

Long Night Of Waiting

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What—what are we going to do?" Lesley squeezed her hands so tightly together they hurt. She really wanted to run, as far and as fast as she could.

Rick was not running. He stood there, still holding to Alex's belt, just as he had grabbed his brother to keep him from following Matt. Following him where?

"We won't do anything," Rick answered slowly.

"But people'll ask—all kinds of questions. You only have to look at that—" Lesley pointed with her chin to what was now before them.

Alex still struggled for freedom. "Want Matt!" he yelled at the top of his voice. He wriggled around to beat at Rick with his fists.

"Let me go! Let me go—with Matt!"

Rick shook him. "Now listen here, shrimp. Matt's gone. You can't get to him now. Use some sense—look there. Do you see Matt? Well, do you?"

Lesley wondered how Rick could be so calm—accepting all of this just as if it happened every day—like going to school, or watching a telecast, or the regular, safe things. How could he just stand there and talk to Alex as if he were grown up and Alex was just being pesty as he was sometimes? She watched Rick wonderingly, and tried not to think of what had just happened.

"Matt?" Alex had stopped fighting. His voice sounded as if he were going to start bawling in a minute or two. And when Alex cried—! He would keep on and on, and they would have questions to answer. If they told the real truth—Lesley drew a deep breath and shivered.

No one, no one in the whole world would ever believe them! Not even if they saw what was right out here in this field now. No one would believe—they would say that she, Lesley, and Rick, and Alex were all mixed up in their minds. And they might even be sent away to a hospital or something! No, they could never tell the truth! But Alex, he would blurt out the whole thing if anyone asked a question about Matt. What could they do about Alex?

Her eyes questioned Rick over Alex's head. He was still holding their young brother, but Alex had turned, was gripping Rick's waist, looking up at him demandingly, waiting, Lesley knew, for Rick to

explain as he had successfully most times in Alex's life. And if Rick couldn't explain this time?

Rick hunkered down on the ground, his hands now on Alex's shoulders.

"Listen, shrimp, Matt's gone. Lesley goes, I go, to school—"

Alex sniffed. "But the bus comes then, and you get on while I watch—then you come home again—" His small face cleared. "Then Matt—he'll come back? He's gone to school? But this is Saturday! You an' Lesley don't go on Saturday. How come Matt does? An' where's the bus? There's nothin' but that mean old dozer that's chewin' up things. An' now all these vines and stuff—and the dozer tipped right over an'—" He screwed around a little in Rick's grip to stare over his brother's hunched shoulder at the disaster area beyond.

"No." Rick was firm. "Matt's not gone to school. He's gone home—to his own place. You remember back at Christmas time, Alex, when Peter came with Aunt Fran and Uncle Porter? He came for a visit. Matt came with Lizzy for a visit—now he's gone back home—just like Peter did."

"But Matt said—he said *this* was his home!" countered Alex. "He didn't live in Cleveland like Peter."

"It was his home once," Rick continued still in that grown-up way. "Just like Jimmy Rice used to live down the street in the red house. When Jimmy's Dad got moved by his company, Jimmy went clear out to St. Louis to live."

"But Matt was sure! He said *this* was his home!" Alex frowned. "He said it over and over, that he had come home again."

"At first he did," Rick agreed. "But later, you know that Matt was not so sure, was he now? You think about that, shrimp."

Alex was still frowning. At least he was not screaming as Lesley feared he would be. Rick, she was suddenly very proud and a little in awe of Rick. How had he known how to keep Alex from going into one of his tantrums?

"Matt—he did say funny things. An' he was afraid of cars. Why was he afraid of cars, Rick?"

"Because where he lives they don't have cars."

Alex's surprise was open. "Then how do they go to the store? An' to Sunday School, an' school, an' every place?"

"They have other ways, Alex. Yes, Matt was afraid of a lot of things, he knew that this was not his home, that he had to go back."

"But—I want him—he—" Alex began to cry, not with the loud screaming Lesley had feared, but in a way now which made her hurt a little inside as she watched him butt his head against Rick's shoulder, making no effort to smear away the tears as they wet his dirty cheeks.

