

Clem Johnson's General Store

VIRGINIA COXEN

"I reckon that that there buildin' across the way jes' looks like a pile of old boards to you folks," the old man at the filling station said as he wiped the car windows.

I looked across the road and saw what seemed to be a dingy, run-down loafing place for all the idlers and farmers of the community.

"Well, it ain't what you're a-thinkin', ma'am. That store is Clem's whole life. See, you can tell it's Clem's store 'cause it says so right up over the door in big red letters, Clem Johnson's General Store. 'Course, now the sign's kinda faded 'cause it ain't been painted for nearly twenty years or so, jes' like the whole dern buildin'. Clem's been a-managin' that store ever since his pa died when Clem was eighteen. It used to be a right-nice lookin' place."

"Clem's planned for years to re-do the old place and have it painted and repaired and then three years ago when he had the money all saved, his barn burned clean to the ground in the middle of the night. Nobody knows what caused it. Then Maud, that's Clem's wife, took sick and she's been abed ever since."

I slipped quietly out of the backseat of the car as the old man continued to tell the others about Clem, and I walked slowly towards the store. Indeed, it was badly in need of repair. The unpainted frame structure was covered with tin and cardboard signs advertising tobacco and bread, and on the left side in front of the building was a shabby bench which was the favorite spot for gossiping farmers. The door creaked as I opened it. I stepped inside the door and the room was quite dark, and it had a musty odor. As

my eyes became used to the darkness, I could distinguish an old, black iron stove in the center of the room. To my left were boxes, crates and sacks. They were as drab and plain as the rest of the store. Farther back was a counter with crates of eggs and a sort of old yellow scales. The whole side of the room was lined with cans; they looked lazy and bored, as if they were to stay there forever. On the other side of the room was an old glass counter that contained thread, shoe laces, flower seeds, combs, pocket knives, and ten-cent cosmetics. Hung on a thin wire above the counter were farmers' straw hats and red bandana handkerchiefs. Two old men were sitting on a wicker settee that was leaning against the wall. One got up and came towards me and I knew it was Clem.

"Is there somethin' I can do for you, ma'am?"

I had just gone into the store out of curiosity and I hardly knew what to say. "I — I just wondered if you had any candy," I managed to say.

"No, ma'am, I ain't. It's hard to get these days with the war and all."

I thanked him and walked across the uneven and somewhat sloping floor into the sunlight.

When I got back to the car, the man was again slowly wiping the window. I slipped into the car and heard him say, "Yep, like I said before, that store is everything Clem's got. It jes' kinda reminds me of Clem's life. When he was a young man it was a fine lookin' store, but now it's gettin' to be old and run-down, jes' like Clem; but he's a fine man. Yes, sir, he sure is."