

Joseph Beam

Emmett's Story: Russell County, Alabama

Together we are creating and naming a new community while extending a hand to the one from which we've come. We are bringing into the light the lives which we have led in the shadows.

Joseph Beam, In the Life, 1986

Editors' Introduction

Originally published in Joseph Beam's groundbreaking 1986 collection, *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology*, "Emmett's Story: Russell County, Alabama," helps to undermine the prevalent stereotypes of southern black gay men. Emmett's story affirms that not all southern black gay men are drag queens (despite the most widely recognized popular images of southern black gay men—RuPaul and the Lady Chablis of John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*); not all southern black gay men live in cities (or even want to live in southern cities with large gay communities—New Orleans, Atlanta, Nashville, Birmingham—Emmett says, "I was afraid of Atlanta"); and not all southern black men are poor (Beam writes of Emmett, "He owns his own two-bedroom home and car, and has a manufacturing job with a future").

As Beam indicates in his introduction to "Emmett's Story," "Emmett" is a pseudonym. The invisibility needed to protect his life in rural Alabama ironically prevented us from finding him to update his story since his interview with Beam. We hope that Emmett has found the "loving, kind, and honest" lover he was searching for and still finds Russell County, Alabama, "peaceful," and "very, very comfortable."

Beam wrote in the *Philadelphia Gay News* in 1984: "Black gay history, not recounted by white gay media, compounds and extends our invisibility. Transmitting our stories by word of mouth does not possess archival permanence. Survival is visibility." We hope by reprinting his interview here to add more archival permanence not only to Emmett's story but to all

the stories of southern black gay men, in the cities and on the farms, in pumps and in work boots, in unemployment lines and in line at the bank.

Emmett and I met through a web of connections: friends of friends of friends. I traveled down to see him in April 1985; my first real trip to the rural South. By either urban or rural standards, Emmett's quite a catch. At twenty-seven, he owns his own two-bedroom home and car and has a manufacturing job with a future. More importantly, he's warm and down-to-earth. What follows is most of our conversation on the evening before I left. We had spent the previous four days getting to know each other, enjoying the sunshine, and comparing notes. We sipped whiskey and Coke while he spoke candidly of his past, present, and future.

[Joseph.]* What kind of gay social network exists here?

[Emmett.] Well, mainly there's just the gay clubs and bars really. On Auburn University's campus there's a gay club, which I really don't know much about. Most of what I've heard about them is through my cousin Nate.

[Joseph.] When you say club you mean an organization?

[Emmett.] Yeah, a group of guys, hanging out together, whatever. Sometimes they have meetings on campus, I understand.

[Joseph.] So that's the only formal kind of thing outside of the bars, of which there aren't any?

[Emmett.] Exactly. They've all closed.

[Joseph.] So, how do you identify other gay men?

[Emmett.] How do I identify other gay men? Mostly by the way they look at you. Sometimes the way they dress. It all depends. There are a lot of gay guys who dress very girlish; there's others that may wear their hair girlish. You know—the eyes, always something. It's not very hard to tell.

[Joseph.] I don't see people doing keys and hankies and that sort of thing here, which is still in common use in Philly. Gay men aren't using signals like that?

[Emmett.] I think mostly it's body language.

[Joseph.] I would imagine that a lot of gay men in small communities move to bigger cities like Atlanta or New Orleans. What has kept you here in Russell County, Alabama?

[Emmett.] I find Russell County to be very, very comfortable. It's sometimes hard, difficult to find a friend that you can really get into, but I feel that if you do, if you

*Dialogue names have been added for ease of reading and were not in the original essay from *In the Life* (Boston: Alyson, 1986).

are successful enough, that it can be very nice. Because . . . Russell County . . . is very peaceful. I think the springtime is the most loving time of all because of the smell of the greenery. It's just real comfortable.

[Joseph.] You have a little girl who will be four in October. How often do you see her?

[Emmett.] Oh, I see her about every other week. She stays with me mostly on weekends and when I'm off from work, on vacations and holidays. I see her quite a bit, really.

[Joseph.] So are you out to her mother? Does she know you're gay?

