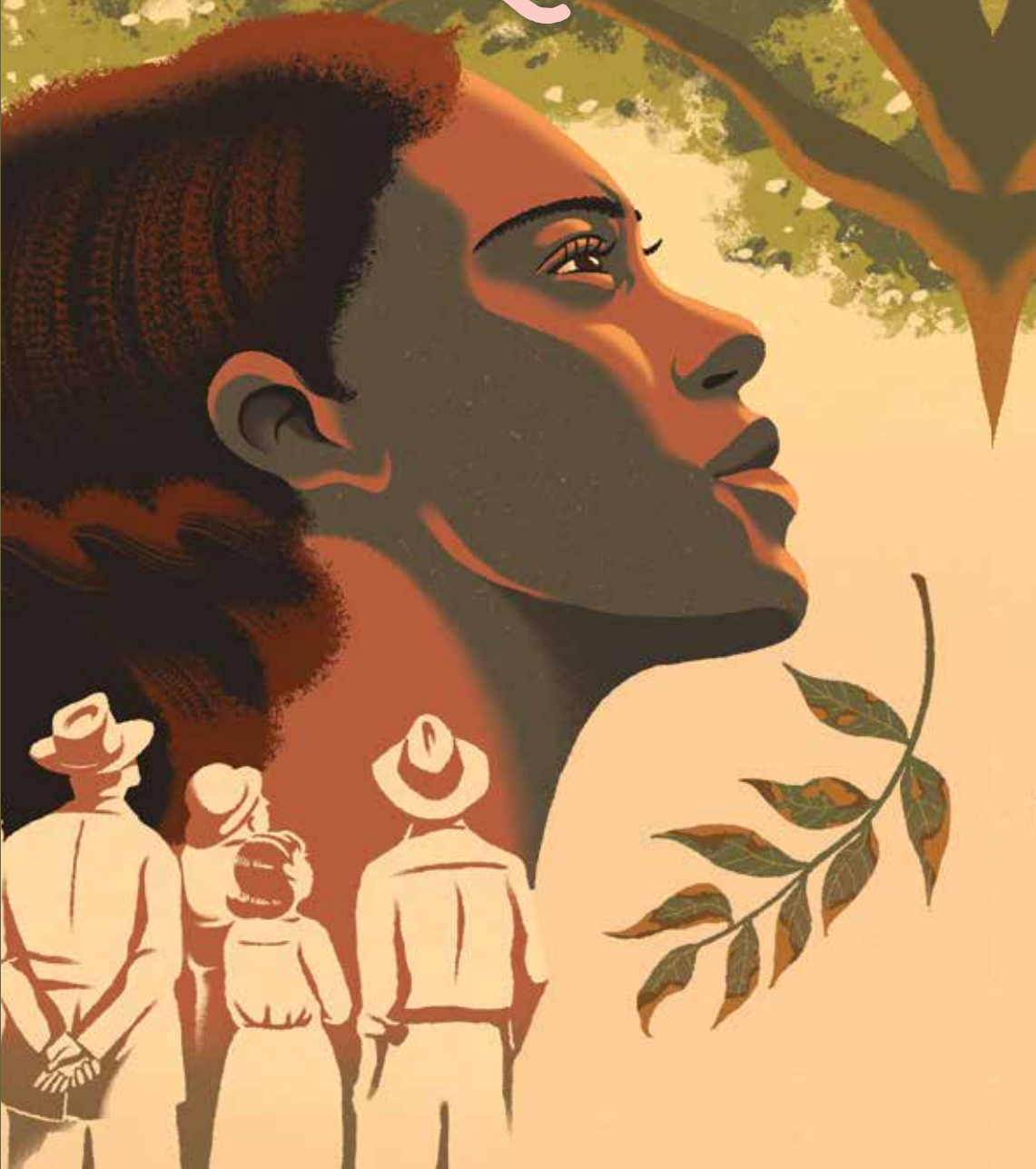


Coretta Scott King Honor Award-Winning Author

LESA CLINE-RANSOME FOR LAMB



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PROLOGUE

And then, there, there in the torchlight, I see her. Pressed in close against the others. Her face red as a fever sweat. Hair bright as a flame.
My friend.

When the men let her go, I hear branches snapping and watch the crowd move closer. I search again for my friend, but I can't hardly tell one from the other in this crowd. Pressed in tight, each one of those white faces looks just like the next. Smiling through shiny white teeth like a pack of hungry dogs.

Simeon is long gone now, I suspect.

Far.

North.

Safe.

From this. From them. From all of it.

A branch cracks as loud as a gunshot and the crowd cheers. I stay hidden behind the bush, just past the fence, and look up through the leaves at the dark. Not a star in the sky tonight. But the flickers of gold from the embers light up the sky in what looks like fireflies. Pretty almost.



