

# STARTLING

*stories*

Combined with **THRILLING WONDER STORIES** and **FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE**

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The body in the box  
was my own . . .

# I Like a Happy Ending

By LESLIE WALTHAM

**M**ONDAY, Sept. 3, 2037. . . .  
September, the third. Just four months to the day since he left.

God knows, I have done the best I could to be like the rest of them. Those capable, organized war wives. Producing tea sandwiches, and flower arrangements, and conversation, and sometimes babies. Didn't I try? These sixteen rotten weeks?

But for me, it's just a vacuum. Days

filled with the shadows of children I don't have. Lonely meals. Chaste, empty hours. It's almost like a disease of some sort.

And now I'm beginning to have symptoms.

This morning I went out to get the fission pellets. After loading two of them into the house tubes, and putting the last one into my Chevrodone, I took the lead shielding back, and tried to jam

it into the box. Something was in there.

It was a rock. Just a pretty cairngorm rock. Transparent and sun riddled.

The mailcopter shooshed in circles of sound over my head. "Good mornin', Miz Tully."

I tried to look up, but I couldn't. A stiletto of light, imprisoned in the rock, had harpooned out, holding me. A feeling of well-being spilled over me. Waves of it.

And I felt Mike nearby. It was as if he had come up quietly from behind and girdled my waist in his arms. I could even feel the muscles tighten on my ribs, moving. It was the strangest sensation. I wanted to stop right there, and never move again. Never lose that awareness that he was here, with me, home where I want him.

"Good mornin', Miz Tully!"

"*Miz Tully!*" The voice came to me muffled in layers of tissue. I had to wrench myself to answer.

"Oh—I didn't hear you, Mr. Markham."

"Well, I cal'clate you didn't. You sure were concentrated like."

"Yes." He had on his Monday morning smile. "I was . . . I . . ."

"You feel poorly, ma'am?"

"No. . . ." But everything real was so dull. The trees, making that mangy fringe against the sky. "No, I'm just fine."

"You look a mite squeamish. Not so sassy as usual."

I smiled. "It's nothing."

"The way you was standin' there. If I didn't know I ain't let the mail down yet, I reckon you was reading somethin' right interestin'." He looked quizzical. "Nothing give you a start, did it?"

"No, there's no news. I . . . I found a rock." It sounded so silly.

The rotor song washed my words away from him. "You what, ma'am?"

"A rock. A *rock*. I found a **ROCK**."

Something about Mr. Markham's face closed in. "I see," he muttered. "You got one of them things too, huh?"

"One of what things?" He quickened his blades and lifted away from me. Deliberately. The noise fluttered my ears.

"Cain't hear you, Miz Tully."

"I just wanted to know . . . please! *Mr. Markham!*"

The machine disappeared skyward. A giant dragon fly, swooping and dipping and swooping, over the suburban homes.

And I stood there with the sun shining on my letters and my rock.

What did he mean? "One of them things, *too?*"

**T**UESDAY, the fourth, three A.M. . . .

I just woke up. I know where that rock came from. It belongs to Bobby. Mrs. Steadman told me he's always collecting something or other. Tadpoles, or dead flies, or dismantled robot parts.

It's very likely that the thing belongs to him and he stuck it in the box to tease me.

I must give it back to him in the morning.

At any rate, I'll be glad to get it out of the house. It's down in the viewing room. I don't remember putting it there, but I have an urge to go down and look at it.

Imagine. I'm in my bedroom. Twenty feet away. Separated by almost eighteen inches of plastistone and mentorium and eternomet.

And I can *feel* it there. . . .

**S**AME day . . . lunch time. . . .

That's funny.

Fifteen minutes ago the front door slammed. Bobby banged in, all dust and hurry.

"I'm in here," I called.

Crash, boom, boom, up the hall ramp. "Ma wants something."

"Over at your house?"

"Nope." He pushed a liquid recipient into my hand. "The coffee tube isn't working, and it's coming through all mixed up with the onion soup. She wants to know if she can borrow some until the circuitman can come, cause they're not working today, and she's going crazy without her morning coffee, and thank you very much."

He clattered at my heels into the kitchen. "How's the milk tube?"

"It's got gin in it, and Ma won't let

me drink any. I hope the circuitman don't ever come."

I laughed, and leaning against the counter top, drew a draught of coffee. "Oh, by the way," I said carefully, "I found something that belongs to you."

