

## **Mixed Emotion Family**

by Susan D. Bernstein

“My mama is mean,” Ruth used to say. I couldn’t see this myself. Miss Cora, as Ruth insisted her mother liked to be called, seemed a benign old woman to me. She had traveled to suburban New York from Georgia by bus to spend six weeks of the summer with her daughter. Miss Cora hardly spoke to me. I might say, “Good morning,” and she’d wince a smile or murmur some slight recognition. I found her puzzling, but since she was Ruth’s mother, I accepted her presence without asking questions.

When I was an infant my parents hired Ruth to cook and clean and to care for my brother and me. She remained in this job for over forty years until each of my parents died in the same house where Ruth had dusted, swept, and managed the kitchen work. She witnessed everything, from first days of school to arguments and holiday celebrations. She not only washed the dirty laundry, she saw and heard it. But while she knew everything about us, it seemed, what did we know of her family and her life beyond our house?

We knew Ruth had grown up in Georgia where her mother still lived. At Christmas each year, Ruth journeyed south to Cordele, Georgia to see Miss Cora and other family whose names I never kept straight, and occasionally Miss Cora came north in summers. In 1979, the last time Miss Cora visited her daughter, she was closing in on eighty, her sight was gone, and cancer lurched through her body. She sat silently in the folding chair by the back door for hours, sucking the juice out of an orange through a straw Ruth had inserted. She wore heavy cotton socks rolled up at her ankles, and my blue gingham shirt from my high school years underneath a sleeveless dress with a faded floral print. Although her eyes did not work, Miss Cora wore heavy black-rimmed

glasses. Ruth dressed her mother every day and fixed the elastic in the waist of the slip because Miss Cora liked wearing a slip, but objected if it drooped below her hemline.

“Why does Miss Cora wear glasses if she can’t see?” I asked. I was home for a visit a few years after I’d graduated from college. Ruth peeled potatoes into the sink, her back hunched over as she supported much of her weight on her forearms, which were massive, as if they belonged on a bigger, athletic body. Due to childhood polio, Ruth’s legs looked like skeleton bones, thin envelopes of flesh wrapped around them.

“I put them on to keep her from picking at her eyes. She don’t care anymore.” Ruth’s low voice hushed the room as she watched Miss Cora from the kitchen window. “She about given up and is just passing time.”

My mother walked in from the front hall. For many years I’d watched her passing time. “Ruth, did you see my book? I was reading it at lunch, but now I can’t find it anywhere.”

I hugged Ruth from behind, circling her broad back with my arms. Then I turned on my mother. “Why should Ruth know where your book is? She’s busy taking care of her mother, who can’t see at all.” I was in a stage of belligerence towards my mother and protective of Ruth. Eventually I outgrew my pugnaciousness like the gingham shirt Miss Cora wore.

My mother sighed, “Oh, leave me be! I didn’t say Ruth should know—I only asked a question. Is that a crime?” Not waiting for a reply, my mother walked out of the room, and I heard her climb the stairs to her bedroom, where she often soothed herself with rounds of solitaire.

Ruth patted my cheek. “Hear her and don’t hear her. That’s what I do. She only talking to hear herself talk.” Ruth had little tolerance for what she called “chin music” or “jaw dancing,” whether aimless chatter or in this case my mother’s mumblings of despair.

“Where do you sleep when Miss Cora is here?”

“In there,” Ruth gestured toward her cubby of a room adjacent to the kitchen. but her eyes caught mine as she turned from the sink. Ruth was the mistress of the ironic,

“you-fool” glance.

As a child, I had loved Ruth’s room because it was small, a coziness that I thought had to do with the size and walls, but it was Ruth’s presence that made her room a safe hideaway. I had tried to get Ruth to switch rooms with me at one point when I was five or six, but she told me I had to sleep upstairs, she downstairs. Ruth’s room was warm in winter, cool in summer, as if it had its own thermostat that adjusted to seasonal weather. The shoe-box room held a cot, two feet wide, a bureau, a desk, and a sink. The black and white checkered bedspread, from my brother’s bedroom years ago, was tucked neatly around the mattress. In clumps everywhere were food coupons, prescription drug bottles with the pharmacy labels peeling away, spools of colored thread for crochet projects, plastic bags of assorted shades piled high on top of newspapers and stacks of *Ebony* and *Jet* and outdated *TV Guides*. Miniature china animals and faded hard candies sat on the glass top of the desk along with rolls of pennies, safety pins, and baseball cards. On the bureau, along with the coupons and scraps of papers with Ruth’s handwriting—addresses and phone numbers, stray shopping lists—was a Gideon Bible, like the ones in hotel bedside table drawers. From the array of improvised bookmarks protruding beyond the gilt and crimson edges, it looked as if Ruth read from all the Gospels simultaneously. Once she showed me a dried flower pressed into the pages near a crucifixion scene. “That’s my orchid for Good Friday. Your mama gets me one every year.”