"Sure you want him," Rick answered. "But Matt—he was afraid, he was not very happy here, now was he, shrimp?"

"With me, he was. We had a lot of fun, we did!"

"But Matt wouldn't go in the house, remember? Remember what happened when the lights went on?"

"Matt ran an' hid. An' Lizzy, she kept telling him an' telling him they had to go back. Maybe if Lizzy hadn't all the time told him that—"

Lesley thought about Lizzy. Matt was little—he was not more than Alex's age—not really, in spite of what the stone said. But Lizzy had been older and quicker to understand. It had been Lizzy who had asked most of the questions and then been sick (truly sick to her stomach) when Lesley and Rick answered them. Lizzy had been sure of what had happened then—just like she was sure about the other—that the stone must never be moved, nor that place covered over to trap anybody else. So that nobody would fall through—

Fall through into what? Lesley tried to remember all the bits and pieces Lizzy and Matt had told about where they had been for a hundred and ten years—*ahundred and ten* just like the stone said.

She and Rick had found the stone when Alex had run away. They had often had to hunt Alex like that. Ever since he learned to open the Safe-tee gate he would go off about once a week or so. It was about two months after they moved here, before all the new houses had been built and the big apartments at the end of the street. This was all more like real country then. Now it was different, spoiled—just this one open place left and that (unless Lizzy was right in thinking she'd stopped it all) would not be open long. The men had started to clear it off with the bulldozer the day before yesterday. All the ground on that side was raw and cut up, the trees and bushes had been smashed and dug out.

There had been part of an old orchard there, and a big old lilac bush. Last spring it had been so pretty. Of course, the apples were all little and hard, and had worms in them. But it had been pretty and a swell place to play. Rick and Jim Bowers had a house up in the biggest tree. Their sign said "No girls allowed," but Lesley had sneaked up once when they were playing Little League ball and had seen it all.

Then there was the stone. That was kind of scary. Yet they had kept going to look at it every once in a while, just to wonder.

Alex had found it first that day he ran away. There were a lot of bushes hiding it and tall grass. Lesley felt her eyes drawn in that direction now. It *was* still there. Though you have to mostly guess about that, only one teeny bit of it showed through all those leaves and things.

And when they had found Alex he had been working with a piece of stick, scratching at the words carved there which were all filled up with moss and dirt. He had been so busy and excited he had not tried to dodge them as he usually did, instead he wanted to know if those were real words, and then demanded that Rick read them to him.

Now Lesley's lips silently shaped what was carved there.

A long night of waiting.

To the Memory of our dear children,

Lizzy and Matthew Mendal,

Who disappeared on this spot

June 23, 1861.

May the Good Lord return them

to their loving parents and this

world in His Own reckoned time.

Erected to mark our years of watching,

June 23, 1900.

It had sounded so queer. At first Lesley had thought it was a grave and had been a little frightened. But Rick had pointed out that the words did not read like those on the stones in the cemetery where they went on Memorial Day with flowers for Grandma and Grandpa Targ. It was different because it never said "dead" but "disappeared."

Rick had been excited, said it sounded like a mystery. He had begun to ask around, but none of the neighbors knew anything—except this had all once been a farm. Almost all the houses on the street were built on that land. They had the oldest house of all. Dad said it had once been the farm house, only people had changed it and added parts like bathrooms.

Lizzy and Matt—

Rick had gone to the library and asked questions, too. Miss Adams, she got interested when Rick kept on wanting to know what this was like a hundred years ago (though of course he did not mention the stone, that was their own secret, somehow from the first they knew they must keep quiet about that). Miss Adams had shown Rick how they kept the old newspapers on film tapes. And when he did his big project for social studies, he had chosen the farm's history, which gave him a good chance to use those films to look things up.

That was how he learned all there was to know about Lizzy and Matt. There had been a lot in the old paper about them. Lizzy Mendal, Matthew Mendal, aged eleven and five—Lesley could almost repeat it word for word she had read Rick's copied notes so often. They had been walking across this field, carrying lunch to their father who was ploughing. He had been standing by a fence talking to Doctor Levi Morris who was driving by. They had both looked up to see Lizzy and Matthew coming and had waved to them. Lizzy waved back and then—she and Matthew—they were just gone! Right out of the middle of an open field they were gone!

