

Snow falls in Bronzeville:

A story of a lost central city neighborhood

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Ruby Walker Moore sat by her window and watched the snowstorm. Days when the snow fell always brought her back to her childhood in Bronzeville. “Bronzeville” was an insider name of a Milwaukee neighborhood just north of downtown that had been razed during urban renewal and freeway construction in the early 1960s. Over 8,000 homes and hundreds of businesses were lost, including the entire community that Ruby grew up in. The neighborhood was made up of mostly African Americans like herself, but quite a few Jews and other European Americans also lived there. Today’s storm reminded her of that week in January of 1947 when the snow fell and fell and fell.

The snow began falling early Tuesday. It stopped, but then started up again. Ruby Walker, a freshman at Lincoln High School, had been sent home early.

“You c’mon in now,” Mrs. Walker directed, as she spotted Ruby trying to find the walkway through the snow to her front door. “Your daddy will not believe this storm when he comes home.”

“Daddy” was Mr. Charles Walker. He was a truck driver and was somewhere on his way to California. In those days, very few people had phones in Bronzeville, so it was very hard to stay in touch with people outside the neighborhood.

Mrs. Walker sent Ruby out back with her younger brother Lester to play in the snow. After considering their options, the siblings decided

to make a fort by packing snow against the house and digging out a tunnel where they could sit. They could hear the sound of the radio near the kitchen window. Mostly they heard weather reports predicting a blizzard by nightfall.

At 5:00 Mrs. Walker called the siblings in for supper.

“Where’s Nate?” Ruby asked. Nate, Ruby’s older brother, worked at the Pfister Hotel downtown as a maintenance worker. He also played in a band on weekends.

“I’m sure he’ll be here soon,” Mrs. Walker replied.

“But he’s always here by 4:30,” whined Lester.

“Well, the traffic is very slow in this snow,” Mrs. Walker said, in a faltering voice.

Ruby shook her head, thinking about that convertible Nate had bought a few months back—a Ford Super De Luxe Sportsman. During the war (that just ended two years ago), most car manufacturing had stopped. Then in 1946 Ford went all out and manufactured fancy new lines. Ruby and Lester thought Nate’s car was about the most beautiful thing they’d ever seen. But their parents saw it as dangerous. They always complained about Nate being a risk taker ever since he insisted on joining the Marines as soon as it opened up to colored men (as they called black men back then) in 1942. His war letters were filled with bloody battle stories of the Pacific—to the extent that Mrs. Walker actually thought he might have adjusted to the war a little too well. Then when he spent all the money he’d saved from the Marines and a whole year’s salary at the Pfister (making 75 cents an hour, no less!) on that convertible, she was hopping mad. Even more so, she was afraid—afraid the convertible would turn over if he drove around a curve too fast, and he’d be killed. Ruby saw that look of fear in her mother’s face again today.

“Maybe he never left,” Lester said. “Maybe the Pfister told them to stay overnight there.”

Ruby thought that was a possibility, but with no phones in the neighborhood, they wouldn’t know.



Ruby woke up Wednesday morning hearing the sound of the radio in the kitchen. She knew it was later in the morning than she usually got up, so she figured her mother had heard that the schools were closed. Suddenly she thought about Nate. She jumped out of bed and raced into the kitchen where Mrs. Walker was preparing grits for Lester. "Did he come home, Mama?"

Mrs. Walker shook her head. "I'm sure the hotel kept their workers behind, Ruby," she stated, but without the conviction Ruby wanted.

"But what if he's trapped out there in his car?"

Mrs. Walker tried to reassure Ruby that the road crews were digging people out of the snow all over Milwaukee and there was no reason to worry. She told Ruby to hurry and get dressed and eat her breakfast. "We might run out of food in this storm. The weather report says it could last for days. You and your brother are going to have to go out looking for a store that is still open."

An hour later Ruby and Lester set off on their errand. They spent a half hour digging their toboggan out from under the back porch. Snow drifts were up to their waist. When they got to the front of the house Ruby gasped. Her world looked like an alien planet. The snow was so deep that the streets could not be distinguished from the sidewalks and the sidewalks could not be distinguished from front yards. With no traffic or people on the streets, all was an eerie silence.

"Oh there!" Lester yelled, pointing ahead. "Someone!"

