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To Bend in Strange Winds

I was a Southerner,
and I had the map of Dixie on my tongue.
—Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*

CHICAGO, LATE 1938

IDA MAE BRANDON GLADNEY

THERE WAS A KNOCK on the door at Ida Mae's tiny flat one afternoon when she was at home alone taking care of the children. It was a neighbor lady who had taken notice of the new family just up from Mississippi, seen that the young mother was by herself with the little ones much of the time, the husband likely off to work somewhere, and the neighbor lady was saying she had come to introduce herself.

Ida Mae thought it was awfully nice of the lady to drop by. She hadn't been in Chicago long, as the woman likely knew. George had secured the apartment while Ida Mae was in Mississippi giving birth to Eleanor.

On days when there was no work to be had, Ida Mae was cooped up in the kitchenette apartment, far from home, in a big, loud city she didn't yet know. She was used to wide-open spaces, trees everywhere, being able to see the sun set and rise and the sky stretched out over the field. She was used to killing a chicken if she needed one, not lining up at a butcher and paying for it in pieces with money she didn't have. As much as she hated picking cotton, she missed her sisters-in-law and the other families on the plantation and her mother and younger sister. She didn't know too many people in Chicago yet and was isolated with only little James and Eleanor with her during the day, as Velma was off in grade school.

So Ida Mae welcomed the neighbor lady and invited her in to sit a while. The lady had brought something with her. It was a bottle of homemade wine. Ida Mae had never had wine before. George didn't believe in it, and Ida Mae never had occasion to try it.

The woman opened the bottle and poured some for the two of them to drink while they talked. Ida Mae took a few sips and started feeling woozy as the woman asked her how she'd gotten there. The woman learned all about how Ida Mae's family first tried Milwaukee and how Ida Mae went back to Mississippi to have the baby when George told her he was going to try Chicago. The woman poured more wine, and Ida Mae got giddy and light-headed. She had never felt this way before.

The woman was from Mississippi but had been in Chicago for some time, had gotten to know the city's virtues and vices and how a city resident, which Ida Mae now was, should comport oneself. She told Ida Mae that now that she was in the North, she shouldn't wear her head scarf out in public—that was for back when she was in the field; that she shouldn't hang her wet laundry out the front window, even though there was no place else to let the linens dry out in the open sun like back home; that she should make sure the kids had shoes on when they went out, even though the kids hated shoes and shoes cost money they didn't have.

Ida Mae told the lady she appreciated that advice, but soon she wasn't comprehending much of anything the neighbor lady was saying. When the bottle of wine was finished, the lady said she'd better be heading back home.

George came home soon after the neighbor lady left. He found Ida Mae giggling and slurring her words, talking gibberish, and the children needing to eat and get their diapers changed. She told him that a nice neighbor lady had stopped by and that she had tried some of the wine the lady brought.

George was furious. The devilment of the city had come right into his home, as hard as he tried to protect his family from it. Ida Mae was too sweet-natured to recognize when someone might be taking advantage and wasn't wise to the machinations of the people who had preceded them to Chicago. She wouldn't have noticed if they made fun of them, looked down on them, or took pleasure in seeing the simple country people fall under the city's spell. He had to make it clear to Ida Mae that she was not to just let anybody in—this was Chicago, after all. He told her he didn't want that lady coming around anymore and that Ida Mae wasn't to drink any more wine, which was a sin in his estimation anyway.

When Ida Mae came to her senses, she was shamefaced about what had happened. She was waking up to the ways and the people of the North. She soon learned that the colored people who had gotten there before her and had assimilated to the city didn't look too kindly upon her innocent country ways.

In the receiving cities of the North and West, the newcomers like Ida Mae had to worry about acceptance or rejection not only from whites they encountered but from the colored people who arrived ahead of them, who could at times be the most sneeringly judgmental of all.

