

Blood Journey – Chapter: “The Sanitarium” (excerpt)

It had not been that long ago when Patsy noticed the change: She was tired all the time. But she did not have time to rest because there was always so much to do. She had completed her coursework at Wayne University and received her degree. She was finishing her first semester of student teaching. She—like most of the other Negro college students living in Detroit—was working at one of the city’s recreation centers. She, and the others, worked there part-time to help pay tuition. She also taught piano lessons on Friday afternoons and on Saturday mornings at the YMCA. Then, she directed two choirs on Sundays and met for practice sessions during the week.

“Patsy,” her father said, “you’re doing too much. You’ve got your degree. Leave the recreation center.”

She could not do that. The work at the recreation center gave her a freedom that she did not have in the classroom. She could plan her own day at the center—she was her own boss. She decided when to come and when to go, which children would be grouped together and what they would do. It was different in the classroom: All day in the same room. Certain lessons had to be taught in a certain order and in a certain way. She wanted to be a teacher, that was part of her plan for her life. She also loved her job at the center. “I can’t leave it, Daddy,” Patsy told him.

Before she started college, Patsy had left her job at Klein’s department store. Klein’s was the first store in downtown Detroit to hire Negro women as clerks. Other stores hired Negroes, but as cleaning ladies. A step up for the Negro women who could get work there, it had been Patsy’s first job. She had been hired in as a clerk. But that was different. She always planned to move on. Her co-workers could not understand.

“Why do you want to teach, Patsy? They don’t make much money.”

“This is what I want to do,” she answered matter-of-factly. She did not feel as if she had to explain her decision any more than that. She just knew she did not want to work as a clerk for the rest of her life.

Quitting the recreation center, that was different.

“Can’t I just quit the choirs, Daddy?” she pleaded.

He was adamant. “No,” he said. His voice was stern, almost gruff. “The church is our backbone. You keep the choirs.”

Patsy knew her father was right. Things were getting out of hand. Sometimes she would have three or four paychecks at a time stuffed into her purse because she did not have time to get to the bank and cash them.

She came home from her student teaching one afternoon to hear her father announce, “I’ve called the recreation department and informed them you would not be returning to work there. Effective immediately.”

Tears welled up in her eyes, she was so disappointed. But, in no small way, she was actually relieved. Right away, she felt an invisible weight lifted off of her shoulders. As the days moved on, she began to feel in tune with life once more. It did not take long before she realized how out of step she had allowed herself to become from the other young adults. The year was 1946. The war was over, and soldiers had just begun to return home from overseas. The campus was bulging with veterans—her brother Doug was one of them— who were flush with plans to use the GI Bill to get on with their lives. Young men and women were earnestly courting. She allowed herself to begin dating again. There was time for it, now.

First, she dated someone from the next block named Lamar Rogers. They had known each other from childhood. Both her mother and his assumed they would marry. That was not Patsy's intention. He wanted to be a minister, and Patsy did not want to be a minister's wife. She had other plans for herself.

Then she began dating Bill. He only approached her for a date when he saw she was no longer dating Lamar. He was that reserved. But, there was nothing reserved about his motorcycle. For their first date, Patsy met him on campus and they went to a varsity baseball game. He brought her home on his motorcycle. The roar of that engine could be heard through the entire neighborhood. It was a warm, late spring evening. Several neighbors who had been sitting on their porches or on their front steps stood and watched Patsy's arrival. He parked the bike in the driveway. Her mother was standing inside their front door looking through the screen. Patsy froze at the bottom of the porch steps. The anger in her mother's eyes pierced through the netting.

"Young man," her mother began, "you have disrupted the entire neighborhood bringing my daughter home on that motorcycle."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Ford," Bill answered apologetically. Patsy stood silently.

Her mother continued, "In the future, if you must drive that vehicle, you are to turn off the engine before you reach our street. I don't want our neighbors—or my family—disturbed by that noise, ever again."

"Yes, ma'am," he responded.

"Now, good evening. It's time for Patsy to come inside." Her mother held open the door. Patsy stepped around Bill and went into the house.

Bill followed her mother's instructions explicitly. Patsy peeked out of the living room window and watched him walk the motorcycle down the street to the main road. She saw him turn the corner, but she did not hear the engine start up. Several minutes later, she heard what was either Bill's bike or a truck going down the road.

The Infirmary

Mary Andrews, Wilma Harris, Janet Curry, Harriet Farmer—those were the names of some of Patsy's friends who had succumbed to tuberculosis. The havoc wreaked by TB reached epidemic proportions in Detroit the year following the end of World War II. So many people died from the disease that it seemed it might decimate the entire Negro population in that city. "The threat is very real," Dr. Hammonds explained to Patsy when he ordered a set of x-rays of her lungs during her annual exam.

