

It was the only thing left visible. The few charred posts, the slab of concrete and the sparkle of glass dust—which had been a gas station—were swallowed in the brush, not to be noticed except by a careful glance, not to be seen at all in another year.

They looked away. They drove on, not wanting to know what else lay hidden under the miles of weeds. They felt the same wonder like a weight in the silence between them: wonder as to how much the weeds had swallowed and how fast.

The road ended abruptly behind the turn of a hill. What remained was a few chunks of concrete sticking out of a long, pitted stretch of tar and mud. The concrete had been smashed by someone and carted away; even weeds could not grow in the strip of earth left behind. On the crest of a distant hill, a single telegraph pole stood slanted against the sky, like a cross over a vast grave.

It took them three hours and a punctured tire to crawl in low gear through trackless soil, through gullies, then down ruts left by cart wheels—to reach the settlement that lay in the valley beyond the hill with the telegraph pole.

A few houses still stood within the skeleton of what had once been an industrial town. Everything that could move, had moved away; but some human beings had remained. The empty structures were vertical rubble; they had been eaten, not by time, but by men: boards torn out at random, missing patches of roofs, holes left in gutted cellars. It looked as if blind hands had seized whatever fitted the need of the moment, with no concept of remaining in existence the next morning. The inhabited houses were scattered at random among the ruins; the smoke of their chimneys was the only movement visible in town. A shell of concrete, which had been a school-house, stood on the outskirts; it looked like a skull, with the empty sockets of glassless windows, with a few strands of hair still clinging to it, in the shape of broken wires.

Beyond the town, on a distant hill, stood the factory of the Twentieth Century Motor Company. Its walls, roof lines and smokestacks looked trim, impregnable like a fortress. It would have seemed intact but for a silver water tank, the water tank was tipped sidewise.

They saw no trace of a road to the factory in the tangled miles of trees and hillsides. They drove to the door of the first house in sight that showed a feeble signal of rising smoke. The door was open. An old woman came shuffling out at the sound of the motor. She was bent and swollen, barefooted, dressed in a garment of flour sacking. She looked at the car without astonishment, without curiosity; it was the blank stare of a being who had lost the capacity to feel anything but exhaustion.

"Can you tell me the way to the factory?" asked Rearden.

The woman did not answer at once; she looked as if she would be unable to speak English. "What factory?" she asked.

Rearden pointed. "That one."

"It's closed."

"I know it's closed. But is there any way to get there?"

"I don't know."

"Is there any sort of road?"

"There's roads in the woods."

"Any for a car to drive through?"

"Maybe."

"Well, which would be the best road to take?"

"I don't know."

Through the open door, they could see the interior of her house. There was a useless gas stove, its oven stuffed with rags, serving as a chest of drawers. There was a stove built of stones in a corner, with a few logs burning under an old kettle, and long streaks of soot rising up the wall. A white object lay propped against the legs of a table: it was a porcelain washbowl, torn from the wall of some bathroom, filled with wilted cabbages. A tallow candle stood in a bottle on the table. There was no paint left on the floor; its boards were scrubbed to a soggy gray that looked like the visual expression of the pain in the bones of the person who had bent and scrubbed and lost the battle against the grime now soaked into the grain of the boards.

A brood of ragged children had gathered at the door behind the woman, silently, one by one. They stared at the car, not with the bright curiosity of children, but with the tension of savages ready to vanish at the first sign of danger.

"How many miles is it to the factory?" asked Rearden.

"Ten miles," said the woman, and added, "Maybe five."

"How far is the next town?"

"There ain't any next town."

"There are other towns somewhere. I mean, how far?"

"Yeah. Somewhere."

In the vacant space by the side of the house, they saw taded rags hanging on a clothesline, which was a piece of telegraph wire. Three chickens pecked among the beds of a scraggly vegetable garden; a fourth sat roosting on a bar which was a length of plumber's pipe. Two pigs waddled in a stretch of mud and refuse, the stepping stones laid across the muck were pieces of the highway's concrete.

They heard a screeching sound in the distance and saw a man drawing water from a public well by means of a rope pulley. They watched him as he came slowly down the street. He carried two buckets that seemed too heavy for his thin arms. One could not tell his age. He approached and stopped, looking at the car. His eyes darted at the strangers, then away, suspicious and furtive.

Rearden took out a ten-dollar bill and extended it to him, asking, "Would you please tell us the way to the factory?"

The man stared at the money with sullen indifference, not moving, not lifting a hand for it, still clutching the two buckets. If one were ever to see a man devoid of greed, thought Dagny, there he was.

"We don't need no money around here," he said.

"Don't you work for a living?"

"Yeah."

"Well, what do you use for money?"

The man put the buckets down, as if it had just occurred to him that he did not have to stand straining under their weight. "We don't use no money," he said. "We just trade things amongst us."

"How do you trade with people from other towns?"

"We don't go to no other towns."

"You don't seem to have it easy here."

"What's that to you?"

"Nothing. Just curiosity. Why do you people stay here?"

"My old man use to have a grocery store here. Only the factory closed."

"Why didn't you move?"

"Where to?"

"Anywhere."

"What for?"

Dagny was staring at the two buckets: they were square tins with rope handles; they had been oil cans.

"Listen," said Rearden. "can you tell us whether there's a road to the factory?"

"There's plenty of roads."

"Is there one that a car can take?"

"I guess so."

"Which one?"

The man weighed the problem earnestly for some moments. "Well, now if you turn to the left by the schoolhouse," he said, "and go on till you come to the crooked oak, there's a road up there that's fine when it don't rain for a couple of weeks."

"When did it rain last?"

"Yesterday."

"Is there another road?"

"Well, you could go through Hanson's pasture and across the woods and then there's a good, solid road there, all the way down to the creek."

"Is there a bridge across the creek?"

"No."

"What are the other roads?"

"Well, if it's a car road that you want, there's one the other side of Miller's patch, it's paved, it's the best road for a car, you just turn to the right by the schoolhouse and--"

"But that road doesn't go to the factory, does it?"

"No, not to the factory."

"All right," said Rearden. "Guess we'll find our own way."

He had pressed the starter, when a rock came smashing into the windshield: The glass was shatterproof, but a sunburst of cracks spread across it. They saw a ragged little hoodlum vanishing behind a corner with a scream of laughter, and they heard the shrill laughter of children answering him from behind some windows or crevices.

Rearden suppressed a swear word. The man looked rapidly across the street, frowning a little. The old woman looked on, without reaction. She had stood there silently, watching, without interest or purpose, like a chemical compound on a photographic plate, absorbing visual shapes because they were there to be absorbed, but unable ever to form any estimate of the objects of her vision.

Dagny had been studying her for some minutes. The swollen shapelessness of the woman's body did not look like the product of