



A NOVEL BASED ON THE LIFE OF
FRANK CAPRA

THE
EMBRACE
— OF —
HOPE

Kate Fuglei

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PROJECT

Chapter One

THE EMBRACE OF COURAGE

Francesco Rosario Capra spent May 10, 1903, in sick bay. It was eight days before his sixth birthday. The rest of his family was also ill and had been since they boarded the ship to America. Everyone except their mother, Rosaria, called Sarrida, was prostrate in their tiny room in steerage. Frankie had a temperature and so was sent to sick bay.

He lay two decks above his family on a scratchy gray wool blanket with “SS *Germania*” printed in large letters across the bottom half. If he leaned on his elbow and raised his head, he could peer out the dirty round window. He lay on his side and watched the rolling waves. He could hear them slap against the side of the ship. A spider spun a web on the windowsill. It climbed slowly, patiently up the skein of the web, sometimes falling back but never giving up. Concentrating on the spider and its efforts took Frankie’s mind off the constant pain in his stomach.

His mother came to visit from steerage every day. She advised the nurse to put a slice of raw potato on his forehead.

Frankie watched the nurse nod her head with her arms crossed. When his mother left, the nurse shook her head and dismissed the old-world advice.

The Capra family—Sarrida Capra and her husband, Salvatore, called Turridu, son Tony, daughter Anne, and little Frankie—had boarded the steamship *Germania* in Naples. An older son, Ben, was already in America. Ben lived in Los Angeles. Two older daughters remained in Bisacquino, a small village in Sicily. The Capra family had lived for generations in Bisacquino. Sarrida's children were baptized and socialized in the Catholic church there. Ben's letters from Los Angeles, the City of Angels, had urged them to come to America. He repeatedly called it the land of opportunity, the land of the immigrant, the land of hope.

Sarrida was the most interested in America. Ben's letters had filled her with ambition. She saw opportunity and a future for her children. Turridu resisted the move to America. He loved the social life of Bisacquino and the evening musicales spent harmonizing with his brothers, sitting and telling stories. He loved the rolling hills and the orchards that produced the fruit he loved to eat. He saw nothing wrong with staying in the village forever. But his wife prevailed. Ben sent money from America. The Capras cobbled together what they could, packed a cart with clothing and belongings, and bought five steerage tickets on the *Germania*.

On the docks in Naples, Turridu put his arm around five-year-old Frankie's shoulders and said, "On the other side of the

horizon, Cici, is America, the land of your mother's dreams and streets paved with gold. Remember your name: Capra. It is the root of the word capricious and also of Capricorn. We are people who are determined but are also willing to change. There is nobility in that, Cici."

"Stop filling his head with nonsense," said his wife. "I don't believe in dreams. I believe in practicality. There is nothing noble about being poor and lazy. Our children would never make anything of themselves in Bisacquino. They'd end up sitting around strumming guitars and doing nothing, like you and your friends. We will never get there if we don't get rid of some of the weight in these bags. You have packed too much. We need to stop talking and get to work."

Everything Sarrida threw out, Turridu begged to keep. A loud argument ensued, and fellow passengers stared.

They left behind a framed painting of the little church in Bisacquino, four jars of olives neighbors had given them as a going-away gift, and three bottles of wine. As they climbed the ramp to go into the ship, the Capra family shaded their eyes to watch the first class passengers board. They were greeted warmly by the captain. A band played a lively tune to welcome them to the upper deck. Flags fluttered gaily on ropes that ringed the perimeter. The steerage passengers were herded onto the ship like so many cattle. Turridu ran back to snatch a bottle of wine that Sarrida had left dockside. He felt he would need it. The wine was quickly confiscated by a surly deck hand.

"You never listen to me," said Sarrida, shaking her head.

“I listen to you too much,” answered her husband.

A deckhand flicked a thumb toward a steel door and slammed it open. He said not a word but ambled off down the dark hallway. It was clear this was to be the Capras' home for the thirteen-day voyage. They surveyed the tiny room with bunk beds bolted to the wall. A yellow bulb hanging on a wire provided the only light. There was no window. A wooden bucket that stood in the corner was, they supposed, their washstand. No one knew where the bathroom was. They would soon need it. The ship pulled out with a lurch from the dock. Before it reached the open sea, everyone but Sarrida had retched into the bucket.

The Capras were confined by illness to their quarters for much of the journey, with Turridu the most affected. They lay prone on their cots, which were covered with scratchy wool blankets. A constant blast of fetid air came from the boiler room. There was no air circulation. Food had to be brought down from the deck above. Frankie watched his mother climb up the narrow iron ladder to the next deck with an empty wooden tray. She returned a while later with the tray laden with bowls. She somehow balanced it with one hand while climbing down the ladder, holding her long skirt in the other. For the first ten days of the voyage, Frankie watched her perform this feat of love three times a day, never spilling a drop. He was full of admiration. Then his temperature sent him to sick bay.