LAMB

“**THE** choir will lead us in our devotional hymn,” Reverend Greer said, and sat down behind the pulpit.

Soon as I heard the first note on the piano, the sweat started under my arms. In the back row of the youth choir during rehearsal every Saturday morning with everyone’s voice singing on top of mine, I didn’t know Miss Twyman even knew I could carry a tune. But one Sunday, after service, Miss Twyman told Momma I had a “lovely voice,” and Momma told Miss Twyman she already knew that but was surprised Miss Twyman was just finding out. And now, since she knew, my momma said, couldn’t Miss Twyman find a way to let me lead next week’s devotional hymn? Momma has a way of asking that lets you know she’s not asking at all. And now, here I was leading, when all I wanted was to follow, singing along quiet, in the back, with the rest of the choir. There were days, listening to Momma, I could make my ownself believe near anything she believed about me. Not today.

At breakfast this morning, when she was braiding up my hair, she could tell I was getting the scared feeling I always get when I have to be up in front of people.

“Now Miss Twyman wouldn’t have you up there looking like a fool if you couldn’t sing. You know that,” Momma said, pulling my braid tight.

“Miss Twyman says everybody has a lovely voice,” I told her. “Not just me.”

“I don’t know about everybody. She was just talking ’bout you.”

In the back was where I felt I belonged, looking at Juanita Handy’s curly ponytail, swaying from side to side while she sang all the youth choir solos. Every once in a while her voice would crack when she tried to reach too high for a note, and Earvent would hit my hand or one of the boys in back would laugh, but I kept looking straight ahead, wishing I was brave enough to stand up every time like Juanita, not caring if my voice cracked or not, but knowing, like Juanita always did, that up front was just where I was meant to be.

Now standing alone with the choir behind me, I was too scared to be mad at Momma. Just needed to get through one song and be done. Let Momma see I ain’t never been and never would be a soloist. I could almost feel Juanita Handy’s eyes staring in the back of my head. I could hear her sweet voice hitting those notes right and know she was wondering what I was doing in her spot. I wished I could tell her to go ask my momma. The blood was pounding in my ears, louder than the piano, but I came in,

Would you be free from the burden of sin?

There’s pow’r in the blood, pow’r in the blood.

Too soft, too shaky, I could tell. I looked over at Miss Twyman and she pinched up her face. I closed my eyes tight.

“Sing it, child,” Reverend Greer said beside me. I opened my eyes and looked out into the pews. Staring back at me was Simeon, grin stretched from one end of his face to the other. He saw me looking and nodded his head, telling me to go on ahead, give it some more. So I did. Now the front pew chimed in.

“Yes, yes, Lord” and “That’s right” mixed in with the song, and I looked over at Miss Twyman, watching her hands tell my mouth what to do. She smiled up at me.

*There is pow’r, pow’r, wonder-working pow’r
In the blood of the lamb...*

I looked over at Momma swaying, quiet, her head bowed low, one hand raised just above her head. The sweat dripped down my back now.

In the pews together, when we sang this song from the hymnal, Momma would squeeze my hand, remembering.

I closed my eyes again.

*Would you o’er evil a victory win?
There’s wonderful pow’r in the blood.*

After the second verse, Miss Twyman was circling her hand, telling me and the choir to sing the chorus one more time, and this time, my voice got a little louder, a little deeper too.

Let God move you, Miss Twyman reminded me after yesterday’s rehearsal. And I think I did let God in, and he helped me move from side to side, with the music making my voice stronger as I swayed. I hoped it was God, because Simeon and Momma weren’t gonna be enough to make me sing the song the way it sounded in my head. Just when I was finding my way, the song ended, and the reverend stepped up again to the pulpit.

“Amen, Sister.” He nodded at me. “A-men...”

I walked to the back row of the choir stand, not looking at Juanita, not hearing any of Reverend Greer’s sermon. Not even Earvent said anything as I made my way over her legs and back to my seat. I just

made my lips move along to the rest of the hymns we sang in service, hoping Momma would let me alone now but knowing she never would.

“You sang that song today, Sister Lamb,” Reverend Greer said after service as I stepped down from the choir stand.

“Thank you, Reverend Greer,” I said. My momma stepped up beside me, smiling. Simeon stood behind her, grin still on his face.

“This girl can sing, can’t she, Reverend?” my momma said. *Too bold*, I thought. My momma is always too bold.

“She sure can,” said Simeon, his head nodding. I hit his hand.

“Why didn’t I see you up there in the choir, Brother Simeon?” the reverend said, his hand slapping down hard on Simeon’s shoulder.

“Well, uh... God has blessed each one of us with our own special gifts.” Simeon smiled. “Sadly, singing is not mine.”

Momma looked at Simeon, trying, I could tell, to keep smiling and not say what she wanted to say in the House of God and in front of Reverend Greer.

