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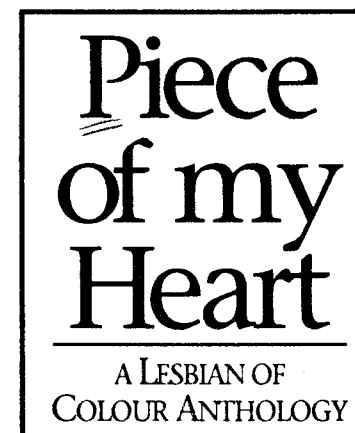
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fall
into yr armz/ unless we cd
put the typewriter back
up on the table
& the records
into their sleeves

if you cd let
there be
summer/ in the
fall

INTERVIEWED BY TERRI JEWELL

MISS RUTH

Ruth Ellis is a 90-year old Black Lesbian presently living in Detroit, Michigan. Conversations were held with her on April 23, 1989 in Lansing, Michigan and on February 10, 1990 in Detroit.



RUTH ELLIS: My life has been nothing special. I am a quiet person who came from a very ordinary, middle-class Negro family. I was born July 23, 1899 in Springfield, Illinois. My Dad's name was Charles, Sr. He was a stately-looking man, like what I would call a Black Colonel. I favor him. My Daddy was a well-built man and black-skinned, very proud. I don't think he had much schooling, but he knew what it was all about. I didn't appreciate him when I was younger like I think I could now. I sort of feared him. He was so strict, you know. And I shied away from him. I clung to my mother. Her name was Carrie Farrell. She was very smooth, just a kind person. I was crazy about her. My mother was medium-brown, a nice looking woman. I was a "Momma's girl." I have my birth certificate,...

TERRI JEWELL: Your mother was 35 years old when you were born and she was from Tennessee as was your father. He was 38 when you were born. She was a housewife and he was a mail carrier.

ELLIS: I do remember my mother saying something about being born in ... she'd just say, "in '65". I think she must have been in her 40's when she died. She had a massive stroke and I was around 11 or 12 years old. My daddy raised us children.

I had three brothers. Wellington was the youngest brother, Harry was the middle one, and Charles, Jr., the oldest. I was the baby and had a twin who died as a baby. All my brothers were World War I veterans; Harry and Charles, Jr. went overseas, but not Wellington. He eventually got married. Now, my oldest brother never married. I think Charles, Jr. was gay because he used to like having male office boys. He never talked about it or anything like that. Harry never married, but became a boxer.

We had quite a bit of music in our family. My daddy used to sing in the choir at Saint Paul AME in Springfield and my brother played the pipe organ. The oldest brother could play the violin, the middle brother played mandolin and could play piano by ear, but I didn't get very far with any of it. I like the better class of music – orchestra music and the old-fashioned religious music like Marian Anderson sings. And we played jazz and dance music. I love to dance. I don't know too much about this modern music at all. I don't listen to it at all except when I go dancing. But I don't like the records I hear these days. I don't like vulgarity.

We lived in an integrated neighbourhood in Springfield. There was a riot there when I was about 8 years old. The whites rioted because they found out a Black man had a white wife. White people were told to put sheets up in their windows so the rioters would burn out only Black families. The only weapon my Daddy had was a sword from the Knights of Pithias. Troops came in and took all the weapons away from the colored People but not the whites. The wrong Black man was hung... I didn't even know what a riot was.

I do remember one friend I used to have. She was a white girl named Esther Black. My mother would let me go down the block to play with Esther for a half-hour. And Mrs. Black would let Esther come over to my house to play, too. When we started school, though, we couldn't play together anymore. When children are left alone, they don't care about all the foolishness that the parents worry over. Children get all that hate from their parents.

I didn't learn too much when I was in school. If I were going to school now, I would be in what you would call "special classes" because I was a slow learner. I went to a white school. They didn't pay attention to colored kids then. I had no one to take a real interest in my schoolwork. My brothers, I guess, were busy studying for themselves. My Daddy was crazy about schooling. We had a little library and he had the works of Shakespeare, a set of encyclopedia and law books.

We could go into the theatres, but we had to sit in what they called "Pigeon Heaven" – way up in the balcony. We couldn't go in the restaurants. We couldn't go to the "Y" where young white kids could learn how to swim. We had to go to the river to learn how to swim. But Daddy wouldn't let us go everyday because too many children got drowned.

But the teachers didn't teach me anything, you know? Now if I had been raised in the South as a kid, I would have been taught to work. I was a loner in school. I didn't mix very well with the white girls. Or they didn't mix with me. In gym class, the teacher would have to hold my hand because some of the girls didn't want to hold hands with someone Black.

When I went to high school, I fell in love with my gym teacher. She was a Portuguese woman named Grace L., and it didn't matter to her what color anyone was. I didn't get through Springfield High School.

JEWELL: Were you gay before you were 21 years old?

ELLIS: Yes. I used to fool around with girls and have them stay all night. One morning, my Daddy said, "Next time ya'll make that much noise, I'm going to put you BOTH out."

JEWELL: You mean to tell me you were in your Daddy's house?!

ELLIS: Sure! That's where I lived! I think he was kind of glad I had a woman instead of a man because he was afraid I'd come up with a baby. If you had a baby in those days, you'd have to leave home. And he wanted me home.

