



LESA CLINE-RANSOME

Being Clem

A companion to the
Coretta Scott King
Honor-winning
Finding Langston

ADVANCE READER'S COPY – NOT FOR SALE

Being Clem

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LESA CLINE-RANSOME

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*For Linda and Bill Cline:
My first teachers and tormentors.
Agitators and allies.
My big sister and brother. My best friends.*

Being Clem

ONE

There's 2,341 miles from Chicago to the San Francisco Bay. And even if you happened to catch a ride in one of those '44 Silver Streak Pontiacs with the shiny front grilles that look like big ole teeth smiling back at you, and drove as fast as the wind, it'd still take you about a week to get there. 2,341 miles is a lot of miles. But it ain't so far when an explosion that happens in San Francisco, California, lands right smack-dab in your lap here in Chicago.

I was sleeping good when that explosion happened. I heard loud knocking on the front door, and Momma's tired voice asking, "Who's that?"

I sat up in my bed, knowing there was no way company could be knocking on our door before Momma even called us in for breakfast. And then I heard her slippers scraping toward the door. Just as soon as Momma unhooked the chain and undid the bolt, all I heard after that was the screaming.

Soft-spoken is how most folks describe my momma. She speaks her mind, don't hold back on the truth, but she's just as quiet as can be. Before that night, I never so much as heard her raise her voice, let alone scream, but there she

was, shouting like she was broken in two. By the time I hopped from my bed and made it to the front room where all the screaming was coming from, my sisters were already there, plus two men I'd never seen before, dressed just alike, holding their hats in their hands. They looked like the picture of my daddy my momma kept in a frame hanging over our kitchen table. *Soldiers*. They were holding up my momma by her arms. A piece of crumpled-up paper was lying on the floor in front of her. Her head was rolling from side to side. Clarisse, my oldest sister, put her hand out to stop me.

“Go on back to bed, Clem,” she said, staring at Momma. But even she didn't sound like her usual mean self. So I stood there behind her watching our momma. It looked like her legs stopped working the way the soldiers had to hold her up.

“Get her some water, son,” one of them said to me. But I was too afraid to move. I heard the water running in the faucet behind me and it was my other sister, Annette, filling up a glass. She brought it to the soldier, and he tried to get my momma to drink. Annette stood on the other side of me close.

Momma stopped screaming but her head was still rolling from side to side. Clarisse stepped away from me, toward the soldiers. We never had white folks in our house before,

and these soldiers looked funny standing here in our living room holding up our momma.

“Do you have anyone you can ask to come over and sit with your momma till she’s . . . uh, feeling better?” the soldier asked. But looking at Momma with her head rolling every which way, I didn’t think my momma was ever gonna get right again.

“It’s okay,” Clarisse told him. “We’ll be fine.” She walked to our momma and sat her on the couch. I could see Momma’s hand shaking in hers. Clarisse is only five years older than me, but talking to the soldier, and sitting on the couch calm as could be, she looked like the momma, and our momma looked like the child.

“Good evening, then,” the soldier said to Momma, both of them tipping their hats to her. “Our deepest condolences.”

Condolences. I had never once heard that word, but I knew as soon as the soldier said it, he was telling us he was sorry.

Over the next days I watched my momma sit still as a stone in that one spot Clarisse sat her in. I don’t know who dressed her. Who combed her hair. How she did her business. She didn’t look like she even remembered who I was.

Folks from our building and our church came in and out all day and night, whispering soft words away from Momma’s ears, in the kitchen, where they left cakes and pies and

chicken and sandwiches on the table. “Explosives...” and “They still don’t know nothing...”

“Nothing to bury...,” I heard one of the whisperers say.

My momma wore black, like any day now, we’d be going to a cemetery. Clarisse kept up her bossing, telling me and Annette to fetch this or get that or give Momma room to breathe when I tried to sit close to her and hold her hand and make her remember who I was. Reverend Maynard came over and prayed with Momma every day, and he might as well have been praying by himself. Momma sat with her head down, looking at her lap like it was the first time she’d seen it.

