

The Two-Headed Baby

By Harry Steven Ackley

Mrs. Forsythe had consented to allow David to go to county fair with the Durkee family, but she did not relish the idea of turning her son over to them, even if it was only for a few hours.

As she turned into the driveway of the Durkee house, Mrs. Forsythe tightly gripped the steering wheel of the families' brand new 1964 Ford Country Squire. The afternoon sunlight caught her eyes as she made the turn and her well-made face crinkled up, as if she smelled something putrid. Mrs. Forsythe had attended a tea that afternoon and was wearing a red dress, with a pillbox hat and white gloves. She was a thin woman with refined features. At that moment, she just looked mean.

"Now if they try and get you to go to church, you just tell them, no thank you. You have your own church to go to," said Mrs. Forsythe. The Forsythes were from a long line of Methodists; the Durkees belonged to one of those Pentecostal churches where they were always trying to convert everyone. Mrs. Forsythe resented the Durkees trying to get David to go along with them on Sundays.

"Aw, Mom!" said David.

"Aw nothing. You just do as I say."

The big station wagon came to a stop and David exploded out to meet his friend Arlon who had been waiting on the front steps. The two boys quickly disappeared around the back of the house together.

"Hey Linda, how you been?" came a slow twangy voice from the direction of the front porch.

Mrs. Forsythe squinted to see where the voice was coming from and then finally made out the shape of Mrs. Durkee's big silhouette veiled behind the screen door.

"I've been well, Betty. How about yourself?"

"The good Lord takes care," said Mrs. Durkee, as she opened the door and motioned for Mrs. Forsythe to come in.

The inside of the Durkee house was filled with the smell of chicken fried steak. Mr. Durkee, a large man with an oversized forehead that made his face look like a lightbulb, sat at the kitchen counter, waiting for his supper. He nodded silently at Mrs. Forsythe as she entered the house.

"You weren't planning on feeding the boys, were you, Betty?" asked Mrs. Forsythe. "I already gave David something to eat before we left."

"Oh, why yes," answered Mrs. Durkee. "I thought we'd all have supper together. Didn't I tell ya?"

"No."

"Oh, I am sorry. I just figured, if I didn't give the boys something to eat, why they'd be munchin' down a bunch of garbage at the fair," said Mrs. Durkee. "Maybe Davey will still have room for a little something, huh?"

Mrs. Forsythe did not like her son being called Davey. She'd made that very clear in the past. However, at the moment, she did not wish to broach the subject.

"I don't know, Betty, I suppose you'll have to ask him and see," said Mrs. Forsythe. "So you think you'll be back around ten o'clock?"

"Oh yeah, but don't trouble yourself to come back out. We'll drop Davey off on our way home."

"That's awfully far out of your way, Betty. You only live a half mile from the fairgrounds. I'm all the way back in town."

"Ain't no trouble at all," interjected Mr. Durkee in a powerful baritone voice. "We'll bring him on by at ten."

With that settled, Mrs. Forsythe saw no reason to stay around. So, after she bade the Durkees a quick and courteous farewell, she turned to go. As she did, the Durkee's five year-old son Cloy came screaming at her from out of nowhere. He ran right past Mrs. Forsythe, jostling her and causing her hat to fall to the floor.

Cloy grabbed his mother around her waist, leaning his head into her side while fixing his gaze on the stranger in the room.

"Cloy!" barked Mr. Durkee. "That ain't nice. What's wrong with you, boy?"

Cloy clung even tighter to his mother, never taking his eyes off Mrs. Forsythe, who picked up her hat and smoothed the veil of netting that hung over the front.

"Now, Tucker, he's alright. See, he's just not used to Linda, that's all. He musta been hidin' just outside the front door." Mrs. Durkee turned to Mrs. Forsythe and smiled with a doughy grin. "When he saw you comin' towards him, he musta got scared."

Cloy pointed a wet finger at Mrs. Forsythe and said, "Who's that?"

"Why, that's Mrs. Forsythe," said Mrs. Durkee. "Davey's mom. You remember Mrs. Forsythe. They live around the corner from Arlon's school."

"Could you please refer to him as David?" asked Mrs. Forsythe. "He doesn't like being called Davey."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Yes, you mentioned that before," said Mrs. Durkee.

Still staring at Mrs. Forsythe, Cloy breathed heavily through his nose, green snot flagging from his nostrils in rhythm with each breath. Cloy's head jutted forward from his mother's side and he stuck his tongue out at Mrs. Forsythe.