Reverend nodded his head at Simeon, smiling back. “You are right there, son. Lord knows, some folks sitting in that choir have talents that should be put to use elsewhere in the church. Can I get an Amen, Brother Simeon?”

“Amen!” Simeon laughed.

Me and Momma stood watching them. No matter who Simeon talked to, it wasn’t long before he said something to win them over. Everyone except Momma, who stood watching him and smiling for Reverend Greer but not Simeon.

When we left church and headed home, Momma turned to Simeon. “You can’t let her shine for just one day?”

“What?”

“Don’t you *what* me. You always gotta take away her shine?” she said.

“Momma, I—” I started.

“You know she was only up there because you made her do it, right? That wasn’t nothing about Lamb. That was about trying to make *you* shine,” he said.

“Boy, I—”

“Can we please not do this today?” I asked. “On a Sunday? After church? Please?”

They were both quiet.

“Well, Amen to that,” Simeon said.



LAMB

I ain't never seen my momma as someone who was saved. More like she sees God as the insurance man who comes round once a month collecting and you pay up because if you don't, you die without a halfway-decent burial, laid out in some pitiful pine box. For my momma, Sunday service is like paying the insurance man. She don't like paying up, but knows it could be worse if she don't. I think for both of us the best part of church is the music. Me singing in the choir and the two of us singing loud to the one hymn they play nearly every week that makes my momma reach over and touch my hand, like just hearing it brings her right back to the day I was born.

“You wasn't nothing like your brother, screaming to be seen the minute he came into this world. Nope, you just looked at me, real quiet, with those big old eyes of yours. Miss Ruby helped deliver you and I said to her, soon as you were in my arms, not making a sound, but watching me close, ‘She's as quiet as a lamb.’ By the time your daddy came home, you hadn't even moved and that's when I knew.

“He said to me, ‘Thinking we can name her Cora, for my momma.’ I looked him right in his eyes, tired as I was, and said, ‘Her name is Lamb.’ He laughed some. Everybody did. ‘You can't name her no

Lamb. You out your mind, Marion?’ But I knew. I knew your name the minute I saw you. *My Lamb*.

“You had me worried, though, quiet as you were. When I took you back home for my daddy’s burial, you spent the whole time hiding behind me. And with Simeon ’bout talking you to death, even my momma said, ‘She ain’t never gonna speak if that boy don’t stop talking for her. My momma wasn’t right about much, but she was right about that.

“Your daddy used to ask me twice a day—morning and night—‘That Lamb sure favors me and my people, don’t she?’ And I’d have to tell him ‘Yes she do, Chester.’ But he was just asking because he could see you up under me all the time. He wanted a little piece of you too.”

You can’t get my momma to talk much about the past. Ask her about where she grew up or anything about my daddy, she barely has two words to say. But the one thing she can talk about all day long is naming me Lamb. Like it was the one thing she did right in her life.

“But Daddy picked Simeon’s name, right?” I made the mistake of asking her once in the middle of her storytelling. She stopped me right there.

“Simeon is from the Bible. I picked his name too. Wasn’t going to let no one name *my* children.”

It’s always *my children* with my momma, like she made us all by herself. My momma prides herself on not needing nobody to take care of hers. I suppose if there was a way to make us on her own, she would have done that too.

After that, I never interrupted when she was talking about the past. She needed to tell it her way.



LAMB

I remember my daddy in pieces, but not enough to make him whole. Simeon says he remembers him living with us one day and packing his bags the next. Come the next week, here he comes back again, unpacking the suitcase he just packed. I don't remember a lot of fighting, just the quiet of my momma and daddy. Sitting at a table not speaking.

Working on a railroad. Traveling to see his family. Working all kinds of hours. Simeon and Momma told me all kinds of stories until we all knew I knew the truth of it. He was gone for good.

One thing I remember about my daddy is the smell of him. Like the smell of fresh-cut wood and smoke, like the cigars I remember him smoking. And he was big. I'm expecting one day to be tall like him, but for now I just took on being big-boned and "bright," my momma calls me, with skin as light as my daddy's. Not sure I'll ever be anywhere near as tall as Simeon or my momma, so I'm sure never going to be as tall as I remember my daddy. One day Momma stopped talking about Daddy altogether. And when she did, me and Simeon did too.

I had just started school. And I was happy to finally not be away from Simeon for so much of the day when he was gone. Now Momma walked us both to school. Soon she said I'd walk with just Simeon. Didn't matter much to me. Walking in between the two of them was all

I really needed. Momma told me I'd need to start speaking for myself once I got to school.

"Won't be no Simeon to tell the teacher what you need," she said to me.

