

An Orange for Frankie

Every time I peel an orange and inhale the scent of it and feel the mist that sprays from its skin, I think of a very special Christmas and a flaxen-haired boy who lived many years before I was ever born.

That boy was Frankie, my grandmother's youngest brother.

Whenever my grandmother spoke of him, her eyes would soften and I could feel how much she loved him. He was the youngest boy of nine children in the Stowell family. My grandmother, Stella, was the oldest and felt that she had helped raise them all.

Frankie was the heart of the household—especially at Christmas. That was when the whole family came together to celebrate and gather boughs of greens to put on the mantel. Then they placed apples, dried flowers, cookies and nuts in the greens, and finally, as the crowning touch, the oranges. Nine of them! One for each of the children born to the Stowell clan. Precious, rare oranges that their father had driven horse and buggy all the way to Lansing to fetch back home for Christmas.

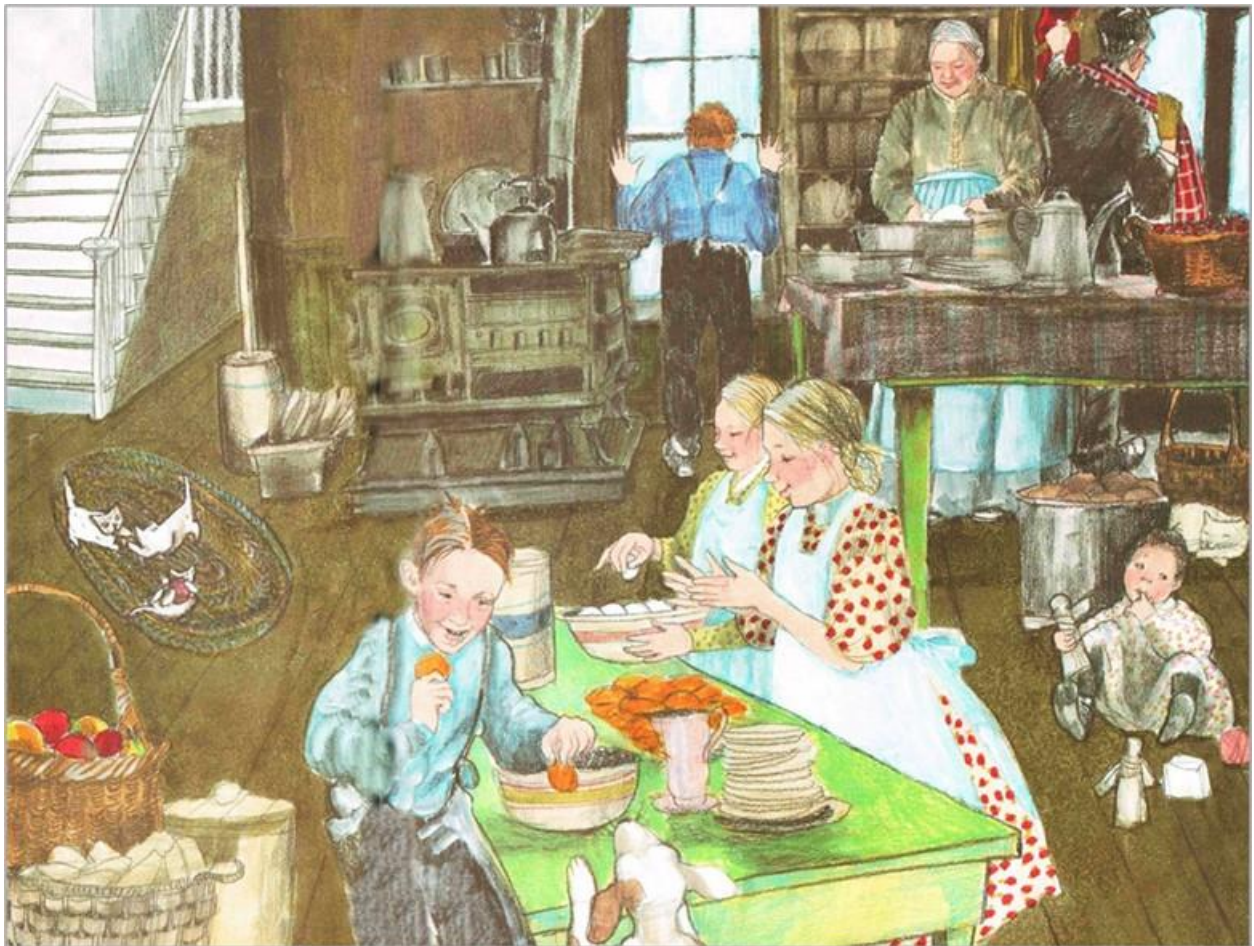


It was early winter. A morning mist lingered over the frosty fields in Locke Center. The snow whirled along the rail bed in front of the 628 freight train hurtling along the tracks out of Lansing, bound for Detroit.

Frankie was the youngest boy in the Stowell clan. He was all of ten. He shared his room with his two older brothers: Will, who was thirteen, and Ernest, the sixteen-year-old. They all awoke to the whistle of the 628 as it chuffed to a stop at the water tower on the edge of their property.

Frankie sprang out of bed and leapt to the winderlight. “She’s steaming in, and right on time too,” he sang out excitedly.

The boys dressed as fast as they could and tumbled down the stairs to their ma's kitchen. There were chores to do before school, and they had to help get the breakfast for the guests that would soon arrive at their back door.



The kitchen was already smelling like hoecakes and warm molasses. The aroma of coffee and chicory was hanging low in the air. Thick rashers of bacon and salt pork were spitting and sizzling in the pan on the woodstove.