Those thoughts were far from Patsy's mind in the fall of 1946 when she stepped through the doors of Herman Kiefer County Hospital carrying the x-ray films. The doctor's nurse had called and left instructions for Patsy: she was to pick up the films from the office and hand-deliver them to the hospital. Patsy was not alarmed at those instructions. At the age of twenty-one, Patsy was just looking forward to another day of student teaching.

"Let me come with you," her mother had offered over breakfast. "The county hospital is such a big place. It's easy to get lost around there."

Patsy agreed.

Neither one of them knew how to drive a car. And since her father had left for his job at the factory much earlier that morning, he could not drive them there himself. So Patsy and her mother took the bus, first to the doctor's office and then to the hospital.

They arrived at Herman Kiefer, as it was called, early enough for Patsy to drop off her films and get to her teaching post on time. But, when they finally found the correct department and signed in at the receptionist's window, a series of events began that Patsy was not expecting.

A man stepped into the room, called her name and asked Patsy and her mother to follow him. He led them to an elevator which they rode down to the basement. Then, they walked through a corridor to a parking garage. A van was waiting for them. They were escorted into the van; the driver immediately started the engine and drove off. This was the beginning of the episode that disrupted Patsy's life.

"Where are they taking us, Mother?" Patsy asked, sounding a bit anxious and confused.

"We'll know soon enough," her mother replied.

"But I'm supposed to teach this morning," Patsy reminded her. "Who's going to call my supervisor and tell her I'll be late?"

"We'll take care of it. There's plenty of time," her mother said confidently.

It was a long drive, lasting almost an hour. When they finally arrived, they were outside the city of Detroit and in the small town of Northville Township. The van had stopped in front of Maybury Sanitarium. They were met at the door by a nurse who directed Patsy down one hallway to have another x-ray taken and who directed her mother down another hallway to a waiting area.

Patsy put on the hospital gown they gave her but kept on her low-heeled pumps. They took away her suit. After the x-ray, she asked for her suit. She explained to the attendants that she had to leave because she was expected to teach that day. A nurse

standing nearby ignored her request and said curtly, “Dr. Peck will talk to you now.” The nurse led her to Dr. Peck’s office. Her mother was already sitting there. Patsy saw the look of distress on her face.

“Mother, what is going on here?” Patsy asked, demanding to know.

Before her mother could answer, Dr. Peck walked into the room. “Hello, Miss Ford,” he greeted Patsy. “I need to speak with you *and* your mother. Is this your mother?” Patsy’s shade of brown could be called a pecan color. Her mother looked almost as white as Dr. Peck. Patsy was used to the confusion, but that morning it bothered her. Her mother interjected, “Yes, I’m Mrs. Ford, her mother.”

“Good,” he said. He continued talking as he put her chart and films on his desk.

“Miss Ford, how long have you been sick?” he asked, looking directly at Patsy.

“Am I sick?”

“Why, yes you are.” He picked up the films. “I’ve examined your x-rays. You have rather deep cavities on both lungs. This indicates that you have been sick for quite sometime. When did you have your last chest x-rays taken, aside from the ones you’ve brought with you here?”

Patsy explained to the doctor that she had one taken in February or March of that year. The university required one before she could begin her student teaching.

“You’re at the university?”

“Why, yes,” she responded defensively, “and you’ve interrupted my teaching schedule for today.”

Dr. Peck looked at Patsy. “Miss Ford, you’re going to be staying here for a while.”

“Can my mother stay with me?” Patsy asked.

“No,” he replied. “No, you’ll be staying too long for that.”

“But, I’ve got to contact my student teaching supervisor.”

Dr. Peck looked concerned. “We’ll take care of that.” He looked at Mrs. Ford. “We’ll want to take x-rays of your family and each child your daughter has come into contact with while teaching.”

He pressed the buzzer on his desk. When the nurse entered, he instructed her, “Please take Miss Ford to room one twenty-two, bed number two.”

Patsy left her seat, leaned over to her mother and hugged her tightly. “What’s happening to me, Mother?” she pleaded as she burst into tears.

“Everything will be fine, baby,” her mother whispered as they embraced.

The nurse took Patsy by the elbow, gently pulling her away from her mother, and led her out of the room. As she left, Patsy heard the doctor say, “Mrs. Ford, anything your daughter has handled at home will have to be either boiled or destroyed...”

The door swung shut behind her. Patsy continued to hear the doctor’s muffled voice.

“...we advise you to burn all of her clothing...”

She stopped a few paces behind the nurse and strained to hear the rest.

“...save one dress to bury her in.”

Patsy froze in her step. A sudden rush of heat went through her entire body. “Oh, no!” she screamed. Then her body fell heavily onto the floor as she fainted.