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Roger Clinton proves once again that while you can pick your spin doctors, you can't choose your family. Tessa Souter watches Bill's little brother grizzle his way through a book launch and a box of tissues

"IT CAN BE frustrating to have an over-achieving sibling. Especially when that sibling becomes the President of the United States." So says the blurb advertising "An Evening with Roger Clinton on Growing Up and Overcoming the Obstacles of a Dysfunctional Family". The title is a little misleading, however: in the first place, judging by his performance tonight, one can't help wondering if 38-year-old Roger Clinton has grown up at all.

A self-confessed — and proud of it — "mama's boy" and stuffed-animal lover, Clinton cries like a baby almost throughout the entire two hours. Then there is the question of whether he actually has overcome his family obstacles. As he points out himself, "I'm no professor", (hate-radio talk-show host Rush Limbaugh goes one further, describing him as Bill Clinton's "half-witted half-brother"). "And I am not, I am not here to lecture you on dysfunctional families," he says. However, what ensues this evening might be construed as something of a practical demonstration.

We are at San Francisco's Learning Annex, where various authors and "personalities" boost sales of their books by giving talks on their individual areas of expertise, from out-of-body experiences to "How to Drive a Woman Wild in Bed". Tonight, Roger Clinton is promoting his book (advance copies are available at the back of the room), *Growing up Clinton: The Lives, Times and Tragedies of America's Presidential Family*.

Crammed into a tiny room at the Holiday Inn are only 24 chairs, nine of which are empty, which does not bode well for book sales. The rest are filled by mostly older women, some of whom have read — and are now clutching — his mother Virginia Kelley's book, *Leading with my Heart*. There is only one man here who, younger than everyone else in the room by at least 15 years, looks distinctly out of place. "I thought it would be sold out," says one woman, voicing the thoughts of everyone here.

A little late, a small commotion announces Roger's imminent arrival. "Here he comes," someone

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◀ stage-whispers, and he swishes into the room, along with several women in attendance, looking like a cross between sixties football star George Best and rock legend Bruce Springsteen. Without further ado, he is introduced by no less than the president of the Learning Annex, as "First Brother, Roger Clinton".

DESPITE THE SMALL turnout, he seems happy to see us. "Glad y'all are here!" he says, brimming with Southern charm, as he sits down at a small conference table at the front of the room. There is a smattering of applause. The only clue to the fact that the evening will end in tears is a small box of tissues, which sits on the table where most speakers would have a water jug. In the meantime, what is eventually going to turn into a two-hour emotional roller-coaster ride, starts out innocuously enough with Roger showing us all a picture of his 14-month-old son (or should that be the First Nephew?), Tyler, sitting on the lawn outside the White House. "In't that great?" he asks, all smiles. "Being a father is the greatest single thing that's ever happened to me. Period. Period."

"When I was standing by that bed and the doctor said: 'Roger, I want you to come and look at something,' and the baby's head was barely showing, I..." His face reddens, "gosh, I'll start crying again right now," he exclaims, snatching a tissue out of the strategically placed box and mopping at his eyes. People start shifting uncomfortably in their seats. The sole man in the room appears to be utterly absorbed in the cover blurb of his neighbour's copy of *Leading with my Heart* ("a beautiful, beautiful book," says Roger). "The doctor said: 'I don't know who cried more,'" he sobs — although, in his book, this comment is attributed to his wife, Molly. In fact, there are so many (admittedly small) discrepancies between the book and tonight's talk, that it would not be a surprise if false-memory syndrome turned out to be another one of the Clinton family's dysfunctions.

But these are minor quibbles. The point of this story — in fact, of this whole evening — is not who said what but how Roger *felt*: "It was the culmination of so many years of pain, loneliness, abandonment, fright, and abuse on the one side and then all of the visions of peace, joy, and satisfaction and gratitude, all hitting me right then, and the more that baby came out, the more I cried. I just couldn't stop. It was the greatest moment of my life."

The one blot on the whole experience was the absence of Roger's mother, who died before Tyler was born. However, he takes comfort in the fact that his mother knew that Tyler was on the way. In fact, this omniscient woman knew a lot more than that. "She *knew* that Molly was going to be the one. She *knew* in her heart. For the first time in her life she *knew* — the only time she really thought she *knew*. But she *knew* that we were going to be married. She *knew* that we were pregnant — I say 'we' because I gained 32 pounds during the pregnancy [laughter] — but she *knew* all that. And do you know something? That was the greatest feeling. That was the greatest satisfaction. Knowing that my mother left *knowing* that in her heart."

It is hard to view such a public display of emotion without suspicion — particularly having read in that day's *Los Angeles*

*Times* that he broke down in exactly the same spots only two nights before at the Learning Annex in Los Angeles.

However, if this is acting, it is method acting. The tears coursing down Roger's reddened cheeks are real. And they are having their effect on the women in this audience. "I can relate to that," says one, responding to his claim that his mother felt able to die when she knew she no longer had to worry about "her baby". Was Roger's mother his best friend, another woman wants to know. He responds by making another lunge for the tissue box. A glass of water has to be fetched and administered. "Thanks, I'll keep this right here," he says rearranging the tissue box to bring it nearer.

