAKUR

E

ven free, Afeni faced instability and poverty. Her struggles cemented her worldview that inequity, lack of opportunity, and social injustice were the evils destroying her community. Though the Panthers were splintering, she knew the “war” with the government was not over. Her commitment to the fight for equality intensified, even as the sting of betrayal from her Panther comrades and the undercover police bred a “trust nobody” mentality. These stark realities in Afeni’s young life set the stage not only for the world that Tupac was born into but also for the one he walked in throughout this life. Ingrained from birth and into his upbringing were both Afeni’s fears and her dreams for her son—the expectation that he would carry on her dedication to the Black community and the will to help others achieve freedom from oppression.

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Tupac took this path to heart. Years later he would say, “I think my mother knew that freedom wouldn’t come in her lifetime just like I

know that it won't come in mine. But it's a matter of either we stay like this or somebody sacrifices. . . . Somebody lay a track so we don't stay in a three-hundred-sixty-degree deadly circle. Somebody has to break out and risk losing everything and being poor and getting beat down; somebody has to do something."

Emerging from the two-year whirlwind of a horrid incarceration and the stress of a high-profile court case, Afeni had no plan, no place of her own, and no money. But she knew she was always welcomed by her sister until she figured out her next steps, no matter how hard life got.

Baby Tupac spent his very first days at 1240 Woodycrest Avenue in the Bronx, near Yankee Stadium. The three-bedroom tenement apartment was on the first floor of a five-story walk-up in the middle of an ethnically diverse neighborhood, with Black and Puerto Rican communities recently joined by an influx of Dominican immigrants. Living conditions on Woodycrest were crowded. Aunt Jean, now a single mother, had five young children all under the age of nine. They were packed in, making do with what little space they had. Jean's eldest, Bill Jr., was eight years old. Scott, born a year later, was seven. Kenny was five years old, and Greg, who would be diagnosed with non-verbal autism, was four. Jamala (named after Jamal Joseph, the youngest member of the Panther 21), the only girl, was just two years old.

Bill remembered the day Afeni brought Tupac home. "He was like a little teddy bear. Immediately everyone started to fight over who was gonna hold him next. And for days he was passed around to all the people in the house. Friends from the movement would come by the house day and night to see him. And Tupac was just there wrapped up in a blanket. He was like a little baby doll." Right away Tupac was exposed to the flurry and constant activity of his five young cousins. "When I was a little baby I remember that one moment of calm peace," Tupac later said, "and three minutes after that it was on."

The sibling-like bond between Tupac and his cousins was immediate and would stand the test of time. But the curse of poverty dogged their existence. Food was scarce, clothes were torn, and rent was due. Luckily, Tupac was so young that he didn't notice that he was going without. Instead, by day he was entertained by the clamor of his cousins—and by night, by his mother's soothing presence as she

rocked him back and forth in the antique wooden cradle next to her bed.

In these early months of Tupac's life, while Afeni was facing so many uncertainties, she came across a glimpse of hope, a momentary calm in the constant churn of instability. Her legal prowess during the Panther 21 trial had impressed many Panther supporters, leading to a handful of generous offers of assistance. One of them came from Ann Dubole, a wealthy Manhattanite who lived in a quaint apartment in the heart of Greenwich Village but planned to spend several months out of state. She suggested Afeni and her newborn son take advantage of her vacant apartment, offering them their own little oasis, rent-free, while she was gone. Afeni accepted, overwhelmed by Dubole's generosity and relieved to have a chance to establish her independence.

This small apartment in a peaceful enclave on Bank Street became a sanctuary for the new mother and son, a place for them to bond, for Tupac to have his mother all to himself. Ultimately, the apartment proved to be one of the most secure and comfortable homes Afeni would create for them. Afeni's friend Crooksie lent a helping hand, brightening Tupac's bedroom with a fresh coat of paint and filling it with as many toys as she could afford. She also helped Afeni care for Tupac. The luxury of having a friend to help change, feed, and bathe the baby allowed Afeni a respite from the painful experience of her legal battle and incarceration. Finally, her mind began to calm and her thoughts grew clearer.

