

Leaving Lymon

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HOLIDAY HOUSE  NEW YORK

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Printed and bound in November 2019 at Maple Press, York, PA, USA.

www.holidayhouse.com

First Edition

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Cline-Ransome, Lesa, author.

Title: Leaving Lymon / Lesa Cline-Ransome.

Description: First edition. | New York : Holiday House, [2020] | Summary:

Raised by his grandparents, first in Mississippi then in Wisconsin, ten-year-old Lymon moves to Chicago in 1945 to live with the mother he never knew, while yearning for his father.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019011659 | ISBN 9780823444427 (hardcover)

Subjects: | CYAC: Family problems—Fiction. | Moving, Household—Fiction. | African Americans—Fiction. | Milwaukee (Wis.)—History—20th century—Fiction. | Chicago (Ill.)—History—20th century—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.C622812 Le 2019 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019011659>

ISBN: 978-0-8234-4442-7 (hardcover)

*In memory of my own Auntie Vera (Ransom): kind,
independent, supportive and a rock for us all.*

September 30, 1929–July 3, 2019

Leaving Lyman

Daddy

ONE

Parchman Farm

Sunflower County, Mississippi 1938

MA and Grandpops didn't tell me nothing 'cept we were going on the train. From our house I could sometimes hear the train whistle on quiet nights. Grandpops used to tell me stories about trains that carry people to places far away to a town I thought was called *North*. Turns out that wasn't the name of a town at all, just a place people bought a ticket to.

Ma made a mess of food. She spent all Saturday cooking, and the house smelled like frying grease and pickles and chocolate cake. I told her twice I was hungry, just to get a taste of something, but she hit me so hard on my backside, I stopped asking after that. Way past supper and bedtime, Grandpops came in my room whispering.

"Lymon, c'mon now. Time we get going." He dressed me quiet in my church shirt and pants, wrapped my blanket 'round my shoulders, and carried me out to his truck. I remember the truck smelled like all the food Ma had been cooking, and that smell woke me up good.

"We going on the train now?" I asked.

“Sure are,” said Grandpops. Ma just closed her eyes, laid her head back against the seat, and didn’t say nothing. I thought she was tired from all the cooking.

We drove quiet through the night till we pulled up to a small building.

“Here we are, Jackson Depot,” Grandpops said.

Grandpops lifted me out first, and kept my blanket ’round my shoulders. Then he helped down Ma. Last he got the basket of food Ma made. While Grandpops stood in line for tickets, I looked ’round at all the other folks. Most looking as tired as Ma and nearly all with food and bags and packages. The ladies had on fancy dresses. I grabbed Grandpops’ hand tight when I saw the lights from the train and heard its loud whistle when it pulled into the station, huffing and puffing smoke. Back home it sounded like a whisper, but here, it sounded it like a long scream. I covered my ears, and Grandpops laughed. I nearly peed myself, I was aching so bad to get on that train.

“Stop that jumping.” Ma snatched my arm.

The train was so tall, I didn’t know how we were gonna get all the way up there, but then a man opened a door and let down stairs. Grandpops helped me up the steps and I walked into the train car. It looked like it went on forever, and when we walked through, I ran my hand on the backs of the seats we passed. I didn’t care it was crowded and hot with people smells and food smells. Felt good to be going somewhere new. Skinny as I was, I sat on the hard seat between Grandpops and Ma.

Train man yelled, "All aboard the Midnight Special!"

"When we gonna get there?" I asked Grandpops.

"You go on and sleep now. We got a ways. Be morning before we pull in."

Heard Ma suck her teeth and look away.

I told myself I'd stay wake the whole time so I wouldn't miss a thing. Liked hearing the train men in uniforms ask for tickets, and listen to the folks talking and babies crying. But it was so warm and tight in my seat, I couldn't keep my eyes open. I woke with my head in Grandpops' lap and heard the conductor shouting, "Parchman Farm."

"This it?" I asked, sitting up straight.

Everybody got up to get off the train and there was a beat-up bus waiting and we all got on that. Wasn't near as fun as being on the train, but Grandpops said, "Not long now," and I mashed my face against the cool of the window.



In the back of the bus, someone started singing a song I sometimes heard in church. Few others joined in. Out the window, I saw rows and rows and rows of cotton as we drove up a long road and under a gate.

