

It's a Long Way from Home

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Louis's heart skipped a beat as the train slowed to a halt. He stood tiptoe straining to see beyond the sea of heads in front of him. His fellow travelers pushed him impatiently to get a look. Louis tried in vain not to push the people in front of him. Suddenly the door opened. The push from the people behind was so great he hardly had to put his foot on a step; he was carried down the stairs and onto the platform of Central Station in the big bustling city of Chicago in the great northern state of Illinois. He had heard about this station. It was the entry to a new way of life for young men like himself. Central Station was the door to his future and for Louis, it symbolized the chance to be something other than a sharecropper like his parents and grandparents before him.¹ It was a chance to see something of the great big world outside of

Mississippi. It was a chance to spread his wings. It was a chance for freedom.

Louis looked up and down the platform for his cousin, Robert. He had only seen him once before when they were kids. "Hey, hey, over here, Louis, I'm over here!" Robert shouted. He looked and acted the same—the sparkling eyes and the big, welcoming smile. Louis shyly held out his hand, but Robert grabbed him and hugged him. Louis noticed Robert's suit. It was new; his plants were pleated, the lapels were wide, and his shoes were shiny. Louis shifted his weight from side-to-side. He adjusted his collar and tugged at the sleeves of his suit coat. There were new leather patches on the elbow but he couldn't help but feel that they were a signal to the world that the suit had been worn by his father and brother before him. His mother had

always reassured him that he didn't need a lot of clothes, just a bar of soap to make him clean and presentable, but his mother wasn't on the platform looking at his nattily attired cousin.

Robert exclaimed, "You daydreaming, or what? Come on! Aunt Celia told me I had to bring you home right away, because I have got to show you your new home. She is worried about her little grand-nephew coming to the big, bad city for the first time. But don't worry about her, I'll just tell her your train got in late." Louis could hardly keep track of Robert's excited talk as he jumped from subject to subject. One second it was Aunt Celia, the next it was Louis' future. "We'll get you all set up," Robert assured him. "Maybe you can find a job in a hotel or in the stockyards where my Dad and I work. No matter what happens, I'll tell you this, the year is 1922 and being here is better than milking some cow

and chasing chickens." Louis felt suddenly excited at the thought of work in the big city. He didn't want to be a sharecropper; he didn't want to raise crops on farm land that didn't belong to him. He got angry whenever his father gave the landlord not only rent but also a share of their crops they had worked so hard to harvest.

Robert led the way out of Central Station one step ahead of Louis. He pointed to the tall buildings downtown north of the station. Then with a wave of his hand to the left or to the right Robert talked about the exciting world of the South Side. Louis had never seen anything like it. In Mississippi the folks he knew hardly owned anything except the clothes on their backs. But here there were restaurants, flower shops, drugstores with all black customers. What impressed Louis even more was that Robert told

him this was an area in the city where blacks owned most of the businesses, too.²

Robert led Louis to his home. The small, wooden cottage was a few blocks west of the grand, stately gray and brownstone homes on South Park Avenue.³ Robert's house was one of many little cottages on a neat and tidy street. Once inside and after a warm welcome from Robert's parents, Louis met his Great-aunt Celia for the first time. "Hmmp," she said, as she looked Louis up and down. "You seem like a nice young man. You stand straight and you know your manners. Keep it that way! I don't want you getting into trouble. I'll be watching you." "Yes, ma'am," Louis said as Robert looked exasperated. Aunt Celia turned and glared at

Robert, "And I don't want to hear any of that fancy talk coming out of your mouth, Robert. All I know is I don't want to know where you are picking it up." What fancy talk? Louis wondered. His cousin seemed pretty normal to him.

After dinner, Louis and Robert headed straight to Robert's room where they would both be sleeping. Louis started to take off his shoes, but Robert apparently had other plans. He strode over to the window, opened it and put his leg over the sill. "I'll see you later, Louis. Aunt Celia can really bring me down⁴ with all her 'none of that fancy talk, Robert.' She gonna make me snap my cap.⁵ I gotta split.⁶" Snap my cap? Bring me down? Split? Louis had no idea what Robert was saying. Was this the fancy talk to which Aunt Celia referred? Robert threw his other leg over the sill. Louis looked out the window in time to see Robert land with a thump.