My mother gave Ruth corsages twice a year, one for Easter and one on the day of Yom Kippur Eve. The first was for Ruth to wear to services at the African Methodist Episcopal Church she attended in Harlem. The other commemorated Ruth’s anniversary with our family. I was three months old when Ruth arrived at our house to take care of my brother and me during the evening while my parents went to Kol Nidre services.

Ruth proved ecumenical in her religious practices. She fasted with my father on Yom Kippur and ate matzah during Passover, entirely without my mother’s lapses into bread. Still, she was a dedicated Christian and went to her church Sundays and read

daily spiritual texts from a worn pamphlet she carried in her apron pocket. More than anyone else in my family, Ruth was the religious enthusiast, and took to any kind of ritual or prayer. “It all goes to the same God,” she liked to say.

During those years, the little I did know about Ruth's past came from her occasional revelations or from my mother. Ruth was evasive about her age and her background. My mother told me that Miss Cora was thirteen when Ruth was born in Georgia, but Ruth never confirmed this hearsay. Ruth's surname was Stedman before she married, then Greene. When I knew Miss Cora, her last name was Smith. I thought that nearly everyone Ruth knew seemed to be related to her, and I could never follow the familial lines, as they seemed to run in a more circuitous fashion than what I understood about my own more limited store of relatives. Although Ruth didn't have anyone she claimed for siblings, she had countless aunts, uncles, and cousins. I grew up with these scattered bits of knowledge about Ruth's life, but later I tried to learn more.

In August 1996 when Ruth was eighty years old, I interviewed her, and then didn't play the video recording for a dozen years, some four years after Ruth had died in a nursing home in central Georgia in 2004. I had asked predictable questions, prompted by the outline of a life my mother had fed me about Ruth, leading questions Ruth either evaded or flat-out contradicted. Like the woman I knew and didn't know from infancy, Ruth's answers were elusive, skewed, as if she'd heeded Emily Dickinson's advice: “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—/Success in Circuit lies.” Take her reply when I asked where she was born.

“Now, that is a very big question. I was born on the county line of two places, Dooly and Pulaski—half the house in Dooly, half in Pulaski.” This would be central Georgia, just after the First World War. If her birthplace was suspended across county lines, her family was equally dispersed across many names.

“Oh, I'm the sum total of a mixed emotion family,” This meant four names: McIntire, Brown, Anderson, and Marshall. I don't know where Stedman or Smith fit in,

and Ruth didn't elaborate. She was adept at redirecting my follow-up questions. Cora's name was McIntire until she married, but whether she married Stedman first, or Smith, or either one, remains a mystery.

Some of the naming in Ruth's family had a more legible genealogy. Her maternal grandmother was Minnie Brown. Minnie married twice. The first marriage produced Mary, Carrie, and Cora, and the second marriage to Joe Brown resulted in a couple of boys, and six girls: Margaret, Lula Bell, Willie Mae, Minnie, Thelma, and Anne. These children from her marriage with Joe were more like siblings for Ruth because they were close to her in age even though they were her aunts.

"My mother was about one generation, and they and the rest of them another generation. They all came out the same hole. Let's say it that way. They all by the same woman, so the same little place." Ruth waxed graphic here, maybe a flashpoint of irritation over my repeated questions to ascertain the exact relationship between Ruth and Thelma and Minnie. I gradually comprehended that precise bloodlines were a contrivance that didn't have much traction in Ruth's sense of her world. "We all related" summed up her view.

Those patterns of generation fueled my persistent questions to know her family constellation. Joe Brown was Miss Cora's stepfather; he was a farmer, probably a sharecropper, although Ruth didn't use this word. "He raised corn, cotton, stuff like that, and peanuts for the house." During my childhood, Ruth regularly roasted peanuts in papery red skins which fell off in brittle flakes.

My mental images of Joe Brown with his cash crop harvests of cotton and corn, the peanuts a treat for the family, are nourished by a different documentation. My quest to understand Ruth led me to photographs by Dorothea Lange, which show Southern tenant farmer families, with children in raggedy clothes in the cotton fields, many of these from the 1920s and 30s when Ruth would have been a child or teenager. This sharecropper system of exploitation, with its legacy in serfdom and slavery, fell apart under the New Deal in the 1930s when union organizing and strikes brought to wider attention the abuses landless farmers and their families—many African Americans in

the South before the Great Migration northward—experienced. This public history offered a narrative arc for Ruth’s account of how she and many of her relatives moved north.

