

Blood Money

I don't think I've ever done anything so desperate for eight dollars. Then I again, in grade school I delivered newspapers in raging snow storms at 4:30 in the morning...for the princely sum of two cents a paper.

It's 1982 and I'm in my first quarter as a freshman at the University of Georgia located in the college town of Athens. I don't have a work-study job yet, or any other job...so I decide to sell my blood plasma.

The Plasma Donation Center is about a mile off the UGA campus, straight down Baxter Street. I can walk there. On the way I pass high-rise dormitories like Russell Hall, the all-girls dorm called Brumby and the grocery store where I buy cheap food.

As I get further away from campus the buildings and people seem to become more run down. I don't see many other students wandering this far away from campus. There are men, mostly older, both black and white, smoking, hanging out by a liquor store and loitering on the sidewalk in the hot Georgia morning sun. I find it interesting to see these down-on-their-luck fellows so close to the university, so close to bright young people with futures. They seem to have been abandoned as if the world packed up, left, and forgot to tell them.

It is here way off campus that I find The Plasma Center, a small one-story building with the blinds down on the windows and a glass front door. It's nondescript looking — as if it's trying to hide in plain sight. I peer in the glass door, squinting until my eyes adjust from the bright morning sun. I see a young woman in a nurse's uniform sitting at the front desk. She looks nice enough, but sort of out of place in this part of town. I've never given blood before in my life and I'm kind of worried. Will I be okay after they've taken my plasma out? How do they get the plasma out of my blood? Will it take so long that I'll miss my 11:30 AM art history class? I've heard that people who give blood sometimes get a cookie, maybe even orange juice. Will I get a cookie too? My stomach rumbles. The generic crackers and banana I had for breakfast a few hours ago are already digested. I need more money to buy food because I'm always hungry.

I've been at the University of Georgia for a couple of weeks and have used up the one-hundred-sixty-five dollars I brought with me for books, essentials, and my Greyhound bus ticket to get here.

Now that I'm eighteen, and according to my parents an adult, I'm paying for everything, including college. Luckily I've picked a college in the south. It's a lot cheaper down here than in Massachusetts where I grew up. My dad always reminds me he put himself through college, saying it made him a better person. He also claims our family is poor, so he can't give me or my two sisters a red cent towards college. My parents do send a care package of food to me my first week here. After noticing cobwebs in a box of spaghetti and eating stale Ritz Crackers I realize they must've cleaned out their kitchen cabinets and sent all their expired food to me.

I'm too proud to call and beg my folks for cash...not if I have a pint of blood plasma left in me to sell. I pull open the Plasma Center door and go inside.

The young woman smiles and says, "Good morning! I haven't seen you before."

"No, I've never been here. I've never even donated blood. It doesn't hurt, does it?"

"Don't worry, it's a piece of cake," she assures me, then gives me forms to fill out.

I take a seat in the shaded front room. There are a few men in here also filling out papers. None of them look like students. They look like the guys on the sidewalk outside, in grungy overalls, dungarees and t-shirts with sweat stains. Stale cigarette odor is coming from the sunburnt man next to me. He looks at me with bloodshot eyes like, why are you here? My nose twitches. There's another odor coming from the man, but I'm not sure what it is.

I fill out my name, phone number and address in Creswell Hall on campus and blood type — O positive. I find out about this "job" in *The Red and Black*, our university newspaper. There's a small ad in the back offering cash to students willing to sell their blood plasma for eight dollars. There's also an ad for male students willing to sell their sperm for twenty dollars. I'm actually upset I can't sell sperm. How come men get twenty dollars for sperm? And I only get eight dollars for a whole pint of blood plasma? What do people want with some man's sperm? Meanwhile, my plasma could save someone's life!

After handing in my papers I'm directed to go inside the donation room. I enter a large open space where along the walls are about twenty off-white barcaloungers, filled with men, most much older than me. I do spy a young college-age guy. He looks out of place but I look even more out of place. Thank goodness all five

nurses are women, otherwise I'd feel like I was the entertainment hired for an Elks Club dinner. All the men are hooked up with IVs coming out of their arms. A few have Reader's Digest magazines lying on their laps, but their eyes are shut. Others just stare out. A few glance at me in a curious manner. A young nurse directs me to sit in a barcalounger in the middle of the room. "You wanna magazine?" she asks me.

"Um, okay," I reply. I lay back and she plops a Reader's Digest on my belly.

