

when the preachers of self-sacrifice discover that those who are willing to practice it, have nothing to sacrifice, and those who have, are not willing any longer—when men see that neither their hearts nor their muscles can save them, but the mind they damned is not there to answer their screams for help—when they collapse as they must, as men without minds—when they have no pretense of authority left, no remnant of law, no trace of morality, no hope, no food and no way to obtain it—when they collapse and the road is clear—then we'll come back to rebuild the world."

The Taggart Terminal, she thought; she heard the words beating through the numbness of her mind, as the sum of a burden she had not had time to weigh. *This* was the Taggart Terminal, she thought, this room, not the giant concourse in New York—this was her goal, the end of track, the point beyond the curve of the earth where the two straight lines of rail met and vanished, drawing her forward—as they had drawn Nathaniel Taggart—this was the goal Nathaniel Taggart had seen in the distance and this was the point still holding the straight-line glance of his lifted head above the spiral motion of men in the granite concourse. It was for the sake of this that she had dedicated herself to the rail of Taggart Transcontinental, as to the body of a spirit yet to be found. She had found it, everything she had ever wanted, it was here in this room, reached and hers—but the price was the net of rail behind her, the rail that would vanish, the bridge that would crumble, the signal lights that would go out. . . . And yet . . . Everything, I had ever wanted, she thought—looking away from the figure of a man with sun-colored hair and implacable eyes.

"You don't have to answer us now."

She raised her head; he was watching her as if he had followed the steps in her mind.

"We never demand agreement," he said. "We never tell anyone more than he is ready to hear. You are the first person who has learned our secret ahead of time. But you're here and you had to know. Now you know the exact nature of the choice you'll have to make. If it seems hard, it's because you still think that it does not have to be one or the other. You will learn that it does."

"Will you give me time?"

"Your time is not ours to give. Take your time. You alone can decide what you'll choose to do, and when. We know the cost of that decision. We've paid it. That you've come here might now make it easier for you—or harder."

"Harder," she whispered.

"I know."

He said it, his voice as low as hers, with the same sound of being forced past one's breath, and she missed an instant of time, as the stillness after a blow, because she felt that this—not the moments when he had carried her in his arms down the mountainside, but this meeting of their voices—had been the closest physical contact between them.

A full moon stood in the sky above the valley, when they drove back to his house; it stood like a flat, round lantern without rays, with a haze of light hanging in space, not reaching the ground, and the

illumination seemed to come from the abnormal white brightness of the soil. In the unnatural stillness of sight without color, the earth seemed veiled by a film of distance, its shapes did not merge into a landscape, but went slowly flowing past, like the print of a photograph on a cloud. She noticed suddenly that she was smiling. She was looking down at the houses of the valley. Their lighted windows were dimmed by a bluish cast, the outlines of their walls were dissolving, long bands of mist were coiling among them in torpid, unhurried waves. It looked like a city sinking under water.

"What do they call this place?" she asked.

"I call it Mulligan's Valley," he said. "The others call it Galt's Gulch."

"I'd call it—" but she did not finish.

He glanced at her. She knew what he saw in her face. He turned away.

She saw a faint movement of his lips, like the release of a breath that he was forcing to function. She dropped her glance, her arm falling against the side of the car, as if her hand were suddenly too heavy for the weakness in the crook of her elbow.

The road grew darker, as it went higher, and pine branches met over their heads. Above a slant of rock moving to meet them, she saw the moonlight on the windows of his house. Her head fell back against the seat and she lay still, losing awareness of the car, feeling only the motion that carried her forward, watching the glittering drops of water in the pine branches, which were the stars.

When the car stopped, she did not permit herself to know why she did not look at him as she stepped out. She did not know that she stood still for an instant, looking up at the dark windows. She did not hear him approach; but she felt the impact of his hands with shocking intensity, as if it were the only awareness she could now experience. He lifted her in his arms and started slowly up the path to the house.

He walked, not looking at her, holding her tight, as if trying to hold a progression of time, as if his arms were still locked over the moment when he had lifted her against his chest. She felt his steps as if they were a single span of motion to a goal and as if each step were a separate moment in which she dared not think of the next. Her head was close to his, his hair brushing her cheek, and she knew that neither of them would move his face that one breath closer. It was a sudden, stunned state of quiet drunkenness, complete in itself, their hair mingled like the rays of two bodies in space that had achieved their meeting, she saw that he walked with his eyes closed, as if even sight would now be an intrusion.

He entered the house, and as he moved across the living room, he did not look to his left and neither did she, but she knew that both of them were seeing the door on his left that led to his bedroom. He walked the length of the darkness to the wedge of moonlight that fell across the guest-room bed, he placed her down upon it, she felt an instant's pause of his hands still holding her shoulder and waistline, and when his hands left her body, she knew that the moment was over.

He stepped back and pressed a switch, surrendering the room to