But I already knew that. I knew too I could find the words when I needed, but Simeon always had the right ones when I didn't. His words were pretty and he could find a way to make them funny or mean or serious or smart anytime he wanted, without thinking much about it. I couldn't do all that with mine but I knew I could get by fine until the school day was out and he'd be waiting for me by the door.

"What did you teach the class today?" he used to ask me every day that first year. And I would laugh.

"I'm not the teacher, Simeon."

"No? But I bet you're the smartest one in that class." I shook my head no, hung it low. Simeon always made me look at him. "You are the smartest one in that class, Lamb. Don't you forget that."

"But Simeon—I'm not..."

"You are what you say you are." Even young, Simeon always talked old. Like he was born knowing what to say.

So when the kids would make "baaa baaa" sounds like a lamb when I walked past, I tried to remember what Simeon told me about being smart and being the best even when I didn't always feel it.

From what I remembered, Momma wasn't much different after Daddy left. Maybe a little happier. Or as happy as Momma can be. Not long after Daddy left is when the Saturday parties started up. Momma would start cooking early in the day. A pot of neck bones and greens, corn bread. She'd fix us a cold supper early and draw our baths. Get us into bed. And then she'd put on one of her nice, flowery dresses, some lipstick, put music on the record player in the front room. And then we'd hear folks come in loud and laughing. Couldn't call them her

friends because Momma didn't have people she saw regular outside of those Saturday night parties. We opened up the door from Simeon's room just enough to get a peek to see who they were and so Simeon could make up names for everyone, like Big-Boobied Bertha and Lil' Marge, that'd make me laugh till I cried. Sometimes the floor would shake, and the records would skip with all the dancing they were doing. We always knew when my momma's younger brother, Uncle Chime, came in. We could hear his voice above everyone else's. And before the night was over, he'd make his way into Simeon's room and check on us.

"I know y'all ain't asleep, so don't even play," he'd say, leaning in the doorway. I would run to hug him even though I hated the smell of drink and sweat on his clothes. I'd hear some woman shouting behind him, "What you doin' in there, Chime? C'mon back out here and dance with me," or "Chime, it's your hand." But I loved that he always took a minute to check in on us.



LAMB

I don't know when Momma started letting us come out to see what was going on. Probably Simeon just said he was gonna do it and did. Or maybe it was when I would sing along to the records, standing on Simeon's bedspread in my bare feet, and Simeon would practice all his dances. And Momma, who never checked in on us, one night did. She was just standing in the doorway, leaning the same way Uncle Chime did. A little smile on her face listening to me. When I finished singing "A-tisket, a-tasket, a brown and yellow basket," she clapped real slow.

"C'mere, baby," she said. I hated her drinking voice, which was deeper and slower than her regular voice. I stepped down thinking I was gonna be in trouble for being out of bed. But Momma took hold of my hand and pulled me into the front room, where all her Saturday night friends were sitting and talking or dancing.

"Listen to my baby," she said to everyone, and they got quiet and looked over at me. Then she walked over to the record player and played the song again. "Sing like you just did," she said to me, leaning up against her friend Myrtle, and everyone was looking, even Simeon. But I didn't want to sing in front of her Saturday night friends, just Simeon, and burst out crying.

Momma leaned down and whispered in my ear, “You got to stop being so scared of everything. Now go on and sing.”

Simeon stepped in front of Momma, looked at me, and said soft, “Pretend it’s just us, in my room. I’ll stand in front of you and dance.” He smiled down at me. And that was how I did it, with Simeon in front of me, swooping low and shaking his shoulders back and forth, and me singing loud as I could behind him, while everyone yelled, “Go on now,” and “Git it!” I don’t know if it was for me or Simeon and I didn’t care. It felt a little bit good to be a part of the party with Momma and her friends. Uncle Chime walked in and watched too, yelling, “That’s my Chop!”

When the song ended, Momma scooped me up, swaying a little bit. Told me I could go on back to the room if I wanted. But me and Simeon stayed in the front room, walking around trying to match the faces to the voices of the folks we’d been hearing. After that, when Momma didn’t yell or make us go back into the room, we stayed every Saturday night there was a party until Momma’s friends started expecting us to be there. I never liked the parties the way Simeon did. I said hello to the people I knew. Turned out Big-Boobied Bertha was the woman who worked at the Alamo Theater ticket counter.

When I was old enough, Momma would have me help with the food, stirring a pot or making a pan of cornbread. If it was warm, I’d fix two plates and bring them outside for me and Simeon. I liked to sit out back where it was quiet, unless Momma pulled me onto the floor with her.

“C’mon and dance with me, baby,” Momma would ask, moving her hips in that way that made me feel like I was seeing something I shouldn’t be.

“Nah, Momma, you know I hate dancing. Ask Simeon,” I’d say, backing away.

“But I wanna dance with my baby. Simeon ain’t my baby.”

“Momma...” I had to do a little two-step to get her to stop.