Through the falling snow Ruby could almost make out the figure of two children pulling a sled. As they got closer they saw it was Alisha and Alice Johnson. Ruby and Lester waved and met them at the end of the block. Their sled was filled with grocery bags.

"My mama said that Nate didn't get home last night," Alisha said.

"How did she know?"

"She visited your mama this morning. Is it true that he's probably still at the hotel?"

Ruby dropped her head, hoping it was true.

"Say, where did you get the groceries?" asked Lester.



“Silverstein’s is open up on Walnut, but they’re out of milk. We stopped at Clara’s and she was just closing but said she’d wait if we could come back with containers and she’d fill them with milk.”

Ruby told Lester to run back home and get the big thermos.

“But don’t go up to North Avenue,” warned Alice. “It’s all snow drifts and everything’s closed.”

When Lester got back with the large thermos, they tugged the toboggan to the corner of 7th and Walnut. The Johnson sisters were right and Clara’s Restaurant was still open. Clara herself was just inside the front door, and took the large thermos and filled it to the top. “Now I gotta be closing, you hear,” she said, “or I won’t be able to get home. I hear from those Johnson kids that your Nate didn’t get home last night.”

“He’ll be alright,” Lester responded. “The hotel probably kept their workers overnight.”

“In those fancy rooms? Hmm,” Clara muttered. “Well, tell your mama that Clara hopes he didn’t try to get out in that fancy convertible.”

The siblings put the thermos on the toboggan and headed down the block.

Lester looked up at the Regal Theater marquee. “I don’t suppose we’ll be able to see the triple feature this weekend.”

Ruby shook her head. Ruby loved the old theater. She dreamed of getting a job there as an usher in a couple of years. Her dad had told her the story of how the theater had gone into foreclosure during the Great Depression a few years back. Then a friend of her father, Attorney James Dorsey, and a Jewish businessman, Samuel Ludwig, got together and bought the theater. Ruby’s dad told her that this partnership between people of different backgrounds was a good thing for the community.

Silverstein’s Grocer was two blocks west of Clara’s restaurant. When the siblings got there, they saw several other toboggans and sleds parked outside the store. Inside the place was bustling.

Ruby checked the list. She sent Lester through the aisles for bread, oats, and mustard greens. She would get toilet paper, lard, and a chicken. When they checked in with each other they were unable to find any mustard greens or lard. "Mama said it was okay if we couldn't get everything, but she really needed the chicken."

Ruby and Lester walked up to the butcher's counter. Ruby looked at the meat. It looked very much like the meat that her family usually bought, but she'd always heard that Jewish meat was different. Ruby pointed to what she thought was a chicken.

"Do you want that?" asked a young man behind the counter.

"Is it a chicken?" asked Ruby

"It's kosher," added the man. "Is that what you wanted?"

"Is this what we wanted?" Ruby asked Lester, nervously.

"Just get it," whispered Lester.

The butcher wrapped the bird and the siblings took all their items to the cashier.

"Are you the kids with the brother with that fancy convertible?" asked the woman at the cash register.

The siblings nodded.

"We heard he didn't come home in the storm. I hope he'll be alright." She reached under the counter and retrieved two wrapped candies and handed them to Ruby and Lester. "You say your prayers, now."

The siblings were happy to get the candy, but they now had two things to worry about. They were certainly worried about Nate, and they were also worried about telling their mother they'd bought a kosher instead of a chicken. On the way home they reasoned that the bird looked just like a chicken and perhaps their mother would not care. Maybe they didn't even have to tell her.

As it turned out, Mrs. Walker did not even unwrap the kosher that night. She said she was saving the "chicken" for the time when Nate came home. All went to bed uneasily that night with still no word of Nate. And the snow kept falling.



Ruby woke up the next morning thinking it was still night. The wind had blown so much snow up against her window that it was nearly completely covered. But she heard the sound of the radio in the kitchen and people in the living room and knew it must be morning. For several seconds she listened carefully for Nate's voice. Nothing.

Ruby got up and went into the kitchen. Lester was eating oatmeal. "Nate's not here," he said before Ruby had the chance to ask. "Mrs. Jackson, Mrs. Bishop, and Mrs. White are in the living room. They brought food." Lester pointed to a casserole dish and a sweet potato pie on the counter.

