

*The Colored Car* – Chapter: “The Colored Car” (excerpt)

Patsy watched as a different conductor entered their train car and announced, “Next stop Cincinnati!” He looked up and down the rows of seats and walked over to where her mother sat. “Are these your babies? Your young ‘uns?” he asked brusquely, looking over at May and then at the girls.

Once again, Patsy knew why he asked: her mother’s light skin was almost as white as the conductor’s and not like the color of her four brown-skinned girls.

May looked him straight in the eye. “Yes, these are my children,” she answered.

“We’re comin’ up on Cincinnati,” he continued. “You’ll need to change cars.”

“We’ll be ready,” she said.

“Where are we going?” Laura asked.

“You said there’s a new train station in Cincinnati. Can we go see it, Mama?”

Patsy asked.

“We’ll just have time to look at it from the outside, at the most. But it’s so dark out; I don’t know how much we’ll even be able to see. There probably won’t be time for much else. But we’ll see,” the mother answered.

The train had stopped and the conductor announced from the platform, “Cincinnati Union Station!”

“All right, girls,” May Ford instructed, “gather up your things. Get up, now. Put on your gloves. Make sure you have your handkerchiefs. Do you have any peppermints left? No, I didn’t think so. Come now, let’s go.”

Patsy and her sisters stood and did as they were told: They put on their white gloves and held tight to their handkerchiefs. With baby Annie May in her arm, their

mother led them off of the train. That same conductor was standing there as they left the car. He directed them and the other colored passengers who were leaving their train cars, “This way to the colored car.”

“What’s the colored car, Mama?” Patsy asked.

“Patsy, you take Laura’s hand,” their mother said. “Follow close to me.”

It was almost midnight but the heat was still stifling. With Annie still in her arm, May wiped her forehead and the back of her neck with her handkerchief. Then, she took Jean’s hand. They walked into the crowd of people on the platform, some were standing, some walking, some seated on benches.

“Here we go girls, we won’t have to walk too far, I don’t think,” their mother said.

They walked up to a car. May Ford looked up. Patsy followed her mother’s gaze. Above the steps to the train car was a sign with the word COLORED on it.

*Last call for Louisville, Clarksville, and Nashville!*

“This is it. Patsy, you and Laura go on in now,” their mother said, “I’m right behind you.”

They stood behind a line of passengers, all colored, who were getting on the train car.

Patsy led her sister into the car. She stopped in the doorway. It took just a few seconds for her to take it all in—the floor was bare and worn and there were rows of old wooden seats. There was no upholstery, no cushions, no curtains. A rusty, pot-bellied stove was situated in the middle of the car. There was soot in the air and she started to

cough. She looked up at her mother and said, “Mama, this car’s dirty...our dresses will get dirty. Let’s go back to the other one.”

“We can’t do that. Come on and make the best of it.”

As May Ford led the other girls to their seats, Patsy stood in the doorway.

“But it’s dirty, Mama. Let’s go back to the other car. Why couldn’t we just stay in that car?” Patsy asked. “There were other people staying in that car.”

“Take your seat, Patsy. This is where we’ll be until we get to Clarksville,” her mother said.

Patsy turned and went back down the stairs and stood on the platform. The mother looked at the other sisters and commanded, “Stay right here, girls.” Then she joined Patsy on the platform and grabbed her daughter’s arm.

“Patsy, what’s gotten into you? You can’t go running off like that. Now get back on the train!”

Patsy pulled away. “Mama, that train car smells. It’s dirty. It made me cough. The seats are all crowded together. There’re no cushions on the seats...How can we ride all the way to Clarksville in that colored car?”

“Oh, sweetheart, it won’t be so bad. You’ll fall asleep. We’ll be there before you know it, bright and early in the morning.”

*All aboard!*”

“No, Mama—get Laura and Jean and the baby. Let’s go back...” Patsy’s voice was shaking.

“Patsy, now stop it. We cannot go back to the other car. We have to ride in this car. *We have to ride in the colored car!*”

“But why, Mama, why?” Patsy’s eyes were filled with tears.

