

r u t h i e b o l t o n

g a l

a true life



foreword by josephine humphreys

gal

a true life

ruthie bolton

harcourt brace & company

New York San Diego London

Copyright © 1994 by Ruthie Bolton
Foreword copyright © 1994 by Josephine Humphreys

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Requests for permission to make copies of any part of the work should be mailed to: Copyrights and Permissions Department,
Harcourt Brace & Company, 6277 Sea Harbor Drive,
Orlando, Florida 32887-6777.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Bolton, Ruthie, 1961–
Gal: a true life/Ruthie Bolton; foreword by Josephine
Humphreys.—1st ed.
p. cm.

ISBN 0-15-100104-9

1. Bolton, Ruthie, 1961–. 2. Afro-Americans—South
Carolina—Charleston—Biography. 3. Charleston (S.C.)—Biography.
4. Afro-Americans—South Carolina—Charleston—Social conditions.

I. Title.

F279.C49N414 1994

975.7'9100496073'0092—dc20 93-43705

Designed by Lisa Peters
Printed in the United States of America
First edition

E

*I dedicate this book to the Lord above,
my five children, my husband;
Jo Humphreys, Harriet Wasserman,
and Cork Smith.*

foreword

ruthie bolton and I call the same place home: Charleston and its islands, some of which are bodies of land surrounded by water and some of which are clusters of people divided by less bridgeable things. We were both born and raised here, and live not ten minutes apart, but we never met until the summer of 1993.

I first heard her voice over the telephone, a young woman asking if I would take a look at the book she was writing. Right away I said yes, for a reason I knew was odd: I wanted to hear the voice again. I loved its sound, bright and quick, edged with a hint of mystery, a strong voice. But I had no idea how strong it would prove to be.

Her manuscript was handwritten on notebook paper, fifty-eight pages bound in a red folder her daughter had brought from school,

labeled “Parent Handbook.” It outlined the extraordinary events of Ruthie’s childhood—but she was having trouble saying the things she really wanted to say. Every writer knows how the very act of putting words on paper seems to spoil the original reality of the story; the mechanics somehow interfere with the telling, and what we want to say is seldom what gets written.

So she decided to try another way of telling, the way southern stories are best told: out loud, teller-to-listener. We agreed to meet twice a week, and between sessions I would transcribe the tapes and type up the chapters.

As *Gal* was being told, I was fortunate enough to be its audience. But I knew that Ruthie wasn’t telling the story for me or even to me. I was only a witness and a secretary, while Ruthie was *in* it, seeing it, making it happen again. She recalled tiny details and actual conversations from her earliest years. While she spoke she moved around the room, took the voices of different characters, acted their parts, and cried and laughed. And she never hesitated. She told the story of *Gal* straight through to its remarkable and inspiring end, then later went back to fill in some gaps and expand some scenes.

Gal is a gift to us all.

—Josephine Humphreys
Charleston, South Carolina
January 1994

gal

a true life

"Ruthie Bolton" is a pseudonym.

The names of all the people and many of the places in this narrative have also been changed. The author has chosen this method in order to spare her children, her family, and her friends any pain or embarrassment. In every other respect, the words and events in Gal represent the author's true life.

chapter one

now, all the streets are paved. But before Hungry Neck was like it is now, the house that we're in wasn't there. It was off of Rifle Range Road as you're going around that curve. It was a white house, it was a white cedar house—and it was a *showcase* house. People could walk in to see how that house would look, if they wanted one like it. The floors were all wood, and the siding was cedar, it was that very strong cedar wood.

What happened, my grandfather Clovis Fleetwood, who was a cook on a ship, got stationed here in Charleston. He married my grandma—she was from Hungry Neck and already had my mother before she met him—and then they had three daughters more. He went and he saw that showcase house and wanted to buy it, but they told him that he would have to get it moved—it couldn't stay where it was at. He knew there was some lots for sale just below there, in

Hungry Neck, so he bought a lot, and he bought the house, and they moved it. The streets were all nothing but dirt, they didn't even have no street signs or anything like that. Most of the houses were old, but little by little, new houses was being built.

At first we didn't have hardly any neighbors except a old lady behind us called Miss Coralie, and one man across the street. His name was Mr. Buzz. He had a horse and a old buggy and a house—it was a house that nobody would even think that somebody lived there. He sold beer, liquor, cigarettes, candy—you name it. My grandmother and grandfather got to know him very well, knew that he was very old, and they felt like giving him meals and stuff because nobody would come and feed him. So as we grew up we would take breakfast, lunch, and dinner to him and also give him water because he didn't have any water in the house, didn't even have a bathroom in the house.

My grandfather decided that he was going to let this man babysit us. My grandmama, she was home, but Mr. Buzz would mind us when she would go places. He was a nice man, but he kept a lot of traffic in and out of his place. You would find drunk mens, drunk ladies there. We would steal his candy when he wasn't looking, and he would take us riding in the buggy, with the horse, up and down all the dirt roads in Hungry Neck. Only once we rode out on the main road, Rifle Range, and that was paved. But we didn't go but a short distance. Just to the big curve and the sign that said Mount Pleasant.

