

THE WALLS

Harry Trimble looked pleased when he stepped into the apartment. The lift door had hardly clacked shut behind him on the peering commuter faces in the car before he had slipped his arm behind Flora's back, bumped his face against her cheek and chuckled, "Well, what would you say to a little surprise? Something you've waited a long time for?"

Flora looked up from the dial-a-ration panel. "A surprise, Harry?"

"I know how you feel about the apartment, Flora. Well, from now on, you won't be seeing so much of it-"

"Harry!"

He winced at her clutch on his arm. Her face was pale under the day-glare strip. "We're not-moving to the country . . . ?"

Harry pried his arm free. "The country? What the devil are you talking about?" He was frowning now, the pleased look gone. "You should use the lamps more," he said. "You look sick." He glanced around the apartment, the four perfectly flat rectangular walls, the glassy surface of the variglow ceiling, the floor with its pattern of sink-away panels. His eye fell on the four-foot square of the TV screen.

"I'm having that thing taken out tomorrow," he said. The pleased look was coming back. He cocked an eye at Flora. "And I'm having a Full-wall installed!"

Flora glanced at the blank screen. "A Full-wall, Harry?"

"Yep!" Harry smacked a fist into a palm, taking a turn up and down the room. "We'll be the first in our cell block to have a Full-wall!"

"Why-that will be nice, Harry. . . ."

"Nice?" Harry punched the screen control, then deployed the two chairs with tray racks ready to receive the evening meal.

Behind him, figures jiggled on the screen. "It's a darn sight more than nice," he said, raising his voice over the shrill and thump of the music. "It's expensive, for one thing. Who else do you know that can afford-"

"But-"

"But nothing! Imagine it, Flora! It'll be like having a . . . a balcony seat, looking out on other people's lives."

"But we have so little space now; won't it take up-"

"Of course not! How do you manage to stay so ignorant of technical progress? It's only an eighth of an inch thick. Think of it: that thick"-Harry indicated an eighth of an inch with his fingers-"and better color and detail than you've ever seen. It's all done with what they call an edge-excitation effect."

"Harry, the old screen is good enough. Couldn't we use the money for a trip-"

"How do you know if it's good enough? You never have it on. I have to turn it on myself when I get home."

Flora brought the trays and they ate silently, watching the screen. After dinner, Flora disposed of the trays, retracted the table and chairs, and extended the beds. They lay in the dark, not talking.

"It's a whole new system," Harry said suddenly. "The Full-wall people have their own programming scheme; they plan your whole day, wake you up at the right time with some lively music, give you breakfast menus to dial, then follow up with a good sitcom to get you into the day; then there's nap music, with subliminal hypnotics if you have trouble sleeping; then-"

"Harry-can I turn it off if I want to?"

"Turn it off?" Harry sounded puzzled. "The idea is to leave it on. That's why I'm having it installed for you, you know-so you can use it!"

"But sometimes I like to just think-"

"Think! Brood, you mean." He heaved a sigh. "Look, Flora, I know the place isn't fancy. Sure, you get a little tired of being here all the time; but there are plenty of people worse off-and now, with Full-wall, you'll get a feeling of more space-"

"Harry"-Flora spoke rapidly-"I wish we could go away. I mean leave the city, and get a little place where we can be alone, even if it means working hard, and where I can have a garden and maybe keep chickens and you could chop firewood-"

"Good God!" Harry roared, cutting her off. Then: "These fantasies of yours," he said quietly. "You have to learn to live in the real world, Flora. Live in the woods? Wet leaves, wet bark, bugs, mould; talk about depressing. . . ."

There was a long silence.

"I know; you're right, Harry," Flora said. "I'll enjoy the Full-wall. It was very sweet of you to think of getting it for me."

"Sure," Harry said. "It'll be better. You'll see. . . ."