[Emmett.] Well, I think she knows but it's something we really don't get into. 'Cause, there are things that she has heard and she has come back to me about it. You know, I approach her with the attitude like: Wow, people always talking, so what, no big deal! She says, "Well I don't care; I like you the way you are because you're Sharon's father." And that's that. She knows that, and everybody else knows that. She makes me feel good when she tells me that because she lets me know—OK. I feel that she knows what's happening, but she lets me know that she doesn't care because I am the guy that made a baby by her. Two of us made a baby together, and we both love her, and we care a lot about each other. We're good friends, good friends. And I can appreciate that.

[Joseph.] Have you had a lover before?

[Emmett.] A lover? Yes, I've had a lover before. I've had a couple of lovers before. But most important of all there's Wayne who I find to be very sweet and kind. A person who's very easy to love and understand. And I feel that he's very honest because . . . because we've never really been together during our relationship; we were always separated. We had to correspond by mail or telephone or something of that nature. And all kinds of things have happened to both of us. Wayne who has fell in love with a female and decides to be married, then change his mind and don't want that. And then again he's not sure what he wants. He feels like he wants me, and then sometimes he feels like he should be with a female. 'Cause he feels like that's the way it should be.

[Joseph.] Were the two lover-relationships before Wayne short-term or long-term?

[Emmett.] Short-term, very short.

[Joseph.] Months? Weeks?

[Emmett.] Oh, I'd say a couple of months. There was this guy named Randy that I knew when I was in the Job Corps. And he and I—first of all—we became very good friends. When he first got to school his grandmother died. She had raised him from an infant, and he was really shocked, it just twisted him up a little. So he went home for awhile, then he returned to school. That's when we really became close. We spent a lot of time talking, talking about the situation with his grandmother, her raising him

and everything, and the shock of her death. He shared those feelings with me, and so we became more than friends. We fell in love, which was very difficult to express at first. For him and for me. I kind of broke the ice. After spending so much time together and realizing what I was feeling for him and what I felt he was feeling for me I decided to write him this little cute note expressing my feelings and whatnot. I sent it to him by a friend of mine. He got the note. I was down in my room, he came down, and it was just what was needed—just what the doctor ordered. He came out and expressed his feelings about how he felt about me, him being in love with me and everything. It was really the first experience I ever had of love with a guy. Because I thought it was something that really couldn't happen to me.

[*Joseph.*] You were eighteen.

[*Emmett.*] Yeah, about eighteen, yes. Before that I couldn't imagine myself falling in love with another guy. I knew how I felt sexually about guys, but I never felt that I could fall in love with one. My feelings for him were really a shock for me because I was determined not to be that far out. But it was really very beautiful.

[*Joseph.*] So what happened to Randy?

[*Emmett.*] Well, Randy, well . . . after our relationship went on for awhile I graduated and left and went to Atlanta for awhile. We were supposed to meet there and live together and work and everything, build a future. But it didn't quite work that way because I got to Atlanta and just wasn't ready for it. I thought that I was but the city was much faster than I was at the time. And I was really afraid.

[*Joseph.*] Afraid to settle down?

[*Emmett.*] I was afraid of Atlanta. Because at the time my lover wasn't there. He was still in school and so I stayed in Atlanta about two weeks and during that two weeks I was hanging out, doing this, and doing that, meeting different guys. It was all going much faster than I wanted it to go. And I decided I should be back in Alabama because it was nothing like Atlanta. At the time I felt that Atlanta was a place not for you to live but to visit. I felt that Alabama was a place for living and building a home and a relationship with somebody that you really love.

[*Joseph.*] And you think you can do that here with your people so close by?

[*Emmett.*] Well, I feel that I can do that here with my people, but not close by. With me being so close I feel that they feel that I'm still a child, so to speak. That they always got to watch over me; tell me to do this, tell me to do that. Make sure I do this right, make sure I do that right. And still that's not what it's all about. I'm not happy with that at all, but I can deal with it for a little while.

[*Joseph.*] Does that mean you'd move into town or would you—

[*Emmett.*] No, I would still live in the country, but not so close to my parents. I feel like with them being so close they're just too into my affairs. If I could just be a couple of miles away that would be even better. But next door—it's just too close.