“Listen baby—when we leave Cincinnati, we’ll be in the South. In the North, where we live, colored people and white people can sit on any train they want. In the South—Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, all the southern states—they want colored people to sit on the train with other colored people.”

Patsy’s mouth dropped open. “That’s why there were mostly colored people getting off of our train? But I saw some white people getting off, too.”

“They probably had business or family in Cincinnati,” her mother explained. “But if they didn’t, they didn’t have to leave their seats.”

“Let’s get a move on!” The gruff voice behind them belonged to the conductor.

“We’ll be on presently,” May Ford answered him.

She turned to Patsy and held out her hand. “Come on, now.”

Patsy stood firm. “I don’t want to sit in that colored car!”

“Please, child, come on,”

Patsy looked up and saw Laura and Jean looking out the window. She wanted to be with her sisters, but not in the colored car.

“Everybody in the car!” It was the conductor again.

“Come on, Patsy!” Her mother’s voice was firm now, no longer pleading. Sweat was beading up on her forehead.

“If you can’t get her up in that car, I will,” the conductor said, reaching for Patsy’s arm.

“Don’t touch my daughter, sir,” May Ford said sternly.

“What did you say to me?” he demanded.

The conductor stepped back and looked May straight in the eyes. Veins were bulging out on his forehead. His white face seemed to turn almost purple.

“I said don’t touch my daughter.” May’s voice was cold. Patsy stepped away from the conductor’s reach. She was shaking. By that point, people walking by on the platform—colored and white—had stopped and were watching.

“Oh yes, but I will touch your daughter. And I will drag her onto that car if I have to because I’ve got a train to run! Now you take this little picka—”

Right then, from behind, Patsy felt the firm grasp of two massive hands lift her off the ground.

“Daddy? Daddy is that you?” Patsy asked.

“Let me help here, sir,” the man said.

Patsy looked over at the man’s face. It was not her father. It was a tall, light-skinned colored man. He had on a dark-blue cap. The words “Pullman Porter” were etched in brass in the middle of the cap.

The porter lifted her up and carried her up the steps. He spoke gently. “Let’s get you up on this train. You’ll be fine. You’ll have a good ride, I promise you.”

Patsy saw her mother hurry up behind them. “Thank you, sir, thank you so much.”

The porter put Patsy down in a seat right behind her sisters. “How’s this?” he asked. Patsy just nodded her head. There were tears streaming down her cheeks.

“That’s fine,” her mother said, a little flustered, as she reached into her pocketbook.

“No, please,” he said as May tried to hand him a dollar coin. “I’m more than happy to help.” He tipped his cap to her and then to Patsy. “Have a good trip,” he said and left the train.

*All aboard for Louisville, Clarksville, and Nashville!*

Patsy sat in the wooden seat by the window. May Ford sat next to her with Annie May sitting in the aisle seat. Patsy felt her mother’s arm wrapped tightly around her shoulder. She raised her gloved hand to wipe the tears from her face, but she noticed some soot on her glove. She took it off and used the back of her hand instead.

Jean and Laura were peeking at Patsy and their mother through the space between their two seats.

May furrowed her brow and gave the two girls a stern look. They quickly turned around.

“We’ll be in Clarksville before you know it,” May said to Patsy. “Grandma Jackson will be so glad to see you and your sisters. And I bet you more than anything there’ll be an apple pie on the table. You’ll be able to smell it as soon as we walk in the door. Mama always bakes an apple pie when there’s company coming...”

“She raised those girls to think they’re too good for the colored car...”

Patsy leaned forward and looked past her mother and Annie May. It was the woman in the next aisle muttering just loud enough for them to hear.

“Bet they know different now, don’t they.”

Patsy looked up at her mother. May’s face had turned red. She stood up and faced the woman.

“No one,” Patsy’s mother said in a firm voice, “*no one* tells me how to raise my children.”

The woman didn’t say another word. She turned her head and looked the other way.

As her mother sat back down, Patsy looked down at the folds in the skirt of her dress.

“Oh, Mama, Look!” she whimpered. The soft organdy fabric hung over the side of the wooden seat. Patsy could see long, dark smudges all across the pale-blue gathers of her dress. She broke down into tears. She could barely speak. “Mama,” she cried softly, “my dress is dirty!”