As soon as we stepped off the bus, I heard someone shout, "Pops!" And there was my daddy. His face was so fuzzy in my head, I almost forgot what he looked like. He was smiling big and walking fast toward us. His black-and-white-striped pajamas looked too big for him, and I heard Ma breathe in fast.

“Ma,” he said, kissing her on the cheek.

“Grady,” is all she said.

But Grandpops pulled him in close and hard. “How you makin’ it, son?”

“I’m making it, Pops, I’m making it....”

“And who is this young man growing tall as a weed?” Daddy asked looking down at me.

“I’m Lymon,” I told him.

“I know who you are, boy!” He laughed and swung me up high.

Seemed like a big party. All the men there dressed in the striped pajamas like Daddy. There was music playing from a radio, and couples were dancing close and kissing too.

“Stop staring,” Ma told me, and moved me away.

We laid down my blanket under a tree, and Ma put out all the food she made. Daddy and Grandpops talked and talked. Ma barely ate.

“You ain’t hungry, Ma?” I asked her. My belly was hurtin’ ’cause I ate too many deviled eggs. She didn’t answer. Just looked out past the trees. Daddy showed us where he and the other men slept. In one big house with beds all lined up next to each other. He held my hand when we walked. It was hard and dry and cracked, but it still felt good holding mine. After Ma cleaned up the food and cut the cake, Daddy took out a harmonica. He took his hands and made a cup around it and made music come out that sounded a lot like the train whistle

back at the depot. As he was playing, more and more folks came over, standing 'round my daddy. His face got wetter and wetter the more he played. Folks were clapping and moving to the music. But then the white men with guns came over too, and folks quieted down some. When Daddy finished playing, one of the white men stepped forward.

“Your boy got talent,” he said to Grandpops.

Grandpops looked down. “Yessir,” he said quiet.

“He behave hisself in here, maybe he make you proud one day, right, boy?” he said to my daddy.

“Yessir,” my daddy said, and put his harmonica back in his pajama pocket.

Folks started moving away. I went and sat up close to my daddy.

“So how’s my Lymon doing?” he asked smiling down at me.

“Good, Daddy.”

“How’s your mamma?” he asked. I shrugged.

“You know he ain’t seen her since she left. Why you asking foolishness? She’s there and he’s here. That’s how she’s doing.” Ma started coughing like she do whenever she starts yelling.

“Alright now, Lenore. You getting yourself all worked up. Ain’t a need for all that today. He’s just asking a question is all.”

Ma got quiet again.

“Heard she went up to Chicago with her sister not too long ago,” Grandpops said into Daddy’s ear. “Got another one on the way.”

Daddy whistled through his teeth and shook his head.

“Vera and Shirley send their best,” Grandpops told Daddy. “Clark got a good job at the new foundry in Milwaukee. They told us to come up and join ’em.”

“Y’all thinking about going?” Daddy asked.

“Nah, I can’t get this woman to leave Vicksburg for nothing in the world, right, Lenore?” Grandpops laughed, looking at Ma.

I saw a little smile at the corner of Ma’s mouth. First one all day.

“Ain’t no need dragging my tail all the way to Milwaukee when I got all I need right here in Mississippi.”

“She’s talking about me.” Grandpops leaned over and kissed Ma a big kiss on her cheek.

She laughed then. “Stop that fuss, Frank. You are a fool.”

One of the white man started clanging a bell and told everybody visiting time was over. Folks started picking up all their food and fixings and saying goodbye and kissing even more. I couldn’t help but stare then. And Ma didn’t stop me. Someone was crying loud.

We stood up, and I hugged my daddy tight ’round the waist. “You coming home with us?” I asked.

I saw the water in his eyes. “Not today, son, but I’ll be home soon,” is all he said.

Grandpops took my hand. “Come on, Lymon.”

When Daddy bent down to kiss Ma I heard him say, “Don’t

bring him back here no more. I don't never want to see him inside this place again."

Ma pulled away from Daddy. "You should have thought about that before—"

"Hush, Lenore!" Grandpops said, mad.

Me and Ma walked onto the bus as Daddy and Grandpops hugged goodbye. When the bus pulled down the long dusty road, my daddy was the last one in a line of men in pajamas walking back into their house.