Frankie's three younger sisters were already downstairs. Bertha turned out a skillet of corn bread to cool on the sideboard. She was nine, the oldest girl still at home. Altah, the six-year-old, was getting eggs from the glassene crock to be fried up, while Ivah, the three-year-old, played with corn dolls in the pantry.

Frankie's three older sisters, Stella, Adah and Mabel, had all gone to Normal School and were teaching, though Stella, the oldest, had gotten married and was the mother of a three-year-old girl. She and her husband were farming the spread right next over the holler.

"Look, it's Mr. Dunkle. He's the engineer today!" Will announced as he looked out

the kitchen winderlight. Their ma looked and smiled, then surveyed the raggedy men—hobos who were coming up to the house behind him.

Mrs. Stowell swung open the back door and handed the engineer a stoking cup of hot coffee. “Step in. Looks like that cold out there is blowin’ hard up yer back,” she called out.



Then she served up a plate of hot hoecakes for him. “You boys see to it those men out there get washed up and full of hot grub too,” she said as she drizzled molasses on the hoecakes and motioned to the four men huddling together. Ernest, Will and Frankie toted baskets of food to the back door. Bertha set out a bucket of steaming water with a chunk of lye soap and a towel.

The men dragged off their mufflers and hats, rolled up their threadbare sleeves and washed themselves. “Much obliged,” they muttered.

Mr. Dunkle, like most of the engineers and bulls on this line, wasn’t supposed to allow hobos on his train, but he knew times were hard and that those men got very little kindness from this old world, so he turned a blind eye.

Frankie kept the hobos’ cups filled with hot coffee. Most of them had come through before. Except one. Frankie noticed that the man couldn’t stop shivering. Wearing a fur hat, but a threadbare coat, he seemed much older than the others. He smiled warmly when Frankie filled his cup.

