



Excerpt from *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* by Isabel Wilkerson

CHICAGO

*Timidly, we get off the train.
We hug our suitcases,
fearful of pickpockets...
We are very reserved,
For we have been warned not to act green...
We board our first Yankee street car
to go to a cousin's home...
We have been told
that we can sit where we please,
but we are still scared.
We cannot shake off three hundred years of fear
in three hours.
—Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices**

CHICAGO, TWELFTH STREET STATION, OCTOBER 1937
IDA MAE BRANDON GLADNEY

The leaves were the color of sweet potatoes and of the summer sun when it sets. They had begun to fall from the branches and settle in piles at the roots of the elm trees. The leaves had begun to fall when Ida Mae and George walked into the cold light of morning for the very first time in the North.

Ida Mae and her family had ridden all through the night on the Illinois Central and had arrived, stiff and disheveled, in a cold, hurrying place of concrete and steel. People clipped past them in their wool finery and distracted urgency, not pausing to speak—people everywhere, more people than they had maybe seen in one single place in their entire lives, coming as they were from the spread-out, isolated back country of plantations and lean-tos. They would somehow have to make it across town to Milwaukee and cart their worldly belongings to yet another platform for the last leg of their journey out of the South.

Above them hung black billboards as tall as a barn with the names of connecting cities and towns and their respective platforms and departure times—Sioux Falls, Cedar Rapids, Minneapolis, Omaha, Madison, Dubuque,—footfalls, redcaps, four-faced clocks, and neon arrows pointing to arrivals and track numbers. The trains were not trains but Zephyrs and Hiawathas, the station itself feeling bigger and busier than all of Okolona or Egypt or any little town back home or anything they could possibly have ever seen before.



They would to have to ride the La Crosse and Milwaukee Railroad for three more hours to get to their final stop in their adopted land. They could not rest easy until they had made it safely to Ida Mae's sister's apartment in Milwaukee. In the end, it would take multiple trains, three separate railroads, hours of fitful upright sleep, whatever food they managed to carry, the better part of two days, absolute will, near-blind determination, and some necessary measure of faith and just plain grit for people unaccustomed to the rigors of travel to make it out of the land of their birth to the foreign region of essentially another world.

The great belching city she passed through that day was the first city Ida Mae had ever laid eyes on. That first glimpse of Chicago would stay with her for as long as she lived.

"What did it look like at that time, Chicago?" I asked her, half a life later.

"It looked like Heaven to me then," she said.