

The Mending Time, a novel, by
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Chapter One
Chicago, 1933

That year, a web of uncanny events wove and tightly fixed itself all around our city's permanent shadow. The first Negro airport, located in Robbins, Illinois - the first Negro suburb in history - was mysteriously burned down. Our own Provident Hospital expanded. FDR took office just as Hitler came to power. The World Exposition was cancelled in the height of a most embarrassing calamity juxtaposed between two world wars. Then, as that twelfth month lay dying, Prohibition was finally repealed.

They called this calamity the Great Depression because, for an entire decade, due to a series of greedy acts, working class America was quickly reduced to what had been customary for Negroes. Rice and water for breakfast. When before, blacks might have had a bone, it was now pot liquor time for all. To survive, Negroes pulled together harder, shared what little there was, scratched deeper, longer for America's leftovers, spread it thinner, and just worked harder, in our minds.

It was a time when knowing our place could be life saving. With those thick and unmovable boundary lines drawn all around us, we lived as if their hot edges were electric. Living always in cold, crowded new places carrying the scorching memory of the old field times, we did what we knew to protect our children from the past, as we, ourselves, became their present-day overseers.

And through it all, there was the giant, reliable hand holding us up, extending herself from the complex, dissonant and polarizing experiences we couldn't comprehend. That's what the music felt like. Something strong and solid to stand, walk and dance upon when the indescribable things got too hard, too heavy, too many. Her steady hand would hold and hum every particle of life we carried be it sweet, shattered, or otherwise...

Nothing in medical school had begun to prepare him for the things he saw and heard once he went into practice on the South Side where he had decided to make his life. Benjamin Kenneth Lowery had completed his internship at Provident, the Negro Hospital on East Fifty-First Street.

Never had he imagined such violence and deep despair. On the other hand, never had he seen so many Negroes rise to prominence in the performing arts or sports arenas. To him, it was a city of either extreme, with the very best and worst of everything his people knew and had. While he thought he understood their needs for the countless broken lives, hearts and minds - absent help along these lines in slavery's aftermath - he learned much more from the people and stories he encountered. While he made it a point to remember all of his patients, his conversations with one man, a Mr. Hugh Coleman, in the early days of his practice, would stay with Ben forever.

Ben had rented a small, ground-level apartment on Forty-Seventh and Grand Boulevard. He used the front rooms for his offices, slept in the back, and reserved Tuesday afternoons for study in his medical journals as well as the Negro newspapers, to keep abreast. He had questions to explore and used this time to delve into them. How would he accurately, appropriately describe his suspicions about the effects that racial prejudice and hatred had on Negroes?

More to the point, what was the difference between the brain chemistry of someone whose life was shaped by trauma and violence, and that of someone whose was not? Could techniques such as hypnosis help to

access painful memories locked away in the farthest recesses of mind? Could hypnosis be used to restore balance to patients whose presence was deeply strong and troubling, to help them move back into more neutral affectation, a natural or more functional state of being and knowing? Exactly what for them would be a more natural state? And, what of sex: that magical, glorious mystery most Negroes would never try reducing to words? Ben thought of these, his big questions, as game. Like a hound ever in the hunt, he was focused, relentless and impartial in pursuit of his priceless answers.

His practice in its infancy and with no secretary yet, Ben made his own appointments. For money, he worked in the emergency room, moonlighting at Provident. To make himself and his work known in the community, he bought ads in the Daily Defender, he attended functions given by the Baptist ministers' group, the Prince Hall Masons and the Eastern Star, Alpha Phi Alpha, Delta Sigma Theta, and others whenever he could. Then, in the neighborhood libraries Ben attended lectures of interest and then, he himself gave monthly lectures on mental health. Usually one or two people would attend. Sometimes up to five, and these he considered very successful.

There, he spoke about depression and

anger, things he believed anyone could relate to. He shared news about the mental health clinic now open in Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church as an example of what the people can do to help themselves. After about six months of giving these talks, a newsman from WMAQ radio showed up and asked for an interview!

One Tuesday afternoon soon after that radio show aired, Ben's door opened unexpectedly as Mr. Coleman presented himself, carrying a peculiar, badly crumpled, large brown paper bag under his arm.

"May I help you?"