Other details about Ruth’s childhood in Georgia came through in unexpected ways. When my daughter was eight years old, she had a school assignment to interview someone “old.” Her class had developed a set of questions to find out what life was like when their subjects were children. Flora immediately thought of Ruth and phoned her with her class query in hand. Ruth was past eighty by then.

“What kind of board games did you like to play?” was one of the questions the third graders had come up with.

“We didn’t have no games like that!” Ruth laughed at the question. “We played in the dirt, and with sticks and stones. That’s the only board games we all had.”

“Where did your family go on vacations?” Flora wanted to know, again referring to the class assignment.

“Vacation? What you talking about, baby? Well, let me see. Maybe we go up to Valdosta a piece, if we in Cordele, or to Cordele or maybe Sibley when we lived down by Sylvester. We visited our family—aunts and uncles or cousins—or sometimes my mother. That’s about the size of it, the sum total of the family vacation we had!”

“What restaurants did your family like to go to when you were little?” And that’s how the interview went, a limping affair with most every question totally out of key with the chords of Ruth’s childhood.

Flora’s questions were molded from the same narrow vision of the ones I asked Ruth in my interview only a few years before. I kept trying to find out how the ages of people at certain milestones fit in her narrative of her early years. My aim was to work out Ruth’s age and the chronological difference between her and her mother. I tried to confirm without saying so the unwed teen mother story I’d heard. But Ruth seemed downright annoyed.

“So your grandmother must’ve had those children with Joe Brown later on,” I fished for some ages.

"What you call later on?"

"Thirty-five? Forty?"

"I don't know how old my grandmother was. She had these three kids, became a widow, married this man, and had those kids. If your husband died, wouldn't *you* marry again, if you was a beautiful lady?" Ruth gave me that signature arch look of hers, her voice edgy with impatience. "I called him Papa like his children did. I never said 'Grandpa' or 'Grandma' neither."

After her father died, Ruth recalled moving around, even living apart from her mother whose work took her to Sibley, Georgia. "I stayed with my Aunt Mary quite a spell when I went to a public school." I was very interested in learning more about her father, but Ruth yielded little other than his name was Nathan.

I reached for fiction to parse this shadowy father. In his short story "Cora Unashamed," Langston Hughes juxtaposes two out-of-wedlock pregnancies, one of a white teen named Jessie, the other of Cora, the family maid. While Cora's response to her condition is announced in the title, Jessie's parents force her to have an abortion from which she dies. My own mother had told me the tale of Miss Cora, a mother while she was still a child, but there was not a hint of difficulties in Ruth's recollection of her origins. Instead, Ruth talked about a father she knew and loved. "He was a turpentine man in Sylvester."

Again, I resorted to public images to fill in gaps. I found a 1912 postcard of the "turpentine industry" in Florida, with the added caption, "Dipping and scraping pine trees." The image shows two black men in overalls stripping the bark. Turpentine vapors are health hazards, solvents that burn the skin and eyes, and can even damage the lungs and the central nervous system. Was occupational harm responsible for Nathan's too early death? Dorothea Lange's 1937 photographs gave more visual clues: "Turpentine Workers, Georgia, July 1937" shows a group of black men in a field fringed with pine trees.

As she had with Flora's school assignment, Ruth pushed against the preconceptions that prompted my line of questions about her parents. She didn't

remember why or when Nathan died, but that it was when she was too young to go to school. “My father I was very fond of—when I saw him coming down the road, no matter who I was playing with, I would leave them. I’d jump up and meet him, and he would pick me up, put me around his neck, and bring me home. I adored my father, and then he died.”

“Was your mother living with him at the time?”

“I said he was my father!”

“But not all parents live together.”

“Well, this one did.” Ruth’s emphasis on “this one” couldn’t have been sharper, a resolute rejection of my insinuating narrative of a poor single black mother and child. “That’s how I know he died. And after that, my Aunt Mary and her husband came and moved us to Cordele.”

Ruth explained that her mother worked as a cook in those days “for ladies in their homes,” first in Sibley and Sylvester, and then in Cordele. “Why did she have that job, and not another kind of job?” I asked, again wanting Ruth to say that African American women had scant employment opportunities, and that domestic labor was better than other alternatives. I had remembered when I was a child hearing Ruth’s Aunt Thelma declare she didn’t want to cook and clean for anyone but herself in her own home. How Thelma’s insinuation about her relatives’ employment “for ladies in their homes” sat with Ruth, I didn’t know.

During this interview, Ruth had another quick retort to my question. “She had to do something, so she must’ve got a job being somebody’s cook.” Ruth offered a logic about her mother’s work in white people’s homes that she thought was self-evident.