The Full-wall was different, Flora agreed as soon as the service men had made the last adjustments and flipped it on. There was vivid color, fine detail, and a remarkable sense of depth. The shows were about the same-fast-paced, bursting with variety and energy. It was exciting at first, having full-sized people talking, eating, fighting, taking baths, making love, right in the room with you. If you sat across the room and half-closed your eyes, you could almost imagine you were watching real people. Of course, real people wouldn't carry on like that. But then, it was hard to say what real people might do. Flora had always thought Doll Starr wore padded brassieres, but when she stripped on Full-wall-there wasn't any fakery about it.

Harry was pleased, too, when he arrived home to find the wall on. He and Flora would dial dinner with one eye on the screen, then slip into bed and view until the Bull-Doze pills they'd started taking took effect. Perhaps things were better, Flora thought hopefully. More like they used to be.

But after a month or two, the Full-wall began to pall. The same faces, the same pratfalls, the same happy quiz masters, the puzzled prize-winners, the delinquent youths and fumbling dads, the bosoms—all the same.

On the sixty-third day, Flora switched the Full-wall off. The light and sound died, leaving a faint, dwindling glow. She eyed the glassy wall uneasily, as one might view the coffin of an acquaintance.

It was quiet in the apartment. Flora fussed with the dial-a-ration, averting her eyes from the dead screen. She turned to deploy the solitaire table and started violently. The screen, the residual glow having faded now, was a perfect mirror. She went close to it, touched the hard surface with a finger. It was almost invisible. She studied her reflected face; the large dark eyes with shadows under them, the cheekline, a trifle too hollow to be really chic, the hair drawn back in an uninspired bun. Behind her, the doubled room, unadorned now that all the furnishings were retracted into the floor except for the pictures on the wall: photographs of the children away at school, a sunny scene of green pastureland, a painting of rolling waves at sea.

She stepped back, considering the effect.

The floor and walls seemed to continue without interruption, except for a hardly noticeable line. It was as though the apartment were twice as large. If only it weren't so empty. . . .

Flora deployed the table and chairs, dialed a lunch, and sat, eating, watching her double. No wonder Harry seemed indifferent lately, she thought, noting the rounded shoulders, the insignificant bust, the slack posture. She would have to do something in the way of self-improvement.

Half an hour of the silent companionship of her image was enough. Flora snapped the screen back on, watched almost with relief as a grinning cowboy in velvet chaps made strumming motions while an intricately-fingered guitar melody blared from the soundtrack.

Thereafter, she turned the screen off every day, at first only for an hour, later for longer and longer periods. Once, she found herself chatting gaily to her reflection, and hastily fell silent. It wasn't as though she were becoming neurotic, she assured herself; it was just the feeling of roominess that made her like the mirror screen. And she was always careful to have it on when Harry arrived home.

It was about six months after the Full-wall had been installed that Harry emerged one day from the lift smiling in a way that reminded Flora of that earlier evening. He dropped his briefcase into his floor locker, looked around the apartment, humming to himself.

"What is it, Harry?" Flora asked.

Harry glanced at her. "It's not a log cabin in the woods," he said. "But maybe you'll like it anyway. . . ."

"What. . . . is it, dear. . . ."

"Don't sound so dubious." He broke into a broad smile. "I'm getting you another Full-wall."

Flora looked puzzled. "But this one is working perfectly, Harry."

"Of course it is," he snapped. "I mean you're getting another wall; you'll have two. What about that? Two Full-walls-and nobody else in the cell-block has one yet. The only question is-" he rubbed his hands together, striding up and down the room, eyeing the walls-"which wall is it to be? You can have it adjacent, or opposite. I went over the whole thing with the Full-wall people today. By God, they're doing a magnificent job of programming. You see, the two walls will be synchronized. You're getting the same show on both-you're seeing it from two angles, just as though you were right there in the middle of it. Their whole program has been built on that principle."

