

THE COLDEST NIGHT OF THE YEAR

By Marguerite Davol

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Papa Alonzo Leatherby lived a long, long time ago. He lived *so* long ago that nobody in Carroll County had even heard of automobiles, much less seen one. Nor airplanes. If people wanted to get from one place to another, they rode a horse. Or else walked. Mostly, people walked.

Of course, way back then, there weren't radios, either, leastways, not in the little house in the woods where Papa Alonzo and the Leatherby family lived. As for television, why nobody'd thought it up yet!

What did Papa Alonzo and his wife, Lulie, and their nine children do for entertainment? Well, Saturday night they might hitch up their horse, Macduff, pile into the wagon, and drive over to Tamworth Grange Hall for a sing-along or square dance. But most of the time, they listened to Papa Alonzo tell stories—all about when he was young, all about farm and forest—stories for every season of the year. Papa Alonzo told stories to anyone who'd listen, and after awhile he became known as the best story-teller in Carroll County. A champion storyteller, that's what he was.

The Leatherby children—five girls and four boys—loved to hear their father's tales. When something reminded Papa Alonzo of a story, he'd clear his throat and say, "Well, now, as I recollect..." which was the way he always began. Hearing those words, Lulie and the children would gather around, waiting. And then Papa Alonzo would commence to tell his tale about the day the goat turned blue. Or how his dog got its name. But one year, believe it or not, Papa Alonzo didn't tell any stories to his family, not a one....

Early one winter morning, it started to snow. It snowed and snowed. And the snowflakes that fell were huge. Humongous! Giant-gigantic! Why, they were so large that when one of them fell on Papa's dog, Willy, it knocked him flatter than a pancake. If Papa Alonzo hadn't been right there to scoop Willy up and sort of push him and pull him and pummel him back into shape, that dog probably would have spent the rest of his days as a fur rug on the parlor floor. Quick as a weasel's wink, Papa Alonzo grabbed up Willy and hurried the both of them into the house. Besides worrying about Willy, Papa had a headache from all those huge snowflakes thumping him on the head.

By the time breakfast was over, snow covered the front steps right up to the bottom of the door. But it didn't quit. By lunch time, the snow was as high as the window sills. But it didn't quit. And by the time supper was on the table, snow had piled higher than the window tops and covered all the doors. But still it didn't quit. Those enormous snowflakes kept dropping down from the sky and drifting up against Papa Alonzo's little house in the woods. The snow didn't stop until the house was buried right up to its roof. It was a mighty good thing that the snow quit then or one of those gigantic flakes might have slid down the chimney and put the fire out!

The snow stopped, but then a frigid wind straight out of the North Pole began to howl round the chimney, threatening to suck the fire right up out of the fireplace. And that night turned out to be the coldest night anybody ever remembered. It got so cold that even sitting close to the fireplace, the whole family had to wrap themselves in shawls and blankets to keep warm.

In fact, it was so cold that when Papa Alonzo began to tell a story—"Ahem. Well, now, as I recollect..."—something odd happened. *His words froze*. Yep, all those words turned into solid ice, right there in midair. Not a sound except for the north wind screeching around the chimney. Lulie and the nine Leatherbys, from thirteen-year-old Martha to baby Moses, didn't hear a single word that Papa Alonzo was saying, because every last syllable was frozen solid. But they could see all his words just hanging there in the air.

Now Lulie was as sharp as an icicle and as quick as an avalanche. She jumped up and grabbed a bunch of those frozen words, plucked them right out of the air, and threw them into the big kettle of soup simmering on the iron cook stove. The words began to melt, little by little, and pretty soon, everybody could hear, "Well, now, as I recollect..." and one of Papa Alonzo's tales would begin. And that's how the family spent the night, listening to one after another of Papa Alonzo's melted stories. Of course, once in a while one of his words would be a little hard to understand—all tangled up as it was with a slice of onion or a chunk of celery in that soup kettle. But the stories kept on until everyone fell asleep.

Nobody knew exactly when morning came. It was impossible to tell when the sun rose and when the sun set with snow covering all the windows and doors. So the whole family ate soup and slept and in between times huddled around the fireplace. There they'd watch each of Papa Alonzo's stories freeze in midair. Then, once the words thawed out on the stove, everybody would settle back and listen.

Finally, by evening of the next day, the wind shifted to the south; and it warmed up enough so the family could begin to dig itself out. A good thing, too. After all those hours of recollecting, Papa Alonzo had just about run out of stories to tell.

In fact, he did not tell one more story for the rest of that year. He didn't need to. Because, as it turned out, Lulie missed a lot of those frozen words. She'd grabbed fast because all that ice was so cold, and a lot of the words slipped right out of her hands. They never got to the soup kettle to thaw. Instead, words from all those tales dropped into the nooks and crannies of the little house. The rest of that winter, whenever Lulie baked bread or muffins and the oven warmed up the house more than usual, some of the frozen words would thaw and another of Papa Alonzo's tales could be heard. Now sometimes the words didn't make sense, all jumbled together any which way. Then Lulie'd have to use her egg beater and whisk them into shape!

If nobody was around to listen, Lulie would pick up the words and set to work canning the tales so's they wouldn't spoil. And she felt mighty proud of her neatly labeled glass jars lined up all in a row on the pantry shelf, ready to open when the right season arrived.

Along about the middle of March, the very last of all those words melted. Actually, they weren't really words at all but Papa Alonzo's loud snores, which had frozen while everyone slept that coldest winter night. And Lulie, who always hated to waste anything, just stuffed those snores into the pickle barrel and clapped the lid on tight. One hot July night, the twins were hungry for pickles. Lifting the barrel lid, they let loose some of Papa Alonzo's vinegary snores. Papa Alonzo nearly jumped out of his suspenders. He'd never heard himself snore before! Besides, Lulie discovered that pickled snores were great for scaring mosquitoes away!

People might wonder about whether all of this really happened. Well, Papa Alonzo has told everybody the story himself, so it must be true. After all, he's the champion storyteller of Carroll County. And if anyone wants to hear one of his tales, all they need to do is to take down one of Lulie's jars from the pantry shelf and open the lid. And listen.