The ladies in the living room were members of the Pleasant Company Needle Craft Club. The club made stocking dolls, quilts, and crocheted items for the Folk Art Fair. They used the proceeds to help the colored veterans and give scholarship money to young people in the community. But today Ruby knew they weren't meeting to sew. They were here to reassure Mrs. Walker about Nate. "They think Nate is stranded or dead, don't they?" Ruby snapped.

Lester shrugged his shoulders. "No one said that. I think he's still at the hotel."

Ruby couldn't respond. She figured her little brother had to believe that. She went to the kitchen window and could see snow still falling. She could also see people shoveling in the distance.

"Mama thinks we should go out today and help everyone shovel. She said the Jews will have to get to their synagogue tomorrow."

Ruby knew that her Jewish neighbors could not do any work beginning sundown on Friday. They always walked to their synagogue on 11th and North on Friday evenings and Saturdays, no matter what the weather was.

Ruby and Lester went out to help shovel after breakfast. Mrs. Walker told them she'd wait for Nate and if they stayed close enough to their home, she would find them as soon as he arrived.

The siblings agreed to shovel the area around 9th and Galena. They recognized most of their neighbors—colored and white—out shoveling

too. Ruby started clearing the blocks going east with Freddie and Samantha Gibson, and Lester began shoveling the blocks going south with his school friend Walter. Everyone knew about Nate, and everyone kept saying he was still at the Pfister Hotel.

Ruby eventually finished the block between 9th and 8th on Gale-na with the Gibson siblings until the two went home to dry out their clothes. Ruby continued on to 7th Street. Near the corner was the music union property. It was a rooming house for musicians run by a Mr. Thomas that some called T-Joe. Ruby went to rest on a snow bank near the house, and remembered the last time she was there. Within minutes, she started to cry. This was the place where Nate would come to jam with his fellow musicians. They would often jam all night there, and sometimes famous musicians that were in town, like Cab Calloway, would join them. Ruby remembered going there with Nate just two weeks ago. She got to watch and pour coffee for the musicians. She was now sobbing. She tried to hum the Fire House Blues to console herself.

Ruby got up from the stump. Her tears had frozen in her eyes. She knew she had to go home and get a handkerchief as her nose was running badly, but she couldn't see through the frozen tears. She started to walk in a direction that could have been home and couldn't stop crying.

"Ruby!" someone hollered.

Ruby didn't want the man to see her crying so she just continued to stumble on. The man began to follow her and Ruby walked faster. Her nose was running so badly she had to breathe through her mouth.

"Ruby, stop!" ordered the man.

Ruby continued on, not knowing where she was going.

The man grabbed her shoulders from behind. "Ruby! It's Nate!"

Ruby choked on her own phlegm. She turned and Nate took her in his arms. "Nate! Oh Nate! I thought you were dead!" she sobbed.

Nate gradually led Ruby in the direction of home. From a distance people began cheering and calling out Nate's name. Within minutes

a crowd had gathered around Nate. He started telling them his story and how he'd walked home from the Pfister today. "I started early this morning, but you couldn't even see the streets, and the snow was so deep."

"Where did you stay the last two days?" someone asked.

"In the hotel lobby. There were people stranded there from all over the country—one even from England. But I couldn't start walking then because I didn't wear boots to work on Tuesday."

"Oh, that is so Nate," someone laughed.

"Finally someone from the hotel found some old boots in lost and found," Nate continued. "And here I am."

Ruby continued sobbing—now in joy—keeping her head tucked against his jacket so no one would see.

That night Mrs. Walker stuffed and roasted the kosher. Lester and Ruby never told her the true identity of the mysterious bird, and all enjoyed it immensely.

On Friday the snow began to let up. Ruby and Lester invited Nate and their friends to join them in the fort they built in the backyard. By late afternoon they watched the Jewish families walking to the synagogue. Sunday became a day of rejoicing. After the Walkers returned from church, Mr. Margoles, the Jewish manager of the Regal Theater, delivered free movie tickets and coupons for popcorn to all, thanking them for their help shoveling during the snowstorm.

Mrs. Ruby Walker Moore smiled as she thought about the days of the great snowstorm of 1947. She remembered the warmth of her community in Bronzeville before it was razed for freeway construction and urban renewal. She was grateful that at least the Walker family had stayed together. Her parents lived into their nineties. She'd married and had four healthy children and 18 grandchildren. Lester became a dentist. Nate went back into the Marines and (despite himself) actually managed to stay alive well into his eighties.

