

## To Be Where You Belong

by Dennis Payton Knight

The challenge is to answer the question, “Where Do I Belong?” It is, for me, a very short essay. I belong right where I am on this bright summer day, even if the journey has been imperfect and the credit for getting here is not mine. It is a sense of belonging that I hope I share with you.

And then I remember the children in cages at our border, and wonder if my place is actually to be with them, clutching to a silvery mylar sheet – an uncomfortable blanket of insecurity – wondering where I am, where my mother is, or my father, or if they are even together, and wondering if I will ever in my life get to a place where I know I belong.

And I reflect on a book I have recently read, *Orphan Train* by Christina Baker Kline. a fictional piece based on a similarly sad part of our history. A time from 1854 to 1929 when hundreds of thousands of orphaned, abandoned, abused or homeless children in the crowded Eastern cities of America were shipped to the west by train, under the auspices of a children’s aid society, in hope of finding places to belong.

A duly, if righteously, chaperoned orphan train leaving New York City would within days arrive at a city like Minneapolis where the children would be paraded at the station to prospective foster parents. While the pickers might be vouched for by the mayor or clergy, their motives for laying claim to a child were seldom questioned.

The goal was placement, and the unclaimed were put back on the train to be offered again at the next destination, or the next.

For every child taken into a nurturing family, chances were just as strong that a child was picked as free farm labor or domestic help. They were required to attend school, but that did not always happen.

This story about humankind’s eternal need for a sense of place to belong is told through the eyes of two women. The first, an Irish immigrant, now in her nineties, whose childhood tragedies took her in 1929 on an orphan train from New York City to be claimed in Minnesota, and her struggles through near-bondage and several dysfunctional families to finally find a sense of place. The second, a troubled teenager in foster care, who develops a connection and then a deep friendship with the elder woman while helping her sort through an attic filled with connections to the past.

It is a book that tells about the depravities of human exploitation, the deepest of hunger, and the depths of displacement and loneliness. But it is wonderfully told and ends with the two finding together a sense of being in the right place at the right time.

And then the television news reminds you of those thousands of children at the border, waiting in cages, wondering where, or if they will ever belong.