"I sho do hope ya can. Doc McDaniel say I might wanna talk to ya, but I ain't paid him much mind. Once I heard ya over the radio, I figure it must be a sign. So, I look ya up and come own over here to see ya."

"McDaniel, at Provident?"

"He the one."

"Yes, I've known Ole Mac since my training. But, I'm sorry. No appointments on Tuesday afternoons. It's my research time. You're welcome to set an appointment now if you'd like." Ben wanted to keep his office rules clear.

Like Ben Lowery was no stranger, like he hadn't just refused to see him, Hugh got right to it.

"Didn't know nothin' 'bout that. I done brought it. Right here in this bag. Somethin' I don't rightly know what to do with. Ya see, this thang I got, well, it ain't somethin' I thank is even right to do 'way with. If'n I did, then, I'm actin' like it ain't important, and it is. If'n I tries to change it some kinda way, then I'm actin' like I can change what's done happen, and I can't. If'n I keeps it like it is, then I'm gonna thank 'bout it the rest of my life, and I can't do that neither."

Curious now, Ben nodded toward the next room.

"Let's go inside and talk."

He put down his journal, stood and walked to the door, opened it for Hugh and both men went inside.

Hugh had always been slow to see any kind of doctor, let alone one for the head. But, he'd been impressed when he heard Dr. Lowery explain that there was no shame in seeking mental health care.

"I'm Ben Lowery, and your name?" Ben

extended his hand to Hugh's.

"Mine's is Coleman. Hugh Coleman. Good meetin' ya, Doc." They shook hands.

"It's good meeting you, too, Mr. Coleman. Now, just what can I do for you?"

"You can tell me what I suppose to do with this here shirt. You probly the onliest one who can." Hugh sat in the chair, opened the paper bag and slowly took out the shirt he'd worn That Night.

The flannel logger shirt appeared to have once been a blue and black checkered print. Now, it was wadded, stiff and aching with dark brown stains covering both arms, the collar and cuffs, with big brown blotches stretched over both sides of the shirt's front, the left side much more soiled than the right.

Stunned at the sight of it, Ben took a step back and asked, "What *is this*?" And then, Hugh stood, paced the length of the small room, telling his version of the That Night story. Once he had, he sat back down, put his head in his hands and wept as he hadn't had the chance to until now. Respectfully, Ben sat too, as Hugh cried.

Once Hugh regained his calm, Ben stepped into the front room, retrieved a fresh handkerchief from the stack he kept for times like this, then returned, handed it to Hugh and asked, "How long ago was this, Mr. Coleman?"

"'bout three months now. Jessie Lee still in the hospital." Hugh wiped his face and blew his nose.

"At Provident?"

"Yessuh."

"And you want *me* to tell you what to do with this shirt?" Ben's mind was churning.

"I needs to be sho, whatsonever I do."

"I see. Then, let me sleep on it. Call me first thing, and we'll talk then."

"Thanks. What I owe ya?"

"Nothing. Just call tomorrow."

Leaving Ben to his thoughts, Hugh stuffed the shirt back into the bag, closed it, rose from his chair, squeezed the bag back under his arm, walked out and softly closed the inner door behind him...

As Ben reached for the door to close down that evening, he noticed a five dollar bill lying at the corner of the desk. A crisp bill, there for the silent hours as Ben had tried again to study but couldn't quite since Coleman left. He smiled, put the bill into his pocket, locked the front door, and switched off the lights.

The phone rang at nine o'clock sharp.

"Ben Lowery."

"Mornin.' This here's Coleman."

"Yes. How are you?"

"Fairly middlin,' but, some better fo sho."

"Good. I've got us an answer. You're right not to change the shirt. Instead - this might sound strange - but, I think you'd do best to bury it."

"Bury it, you say?" Hugh repeated intently.

"Yes. By keeping it as is, you'd be holding onto the terror of That Night. But

now, if you *buried it*, left some small grave marker there, you'd be treating it like something dead, as if That Night killed something worth grieving for both families. But here's the thing. Since death is just a doorway, Mr. Coleman, we *have a right to expect something to come back* in its place, something good. Make sense?"

Hugh thought. "Yessuh. B'lieve so. I'll bury the shirt, and pray the Good Lord tell me what I supposed to do next. That's it!"

"Call again if you need to."

"Thank ya, Doc." Hugh said.

And as each man hung up the phone, he did so satisfied.