“Bend your knees, baby,” Momma told me. “Like this,” she’d say, squatting low and laughing.

I bent my knees, but I still wasn’t doing much of nothing. Finally she’d stop fussing with me, knowing that was the most she was gonna get.

But Simeon always stepped in for me. “C’mon, Momma,” he said. He dropped his tall, skinny self down deep and spun around. Held out his hand. Momma rolled her eyes but laughed. Everybody watched the two of them together. His dancing was more like floating across the floor. Just about every part of his body moved together—arms, legs, head, and shoulders—and he sang along with the words.

“Do it, Simeon!” someone shouted. I could see Simeon soaking up that attention like bread to gravy, getting every last drop of it. When the song ended his face was shiny with sweat. I went out to the back porch to sit and a few minutes later I heard the screen door bang behind me. Simeon sat down next to me with two cups of Myrtle’s punch.

“This ain’t got nothing in it, right?” I asked him before taking it from him.

“Only one way to find out,” Simeon said, swallowing his in one gulp. I sniffed and took a small sip.

“I think you’re gonna have to teach me to dance,” I said.

“I tried to, remember?” he said, taking a sip of my drink. “As I recall, you are a lost cause.”

We laughed. “Tell Momma so she’ll stop asking.”

“That ain’t her asking, it’s the whiskey.”

Sometimes Simeon stayed inside talking, sometimes playing cards or dancing with women old enough to know better but too drunk to care. Momma was different on Saturday nights. Laughing loud in a way she never did with just us during the week. And she even danced, something we never saw her do even when her favorite songs came on

the radio. But on Saturdays she was pressed up close with her friend Myrtle, who was round and could have been called big-boobied for as much as she had in the front. Sometimes I watched them in the middle of the front room, laughing with Myrtle's arms around Momma's neck, swaying, and Momma's hands would rest on top of Myrtle's big wide behind to a slow song. Myrtle was the only one Momma let sleep overnight on Saturdays. Everyone else had to be gone by midnight. Momma's rules. "You heathens don't got Sunday service at nine in the morning, but I do," she'd tell them.

Saturday nights were the only times she'd let me sleep in the room with Simeon on a little cot next to his. I started looking forward to Saturday nights because there was nothing I hated more than sleeping alone. Even when I was little and scared and would go into my momma's room at night, she'd hold me a bit but bring me right on back to my own bed to sleep. My momma didn't like to share her bed with no one, scared or not. I asked her once, "You ever get scared sleeping alone in here?"

She laughed. "I been waiting my whole life to sleep in my own bed, without someone's elbows or stinkin' feet all up in my face. Last thing I am is scared."

There wasn't much that made my momma scared. After that, when I got scared, I went to Simeon. And he held my hand, sometimes he'd even move over, make room in his bed for me to lie down next to him. I'd have to leave before daylight, though, because Momma told Simeon it "wasn't natural" for a boy child to let his sister lie next to him like that when I had my own bed. She told him, "I had to share a bed with my brothers. Wasn't no choice." Most times whatever Momma said, Simeon was just contrary and did what he pleased, but when she told him that, he started sleeping on the floor if I had to stay in his room. I could tell she made him feel ashamed in a way he hadn't felt before.



SIMEON

TO hear my momma tell it, I started complaining the first breath I took, and I haven't stopped since. But what she calls complaining, I call being impatient. Started crawling and wanted to run. I opened a book, read the first page, and flipped to the last. And now, all I want to do is get out of Mississippi and live in a place that lets me walk on two feet instead of crawling around on four. Problem is, that's not what my momma wants to hear. It's like I can always see what's next for me, a little bit further down the road.

Now, a lot of folks say Jackson has plenty to offer our people—good jobs, a section of town where Negroes can work for themselves, a pretty downtown, not like where my momma's people came from, where the only work they could do was farming and more farming. Here you even got a choice of schools that ain't too bad, with some of the teachers from colleges up north. This is what they call *opportunity*. What they never talk about, though, is that the best Jackson has to offer is for Whites Only. Those Whites Only signs ain't just for water spigots and buses, nah, they are for anything worth something in Ole Miss. If a Negro wants something more than some scraps, you best pack your bags and make your way over to the train depot, start heading north yesterday because you ain't going to find it here. The *Chicago Defender*

posts jobs with good pay asking, no, begging, Negroes to make their way north. And what do they do? Stay right here, scraping and waiting for someone to treat them just a little bit better than a dog. This Jackson Negro is gonna be long gone come August.

When our daddy “took up lodging elsewhere”—that’s what my momma told me first time I asked her when Daddy was coming back—Lamb was too young to remember much. My daddy was in and out so much, I’m not even sure Lamb understood much of who he was. Momma told her he worked out of town and she believed it. But I knew better.