And finally the horse broke his leg. And broke something else on it, so they had to shoot it. It was during the fall, the leaves were yellow and brown. Some of the leaves were on the ground. I was standing there. Mr. Buzz took a rifle, shot him right in the head,

and the horse fell down. There were six or seven mens, the drunks that always come out there, and they buried that horse right there in the backyard. They did it just to get a bottle of drink afterwards. A brown pretty horse with a cream-colored tail.

I was four then—knotty head, raggy shoes, dirty clothes, snotty nose. They called me Gal, because of one time I wandered past the yard and my grandfather hollered “Get that gal out the street” and they called me Gal all the time after that.

I was born January 6, 1961, when my mother was thirteen. She couldn't take care of me, so my grandmother took me. I didn't have any sisters, but since I was given to my grandmother, I considered myself at that time one of her daughters. I knew we were aunts and niece, but we were like sisters—Naomi, Kitty, Florence, and me. I had three brothers, but I never knew them. Every time my mother did get pregnant, she would give the kids away. She never kept nobody, she just gave them away. Why, I don't know. Maybe she just didn't want to be bothered with any kids. Or she couldn't handle them.

I never really knew where she was. Only a few times, she lived in the house with us, but when I did see her in the house, she was always being beaten by my granddaddy.

She was in the band at Mount Pleasant High School, she played the drums. One day she came home out of school. I was in the kitchen eating, and I heard somebody come in the door. And when I looked, it was her. She had on the band blues, blue-and-white with a gold trimming in it. I heard the bus pull off. She came down the hallway, because she slept in the last bedroom. She took off her clothes. And then I heard the yelling from my grandfather.

I got up from the table, and my grandmama she grabbed me as

I was coming down the hall. She caught me, and when I was trying to peep around her—there was two twin beds in that last bedroom—I saw my grandfather had a belt and my mother was jumping from one bed to the other bed trying not to get beat.

She ran past us and out the house and I didn't see her no more that day. Late that night we had a phone call from Miss Coralie. She said that my mother was there, and she was afraid to come home. When my grandfather found out that she was there, he went out the back door.

My mother heard him coming, so she ran on to a lady house name Miss Furber. She was a old lady that had cancer and had both her legs cut off, she was in a wheelchair, and she was blind. But she could tell what money she give you—one, five, twenty—it's a feel that she had. My mother stayed there awhile. She moved in there with Miss Furber, and she end up dating one of Miss Furber's sons. But then all of a sudden she just left town. Disappeared. Nobody didn't know where she was at. We got a phone call saying she might be in Philadelphia.

I don't know how many years went by—could have been one, two—but we had gotten a dog. He was a collie and we named him Lassie because he looked just like Lassie. And we heard a screaming. I don't know if it was day, night, or what, but I remember the screaming. *Yelling*. The dog was barking, and then I remember seeing that the dog had someone hand in his mouth, just pulling, tearing it apart, and then I saw it was my mother. She had come home to see me.

They had to take her to the hospital to take care of her.

The next day my grandfather took Lassie, and we all got into the car. It was a white Chevrolet—he always bought a Chevrolet,

never no other model car. And we took the dog somewhere into the north area and let him out on the railroad track. Just let him go. When we drove away, it was getting dark, and the dog was standing on the track looking at us. He tried to follow the car.

That night my mother told me, "I'm only going to stay here for about a week. I won't stay longer because I just came to see you."

But a guy came over to the house—his name was Marlon Taylor. She had probably had a fling with him before she even left Charleston. I'm not certain. He came to the house and Daddy wasn't home (Granddaddy, but I called him Daddy). There was a little red chair that was always passed down to the next daughter—it was my mother's chair first, and then it went down through all the sisters until it came to me—and I remember that red chair right there just before you walk into the dining area, and I was sitting in it, and my mother was against the wall with this man, kissing and rocking, I mean they were just going crazy. And I sat there and I watched that. Then he took her chest out. I mean I watched this thing. They were kissing and kissing. And I remember walking up to him, and I said, "Marlon," I said, "are you my daddy?"

And he never answered. He never answered. But he didn't stay that long. He left.

That night my mother went into the bathroom. I don't know why but I said, "Mama, can I come in the bathroom with you?" And she said yeah. I just wanted to be with her. And then I asked her can I suck her chest and she told me no, I couldn't do it.

She said, "Gal, I'm going to leave in a couple of days, but I'll be back."

And I remember crying and crying and begging her please don't go, and I said, "Can I go with you?" and she said, "I can't let you

go with me.” And she left two days later. But she said, “I will come back.”

THAT SUMMER, MY grandfather went out to sea. And when September came, my grandma said, “Gal, you know you got to start Head Start so I bought you these clothes. ‘Cause you know your mama don’t send you any money.” She said, “Clovis send money here,” and I said okay. And she said, “I’m going to have to iron you something. You can go ahead on and lie on the bed for a while.”