On the thirteenth day at sea, Frankie was deemed well enough to return to his family in steerage. As he climbed down

the ladder, he heard his father say they were nearing America. There was a jolt of energy in the squalid room as Sarrida ordered everyone to fold their clothing and stuff it neatly into bags. The clothes were, for the most part, filthy. The Capras had been unable to bathe since they left Bisacquino.

“It is nothing to be ashamed of,” Sarrida said. “We will hold our heads high nonetheless. We are no different from any of the other people in steerage.”

“Soon Lady Liberty will smile on us,” Turridu promised.

“What if she spits on us?” said Tony, who received a quick box on his ear from his mother. It was quickly followed by a bear hug. Tony was Sarrida’s favorite.

The ocean was beginning to calm and there was a general feeling of bustle in the dark hallway. A loud horn began to blow and Frankie could feel the ship slowing. He still felt weak and tired and lay back on his bunk.

“Get up, lazy!” said Tony, leaning over him with his face inches away. “It’s time to see Lady Liberty! I’m told she has a good figure,” he said, cupping his hands suggestively on his chest. Frankie looked away.

“Aw, you are a wimp,” Tony conceded and raced up the ladder to the deck, following the rest of his family. Turridu stayed behind and lifted Frankie to his shoulders so he could just peek out at the sky.

“See, Cici?” he said. “There she is, Lady Liberty. Isn’t she beautiful?”

Frankie saw her. She was framed for just a moment by the

opening at the top of the ladder. Right in the center. She held a torch. The morning sun glinted off her steady gaze. She slowly passed out of sight as the ship made its way into the harbor.

“You are now in the country of freedom and opportunity, Cici,” said his father. “Here you can be anything you want to be. You are going to be a great American. Now go and wipe the vomit off your chin. Stand up straight. Never forget your roots—the people of Sicily, of Bisacquino. We’re here.”

A cacophony greeted the Capras as they lurched down the ramp, clutching their belongings. It overwhelmed them. Frankie gazed across the water at the buildings of lower Manhattan. Their tops seemed to touch the clouds. Frankie had never seen anything like them.

Frankie’s heart was pounding with anticipation. But exhaustion soon overcame him as he stood with his family in a huge crowd of people. He heard sounds and languages that were strange and guttural. Women carried bags filled with feather ticking and dented pots. They clutched their children. The children grew restless. Some threw tantrums. Many were hungry, and although Frankie could not understand their languages, he knew their pleading was for food. Frankie watched the scenes of human interaction with interest. He realized that though their languages were different, they were all, in essence, the same, with the same needs, the same wants.

Hours went by as they stood in line. They finally moved up to a row of benches and sat there for several more hours. Then the Capra name was called.

A plump man wearing a blue suit and sporting a mustache that looked like a paintbrush called their name again. "Capra family! Get out your health tickets." Sarrida had them ready, tucked into the pocket of her apron. Another man walked up to them and gave each of them the once-over. He pinched Anne's cheek, and Turridu, offended at a stranger touching his daughter in such a familiar manner, began to protest. Frankie saw his mother slap his father's back. "Enough," she said, and shook her head vehemently. Frankie saw his father step back, head down. Apparently in America he had to accept such behavior. At least for now. They were all given cards and told to go to another area of the registry hall.

After more hours of waiting, the Capra family was allowed outside. Ben had told them in a letter to hire a cart to take them directly to Grand Central Terminal. "You'll be tired," he wrote, "but you can sleep on the train. Less expensive than finding a hotel for five people in Manhattan." The cart, with an imper-turbable driver, rattled through lower Manhattan. The streets teemed with people. Pushcarts lined the sidewalks. At times, it was impossible to move forward. The Atlantic Ocean had been replaced by a sea of people walking quickly and talking loudly. Carts full of colorful fruit tempted Tony. He jumped off at one point, grabbed three apples, and jumped back on, putting his finger to his lips.

The train proved to be worse, in some ways, than the ship. Frankie had imagined soft beds and steaming bowls of soup. The Capra family was directed to a train car with brown wooden

benches. The ticket taker indicated there was no time to get food, as the departure was imminent. Tony decided he was so hungry he didn't care if the train left without him. He was determined to get food. Sarrida, who trusted her son's ingenuity more than her husband did, gave him one American dollar. Tony returned ten minutes later with four loaves of bread, salami, and a round of cheese. These he showered triumphantly on his grateful mother, along with a wink and the dollar she had given him. Sarrida patted her son's cheek and looked at her husband, saying, "Now this one knows how to survive."

Frankie, who was too young to leave his family and forage for food, stared out the train window at the scene on the track. He took in the young woman in a white silk dress kissing her child good-bye. He saw a beggar who kneeled on a board shaking a cup, then stood up and gingerly walked to a new spot when he thought no one was looking. Frankie looked in vain for the streets paved with gold as the train lurched across seemingly endless miles. He saw the smokestacks of Pennsylvania and tried to sound out the strange names of the rivers they crossed: Susquehanna. Monongahela.