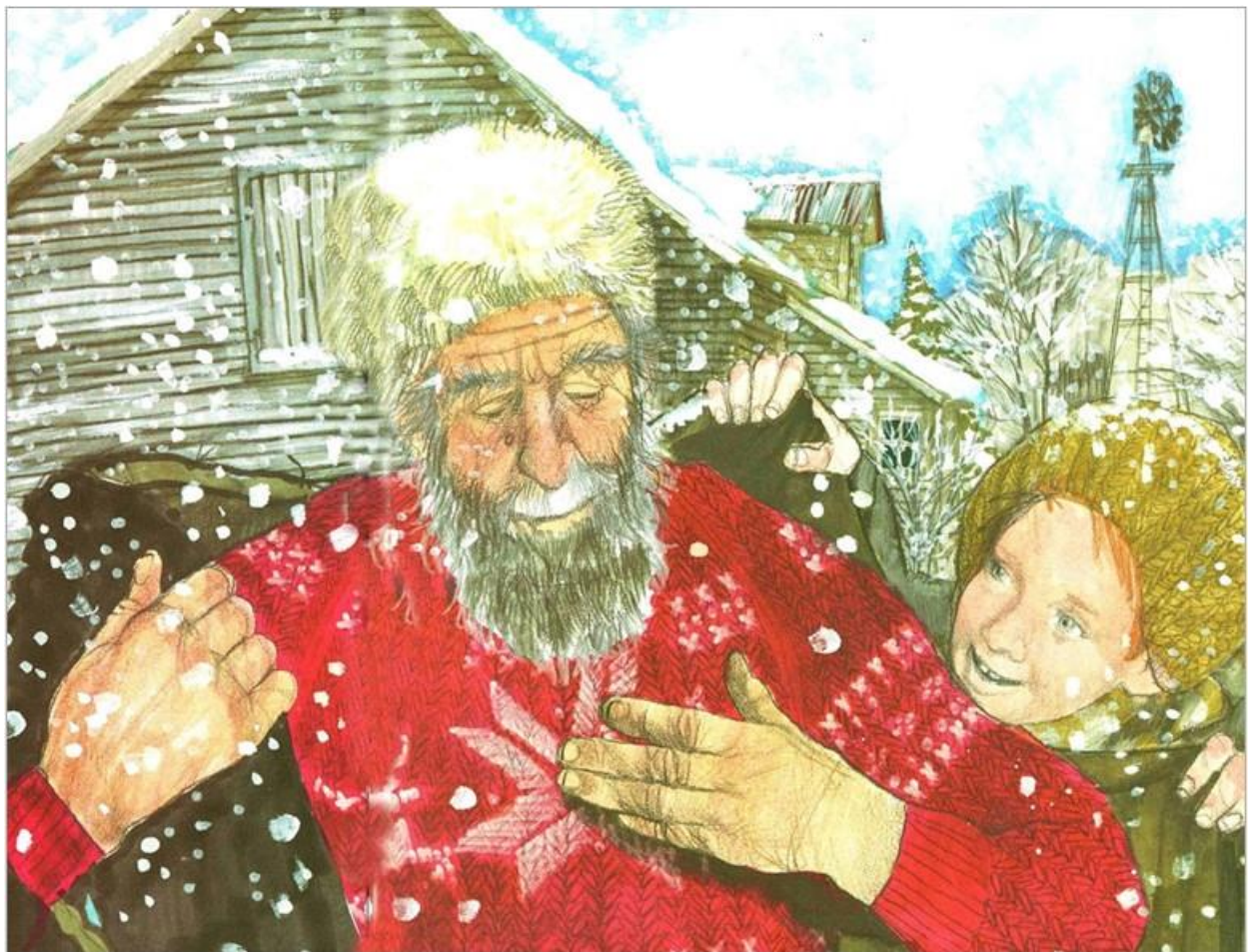
Mrs. Stowell chatted with the men. She always called the travelers “Mister” even though they had names like Boxcar Eddie or Too-Tall Jake or Bull-Trip Charlie.

“What’s yer name, Mister?” Frankie finally asked the old man.

The man's eyes softened. "Jump-Up Billy," he said. When he reached up for Frankie to fill his cup again, Frankie could see under his coat. He didn't even have a shirt.

Frankie raced up to his room and pawed through his sweater drawer. Most of the sweaters were too little for Frankie, let alone for a big old man like Jump-Up Billy. Then Frankie pulled out his best sweater—the only one that would be big enough. He especially loved that sweater because Stella had knitted it for him last Christmas. But that old man needed it far more than he did!

Frankie stuffed it under his waistcoat. He didn't want his ma to see what he was doing with it. Outside, he pulled the old man away from the others and, behind the shed, gave the sweater to him. The old man threw off his coat and eagerly pulled the sweater on, smiling as he stroked it.



"Now, ain't this purty," he whispered.

"There's fire in her belly, boys... time to set to rails!" Mr. Dunkle called out after bolting down the last gulp of his coffee.

Frankie hurriedly helped the old man on with his coat.

“Best vittles this side of the Rockies, Missus,” Mr. Dunkle called out as he and the hobos crossed the field to the waiting train.

