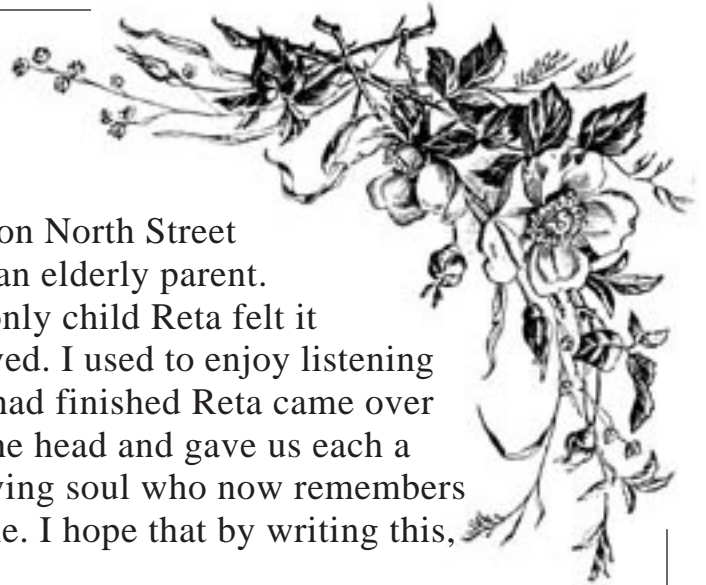


Reta Spencer

North Street Tales

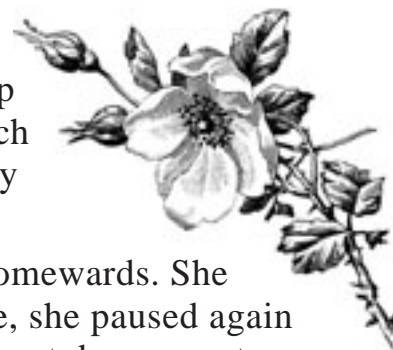


Reta Spencer was another of those women on North Street who gave up a life of their own to care for an elderly parent. In this case it was her father and being an only child Reta felt it her duty to care for him for as long as he lived. I used to enjoy listening to her and mother chat because when they had finished Reta came over to me, and to brother Morry, patted us on the head and gave us each a peppermint candy. I doubt that there is a living soul who now remembers Reta except for a few old-timers, such as me. I hope that by writing this, her story, that Reta will live on in memory.

Reta left Florence Nixon standing on her porch and walked slowly up the hill on North Street. She always chose this side of the street to walk home even though she lived on the other side mainly because the hill on the other side of the street was much steeper. She was tired, very tired, even though this was her day off from the Diefenbacher Laundry. She considered herself very fortunate to have work because times were still hard. The burden of the Great Depression still weighed heavily on her shoulders. She was paid forty cents an hour because her job carried more responsibility. She operated the huge mangle which ironed sheets, pillowcases, towels, tablecloths, in other words anything flat. It was usually beastly hot in the laundry even on beautiful summer days such as this when the temperature was moderate and it wasn't muggy. She had been shopping at the A & P on Main Street. They had specials on this week and she determined that she would take advantage of them. She had a nice free soup bone to make vegetable beef soup because Daddy like it so much. She needed a few staples such as flour (fifteen cents for a five pound bag), baking powder (five cents a can) and some Fels-Naptha bar soap (five cents a cake). A dozen eggs cost her twelve cents, a loaf of bread eight cents, and a pound of hamburger fifteen cents. All together she had spent less than a dollar She knew she could depend on Mr. Whitney, a next-door neighbor, for fresh vegetables and fruit from his garden. Whenever she had time she canned the vegetables and fruit for the winter.

