

at the dinner, and a national hook-up! . . . You can't do this to me!" He seized her arm, screaming, "But why?"

"You goddamn fool, do you think I consider their question debatable?"

The car stopped, she leaped out and ran.

The first thing she noticed after a while, was her slippers. She was walking slowly, normally, and it was strange to feel iced stone under the thin soles of black satin sandals. She pushed her hair back, off her forehead, and felt drops of sleet melting on her palm.

She was quiet now; the blinding anger was gone: she felt nothing but a gray weariness. Her head ached a little, she realized that she was hungry and remembered that she was to have had dinner at the Business Council. She walked on. She did not want to eat. She thought she would get a cup of coffee somewhere, then take a cab home.

She glanced around her. There were no cabs in sight. She did not know the neighborhood. It did not seem to be a good one. She saw an empty stretch of space across the street, an abandoned park encircled by a jagged line that began as distant skyscrapers and came down to factory chimneys; she saw a few lights in the windows of dilapidated houses, a few small, grimy shops closed for the night, and the fog of the East River two blocks away.

She started back toward the center of the city. The black shape of a ruin rose before her. It had been an office building, long ago; she saw the sky through the naked steel skeleton and the angular remnants of the bricks that had crumbled. In the shadow of the ruin, like a blade of grass fighting to live at the roots of a dead giant, there stood a small diner. Its windows were a bright band of glass and light. She went in.

There was a clean counter inside, with a shining strip of chromium at the edges. There was a bright metal boiler and the odor of coffee. A few derelicts sat at the counter, a husky, elderly man stood behind it, the sleeves of his clean white shirt rolled at the elbows. The warm air made her realize, in simple gratitude, that she had been cold. She pulled her black velvet cape tight about her and sat down at the counter.

"A cup of coffee, please," she said.

The men looked at her without curiosity. They did not seem astonished to see a woman in evening clothes enter a slum diner; nothing astonished anyone, these days. The owner turned impassively to fill her order; there was, in his stolid indifference, the kind of mercifulness that asks no questions.

She could not tell whether the four at the counter were beggars or working men; neither clothes nor manner showed the difference, these days. The owner placed a mug of coffee before her. She closed both hands about it, finding enjoyment in its warmth.

She glanced around her and thought, in habitual professional calculation, how wonderful it was that one could buy so much for a dime. Her eyes moved from the stainless steel cylinder of the coffee boiler to the cast-iron griddle, to the glass shelves, to the enameled sink, to the chromium blades of a mixer. The owner was making

toast: She found pleasure in watching the ingenuity of an open belt that moved slowly, carrying slices of bread past glowing electric coils. Then she saw the name stamped on the toaster: Marsh, Colorado.

Her head fell down on her arm on the counter.

"It's no use, lady," said the old bum beside her.

She had to raise her head. She had to smile in amusement, at him and at herself.

"It isn't?" she asked.

"No. Forget it. You're only fooling yourself."

"About what?"

"About anything being worth a damn. It's dust, lady, all of it, dust and blood. Don't believe the dreams they pump you full of, and you won't get hurt."

"What dreams?"

"The stories they tell you when you're young—about the human spirit. There isn't any human spirit. Man is just a low-grade animal, without intellect, without soul, without virtues or moral values. An animal with only two capacities: to eat and to reproduce."

His gaunt face, with staring eyes and shrunken features that had been delicate, still retained a trace of distinction. He looked like the hulk of an evangelist or a professor of esthetics who had spent years in contemplation in obscure museums. She wondered what had destroyed him, what error on the way could bring a man to this.

"You go through life looking for beauty, for greatness, for some sublime achievement," he said. "And what do you find? A lot of trick machinery for making upholstered cars—or inner-spring mattresses."

"What's wrong with inner-spring mattresses?" said a man who looked like a truck driver. "Don't mind him, lady. He likes to hear himself talk. He don't mean no harm."

"Man's only talent is an ignoble cunning for satisfying the needs of his body," said the old bum. "No intelligence is required for that. Don't believe the stories about man's mind, his spirit, his ideals, his sense of unlimited ambition."

"I don't," said a young boy who sat at the end of the counter. He wore a coat ripped across one shoulder; his square-shaped mouth seemed formed by the bitterness of a lifetime.

"Spirit?" said the old bum. "There's no spirit involved in manufacturing or in sex. Yet these are man's only concerns. Matter—that's all men know or care about. As witness our great industries—the only accomplishment of our alleged civilization—built by vulgar materialists with the aims, the interests and the moral sense of hogs. It doesn't take any morality to turn out a ten-ton truck on an assembly line."

"What is morality?" she asked.

"Judgment to distinguish right and wrong, vision to see the truth, courage to act upon it, dedication to that which is good, integrity to stand by the good at any price. But where does one find it?"

The young boy made a sound that was half-chuckle, half-sneer: "Who is John Galt?"