

CARTON 7:38

CHAPTER 4

c. 1998

CHAPTER FOUR

Chapter 4/New Orleans (1)

After packing my suitcase, I bought a ticket on the All American Bus and left for New Orleans one foggy morning. I changed buses four times; the last change was in Dallas, Texas. Then I caught a Trailways bus that was already waiting in the bus station. The Trailways Bus rolled right into New Orleans at three o'clock in the morning.

When I stepped off the bus a lady acquaintance whom I had met on the bus was with me. This lady was looking for a friend to meet her, but no one came. With great disappointment, she came along with me to the address of mother's house, that had been given me. As we came near the house I was trying to imagine what my mother would be like and also if I should call her Janie or mother.

In a few more seconds, I was knocking on the door. A smiling dark skinned lady came to the door. When she saw who I was, she spoke with a soft voice: "Lee Brown, I am your mother." As my mother embraced me, at that moment, I didn't feel any emotion or love, only respect, in knowing this was my mother and at last we had united.

Suddenly Jeanette, my half-sister, ran from a room and started hugging and kissing me. The last time I saw Jeanette we were children. She was three years old then. Now, she had grown up to be a beautiful young lady. My half-brother, Peter, whom I hadn't met yet, wasn't living with Janie, but was married and living some other

place in New Orleans. Despite all the excitement, the lady who came along was eventually introduced. It was about three-thirty in the morning, with all the talking and getting acquainted all over again. Before we knew it was daybreak.

During all the conversation I had with my mother, I wanted to ask her why she hadn't come to get me to live with her when grandfather died. Did she ever try to find out whom I stayed on the farm with or what I was doing? So many questions I wanted to ask Janie, but I only felt gratitude being in her presence. . . and these questions became unmentionable.

It was seven o'clock when Janie left the house, went to the store, and brought back some food for breakfast. Jeanette got dressed and went to work.

After breakfast the lady acquaintance and I left the house to find her friend. We walked down Rampa Street. In and out of bars. We continued walking for hours. Finally the last bar on the street, we found her friend. The lady thanked me for helping. Then we parted. Although this was my first time getting around in New Orleans, it wasn't difficult finding my way back to Janie's house.

When I first arrived at Janie's house, I didn't know my half-brother, Peter, wasn't raised by Janie either. Only my half-sister stayed with Janie. (By the way, I called my mother by her first name which was Janie.) Janie wasn't as ill as I expected she would be when I arrived in New Orleans. Nevertheless, without complaining about things that happened in the past, I settled down to make New Orleans, my home for the time being.

I rested around the house for three or four days, then I started inquiring about a job. Janie thought about a man, named Walter, who was a member of a union. She said, "Walter lives three blocks from the house and he might be able to tell you where to find work." I thought Walter might be at work in the morning, so I waited until one evening before going to his house.

Walter had just come in from work. I introduced myself, then I told Walter that I was Janie's son, who had just arrived from Los Angeles, California. I also asked Walter what union he was a member of. Walter said he was a member of Local 207 ILWU located at 420 Grads Street. He said the president's name was Andrew Nelson. With directions from Walter on how to find the union hall, at ten thirty the next morning I arrived at the union hall. I waited twenty minutes before the president, a Black man, came through the door. Inside his office, I introduced myself and showed him my traveling cards from Local 12 in Los Angeles, California. I asked the president if he had a job open. He answered, "Yes, this union has an opening and will be glad to give you a job." I told the president "Since you have a job open, I'd like to transfer to your union." He accepted that. Then, he wrote out a worksheet for me to take to the federal barge line to give to Orange Dickie, who was the shop steward.

The Federal Barge Line was located at Galveston Street Wharf in New Orleans. The president had written down the directions. I caught a streetcar, transferred to Canal and Galveston, stayed on the Galveston bus until it went to the end of the line, walked one block and turned left. After following these directions, eventually I made it

to the right place. Orange Dickie was pointed out to me. He was busy driving a tractor. I stopped him and gave him my worksheet. Then we went upstairs to see the personnel manager. The personnel manager signed me up, and told me to come to work the next morning.