They stopped in Chicago, and Turridu got off the train to buy day-old sandwiches, as a fellow passenger had told him they were cheaper and almost as good. Frankie could see his father through the dusty window of the train, bargaining with the sandwich man. The train began to lurch forward and the whistle blew. The bellman screamed out "All aboard!" The sandwich man snatched a dollar from Turridu, who ran toward the train to jump on before it picked up speed. He barely made it into

the car with sandwiches spilling from his hands. As the hungry Capra children pounced on the stale sandwiches, Sarrida berated her husband for allowing himself to be cheated. They argued like this for miles as Frankie looked out the window at the ocean of waving wheat.

After a three-day train journey, the Capras arrived in the City of Angels. They were tired to the bone, dirty, and starved for something besides stale sandwiches. It was midday, and the sun beat down on them as they searched for Ben. Appearing from behind a fruit wagon, he was a welcome sight. He was bearing a basket of delicious edibles, which his family had not eaten in weeks. Frankie spied him first and ran ahead, eager to tell his big brother about the journey. Sarrida knelt on the platform at Union Station and bent down as if to kiss it. First, she crossed herself and thanked God for the safe arrival of her family in California after nearly twenty days of travel. Ben grabbed her by the shoulders just before her lips touched the filthy cement. "People don't do that here, Mamma," he said. "You are making a spectacle."

Frankie stared at a huge purple tree that stood against the blue sky. It had dropped its blossoms on the ground like a lavender carpet of welcome. The air was dry and it made Frankie's nose tickle. Ben gave him a bear hug, ruffled his dark curly hair, and said, "You have grown a little since I last saw you, but you will always be a squirt." Ben explained that the beautiful purple tree was a jacaranda. "Those blossoms you love are a mess to clean up. They stick to your shoes and they are not beautiful to me."

“Beautiful things can often create messes,” agreed Turridu. “Just look at your mother and me.”

Sarrida harrumphed and gave her husband a poke in the ribs.

“I’m teasing you, *mi amore*,” said her husband. “Smell those orange blossoms in the air. If that isn’t romantic, I don’t know what is.”

“I’m not looking for romance. I’m looking for food and a hot bath,” replied his wife.

They made their way from Union Station down Alameda Street and up the hill to Castelar Street. Ben helped them climb the stairs to a small apartment. The windows faced the apartment next door. The air was stifling. As Sarrida surveyed the place, she said, “How am I going to feed and house five people living like this?”

“It was the best I could do with what I had, Mamma,” said Ben. “It isn’t far from downtown and the excitement of the city.”

“Jobs are what we need,” said Sarrida. “All of us. We can’t make it unless we all contribute. America is not the land of slackers. All slackers can leave the premises,” she said, eyeing her husband.

Sarrida immediately began to unpack, directing Anne to find a bucket for starting the laundry. She ordered her husband to find a grocery store with rice and beans. No meat. Just rice and beans.

Ben left his family to settle in, promising to return later. Frankie and Tony went exploring. They saw hordes of people of all races and descriptions. They saw Chinese, Africans, Mexicans, and Italians like themselves thronging a street called

Broadway that crossed Alameda. They ventured toward what Ben had called “downtown” and marveled at the cacophony, the teeming life of the city, and the energy that pulsed through the streets. Frankie and Tony watched the sun fade from gold to pink to purple over the turreted tower of the Los Angeles Times building. They saw crowds of boys their own age who seemed to be selling newspapers on the street corners nearby.

The night air was cool after the heat of the midday sun, and the two brothers returned home full of excitement to share what they had seen. They clambered up the narrow stairs in the dingy hallway and burst through the door. Sarrida boxed their ears for staying away so long. Dinner was rice and beans flavored with bacon fat that Sarrida had begged from the butcher down the street. They couldn’t afford the bacon itself.

Sarrida Capra looked at her two young sons, her daughter Anne, and her husband. “If we are to survive here, we will all have to start working,” she announced. “And that includes you two,” she said, pointing at Tony and Frankie. “We are calling you Frank from now on,” she told her youngest, “and you and your brother can find a way to contribute. No more wandering around scaring your mother half to death. There are no streets paved with gold, in case you haven’t noticed.”

Her face glistened with sweat. The air in the apartment was still. They could hear the clang of the streetcar running up Broadway. There was a loud altercation in the street below in a language none of them understood.

“America is not for the weak,” Sarrida continued. “It is not going to give us anything. We have to work for it. Every hour.

Every day. Nothing comes for free. But the hope of something better will keep us going. It brought us from Sicily, and with the help of God it has gotten us here, and it will give us strength. Without hope, there is nothing. Now eat. But not too much. We have to save some for the morning.”