The northern-born colored people and the long-standing migrants, who were still trying to keep their footing in the New World, often resented the arrival of the unwashed masses pouring in from the very places some of the old-timers had left. As often happens with immigrant groups, some of the old-timers would have preferred to shut the door after they got there to protect their own uncertain standing.

The small colony of colored people already in the New World had made a place for themselves as an almost invisible minority by the time the Migration began. Many were the descendants of slaves the North had kept before Abolition or of slaves who fled the South on the Underground Railroad or were among the trickle of pioneers who had migrated from the South in the decades after the Civil War.

A good portion were in the servant class—waiters, janitors, elevator operators, maids, and butlers to the wealthiest white families in the city. But some had managed to create a solid though tenuous middle class of Pullman porters, postal workers, ministers, and businessmen who were anxious to keep the status and gains they had won. The color line restricted them to the oldest housing in the least desirable section of town no matter what their class, but they had tried to make the best of it and had created a world within a world for themselves.

From this group came the letters and newspaper stories about the freedoms of the North that helped inspire blacks to leave the South in the first place. The Great Migration brought in many a northerner's sweetheart, aunts, uncles, siblings, nieces, nephews, parents, and children. It also delivered hundreds of thousands of new customers, voters, readers, patients, and parishioners to the black institutions that stood to profit and be forever changed by the influx.

"They have been our best patrons," a colored physician in Chicago told researchers studying the Migration in the 1930s. "We have increased from five to two hundred and fifty doctors. We are living in better homes, and have more teachers in the schools; and nearly every colored church has benefitted."

Businessmen jumped at the opportunity. They opened restaurants serving hog maws and turnip greens. A man named Robert Horton opened Hattiesburg Shaving Parlor in a five-block stretch along Rhodes Avenue where some 150 families from that Gulf Coast town were huddled together. A few blocks away, there sat the Mississippi Coal and Wood Company, the Florida East Coast Shine Parlor to pull in the Floridians, and the Carolina Sea Island Candy Store for those who'd made it from there.

The Migration made giddy landlords of some of the old-timers. It gave them the chance to get extra money and bragging rights, too, by renting their spare rooms and garages to the new people. In Los Angeles and Oakland, it became a status symbol to have the wherewithal to take in roomers.

"I got a sharecropper," a woman in Los Angeles was heard boasting.

"Honey, I got me three sharecroppers!" another one said.

The churches stood to gain the most, and did. They ran notices in the *Defender* proclaiming, "Strangers welcome." Walters African Methodist Episcopal Church in Chicago tripled in membership. The city's Olivet Baptist Church got five thousand new members in the first three years of the Migration, making it one of the largest Baptist churches and one of the first megachurches in the country. A migrant from Alabama said she couldn't get in the first time she went. "We'd have to stand up," she said. "I don't care how early we'd go, you wouldn't get in."

But soon the cultural and class divisions between the newcomers and the old-timers began to surface. Many of the migrants, seeking the status and security they could not get back home, filled the stained-glass sanctuaries of the mainline churches. Others were overwhelmed by the size of the congregations and the austerity of their services. One migrant said she "couldn't understand the pastor and the words he used" at Olivet and couldn't get used to the singing. "The songs was proud-like," she said.

A migrant from Louisiana felt out of place at Pilgrim Baptist, another big, old-line church. "Nobody said nothing," the migrant said. "But there were whispers all over the place."

The migrants did as much moving around from church to church as they did from flat to flat. They tended to favor smaller storefront churches opened up by ministers fresh from the South, where they could sing the spirituals, catch the spirit, and fan themselves like they were used to. The reason one woman left a mainline church was because it was "too large—it don't see the small people."

The migrants brought new life to the old receiving stations. But by their sheer numbers, they pressed down upon the colored people already there. Slumlords made the most of it by subdividing what housing there was into smaller and smaller units and investing as little as possible in the way of upkeep to cash in on the bonanza. It left well-suited lawyers and teachers living next to sharecroppers in head scarves just off the Illinois Central. The middle-class and professional people searched for a way out.