TWO

Vicksburg, Mississippi 1939

I knew it was Friday when Grandpops started cleaning his guitar. He worked all week at the mill, coming home every night tired and dirty. Ma had supper ready, and soon as Grandpops washed up, we'd eat. After the supper dishes were put up, Ma sat out front with me and Grandpops, watching the lightning bugs, and doing her crocheting, Grandpops talking a mile a minute and plucking his favorite songs on his guitar, Ma saying every now and then, "mmm-hmmm," and tapping her foot. But on Friday nights, Grandpops didn't eat supper with us. He'd come home, same as always, but he'd wash up, then polish up his guitar, check the strings, and one by one, his men friends would come by the house with guitars and harmonicas, one banjo. Ma would stay in the kitchen making sandwiches and put them on a big ole plate and bring out some soda pop to the front room. Later it got, after the sandwiches and pop were gone, the men took out jars of other drinks they passed around. When it was still early, Grandpops would let me sit with them in the front room and listen. Sometimes they did more talking

than playing. But on a good Friday, when everybody was in the mood for playing, it could go on nearly all night.

The man with the banjo was Mr. Joe from church. He came every week with the same old beat-up overalls and worn-through shirt. He looked old enough to be my grandpops' daddy, but if you closed your eyes when he sang, his voice sounded young and sweet as a girl's. He hiked one leg up on the chair while he played his banjo. Tilted his head back and sang:

*Got to New York this mornin', just about half-past nine
Got to New York this mornin', just about half-past nine
Hollerin' one mornin' in Avalon, couldn't hardly keep
from cryin'
Avalon, my hometown, always on my mind
Avalon, my hometown, always on my mind
Pretty mamma's in Avalon, want me there all the time...*

On those nights, I'd see Ma standing in the doorway of the kitchen, her hand tapping her thigh in time to the music.

My grandpops would strum along behind Mister Joe's singing and you could hear the other men saying low, "c'mon now, Joe," and "tell it," just like we were in church on Sunday morning. If it got too good, I couldn't stop myself from clapping. One time Grandpops pulled me onto his lap.

"You remember that song we been working on?" he asked.

I nodded.

“Go on ahead then,” he said. Grandpops set his guitar on my legs, and I started right in playing. I looked around and all the men were nodding their heads, smiling and making me feel like church again. When I played the wrong note, they said, “That’s alright, son.” I felt like one of them then, as big as my grandpops and his men friends. When I finished, they all clapped and shook my hand. “Nice work, little man.”

“We gonna need to pull up another chair soon,” my grandpops told me. “But for now, you need to get on to bed.”

My ma took me in and got me washed up. When I settled in, I laid awake listening to them play, thinking wasn’t nothing better than my grandpops, Friday nights, and music.

THREE

Vicksburg, Mississippi 1941

MY aunt Shirley told me I was gonna love learning my letters and numbers at school, but that wasn't what I liked best. First day of school, Grandpops drove me all the way to the schoolhouse in his truck. I was thinking it'd be one of those big brick buildings like I see in town, but it wasn't much bigger than our house with a lot of the paint chipped away. 'Long the way, we saw Little Leonard and Fuller walking, and Grandpops pulled over and picked them up too. I mostly only saw them in church at Sunday school, but those were the two I played with most. Once, out in back of the church after service, I wrestled with Fuller, and when we came back in, Ma slapped me on the back of my neck for dirtying up the knees of my church pants. Fuller laughed behind his hand, till his momma did the same to him. Fuller and his big brother, Little Leonard, got a mess of sisters and girl cousins. Their family takes up two whole rows of pews at Sunday service.

I'm 'bout the only one who don't have brothers or sisters, just Ma and Grandpops. My cousins Dee, Sis, and Flora are too big to play with. Never get a chance to play tag and hide-and-seek

when I ain't at Sunday school or maybe when I go visiting with Ma. Most times I'm fine being by myself or sitting with Grandpops. I like the quiet of it. But at school, having a field with balls to kick and rope for tug of war, I could have played all day. Sometimes, when we'd get going good, Teacher, Miss Stokes, called us in to go back to our desks before we started getting "too wild," she said. I didn't like sitting at long tables and hard benches copying the numbers and letters Miss Stokes wrote on the chalkboard half as much as I like playing outside in the schoolyard.