Finally, my momma’s sisters, Aunt Dorcas and Aunt Bethel, came from Washington, D.C., and all of a sudden, they were like our momma’s momma. They got her up off the couch and had Clarisse run some bathwater, “Hot as you can get it,” they told her.

When our momma started her moaning and crying, they held her tight, with her face in their necks, letting her tears run down their dresses, shushing her with “C’mon, Cecille,” and rocking her and rubbing her back like she was a little baby.

“Why does Momma have to be quiet if she wants to cry?” I whispered to Annette when they were busy shushing.

“Think they’re afraid she’ll start falling out, you know

how the ladies do in church when they get the spirit?" Annette whispered back.

That made sense to me, but Momma didn't look like the church ladies with their hands up in the air and their heads thrown back, praising. Momma looked like she even forgot who God was.

Next thing I knew, my aunts moved me out of my room while they moved in. Clarisse is fourteen years old, Annette thirteen, but the way they looked when I showed up at their bedroom door with my blanket and pillow from my bed, you'd have thought they had to share a room with a newborn baby instead of their nine-year-old brother.

"Aunt Dorcas said it's just till Momma gets better," I told them. Annette made room in her bed for me, but not before Clarisse rolled her eyes.

Our aunts got our momma eating and talking just a little bit again. One thing I know is, Clarisse didn't get her bossiness from our momma, but she sure got it from our aunts. It's like they bossed our momma back to herself again, and that was all I needed.

When I got up early one morning while everyone was still sleeping, I walked out to the front room and saw Momma sitting up on the couch.

"Clem?" she said so soft, I could barely hear her.

I walked over, making sure that was my momma talking,

and stared hard at her puffy face. She almost looked like the Momma before the soldiers knocked on our door weeks ago. She reached out and pulled me onto her lap. And even though I was too big to be sitting on anybody's lap, I let her hold me tight, and I rubbed her back, just like I saw my aunts do.

Later I found out it wasn't just my daddy who was killed in that explosion in San Francisco. There were 320 other navy men too. The Port Chicago Disaster, they called it. But didn't nobody bother to count the four of us, Clarisse, Annette, Momma, and me, here in Chicago. Because that explosion that happened 2,341 miles away just about ripped us apart too.

Before my daddy left this earth, I never thought much about him, and after he left, he was all I could think about.

Reverend Maynard held a service at Emmanuel Baptist Church for my daddy the first Sunday in August, same day as communion. They had every one of my daddy's pictures from our apartment up in front of the church on the pulpit, where the casket would have been if we had one.

Reverend Maynard preaches so long on Sunday Momma has to poke me with her elbow to keep me awake, but this Sunday I wondered if he finally ran out of things to say because it seemed like *bravery* and *honor* and *country* were the only words he knew. We sat in the front row, where the

deacons usually sit, and even though it was hot, Momma, Clarisse, and Annette wore hats and gloves with their black dresses. The lace from Momma's glove scratched me when I held on to her hand, but I didn't let go.

After Reverend Maynard finished talking about what a good man our daddy was and after all the "amens" and "God bless him" from everyone in the pews behind us, and after the choir sang, "Soon and very soon, we are going to see the king. Hallelujah, Hallelujah, we're going to see the king..." two soldiers walked up front and stood in front of us. They folded up a flag into a triangle and handed it to Momma. Momma didn't reach for it like she was supposed to, but Clarisse did and nodded to thank them. They saluted us and turned and walked back down the aisle and out the church doors.

Momma didn't do any more falling out like she did that first day we heard about the explosion, but she didn't do much of anything else either. She cooked, straightened up as best she could, always kissed us every morning and night. But she looked like she was half-asleep even when she was wide-awake.

I ain't like Clarisse and Annette and Momma. I don't remember much about my daddy. He went off to the navy before I could get too many memories of him in my head. If it wasn't for the pictures Momma keeps in the apartment, I might have even forgotten his face. But when I think of him,

I think of water. Of a big ole lake. I couldn't tell you if it was Lake Michigan or the Pacific Ocean, but Momma told me it was in South Carolina. And I remember it was hot.