"They tried to insulate themselves by moving further south along the narrow strip that defined the gradually expanding South Side Black Belt," wrote the historian James R. Grossman. "But the migrants inevitably followed."

Unlike their white counterparts, the old settlers had few places to go and were met with hostility and violence if they ventured into white neighborhoods. The color line hemmed them in—newcomers and old-timers alike—as they all struggled to move up. "The same class of Negroes who ran us away from Thirty-seventh Street are moving out there," a colored professional man said after moving further south to Fifty-first Street ahead of the migrants. "They creep along slowly like a disease."

The fate of the city people was linked to that of the migrants, whether they liked it or not, and the city people feared that the migrants could jeopardize the status of them all. A colored newspaper called *Searchlight* chastised them for boarding the streetcars in soiled work clothes after a day at the stockyards and accused them of threatening the freedoms colored people had in the North. "Don't you know that you are forcing on us here in Chicago a condition similar to the one down South?"

A survey of new migrants during World War II found that an overwhelming majority of them looked up to the people who were there before them, admired them, and wanted to be as assured and sophisticated as they were. But a majority of the colored people already in the New World viewed the newcomers in a negative light and saw them as hindering opportunities for all of them.

The anxious old settlers were "like German Jews who in the late nineteenth century feared that the influx of their coreligionists from eastern Europe would endanger their marginal but substantial foothold in gentile Chicago," wrote the historian James R. Grossman.

"Those who have long been established in the North have a problem," the *Chicago Defender* acknowledged. "That problem is the caring for the stranger within their gates."

It turned out that the old-timers were harder on the new people than most anyone else. "Well, their English was pretty bad," a colored businessman said of the migrants who flooded Oakland and San Francisco in the forties, as if from a foreign country. To his way of looking at it, they needed eight or nine years "before they seemed to get Americanized."

As the migrants arrived in the receiving stations of the North and West, the old-timers wrestled with what the influx meant for them, how it would affect the way others saw colored people, and how the flood of black southerners was a reminder of the Jim Crow world they all sought to escape. In the days before Emancipation, as long as slavery existed, no freed black was truly free. Now, as long as Jim Crow and the supremacy behind it existed, no blacks could ever be sure they were beyond its reach.

One day a white friend went up to a longtime Oakland resident named Eleanor Watkins to ask her what she thought about all the newcomers.

"Eleanor," the woman said, "you colored people must be very disgusted with some of the people who have come here from the South and the way they act."

"Well, Mrs. S.," Eleanor Watkins replied. "Yes, some colored people are very disgusted, but as far as I'm concerned, the first thing I give them credit for is getting out of the situation they were in. . . . Maybe they don't know how to dress or comb their hair or anything, but their children will and *their* children will."

In the early years of the Migration, the *Chicago Defender* took it upon itself to help correct the country people it had helped lure to the North to better fit the city people's standard of refinement. "It is our duty," the *Defender* wrote, "to guide the hand of a less experienced one, especially when one misstep weakens our chance for climbing."

The *Defender* ran periodic lists of "do's and don'ts" that recirculated over time and were repeated to newcomers like Ida Mae:

> DON'T HANG OUT THE WINDOWS.
>
> DON'T SIT AROUND IN THE YARD AND ON THE PORCH BAREFOOT AND UNKEMPT.
>
> DON'T WEAR HANDKERCHIEFS ON YOUR HEAD.
>
> DON'T USE VILE LANGUAGE IN PUBLIC PLACES.
>
> DON'T ALLOW CHILDREN TO BEG ON THE STREETS.
>
> DON'T APPEAR ON THE STREET WITH OLD DUST CAPS, DIRTY APRONS AND RAGGED CLOTHES.
>
> DON'T THROW GARBAGE IN THE BACKYARD OR ALLEY OR KEEP DIRTY FRONT YARDS.