Mr. Mendal and the Doctor, they had been so surprised they couldn't believe their eyes, but they had hunted and hunted. And the men from other farms had come to hunt too. But no one ever saw the children again.

Only about a year later, Mrs. Mendal (she had kept coming to stand here in the field, always hoping, Lesley guessed, they might come back as they had gone) came running home all excited to say she heard Matt's voice, and he had been calling "Ma! Ma!"

She got Mr. Mendal to go back with her. And he heard it, too, when he listened, but it was very faint. Just like someone a long way off calling "Ma!" Then it was gone and they never heard it again.

It was all in the papers Rick found, the story of how they hunted for the children and later on about Mrs.

Mental hearing Matt. But nobody ever was able to explain what had happened.

So all that was left was the stone and a big mystery.

Rick started hunting around in the library, even after he finished his report, and found a book with other stories about people who disappeared. It was written by a man named Charles Fort. Some of it had been hard reading, but Rick and Lesley had both found the parts which were like what happened to Lizzy and Matt. And in all those other disappearances there had been no answers to what had happened, and nobody came back.

Until Lizzy and Matt. But suppose she and Rick and Alex told people now, would any believe them? And what good would it do, anyway? Unless Lizzy was right and people should know so they would not be caught. Suppose someone built a house right over where the stone stood, and suppose some day a little boy like Alex, or a girl like Lesley, or even a mom or dad, disappeared? She and Rick, maybe they ought to talk and keep on talking until someone believed them, believed them enough to make sure such a house was never going to be built, and this place was made safe.

"Matt—he kept sayin' he wanted his mom." Alex's voice cut through her thoughts. "Rick, where was his mom that she lost him that way?"

Rick, for the first time, looked helpless. How could you make Alex understand?

Lesley stood up. She still felt quite shaky and a little sick from the left-over part of her fright. But the worst was past now, she had to be as tough as Rick or he'd say that was just like a girl.

"Alex," she was able to say that quite naturally, and her voice did not sound too queer, "Matt, maybe he'll find his mom now, he was just looking in the wrong place. She's not here any more. You remember last Christmas when you went with Mom to see Santa Claus at the store and you got lost? You were hunting mom and she was hunting you, and at first you were looking in the wrong places. But you did find each other. Well, Matt's mom will find him all right."

She thought that Alex wanted to believe her. He had not pushed away from Rick entirely, but he looked as if he was listening carefully to every word she said.

"You're sure?" he asked doubtfully. "Matt—he was scared he'd never find his mom. He said he kept calling an' calling an' she never came."

"She'll come, moms always do." Lesley tried to make that sound true. "And Lizzy will help. Lizzy," Lesley hesitated, trying to choose the right words, "Lizzy's very good at getting things done."

She looked beyond to the evidence of Lizzy's getting things done and her wonder grew. At first, just after it had happened, she had been so shocked and afraid, she had not really understood what Lizzy had done before she and Matt had gone again. What—what had Lizzy learned during that time when she had been in the other place? And how had she learned it? She had never answered all their questions as if she was not able to tell them what lay on the other side of that door, or whatever it was which was between here and there.

Lizzy's work was hard to believe, even when you saw it right before your eyes.

The bulldozer and the other machines which had been parked there to begin work again Monday morning—Well, the bulldozer was lying over on its side, just as if it were a toy Alex had picked up and

thrown as he did sometimes when he got over-tired and cross. And the other machines—they were all pushed over, some even broken! Then there were the growing things. Lizzy had rammed her hands into the pockets of her dress-like apron and brought them out with seeds trickling between her fingers. And she had just thrown those seeds here and there, all over the place.

It took a long time for plants to grow—weeks— Lesley knew. But look—these were growing right while you watched. They had already made a thick mat over every piece of the machinery they had reached, like they had to cover it from sight quickly. And there were flowers opening—and butterflies—Lesley had never seen so many butterflies as were gathering about those flowers, arriving right out of nowhere.

"Rick—how—?" She could not put her wonder into a full question, she could only gesture toward what was happening there.