Momma says my daddy was born on James Island with the Ashley River just down the road, and he grew up fishing with his daddy and granddaddy. He once told Momma he was on the water so much, it was land where he felt shaky. I remember he sat me tall on his shoulders and let the cool, muddy river water touch the bottoms of my feet. Daddy floated high in the water with me holding on tight to his neck. When he went low in the water, I heard Momma say, "Careful, Clemson, you'll scare him," but my daddy just laughed and kept right on ducking in and out till I started crying. He brought me back to my momma, and I watched him swim like a fish all around while Clarisse and Annette sat and splashed each other at the edge. After a while, Daddy dried off with a towel, and he made a fire and we all ate hot dogs and potato salad and drank soda pop on a blanket.

And I watched my daddy as he stuffed his mouth full of food and sat quiet looking out at the water. He reached over and held my momma's hand, and I was squeezed up between the two of them, but it didn't bother me at all.

Right before school was about to start up, I came in the kitchen and Momma was already up at the stove making breakfast.

“Morning, Momma,” I said, hugging her around her waist.

She was quiet, kissed me on the top of my head, and went right on back stirring eggs.

I sat at the table, waiting to eat.

“Momma,” I said.

“Yes, Clem.” She didn’t turn around.

“You ever want to be a spy?”

“Clem, I’m very tired,” she said.

“But imagine if you went undercover as a double agent but as your disguise you were a cook behind enemy lines, and they loved your food. But one morning they came to breakfast, and you made your special eggs for breakfast, but they didn’t know your special eggs had poison in them. And one by one, the special eggs with the poison killed off all the enemies we were fighting in the war. You could end the war just by making eggs.”

My momma was quiet, but I could see her body shaking.

I jumped up from the table. “I’m sorry, Momma. I was just—”

She turned to me and her eyes were wet. She covered her mouth with her hand.

“Momma?”

She put her hand down and let out a loud laugh.

“Sit down, Clem, and eat your secret agent eggs,” she

said, laughing some more. She was still laughing to herself when Clarisse and Annette came in.

“I think your brother is reading too many of his adventure stories,” she said to them, fixing their plates. They looked at me with their eyebrows raised up.

Even though my momma was missing my daddy and half-asleep too, I knew now, if I tried hard enough, I could still make her laugh.

TWO

Clemson. It's a name that matches my daddy. Big, strong, and in charge. In the pictures of my daddy Momma keeps in frames in our apartment, in his sailor uniforms, he is standing tall over most of his navy friends on the docks or on boats out at sea. At Lincoln Elementary in every picture, from first grade on, they put me right up front, with the girls, so everyone can see that I'm just about the smallest in my class. *Clem.* It's a little bitty name. I never had any problems with my name until Clarisse started in on me, saying "Look at little Clementine." Clarisse took to calling me that until Momma made her stop. Now she only says it when Momma can't hear. But a clementine is just what I feel like sometimes. Small and sweet. But the picture of me in fourth grade is the one I can barely look at. In that picture, everyone, even the girls, were heads taller. Thinking back on that time, before Daddy passed, reminds me now of how just a year before he died, my momma wrote my daddy about all the goings on here in Chicago, and then everything happening with me and Clarisse and Annette. And how she was sure to mention, right at the end, how I was probably the smartest student at Lincoln Elementary, and Daddy wrote

right back saying he wished he was as smart as I was, and could I please wait till he got back to graduate high school. Momma laughed when his letter came in the mail and she read that part aloud to us. But my daddy never came back. And he'd never see me or my sisters graduate from anywhere.

Out at recess, I ain't too bad at marbles, and I can hold my own in dodgeball, but most of the other boys in my grade made me feel as small as my name. In the classroom, sitting in the back, when the other boys didn't know the answers to Miss Schmidt's questions, and I could whisper the answers to them so soft and sideways out the corner of my mouth you'd think I was a ventriloquist, was the only time I felt strong. But I thought even that was going to stop when Miss Schmidt sent a letter home to Momma in my satchel. I just knew Momma was going to be some kind of mad.

"What does it say?" I asked her, standing, trying to read Miss Schmidt's curly writing behind Momma while she looked over the letter.

