

GHOST CHILD ON THE ORPHAN TRAIN

-by Larry Mitchell

10. DELIVER ME

The day was overcast and chill, a dreary pause before rain. There was nothing to see out my office windows except people hurrying along to get out of the weather. I was making telephone calls to locate people who had ridden the orphan trains. The work brought home to me the truth of what Billy Boyd O'Shea had said about a detective's life. Only my need to know could carry me through this futility until something came of it.

There must be something between Billy Boyd and me. He walked in my office door.

"We found the man with the hat." He thrust a copy of the Times at me. "Look at the second page of Local News."

I opened an inside page of an inside section. "What am I looking for?" Before he could answer, I held up my hand to let him know I had found it: **Colored Man Shot by Police.**

The story was brief and told little. Jefferson Jones, of Madison Park, had been identified by police as involved in a fatal motorcar mishap. When they went to his home, he attempted to flee and was shot.

I stared at Billy over the top of the paper. "Had he done anything wrong?"

Billy curled his fingers and studied the fresh manicure. "He tried to help a white woman. He miscalculated the speed with which her car would descend the slope when pushed, a third mistake and fatal for them both."

I could not stop staring at him, wanting him to meet my eyes. "I don't understand. What was his first mistake?"

He finally looked back at me, exasperated. "Come on, Carrie. He was born colored. I don't know whose fault that was, but there it is."

I was the one who looked away. "I can't stand the word 'colored'. The way some people say it, I hear the meanness in their voices. Oh, Billy Boyd, why was I ever put in this horrible place?"

His voice was low and gentle, emphatic. "If you did not want to find things out, you should not have gotten into this business."

The previous owner of my life had left me no memories of contact with Seattle's many black people. They were background creatures, living unknown lives.

Now, Billy Boyd and I stood with a huddle of policemen under a rain-dripping storefront awning on Pine Street at 14th Avenue, across from Capitol Hill's AME Church. An invisible seam ran down this hill, separating the bungalows of prosperous white people to the west, from modest, neat black-owned houses of the Central District.

Traffic officers stood in the intersections, clad in raingear and boots so white they appeared almost luminous. They blew whistles. They extended pale wings. Traffic stopped.

I heard the distant singing of many voices, a sound somewhere between a moan and a chant.

Please, Lord, deliver me.

Please, Lord, deliver me.

Please, Lord, deliver me.

Won't you grasp my weary hand?

As if on cue, the rain stopped, and pinhole beams of sunlight poked through the overcast. I trembled.

A vast procession of dark people in bright clothes moved through the sunlight, turning down Pine Street at the top of the hill. There were hundreds of them, from the very young to the very old, bonded by sorrow into a single family.

Two women led the way, one old and one young, holding a large lavender wreath with a purple ribbon, inscribed *Another Man Gone*. Behind them, six burly black men carried a burdensome, plain pine box on their shoulders.

I pressed my handkerchief to my face.

Billy Boyd patted my shoulder. "You're a soft-boiled angel in a hard-boiled world."

I tried to smile at him. The uniformed officers snickered. Billy Boyd looked away from me, at them. Their faces sobered.

I did not see the look he gave them, but something made him prized among men. Whether it was the glory of his repute or his easy grace or the shadowed presence of his fate, I did not know.

No matter. I was learning how to become curious. "Why are we here?"

"He might still be alive if not for our shrewd deductions and insights."

"It was guesswork!"

"Detective work is lethal work. Another man gone." He took off his Homburg hat and held it over his heart.

We stood with our heads bare, as the coffin passed by.

The dark mourners sang.

Please, Lord, deliver me.

Please, Lord, deliver me.

Please, Lord, deliver me.

Lift me from this dreary land.

Their repetitive lament, with its weary, trudging cadence, went on for longer than I could bear.

Ghost Child on the Orphan Train

A novel in revision, by Larry A. Mitchell