“Now, my mother was a wonderful cook.” About Miss Cora’s culinary skills, Ruth elaborated, “I hear people she worked for rave about what a wonderful cook she was, and if you want something good, let her cook it. I know she made something I loved—that was pork chops. Seemed like they melt away in your mouth.”

Ruth cooked everything our family ate—from brisket and matzo ball soup and chopped chicken liver to vichyssoise and layer cakes with caramel frosting. My mother

would find recipes in the newspaper or *Ladies Home Journal* for Ruth to prepare. I was astonished to learn from Ruth that she didn't consider herself much of a cook. I had heard the family legend that when my mother interviewed Ruth about the job, she had asked Ruth if she knew how to cook. When Ruth said she didn't, my mother replied, "I don't either, and one of us will have to learn how, and it won't be me." Ruth's own account of this encounter didn't contradict my mother's story; rather, she played up her own side of it. "She say, you know how to cook? I say, no. You ask me today, I'll tell you the same thing. I don't tell nobody I know how to cook. I just don't." It was clear that a job cooking for "ladies in their homes," as Ruth had described Miss Cora's employment, was nothing Ruth relished.

Ruth and Cora had other jobs in the food industry. When Ruth was a very young woman in Georgia, she had followed her mother to a canning factory called Liberty MacNeil. "I worked in tomatoes, my mother worked in beans and pickles." Some sixty years later, Ruth was telling me about grating tomatoes "near a machine where they'd pull the rotten tomatoes off, and the rest went into a boiler to make canned tomatoes, tomato juice, tomato ketchup, or what have you." This position seemed to suit Ruth at the time. "If I worked every day, I had a nice check—once they took income taxes out of it. I think they closed that factory. I'm not sure, but maybe they didn't have peoples to come to work there like when I was working there. My mother worked there year round."

For Ruth, this canning factory was a summer job. About her youthful attitude on work back then she mused, "I was a spoiled brat. I wanted to work with the other kids picking tomatoes or tobacco, but they wouldn't let me go, and I had to stay in the restaurant to help, but then there was nothing to do there." Ruth didn't elaborate on this restaurant, nor did she provide background about Liberty MacNeil. These narratives assumed I knew the broader contexts of places and people. I was too uncomfortable to ask outright about the teen mother and other buried bits of Ruth's story. Maybe it was none of my business.

During that humid summer morning in 1996 when I videotaped our conversation, I pursued the kinds of life stages most familiar to me. I remember once, when in high

school I was struggling to translate Caesar's Gallic War feats, Ruth said she had studied Latin. But I didn't hear about classical language classes so many years later when she told me about moving from school to school as a young child. Speaking of the time following her father's death when her mother moved for work and Ruth lived with her Aunt Mary in Cordele, she said, "I went to public school then. Sometimes I visited my mother in Sibley and went to school there too one term, but then went home to Cordele, and went into boarding school at Gillespie Selden Institute and finished high school there." Gillespie cast a certain glow in Ruth's recollections. The school was established in Cordele in 1933 when it merged with Selden Normal and Industrial Institute in Brunswick, originally opened in the first decade of the twentieth century to offer vocational training to African American students. When Ruth attended Gillespie-Selden, most likely during its initial decade, it offered the state's first nursing program for black women. Although Ruth didn't mention subjects related to health or anatomy when she talked about her school days, she had told me she was once a nurse in Cordele. Ruth linked this work to surgery on her legs while she was at Gillespie. "They chopped up the bones and then pieced them back together," Ruth had explained to me once when I was a child and I asked about her bone-thin legs. My mother had told me that Ruth had polio and lived where she didn't receive proper medical care.

Ruth had a different take on this chapter of her life. "I had quite a few operations—don't know why." When I mentioned polio as the reason, she countered, "Rickets too, some doctor once told me. All I know is my legs musta been weak. There was a problem from the time I was little, so they did operations to make me walk a bit better." A nurse by Ruth's measure, I gathered, meant taking care of children. "I hung around the hospital as a teenager and everyone thought I was a nurse. A lady, a teacher, wanted me to be a nurse, but I said I had to go back to school to get along with my mother." Ruth paused here and laughed, "You had to go to school to get along with your mother too because she sent you." School was a filial obligation, and Ruth made clear that she had finished high school despite interruptions from surgery and work.

Then Ruth left Georgia for wider horizons up north. "I went to Washington and

took a change of plans and came to New York. I had two or three relatives there, Lula Bell and Margaret.”

