

## Chapter I THE THEME

"Who is John Galt?"

The light was ebbing, and Eddie Willers could not distinguish the bum's face. The bum had said it simply, without expression. But from the sunset far at the end of the street, yellow glints caught his eyes, and the eyes looked straight at Eddie Willers, mocking and still—as if the question had been addressed to the causeless uneasiness within him.

"Why did you say that?" asked Eddie Willers, his voice tense.

The bum leaned against the side of the doorway; a wedge of broken glass behind him, reflected the metal yellow of the sky.

"Why does it bother you?" he asked

"It doesn't," snapped Eddie Willers.

He reached hastily into his pocket. The bum had stopped him and asked for a dime, then had gone on talking, as if to kill that moment and postpone the problem of the next. Pleas for dimes were so frequent in the streets these days that it was not necessary to listen to explanations and he had no desire to hear the details of this bum's particular despair.

"Go get your cup of coffee," he said, handing the dime to the shadow that had no face.

"Thank you, sir," said the voice, without interest, and the face leaned forward for a moment. The face was wind-browned, cut by lines of weariness and cynical resignation; the eyes were intelligent.

Eddie Willers walked on, wondering why he always felt it at this time of day, this sense of dread without reason. No, he thought, not dread, there's nothing to fear; just an immense, diffused apprehension, with no source or object. He had become accustomed to the feeling, but he could find no explanation for it; yet the bum had spoken as if he knew that Eddie felt it, as if he thought that one should feel it, and more: as if he knew the reason.

Eddie Willers pulled his shoulders straight, in conscientious self-discipline. He had to stop this, he thought; he was beginning to imagine things. Had he always felt it? He was thirty-two years old. He tried to think back. No, he hadn't; but he could not remember when it had started. The feeling came to him suddenly, at random

intervals, and now it was coming more often than ever. It's the twilight, he thought; I hate the twilight.

The clouds and the shafts of skyscrapers against them were turning brown, like an old painting in oil, the color of a fading masterpiece. Long streaks of grime ran from under the pinnacles down the slender, soot-eaten walls. High on the side of a tower there was a crack in the shape of a motionless lightning, the length of ten stories. A jagged object cut the sky above the roofs; it was half a spire, still holding the glow of the sunset; the gold leaf had long since peeled off the other half. The glow was red and still, like the reflection of a fire: not an active fire, but a dying one which it is too late to stop.

No, thought Eddie Willers, there was nothing disturbing in the sight of the city. It looked as it had always looked.

He walked on, reminding himself that he was late in returning to the office. He did not like the task which he had to perform on his return, but it had to be done. So he did not attempt to delay it, but made himself walk faster.

He turned a corner. In the narrow space between the dark silhouettes of two buildings, as in the crack of a door, he saw the page of a gigantic calendar suspended in the sky.

It was the calendar that the mayor of New York had erected last year on the top of a building, so that citizens might tell the day of the month as they told the hours of the day, by glancing up at a public tower. A white rectangle hung over the city, imparting the date to the men in the streets below. In the rusty light of this evening's sunset, the rectangle said September 2.

Eddie Willers looked away. He had never liked the sight of that calendar. It disturbed him, in a manner he could not explain or define. The feeling seemed to blend with his sense of uneasiness; it had the same quality.

He thought suddenly that there was some phrase, a kind of quotation, that expressed what the calendar seemed to suggest. But he could not recall it. He walked, groping for a sentence that hung in his mind as an empty shape. He could neither fill it nor dismiss it. He glanced back. The white rectangle stood above the roofs, saying in immovable finality. September 2.

Eddie Willers shifted his glance down to the street, to a vegetable pushcart at the stoop of a brownstone house. He saw a pile of bright gold carrots and the fresh green onions. He saw a clean white curtain blowing at an open window. He saw a bus turning a corner, expertly steered. He wondered why he felt reassured—and then, why he felt the sudden, inexplicable wish that these things were not left in the open, unprotected against the empty space above.

When he came to Fifth Avenue, he kept his eyes on the windows of the stores he passed. There was nothing he needed or wished to buy; but he liked to see the display of goods, any goods, objects made by men, to be used by men. He enjoyed the sight of a prosperous street; not more than every fourth one of the stores was out of business, its windows dark and empty.

He did not know why he suddenly thought of the oak tree. Nothing had recalled it. But he thought of it—and of his childhood sum-