Feeling great about getting this job, I couldn't wait to get home to tell Janie. Janie was sitting in the front room when I got home. I told her about having gotten the job. She said, " You were lucky to get a job so soon." I explained to Janie, "It's not luck when you belong to a union, and are determined to work. Members of the union often look out for each other"

The next morning when I went to the union hall I was given a number to check in by and also to call out a number when passing a window. The most pleasing thing about this job was the wages: one dollar and twenty-five cents an hour. In addition, the workers were splendid in helping me get started. This work was almost the same when I worked in the warehouse in Los Angeles, except this time it was on the dock loading and unloading boxcars and barges.

In as much as I had gotten a job, I was now anxious to look New Orleans over and get acquainted with some people. I soon found out it was a fact: New Orleans has the most beautiful Black women in the world. Black women every color of the rainbow! I also went to the French Quarter where most of the mulattos live. Bars stayed open all night. Each bar had a dance floor. Unlike most bars in California, one could bring your own bottle and put it on the table. The weather, hot in the summer, was very cold in the winter. Occasional floods.

Weeks passed, before I had the pleasure of meeting Peter, my half-brother and his wife, Henriette. Peter and I got acquainted. We talked a long time about how many years we were separated from each other. Peter was the eldest in the family. His grandparents raised him. As time passed, we became a close family. Now it was obvious: Jeanette, Peter, and I had different fathers. Under those circumstances, I could easily see why our family members were such distances apart. Since I became a man, these things seem very unimportant now.

In the meantime, after a few weeks working on the dock, Walter Green and Chester Langha took me to the union meeting. Attending this meeting for the first time gave me confidence toward helping my people. Every attempt was made on my part to attend frequently. In doing so, I became an acceptable member and was placed on the Executive Board in the union. My constant involvement was in fighting for better working conditions for union members. Shortly, the union members elected me shop steward on the docks. In doing so, this gave me more of an advantage to enforce union contracts by methods of communicating with employers on jobs. The workers on the dock had one hour for lunch. Whenever I called for a noon meeting nearly half an hour would be spent on discussing political issues with the workers. Also, we discussed the conditions that existed in the Black community. Later I discussed the political issues around the nation with Bro. Nelson.

One night Bro. Nelson invited me to attend a political meeting in the Gojo Building on Canal Street. I wasn't aware at the time that it would be a Communist meeting. This was my first time to attend

such a meeting. Being a new face in the group, the District Organizer asked people, after the meeting, to give comments or make criticisms. My statement was that I enjoyed the meeting and the discussion was helpful. At that point, the District Organizer said, "Come back again."

I attended every time the Communists had a meeting. Bro. Nelson would let me know when a meeting as scheduled. After attending these meetings for a while, I became a member of the Communist Party in the United States of America.

In the meantime, I went out with several girls. One girl in particular was my steady. Her name was Shirley. Shirley lived a few houses down the street from Janie's house. We kept company for a long time. Shirley was a young girl. She would meet me every evening after work. We walked home together. One night after our date, Shirley asked me to marry her. I talked this over with Janie. She explained that if a girl asks you to marry her, "You should think the matter over before marrying her, because she might be pregnant!" I decided I wasn't ready to settle down and didn't want marriage standing in the way of the complete struggle for my people that I hadn't yet begun.

Meanwhile, I started studying. I read books on Marxism, V.I. Lenin's philosophy, African history, and Black history in America. With knowledge from these books, I was more suited to struggle around political issues in the community and on the job. This was in the year 1944. I continued on the job activities and political action in the community.

Frequently I attended party meetings and special meetings of the party to get accustomed to fighting around issues, staying active, and getting acquainted with other party members. The reason I liked the party program was because the program opposed capitalism and advocated socialism for the working class. It also fought against Jim Crowism, for better education, decent homes, health institutions, and the necessities of life like food and clothing.