In a photo booth image taken in the late 1940s when Ruth was in Washington DC in her early twenties, she’s posing with Miss Cora. They look like sisters, although Ruth is the glamorous one, with glossy lipstick, and a spirited smile in contrast to Cora’s mild, wistful expression. Ruth sports the fancier hairstyle, with waves cresting over her forehead, and she wears a double-strand pearl necklace and shiny ring earrings, while Cora has a dark dress with a white collar, reminiscent of the uniforms Ruth wore at our house. Although Ruth did not elaborate on the "change of plans," she did pause in her prescient way, in her response to my question about why she continued on to New York.



She leveled her gaze squarely at me. “I was looking for you.”

I learned “phlegmatic” and “laconic” from my mother who dwelled on these three-syllable words as the epitome of Ruth’s sensibility. “She doesn’t show much emotion,” my mother often said when describing Ruth, who did not go in for chin music or jaw dancing. To me Ruth revealed a firm belief that our meeting was fate and that she had sought me even before knowing me. I didn’t feel I needed more explanation for feelings that cut through the dross of my reportage-style interview.

Then she supplied the ordinary answer: “I came to New York to see Thelma. She was a housekeeper for Peanut Cole.” Here I interjected that I’d remembered Thelma saying she didn’t want to clean or cook for other people. “After that job,” Ruth continued, “Thelma came from the mail-packing place. Then she started at some school, a Catholic school, a hospital where chirrens are, where kids come from broken homes. You know, where your mother got mail sometimes asking her to help.”

I wanted to get back to the narrative about Ruth and my parents. “So you came

to New York to see Thelma, and then what happened?”

“I found *you*.” Again that prophetic-ironic voice.

I hung onto a journalist role. “How did you find me?”

“I found you through Aunt Florence.” We were back to the often-recited tale. Florence was my father’s brother’s wife. Ruth continued, “Well, Aunt Florence was looking for a housekeeper, and Peanut told her—Mrs. Cole told her—that Thelma’s niece was here, and maybe she could get me to work for her.” This alternating between formal and familiar names, between—in reference to my father—“Papa” and “Mr. B,” was indicative of Ruth’s not-quite status, as family member in some respects, yet an outsider in most. The rest of the story had to do with housekeeper-swapping. Aunt Florence was visiting my mother when someone my parents were considering hiring came over. “Aunt Florence liked her, or she liked Aunt Florence better than she did your mama.” Ruth injected an element of mistress-trading too. “So Aunt Florence said, ‘I’ll take her, and you take Ruth, you take who Mrs. Cole have visiting.’ And that’s the way it went.”

According to my mother, Ruth was supposed to go to Aunt Florence’s house, but in the end, another young woman arrived earlier to take the position when Ruth’s arrival in New York was delayed by her stopover to visit relatives in Washington. Florence convinced my mother to “try out” Ruth on a temporary basis. “She was very serious and had a beautiful face,” my mother told me regarding her first impressions of Ruth.

“What was the job like?” I asked Ruth, as if I were conducting a survey for an employment agency.

“Well, from what I see, I was to take care of her whole house—do her cooking, do her washing, do her ironing, do her cleaning. She had a cleaning lady for a while, but then that stopped. And then take care of you and Jonny, and have off Thursdays and every other Sunday.” When I asked her what she thought of this “job,” her hired position in the life of my family, after all the variety of work she’d had before, she said, “Not too much of nothing. It was something to do and put a little change in my pocket, or I’d have to go back to Liberty MacNeil.”

Ruth's retrospective on this employment reminded me of a story my mother had told about her uneasiness that Ruth seemed "unhappy" in our home at first. After Ruth had worked for a few months, my mother considered asking her to leave. "She never smiled and I worried that her disposition wasn't good for young children." My mother put my father up to the task of sacking Ruth, but that backfired, as my mother relayed to me. "Your father said to Ruth that she didn't seem happy and thought maybe she would prefer a different family or a different job. Ruth didn't flinch, just looked at him, and said calmly, 'Everyone who gets to know me, loves me. You all will too.'" This is the tale I heard often from my mother about how Ruth ended up part—and not part—of our family for these multiple decades. Ruth's words clarified that this was a menial job, "doing" for others in their Northern homes, barely preferable to the factory assembly line in the South. And yet the value of Ruth's labor was not the polished silver or holiday pot roast, but in the lasting—and loving—entanglements with this cluster of people.

"What was I like as a baby?"

"Didn't want to drink your milk! Didn't care too much about eating! Jonny kind of clicked with me right away, and everything he had was mine. I wonder why?" Ruth laughed ruminatively. "I guess kids are like that if they see something in you they like."

