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## The Helping Hand

by Chris Baker

The apartment had been standing empty for several weeks. That stale smell that comes from having been closed up filled its rooms. Weak afternoon sun fell into the silence and landed on the pale oak floor, making a pool of the palest gold below the wall where the painting once had hung.

The catalogue entry: “*Lot 142 Oil on board 16' x 13 ½' 1933 The Helping Hand \$800 - \$1,200*” told no story. It gave no connection to the summer party the year that the painting was first hung in the apartment. The owners' delight in their new possession was infectious. No one could escape it. Every summer party of theirs had been enjoyable. But each had to be better than the last. We had a private joke. We measured its success on the Conviviality Index, an obscure allusion to nearby Wall Street and its performance matrices. That year, the artist's son had been invited to speak.

As guests we were sceptical at first, even a little put out. It would be an interruption: conversations cut short, annual friendship renewal knocked off course, canapes couldn't circulate and casual flirtation cooled. But we were captured. His voice was rich and round. It was so comfortable that I closed my eyes and listened.

*“My father was a painter and a storyteller – we went everywhere together: he was such fun. As we went about he would talk to me as if we were equals and drew others into our conversation; it seemed the most natural thing in the world. He enjoyed making us laugh. When they got up to go, they'd often shake his hand and thank him for cheering them up. My friends were embarrassed by their parents. They envied me. I was with him as he sketched the painting hanging right here behind me on the wall. We were at the Journal Square Transportation Center in Jersey City. It was such a cold day; winter*

*clung on trying to smother spring that year. The windows were rimed with frost like inter-locking fern leaves, cast in silver filigree.'*

*"Everyone wore heavy overcoats and most hats. It wasn't much of a day for conversation. I think everyone was thinking about keeping warm." "Do you think", the artist's son said, digressing a little mischievously, "whether collective thought now might cool mankind?"*

*His gentle irony made a few smile.*

*He continued, "I remember looking at the boy. He was about my age but seemed older. He ignored me. His attention was on the man next to him, to whom he said something. I couldn't hear what. As if prompted, breaking the silence abruptly, the man began to recite the Gettysburg address in a loud voice. When he read: "The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here" he petered out, his face crumpled, fallen in on itself, as if he knew that he would receive little charity here. The boy put a fortifying hand on the man's trembling forearm. Encouraged, he held out a small blue collecting bowl, pleading to those around him, "A few cents please, a few cents please."*

*"No one moved." Which is how it is now, I thought.*

*"What is your name?" my father said to the man. "Chuck", he replied. "You read so well Chuck", my father said, "As if you'd trained professionally". "He did", said the boy. "He was on Broadway you know, until my Ma died. He wasn't the same."*

*"My father had no joke to make. Instead, he reached out and put five dollars into the blue pot. Chuck barely nodded his thanks. The boy looked away."*

*My father told me later that he hoped that it'd helped.*

*I learned later that the painting had been knocked down for \$812, including fees. It had not reached the bottom end of the estimate.*

*Austerity doesn't hang so well these days.*