"Okay hon', let me see your veins," she asks all friendly, yet business like.

I hold out both arms and watch her press on my inner elbows.

"Hmmm, this your first time? I don't see any scars honey."

"Yeah."

"Well, I'll try ta be real gentle then."

This scares me more that she's said this. Is it that she'll be gentle for my first time, and she'll be rough and mean the next time? I want to be brave, but even more I want the eight dollars.

"Thanks," I tell her.

"Look away honey, cuz I'm gonna stick ya," she says. "Most folks don't wanna see me put the needle in."

"I hate surprises," I claim as I watch her every move. Some men peer over half-interested, but a few actually turn away. Wow, if they can't take watching what's gonna happen, what does this mean? My body stiffens as I brace myself.

A moment later I feel a pop and some pressure when I see the needle go under my skin. Thank goodness I'm not squeamish. I loll my head to one side and watch the blood drain away from me. How odd. It was inside of me just seconds ago and now I can watch it travel through a long tube, then collect into a clear rubber bag.

"See, we take your blood out," the young nurse explains. "And then we centrifuge it to separate the plasma from the red cells". She points to a hulking white machine next to me and says, "That thing there separates the plasma from your blood. Then we put your red cells back in ta ya with a saline solution into your other arm. It takes about an hour-and-a-half if it all goes well."

I'm not quite sure what she means by all this. I just know it means eight dollars for me when it's all done — and I be out in time for my class.

I feel like an adult suddenly, like I'm making blood money just like these guys. I don't need my parent's money, even if they had some to give to me. I can make my own, no matter what it takes. I sneak peeks at the men filling the other seats and hooked up to machines. I wonder what they'll use their eight dollars for? Some of these guys, if they're lucky enough to have a rare blood type will even get thirty dollars today. I wonder if they know they can get twenty dollars for their sperm? I assume they probably don't read *The Red and Black* student newspaper. Maybe they found The Plasma Center because it's in the part of town where they hang out. I would tell them how they could make twenty more dollars, but I can't discuss sperm donation with strangers. I couldn't even do this with men I know. I cringe at the thought of them well, doing whatever it is they do that leads to a sperm donation. Yeesh.

The guys reclining here remind me of a few men I rode with on the Greyhound bus from Massachusetts to Georgia just a few weeks ago. These men got a one-way bus ticket and an ill-fitting new suit because they just left prison. I know this because they tell me. They also tell me they need to go to a new place and find someone willing to take a chance on hiring them for a job.

Then I think, well, no one has hired me for work-study yet. I applied for it when I got here in the first week of September. But I've heard nothing and it's been over ten days.

I lean back with the Readers Digest on my belly, imagining the food I can buy with the eight dollars. I'm hungry all the time. I'm lucky that my roommate, a rich debutant from Atlanta is helping me — her poor Yankee roommate. She smuggles food for me from Bolton Dining Hall which is right across from our dorm. She's on the meal plan so she gets a kick out of secreting bananas, dinner rolls and donuts in her Ralph Lauren blouse, or filling the pockets of her pastel pink capri pants with trail mix. I need more food but I can't ask her to hide peanut butter sandwiches and sliced cheese in her matching Pink Bermuda bag. She's already pushing her luck. I don't know what'll happen if she gets caught stealing food for me.

Unlike most freshman I'm not gaining weight. I'm losing it. During art history class my stomach growls like a trapped animal. I've been a vegetarian almost all my life and cheap peanut butter is about the only protein I've been getting lately. I have to wonder what donating blood plasma twice a week will do to me? I glance at the men around me. They look like hell. Most could use a shave and a bath. The only other person who seems to be a UGA student is studying a textbook as if he's in the library right now with an IV needle stuck in his arm. Maybe I will bring my drawing pad next time and work on my charcoal sketches for my studio class. I'm an art major and like many a great artist I am starving. I'm a cliché like all the anguished, misery-filled artistes who came before me. Van Gogh might have cut off his ear, and Edvard Munch suffered from anxiety, but I have a suffering all my own...selling my blood plasma for cash.

About an hour-and-a-half later I'm almost done, my blood has been removed, centrifuged, and the red cells returned to me into my other arm with a cold saline solution. I can feel it slither back into my vein, marking its journey through my body with a cool snake-like feel.

