

# KENNY'S NEIGHBORHOOD

BY JEAN ALICIA ELSTER

**M**rs. Elster, Kenny died yesterday evening. Could you bake something and take it to the Campbell house before the funeral on Friday?"

*Kenny is dead.* The words resounded in my ears. *Kenny is dead.*

Kenny was the first neighbor my husband Bill and I met when we moved into our new home after our marriage. Actually, "met" is too formal a word. We had driven up and parked in the street in front of Kenny's house (there is no parking on our side of the street), and there on his porch stood Kenny. He looked about 65, had on old-but-clean overalls, running shoes, and a baseball cap, and from his clenched teeth hung an unlit cigar, soggy at the mouth end.

He stared at us as we got out. He stared as we unloaded sleeping bags and lamps from the trunk. And he stared at Bill and his outstretched hand. Bill's greeting went unacknowledged.

We had moved here because Bill was a minister and was starting a church in this formerly working-class neighborhood—now just another decrepit corner of Detroit, filled with drugs and alcohol, violent crime, and prostitution. Many of the old homeowners had either died or moved south. New renters filled their spaces, bringing with them vice and self-destruction. So people were leery of opening up to newcomers, even to a pastor and his wife.

Still, our block had been spared decay. Our neighbors were mostly retired homeowners who had lived here 25 or 30 years. There was a certain stability to the neighborhood. The other unusual thing was that they were all Christians. Block club meetings began with prayer, testimony, and singing. In the early dawn hours I could see lights in the homes of Mrs. Keys and Mrs. Harper. Their telephone prayer network had begun.

These were people who looked after one another. Part of that care meant saving old newspapers for Kenny. He would collect them from our front porches once a month and load them onto a pickup truck for transport to the refuse station. With his payment he would purchase one fat, hand-rolled cigar. It would last him a whole month.

Kenny looked after us, too. He would knock on our door to tell us when our parking space was again available. Sometimes I would leave cookies or a slice of gingerbread on top of the newspaper stack as an extra-special thanks. And even though his mental capabilities were on a par with an 8-year-old, Kenny had more sense than many a wasted addict born with full mental faculties.

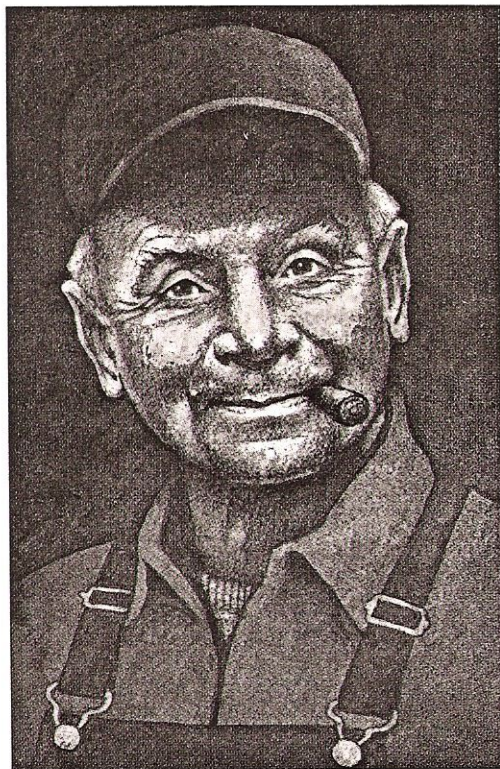
After four years of living on that block I still marveled at the power of Jesus to keep away the ele-

ments of destruction that tore apart surrounding blocks. I continued to be awed by these stalwart disciples who led their lives in dignity and peace. But even after four years, Bill and I felt not only new to the block but new to the task of life as our neighbors had lived it—enduring and prospering for decades.

That's why the phone call announcing Kenny's death shocked me. It wasn't just the news. It was also the request. These neighbors had welcomed us, invited us to join the block club, and chatted with us freely and with warmth across backyard fences. But Bill and I knew we

were still babes in the flock. I would watch them hurry down the street, a look of concern on their faces, because someone's spouse had just died or taken a turn for the worse. I would watch them carry steaming casseroles to feed family and friends after "family hour" and funerals. We had not yet penetrated that inner circle of care.

**S**o, after expressing my sorrow at Kenny's death and announcing my willingness to help, I realized how special this moment was. Kenny's death saddened us because he represented the vitality and endurance of this block. His steady presence had transformed him into a timeless character. Now we were being asked not only to help, but to mourn him as they mourned; to care as they cared. They were acknowledging that our roots were planted firmly in good soil, that our zeal for God wouldn't just blow away at the first sign of turmoil. And as the apostle Paul was finally accepted into the Christian community by Barnabas' intercession, we were accepted into *our* community because of Kenny's death.



He looked about 65, had on old-but-clean overalls, running shoes, and a baseball cap.