

WEEK END

FRANK WINTIN

Lu had been in the city for seventeen years. They were two different people, the frightened, pregnant girl she had been at twenty when she first came here, and the calm-eyed honey-haired woman she was now, standing at the "cross roads of America."

The memories of those first years, nightmares though they had been, thronged now upon her memory pleasantly remote, a jumpy, maudlin motion picture she had been forced to sit through.

The wretchedness of her betrayal at Hagersville, the sorrowed bewilderment of her aging parents, the shame of the flight to Indianapolis, the terror and agony of her abortion.

Now all this was pleasant to remember—pain regarded from immunity from pain. Precise in her movements, she walked around the Circle to West Market, and along West Market to Illinois street, a slim, shapely woman in her neat black suit, with her black overnight bag.

She crossed Illinois. Illinois: gaudy, raucous, dirty—a fitting symbol of her life, though you might not have believed it to see her so sublimely indifferent to the whirl about her. She turned into the Bus Terminal and, without losing her attitude of indifference, set down her bag and looked about her, as if searching for someone.

Adah wasn't there yet. Adah, her younger sister, who had come from Hagersville five years after she had left it in her disgrace. Adah, whom so many took to be her twin sister, yet who was so exactly her opposite in disposition.

Now Adah pushed open the swinging door and looked about her. There was noise and belligerence in her stance, and a measure of selfconscious casualness.

Spying Lu, she rushed to her with a broad smile.

Lu was annoyed. She said nothing however.

"Lu-ella, dar-rling, I thought I'd never get here. Have you got your ticket to Cincy yet? Be a sweet and lend me a ten until next week, won't you? I saw a ducky little hat on my way here, and I just couldn't resist—" Adah's chatter ran off into dashes periodically.

Holding her borrowed ten dollar bill, Adah raced to the ticket window. With her most intense smile, she ogled the ticket seller. Lu followed after her with a leisurely stride.

Adah was resuming her weekly flirtation with the ticket clerk. He had come to recognize the pair, and always responded gracefully to Adah, meanwhile smiling at Lu knowingly.

With their tickets for Cincinnati in their purses, they went to the news stand. Lu bought a copy of *The Daily Bugle* and the September issue of *Glamorous Hollywood*.

"What do you plan to do, dar-rling, this week in Cincy? Let's go to the Swinnerton and get rooms on the third floor. What will we do tonight? We won't get there until almost ten. We'll go down to the bar and see if there are any interesting men in town and if there aren't we'll get some liquor and the Sunday papers as soon as they come out and go to our rooms and read the funnies and get tight—"

Lu sighed. It would be a facsimile of all the other week-ends in Cincy. They would get tipsy and work themselves into hysterics over Popeye and Jiggs and finally go to sleep. It was good for the nerves,

they thought, but recently the hysterics weren't as much of a relief as they used to be. They just paved the way for more hysterics.

Once in a while they went back to Hagersville for the week-end. People no longer stared at Lu there, but she didn't care anyway. They would lie around all day Sunday and help their mother with the dishes or sometimes even with the cooking. And before they left, they would press a couple of ten dollar bills in their mother's or father's hands.

But usually they went to Cincinnati or stayed in Indianapolis during the week-end. More life, they would say. Life was what counted. You couldn't possibly get enough of it.

Their bus was coming in. Adah was straining at the bit to rush out to meet it. She wanted a good seat half way back, and she was determined to get it. Lu liked to wait until there were several people on the bus, so that she might have an audience to admire her leisurely world-weariness as she got on and settled in her seat.

The terminal smelled of fresh popcorn and dust and people. The sounds from the street—beep-beep-beep, honk-honk, read-all-about-it, scree-eech — all had travelled here through a tunnel of oblivion. The bus itself smelled of exhaust fumes and leather.

A fat woman got on, a couple of thin married men (funny how she always knew if they were married), a couple of white-haired grand dames, a fat man, a half-starved looking, adolescent boy who looked at her with the insolent non-perception of youth. She thought he was still looking at her several minutes later, and she turned casually, as if to look out the back window, but his head was turned the other way.