Her brother shrugged. It was as if he did not want to look at what was happening. Instead he spoke to both of them sharply.

"Listen, shrimp, Les, it's getting late. Mom and Dad will be home soon. We'd better get there before they do. Remember, we left all the things Matt and Lizzy used out in the summer house. Dad's going to work on the lawn this afternoon. He'll want to get the mower out of there. If he sees what we left there he'll ask questions for sure and we might have to talk. Not that it would do any good."

Rick was right. Lesley looked around her regretfully now. She was not frightened any more—she, well, she would like to just stay awhile and watch. But she reached for Alex's sticky hand. To her surprise he did not object or jerk away, he was still hiccuping a little as he did after he cried. She was thankful Rick had been able to manage him so well.

They scraped through their own private hole in the fence into the backyard, heading to the summer house which Rick and Dad had fixed up into a rainy day place to play and a storage for the outside tools. The camping bags were there, even the plates and cups. Those were still smeared with jelly and peanut butter. Just think, Matt had never tasted jelly and peanut butter before, he said. But he had liked it a lot. Lesley had better sneak those in and give them a good washing. And the milk—Lizzy could not understand how you got milk from a bottle a man brought to your house and not straight from a cow. She seemed almost afraid to drink it. And she had not liked Coke at all— said it tasted funny.

"I wish Matt was here." Alex stood looking down at the sleeping bag, his face clouding up again. "Matt was fun—"

"Sure he was. Here, shrimp, you catch a hold of that and help me carry this back. We've got to get it into the camper before Dad comes."

"Why?"

Oh, dear, was Alex going to have one of his stubborn question-everything times? Lesley had put the plates and cups back into the big paper bag in which she had smuggled the food from the kitchen this morning, and was folding up the extra cover from Matt's bed.

"You just come along and I'll tell you, shrimp," she heard Rick say. Rick was just wonderful today. Though Mom always said that Rick could manage Alex better than anyone else in the whole family when he wanted to make the effort.

There, she gave a searching look around as the boys left (one of the bags between them) this was cleared. They would take the other bag, and she would do the dishes. Then Dad could walk right in and never know that Lizzy and Matt had been here for two nights and a day.

Two nights and a day—Lizzy had kept herself and Matt out of sight yesterday when Lesley and Rick had been at school. She would not go near the house, nor let Matt later when Alex wanted him to go and see the train Dad and Rick had set up in the family room. All she had wanted were newspapers. Lesley had taken those to her and some of the magazines Mom had collected for the Salvation Army. She must have read a lot, because when they met her after school, she had a million questions to ask.

It was then that she said she and Matt had to go away, back to where they had come from, that they could not stay in this mixed up horrible world which was not the right one at all! Rick told her about the words on the stones and how long it had been. First she called him a liar and said that was not true. So after dark he had taken a flashlight and went back to show her the stone and the words.

She had been the one to cry then. But she did not for long. She got to asking what was going to happen in the field, looking at the machines. When Rick told her, Lizzy had said quick and hot, no, they mustn't do that, it was dangerous—a lot of others might go through. And they, those in the other world, didn't want people who did bad things to spoil everything.

When Rick brought her back she was mad, not at him, but at everything else. She made him walk her down to the place from which you could see the intercity thruway, with all the cars going whizz. Rick said he was sure she was scared. She was shaking, and she held onto his hand so hard it hurt. But she made herself watch. Then, when they came back, she said Matt and she—they had to go. And she offered to take Alex, Lesley, and Rick with them. She said they couldn't want to go on living here.

That was the only time she talked much of what it was like there. Birds and flowers, no noise or cars rushing about, nor bulldozers tearing the ground up, everything pretty. It was Lesley who had asked then:

"If it was all that wonderful, why did you want to come back?"

Then she was sorry she had asked because Lizzy's face looked like she was hurting inside when she answered:

"There was Ma and Pa. Matt, he's little, he misses Ma bad at times. Those others, they got their own way of life, and it ain't much like ours. So, we've kept a-tryin' to get back. I brought somethin'—just for Ma." She showed them two bags of big silvery leaves pinned together with long thorns. Inside each were seeds, all mixed up big and little together.

