

Down By The Berry Patch

"Disillusions"

Rita Luks

2005

I got out of the car and walked from Georgia to Alabama. [Aunt Mary](#) and [Uncle Jack](#) insisted I walk across the state lines when we crossed from Michigan into Ohio and had been ordering me out of the car at every state line from there on. "Think of it as a great adventure," they said, "How many people do you know of who can honestly say they walked from state to state all the way from Michigan to Georgia?" A few steps over the border I climbed back into the car and we continued on to Demopolis where we'd meet up with Uncle Jack's sister who was coming from Texas to return their boxer she had been dog sitting for months. I must have shared the back seat all the way back to Fort Benning with that giant dog beside me yet I don't have a single recollection of the return trip.



I do remember Vera. She worked for the lady we all stayed with in Demopolis. I was reading a book on the sun porch early one morning while waiting for someone else to wake up and keep me company when she came into the room carrying a mop. She was startled when she saw me and started to back out. I told her my name, prattled on about what I was doing there and offered her a piece of Dentyne gum, which she refused by saying, "I shouldn't take it."

That seemed like a strange reply. Why shouldn't she take it? When I asked her a direct question she answered me and I had a lot of direct and very nosy questions. I found out her name was Vera and discovered we were both 15 that summer of 1953. I asked about her school but she didn't have one. She had to quit school to go to work and help her family. She had to get up early to walk to the place where she caught a ride on the back of a truck that took her into town six days a week where she worked from 7 to 4. I worked, too, in my dad's restaurant but only one or two days after school for a few hours and a shift on Saturday or Sunday. Sometimes if the Snack Bar was really busy Daddy would ask me to come in and help. Then I would go in and work through the rush time. If something special was going on at school or with my friends, I didn't have to work at all. And getting to work was much simpler. I could walk but usually I'd just call and Daddy would come pick me up.

The lady we were staying with paid Vera one dollar a day to work from 7 to 4. Vera paid the truck driver 50 cents a day for her ride. The other 50 cents she gave to her mother to help out the family. I got paid 40 cents an hour during the week and 60 cents an hour on the weekend. The money I earned was mine and I decided how to spend the money myself. I had just saved enough to buy my plane ticket from Atlanta to Detroit and several new outfits to pack in my suitcase. Vera was wearing a faded, old lady dress.

Reprinted from *Down by the Berry Patch*

<http://berrypatch.info/rita/001.html>

Last updated on 22 August 2014

Photo Caption: The Snack Bar in 1950.

Vera said she couldn't talk anymore. She'd get into trouble for not working and lose her job. All this was just not right for a 15-year-old like myself. I would get things changed for Vera. That shouldn't be difficult.

I brought up the subject over black bottom pie and sweetened ice tea when our hostess took me out to lunch. "Vera needs a raise." My hostess listened to me explain how Vera really only made 50 cents a day because she paid half of her wages for a ride. She worked hard for nine hours every day and only got to keep fifty cents. A dollar a day wasn't even a fair wage.

Without hesitation she agreed with me. She said it wasn't right and shouldn't be like that. She told me people always took advantage of Negroes. She wanted to do something about it but she couldn't. That's what other people paid their maids and if she paid Vera more it would cause a lot of problems. Vera would tell others and they would want more money, too. Then all the people in town would be upset with her for getting something started. No, it would not be right to cause such a problem. My 15-year-old mind didn't agree with her reasoning. It wasn't right to cheat Vera just because other people did it.

My experience was limited. Vera was the only black person I ever had a conversation with but I knew she'd be better off in Unionville. Thank goodness I didn't live around people who thought like that. Thank goodness my parents weren't that kind of people.

Later that summer something happened that never had happened before. I was working with [Daddy](#) one afternoon when a Negro man, his wife and I think the third person was her mother, parked on the main street right in front of the Snack Bar and came inside. They sat down at the table to the left of the door, right in front of the window. Negroes were in Detroit and down south. Not in Unionville. I looked at them and then at Daddy and said, "What should I do?" This amused my father. He said, "Go wait on them!" The man was very polite and ordered for all three of them. I wrote it on my little green pad. One half chicken, one quarter chicken (dark meat), one fish and chips and three coffees with cream. It was like waiting on anyone else. I felt it was a special honor that they chose to come into our restaurant. I kept their water glasses and coffee cups full. If they liked the food and the service they'd probably come back again. No one else came in while they were there so I had lots time to give them excellent service.

When the man paid the bill, Daddy started a conversation and walked outside with him. This was one of his favorite things about the restaurant. Talking with the customers. When he came back inside he told me he had just done something that was one of the hardest things he'd ever done in his life. He asked the man to never come back again. He told me that as much as he hated to do that he didn't have any other choice. The Snack Bar was our livelihood and if Negroes started coming there, the local people wouldn't. The merchants in town wouldn't even sell him the supplies he needed and he would soon be put out of business. He had to think about his family. My 15-year-old mind didn't want to believe any of this happened. There must have been some other choice. Why did he even have to tell me?

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