

# Frank

By: Jack LaValley

Yesterday, a paper'boy' came up the street. I hadn't seen this man before. He was expanding his route a little, though he shouldn't have been.

It was ten above as he limped along the curb pulling a little red wagon. On his head was a bright yellow toque with a tethered tassel swinging back and forth as he scanned the new fallen snow. His collar was pulled up on his thin, black raincoat and 'round it was wrapped a long red and white striped scarf knotted under his chin. The cuffs of his dark, baggy pants were stuffed into black, salt-stained boots zipped to the top.

His cheeks were red and blue eyes sparkled under wirey white eyebrows. A small pendant of ice hung from his nose dripping from the end. He looked to be 80 but he smiled broadly at the twinkle of winter on a cloudless day.

He came to my door and knocked. I opened to a hearty, "Hello! Can I sell you a paper today?" as he held one out to me.

"No," I said, chuckling. "I get it downtown, but do you have time for coffee? You look cold. "

He slid the paper into his coat pocket and took another look at me. "O.k. Sure. Why not?" He held out a gloved hand and with the other, pulled a hanky from his pocket. "Frank," he said.

"Jack, C'mon in."

He took his boots off inside the door, stuck his gloves in them, and followed me to the kitchen saying his paper route was too big now. I took his coat, scarf, and hat, and laid them on a chair.

"Have a seat, Frank. I'll make some coffee." I placed a filter into the basket and filled the reservoir with water. Leveling 4 scoops with my finger, I dumped them in, slid the drip pot home, and flicked the switch.

"I know what you mean," I said, setting mugs and a plate of cookies on the table. "..about the paper route," though I didn't know at all and sat across from him.

"It takes me too damned long," he said. "I got this pace-maker now and anyway my wife can't be left alone no more. She's gettin' old."

So, how come you're trying to add me to your route?"

He chuckled, "Cause I'm gettin' old too. Can't remember nothin' no more."

"How long you been selling papers?"

"Ten years. You believe it? An old guy like me? I used to get around it a lot faster though, I'll tell ya. We been retired from the mill twenty years. Puttered around the house a little and got this route. Nothin' to do, ya know. Worked all my life and found out I didn't know nothin'. Work's the only thing I ever done. Started when I was seventeen. "

"Where?"

"Right here t'the mill. Stockboy first at the A&P. Then this older kid says he's quittin' for a real job. At the factory, he says, and he did. Next thing I know, I'm doin' both jobs for the same pay so I puts in my application too. Got hired right off and painted pumps for three years 'til the Army caught up with me. War, ya know."

"Where'd you serve?"

"Normandy. Made it through them damned bunkers and a lousy sniper gets me in the hip. Heard the shot. Just a pop way off. Got spun around and come down on my face. By the time the bullet stopped bouncin' around in there some bones got broke. Still got the lead t'home. He was out way there, let me tell ya, and I think it dropped more than he thought it would. Good thing or I'd be dead. Wasn't there a week and I was headed home for good."

"Army's done with ya when ya can't fight no more though. Drop ya like a dirty shirt. Pay stops and you're on your own. That ain't no way t' treat the wounded but they're still doin' it. Had to go back to my folks. Just a nuisance too. Stayed outta the way though. Soon as I could stand, I headed for the mill. Lost my old job but they offers me one on a motor cart that run around the factory selling food. Small steel bed with shelves and two coffee urns tied on the back. Fried cakes, and sandwiches. They liked to see me comin'. That's how I met Lucy."

"Your wife?" I got up to get the coffee and cream.

"Yeah. She worked the line with the men and was she good lookin'. Tight-fittin' jumpsuit. Rosie the Riveter, know what I mean? Didn't think I had no chance on account of the limp, ya know. Found out what she liked to eat though and left coffee, fixed right, and a fancy donut on her desk every morning. It was there when she come in. The first time she thanked me, I knew I was gunna marry her. Then she finds out what my route is and every day, on her break, she's sittin' on a box by the big door to the foundry. One Friday I asks her if she'd like to go see *Gone With the Wind*. My heart was in my throat I'm tellin' ya but she says o.k. She'd go with me. Next day, I put a rose on her desk with that coffee and donut. Year later, we was married.

Never moved up at the mill. Her neither. Forty-two years later, they wanna get rid o' Lucy. Says they was payin' her too much. Offers her the mop at night and dirt for wages. We both quit. Got a little pension though and the Social Security. "

Frank raised the mug and drained it. "Thanks for the coffee". Better finish up the route. Get talkin', don't know when t' quit. Old people do that. Gettin' old. Wife don't say much no more, so no body says nothin' t'her, 'cept me, ya know. She'll be looking for me." He slid his chair in and I helped him with his coat.

His face red from struggling with his boots he says, "Sure ya don't want no paper?"

"Frank?"

"Just kiddin'," he grunted, working at the zippers. "Lucky if I can get home with the empty wagon."

I held the door for him while he got a grip on the railing and hobbled down the steps. He picked up the handle of his wagon and slowly rose, his face all red again, out of breath. Our eyes met and he pointed to his chest. "Gotta get new battries." Then he raised a hand and limped up the driveway. At the street, he stopped, and I could see his chest heaving as he looked both ways. I yelled, "Frank, let me give you a lift!"

He turned around. "Naw," he said. "Look at this," and he swept an arm over the glistening blankets of snow. "I gotta walk. Thanks though," and he waved goodbye. That was the last time I saw him and that was the last walk he'd ever take. The following week I asked the neighbor about him because I hadn't seen him for awhile and he said he died going into the house with his wife holding the door for him.