"Harry, I'm not sure I want another wall-"

"Oh, nonsense. What is this, some kind of self-denial urge? Why not have the best-if you can afford it. And by God, I can afford it. I'm hitting my stride-"

"Harry, could I go with you some day-tomorrow? I'd like to see where you work, meet your friends-"

"Flora, are you out of your mind? You've seen the commuter car; you know how crowded it is. And what would you do when you got there? Just stand around all day, blocking the aisle? Why don't you appreciate the luxury of having your own place, a little privacy, and now two Full-walls-"

"Then could I go somewhere else? I could take a later car. I want to get out in the open air, Harry. I. . . . haven't seen the sky for. . . . years, it seems."

"But. . . ." Harry groped for words, staring at Flora. "Why would you want to go up on the roof?"

"Not the roof; I want to get out of the city-just for a little while. I'll be back home in time to dial your dinner . . ."

"Do you mean to tell me you want to spend all that money to wedge yourself in a verticar and then transfer to a crosstown and travel maybe seventy miles, packed in like a sardine, standing up all the way, just so you can get out and stand in a wasteland and look back at the walls? And then get back in another car-if you're lucky-and come back again?"

"No-I don't know-I just want to get out, Harry. The roof. Could I go to the roof?"

Harry came over to pat Flora awkwardly on the arm. "Now, take it easy, Flora. You're a little tired and stale; I know. I get the same way sometimes. But don't get the idea that you're missing anything by not

having to get into that rat-race. Heaven knows I wish I could stay home. And this new wall is going to make things different. You'll see. . . ."

The new Full-wall was installed adjacent to the first, with a joint so beautifully fitted that only the finest line marked the junction. As soon as she was alone with it, Flora switched it off. Now two reflections stared back at her from behind what appeared to be two intersecting planes of clear glass. She waved an arm. The two slave figures ape'd her. She walked toward the mirrored corner. They advanced. She stepped back; they retreated.

She went to the far corner of the room and studied the effect. It wasn't as nice as before. Instead of a simple room, neatly bounded on all four sides by solid walls, she seemed now to occupy a stage set off by windows through which other, similar stages were visible, endlessly repeated. The old feeling of intimate companionship with her reflected self was gone; the two mirror-women were strangers, silently watching her. Defiantly, she stuck out her tongue. The two reflections grimaced menacingly. With a small cry, Flora ran to the switch, turned the screens on.

They were seldom off after that. Sometimes, when the hammering of hooves became too wearing, or the shouting of comics too strident, she would blank them out, and sit, back to the mirror walls, sipping a cup of hot coflet, and waiting-but they were always on when Harry arrived, sometimes glum, sometimes brisk and satisfied. He would settle himself in his chair, waiting patiently enough for dinner, watching the screens.

"They're all right," he would declare, nodding. "Look at that, Flora. Look at the way that fellow whipped right across there. By golly, you've got to hand it to the Full-wall people."

"Harry-where do they make the shows? The ones that show the beautiful scenery, and trees and rolling hills, and mountains?"

Harry was chewing. "Don't know," he said. "On location, I suppose."

"Then there really are places like that? I mean, they aren't just making it up?"

Harry stared at her, mouth full and half open. He grunted and resumed chewing. He swallowed. "I suppose that's another of your cracks."

"I don't understand, Harry," Flora said. He took another bite, glanced sideways at her puzzled expression.

"Of course they aren't making it up. How the devil could they make up a mountain?"

"I'd like to see those places."

"Here we go again," Harry said. "I was hoping I could enjoy a nice meal and then view awhile, but I guess you're not going to allow that."

"Of course, Harry. I just said-"

"I know what you said. Well, look at them then." He waved his hand at the

screen. "There it is; the whole world. You can sit right here and view it all-"

"But I want to do more than just view it. I want to live it. I want to be in those places, and feel leaves under my feet, and have rain fall on my face-"

Harry frowned incredulously. "You mean you want to be an actress?"

"No, of course not-"

"I don't know what you want. You have a home, two Full-walls, and this isn't all. I'm working toward something, Flora. . . ."

