

# A Bronzeville Story

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“All right, everybody, here we are,” Uncle Obie said. There was a note of pride in his voice. “South Parkway, just off 35th Street. That puts us right in the heart of Bronzeville. You’re going to like Chicago, I believe.”

Penny looked out at Uncle Obie’s house as the car pulled up to the curb. She could see why he seemed so proud. The house was three stories high and built from giant blocks of yellowish stone. It had wide front steps and a nice roomy porch with a wrought-iron railing. The street was even lined with shade trees.

It was 1949, and Penny was eleven years old. But she had rarely laid eyes on a house so fine. Back home in Mississippi, she’d only known white folks to live in such places. Even there, though, she hadn’t seen many. Going into those neighborhoods might bring a body a lot of trouble, even if you had business there.

But that whole life in Mississippi was long gone now. For Penny, her parents, and her brother, Cleet, home had been a tiny, two-room wood cabin. It stood off a dirt road outside Clarksdale. From now on, though, Clarksdale would be only a memory. They had traded it for life in this big city. They were part of something her parents called the Great Migration.

Penny hadn’t known what those words meant, but now she knew well. The first wave of that migration had started about 1916, just as America was about to get involved in World War I.

Daddy had explained it all on the train north, while Penny had watched her old world disappear, and a new one start to unfold outside the window.

“Once the war broke out, plenty of men went off to fight,” he told her. “That left all those jobs open up there, you understand? Thousands

of folks migrated north to the big cities like Chicago, Detroit, New York, all those places. All hoping to get some of the good-paying work those soldiers left behind.”

“We’re kind of late,” Penny had replied. “Hope there’s still something left.” Daddy had laughed good at that one. She had a way of doubting. But Daddy had a way of smoothing away those doubts. Then he’d told her all about how they were part of a whole new second wave of the Great Migration.

Thousands of southerners, mostly blacks and poor whites, were flooding north again for some of the same reasons they had before. A few years earlier, the U.S. had joined World War II. So again, better-paying jobs had opened up. Lots better schooling up there too, he’d told her. Even after the war ended in 1945, people just kept on migrating north.

“And they’re going to keep on coming, I reckon,” Daddy concluded. “I figure we’re lucky to be coming up as soon as we are, rather than later.”

Mama smiled wide. “That’s right!” she said. “Chicago, here we come!”

Chicago. The word held the sound of a strange, new place. As the train chugged slowly into Illinois Central Station, Penny felt the knot in her stomach tighten. She’d had it ever since she’d learned they were leaving Mississippi. But her parents didn’t seem to have a minute’s doubt.

“It’s for the best, Penny,” her father reassured her again as they gathered their things to get off the train. “We’ll find all kinds of good opportunities here that we’d never get down home. You’ll see.”

To pass time on the long ride, Penny and Cleet had read articles in the *Chicago Defender*.

That was a newspaper her parents had been reading since even before they'd left Mississippi. The paper published a lot of good advice for newcomers, written by black folks who had been in Chicago a long time already and knew all the city ways.

On one page Penny read an article about things a person must never do in public in the big northern cities, like cook on the street corner or wear your house dress outside. There were articles on politics and education, too, but those were harder to read.

The articles that interested Penny most were all the ones about the good things people of her race were accomplishing in Chicago. The paper talked all about how the migrants' coming had changed the whole face of the city. Given it all kinds of fresh new flavors and a strong new energy.

According to Daddy, the *Defender* was the most respected Negro newspaper in the country. So maybe, Penny figured, things would be good after all.

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But the minute they'd stepped off the train in the bustling station, her whole family had been hit hard by what a big change it was. Now they were in a world of noise and traffic and people rushing every which way. It was a place that seemed to be built of sky-high buildings, making a body feel smaller than ever. And it was way too cold for an early April afternoon.

They'd all shivered like the dickens as Uncle Obie led them outside and straight to his fancy car. By now in Mississippi, the magnolias were blooming. The air was as sweet and warm

as honey on toast. But here in Chicago, under stone-gray skies, it still felt like winter.

As nervous as Penny was about the whole deal though, Cleet, being twelve, was excited. For him, coming to Chicago was all about the music. He loved a kind of music called the blues. The blues sound was full of sad guitar music and fine, wild harmonica notes. And young as he was, Cleet could play a lot of it better than most.

Just like their family, Cleet pointed out, the blues came from Mississippi. The music had migrated north too. Now, Chicago was a big blues town. Cleet knew about every great blues singer who'd ever left Mississippi for Chicago, it seemed. For him, Chicago was a place of pure possibility.