When all of the hobos had crawled into their open boxcars, they lifted their hats and waved as the 628 blew its whistle and jolted to a start. The big iron wheels pumped and spun in place as billows of steam hissed and puffed with each turn. Finally the train jerked, all of the cars made a clanging sound, and the train was under way.



As Mrs. Stowell and the others went into the house, Frankie watched that train until it disappeared, its whistle growing fainter and fainter. It made Frankie think about his pa.

Christmas was almost here. Pa should have been back by now. Frankie was looking forward to gathering the boughs of greens for the mantel. But the oranges were always the crowning touch, nine of them—one for each of the Stowell children. Their father had driven horse and buggy all the way to Lansing to fetch those precious oranges back home in time for Christmas. Mr. Dunkle had said that there was powerful bad weather up Lansing way.

“It has to be the weather holding Pa up,” Frankie hoped to himself.

School that day seemed to last forever. Frankie was glad to be home even if he was having to stand still while his mother pinned up the hem on his angel costume for the Christmas pageant. He'd always wanted to be in the pageant, and this year Miss Longstreet had picked him to be the archangel.

"Hold still, Frankie," Mrs. Stowell scolded. "I can barely see these here small pins, and your wiggling doesn't help!"

"When are you going to go get spectacles, Ma?" Frankie was only half teasing.

"When pigs fly, son. We sure can't afford spectacles—we haven't finished paying off our winter hog!" she answered.

"If times are that hard fer us, Ma, then we sure can't afford to feed all them hobos every week," Will said.

Mrs. Stowell gave Will a withering look. "We had an abundant harvest. It don't cost us nothin' to share some of it with folks that could use it."



Just then there was a stomping on the front porch. The door flew open and snow whirled into the parlor. "It's Adah and Mabel! Look, Ma, they're to home!" Bertha and Altah sang out as they leapt into their older sisters' arms. Everyone cheered and hugged.

"But where's Pa?" Adah called out.

"He's always here to greet us," Mabel added.

Their ma told them about the bad weather and that their father was probably delayed because of it.

Later that evening, Stella, Fred and baby Mae arrived. Soon everyone was in the kitchen, helping Ma with supper. Frankie smiled to himself. It was almost as if none of them had left home. Everyone was together again.

As they sat down to eat, Mrs. Stowell said a right perfect blessing. Frankie was so hungry and everything looked so good!

“Frankie,” Stella began. “This year I knitted you a muffler to match the Christmas sweater I gave you last year. I can’t wait to see how it will look.” Frankie almost choked on his mashed potatoes.

“Maybe you should try it on tonight!” Mrs. Stowell sang out.



Frankie squirmed and changed the subject. “Do you think Pa will still try to bring home the Christmas oranges, him being so late and all?”

“Nothin’ in this world would stop him from bringing home our Christmas oranges, boy,” Mrs. Stowell whispered.

The conversation around the table successfully switched to talk of Pa and the oranges. Frankie sighed with relief.

Another whole day passed, and the Stowell household was uneasy. Pa still wasn't home and they had gotten no word. Christmas was only two days away. Pa had never been this late in from Lansing to fetch the oranges from the Florida train.

Adah and Mabel had busied themselves with baking and decorating cookies. Bertha and Altah were helping roll out the fondant, and Ernest, Frankie and Will were eyeing the cakes baked for the social that was always held after the pageant on Christmas Eve. Even so, all of their hearts were heavy with worry.

"Pa would have picked the perfect tree for the parlor by now," Frankie said sadly.

"And there'd be greens on the hearth with apples and cookies too," Bertha whispered.

"No o-unges," little Ivah gurgled, pointing at the mantel. Even she knew that Christmas Eve meant the oranges were placed on the mantel.

Just then Mrs. Stowell bustled into the parlor.

She was worried, all right, but she didn't show it. "Now hark, children. Everybody get on your winter togs. I've got soapstones already heating in the stove. Will, you and Ernest hitch up the sled dray. We're going out to find the perfect tree and gather up them greens fer the mantel," she announced.

"That's what yer pa would want us all to do, not sit here in the parlor all vexed with botherment!"

Everyone's spirits lifted. Scurrying for their coats, they set out to do as their mother had bid them.