"Well," she said slow, answering while running her fingers under the sentences. "Miss Schmidt would like me to come in and speak with the principal."

"Am I in trouble?" I asked her, already knowing the answer.

"Why would you be in trouble, honey?" Momma asked, folding up the letter and looking at me.

When I didn't answer, she said, "Well, we'll find out what it is tomorrow."

The next day when I got home from school Momma was waiting for me. "Sit down," she said.

I put my head down.

"I won't do it no more," I told her.

"Do what?" she asked.

"Give out the answers," I told her.

"Clem, are you giving out answers in class to the other students?" Momma didn't look mad before, but now she did. I heard her taking God's name in vain under her breath.

"I see," she said. She sat quiet, looking at me look at the table. "I think you can put your talents to better use than that, don't you?"

She sounded like I bet my aunt Dorcas sounded talking to the students she taught in her high school history class. And I sure didn't want to think about Aunt Dorcas right now.

"I'm sorry, Momma."

She nodded. Seemed like that was all she needed, and then she said, "I went to see the principal today." I sat waiting for the part when the trouble was coming. "And both he and Miss Schmidt feel you are a very bright student," Momma said. "One of the brightest."

I looked up to see Momma smiling. "They want to move you to fourth grade."

“But I’m in third grade,” I told Momma, thinking maybe she forgot.

“Yes, Clem, I know. But sometimes, people are smarter than the grade they are supposed to be in.”

“And that’s me?” I asked her.

“Yes, Clemson Thurber Junior, that’s you.”

“Clemson is a very special student,” my new teacher, Miss Glynn, announced the day I walked into fourth grade. She put her arm around my shoulder and stood me in front of the class. “He has been moved from his third-grade class into our fourth grade. Let’s give Clemson a—”

“Everyone calls me Clem,” I told her.

She smiled down at me. “Of course. Let’s give *Clem* a fourth-grade welcome,” she said to the class.

It looked to me like not one of those fourth graders heard a word Miss Glynn told them about giving me a fourth-grade welcome, because from where I stood, the looks they gave weren’t telling me to come on in. They were telling me to go back to third grade where I belonged.

“She sure he didn’t come from first grade?” one of the girls up front whispered loud enough for me to hear.

After that first day, when I got home, I told Momma I wanted to go back to third grade.

“We can’t always do what’s easiest, Clem,” she told me.

“Look at your daddy, and how brave he was in sacrificing for his country. Where would he be if he gave up every time he got scared?”

Alive? I thought to myself. But just as soon as I thought it, I took it back and asked God to forgive me.

So I thought about my daddy the second day I went back and listened to more of the “first grade” and “baby” talk. And I wondered if this was what bravery felt like, because it sure didn’t feel good.

Miss Glynn sat me in the middle of the third row toward the back and I could barely see over the heads of the boys in front of me. But I could hear just fine, and even though now I was in fourth grade instead of third, I still thought the fourth-grade work wasn’t much harder than the third-grade work, and I still knew the answers to most of the questions Miss Glynn asked. When the first test day came around, I felt a tap on my shoulder. “Hey, Professor, gimme the answer to number three.” I could see my momma’s mad face when I told her I gave out answers. But my momma wasn’t sitting in a classroom with boys twice her size tapping on her shoulder. “Fifty-two,” I whispered back.

Just like in third grade, before I knew it, there was a chorus behind me of “Ask Clems,” and I’d have to pass back my whole doggone test to anybody who needed it.

“Hey, Professor!” they yelled at recess, rubbing my head

and patting my back, making me feel like a baby and a movie star at the same time.

I knew that giving away answers wasn't making my momma and daddy proud. But I also knew that being smart meant using your brain and that meant making it through fourth grade any way I could.

THREE

A nice Negro doctor is our landlord, and Momma says he and his wife are “good people.” We only see them on rent day when he comes to collect. Before my daddy died, you could tell when it was rent day because Momma would put on her nicest housecoat, maybe a little bit of lipstick, and when we heard the knock on the door, she would talk just as sweet as could be to Dr. Stanford. Sometimes she’d invite him in for a cup of coffee, but he’d always say, “Oh, thank you, Mrs. Thurber, I’d love to, but I’ll have to take a rain check.”