He ran out of the yard and then turned and waved. He laughed as he ran away from the house.

On Louis's second day in Chicago, Robert pulled him aside. "I know you are planning to start to look for work, you being such a good boy and all. But tonight you are coming with me. You didn't leave that farm just to hang around with these old folks. You and me are going for a walk along the Stroll."⁷ Wherever they were going, Louis was sure Aunt Celia wouldn't approve. After dinner Robert and Louis went to Robert's room. "Come on, we got to catch the streetcar." Robert threw his legs over the sill and jumped. Louis had no idea where Robert was talking about, but his stomach felt like it had a butterfly and a knot in it at the same time. Louis jumped and ran behind Robert. They took the streetcar headed north to 35th and State Street.⁸ Robert

explained to him that this is where the nightlife of the South Side was. "You haven't heard or seen anything 'til you have been on the Stroll."

The Stroll. Louis had read about it in the *Chicago Defender* but had never dreamed that such a place really existed. There were movie theaters, vaudeilles, cabarets; the sidewalks were teeming with people walking shoulder-to-shoulder.⁹ You could have ice cream in a fancy shop called a parlor or could eat chili or something as exotic as chop suey in a restaurant.¹⁰ There were lots of guys and girls. Everyone was whooping it up and laughing. And the light! There weren't just streetlights like Louis thought there would be in the city.¹¹ The signs of the cabarets, vaudeilles and movie theaters

were surrounded by little round bulbs, illuminating the pleasures to be found inside. It was so bright it was like the middle of day at midnight. The buildings where people lived were all brick. One building was next to the other and one floor was stacked on top of the one below. But the most amazing thing was the sound he heard coming out of some apartments. It wasn't the slow, sad blues he was used to hearing back home. This music was running fast and was getting ready to go faster. There were banjos, a piano and horns. Louis recognized the sounds of a banjo strumming. But he had never heard the brassy sounds of the saxophone and cornet.¹² The piano sounded like someone was rolling his fingers up and down the keys. Then suddenly a horn would burst on the scene and take the music in another direction. Robert looked at Louis and said, "Boy, close your mouth, try not to

look like what you really are—a farm boy. We are going into this building here; we are going to blow it down!"¹³

Inside the apartment young men and women were dancing and laughing. Louis remembered Aunt Celia pointing her finger at him and telling him to be a good boy. He didn't see anybody over the age of 25. A guy came up to Robert and put out his hand, "Hand me that skin, Robert."¹⁴ Listen to this record of the King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band.¹⁵ Old Satchel Mouth is really laying down some hot licks!"¹⁶ He pointed at Louis's hat. "What kind of lid is that?"¹⁷ Louis could feel the blood rushing to his face. The hat was rumped around the edges. He took it off. "Don't pay any attention to him," Robert said. "He's my cousin from Mississippi. Pay up, Louis. Put some cash in that hat over there." Money? Louis wondered why he should put money in the

hat. Robert saw the bewildered look on his face and leaned over and said, "It's a rent party."¹⁸ We get to hear the newest jazz record by the King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band,¹⁹ have some giggle-water,²⁰ and meet some girls. In return we help the guy pay his rent. It's no big deal, it happens all the time. Some rent parties have guys playing real pianos! Just put some money in the hat and start enjoying yourself." Giggle-water? He meant have some alcohol.

Robert talked and danced until 2:00 a.m. Louis watched him and talked a little to some other young men, but stayed far away from the young women. He was too nervous to talk to them. He had never socialized with young women without a chaperone before. Robert and Louis took a streetcar back home and climbed in the window and fell right to sleep.

The next morning Aunt Celia was in rare form. She was shaking and pointing her index finger straight up at Louis who was at least a foot taller than she. "I know I can't walk up these stairs with this bad leg, but I am pretty sure you two were not in that room. Where did you go? Louis, I told you I was going to keep an eye on you. Robert, where did you two go? If I find out you trying to corrupt this boy, why I am going to tell your father when he gets home..."

Robert looked at Aunt Celia with his big brown eyes. "Awww, Aunt Celia, you are right. We weren't in our room." Louis' throat plunged down into his stomach. "We just walked down to the next block to see Thomas and Michael and their sisters. You know that we are old enough to

take care of ourselves. Can't we just visit some friends?"