“What’s that mean, ‘lodging elsewhere?’” I asked my momma. She was folding laundry from the line out back and I must have already knew what she meant because I remember watching to see if any of the clothes she was folding was Daddy’s.

“It means he ain’t living here no more,” she said.

“Why’s that?” I asked her. “Why isn’t Daddy living here anymore?”

She stopped folding. Leaned down and looked at me. “I already told you. Because he took up lodging elsewhere.” I waited, watching her fold some more, and then I went on in the house. I waited awhile before I told Lamb. By then I had a story for her better than the one Momma told me.

“Daddy got a job on the railroad,” I told her at first. She just nodded. I showed her a picture in a book of a train. Pointed to it. She put her finger on the picture next to mine. “Yup, that’s right, the train. He travels everywhere so we ain’t gonna see him like we used to.” She nodded again. Lamb wasn’t much of a talker, but she understood everything I said. “But when he comes back, he’s gonna tell us about all the places he visited.” Sometimes I told her Daddy came by when she was sleeping or that he told someone to tell us hello. I hated lying to Lamb, but I hated more what Momma might tell her. Momma ain’t never been known for holding back on her words.

One thing I know is that if you want something in this world you gotta get out there and take it. My momma never had much schooling, but I give her credit, she makes sure we get ours. She is proud in her own way that I get good grades and all the teachers tell her I have a good head on my shoulders.

“Didn’t get it from me,” she tells them to their face, talking the way she thinks mothers do to teachers. But to me, she says, “I may not be book smart like you, Simeon, but I know one thing, can’t no one call me a fool neither. There isn’t nothing I can’t do if I don’t set my mind to it, book or no book.”

“I know, Momma,” I told her, not knowing why she was needing to tell me about herself every time the teachers told her something about me. To me, my momma does all right for someone who, according to her, “barely made it past grade school.”

“Didn’t you want to?” I asked her. “Didn’t you like school?” Too young to know better than to ask my momma questions like that.

“You thinking I had a choice?” She laughed a mean laugh. “When I had to work in the fields every day? I was lucky I got the schooling I got. Don’t you forget that, Simeon. You best thank God for what you got.” I nodded, not knowing if I was supposed to be thanking God for not working in the fields, for going to school every day, or for the momma who was reminding me of both.

She went over my letters with me, best as she could. She was good with numbers, I could see that. She could add them quicker in her head than I could with pencil and paper. She sat next to me when I did my lessons. She didn’t say much but she was checking on me to make sure my answers were right and everything was neat and on time to hand in in the morning to my teachers. When I finished up, she’d put her hand on my head, rub it quick, then get up and tell me to go on to bed. That’s how she let me know I’d done a good job in her eyes. That

was more than I could say for some people's mommas and daddies. Franklin Hall, my friend since third grade, had a momma who never even made him go to school if he wasn't in the mind to go. He ribbed me about my momma making me go, but I didn't let it bother me none. Franklin and every one of my friends knew that going to school didn't bother me one bit.

By the time I got to junior high school, Momma didn't sit with me anymore at the table or help me with my work, but Lamb was with me, and I started helping her with hers. When I started at Lanier High School, it was in a different direction than Jim Hill Junior High School, so I could only walk with Lamb partway. Lanier's building was tall and prettier than Jim Hill's with more steps heading up to the front door. On my first day, the principal was there at the front, in a fine white suit, with small little spectacles, almost like mine, shaking the hands of every student who came in. Most of the older ones he knew by name, the others he introduced himself to.

"Good morning, young man," he said to me when I reached him. I was tall enough so we were almost looking eye to eye. "I'm Dr. Atkins, the principal."

"Good morning, Dr. Atkins," I said back to him. And as I started to walk into the school, I thought of something and turned back to him. "If you're a doctor, why are you our principal?"

Dr. Atkins was reaching out to shake the hand of the boy behind me when he stopped. "What is your name, young man?" he asked.

"Simeon," I told him. "Simeon Clark."

"Well, Simeon, I do love a young person who asks the right questions, so we'll begin your first day of high school with a lesson about higher education. I have a doctoral degree in education—a PhD." He tapped his chest. "I am a proud graduate of Wilberforce University. All doctors do not practice medicine."

My mouth was just about hanging open. “Happy to have you with us this morning, Mr. Clark,” he said.

“Nice to meet you, Principal—Dr. Atkins.” He nodded his head at me and smiled. I went home thinking *A doctor of education?* Just when I thought I knew just about everything, I found out I knew next to nothing.

That night at dinner, I said to Momma, “Did you know you could be a doctor and not ever see a patient?” She looked at me and kept right on eating.

Lamb spoke up. “Is this a riddle, Simeon?”

“Nope.” I looked at Momma.

“You know I don’t like you playing at the table, Simeon,” she said.