After dinner, Sarrida insisted they walk to the Mission Plaza Church on Main Street and Sunset. They entered through a small courtyard. There was a large tree in the middle of the grassy interior that looked to Frank like an upended mop.

“It is called a palm tree,” said Frank proudly. “Palm trees are beautiful, although not native to California.”

“How do you know?” asked Tony derisively.

“I learned it myself today,” said Frank, “I asked a man standing in front of the Los Angeles Times building. It’s more than you could learn in a month.” This provoked a scuffle that Turridu ended by kicking both of their backsides.

“You’re in church,” scolded Sarrida. “Behave respectfully, for God’s sake.” She lit a candle and they knelt. “May God protect us in America,” she prayed. “Especially our children. May they grow to be proud, respected Americans.”

“May they never forget who they are and where they came from,” added Turridu.

In the weeks that followed in the early summer of 1903, the Capra family began to adjust to their new life. They came to see Los Angeles as a city in the midst of constant expansion. It had a center for commerce, a port in San Pedro, and a burgeoning attraction for tourists who came to the city for its sun and to Pasadena for its air, which was thought to be healthful and

restorative. The business community was eager to promote California as a tourist mecca. Harris Gray Otis, or General Otis, as he was called due to his military exploits, was an owner of the *Los Angeles Times*. General Otis was a powerful promoter of his own business interests. A vehement anti-unionist, Otis used his newspaper to sell California to the world.

Even then, the city of Los Angeles had a curious relationship to immigrants. Their labor was needed to build the city. And yet, the image of a blonde, fair-skinned, orange-consuming, fresh-faced Californian was the one actively shown to the world. The wealthy Caucasian Protestants tended to congregate in Pasadena, while recent immigrants populated neighborhoods like Boyle Heights, to the east and just north of downtown, where the Capras first lived. The Capras settled in a neighborhood with a polyglot of races and nationalities who all shared common goals: to get out, to educate their children, and to better themselves.

Sarrida Capra's first job was picking strawberries. Then, on the advice of a neighbor, she found a job she would have for many years. She pasted labels on bottles of olive oil at the C. P. Grogan factory. There, she found camaraderie with other female immigrants. The factory was conveniently located blocks from her home on Castelar Street. She awoke early, put out bread to rise, made a stew to be reheated in the late afternoon, and left for her job by 7:00 a.m. This was the lot of a working immigrant woman with a family to support. Sarrida quickly stopped wearing the black dresses commonly worn by women her age in Italy. She adapted to American customs and dress, aided by her friends and colleagues at C. P. Grogan.

It was more difficult for Salvatore Capra to adjust. The grand life that had been promised by his son Ben failed to materialize. At one point, he was performing the only job it seemed he could do: shining shoes.

The Capra children were not exempt from the search for employment. Sarrida encouraged them daily to get out and make money. One neighbor told Tony and Frank that newsboys who hustled could do just that. Potential newsboys had to be at the Times building at 5:00 a.m. They picked up however many newspapers they thought they could sell. A boy could make a penny for each sale. Any leftover papers were charged against him. Success hinged, apparently, on the corner he worked. Fisticuffs often occurred over “ownership” of a good corner. The best corner downtown, by far, was in front of the Jonathan Club, the private club for the wealthiest and most powerful men in Los Angeles.

A month after arriving, Tony and Frank began to frequent the 5:00 a.m. dispersal in front of the Los Angeles Times building, and to move as fast as they could to claim the best spots. If they had papers left over at the end of the day, they would stage a mock fight to attract attention. When a crowd gathered, Frank would say in a pitiful voice, “He’s beating me because I didn’t sell all my papers!” His tearful visage always gulled the crowd into buying the leftovers. As the older brother, Tony took it upon himself to protect Frank from the other newsboys. They were a rough crowd of mixed ages and thought nothing of threatening or actually beating another newsboy they suspected of trying to muscle in on their profits.

One day, Tony watched Frank sell a paper to an amused member of the Jonathan Club. "Smart kid," said the member, ruffling Frank's hair and giving him a large tip. Tony felt humiliated and took it out on Frank. "If you are so damned smart," he said, "you can go out tomorrow by yourself."

"I will," said Frank. "And I'll sell a whole lot more than you." This prompted a chase around the rickety kitchen table, with Tony kicking Frank and Sarrida screaming that they stop.

The next morning, while it was still dark outside, Frank left the apartment on Castelar Street. It was already warm. Santa Ana winds were blowing, bringing dust from the desert and, some said, crazy behavior. Frank had never been out this early without his brother. He hurried right and down dark, deserted Alameda Street toward the Los Angeles Time building at First and Spring Streets. He had fifty cents in his pocket, a fortune to a six-year-old. He planned on using it to buy a stack of newspapers to sell in front of the Jonathan Club as the businessmen made their way to breakfast meetings inside. Frank's heart pounded as he rushed down the dark street. Suddenly, he heard the familiar voices of two of the older newsboys, one of whom had already been in a fight with Tony.