Flora sighed. "Yes, Harry. I'm very lucky."

"Darn right." Harry nodded emphatically, eyes on the screens. "Dial me another coflet, will you?"

The third Full-wall came as a surprise. Flora had taken the 1100 car to the roboclinic on the 478th level for her annual checkup. When she returned home-there it was. She hardly noticed the chorus of gasps cut off abruptly as the door shut in the faces of the other wives in the car. Flora stood, impressed in spite of herself by the fantastic panorama filling her apartment. Directly before her, the studio audience gaped up from massed seats. A fat man in the front row reached inside a red plain shirt to scratch. Flora could see the perspiration on his forehead. Farther back, a couple nuzzled, eyes on the stage. Who were they, Flora wondered; How did they manage to get out of their apartments and offices and sit in a real theatre. . . .

To the left, an owlish youth blinked from a brightly lit cage. And on the right, the MC caressed the mike, chattering.

Flora deployed her chair, sank down, looking first this way, then that. There was so much going on-and she in the middle of it. She watched for half an hour, then retracted the chair, deployed the bed. She was tired from the trip. A little nap. . . .

She stopped with the first zipper. The MC was staring directly at her, leering. The owlish youth blinked at her. The fat man scratched himself, staring up at her from the front row. She couldn't undress in front of all of them. . . .

She glanced around, located the switch near the door. With the click, the scene died around her. The glowing walls seemed to press close, fading slowly. Flora turned to the one remaining opaque wall, undressed slowly, her eyes on the familiar pictures. The children-she hadn't seen them since the last semiannual vacation week. The cost of travel was so high, and the crowding. . . .

She turned to the bed-and the three mirror-bright walls confronted her. She stared at the pale figure before her, stark against the wall patched with its faded mementos. She took a step; on either side, an endless rank of gaunt nude figures stepped in unison. She whirled, fixed her eyes gratefully on the familiar wall, the thin crevice outlining the door, the picture of the sea. . . .

She closed her eyes, groped her way to the bed. Once covered by the sheet, she opened her eyes. The beds stood in a row, all identical, each with its huddled figure, like an infinite charity ward, she thought-or like a morgue where all the world lay dead. . . .

Harry munched his yeast chop, his head moving from side to side as he followed the action across the three walls.

"It's marvelous, Flora. Marvelous. But it can be better yet," he added mysteriously.

"Harry-couldn't we move to a bigger place-and maybe do away with two of the walls. I-"

"Flora, you know better than that. I'm lucky to have gotten this apartment when I did; there's nothing-absolutely nothing available." He chuckled. "In a way, the situation is good job insurance. You know, I couldn't be fired, even if the company wanted to: They couldn't get a replacement. A man can't very well take a job if he hasn't a place to live in the city-and I can sit on this place as long as I like; we might get tired of issue rations, but by God we could hold on; so-not that anybody's in danger of getting fired."

"We could move out of the city, Harry. When I was a girl-"

"Oh, not again!" Harry groaned. "I thought that was all threshed out, long ago." He fixed a pained look on Flora. "Try to understand, Flora. The population of the world has doubled since you were a girl. Do you realize what that means? There are more people alive now than had been born in all previous human history up to fifty years ago. That farm you remember visiting as a kid-it's all paved now, and there are tall buildings there. The highways you remember, full of private autos, all driving across open country; they're all gone. There aren't any highways, or any open country except the TV settings and a few estates like the President's acre and a half-not that any sun hits it, with all those buildings around it-and maybe some essential dry-land farms for stuff they can't synthesize or get from the sea."

"There has to be some place we could go. It wasn't meant that people should spend their lives like this-away from the sun, the sea. . . ."

A shadow crossed Harry's face. "I can remember things, too, Flora," he said softly. "We spent a week at the beach once, when I was a small boy. I remember getting up at dawn with the sky all pink and purple, and going down to the water's edge. There were little creatures in the sand-little wild things. I could see tiny fish darting along in a wave crest, just before it broke. I could feel the sand with my toes. The gulls sailed around overhead, and there was even a tree-

"But it's gone now. There isn't any beach, anywhere. That's all over. . . ."

