

Act I, Scene 1

AT RISE: Early evening, autumn. An office in Cleveland, Ohio. Under the only light is a work station with two chairs. The desk is filled with printed material and a computer screen is in power-saving mode. GERI, 54, ENTERS, eating an egg roll and holding a paper bag. SHE hits a button on her answering machine. We hear a TONE, and then:

AUTOMATED VOICE, V.O.

You have one new message.

RUTH ON TAPE, V.O.

Geri? ... Hello?... ... Oh, never mind. I'll call 9-1-1.

(TONE)

AUTOMATED VOICE, V.O.

Six-forty-five p.m. End of final message.

GERI

No kidding.

(GERI picks up her phone and dials. She waits a beat.)

(Into her receiver) Ma? ... Call me. At work. On my back line.

(GERI hangs up, then looks at her computer screen. SHE studies a document and takes another bite of the egg roll.)

Crap.

(GERI begins tapping keys.)

Utter crap.

RUTH, O.S.

Hellooooo?

GERI

No. ... Nonononono.

RUTH, O.S.

Hell-oooooo!

(GERI shoves her egg roll in a drawer, then tosses in the paper bag.)

GERI  
(Under her breath) Shoot...

RUTH, O.S.  
(Closer) Anybody home?

GERI  
Ma?!

RUTH, O.S.  
Keep talking...

GERI  
Just follow the light!  
(GERI turns on a SECOND LIGHT. RUTH, 76, ENTERS, perfectly coiffed, but otherwise disheveled. SHE carries purse and shopping bag.)

RUTH  
Well!

GERI  
What are you *doing* here?

RUTH  
I should ask the same question. ...What's so important it can't wait 'til Monday?

GERI  
What'd you, break in?

RUTH  
Let's just say the cleaning crew accepts tips.  
So this is where you work.

GERI  
For twelve years now, Ma.

RUTH  
At 20 years, do they give you a window? ...Or a dust rag?  
Oh, my.

GERI  
What.

RUTH  
This picture of Rachel.

GERI  
It's a sentimental favorite.

RUTH  
Well, she certainly isn't hanging upside down anymore.

GERI  
But from that position, she's smiling at me.  
(RUTH picks up another photo. This one is in an 8x10 frame)

RUTH  
Where'd you get this?

GERI  
Sharon said I could have it.

RUTH  
I never saw it.

GERI  
You probably don't remember.

RUTH  
I'd remember. When was it from?

GERI  
...Look, you didn't drive all the way over here to do an inspection.

RUTH  
...Anyway, I'm not staying.  
(RUTH sits down.)

GERI  
It's been a rough week.

RUTH  
They hired another new reporter and all they give you is "crap." ...I listen.  
Something smells good...  
(GERI opens her drawer and retrieves her half-eaten egg roll.)

That's your dinner?

GERI

Actually, it's my lunch.  
(GERI retrieves the carryout bag.)

*This* is my dinner. ...Egg roll?

RUTH

You promised you'd stop eating at your desk.  
(RUTH takes the egg roll.)

They give you any sauce with this? (...)What about a napkin?

GERI

(Producing a tissue) I didn't know I was entertaining.

RUTH

You aren't, believe me.

GERI

Are you going to tell me what's on your mind?

RUTH

These novices. They make a lot of mistakes.

GERI

(Reading) "Although it may be back-to-school time in Northeast Ohio, a handful of suburban kids won't be in class just yet." Three graphs down, he says the "kids" are 21!

RUTH

You always were a stickler for logic.

GERI

And, in any case, school started three weeks ago.

RUTH

"The Logic Police," we used to call you.

GERI

...Then, he makes two grammatical errors in the next sentence and changes the gender of the arresting officer!

You're not going to eat that.

RUTH

My eyes were bigger than my stomach.  
(RUTH puts the egg roll into her purse. GERI lets it go. Pause.)

Your hair looks nice. GERI

They called you? RUTH

Who? GERI

Nobody. ...Nobody called. RUTH

You're acting stranger than usual tonight. And you're hugging that bag. GERI

Let me see what you bought. Come on!

No-no. ...It's something I wanted you to... look at. RUTH  
(RUTH pulls out a thick brown envelope.)

Some pages.

Oh, geez, Ma. Not more insurance forms... (...) Well, it's not tax season... GERI

Okay. I give up.

...From a book. RUTH

What kind of book? GERI

An autobiography. RUTH

Oh? GERI

Mine. RUTH

...You're serious?! GERI  
(GERI pries the envelope from RUTH.)

RUTH

Would you mind?

(RUTH fishes in her bag and finds a hand sanitizer. GERI wipes her hands, then opens the envelope.)

GERI

My God! Look at this! ...Since when...

RUTH

On and off, about two years.

GERI

Two years!

RUTH

You were on deadline.

GERI

So all this time, you were holed up in that house...

RUTH

You told me once, I should have been a writer.

GERI

Do you remember the context?!

RUTH

Well, I ... I was thinking, maybe you could be my...whaddya call it, copy reader.

GERI

There must be 200 pages here! And it's copy *editor*.

RUTH

Two hundred and thirty-seven, not including the dedication and the appendix.

GERI

Geez, Ma! Who typed all this?

RUTH

...I found someone.

GERI

(Reading the title) "Telling a Life," by Ruth Garver. ...

RUTH

So I can still surprise you.

GERI

What could you possibly say in 237 pages?

RUTH

She double-spaced.

GERI

I'm sorry. This really is an achievement, isn't it. ...Remarkable, really.

RUTH

So you'll read it?

GERI

Of course. But right this...? It's just that you should see all the work I'm bringing home!  
(RUTH takes the manuscript from GERI.)

RUTH

This was probably a mistake, anyway.

GERI

Ma, you're acting very weird.

RUTH

Just call me, when your busy schedule opens up.  
(RUTH EXITS.)

GERI

Suddenly, she's Miss Jane Pittman.

RUTH, O.S.

I heard that!

How do you get out of this place? ...Ow!

GERI

Come back here, please?  
(GERI turns on another light. RUTH ENTERS.)

Okay. Let's have it.

RUTH

But I don't want any marks on the page.

GERI

Fine.

RUTH

I got you little sticky papers for your comments.

GERI

Fine, fine. Let's get out of here. I'll follow you home.

RUTH

Now what.

GERI

Your makeup. ... It's all smudged.

(RUTH fishes in her purse for a compact and lipstick.

SHE steps down to a spot, opens the compact, and freezes.)

Gimme a minute here?

(GERI wraps up her Chinese food to prepare it for travel. Glancing at the title page of Ruth's manuscript, she writes something on a post-it note and sticks it on the page. SHE puts the papers back into the brown envelope and then puts everything into Ruth's shopping bag. GERI starts to exit, but stops to pick up the two photographs and drop them into the bag. SHE TURNS OFF A LIGHT, then EXITS.

The SOLE SPOT is on RUTH, staring into her mirror. SHE studies her image, with growing concern, then covers her mirror with lipstick.)

GERI, O.S., CONT'D

All set?

Ma?

(RUTH stops, closes her compact, throws it into the trash, and EXITS.)

END OF SCENE.