

Old Emma's Album

by Gerri Gilliam

We had been sitting in the living room around the coffee table, looking through those same old photo albums. The cardboard pages were falling away from the binding, and the pictures did not stick to them anymore. The cellophane coverings had turned yellow and were cracked. The kids wanted to look at what they called the old-fashioned pictures every time they came to visit me, which was not often.

They always seemed to find one they had not seen before and that I had forgotten. This time they had found one of me. It had fallen out of its place and lay upside-down behind three others. Greg, the youngest of my three grandchildren, had pulled it out.

I was sitting in the middle of a small gray boat in the middle of the lake that was near our house. Junebug, Nancy, Little Carol, and Tommy Lee were in the boat with me. Everybody was holding their hands in the air and laughing with all their teeth showing except me. I looked as if I were about to cry.

After the kids left, I sat back in my worn, brown armchair and looked at the picture for a while, remembering the day it had been taken.

Little Carol's uncle had just come to town to visit and he brought a new camera that he wanted to take pictures of everybody with. He told all of us to go home and ask if we could go on the lake to pose for him in the boat that was tied to a dead willow tree on the bank. I was so excited that I ran home to ask my Mamma Jesse for permission.

She was sitting on the wide wooden porch in a folding chair like the kind we had in the choir stand at church. When I asked her, Mamma Jesse looked worried and said that maybe I should not since my Mamma was not home from work yet. I told her it would be too late when Mamma got home, and that it would be okay if she said I could, since she was my grandmamma. She did not say anything right away, so I reminded her that I was ten years old, a big girl. She was about to say yes when Aunt Johnnie, who was sitting on the porch with her, told Mamma Jesse not to let me go. She said I did not need to take pictures because I thought I was too pretty already. She said she had seen me flirting with some older boys when I passed her house the day before on my way to school. I stared at her for a second, then quickly looked away when her squinted yellow eyes peered hard at me. I did not know why Aunt Johnnie was lying. She knew those boys always picked on me, and she knew I threw rocks at them to make them leave me alone. I wanted to tell Mamma Jesse all of this, but I did not want to get slapped by Aunt Johnnie for being sassy. Anyway, Mamma Jesse already knew. I just stood on the porch with the crowded wooden post holding me up, listening to the dark, wrinkled old woman. She said I was probably begging Little Carol's uncle to take pictures of me by myself and was probably just trying to get him to look at me. Aunt Johnnie told my grandmamma that I was sassy and that if she and my mamma did not keep an eye on me, I would be a Jezebel before I was twelve years old. She said it was in my blood. I hung my head to my chest and listened to her say how all my daddy's sisters were trash and thought they were so pretty. Aunt Johnnie said their long black hair and half-white skin did not bring them anything but trouble because boys did not respect them. She said I was just like them and called me a little yellow heifer.

Mamma Jesse saw the tears in my eyes and told me not to mind anything Aunt Johnnie said because she never had anything good to say about anybody. She told me to go ahead and have Little Carol's uncle take my picture and to bring one back to her. I kept the back of my hand across my eyes and told Mamma Jesse that I did not want to take the pictures anymore. I told her I felt sick. I said I wanted to go inside and lie down. Aunt Johnnie cut her eyes at Mamma Jesse and made a grunting I-told-you-so sound in her throat without moving her lips. Mamma Jesse pulled me to her and kissed me on the forehead, then told me to run along. She said to be sure to smile real wide and pretty for her on the pictures so everybody could see what a beautiful girl I was. Aunt Johnnie breathed loudly and let the air pass from her parted lips slowly as if she were trying to whisper. I turned around and quietly stepped off the porch. When I got to the gate in front of the yard, I heard Aunt Johnnie say that if Little Carol's uncle sent me home crying, Mamma Jesse and my mamma had better not blame him because I would have encouraged him.

I walked into the road and the tears that had been brimming in my eyes ran hot down my cheeks and tasted salty on my lips. I knew Aunt Johnnie did not like me and she always let me know it. But I did not know why.

I rested my head on the white crocheted doily that covered the spot where the material was shredding on the back of my armchair and thought about Aunt Johnnie. She was the oldest and the meanest of all five of Mamma Jesse's sisters. None of them liked me except the baby girl, Augusta. She was the prettiest of all. They were dark women, almost as black as the pot belly stoves that stood in the middle of their small, wooden houses. Even Mamma Jesse was dark, but Aunt Johnnie was the blackest. Aunt Augusta would take up for me whenever the others picked on me or made me cry. Whenever one of my grandaunts had to babysit me, I begged for Aunt Augusta. I cried when she could not because I knew one of the others would have to. Whenever any of them cared for me, they reminded me of how gracious they were being and how much they thought I needed somebody to keep an eye on me. I remembered the last time I stayed with Aunt Johnnie.

