I

The Thought

She sat on a big chair with her head thrown back on its cold, shiny leather paneling, her feet pulled up under her. A small arc of yellow light from the bridge lamp shut her off from the darkness of the room, and she turned her head as if to listen to the stillness. There was no sound—only a thick whir of silence. On her lap lay a crinkled piece of dirty paper with a handful of words hurriedly scribbled across it.

"Each man's soul is imprisoned in a world of smoky laughter."

If he could but set it free to nurture on the good land!

These words had stirred the anger in her breast—anger that cried out against the pain that living in crowded cities, struggling for a foothold on Life's ladder, can bring. She knew there was contentment for her in the clean places where painted skies stretched over her head and fields lay moist and fragrant at her feet. She knew that the seas had much to teach her, for they were old and everlasting. The wind had a melancholy song for her heart, and the sands were a soft couch on which she might slumber. Her eyelids became weighted with weariness, and a bright peace surrounded her as her closed eyes curtained the world of sound and color and subtle change.

She slept, and slowly, easily a dream laced its eddies into her mind. For her there was but one dream—a filmy, beautiful dream told in the sighs of the wind and the rumble of water, for she always dreamed of a part of her life, a precious drop of contentment that she had felt once and was, doubtless, never to feel again.

II

The Dream

I have found peace. I have felt its sweet coolness on my head in the musty North Woods, and I cherish each damp pine needle, each pale wild flower, each bubble of lake foam.

I remember how I prepared for my six weeks of peace, how excitedly I flung denim and wool into the old suitcase, how I scurried about the tiny rooms of our flat at the last moment collecting Mac's camera, and the sun glasses, my knitting, the beach robes, his rain coat, a stack of novels. I remember how happy my heart felt as he pressed the starter and the car coughed, filling the garage with gagging gasoline fumes. We backed out of the garage, turned into the cement driveway, and onto the city street.

The town was asleep at four o'clock in the morning when we left, and a faintly tinted mist coated the car with tiny beads of cold dampness. Only the click of a milkman's horse and the grate of a truck's brakes ripped the silence. The rows of new homes on the outskirts of the city were silent and young-looking in the sun's first smile, and we did not speak for fear of awakening the silent houses.

When we had left the traffic signals and dull street lights behind and settled into the monotony of covering miles, the chilled tension between us relaxed, and Mac and I began to talk of the six weeks
that were to be stolen from our two lives. How wonderful and close they now seemed; this cement ribbon of road was leading us to those six weeks, and the sun's glare and flashes of small villages and lurid advertisements could not dim them for us.

After we had stopped in a typical little Indiana restaurant for an equally typical Indiana breakfast, I laid my head back on the seat and pretended to nap. I felt then that I could devote myself completely to the black-lined road that my half-closed eyes viewed ahead and the gently rising countryside along the road. Clean, white farmhouses and chicken yards and brown-skinned little farm boys waving to the car made me feel so secure.

At dusk, when the world about us was bathed in a sort of unearthly glow and the land lay silent and waiting for night, Mac turned on the headlights, blotting out the scenery, leaving only a circle of white light on the road ahead. He told me to watch for a sign marked "Lakeview Cottage," for this sign was to bring us to our Shangri La. We drove for miles in the heavy mist of early night, and suddenly our circle of lights caught a large sign with black letters that spelled LAKEVIEW COTTAGE HOT AND COLD RUNNING WATER LIGHTS TURN IN AT NEXT SIDE ROAD. The sign was streaked with weather, and it had the comfortable, worn look of age.

Mac whipped the car onto the next gravel road, went into second on a steep hill, and we jumped to a stop before a large wooden house. It was filled with a yellow light, and at the door stood a very bald, redfaced man.

"Welcome, sir, and you, ma'am. I started a little fire for you an' got a pot of coffee heated. Knew you'd be tired after the trip."

I remember how bitter and burning the coffee tasted and how assuring the leaping flames in the fireplace felt. Lakeview was ours for six weeks, and I felt a swell of pride for this "home" of ours.

Mac and I took a hot shower and went to bed at once. How cold and fresh the sheets felt. Even now I love the smell of sheets dried on rope lines in the blinding sun and steady wind.

The next morning Mac and I started living in "our house." We drove into the nearest village to buy groceries, and Mac bought me an armful of bright gladioli for the coffee table. When we had put each item of food in its properly labeled can and had spent some time arranging the salmon-pink gladioli in a gallon dill pickle jar, we put on our bathing clothes and began the steep descent to the beach.

The land about us lay in great, rising folds, and "our home" was planted atop the highest fold. Before us the lake stretched like a wrinkled piece of dark blue silk, and all about us were pine-fringed hills. Mac and I climbed down the golden sand bank and at last reached the water. From a distance it had seemed quiet and subdued, but now that we were at its brink it roared loudly at us and dashed its fury over us. Here was the sea at its birth and death, for, if but a lake, this long thumb of water had some of the sea's madness in it—some of its blood and bones—all of its endless, thrashing features. I now recaptured my feeling for the sea, a feeling more magnificent and strange than any other thrill to be found. When the cold, green waves of the sea poured over me, throwing me before them until I struggled for breath and the hard hot sand, when the sea soaked into every pore of my body, chilling me, soothing me, seducing me, I fell
so deeply in love with it that never have I been able to cast its lure aside and look at its heaving power with casual interest. It has caught me, and I must have it at all costs. I must lurch across its face in a sailboat. I must feel its icy pin-points thrown on the wind's arm from the surf. I must run along its silver edge shoeless, laughing with its gayness, and I must plunge into its great, folding waves to be washed under and left floating like a dead cork. How small and powerless I felt in that second!

Our six weeks were not long-lasting; they passed with the non-pausable grains of Time. The long hours of sunshine and thick, black evenings passed, the thrill of the swim and walking, the smell of early breakfasts, the blue cigarette smoke after dinner, the star-bright beach combing came to an end.

The last night of our six weeks, Mac and I stood, hand in hand, on the highest hill, watching the day die. The sea was the texture of slate—smooth and cold in its grayness. A ghost sun hovered over it like some ghoulish spectre waiting quietly, patiently for its prey to sigh and gurgle into death. Filmy wisps of clouds veiled the dull spectre, and the hollow world seemed to be anticipating some disaster embodied deep in the earth's bowels.

III

The Awakening

Time slips into the faded air as thick, rich tones of music die in vaulted halls and rose petals become faded ashes. Its exotic fascination can remain but for the instant of a harp's sweep or the single lash of a sea's pulse or the first touch of a lover's lips. It is indescribable and as hated as rasping screams, as revered as a young girl's song. For often it is slow and meaningless. Man prays for it to pass and leave him calm again. He begs that the grey walls of his room be torn away—that his executioner's step come quickly—that a rough, milk-glass door with neat black letters on it be opened for the meeting. Let it pass—Oh God, I implore you to let it pass. Let my fate come to me in fast passion.

And man entreats his God to pull Time into thin shreds and allow it to linger in the soft liveliness of a sunset, the chilled expectancy of the morning's birth, the mad allure of the sea and pulsing melody, the warmth of a father's hand, the cool of the early morning grass, the wet of silver rain, driving into the face and nostrils, the shocks of sheet lightning, so green and protective, winking onto small lakes and low birches, the moon slowly lapping the frozen desert.

And Time slips into the faded air, wasted and detested, loved and wished back for just six weeks.