"My kite?"

"No, a rock."

I saw him look down at his hands. "A yellow one?"

"Yes." It was a good, *deep* breath. "Then it *does* belong to you."

"No, it doesn't."

"But you knew it was yel—"

"They all are. But that one's yours. I got mine." He fished one grimy hand into his overjacket and came up with a chip of sun.

I just looked at it for a minute, not saying anything.

"It's like I told you. Yours is yours. We're not supposed to have but one."

"Who isn't?"

"Everybody."

"Everybody *where*?"

"All over."

"On this street? . . . or farther?" He fidgeted one foot over the other, scraping away at the leather. "Do *all* the children have them?"

"Sure. And all the grown-ups too. Only some of them don't know it yet."

"Oh? Why not?"

"Cause. Cause big people don't believe in stuff like that. They tell you stories about Peter Pan and stuff like that, only they're laughing so hard they don't give it a chance to work."

"And that makes them harder to find."

"Sure."

I could hear the egg-beater noise of the school plane as it circled near the Carson house.

"Golly!" he yelled. "I'll be late . . . ; I gotta get this back to Ma, and. . . ."

"Wait!" I called, running after him. "Just tell me . . . what are they for?" I asked.

"Why, for *wishing*," he answered, staring at me.

He said it as if I had asked him what a piece of cake was for.

"Why, for *eating*," he would have said.

ABOUT two o'clock. . . .

I just called Edna. She has a pre-school youngster. At that age, they ought to be approachable. And she lives in the Mastering section. That gives it plenty of distance.

"Have you gotten yours yet?" I asked.

"Now, honestly, Carrie. You'll have to qualify that remark a bit. My what?"

"Your *rock*."

There was a dead silence at the other end of the artery.

"No, but I know whose head I can find one in. Listen, dear. You've been alone too much. Why don't you whip over and spend the night with us? Tom and I would love to have you."

And I'm going. I'm going to find out about this thing.

It's ridiculous, but I looked at that stone after Bobby left, and I could swear that both of them are as alike as two peas in a pod. Not just made out of the same material, with little differences here and there. But every angle, every plane, every shading of color . . . exactly alike.

They're duplicates.

*Exact duplicates.*

STILL Tuesday . . . late. . . .

I got here about seven-thirty. Tom met me after I ported the Chevrodron.

"How're things tieing off?" he welcomed me.

"Oh, the knots are tight enough. I hope."

"Like a drink? Well seasoned, or just waved under the nose?"

"No, not tonight, thanks." I waited until Edna came down and then I told them the whole story. They looked at one another and at me just the way I knew they would. They laughed a little, and then a lot, and said sure I could ask Binky about it if I wanted to.

She stood in front of us, a raw five-years-old and shiny with soap.

"Acourse I founded mine. Yesters morning in the washmouth."

"In the mouthwash?"

"Yup. And it works good too. Just like they said it would." She nodded a vigorous testimonial.

"How does it work? Mommie and I don't know."

"Oh, just neat. You look in it and want after something, and what you want after comes."

"You mean it materializes?"

"Hummm?"

"Does the thing you 'want after' become solid . . . real . . . in your hands?"

She puzzled for a moment. "Nopè. I don't think so. Cause yesters when I wanted after that doll, it comed. And now it's went."

Tom leaned forward suddenly. "Was that when you were in the yard? When I had to go out and bounce you one to get you to answer?"

"Yup."

Tom's eyes rimed Edna over the child's head.

"Oh, hang on to your liver," she said. "This is kid stuff."

"Yes? Well you should have had a look at her. Standing like a statue while I yelled. I had to come down from the second tier, and she still hadn't moved."

Edna pulled Binky's flushed attention on to her lap: "Look, Sweetie, Daddy and I won't be mad if you and the kids are playing a joke on us. We just want the truth."

"Oh yes!" She approved heartily.

"Somebody—maybe Julie or Meg—is giving these rocks around, and you're making believe with them. That's it, isn't it?"

"Hummm?" She wriggled to her feet.

"Pay attention. The kids are doing this, aren't they?"

"Nooooo."

"Then why don't big people have them?"

"They do, but they don't see things so good." Edging for escape.

"Does the nursery school teacher have one?"

"Yup."

"And your dancing instructor?"

"Yup, and the 'pres'dent, and Hoppa-plane O'Leary—" she bounced on the elevation ramp, and it carried her off, pointing one fat finger—"and you . . . and you . . . and you."

