



2021

Helping Hands

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Recommended Citation

Uroff, Catherine (2021) "Helping Hands," *Floodwall Magazine*: Vol. 1: Iss. 3, Article 11.
Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/floodwall-magazine/vol1/iss3/11>

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Helping Hands

On the first day of training, Mary asked our group why we were there, what our reasons were for volunteering at the Helping Hands Women's Shelter. When it was my turn, I said that I'd undergone some difficult experiences myself not too long ago and there was no need to go into specifics but suffice it to say, I felt the need to give back. People believed what they wanted to believe. Even Mary nodded and reached over to pat my hand. But the real reason I gave up four Saturdays in a row to sit crowded around a long table in a windowless conference room on the fourth floor of a nondescript office building, listening to Mary tell us stories about her abusive ex-husband, was because I'd recently moved to Troy and didn't know anyone in town yet. I thought it might be a good way to make friends.

Mary had long, gray hair that she kept back in a loose side braid. She had a thicket of silver bracelets on each arm and she wore tight t-shirts that accentuated her tiny breasts and long skirts that swept her toes. I imagined going out for coffee after the meetings with her and the other Helping Hands volunteers. I thought we could talk about our shared traumas and go over the training topics of the day. But none of that ever happened. Mary would end the meetings by giving us a brief summary of what we'd just learned: the signs of an abusive relationship; the most dangerous times for a victim; the reasons people stay. Then, once she was done, everyone would rush for the one-door exit. We were all probably trying to get the image of Mary's ex out of our heads. He became, for me at least, a monster of a man – as tall as a mountain, red-faced, Popeye muscles, even though she described him on the very first day as slight and short, a man who liked to start his Saturday mornings listening to John Coltrane and ended each night by reading poetry out loud. Still, I couldn't stop thinking about how, once, he slapped her on the ear for leaving an opened sleeve of Saltines out on the kitchen counter overnight.

On the last day of training, Mary stood at the head of the conference table and clasped her hands together, like she was praying.

"I want to tell you how my story ended," she said, "My husband locked me in our guest bedroom for a week. He let me out three times a day to use the bathroom – that was all. He took all my clothes from me so I had nothing to

wear, no way to cover myself. That was in case I tried to split. I wasn't even allowed a bra or panties. He left me naked as the day I was born."

One of the volunteers sitting next to me whimpered. Mary stared at her but it was like she wasn't really seeing anyone.

"And then one morning he left the house for a beer run and I punched out the window to get out. I was clumsy on my way out, and I fell to my hands and knees on all that glass. But I did get out."

I sat up in my chair. I couldn't take my eyes off of her. I thought about my own life then, how I'd moved to Troy from New Jersey only because Evan, my married boyfriend, had gotten his wife pregnant with their third child. I wanted Mary to tell us more – how once she got away, she never spoke to her ex again, never even considered going back.

Mary pointed at us. "OK, that's it. I'm all done. Thank you for volunteering your time. And always remember the number one rule. Does anyone remember what it is?"

I had no idea what she was talking about but most of the people around the table were nodding their heads. Stanley, one of the few men in our group, raised his hand. He'd told us the week before to never assume that it was only women who were abused. He'd been pinched, kicked, and punched by his wife for ten years straight but the cops never did one thing about it.

"Assess the situation first," Stanley said when Mary looked at him.

"That's right," she said, "You are not a professional. You are just a volunteer."

After class, I drove through downtown Troy, thinking about Mary's daring escape, her dash to freedom. I figured someone must've seen her at one point – cowering, trembling, blood on her hands and knees – and stopped to help. Although, usually, it was never that obvious. According to Mary, most people tried to hide those kinds of things. We needed to keep extra vigilant for signs of abuse: irrational fear, jumpiness, unexplained bruises. I started looking closely at everyone I drove past. On the corner of Liberty and Division, there was a woman wearing a short skirt and high heels. She was laughing into a cell phone, and when the wind picked up, her long, thick hair swirled over her face. A small woman with sloped shoulders was walking slowly down Canal Street. She took very small steps and appeared to be mumbling to herself.

Then, as I was stopped at a light on 4th Street, I saw a young woman waiting at the curb. She was holding a baby to her chest with one hand. The baby's mouth kept opening and closing and I felt something in the pit of my stomach. It shouldn't have been anything, just another someone waiting for the light to change, but the baby was crying and the girl was crying also. Sobbing really. She kept looking over her shoulder and wiping her nose with the back of her free hand. Then a man came running down the sidewalk, heading towards her full-speed. His arms were raised, his hands clenched into fists, and the girl cringed, curling her body around the baby.