"Things grow there," she nodded toward the field, "they grow strange-like. Faster than seeds hereabouts. You put one of these," she ran her finger tip in among the seeds, shifting them back and forth, "in the ground, and you can see it grow. Honest-Injun-cross-my-heart-an'-hope-to-die if that ain't so. Ma, she hankers for flowers, loves 'em truly. So I brought her some. Only, Ma, she ain't here. Funny thing—those over there, they have a feelin' about these here flowers and plants. They tell you right out that as long as they have these growin' 'round they're safe."

"Safe from what?" Rick wanted to know.

"I dunno—safe from somethin' as they think may change 'em. See, we ain't the only ones gittin' through to there. There's others, we've met a couple.

Susan—she's older 'n me and she dresses funny, like one of the real old time ladies in a book picture. And there's Jim—he spends most of his time off in the woods, don't see him much. Susan's real nice. She took us to stay with her when we got there. But she's married to one of them, so we didn't feel comfortable most of the time. Anyway they had some rules—they asked us right away did we have anything made of iron. Iron is bad for them, they can't hold it, it burns them bad. And they told us right out that if we stayed long we'd change. We ate their food and drank their drink stuff—that's like cider and it tastes good. That changes people from here. So after awhile anyone who comes through is like them. Susan mostly is by now, I guess. When you're changed you don't want to come back."

"But you didn't change," Lesley pointed out. "You came back."

"And how come you didn't change?" Rick wanted to know. "You were there long enough—a hundred and ten years!"

"But," Lizzy had beat with her fists on the floor of the summer house then as if she were pounding a drum. "It weren't that long, it couldn't be! Me, I counted every day! It's only been ten of 'em, with us hunting the place to come through on every one of 'em, calling for Ma and Pa to come and get us. It weren't no hundred and ten years—"

And she had cried again in such a way as to make Lesley's throat ache. A moment later she had been bawling right along with Lizzy. For once Rick did not look at her as if he were disgusted, but instead as if he were sorry, for Lizzy, not Lesley, of course.

"It's got to be that time's different in that place," he said thoughtfully. "A lot different. But, Lizzy, it's true, you know—this is 1971, not 1861. We can prove it."

Lizzy wiped her eyes on the hem of her long apron. "Yes, I got to believe. 'Cause what you showed me ain't my world at all. All those cars shootin' along so fast, lights what go on and off when you press a button on the wall—all these houses built over Pa's good farmin' land—what I read today. Yes, I gotta believe it—but it's hard to do that, right hard!"

"And Matt 'n' me, we don't belong here no more, not with all this clatter an' noise an' nasty smelling air like we sniffed down there by that big road. I guess we gotta go back there. Leastwise, we know what's there now."

"How can you get back?" Rick wanted to know.

For the first time Lizzy showed a watery smile. "I ain't no dunce, Rick. They got rules, like I said. You carry something outta that place and hold on to it, an' it pulls you back, lets you in again. I brought them there seeds for Ma. But I thought maybe Matt an' me—we might want to go visitin' there. Susan's been powerful good to us. Well, anyway, I got these too."

She had burrowed deeper in her pocket, under the packets of seeds and brought out two chains of woven grass, tightly braided. Fastened to each was a small arrowhead, a very tiny one, no bigger than Lesley's little fingernail.

Rick held out his hand. "Let's see."

But Lizzy kept them out of his reach.

"Them's no Injun arrowheads, Rick. Them's what they use for their owndoin's. Susan, she calls them

'elf-shots.' Anyway, these here can take us back if we wear 'em. And we will tomorrow, that's when we'll go."

They had tried to find out more about there, but Lizzy would not answer most of their questions. Lesley thought she could not for some reason. But she remained firm in her decision that she and Matt would be better off there than here. Then she had seemed sorry for Lesley and Rick and Alex that they had to stay in such a world, and made the suggestion that they link hands and go through together.

Rick shook his head. "Sorry—no. Mom and Dad— well, we belong here."