My mamma and Mamma Jesse had to go out of town for two days and Aunt Johnnie convinced them that I would best be looked after by her. The first day I was there, Aunt Johnnie made me haul three tubs full of water into the backyard and wash some old, stained and yellowed sheets in lye soap. I had to rinse them in the other two tubs of clear water, wring them out, then hang them on the line. After two loads of tattered sheets that should have been thrown away, my hands became red, raw, and sore. I hauled the tubs to the edge of the yard where the woods started, then poured the water out of them. When I tried to stand up to stretch, my back and my stomach hurt. I slumped down in the grass and began to cry, looking at my sore hands, until the thin black woman crept onto the back porch and began squawking what a lazy, shiftless little heifer I was.

Later on that night, Aunt Johnnie let me sit on the porch while she and her friends listened to the radio. I had asked her if I could sit and listen too, but she said no and slapped me for trying to be grown. She told the ladies that I was sassy because my mamma and grandmamma let me do anything I wanted and thought the sun rose and set in me. She said I was just a slick, shit-colored little heifer who thought every man and boy in town wanted me. I stood in front of her with my head down, looking at the blue veins in my feet, while the old women mumbled their agreements. After she finished chastising me, Aunt Johnnie told me to go onto the porch and to stay out of her sight. I walked out of the room and closed the creaky screen door quietly behind



me. I was going to sit in the porch swing, but I looked down at Aunt Johnnie's patchwork quilted cushion on the seat and decided to sit on the hard, wooden stairs.

I sat on the next-to-the-last bottom stair and pulled my knees to my chest and cradled my head in my arms. I looked at the light-colored skin on my folded arm and hated it. I did not want to be fair-skinned, and I did not want anyone to look at me. One of my braids fell into my face and I wanted to pull it off my head. I hated the long, wavy black hair because they pulled it, yanking my head and giving me headaches whenever they washed or combed it. I did not want to look like my daddy or his sisters no matter how nice-looking my mamma said they were. They were the reason why Aunt Johnnie and almost all my mamma's people did not like me. Aunt Johnnie said they thought they were better than everybody else because they looked white and that I did too. But I did not. I wanted to be brown with short, curly hair. I wanted to look like my mamma. I sat on the steps crying and wishing I looked differently until Aunt Johnnie made me go to bed.

The next day, my mamma and Mamma Jesse came to pick me up early. I ran into my mamma's arms and buried my head deep into her chest. She hugged me tightly and kissed me, asking if I were okay. I told her that I was fine and was only happy she was home. Aunt Johnnie sat on the edge of her porch swing and yelled over the bannister that she had kept a close watch on me and made sure that I stayed out of trouble. Mamma Jesse glanced at her coldly and held her arms out to me. I ran to her and wrapped my short arms tightly around her soft, wide hips. She patted my back gently and kissed the top of my head. My mamma told me to come and sit on the steps beside her because she had a surprise for me.

They were the pictures her friend Walter had taken of us on Easter. On one

picture, me and mamma were posing together, holding hands. Mamma was dressed in her new beige suit and smiling, barely showing her teeth. I was wearing my new blue dress and carrying my small yellow purse high up on my arm, smiling brightly. Mamma Jesse said that I looked very pretty and that my eyes were shining. Aunt Johnnie asked for the picture, looked at it for a moment, then dropped it back into my mamma's lap. She said my mamma looked nice, but I looked like a little hussy with my chest poked out. She said it seemed as if I were trying to get Walter to look at my little yellow body and take the picture only of me. Mamma Jesse gritted her teeth and told Aunt Johnnie to hush her nonsense talk and leave me alone. My mamma gathered the pictures and put them into her flowered black purse, then stood up and held her hand out for me. She thanked Aunt Johnnie for taking care of me and handed her a five dollar bill. Aunt Johnnie quickly took the money and folded it down inside her bosom. She said she would not have charged my mamma so much if I had not been such a problem child. I stared at her with hurt and hate in my eyes and wished that the chains on the porch swing would break. I tried to understand why she hated me and why she lied. Mamma thanked her again and said she would not ask her to watch me anymore. As we stepped off the creaky stairs and walked away from the house, Mamma squeezed my hand and winked her eye at me smiling.