Unquestionably, every child should get a high school education or special trade school training, so he or she can earn a living and this should be paid for by the federal government; also, four years of college. In this way a child won't have to drop out of school to help his parents earn a living. With the highest possible degree of education, a child would be able to earn his own living. Special trades like lawyers, doctors, nurses, any jobs that call for special education should be paid for by the federal government, regardless of race, color, creed. I learned this should be done when I was in the Communist Party meetings.

Even though I had lived in Los Angeles for approximately five years, in a short while I fell in love with New Orleans. The people here were more friendly toward each other at least, more so than in California. Neighbors wouldn't pass you without speaking, and sometimes they would stop and have a long conversation with you. The people seemed so concerned about your well-being and would often invite you over to dinner and make you welcome in their home. I enjoyed the Creole food that was served in restaurants and in homes. Actually this Creole food is the best you can eat anywhere. One of my favorite dishes is gumbo and oyster loaf, which I ate all

the time. These are some of the reasons I fell in love with New Orleans so quickly.

In the year 1945, one Sunday at a general membership meeting of the Warehouse and Distribution Workers' Union Local 207, I noticed a beautiful brown-skinned lady in the meeting. I didn't get a chance to meet her that day. In the meeting that day a union member nominated me to to to a convention, which was to be held in Detroit. I declined the nomination. Then the union member spoke on my declining. He said, "I nominated Brother Brown to go to the convention, because Brother Brown doesn't have a wife and I figured he was the best qualified man to go to the convention." Anyway as it turned out I didn't go to the convention. This was the day this beautiful lady started paying attention to me.

One Friday night I met her at our Local Executive meeting. She was sitting about three seats in front of me in the meeting. She kept looking back at me, and smiling. Shortly afterward, I got up, stood on the floor, and made a comment about the good and welfare of all our union members. After the meeting had adjourned, this beautiful lady came over and shook my hands and told me, "I liked your talk. It was very good. And you hit the union representatives where it hurt and you shook them up!" I told her I didn't have anything personal against any of the union officers. I was only trying to get them involved in building a strong rank-and-file Local. I went on to tell her that a strong rank-and-file Local means better working conditions on jobs, welfare, and pension plans with job security. I told her all these facts to try to inform her on Trade unionism, so she could become a better Trade Unionist.

As our conversation continued, this beautiful lady told me her name was Rose. Rose said that she heard the union member say in the last general membership meeting that I didn't have a wife. Then I asked Rose where she lived and if she had come to the meeting alone. Rose answered that she lived on a certain street in the city and she came to the meeting alone. I asked her if I could see her home. She said "Yes".

My intention was to build a better relationship with Rose and to get her more involved in union affairs. She seemed to be very interested in my talk at the meeting and in her union's affairs. Rose was shop steward on her job, working in the feed mill in the city.

Rose and I left the Union hall and took a bus to her home. Before we reached her home, we stopped at a bar about a half block from her house. Rose asked me if I drank. I told her, "Yes". We ordered two glasses of draft beer and sat for about an hour or longer, talking and getting acquainted. Rose and I talked on different subjects. I talked a little about myself and my activities in the union. Apparently, I didn't tell Rose I was a member of the Communist Party. What I did tell her was that I became a member of the union in 1938 in Galveston, Texas. The union I was a member of was the Labor Union. My salary in that union was 35 cents an hour, working in the shipyard, Todd Dry Dock. When Rose and I finished our drinks, we went to her home. Rose asked me in. Once inside, we talked some more, until it became late at night. I stood up and said, "I believe I'd better go." Then Rose said, "It's getting so late and the buses run slow. I don't think you should go back across the Industrial Canal at night, because it's very far. While you are standing waiting on a bus,

someone might try to rob or hurt you. I suggest you stay here."

Without any hesitation at Rose's suggestion, I accepted the invitation. To me, Rose was quite impressive and desirable I told Rose I didn't have to work the next day which was a Saturday. All I had to do was to go pick up my paycheck Saturday afternoon. I was working on Galvez Street Wharf, loading and unloading boxcars and barges.

Next morning Rose went to the grocery store and bought some food for breakfast. Not only was Rose beautiful, but she was a real good cook.