One of the nurses pulls out the needle. "You're done honey. Look at you. You survived your first plasma donation." She has me raise my arm way up over my head, then has me use my other hand to clamp over my inner elbow. After a minute she wraps it in a stretchy bandage. I'm wondering if I'll get a cookie now? It's been a long time since I've had a cookie — not since I left Massachusetts a few weeks ago. Boy, I'd love one now...maybe an Oreo, or a Chips Ahoy, or even a boring old Fig Newton.

When I get up I'm light headed. My heart flips for a moment. I force a smile while a nurse walks me to the front desk. Both she and the nurse at the desk ask me how I am. I assure them I'm fine, struggling to seem "okay" so I can collect my payment. I try to not sound like I'm begging when I ask, "Do I get a cookie or something?"

"Nope, just the cash," the nurse tells me. "Now you can buy yourself a cookie."

I'm handed eight ragged one-dollar bills. While I clutch the money in one hand, I'm told I don't need to make an appointment for my next donation. It's by drop-in only and there must be two days between them so my body can resupply my blood plasma.

I walk out into the blinding sunshine, holding the door while two men make their way in. The acrid stench of alcohol is coming off of them. I realize that's what I had smelled on that other man earlier. Liquor! That man I filled out forms with must have been drinking before coming to get money for his blood plasma. It's only eleven in the morning. How can they smell like they just stepped out of a bar? There must still be alcohol circulating in their blood. I'm sure they'll be turned away. Then again, they didn't turn away the man I noticed earlier who smelled like this.

I use some of my blood money to buy a granola bar from a vending machine on campus before I go to my art history class. It's not a cookie, but it almost tastes like one and is healthier. Thank goodness eight dollars goes a lot further here in Georgia. After classes I stop at the grocery store near my dorm to buy generic food. These are the no-frills grocery items packaged in plain white boxes or white labeled cans. Bold black lettering on the labels tells me what I'm buying. There is nothing extra written claiming it's tasty or appetizing and no bright colored pictures on the packages making the food inside seem like it might be delicious. I don't know if it's just my imagination but the generic food doesn't taste as good as the name-brand food. The generic peanut butter has the consistency of brown wall spackle. The phony Saltines don't have much salt and seem less crispy. The fake Kraft macaroni and cheese is the worst. The noodles are gummy and the powdered cheese smells like feet, but at least it fills my belly for hours.

One day between plasma donations I have no money and I'm hungry. I go to the supermarket across from the dorms on Baxter Street...just to window shop. I'm in the produce section when I'm tempted to swipe an apple. It's just sitting there, all red, shiny and not wrapped in plain white paper with bold black print. My hand hovers over it. What if I just took one bite and put it back? Would that be like stealing? I pick it up. Real food, only a few inches from my mouth. I just want something that's not fake, not powdered or gummy like the generic macaroni noodles. I breath in deep, close my eyes...and put the apple back. I just can't steal, but now I understand why some people do. I turn my head, walk away and out the supermarket door. Outside I hold up my

fist and make a silent vow. “As God is my witness I hope there comes a day when I’ll never eat generic food ever again!!”

I’ve been selling my blood plasma for almost eight weeks now. I enter a whole other world when I leave campus and head to The Plasma Center for my bi-weekly donations. Having eight dollars in my pocket after all this makes a huge difference in my eating habits. I’m not so hungry now, but I’m sure bored with tasteless generic food. And worst of all, all this suffering doesn’t seem to be helping my art. My seemingly well-fed classmates are getting better grades on their charcoal sketches than I am.

One day while walking back to campus after going to The Plasma Center I notice a warm sticky feeling on my inner elbow. I glance down and notice the stretchy bandage is soaked. I’ve started bleeding again. I hold my arm up and apply direct pressure. It won’t stop. I run all the way back with my arm in the air and my other hand clamped over it. A nurse puts another gauze bandage on it, saying this happens from time-to-time, and not worry. She tells me I’m not getting enough vitamin K so my blood isn’t clotting like it should. “Remember,” she says, “you should eat more fresh spinach and broccoli.”

I tell her I will, but deep down I know I just don’t have the money for fancy fresh vegetables.

By the middle of November I’m called by the work-study program. I will interview for a job with Miss Arbor at Bolton Dining Hall — the place where my roommate has been smuggling food for me.

I had no idea how big Bolton was on the inside. I stroll through the dining area and gape at students with plates full of delicious looking food...broccoli smothered in cheddar sauce, corn-on-the-cob with butter, giant cookies with M&M’s pressed into them and tall glasses of ice cold milk. I enter the back kitchen area to meet Miss Arbor in her small office. When I walk in an older, short-haired, worried-looking woman has a phone receiver between her cheek and her shoulder. She points to a chair. Once I’m seated she covers the mouthpiece and asks me who I am and why I’m here. I tell her, “I’m Coree Spencer and I’m here to interview for the work-study job.”

