

like the age when Nat Taggart moved across the country, and the stops along his way were marked by men eager for the sight of achievement. That age, she had thought, was gone; generations had passed, with no event to greet anywhere, with nothing to see but the cracks lengthening year by year on the walls built by Nat Taggart. Yet men came again, as they had come in his time, drawn by the same response.

She glanced at Rearden. He stood against the wall, unaware of the crowds, indifferent to admiration. He was watching the performance of track and train with an expert's intensity of professional interest, his bearing suggested that he would kick aside, as irrelevant, any thought such as "They like it," when the thought ringing in his mind was "It works!"

His tall figure in the single gray of slacks and shirt looked as if his body were stripped for action. The slacks stressed the long lines of his legs, the light, firm posture of standing without effort or being ready to swing forward at an instant's notice; the short sleeves stressed the gaunt strength of his arms; the open shirt bared the tight skin of his chest.

She turned away, realizing suddenly that she had been glancing back at him too often. But this day had no ties to past or future—her thoughts were cut off from implications—she saw no further meaning, only the immediate intensity of the feeling that she was imprisoned with him, sealed together in the same cube of air, the closeness of his presence underscoring her awareness of this day, as his rails underscored the flight of the train.

She turned deliberately and glanced back. He was looking at her. He did not turn away, but held her glance, coldly and with full intention. She smiled defiantly, not letting herself know the full meaning of her smile, knowing only that it was the sharpest blow she could strike at this inflexible face. She felt a sudden desire to see him trembling, to tear a cry out of him. She turned her head away, slowly, feeling a reckless amusement, wondering why she found it difficult to breathe.

She sat leaning back in her chair, looking ahead, knowing that he was as aware of her as she was of him. She found pleasure in the special self-consciousness it gave her. When she crossed her legs, when she leaned on her arm against the window sill, when she brushed her hair off her forehead—every movement of her body was underscored by a feeling the unadmitted words for which were: Is he seeing it?

The towns had been left behind. The track was rising through a country growing more grimly reluctant to permit approach. The rails kept vanishing behind curves, and the ridges of hills kept moving closer, as if the plains were being folded into pleats. The flat stone shelves of Colorado were advancing to the edge of the track—and the distant reaches of the sky were shrinking into waves of bluish mountains.

Far ahead, they saw a mist of smoke over factory chimneys—then the web of a power station and the lone needle of a steel structure. They were approaching Denver.

She glanced at Pat Logan. He was leaning forward a little farther. She saw a slight tightening in the fingers of his hand and in his eyes. He knew, as she did, the danger of crossing the city at the speed they were traveling.

It was a succession of minutes, but it hit them as a single whole. First, they saw the lone shapes, which were factories, rolling across their windowpanes—then the shapes fused into the blur of streets—then a delta of rails spread out before them, like the mouth of a funnel sucking them into the Taggart station, with nothing to protect them but the small green beads of light scattered over the ground—from the height of the cab, they saw boxcars on sidings streak past as flat ribbons of roof tops—the black hole of the train-shed flew at their faces—they hurtled through an explosion of sound, the beating of wheels against the glass panes of a vault, and the screams of cheering from a mass that swayed like a liquid in the darkness among steel columns—they flew toward a glowing arch and the green lights hanging in the open sky beyond, the green lights that were like the doorknobs of space, throwing door after door open before them. Then, vanishing behind them, went the streets clotted with traffic, the open windows bulging with human figures, the screaming sirens, and—from the top of a distant skyscraper—a cloud of paper snowflakes shimmering on the air, flung by someone who saw the passage of a silver bullet across a city stopped still to watch it.

Then they were out again, on a rocky grade—and with shocking suddenness, the mountains were before them, as if the city had flung them straight at a granite wall, and a thin ledge had caught them in time. They were clinging to the side of the vertical cliff, with the earth rolling down, dropping away, and giant tiers of twisted boulders streaming up and shutting out the sun, leaving them to speed through a bluish twilight, with no sight of soil or sky.

The curves of rail became coiling circles among walls that advanced to grind them off their sides. But the track cut through at times and the mountains parted, flaring open like two wings at the tip of the rail—one wing green, made of vertical needles, with whole pines serving as the pile of a solid carpet—the other reddish-brown, made of naked rock.

She looked down through the open window and saw the silver side of the engine hanging over empty space. Far below, the thin thread of a stream went falling from ledge to ledge, and the ferns that drooped to the water were the shimmering tops of birch trees. She saw the engine's tail of boxcars winding along the face of a granite drop—and miles of contorted stone below, she saw the coils of green-blue rail unwinding behind the train.

A wall of rock shot upward in their path, filling the windshield, darkening the cab, so close that it seemed as if the remnant of time could not let them escape it. But she heard the screech of wheels on curve, the light came bursting back—and she saw an open stretch of rail on a narrow shelf. The shelf ended in space. The nose of the engine was aimed straight at the sky. There was nothing to stop them but two strips of green-blue metal strung in a curve along the shelf.