Story for performance #986
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Let the record state that I made an effort to be friendly. Myrtle Baker will never stand accused of unchristian behaviour. 'Myrtle,' my friends say to me, 'we know that much about you at least.' Well they know a lot more about me than that—I have nothing to hide.

So there they all were, these foreigners and strangers, very dark some of them, standing around the photo and pointing me out. 'Just have a look at her,' they're saying. 'Standing there with her white gloves and hat! And what about the shoes! She looks like a witch.'

I look at the shoes and I see perfectly sensible leather lace-ups with good solid heels. Respectable shoes for the time and place, shoes that lasted. I'd had them since the war and no need to give them up just because it's 1958.

'She's evil!' they're saying to each other. 'Look at the poor little kids!'

I don't have to look, I can still smell those three sweaty little bodies like it was yesterday. I remember I arrived at the station with a good half hour to spare. It never hurts to be early. It was midday, white and glaring, but a cold wind blowing. It can be like that out on the western slopes. I was glad of that warm full-length coat in the picture.

My job was the same as always: round up the children off the train, give them the toys from the Ladies Auxilliary to cheer them up, teddy-bears and rag dolls, check who I had against my list of Placements, and make the decision there and then, before they left the station. You had to be clear about it, it was the only way to be kind. Do it while they were still a bit in shock, the poor things, keep them busy and settle them into their new lives before they had time to miss their mothers. The actual life those children lived in humpies and such—the sooner that faded, the better for all concerned!

My job was never made any easier by old Ferguson, the Station Master. The moment he'd spot any little dark faces in the crowd on a morning I was there to meet a train, he'd rush in and upset the apple cart, squatting down, cuddling them like they were his own kids, and then you'd see them start crying. It's wrong, I always told my ladies. It's quite wrong to let them think they have something to be sorry about. Distract them I say, be kind but be firm, you have to draw the line.

Look, you can see him in the photo, arms around them, pointing to something on the platform. They're not interested in anything at a moment like that except knowing who'll be looking after them now and that they're finally going to have a hot meal each day and a clean place to sleep!

'Oh no,' says a woman behind me. 'Their faces. I can't bear it!' She points to the two little brothers, holding hands, their new teddy bears forgotten. And then the little girl. Said to be the sister, but proper records were never kept of course so who could say? I look with them—after all, no-one knows that's me in the picture too. I'm just an anonymous little old lady to them.

So I look at the faces. Each little mouth is open in a listless droop I'm very familiar with. She's going on about some painting, or something. 'They're dumbstruck but they're screaming!' she says. 'And no-one can hear it! Their souls have been ripped from them! Who have they got left in the world now? Probably not even each other!'

Well in fact we did keep the little boys together for a few months but the older one didn't work out. Very angry little boy, you'd probably say now. I concede we understand more about destructive behaviour these days. And those farming families, they could be pretty cruel to be kind. So they had to be separated in the end. I believe he was sent to the coast, one of those good church-run Homes.

The girl—her skin was much lighter and I thought she'd have a good chance of blending if she was raised in town with the good catholic family I had in mind. She did well enough at school, married a white man, and most of her children—you'd never pick it. They could honestly pass for the real thing, with good jobs and decent families of their own.

Not that the woman screeching into my ear about damage and ignorance would have a clue about any of that. She apparently knows so much better than we did, poor fools locked in the past, trapped in the photograph. Well what's ignorance, I ask you? Getting in and doing your best at the time, or having a whole lot of useful opinions about it fifty years after the fact?

I'm afraid I had to speak up, had to declare I make no apology for doing the decent thing! But they stared at me as if not a word was coming out, like I was someone from another planet, as if the sight of me shamed them. I've never felt so alone—shocking!—and in my own country!

A security person arrived and asked us all to please lower our voices and move along. But I found my legs wouldn't work. So he got me a chair and I sat for a bit, alone with the photo, getting my breath back.

And that's when I saw the eyes. Three huge pairs of eyes, all staring as if they'd just landed on the moon. Nothing real in sight, nothing familiar, nothing that can recognise them anymore. Nothing that ever will again.

And you know, I couldn't move from that chair for such a long time.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Susan Murphy.