

Tripping Over Lies

Standing out in the blistering sun, six year-old Emma wondered if this was to be a preview of the rest of her life; rising before dawn, working until dusky dark in intensifying heat. Emma's father was a share cropper. Emma and her siblings were "poor white trash."

The rows of tobacco seemed to grow longer and longer with each hot, long, passing day. Emma's sweat became sticky as it mixed with the layer of North Carolina dirt that already covered her face. She was once again on her hands and knees, "suckering" tobacco. Tobacco suckers were those annoying small growths that grew on the stems of tobacco plants and, according to Emma's father, proceeded to "suck" away the plants potential to develop. No sucker was too small to pluck off and there was no such thing as a "sucker-less" tobacco plant. A fact drilled into the heads of all

the Oates children. Emma somehow felt sure her father inspected each plant as the size and quality of the leaves were directly correlated with the price the crop would bring.

Fatigue engulfed her small frame as she slowly slumped to the ground. Closing her dust-covered eyes, Emma drifted out of the rows of tobacco and into her newfound world of fantasy. In her fantasy world, Emma could be whatever she desired. Today, she imagined herself in a soft, pink, ballet dress, twirling and swirling to the melody of the music. In the corner of her fantasy room, located here in her fantasy world, were lots of clean, soft pillows for tired little girls to rest on. In her mind's eye, Emma saw herself luxuriously lounging on those pillows, stretching and flexing her small frame. For Emma, soft pillows on which a small frame could safely stretch and flex were only found in her fantasy world. For, in Emma's real world, there was no softness to be found anywhere, only the cold hard realities of a fractured childhood.

Emma was born the sixth of eight unwanted children. Someone once wrote there are no illegitimate children, only illegitimate parents. A fact that was pretty hard to ignore in Emma's "real" world. Not only were there no soft pillows for Emma to lounge on here, there was no "softness" at all.

The living room in Emma's house was completely bare except for the fireplace. The floor was rough, uneven lumber, full of splinters. The kitchen contained a homemade table with 2 benches and 4 chairs. Emma's father made all their furniture. The chairs he labeled "straight chairs" and rightly so. They were also uncomfortable. They were hard, cold, scratchy and, of course, straight. The old, outdated refrigerator stood in one corner. Emma was accustomed to drinking warm milk and eating partially melted butter. In the other corner of the kitchen stood the wood stove on which her mother cooked all of their meals. As there was no water in the house, the homemade ill-fitting sink served no real purpose. Emma and her sister always carried the dishes to the back

porch to wash them under the sometimes obstinate hand pump.

Two of the four rooms, in Emma's house, were used for bedrooms. There were two beds in each. The house had no closets so her father strung wires in the corners of the bedrooms on which to hang their school clothes. Everything else, what little there was, was folded on the floor or placed in cardboard boxes. No, there was no softness here, not in Emma's real world.

Emma knew practically nothing about her parents' families. What little she did know was gleaned from listening behind doors or by window sills. She vaguely knew she had some far-away rich aunts who wanted nothing to do with her family. However, they occasionally sent hand-me-downs to Emma and her sister.

Emma had managed to learn that her father was the second of eight children, four girls and four boys. He was, however, the sole surviving son. Benjamin died at two.

William died at four months. L. F. died at seven. Consequently, her father's sisters doted on him. Emma remembered hearing her mother refer to her father as the "fair-haired" boy once. In Emma's mind, these dots did not connect. How could she have relatives who were wealthy? Didn't they know she was scared and hungry most of the time? Didn't they know that Emma had no lunch money and was too proud to clean the school dining room for free meals? Sometimes Emma wondered if she had imagined overhearing her parents discuss these relatives. Perhaps, these wealthy relatives existed only in her fantasy thoughts.