Lizzynodded. "Thought you would say that. But— it's so ugly now, I can't see as how you want to." She cupped the tiny arrowheads in her hand, held them close. "Over there it's so pretty. What are you goin' to do here when all the ground is covered up with houses and the air's full of bad smells, an' those cars go rush-rush all day and night too? Looky here—" She reached for one of the magazines. "I'm the best reader in the school house. Miss Jane, she has me up to read out loud when the school board comes visitin'." She did not say that boastfully, but as if it were a truth everyone would know. "An' I've been readin' pieces in here. They've said a lot about how bad things are gittin' for you all—bad air, bad water—too many people—everything like that. Seems like there's no end but bad here. Ain't that so now?"

"We've been studying about it in school," Lesley agreed, "Rick and me, we're on the pick-up can drive next week. Sure we know."

"Well, this ain't happening over there, you can bet you! They won't let it."

"How do they stop it?" Rick wanted to know.

But once more Lizzy did not answer. She just shook her head and said they had their ways. And then she had gone on:

"Me an' Matt, we have to go back. We don't belong here now, and back there we do, sorta. At least it's more like what we're used to. We have to go at the same hour as before—noon time—"

"How do you know?" Rick asked.

"There's rules. We were caught at noon then, we go at noon now. Sure you don't want to come with us?"

"Only as far as the field," Rick had answered for them. "It's Saturday, we can work it easy. Mom has a hair appointment in the morning, Dad is going to drive her 'cause he's seeing Mr. Chambers, and they'll do the shopping before they come home. We're supposed to have a picnic in the field, like we always do. Being Saturday the men won't be working there either."

"If you have to go back at noon," Lesley was trying to work something out, "how come you didn't get here at noon? It must have been close to five when we saw you. The school bus had let us off at the corner and Alex had come to meet us—then we saw you—"

"We hid out," Lizzy had said then. "Took a chance on you 'cause you were like us—"

Lesley thought she would never forget that first meeting, seeing the fair haired girl a little taller than she, her hair in two long braids, but such a queer dress on—like a "granny" one, yet different, and over it a big

coarse-looking checked apron. Beside her Matt, in a checked shirt and funny looking pants, both of them barefooted. They had looked so unhappy and lost. Alex had broken away from Lesley and Rick and had run right over to them to say "Hi" in the friendly way he always did.

Lizzy had been turning her head from side to side as if hunting for something which should be right there before her. And when they had come up she had spoken almost as if she were angry (but Lesley guessed she was really frightened) asking them where the Men-dalhouse was.

If it had not been for the stone and Rick doing all that hunting down of the story behind it, they would not have known what she meant. But Rick had caught on quickly. He had said that they lived in the old Mendal house now, and they had brought Lizzy and Matt along with them. But before they got there they had guessed who Lizzy, and Matt were, impossible as it seemed.

Now they were gone again. But Lizzy, what had she done just after she had looped those grass strings around her neck and Mart's and taken his hand? First she had thrown out all those seeds on the ground. And then she had pointed her finger at the bulldozer, and the other machines which were tearing up the rest of the farm she had known.

Lesley, remembering, blinked and shivered. She had expected Lizzy and Matt to disappear, somehow she had never doubted that they would. But she had not foreseen that the bulldozer would flop over at Lizzy's pointing, the other things fly around as if they were being thrown, some of them breaking apart. Then the seeds sprouting, vines and grass, and flowers, and small trees shooting up—just like the time on TV when they speeded up the camera somehow so you actually saw a flower opening up. What had Lizzy learned there that she was able to do all that?

Still trying to remember it all, Lesley wiped the dishes. Rick and Alex came in.

"Everything's put away," Rick reported. "And Alex, he understands about not talking about Matt."

"I sure hope so, Rick. But—how did Lizzy do that— make the machines move by just pointing at them? And how can plants grow so quickly?"

"How do I know?" he demanded impatiently. "I didn't see any more than you did. We've only one thing to remember, we keep our mouths shut tight. And we've got to be just as surprised as anyone else when somebody sees what happened there—"

"Maybe they won't see it—maybe not until the men come on Monday," she said hopefully. Monday was a school day, and the bus would take them early. Then she remembered.

"Rick, Alex won't be going to school with us. He'll be here with Mom. What if somebody says something and he talks?"