"Cloy!" yelled Mr. Durkee, getting up from his chair and lunging at the boy.

Cloy ran screaming down the hall to the back of the house. Mr. Durkee began to undo his belt and went after him. "You come here, boy!"

A minute later, a swatting sound came from the back of the house. In between swats was a high-pitched yelling. Mrs. Durkee pointed her large dopey nose towards the hallway. "Sounds like Cloy's gettin' himself a lickin'!"

Mrs. Forsythe stood in silence. She had been all ready to make her escape, now she felt obliged to stay until the commotion ceased.

Mr. Durkee reappeared and Cloy came running from behind him, his eyes running with tears. He bolted towards the front door, but Mrs. Durkee stepped in front of him, heading him off.

"Now where do you think you're going? Supper's ready," said Mrs. Durkee, using her big hips to corral the boy back to her husband. Mr. Durkee snatched the boy by his armpits and forced his wiggling body into one of the dining room chairs.

"I'm awful sorry about all his, Linda," said Mrs. Durkee.

"It's OK. I —"

Mrs. Forsythe was interrupted by the sound of the screen door opening and closing with a loud WHAP. The two older boys came rushing into the house.

"Say, Linda, I got an idea," said Mrs. Durkee. "Why don't you stay for supper? Then you can go out to the fair along with us."

There was nothing Linda Forsythe wanted more than to grab her son and get away from the Durkees. She and David could go the fair by themselves, or to a movie — anything to escape.

She watched as David and Arlon quickly sat down and scooted themselves up to the table, both wearing broad smiles. *If she went along, at least she'd be able to keep an eye on things.*

"Well, I'll have to call Bill to see if he needs me at home tonight," said Mrs. Forsythe. "Come to think of it, it might be nice to get out and see some of the exhibits."

"Yeah, Betty's got some of her stewed tomaters put up in Ball jars out there this year. Won an honorable mention," said Mr. Durkee.

"Aw Tucker, shame on you. Why do ya have to go and tell all?" Mrs. Durkee said with a blush.

Big farm machines and the raucous crowd greeted the little entourage as they walked past the entrance gate and towards the great midway, the boys taking it all in with wonder. Mr. Durkee gave each of his sons three dollars to spend. Not to be shown up, Mrs. Forsythe matched the sum, which, when added to amount he'd been given at home, gave David a total of eight dollars.

As the fantasyland of roaring contraptions, whizzing lights, and tent-covered *dime toss* and *three-for-a-quarter* games opened before them, David and Arlon could not contain themselves. The two boys bolted away. Cloy immediately tried to follow but was restrained by his mother's pudgy hands clutching tightly on his shoulders. In frustration, he socked his mother hard in the leg. Mrs. Durkee let go of her grip and Cloy ran after his brother. His father gave chase and caught up with the three boys at a cotton candy booth. Mrs. Durkee was left hunched over in pain, rubbing her thigh.

"Are you ok, Betty? Can you walk?" asked Mrs. Forsythe.

"Mmm ... oh, I'll be fine. He's just a little mischief maker, that's all." Mrs. Durkee looked up. Her eyes were wide and sad. "It's just cause of his mind, ya know. Cloy's got himself a weak mind — one of God's blessed ones. He can't help what he does."

Mrs. Forsythe had heard the story before. David had told it to her time and time again — how Cloy was always being let off the hook because of his being slow. Cloy would come up behind David and box his ears or pinch him real hard and David wouldn't be able to retaliate or defend himself because Cloy 'didn't know no better.'

Mrs. Forsythe didn't buy it. *Why couldn't they just reason with the boy? Why couldn't they set rules and guidelines for the boy and teach him to respect them?*

A few minutes later Mr. Durkee and the three boys returned, each with a big poof of cotton candy in hand. Cloy's rage had been placated and the little unit was once again herded together.

Well, what d'ya all wanna see first?" asked Mr. Durkee.

"We wanna go on the rides!" shouted the two older boys in unison.

"Yeah, the rides," said Cloy.

"You're too young to be goin' on any of them rides, Cloy," said Mrs. Durkee in a stern voice.

Cloy began to whimper.

"Hush now!" said Mr. Durkee. He then bent over and put his face right up to Cloy's. Now you can't go on any of them rides, Cloy. You're only five. Them others, Arlon and his friend, is nine. They's bigger than you."

The bear-like man then moved over to his wife, getting close to her so Cloy wouldn't hear. "Betty, why don't you and Mrs. Forsythe take Cloy and go and look at your booths and so on, and I'll take the two older one on the rides." He mumbled in a low dark voice, dipping his head as he spoke, as if to say, "This is what we WILL do. This IS the plan."

