

Betty Sue Washington

Called Betty Sue · Born March 12, 1947 · Clarksdale, Mississippi

They are still here. This is a living obituary, not a death notice.

Questions they answered

52 of 79 questions answered. The ones they skipped are not here.

This is the full list. Every question they answered, with the answer they gave. Skipped questions stay out. The newspaper living obituary is made from these answers.

NAME

1. *Who is writing this, and who are you to them?*

I am. Betty Sue. This is my story. Denise is sitting with me so I do not skip the hard ones.

2. *What should people call them?*

Betty Sue.

3. *What is their full name, if it is different?*

Betty Sue Washington.

4. *Was there a name only family used?*

Robert still says Sue-Sue when he thinks I am not listening.

5. *Was there a name from before -- a maiden name, a name from another country, a name they left?*

Hale. Betty Sue Hale. Mae was a Brooks before she married Ellis.

6. *Where do they live now, and which cities still have their name on a mailbox?*

Clarksdale, Mississippi. Always Clarksdale. The porch is still the porch.

BEGINNING

7. *When were they born, and where?*

March 12, 1947. Clarksdale, Mississippi.

8. *Who raised them? Name those people.*

Mae Hale and Ellis Hale. Mae did the raising. Ellis did the garden.

9. *What were their parents' names -- including a mother's name before she married, if you have it?*

Mae Brooks Hale. Ellis Hale.

10. *Where did they grow up, and what did that place feel like?*

Clarksdale. A loud kitchen. A porch that never got painted the same color twice. Heat. Hymns through the wall.

11. *Who did they grow up with -- sisters, brothers, cousins in the same house?*

Joann. She had the other bed. We fought over the window.

12. *What is one story from when they were little that still gets told?*

I stole a biscuit cooling on the stove and blamed the dog. There was no dog. Joann still tells it.

13. *Which towns or houses still count as home?*

Clarksdale. That porch. The classroom on Fourth.

SCHOOL AND WORK

14. *Where did they go to school, and what did they finish?*

Coahoma County schools. Then I taught. I did not need a speech about it.

15. *What work did they do, or how did they spend their days?*

Third grade. Thirty-four years. Extra pencils. The quiet children by name.

16. *Who did they work for, and for how long?*

The Clarksdale schools. Thirty-four years in a room that smelled like chalk and orange peels.

17. *What were they known for at work -- the thing a coworker would say without thinking?*

She knew the quiet ones. She kept the extra pencils. She did not raise her voice.

18. *Was there unpaid work that was still the work of a life -- a house, a farm, a child, a parent they kept?*

Sunday table. Three children. The roses. Mae at the end, in our front room.

LOVE**19.** *Who do they love?*

Robert. Denise, Marcus, Angela. The grandchildren. Joann, even when she is wrong.

20. *Is there a spouse or a partner they built a life with? When did that begin?*

Robert Washington. 1971. He is still here too.

21. *How did they meet that person, if there is one?*

Church supper. He asked if the potatoes were mine. They were Mae's. I said yes anyway.

22. *Where did they marry, or begin, if they want that day named?*

Under a borrowed tent. Clarksdale. 1971. He stepped on my foot twice.

23. *Who are their children? Name them.*

Denise, then Marcus, then Angela.

24. *If a child married or made a life with someone, who belongs in that sentence?*

Angela married a Cole. Put him in it. He shows up for Sunday.

25. *Who are the grandchildren, and the little ones after that?*

Five of them. The little ones stay a number. They sit on the couch after church.

26. *Do they want young children's names in print, or only that the children exist?*

A number. They are young. They can have their names back later.

27. *Who already left, that this story should still name?*

Mae. Ellis. 2011 and 2004. Name them.

FAITH AND BELONGING

28. *Is there a faith, a church, or a quiet they keep instead?*

Baptist, quietly. I do not need a speech.

29. *If there is a congregation, what did they do there -- choir, kitchen, usher, just the pew?*

Choir when my voice held. Then the kitchen. Then the pew.

30. *If people want to give, is there a church, a cause, or a place that should receive it?*

The school. Extra pencils. Not flowers I cannot water.

TEXTURE

31. *What did they love to do when nobody was watching?*

The roses. The hymn book with the recipe in it.

32. *What food, music, team, or place would make a stranger know it was them?*

Biscuits. Precious Lord. Sunday gravy. No paper plates.

33. *What did they cook, or refuse to cook, that family still talks about?*

Biscuits. The buttermilk amount is in pencil in the hymn book in the left drawer because I kept changing my mind.

34. *What did they say, over and over, that family can still hear?*

Sit down. Pass to the left. That is the whole religion of it.

35. *What gathering, holiday, or Sunday was theirs?*

Sunday table. Gravy from Robert's mother's boat. Too much food. That is how we tell the truth here.

36. *Is there a place they want people to picture them -- a chair, a garden, a trail, a kitchen?*

The roses. Then the kitchen. Not a hospital bed.

WHO THEY WERE

37. *If I sat next to them for an afternoon, what would I notice first?*

I will feed you before I ask you a question. My hands. The garden dirt that does not come out.

38. *How did they show love without saying the word?*

A plate left in the oven. Showing up early. I was proud of Denise when she left. I should have said it then. I am saying it now.

39. *What could they not stand, that people who knew them already know?*

A paper plate on Sunday. Being fussed over. People who will not sit down.

40. *What would be the first thing someone would miss in the house?*

The gravy boat. The hymn book in the left drawer. Sunday at two.

PICTURES

41. *What photographs belong in the ten-minute film?*

The classroom. The tent. The roses. Sunday table. The couch after church. Not a hospital.

42. *Which days have to be in the pictures -- a wedding, a porch, a classroom, a child?*

The classroom. The wedding. The roses. Sunday table.

43. *What should we leave out of the pictures?*

No hospital. No machines. I am not that photograph.

THE STORY

44. *What should people remember?*

Sunday table stays Sunday table. I was not afraid of the quiet. Keep the roses watered.

45. *What were they proud of, even if they never said it loud?*

Denise leaving. The quiet children who could read. Thirty-four years.

46. *What do they want the people who love them to know, while they can still say it?*

I am still here. This is the story I will leave. Tell them I was not afraid of the quiet.

47. *Is there one sentence they want in the written story?*

Sunday table stays Sunday table.

48. *What should this story not say?*

Do not put a house number. Do not put the little grandchildren's names.

49. *What should the grandchildren remember about Sunday table?*

The gravy boat was Robert's mother's. Do not use a paper plate. Sit down. Pass to the left. That is the whole religion of it.

50. *Where is the biscuit recipe?*

Inside the hymn book in the left drawer. The one with the blue ribbon. The buttermilk amount is written in pencil because I kept changing my mind.

51. *What do you want someone you love to know that you never said out loud?*

I was proud of her when she left. I should have said it then. I am saying it now.

52. *Who gets the roses?*

Angela. She already knows how to prune them. Marcus gets the attendance book. He liked the names.