[Joseph.] Was it in the Job Corps that you first started having sex with men or did it happen earlier?

[Emmett.] No, that happened earlier when I was in high school. I say really around the ninth grade was when I first experienced sex with another male. At the time it was really just a game, but I grew up liking it—and enjoying it—wanting to experience it more.

But I think I felt that long before high school because I grew up not really being a guy, enjoying the things that the boys around me enjoyed like BB guns and bicycles; I wanted dolls or something like that. I really did. And really that's what I had. I grew up just wanting to do girlish things from a very young age, then as I got older, around age ten or eleven, the guys and I were getting closer and playing around all the time—just checking each other out—physically—and enjoying it.

[Joseph.] What did your mama say when she was buying you a doll instead of a G.I. Joe?

[Emmett.] I don't know. I think she thought it was cute. I really did.

[Joseph.] Did you play jacks?

[Emmett.] No, never, I don't play jacks.

[Joseph.] Well, I played jacks a lot—always on the back porch. I couldn't play them on the front porch. And I was fierce at them, too!

[Emmett.] I wasn't good at jacks, but I played a good mother's playhouse. [We both laugh.]

[Joseph.] Are there any gay male couples who live together in this community?

[Emmett.] No, there's none. There are people you suspect—but in this neighborhood—no.

[Joseph.] Maybe not in the neighborhood, but say a five-mile radius?

[Emmett.] People I suspect as being lovers? No, I really can't say there are any. At least, not that I know of.

[Joseph.] Will you talk a little bit more about why you feel comfortable here?

[Emmett.] I feel it's comfortable here because . . . there's not a very big population. You got less people to really deal with and less congestion. I sometimes think—this may sound strange—that just the smell of the air puts me in a certain mood. 'Cause sometimes the freshness can be so nice and so loving and peaceful that there's just nowhere else to be. It's just . . . hard to describe. It seems to be hard to find words to express what I really want to say. Just . . . comfortable: the atmosphere. The people is a little difficult to deal with sometimes but I feel that people are going to be a big issue wherever you might go. So, I'm willing to deal with that; there's a lot less of them to deal with here.

[Joseph.] It seems like the feelings of comfort are also related to your family being here.

[Emmett.] I like being near my family, especially my grandmother really. Well, she's my grandmother, but she was like a mother to me. She raised me; I've been with her most of my life, and I love her a lot. She's not very young now and I just like being with her. For some reason I feel . . . a certain security with her or something. I feel that she feels that with me and wants me around. I feel happy being near her.

[Joseph.] But not this near!

[Emmett.] No, not next door!

[Joseph.] Why do you think you've been unsuccessful finding a lover?

[Emmett.] Why? I just feel I haven't been in the right place at the right time. I feel that if there's a lover for me I can find him. I can find him here somewhere. It's just a matter of time.

[Joseph.] Do you think that maybe a lot of men aren't about anything?

[Emmett.] I find a lot of guys in this particular area, most of the ones who will approach you are unemployed, not very serious. The type of relationship I want is not just a one-night stand, but something that can be special and long lasting. And most of the guys I run into, at this particular time, are just hanging out for the night, so to speak. And it's getting very tiring.

[Joseph.] So do you think they describe themselves as "in the life" or do they jump the fence and think of themselves as bisexuals?

[Emmett.] Well, frankly, they consider themselves as heterosexuals. They just doing something, trying it out. It's just an excuse that most of them use. They do it every now and then, but they consider themselves real men: heterosexuals. They will deny to the last minute that they are bisexual or homosexual. And yet you know something ain't right; they're either gay or bisexual. You know they are and they know they are, but they're not willing to accept this; otherwise, I don't think they'd be interested. But I've found that a lot of them are, a lot of them.

[Joseph.] We've talked some about your grandmother and mother. What about your father?

[Emmett.] My natural father and mother were divorced when I was two. My mother remarried. My stepfather and I are not very close, not close at all. We don't have any conversation: hello, goodbye, anything. He lives over there; I live over here.

[Joseph.] Does he live in the house?

[Emmett.] He, my mother, and my grandmother live nextdoor. But they are in the process of getting a divorce. It's a long time coming. Very late; it should have been