The Chicago Urban League, which helped direct migrants to temporary shelter, rental options, and jobs, was the closest the migrants got to Customs in the North. It held what it called "Strangers Meetings" to help acclimate the newcomers, and its members went door-to-door, passing out leaflets advising the migrants as to their behavior and comportment. To the *Defender*'s do's and don'ts, the Urban League distributed cards adding the following admonishments:

1. DO NOT LOAF. GET A JOB AT ONCE.
2. DO NOT LIVE IN CROWDED ROOMS. OTHERS CAN BE OBTAINED.
3. DO NOT CARRY ON LOUD CONVERSATIONS IN STREET CARS AND PUBLIC PLACES.
4. DO NOT KEEP YOUR CHILDREN OUT OF SCHOOL.
5. DO NOT SEND FOR YOUR FAMILY UNTIL YOU GET A JOB.

Ida Mae didn't take it personally when people pointed these things out to her, like the neighbor lady who had brought the wine. Ida Mae wouldn't likely have seen her again because the family moved so much in those early months in Chicago. But she thanked people like her and a lady who mentioned her head scarf on the bus one day. She was grateful for the advice and, in fact, took most of it.

But there were some things she was not ever going to do. She was never going to change her name to something citified and highfalutin. She was never going to take on northern airs and name-drop about the pastor she knew from this or that church or the alderman who stopped to greet her at the polls, even though she would come to know famous people who made good up in the North because she had known their kin people back in Mississippi. She was never going to forget the folks back home and how she loved them so. She was never going to change her Mississippi drawl, not in the least, not even after she had spent more of her life in the North than in the South, not even when some northerners still had trouble understanding her decades after she'd been there; though she wasn't trying to be difficult and was just being herself, she simply didn't care what anybody thought. It didn't matter, because people seemed to love her for it.

She decided to keep the things that made her feel like home deep within herself, where nobody could judge her, and inside the walls of their kitchenette apartment where she made turnip greens and peach cobbler and sweet potato pie flecked with nutmeg and sang spirituals like in Mississippi as often as she liked.

NEW YORK, JANUARY 1947

GEORGE SWANSON STARLING

IT TOOK EIGHT YEARS OF MARRIAGE, broken by fearsome silences and fitful separations due to George's work on the railroad and the circumstances under which he had to migrate north. But finally George and Inez had a baby. It was a boy. He was born in January 1947, and they named him Gerard. There were already enough Georges in the family, and Gerard was close enough.

CHICAGO, EARLY 1939

IDA MAE BRANDON GLADNEY

GEORGE AND IDA MAE had been in the North for close to two years. They had three little ones to feed and were still having trouble finding work. They had arrived in the depths of the Great Depression with the fewest skills any migrant could have but with the most modest of expectations and the strongest of backs. They had taken their chances and found even the most menial jobs hard to come by.

Anything with the least amount of status or job security seemed reserved for people who did not look like them and often spoke with an accent from a small eastern European country they had never heard of. They were running into the same sentiment, albeit on a humbler level, that a colored man in Philadelphia faced when he answered an ad for a position as a store clerk. "What do you suppose we'd want of a Negro?" the storekeeper asked the applicant.

George had been struggling since he arrived. He had worked on a coal truck, dug ditches for the Works Progress Administration, delivered ice to the tenements on the South Side, and been turned away from places that said they weren't hiring or just had nothing for him. He would just keep looking until he found something.

Finally, he landed a job that suited his temperament on the soup-making line at the Campbell Soup plant, a place so big there was bound to be some work for him if the people were open to hiring him, which, fortunately for him, they were. The plant was on twenty-two acres at Thirty-fifth and Western by the panhandle tracks, where they mixed several thousand tomatoes and oxtails at a time to make soup for customers west of the Mississippi. He had been working all his life, but this was the first indoor job he had ever had.