Emma stretched her slender body in the warmth of the summer day. Further and further into her dream world she drifted. Here she could be, or do, anything she chose. Today, she chose to dance. The glossy texture of her dress felt cool and crisp as she caressed the folds with her clean, creamy hands. The dress was a soft, pale pink with a starched crinoline slip underneath. She imagined her freshly shampooed hair

falling in ringlets around her face, a pink bow clasped tightly in place. Oh, how she would love to dance! Released from the drudgery and fear that haunted her young life, she swirled in perfect rhythm to the imaginary music, her feet moving effortlessly to the beat in her new, shiny, black satin shoes. There was no sticky dirt anywhere in her fantasy world. Here, and only here, Emma was totally free.

Suddenly Emma was jarred awake and back to reality by the force of something hitting her cheek. Stunned by the impact, she struggled to stand. Her body swayed as she tried to maintain her equilibrium. The green slime of a crushed tobacco worm began to slowly trickle down her already dirty cheek.

"What are you day-dreaming about this time?" her brother Stanley asked.

Emma's brother Stanley terrified her. He was cruel and used words she did not understand. Sometimes, he stared at her in ways that sent shivers up and down her spine. She

desperately wiped at her face. She could feel her tears begin mixing with the green, oozing, slime. Stumbling through the maze of endless tobacco rows, Emma ran towards the sounds of her father's tractor. Her brother Stanley was in hot pursuit.

As she rounded the bend into the open field, Emma nearly collided with the tractor on which her father was plowing. Bringing her flying feet to a screeching halt that caused her body to ricochet forward, she stopped only inches away from the moving vehicle. Just as her father was about to speak, Stanley rounded the bend.

"What did you do to her?" her father's cold, blue eyes pierced through her brother who now stood motionlessly behind her. He made no reply. He just stood there glaring at their father. Emma was sure the two hated one another but did not know why. Emma darted behind her father who had slowly begun to remove his belt. Then, with sad resolution, he began to beat her brother. For what seemed like an eternity, the beating continued. Stanley never flinched. Emma could

not bear to watch anymore. Turning her head, she saw her brother Mike standing silently to her father's left.

Mike was the "fair-haired" boy in the family. Everyone knew Stanley hated him. Perhaps it was because Mike never caused any trouble and enjoyed the overt approval of their father. Emma's father was extremely proud of Mike (sometimes Emma thought he even loved him).

Her father's face was void of expression. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the beating stopped. Stanley continued to stare emotionlessly at their father, his hands sticky with green slime. Emma, still traumatized, began to run once more. She ran and ran through the fields until her small legs felt like jelly. Now exhausted, she saw the outhouse up ahead. She slipped inside. Once safely locked in, she fumbled to tear apart the Sears catalog and, in vain, tried to clean the sticky, green slime from her face.

"Jack be nimble! Jack be quick!" Jack jump over--
the something stick. How did that rhyme go? Emma

wondered if she was the only one who had ever wondered who Jack was and why he was always jumping over something. Jack, of course, was the lead jumper in the "be nimble" nursery rhyme of long, long ago. The nursery rhyme that now seemed determined to play itself over and over in Emma's head. Why Jack had chosen this particular day to go jumping through Emma's mind and memory, was a mystery.

As scenes of Jack's jumping continued to circulate haphazardly through her mind, a squirrel playing on the picnic table outside the window diverted Emma's thoughts. With startling ease, the squirrel jumped from the picnic table onto the ledge outside the kitchen window. From his perch on the ledge, the squirrel intensely studied the human inside. Emma silently stared back, being careful not to move. As she watched the squirrel she remembered standing in her mother's kitchen.



"Mama, what's this in the dumplings?" Emma asked as

she stood beside her mother who was methodically stirring the huge pot.

"It's squirrel," her mother replied.

"Do I have to eat it?" Emma asked.

"Not if you don't want to."

Even though the thoughts of eating squirrel momentarily repulsed her, the tightening in Emma's stomach reminded her of how hungry she was.

The hot, humid kitchen, even though bare of many "necessities" for cooking, always seemed to brim with delicious smells. Emma watched as her mother began to make the biscuits. This was a true art form.

Slowly her mother turned and rotated the dough, working together the flour, shortening, and milk. The secret was to get the correct consistency. Then, with the skill of a surgeon, she carefully pinched off pieces of the dough and rolled them into what would eventually become perfectly shaped biscuits. Emma liked watching her mother create