

A L I F E

—— *told* ——

W O R D F O R W O R D

R U T H E L L E N M E R C E R

1946 — Bellefonte, Pennsylvania

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“A life told Word for word” was prepared for print with heirleaf. Set in
EB Garamond at 11.5 point, A5, 148 × 210 mm.

For Michael and Susan, who kept asking.

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CHAPTER ONE

Where I come from

My grandmother's name, more or less

Ruth was my grandmother on my mother's side. She died the spring before I was born, so I never met her, and I think my mother wanted the name back in the house. The Ellen part was my father's doing. He said Ruth on its own sounded like somebody who'd tell you off.

A town built on limestone

Bellefonte sat in a valley with hills all around it, and the whole place ran on the limestone. There were quarries north of town and you could hear them some mornings, a sort of thud you felt more than heard. The main street had the courthouse at the top with the big columns, and going down from there the bank, Hoover's drugstore, the five and ten, and at the bottom the spring, which is where the town got its name. The water came up out of the ground clear and so cold it hurt your teeth. My father used to say you could set your watch by that spring, that it never changed, and I suppose it hasn't.

In winter the whole valley would fill up with fog and you couldn't see the hills at all, and it felt like the town was the only thing there was.

My mother

She was small and quick and she never sat down. I mean that — I can't picture her sitting. She took in sewing, alterations mostly, and she'd have the machine going in the front room at nine at night with the radio on low. She had a way of holding pins in her mouth and still talking to you, and you'd understand her fine.

She wasn't affectionate the way people are now. She didn't say things. But if you were sick she'd sit up with you all night and never mention it after.

My father

My father worked at the quarry from the time he was seventeen until his back gave out. He came home grey — the dust got into everything, his hair, the creases of his hands, and my mother made him wash at the sink in the kitchen before he'd come through.

He was a quiet man but he sang. That's the thing people forget about him. He'd sing in the car, hymns mostly, and he had a good voice and he knew it.

The winter of the flood

The flood of thirty-six, before I was born. My father was ten and the water came up into their kitchen and his mother made them all stand on the table, and the story was always about the piano floating. It came away from the wall and turned around slow in the middle of the room, and he said it made a noise when it hit the doorframe, a sort of chord. He must have told that a hundred times and it was never the same twice. Sometimes the piano got out into the hall.

CHAPTER TWO

Childhood

The house on Allegheny Street

It was a narrow house, two floors and an attic, on Allegheny Street. You came in and there was a hall with the stairs going straight up and the banister that my brother slid down until he broke his arm, and then nobody slid down it.

On the right was the front room, which we didn't use except at Christmas and when the minister came. It had my mother's good chairs and it was cold all year. The sewing machine was in there too, in the window, because that's where the light was, so it was also the room where she worked, which meant the good room was never really a good room.

Through the back was the kitchen, and that's where we lived. Coal stove, a table with an oilcloth on it, and a window over the sink looking at the Dunkles' fence. Upstairs my parents' room at the front, mine and my sister's at the back, and my brother had the little room that was really a closet with a window put in.

The attic smelled of mothballs and hot dust and we were not supposed to go up, so of course we did.

An ordinary day at school

You got up when my father got up, because the stove was down there and he'd got it going. Oatmeal every day of the world. My mother did my hair at the kitchen table, and she pulled, and I'd complain and she'd say I was tender-headed and keep pulling.

Then you walked. It was eleven blocks and you went whatever the weather was. In winter the snow came over the top of your boots and you sat in the classroom all morning with your socks drying on you. I don't remember minding it. That's just what the walk was.

What I played, and who with

Jacks, and jump rope, and a game we called Ally Ally In that I couldn't explain to you now. With Nancy Dunkle next door mostly, and my sister when she'd let us. And in the summer we'd go down to the creek, which we were told not to.

What my house smelled like

Coal smoke and my mother's ironing. And on Mondays, bleach, because Monday was wash day and there was no arguing with it.

CHAPTER THREE

Growing up

Seventeen, and in a hurry

Oh, I thought I was something. I had a blue coat I'd saved for and I wore it in September when it was still too warm, because I wanted people to see it.

I was in a hurry. I couldn't have told you what for. I wanted to be somewhere that wasn't the valley, and then I married a man from the valley and stayed in it, so there you are.

The first work I did

I worked the counter at Hoover's drugstore on Saturdays from when I was fifteen. Sodas and sundaes and the cigarette case behind you. Mr Hoover paid me forty cents an hour and told my father he was overpaying.

The bus to Pittsburgh

My cousin Jean and I took the bus to Pittsburgh when I was eighteen, and nobody came with us. That was it. That was the whole thing. We went to Kaufmann's and looked at things we couldn't buy and ate lunch at a counter, and came home on the evening bus, and I have never in my life felt as free as I did sitting on that bus going in.

CHAPTER FOUR

Love

The great love of my life

Walter Mercer. He worked at the feed store and then for the county, forty-one years, and he was the steadiest person I have ever known. Not exciting. He'd tell you that himself. But in fifty-two years I never once wondered where he was.

He died in two thousand and nine and I still set out two cups some mornings before I catch myself.

The day we met

At a fire company dance in the fall of sixty-four, and he didn't ask me to dance, he asked me if I wanted a Coke. Which I thought was a poor start. Then he stood there and didn't say anything for what felt like an hour, and I decided I'd have to do the talking, and I did the talking for fifty-two years.

CHAPTER FIVE

The family I made

The day my first child was born

Michael came in June of sixty-six at the Centre County hospital and Walter wasn't there, because they didn't let them in then. He was in a corridor for eleven hours. When they finally brought Michael out to him he said the first thing he thought was that the baby looked annoyed, and he laughed, and a nurse told him off for laughing.

CHAPTER SIX

Places

The home I miss

Willowbank Street. It wasn't the nicest house we had but it was the one with all of them in it, and you could hear the whole house from the kitchen. I knew who was on the stairs by the sound of them.

Every house I've lived in

Allegheny Street, Bellefonte — my mother and father's house (1946–1965)

The apartment over the feed store (1965–1968)

Willowbank Street (1968–1994)

The house on Pine, after the children had gone (1994–2018)

Susan's, in the back room with the good light (2018–)

CHAPTER SEVEN

What I've learned

What I'd like to be remembered for

That I was good company. I'd rather that than anything else they could say.

What I never told

I wrote my sister a letter in nineteen seventy-one, after the business with our mother's house, and I never sent it. I kept it in the drawer with the insurance papers for about thirty years and then I burned it in the kitchen sink, and I felt worse after, not better.

We made it up eventually. We never talked about any of it. I don't know if that counts as making it up.

She's gone now. I'd like it written down that I was in the wrong first.

Notes

This book holds 19 answers from Ruth Ellen Mercer, in Ruth's own voice, recorded between February and June 2026. It was set in EB Garamond at 11.5 point, on A5 pages of 148 × 210 mm, and printed in black and white print on demand.

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