At that time, I was living with my mother and sister across from the Industrial Canal in a two room apartment. There wasn't too much room for the three of us. I discussed this problem with Rose. She told me, if I would like to, I could stay with her, because she had plenty of room and only her sister's son lived with her. . . .

I agreed to live with Rose. So I went to pick up my paycheck that evening and went by my mother's house. I gave my mother some money and told her I was going to live with a lady who was a member of my union. I told mother I was doing this so it wouldn't be so crowded and I will always come by to see her. Mother agreed with me; my sister didn't have any comment on the subject. I took some of my clothes and went back to Rose's house to live.

As time passed, Rose and I grew close to one another and we were able to help each other in the labor movement. However, this was only half the picture. Rose was separated from her husband. She also hadn't mentioned she had any children until we were living together for a while. Then Rose sent for her children, who were living

in Delta, Mississippi with their grandmother. She had five children, including the boy who was living with her during the first time we got acquainted and was not her sister's son, but one of her own. Actually, it didn't matter to me that she had children. All Rose's children accepted me and I them. Before long we were living together as a family. Her children called me their father.

Several years later, Rose had a son for me. We named him Lee Brown, Jr. He weighed 12 pounds when born and we called him "Brownie" for short. As we continued living together, Rose was known in the state of Louisiana as my common-law wife. With my family and beautiful common-law wife, I continued my trade union activities,

I was a shop steward at Galvez Street Wharf, on the Negotiation Committee, Executive Board member, member of the Political Action Committee of my Local, and member of the Trustee Committee, and one of the advisers on the Three Man Committee to our Union president.

As a member of the Communist Party, I was active in my club, which was known as the French Quarter Club. I was transferred to the Trade Union Club. I worked very close with the District Organizer. I gained much knowledge about the labor movement. Also, I learned how to get involved in issues that were facing Black workers in the South.

Also I was gaining knowledge from reading a lot of literature about the union and the Party. An old-time trade unionist and member of the party kept me up with the literature. He kept me well-informed on issues that we were facing and had to get involved

around: Jim Crowism, segregation, discrimination. He was a loyal trade unionist and Party member. He pointed out to me these were the reasons wages were low and we had bad working conditions. The majority of the workers weren't organized in a union. The Jim Crow system kept the workers divided, particularly in the South. That is one of the bosses' main weapons that they use against the workers to keep them divided, which meant that we would always have problems facing the Black workers and poor people in the South.

This also meant the Black workers would be denied a right to vote, education, health institutions, and adequate housing. Conditions would remain the same, in the ghettos, particularly in the South. millions of Black children would go to bed hungry unless the union would try to organize the workers in the South, both Black and white.

It would mean the Black workers would have to fight to register and vote as first-class citizens of the United States of America. Also, it would mean they would have to fight for decent wages on jobs, as well as job security, seniority rights, health and welfare plans, pension plans: all of which should be open for all workers to fully partake!

A union means Black and white workers working together. In so doing, that means we can destroy our main enemy: Jim Crowism and discrimination. As long as these exist, problems will always confront the workers in the South and in the nation as a whole

A white officer of the union and I discussed all of these issues frequently, while we were having lunch. Years have passed and gone, and I don't know, at this time, if this union officer is living or dead.

I got myself involved in a lot of these problems that were confronting Black and poor workers in the South I fought for the right to register and vote,

In the month of December Rose and the children were away in Delta, Mississippi visiting her parents, for the holidays. With nothing to do one night, I went walking the streets about twelve o'clock night, as was usual for me, just to observe people. I was standing on the corner, being very concerned and interested in my Black people's behavior. Then I walked down a poorly lit street going to another bar on that street. I noticed three youngsters coming toward me.

When they came close to me, one of the youngsters asked me if I had a match. Not knowing what the youngster had in mind, I ran my hand into my pocket. With one hand in my pocket, one of the youngsters hit me over the head with a garbage can top. Then they took my leather gloves, wallet, and overcoat. (It so happened that I didn't have much money in my wallet.) If I had known in advance their intentions, I would have protected myself better. During the robbery, the youngsters seemed so frightened! Actually, they seemed as if they weren't in the business of robbing too long.