He broke off. "Never mind. That was then. This is now. They've paved the beach, and built processing plants on it, and they've paved the farms and the parks and the gardens-but they've given us Full-wall to make up for it. And-"

There was a buzz from the door. Harry got to his feet.

"They're here, Flora. Wait'll you see. . . ."

Something seemed to tighten around Flora's throat as the man emerged from the lift, gingerly handling the great roll of wall screen.

"Harry. . . ."

"Four walls," Harry said triumphantly. "I told you I was working toward something, remember? Well, this is it. By God, the Harry Trimbles have shown 'em!"

"Harry-I can't-not four walls. . . ."

"I know you're a little overwhelmed-but you deserve it, Flora-"

"Harry, I don't WANT four walls! I can't stand it! It will be all around me-"

Harry stepped to her side, gripped her wrist fiercely. "Shut up!" he hissed. "Do you want the workmen to think you're out of your mind?" He grinned at the men. "How about a coflet, boys?"

"You kiddin'?" one inquired. The other went silently about the work of rolling out the panel, attaching contact strips. Another reached for the sea-scene-

"No!" Flora threw herself against the wall, as though to cover the pictures with her body. "You can't take my pictures! Harry, don't let them."

"Look, sister, I don't want your crummy pictures."

"Flora, get hold of yourself! Here, I'll help you put the pictures in your floor locker."

"Bunch of nuts," one of the men muttered.

"Here, keep a civil tongue in your head," Harry started.

The man who had spoken stepped up to him. He was taller than Harry and solidly built. "Any more crap outa you and I'll break you in half. You and the old bag shut up and keep outa my way. I gotta job to do."

Harry sat beside Flora, his face white with fury. "You and your vaporings," he hissed. "So I have to endure this. I have a good mind to. . . ." he trailed off.

The men finished and left with all four walls blaring.

"Harry," Flora's voice shook. "How will you get out? They've put it right across the door; they've sealed us in. . . ."

"Don't be a bigger idiot than you have to." Harry's voice was ugly over the thunder from the screens. He went to the newly covered wall, groped, found the tiny pin-switch. At a touch, the panel slid aside as always, revealing the blank face of the lift shaft safety door. A moment later it too slid aside and Harry forced his way into the car. Flora caught a glimpse of his flushed

angry face as the door closed.

Around her, the walls roared. A saloon fight was in full swing. She ducked as a chair sailed toward her, whirled to see it smash down a man behind her. Shots rang out. Men ran this way and that. The noise was deafening. That man, Flora thought; the vicious one; he had set it too loud purposely.

The scene shifted. Horses galloped across the room; dust clouds rose, nearly choking her in the verisimilitude of the illusion. It was as though she crouched under a small square canopy of ceiling in the middle of the immense plain.

Now there were cattle, wild-eyed, with tossing horns, bellowing, thundering in an unbroken sea across the screens, charging at Flora out of the wall, pouring past her on left and right. She screamed, shut her eyes, and ran blindly to the wall, groping for the switch.

The uproar subsided. Flora gasped in relief, her head humming. She felt faint, dizzy; she had to lie down- Everything was going black around her; the glowing walls swirled, fading. Flora sank to the floor.

Later-perhaps a few minutes, maybe hours-she had no way of knowing-Flora sat up. She looked out across an infinite vista of tile floor, which swept away to the distant horizon in all directions as far as the eye could see; and over all that vast plain, hollow-eyed women crouched at intervals of fifteen feet, in endless numbers, waiting.

Flora stared into the eyes of the nearest reflection. It stared back, a stranger. She moved her head quickly, to try to catch a glimpse of the next woman-but no matter how fast she moved, the nearer woman anticipated her, interposing her face between Flora and all the others. Flora turned; a cold-eyed woman guarded this rank, too.