"Let me say something first that I want to tell y'all.

I am not a structured speaker," he says, launching off at a tangent. "I think I'm a very capable and able communicator. Mother always taught her two boys the importance of communication and the importance of manners and the importance of education. I've always been a spontaneous soul, my brother's always been the one to plan way ahead. My brother always looks at the moment but acts on the moment according to what might be down the road. If something tastes good, he'll be looking down the road to see if it turns sour. Me, if something tastes good I'll always taste it right then before it turns sour. And that's always been my life. Period."

It turns out that a mere ten minutes into the Los Angeles talk, when he was describing his mother being beaten up, "I was just bawling. I thought, 'Oh my gosh, I've got two more hours. These people are not going to put up with me being out of control emotionally.'" However, the Los Angeles audience, like tonight's crowd, did not just put up with it, they lapped it up. It was a "good experience" for Roger. "As my brother always told me, I can suck it up. As he also often told me, 'Rog, it's showtime. It's showtime.' That's what mother used to always tell both of us whenever our emotions were getting the best of us. She would always say: 'It's showtime, and it's time to go on.'"

It could almost be an introduction to the next anecdote he shares — the one he opens his book with — the day, when he was six years old, that he found mother being attacked by daddy with a pair of scissors — "the real long kind with black handles". He was in the living room when he heard "the noises and the approachment of The Violent One. Of my dad." Or perhaps he was "resting in bed" with a headache (as he



Despite the happy family snap with Bill (right) and mother, Roger Clinton claims that the threat of parental violence haunted the brothers' childhood days

says in the book). Anyway, he heard "the noise of an appliance being pushed across the floor". Unless you go by the book, of course, which describes the noise he heard as "a sort of soft thud".

When he saw his mother pressed up against the washing machine (or dryer) he couldn't scream or move until "something" thrust him. "I don't believe in spirits but that was God that pushed me out of that door, and I'm not a religious person! So I was pushed out that door. I was pushed towards that door and I just flew toward that door and I ran next door to where I knew Bubba was and I just sort of screamed: 'Bubba [Southern baby-speak for 'Big Brother', the name by which Roger often refers to

Bill this evening], please come quick, Daddy's killing Dado. Daddy's killing Dado!' Before we know it we are launched into an aside about why he called his mother Dado.

THE ADVICE AND suggestions from the audience are now coming thick and fast. One woman in particular seems obsessed with explaining why his mother didn't tell him when her cancer recurred. "Maybe she loved you so much, she didn't want to hurt you?" she says. Someone else asks: "What was going on in your life at the time?" One of the others snaps: "That has nothing to do with anything!"

Nothing seems able to stop Roger's tears, until a latecomer — a man — punctures the atmosphere, causing a minor commotion and, by the time the intruder is seated,

Roger, who seems a teensy bit irritated, has thankfully got a grip.

I'm beginning to feel a growing admiration for Bill Clinton. One has to marvel at the immense reserves of patience and generosity that he and Hillary must have had in order to cope with Roger at his most unstable — especially if tonight's performance is a demonstration of how he is at an emotional high point in his life. There's no doubt in Roger's mind, and nor should there be, that Big Brother loves him. Ten years his senior, ("I have realised that across the board he is ten years older than I am. Always has been, always will be"), Bill even took Roger on dates, to get him away from abusive Roger Senior.

"Big Brother loved me so much, he loved me SO MUCH, he would tell his dates, 'Roger is coming too.' It was because he loved me so much." But how much does Roger consider Bill's feelings?

When someone in the audience advises him that "the best thing for you to do is sit down with your brother and talk with him about how it was for him", Roger says, "That's a good point. I never thought about that. Thanks. I don't know why in the world I never thought of that before!"

And Roger owes a lot to Bill, from the many opportunities to sing at political functions ("One of the finest compliments I'm ever paid is when somebody comes up and says, 'You're not black. I thought you were black!'"), down to Bill knowing in advance about the sting operation that eventually sent Roger to prison, where he joined Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous and turned his life around.

That's not to say things didn't get tough in that co-ed prison. Thankfully, there was comfort in the forms of Debbie the murderer and "Vicki... a very attractive blonde, blue-eyed, well-built 24-year-old bank-manager-turned-embezzler. What a wonderful girl to come into my life at this crucial time," he says in his book.

Prison is all behind him now. Recently Hillary called to say how proud she was of him and how he acts as First Brother. "I can count the times that she has called me on one hand in the past 20-some years," he says, getting all choked up again. "[It just shows] how far our relationship has come!" Presumably he meant since the days he thought "her hair was silly" and he "hated her cola-bottle glasses".

Since the birth of Tyler, however, the only way is up and straight ahead... "Sometimes it's so overwhelming I just have to sit down and rest."

And with that, the evening fizzles to a close; ending, as it began, not with a bang but a whimper. And the end of his book, remembering the time that Bill called Hillary to describe baby Tyler over the phone, he was "too proud for words. I was married to a beautiful woman, my life was back on track and my brother was the President of the United States." What did he do at that moment? "My eyes filled up with tears... When I'm feeling really good, I always start to cry." ●