

The Boy

—*Diane Ney*
English, Jr.

THERE was nothin' wrong with him really. He was just ugly. Not homely nor bad lookin' but downright ugly. And he used to hang around the store so it got to the point where I was explainin' him to the customers. See, they'd look at me kinda funny and they'd say, "He a friend of yours?" And me, I'd look real surprised and say, "Why, I don't know him any better 'n' you do. He just hangs around the store, is all." And I'd say to myself, "Now, it's plain that he's ruinin' your business so why don't you ask him to leave?" But I never did.

He'd come in about 9:30 and set down by the stove, not sayin' a word, just settin', and sometimes he'd rock the chair on its hind legs and throw his head back and stare at the ceiling, and other times he'd set real still and hum so low and soft as would make you lean closer to hear him. And the whole time people walkin' around him, pretendin' not to notice, and then whisperin' to me whether he was my friend or not. And me sayin' no. Which was a lie. Well, not really a lie, because he wasn't a friend, but I knew him. Or I knew where he come from.

I went to school with John Kenney and got to know his wife, Susan, after they were married. When Ellen died, though, I stayed away because I felt funny by myself, with them settin' there and talkin' about all their plans. I just felt kinda bad, you know?

Anyway, I was out o' town when the baby come but I heard from Mrs. Hershey—she delivered it—that Susan just wasn't strong enough and the comin' was long and it wore her out so's when the baby finally did come, Susan died right after.

Mrs. Hershey was still kinda upset about it when she was tellin' me. "I looked at that poor little thing and I thought,

'How am I goin' to tell Mr. Kenney?' But I didn't have to 'cause I heard him close the door and I knew he must have seen her die. And I went to him and I said, 'Mr. Kenney, I'm so sorry.' But all he said was, 'Where's the baby?' and I said, 'Well, he's layin' in there beside his mother, Mr. Kenney, but he don't cry like he should,' and he just looked at me and then got up and went in and stood over the bed lookin' at the two o' them. And I went in and asked him if he wanted me to have one o' the girls nurse the baby but he said no, he'd take care of everything and I tried to tell him but he just kept sayin' that he'd take care of everything. Well, you know, Mr. Bennet, I couldn't just leave that baby there like that without any milk, so I went and heated some milk and put a little honey in it and went in and told Mr. Kenney what I done. But he didn't even look at me. Just kept starin' at the two o' them on the bed, so I left. And I know for a fact that that baby didn't die no natural death, Mr. Bennet. It was killed by its pa."

I didn't want to believe Mrs. Hershey, 'cause I knew John Kenney and I knew he wouldn't have killed no baby, 'specially not one of his own blood, but Mary Hershey didn't usually exaggerate.

The only time I ever saw John now was when he come to town for supplies and then he never come to my store—always went to the one across the street. I thought a long time about goin' to see him but then I decided that I'd best stick to my business and let John stick to his.

The town had five good years and then the luck gave out. Weather hit us bad and the crops weren't enough for the people they had to feed. I run the business on credit that year, and just barely made it.

Little by little, though, the town got back on its feet and the three bad years were forgotten with the first good harvest.

People don't do much socializin' when they're hungry, but after the harvest they started comin' out again. They'd come into the store just to talk and we'd all catch up on what was happenin' to our neighbors.

John't come into town less and less these past eight years until finally nobody'd seen him except for once or twice a

year. He kept pretty much to himself.

It was when the boy first started comin' in that I got to wonderin'. Like I said, he was horrible ugly and his body looked like it didn't fit itself right, but that wasn't what bothered me. He acted so funny. Settin' in the chair, hummin' and stretchin' and never sayin' a word. Just starin'. And nobody knowin' where he'd come from. It was odd all right.

John come into the store one mornin' about eight. He stood in the doorway a second, lookin' around, and then strode toward me, not takin' his eyes from my face. I smiled and said "hadn't it been a long time?" and he said, "Yes, a real long time," and then he looked around for a while and said I had a real nice store and I said that I tried to make it as nice as I could. "Well, you certainly done a good job of it," and I said, "Thanks a lot" and then we stood there a while before he mentioned Susan.

He said how he missed her and how he was sure I knew how it was and I said yes, I did, and then he told me about how he'd buried Susan and the baby together. He was lookin' at me real careful and talkin' fast. "The baby died the next morning so I put them both in the same box and buried it out back." He waited a minute, and then faced me. "That baby wasn't right. I knew there was somethin' not right about him. . ." He looked away.

I didn't know what to say so I just waited. He was pacin' around the store. "People can't understand a baby that ain't right, nor a man neither. They laugh at him." He stopped. "You know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I know what you mean, John," I said. And now I did. "But there's nothin' you can do about it, is there?" I was standin' beside him. "If the baby don't die, you can't kill it, can you?"

He looked away and then shook his head and whispered somethin' that I didn't hear before he said, "You'll have to come out to the farm sometime," he was facin' me again, "and see how things have changed." I said I'd like to and then we shook hands and he walked over to the store across the street.

The boy came in about 9:30.