The soapstones were wrapped in burlap and placed on the floor of the sled dray. Four thick wool blankets covered them all as they set out to find their Christmas tree and evergreens.

Penny and Fanny's steps were sure and steady, and the bells on their harnesses rang and echoed across the snowy dells. Bertha, Altah and Frankie were singing as they went.

Finally they came to a clearing. It was dotted with fine firs and pines. The family poured out of the sled dray and fanned out.

“The girls and I will get the greens. You boys go get our perfect tree,” Mrs. Stowell called out.

Frankie, Will and Ernest searched everywhere for the perfect tree. How they wished their pa was with them. Just when they were wondering if they would ever find that tree, they came over a small hillock.

There it was!

All by itself as if it were just waiting there to become the tree in the Stowell parlor.



“There, doesn’t that just look grand!” Mrs. Stowell cooed that night as she adjusted the last clump of greens on the mantel.

“I’ll go get the apples and nuts,” Altah called out.

“I want to put on the dried flowers and the holly sprigs,” Bertha squealed.

Meantime, Frankie, Will and Ernest were sinking the tree into a bucket of wet sand, while Adah and Mabel gave them orders just as they did every Christmas:

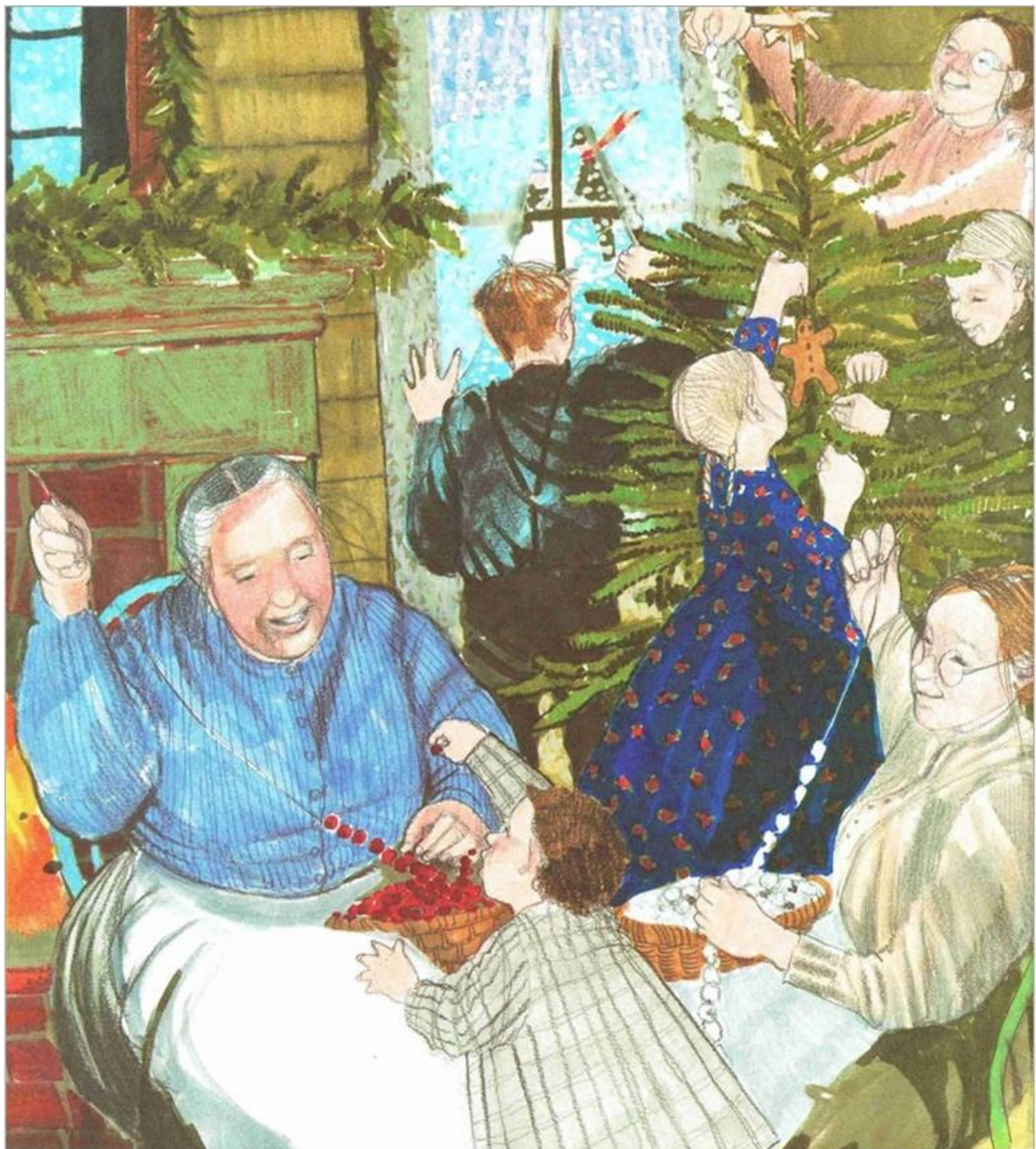
“No, no, that isn’t straight from here!” Adah scolded. “A little more to your right.”