Her belt trailed pinkly behind her, leaving silence in its wake.

Edna cleared her throat and recrossed her legs.

"They could have gotten them from a rockpile somewhere."

"Some rockpile," said Tom.

"But it doesn't make sense," she protested.

"Why does everything always have to make sense? Just suppose . . . just figure it!" His face was the color of concrete.

"All right. Go ahead."

He leaned his elbows on his knees and ticked off the items. "Carrie would have Mike home with her. You'd have your new entertainment room. Old Wellbourne would talk to his dead daughter. Mrs. Davis would go to the tropics. Father Shiffon would build his church. Mr. Crowner wouldn't be deaf . . ."

Edna laughed. "And where would the psychiatrists be? No more frustrations! Every fantasy come true! Is that bad?"

"But what if it caught you?"

"Caught you?"

"Yes. People are the way they are . . . they keep trying because they have something to reach for. If they get it too soon, what's to keep them from just sitting down, and . . . no, it's too easy."

She laughed again. Tom didn't.

"Daddy!" The speaking tube spluttered.

"Binky, I thought you were in bed."

"Yup, I know. But Daddy. . ."

"What?"

"I wanna tell you. Mommie's is in the drier chute in the basement, and yours is in the airboat. Goonite!" Click. Click.

What we talked about after that I don't remember. I do know that Edna excused herself to do something in the kitchen. If she hadn't stumbled on the ramp, I wouldn't have realized she was going down into the basement.

Tom was so busy getting my kit into the guest room he didn't hear it.

"Bury me sitting up, pet," he said as he left me. "I'm always at a disadvantage when I'm on my back."

I watched him as he went straight from the house to the little hangar they

have in the yard. I could see his flash making fans of light back and forth. Then it stopped about waist high and focused on something in his hand.

He didn't move a muscle until the dog from next door started barking and pulling at his trouser leg.

I timed him. It was well over twelve minutes.

I'm getting frightened. . . .

WEDNESDAY, the fifth. . . .

I got back quite early.

Everything is going wrong with the house. The pellets weren't delivered this morning. I pushed the "egg" lever and the "toast" lever and they just popped up again. Neither did the mail come. I waited outside for Mr. Markham for an hour, but he never showed up.

It's a beautiful day . . . the sun runs down the buildings like melted butter—but there are no children about. Just one, up on the corner, where there are usually about a dozen.

I waited until noon for the house to adjust, and then I called up.

"Necessity Service?"

"Yes?" a tired voice answered.

"This is Tully, 314W36. The food dispensers don't seem to be delivering."

"Oh yes. I'm sorry, but the rigger from your section isn't in today."

"Couldn't you put another one on it? I'm going to need some things soon."

"I'm sorry, but the riggers are not in."

"All of them?"

"Well, quite a few. We're really very rushed. About one third of the men are out, and we're doing the best we can. I have you on the list and we'll get to you as soon as possible."

"Thank you."

I looped in for another number. It was a business number, but no one answered at all. I looped in a third time.

"Power Dispensary."

"Do you take care of the Z-Y zone?"

"Yes. May I help you?"

"It's about my energy allotment."

"It hasn't been delivered." She didn't even ask. "How many days behind are you?"

"Why . . . just today."

"Oh. Well, you'll have to be patient. We are tracing through on deficiencies now." She sounded about to hang up.

"Just a minute," I said. "Why are your deliveries late?"

"We have a great may of our employees on the sick list at this time."

"Oh, I see. Could you . . . could you tell me what percentage?"

"Really, madam, I have other lines ringing. I suggest you get in touch with Personnel. . . ." And the line went dead.

I looked at the floor for a few moments, and then I tried to get in touch with the Master of Personnel.

He's out sick.

I hope he *is* sick. Oh, how I hope he *is* sick."

THURSDAY, September sixth. . . .

The food gave out this morning, and I had to go in to town. It looks like it does on a holiday. Almost deserted, with just the glare coming down the center of the street at you. And sun all over. Sun on sun, all down the sun-drenched walls.

There was one woman in the store. She was staring red and purple at the same time.

"I'm *not* complaining! But you just said you haven't seen the loading rocket for *two days*." Her face looked very familiar to me.

"That's beyond my control, madam."

"I know, I know, but *why* haven't you seen it?"

"The men must be out on strike."

"No, they're not! It's the same all over . . . !"