She nods and whispers to me, “Oh, yes.” Then she speaks into the receiver. “You can call me back in a few minutes.” She hangs up and eyes me suspiciously. Does she know about the purloined food I’ve been receiving from her dining hall? Or is it my Yankee accent? She looks at me sideways the whole time she asks me about my schedule and if I’ve ever worked in food service before. It’s very unnerving. I need this job. I’ve never worked in food service, but I know a lot about food — mostly how to eat it. If I get a job here I’ll be surrounded by food and I will get to eat all I want during my four-hour work-study shifts. After the short interview I thank her just as her phone rings. She gives me one more sideways glance before turning to answer her phone.

A week later I still haven’t heard back from Miss Arbor. I return to the student center to check out more jobs. I don’t think I can work these other ones and be fed at the same time. There are other work-study positions such as science lab equipment cleaner, or library assistant. I think I’ll hold out a while longer to see if I get the call to work at the dining hall. My dream is to work around food.

I continue going to The Plasma Center. I’m stuck in the arm with a needle by young nurses who seem to be starting out their medical careers. The men, few other UGA students and I are like guinea pigs they can practice their skills on. One day these nurses will be at fancy hospitals sticking people with needles like experts every time. Occasionally they miss my vein and I have deep purple bruises that eventually turn green, then yellow on my pale white skin.

One day while I’m giving blood plasma I think about drawing in my sketch book. Instead I look at the men across from me. The Plasma Center seems to turn away completely inebriated men, but even I can tell many of these guys have tippled before coming here. I wonder about the patients who might receive their blood plasma. Will they wake up from a transfusion or surgery suddenly craving cigarettes and cheap Ripple wine? These men seem like they gave up years ago. Wild Irish Rose, Thunderbird and Colt 45 have given them a reason to go on one more day. I never really talk to these men, other than saying; good morning, good afternoon, or thank you for holding the door. They all seem polite. A few pass the time by flirting with the nurses. I listen to them make remarks like; “you sure is too pretty to be sticking needles into people’s arms” or,

“what’s a nice girl like you doing in a place like this”, and “how can you be single with a figure like that”. The nurses laugh it off. These attempts at flirting are so ridiculous that it’s obviously one big joke. I think some of these sad sack guys might really mean it, but mostly they seem to be going through the motions.

I feel an odd kinship with these men. All of us are desperate for money. Sometimes I feel closer to them than my fellow UGA students. I have more in common with them even though I’m an eighteen-year-old girl from the North, and they’re older fellas from the Deep South. I’m addicted to filling my belly with macaroni and fake cheese and they’re addicted to liver damaging liquor.

I confess to only a few college friends that I get my grocery money by selling my plasma. I tell my roommate and a girl from Queens, New York who lives across the hall from me. I can’t imagine sharing this with all the southern belles on my dorm floor. Most of them have never had to work. I spent the last couple of summers working in a greeting card factory back in Massachusetts. I also babysat, cleaned a neighbor lady’s house and had two paper routes. Most of these girls have everything paid for by their parents, including receiving weekly checks for “mad money”. I wonder if these girls would understand my spending time with alcoholic men, hooked up to machines, centrifuging our blood to extract the plasma for cash. These girls spend eight dollars like it’s nothing at all. These girls write checks at the small dormitory convenience store for gum and Diet Coke. Once my roommate even bounces a check at this convenience store after purchasing two packs of Bubble-Yum grape bubble gum. When she gives me a piece of her ill-gotten Bubble-Yum I savor it like I’m a death row prisoner and this juicy piece of gum is my last meal.

Now that I go to The Plasma Center I count every penny I make because it’s literally blood money. I wonder how long I can do this? I wonder how long the men have been doing this? If I do get a work study job I will actually miss seeing these guys, these misfits, and I will miss the nurses who call me honey like they’re waitresses at The Waffle House and I’m a regular customer.