“Why does he need to wait until it rains to have coffee?” I asked Momma. She just about bust a gut laughing when I asked that and told me it was a saying that meant “another time.” But every month he said the same thing.

But the month after daddy died, Momma didn’t put on her nice housecoat on rent day. She didn’t even answer the door. When we heard the knock, Momma didn’t move. She put her finger to her lips, which meant we all had to be quiet and pretend we weren’t home like we sometimes did when we knew it was Mrs. Jefferson from the church who would come by right about suppertime and say she was “just

passing by,” but would stay and eat up all your food if you let her and never leave even when it got late and everybody was tired.

Momma says she’s grateful Dr. Stanford only rents to “good, hardworking families,” and we never had to live in a kitchenette apartment, all up on top of each other, sharing one bathroom with God knows how many folks.

“There’s a lot I can abide, but I cannot abide that,” Momma told us.

Here we have two bedrooms, the bigger one for Clarisse and Annette. The smaller one with the window looking down on the street is the one that used to be for me and Momma and Daddy. But after Daddy died, Momma took a quilt and pillow and started sleeping out in the front room on the couch and never came back. Now it’s just a bedroom for me. And we have two big windows in the parlor that light up the front room in the mornings like a lightbulb, and a kitchen big enough for a table plus an icebox.

Just when we stopped seeing Dr. Stanford on rent day, I started seeing letters for Momma pushed under the door. I saw the first envelope pushed under the door with Momma’s name written on the front early one morning on my way to the bathroom. I stopped and picked it up off the floor and put it on the kitchen table.

When I came in for breakfast, the letter was gone. “Did

you see the letter I left on the table?" I asked Momma. She shook her head, quiet. "Was it from your secret admirer?" I asked, smiling. I once read in one of Clarisse's romance magazines that boys sometimes slipped girls love letters if they really liked them but were too afraid to tell them.

"No, Clem, it was definitely not a secret admirer," Momma said in her tired voice. So I stopped asking and stopped smiling. I realized asking about a secret admirer probably made her sad thinking about Daddy.

When the second letter came, I left it in the same place and this time, I didn't ask any more about it.

Now other letters started coming too, and Clarisse let me know they were not from secret admirers.

"Bill collectors," she said, shaking her head and flipping through the mail one day when Momma wasn't home, like she was the daddy who was paying bills.

Momma had been looking for work for weeks, leaving the apartment early in the morning, all dressed up pretty with her hair fixed nice, wearing her church heels and shiny red lipstick. When Daddy was in the navy, Momma worked two days a week in the Emmanuel Baptist Church office typing up Sunday service programs and bulletins for Reverend Maynard. It was just her "spending money" job, she called it, and with the money Daddy sent home to Momma every month to pay our rent and bills, we had enough. Momma

told us the U.S. government sent out a letter to every family of every soldier who died at Port Chicago, apologizing and telling them that they would make sure they were taken care of. That they would send them a check to “compensate” for their loss. Momma rolled her eyes when she said the word *compensate*, like it was a word the U.S. government made up. I didn’t really know what that word meant, but I could tell by the way Momma said it that it had something to do with the government making a mistake by having the hundreds of Negro enlisted men load ammunition onto the ships without training them like they did the white soldiers who did it before them. And then when an accident happened, blowing up everyone in sight, blaming it on the Negro soldiers instead of the white officers in charge. All the money in the world can’t make you forget about that. And how do you forget about your daddy dying because you have a check? Momma looked like she believed a check was coming about as much as she believed in the tooth fairy. So we had to go on living every day without waiting for “compensation.”

With Daddy gone and just the little bit from her widow pension, and Momma not waiting on the compensation from Daddy’s accident, Momma spent every day trying to find a secretary job like the one she has at the church. She got up early in the morning to take the el train all the way to the downtown Chicago office buildings where they hire for

the secretary pool. And she said she had to smile extra pretty at white folks who probably threw away her application just as soon as she turned to walk out the door. Everybody knows can't no one tell whether a Negro or white woman types a letter, or makes an appointment or answers the phone, but Momma says that don't mean they want Negroes working in their offices. She says she has twice as much training as most of those white secretaries and could probably do twice the work too.