I forgot to consider the possible danger in the situation. I shouted out the window to her: "Get in! Get in!" When the girl hesitated, I stretched over the seat to unlatch the passenger side door, pushing the door until it swung open.

"Hurry!" I shouted.

She looked behind her again. The man was getting closer. I honked my horn and called out to her one more time. At the very last moment, right as he was bearing down on her, almost within arm's reach, she nodded to herself – a small bob of her head – and ran over to my car, jumping in, slamming the door shut, pressing down the lock. My foot trembled, even my little toe was quivering, but I started the car moving forward anyway. For a flash of a second, I thought we'd be able to get away. But the guy didn't stop. He kept running towards us and then I heard a big thump as he jumped on top of my car. He came up from the trunk, skittering across the roof, sliding down the front window. And I was stuck in the middle of the intersection, having gotten no further than a few yards in my getaway.

He was wearing a black t-shirt and dark blue jeans. His work boots kept scrambling to get a purchase on the sloped front of my car. When he pressed his shoulder against the windshield, I was looking at his face – his high cheekbones, his small, dark eyes. That was all I remembered about him. That and his fierce unwillingness to give up. He yanked up the windshield wipers for leverage. He pounded on the front window. He opened his mouth so wide to scream that I could see the silver fillings deep in the cavern of his mouth.

Although all of this took only a few seconds, I was aware of other people around us. On the opposite side of the street, there was a man pushing a grocery cart piled high with blankets and black garbage bags. Two teenage kids lounged over each other on the cracked front steps of the Holmes & Watson pub. A bald man cupped his hand around his mouth to light a cigarette in the wind. And not one of them stepped forward to help.

I thought there was no choice. I was afraid that the window was going to cave in, that the guy's beefy arm would snake inside the car to grab the girl by her hair. I thought that the moment demanded heroics. I was alone in saving us and had no other choice. So I told the girl to hold on tight and I pressed down on the accelerator pedal as hard as I could. We zipped forward, out of the intersection. I jerked the steering wheel to miss the traffic, swerving just in time to avoid an empty city bus parked in the travel lane. The girl made a quick, startled sound, more like a grunt than anything else. She was sunk back in the seat, hugging the baby, her lips on top of the baby's head. In the split second I took to look over at her, I lost control of the car, and we jumped the curb. When I slammed to a stop, the girl braced herself with one hand on the dashboard, expertly keeping the baby close to her chest with her other hand, and the guy flew off my car, landing next to a heap of tires in front of Sal's Auto Body and Repair shop.

Jack Woolsey was the name of the man who jumped on my car. His girlfriend was Tiffany Jubec and their six-week-old baby was Victoria Grace. Jack broke both legs in the fall. The cops didn't press charges at the scene because Tiffany was too hysterical to give them a statement as she alternated between comforting the screaming baby and soothing Jack who kept touching his legs and howling in pain. But someone from the police department called me early the next morning to say that it was likely some kind of decision would be made soon. They advised me not to leave town anytime in the near future. According to Jack, he was just trying to rescue his girlfriend and newborn baby from some crazy lady and her car.

Mary came to visit me the day after the accident. I was renting a house then that came with about twenty different plants and detailed watering instructions, a detail I considered to be charming when I first moved in until late one night when I woke up, gasping for breath, positive that the plants were sucking all the oxygen out of the room, that they were growing bigger and bigger by the second, that their tendrils were reaching out for me.

Mary came in no further than the front hallway. She shook her head, pressed her eyelids down with her fingertips, and then pinched the bridge of her nose. "You weren't trained for this."

"I thought I was," I said.

"Do you know what your responsibilities would've been at the shelter? Babysitting the kids while the women went on job interviews. Stocking the pantry with donated canned goods."

"I can still do that."

"Forget Helping Hands for a moment. I don't think that's where your focus should be at this point. You could've killed him. You could've gotten yourself killed."

"But I was getting her out of a horrible situation."

Mary shook her head slowly. "Not according to Tiffany."

"What do you mean? She can't possibly – "

"Tiffany's busy nursing Jack at the hospital. I stopped by to see her. She didn't have a lot of time to talk to me but she did make it pretty clear. The story she's going to tell, well, let's just say it's going to sound a lot different than yours. She says it was no big deal. They were just having a silly fight and you got in the middle of it."

"I need to talk to her."