"That's right," I couldn't help it. "I tried yesterday. . . ."

"You see! You *see!*" I could have sworn I knew her from someplace. "Don't you see what's happening?"

I felt something inside of me shut itself up. I didn't want to hear it.

"I'm sorry. . . ."

"Don't be like the rest of them. Why can't we talk about it? What's holding us back?"

She shouldn't have said it. I tried to pull away.

"They're slipping away by the hundreds. People are sitting in their houses and smiling at pieces of rock! Please, *talk* to me."

My flesh crawled and I started toward the street.

"Wait!" she cried. "For the love of heaven! If it hasn't started to pull you yet, get help, *quick*. They don't try to keep going any more. There's three on our block already—they couldn't be roused. And there are fewer of us left to do the rousing!"

Part of me leaned out to her, but the thing in me that wanted Mike held me back. We were outside now.

"I begged you. Remember—I begged you! And when you're begging someone else, you won't be alone." She looked helplessly in vacant circles at the vacant lanes, her eyes forged in hysteria. "I can't *stand* this any longer!"

She fell apart all of a sudden. Her words rose to a half scream, and she raced past me. At the corner, a lonely congestion officer stood, directing nothing in particular.

"Put me in jail," she shrieked into his astonished face. "Lock me up so I can't get to it. . . ."

"No, *wait!*" I called to her.

"There's no time to wait. . . ." Her disintegrator lanced into the staring windows of the buildings. One, two, six, ten . . . fragments of glass showered from gaping wounds. "Lock me up. *Lock me up!*"

She stopped as suddenly as she started, and looked at the man, waiting.

He stirred himself as if waking from a dream.

Arms reached toward him, wrists together, palms upward, asking for the handcuffs.

"Please?" she said in a child's voice.

"Come on," he murmured gently as he led her away.

**M**ID-MORNING. . . .

When I came home, I put the rock into the safe. I closed my eyes and reset the numbers on the combination. I can't open it now.

Then I came upramp and stood looking at myself in the reflector. Do you

know why that woman looked so familiar? I have the same horror on my face that she had on hers.

I'm terrified. . . .

*Late afternoon.* . . .

The televue shots are getting spotty. Some of them come through and some of them don't. Of the news commentators, only Dudley Jamison is left. He said that fighting on the fronts has come to a virtual halt.

Before he signed off, he dropped his notes and looked straight into the camera. He looked tired. Awfully tired. Then, when he usually says "Good afternoon," he said something else.

I won't tune in on that channel tomorrow. He won't be there.

*Night.* . . .

The audio signaled this evening. It has been over three days since the last signal, and I could hardly control my hands.

"Yes."

"Mrs. Michael Tully?"

"Yes." My spine was a frozen necklace.

"India calling. Will you hold on please?" The lines sparked and spluttered endlessly.

"Mike?" I asked the spluttering.

And then his voice came through.

"Carrie? Carrie, is that really you?"

"Yes, darling, yes! Oh, I'm so glad!"

"I had to call. I was afraid I wouldn't reach you."

"I'm all right," I said unnecessarily.

He hesitated for a long moment. "Is it *there* too?"

"Yes."

"Bad?"

"I think so. I'm afraid to really look. What about with you?"

"Oh God, Carrie!" His voice broke.

"There isn't anybody left any more."

"Darling. . . ."

"We're the first, out here. Away from home. Wanting things so badly. It was easy for most of them." He stopped suddenly.

"Tell me."

"Make sure first. It isn't pretty."

"It's all right."

He drew a breath. "They were in our packs. All at the same time. We

just put in our hands and took out the supplies and the rocks. As simple as that."

"I know."

"That was on Monday. Just after we got through mangling and bombing and killing and dying . . . God . . . men who hadn't had a cigarette in a week, smoked them by the dozen. Men whose stomachs were blasted all over the ground were eating seven course dinners. Do you understand, Carrie? Do you see?"

"What do you want me to see?"

"That it's so easy . . . what's the use of standing here popping a little fission piston at those mountains of hell? Why should we pull ourselves through mud and filth with our insides trailing out like the slime out of a snail?"

"Mike, don't put yourself in it . . . don't!"

"I've got to. You don't look into wrecked cellars for disembowled churchmen, or walk through a lovely field to stumble over a mangled foetus, and not be touched by it. Try, Carrie, try! A man can get only just so tired."

"But this isn't the way. . . ."