My very earliest memories put me in a high chair in the kitchen with Ruth listening to a noontime gospel radio hour, with Mahalia Jackson, the Queen of Gospel, belting out "Take My Hand, Precious Lord." In memory, all the white of the kitchen merges like the days, each into the next and back again, Proustian style. The white of tile and appliances bleeds into the white of the smelly white fish I could not stand. "Now you eat that up—it's brain food. Your mama done paid a lot of money for that fish."

During the interview, Ruth offered a wry summary of her job. "Life around your house was just a bowl of cherries. Yessssss ... you and Jonny would mash the cherries, and I dranked the juice!" There's a compressed metaphor swirling in that bowl.

Much to my parents' discomfort, Ruth announced, "I'm voting for George Wallace," the Alabama racist who tried to undermine the effects of the 1964 Civil Rights

Act when he ran for U.S. president that same year and again in 1972 and '76. Perhaps there was some undercurrent of irony in Ruth's insistence that she could vote for whomever she pleased, whether she intended to cast this vote, or whether she liked provoking my parents' predictable reaction.

She demonstrated this slippery humor even when it came to her annual vacation. Since my family was dependent on Ruth's presence, and planned all travels accordingly, my mother would ask Ruth when she was going to Georgia to visit Miss Cora, or if she was going to take any other trips. "Well," Ruth would sometimes smile, "I'm going to see the Queen real soon!" Maybe she'd elaborate that she had plans to travel around the world, or go to France, but this was her way of joking and the effect was that my mother's anxiety about travel plans increased. My mother used to say, "It's hard to know where you are with Ruth." Ruth's evasions weren't calculated exactly, yet all told, I see her dodges as something other than narrative allergy. Except for Ruth's hysterectomy when I was twelve when she was unable to work for a month, she never left me for long.

While I was in high school Ruth called me into her room one evening, and said she had an important secret to tell me. "Walter and I got married last week, but I don't want your mama or daddy to know." Her reason for this secrecy was that Ruth didn't intend to live full-time with Walter until I left home. "When you go off to college, there will be time enough. I'm not leaving you until I see you through to the other side."

Walter Greene was a chef at a restaurant in White Plains. Ruth loved to take my brother and me to visit Walter's kitchen where he'd ply us with our favorite menu items. He knew all our dietary delights from Ruth. "French fries?" he'd ask. "I know you love spaghetti, Susie," and he heaped up a plate with pasta. Ruth added to her ironing basket Walter's uniforms and I'd see her prop up with starch those white toques. Although I enjoyed his generosity as a professional cook, so different from the domestic version his wife halfheartedly held, Walter remained a shadowy person to me. In death, Walter became more vivid, as did Ruth's world outside our home.

It was after eleven at night when my mother phoned from New York to tell me Walter had died two days earlier from lung cancer. At six the next morning I called Ruth to say I'd be in New York in time for Walter's funeral.

"Really?" Ruth sounded almost excited and almost like herself, except for a slight hollowness in her voice. "You really goin' be here?"

My parents and I arrived at the funeral home before Walter's family. In the front hallway was a black glass-enclosed announcement offering the day's event: 11 o'clock. Monday February 23, 1981. Services for Walter G. Greene. The three of us went uneasily from the entrance hall to the chapel where the coffin was on display in the front of the room. I saw Walter's head propped up, his black eyeglasses on his face although his eyes were closed.

Two days earlier Ruth had asked my parents to drive her to the funeral home, "the undertaker's," as she put it. "You can see Greene's body. They did a real good job on him. I made sure they put on his glasses. No one would even know it's Greene without his glasses."

I asked my mother, "Was it hard to look at him?"

"Actually, it wasn't so bad. Your father took one look in the coffin and whispered, 'That's my suit he's wearing!'" We had entered Ruth's world by proxy only, through castoff clothing, even while she lived in ours. We were making our debut at Walter's funeral.

After I greeted Ruth's cousin Agnes who had taken a seat up front, I turned back to the third row where my parents had rooted themselves into gray folding chairs. "We better move back, since the front rows are all for Ruth's family."

"Don't worry, dear," my mother quickly parried. "We'll be conspicuous no matter where we sit."

When the seats were nearly filled, two young men helped Miss Cora, who had traveled in a car from Georgia for thirty hours, in through a side door to the front of the room.

Suddenly a hush descended on the dim hum of chatter, and behind me was a

terrible sound, a chillingly painful gasp. Everyone turned toward the main entrance, and there was Ruth as the chief mourner, like the bride at the back of a procession. Going down the aisle ahead of Ruth were Walter's daughter Patricia from Jacksonville, his brother Charles from Miami, and his sister Anne from Chattanooga.