The Panther 21 trial might have ended in victory, but it was only one battle in the war, as Afeni often called it, between right and wrong. She watched the Black Panther Party continue to splinter under the pressure of the government's ongoing siege. Fred Hampton was dead. Eldridge Cleaver had fled the country. Bobby Seale was jailed after being infamously gagged in the courtroom during his trial in Chicago. While some Panthers responded by moving away from organized activism, others gravitated toward a new, more aggressive movement: the Black Liberation Army, an underground militia that saw "armed rebellion" as the only viable tactic against a violently oppressive system.

Afeni would not go that route. But neither would she relinquish her passion for and commitment to the Black freedom movement. As a mother, she developed a new mindset. She would continue to defy the system and fight for the good of the people, but not as a member of the organized armed resistance. Instead, she would challenge the inequities of education, indecent housing, poor medical care, oppression, and discrimination. She would continue to fight the adverse effects of systemic racism and oppressive forces without having to risk her life. And the best way to do that, she decided, was through the law.

During the Panther 21 trial, Afeni had met an attorney with Bronx Legal Services named Richard Fischbein. Given Afeni's evident talent in the courtroom, Fischbein needed little convincing to bring her aboard as a legal assistant. She made an immediate impact when she and her coworkers helped to organize one of the first legal services unions. The job also had one joyful perk: Afeni was able to bring her baby to work each day.

On weekdays, the work of building a more equitable world took priority. But on weekends Afeni and Tupac would take advantage of New York's cultural offerings. They attended art festivals, discovered new ethnic culinary treats, and found themselves among crowds listening to emerging leaders speak about the plight of Black communities in America. One afternoon they stopped in at the Armory on 168th Street to listen to Minister Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam, and walked into a remarkable moment in time that would mark both coincidence and fate in Tupac's life ahead. In the crowd that day was Billy Garland, the man whom Afeni believed was possibly Tupac's father. Garland was with his wife and his wife's close friend, a young woman named Karen Lee. Lee, who at that moment could never guess that in twenty years she would become Tupac's publicist, recalled the moment when Afeni approached them. "Billy's wife was a good friend of mine, but Afeni was sort of a heroine to me because I had read a lot about the Panther 21," said Lee, "and I knew of her because of her work in the movement." Karen watched Afeni walk toward Billy and put baby Tupac in his arms. "It was a bit of an awkward situation at the time. She said, 'I think you want to meet your son.'" Lee remembered him as a two-week-old baby. All I can remember is those big eyes peering out of the blanket and how cute he was."

A few months later, when Legs Saunders was released from prison, he wasted no time in making his way to the apartment on Bank Street to see the baby who was born while he was locked up. He waltzed past Afeni at the door and went straight to the crib, where Tupac, coiffed in cornrows, lay asleep. Peering down at the peaceful infant, Legs proclaimed, "Yeah, he's mine. That boy's definitely mine." His smile was proud. Afeni stood in the doorway watching him gloat over Tupac. Although she still could not confirm definitively the paternity of her baby, she smiled at Legs and yielded to the magic of the moment.

But once again, Legs didn't stick around for long. Having just been released from prison, he needed to find a place to live and get his life back on track. And despite his promise to be in his son's life, it would be years before Tupac and Afeni saw him regularly.

Billy Garland and Legs Saunders represented two very different directions regarding the question of Tupac's paternity. But there were no clear answers. Billy did not claim Tupac that day at the Armory. And weeks later, Legs vowed Tupac was his. The mystery of Tupac's biological father would not be solved until many years later.

In 1972, as Tupac turned one, his time on Bank Street came to an end. Afeni moved them back to Jean's apartment on Woodcrest. Even though the living situation became crowded once again, life with so many cousins in one house was fun for Tupac. As the youngest, he was the focus of everyone's attention. His older cousins took great delight in him, enticing him into pranks and making him the butt of many harmless jokes, especially as Tupac became a toddler. "We used to tease Tupac all the time," Bill remembered. "There was this empty mayonnaise jar with eggshells and water in it. I can't remember what it was used for or why it was in the fridge, but just to get our kicks, we used to take off the lid and make Pac smell it. It stunk real bad. . . . We used to get a kick out of making him smell it and we'd watch his facial expressions. We just used to like to see him frown up over and over again."

In those years, Tupac was at his mother's side as she waged political war against the system. His cousin Kenny, five years older, remembered traveling to different boroughs' political meetings held in