Reta didn't get too far up the street. She stopped for a moment to talk with Mrs. Barkley who was shaking a dust mop from her side porch. She called, "Hello Blanche." Blanche said, "Why don't you come in and have a cup of coffee. I just made it." Reta replied that she would like to very much but that she had to get home to fix Daddy's lunch. She did ask Blanche if there was going to be Bingo that evening. Blanche replied that there would be and that she hoped that Reta would be able to come. Penny bingo was played every week around the neighborhood in a different home every week. Blanche was busy getting the house in order and making a dessert to serve after the game was finished. There

were usually twenty or more folks who attended. It was cheap entertainment during hard times and it was also a chance to catch up on the neighborhood news. Some would call it gossip, they didn't.



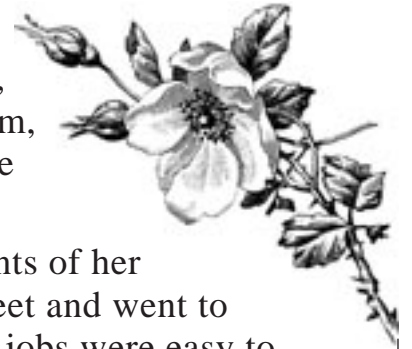
Reta waved goodbye to Blanche and proceeded on her trek homewards. She was almost there. At the third house east of the Barkley home, she paused again to pass the time of day with Lavinia Curry. Lavinia had her front door open to take advantage of the breezes. Reta always like to talk with Lavinia because they had something in common. They both worked in laundries. However, Lavonia's laundry was right in her own home. She "took in" washings. She charged \$1.50 for a large wash, especially one with lots of hand ironing to do. A dollar was the charge for a largely "flat wash." Her washing machine was going constantly it seemed, her dining room table was always full of clothes waiting to be ironed either with a flatiron or on her mangle. Lavinia was able to support herself, her two girls, and her blind husband by her toil every day washing and ironing other folk's clothes.

Reta remarked that it was a nice day and asked her if she was going to bingo at the Barkley's. Lavinia couldn't often go to such things because her workday often extended into the evening hours. Reta hoped that her friend would be able to take some time off but she also realized that those washings had to be ready to be picked up. Lavinia was on a tight schedule. Reta crossed over to her own home, greeted Daddy who was sitting on the porch, then headed for the kitchen. She put the kettle on the boil for tea, then made a sandwich for her father. All she wanted for lunch was a cup of tea and a piece of toast. She had purchased an electric toaster last year so that she wouldn't have to hold the slice of bread over the coal fire in the kitchen range to toast. She felt herself blessed by the kitchen range. It was a combination stove of coal, for the winter months, and gas for the summer. She made her toast, poured the tea, and took everything out on the porch so that Daddy wouldn't have to eat alone. She sat down in her chair and gave a sigh of relief that she could relax for a while.

As they were sitting there, Ed, the postman, came up the sidewalk to deliver the morning's mail. There would be another delivery late in the afternoon. He handed Reta a penny postcard from a friend of hers in Rochester. Then he paused to tell them that Miss Birmingham, a neighbor down the street wasn't feeling well and that Mrs. Walls was going out to spend a few days with her daughter Mae and her husband Jimmy on their farm. After Ed departed, Reta gathered up the dishes from the lunch, took them to the kitchen sink. She would wash them along with the supper dishes later that day.

Reta was really tired so she decided to put off answering her friend's card and read another chapter in her library book. She had to finish it this week because if she returned it late she would be charged a fine of two cents a day. She couldn't afford that.

She picked up her book, looked out to see if Daddy was alright, then sat down in the most comfortable chair in the living room, opened her book, began to read, and then her eyes closed, the book dropped into her lap, and sleep came.



Sometime after 1943, Reta's father died. Reta sold the contents of her home at auction, and then sold her house. She left North Street and went to live in Rochester. Times were better, except for the war, and jobs were easy to find. Once a while she would return to North Street to visit with her old neighbors. She blossomed in her new life. The lines of care seemed to vanish from her face, She had purchased new clothes, and Life was good to her. It is sad to relate, though, that as they years went by she came less and less to visit. Then she stopped coming. I often wonder what happened to her and where she found her final rest. She was a faithful daughter and a good neighbor.



Edward Barkley