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The Helping Hand

by Lizzie Staples

The train pulled into the station and for a moment a billow of smoke engulfed the platform. The door swung open as my father pulled down the heavy chrome lever and I clambered up into the carriage holding his hand.

It was always a huge effort to find somewhere to sit, but today we were lucky and we found ourselves sitting next to a rather large lady. I noticed straight away she was wearing a very well made tailored wool coat with a fur wrap draped across her shoulders. Her plump well-manicured hands held the daily newspaper. How different she looked to the rest of the people in the carriage.

My father on the other hand was a man full of despair and life for us was a struggle. He was a well-educated man but was unable to find work as a journalist as a lot of the newspapers had closed down. His passion was books, and at least we were able to go to the local library and lose ourselves in times of trouble. We always came away with at least three books and today was our monthly visit to the library.

It saddened me that my father's Harris tweed coat had seen better days. My mother had to constantly darn the threadbare cloth in order to keep up his appearance as he was a proud man.

Today was a partially cold day and his beige scarf was tightly wrapped around his neck, his cloth cap casting a shadow over his round rimmed glasses. His large warm hand squeezed mine as the train started to pick up speed.

We past row upon row of terraced houses with backyards full of children playing underneath lines of washing and kicking tin cans down the cobbled streets. A man caught the corner of my eye leading a pony and trap full of milk churns to be dropped off at a local farm. Later they would be picked up by the villagers. If you were lucky to live near a farm you at least had milk to keep you going when food was hard to come by.

I had noticed the woman sitting behind us with a very saddened expression. I knew she lived in one of the neighbouring villages over the brow of the hill. How hard it must be for her to live in a foreign country so far away from her Caribbean roots. What did she have to smile about in her life, nothing? I wondered if she came over to work for a wealthy family who were now no longer able to offer her employment and had left her to find her own way in life? She wore a green turban, which seemed so out of place with all the other people in the carriage. Her gaze was distant and she looked into nothingness, the despair was etched across her deeply lined face.

Where was the helping hand that she so desperately needed? My gaze turned back to my father who I could tell was deep in thought. I gently put my hand in his and snuggled into his old tweed coat and hoped my mother had some bread and jam waiting for us after our monthly journey to the library.