She looked at Robert suspiciously.

"Thomas had better have been with you. I don't want you visiting any girls without a chaperone." With that she walked away shaking her head and muttering about how times had changed. The last thing Louis wanted was for his uncle to find out that they had been on the Stroll. Robert looked at Louis and winked, "Tonight we are going to a club."

After dinner the cousins jumped out the window and headed for the streetcar again. As they walked down State Street north of 26th Street, Louis could see the glow from all the lights from the Stroll. He could feel his heart beating. He was more excited and less nervous than the night before. What would a club be like Louis wondered. "We are going to the Lincoln

Gardens;²¹ it's a black and tan club¹⁸ up north on 31st Street," Robert explained. Louis was getting used to Robert's way of talking, but "black and tan" was a new expression.

Robert told Louis the Lincoln Gardens was the largest dance hall on the South Side. Louis thought it was one of the most handsome buildings he had seen in the South Side. Inside there was a large crystal ball hanging over the dance floor that had small pieces of glass on it.²² There were spotlights that shone on the ball and made the whole dance floor sparkle.²³

To Louis's astonishment he soon found out that "black and tan" meant blacks and whites both went to the club. While Robert and Louis took a seat in one section, there were white

people their age sitting in another. There was a floorshow on the dance floor where a master of ceremonies instructed the customers to stay in their seats while black dancers stepped this way and that showing the customers the steps to a dance. Then the dancers got faster and faster.²⁴ All Louis could think was that Aunt Celia would definitely have not approved of how they were dancing. They were shaking their hips, twisting, and jumping. Their feet were moving as fast as their arms.²⁵ Then the master of ceremonies instructed people to gather on the dance floor.²⁶

Robert ran to the dance floor and tried to drag Louis with him. There was no way Louis felt he was going to go, but he watched as Robert and a young woman danced right next to a young white couple. Louis could not believe his eyes. Something like that would never have happened in Mississippi. If a couple was getting

too close (like Robert did once) the master of ceremonies came on over and told the couple to keep it moving.²⁷ The master of ceremonies did an O.K. job of keeping people in line, but Aunt Celia would have done better, Louis thought to himself. The dance floor was packed and hopping at the same time. Finally Louis couldn't take it anymore; his foot was tapping to the beat and his body swaying to the rhythm. He had to dance. A young lady sitting at a table nearby had looked at him a few times. Louis thought she might have what Robert would call a "crush."²⁸ Finally he got the nerve to ask her to dance. She practically jumped out of her seat and ran to the dance floor. They danced one dance, and then another. Louis made sure to keep his distance and not get too close.

After a couple of hours Louis grabbed Robert's arm. "We've got to get back before

sunrise!” Robert agreed. As they walked away from the Stroll toward the streetcar stop Robert put his arm around Louis. “Well, what do you think?” Louis laughed and said, “Well, it’s a long way from home...”

Sources

¹ Olivia Mahoney, *Douglas/Grand Boulevard A Chicago Neighborhood* (Great Britain: Arcadia Publishing, 2001) p. 51

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, p. 76

⁴ Jazz slang, www.allaboutjazz.com

⁵ Jazz slang, www.allaboutjazz.com

⁶ Jazz slang, www.allaboutjazz.com

⁷ William Howland Kenney, *Chicago Jazz, A Cultural History, 1904–1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) p.14

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p.15

¹² Chicago Historical Society *My Kind of Town* exhibition materials.

¹³ Jazz slang, www.allaboutjazz.com

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Chicago Historical Society *My Kind of Town*.

¹⁶ Jazz slang, www.allaboutjazz.com

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Kenney, *Chicago Jazz*, p.13.

¹⁹ Chicago Historical Society *My Kind of Town*.

²⁰ Chicago Historical Society, *Fashion Flappers 'n All That Jazz* exhibition brochure.

²¹ Kenney, *Chicago Jazz*, p.17.
Chicago Historical Society *My Kind of Town*.

²² Kenney, *Chicago Jazz*, p.16

²³ Ibid., p. 20.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Chicago Historical Society, *Fashion Flappers 'n All That Jazz*.

²⁶ Kenney, *Chicago Jazz*, p. 24.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 20

²⁸ Chicago Historical Society *Fashion Flappers 'n All That Jazz*.