He laughed a little. "Try telling that to some of the men. They have everything they want now. Liquor, food, women—"

"Oh no!"

"Oh yes. You should see them. They sit with their stones in their hands—the ones that are still whole, that is—and they grin. Some with big chested blondes. . . ."

"Mike stop!"

He must have realized what he was doing.

"I'm sorry, Carrie. But I had to let you know. . . ."

I could feel him trying to gather himself together. "Carrie, I've loved you so much. And we've had so many beautiful things together. Haven't we?"

"The most beautiful that could have been. You know it's the same with me."

"Yes, but I wanted to hear you say it. Funny, how you reach for the words, so you can hold them. . . ."

The lines started to gibber.

"I love you, Mike. I love you. I love you . . . hold them close." It got worse.

I could hardly hear him.

"Maybe—maybe I'll call again in a couple of nights. But if I don't, I—well, I want you to know that—"

"Yes, Mike?"

"That it will be with you, Carrie. It will be with you."

"Thank you, darling," I said, and then the line went dead.

**F**RIDAY, September seventh. . . . I fell asleep in the library last night. Sitting next to the audio.

I dreamed I was sitting on something large and oblong, in the middle of a twilight beach. It didn't seem to have any hinges, but there was a small crack around the edge just big enough for me to get my fingernails into. Suddenly, I knew there was something inside that was very precious to me. I had to get it out. I worked at it with all my strength, and after a long while, the lid came loose. It was almost pitch dark, and I had to lean close to see.

There was a body in the box.

It was me.

As I looked, a light came, suffused the face. Then . . . the eyes stayed closed, but the lips opened in a wide grin.

My own scream woke me up. I was standing in front of the safe, tearing at the lock like a wild thing. There was blood all over my hands.

My God, my God, what is happening?

*Eleven o'clock. . . .*

I've got to do something definite. Something besides sitting here and letting that thing pull me.

A few hours ago, I went down the street house by house. Directly across, I couldn't get in. I went to the window and old Mr. Lieber was there. He was sitting in his chair with the newspaper forgotten at his feet. His head was leaning back as if he were resting, but he held something in front of him. I rapped on the pane several times, but he didn't answer.

The Rockwood house is completely empty. The doors are open, and you can walk through the entire place, but there is no one home. Just the curtains,



spinning on the September breeze.

The Marchands are sitting in a chilled circle on the terrace, smiling. They look as if they're playing a game.

Then I decided to fly over to Tom's and Edna's.

All the shutters are down on their house. It is like walking undersea when you go in the front hall. It gives you the feeling you are trespassing on something that is complete and perfect—that shouldn't be disturbed.

They're all in the living room . . . Binky on Edna's lap.

"Tom," I said. I put my hand on his shoulder.

"Tom. *Tom!* TOM!" My voice came back to me, shaky, quavering.

Tom started to lean to one side. Then he slid gently, gently, softly, softly from the couch, buoyed up by the green air of the room. A piece of yellow crystal rolled from his hand and lay between my feet.

I found myself running toward the daylight. The sun was warm, but it couldn't warm me any more.

I remember what you said, Tom. "Bury me sitting up. . . ." But I can't go back to you. I can't!

Forgive me, Tom. . . .

*One-thirty. . . .*

That woman. That woman in the jail.

I just called there and got no answer. They've left her there alone.

I'm going down and let her out. . . .

SIX o'clock. . . .

She didn't want me to.

She was sitting in a cell all by herself. Just an empty building with long steel corridors, the bars flying in silver repetition, smaller and smaller, into a jealous spider web. And in the center, a solitary woman, sitting, looking at the floor.

She raised her head at my sounds. "Go back," she called.

"I can't." The release tools jingled in my hand.

"Go back!" she cried. "I don't want you to."

"How can you know?" My steps brought me closer.

"I don't want to die that way. I want

to know what's happening to me. Don't take my mind away—"

The words hit hard. Bullets from a gun, they ripped into my stomach.

"I can't leave you here knowing you can't get out. It's the same as murdering you."

"No . . . you don't understand!" She was standing at the bars, holding them close, clinging with a desperation you might see in a mother with a dead child. "Let me be. Turn around and go back."

I looked for the liberation mechanism and tried the contact knobs. Her voice hammered at my back.

"*Let me alone.* I want to stay here. This is the only way I can keep what I am. The rest of them are all *erased. . . .*"

"You'll die there."