As for herself, Penny could see that getting used to such a strange new place would take some doing. And her cousin, called Lurlene, wasn't making it any easier so far. Penny had

been looking forward to meeting this new cousin of hers. Lurlene was sixteen, and Penny had imagined they might become close as sisters. But one thing was clear right from the start. Lurlene wasn't exactly thrilled to meet her Mississippi kin.

During introductions at the train station, Lurlene's eyes had swept over them with a chilly gaze. She had the look of somebody who'd just been asked to take in a pack of stray dogs. She'd barely said a word either. Uncle Obie and Penny's parents had done most of the talking in the car.

Now, as they all got out in front of the house, Cleet looked around with a big smile on his face. "So this is it, huh? The big city," he said. "All right!"

"It's all right if you're white," Lurlene said, under her breath.

They all began moving up the walk to the house, Uncle Obie in front. It looked like a single

home, not an apartment building. But before they'd left Mississippi, Mama had explained about that, too.

Uncle Obie was an Old Settler. That meant he'd lived in Chicago since even before World War I. So he had had plenty of time to settle in and make the most of his own opportunities. Now he owned this whole big house and a lot more, too. He and Lurlene lived on the top floor. But he had turned the first two floors into apartments and rented them out. Penny could see Obie must be doing as well for himself as Mama had said.

"What's Bronzeville, Uncle?" she asked now. Lurlene snorted, like it was the dumbest question in the world.

If Uncle Obie heard her, he didn't let on. "Bronzeville is this here Chicago neighborhood, Niece," he explained. Most of those living around

here these days are black folks. So Bronzeville just stuck, to represent the color of beautiful skin."

"Just don't try moving away from here though, tell you that," Lurlene said, still in that harsh low voice she seemed so fond of using. The grownups were talking among themselves and paid no attention. Cleet just laughed.

"Looks like a fine enough place to live to me," he told Lurlene.

"You'll see," she replied sullenly.

"You're on the second floor," Uncle Obie said, as they went in. He led them up a narrow flight of stairs. The carpeting was worn, but Penny was impressed. They'd never had any such thing at home.

"Here we go," Obie said, unlocking a door at the end of the hall. "See how you like it. It's the best I got right now."

Penny's eyes widened as Uncle Obie switched on an overhead light. The room they were standing in was half kitchen and half sitting room. But it looked huge.

"Look around!" Obie encouraged. Penny did not hesitate. She headed straight for one of the best things the apartment had to offer—a real sink. She ran her hand along the smooth white porcelain edge. Then she reached out and slowly turned one of the faucet handles, almost scared to touch it. When cool water came spilling out, she giggled excitedly.

The apartment had other good things, too. Cleet plopped down in one of the two comfy chairs, switching an electric table lamp on and off, on and off, grinning wide the whole time. Obie showed Daddy how the couch pulled out to make a bed, while Mama went back to inspect the

apartment's other room—a whole separate bedroom with twin beds.

"Can't be helped that it's not bigger," Uncle Obie said apologetically. "Most apartments around here are kitchenettes. That's a single room less than half this size, with a whole family living in it!"

Penny—and the rest of her family, she knew—hardly heard his apologies they were so impressed. Their Mississippi house had been far smaller than this place. And it hadn't had running water or electric lights either. The new apartment was simple and spare, but it could not have been tidier.

"I'm afraid the bathroom is down the hall, too," Uncle Obie said. "You'll have to share with the others on this floor." Who cared if it was a couple of steps down the hall, Penny thought. They had a real bathroom now!

“This will do just fine, Obie, don’t you worry,” said Mama. A slight glint of tears shown in her eyes, but she was proud and strong.

“Many thanks,” Daddy added. “I’ll be hunting down a job starting tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow’s Sunday,” Obie reminded them. “A day for rest and thanksgiving. Monday will do for job hunting.”

“We could all do with a day’s rest,” Mama said.

“Sure you could!” Uncle Obie agreed. “Now why don’t you all freshen up and take it easy for a while. We’ll all go out for dinner this evening. Lurlene and I will show you around a bit.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Obie,” Daddy said before anyone else could agree. “We’ve got to watch our pennies until I find work.”

“You do, indeed,” Uncle Obie replied.

“That’s why it’s my treat. There’s a nice place nearby here where Lurlene and I always go. We have to celebrate your first night in Chicago, don’t you know!” Mama and Daddy protested strongly. But Obie wouldn’t take no for an answer.

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Two hours later the six of them were seated at a big round table in a classy-looking restaurant. From somewhere came the sounds of mellow jazz music. Every table had a crisp white tablecloth and a vase of fresh white tulips and leafy greenery. But there wasn’t a white person in sight. Penny couldn’t believe it.