"I think that's wise," answered Mrs. Durkee. "To take him along with you would only cause trouble. He'd be tempted to try and hop on all them rides and just be throwin' fits all night long.

"Cloy, you come along with us," ordered Mrs. Durkee.

In the Will Rogers memorial exhibit hall, as the two women viewed the dried flower arrangements, Mrs. DeeDee Asmuth, a church friend of the Durkees, came up and said hello.

"Why howdy, DeeDee! Where's Joe? You here all by yourself?" asked Mrs. Durkee.

"Joe's home. I came out to work alongside Billie Crandall in her patchwork booth. Mrs. Asmuth then cast an appraising eye on Mrs. Forsythe.

"DeeDee, this here's Mrs. Forsythe. Her boy's a friend of Arlon's."

"Howdy," said Mrs. Asmuth. She wiped her hands against her barrel-shaped thighs and extended one to Mrs. Forsythe.

"Hello," said Mrs. Forsythe, taking the hand and gently clasping it as though it was made of cigar ash.

With the formalities over, Mrs. Durkee interjected once again, "So how's Joe's tomatoes doing, DeeDee? Has Joe been able to get himself some Mexicans to do his pickin'? I remember you mentioning it to keep it in our prayers at last Sunday service. It's terrible how them braceros is starting to unionize and all."

Mrs. Durkee turned to Mrs. Forsythe, "DeeDee's Joe farms near the basin. He had a bad time getting workers this season cause of the Mexicans striking."

Mrs. Forsythe had nothing to add to the conversation about Mexican farmworkers. She was a Kennedy Democrat and supported the workers. But she wasn't about to let her true feelings be known at this point. She simply wanted the night to end. She politely turned up the corners of her little mouth and nodded at Mrs. Asmuth as if she cared — as if she fully understood her plight.

Mrs. Asmuth smiled back, then turned to Mrs. Durkee and said, "Yeah, we was in a fix for a while. But we got ourselves some new boys last Tuesday. We're OK now."

"Oh, praise God!" said Mrs. Durkee with genuine relief.

"Yes, that's right. Praise his name."

The two women turned to Mrs. Forsythe for some additional spiritual affirmation. She responded only by widening her smile and nodding.

"Well Jesus did it," added Mrs. Asmuth. They's Guatemalan boys. Hard up, I guess. But Jesus brought 'em in."

A mental picture of Jesus leading a train of impoverished Guatemalans onto the Asmuth ranch formed in Mrs. Forsythe's mind — Jesus the labor contractor.

"Say, where is Arlon anyhow?" asked Mrs. Asmuth. "Where's Tucker and Cloy?"

"Oh, the boys is off with Tucker going on rides. Except for Cloy. He's... Now where is he?"

The three women all looked around in the immediate vicinity for Cloy. Finally, Mrs. Durkee spied her son ripping apart cattails from a nearby dried flower arrangement. The cattail fluff was being scattered everywhere.

"CLOY!" Mrs. Durkee hollered as she shot after him. The boy screamed and ran away from her, knocking over a card table of dolls made out of tree bark.

"Cloy, you come here this instant! I'm gonna whip your little bottom."

As Mrs. Durkee continued to give chase, Mrs. Asmuth turned to Mrs. Forsythe and shook her head piteously; her big eyes brooding doglike in their sagging sockets. "That poor boy. He's just one of the simple ones of God." She shook her head even more gravely. "Ya know, at first they thought it might have been a demon in him. They tried casting it out but it just didn't take. Then they maybe figured he was just simple."

After the women had viewed all the various exhibits, they went off to look for Mr. Durkee and the older boys. They found them at the far end of the midway, sitting on a bench. Mr. Durkee looked weary and disheveled. The deep folds of his face were all bunched up and he looked like an old man about to nod off during a long sermon.

"Why, Tucker. You look as if you'd died and gone to heaven," said Mrs. Durkee with an amused tone.

"We went on the Zipper and the Rock-O-Planes!" shouted David.

"You did?" asked Mrs. Forsythe with a mixture of excitement and concern.

"Yeah," answered Arlon. And now we wanna go see the two-headed baby. Can we go, Ma?"

"Yeah, can we?" repeated David.

The WHAT?" asked Mrs. Forsythe.