I turned to Lamb. “My principal is Dr. Atkins but he isn’t a doctor doctor with a stethoscope and all who sees patients. He says he’s a doctor of education. He’s a PhD.”

“A PhD?” Lamb asked me. Lamb was always interested in whatever I was saying but my momma said that most times my talking was a way of showing I knew more than everybody else. Momma kept eating and acted like I was telling her the sky was blue.

“I wanna be a doctor like that,” I said, not knowing it was something I wanted until I said it, but after talking to Dr. Atkins it was all I wanted. Not just because of my name with the word “Doctor” in front of it, but because it sounded like it meant a lot more years of spending time learning all of the things I wanted to learn. Maybe even at the college Wilberforce he talked about.

I heard Momma laughing.

“Momma?” Lamb asked, both of us looking at her. Wasn’t often we heard our momma laughing out loud.

“I think I heard just about everything now. My son gonna be a doctor and never see a patient.” She shook her head. “Maybe you can be a lawyer, Lamb, and never try a case,” she said, smiling.

“Well, it’s true, Dr. Atkins—”

“Didn’t say it wasn’t true. I just said I heard everything is all,” Momma said.

I saw something on her face I hadn’t seen before. Something aside from her laughing. Momma looked proud.

“You think I could be a doctor?” I asked her.

“Don’t see why not,” she said, putting her head back down to eat. “But here’s the thing—Dr. Atkins at your school paying for you to be a doctor just like him?”

“I don’t think—”

“Cause if he ain’t, then I’m not sure who is,” she said, finally looking at me.

“I’ll figure out a way,” I told her.

“You gonna have to. Last I checked, my paycheck is barely keeping food on the table and clothes on our backs. Not sure who is paying for people to become doctors.” She stood up to clear her plate. “Lamb, wash up these dishes. I got to finish up this order before the morning.”

I watched her back as she left the room.

“You *are* gonna be a doctor,” Lamb said to me soft.

I nodded my head. “I know I will,” I told her.

The next day, I went looking for a job. If I was going to be a doctor and go to a college named Wilberforce, my momma was right. I was gonna have to figure out a way to pay for it all by myself.

The day I got the letter from Wilberforce University saying I was accepted into the School of Education, it felt like I was reading the Emancipation Proclamation. I must have read it over five times. Even took off my glasses and cleaned them good, then read it again. Later, I took Lamb in my room and told her I needed to show her something. I could hardly stand still when I handed her that letter.

“Simeon, what’s wrong with you? You can’t hold your water?” Lamb asked, laughing.

She unfolded it and I watched her head go back and forth reading until I couldn’t take no more. I snatched the letter back.

“I got accepted,” I whispered hot into her face. “Into Wilberforce. With a full scholarship, Lamb! You know what that means?”

Lamb snatched the letter back and kept reading. When she finished she looked up at me and back again at the letter.

“Simeon!” she said. “You really—” She threw her arms around me. “I knew it, I knew it,” she said. I could feel her tears on my neck.

“Now don’t go and get me to crying,” I said, and pulled her away so I could see her face.

“A full scholarship means they think you are one of the smartest students,” she said, staring at me and smiling.

I nodded at her. “It must, right?”

“You already told Momma?” I knew she wasn’t trying to kill my celebration, but she just about did. The one thing I knew was my momma would not be celebrating me going to college, Ohio, or any other place that meant I was trying to be my own kind of man. But I didn’t tell Lamb all that. Didn’t want to get her started up again on me and Momma. Not when I was in the middle of my celebration. There was a lot I couldn’t say to Lamb about our momma. A lot she couldn’t know. Not yet anyhow.

“Not yet,” I said to Lamb. “I’m gonna surprise her later.”

Lamb tilted her head to the side, looking at me.

“Well, you know how Momma is—” I started. “I gotta make sure I get her in the right mood. I’m gonna tell her soon, don’t worry. But you have the distinction of being the very first to know that Simeon Clark is going into Wilberforce University’s Class of 1944.”

Lamb smiled then. “But you’ll tell her soon, right?”

“I promise,” I told her.

After Lamb left my room, I tucked that letter in my top drawer and knew I wasn't going to be able to sleep that night. I could already see myself graduating from Wilberforce. I could see myself in a suit just like Dr. Atkins with my diploma in my hand. Lamb sitting in the front row. I was going to have to tell Momma soon, I just needed to find a way to do it without her making a fuss. Without her muddying up my dreams. When I closed my eyes, tossing and turning, trying to make myself go to sleep, I went back again and again to the picture of me crossing the stage. I could see me in my white suit, see my hand reaching out for that diploma, hear Lamb shouting my name. But the funny thing was, even with that picture clear as day in my head, I couldn't see my momma anywhere.