She had dressed her best, but she felt raggedy in this setting. Especially compared to Lurlene. Lurlene was wearing a sweater the rosy pink color of a Mississippi sunset, a color that



perfectly set off the glowing cocoa tone of her skin. Everything about Lurlene was perfect.

But it was the sweater that Penny couldn't take her eyes off of. It was fuzzy-soft as chick's down and looked real warm. Every time she snuck a look at Lurlene, Penny felt chillier than ever.

Beyond the big restaurant window, the city's lights were blinking on. More and more people were spilling onto the sidewalks. Saturday night was underway. Somebody stopped on the curb and started blowing on a trumpet. A small crowd began to gather. Someone pitched a few coins into a hat the trumpet player had tossed on the ground. The sound seeped right through the glass, like little bits of excited energy. Cleet caught the beat and tapped along against the tabletop.

Uncle Obie smiled. "Out there's just one example of all the good stuff black folks add to Chicago. We bring the music, of course—blues, jazz, gospel. But our people are making big contributions in sports, politics, business, and civil rights, too. Not to mention all this good food that comes from the South." Now Obie tapped the table, too, as the waiter set their dinners before them.

"Lots going on in this neighborhood, seems like, Obie," Daddy said.

"Yes," Obie agreed, "but not like the old days, Luke." He waved his hand toward the street. "In the 1920s, people called the stretch of blocks along here the Stroll. It was one of the best-known areas in any black community in the country."

"How come the Stroll?" Cleet asked.

"Why, 'cause you went there to be seen!" Obie said, grinning. "The Stroll was famous for

many a fine jazz club, playing that music all night long.”

“Wish I’d been here then,” Cleet said.

Uncle Obie chuckled. “I’m sure you do, son. It’s cooled down considerably around here since then. We still have the Regal Theater, though, and the Savoy Ballroom. That’s where all the best music’s coming from these days.”

Uncle Obie promised to take them all to those places. For a minute Lurlene looked excited. Then some commotion outside on the street caught her eye. A fight had broken out. People were hollering and shoving at each other. Someone threw a can at the crowd.

Lurlene turned away from the scene looking disgusted. “New people always starting trouble for all of us,” she said, lifting her chin in the air like she was a queen. “Cops be here any minute now, you’ll see.”

“Now, Lurlene,” Uncle Obie warned. He turned to Penny’s parents and spoke apologetically. “It’s true some of these folks who come up here just don’t seem to want to fit in. They make a bad name for all of us. Not y’all, of course.”

“They’re the ones causing the race riots,” Lurlene said boldly.

“Now Lurlene, that’s enough! You know that’s not at all true,” Obie said now. Everyone looked at him except Lurlene. She was still staring off across the restaurant like she was much annoyed.

“Race riots?” Penny said, surprised. Until that moment, she had not thought things like that happened up north. The *Defender* articles always seemed so positive. Why hadn’t she heard?

“Don’t you worry, Penny,” Obie said. He looked at Daddy and Mama and continued.

“Bronzeville is growing and changing, so of course there are some problems. My daughter has a sensitive nature, especially when it comes to what’s difficult.” Lurlene scowled but said nothing. Glancing at her, Penny thought she looked about as sensitive as a hornet.

“State Street’s pretty much been Bronzeville’s boundary all along,” Obie was saying now. “But people are pushing east and south to live. Just too many people coming in to keep cramming them into these few blocks. It breeds anger, frustration, all that. They can’t be living all on top of each other like this too much longer.”

“Can’t they just move on out to somewhere else then?” Cleet asked, full of sense as usual. “I never seen such a big place. Must be plenty of room in other parts.”

Lurlene spoke up before anyone else could. “Can’t move anywhere,” she said, angry as ever. “No matter how much money you got, might as well forget it. A body cannot buy a house anywhere that whites live. Poppa could afford a house practically anywhere, but nobody will sell to him!”

Lurlene was upset, for sure. But Penny felt plenty troubled, too, maybe even more so. If you had money, at least then you should be able to move. Weren’t they in the North, the freedom states?

“Whites want to contain the growth outward much as they can,” Uncle Obie informed them. “They got this thing called a covenant—an agreement white folks make not to rent or sell to Negroes.”

“I seem to remember reading about that in the *Defender*, Obie,” Daddy said. “Didn’t the Supreme Court outlaw covenants just last year?”

“Indeed it did, Luke. Ruled unconstitutional,” Obie replied, nodding slowly. “But people are still being pressured not to sell to black folks. Maybe just not so obviously.”