“Then the fullest part of the tree will be facing the wall!” Mabel said.

The boys twisted and turned, trying to lean the tree this way and that.

Suddenly all the others shouted in unison, “That’s it... it’s perfect!” They all stood back. It was perfect!

Then the whole family started decorating the tree. “What a glorious surprise this will be for your pa when he gets home,” Mrs. Stowell whispered. Not for one minute did anyone think he wouldn’t get home.



Ma and Adah strung berries and popcorn to put on the tree, while Bertha and Altah tied on dried flowers. Frankie and Ivah hung the frosted cookies, though they probably ate more than they hung. The fire was crackling in the fireplace. Everything seemed so warm and cozy.

Then Frankie looked out the parlor winderlight. It was snowing real hard again. "How will Pa get through this?" he said with alarm.



Everyone came to the window.

"That mantel looks so bare without the oranges!" Frankie blurted out.

"The oranges!" Adah scolded.

"Is that all you can think about?" Mabel added. "Frankie, it isn't like you to be so selfish!"

"Who cares if the oranges EVER get here ... we all want Pa!" Bertha cried.

That wasn't what Frankie had meant at all. But with everyone being so upset, tempers were frayed.

"I ain't selfish, Ma!" Frankie cried later that night, "All's I meant was that the oranges being there would mean Pa's home, safe and sound."

"I know that, and so do they. We're all so worried about yer pa, but maybe he'll be home by tomorrow. We'll pray for that tonight," his ma said as she kissed her youngest son good night.

That night Frankie prayed for a miracle to bring his pa home. But outside it snowed and snowed and snowed, and by morning all the roads were closed. There was no way for his buggy to get home.

The next morning—the morning of Christmas Eve—Frankie and his brothers awoke to the 628 whistle as it steamed through their pasture. When Frankie came down to breakfast, he was wearing his old gray sweater. He had almost outgrown it.

"Frankie, aren't you going to wear your sister Stella's Christmas sweater?" his ma asked. "She and Fred will be coming over after the pageant this morning."

Frankie was about to tell his ma the truth when Will called out, "It's Pa. It's Pa!"



Everyone ran to the parlor. They almost swept their pa clean off his feet with their hugs and kisses.

"My little lambs, my precious little lambs," their pa whispered as he hugged each of them.

“Oh, Frank,” Mrs. Stowell cried. “How ever did you get here?”

“Well, when I met that train from Florida at the station to fetch home these here oranges, I could hardly see the engine, it was snowing so bad! Then I found out all the roads were closed. My heart fair broke.”

“But you’re here, Pa,” Will exclaimed.

“And I wouldn’t be if ‘n it hadn’t been for Mr. Dunkle. He overheard me lamenting about not getting home and he said there was only one thing for me to do—ride the 628. Why, he even let me sit up there in the engine with him ... all the way here! And he loaded the horse and buggy into a boxcar and brought them right along with us. Now, I just wonder what would make him think so kind on me and my family.”

Pa looked right over at Ma when he said that. “I tell you, Rosa, it was a miracle, that’s what it was! A miracle.”

“It being the morning of Christmas Eve, I think we have just exactly the right moment to put the oranges on the mantel afore the pageant over to the church,” Pa said as he pulled the cover off the crate with the luscious oranges inside.