After we got home, Mamma held me in her lap and told me not to think about anything Aunt Johnnie had said about me. She said that it was hard to explain why, but Aunt Johnnie was just an old, bitter woman and she really did not hate me. Mamma told me not to be ashamed of my color or let people make me feel bad because of the way I looked. She told me to be proud of myself and to stop letting people make me cry. For the next few weeks I did everything she said. I tried not to be self-conscious or careful of how I looked or behaved around people. When Aunt Johnnie or anybody else said anything about me, I ignored them, continued on about my business. I had begun to like myself and even begun to think I was pretty too. I was happy.

I remembered the day Uncle Charles, my Aunt Hattie's husband, came over to pick me up and take me to his house. Aunt Hattie, who was a midwife, was doing rounds out in the country. She had asked my mamma if I could do some laundry and housecleaning for her. Mamma said I did not have to do it if I did not want to, but that Aunt Hattie would pay me five dollars. I quickly said yes and Aunt Hattie said she would have Uncle Charles come and get me. When we got to his house, Uncle Charles went into the yard and Aunt Hattie drove away in their blue '56 Ford Thunderbird. I went into the house and began folding the clean laundry. I was cleaning the guest bedroom when I heard Uncle Charles come in the back door. He walked through the house calling me and found me in the front room off their living room. He leaned on one arm in the doorway, talking about his chickens, then asked if I was hungry or wanted anything to drink. I said no and he just stood and looked at me. I began to feel uncomfortable and hurriedly dusted the chest of drawers so I could leave the room. As I passed him at the door, Uncle Charles lightly brushed his free hand over my newly developing chest, then grabbed my arm as I jumped away. I started to cry and told him I would tell my mamma and Mamma Jesse if he touched me again. He let me go and said he was sorry, but that he could not help himself because I was so pretty. He begged me not to tell anyone and asked me to stop crying. He tried to touch my hand and I jerked away. Then he said if I did say anything to anyone, they would say it was my fault because I thought I was so pretty. Uncle Charles said he saw the picture I had taken on Easter with my mamma and thought I looked real pretty. He agreed with Aunt Johnnie that I looked like I wanted somebody to look at me. He thought that I wanted him to touch me, that I would like it

Tears dripped from my chin onto the waxed, wooden floor as I watched the nasty smile on his face. I hated Uncle Charles and I hated myself. I wiped my face with a cold rag in the bathroom and asked him to take me home. I did not tell my mamma when I got to the house, and I did not tell Mamma Jesse. I felt guilty and dirty and did not want anyone to know what had happened. I tried to forget about it during the next few days, but I could not stop blaming myself and I could not force Uncle Charles or the Easter picture out of my mind.

I sat up in my chair and tried to remember what had happened to that picture. Though I did not want it, I wondered who had it. I picked up the bent picture from my lap and thought about it again.

After I had left the yard with Aunt Johnnie and Mamma Jesse still sitting on the porch, I walked down the road toward the lake and saw everybody laughing with Little Carol's uncle snapping their pictures. I dried my face with the sleeve of my dress and stood watching them. Junebug pulled the little boat up to the bank of the lake and called me to come and get in with everyone else. I had been so eager to take the pictures before, but I did not want to anymore. I stepped into the boat and Junebug and Nancy pushed us off the bank with fallen willow branches. Everybody was arguing over what we should do for our picture, and I listened to them. Nancy said we should make faces at the camera, then Junebug told us all to shake our hands in the air and scream. When the bulb flashed from the top of the black camera, everyone around me was laughing and shaking their arms, while I was sitting with my head bowed.

The kids had asked me why I looked so sad on the picture and was not having fun like the other children. I told them I did not like to take pictures and had not wanted to take that one. There were not many pictures of me in any of the old albums and most were of me after I was married. There were only five pictures of me as a child, including the boat picture, and I never smiled in any of them.

This is the last of a series of poems written about Richard Brautigan, my favorite author and poet, who killed himself in September of 1984.

Richard Brautigan Meets Joe DiMaggio

by Jay Lesandrini

Just like Joe
 DiMaggio's
 I wish I had your
 bubble-gum card.

A professor of mine once
 met you at a gathering
 of poets and musicians.
 He, is Joe DiMaggio
 to me.