“But this is the North!” Penny burst out. “What about equal rights for folks?” Even down south, teachers made sure their classes understood what the rights of black citizens were, even if they weren’t getting them.

“It’s a shame,” Mama said. “From all we read, things seem to be so much better up here than down home.”

“Oh, that it is, to be sure, Grace!” Obie replied quickly. “When it comes to how blacks and whites get on together here, well, there’s a lot to be hopeful about. But at the same time, you still

got the segregation, in neighborhoods, schools, jobs. People are fed up.”

“I’m happy to be here, just the same,” Daddy said. “Down home we got much farther to go.”

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That night, back in their two-room apartment, Penny and Cleet found the fire escape. It was just outside the bedroom window. They crawled out and sat together in the dark. Cleet pulled out his harmonica and began to play.

Listening to the sad blues notes, Penny thought about earlier in the evening. Uncle Obie had taken them all on a tour of his big, fancy apartment before dinner. Everything he and Lurlene had was fine. Nice clothes and a big car. Polished wood furniture. Thick carpeting. Even big

wide windows that showed them the sparkling lights of the city.

Here they were, living in the North, freer than Penny's family had ever been. But Lurlene, even Obie, had made it known they still had their share of troubles, some not much different than the ones folks had down south. Hadn't her family come up here to escape all that?

"You think things going to be all right up here, Cleet?" Penny asked. Cleet put down his harmonica and nodded.

"Sure thing, Penny," he said with a slow, easy smile. "Come on, sister. Don't worry it. Things will be real good. Already are."

"But Lurlene isn't all that happy! What about us? We going to end up like her?"

"No sir! Trust me. Things are better already," Cleet assured Penny. "For starters, we got a place to live with electric lights and a

bathroom, don't we? This city here is full of wide-open chances! No matter what, being here is a step up."

"I guess," Penny agreed. But she felt like she'd have to see how it went for a while before she could say for sure. Cleet always viewed things in a positive light. But Penny saw how she was probably more like Lurlene. The hornet.

Lurlene's angry voice echoed in Penny's head suddenly. All those things that set her cousin off came to mind, too. She couldn't blame Lurlene, of course, seeing how things got sometimes. But she didn't want to end up all angry that way herself.

Penny hoped with all her heart that her brother could see the future right and that things would be all good up here.

Cleet started back on his harmonica. This time the tune was more upbeat and full of lively,

joyful notes. The music was magic, lifting Penny's mood some. She sang along a few bars, her voice floating out smooth and clear on the night.

Then she stopped. "I hope you're right with all your things-getting-better talk, Cleet," she said. "But you know what little piece of 'better' I'd like to have first?"

"No, what's that, Pen?"

"That would be having a fine fuzzy sweater like the hornet's got!"

They both laughed. Just then footsteps sounded, coming down the fire escape.

"What about a 'fine fuzzy sweater'?" a voice said.

Penny and Cleet looked at each other, eyes wide.

"Hornet on the loose," Cleet whispered, causing them both to laugh softly again. Then Lurlene was standing there with them.

"That was you two making all that racket?" she said.

"Yeah, Lurlene, sorry," Cleet said, ducking his head. "I guess it's a little late."

Surprisingly, Lurlene's mouth curved into a half-smile. "No, it's okay," she replied, folding her arms across her chest. "You two didn't sound half bad—for a couple of alley cats."

Penny could see right off it was Lurlene's mixed-up way of trying to make some peace among them. And neither she nor Cleet could help chuckling at Lurlene's comment.

"Yeah, but just don't try it on a street corner, right?" Penny said.

Now Lurlene genuinely grinned. "You learn fast, cousin. Now what about fuzzy sweaters?"

Penny, embarrassed, felt the heat come to her cheeks. "I like it is all. Your sweater's nice."

“For real?” Lurlene sat down on a step. Her voice sounded slightly surprised. Then that half-smile crawled across her face again. “Maybe I’ll let you wear it sometime.” She paused. “If you two country folk don’t embarrass me to death right off the bat.”

Now Penny felt surprised. Maybe once you got under her hard shell, Lurlene wasn’t such a hornet after all. Penny figured she’d have to wait and see about this, too.

“Don’t worry, Lurlene,” Cleet said right back at her. “Like you said, we learn fast.”

“You got that right,” Penny agreed. Another old blues song came to her then, and she lifted her voice, singing low and sweet. Cleet chimed in with the harmonica. After a few minutes, Lurlene picked up the lyrics and, almost shyly, began to sing, too. Her voice nearly fit right in, almost perfect.

Okay, Penny thought, yeah. I’ve got a ways to go. We all do. But at least we’re in Chicago.