"No, you can't do that. You can't go near her. Your involvement in their lives is over."

"Look, I think I can handle this. Really, it's no problem."

I wanted to be strong and brave back then, one of those people known for their courage in moments of high stress, like my great-uncle who'd helped a man when he was kicked in the face by a horse at the Schaghticoke Fair in 1946, and my grandmother who'd saved her sister's finger in a dishtowel during a dicing mishap in the kitchen. The thing about courage, my mother always told me when she finished the story about Great-Uncle George and Grandma Dorcas, was that it was a natural instinct. You either had it or you didn't. And I wanted to be one of those people who had it.

"But don't you understand? She's the witness," Mary said.

I shook my head. "That story you told about your ex, well, that was unforgettable, you know? And I think it's wonderful that you were able to get out, but other people, like Tiffany, well, they may not be so lucky."

I suddenly wanted to tell her about Evan, how even though I'd moved to Troy to get away from him, we were still in touch. As soon as I'd gotten a job

working for the state of New York in Albany, I'd sent him a postcard of the Empire State Plaza, circling the building where I worked. He called me the second he got it and asked me to come back home.

Mary put her hand on the doorknob. "Just stay out of it. That's my advice to you. And I should tell you. You might need a lawyer at some point."

"But she was in trouble. You have to believe me."

Mary cocked her head to the side and squinted as if it hurt to look at me. "It doesn't matter what I believe. Tiffany's standing by her man. That's what's important here."

She paused and I waited for her to tell me another story about her ex. I leaned forward – we were almost touching – because I wanted to capture every word, but instead she just nodded, twisted the doorknob, and stepped outside.

I couldn't calm down that night. I didn't even try to lie down in bed. I walked through each room of the house several times. I flicked on the television and then turned it off again. I gathered up all of the plants and lined them up on the kitchen counters, arranging them by height and then leaf color. Finally, I called Evan on his cell. He was the only person I knew who'd still be up at this hour. I knew exactly where he'd be – sitting by himself in the downstairs den, the rest of his family safe and sleeping in their beds. We used to laugh at our shared bouts of insomnia. We'd stay on the phone together throughout the night. We'd watch the sun rise from our windows.

In New Jersey, I worked for a property management firm. My boss, Janice, was thirty pounds overweight and always begged me to go to the gym with her on Saturday mornings. There we'd be, side by side on our StairMasters, grinning at each other as we stepped in place. Afterwards, we'd stop at Starbucks where Janice would order a Mint Chocolate Chip Frappuccino. Then I'd rush back to my apartment and check my answering machine to see if Evan had called.

He usually left cheerful messages, all about missing me, thinking of me, loving me, how happy he was that I was in his life.

I didn't know he was married when I first met him. He came into the office one day, looking for a rental property for a friend. I made some photocopies of our latest listings for him, and while I was standing in front of the copier, Janice stood behind me and whispered in my ear. "Better stay away from that one."

He's too good looking for his own good." He didn't wear a wedding ring so I just assumed he was free. But even after I found out the truth, I told myself that his marriage didn't matter because he was always so tender and kind to me. His wife never felt real to me and then I began to feel like nothing was real except for the time I spent with him.

"I'm in trouble, Ev," I said when he answered. "I injured a man. Seriously injured him with my car. I'm lucky I didn't run him over."

"What happened?"

"I was out, driving around, and I saw this girl who was crying so I had her get in my car but then the boyfriend jumped on top of my car and I had no choice. I had to get him off the car. I – we – were in danger. Did I tell you that a baby was involved?"

Before I left New Jersey, I came home one night and Evan was hanging around the front of my apartment building. He looked so frightened and sad that I was sure something unbearable had happened – someone in his family died, he'd just lost his job. I begged him to tell me what was wrong, and he gulped. That was the first thing he did. The second thing he did was tell me that his wife was pregnant.

He apologized and cried and knelt down before me, his knees pressing hard into the concrete sidewalk. He wrapped his arms around my legs. He said that he'd made a mistake and now he had to do the right thing by his wife and his unborn child, but he couldn't bear the thought of losing me. He even went so far as to slap himself in the face. So I told him it was OK. I told him that this was just another barrier for our love to cross. And I thought I could do it – go on as before, waiting for his late night phone calls, sneaking around with him on nights when his wife was busy with friends or church activities. But then I started seeing pregnant women everywhere. They were haunting me around every corner, in front of every store, standing in line at the post office, behind the counter at the dry cleaners, waiting on the padded banquettes at the hair salon. There they were with their full stomachs and self-satisfied smiles. And since I'd never met his wife or even see a photo of her – Evan was very good about keeping his family life private – I kept imagining that one of those women was her. I forced myself to greet them all: the woman fumbling to unlock her car door in front of the Price Chopper; the one with toned arms and a pronounced jawline who was powerwalking down my street; the tired-looking woman with limp hair and sunken-in eyes who was trying to hold

hands with a squirmy three-year-old boy as they walked into the movie theater.

