

They held each other's glances for a moment, the light playing on the golden liquid, not reaching their faces or eyes.

"Oh, go to hell!" he cried, leaping to his feet, flinging his glass to smash on the floor, and rushing out of the room.

She sat at the table, not moving, for a long time, then rose slowly and pressed the bell.

She walked to her room, her steps unnaturally even, she opened the door of a closet, she reached for a suit and a pair of shoes, she took off the housecoat, moving with cautious precision, as if her life depended on not jarring anything about or within her. She held onto a single thought: that she had to get out of this house—just get out of it for a while, if only for the next hour—and then, later, she would be able to face all that had to be faced.

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The lines were blurring on the paper before her and, raising her head, Dagny realized that it had long since grown dark.

She pushed the papers aside, unwilling to turn on the lamp, permitting herself the luxury of idleness and darkness. It cut her off from the city beyond the windows of her living room. The calendar in the distance said: August 5.

The month behind her had gone, leaving nothing but the blank of dead time. It had gone into the planless, thankless work of racing from emergency to emergency, of delaying the collapse of a railroad—a month like a waste pile of disconnected days, each given to averting the disaster of the moment. It had not been a sum of achievements brought into existence, but only a sum of zeros, of that which had not happened, a sum of prevented catastrophes—not a task in the service of life, but only a race against death.

There had been times when an unsummoned vision—a sight of the valley—had seemed to rise before her, not as a sudden appearance, but as a constant, hidden presence that suddenly chose to assume an insistent reality. She had faced it, through moments of blinded stillness, in a contest between an unmoving decision and an unyielding pain, a pain to be fought by acknowledgment, by saying: All right, even this.

There had been mornings when, awakening with rays of sunlight on her face, she had thought that she must hurry to Hammond's Market to get fresh eggs for breakfast; then, recapturing full consciousness, seeing the haze of New York beyond the window of her bedroom, she had felt a tearing stab, like a touch of death, the touch of rejecting reality. You knew it—she had told herself severely—you knew what it would be like when you made your choice. And dragging her body, like an unwilling weight, out of bed to face an unwelcome day, she would whisper: All right, even this.

The worst of the torture had been the moments when, walking down the street, she had caught a sudden glimpse of chestnut-gold, a glowing streak of hair among the heads of strangers, and had felt as if the city had vanished, as if nothing but the violent stillness within her were delaying the moment when she would rush to him and seize him; but that next moment had come as the sight of some meaningless face—and she had stood, not wishing to live through

the following step, not wishing to generate the energy of living. She had tried to avoid such moments; she had tried to forbid herself to look; she had walked, keeping her eyes on the pavements. She had failed: by some will of their own, her eyes had kept leaping to every streak of gold.

She had kept the blinds raised on the windows of her office, remembering his promise, thinking only: If you are watching me, wherever you are . . . There were no buildings close to the height of her office, but she had looked at the distant towers, wondering which window was his observation post, wondering whether some invention of his own, some device of rays and lenses, permitted him to observe her every movement from some skyscraper a block or a mile away. She had sat at her desk, at her uncurtained windows, thinking: Just to know that you're seeing me, even if I'm never to see you again.

And remembering it, now, in the darkness of her room, she leaped to her feet and snapped on the light.

Then she dropped her head for an instant, smiling in mirthless amusement at herself. She wondered whether her lighted windows, in the black immensity of the city, were a flare of distress, calling for his help—or a lighthouse still protecting the rest of the world.

The doorbell rang.

When she opened the door, she saw the silhouette of a girl with a faintly familiar face—and it took her a moment of startled astonishment to realize that it was Cherryl Taggart. Except for a formal exchange of greetings on a few chance encounters in the halls of the Taggart Building, they had not seen each other since the wedding.

Cherryl's face was composed and unsmiting. "Would you permit me to speak to you"—she hesitated and ended on—"Miss Taggart?"

"Of course," said Dagny gravely. "Come in."

She sensed some desperate emergency in the unnatural calm of Cherryl's manner; she became certain of it when she looked at the girl's face in the light of the living room. "Sit down," she said, but Cherryl remained standing.

"I came to pay a debt," said Cherryl, her voice solemn with the effort to permit herself no sound of emotion. "I want to apologize for the things I said to you at my wedding. There's no reason why you should forgive me, but it's my place to tell you that I know I was insulting everything I admire and defending everything I despise. I know that admitting it now, doesn't make up for it, and even coming here is only another presumption, there's no reason why you should want to hear it, so I can't even cancel the debt, I can only ask for a favor—that you let me say the things I want to say to you."

Dagny's shock of emotion, incredulous, warm and painful, was the wordless equivalent of the sentence: What a distance to travel in less than a year . . . ! She answered, the unsmiling earnestness of her voice like a hand extended in support, knowing that a smile would upset some precarious balance, "But it does make up for it, and I do want to hear it."

"I know that it was you who ran Taggart Transcontinental. It was you who built the John Galt Line. It was you who had the mind and the courage that kept all of it alive. I suppose you thought that!"