His days would now turn on the directions of foremen and the spinning of machinery, the orderly and finite ticking of the company punch clock instead of the rhythms of the field, where he and Ida Mae used to work according to what an anthropologist once called "the great clocks of the sky."

The plant turned out six thousand cans of soup a minute along three miles of tracks and switches. He was entering the world of assembly-line factory culture, the final destination of many unskilled black southerners once they got established in the North. Whatever reception he got, good or bad, he kept it to himself, as was his way, and he carried out whatever duties he was to perform without complaint, whatever kind of soup was coming down the vats in his direction.

Like so many others, he had gone from the mind-numbing sameness of picking cotton to the mind-numbing sameness of turning a lever or twisting a widget or stoking a flame for one tiny piece of a much larger thing he had no control over. He had moved to a different part of the country but was on the same rung of the ladder. It was, in some ways, not all that different from picking cotton. The raw bolls went off to some mill in Atlanta or Massachusetts to be made into something refined and unrecognizable from what he saw of it, from the poorly remunerated kernel of the thing that represented George's and other sharecroppers' contribution to the final product intended for someone far better off than he. Except now, in Chicago, he would get paid.

Just by being able to keep his job, which he would for many years, George would be spared the contentious relations at so many plants in the North, where the migrants were scorned if they were hired at all, or outright turned away. Most migrants like George were hired into either menial labor—janitors or window cleaners or assembly-line workers—or hard labor—longshoremen, coal miners, stokers of foundries and diggers of ditches, which is what he had done before landing the assembly-line job at Campbell Soup.

Many companies simply didn't hire colored workers at all but for altogether different reasons from the South. It wasn't because of an explicit Berlin Wall of exclusion, written into law and so engrained as to not need to be spelled out for people on either side, as in the South. Instead, in the North, companies and unions said that, however much they might want to hire colored people, their white workers just wouldn't stand for it. And, for the sake of morale, the companies and unions weren't going to force the issue.

A glass plant in Pittsburgh tried to hire colored workers, but the white workers ran them out, the researcher Abraham Epstein reported, by cursing them and "making conditions so unpleasant they were forced to quit." At a steel mill there, the white bargemen threatened to walk out "because black workers were introduced among them." The white workers at the mill were appeased only "by the provision of separate quarters" for the colored workers.

A factory in Chicago reported that after it hired colored workers, there was "friction in the washrooms" and that "for every colored girl employed, we lost five white girls."

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"I find a great resentment among all our white people," the manager of a wholesale millinery in Chicago reported. "I couldn't overcome the prejudice enough to bring the people in the same building, and had to engage outside quarters for the blacks. . . . We thought it would be nice if we would start a school for machine operators. . . . I received a delegation from our sewing hall who said they resented the idea. They wouldn't listen to it at all, and I had to abandon the project. Their argument was: 'If you let them in it won't be long until we are out entirely.' The attitude against the colored is only the same as it was against the Slavs or the foreign races when they first intruded the field."

Somehow the migrants persisted, partly because they had little choice and could only hope that open-minded whites might see past the preconceptions. A Chicago laundry, for instance, reported that when it hired its first colored girl, "the white girls threatened to quit. The manager asked them to wait a week and, if they still objected, he would let her go." As it turned out, the white girls grew to like the colored girl, and she was permitted to stay.

Overall, however, what was becoming clear was that, north or south, wherever colored labor was introduced, a rivalrous sense of unease and insecurity washed over the working-class people who were already there, an unease that was economically not without merit but rose to near hysteria when race and xenophobia were added to preexisting fears. The reality was that Jim Crow filtered through the economy, north and south, and pressed down on poor and working-class people of all races. The southern caste system that held down the wages of colored people also undercut the earning power of the whites around them, who could not command higher pay as long as colored people were forced to accept subsistence wages.