Hello? How are you feeling? I asked each of them. I stared hard at them, meaning to really see them. At first, they smiled back. The woman with the son even answered me, complaining about the heat. But something about me unnerved them.

They got nervous. They stopped smiling, moved away from me quickly. They shook their heads and checked to make sure I wasn't following them.

Not long after that, I quit my job and packed up my car and drove up the New York State thruway, stopping in Troy only because I was running low on gas.

Now, over the phone, Evan whistled when I finished my story.

"This is bad. Do you want me to come up there? I'd do it. I'd do anything for you."

"No, no. That's not why I called."

"Maybe you should come home now. You've been there long enough. Have you thought about coming home?"

"Don't ask me that, please."

"Please forgive me and come home."

"It's not as simple as that. You know."

"Sweetheart, what I really know is that you need to come home. You can't hide in Troy forever. We can work this out, I promise. I thought we were going to find a way to get through this together? I love you. You know how much I love you. I'm sorry for everything – all of this – but I've never stopped loving you."

"I've got to figure this out," I said, "I can't just leave now. Look at what I did, after all."

He thought I was referring to Jack and Tiffany. "Hey now, you didn't mean to do any harm and that has to count for something, right?"

He paused for a second and I imagined him taking the cell phone away from his ear to catch some sounds from his family stirring upstairs. He was probably listening for his wife who must've been – by my estimation – six and a half months pregnant by then.

The next morning, I found Tiffany's address online. She lived across the street from Russell Sage College on the first floor of an old row house. It was a nice day outside so I decided to walk to her place. I took 8th Street to Congress, past three-family homes with vinyl siding and enclosed sun porches on the second and third floors, turning on St. Mary's Avenue to go through the downtown area that was filled with soap-laced storefront windows and empty bus shelters. All the way there, I caught glimpses of the gray Hudson River sparkling in between buildings.

Because it was still early, there weren't that many people on the street. In front of Bruegger's Bagels, a portly man was hugging himself to keep his long overcoat closed. As he wished me a good morning in an unusually high-pitched voice, a wet-nosed Jack Russell terrier peeked out from underneath the collar of his overcoat to bare its yellow teeth at me.

Towards the gated entrance to the RPI campus, a teenage boy with bad skin almost ran into me on his skateboard, swiveling gracefully at the last moment to avoid a collision. But for most of the walk, I was alone.

When Tiffany opened her apartment door, she was cradling the baby in her arms. Although I'd been worried that I wouldn't remember what she looked like – she'd been in my car for only a few seconds – it seemed as if she was wearing the same clothes, or hadn't touched her hair since the accident because I recognized her immediately. She was a pretty girl with a spray of freckles on her nose. I took a second to check her face for any bumps or welts, looking at her arms for any marks – thumbprint bruises, long, red scratches – but her skin was completely clear.

"What in the world are you doing here? If Jack knew – "

"Is he OK?"

"He'll live. No thanks to you."

"If you wouldn't mind letting me in. I'll only be a second."

She stared at me, not saying a word.

"Please, I won't stay long. I promise. I just – it's important – I need to make sure that you're alright. That's it." My voice broke a little. A few seconds went by and then she shrugged and moved to the side so that I could slip in. I followed her down a short, dark hallway into a living room that had an ironing board propped open with a package of unopened baby wipes on top of it, a porta-crib with ripped netting pushed up next to the bay window, and two folding chairs facing a big screen TV on the wall. Tiffany put Victoria in the crib and then turned around to face me.

I introduced myself and told her a little bit about my recent move to Troy, my training at Helping Hands. As I talked, she tidied up, picking a pink baby blanket off the floor, pushing some shoes out of the way with the side of her foot. "I still don't understand why you're here," she said.

"I wanted to check up on you."

"Well, I'm not the one still in the hospital, am I? Though the doctors said yesterday that Jack might be released by the end of the week. He's going to go on disability. He works for the city, did you know? Hard to run a paving truck with broken legs."

"I'm sorry."