"Hey, runt! Where you going so early? Where's your ugly brother?"

Frank heard the crash of glass and realized they had thrown a bottle at him. He began to run. There were three of them, all twice as tall as Frank, and the click of their shoes on the pavement made a staccato sound.

The tallest, a boy with a pockmarked face, threw his arm

around Frank's neck and dragged him roughly into an alley. He grabbed Frank by the front of his trousers, which were hand-me-downs from Tony and much too big. Then he punched Frank in the stomach with such force Frank let out a gasp of air. He punched Frank a second time. Frank felt the impact as though it had gone all the way to his spine. He collapsed onto the concrete, and his attacker kicked him in the knees while leaning down close to Frank's ear. His breath smelled like sour onions.

"This is what we do to little dagos that try to horn in on our territory," the boy hissed.

It was over in a moment. Frank's attacker rejoined his friends, saying, "The little squirt got what was coming to him." They smashed another bottle against the brick wall of a grocery store that was just opening. The owner came out screaming and brandishing a broom. He saw Frank staggering around the corner and thought at first he was part of the gang. When he noticed the gash on Frank's cheek and realized he was looking at a very young boy, he reached for Frank's hand. Frank shook his head and turned toward home.

His stomach ached where he had been punched. He stopped to vomit the hard roll and milk he had eaten before leaving. Then a thought came to him. He didn't know where it came from, but it was clear and strong, like a voice in his head: *I will never run from anyone again. You can't run from what is ugly. You have to face it.*

With that, Frank turned, retraced his steps, and soon found himself at the Los Angeles Times building. The boys who attacked him were nowhere to be seen. The warm Santa Ana

winds rushed through the streets and made the palm trees sway. The last star in the Los Angeles sky was fading. Frank felt dried blood on his face and wiped it with a dirty handkerchief. He jingled the fifty cents in his pocket and stepped up to the wagon that held stacks of newspapers. He was ready to make some sales. His childhood ended that day, but in its place arose a stubborn adult resilience.

Frank made his way to the corner of Sixth and Main, near Angels Flight. It wasn't the Jonathan Club, but he would still make plenty of sales. He walked by drunks lying in the gutter and disheveled women leaning against the streetlights that were just beginning to turn off. He didn't know why the women were there; he was still too young. But the despair and weariness in their faces touched him.

As he neared the corner, a legless beggar who got around on a platform with wheels greeted Frank by name. "Frankie, it's gonna be a good day! The Santa Anas always bring a change. You'll see, kid." Frank found a way to smile. No matter how bad his life was, there was always someone who had it worse.

Frank and Tony continued to compete for the best spots. Frank understood that he needed Tony for protection. He decided not to antagonize his older, brawny brother. Tony continued to resent his younger brother's obvious intelligence, which was noticed by teachers at Castelar Elementary. They singled out Frank early on, choosing him to recite the Pledge of Allegiance on opening day of first grade. The whole family turned out to witness this expression of pride in becoming an American. Although proud of their son, his parents also realized

this was the first of many steps that would take him away from them and their identity as Sicilian immigrants. Also, Sarrida was more interested in saving money and buying a house. The education of her children came second.

Her dream was realized in 1905, when the Capra family purchased a three-bedroom home on Albion Street in Lincoln Heights, a neighborhood that bordered downtown Los Angeles to the east. Sarrida was pleased, finally, with this first true step toward achieving the American dream. Turridu, who still longed for the orchards of Italy, planted fruit trees in the small backyard and on the parkway. The front porch became a spot for weekend gatherings and musicales. The step up in living situation did nothing to lessen the arguments between the couple, many of which centered around money. There never seemed to be enough.

Frank attended Griffin Elementary in Lincoln Heights from 1905 to 1911. One of his teachers, Jean McDaniel, took a special interest in him, giving him books from her home library. Frank often read late into the night. One night, he became lost in the adventures of the *Three Musketeers*, read until almost dawn, and slept through the wake-up time for his paper route.

“Get up, you lazy idiot!” Tony yelled, smacking Frank on the head and kicking the book under the bed they shared.

“Wasting time like that will ruin your eyes and you’ll end up with nothing,” agreed Sarrida. “Get up and get out! You think money grows on trees? There are newsboys standing in line who want to help their families. Don’t you?”

She shoved a piece of bread slathered with sardines at Frank.

Tony snatched it away as they ran down the stairs of the porch onto Albion Street. The sun was just making its way to the tops of the palm trees.

“Little runts like you don’t need to eat,” Tony said, downing the bread and sardines with one bite. Frank chased him, jumping on his brother’s back. They tumbled to the ground. Sarrida ran out of the house, clapping them both on the back.

“What did I ever do to deserve sons like you? God, tell me, what?” she screamed dramatically.