"I'll die anyway. And the other way isn't decent. With your eyes seeing something that shouldn't be seen. . . ."

Secret gears sprang to life.

"Let it *stay locked!*"

And the grating slid away with a whirring sound.

She covered her face in her hands, and sank to the floor. "No, no, no. . . ." I heard her moan as I turned to go.

And she wouldn't leave. All the way down that steel corridor, I turned back, her figure tinier and more huddled each time. Not moving.

"Wait," she called as I reached the door. I waited.

"I *hate* you! You took my prayers away from me!"

I ran until my legs twisted and threw me on the ground. I've never run like that before in my life.

*That night. . . .*

The audio didn't signal. Mike didn't call.

I tried three times to get the operator, but the artery doesn't get through. There is no one there to receive it. I waited until dawn.

Dawn, did I say? That used to be a lovely word.

Oh Mike . . . Mike . . . Mike. . . .

SEPTEMBER eight—the *sixth* day. . . .

I planed into New York today.

The little airboat flew as if it knew.

Proudly, over the desolate, shining land. Keep your head high, Carrie, it seemed to say.

The altitude lanes blinked their lights at me. Proceed. Caution. Tread atmosphere. Directing ghosts.

I was the only one. And I'm almost a ghost now too.

New York is perfect. An unscarred miraculous corpse. The strains of Stravinsky still float over the pavilion at Television Square. Electronic eyes still open and close doors for forgotten images. A mechanical heart still keeps it flowering—squandering its metal-and-stone beauty for the touch of a never-more hand.

It tries. So hard. For no one.

I cruised from the Bronx to the Island. From Brooklyn to Riverdale. No one.

*No one!* It's just not possible.

Do you know what you do when you are the last woman, with a city at your feet? Crazy things! Silly things you know are wrong, but you keep on doing them because the want of a warm sound blinds you, and you can't think.

I went from one store to another, trying on mink coats. The ones I didn't want, I threw into the disposal grinders. One of them, a silverblue greatcoat that almost dragged the floor, had a price tag on it. Twenty-three thousand dollars, and I walked out of the store wearing it.

No one stopped me. A week ago . . . never mind, that was a week ago.

I walked over to Tiffany's and looked in the window. Diamonds. My hands ran along the velvet cushions cuddling the gems, pools of them. I took them outside and let them rain through my fingers onto the sidewalk. They lay like blazing eyes, winking at me in the sun.

Suddenly I thought of all the women who are holding things like that in their hands, forfeiting their lives for a fragment of light. And I started to laugh.

"What are you doing?" a voice asked.

At first I thought it was my mind playing tricks.

"What are you doing?" it asked again.

He must have been watching me.

Standing quietly, wondering, and watching me.

"Nothing," I stammered. "I mean . . . nothing."

He smiled as the blood rose slowly in my cheeks.

"What a luxury for me," he said. "A blush of embarrassment at a time like this. What a wonderful thing."

AND I started to cry. All the tears that hadn't fallen, the ones of fear, the ones of anger, the ones of grief, came loose, and were free. I don't know how long he soothed me or how far we walked, but his fingers were gentle as thistledown.

He tilted my head up, and memorized my face. "What do they call the girl with the brown hair and the red-blue eyes?"

"Carrie."

"And why are you still here, Carrie?"

"It's in the safe and the combination is changed. I can't get to it."

"You have your disintegrator," he suggested.

"The charges are all gone. They don't deliver any more, you know."

"Oh." He stroked my cheek absently.

"Where's yours?"

"I have it here." He took a small yellow fire from his pocket.

"And you haven't used it?"

"I will. It's only a matter of time."

"But when?"

"Who knows what instant of what hour a thought will begin to be born. With me it's a little different. I never wanted much that I didn't have."

"You were rich?"

"The opposite. I was a 'uranium bum.'"

"You?"

He nodded.

"But then . . . *anything* would be better than what you had."

"No. That's where you are wrong. I've always just watched. The big ones . . . clawing for power and position. The lower ones . . . reaching for the next rung up. Everyone jamming his feet into the face of the one he was climbing on. No, I never wanted any-

thing better than what I had."

I didn't answer.

"That's what stopped them. That's why it's taking me longer. I never coveted. I was just satisfied."

My eyes started to fill again, and he handed me a handkerchief. "Don't now, don't. It's actually not so bad."

"Oh, how can you say that?"