Every day, after that first day, Grandpops asked me, "How you doing with your letters?"

And every day I told him, "Fine." But truth was, when everyone was writing on their papers, I was looking out the window, just waiting to go on out and play. Miss Stokes said I wasn't trying hard enough, but every time I did, I'd get the letters all mixed up in my head. Sometimes she'd lean over me, smelling like cocoa butter and lemons, and put her hand, so smooth and dark brown, over mine to trace the letters on my paper. "There you go, Lymon," she'd say smiling. I thought she had to be the prettiest teacher there ever was, even though she was the only one I ever seen. With her next to me, felt like I could write every letter of the alphabet with my eyes closed, but soon as she walked away to help someone else, the letters would get mixed up again.

Just when the leaves were turning was when Grandpops started getting sick.

“Where’s your grandpa?” Fuller asked me the second day I walked all the way to school with them.

“He ain’t been feeling good,” I told him.

Think they liked getting a ride in Grandpops’ truck, but I liked the walking ’cause it meant I had more time with Little Leonard and Fuller. Half the time we raced each other till we were just ’bout out of breath. But soon as we saw the school bus coming down the road, taking the white kids to their school across town, we’d jump in the ditch to hide so we didn’t get the dust from the wheels in our faces and have to hear the nasty words they yelled from the window. Only when it passed good, we’d throw rocks at the back of the bus, knowing we’d miss, but feeling good we did something. Sometimes we’d yell our own bad words, not so loud anyone could hear, then laugh till our sides just about bust.

When Grandpops hadn’t gone to work for two weeks and wasn’t getting any better, Ma started making less food, not even enough for second helpings. First, I thought it was ’cause Grandpops was barely eating, then I saw her counting coins out of her purse ’fore she went into town for groceries. Ma prayed half the night, begging God to “see us through.” Didn’t know if she meant the money, or Grandpops, or both. Was barely enough food for my lunch sack.

Now, every day I got home from school, Grandpops was sitting up in bed looking smaller and smaller. After the doctor came and looked Grandpops over good, Ma told me the doctor said it was his heart. But when I asked Grandpops how his heart

was feeling, he told me, “Still pumping,” and I thought that meant he was getting better.

When I came home from school, first thing I went straight to his room.

“There’s my Lymon,” he said, like he’d been waiting all day for me to come home.

“Look at this, Grandpops,” I’d tell him, ‘cause just ‘bout every day I brought something home to make him feel better. Grandpops was always looking over the things I collected like I found buried treasure. So, I showed him the rock that looked like a star and a brown and white feather with fat stripes all the way down.

“Woowee, you got some finds today, didn’t you,” he said so quiet I had to lean in close. I put the feather in his hand. His skin felt dry as tree bark. The wiggly veins sticking up made his hand look like a map.

“What kind of feather you think this is?” I asked him.

He turned it over and looked close. “This here’s an owl feather. Probably that one we hear making all that fuss outside your window all hours of the night.” He smiled.

“When I get up from this bed, me and you gonna have to do some more feather hunting. But let me rest just a bit more now.” Grandpops closed his eyes. When his breathing got heavy, I went out to the parlor and took out his guitar. Polished it up for him. It was a long time since he had his Friday night friends over to play.

Next day when I got home from school, I didn’t have any

treasures, but Grandpops said, “Play a little something for me, son.” I ran and got the guitar.

“I polished it for you,” I told him.

“Can see that. You taking such good care of my baby, I’m gonna have to give it to you to take care of till I get back on my feet.”

“Me?” I asked him.

“Yes you. Now let’s see what you got.”

I started in playing.

“Careful now with that chord,” he’d said when I messed up. “The C sharp can be tricky.”

Ma stopped fussing after me to do chores long as I was in with Grandpops. She let me sit hours by his bed, and never said one thing ’bout setting the table or taking out the trash. Seemed every day Grandpops talked less and less till he finally stopped talking at all. Even then, I’d sit by the bed, rubbing his hand. I even told him ’bout how pretty Miss Stokes was and the bad words I yelled at the white-people school bus. But nothing could made him talk.