The boys simultaneously pointed past the woman to a tent made of red and yellow striped canvas. Above the entrance was a large sign that read 2 HEADED BABY. Below the words was a picture of a sinister looking nurse with dagger-like fingernails standing behind a two-headed baby. The diapered baby sat on a table, a grotesque cross between a hydra and a Gerber label.

"Oh my God," gasped Mrs. Forsythe. *There was no way her child was going to go inside that tent.* But before she could say a thing, Mrs. Durkee was giving her approval.

"I'm too tired to take 'em, Betty," said Mr. Durkee. "Ya mind if I just sit here while you go on in?"

"Betty, I don't know about letting the boys go into a freak show," said Mrs. Forsythe. "After all, they're only nine years old."

Mrs. Durkee looked at the two boys. "Well now, that never occurred to me."

"Aw, Mom. C'mon," pleaded David. "We already saw the woman who turns into a gorilla."

Mrs. Forsythe shot a stern glance at Mr. Durkee, then turned to her son. "Well, I'm certainly not going to give you the money for it. After all those rides and candy, I doubt if you have anything left."

"I have enough," said David. "Remember that other money you gave me before we left home." And with that, the boys got up and began to amble in the direction of the tent. Cloy followed.

"Now hold on boys! Cloy! You boys wait a minute," snapped Mrs. Durkee. "Maybe it'd be best if Cloy stayed here with you, Tucker. After all, he is a young'un."

Cloy began to cry and stomp his feet. "No! ... I never get to go! I never get to go!" he wailed.

"Aw, let him go on in, Betty," said Mr. Durkee. "He's had to tag along with you gals all night long. Let him go in with the other boys."

Of course Mrs. Forsythe had no intention of going in herself. But as the three boys and Mrs. Durkee began moving away, and she realized she was being left alone with Mr. Durkee, she followed. She justified the action by telling herself that, if David were to see something appalling, or that he wouldn't understand, it'd be better if she were on hand to explain.

At the front of a group of about fifteen people, the five of them stood, silent and waiting. Facing them was a high narrow table and on top of the table, near the edge was a drum-sized object with a blue towel draped over the top. On either side of the object were two, flat, glass cases in which yellowed news clippings and photos were arranged, giving the history of the attraction.

The man who had sold them the tickets outside was a plump balding man, about fifty years old. He wore thick glasses and had a kind, even childish-looking face. It was he who came through the back of the tent and stood behind the table. He flicked a couple of overhead switches and, as he did, the lights where the crowd stood went dim. At the same time, a bare lightbulb came on above the table with object covered by the blue towel.

He lifted the towel.

"This is a two-headed baby. It is a real baby. It was born with two heads. His name is Terrell and Adrian Devorak and he was born in 1942 and lived for approximately two hours and forty minutes. He went on with his well-rehearsed yarn, accenting the same syllables he had accented a thousand times before.

As he spoke, the man looked down at a huge glass jar. He had an almost endearing expression on his face. The jar was on a Lazy Susan. He turned it slowly so it could be seen from all sides.

The baby was a grayish-yellow color, probably affected by the light and the liquid in the jar. At first glance it looked like a big wad of old chewing gum. The heads and the arms were curled in

towards its chest and the only features that could be clearly seen were its tint feet and the raw purplish pigtail of what was left of its umbilical cord. Little pieces of flesh that had broken off of the child were dancing around in the formaldehyde as the man kept turning the jar.

Mrs. Forsythe stood stone-faced. *What a vile thing to do for one's livelihood*, she thought. *How could anyone live with that thing?* She grew angry for having allowed the Durkees to talk her into this.

Suddenly Cloy spoke up. "What's that?" he asked.

Mrs. Durkee bent over son and spoke softly. "Why, that's a little boy, Cloy. It's got two heads."

The man, now finished speaking, kept turning the infant in a jar. Its heads came around to face the front again, and there he stopped. The solution, still swishing from all its turning, caused the small lips to move as if they were trying to speak.

A monster's roar erupted from Cloy as he lunged for the jar and pulled it down onto the hard earth floor where it shattered and spilled its contents. The formaldehyde soaked into the ground leaving, amidst the glistening shards of glass, a twisted little heap of gray bulbous matter.

The man shouted and rushed from behind his table, knelt down beside the child and began to weep. He cried, "It's my baby. You done in my baby! Oh Jesus, my baby's gone." He moved some of the pieces of glass and found a small hand.

On the way home that night Mrs. Forsythe was silent and remote. The big station wagon moved along quietly as hot air blew in through an open window.

When they got to the street where their house was, Mrs. Forsythe, her eyes gazing blindly in front of her, missed the turn.