Each of the children, young and old, took an orange out of the box and placed it on the mantelpiece. Then everyone stood and looked at them. How beautiful they were! Nine oranges nestled in the greens, one for each of them.

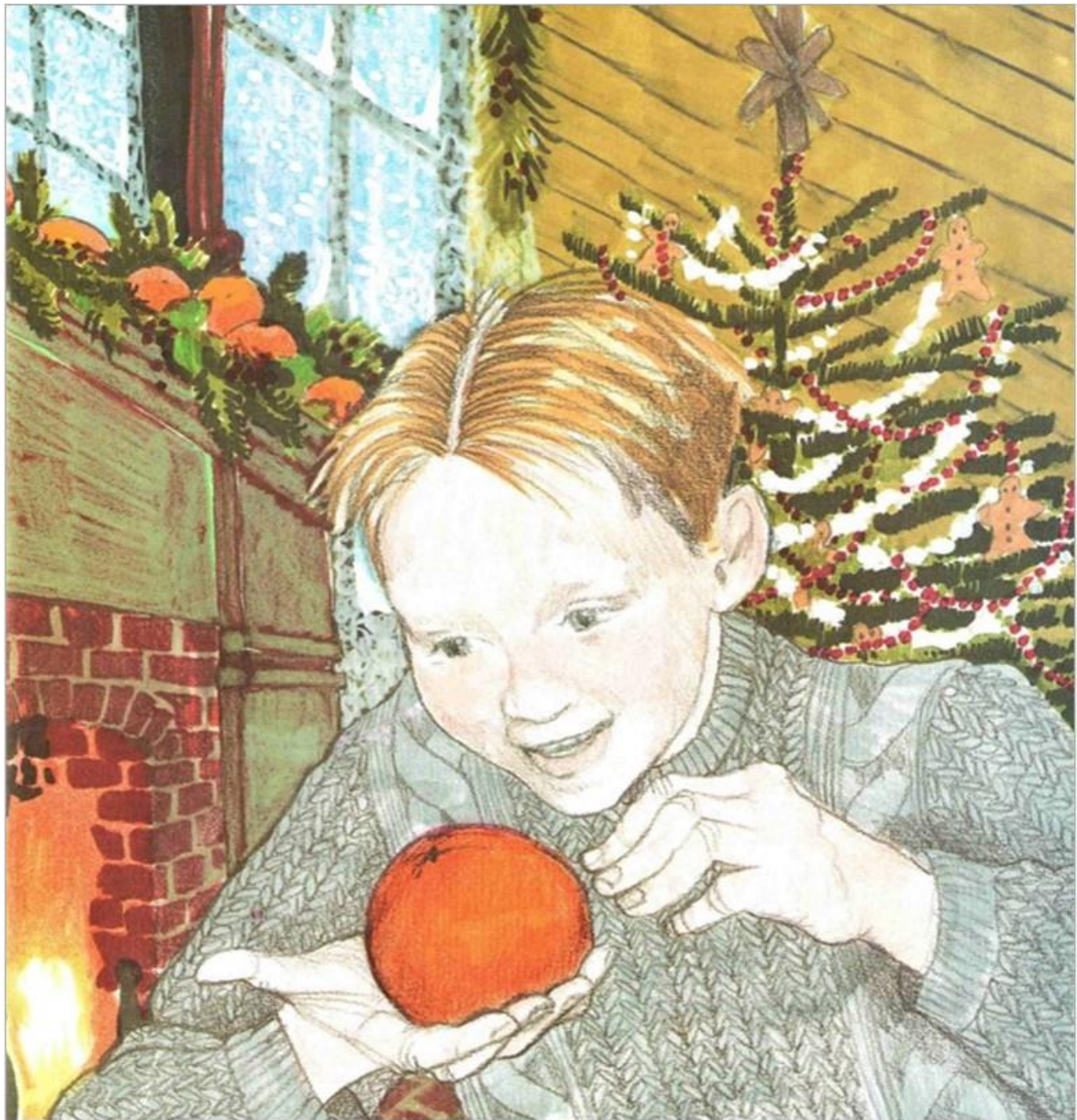
“Hark now, children. Don’t be tempted to touch them. They are for our Christmas Eve supper tonight,” Pa said as he went with the rest of the family to dress for church.