"Please," Flora heard herself pleading. "Please, please-"

She bit her lip, eyes shut. She had to get hold of herself. These were only mirrors-she knew that. Only mirrors. The other women-they were mere reflections. Even the hostile ones who hid the others-they were herself, mirrored in the walls.

She opened her eyes. She knew there were joints in the glassy wall, all she had to do was find them, and the illusion of the endless plain would collapse. There-that thin black line, like a wire stretched from floor to ceiling-that was a corner of the room. She was not lost in an infinitude of weeping women on a vast plain; she was right there, in her own apartment-alone. She turned, finding the other corners. They were all there, all visible; she knew what they were. . . .

But why did they continue to look like wires, setting apart the squares of floor, each with its silent, grieving occupant. . . . ?

She closed her eyes, again fighting down the panic. She would tell Harry. As soon as he came home-it was only a few hours-she would explain it to him.

"I'm sick, Harry. You have to send me away to some place where I'll lie in a

real bed, with sheets and blankets, beside an open window, looking out across the fields and forests. Someone-someone kind-will bring me a tray, with a bowl of soup-real soup, made from real chickens and with real bread and even a glass of milk, and a napkin, made of real cloth. . . ."

She should find her bed, and deploy it, and rest there until Harry came, but she was so tired. It was better to wait here, just relaxing and not thinking about the immense floor and the other women who waited with her. . . .

She slept.

When she awoke, she sat up, confused. There had been a dream. . . .

But how strange. The walls of the cell block were transparent now; she could see all the other apartments, stretching away to every side. She nodded; it was as she thought. They were all as barren and featureless as her own-and Harry was wrong. They all had four Full-walls. And the other women-the other wives, shut up like her in these small, mean cells; they were all aging, and sick, and faded, starved for fresh air and sunshine. She nodded again, and the woman in the next apartment nodded in sympathy. All the women were nodding; they all agreed-poor things.

When Harry came, she would show him how it was. He would see that the Full-walls weren't enough. They all had them, and they were all unhappy. When Harry came-

It was time now. She knew it. After so many years, you didn't need a watch to tell when Harry was due. She had better get up, make herself presentable. She rose unsteadily to her feet. The other husbands were coming, too, Flora noted; all the wives were getting ready. They moved about, opening their floor lockers, patting at their hair, slipping into another dress. Flora went to the dial-a-ration and all around, in all the apartments, the wives deployed the tables and dialed the dinners. She tried to see what the woman next door was dialing, but it was too far. She laughed at the way her neighbor craned to see what SHE was preparing. The other woman laughed, too. She was a good sport.

"Kelpies," Flora called cheerily. "And mockspam, and coflet. . . ."

Dinner was ready now. Flora turned to the door-wall and waited. Harry would be so pleased at not having to wait. Then, after dinner she'd explain about her illness-

Was it the right wall she was waiting before? The line around the door was so fine you couldn't really see it. She laughed at how funny it would be if Harry came in and found her standing, staring at the wrong wall.

She turned, and saw a movement on her left-in the next apartment. Flora watched as the door opened. A man stepped in. The next-door woman went forward to meet him-

To meet Harry! It was Harry! Flora whirled. Her four walls stood blank and glassy, while all around her, the other wives greeted Harry, seated him at their tables, and offered him coflet. . . .

"Harry!" she screamed, throwing herself at the wall. It threw her back. She ran to the next wall, hammering, screaming. Harry! Harry!"

In all the other apartments, Harry chewed, nodded, smiled. The other wives poured, fussed over Harry, nibbled daintily. And none of them-not one of them-paid the slightest attention to her. . . .

She stood in the center of the room, not screaming now, only sobbing silently. In the four glass walls that enclosed her, she stood alone. There was no point in calling any longer.

No matter how she screamed, how she beat against the walls, or how she called for Harry-she knew that no one would ever hear.