But I didn’t go to sleep. I was peeping at her, watching her. The ironing board that we had—we still have it today—is a wooden old ironing board. I was peeping at her and making her think I was sleeping, but I wasn’t.

She had four gold teeth in her mouth. Two up top on each side. She was a lady that you thought she was a white woman but she was not. Her mother probably or somebody in her family was white. She was just as bright, with pretty curly silky hair. Everybody liked her. I mean everybody liked Ruth. They named me after her. Her name was Ruth Homer Fleetwood. And I was Ruthie.

I fell asleep watching her iron me a new blue dress for school.

In the morning she woke me up out of her bed. “Come on, you got to get up before the bus come and pick you up.”

I put on the blue dress. Grandmama fix my hair. I knew I was getting ready for something, but I didn’t know really what it was. And then came a knock on the door.

I never seen a car pull in. It was just the knock. My grandmother answered the door.

"Gal, your mama here!" And right then I knew I wasn't going to go to school.

When she come, she always have a pocketbook, and two luggage in her hand. And it made me think she was going to stay. And I remember going through that luggage, searching through it, looking for things. Just want to see what she got. And see if she had something for me.

And I told my grandmama, I said, "I'm not going to go to school because I want to stay with Mama."

"No, you got to go to school, Gal, you got to go to school."

Mama said, "Oh, can't she stay home and play with me?"

Grandmama said all right. So I didn't go to the first day of school—I stayed home. I asked my mama, I said, "Mama, can I go away with you this time?" and she said no.

And she said, "Anyway, I need to let you know something."

I asked her what it was.

She said, "I'm blind in one of my eyes."

"No, you're not."

She said, "Yeah, I am."

I said, "No, you're not!" and I started jumping up and down. I said, "Can you see me?"

She said, "Yeah, but let me cover my eye."

I was just jumping up and down and waving my hands, I was doing some of everything, and I said, "Can you see me?"

And she said, "No, I can't see you at all."

"Yeah, you can."

"I can't see you, Gal."

She took her hand off that eye and put it on the other eye. I waved one arm, and she told me exactly what I was doing.

"How did you get like that?" I asked her.

"A man that I dated knocked me in the eye."

And I said, "Mama, you know that man you was talking to named Marlon?" I said, "He came by."

"Well, I'm not going to see him, I'm going to leave and go back. I just came back to see you, because I remember you crying from last time. And I brought you a present."

"What is it?"

She said, "Go outside and look by the back room."

That's where we had our washing machine and our freezer. When I went out, there was a pink bike with white stripes. I couldn't believe she had bought me that bike. I rode that bike and I rode that bike and I *rode* that bike that day, and I rode that bike so much until I couldn't even stop. I fell off right in the front of the Wickers' house and skinned my knees so badly that I couldn't even walk. It was bleeding, the meat was hanging out, and I was screaming and crying. They didn't take me to the doctor, they just threw alcohol on it. Later on that day I told Mama that I did feel better.

Right across from us, catty-corner, there was no house there, there was nothing but plum bushes. I told Mama me and Naomi was going to go get some plums. She said, "Well, you better watch out for them snakes out there."

I said, "Yeah I'm watching for the snakes."

But when we went out there we decided that we didn't want to get plums again, we wanted to go taste those red things on the cactus because they looked real good. So instead of us going where we said we was going, we ended up going where something else looked good.

We pulled the red fruit off and we et it, and the next thing we know our tongue was hanging out of our mouth—because the fruit

was full of stickers. And we went home with our mouth, and they had to pick all that stuff off of our tongue, and Mama said, "Gal, didn't I tell you to stay from over there?"

Daddy wasn't there because he was out to sea somewhere, and then we snuck later on that day to the plum bush anyway to get plums. Somehow when I was getting plums a thorn stuck straight in the corner of my eye. I ran home and it was bleeding so bad and Mama said oh Jesus Christ and I was crying, crying, crying. They took that out but I never went to the doctor.

My grandmother was a really nice lady, she never got mad at me, but she used to fuss at me a little—and she said, "Gal, you know your mama's leaving, and you're acting crazy, getting yourself all hurt up."

I said, "Mama, don't go, don't go." Kept crying. But she left anyway. I thought she left to go to Philadelphia, but she didn't. She only left to meet mens or whatever.

The next day my grandfather was home. He came home. And when he pulled up, he had a white Chevrolet. He said, "Gal! Naomi!"

We said, "Sir?"

He said, "Get out there and clean that car."

Naomi said, "I'm going to clean out the front seat."

I said, "No, you ain't. I'm going to clean out the front seat. You can clean out the backseat."

She said, "I'm going to clean out the front seat because the money's always in the front seat."

That's where, you know, when you sit in the front seat the mens' change falls out.

So we was fussing about that, and I didn't know that my mother was still in town. I saw a person walking up to the door and it was