Frankie loved this day most of all, and since he was already dressed, he stayed in the parlor. He walked over to the mantel and gazed at the splendid oranges. His heart sang that his pa was home—and safe. He looked at the oranges closer and closer. He could smell the pungent aroma of their skins. He noticed how they seemed to have pores, just like his own skin.

Finally he couldn’t resist. He looked to see if anyone was in the kitchen. Even though he’d been told not to, he gently touched his orange. Then he picked it up. It smelled like sunshine. It was ripe and heavy with juice—he couldn’t wait to taste it that night.

Suddenly he heard someone coming. His mother! “Frankie,” she called. He didn’t have time to put the orange back on the mantel. He quickly stuffed it into his sweater.

He'd put it back when they got home from the pageant, and no one would know that he had disobeyed his father.



Frankie was, indeed, a perfect archangel in the Christmas pageant. Everyone commented on how he looked just like a real angel. Later, as they were making their way home in the sleigh, bumping over hills and dells, Frankie was exploding with the thought of eating his orange that night. Then he remembered. He felt in his sweater.

To his horror, the orange wasn't there.

He must have dropped it! Frankie looked up at his pa's face and fought back the tears. How could he have been so careless? His orange. His precious orange ... lost!



Finally home, Frankie hurried to his room. He wept bitterly, afraid to go down to the parlor and face his family.

There was a knock on the door. His ma! "Frankie, dear ... everyone's waiting. We're ready to tell stories, the popcorn is popping and then it will be time for the oranges."

Frankie opened the door, "Oh, Ma, I've done a terrible thing!"

"What do you mean?" his mother said as she patted him to sit next to her on his bed.

"I lost my orange!" Frankie blurted out.

"What?... But how, Frankie?"


"When everyone was gettin' dressed, I just wanted to hold that orange. And so I did, and I was just lookin' at it. Nothin' more than that, but Pa said not to touch 'em ... so when you came in, I slipped it into my sweater. I was gonna put it back, Ma." He stopped. "But I lost it."

“Oh, my dear boy, your pa went through so much to fetch those oranges home for us,” his mother whispered.

“That’s not all, Ma. Stella’s sweater ... I gave it to one of those hobos.” He sobbed.

When his mother finally spoke, she said, “Frankie, you didn’t do a terrible thing. Maybe a thoughtless thing, taking that orange. But you did a noble thing too, giving something that meant so much to you to someone who needed it. That is the true spirit of Christmas, my darlin’.

“Now you stay here and collect yourself. I’ll call you when we are ready tonight,” Ma whispered almost mysteriously.

hen Frankie finally did come downstairs, all of his brothers and sisters were waiting.

“We have something for you, Frankie,” Stella said as she handed him a bright orange with a pink ribbon tied around it. When Frankie looked at the orange, he noticed that it was made up of wedges—eight wedges. The ribbon held them together.



He looked at all of his brothers and sisters. Each of them held out his or her orange. A section of each was missing.

They had all given him a wedge of their own orange to make an orange for Frankie.

“Our family is like your orange, Frankie,” their pa said softly. “Love holds us together like that ribbon.”

That was the most splendid Christmas ever for Frankie and for all the Stowells. The oranges were eaten—all nine of them savored down to the last bite. Stories were told in front of the fireplace. Popcorn was popped and eaten, and hot chocolate was slurped down with gusto. And when the family was snug in their beds that night, Frankie's ma and pa looked in on him. They would tell for years to come how beautiful he was, that he looked like a sleeping angel, and how precious that particular Christmas was to all of them.

It was always known ever after as “Frankie's Christmas.”

Generations have passed since that day. Our dear Frankie never made it past childhood. That Christmas was his last. But the descendants of Stella—and of her sisters and brothers—still set out greens with oranges on their stoves or mantels. We all do this every Christmastide.

When the season ends, we always feel a little sad as we remove the mantel greens and oranges. The boughs are tinder dry. The oranges are leathery and brown.

All except one. A Christmas miracle, we suspect. In all of our households, there always seems to be one single orange that is as fresh as the day it was placed there.

We call it, in my family . . . Frankie's orange.



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