“Oh, Ma, we’re going,” said Tony, dusting off his pants. “Come on, runt.”

When Frank was a year away from graduation from Griffin Elementary, Jean McDaniel invited him to her home for dinner. The occasion was the source of endless jokes and taunts from Tony, who was no longer going to school, having punched a teacher. Frank ignored his brother and dug out a clean shirt from a pile on the floor of their shared bedroom.

The McDaniel home in Boyle Heights was painted white and had a white picket fence surrounding the front yard. Mr. McDaniel answered the door with a smile and showed Frank into the dining room, where a porcelain soup tureen sat on a lace tablecloth. Jean McDaniel brought out a platter bearing a roast chicken surrounded by vegetables. Her husband served the soup, and they ate it with special soup spoons.

Beside Frank’s plate was a cloth napkin edged in lace. Frank didn’t know what to do with it at first and stuck it in the front of his collar, as he had seen men do in downtown coffee shops. The McDaniels had two older daughters who asked Frank polite

questions. There were no arguments. No teasing. No insults, loud voices, or threats. As the light outside faded, Jean McDaniel lit two white candles in brass holders. The glow gave even more warmth to her kindly countenance. The table was cleared and tea was served in china cups.

“Frank, I want to encourage you to go to high school,” she said. “You are excellent at math and science, and I know you have an interest in history. Manual Arts is a new high school not far from downtown. They have a new administration, a very forward-thinking one, and” Here Jean McDaniel paused and stirred sugar into her teacup. Then she continued.

“Members of the PTA and I know you work a newspaper job every day of the week. We’ve gathered together some contributions from the committee, and we want to give them to you so you don’t have to work so hard. For this last year of elementary school, we want to give you the gift of being able to be a student, a boy, without having the burden of constant work.”

Realizing the kindness and generosity of the gesture brought a lump to Frank’s throat. At the same time, he felt a rush of shame. His heart started pounding and he began to sweat. He could feel his cheeks flushing. He looked down at the thick flowered carpet at his feet as if memorizing the swirls and patterns in the wool tufts. Jean McDaniel patted his head and said, “Well, you think about it, Frank. Just think about it.”

As Frank walked down the brick path in front of the McDaniel home and clicked the gate shut, he gazed for a moment at the serene scene through the front window. Mr. McDaniel sat puffing on a meerschaum pipe and reading the newspaper.

Jean McDaniel sipped tea and graded papers. This was America. He decided he was going to change his name from Francesco Rosario Capra to Frank Russell Capra. No matter what argument or insult his own family offered about high school, he was determined to go.

Frank Russell Capra was in America, and he was going to pursue his own freedom and happiness. It was his right now. And no one was going to stop him.

On February 6, 1911, Frank Capra sat at the back of the auditorium assembly at Manual Arts High School. It was his first day of school as a member of the Winter 1915 class. He had graduated from Griffin Elementary the week before. Frank wanted to observe his fellow students en masse, hoping this might quell the feeling of intimidation that sat like a rock in his stomach.

He arrived at Manual Arts, which was situated south and east of downtown Los Angeles, by leaving the house at 5:00 a.m. and taking two trolleys. Newly built as a second high school close to downtown, Manual Arts was at the edge of a large bean field near the University of Southern California. Frank had to cross the field alone in the pitch dark.

His family agreed to let him go to high school only if he continued to contribute to the family coffers. Jean McDaniel helped him find a job as a janitor at the school. On his first day, Frank arrived early for his daily shift, emptying trash cans and cleaning blackboards at the direction of the surly head of maintenance. He carried a clean shirt to change into after he sweated through his work shirt. After his shift, he wandered the

halls, taking in the arched doorways and the large plaza with a fountain. He ended his tour at the auditorium that would soon be filled with his peers.

At 8:00 a.m., the students began filing in. They came in groups of four and five, many arm in arm, waving greetings to one another. Some searched desperately for someone they knew. Frank had never seen so many beautiful girls. They wore pink, yellow, and white linen dresses and looked for all the world like moving flower gardens. Rocky Washington, a friend from Lincoln Heights, slid in beside Frank, who had never been more grateful for a familiar face.

“Those are the Pasadena girls,” Rocky said. “You can tell them by their blonde hair and perfection. But you can’t tell one from the other. They are sort of all the same.”

Frank laughed in agreement and wondered what his mother and his sister Anne would think about these female clouds of perfection, so different in every way from the neighborhood girls he was used to.

A tall, distinguished-looking man wearing a bow tie and sporting a crown of gray hair walked to the podium.

“That’s our principal, Dr. Albert Wilson,” said Rocky. “He runs a tight ship. Don’t try to pull anything on him.”

“Dear scholars,” Dr. Wilson began. “For scholars are what you are. You have been chosen by fate to come together here, at this temple of learning, from all parts of this great, great city, the City of Angels. Our city is on its way to becoming the best example of what makes this country great. From Lincoln Heights, Angelino Heights, Boyle Heights, Pasadena, Alhambra

and beyond, you have all gathered here to learn, to grow, to bestow on us your joy in living. It is our job to bring peace to this world and lead our great American communities.

