



The Helping Hand

by Penny Humphrey

The bus rattled and clattered as it crossed the tram lines, wending its way through the city until they reached the freeway.

George sat heavily and gratefully in his seat clutching the precious books, while Abe Junior stood by him, legs akimbo holding his uncle's arm more for security than balance. There were only two seats left when they got to the booking booth, Junior offered to stand rather than wait another three hours for the next Greyhound to South Carolina. His aunt sat next to George reading the Daily Post, oblivious to the boy's discomfort; she was a woman of few words at the best of times and Junior wished she had stayed home and not come grudgingly on this trip. When Junior and George weren't speaking, there was still a comfort in their union, when Myrna didn't speak it usually meant trouble.

Three years now since the start of The Great Depression. Three years since Abe Junior's Pa jumped off a high building after losing his fortune and three weeks since his mother died from consumption. Uncle George and Myrna came to collect the boy and take him back home. They arrived just before the funeral and Junior heard Myrna complaining at night about how they could barely feed themselves, never mind afford the bus to come and collect him.

And so here they were sitting on the bus with very few possessions other than the books. One the family bible, the other an account of the life of Junior's father and his rise to fame and fortune written in his own hand, an important family relic to be handed down through future generations.

George, whose timber mills had suffered a major knock, was beginning to pull his way back with much hard work. He and Myrna had no children of their own so his hope was to leave the business to his nephew one day. He closed his eyes, aware of the boy's grip on his sleeve and thought of his brother who took himself off to the city at a young age, ambitious, handsome, with everything to live for but when the crash happened he could not face the future.

George was not so ambitious, nor particularly clever but he managed to build a small empire in the country town where they lived through sheer hard work and devotion to the wife who neither appreciated nor deserved him.

The bus stopped suddenly, jolting George out of his reverie and sending the boy sprawling. That was when the tears came, not because of the fall or the pain of it but because his tears had been locked up without a key. The fall broke that lock.

Myrna looked up from her paper and hovered momentarily between disapproval and pity. George leant forward and helped the boy back onto his feet.

Myrna opened her arms and took the boy to her. The stiffness of all those barren years melted away and their tears mingled into one river.