On December 2nd, the day before the University of Georgia closes for Christmas break I head off to The Plasma Center. I will be leaving on a Greyhound bus back to Massachusetts in two days. I’ll need eight dollars

for some cheese crackers and soda I'll buy at bus stations on the 36 hour journey. I know I'll eat real good when I get home to Massachusetts. I didn't think I'd ever miss my mom's cooking, but eating generic food for three months has driven me to miss her BisQuick pizza, powdered mashed potatoes and boiled spinach with vinegar and margarine. I have tried to make my parents feel guilty by telling them I'm forced to sell my blood plasma for grocery money. But they think it's great, especially my dad. He would probably have had my two sisters and I selling our blood plasma years ago if it was legal.

At The Plasma Center the donation room is decorated for Christmas and the nurses have Santa Claus buttons pinned to their uniforms. It's festive and I'm in a warm, generous mood as I look at the men here. With a needle stuck in my arm I imagine being back in the bosom of my family in about four days. I wonder, what will these men do to celebrate the season? Will they purchase better booze? Will they buy a Slim Jim to eat along with their fortified wine called Night Train? I'm smiling while I ponder these lovely holiday thoughts.

Suddenly all the nurses move with great purpose. They start unhooking everyone methodically. A few appear teary-eyed.

"What's going on?" I ask as they pull my needle out. "I'm not done yet."

"Everyone is done," the young nurse explains as she bandages my arm.

"Wait, what?" I ask. The men around me are asking the same thing. They are even more frantic.

"Everyone has to leave," another nurse announces. She's from the front desk. She has a clip board and her face trembles.

Something is very wrong.

A couple of men don't even get up after they've been unhooked. They remain reclined and want the needle put right back in. I gather my knapsack and head to the front desk with some of the men.

"Are we still getting our eight bucks? Even if we didn't finish?" one of the men asks. I'm glad he did and so are the others as we gather like a small mob in front of the desk where we get our payment.

A young nurse, her face bubbling with tears, opens the old strongbox then starts handing us our cash while telling us, "This is your last eight dollars. You can't come back. We're closing after today."

“Why, ma’am?” another man asks.

“Yeah, why, please,” I repeat.

“Can I come back in a couple days?” Asks a man who smells like he hasn’t bathed in some time.

“You *don’t* understand,” she explains, choking back tears. “No one can come back. We’re closing for good.”

“But where’ll we get our cash from now on?” I hear some man behind me.

“I don’t know. I’m so sorry. Now please go, we have to close up,” she begs us.

We start to leave, all of us a bit stunned until a man breaks the silent shuffle out and says,

“I’d really like to know why, ma’am?”

The young nurse comes from behind the desk and starts to herd us all out, stammering when she says, “Ahhh...there’s this thing called AIDS. They say it might be gotten from needles and maybe through blood. We can’t let y’all do this anymore. Now y’all please have a Merry Christmas.”

After we get outside I hear the glass door shut. I turn back and see her locking up while a few men head towards the liquor store. Some men loiter outside The Plasma Center. They seem in palpable pain at the loss of their income and are unable to say goodbye to their money source. All I can think is thank goodness I’ve got enough generic Saltines and peanut butter to last me until I leave for home.

I take one last look at the men, with their heads down as if the answer to their problems is hidden in the cracks of the sidewalk. I say goodbye, but it comes out as a faint whisper. Only a few men hear. They lift their heads and nod at me.

I start walking, stunned. What is AIDS? And why does it mean I can’t give blood plasma for money anymore? I get back to campus knowing I likely will never see these men again now that The Plasma Center is closed. I’ll never have any reason to walk back to that part of town.

I enter my art class thinking, “Dear God, I sure hope I get a real job and never have to sell my plasma or any other part of my body for money ever again”.

The day before I get on the Greyhound bus bound for Massachusetts I receive a phone call telling me I can start working at Bolton dining hall when I return to UGA in January. Maybe God was listening to me. Now instead of giving up my blood plasma twice a week for cash I will be paid to come in five days a week to eat all the most delicious food I can during my work-study shift.

On the bus ride home a middle-aged man nods before slumping into the aisle seat next to me. The faint scent of beer and cigarettes wafts off his damp winter coat. I smile at him before turning and leaning my forehead on the dirty bus window. I'm waiting to catch my first glimpse of snow while heading back north. Passing billboard after billboard hawking refreshing Coca-Cola, Cracker Barrel Restaurants and Camel cigarettes I mull over one thing — I wonder what the men from The Plasma Center will do from now on to get their liquor and cigarette money?

Bio:

Coree Spencer has lived and worked in New York City for the last 34 years. She has been published online, most recently on Mr. Beller's Neighborhood's website. She has also been published in journals and anthologies, most recently in Inkwell Journal.