“Manual Arts can only be the sum total of what you bring to us: your passions and interests,” Dr. Wilson continued. “You are all destined to be what we produce here at Manual Arts. You are the Model Ts of this great city and we, your teachers, are only here to polish your hubcaps. Some people call me ‘out of the box.’ That is absolutely true. I have brought together here, at Manual Arts, the finest teachers who are here to bring out the best in you, to help you create your own American destiny.”

Frank had no idea what to make of the speech. He had never heard anything remotely like it. He had never been addressed by an adult or any person of authority with such warmth and respect. He felt he was going to like Manual Arts.

The years at Manual Arts, with its progressive administration and combination of students from all income levels, gave Frank further education in the lives of the haves and the have-nots. Along with Rocky Washington, there were other students from his neighborhood, such as Jimmy Doolittle, whose family had come over from Ireland. Doolittle would grow up to be one of the most honored pilots in history. For now, he was a jocular teenager and a fellow member, with Frank, of the Manual Arts gymnastics team.

Then there were the blue bloods of Pasadena, who moved through the universe of Manual Arts with a physical ease and confidence born of security and entitlement. Frank watched them each morning from his perch in the window of the janitor’s

room. They alighted from fancy cars on the sidewalk in front of the school, kissing their loving parents good-bye. "They are at ease in the world. It is their oyster. All is right in their world," thought Frank as he changed from his dirty work shirt into a clean one he had ironed that morning.

All was not right in Frank's world. He still had to do the janitor job every day before school. He also continued to work selling newspapers with his brother Tony. And, taking after his father, he had picked up enough musical skill to play a banjo. He found work on the weekend playing at bars on Central Avenue. There were upstairs rooms at some of the bars, and Frank was now old enough to understand what happened there. The schedule he kept, and the panoply of lives and people he encountered, made him wise beyond his years. His family still harangued him constantly about contributing money.

Despite all this, Frank found the time and energy to be involved in activities at Manual Arts. He desperately wanted to be part of the life at the school, to reach beyond the confines of his family. He learned to manage his time and to switch between jobs and people with grace and dexterity. He joined the Delphic Society and pursued his interest in science. He had neither the time nor the money for the dating rituals that were intrinsic to teenage life. He felt he stood outside the window, always looking in. His life, full of encounters with jaded newspapermen, fellow janitors, and ladies of the night from the Central Avenue bars, was a far cry from the lives of the popular, well-scrubbed Pasadena blue bloods. For the most part, they shunned him and Frank

gave them a wide berth. He kept his life in Lincoln Heights and his array of jobs secret and separate from his life at Manual Arts.

One of his favorite teachers was Rob Wagner, a visual artist, illustrator, and designer who taught English. Wagner had moved from the East Coast to California for his wife's health. She had passed away, leaving him with two young children to raise. Dr. Wilson had seen in Wagner the passion and energy that he felt would inspire students at the newly forming high school. Wagner was a true Bohemian and lived in a house full of art. He encouraged his students to think unconventionally and to write about their own lives and experiences.

Frank never forgot the day he met Rob Wagner. Striding into the room wearing a billowing white shirt, Wagner swept onto the small stage at the front, already speaking.

"You must know who you are and what you want to say," he told them. When he spoke, he gesticulated wildly and ran his hands through his hair, which stood on end. "Let us throw out convention. Rule-followers and kiss-asses, there is the door! I'm looking into each of your faces and I see thousands of stories behind those eyes. Do not write what you think I want to hear. Write what you know, what you feel, what you dream.

"You there, the gentleman knitting his brows and looking at me as if I am out of my mind," Wagner said, pointing to Frank. "Yes, you. The one who clearly thinks I am off my rocker. What makes you tick?"

Frank was dumbfounded. Did Wagner really want an answer?

“I want to tell stories!” Frank blurted out. “That’s why I’m here. That’s what makes me tick. Stories about what I’ve seen and heard and . . . and felt.” Frank had no idea where the words came from. Now they hung in the air of the classroom. Forty other students and Rob Wagner had heard.

“What’s your name, young man?” asked Wagner.

“Frank. Frank Capra.”

“Well, Frank Capra,” said Wagner, “I have a feeling we are going to get along just fine. I want to hear all your stories. The world does, too. That is what makes us human; the coming together to share all we have seen, felt, heard. Don’t remain silent, Frank. This is not a class for remaining silent. Ever. Find a partner. Start telling them one of your stories. The only rule: for God’s sake, don’t bore them.”

The girl seated in front of Frank turned around. She had round cornflower-blue eyes and pale blonde hair that framed her face. She was enchanting. She had never before spoken to Frank. “Hi there, Frank Capra,” she said with a grin, “I’m Mary, and you are going to tell me your story.”