Transfixed with fear I watched Ruth, her hands covering her face as she sobbed loudly. I had never witnessed this pitch of emotion from her in all my life. My mother's view of Ruth as stolid may have had more to do with our particular domestic dynamics. A woman dressed in a nurse's uniform supported Ruth as she limped toward Walter's coffin. She held Ruth around her shoulders as they moved down the aisle.

When Ruth reached Walter's body, she leaned over it and cried out, her voice piercing the still room, "Why did you leave me, Greene?" My fingernails reflexively pressed into my palm. On one side of me, my father seemed to shudder, and said beneath his breath, "Gee!" On my other side, my mother did not flinch.

Once Ruth had been led to her seat in the front row, Reverend John Jackson, the minister from Ruth's AME Church in Harlem, stood at the pulpit to address the mourners. He was a large man with impressive presence, his voice like a full sunset, streaked with a symphonic range of emotion. He began his eulogy, his eyes trained on the audience before him.

"Sometimes, sometimes, my brothers and sisters, we find ourselves between a rock and a hard place. We have the suffering with the living, and then more suffering with the dying, and then the ache of hell when they are dead. And we cry out in our pain and in our rage, 'Why Lawd, why?'"

The minister's head bent down as if under a huge weight, a pendulum suddenly struck still in the clock of life. Slowly he lifted his head. I was mesmerized by the drama of him, the room's fragile quiet. Now his voice was a low, deep wave, gathering force as it grew.

"And you ask yourselves, brothers and sisters, 'Why did my brother Walter Greene die? Why Lawd? Why Lawd? Why now? We're not finished with him, Lawd! Why now? Why did you take him from me, Lawd? Why?'"

After the graveside services when we were walking back down the path to the row of parked cars, Ruth introduced me to Charles, Walter's brother. "This here's my baby." She appeared tired and, as usual, walked with a lame gait. I was relieved to hear Ruth speak without that pitch of powerful feeling, her cries still pinned to my brain.

Charles put his hand out and I shook his. "Nice to meet you, m'am."

I was Ruth's baby. She told me this, she told other people this. But was there another baby? Did I replace another lost baby, like Jessie replaces Cora's Josephine in the Langston Hughes story? Did I displace Ruth's own story of other babies, narratives buried, forever lost? Twice I heard that doctors had pronounced Ruth's body bearing the traces of childbirth.

When I was in seventh grade, Ruth suddenly became ill and had to have a hysterectomy. My father's cousin Eugene was a gynecologist, and so my parents arranged for Eugene's partner to perform the surgery. I only remember visiting her in the hospital the night after her operation. She looked small and helpless, not at all the Ruth who protected me from my brother's punches, my mother's depression, my father's mild-mannered oblivion. Her face was drenched, and I could tell she was in terrible pain.

"There's my baby," her attempt at smiling more a grimace as she saw me at the foot of her bed.

My mother tried to reassure me when we left the hospital. "Of course, Ruth isn't dying! She just had major surgery. She'll be fine in no time." We spent a month eating most dinners at restaurants, or my mother made tuna salad sandwiches. I learned to make spaghetti sauce from a mix. During that period, I overheard that the doctor said Ruth once had a child.

Many years later I heard a similar story when Ruth was crazy with senility, and no longer knew me even by name. That failure of memory was so painful to bear that I stopped phoning her at the Pinehill Nursing Center in Byronville, Georgia. Her cousin Jean Smith, who lived in Cordele and looked after Ruth when she moved back there a few years after my parents died, would phone me from time to time with updates about

Ruth's condition. I hadn't caught Jean's place in Ruth's sketch of her family tree, but Jean told me she'd known Ruth forever. This time she told me that Ruth had some bleeding, and that the doctors said she had cancer of the uterus.

"That can't be! I know Ruth had a hysterectomy a long time ago, when she was maybe forty years old."

"I'm just telling you what the doctors say. And they say she had one baby, maybe two." If Ruth had given birth, what happened to the baby? Dead or surrendered or something else? In the part of Ruth's life that overlapped with mine, so much was unspoken, so much of the past unshared, that baby was as good as dead.

Ruth liked to talk to the dead, and that's what she did when I took her to visit Walter's grave. As if paralleling our peculiar family, The Jewish cemetery, Sharon Gardens, where my family has a plot, and a Christian cemetery, Gates of Heaven, lie side by side in Valhalla, New York. Ruth made wreaths for Walter's grave with different colors of plastic newspaper and supermarket bags which she balled up in some fashion and then attached to wire clothes hangers. Once I suggested I could get some cut flowers from a florist for her to leave by the gravestone, but Ruth declined. "My flowers look fresh a lot longer than those ones you spend your money on." She had a point.

I envied Ruth's camaraderie with the dead. When we approached Walter's plot, she'd call out, "Look who's here, Greene! I brought Susie to see you!" Then she'd give a quick update about relatives or friends, the change of ownership of a restaurant where he'd worked.