LAMB

SIMEON kept newspaper articles he cut out tucked between the pages of his notebook, and every morning, before Momma came in, tired from being up late sewing, he'd tell me what he figured I ought to know. Simeon didn't care nothing about what was happening overseas or even who was getting married in town. Simeon was only interested in the stories that had something to do with Negroes. Now if a Negro was progressing or being held back from progressing while getting married or being overseas that was fine, but otherwise, he'd skip right past it.

This morning I sat down with my toast and Simeon let out a long whistle. "One of these days, one of these days..." I started chewing, waiting. I liked to start my mornings not hearing about Negroes fighting, dying, struggling, or surviving, but Simeon wasn't all that interested in how I wanted to start my mornings. He put down the paper and looked at me.

"Now look at this," he said, pointing to a small article on the front page of the *Clarion-Ledger*. "Seems it's time for the annual Daughters of the Confederacy meeting this weekend."

He shook his head. "Least we know where *not* to be," he said, whistling again. "May as well be 1840 instead of 1940..."

“Fortunately for you, it’s a *Daughters* of the Confederacy meeting. It’s only for women,” I said, trying to make him smile. When he didn’t look up, I opened my math book. “Can I ask you something *not* in the newspaper?”

Simeon kept talking like he didn’t hear me. “You would think white folks got other things to do aside from trying to make our lives harder.” He shook his head one more time.

“So you won’t help me with math?” I asked again.

He looked up. His little round glasses made me feel like I was looking at his eyes through a magnifying glass. “Aren’t you just tired of it? Tired of being here?”

“Simeon, we barely see white folks. ’Side from your job, and when I go to the store with Momma, we wouldn’t see them at all. And since I don’t plan on going to any Confederacy teas anytime soon...”

“See, it’s thinking like that that’s setting us back,” Simeon said to me.

I put my head in my hand. I liked math but that didn’t mean it came easy. I had to go over my work two, sometimes three times to make sure I got things right. And even then I made Simeon check it. I knew Momma liked numbers, the way when I was young she sometimes watched me do my math schoolwork over my shoulder. I could hear her whispering numbers to herself. She told me once she did all the figuring for her daddy’s books back on the farm. But Momma didn’t do much talking about what she wished she’d done. She didn’t talk about anything from her past.

“You listening, Lamb?” he said, trying to get me to look at him.

“Are you listening, Simeon? You want me to be better? Do better? Help me with these math problems!”

He was quiet, then started laughing. He snatched my book and paper with my homework. “Let me see what you got.” He circled two of

them with his pencil, shaking his head. “Good Lord, girl, you planning on spending your whole life in eleventh grade?”

“Shut up, Simeon. That’s not even bad.” I hit him on his head with my pencil. “Just show me what I did wrong.”

He took out another piece of paper and went over my mistakes step by step. He wouldn’t move to the next problem until he was sure I understood. Just as we finished the second one, Momma came in the kitchen, yawning.

“Y’all gonna be late you don’t get a move on,” she said.

“And good morning to you, Momma,” Simeon said.

Momma stared at him. She hated when Simeon talked too loud or too happy too early in the morning.

“Lamb, c’mere, let me fix your braid,” she said.

I stood up, and Momma had to bend down a little because she was so much taller than me. I loved the feel of her fingers in my hair. They moved light and quick, and it seemed like only Momma’s hands could get through all the way to the scalp and make my hair do what it needed to.

We packed up and left Momma in the kitchen stirring her coffee.

Me and Simeon never minded when it was just the two of us walking to school together. I think we both liked being alone, out the house, away from Momma, though we never said it.

“As I was saying...” Simeon started up again, like we were still sitting having breakfast, “someone needs to teach these white folks a lesson.”

I looked behind us, checking to make sure no one heard him. “Don’t talk like that, Simeon. That kind of talk ain’t helping no one.”

“*Isn’t* helping *anyone*,” he corrected me. “What good is us staying quiet when every day things are getting worse and worse? You need to leave with me,” he said.

“How am I gonna do that, Simeon, when I have to finish school here first? Besides, I can’t leave Momma by herself.”

“She has Uncle Chime. She won’t be alone. Momma’s never gonna leave here. Suppose I found a school for you near me? A better school than Lanier? Me and you got to make plans for our future, Lamb. A real future in a place with real opportunity for Negroes. People here can’t see beyond their circumstances,” Simeon said.

“You saying Momma’s dumb for wanting to stay in Jackson? This is her home, Simeon.”

“Not dumb, Lamb. Her world don’t go much beyond Jackson. She’s scared, like everybody else here. Just the way white folks like it,” he said.

“Just because people stay don’t make them scared, Simeon. Just because people quiet don’t make them cowards neither. Sometimes that makes them smart. Makes them want to live and take care of their families. Maybe live to see another day.”

Simeon stopped walking and pushed his glasses up again on his nose, sweating now the way it does when he gets worked up. “But that ain’t really no way to live, now is it?”