

The Helping Hand

by Janie Reynolds

Young Jack's lank hand pushed reassuringly down on the sleeve of his father's bear-like, brown overcoat. As if such a tiny force would keep his father from falling sideways, off the unyielding wooden bench. At the same time he leant his own hungry body, gently but firmly, into his father's frame, wedging himself into the crook of the shoulder, to stop him falling forwards.

"It's time to grow up and be a man," he thought, while at the same time not having any idea what that meant.

His father's arm was buried too deeply under the coarse, woolen coat sleeve, and beneath too many other layers of different yarns, for the boy to sense the living body underneath. So he pushed his palm down a little harder, to say "I am here for you." His father, sensing the message behind the pressure, leaned with great measure, towards his young son, warmly, carefully, lovingly, until their shoulders embraced, the exchange of physical mass both a giving and a receiving of comfort and company.

In his innocence, Jack's thoughts wandered from the horrors of the past few hours to those of the present moment. His stomach seared with hunger and his throat was as arid as the choking dust that clapped in swathes on the other side of the railway waiting room window.

Jack's father sat, heavy and pale, beside him. Were it not for the faint warmth emitted by his breath and a few flickers of his fingers holding the map in one hand and his pipe in the other, Jack might have thought that his father, too, was dead.

"The blood was so bright red, and poured out of mother so fast," he thought momentarily, before returning to the sharp hunger and the consuming thirst.

Like the rolling black blizzards that had flattened his farm, and rendered them all homeless and helpless, waves of anguish lurched through his father's heart, a heavier heart than his son's, for his years had brought with them responsibility and fear. He could not think of

what he had just seen. It was not something that should ever be seen. His wife, bleeding, to death, in front of him. No one to help them, no one to save her, no one who knew how to keep a little, blue, baby boy alive. From hopes of four to fears for two, how nature can destroy a man. How the blizzards had blown death into his dreams and how the variety of the seasons, and with it the crops, had been reduced to an eternal night.