As soon as I recovered, I went to the Twelfth Precinct and reported the robbery. I made a statement to a policeman what had happened. The policeman told me, "Nigger, you didn't have anything!" I explained that I could have gotten hurt or killed with people robbing on the streets and not any protection. I told the police, "You people are not concerned for Black people, robbing and beating each other up in this city." That the policeman didn't know was that I was a well-informed, active trade unionist.

Then the policeman told me: "Run, nigger!" I told the policeman I had no reason to run. Why should I run from him, when I was the victim -- not the robber! I added: "I see now Black people have no protection in this city from you white racists and segregationist policemen!"

I have always spoken up for myself. My grandfather taught me to speak up for myself when I was being attacked by the unjust. That was the reason I wasn't afraid to speak up to these so-called peacemakers. Naturally this was amusing to the policemen. They continued laughing about the whole thing. I told the policemen, "That's all right. Forget it!"

I then left the station. Since Rose and the children weren't at home, I went and spent the night with my cousin. Early the next morning, walking down the streets, I met a friend. He went back with me to the scene of the robbery. We looked around trying to find out if one of the youngsters had dropped my wallet. With no such luck, we went in and out of bars to see if I recognized any of the youngsters. My friend and I soon gave up. Then we went to the office of the Pittsburgh Courier, a national Black newspaper. The newsreporter of the Pittsburgh Courier took my statement. I told him precisely what had happened: about the robbery and the abrupt attitude of the police at the Twelfth Precinct. However, I asked the reporter to go to the Superintendent office with my friend and myself. (The Superintendent's office is known in some cities as the Chief of the police department.) The reporter agreed to go to the Superintendent's office with us. Seemingly we were well received by

the Superintendent. I made the same statement to the police Superintendent that I had made to the newsreporter.

When the Superintendent finished hearing my complaint, he said: "This is the first time anyone came in this office and made a complaint about the police." He went on to say, "I had been hearing rumors about the policemen for a long time---in the Black communities. But no one had the guts to come forward and make a complaint until now." The Superintendent asked me, "Could you recognize any of the policemen again?" I told him, "Yes!" Then the Superintendent asked me, "Did you get the policeman's badge number?" I told him, "No." Then the Superintendent said, "The officers are on the night shift. Can you come back at night and identify them?"

The newspaper reporter who came with us was concerned about what happened to Black people in the South. The newsreporter began talking with the Superintendent about what had happened and took notes while he was talking. Then the Superintendent asked me: "What action do you want me to take to clear up these problems?" I said, "As a first step, you should hire Black policemen, because I feel that the Black people need some protection against crime in the Black communities." Then, the Superintendent asked me: "Do you want to be a policeman?" I said, "No! My job is to fight for the rights of my people here in the South."

The Superintendent didn't give us any direct resolution to this problem, except he wanted me to come at night to the Twelfth precinct to identify the policemen. We talked awhile in the Superintendent's office and left. Once outside the newsreporter

advised me not to go back to the police precinct at night alone, because all the policemen stuck together and they wouldn't tell you which one was on that Friday night anyhow. Added to this, even some friends told me not to go at night, because I would be leaving myself open to get hurt or framed by the police. Except for the facts, I still wasn't satisfied with the behavior of the policemen when I reported the robbery. Evenso I didn't go back at night or any time thereafter.

Three Black newspapers supported me. They put in their papers that Lee Brown was asking for Black policemen to be put on the police force in New Orleans. This was the first beginning of getting better security for the Black communities in New Orleans. Sure enough--- Black policemen were put on the force. Then the Black communities felt a little safer. White police couldn't relate to the Black people. Black people were more afraid of the police than they were of the criminals. White police at that time were racist and deadly against the Black workers in the South.

These are some of the things I faced in the South. The white police department was anti-labor, anti-Black. It was the same as Fascism in Germany. It was a crime against the Black workers and the poor people. If anyone was fighting for Black police to be put on the police force during that time, beside myself, I was not aware of it.