"He hasn't had time off in a long time. Maybe we'll go to Maine or something. That's what he's thinking."

"Look, about what happened – "

Tiffany continued as if I hadn't spoken. "I don't know what to do about Victoria though. She's probably too young for any big trips, don't you think?"

"I'm not sure. I don't know much about children."

We moved over to the porta-crib and looked down at the baby.

"I was clueless when she was first born. She had a little jaundice. You know the thing that makes your skin all orange? They told me to put her by the window. The doctors said she needed some sunlight. But now it stuck. She cries if I try to move the crib," Tiffany said.

From the window, I could see the Russell Sage campus just beyond a wrought-iron fence.

"Are you a student?"

Tiffany nodded. "Only need six more credits. Victoria's worth the wait though."

"Of course."

We were both quiet and I took it to be a good sign, that Tiffany was feeling comfortable with me.

"If I can ask you about what happened. Do you mind? You looked like you were in such distress that day. Frightened for your life, really. And then when I saw him running after you – "

Tiffany touched the windowpane with the tips of her fingers. "

Jack and I love each other. You should know that. We've always loved each other. We've been together three years now.

It seems like a lifetime. We're going to celebrate our anniversary in October. Jack says we're going to go all out."

"You don't have to protect him, you know. You can let him stand on his own."

She turned towards me again.

"Well, actually, you kind of fixed that, didn't you? I mean, Jack won't be standing on his own for a little bit, now will he?"

"If you're afraid of him, you have options. I'm here to tell you that you do have choices," I said, wishing that Mary was here with me. Mary could've impressed Tiffany with her story about falling out the window, crawling on broken glass.

"Choices? I have choices? You're here to tell me about the choices I have?"

Tiffany was smiling but her nostrils flared in and out and when she brought her hands up to cover her mouth, her fingers were trembling. Just then Victoria started to cry – little yelps that quickly turned into full-blown, high-pitched shrieks piercing the air between us.

"What choice do I have now? Do you want to tell me that too? Should I pick up my baby and tend to her? Or just do nothing and let her cry and cry and cry?" Tiffany asked. She tapped her fingers on the crib's flimsy railing. Victoria

flailed her arms and legs asynchronously, like a tiny swimmer who'd forgotten her strokes.

"Look, you appear to be in trouble. That's all I'm trying to say. And I know what it's like to feel boxed in, to feel like everything's a mess and nothing makes sense. Trust me, I know. Sometimes you get to a point in your life when you look around and you ask yourself, 'Hey, how did this happen?' Most of us, we're good people, you know, or at least we try to be. Just sometimes the things we do, well, they may not be so good. And now you've got a child involved so that makes it even more important. But, I just want to tell you that you don't have to stay with him. Not if you don't want to." "Well, what about you? What are your options right now? That's what I'd like to know. Jack's thinking of suing you as soon as he gets out of the hospital. Did you know that? And then there's the cops. They keep calling me because they want a statement. Seems like you're in a lot more trouble than I'll ever be."

I didn't know what to say for a second. When I finally spoke, my words came out in a whisper.

"But I was just trying to help."

She reached into the crib for the baby and rocked Victoria in her arms for a moment. When a phone began to ring in the next room, she handed the baby to me.

"Here," she said, "You want to help? Hold her for a minute while I get that. That's something you can do." And then she left the room to answer the phone.

The baby had on a stained onesie and yellow knit booties. One of the booties had fallen off, exposing her fat foot, perfectly clipped, rounded toenails. The top of her head smelled like baby oil. She had something crusty coming out of the corner of her left eye but I didn't try to remove it.

I walked around the room with her, kissing the top of her head, her small body sweating into mine, and it wasn't long before she stopped kicking, her screams subsiding into little hiccups. She put her fingers in her mouth and let out a little sigh. I watched as her eyelashes fluttered half-mast and her breathing calmed down. I wondered if this was what it was going to be like for Evan and his wife soon – soothing their newborn baby, the ache in their arms from the extra weight.

After awhile, I knew it was time to go, sneak out of the apartment, closing the door softly behind me. I had no business being there, that was now clear. Tiffany didn't want my help, and I'd never understand what had really happened.

I would've put Victoria back in her crib before I left but she'd finally fallen asleep, her bald head heavy against my chest, and I didn't want to wake her.

THE END

About Catherine Uroff

Catherine Uroff's short fiction has appeared in *The Worcester Review*, *Red Wheelbarrow*, *The Bellevue Literary Review*, *The Green Hills Literary Lantern*, and other journals.