I've had one intimate boyfriend. He took me to Decatur to a

dance and that was something! Then, all of a sudden, I never saw him again. And I know what happened. The people he stayed with knew I was gay. "You with a bulldagger..." And I never saw that fellow again. He has passed now.

My people have been dead so long, so long. Daddy was the first colored man to be at the post office in Springfield, Illinois. A man insulted him once and Daddy got fired. He never got a good job after that.

JEWELL: What kinds of jobs have you worked?

ELLIS: Just printing. After the war, my oldest brother, Charles, came to Detroit. I left Springfield when I was 37 and moved to Detroit because Charles was here. Now, when I first started to work in Springfield, I made \$3.00 a week taking care of a baby and I stayed on the place. I was a woman past the age of 21. But the top wage then was \$10.00 a week. If you were a cook, you got top wages. But look at what you could get with \$10.00, with \$3.00. You could buy 2 cents worth of potatoes, a steak for fifteen cents., a loaf of bread for a nickel. You could buy a penny's worth of candy, your insurance would be 5 cents a week... a "5 cent policy". When I moved to Detroit, I got a job making \$7.00 a week. In the meantime, on Thursdays, I'd look for a printing job. I finally found one and stayed there about 10 years.

JEWELL: But how did you get interested in printing?

ELLIS: Well, I kind of fell into it. After high school in Springfield, a neighbourhood man taught me how to set type and run his presses. I stayed with him for quite awhile. When I moved to Detroit, I worked for a printer named Waterfield for awhile, then decided to have a shop of my own.

I had one real girlfriend. Her name was Ceciline. We called her Babe. She was the only person I had ever lived with. Babe was from Springfield and she once told me, "If you ever leave Springfield, I'll come where you are." So, when I came to Detroit, she came here, too, but later. We lived together for 30 years. Babe was 10 years younger than I, weighed about 250 pounds and stood under 5'5".

And she was medium-brown. She could cook! That she could do. And she always wore a dress.

When I decided to have a shop of my own, my girlfriend and I bought a home. It was a two-family flat at 10335 Oakland Avenue in Detroit. There were 5 rooms downstairs and I took the front room for my shop. I printed anything small, not books or things like that where it had to be linotyped. I did all printing by hand. The largest printing I did was 11" x 14". I called it "Ellis and Franklin Printing Company". I didn't have any help, either. That's why I refused a lot of jobs because it was too much for me. I wasn't going to have it run me crazy. I would just take in the walk-in trade.

There were quite a few churches in my neighbourhood and I used to do a lot of their work. Coin envelopes and raffle tickets... I made enough money to live off of. I didn't save too much, but I could pay my bills and eat what I wanted. Babe worked as a cook in a restaurant. I also taught myself photography by reading books. There weren't always color films, so I hand-colored my own prints. I had my own dark room and had it set up in a coal bin.

Our house was noted for being the "gay spot". There weren't very many places in Detroit you could go back in 1937, 1940. We rented out the back 4 rooms of the downstairs to a gay fellow. When we had a party, we would open up the whole house. People used to come from every place. They'd be all out in the yard, upstairs and downstairs. Sometimes, people would bring their own bottle. They would get so drunk, everybody would get to fighting. I'd be looking on because I don't know how to fight. Next morning, I'd be sweeping up hair from the women fighting. And the boys would fight out in the yard. Now, I wasn't a drinker. If I drank anything, I'd put it in the little cap of the bottle. That would be my portion. Put ginger ale or Coca-cola in that, sip on it. But my girlfriend could drink!

Babe and I were two different types of people. She liked to go a lot, gamble and drink, but I didn't take that up at all. I was the stay-at-home type. But we made it pretty well. I learned to accept her faults. A lot of people would ask me, "Why don't you leave her?" That was my home, so I just stayed. I had hobbies of my own like my photography to take up my time and we had a couple of dogs. Whenever she'd leave the house she knew the dogs would be taken

care of because I'd be there. I liked my home. We had a nice place and a big yard. Babe remodelled our place, you know. She could knock the plaster off the wall, put in a doorway, do all that kind of stuff. But she never wore pants or anything.

JEWELL: Did you ever cross-dress?

ELLIS: The only time I did that was on Halloween night. I'd put on my brother's trousers.

JEWELL: Is your house still standing?

ELLIS: No, the city had it torn down during Urban Renewal. Babe and I separated then because I wanted to live downtown since I had no car. Babe had a car and wanted to live up near where she worked, so she moved out to Southfield. I had a key to her place and I could come and go as I wanted, but she couldn't have a key to my place. Where I lived, they wouldn't let a resident have 2 keys. I lived at the Wolverine Senior Citizen moved housing complex for 16 years in downtown Detroit. Then, I moved to my present address, still in downtown Detroit, and I've been here for 3 years.

Babe had a child when she was 17, before she got out of school. Her daughter got mixed up in dope, then broke herself of the dope habit. But she got on a whiskey habit and then she wouldn't eat anything. She became dehydrated and had to be put on a respirator. The daughter had 4 children and they were scattered around at different people's houses, but now they're doing very well for themselves. I never see them, though. Babe died in 1973. Her daughter passed about a month afterwards. Babe's daughter never knew that her mother had died...

Now, is this a story? To me it's nothing. Some people have all their life mixed-up. There's so much happening in their life. Not mine. My life is ordinary, calm. I love to dance, bowl and go to classical music recitals. I have many young friends who treat me wonderfully. They make me feel young! I'm having a lot of fun for a 90-year-old woman!!!