The dynamic was not lost on northern industrialists, who hired colored workers as strikebreakers and resorted to them to keep their labor costs down just as companies at the end of the twentieth century would turn to the cheap labor of developing nations like Malaysia and Vietnam. The introduction of colored workers, who had long been poorly paid and ill treated, served as a restraint on what anyone around them could demand.

"Their presence and availability for some of the work being performed by whites, whether they are actually employed or not," wrote the sociologist Charles S. Johnson, "acts as a control on wages."

By the time George managed to find steady work, he was joining the forty percent of black men doing unskilled or semiskilled work in

Chicago in the 1940s. Another thirty-four percent of black men were working as servants, meaning that, for three out of four black men, the only work they could get was work that nobody else wanted—lowly and menial or hard, dangerous, and dirty. Nearly the inverse was true for white men, the majority of whom—some sixty percent—were doing skilled, clerical, business, or professional work, clean indoor jobs.

The ceiling was even lower and the options fewer for colored women, a situation that was making it even harder for Ida Mae to find work. By 1940, two out of every three colored women in Chicago were servants, as against seventeen percent of white women (most of those newly arrived immigrants). Only a fraction of colored women—a mere seven percent—were hired to do clerical work—common and upstanding positions for women of the day—compared to forty-three percent of white women.

Under these conditions, Ida Mae and George found themselves at the bottom looking up at the layers of immigrants, native-born white people, and even northern-born black people who were stacked above them in the economic hierarchy of the North. It was all well and good that George now had a job at Campbell Soup. But they would never be able to get settled in Chicago until Ida Mae found reliable work. So Ida set out to look whenever George wasn't at work and, the rest of the time, took care of the children.

By now it was winter in Chicago, and the cold was beginning to get to her. She had never felt anything like it before. It was a supernatural kind of cold that burned the tips of her fingers and hunted her down through the layers of sweaters to the half inch of skin that happened to have been left unprotected.

On the streets, there were perils at every turn. The sidewalks were glazed with ice, and she had to climb over hills of unmelted snow. She looked up and saw spears of icicles hanging from the gutters and soffits of the buildings. The icicles were as big as a human leg and pointed toward the sidewalk like swords. She heard that sometimes the icicles broke from the buildings and killed people. It was like being on a different planet.

"You spit, and it would be froze," she said.

She didn't complain about it. She just did what she had to do. She trudged through the snow to take baby Eleanor to the clinic at Forty-third and State for the immunizations the city said the baby had to have.

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She wrapped Eleanor in so much swaddling you couldn't tell there was a baby inside.

At the clinic, the nurse gave her instructions.

"Mother," the nurse said, "take the baby's clothes off."

Ida Mae thought that was the craziest thing in the world, cold as it was outside. She didn't want Eleanor exposed like that.

"All that snow out there," Ida Mae said. "I ain't takin' my baby's clothes off."

"The doctor has to see her," the nurse told her.

Ida Mae balked but soon learned there was no point in protesting. This was the way they did things here on this new planet she was on.

NEW YORK, DECEMBER 1951

GEORGE SWANSON STARLING

NO MATTER HOW SETTLED the migrants got or how far away they ran, the South had a way of insinuating itself, reaching out across rivers and highways to pull them back when it chose. The South was a telegram away, the other end of a telephone call, a newspaper headline that others might skim over but that hurtled them back to a world they could never fully leave.

George had been in New York for six years when the South came back to haunt him. Sometime in late December 1951, he got word that something terrible had happened to an old acquaintance back in Florida.

It was someone he knew from his days as a substitute teacher at the colored school in Eustis during the lulls in the picking season. George had only a couple years of college, but it was more education than most colored people in town, which was why they called him Schoolboy with his proper-sounding talk. So George was a welcome and natural fill-in for the regular teachers when they took sick or went away.

He loved imparting whatever wisdom he had acquired in his twenty-odd years. But he soon came to realize that colored teachers were making only a fraction of what the white teachers were making in Florida.