Rick was frowning. "Yeah, I see what you mean. So—we'll have to discover it ourselves—tomorrow morning. If we're here when people get all excited we can keep Alex quiet. One of us will have to stay with him all the time."

But in the end Alex made his own plans. The light was only gray in Lesley's window when she awoke to find Rick shaking her shoulder.

"What—what's the matter?"

"Keep it low!" he ordered almost fiercely. "Listen, Alex's gone—"

"Gone where?"

"Where do you think? Get some clothes on and come on!"

Gone to there? Lesley was cold with fear as she pulled on jeans and a sweatshirt, thrust her feet into shoes. But how could Alex—? Just as Matt and Lizzy had gone the first time. They should not have been afraid of being disbelieved, they should have told Dad and Mom all about it. Now maybe Alex would be gone for a hundred years. No—not Alex!

She scrambled downstairs. Rick stood at the back door waving her on. Together they raced across the backyard, struggled through the fence gap and—

The raw scars left by the bulldozer were gone. Rich foliage rustled in the early morning breeze. And the birds—! Lesley had never seen so many different kinds of birds in her whole life. They seemed so tame, too, swinging on branches, hopping along the ground, pecking a fruit. Not the sour old apples but golden fruit. It hung from bushes, squashed on the ground from its own ripeness.

And there were flowers—and—

"Alex!" Rick almost shouted.

There he was. Not gone, sucked into there where they could never find him again. No, he was sitting under a bush where white flowers bloomed. His face was smeared with juice as he ate one of the fruit. And he was patting a bunny! A real live bunny was in his lap. Now and then he held the fruit for the bunny to take a bite too. His face, under the smear of juice, was one big smile. Alex's happy face which he had not worn since Matt left.

"It's real good," he told them.

Scrambling to his feet he would have made for the fruit bush but Lesley swooped to catch him in a big hug.

"You're safe, Alex!"

"Silly!" He squirmed in her hold. "Silly Les. This is a good place now. See, the bunny came 'cause he knows that. An' all the birds. This is a good place. Here—" he struggled out of her arms, went to the bush and pulled off two of the fruit. "You eat—you'll like them."

"He shouldn't be eating those. How do we know it's good for him?" Rick pushed by to take the fruit from his brother.

Alex readily gave him one, thrust the other at Lesley.

"Eat it! It's better'n anything!"

As if she had to obey him, Lesley raised the smooth yellow fruit to her mouth. It smelled—it smelled good—like everything she liked. She bit into it.

And the taste—it did not have the sweetness of an orange, nor was it like an apple or a plum. It wasn't

like anything she had eaten before. But Alex was right, it was good. And she saw that Rick was eating, too.

When he had finished her elder brother turned to the bush and picked one, two, three, four—

"You are hungry," Lesley commented. She herself had taken a second. She broke it in two, dropped half to the ground for two birds. Their being there, right by her feet, did not seem in the least strange. Of course one shared. It did not matter if life wore feathers, fur, or plain skin, one shared.

"For Mom and Dad," Rick said. Then he looked around.

They could not see the whole of the field, the growth was too thick. And it was reaching out to the boundaries. Even as Lesley looked up a vine fell like a hand on their own fence, caught fast, and she was sure that was only the beginning.

"I was thinking, Les," Rick said slowly. "Do you remember what Lizzy said about the fruit from there changing people. Do you feel any different?"

"Why no." She held out her finger. A bird fluttered up to perch there, watching her with shining beads of eyes. She laughed. "No, I don't feel any different."

Rick looked puzzled. "I never saw a bird that tame before. Well, I wonder— Come on. let's take these to Mom and Dad."

They started for the fence where two green runners now clung. Lesley looked at the house, down the street to where the apartment made a monstrous outline against the morning sky.

"Rick, why do people want to live in such ugly places. And it smells bad—"

He nodded. "But all that's going to change. You know it, don't you?"

She gave a sigh of relief. Of course she knew it. The change was beginning and it would go on and on until here was like there and the rule of iron was broken for all time.

The rule of iron? Lesley shook her head as if to shake away a puzzling thought. But, of course, she must have always known this. Why did she have one small memory that this was strange? The rule of iron was gone, the long night of waiting over now.