Frank swallowed hard. She was so beautiful it was hard to think of one word, let alone string any together. He began tentatively, but soon became caught up in telling his story so Mary would feel she was right there inside it. He told her the story of an exhausted immigrant family on a train, starving hungry, the father being cheated out of his last dollar by a sandwich seller, and the matriarch of the family excoriating her husband. Mary hung on every word. Her eyes filled with tears when he described the final image.

“Why did the wife yell at and humiliate her husband?” Mary asked. “It wasn’t really his fault.”

Frank shrugged, “Because she was tough. And she was protecting her children, I guess, telling her husband he needed to have a backbone.”

“Is it a true story, Frank Capra?” asked Mary in a low tone. She had moved closer and he could see the dark lashes that framed her blue eyes. He lost himself in them.

“Class is concluded for today,” announced Rob Wagner, “but as an artist, you must never stop observing, taking notes, living, for God’s sake, LIVING. Live in the here and now. Yesterday is the past. Tomorrow is only a dream. You are young. Live! No; better yet, go out and create. And bring what you create here to share.”

Frank spent his years at Manual Arts moving between the stressful life of the Capra family, perpetually struggling, and the wider world of education and opportunity. He spent less and less time at home, managing to escape some of the tension. The schism between life at home and the life he led away from home grew larger. Frank felt like an outsider in his own family as well as at his school. The only time the aching feeling went away was when he lost himself in his work. Sometimes, reading a book, completing an experiment in the lab, or working in Rob Wagner’s class, he forgot he was little Frankie Capra, the outsider.

As graduation approached in 1915, his teachers, like those at Griffin Elementary, began to encourage him to continue his education. His family’s derision for college was even more

strident than it had been for high school. Sarrida was anxious to have her son making a living working full-time. She saw no practical purpose in a college education.

Frank's daily walks across the bean field to Manual Arts had long been a welcome break between home and the world of his high school. Roads were being blacktopped, and the city of Los Angeles was growing up around what had once been fields and empty lots. To the south, he could see the spires of the University of Southern California, a private university that to Frank seemed unattainable. But Rob Wagner had told him about a college in Pasadena that had the lofty aim of rivaling the University of Chicago in the humanities and competing with MIT in science. Its name was Throop College of Technology. (Today it's known as the California Institute of Technology, or Caltech.) Wagner encouraged Frank to apply.

Wagner also urged his students to see a full-length film directed by D. W. Griffith that was opening at the Clune's Theatre. The auditorium seated 2,700, and on the night Frank attended in March 1915, every seat was taken. The impresario Billy Clune hired a full orchestra to accompany the film, called *Birth of a Nation*. Frank had seen films before, but this was the first time he had done so with a full audience in a movie palace. He was disturbed by the images of violence and racism. He was equally mesmerized by the film and the way the audience reacted. The unique power of capturing the attention of so many people for two hours in the dark impressed him deeply. The film struck Frank as overblown and at times inauthentic. But the audience's response was remarkable.

Frank's graduation from Manual Arts provided the opportunity for a celebration at the Capra home in Lincoln Heights. Although they were not always supportive of his decision to attend high school, the Capra family looked on their son with pride. There were tables of pastries, bowls of pasta, and, of course, music provided by Turridu and his friends from the neighborhood.

"We came here twelve years ago with only what we could bring in a cart," Turridu said, wiping tears from his eyes. "Now we have a high school graduate. And more great things are happening for the Capra family. I am taking over as manager at Churchill Ranch in Sierra Madre, and I will be able to work full-time with fruits and vegetables, and be outside in nature with trees and the sun and the sky . . . where I was meant to be. And my son Francesco, for he will always be Francesco to me, will be attending Throop College of Technology in Pasadena in the fall."

There was the sound of a pitcher being dropped. This was the first Sarrida Capra had heard of either her husband's new job or Frank's college plans. A loud argument began that lasted late into the night.

Just after graduation, in May of 1915, Rob Wagner was commissioned to produce and direct a film called *Our Wonderful Schools*. He used Manual Arts as a location, and Frank visited the set one evening in late spring. His classmate Mary was also there. The two of them were amused as they watched Rob run from the director's chair to the set, brandishing a bullhorn as he herded students who were being used as extras.

Frank and Mary stood back from the mayhem. A spring

breeze rustled the palm trees above them. The bright lights from the set illuminated the night sky.

“My friend, you would be good at this,” said Mary.

“At what?” said Frank, looking at her. He wasn’t thinking about anything but the light shining into her blue eyes.

“At this. Directing. You are so organized and intelligent, and anyone who can work three jobs as well as do what you do . . . I believe you can do anything.” She lifted up her face and it was illuminated, briefly, by a klieg light.

Frank had never wanted anything more than to kiss her at that moment. But she had called him “friend.” He was too afraid. The moment passed.