

CHAPTER TWELVE

· - - - - - ·

Orphan Train Rider Tales

It was a Sunday afternoon in 1938 when I first heard Benedict Farley, Benny for short, running up the stairs to one of my third-floor apartments. He didn't have much furniture to carry, but he was with my beautiful suffragette Kathleen Duffy. I saw her follow him slowly up the stairs while she kept turning her head backward toward the bottom of the landing as though she was looking for someone.

In my mind's eye, I thought Kathleen was thinking of her youthful life here in my building. If I could only talk to her and tell her how much I missed her spirit and courage. All I could do was embrace the sight of her helping Benny up the stairs.

Benedict was born in New York City in 1913. He was the child of Beth and her husband, William Farley. He was only a year old when his father abandoned them both to be with another woman. One evening when Benny was five, his mother suddenly became ill at work. She had a fever, then chills, and finally passed out on the floor while cleaning rooms. An ambulance was called, but Benny's mum died in the emergency room.

When Beth's neighbor "Auntie Sarah," Benny's babysitter, opened the door, a policeman stood there with his hat in his hand. "I'm sorry, Ma'am, I have bad news. Mrs. Beth Farley has died, and Miss

Sharon, a social worker, is here to take her little boy to the Brooklyn Industrial School Association and Home for Destitute Children.”

Auntie Sarah and Benny both cried when the “black hat” lady took him out of her arms.

The only thing Benny remembered about his Mum was how much he loved and missed her every day.

When he was eight years old, he was taken to his first foster home. He stayed there until he ran away on his eleventh birthday because of the abusive treatment from his foster parents.

Living on the streets of New York City wasn’t easy, either. Benny was constantly afraid of being caught and taken back to his foster home. What he missed most was going to school. After a month of his being on the streets, the cops found him digging in garbage cans and took him to the station house. At first, Benny wouldn’t talk. When they asked about his family, he said, “I don’t have one.”

They checked the missing children’s file and found his picture among others from the Home for Destitute Children and immediately contacted them. Benny was returned to the orphanage, which was a safer place than the foster home he was placed in.

In 1926, when Benny was thirteen, he became part of a mass migration of thousands of children sent on orphan trains out to the Midwest to join farm families. The Orphan Train Program existed from 1853 to 1929 and was formed by Charles Loring Brace and a group of social reformers, who also founded the Children’s Aid Society (CAS). Benny was placed on a train with twenty other children and was told only that he was taking a long train ride. Benny was scared and didn’t trust anyone. Most of the children on the train were from the same orphanage and were between the ages of five and thirteen. They were supervised by Miss Hammond, a western

agent from the Children's Aid Society. Benny always remembered her name because she was kind to him.

At each train stop, they had to make sure they were clean and dressed properly. Their hair had to be combed, and they had to use their best manners because the screening committee would be meeting them at the train station. Miss Hammond kept telling the children how lucky they were to be going to new families. Benny was one of the older boys who wanted to run away when they found out what was happening. They watched carefully as the committee made up of important community members and local families told them to stand in a straight line. The committee issued a special paper for the kids who were selected that allowed them to be placed with their new families. Benny felt like they were being sold. Miss Hammond promised the older kids that they could go to school until they were eighteen if they were selected. Most of the older boys, including Benny, were tall and sturdy and would be able to lift heavy bales of hay and do additional farm work.

"They'll treat you like their own family," Miss Hammond promised. "Maybe they'll even adopt you. All you have to do is try your best and write to me regularly. The head of your new family will write to me once a year unless there are problems and they want to send you back."

Benny's farm family of five was from Missouri. The head of the family poked and examined him before he was picked to live with them. They had three daughters and no boys. All he did was work, and he wasn't allowed any contact with his new sisters unless it was in the presence of their mother and father. In less than a month, Benny made sure he got in trouble by answering the father back and slacking off on his farmwork so that he would be sent back to the orphanage in New York City.

In 1927, when Benny was fourteen, his caseworker tried one more time to help him by sending him to Bowdoin Farm School for training in Hamburg, New York. It was his only chance to get a job. At Bowdoin Farm School, he was treated fairly and learned to be an excellent farm laborer. He was almost seventeen when the school stopped taking new boys because it was scheduled to close as soon as the Orphan Train Program ended. Benny was fortunate because he was hired as a farm laborer at Weiss Farms in Eden, New York.

The Children's Aid Society continued to track all the Orphan Train riders, and Benny's Buffalo field agent, Kathleen Duffy, was responsible for making regular visits to the school. When I heard this, I wondered if this happened by chance or was it by fate? Actually, she was responsible for checking on all three of the orphan train riders who were hired from their orphanage in New York City. In 1930, when Benny turned seventeen and Kathleen's last report was finished, she invited him to visit the city of Buffalo, her hometown.

That visit changed Benny's life forever.

Kathleen invited him to her apartment for lunch and fed him her homemade chicken soup and chocolate cake. No one had ever done something special for him before. Then, she did something extraordinary that shocked Benny by offering to rent him her second bedroom in the apartment. This would give him time to save money to get a place of his own because the depression raged on and jobs were scarce. Kathleen also arranged for Benny to have an apprenticeship in her brother-in-law's insurance business. I saw how Kathleen worried about him. It was the first time he felt loved and respected, except for before his mum died. When I heard what happened, it made me happy. I knew we were both lucky to have Kathleen in our lives.

Fast forward to 1937 when twenty-four-year-old Benny was hired at the Ford Plant where he could save enough money to afford to rent his own apartment, plus accumulate a savings account with a healthy balance. He considered it one of the best years of his life.

One evening, Kathleen came home late from work with exciting news. “Benny, I found you an apartment in a nice neighborhood, with a bus stop right on the corner, and it has affordable rent,” Kathleen said excitedly. “The Skyway Tavern is right across the street, and they have homemade food.”

“Kathleen, let’s go see it now! I’ll buy some used furniture, a bed, couch, and kitchen table! I can’t thank you enough.”

Benny seemed genuinely excited, but he became suddenly quiet.

“What’s wrong, Benny?”

“Kathleen, today I found out why my Mum named me Benedict.”

“Why?”

“All my life I’ve been teased about my name. It’s not Irish. In the orphanage, I was called Benedict Arnold by the older boys. I never knew who he was until I was about sixteen when my teacher told me he was an American traitor who lived during the Revolutionary period. But now I’ve found out the real reason I was named Benedict.

“Well, I met a man at the Ford Plant. His name is Salvatore Verdi; he’s Sicilian, and his father’s name is Benedict, and he was named after one of the sixteen popes. Then, he told me that Benedict means blessed. Salvatore told me that Saint Benedict was an Italian monk who founded the Benedictines in the sixth century and then he said that the name was even popular in England in the twelfth century. I couldn’t believe it. I’ve decided I no longer want to be called Benny. From now on, I’m going to be proud of my name.”

FRED: BUFFALO BUILDING OF DREAMS

“Benedict, your time has come. Your mum knew what she was doing when she named you. She wanted you to be strong and honorable. You’re a blessing to her memory.” This was good news to me too. I’d just found out how important a name can be. I think my name, Fred, is a common name, like me. I’m not pretentious. I’m finding out what it’s like to be alive in the twentieth century and telling tales of my own.