"Because it's true. How could it have been done with more mercy? This is a miracle of magnificence—"

"I don't think so."

"I do. And you should, too. All of them—to have it over so easily. No dark violence. No gut ripping. Just the fulfillment of every desire. And peace. With loved ones together. Orderly as an index." He looked up the sunswept street and nodded his head.

"But they're all dying. It's the end of the world."

He looked at me. "It had to come sometime."

"I don't care. I won't have it. It's horrible."

"What do you want, Carrie? To go down lashed to the mast with the band playing 'Nearer My God To Thee?'"

"No, no! But I think I'd like to understand."

"Let me tell you a fairy tale."

"A what?"

"A fairy tale." He stopped walking and faced me. "About a boy and a ball. Once upon a time, a little boy had a lovely, round ball. It was shining bright with newness. And the boy took his chalk and drew pictures upon the ball—pictures of all the things he knew about, and sang about, and thought about. And with each picture he drew, the ball grew in beauty.

"Then, one day, the pictures started to overlap one another, and the lines got tangled together and they weren't so clear any more. And finally it got so that no image of beauty could be seen. There were only angry scrawls, saying nothing.

"Now the little boy was a kind-hearted little boy who loved his ball very much, and he didn't want to destroy it. So instead of throwing it away, he left it in a gentle night rain. For he knew that

in the morning it would be clean and shining bright, so that some day, maybe a long, long time from now, it might be written on again."

I waited a long time before I spoke. "Is that a fairy tale?—or a parable?"

"I don't know."

"Don't you think he could have left the scrawls there? He could have forgotten the ball."

"No. They were ugly-scrawls."

"I guess so," I said, starting to go. "I guess they were."

Then a thought crept into my head. The mink coat fell from my shoulders, as a light breeze lifted my hair.

"Would you . . . would you like to come home with me?"

"I don't know what you mean." His eyes were surprised.

"Please—it's hard to say. But you said that some day the ball might be written on again. There'll have to be—chalk."

His face misted in pity. "Oh, Carrie! You poor, valiant, confused little Carrie!"

He came to me, standing close. "That was the nicest present I've ever received. Thank you, Carrie, with all my heart."

He never took his eyes from mine, but placed something in the palm of my hand and closed my fingers around it. "It's all I have to give." Taking my face in his hands, he kissed me on both cheeks.

"Good-by, my dear."

He walked swiftly across the street and disappeared around a building, his cloak flapping like giant wings.

I looked down at what I held in my hand.

It was one charge for my disintegrator. . . .

**T**HE Seventh Day. . . .

No, I'm not running any more. There is a point beyond which you don't even try. You slow down and let the thing catch up gradually from behind. You rest.

I've put everything in its place. "Have your house in order," my mother told me. "So that you may open the door wide and say 'Come in.'" The

beds are made. The kitchen is spotless. There are flowers in all the holders.

"Come in," I'll say. "Come in."

It's really a beautiful room . . . this room. A place where everything loves me and holds some thought that I have given it in the past. A pipe that Mike smoked. A bronze plaque we discovered on our honeymoon. They have held the thoughts for me, in safe keeping, and are giving them back to me now . . . when I need them.

I looked into the old Bible just now. There is something in Genesis that caught my eye. In Chapter Eight. Verses Twenty-one and Twenty-two:

"And the Lord said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again *smite* any more every thing living, as I have done. While the earth remaineth, seed-time and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease."

Poor Von Weisacker. Poor Von Bethe. With their theory of the transmutation of elements. No nova will burn us. No funeral pyre of hydrogen-

to-helium, helium-to-what . . . ? They worked so hard to damn us in a flaming crematory of dying worlds. And it is all so simple. So gentle. In a daydream. A sigh. A whisper.

We had only to read a book if we had wanted to know.

Yes, the earth will go on. It will revolve around the sun on it's six-hundred-million-mile orbit. It will make one precession cone every twenty-six-thousand years. And the skeletons will sit in the houses, and on the streets, and in the gardens, and they'll smile and smile, and smile. The spring suns will try to warm their bones. The Christmas sky will snow its snow on their shining skulls.

But it won't matter.

Because we'll just smile, and smile, and *smile*.

I don't even mind too terribly any more. It would have been ninety-two-million miles into the sun, but it's only two and a half inches to the heart.

I only wish one thing. That Mike could have been here to hold my hand.

But then, he *will* be, won't he?