



Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?

1983

Acrylic on canvas

90 inches by 80 inches (228.6 centimeters by 203.2 centimeters)

Jemima Blakey (*fig. A*) didn't come from no ordinary people. Her Granma and Granpa bought they freedom out a slavery in New Orleans. Granma Jemima Blakey -- they owners in Louisiana. And Granpa Blakey was a first-class tailor, too. From memory he could make a suit of clothes that fit like a glove. They was sure smart people, them Blakeys. And Jemima was just like 'em; hard working, and God-fearing, till the day she died.

Jemima could do anything she set her mind to. When Ma Tillie (*fig. B*) and Pa Blakey (*fig. C*), Jemima's Ma and Pa forbid her to marry Big Rufus Cook (*fig. D*) on account-a they wanted her to marry a preacher. Jemima up and married Big Rufus anyway, and they run off to Tampa, Florida to work for Ole Man and Ole Lady Prophet (*figs. E, F*) cookin, cleanin and takin care-a they chirrun somethin Jemima never had to do livin in her Ma and Pa's comfortable home in New Orleans.

Ole Man Prophet used to joke that Jemima was his heir. "Jemima keep my house and family like they hers. I reckon I'll leave 'em to her when I die," he used to tell Ole Lady Prophet.

“Over my dead body,” she used to say. Well as God would have it, lightning struck they house one night whilst the servants was away and burnt it to the ground. Ain nar’ one of them Prophets survive. And, praise God, she was.

Jemima & Big Rufus was rich now. They come to New York with they cherrun, Georgia (*fig. G*) and Lil Rufus (*fig. H.*), and opened a restaurant and catering business in Harlem.

Big Rufus was a fine chef too, and could tailor clothes out this world just like Granpa Blakey. He looked like white, and couldn’t see nobody but Jemima, black as she was. No- never did. “Where you get that fine-looking man from Jemima?” folks used to ask her. “Where I get you from asking me that question?” she’d say, laughing.

Now Lil Rufus, Jemima’s baby, handsome as a Greek god, took color after Jemima’s side-a the family. Jemima likena died when he married a white gal, name-a Margo (*fig. I*) he picked up in Germany, of all places, during that Korean War. Brought her home too, to live in Jemima’s house in Harlem. They had three girls: Jemima (*fig. J*), JoAnn (*fig. K*) and Julia (*fig. L*). They look just like Jemima. They ain look nothin like they Ma. Margo, she a scrawny little ole white gal, Love the ground Lil Rufus walk on.

Georgia, Jemima’s daughter, was high yaller likena her pa., Big Rufus, and had green eyes and long straight hair she could sit on. Only thing she took after Jemima was her shape. Georgia was real big up top and had skinny legs and big feet.

Jemima’d blow up like a balloon when folks say’d she was Georgia’s maid. Georgia’d laugh and call her ma ‘Aunt Jemima.’ Jemima’d take that piss tail gal over her knee and whoop her till she quit. “You ain no more’n your ma,” Jemima’d tell her, and Georgia’d screw up her lil’ horse face an holler.

Jemima was some proud at Georgia’s wedding to Dr. Jones (*fig. M*). But Ma Tillie said, “Jemima, that’s a evil ole ugly black man. You’ll see.”

Tillie Blakey, Jemima’s Ma, was half-Indian. A real beauty in her youth, she was coal black with long braids and keen features. They say she ran a bad house for white men in New

Orleans. All's I know she was a good church-going woman owned a fine house and left plenty money to the church when she died. Pa Blakey called it penance money from the devil. He swore he'd never touch it. Much as he loved Georgia and her struggling doctor husband, and they two chirrun, Peter (*fig. N*) and Annabelle (*fig. O*), he never give em a cent of Ma Tillie's money.

After Pa Blakey died, Jemima and Big Rufus give they restaurant business in Harlem to Lil Rufus and his German wife Margo, and moved to New Orleans. There they opened another restaurant near Georgia's house.

But Jemima ain never see her grand chirrun, Peter and Annabelle. "My Pa don't want you in our house," they told her one day. And then Peter kicked Jemima in her bad knee and he and Annabelle ran off. The next day before Dr. Jones could leave for his office, Lil Rufus was there, and he was mad as hell. When Dr. Jones saw him he jumped in the pool fully dressed, bag an all.

That same morning Jemima and Big Rufus had a fatal car accident on the way to open they restaurant. God rest they souls. Lil Rufus brought they bodies back to Harlem, and give 'em an African funeral -- Praise God! Dressed Jemima in an African gown and braided her hair with cowrie shells. Put Big Rufus in a gold dashiki. They looked nice though, peaceful, like they was home.

Georgia, her doctor husband, and them two worthless chirrun a hers got Jemima's restaurant business and Ma Tillie's big fine house in New Orleans. Now, who's afraid of Aunt Jemima?

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