Some months after my mother's Aunt Fredda died in a nursing home, her body willed for scientific research, a special delivery package of the rest of Aunt Fredda, now reduced to smooth sand, arrived at my parents' front door. My mother and Ruth took Aunt Fredda's box to our local Valhalla. As they approached Walter's grave, my mother held the open box while Ruth called out, "Greene! I've brought Aunt Fredda to stay with you now! You remember Aunt Fredda! She's the lady who basted the turkey every Thanksgiving!" Ruth scooped up the substance of Aunt Fredda's remains, and

dispersed the grains like fairy dust onto Walter's plot.

Ruth's own death, like her life in some ways, felt painfully remote to me. I had not seen her in several years since she'd returned to Georgia and I had not spoken to her in over a year since she didn't seem to know who I was anymore. Still, I was some variety of next of kin and received the news before dawn one September morning.

"She gone," I heard a voice say. "She gone now. Susie, this is Jean. Ruth passed in the night, around one o'clock."

A week later and a thousand miles away, Ruth's funeral took place at the New Oak Grove Baptist Church in Cordele. Jean sent me the program from the service, a six-page foldout with a large color photo of Ruth on the front. The image of Ruth came from another photo which appeared inside, one I'd taken at my brother's rental home on Martha's Vineyard the summer of 1996 when I'd interviewed Ruth. In the original picture, Ruth sits in a tee-shirt on a lawn chair in the company of two toddlers, my brother's daughter Jenna and my Flora next to her. Flora is hamming it up, Jenna is studying something on her hands, Ruth is looking at the camera. Her expression seems distraught, but perhaps she was in the middle of saying something, and the shutter caught her face at an odd angle.

The program came to me like a long-distance notice of the framework of Ruth's story, her early and final years in Cordele, which became legible on my mental map when I learned the city was forty miles east of Jimmy Carter's hometown of Plains. Unlike Walter Greene's funeral in White Plains, NY, Ruth had the royal treatment with escorts courtesy of the city of Cordele, including the chief of the police department, the city manager, and the sheriff of Dooly County. The order of the service includes two selections of songs by "The Gospel Ensemble" and a eulogy from the Minister Charles Perry. Ruth's body didn't make it to Walter's Valhalla resting-home; she was buried in "Pleasant Valley". Toward the back of the funeral program is a poem titled "Come and Rest":

God said you were getting weary  
So he did what he thought best,  
He came and stood beside you  
And whispered, "Come and Rest."

If there were any "Why Lawds" at Ruth's funeral, the answer might have been this, that she was "getting weary." Arranged around the poem at the center of the page are several photos including one of Flora and Jenna, a few of Ruth as a much younger woman. In one she's in a kitchen, although I don't recognize it. In another, she wears a uniform with an apron, and another shows Ruth with her arm linked through Walter's. Although neither my parents nor my brother and I appear in any photo, there is one of Ruth at the Hartsdale train station, with her hand resting on the back of my parents' 1960s Cadillac convertible. Ruth was likely heading to her church in Harlem.

A short obituary begins: "Mrs. Ruth Steadman Greene, daughter of the late Mrs. Cora Smith born on January 1, 1916 in Sylvester, Worth County, Georgia." Finally, I learn Ruth's age, and marvel that she died at eighty-eight, a year older than my father had lived, and thirteen years longer than my mother. She was less than two years younger than my mother. Why had I assumed my mother was at least a decade older? Neither woman was forthright about her age. In addition to her mother's name, this version of Ruth's biography mentions two aunts and seven cousins, again a glaring contrast with Ruth's own account of an adored father. Then, this: "She moved to New York where she lived and worked for many years. She was employed by a very loving and caring family, The Barntine Family."

Something was garbled in the translation here, from "Bernstein" to "Barntine," but no matter. Like a photo negative, Ruth's many decades in New York working for our family for most of her adult life was a shadowy detail for the people at her funeral in Cordele. What she told me about her childhood and family in Georgia, an account colliding with my mother's version, was more a sketch than the thick description I sought. From each perspective, her Cordele community of her childhood and final

years, and her workplace people like me, Ruth was a strong presence, known in some respects, and not known in others, the very marvel and mystery of herself, as she had told me, a sum total of a mixed emotion family.



**Susan D. Bernstein** moved a few years ago to Boston from Madison, Wisconsin where she spent twenty-eight years as a professor of English with a focus on Victorian literature and gender studies. She now teaches in the English Department at Boston University including a course on life writing. In addition to scholarly books and articles, she has published literary nonfiction essays and short fiction, and is writing a novel.