Aunt Shirley came by every Sunday with her almost grown-up daughters, Sis and Flora, and I could hear them in the kitchen talking ’bout Grandpops and crying to Ma. Grandpops’ Friday-night friends started coming ’round too, Mister Joe, Mister Bastion, and Mister Stroud. They stood at the foot of his bed, heads hung low. Heard Mister Joe singing one of Grandpops’ favorite songs, not loud like he sang on Friday nights, but soft as a whisper, like he was telling Grandpops a secret.

FOUR

Vicksburg, Mississippi 1941

ONE day after school, Ma had me wait out on the porch while she brought in the basin of hot, soapy water to wash up Grandpops. It was finally cooling down some, and I was in the front yard flinging pebbles at an empty bottle of soda pop when I heard a car coming down the road.

I hadn't seen Aunt Vera and Uncle Clark since before my daddy went away. And even though their big gray car was covered in dust, Aunt Vera looked like a fancy movie star when she got out. She had a red scarf tied around her head and sunglasses and high heels women wear to church on Sunday mornings. I ran to the trunk to help with the suitcases, and she kissed me 'bout ten times.

"I can't believe how big you've gotten, Lymon," she said, and kissed me some more. Uncle Clark shook my hand hard.

First, I was just glad to see Aunt Vera, till I realized if she was home and it wasn't summertime, there must be something important going on. Right away Aunt Vera went in to see Grandpops. He wasn't talking anymore then, but you couldn't tell Aunt Vera that.

“Daddy, I’m here,” she told Grandpops. “How you doing today, Daddy?”

I thought Ma should have told her that Grandpops couldn’t answer. Uncle Clark got their things settled into her old room, and finally Aunt Vera left Grandpops’ room, wiping her eyes. She changed into a flowery housecoat and went into the kitchen to help Ma with dinner. Uncle Clark sat out back smoking a cigarette while they talked.

’Fore long I heard Aunt Vera crying some more.

“Deliver him, God,” she said over and over. “Deliver him.”

“Hush now, Vera,” I heard Ma tell her. “He can still hear you.”

In the morning, Ma didn’t wake me up like she usually did, but I could hear Aunt Vera crying and praying, and Uncle Clark saying, “It’s gonna be all right, Vera.” Didn’t hear nothing from Ma. The door to Grandpops’ room was open wide. Ma’d been keeping the curtain closed so the room stayed cool, but now the curtains were pushed away from the windows so it was bright as could be. Aunt Vera and Ma looked up as I walked in. Grandpops was lying still in the middle of the bed.

“He’s gone on, Lymon,” Aunt Vera said.

“Gone on to heaven?”

“Yes, Lord willing.” Aunt Vera pulled me close.

They laid Grandpops out in the front room to wait for the funeral people to come and get him the next morning. I sat outside, missing supper, afraid to go in till Ma told me to come on and get washed up for bed. She let me hold her hand when I

walked past Grandpops. That night after all the lights were out and the house was quiet, I lay in my bed wide awake, wanting to go out and make sure he was really gone, but too scared to do it. When I sat up, I heard Ma, moaning low. Sounded like her head was in her pillow.

Aunt Shirley brought me a shirt and hand-me-down suit, too long in the arms. I had to wear my old shoes, but Ma polished them up good.

“Your grandpop be proud to see you looking so strong and handsome,” Aunt Shirley said. “Looking just like your daddy.”

“Is he coming?” I asked her.

“Is who coming, baby?” she said.

“My daddy.”

She put her head down and fussed with the collar on my shirt. “Your daddy can’t come just yet, but we need you to be a little man for today.”

I nodded, and I didn’t say my daddy was a real grown man, not a boy like me dressed like one.

I still waited for Daddy to come, all the way till we got in the car to go to the church.



People I never seen before shook my hand. Told me, “He’s gone on to a better place” and “You take care of your grandma now, hear?” Felt like they were talking to someone else. Ma hit my arm to tell me it was time to walk up front with her one last time, ’fore they laid him down. I walked as slow as I could till I was

the last in line. Looking at Grandpops in his best suit and tie he wore to other folks funerals, I stood there just wishing I could hear his voice one more time.

When no one was looking, I reached in my pocket and pulled out the owl feather I brought and put it on top of his dry hand 'fore they closed the box he was laying in.