She felt Adah snap suddenly to attention at her side. Adah was sitting on the

aisle. Lu knew without looking that a good looking man was getting on. And she was right. He sat down across the aisle from them by the fat man.

Poor, poor Adah, she thought — for no particular reason at all. Somehow it was always silly and disgusting, that eagerness for the hunt which Adah had.

She unfolded *The Daily Bugle* to the sports page. How had today's races come out? Lu loved the horse races. She always went if she had a chance, and sometimes she lost a two-dollar long shot on some animal with a lot of "L's" in its name. That was Lu's system.

The bus was almost full and ready to pull out. The long shadows of late afternoon were becoming gray-blue. "Advice to the Lovelorn" wasn't very interesting today. No misunderstood wives. Lu liked letters from misunderstood wives.

And now in *Glamorous Hollywood* there was a good story about Hedy Lamarr's private life. And a wonderful picture of Cary Grant.

By now the bus had pulled out and was traveling through the crowded streets. Lu looked out on the crowd with a pleasant consciousness of her own remoteness. After a week behind the lingerie counter at Tracy's department store, it was heaven to have nothing much to do.

Adah was still busy with her extra-curricular activities. Her purse had slipped out of her lap into the aisle twice already now. The second time the young man caught the hint. In a few minutes she knew all she needed to know. The man was on his way to Cincy, too, and he wasn't married. He lived in Chillicothe, O., and traveled for a shoe company.

Lu looked now at the young man. With a sudden helpless stab of envy she was sorry that she had not seen him first. He wasn't too young. Very well-groomed, clean-cut but not handsome, sad, and

sincere. Not what Adah was accustomed to term "one of the haw-haw boys." She knew she could take him away from Adah if she wanted, but she was too lazy to try.

This probably wouldn't be one of those week-ends, then. They would dig up another man and celebrate a whole mess of holidays at once.

Now they were in the country. There was a large meadow of cows, sublime amid the dust. About time to milk them, she thought, remembering her father back at Hagersville and how he would be driving the cows in about now.

And there was a little old woman standing in a farmyard. About her mother's size, Lu realized. It would be nice to be standing now in a patch of cool grass in a farmyard, breathing in all the rich, clean smells of the farm. It would be nice to be smelling some clover. It would be nice to take off your shoes and run about barefooted, feeling the cramped soreness ooze out of your feet.

It would be wonderful to eat corn-on-the-cob and drink a lot of milk, and then go to sleep on a marvelously soft, miraculously cool bed, and know subconsciously that tomorrow there would be no job to go back to, no admiring nor disapproving stares to feel upon oneself.

Saturday night on the farm. That was the best night of all. You felt the excitement in the air, but you were not a part of it, released and remote. And there would be a moon tonight. Funny—you never noticed there was a moon in Cincy.

"Pers'nally, I always get sick if I eat frankfurters," Adah was saying to her young man, "but I must say I do love them. Frankfurters and sauerkraut; it's not very elegant, but oh my—"

"Sweet romance!" Lu snorted to herself. Adah had exhausted the superficial details of her existence and was getting down to what really mattered—her stomach. The young man was still interested though.

The blue-green of the distant forests was becoming gradually darker. Some of the cars they met had already turned on their lights. She wished she could open a window and let the cool wind brush over her.

There were lights now in the kitchens of the farmhouses. Poor, dull farmers eating supper. She realized that she was hungry. And now the town of Christy was coming up before them.

When the bus pulled in at Christy, nearly everyone got off to stretch.

Lu called to the bus driver, "Throw my bag off here, please."

Adah looked at her with astonishment. "Well, whatever in the world?"

"You go on to Cincy. I'm going home to Hagersville."

"Oh, Lu, for Pete's sakes. What has come over you? I never did hear of such—"

But she finally realized that Lu had made up her mind. Pouting, she refused to go ahead to Cincinnati, but she finally changed her mind as the bus was almost ready to leave.

Lu watched the bus's red tail lights becoming tiny flecks in the dusk. Then she picked up her overnight bag and went to the railroad station. She was exhausted from the weight of her decision.

She opened her purse as she approached the window. The stationmaster smiled a friendly greeting.

"One way to Hagersville," she said.