Now instead of two days a week, Momma was going to need to work the whole week to help pay the bills Daddy's money used to pay.

Every day Momma came home sweaty, with her lipstick nearly gone and her feet hurting, with no job. Made me go to bed thinking about if we were going to have to move to one of those kitchenette apartments with one room and share a bathroom with strangers.

"Can you work more days at the church?" I heard Annette asking Momma one night, while she took Momma's feet in her hands to rub the soreness out.

"Reverend Maynard said he could maybe give me one more day, but that's just not going to be enough. I'll figure something out, honey. Go on to bed," Momma told her.

I could hear the tired in my momma's voice all the way to my room.

“You look prettier than Lena Horne,” I told her every morning before she left. Not just to make her feel better, but because she did.

“Thank you, Clem, but it’s going to take a lot more than Lena Horne and a college degree to get a secretary job in Chicago,” she said, smiling tired.

She asked our neighbor Mrs. Marshall to keep an eye on us while she was out looking, and Mrs. Marshall did her best but she’s almost as old as Methuselah and fell asleep on the couch almost as soon as Momma closed the door. I knew if Momma walked in the door at the end of the day and her face was pinched up tight, not to ask how it went looking for a job, and not to start messing with Clarisse, just sit quiet until Momma got right. But one day, Momma came home and told us she got a job that she was starting on Monday morning, but her face was still pinched up tight.

“You did it, Momma.” I went right over to hug her good, but she turned away.

“Not now, Clem,” she said.

One thing I could always count on from my momma, even on the days when she was in her quiet moods or looking like she was half-asleep, was the way I could always make her happy just by hugging her or holding her hand like Annette or Clarisse couldn’t. They always said I was her favorite, and

I always pretended like it wasn't true, but it was. At least it sure felt like it.

Momma was quiet at supper, and I could barely eat thinking if I couldn't make my momma happy, there must really be something wrong. Maybe my momma was sick and was gonna die too. Maybe Clarisse and Annette were sick and were gonna die. Those were about the worst things I could think of. I watched Momma close all through dinner, checking to see if she looked sick. She looked about the same, but I didn't know if she was just trying to look strong to keep it from me. After she washed up the dishes, dried and put them away, and she still didn't want nothing to do with me, I went into my room and laid on my bed. Clarisse called me a baby nearly every day. And I know crying doesn't make anybody a baby, but I couldn't stop the tears from coming then. I cried so hard I didn't hear the knocking and didn't hear Annette walk in. When I opened my eyes, she was looking down at me.

"You okay, Clem?"

I had snot running out my nose, and I had to wipe it on my bedsheet.

"Is Momma going to die?"

Annette looked at me like I was crazy. "No. Of course not," she said.

“Are you or Clarisse going to die?” I asked her.

“Clem, no one is dying,” Annette told me. “Momma is just upset is all.”

“About being sick?”

“Move over,” she said, shoving me to the side while she laid down next to me. That made me cry some more. “C’mon, Clem,” she told me, and I could tell from her voice that that meant to stop my crying, and stop acting like a baby, so I stopped.

“She’s feeling sad,” Annette told me.

“About me?” I asked her.

“Now why would Momma be sad about her little Clem?” Annette asked.

“You sound like Clarisse when you talk like that,” I told her.

“Sorry,” she said. “But no, she ain’t sick, and she ain’t sad about you. She’s sad ’cause she has to work a job she don’t want to work.”

I turned on my side to look at her. Annette doesn’t talk nearly as much as me and Clarisse. Some days Annette don’t say much at all, but I think that while we’re fussing and talking, Annette must be watching and listening. “How do you know that?” I asked her.

She turned on her side and looked at me. She smiled the

same tired smile Momma does when she doesn't feel like explaining something that shouldn't need explaining.

“Because I know, Clem.”

“You sure she's not mad at me?” I asked her.

She smiled big now. “How could anyone be mad at our little Clem?”